

## *Esperpento*, performance, protest

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Over the last couple of years in Berkeley, Bucharest, and Madrid, I have witnessed a series of manifestations and protests, the majority of which dealt with the local effects of the ongoing world economic crisis, and also with the discontent over raising fees, taxes, coupled with budget cuts, public sector paycheck cuts and massive layoffs. While the severe reality of the situation can be measured in cold statistics, the sensation I experienced at these protest sites was that of attending a performance. I could not abandon this conviction as evidenced in the spectacle of people dancing and jumping with wide grins and happy faces. I felt like being at a rock concert, not at a protest. Does one really smile like that when one is angry? If deep discontent and disillusion travel up from your guts and show up on your face locked in a grin, something is wrong. Maybe not. Maybe, in our time, it's the most natural response. The *esperpento* is back.

In late May and early June I was in Madrid, researching for my dissertation on contemporary Spanish theater and performance practices. As usual, I ventured towards Puerta del Sol. As I descended on Calle Carmen, nostalgia filled my heart with precious memories that stretched over more than a decade, when I fell in love with this urban spaceto which I faithfully returned for undergraduate study abroad, summer vacations, and later doctoral work and research. I have seen the *Oso y Madroño* statue moved from its legendary site, I have witnessed the inauguration of the big glass fish-like entry to the *Cercanías Renfe*, and I have eaten ice cream on the side of the fountain. This year, however, I found a completely different sight in front of my eyes.

The downtown was turned into an *acampada*, a camping site. The center of Madrid certainly looked different: a sea of tents, guitarists, posters, and hundreds of peacefully acclimatized protesters. Most were between 20 and 30, but older people could be seen as well. Tents, people, pets, pots, pans, plastic bags, cardboard turned into mattresses - all meshed into a fresh yet decadent picture. With Carlos III's equestrian statue ceremoniously watching over, it certainly looked like a mismatched collage, a bizarre exhibit. One could take a stroll through the tents, watching the step and making room for other similar "visitors," stop to read the inscriptions and slogans on the posters, chat with the people, nod in approval, and even take a photo. The *acampada* thus became something close to

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what one would expect to find at a modern art museum: a live exhibition of performance art. And yet, those people were gathered *to protest* against the high youth unemployment rate and the government's incapacity to deal with the economic crisis. Despite my impression of a peculiar exhibitionism, I could feel the power of their action as I walked among them. I could sense that their message would travel far. Indeed, a strong community sense reigned. Some were smiling, some were not. Faces read worry, anxiety, hope. They were taking the action seriously. And yes, they posed – albeit unwittingly – for photos and gave interviews, but with an air of solemnity. No wide grins. No performance.

Days later I returned to Sol. This time it was much harder to get



through. Groups were being formed, leaders chanted and urged people to speak out for their rights. They were proposing to move the *acampadas* to the next level: make them regular neighborhood civil assemblies. Thanksto the business owners nearby for their patience and generosity throughout the extended – at the time-three – week *acampada* (May 31) followed. The air breathed optimism. A furtive recollection of Bertolucci's *The Dreamers* and my index finger pressed the camera's button. I only wished that instead of Carlos III's statue, one could have brought that of Ramón del Valle-Inclán from Calle Recoletos...then, the picture would have been complete.

