

## TRAUMA AS DURATIONAL PERFORMANCE

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### Abstract

In this paper which is dedicated to Richard Schechner, Diana Taylor describes her guided visit to Villa Grimaldi, a former torture and extermination camp on the outskirts of Santiago de Chile. Through the lens of her camera and her relationship with the guide of the walking tour, the survivor called Pedro Matta, the author points out affinities between the concepts of *trauma* and *performance*, both based on repetition and always happening in the present. Memory, testimony, embodied practices, affect, history and identity are some aspects that Diana Taylor analyses during this article which subject, in her opinion, is so multi layered that the personal, inter-personal, social and political come together, and trauma can be considered a durational performance.

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“Restored behavior is living behavior treated as a film director treats a strip of film. These strips of behavior can be rearranged or reconstructed: they are independent of the causal systems (social, psychological, technological) that brought them into existence. They have a life of their own. The original ‘truth’ or ‘source’ of the behavior may be lost, ignored, or contradicted—even while this truth or source is apparently being honored [...] Originating as a process, used in the process of rehearsal to make a new process, a performance, the strips of behavior are not themselves a process but things, items, ‘material.’ Restored behavior can be of long duration.” Richard Schechner, “The Restoration of Behavior”<sup>1</sup>

Pedro Matta, a tall, strong man walked up to us when we arrived at the unassuming side entrance to Villa Grimaldi, a former torture and extermination camp on the outskirts of Santiago de Chile. He is a survivor who twice a month or so gives a guided visit to people who want to know about the site. He says hello to Soledad Fallabella and Alejandro Gruman, colleagues of mine in Chile who thought that given my work with human rights groups in Argentina that I would be interested in meeting Matta.<sup>2</sup> He greets me and hands me the English version of a book he has written: “A Walk Through a 20<sup>th</sup> Century Torture Center: Villa Grimaldi, A Visitor’s Guide.” I tell him that I am from Mexico and speak Spanish. “Ah,” he says focusing on me, “Taylor, I just assumed...” The four of us walk into the compound. I hold the booklet and my camera—Alejandro holds my digital tape recorder. I’ve come prepared for my ‘visit.’

The site is expansive. It looks like a ruin or a construction site, there’s some old rubble and signs of new building—a transitional space, part past, part future. In several ways it’s hard to get a sense of where we’re standing. A sign at the entrance, *Parque Por la Paz Villa Grimaldi*, informs visitors that 4500 people were tortured here and 226 people were disappeared and killed between 1973 and 1979. Another peace park in the tradition of Hiroshima to Virginia Tech, I think to myself, that tries to neutralize violence by renaming it. I take a photograph of the sign that reminds us that we’re in a memorial and that this tragic history belongs to all of us. Like many memory sites, it asks us to behave respectfully so that it might remain and continue to instruct. But how does one behave in a former torture center? And what does the place propose to teach? Lesson One, clearly, is that this place is ‘our’ responsibility in more

ways than one.

“This way, please.” Matta, a formal man, leads us into the emptied space. He walks us over to the small model of the torture camp to help us visualize the architectural arrangement of a place now gone: Cuartel Terranova (barrack ‘new land’). The mock-up is laid out, like a coffin, under a large plastic sunshade. As in many historically important sites—the Templo Mayor in Mexico City comes to mind— the model offers a quick bird’s-eye view of the place. The difference here is that what we see in the model is no longer there. Even though we are present, standing in the former concentration camp, we will not (mercifully) experience it ‘in person’. Rather, the space we visit is one that we cannot see and never really know. So, one might ask, what is the purpose of the visit? What can we experience by being physically in a death camp once the indicators have disappeared? Does the space itself convey the event? Little beside the sign at the entrance explains the who, whys, whats, and whens. My photographs might illustrate what this place *is*, not what it *was*. Still, we are here in person with Matta who takes us through the *recorrido* (or ‘walk through’). Matta speaks in Spanish; it makes a difference. He seems to relax a little, though his voice is very strained and he clears his throat often.

The compound, originally a beautiful 19<sup>th</sup> century villa used for upper class parties and weekend affairs, was taken over by DINA, Augusto Pinochet’s special forces to interrogate the people detained by the military during the massive round-ups.<sup>3</sup> So many people were detained that many ordinary civilian spaces were transformed into makeshift concentration centers. Villa Grimaldi was one of the most infamous. In the late 1980s, one of the generals sold it to a construction company to tear down and replace with a housing project. Survivors and human rights activists could not stop the demolition but after much heated contestation they did secure the space as a memory site and peace park in 1995.<sup>4</sup> Matta, among others, has spent a great deal of time, money, and energy to make sure that the space remains a permanent reminder of what the Pinochet government did to its people. Three epochs, with three histories, overlap on this space. The irony of course is that Terranova gives the lie both the elegant, civilized pre- and the recuperative post- .

The miniature extermination camp positions us as spectators. We stand above the camp, looking down on its organizational structure. Well, the rendition actually. With the actual site destroyed, the replica materializes memory. The main entrance to our top left allowed passage for vehicles that delivered the hooded captives up to the main building. Matta’s language and our imaginations populate the emptied space. He points to the tiny copy of the large main building where the officers lived, right here, exactly where we’re now standing; then the small

buildings that run along the perimeter to the left where the prisoners were divided up, separated, and blindfolded—men there, women there. Miniature drawings made by survivors line the periphery—hooded prisoners pushed by guards with rifles for their three seconds at the latrines; a hall of small locked cells guarded by an armed man; a close-up drawing of the inside of one of the cells in which a half dozen shackled and hooded men are squeezed in tightly; an empty torture chamber with a bare metal bunk bed equipped with leather straps, a chair with straps for arms and feet, a table with instruments. The objects reference behaviors. We know exactly what happened there/here. Matta points to other structures on the model. It is clear that the model gives him a sense of control too—control over the terror. He is explicit about the violence, and very clear in his condemnation of the C.I.A.s role in the Chilean crisis. He looks at me and remembers I am not *that* audience—an audience but not that audience.

Looking down at the model, everything is visible through his recounting. We stand on the site of the main building, usurping the military's place. Looking offers me the strange fantasy of seeing or grasping the 'whole,' the fiction that I can understand systemic criminal violence even as we position ourselves simultaneously in and above the fray. We are permitted to identify without identifying. This happened there, back then, to them, by them.... We are not implicated except to the degree that we can understand the information being transmitted to us by the mock-up and Matta, our guide.

The encounter, at this point, is about representation and explication. The model, made by survivors, stages the evidence—here, this happened. The mock-up or 'fake' gives others at least a glimpse of the 'truth' of Terranova. I take photographs, wondering how the tenuous 'evidentiary' power of the photo might extend the evidentiary claim of the model camp. We know what happened at Villa Grimaldi, of course, but is there anything that Matta (or I, with my camera) can do to make visible the criminal violence?

We look up and around at the 'place itself.' There's not much to see of the former camp. The remains of a few original structures and replicas of isolation cells and a tower dot the compound, emptied though not empty—empty of something palpable in its absence. No history. No one responsible. Just mock ups of very bad practice. The meaning lies in the friction between the empty place and the story Matta tells. As opposed to glorious ancient ruins in which narration brings buildings to life, here the objects have been re-constructed and placed to enhance the narration. With the camp demolished, Matta informs and points out, but he does not seem to connect personally or emotionally to what he describes. Yet the disconnect between Matta's formal matter-of-fact rendition and the terrifying things he relates prompts me into filling the gaps. Following Matta from place to place, it becomes clear to me that the little I

actually do see intensifies what I imagine happened here. My mind's eye—my very own staging area— internalizes the violence, fills the gaps.

Matta walks us towards the original entryway—the massive iron-gate now permanently sealed as if to shut out the possibility of further violence. From this vantage point, it is clear that another layer has been added to the space. A wash of decorative tiles, chips of the original ceramic found at the site, form a huge arrow-like shape on the ground pointing away from the gate towards the new 'peace fountain' ("symbol of life and hope" according to Matta's booklet) and a large performance pavilion. The architecture participates in the rehabilitation of the site, moving from past to future. Matta ignores that for the moment—he is still in the torture camp, not in this peace park. This is not the time for reconciliation. His traumatic story, like his past, weighs down all possibility of future. He continues his *recorrido* through the torture camp.<sup>5</sup>

Matta speaks impersonally, in the third person, about the role of torture in Chile—one half million people tortured and 5000 killed out of population of 8 million. I do the math.... There were far more tortures and fewer murders in Chile than Argentina. He speaks about the development of torture as a tool of the state from its early experimental phase to the highly precise and tested practice it became. Pinochet chose to break rather than eliminate his 'enemies'—the population of ghosts, or individuals destroyed by torture, thrown back into society would be a warning for others. Matta's tone is controlled and reserved. He is giving historical information, not personal testimony, as he outlines the daily workings of the camp, the transformation of language as words were outlawed. 'Crímenes', 'desaparecidos,' and 'dictadura' (crimes, disappeared, and dictatorship) were replaced by 'excesos', 'presuntos,' and 'gobierno militar' (excesses, presumed, military government).

As we walk, he describes what happened where and I notice that he keeps his eyes on the ground, a habit born of peering down from under the blindfold he was forced to wear. The shift is gradual—he begins to reenact ever so subtly as he re-tells. I feel compelled to register the moment—I take a photograph as if I could capture the move inwards, into the dark space in which we stand but cannot see. He moves deeper into the death camp—here, pointing at an empty spot: "Usually unconscious, the victim was taken off the parrilla (metal bed frame), and if male, dragged here."<sup>6</sup> Maybe the lens will grasp what I cannot grasp. Looking down, I see the colored shards of ceramic tiles and stones that now mark the places where buildings once stood and the paths where victims were pushed to the latrine or torture chambers. As we follow, we too know our way by keeping our eyes on the ground: "Sala de tortura" "Celdas para mujeres detenidas."

Gradually, his pronouns change—they tortured *them* becomes they tortured *us*. He

brings us in closer. His performance animates the space and keeps it alive. His body connects me to what Pinochet wanted to disappear, not just the place but the trauma. Matta's presence performs the claim, embodies it, *le da cuerpo*. He has survived to tell. Being *in place* with him communicates a very different sense of the crimes than looking down on the model. Glorious ruins—like Machu Pichu and Chichen Itza—conjure up sites of ancient power and glory, mysterious and romanticized pasts, unique tourist destinations, places where “we” (not of that place, not of that time) can perform the unimaginable—keep the past intact as *past* even as we move through it. Dark ruins like Villa Grimaldi bring time right up close. Now. Here. And in many parts of the world, as we speak. I can't think past that, rooted as I am to place suddenly restored as practice. I too am part of this scenario now; I have accompanied him here. My chest hurts. My throat tightens. My “unarmed” eyes look straight down, mimetically rather than reflectively, through his down-turned eyes.<sup>7</sup> I do not see really; I imagine. I *presenciar*; I presence (as active verb). I participate not in the events but in his recounting of the events. My presencing offers me no sense of control, no fiction of understanding. He walks, he sits, he tells. When he gets to the memorial wall marked with the names of the dead (built twenty years after the violent events) he breaks down and cries. He cries for those who died but also for those that survived. “Torture,” he says, “destroys the human being. And I am no exception. I was destroyed through torture.” This is the climax of the tour. The past and the present come together in this admission. Torture works into the future; it forecloses the very possibility of future. The torture site is transitional but torture itself is transformative—it turns societies into terrifying places and people into zombies.<sup>8</sup>

After Matta leaves the memorial wall his tone shifts again. He has moved out of the death space. Now he is more personal and informal in his interaction with us. We talk about how other survivors have dealt with their trauma, about similarities and differences with other torture centers and concentration camps. He says he needs to come back, even though it makes him sick. Afterwards he goes home, he says, takes aspirin and goes to bed. We continue to walk, past the replica of the water tower where the high value prisoners were isolated, past the “sala de la memoria” (memory room)—the small buildings that originally served as the photo and silkscreen rooms. At the pool he tells one of the most chilling accounts told to him by a collaborator. At the memory tree, he touches the names of the dead that hang from the branches, like leaves. Different commemorative art pieces remind us that “El olvido esta lleno de memoria” (forgetting is full of memory).

After we leave the site, we invite Matta to lunch at a nearby restaurant that he recommends. He tells us about his arrest in 1975 for being a student activist, his time as a

political prisoner in Villa Grimaldi, his exile to the U.S. in 1976 and his work as a private detective in San Francisco until he returned to Chile in 1991. He used his investigative skills to gather as much information as possible about what happened in Villa Grimaldi, to identify the prisoners who passed through there, and name the torturers stationed there. One day, he says, he was having lunch in this same restaurant after one of the visits to Villa Grimaldi when an ex-torturer walked in and sat at a nearby table with his family. They were having such a good time. They looked at each other and Matta got up and walked away.

Later Soledad tells me that Matta does the visit the same way every time—stands in the same spot, recounts the same events, cries at the Memorial Wall. Some commentators find this odd, as if the routine makes the emotion suspect. Are the tears for real? Every time? At the very same point in the tour? Is there something put on about the performance? Or maybe what bothers some is simply that the tour *is* a performance—an example of what Richard Schechner has called ‘restoration of behavior’—strips of behavior that are reenacted, reiterated, and repeated “never for the first time”? I agree that the tour is a performance—more interesting for me, though, is what kind of performance is it?

Of all the compelling questions raised by Villa Grimaldi this for me is the most compelling: is the “never for the first time” of performance the same as the “never for the first time” of trauma? Trauma, I have written elsewhere, is known by the nature of its repeats. It is never for the first time.<sup>9</sup> The difficulty in separating out ‘trauma’ from ‘post traumatic stress’ signals the central role of reiteration, and the repeat. Not all blows or wounds create trauma—we speak of trauma only when they produce the characteristic aftershock. Trauma, like performance, is always in the present. Here. Now. Does the restoration of behavior model illuminate the embodied eruptions, repetitions, and flashbacks that are trauma? Or does Schechner’s emphasis that “the behavior is separate from those who are behaving” (36) actually put it at odds with trauma theory that stresses that trauma cannot be separated from the ‘I’ who lives it? Transmitted to others, yes, but not separated. Matta may transmit information, even affect to us through his scripted tour of the torture camp, but what does that say about his affect? Is it part of the show? Is Matta a professional trauma survivor? Am I his witness? His audience? A voyeur of trauma tourism? What kind of scenario is this? Does it help to think of the walk through as a multi-layered performance in which (like the space itself) several things happen at the same time?

To understand this scenario, we need to separate the routine from the affect. The routine—the walk through Villa Grimaldi—offers a clear example of “restoration of behavior.” Matta is, as he’s told us, our “guide” of this clearly orchestrated tour. Every move follows the

outline of the book he has written; every place is about practice: "Here the torture began...." Matta explains. It's the same every time. He wants us to understand what took place there. In that way, the tour is about transmitting information to 'us.' Anyone, theoretically, could lead that tour. The routine is separable from Matta.

Yet, the routine takes on several added dimensions when performed by Matta. For any guide, the routine serves a mnemonic function—people can remember certain events by associating them with place.<sup>10</sup> But for a survivor of torture, going back to the site the *recorrido* is a memory path—through the act of walking, the body remembers. Memory always entails reenactment, even in our mind's eye. Neuroscientists suggest that these paths are physiological as well as material, fixed in the brain as a specifically patterned circuit of neurons. Being in a situation can automatically provoke certain behaviors unless other memory tracks are laid down to replace them.<sup>11</sup> A change in Matta's routine might well change the affect.

Like other survivors, I believe, Matta is both a traumatized victim and a witness to trauma. Trauma too is a durational performance, characterized by the nature of its repeats. For Matta, the experience does not last two hours—it has lasted years, since he was disappeared by the armed forces. His reiterated acts of walking, of showing, of telling, of leading people down the paths characterize trauma and the trauma-driven actions to channel and alleviate it. For him, as for the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, the ritualized tour offers both personal consolation and revenge. Memory is a tool and a political project—an honoring of those who are gone, and a reminder to those who will listen that the victimizers have gotten away with murder. His tour, like the Mother's march, bears witness to a society in ruins in which judicial systems cannot bring perpetrators to justice. Yet the walk-through, like the march, also makes visible the memory paths that maintain another topography of place and practice, not of terror but of resistance—the will not only to live but also to keep memory alive.

I can understand what Matta is doing here better than I can understand what I am doing here. What does Matta's performance want of me as audience or as witness? What does it mean about witnessing and the quality of *being in place*? He needs others (in this case me) to complete the task of witness, to keep those memory paths fresh and create more human rights activists. *To witness*, a transitive verb, defines both the act and the person carrying it out; the verb precedes the noun—it is through the act of witnessing that we become a witness. Identity relies on the action. We are both the subject and the product of our acts. Matta is the witness for those who are no longer alive to tell; he is the witness to himself as he tells of his own ordeal; he is a witness in the juridical sense—having brought charges against the Pinochet dictatorship. He is also the object of my witnessing—he needs me to acknowledge what he and



others went through in Villa Grimaldi. The transitivity of 'witness' ties us together—that's one reason he's keen to gauge the nature of his audience. Trauma-driven activism (like trauma itself) cannot simply be told or known; it needs to be repeated and externalized through embodied practice.

But why do I need him? I wonder about aura and worry about voyeurism and (dark) tourism. Is Matta my close-up—bringing unspeakable violence up as close as possible? If so, to what end? This too is multi layered in the ways that the personal, inter-personal, social and political come together. Walking through Villa Grimaldi with Matta, the over-size issues of human rights violations and crimes against humanity—too large and general on one level—take on an immediate and embodied form. In this spot where we are now standing, other people brutalized and killed their fellow citizens. Matta was one of those brutalized. I knew that of course, but standing there with *him*, I know it differently. Additionally, and on another level, the corporeal proximity to atrocity allows me a place to feel my own experiences of criminal violence in an openly public political context. Matta's pain activates mine—different in many ways but not in one essential way: In our everyday lives, we have no way of dealing with violent acts that shatters the limits of our understanding. Therapy offers some people comfort—but for others, this brutally emptied space of mourning and remembrance is more appropriate. We all live in proximity to criminal violence—and though some have felt it more personally than others, this violence is never just personal. If we focus only on the trauma we risk evacuating the politics. Standing there, together, bringing the buildings and routines back to life, we bear witness not just to loss, but to a system of power relations, hierarchies, and values that not only allowed but required the disappearance of certain members of the population.

The questions posed by these dark ruins may not be unrelated to the ones prompted by other, more glorious ruins. Like the Mesoamerican pyramids, these too make visible the bare bones of current social structures that normally exceed the eye. A topography of the zone around Chichen Itza, for example, would expose the entire area as a network of ancient cities although some lie under bramble and not all of them charge admission. With dark ruins too there's a lot more underground than meets the eye. There were 800 torture centers in Chile under Pinochet. If so many civic and public places like villas and gyms and department stores and schools were used for criminal violence, how do we know that the whole city did not function as a clandestine torture center? The scale of the violations is stunning. The ubiquity of the practice spills over and contaminates social life. The guided tour through Villa Grimaldi gives us an intensely condensed experience within the compound walls. But here, within the

camp, we know that the violence only appears isolated and bracketed from everything that surrounds it, accentuating the knowledge that criminal violence has spread so uncontrollably that no walls can contain it and no guide can explain it. We might control a site and put a fence around it, but the city, the country, the southern cone, the hemisphere has been networked for violence— and beyond too, of course, and not just because the U.S. has taken to out-sourcing torture. Is the dark ruin sickening because it situates us in such concrete proximity to atrocity? Because, by participating, we internalize the violence? Or because the ubiquitous practice situates all of us in such constant proximity to the dark ruin that is our society?

Perhaps here too we might need to separate affect from actions such as walking tours. Matta's trauma is his, inseparable from who he is. Yet his explanation of the causes is transmissible. We share the walk through. And as I follow him deeper down the paths, his experience resonates with me in part because I actually do always know what happened here/there and accept that this, like many other sites, is my responsibility. Although I will not accept the responsibility for torturing or killing other human beings, I do participate in a political project that depends on making certain populations disappear—be it through the criminalization of poverty, for example, or mental illness. I am constantly warned to keep vigil, to "say something" if I "see something." My tax dollars pay for Gitmo. For me, the emotional charge of the visit comes from the friction of place and the practice— inseparable, though at times disavowed. Something has been restored through the tour that brings several of my worlds into direct contact. As the multi-tiered space itself invites, I recognize the layers and layers of political and corporeal practices that have created these places, the histories I bring to them, and the emotions that get triggered as we walk through them in our own ways. I experience the tour as performance, and as trauma, and I know it's never for the first, or last, time.

Matta, the booklet tells us "feels a strong desire to transform history into memory." He makes the past alive through the performance of his *recorrido*. Yet trauma keeps the past alive in Matta as well—the future is not an option for him as long as Terranova grips him in that place. The 'future' in fact might be a very different project. In the best of all possible worlds, the future would mean turning this memory into history, the testimonial walk-through into evidence, Matta's personal admonition into legally binding indictments against perpetrators, and visitors into witnesses, human rights activists, and voters. Someone else, maybe someone who has never been tortured, would lead the tour. But that future is predicated on a past in which trauma has been transcended or resolved. That future is nowhere in sight even though

the arrow points us towards the fountain symbolizing “life and hope.” The tour does not offer us the end of trauma or the end of performance. Looking downwards we make our way through this transitional space between remembrance and future project.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This paper is dedicated to Richard Schechner—whose work has enriched my scholarship, and whose friendship has enriched my life. An earlier, quite different version of this essay will appear in Telling Ruins in Latin America, edited Vicky Unruh and Michael Lazzara (forthcoming Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). The epigraph is from Richard Schechner, Between Theater and Anthropology. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985, pg. 35.

<sup>2</sup> The research that came out of that project was published (in part) in Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina’s Dirty War. Durham: Duke University Press. 1997.

<sup>3</sup> DINA stands for Dirección Nacional de Inteligencia (National Intelligence Directorate).

<sup>4</sup> Teresa Meade, in “Holding the Junta Accountable: Chile’s ‘Sitios de Memoria’ and the History of Torture, Disappearance, and Death” writes that Villa Grimaldi was the “only ‘memorial’ of torture in Latin America” when it was built in 1995. Now ‘Parque de la Memoria’ and ESMA in Buenos Aires also function as memorials. (Radical History Review, 79 (2001) 123-139) accessed online October 24, 2008, [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/radical\\_history\\_review/v079/79.1meade.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/radical_history_review/v079/79.1meade.html)

<sup>5</sup> See Michael J. Lazzara’s Chile in Transition: The Poetics and Politics of Memory. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006) for an excellent analysis of Pedro Matta’s tour and Villa Grimaldi.

<sup>6</sup> Pedro Alejandro Matta, Villa Grimaldi, Santiago de Chile” A Visitor’s Guide. Self-published, pg. 13.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin

<sup>8</sup> Marcial Godoy-Anatívia, “The Body as Sanctuary Space: Towards a Somatic Topography of Torture” (unpublished manuscript, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> “Trauma Driven Performance.” Correspondents at Large section of PMLA’s Special Issue on Human Rights, ed. Domna Stanton. October 2006, vol. 21, No. 5, pg 1674-7.

<sup>10</sup> See Thomas A. Abercrombie, Pathways of Memory and Power: Ethnography and History Among an Andean People. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> See Vittorio Gallese, “Intentional Attunement. The Mirror Neuron System and its Role in Interpersonal Relations.” <http://www.unipr.it/arpa/mirror/pubs/pdf/Gallese/Gallese-Eagle-Migone%202007.pdf> accessed October 25, 2008.

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