

Colectivo Malvestidas (Poorly Dressed Collective): Critical Practices in Fashion, Clothing, and the Body

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Abstract

A(R)MADAS (a Spanish pun for beloved and armed) was performed by the Chilean collective entitled Malvestidas on December 19, 2021 in commemoration of the National Day Against Femicide. In Chile, and Latin America in general, over the course of the last two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically exposed gender inequalities and gender-based social emergencies. This is due to the increase in violence against women, children, migrants, and gender-sex dissidents. Prior to the staging of A(R)MADAS, for a few months, the Malvestidas collected used kitchen towels from family members and female friends, with which they made “domestic fighters” clothing with a nod to female samurai warriors. The original state of each kitchen cloth was preserved. The intervention took place in the so-called Plaza de la Dignidad (former Plaza Baquedano), the epicenter of social mobilizations in Chile from the popular revolt of 2019 to date. A(R)MADAS ends with the Malvestidas unifying their skirts to turn them into a large canvas on which they wrote INDOMESTICABLES (UNDOMESTICABLE). “Indomesticable” in Spanish means something that cannot be tamed. In the context of performance, it also alludes to the domestic as a political space represented by kitchen clothes.

Photos: Rodrigo Arenas

Make-up: Marcos Zamora

Manifiesto Malvestidas

MALVESTIDAS (POORLY DRESSED) SHOWS ITS TRUE COLOURS

We are interested in the reverse of the fabric, what is hidden, dismissed, denied. Loose threads as a result of the precarious. Loose threads as passage of time. Loose threads as twist and fracture of the continuous discourse. Error identifies us. Error inspires us.

MALVESTIDAS AS AN OPEN, INCONCLUSIVE COLLECTIVE WEAVE

Faced with current ruthless and competitive neoliberalism, we summon points of views, thoughts, and voices from and towards marginalized discourse, because we believe it is the weave that gives fabric strength.

MALVESTIDAS AS AN IDENTITY OF PLACE

We position ourselves in and from the south in order to activate our practice. The south as territory. The territory as discourse. From here we weave, articulate, and generate dialogues and cohesion.

MALVESTIDAS AS ETHICAL FABRIC/TEXTILE

We are interested in creating spaces and links that are woven from critical affection, respect, appreciation for the diverse and are free of violence.

MALVESTIDAS AS ACTIVE DISOBEDIENCE AND DISOBEDIENT ACTIVISM

We fight against the fabric of uniformity and comprehended knowledge. We reveal the political potential of the cultural phenomenon that is fashion and the practice of dressing to denounce and vindicate.

MALVESTIDAS AS QUALITY TEXTILE

Quality is the warp thread: strong and resistant, it sustains our actions. Quality that does not seek to satisfy foreign or imposed canons, but rather the result of affection, enjoyment, and dedication that we deposit in each project we weave.

MALVESTIDAS AND HUMOUR AS A STRATEGY

We believe in the disruptive power of humour to shape our opinions, promote critical discourses, and question the norm. Humour is our strategy to undress serious issues.

A(R)MADAS: A PUBLIC INTERVENTION AGAINST SEXIST VIOLENCE

“I have every right to burn and break. I’m not going to ask anyone’s permission, because I’m breaking for my daughter. And whoever wants to break, let them break, and whoever wants to burn, let them burn, and whoever doesn’t, don’t bother us.”¹

—Yessenia Zamudio, mother of María de Jesús Jaime Zamudio, who was a victim of femicide in Mexico in 2016

After months of intermittent work due to the COVID-19 related lockdown, the Colectivo Malvestidas (Poorly Dressed Collective) took to the streets on December 19, 2021 to call out and repudiate the true pandemic that is *machismo*, a learned way of projecting masculinity that demonstrates superiority over women.

This date is the official Chilean National Day Against Femicide, and commemorates the death of six-year-old Javiera Neira, who was murdered by her father when she tried to defend her mother from his attempt to kill her. The Coordinadora 19 de Diciembre, an activist organization against femicide, promoted this project in the Senate, which was approved unanimously by the National Congress in 2018 and became Law 21, 282 on November 10, 2020. The law establishes the dignity of femicide victims and recognizes the contribution of feminist movements in the fight against sexist violence² in the country (Diario Oficial, 2020).

¹ Excerpt from the words of Yessenia Zamudio fighting to do justice for her daughter who was murdered in 2016, in a video that was captured in a protest in 2020 for the femicide of Ingrid Escanilla. This video went viral not only in Mexico, but also in the rest of Latin America.

² We decided to use the term “sexist violence” (*violencia machista*) instead of “gender violence” because the first is independent of the relationship between the aggressor and the women or girls, while the second is framed within affective relationships (partners or former partners). Sexist violence also includes the violation of human rights against people with a gender identity and/or sexuality different from the normative. Additionally, in Chile, Law No. 21,212 was published recently in March 2020, which makes legislative modifications regarding the criminalization of femicide. Before this date, femicide was considered the homicide of a woman by a man only when there was a sentimental or sexual relationship (with or without cohabitation) or they had or had had a child. With this modification, femicide is when a man kills a woman because of her gender, regardless of whether there is a relationship of some kind. See: Ley 21.212. Modifica el Código Penal, el Código Procesal Penal y la Ley N° 18.216 en materia de tipificación del femicidio. 4 de marzo de 2020. D.O. No. 42.595. Recovered from: https://oig.cepal.org/sites/default/files/2020_chl_ley21.212.pdf [5 December 2022].

In Chile, as in other parts of the world, the pandemic revealed and aggravated the already-present gender inequities and social emergencies endemic to contemporary society. At the local level, in 2020, calls to the “help line”³ for domestic violence increased by more than 70% compared to the previous year (Fuentes, 2020). Women have experienced situations of violence and abuse with unusual cruelty, where they are supposed to be safe. The greatest danger, then, has been in their own homes.

A(R)MADAS is an intervention by Colectivo Malvestidas in public space that responds to this situation. The title is a Spanish pun that in English would mean “beloved and armed.”

The action took place in the so-called Plaza de la Dignidad (Former Plaza Baquedano) in Santiago, one of the main sites for protests in Chile since the popular revolt of October 18, 2019 to date.⁴

³ Help line managed by the Ministry of Women and Gender Equity in Chile for victims of violence.

⁴ The beginning of the popular revolt in Chile is related to the rise in the price of the subway ticket, which caused secondary school students to initiate in the capital an “evasion movement,” which was joined by university students, workers, and subway users in general, becoming the largest social uprising since the end of Augusto Pinochet’s civic-military dictatorship (1973-1990). For information on the popular revolt see: Jiménez-Yañez, C. (octubre-diciembre, 2020). #Chiledespertó: causas del estallido social en Chile. In *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 82, núm. 4. Recovered from: <http://mexicanadesociologia.unam.mx/index.php/v82n4/435-v82n4a8> [November 29, 2022].



FIGURE 1 PERFORMANCE A(R)MADAS BY COLECTIVO MALVESTIDAS. PLAZA DE LA DIGNIDAD (FORMER PLAZA BAQUEDANO), SANTIAGO, CHILE, DECEMBER 19, 2020. PHOTO: RODRIGO ARENAS @GGARBANZOS MAKEUP: MARCOS ZAMORA @EFECTO_SEDANTE.

Dressed as “domestic fighters” we occupied the statue of General Baquedano, a monument of the symbolic dispute between active and mobilized citizens and the security forces of the discredited government of Sebastián Piñera. We stood on one side of the statue for a few dozen minutes as if we were “moody” or “a little tense,” which is the way family, friends, or colleagues describe the behavior of violent men. Our attitude intensified and we became more threatening until we reached a climax of aggression, and each raised a kitchen machete as a sign of rebellion and self-defense against the violent perpetrators and murderers of women. The performance culminated in the disrobing of our abundant skirts and then uniting them to form a large canvas on which we wrote “Indomesticables” (Undomesticated).



FIGURE 2 PERFORMANCE A(R)MADAS BY COLECTIVO MALVESTIDAS. PLAZA DE LA DIGNIDAD (FORMER PLAZA BAQUEDANO), SANTIAGO, CHILE, DECEMBER 19, 2020. PHOTO: RODRIGO ARENAS @GGARBANZOS. MAKEUP: MARCOS ZAMORA @EFECTO_SEDANTE.

The intervention constitutes the third and final part of a creative project that lasted for several months during the lockdown. We started by collecting kitchen towels used by female family and friends. Then, on different days, we made the uniform of “domestic fighters,” with a nod to the samurai warriors. No kitchen cloth was altered or modified; we preserved each towel’s shape. The use of these domestic cloths alludes to the kitchen as a political space, where a historically denigrated and feminized activity takes place. These towels thus gain importance in the performance, and when sutured together, compellingly resignifies each piece’s intimate, domestic form into a large-scale public site of militant protest.



FIGURE 3 PERFORMANCE PROCESS, MAKING CLOTHING. COLECTIVO MALVESTIDAS, CENTRO CULTURAL BALMACEDA ARTE JOVEN, SANTIAGO, CHILE, DECEMBER 2020.

In Chile, the COVID-19 crisis (beginning in 2020) occurs in the midst of the social, political, and cultural turmoil that began months earlier with the popular revolt, which in turn led to a historic constituent process.⁵ The protests and uprisings against the neoliberal economic model⁶ that has subjected the country to the tyranny of the capitalist market were not silenced despite the lockdown. Personal stories of domestic struggles and feminist demands proliferated across social networks through actions promoted mainly by women, with the purpose of supporting themselves in situations of multidimensional vulnerability increased by the novel coronavirus. Considering that we had all been prohibited from public space and therefore constrained to domestic space, as the Colectivo Malvestidas we speculated about the meaning that Carol Hanisch's 1969 famous sentence "the personal is political" acquires in this context.

⁵ After the popular revolt, Chile carried out a constituent process for the writing of a new Constitution that began on November 15, 2019 with the Acuerdo por la Paz y la Nueva Constitución (Agreement for Social Peace and a New Constitution) and ended on September 4, 2022 with the new Constitution submitted to referendum. The rejection option won with 61.86% of the votes, compared to 38.14% for the option in favor of the text.

⁶ About the establishment of neoliberalism in Chile see: Conformación de la ideología neoliberal en Chile (1955–1978) in <http://www.memoriachilena.gob.cl/602/w3-article-31415.html>.

The kitchen symbolizes the historical marginalization of women from the public space, hindering their political and social representation and participation (Benavente, Espinace and Rojas, 2021). Since the 1970s, feminist art has been able to account for and problematize this reality. Seminal works include Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) and Birgit Jürgenssen's *Housewives' Kitchen Apron* (1975). In Latin America, the documentary directed by the Brazilian artist Beatriz Mira based in Mexico, *Vicios de la cocina, las papas silban* (1978), is an especially significant example.

However, in moments of increased food insecurity and widespread hunger, women have historically subverted this social order and organized to collectively demand solutions, de-individualizing the problem of food scarcity.

During the pandemic, the self-managed and clandestine preparation of “ollas comunes”⁷ (common pots) proliferated throughout the country (Pleyers, 2021). This survival strategy is deeply rooted in the memory of the working-class struggle and is led again mostly by women who integrate and/or provide food to a marginalized and vulnerable population (ONU Mujeres y Vértice Urbano, 2021). This constitutes an eloquent case of how the kitchen can become a space for social articulation and subversion.

The act of taking the kitchen out into the street and collectivizing it also makes the domestic political — it removes the kitchen from its historic isolation to turn it into an open and public place. We believe that this enables the recognition and problematization of its deeply rooted violence.

⁷ The “ollas comunes” are self-convened popular initiatives that are articulated in periods of economic crisis and famine for community self-management of food. In Chile, they originate in the 1930s in the face of the nitrate crisis and later reappeared in response to the economic crisis and the neoliberal economic model imposed in the 1980s by the dictator Augusto Pinochet. Hardy, C. (1986). *Hambre + dignidad = ollas comunes*. Santiago: PE.

CLOTHES AS A WEAPON FOR PROTEST

Since 2016, we have been engaged in the so-called “new feminist wave” in Chile by both theorizing and exhibiting the aesthetic and political uses of clothing in the intervention strategies by collectives and gender-sex dissidents and women who “from intuition”⁸ are committed to feminist causes.

Our work attempts to generate critical thinking about clothes and their ways of resignification to transmit a specific discourse in the public space. A(R)MADAS contributes to this important movement.

Protesters attribute an intention and a function to clothing, that is, they “activate” it as objects with agency (Cuba, 2021). In doing so, they expand the material limits of clothing and intervene in both the affective and corporeal experience of activism while also producing archetypal images that function as visual experiences of the enactments. The political activation of clothing has been key in the construction of ephemeral communities, in the rearticulation of the idea of protest and, above all, in the rejection of neoliberal patriarchal capitalism.

From our perspective, the performance *Un violador en tu camino* (A rapist in your path) by the feminist collective LASTESIS and the actions of the women self-convened as *Capuchas rojas en resistencia* (Red hood who resists) are part of this movement locally, to name a couple of examples. In May 2018 hundreds of women gathered in downtown Santiago with their heads covered in glitter, feathers, sequins and pearls. Some did it alone, others grouped, but all shouted at the same time “No more discrimination and gender violence in universities.” They were the hooded feminists who were carrying out — unknowingly — the greatest feminist uprising in the history of the country. On November 25, 2019, a month after the popular revolt began, *La marcha más grande de Chile* (The biggest march of Chile) was held with about 1,200,000 people participating. This date is also the commemoration of the Day for the Elimination of Violence

⁸ *Feminismo intuitivo* (intuitive feminism) is a concept that the Bolivian anarcho-feminist, María Galindo, proposes in her last book *Feminismo Bastardo*. According to her, this is a type of feminism that doesn’t come from academic instruction, but from the great ability of women to read their own history and generate ruptures of a political nature. Galindo suggests that this feminism is, in effect, the one that is changing the patriarchal structures of society. Galindo, María. (2021). *Feminismo Bastardo*. La Paz: Mujeres Creando.

Against Women, and taking this into consideration the hooded feminists, now under the name of Capuchas rojas en resistencia, marched demanding the consecration of women rights, better access to power and that the new constitution is written with parity. While this garment has become a symbol of “the new feminist wave,” the Government intends to punish its use by modifying the Penal Code to establish greater penalties for those who cover their faces in contexts of mobilizations.

On November 25, simultaneously in front of the Courts of Justice Palace of Santiago, more than 2,000 women participated in the intervention *Un violador en tu camino* by LASTESIS. Dressed in “party” clothes, the women perform a choreography singing an incisive song in opposition to patriarchy, the main forms of violence women encounter and the lack of justice. Survivors of sexual assault are frequently asked what they were wearing when they report the situation. Through the resignification of clothing to produce a specific discourse, LASTESIS criticizes society and the executive and judicial powers for becoming complicit in the crimes committed with impunity by highlighting clothing as an instigator of crime.

Interventions and activist performances of this type are taking place throughout Latin America. The collective *Mujeres Creando* from Bolivia dressed the statue of Isabel la Católica in La Paz with Indigenous women’s clothing on October 12, 2020 (Columbus Day). This intervention challenges how Spanish colonialism established the figure of the white woman as an ideal model of beauty and virtue. This pernicious, racialized construction of femininity continues to circulate in Latin American societies and discriminates against the non-white woman. Years before on March 8, 2015, and some 6,000 kilometers away, a group of fifteen-year-old girls took to the city streets of Ecatepec, Mexico to protest against femicides, resignifying the *quinceañera* and the “princess party dress” in a intervention that confronts the State and society. Their dresses were dirty, torn, and bloody, alluding to the bodies that are victims of the crudest expression of sexist violence: femicide. The action was coordinated by their teacher Manuel Amador, as part of the workshop *Women, Art, and Politics* at the secondary school they attended at the time.

A(R)MADAS and the other performances mentioned respond to and articulate local struggles that, from their strategic uses of clothes in the public space, produce specific knowledge about dress practices on the continent.

We suggest that these interventions are articulated by the Latin American political and social realities and particular feminist agendas in which they are situated; the political appropriation and occupation of public space; and the way in which clothes are re-signified, where manual techniques (sewing, embroidery, knitting, etc.) associated with the feminine space prevail. These actions are part of a broader panorama, in which clothing has been politicized in different ways. Emblematic cases are, from a historical perspective, the Suffragettes (late nineteenth and early twentieth century), the Black Panthers (1966–1982), and more recently, the Pussyhat movement (2017), the female celebrities dressed in all black at Golden Globe in recognition of Time's Up/#MeToo (2018), and the Black Lives Matter movement (2020).

However, the presentation and reflection on this creative project, also seeks to rethink the narratives historically excluded by fashion studies. The discipline continues to overlook the ways in which clothing in Latin America is problematized beyond the perspective of Eurocentrism. The euro-centric gaze of fashion presents Latin America, as well as other territories that have also been a bastion of colonialist thought and action, as a place that possesses culture, but is denied as a legitimate place of production of knowledge. In this way Latin America exists in this gaze, but without Latin America in actuality/reality, rather it focuses on an exteriority that displaces practices, popular community knowledge, and long-term memories, which are practices that nurture individual and collective identities that have one of their most significant expressions in clothing.

The current feminist movements in Chile give shape to a “political moment” that is essential to theorize, and as Colectivo Malvestidas we amplify the agitating, subversive, and provocative function that clothing has occupied in this context. Clothing, after all, is one of our “weapons” for simultaneously dismantling dominant and oppressive discourses and developing critical disruptive and counter-hegemonic discourses.



FIGURE 4 BACKSTAGE, PRIOR TO THE MALVESTIDAS PERFORMANCE IN THE PUBLIC SPACE. DECEMBER 19, 2020. PHOTO: RODRIGO ARENAS @GGARBANZOS. MAKEUP: MARCOS ZAMORA @EFECTO_SEDANTE.

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Author Bio



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For seven years she has been Arts Projects Manager at the British Council Chile. PhD student in the History of Design Department at the Royal College of Arts (scholarship from the London Arts and Humanities Partnership). She has a Master's degree in Creative and Cultural Entrepreneurship with a minor in Design from Goldsmiths University of London (two scholarships from the National Fund for the Development of Culture and the Arts and Goldsmiths Banco Santander Scholarship). Currently, she is developing research about the resignification of clothing as privileged tools of protest in contemporary feminist movements in Latin America from 2015 to date.

Loreto Martínez is a theatre designer, curator, and creative producer in various cultural projects,

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