Invisible Participation: The Hologram Protest in Spain

By Almudena Escobar López

Is it possible to organize a demonstration without actual people? Rosalyn Deutsche describes how, from the standpoint of democracy, the space of politics is "a discursively constructed site" in which laws delimit its "proper usage."[1] Laws dictate the structure of public space, positioning the body and controlling its relation to the political community. In Spain, where representative democracy is only thirty-seven years old, the government has been containing social dissidents by means of strategic laws with the noble excuse of protecting citizens' security. In 2015, after the economic crisis of 2008 reawakened the old phantoms of Francisco Franco's dictatorship, activists organized a protest with holographic projections of protestors at the doors of the Parliament.

The protest had its origin in the anti-austerity 15-M movement that began in spring 2011. The 15-M, also known in Europe as "The Spanish Revolution," is a grassroots movement that emerged mainly via social media. The protests started on May 15, 2011, following the call from *Democracia Real Ya* (Real Democracy Now) and other social organizations such as *Juventud Sin Futuro* (Youth Without a Future), *No Les Votes* (Don't Vote for Them), and Anonymous. Each of the above organizations focuses on specific issues, such as the precarious situation of youth, the use of electoral abstinence as a political weapon against politicians, and online freedom of expression. But all of them rejected the so-called democratic system in Spain and the austerity policies imposed by the government.

The 15-M movement emerged in a moment of deep social discontent resulting from the prolonged economic crisis in Spain. At the time, Spain had the highest unemployment rate in the European Union—approximately twenty-one percent overall and forty-six percent youth unemployment[2]—with wage stagnation, increasing mortgage rates, job insecurity, credit restriction, and numerous structural adjustment policies that affected the welfare state. The situation was exacerbated by the direct government support of financial institutions and widespread corruption among politicians. The protesters condemned the reductive Spanish electoral system that favors major political parties and promotes the bipartisan rule of the Spanish Socialist Worker's Party (PSOE) and the Popular Party (PP). They argued that the two political parties did not represent citizens' interests, but rather those of private economic interests and corporations. By reactivating public space with protests, the 15-M expressed the indignity of an increasingly closed system in which there is merely alternation between two similar parties, asphyxiating any chance of alternative.

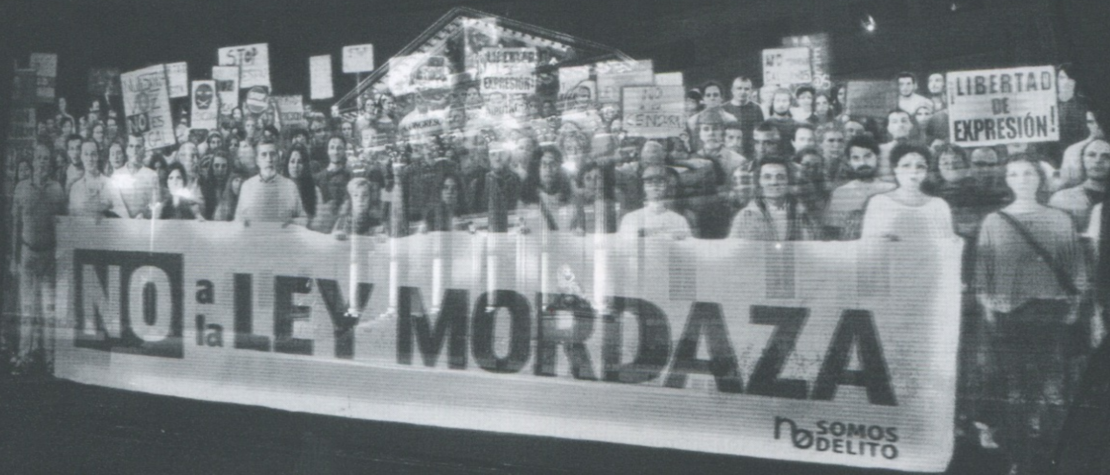
The 15-M movement had as immediate consequences the occupation of the public squares for several months, the surrounding of the Parliament building, as well as protests targeting individual politicians outside their homes or workplaces—known as *escrache*—organized by the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (PAH). In addition, it developed a solid social network of collaboration organized by means of social media and other digital platforms.

On March 26, 2015, as a direct response to increasing social mobilizations in the streets, the government approved a new Citizen Security Law. The law—known in Spain as *ley mordaza* (the "gag law")—was developed and unanimously approved by the ruling PP without the support of other parties in Parliament. Despite the peaceful nature of the protests, the law functions as a defense mechanism by the government in a further attempt to control public space by silencing criticism against its austerity measures.

One of the major changes introduced is the establishment of administrative infractions, which entail disproportionate fines of up to 30,000 euro (nearly $32,000) for people exercising their right to protest, or simply criticizing the policies of the government. These infractions can be imposed by an administrative authority (such as the police) instead of being ruled by a judge in court (as with crimes). Although it is possible to take a case to an administrative court, this requires the payment of taxes to do so, which criminal courts do not. As a result, citizens are not able to participate in protests unless they are able to pay the fines of an infraction or the administrative court taxes.

The law prohibits demonstrations or any "serious disruption of public safety" in front of the Congress building, the Senate, or any of the regional parliaments, even when the buildings are vacant. It also penalizes taking unauthorized photographs or video of police on the grounds that this might cause problems for the officers and their families, effectively prohibiting people from documenting police misconduct. Taking into account the number of police brutality cases that have been made public via social media through video recordings and still images, this measure restricts citizens' resources for self-defense against abuses of authority. It also penalizes those who prevent government employees from enforcing administrative or judicial orders targeting those grassroots organizations, such as members of PAH, who have been stopping evictions of people affected by the economic crisis since 2009. These are only some of the law's more repressive measures, together with a longer list of minor penalties and restrictions.[3]

United Nations human rights reporters have qualified the law as a quick move by the government against the generalized social unrest in Spain. Maina Kiai, UN special rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, said that "the so-called 'gag law' violates the very essence of the right to assembly since it penalizes a wide range of actions and behaviors that are essential



Holographic protest banner, April 10, 2015; photograph by No Somos Delito

for the exercise of this fundamental right, thus sharply limiting its exercise."[4] David Kaye, UN special rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, added that the law "unnecessarily and disproportionately restricts basic freedoms such as the collective exercise of the right to freedom of opinion and expression in Spain."[5]

In short, the gag law is one step forward in the process of turning the Spanish state into an authoritarian representative democracy with a narrow margin for dissent and criticism. By limiting the use of public space, the gag law defines a unitary space that legitimates government power and makes invisible any attempt at criticism, protest, or social movement.

Rosalyn Deutsche describes public space as the core of democracy, as a radically open site of political action characterized by continuous debate and uncertainty:

> Conflict, division, and instability, then, do not ruin the democratic public sphere; they are the conditions of its existence. The threat arises with efforts to supersede conflict, for the public sphere remains democratic only insofar as its exclusions are taken into account and open to contestation.[6]

The authoritarian government of the PP is limiting the capacity to protest, converting the gag law into an institutionalization of repression that closes public space for its own benefit. It is an attempt to domesticate the voices of disagreement by imposing the solitary voice of the government.

On April 10, 2015, the *No Somos Delito* (We Are Not Crime) coalition, or NSD, organized a demonstration against the gag law in front of the Spanish Parliament building. NSD was born in the winter of 2013 to fight the penal code reform in Spain then being promoted by PP minister Alberto Ruiz Gallardón and to make citizens aware of its significance. Since then, NSD has incorporated into its cause the fight against the gag law. It has organized hundreds of demonstrations in front of Parliament, the Senate, and public squares in Spain and even Belgium, asking for support from the United Nations and other European countries.

But why did none of the other protests have the same impact as this one? The main reason, I would argue, is that this time the activists decided to march as holograms in front of Parliament, highlighting the fact that the Spanish people would soon only be able to protest as disembodied images of themselves.

Javier Urbaneja, a publicist who worked at the time for advertising agency DDB Spain in Madrid, heard the idea from a colleague who said that people in Spain would soon need to turn into holograms if they wanted to protest.[7] Urbaneja and some of his coworkers discussed the technical details with a production company called Garlic TV and approached NSD with the idea. For several months, NSD operated the website Holograms for Freedom (hologramasporlalibertad.org), where people were able to upload messages that would appear on

holographic banners during the demonstration, or upload images of their faces or voice messages to be reproduced during the protest.

On April 6, filmmaker Esteban Crespo filmed fifty people—activists from NSD and other social platforms together with non-activist people who volunteered for the filming—marching in the town of Paracuellos del Jarama, about eight miles from Madrid. The images of these bodies were combined with the participation of more than seventeen thousand people who sent their images, slogans, and voices through the website. The sound of their voices was mixed with the original sound of the filming, and their written slogans were used for the banners incorporating their participation in the final action.

Once the day arrived, activists built a 13 x 23–foot translucent screen in front of the Parliament building, along with a telephone booth-sized structure beside it. This structure was used by leaders of NSD to give interviews to the press, appearing in real time as holograms on a separate screen. NSD announced the event as a film shoot open only to members of the press rather than as a public demonstration in order to avoid any embodied protestors. The organizers wanted to clearly convey the message that Spanish citizens would soon not be able to protest unless they became holograms.

Congressional security approved the protest because Garlic TV presented it as a film shoot instead of a political demonstration. As Urbaneja told me, "by the time the authorities realized what this was really about, it was too late. Furthermore, suppressing the protest would give a totalitarian image that they wanted to avoid in front of the press that was reporting the event live."[8] The strategy of requesting the space for a film shoot allowed NSD to penetrate Congress's now privatized "public spaces," and rearticulated these new security measures, making them ineffective. NSD organizer Alba Villanueva explained:

Interview with No Somos Delito activist, April 10, 2015; © Álvaro Minguito; photograph by Álvaro Minguito

> In this case, technology was a channel or tool to get the message across to that part of society that was alien to these issues. Novelty and spectacular action were keys to attract the interest of the media, and generate curiosity about something new or creative while conveying the message.[9]

The hologram protest captured the attention of thousands of people around the world who became interested in the gag law itself and the political landscape in Spain. The protest made visible the increasing restrictions on freedom that the Spanish government was attempting to keep under wraps.

The event was widely covered by the international media. It was on the front page of *Le Monde* as "The Story of the Day," in the *Independent* and the *New Yorker*, and on CNN. Apart from the reporting of the event itself, a suspicious attitude arose internationally around the whole political situation in Spain. On April 16, the *Boston Globe* published an editorial claiming "Virtual speech trumps Spain's gag law," and the *New York Times*, on April 22, condemned "Spain's Ominous Gag Law." By contrast, the Spanish coverage was minimal. The event appeared for only two or three minutes on the national television channel TVE during the Saturday news. The national press also relegated the protest to internal pages, burying it in secondary sections; *El Mundo* placed it in its "Innovators" subsection within its "Economy" section dedicated to digital advancements and gadgets, while *El País* placed it only in the local section dedicated to entertainment in Madrid and, furthermore, published only in that geographic area. The reports focused on the protest's technical innovation and only vaguely touched on its aims, mentioning NSD in some cases. Only independent news such as *La República* or international media such as the *New Yorker* and *Le Monde* offered detailed analyses of the law and the relationship between the protest's goals and its innovative tactics.

The hologram protest made visible what the government wanted to keep invisible, and revealed the capacity of the oppressed to rebel and jump the containment fences built by the government around public space. The biased coverage of the local media was an attempt to keep the eyes of the population shut, reducing the protest's importance by transforming it into a minor entertainment anecdote.

The lack of national coverage and the delimitation of public space in contemporary Spain are symptomatic of the hypocrisy of the Spanish democratic ideal and the traces left by Franco's dictatorship. After almost forty years of a repressive police state, the transition to democracy was a quiet process. It was a transition without justice, in which the perpetrators of the totalitarian regime were assimilated into the newborn constitutional monarchy. This meant that, in contrast to other countries that endured fascist regimes, such as Germany and Italy, there were no trials of former regime members and collaborators. Spaniards who suffered repression during the regime had to keep their mourning quiet within the walls of their homes.

This lack of public historical memory parallels the appropriation and control of public space, which also tries to quiet and contain dissident elements within walls. The gag law is a new mechanism

of control and distrust that demarcates public space and limits the rights of citizens, hidden behind a supposedly benevolent citizen security stratagem.

The protest's disembodied images enacted severe criticism of the vacuity of the democratic system in Spain and its consequent flaws. The holograms became an alternative language for protest in absence, an action without a body. The activists broke with their presence as individual subjects to transform themselves into a hybrid political entity by means of multiple voices, slogans, and disembodied transparent projections. They transformed the inability to protest into an ironic and absurdist protest without protesters. The holographic images were not a direct representation of reality but a visual manifestation of the injustices of Spanish representative democracy, in which the actual bodies of citizens are the least important element. The protest was a direct reference to the lack of representation within the Spanish political system in which the voice is disembodied and carried into the body of the representative—the politician. At the same time, it criticizes the lack of efficacy of the system and shows the capacity of technology to enable the organization of protests in both physical and non-physical form; Twitter, Facebook, and other social networks were fundamental organizing tools during the 15-M.

But the hologram protest was more than just a criticism of Spanish representative democracy; it also embodied a reactivation of the spirit of the 15-M and its mode of making politics and understanding democracy. The 15-M promoted direct participation by means of an assembly process in which everyone could speak, giving priority to heterogeneity and discussion over consensus and representation. The assemblies provided not a static manual of solutions, but rather a continuous chain of questions that analyzed, learned from, and transformed the context as well as each of the participant individuals and their necessities.

The Parliament building is supposed to be the core of the democratic space, where representatives make decisions for the common good of the community. But within a representative democracy such as Spain, fences and police forces enclose the Parliament. Instead of being open to the people, the building has been appropriated by the government, which has transformed it into a fortress in which decisions are made in isolation, independent of public opinion. The holographic images reactivated the space, transforming it into a virtual agora where there was room for criticism and debate. For a few minutes, the voices of the people were heard within the empty space of Parliament. Their transparent images reflected on the walls of the building foregrounded the opacity and stasis of the authoritarian government. The holograms occupied the space of representation and transformed it into a participatory space, returning its openness to the people.

By becoming holograms, the protestors escaped the burden of representation, disassociating themselves from the Spanish representative system. As the images were a hybrid construction that combined distant individuals and places, there was no direct referent within the spatiotemporal reality of the Parliament. What made the protest a protest was not the presence of physical demonstrators marching, but the act of protesting itself. The projection in the particular space of the Parliament is what made the event a protest. The protest was a collective event that resonated internationally and suspended temporarily the restrictive measures of the government. In response, the government systematically attempted to censor the coverage of the event and restrict its dissemination while underlining its originality rather than its severe critique of the current Spanish political system.

In spite of its incorporeality and virtuality, the hologram protest had real consequences, including widespread international media coverage and awareness of the political situation in Spain.[10] In contrast with the old-fashioned model of representative democracy with its sole head of state, the holograms continued the discussion started by the 15-M Movement. This discussion created a new arena of negotiation of meaning and representation, as well as a participatory model of democracy centered on continuous dialogue and the contestatory encounter between individuals. The protest broke the dichotomy of the real and the possible, opening the Parliament space to a new dimension of agency. The event operated in a similar way to Edward Soja's "thirdspace," where the "real-and-imagined" interact as a whole. It was a space of "critical exchange where the geographical imagination [could] be expanded to encompass a multiplicity of perspectives,"[11] constituting a new political reality that communicates other possible public spaces of action. The protest was a lived space created by new technologies, which gave room for a new spatial critical consciousness, questioning the legitimacy of the current political space in Spain.

ALMUDENA ESCOBAR LÓPEZ is a PhD student in the Program in Visual and Cultural Studies at the University of Rochester.

NOTES **1**. Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 289. **2**. "Eurostat," the Statistical Office of the European Union, last modified November 20, 2015, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/about/overview. **3**. See Boletín Oficial del Estado, *Citizen Security Law*, www.boe.es/boe/dias/2015/03/31/pdfs/BOE-A-2015-3442.pdf. **4**. "Two legal reform projects undermine the rights of assembly and expression in Spain," United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, last modified October 30, 2015, www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15597. **5**. Ibid. **6**. Deutsche, *Evictions*, 289. **7**. Javier Urbaneja, quoted in Jonathan Blitzer, "Protest by Hologram," *New Yorker*, April 20, 2015, www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/protest-by-hologram. **8**. Urbaneja, email conversation with the author, November 19, 2015. **9**. Alba Villanueba, email conversation with the author, November 24, 2015. **10**. Raphael Minder, "Spain's News Media Are Squeezed by Government and Debt," *New York Times*, November 5, 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/11/06/world/europe/as-spains-media-industry-changes-rapidly-some-worry-about-objectivity.html?_r=0. **11**. Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 5.

Video content
for this article is
available online!
vsw.org/afterimage