

# A Protest With No People: Maria Blanco and Her Holographic Activists

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IN MARCH 1907, Elsa Yakovleva, a twenty-three-year-old medical student, was arrested for distributing anti-Tsarist pamphlets outside the Moskovsky Railway in St. Petersburg. She was sentenced to seven years labour in a gulag in Siberia, and died of tuberculosis three years into her sentence. In 1927, the journals Elsa wrote during her internment were sent back to her sole surviving brother, Albert, who had them published a year later.

In Elsa's last journal entry, she wrote that her deepest fear was not her own impending death, but the death of the movement. She was possessed of a tormenting, almost paranoid fear that without being at the front lines, her comrades would lose heart. Her final wish, she confessed, was to build 'one thousand life-sized dolls that are of a perfect likeness to me—red hair, full-voiced—but made of wood and metal.' Elsa imagined sending this legion of mechanical clones to protest outside the Tsar's Winter Palace, one-by-one for one thousand days. 'They will arrest me one thousand times and one thousand times I will return,' she wrote. 'They will strike me. They will shoot me. But still I will return everyday, just like the angry mid-summer sun.'

Not many know of Elsa Yakovleva, but her story has been an inspiration for Maria Blanco, a technologist and researcher who has developed a highly idiosyncratic hologram technology designed to assist activist groups around the globe conduct disembodied protests.

Blanco, who was undertaking doctoral research in image recognition and hologram technology before she became involved in activism, has herself never taken part in a protest. In fact, Blanco only became interested in the idea of protest during the final year of her PhD, after watching a group of

protestors assemble outside her university library every day for three weeks. ‘They were there every morning when I arrived and every afternoon when I left the library,’ Blanco says. ‘And I study long hours.’

Precisely what these students were protesting about was of no interest to Blanco. It was simply the fact that they would choose to spend their time protesting—a state of being that Blanco considers both highly activated yet strangely passive—that fascinated her. ‘In my mind, their protest was a formal problem,’ Blanco explains. ‘How can a group of people bring awareness to an issue by assembling in a public space? How can we best deploy and organise human bodies, without using violence, to bring about a desired change?’

After a while, Blanco found herself watching the protestors out of the third story window instead of studying. She noticed that the protestors were getting tired, and that dark circles formed under their eyes. ‘I felt sorry for them, and for their families, because they were obviously neglecting their studies. Their methods seemed extremely inefficient, and I wanted to see if I could be of any help.’

Blanco’s first observation was that the protestors were uneconomical with their time. She made a spreadsheet that mapped out the total number of hours each protestor would have to give up from their week to maintain a visible presence outside the library, while still being able to have time off to study and see family. She emailed it to one of the protestors, a young philosophy student called Gina. ‘I told her that I wasn’t interested in joining the movement, ideologically speaking,’ Blanco recalls, ‘but that I wanted to help on a practical level.’ Gina thanked Blanco, and told her that if she was interested in protests, she should read Elsa Yakovleva’s journals, and send them back to her as a PDF. Blanco read Yakovleva’s journals in a single sitting. She was deeply inspired, moved even, by her idea of mechanical protest. She started to wonder how she could use digital technology to enable a disembodied yet visible form of presence.

Blanco’s first idea was to make hundreds of tiny, cheap, disposable robot protestors controlled remotely over a private network. But she gave up on this after realising that these robot protestors would be too clumsy and vulnerable, as the authorities could simply pick them up and remove them before the public could see them. ‘I needed something with a visible presence, but no physical form,’ Blanco explains. ‘Something that could be there without being there.’ Blanco realised that holograms, the area she’d been studying for the past four years, was exactly what she was looking for.

Over the next few weeks, Blanco studied the way Gina engaged in the act of protest, though from a distance. Blanco then designed a holographic likeness of Gina, and programmed the hologram to behave in the ways she

had observed. Stand up, sit down, shuffle to and fro, wave arms, repeat.

Blanco unveiled the hologram the following week in a meeting with the protest committee. ‘We were all a little suspicious to begin with,’ Gina recalls. ‘Maria had no interest in our cause. She spoke about our protest like it was a science experiment.’ But when they saw the hologram move around the room, they were, understandably, mesmerised. ‘It was a very strange, almost beautiful moment,’ David, Gina’s boyfriend and fellow activist explains. ‘Here was this thing, Gina’s perfect reflection, but moving on its own, according to its own rules.’

Blanco also demonstrated how she could duplicate Gina’s hologram to create the impression of a crowd, each hologram moving according to its own predictably unpredictable range of movements. This way the whole protest could be conducted by one holographic avatar, which would save her the time of designing hundreds of these intricate pieces. Although impressed, the protest committee objected to the idea of a holographic protest made up only of Ginas. They argued that the whole point of a protest was to assemble a collection of different people, to show that resistance is diverse. ‘This is where Maria’s intelligence fell short,’ Gina explains. ‘She didn’t understand what it feels like to be part of something, to feel like you’re the one making a difference.’

Blanco had no desire to model a holographic likeness for each of the protestors, so she came up with a viable alternative. She built a website that allows potential protestors to create an “activist avatar”, a customisable holographic representative. The key development is that these holographic avatars are simply silhouettes, lacking the fine detail and colour that Blanco had so painstakingly designed into Gina’s hologram. The way it works is that the protestor uploads a photo of themselves and the software generates a basic silhouette likeness of the photo. The protestor also gets to choose how radicalised they would like their holographic avatar to be, ranging from “intrigued bystander” to “militant.” These silhouette holograms, much cheaper and easier to produce for Blanco, were also appealing to the protestors, who liked the ghost-like, shadowy presence.

The first holographic protest took place on the steps of the library at Blanco’s university on a pale blue winter’s day. The night before, Blanco set up the required infrastructure inconspicuously on campus, along with a few hidden cameras. At 8:30AM, the protestors gathered at Blanco’s house to watch the protest unfold via livestream. They huddled around her computer, drinking coffee, eyes glued to the computer.

At 9AM the silhouettes materialised without a sound and started to saunter

up and down the library stairs, sometimes sitting, sometimes shuffling to and fro. According to Gina, ‘the holograms looked like underworld figurines doing some weird parade at a dystopian Disneyland.’ Students and staff who saw the initial moments of the protest were startled and retreated inside the library quickly. ‘Usually the other students and staff just walk straight passed, like we don’t exist,’ Gina observed. ‘But today no one could take their eyes off us.’

By 10AM the police and fire brigade had arrived, as had the local news station. The police put up tape around the holograms, hoping to somehow contain them. ‘We weren’t quite sure what all these shadowy figures were going to do,’ Police Chief Margaret Smith says. ‘Our top priority was to keep everyone safe.’ During lunch hour, the children from the school next door, who had heard about the hologram cartoons, came to see what was happening. One girl ducked under the police tape and ran right through the holograms. The crowd gasped, then laughed, then applauded.

Professor Ian Gold, who was on campus the day of the protest, wrote on his blog that the most captivating aspect of the protest was that the holograms made no sound. ‘There was neither chanting nor screaming. Strangely, this apparent oversight proved effective, as the police quickly learnt they had no one to talk to. They shouted at the silhouettes through their megaphones—“Move on”—but these shadowy things, impervious to the police, made law enforcement seem farcical.’ Professor Gold also posted a short video of the holograms on the day of the protest on his blog, and it almost instantly became international news.

That evening the vice-chancellor of the university called the protest committee and told them that not only would their demands be met, but they would all receive scholarships for the remainder of their degrees, having displayed ‘a proven aptitude for innovation, which as you all know is a key principle of this university.’

Since the first protest, Blanco has become infamous. The protests she organises have become public spectacles; crowds gather to watch them unfold like they would for fireworks. Blanco, who feels that she has found her calling, has discontinued her thesis, and is travelling the world, taking up whichever cause offers the best remuneration.

I meet Maria Blanco in her hotel room in central Shanghai. She is dressed in black jeans and a black sweater. ‘Sorry about the room,’ she says. ‘I’ve been up for thirty hours preparing for tomorrow’s protest.’ I ask her what the protest is about. ‘I think something pro-environment. I’m not entirely sure, but it’s big.’ Protest organisers have asked Blanco to deploy three

thousand holograms to hover for twenty-four hours over the Huangpu River. ‘It’s going to be beautiful and expensive,’ Blanco says. ‘I’m charging \$15,000.’ I ask her if she orchestrates any hologram protests for free, for causes she believes in. ‘All human causes are equal,’ she says dismissively.

For Blanco, the content of the protest has never mattered. She arrives in a city, observes it, understands the geography, makes notes, spends a few days with the protestors, again takes notes on how they move, their affect, their body language. Then she disappears for a week into her hotel room to model the protest. ‘I set up the necessary infrastructure at night time, I press play, get paid, and leave,’ she tells me, while packing her bags (she has a flight to catch bound for Zurich). As she bustles around the hotel room, tying chords together, packing up laptops, I realise that this whole operation is done alone. This is a one-woman show.

Blanco is in an unusual position of power in that no one has so far been able to figure out how her holograms work. The problem her imitators face, Blanco explains as we get into a taxi to the airport, is that they waste time focusing on how to model more realistic holograms, and in so doing neglect the details of the set-up. Blanco keeps her holograms simple—they are always silhouettes—but she studies the area in which the protest will take place, and structures her set-up so professionally that she is yet to suffer any malfunction. ‘The aura of the holograms disappears the second they glitch,’ Blanco says. ‘I need to be there. No one else knows how to do it.’

Authorities are divided as to how to respond to Blanco’s holograms. ‘At the first few protests, the police tried to physically confront the holograms,’ Blanco recalls. They tried dousing them with water, spraying pepper spray, hitting them with batons. This confusion made the police into more of a spectacle than the protest itself. People would come just to see the police flounder.

Since then, authorities have come up with new tactics to neutralise the protests. In one town, the mayor commissioned Blanco to create a hologram police force to remonstrate with the hologram protestors, so as to illustrate to the townspeople that everything was in order. The purpose was to simulate a scenario that the town’s people were familiar with, to feign law and order. Blanco says that this technique worked extremely well, and that the protestor/police holographic interaction was a fascinating example of how generative systems can interact in unexpectedly beautiful ways.

Mostly, however, the authorities just let the holograms be. Some local governments secretly hope that Blanco will unleash a hologram protest in their city. Blanco tells me, in her unaffected monotone, that the holograms

have become a tourist attraction. ‘It has been noted,’ she adds ‘that if a protest goes on for a few weeks, the elderly get used to their presence, and enjoy taking strolls to go chat with the holograms during the afternoons.’

Predictably, Blanco’s practice has come under scrutiny from a number of different sources. She is accused by some of trespassing on public property. Others accuse her of being a money-hungry mercenary. Many activists across the globe have argued that she is undermining the act of protest by making it into a commoditised parade. Blanco tells me that she has even received death threats.

But Blanco also has her supporters. Many note that the hologram protestors have advantages over their human counterparts. They never get tired, they don’t get cold, they don’t sleep, nor eat, and they don’t require tents. Most importantly, they diffuse violence before it even happens. An academic published a paper earlier this year in which she illustrates that Blanco’s protests have essentially eradicated the damages incurred by traditional demonstrations.

Nevertheless, Blanco is impervious to both her supporters and detractors. ‘I continue because it’s what I live to do,’ she says. ‘People don’t understand that my protests are beyond politics. They are an art form. I am a choreographer of human discontent.’ Art historian Edgar Mack suggests that Blanco is the most important contemporary artist in the world. ‘The human figure has a certain power even if it is just a representation,’ he writes in his monograph about Blanco, *On Not Being There*. ‘Blanco’s silhouettes signify anger, they signify discontent, and this symbolism can be even more powerful, even more long lasting than a bunch of students waving placards. Consider, by analogy, the terracotta warriors of Xi’an. If you attack them, they will prove defenceless. And despite the fact that we all know this, they are still imposing. They still inspire awe, reverence, and perhaps even fear.’

While Blanco is secretive about whom her clients are—I probed and probed but she has an almost child-like stubbornness—it is said that she is beginning to use her avatars for projects beyond pure protest. Rumour has it, for instance, that a billionaire paid her to infest an island, on which he lives alone, with toddler-sized silhouettes.

One particularly disturbing rumour heralds from a mining town in the Andes. According to various sources, miners went on strike in the middle of winter, when the town was cut off from the outside world, following the death of an underage worker in the mines. Some of the protestors

contacted a few journalists from a nearby city to come up into the mountains and cover the protest in the hope that their grievances would then reach a broader audience. According to various sources, the owner of the mine hired Blanco to swamp the town with silhouettes, so that when the journalists arrived, the town was covered in an impenetrable shadow. The owner of the mine said that he would only withdraw the holograms once that miners returned to work.

Blanco shrugs these rumours off completely. 'I can't tell you how many times I've been approached to do personal projects,' Blanco says, just before boarding her plane to Zurich. 'Many ask if I can model a loved one who they recently lost. Others have offered millions for me to make their look-a-like, so they can sneak off at night and have affairs without their partner knowing.' But this doesn't interest Blanco. She says she's not interested in the individual expression of desire and suffering, but only in its collective expression, only when it becomes a geographical artefact.

After we said goodbye in the airport, I wrote Blanco an email asking her what her greatest masterpiece is, the holographic protest she is most proud of. She replied: 'If you go and stand outside the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg at 6AM, any morning of the week, you will see, from the East, a striking woman with red hair take position out in front of the Winter Palace. She stands right in front of the entrance to the palace, the first in line, always, before any of the tourists arrive. At 9AM, when the gates open for tourists, the young woman with the red hair doesn't move, and the tourists, tentatively at first, but then boldly, and finally, without noticing at all, walk straight through her torso, pay their entrance fee, and begin taking photos. Then, at the end of the day, she disappears.'