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Crisis art: Art Crisis

When the 49th Venice Biennale issued an invitation to the Grupo de Arte Callejero (an action group which had never set foot inside a museum or gallery before), a discussion was sparked in Argentina on the dimensions of political art. The author chronicles the stance taken by the visual arts in recent years, during the greatest economic crisis in Argentina's history, and analyses the relationship that has been established between art, politics and the media.

Buenos Aires, December 1999: In the run-down gym of a cultural centre in Buenos Aires the second of just two performances of Beatriz Catalan's play "*Museo Gaucho*" is being staged. The characters are a grotesque family trinity, who might be seen as a symbol of Argentina's ill-fated social constellation. The father is a shabby version of the nineteenth-century general, a bombastic and vacuous super-macho, constantly laden down with books, reciting patriotic verse. Owner and manager of a cattle ranch, he is reminiscent of the ruling class who founded the nation state and became obsolete and parasitic from the very outset - what used to be known as the Argentinian beef-barons. Perching on planks on the side of the stage, the audience can just make out an Indian woman chained to something that might be the door of a henhouse. She is pregnant—eternally impregnated by the voluble military male. Throughout the play she—the living image of the suffering mother, raped since the beginning of her lineage—emits a sort of undecipherable lament. It is the voice of the bowels of the earth, always on the point of giving birth to bastard children, like the obscene, rubbish-strewn pampa from which she came. Their offspring is the gaucho, an illiterate, illegitimate child whose connotations extend to the present, now transformed into a marginal underclass with all the characteristics of the contemporary urban outcast: football fan, *homeless*, slave of bio-politics—the sort of ragged street militant exploited by the powers-that-be to break windows, buy votes or spark violence at a demonstration, just so that the police can move in and repress it.

Buenos Aires, June 2003. Sociologist María Pía López is addressing a round table discussion on the burning issue of "Art and Crisis".

There has been a change, she says, in the criteria of cultural judgement which emanates not from the cultural arena, but from its links with the political context. At the same time, however, a new force is emerging from within the cultural arena: the possible adaptation—opportunistic, it has to be said—to that element that makes Argentina an internationally recognisable brand. No longer the "Maradona" of years gone by, but "pot-bangers"; no longer "first world and sophisticated art" but "poverty and realism".[1]

From December 1999 to July 2003, Argentina has become a powerful laboratory for creating strategies of survival, founded on new social ties. The movement began spontaneously and was initially marginal. Its only political strategy was to come together to make certain specific demands. These groups rejected any form of political representation inside the framework of the system. They sought their legitimacy not within the structures, but in that stark area defined by specific action, expressed through its own laws in the face of each specific situation. Thus were born the movements of picketers; the re-opened factories run by the workers (there are now over 180 throughout the country); the pot-bangers who took to the streets to voice their discontent; the small investors betrayed by the banks... in short, a vast spectrum of protest with one shared rallying cry: *Out with all of them*. It was a phrase which summed up the general malaise: we've had enough of politicians.

Argentineans tend to mistrust the state, and that mistrust dates back a long time. But this form of protest, expressed through different cells, all linked together like some vast social rhizome, originated when the country as a whole began to feel the effects of applying measures dictated from Washington and implemented by a political class intent on enriching itself at the expense of the state coffers. By the end of the 1990s, Argentina had become a crystallisation of loss: over half the population had fallen below the poverty line while, in government, media-crazy politicians became part of the regular cast of the local pantomime. The new millennium dawned on the worst economic crisis in the country's history. In just ten years the country had been thoroughly plundered, with privatisation of over 80% of the public sector, destruction of the rail network and the selling-off of the national radio frequencies, oil, radar system, media, subsoil (with all the hydrocarbon resources), the entire mining industry, much of the coastline and 60% of public land in Patagonia.

How was this pillage reflected in Argentinean culture? The effects varied in theatre, literature, film and the visual arts. Rather than reflecting the catastrophe, theatre and film adapted to it. Instead of trying to discuss the collapse, they learned to express themselves *from* it. Not only the product, but its creative machinery came to form their most categorical metaphor. A new generation of artists emerged during those years, responding not with an expressly political form of art, but in a broadly political fashion. They adapted their productions to the shortage, forming self-running cells and cutting the stage down to a bare minimum—and they allowed themselves a luxury normally only conceivable in countries where the arts are heavily subsidised: they snubbed success as measured in numerical terms. Precisely at a time when the media footlights shone only on politicians and investors, these artists, refusing to turn art into spectacle, turned their back on show business, in a direct contrast to the circus of political/advertising opulence. They built an extraordinary network of cells of aesthetic and political resistance, which went unnoticed until the collapse of 19 and 20 December 2001, precisely when the new social movements of picketers, pot-angers, small investors, etc. first emerged onto the scene.

This was the case with cinema, theatre and perhaps poetry. In these areas of art there was an immediate response, a re-adaptation of the forms of expression, shaped by the history of the "leaden years"[2]. But the response was different in the visual arts The current debate among visual artists on the dimensions of a new political art arose just as this year's Venice Bienale was issuing an invitation to the *Grupo de Art Callejero* (an action group which had never set foot in an art museum or gallery). The invitation acted as a catalyst. It was as if the scene had suddenly woken up from a long lethargy. For years, the visual arts had kept on the fringes of the crisis, indifferent to the aesthetic movements that had been generated after Documenta X and XI. Caught in a universality they saw as hegemonic, they had never abandoned their posture of supposed independence, still justified today with a fierce defence of "the autonomy of art".[3] It is not the purpose of this article to make a critical analysis of the position taken by visual artists. Rather, I want to answer one important question regarding the way art can be linked with politics without jeopardising its autonomy. Why is it so difficult to assume or represent political contents precisely in an artistic genre whose history contains such names as Berni and "Tucumán Arde"?

This difficulty is not endemic to Argentina. Mistrust over curatorships, assessment criteria that often seem skewed, a hotchpotch of different trends and, especially that restorative

spirit that never seems far away when an economic model goes into decline—all these factors suggest that throughout the world a central element is in crisis: artistic representation. In Argentina, this crisis goes hand in hand with the essential discrediting of political representation. The conjunction of the two planes (political and aesthetic) is not fortuitous: the two are linked by a common denominator from which each feeds—the dynamics of the media. Both politics and art went too far in their attempt to capture "numbers" (audiences, voters, spectators).

How is it possible to compete with the media image outside the media? Serge Daney, in a memorable article reproduced in "Documenta X - the Book" foresaw the beginning of the crisis in representation, remarking in astonishment on the aesthetic and manipulative quality of Benetton's photographer.[4] He examined the difference between the creator and the creative director (in advertising). In other words, he questioned the difference between art and market. And he came to the conclusion that the difference lies in a particular approach to the truth. The creator is concerned with truth, whereas the creative director fictionalises it by placing it at the service of the product.

Beyond socialism and after the ravages of integrated global capitalism, art may again begin to address political categories without descending into pamphleteering, once it learns to abandon the conciliatory stance imposed upon it by the market; when it chooses to ignore the consensus imposed by the media and by politics.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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[1] Lopez's paper was reproduced in *Funámbulos* magazine, Buenos Aires, Year 6 No. 19, May - August 2003

[2] Translator's note: The term *años de plomo* refers to the period of the military dictatorship, between 1976 and 1983

[3] For an example of the many public debates on the definition of a new political art, see "Arte light y arte Rosa Luxemburgo" MALBA, 6 May 2003, reproduced on the website of the "Proyecto Venus" http://www.proyectovenus.org/discursos/malba.htm

[4] DANEY, S. "Bébé cherche eau du bain II", *Libération*, 30.09.1991