

## Is Tucumán Still Burning?

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“Tucumán is still burning”, declares a stencil that appeared on several street advertisements on Buenos Aires walls over the last few months, anonymously authored by Leandro Iniesta, a solitary 23-year old artist. The black and red statement replicates the slightly psychedelic typography of the sticker sketched by Juan Pablo Renzi in 1968, and -to those who have at least heard about- it cannot but stand as a reminder of the political and artistic collective work that marked the peak of the radicalising avant-garde experience that took place in the cities of Buenos Aires and Rosario after the mid-sixties.

The stencil was accompanied by an unsigned text recording recent statistical data about Tucumán's socio-economic situation, starting from the following description: "Tucumán [is a ] small province, densely populated and historically impoverished as from the 60's thanks to the shutdown of its sugar mills and the ensuing de-industrialisation processes." Thus, this intervention, which at first sight might be taken for a private wink aimed at the art circuit stemming from a quotation of the History of Art, and whose full comprehension would seem to be restricted exclusively to those who have some knowledge of the mythical reference to the work of the 60s, provides the possibility of a different reading, exercised by the uninformed pedestrian who, coming across the statement as he walks the streets, can read information about the province without having to refer it to an episode that occurred over thirty years ago or being forced to understand it as meta-art. Our hypothetical pedestrian would infer that Tucumán is still burning because this northern province is still an exponent of the most chronic form of squalor, as has not long ago been pointed out by the front pages of our newspapers. Tucumán is a place where malnutrition keeps furnishing the news through the recurrence of child mortality in the province's public hospitals.

Iniesta's simple strategy, then, reaches far beyond a mere reference to an emblematic name. In a small scale, he is reproducing, in three different ways, the complexity involved in the actions that took place in Tucumán Arde. The first way is related to the fact that the artist becomes a social researcher: in 1968, artists explored the causes for the crisis that was tearing the province to pieces. While it is true that that they turned to sociologists and economists for help, they also travelled to Tucumán themselves, in an effort to become involved in the events as eye witnesses of the consequences brought upon the population by the shutdown of tens of sugar mills. The artists resorted to photographs, interviews, films, and other documentary media to show the falseness of official propaganda regarding the course of the crisis. Consequently, the second way consisted in the construction of *counter-information* within the public space, addressed to a mass spectator outside the limited art circuit. Tucumán Arde intended to set itself up as a counter discourse; in order to achieve their goal, its makers carried out an elaborate strategy installing Tucumán's problems in mass circuits through sundry means

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divided into various stages, such as misleading press conferences, mysterious advertising campaigns (a part of which was the above mentioned sticker), mass exhibitions of the research outcomes, held at the premises of the opposition Trade Unions in Rosario and Buenos, in open defiance to the ban on public meetings imposed by Onganía's dictatorship.

The third coincidence lies in the questioning of the spaces allotted to the exhibition of art. Throughout 1968, and before moving on to work at the heart of the CGT's Commission of Artistic Action, the avant-garde had been at the head of an itinerary composed of actions and definitions that had driven them out from the art institution, in an open, definitive rupture with such modernising institutions as had so far allowed them room and visibility, specially Instituto Di Tella (a private foundation whose support of contemporary art had welcomed experimental trends.) Now Iniesta refuses to stamp "Tucumán is still burning" for a stencil exhibition held at Centro Cultural Recoleta (an institution that legitimises new artists and tendencies) because, in his view, entering this space goes against the potentiality of the means he is using as well as of its being recorded in the streets. He diffidently believes that art is able to alter its own surroundings. Out of this belief, an intervention programme was devised. The proposal consisted in setting out to produce a "new aesthetics" as a specific contribution to a revolution that these artists perceived both as imminent and inevitable. They sought to define "a new field", "a new function", and "new materials to perform this function" so as to achieve "a new work whose structure will realise the artist's ideological conscience." The "new aesthetics" recovered the endeavour of merging art and life from the set of ideas upheld by historical avant-garde movements.

Does it follow from these coincidences that Tucumán is still burning? Iniesta's stencil is not exceptional as far as its recovery of the mythical work of '68 goes. Quite the contrary; references are as frequent as they are varied. For instance, a bar located on the main avenue of Luján City pays homage to the event by bearing the name Tucumán Arde, just as one of the counter-information groups that arose after the popular revolt staged at the end of 2001 was named "Argentina Arde" [Argentina is burning]. In the last few years, Tucumán Arde has become the most frequently revisited work of Argentine art, and it is certainly the one that has been written about the most, not only by art historians, curators, and critics, but also political activists.

Besides the risk of being engulfed by the art institution, added to the reductionism involved in reducing it to stand for an early instance of conceptual art (a risk the protagonists themselves soon pointed out),<sup>1</sup> the question that matters now is how Tucumán Arde is read by activist artists that have thrown themselves into street agitation, an activity that present artistic -and- political practices have taken over from the original '68 experience.

### **Art and politics in the streets: from the 80s to 2001**

In the early 80s, at the closing stages of the last military dictatorship, some artists' initiatives that provided visibility to the fight against a genocidal State that caused the disappearance of 30,000 people were expressed in concrete terms. The most emblematic of these visual productions was the making of thousands of life-size human silhouettes printed on paper and then glued, in a standing posture, onto walls, trees, and pillars. This practice began on the evening of September 21<sup>st</sup>, 1983, on the occasion of the III

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<sup>1</sup> In a number of writings produced between 1969 and 1973, Roberto Jacoby, Juan Pablo Renzi and León Ferrari made an emphatic pronouncement against the claim that Tucumán Arde be reduced to the status of a conceptual work of art.

Marcha de la Resistencia [Third March of Resistance] called by Madres de Plaza de Mayo and other human rights organisations. Its remarkable impact was due not only to its mode of production (the demonstrators lent their bodies for hundreds of artists to outline their contours, which in turn came to stand for each of the disappeared) but also to the effect achieved by the crowd of silhouettes whose voiceless screams addressed passers-by from the walls of downtown buildings on the following morning. The initiative for this procedure had come from three visual artists (Rodolfo Aguierreberry, Julio Flores, and Guillermo Kexel) and was adopted by the society from then on, turning into a series of mobilisations, an overwhelming visual manner of drawing attention to how present an absence can be.

At the same time, Buenos Aires witnessed the production of a group of artists who, at the beginning, went by the name of Gas-tar, a name that they later changed to CAPataco ("colectivo de arte participativo tarifa común" [ordinary fare participative art collective]). The new acronym hints at a pun based on the twofold sense of collective (meaning group) and "colectivo", a word used in Argentina as a synonym for a vehicle in public transport.<sup>2</sup> Until the early 90s, this group, which has not been thoroughly examined yet, carried out a series of street interventions (both graphic and performative), mostly related to popular mobilisations outside the art circuit. Moreover, they sought to lay a bridge towards Tucumán Arde, tracking down those of its protagonists that were still alive and attributing them a parental role they felt was lacking. Something similar happened in Rosario, when in 1984 a new generation of artists<sup>3</sup> organised a conference with the purpose of rescuing works, documents, manifestos and testimonials from Grupo de Arte de Vanguardia de Rosario, self-dissolved after the events of Tucumán Arde.

These young artists thus re-articulated an artistic and political memory that had been smashed to pieces by the ruthless gagging imposed by the dictatorship. The vindication was almost secret, marginal, and anticipatory: long years were to pass before Tucumán Arde entered the official narratives of Argentine art as an inescapable reference for whoever intends to bring art and politics together.<sup>4</sup>

All throughout the 90s -a decade marked by the stripping of the State and the vacuous ostentation of the neo-liberal "achievements" of the Menem administration, there emerged a few isolated groups of artists that promoted interventions in the streets as well as in spaces dedicated to art: En Trámite (Rosario), Costuras Urbanas (Córdoba), Escombros (La Plata), Mutual Argentina and Zucoa No Es (Buenos Aires), among others. Here we should include other two groups that have survived to this day: GAC (Grupo de Arte Callejero) and Etcétera, whose origins are strongly bound to the birth of HIJOS, the human rights organisation that gathers the children of the disappeared, exiles, and militants of the 60s and 70s, many of whom were then entering adulthood. Both groups actively collaborated in staging exposure protests [*escraches*], the mode

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<sup>2</sup> Composed by Fernando *Coco* Bedoya, Emei, Daniel Sanjurjo, Fernando Amengual, José Luis Meirás and several others. Many of its members belonged to the MAS (Movimiento al Socialismo), a party of Trotskyist leanings.

<sup>3</sup> Gathered in a Trade Union co-operative (Artistas Plásticos Asociados) including Graciela Sacco, Daniel García and Gabriel González Pérez, with the collaboration of researcher Guillermo Fantoni.

<sup>4</sup> In current groups, heredity or filiation does not end there. References range from surrealism (Etcétera's foundational myth) and Russian avant-garde movements (posters by Malevich and Maiakovsky, cited by TPS) to less explicit influences like the graphics produced in France's May events, Fluxus and situationism, Chilean CADA and, last but not least, the legacy of conceptualism introduced into Argentine art in the 60s by such artists as Alberto Greco, Oscar Bony, León Ferrari, Víctor Grippo, Edgardo Vigo, among so many others.

adopted by the struggle for human rights on the face of the impunity granted to the perpetrators of the genocide. Exposure protests arise from the need to stimulate "social condemnation" of repressors who had either been exempted from prison or simply not brought to trial thanks to the Due Obedience and Full Stop Laws\*, and the Pardon Decree signed by Menem. The exposure protest discloses the repressor's identity, his face, his address and, above all, his past as a repressor to his neighbours and work mates (as a rule, repressors have been "recycled" in companies offering private security), who know nothing about his criminal record.

Ever since 1998, GAC has been generating a graphics of exposure protests. Their typical notices subvert the highway code by pretending to depict an ordinary traffic sign (in fact, such a sign might well pass unnoticed to the unaware spectator) while what they are really pointing to is, for example, the proximity of what used to be a clandestine detention centre ("El Olimpo - 500 km. away); the airfields from where "death flights" took off (detainees, still alive, were dumped into the Río de la Plata from aeroplanes), or a claim for the trial and punishment of repressors.

Etcétera contributed to exposure protests by staging stunning theatrical performances where huge dummies, masks, or people in disguise played scenes of torture, showed repressors stealing a new-born baby from its mother in prison, a member of the Armed Forces relieving his conscience by confessing his sins to a priest, or a football game where Argentina played against Argentina.

In the beginning, both GAC notices and Etcétera's theatrical performances were utterly invisible to the realm of art in terms of "art actions"; on the other hand, they endowed exposure protests with social identity and visibility, contributing to their being seen as a novel way of fighting impunity.

Encouraged by the popular revolt that erupted in December 2001, there arose a striking number of groups composed by visual artists, film and video-makers, poets, alternative journalists, thinkers, and social activists who created new ways of intervention related to social facts and movements in the hope of changing the Argentine lifestyle. These new ways comprised popular assemblies, pickets,<sup>5</sup> factories recovered from inactivity by their former workers, movements gathering the unemployed, bartering clubs, etc. Some of these groups were extremely short-lived or vanished when the conjuncture had passed, but others carry on with their work in articulation with social mobilisations, as is the case with TPS (Silkscreen Printing Popular Workshop) and Arde! Arte.

TPS originated from a concrete request posed by Asamblea Popular de San Telmo in February 2002 (they wanted to learn silkscreen printing and to disseminate the technique into the society). They soon started to produce posters that called the population to demonstrations or activities and, in a rather random manner, they found themselves printing garments (T-shirts, handkerchiefs, banners, sweatshirts: whatever people wear and "take off in amorous demand") during political meetings and commemorations, particularly hand in hand with the pickets. By working on garments that people actually wear, they succeed in circulating their images and spreading the reason for the protest in other circuits. For each particular occasion they prepare a repertory of direct, not to say obvious, images and slogans, mindless of whether these could be labelled as pamphletary so long as they reflect the frame of mind and the reason for the call. TPS "tries to provide the struggle with an image that may identify

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\* A 60-day deadline for the presentation of further accusations against repressors. [TN]

<sup>5</sup> Pickets are a frequent mode of popular protest, usually staged by unemployed workers, whose modus operandi consists in interrupting the flow of traffic on roads and avenues by blocking them with a compact group of people standing in the way and burning tyres.

the time and place of the protest." They do so on the basis of a one on one exchange, from the hand that prints to the hand that offers a personal garment.

Arde! Arte is an offshoot of Argentina Arde; just like the work it pays homage to, it aims at producing counter-information. It also came to life in the heated atmosphere of the 2001 demonstrations, after a call issued by Indymedia to whoever was recording the events in the streets around that time, once it was confirmed that the mass media were not releasing the expected information ( in those days, graffiti on the walls of the city read "they're peeing on our heads and Clarín reports it's raining", in direct reference to the newspaper with the largest nation-wide circulation.) Argentina Arde functioned as one more among the dozens of neighbourhood assemblies that flourished at the time, gathering more than one hundred people that included art, video, photography, journalism, and cultural activism groups.

After a conflict among political apparatuses that broke up Argentina Arde (the "pettiness of militancy", remarked Javier del Olmo, a member of Arde!), Arde! Arte continued existing as a group of six or more artists working on action art in the streets.

As part of the same feeling (a turmoil) there originated other initiatives whose chief aim did not lie in establishing a connection with popular mobilisations but in recreating social bonds -among artists or non-artists- in re-establishing bonds among people and generating new lifestyles and experiences. Proyecto Venus defines itself as a network "experimental association" composed of about 200 people who exchange either goods or work and use a currency internal to the group, or else undertake joint projects. PTV (Partido Transportista de Votantes[Voters' Transport Party]) appears as a serious parody of a political party whose single platform consists in providing transport to the voting centres. In the city of Córdoba they already have about 100 "members".<sup>6</sup>

Between the revolt of December 2001 and President Néstor Kirchner's inauguration in mid-2003 the country experienced an atmosphere of unprecedented institutional instability and ceaseless agitation. Art groups were addressed by the rising of new collective subjects demanding a radical change within the political system ("out with them all") and were involved in the emergence of renewed activism. "I had never been a victim of repression," says Javier del Olmo as he remembers the bullets shot past him when the police rushed forth against the generalised pot-banging in the summer of 2002. "It was a completely new sensation: we felt we were protagonising reality".

In those days they went through an unceasing, intense time of activism, and were showered with requests from assemblies and pickets, urged by the concrete needs posed by the continual calls to demonstrations. They went as far as to produce weekly actions. Several art collectives would participate and collaborate in one single call. Artists who belonged to more than one group moved from one action to another in a matter of seconds.

Spontaneous actions also occurred. For instance, artists succeeded in proposing that the crowd should change the monotonous rhythm of pots and drums during a demonstration by beating the metal lamp posts along Avenida de Mayo. Some of the actions originated in an art group to be later discussed by an assembly. One of the proposals made by Etcétera to the artists' popular assembly was eventually voted and accepted by the general inter-assembly meeting, to be later taken up again and redefined by neighbourhood assemblies. The "mierdazo" (consisting in massively carrying human and/or animal faeces to Parliament with the purpose of annoying the administration) was finally put into practice on February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2002, bringing about a commotion in the

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<sup>6</sup> Both initiatives were thought out by artists: Proyecto Venus by Roberto Jacoby, one of the promoters of Tucumán Arde, now also a co-ordinator of Zonas Temporalmente Autónomas [Temporarily Autonomous Zones], as part of the invention of experimental societies. PTV's "founding artist" is Lucas Di Pascuale.

media. On other occasions, popular mobilisations appropriated and transformed proposals originally made by artists. In May 2003, Brukman's female workers, aided by several artists (Brukman was a textile factory that, after being closed down by its owners, was recovered by the workers, who were violently evicted by an Infantry battalion in April) performed an action which they named "Maquinazo": a few meters away from the evicted factory, now empty and surrounded by a police fence, the women installed sewing machines on the street and made clothes for the victims of the Santa Fe floods, thus turning an act of solidarity into a public intervention.

The boundaries that define whether or not these various street practices are art or, at any rate, which of them truly are art, suddenly become blurred. Does it depend on the artists' own definition? Does it depend on their status as artists? On the reading of their works by critics or curators, on the judgement passed by the art milieu? Rather than all of this, what comes to mind is the image of a public reservoir, of a number of available resources to turn protest into an act of creation: just think of the performance staged by the "swindled family", when parents and children chose to spend their holidays inside the premises of the Bank that refused to return their money. The whole family settled down in the building wearing their bathing suits and keeping their sun-tan lotions at hand.<sup>7</sup>

It is about creating new ways of life and of relating to others, about turning shortage, grief, and wrath into something else, into a colourful call to others in times of frenzy and social creativity.

### **Dissimilar yet alike**

In December 2002, a score or so of collectives gathered at Tatlin (the space that sheltered Proyecto Venus) to hold what was named Encuentro Multiplicidad [Multiplicity Encounter]. They sought to learn about their common features and to find the specificity from which each of them derived their particular identity. In his analysis of the various interventions that were presented for the occasion, José Fernández Vega finds that these groups have few differences and much in common: "consensual internal functioning, open entrance regimes and member rotation (...), activities organised on the basis of special projects (...), basic agreements, the hope to work as a net, even to co-operate with other groups. (...) It is true that these groups can be identified through their specific works, characteristics, history, location and component parts. Still, their principles are almost one and the same".<sup>8</sup> The list of what they share could certainly be enlarged: they prefer collective authorship and are in favour of effacing the figure of the artist as an individual, blurring the artist's "style" and proper name and replacing it by anonymity or by a generic name.

However, at this point, rather than insist on this common basis I will explore, on the one hand, the uniqueness of four of these groups (GAC, Etcétera, TPS and Arde! Arde, all of them currently active in Buenos Aires), looking into their manner of working, their choice of forms and language, their notions about art and their connection with political action, the ways in which they solve their relation -or affiliation- to political or Trade Union organisations and social movements and, on the other hand, their tensions regarding their relation to art institutions.

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<sup>7</sup>A suggestion from Javier del Olmo.

<sup>8</sup> José Fernández Vega, "Variedades de lo mismo y de lo otro" (in **Multiplicidad**, Malba-Proyecto Venus, May 2003).

### **Organic or autonomous**

The first difference may be found in the way they relate to movements of human rights, of unemployed workers, etc. and to the organisations that support them. Like the majority of Argentine society, these art groups tend to reject old party structures (even those of the Left) and to distrust their modes of intervention on the face of conflicts, for they view these modes as intrusive, manipulative, or sectarian. They do sporadically or permanently approach new organisations: they are members of co-ordinating committees like the Board of Exposure Protests or the Struggle for a Six-hour Working Day; they participated (or are participating) in popular assemblies; they collaborated (or are collaborating) with diverse sectors of the picket movement, especially with regional branches of MTD (Movement of Unemployed Workers).

How do art groups adjust to and discuss their proposals with these organisations? What do these organisations ask of them? Well, certainly not always the conventional role that political art plays by "illustrating the letter of politics", devising the images or the graphic design that accompanies mobilisations (banners, posters, wall paintings). They also ask art groups to fulfil a didactic role, to transmit certain technical skills (like silkscreen printing, for instance) that are believed to provide the unemployed with job opportunities. Along these lines, and seeking "to manufacture without being exploited", TPS and La Matanza MTD manufacture garments on which they have printed their images, and these are then distributed through a "network of fair trade".

Relations do not always run smoothly nor are they mutually sympathetic, particularly when it comes to assemblies, a phenomenon that basically brought together members of the Buenos Aires middle class and whose summoning capacity has been dwindling steadily. TPS Magdalena Jitrik tells about her experience in a neighbourhood assembly during a meeting where the building of a soup kitchen for children was being discussed. She suggested that "the front and architectural features should convey meaning, because if assemblies were a new phenomenon, the architecture should also be new. (...) This was a battle I lost, either because my proposal was misunderstood or simply because they didn't like (...) the idea that every visual, graphic, written or sound expression of a movement ought to be conceived of in terms of what the movement itself aspires to achieve". Some time after this argument, when TPS was created, its members decided not to discuss their production with the assemblies and to keep their autonomy: "there is something about artistic creation that is not democratic. It would be terribly undemocratic for TPS to alter a poster for the sake of yielding to the demands of a collective that knows nothing about art and does not feel like making the effort to understand what it is". This was not the only case in which tensions between artists and assemblies surfaced. Arde! Arte ended up by withdrawing from another neighbourhood assembly when a minor proposal -using one wall of the building where they met as a space for exhibitions- turned into a tedious, corroding argument.

In contrast, it would seem as if the picket movements' acceptance of artists' proposals were much better, and inversely proportional to the fact that pickets have no preconceived ideas about a "politically correct" form for political art.

TPS feel extremely identified with pickets; they perceive themselves as mere executors or performing agents of the images they are asked to produce. "We are they," TPS declare. They make joint decisions with TPS as if it were a tangible subject, and the situations that this subject undergoes define the image and the motto to be printed. "Bringing our workshops out into the streets and socialising the production process encouraged the construction of a relationship, of a "participative form of art".

GAC is very far from such a strong identification. Lorena Bossi speaks of the anarchic nature that has lately been ruling the bonds between the group and the organisations with which it used to establish solid, organic relations.

As for Arde! Arte (initially connected to Universidad Popular de las Madres de Plaza de Mayo and now using a space provided by the Palermo assembly), the issue of autonomy or subordination or acquiescence to the demands made by the various organisations has gone through several phases. To date, they have decided to perform only actions that are *organically* related to the conflict on which they are working. A recent instance of this decision is related to the nearly two hundred young victims of the fire that burnt the "República de Cromañón" disco down to the ground last December. One month after the tragedy, the group, together with the Palermo assembly, made fifty kites. They meant to take them to the demonstration called by the victims' relatives and friends. Their proposal was to take advantage of the pun implied in the two meanings of *kite*\* (the flying toy and the bribe paid to corrupt officials) as an allusion to the victims' tender years and to the accusations levelled at the local government for its irresponsible thoughtlessness. However, as the demonstration marched on, the rain fell on them, grey and persistent, and grief and mourning weighed so heavily that the group decided against flying the kites. Now, when another month has gone by, the relatives themselves are asking them to launch the kites into the sky at the next demonstration.

How did the makers of Tucumán Arde deal with similar tensions? CGT de los Argentinos had issued an unprecedented call for students, intellectuals, and professionals to join their ranks. In the case that concerns us here, the support requested came under an Artists' Committee. Their memberships did not mean that unionists were to interfere with the artists' work, but it definitely contributed to the choice of subject (denunciation of the situation in Tucumán was one of the ten items included in the workers' Union programme). At the same time, it provided the means to bring off their project through the contacts and support from Trade Unions in Tucumán and the Union premises where the findings were exhibited. Moving an avant-garde work of art into a political-and-unionist institution from the opposition changed the rules of the game, the manners of negotiation, and the circulation of the work. This relation, as well as collective authorship, the apparent efforts to reach new (mass and popular) audiences and to find a new language are ways in which a quest becomes manifest: a redefinition of the connection between art and politics stemming from the need to direct the impact of artistic creation towards the transformation of the society. The scope of this quest was constrained by the pressure that the government put on Trade Union leaders, forcing the immediate closure of the exhibition in Buenos Aires, driving the artists to conclude that they were confronting the limitations of working within a legal framework, and bringing about discussions on the convenience of their going underground.

Regarding the Siluetazo, in 1983 the artists' initiative was accepted and re-formulated by Madres de Plaza de Mayo, carried out by the mobilisation that marched with them, and transformed as the demonstration was in progress. The original idea was to have a uniform pattern, and Madres asked for children and pregnant women to be represented as well. The silhouettes were not to bear any marks that might point to their identity, but some of the people spontaneously wrote on them the names of the disappeared and the corresponding dates and others covered the surfaces with slogans.

From this trajectory it is clear that the relations with organisations and movements is wide and changing, shifting from identification to autonomy and from the illustration of

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\* "Kite" is the English for "cometa", which in neutral Spanish means a flying toy made of paper or plastic, whereas in Argentine slang it stands for "bribe". [TN]



a motto to the transmission of a skill. Many of these agreements and disagreements provide grounds to reflect on the status of artistic practices that aspire to intervene in politics.

### **Art or militancy**

Yet another possible approach to this set of art collectives is to question the artistic definition of their practices and to explore the nature of the artist.

GAC evidently finds this issue most irritating. Its members view their production as a specific form of militancy. They describe themselves as "a group of people who try to militate in politics through art. (...) We are not of the opinion that politics should necessarily be exercised using classic tools".<sup>9</sup> "We were called artists *from* the field of art", declares Carolina Golder.

At the opposite end, Etcétera claims –like in early surrealist manifestos- that revolution should come from art, and that anyone can aspire to become an artist. According to Nancy Garín, the group has already begun "to exercise art as professionals". What does such professionalisation involve? "To recover the surrealist view of the group's origins and combine it with a connection to reality, the study of the theory and a permanent update about what is going on in the world of art, besides sustaining our critical presence in the milieu and attending openings". The group " has only recently become aware that "these things" [the objects they produce for demonstrations, for example] are in fact works of art" and that they had to appreciate and have it appreciated as such, giving up the idea that these objects could be discarded and reproduced as often as necessary. Such an appreciation of a device produced as a work of art is diametrically opposed to the ideas upheld by GAC or TPS, who maintain that the resources used during their intervention are of a multiple, often ephemeral and anonymous nature, and favour their being taken up again and used by others, whether the object in question be a print or a survey.

For members of Arde! the matter is less controversial: it is of little importance to define whether what they do is art or not. In any case, they are sure that the manifestation of art is not restricted to the object that has been produced (a wall painting, a poster, a banner, whatever the support) but that it lies in the whole of the action within its own context.

Some of the members of TPS and Etcétera possess their individual work, which may be previous to or simultaneous with the establishment of the groups. These works circulate in conventional exhibition spaces and, on the whole, do not seem to be related with collective production. TPS maintains that the latter is the outcome of an anti-author practice, and that it erases individual style- marks while vindicating the subject-producer as a group that can intervene in their surroundings. In Karina Granieri's words, "what matters is the work process rather than the image itself. Micro scale, one- on -one contact, are situations that cannot be transmitted but lived." She tells that often enough, when attending a mobilisation, they are asked to print garments on which they themselves had made a previous intervention on different and remote times. The overlapping traces on those T-shirts bear the inscription of TPS' s history and its articulation with picket struggles.

It is thus to be noticed that, exception made of GAC, and more or less emphatically, they all define what they do as art and describe themselves as artists. On this point they coincide with the makers of Tucumán Arde, those who defended their status of "true avant-garde" together with the specificity of their contribution to the revolutionary process. By tautening their production and their reflections upon art in the direction of

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<sup>9</sup> Encuentro Multiplicidad, op. cit.

the political arena, those artists intended to gain a space of their own so that they could intervene in the collective transformation of the public realm. They defined their militant practices (handing out resignation flyers at the door of the Di Tella, the violent sabotage to the Braque Prize, breaking into a lecture by Jorge Romero Brest, the guru of avant-garde movements) as works of art; collective, violent actions that made an impact on reality as "a political meeting" would do. On the other hand, the silhouettes were not presented as art by those who made them, nor were they read as art by those who watched them. Rather, they were seen as a visual form of struggle and memory.<sup>10</sup>

### **Inside or outside**

The relation between these groups and the institution of art is another point of conflict. In a movement that inverted the trajectory of '68, when the artists staged a ruthless rupture with spaces and restricted modes of circulation reserved to art -a rebellion that drove them outside or, worse still, on the opposite side of, the modernising institutional circuit with which they had shared their lives till then; a rebellion that forced them out onto the streets and made them seek for alternative environments away from the field of art- at present artists are addressed by the institutions of art and asked to show either their street practices or a record of them inside the circuit.

While it is true that, at that time, Grupo de Arte de Vanguardia de Rosario as well as the group of avant-garde artists from Buenos Aires were visibly acknowledged as the most dynamic area in the field, until 2001 most of the young people in present-day groups appeared as newcomers to art, with little or no symbolic capital, and were suddenly pushed towards tremendous exposure as a consequence of their international projection after being guest artists at major events (GAC at the Venice2003 Biennial; GAC and Etcétera at "Ex Argentina" 2004, just to give a few examples). This naturally attracted domestic attention to them. From the very moment TPS was established, they became the subject of a flood of academic papers and theses that overnight turned them into a case study.<sup>11</sup>

Such an unprecedented parable (from street activism to non-stop acknowledgement by the international art milieu) no doubt aroused tensions inside the groups, particularly in the case of GAC, where it was decided that the group would cease to exhibit their production in conventional exhibition spaces.

Although not in the same categorical, absolute terms, Arde! decided to refuse an invitation to participate in the latest Arte BA fair (which, incidentally, made a big fuss of their expectations to annex "political art" to the market), choosing instead to make an intervention in the vicinity of the fair, laying black paint on Arte BA's advertising posters in order to offset the white, empty silhouettes that referred to the procedure that had started with the Siluetazo. Also, on these very posters, an anonymous hand had glued a sheet of paper in memory of a disappeared artist.

Etcétera also chose the margins of Arte BA to stage, over a period of three years, "Arte Biene", consisting of unauthorised interventions or installations at the entrance to the fair when not illegally inside the premises. The point they were trying to make was that they were not giving up institutional spaces, but claiming for their democratisation

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<sup>10</sup> We can find an early exception in Edward Shaw, art critic at The Buenos Aires Herald, who in January 1984 published a lengthy article in which he spoke of the silhouettes as being "the year's most important artistic manifestation".

<sup>11</sup> This is a very different situation from the one lived by CAPataco in the 80s, as they were not taken into account by the art world, not even to argue against them.

On its part, TPS holds that it is possible to create exhibition and production spaces totally disconnected from those that have long been established: a picket, for example - and persuade the art circuit to acknowledge the validity of such spaces. Thus they claim for an enlargement of the art circuit rather than for its neglect.

Arde! also posits that, although the boundaries are far from clear, the codes ruling the streets are different, and that what works successfully on the streets cannot be transplanted into an art gallery. Ultimately, the most suitable place to gaze at a painting is still "the white cube". In Garín's opinion, Etcétera describes its position before the art institution as that of "one foot in the door and the other out", yet insists that their crucial struggle as artists is to be held "inside the realm of our peers".

While in '68 the avant-garde believed that the "new aesthetics" could preserve its revolutionary nature only if it kept away from the institutions of art, in our days the difference between the inside and the outside of these institutions seems rather blurred, and the boundaries are undergoing constant revision and re-formulation.

### **Experimenting or communicating**

On arriving at the itinerary of '68, artists perceived that their formal experiments had carried them so far that their only audiences were composed of their peers. The making of an avant-garde work of art in a Trade Union opened up an area of tensions between formal quests and the adjustments required by their insertion in the Union, in addition to a call addressed to a lay audience, whether working class or popular. León Ferrari underscores the issue of language that arises when the avant-garde moves into a new environment, abandons the elite code typical of experimental art unknown to the majorities, and starts seeking for a new language that can convey "meaning" to the new audiences. The dilemma between communicability and experimentation was seen in the assembling of the exhibitions of Tucumán Arde; many years later, some of the participants regretted that the informative aspect had prevailed at the expense of an impoverishment of the artistic resolution.

Are such tensions present in art groups nowadays? The issue of communicability of action is solved in various ways, but is never experienced in terms of renunciation. In the case of TPS, the choice of a language that might be read as obvious or pamphletary is clearly related to the decision of prioritising communication with a lay audience, and this is lived as a voluntary choice, with the degree of freedom involved in moving away from "authorship pressures". It is also true that the images produced by TPS are disqualified by some of the voices coming from the field of art: it is said that what they do is "poor socialist realism" and that they are prone to tackle run-off-the-mill "workerish" or "guerrillarish" topics. TPS defend the creative process that enabled them to reach a given combination of image and slogan ("the possibility of generating the right circumstances for intervention; a time for our thoughts; an invention where an image can provide material support to those problems where we wish to intervene".) On the other hand, there are occasions when this decision ends up being an elaborate citation of the history of art. For example, in 2004, at the commemoration ceremony of May 1<sup>st</sup>, shortly before the opening of conceptual artist Victor Grippo's retrospective exhibition at MALBA (a major private museum in Buenos Aires), the group made a silkscreen print based on a photograph in which Grippo is seen building his famous bread oven at Roberto Arlt square in 1973. The caption -"building a bread oven at a public square" is suggestive of utopic and political readings that reach far beyond the learned quotation from the history of art; in fact it turns into a poetic metaphor pointing to the socialisation of the means of production. Other slogans, while still brief and accurate, move away from the conventional rhetoric of the Left and open up to

something that exceeds a strict fight for political power. Examples of this are "working-class culture", "it's us", "21<sup>st</sup> Century has started".

It is also Ardel's concern that people may understand their work, that they may appropriate it and take it into their own hands, but they try to avoid solutions that would look either too obvious or too linear. Nevertheless, they are aware of the fact that an open-end work that allows for multiple readings may result in ambiguity and that, on the streets, a second meaning will often pass unnoticed.

These are the risks that Etcétera runs when it works on humour, on the absurd, or on surrealistic games to find the right metaphor for an intervention in certain political conjunctures. Their metaphors are not always suitably decoded: on March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2004 -an anniversary of the coup d'état staged in 1976- during the ceremony at which Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada (one of the largest clandestine detention centres furnished by the dictatorship) officially passed into the hands of human rights organizations to be converted into a memorial, when the group handed out bars of soap and called their action "spring cleaning", they faced problems. Their intervention was meant as an allusion to the "dirty war", the name given to guerrilla warfare by the military, but it was misinterpreted as an accusation of connivance with the regime ("a cosmetic surgery") by Hebe de Bonafini, Chair of one of the two organisations Madres de Plaza de Mayo, and she fed the mass media with harsh words on the group.

Etcétera also resorts to provocation by staging street performances where the ruling class is represented (politicians, military, priests, businessmen, judges, etc.) They are not content with just denouncing these characters; they mostly parody them and make the performers attack demonstrators, exposing the brutal nakedness of the topics involved in the dominant discourse. The "businessman" shouts, 'Go back to work' at workers on strike, or the "military man" tells Madres of the disappeared that "it can't have been without reason that your children were captured". GAC's works resort to a different kind of overidentification when it camouflages its devices with ruling institutional codes (traffic signs, advertising, public opinion polls, etc.) to make them more irritating, without ever explaining the underlying "joke". "Our production seeks to infiltrate the language of the system and, once there, bring about small ruptures, faults, alterations, so as to unmask or denounce the games of relation played by those in power," they say. On the face of the worrying security problems in Argentina -the population has begun to purchase fire arms for self-protection because of the continual robberies, muggings, and kidnappings- GAC intervened by means of an advertisement consisting of a poster offering inexpensive guns (and information about the uses they had been put to during the past repression, and also ways in which they are being used for repression purposes at present.) The posters were not signed by GAC; instead, they featured the telephone numbers of the Ministry of the Interior, in charge of dealing with domestic strife. On the other hand, TPS's works neither parody nor denounce; they recall a history of struggles.

I could continue drawing attention to differences and coincidences in the formal, rhetoric or discursive modes of action and production of current art collectives and their historical background. What should be borne in mind when associating them is their clear efforts to question the legitimised boundaries of art, their intention to expand their frontiers or even abandon their territory as a result of re-defining their intervention from parameters that have been freed from the lack of a social function to which modernity has condemned art. Regardless of obvious contextual differences between the 60s and the present, they become one in their manifest will to achieve an incidence of art in their surroundings. The risks involved in thinking of an active form of art within mobilisation processes -a form of art that invokes usefulness- not only go against the

established ideology of autonomous art, but also defy the ornamental or merely illustrative space where political convention has lodged art. From this set of practices, rethinking art implies rethinking politics. In my view, such a risk is the most outstanding legacy of Tucumán Arde and the reason why it is still sparking.

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## **Abstract**

Over the last few years, the collective, artistic-and-political performance “Tucumán Arde”, carried out by avant-garde artists from Rosario and Buenos Aires in late 1968, has become the most frequently revisited work in Argentinean art. It has also given rise to countless pieces of writing from the pen of historians, curators, art critics and political activists. On the face of such renewed interest, this paper poses a question about the ways in which Tucumán Arde is read by the activists-artists that opted for street actions in the last decade, and what has remained from the original experience in present artistic-and-political practices.

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