

# From the Conceptual to the Political:

## The Art of Political Protest in Argentina

by Dot Tuer

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On an overcast and chilly evening in late August 2002, 100,000 people converged in front of the Congress in Buenos Aires, waving flags and carrying banners, to protest against poverty, corruption, privatization and the global policies of the IMF. Amongst the demonstrators were the *picateros* — organized groups of the unemployed and the poor who have mounted increasingly intensive protests and general strikes by cutting access to roads and bridges. They had been marching under a pale winter sun since noon, gathering in the poorer barrios and walking for miles toward the city centre. As they reached the main avenues of the city, they were joined by political leaders of the left and centre, university and secondary-school students, union locals, middle-class women and men and children banging pots and pans, intellectuals, office workers, artists, hairdressers, shop owners, writers — in effect, the rich and the poor, the educated and the marginalized, the entrepreneurs and the workers had formed a vast mass of people. Together, they marched under the slogan of *que se vayan todos*: a collective demand that the entire political system be restructured and that

elections be called to reconfirm or replace every official in the country.

After the mass had assembled, political and cultural leaders mounted a podium in front of the Congress to denounce the government's indifference to the economic and political crisis, and to read from hundreds of notes, passed to them hand by hand by the crowd, sent from groups around the country who were mounting simultaneous protests affirming their determination that *se vayan todos*. To end the demonstration, the speakers announced the screening of a video. As the crowd fell silent, an image appeared on a huge screen behind the podium. It was of a hand waving, over and over again. This repeating image, framed by the enormous neo-classical columns behind it of a Congress built to reflect a European heritage of democracy wrought from dependency economics, foreign debt and the concentration of capital, was simple and austere: a single gesture repudiating a political and economic system in ruins. As the hand symbolically waved away corruption and cynicism, the mass slowly dispersed into the

winter darkness of the city. Far from the carefully packaged video installations of Documenta or the MOMA, in a country that has become a casualty of globalization, the conceptual minimalism of a Bruce Nauman or a Bill Viola was transformed into a profound political statement of resistance and indignation.

To arrive in Argentina from Canada is to pass through the looking glass of globalization. On the other side of money markets and multinational mergers and World Trade Organization squabbles amongst the G8 are countries so indebted to the First World that any additional loans the IMF might grant are only tender for the servicing of an already impossible debt load. Completing a vicious circle of repayment and soaring interest rates (57 percent in Argentina) are the austerity measures of the IMF. In return for their "pennies from heaven," the IMF insists upon the privatization of all public sector services (water, gas, electricity), cuts to education, social welfare and health services. In Argentina, compliance with IMF policies and financial dependency has been complicated by a drastic devaluation of the peso and a frightening spiral of massive poverty.

From December 20, 2001, when the country exploded in violent protests over hunger amongst the poor, cutbacks, rising unemployment and the freezing of all saving accounts in the country, until the march to the Congress on August 30, 2002, more than half the country has fallen below the poverty line. In the poorer provinces in the interior of the country, more than seventy percent of the population is now without enough resources to feed their families. In the shantytowns, there is not a dog or a cat to be found. Children search through garbage looking for scraps of food. Small babies have bloated stomachs. In the schools, children faint from hunger. As the protests

against such a brutal poverty escalate, so does police repression and the violation of human rights. Days before the Congress demonstration, the *picateros* cut access to the main highways and bridges leading to Buenos Aires to commemorate the assassination of two demonstrators by police during a previous demonstration in March.

In the face of such harsh deprivation, the question of art's future may appear to be incongruous with the social conflict that Argentineans are living through. Yet one of the great paradoxes of the Argentinean crisis is that the social convulsions of the last months have been accompanied by an explosion of artistic and cultural expressions of protest. In the grand avenues of Buenos Aires, in the dirt roads of the barrios, in the city plazas, people have taken to art as they have taken to the street. In the poorer barrios, communities have organized *assembleas populares* (open assemblies) where they discuss politics and culture and social change. Abandoned public buildings have been taken over to create neighbourhood cultural centres. Theatre groups travel to the outskirts of the city to perform in open-air squares. Video artists and photographers, together with the protestors, roam the streets taking pictures. In the major cultural centre of Buenos Aires, La Recolecta, an open call for a major photography exhibition was organized to collect images from everyone who had documented the months of protest. Argentinean films of the 1970s, such as Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas's epic political manifesto, *Hour of the Furnaces*, considered the founding work of Third Cinema, are being screened throughout the country. In response to this affirmation of art as a vehicle for historical memory and political action, Solanas has begun a sequel to *Hour of the Furnaces*, traveling the country to film the unfolding of an unprecedented economic crisis and demands for political change.

In this convergence of art and protest, the forms of cultural expression that have emerged are distinct from a traditional conception of art in the sense of works exhibited in galleries and museums and bought and traded by wealthy patrons. For the rich of Argentina, the relevance of this type of art remains intact. In times of economic instability, the wealthy put their money in gold and land and paintings. For the poor, who are now the majority of Argentineans, this conception of art is at best a diversion or solace, no matter what claims are made for its role as a form of social critique. The reality that Argentina is now experiencing is not reflected in the preservation of a cultural heritage in galleries or museums, but in the spontaneous artistic expressions of protest that capture the urgency of the present. The inspiration for this form of art lies in a political struggle for social change; its execution is collective rather than individual in nature. On the streets of Argentina, artistic interventions transform the conceptual premises and avant-garde strategies of performance art and video installations into a popular art of the people: an art that is at times humorous, at others deadly serious, but always imaginative and original.

Take for example, a "performance action" that occurred during the first month of the *corralito* — a term used to describe the seizing of all the Argentineans' savings accounts. A middle-class family, unable to go on vacation because they could not withdraw their money from the bank,

decided instead to take their holidays inside the bank. One morning early in January, they arrived at the bank with lawn chairs and tents and tangas and sunglasses and picnic baskets, and set up their beach oasis. Their protest was so ingenious, and appealing to the public, that the bank could not risk the tumult that would have occurred if they had tried to remove them. So there they sat, drinking beer and tanning under fluorescent lights, the cameras of national television trained upon them, as strangers and friends alike brought them holiday treats to eat and red wine to drink.

By March, as it became clear that there was no resolution to the crisis in sight, and repression against the protestors mounted, demonstrators organized an act of cultural critique in front of the residence of the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, the titular head of Argentina's extremely powerful and conservative Catholic church. As hundreds of protestors converged upon the Archbishop's residence, and hundreds of riot police formed a line of defense between his ornate dwelling and the poverty of the street, each of the protestors held up large pieces of reflective mylar that had been cut into the shape of glasses. As they stood there, in silence, and in defiance, holding up a wall of mirrors, they reflected back to the police and the church their own image as the image of repression in Argentina. As eloquent and as simple as the hand waving away political corruption outside

the Congress, the use of mirrors to protest the abuses of power combined the performative elements of contemporary art with a social message that reverberated throughout the society.

In Mayan mythology, there is a legend that in the beginning of creation, humans had a mirror through which they could see into the past and the future. However, as the time passed, the gods dimmed this mirror, so that the past and future became opaque and indiscernible. Perhaps the moment that Argentina is now experiencing — a moment in which the nation is considered by some of the G8 as a *pais perdido*, a country lost to globalization, is one in which the ancient powers of the Mayans are returning. The view of the past and future from the other side of the looking glass, in which spontaneous acts of artistic protest reflect an ever-increasing social and economic crisis, is not a utopian one. In Argentina, people are fighting for their basic human rights, their identity and their lives. And the popular art of protest reflects this convulsive reality. The vibrancy and urgency with which people are using forms of artistic intervention that were once the terrain of the elite and the intelligentsia reasserts a future for art as a collective expression of social conflict. What remains to be seen is whether this Mayan-like mirror of projection and prediction can reach back to the other side of the looking glass — where globalization is still a dream of reason from which we have not awakened.