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Sovereignty of Presence

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Last year in November we went to Buenos Aires to begin a project with the working title ExArgentina.[1] Ex Argentina was originally understood as a form of an economy-critical examination of the economic crisis in Argentina and the international lobbies profiting from it. As an artistic practice, this investigation is based on the concept of genealogy as it was developed by Foucault - a minoritarian and local critique that would have an impeding effect on the production of global and centralized theory. When Foucault ultimately speaks of a revolt of suppressed knowledge using the methods of a science that cannot be made efficient, the aim primarily lies in making this knowledge visible. This inefficiency of the visualizing methods seems to be transferable to the reservoir of artistic categories which have finely ground and polished their optical instruments in their presumption of autonomy. The methods of visualizing this knowledge are not interchangeable; they are an expression of involvement – as is the case with the contents. The issue is not an ultimately valid analysis, but rather the search for a mode of representation that can keep that which has been perceived and the conclusions to which one has come as memorable as a poem or a picture, which only in this form can turn into an “up-to-date tactics”.

We stayed seven months in Buenos Aires, also traveling to Posadas, Tucuman, Cordoba and Bahia Blanca. At the end of this period,

however, it was clear that the issue is not only a form of investigation, but how to describe a social movement which is extremely present here and in which many of the participants in the project up to now are engaged. We are faced with the problem of describing this movement in a hegemonic field which extensively and quite frequently exploits the images, domesticates their messages, and subjects them to a universality that makes all statements invisible. We are confronted with the challenge of recalling an artistic practice of integrity which proves that it is possible to visualize such movements with dignity.

During this time we began to write journey letters - like in the old fashioned literary genre of the 18th century, where these letters also had a kind of mirror function for their own society. This is exactly what the current description of the Argentinean crises does to the European view.

One part of the last letter seems to us a precise description of what "real public spaces" could be – in a public space which does not exist any more, because it is completely occupied by private economic interests and the power of the state apparatus. For us "real public space" is not a place. It is a situation. In this letter we described the occupation of public space in the election campaigns and one of these rare situations of "real public space". We wrote this last letter after we had already returned Germany. So...

"We start by conveying our impressions from the end, and from this new experience of distance, which can be compared to an optical device that now no longer works and would need to be readjusted. But one can't adjust it fast enough, because the distance continues to grow. Or it's like sitting on the back seat of a car and staring out the rear window – at the rapid diminution of things, persons and events, until they turn into mere dots.

Campaigns as Total Occupation of Public Space

At this end, Kirchner became president of Argentina with 22% of the votes. Despite having gained 2 percentage points more, Menem renounced his candidacy for the second ballot. On our TV screen in Berlin, the faces of both the winner and the looser remain as unclear as the live images of persons in a space capsule. They are attacked by nervous lines, and they immediately remind us of portraits of Menem, which were allowed by the campaign organizers only shortly before the election, to prevent them from being smeared. It was the profile of a face turned away, traversed by exactly these lines, as if the camera were only able to capture this figure with extreme technical effort. That's how busy this person is, rushing from an automobile into a building. Now, both faces display this effort. But sitting in front of the TV screen in Berlin, this is also merely a phenomenon of distance and indifference – just some presidential election in some unsettled, bankrupt country.

Here, the election is dealt with using the phrase: an interruption of the urgently needed reform process. At worst, Lopez Murphy is mentioned as an alternative – a law-and-order despot whose legal suggestions are aimed at generating orders for his own security firm. He won in Buenos Aires, receiving the largest percentage of votes, just like Menem did on the first ballot. 80 percent of all Argentines acquiesced to the duty to vote. This time they didn't draw on the ballot-paper – there were no Clements without arms[2] – they didn't scribble any curses or paste slogans on them – things that happened during the last elections and that were a clear rejection of this yes/no obedience to enact "frreedom".

We write this down so explicitly because, first of all, we can't

understand it. In the 80s, a person named Bussi was reelected in the Tucuman province. He had all homeless people taken from the city of San Miguel de Tucuman and abandoned in the surrounding areas, where many died of hunger. Poverty was no longer visible in the city. During the time of the junta, Bussi had already been governor. What does this story insinuate? Who is judged as being stupid, and who as cruel? The insinuation assumes there is a link – or at least the projection of a link – between voting, one's own intentions, and one's own everyday political situation. What it does not take into account is the fictitiousness of representational politics and the force with which these fictions are translated into reality.

We now recall the comical aspects of certain election posters. Rodriguez Saa standing in front of refineries with the slogan "100 percent Argentina", despite the fact that the sale of refineries to international corporations triggered the first wave of mass unemployment. Kirchner promised "en serio" (seriously) a country with a national industry and a functioning health system. Menem, a symbolic figure of "the crisis" and under arrest last year on account of arms trafficking and corruption, advertised for himself as "Una Marca Registrada" (a long-standing brand name). ... We had the impression that these posters had become interchangeable with the billings of family or lawyer movies in front of the huge multiplex cinemas in the shopping centers, i.e. with the collective unconscious of a Doris Day, of milk bottles on the lawn in front of the bungalow, of insurance buildings flooded with light, of schools, hospitals and factories, of a national welfare state that cares for and needs the population. This care is inevitably supplemented by the threat posed to prosperity coming from the outside and directed against enemies on the inside by means of a technique of war which the family contributes to producing.

(...)
So much for the dream conveyed by the election posters and their proximity to cinema. If this dream were to be true, then not due to its closeness to reality, but because of the power that enforces its public presence. The truth stood firm as long as the campaign was rolling. This infallible harmony of the campaign was financed by the IMF and the World Bank, as its course furnished proof of itself. The IMF interpreted last year's boycott of the elections as a lack of education. Money for the party apparatuses was therefore intended as an educational measure.
There were candidates who held speeches applauded by the "people" cast in the provinces and paid in empanadas or T-shirts. It is said that the projections in the newspapers resulted from how much money the parties paid, just like some people made bets on how much money was paid to buy how many votes. There were gigantic graffiti on highway bridges and tunnels reading "Menem / Romero" or "Kirchner / Duhalde". Towards the end of the election campaign, the very same Peronist party, but an internal opposing camp, pasted the slogan "Menem al Gobierno / Bush al Poder" (Menem to rule/Bush to power) over the Menem posters. This was a refined type of polemic, because they copied the same slogan with which the candidate at the time, Hector Campora, had himself elected in 1973only so that old Peron could return to power. That's the patriotic myth that is now "soiled" by replacing Peron with Bush, who is hated. These techniques, then, which we in Europe might call communication guerilla, are controlled by political parties, because they stem from a time when these parties were banned, a time in which contact persons in the various barrios painted their slogans on the walls – except that during their years in power, this subversiveness has become an instrument of control.

It is a fact that no one believes the promises made on the election posters. Perhaps the decision to vote and not to mess up the ballot was not due to a logic of promise, but to a logic of fear, which the campaigns incited in their omnipresence and the threats that accompanied them. Poor districts were often shown in TV commercials with the warning not to let it get to that point, and to save one's own skin yet again from an existence in such poverty – by voting. We had the impression that this warning by the rich functionaries was addressed to the ordinary citizens, who still felt the repercussions of their recent decimation and whose former neighbors constituted the last wave of homeless people now occupying the space of the city like a painful memory.

Campaigns of Expulsion

Now let's turn to the city itself, to this physical space occupied by poverty. What began in the city at the same time as the power to present fictions was an eviction campaign, a campaign of obliterating all forms of self-organization regarded as symptoms of the crisis. First the squatted building in Buenos Aires were cleared, which had served as locations for district assemblies, soup kitchens, cultural and political initiatives. Indymedia, the chronicler of these evictions, and itself driven away during the clearing of a former bank branch office, cites Menem's promise "to clean the streets of communists and other delinquents in order to halt social chaos", which is interchangeable with statements made by other contenders.
A few weeks earlier, a debate was started in the media among established intellectuals about the new social movements and the way they are read in the West , a debate one can summarize under the term "Turismo Piquetero". This discussion resulted in a final

shifting of the reason for the ”crisis”, which had been held until then: from the corruption of a caste of politicians, who got rich together with the international financial trusts, to the ”symptoms”: poverty, protest, the self-organization of the poor in order to survive, the demands for possibilities to survive, which indeed were not exclusively directed towards the state but towards the paradigm of private property of an entire class, the impertinence of these symptoms that they did not simply disappear. All this becomes an object of voyeurism for foreigners. But what is it in the desire to observe that connects the foreigners with those organizing themselves? What *lèse-majesté* is it not to examine power but its abjects? We ask these questions with the emphasis of voyeurs.

First, ”el Padelai” is cleared, a building that had been occupied for 20 years and in which more than 500 people lived at the time of the raid. Most of them were younger than 18. 300 policemen raid the building with tear gas and rubber bullets, arresting 86 persons and injuring more than 40. Then came the meeting places of the jobless organizations San Telmo and Florencia Varela, the community kitchen in Almirante Brown, the meeting place of H.I.J.O.S., the building of the Asamblea Paternal, and the social center ”Azucena Villaflor”, just to name the first ones.
Indymedia writes: ”The repression apparatus is omnipresent. Police forces are posted with their bullet-proof vests in front of every supermarket and every bank. Road-blocks are part of to everyday life, as are the robocops armed with machine guns often present at political demonstrations”. We also saw these images, but they did not startle us at first – that’s how common their presence was, and that’s how safe we felt living behind our spy-hole. All measures are legitimized by the new ”anti-terror” legislation agreed upon exactly one year after September 11 by the U.S. Embassy and the authorized officials of the legislature. The law is to enable

cooperation between the security and armed forces and the secret services. It empowers these organizations to proceed against ”terrorist criminality” upon mere suspicion. Terrorist criminality can mean anything. It is the same arbitrary use of power and deprivation of rights which has come into force in almost all ”democracies” since September 11 and which sets a new standard in terms of state force.

A Singer as the Sovereign of his Presence

The clearing of the Brukman clothing factory was a central event during the election campaign in Buenos Aires. Brukman was one of the 180 occupied companies across the country, which prove on a daily basis that producing without a boss or a proprietor is possible. On Good Friday at 2 o’clock in the morning, around 150 heavily armed policemen raided the factory upon the order of the new judge Grimoldi, who was a member of the junta. President Duhalde’s cronies had appointed him as judge two days earlier and declared the Brukman files confidential, thus again proving their readiness to militarize politics. The workers were able to mobilize a large number of people within a short period of time, who then protested against the clearing for four days, until the federal police drove the 7000 people away from the factory, pursued them and arrested many.
The days between the raid, the protests and the eviction made it clear that it is not as if there were two separate parties of power and of outrage, but that they are linked by a web of mediating and legislative apparatuses called upon by the one side and utilized by the other. In the realm of the fictionality of the campaign, the clearing of Brukman was a show trial which, through the entrances and exits of authorities and objecting parties, proved the

inviolability of private property and the significance of state power accompanying it as its protective shield. The two judges who ordered the clearing stated that ”in the face of economic interests, no sovereignty of life and freedom from bodily harm is given”. This statement caused outrage and was later revoked, but it stands there like a new pillar, like the preamble of a new constitution.

It isn’t correct, however, to say that a play was staged, during which, as it unfolded, all these parties entered the stage, presented their arguments, and then bowed. This would place all on the same level: the Ministry of Labor, various chiefs of police, judges, public prosecutors, members of parliament, lawyers, journalists, workers, men, women, and children. One would reduce them to mere actors against the backdrop of a power, which brought in and posted its police troops even on the very first day . Before one speaks of performance, purpose and outcome, one must recall certain days or hours, their outrage and their beauty. We remember one night, for instance, in which a large bandoneon orchestra played in front of the cordons the police used to block the factory. They apparently came there directly from the concert hall. The singer used a megaphone only when certain parts of the song were addressed to the police. He then sang in a strangely subdued and strutting way. It was clear that the singer was a sovereign of his own presence, that he directed only the insulting parts to the staffages of power. The rest was addressed solely to those who sat on the curb or on the lawn of the nearby park.”

Summary

Like many others, we are concerned with establishing coherencies between political activism, political theory and political art. Many

times, though, that seems to us like a space that only exists in our own heads, or as though there were a one-way street of political information and debates that we can only take into the field of art and show.

Yet maybe this suspicion is inherently false, because it is based on an exchange that is forged from identity to identity. As though we as "artists" report on "Argentina" before "squatters", "media activists" and "philosophers". If we accept these identities as given, they automatically arrange themselves into a pyramid standing on its head. The activists form the peak at the bottom – "the real", so to speak, from which a line branches off to theory – a normative relationship, in which theory judges political activism. The other line branches off to art – a relationship of utilization, in which the artistic work is charged with the social sense of the political activity. In their construction, they might be comparable with the paintings in the room where we sat in Naples, pointing from the banal edges of the clouds more and more towards the heights of the spiritual world.

This schematization is already rocked by the various activities and commitments of the individual people who report. Thus we did not appear here as "artists", but rather as travelers giving an account of the disciplining and emancipation of public space in Argentina. And it would be utilitarian to ask now who could make use of any of this, whether addresses were exchanged or cooperations planned. The days spent in these rooms are not suitable for quickly producing meaning, because they belong to the accumulation of knowledge that cannot be effectuated.

Yet we must ask what happens if the meetings are repeated, if many of us meet, report, talk again and again. Which space emerges there and how can we avoid becoming inured to one

another? A friend of ours suggested that it is a political task to keep the themes alive. We believe that is only possible if they are thought in their current antagonistic relationship.

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[1] A project of the Goethe Institute Buenos Aires supported by funds from the German Bundeskulturstiftung, focussing on the economic crisis in Argentina as a perfect example of the consequences of international financial and economic policies and their neoliberal ideology. We worked and discussed with artists and groups of political activists. One of the results of our trip is an exhibition at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne in March 2004. The project is intended to support an artistic and political engagement that takes a stand against the current global power structures and link it with similar initiatives in Europe. http://www.exargentina.org/