

**ARGENTINA ARDE:  
ART AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL STRUGGLE**

by

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## ABSTRACT

This study focuses on artistic representations of the Argentine crisis of 2002, as produced by the art collective *Argentina Arde*. The photographic, documentary video, performance works and texts produced by *Argentina Arde* give an indication of the ways in which the 'nation' is being envisioned by new social movements in Argentina. This study provides insight into their strategic use of nationalist discourse in organizing and mobilizing various sectors of the population. I look into the role played by *Argentina Arde* within the resistance movements that surfaced as a result of the national crisis, and by extension, the role played by the artists' politico-cultural production itself in counteracting hegemonic discourses of the state and the mass media channels it controls. Through this study I argue that groups of this kind may have great significance for the expression and proposal of alternative solutions to national problems in Argentina and Latin America.

*A mi madre, a mi padre y a mi tia-abuela Hilda  
quienes me enseñaron el gran valor de la educación.*

*A Emilio, Melissa, Jorge, Eva, Angela y a mis demás  
amigos y amigas, quienes me aguantaron y me apoyaron  
durante todo este proceso.*

*A Bob Everton, quien por su interminable amor, energía  
y sabiduría, ha sido mi más grande inspiración.*

*To my mother, my father, and my great-aunt Hilda  
who taught me the great value of education.*

*To Emilio, Melissa, Jorge, Eva, Angela and the other  
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## INTRODUCTION: ART THAT WALKS THE TALK

The recent collapse of the Argentine economy in December 2001, and the socio-political crisis it unleashed on the country are the inevitable result of decades of mismanagement of the national economy, corruption of its political leaders, and orthodox stabilization plans which have effectively dismantled the social welfare system and sent unemployment on a spiraling upswing. The extent of poverty and indigence is now worse than it has ever been in Argentine history. In the near absence of state-sponsored aid and development programs, people have had to group together to try to create local and self-sustainable solutions to their problems. They have had to work collectively to find strategies of resistance and techniques for influencing state policy. New social movements in Argentina have started using a myriad of tools and techniques to educate and raise consciousness, to document the struggles of people living in the margins, to counteract the government propaganda and the lies spread by the communications media monopoly, to inspire organized and mass mobilization, and to create small, local and sustainable development projects. These social movements threaten to redirect the future of the nation-state.

This research project focuses on one particular group, which uses fine arts and multi-media as their method of participation in the social struggles of the nation. The group is called *Argentina Arde*. It takes its name from a political art exhibit from 1968, named *Tucumán arde*. An analysis of the links between the past and present, as well as a structuralist analysis of two of the group's artworks will help to uncover their specific objectives and discourses as well as how their work reflects upon new social movements and national identity in Argentina.

Chapter 1 will outline the theoretical framework used for the study. Chapter 2, 3 and 4 will provide an overview of the relevant economic, political and socio-cultural aspects of modern Argentine history. A political-economy focus will elucidate the key economic and political policies and conditions that paved the way for the development of the crisis. A focus on the modern historical development of Argentine social movements in the context of off-and-on military governance will explain the particular characteristics of the latest popular mobilizations and their methods of resistance. Furthermore, an

overview of recent art history and a look at cultural expression in modern Argentina will bring to light the intellectual and artistic traditions, which have either influenced or are being challenged by the work of the *Argentina Arde* collective. Chapter 5 will describe the formation and development of the *Argentina Arde* collective, as well as listing their specific objectives and forms of organization. Chapter 6 will look into the work of the *Argentina Arde* collective by first providing a general overview of their working methodology, and then, by doing a structural analysis of two particular art works in the context of nationalist discourse and new social movements in Argentina.

The photographic, documentary film and performance works produced by members of the *Argentine Arde* collective will give an indication of the ways in which the 'nation' is being envisioned by new social movements in Argentina. I hope to gain insight into their strategic use of nationalist discourse in organizing and mobilizing various and disparate sectors of the population. I also hope to look into the role played by *Argentina Arde* within the resistance movements that surfaced as a result of the national crisis, and by extension, the role played by the artists' cultural-political production itself in counteracting the hegemonic discourses of the state and the mass media channels it controls. I believe that cultural-political groups of this kind may have great significance for the expression and proposal of alternative solutions to national problems in Argentina specifically, and in Latin America more generally.



Figure 1 Map of the provinces of Argentina  
Based on: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Provinces\\_of\\_Argentina](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Provinces_of_Argentina) (June 11, 2005)

## CHAPTER 1 THEORETICAL APPROACH

For this research project I will look at the *Argentina Arde* collective as a political-art movement born of the Argentine socio-economic crisis, which erupted in December 2001. The artist collective responds to this crisis both as *insiders* or active participants in the struggle and as *outsiders* or media workers attempting to properly represent the struggle of those who are most directly affected by the crisis. I am primarily interested in analyzing the artistic production of the collective, which is teeming with traditional nationalist and leftist symbolism, but are given a new interpretation in light of the characteristics of current social movements in Argentina. The analysis will primarily use Piercian semiotics, but will also be complemented by other theoretical tools, which will be useful to reflect upon the issues of nationalism, national identity, new social movements and historical tradition.

The theoretical framework that guides this study is based on the concept of art as a social product, which is both historically situated and collectively produced. As Janet Wolff explains: "Works of art... are not closed, self-contained and transcendent entities, but are the product of specific historical practices on the part of identifiable social groups in given conditions, and therefore bear the imprint of the ideas, values and conditions of existence of those groups, and their representatives in particular artists." (Wolff, p.49) The emphasis placed on the relationship between the individual subject/actor (artist in this case) and social, ideological and economic structures, takes us back to the Hegelian concept of "history as a process that shapes our choices and our very nature." (Honderich, ed. p.341) This concept of art as a product of history will help to explain the reasons behind particular developments in those periods of Argentine art history which will be investigated in this dissertation. Key to this analysis will be a look at particular *signs* which have developed through history and have later been applied to the production of art works as a form of interpreting and representing history: past and present.

The analysis of counter-informative discourses and oppositional artistic interpretations of the Argentine Crisis will require an examination of the *signs* utilized in *Argentina Arde's* work. The data generated through this study will come mainly from the

analysis of graphic design and performance representations of the Crisis as produced by the *Argentina Arde* collective. In the body of work created by the collective there are clear signs, which are present in both an intentional and consistent manner. As Wolff writes: "All art can be seen as repositories of cultural meaning, or, as it is sometimes put, systems of signification..." (Wolff, 4) This approach to the study of art will be especially relevant to this research project, as the signs utilized by the collective are part of a *system of signification* that can be traced back historically.

Specifically, a Structuralist – Semiotic approach will allow for the breaking down of graphic design and performance representations into a set of signs to be analyzed in relation to the historical structures of Argentine society.

In all the main conceptualizations of semiosis, from Aristotle to Pierce (1931-58) and Sebeok (1976,1979), the primary components of this mental process are seen to be the *sign* (a representative image or icon, a work, etc.), the *object* referred to (which can be either concrete or abstract), and the *meaning* that results when the sign and the object are linked together by association. (Danesi, 1-2)

By paying specific attention to the constructed relationships and systems of signification as the framework for understanding, we can move beyond the individual pieces of artwork to find their cultural meaning as it is tied to current Argentine social structures, institutions and phenomena.

Charles Sanders Pierce's *semiotic* analysis seems most relevant to this research topic, because it brings attention to, not only the *signifier* and the *signified*, but also to the *interpretant* or the process of signification itself. "In establishing the meaning of a pictorial *sign*, therefore, a historical interpretation based on a Piercian model would have the advantage of considering not only that sign's place in the system to which it belonged but also how its interpretations had characterized the objects to which they referred." (Moxey, 34) This framework is useful in the emphasis it places on relationships, particularly between the sign, the object and the interpretant.

A sign becomes a sign only through an act of interpretation envisaging it as referring to some entity other than itself. Hence the logic of the tripartite definition of the sign proposed by Charles Sanders Pierce, in which the sign as material entity points to its object by virtue of an interpretant, an interpretative response which picks up on the reference to its object made by the sign. This is usually summarized in a simple triangular diagram." (Potts,18)

In this triadic diagram, one can see that the sign, the object and the interpretant are located at the three different points of the triangle and they point to each other. The diagram visually shows how the sign, the object and the interpretant are integral members in a relationship characterized by a constant referencing of one another.

It is important to mention that for Pierce there is no significant difference between the interpretant who is the *encoder* of the sign and the interpretant who is the *decoder* of the sign. Once the sign has been created, cultural meaning is deposited into it by both groups, and the encoder loses her/his original control over the sign's intended meaning.

My study will also look at the ideological discourse underlying the *Argentina Arde* collective, therefore I will not only be analyzing specific *signs* they use, which have now become their identifiers, but also their reasons for choosing and using these signs. Jacques Derrida states that "meaning is not inherent in signs, nor in what they refer to, but results purely from the relationships between them" (Appignanesi and Garratt, 79). A focus on semiosis, on relationships, on process more than product, will be the most appropriate framework for addressing this particular component of my study.

The concept of *semiosis* – process rather than product, relations rather than things – is wider and more encompassing than "representation". And, since *semiosis* implies "mediation," it is deeper and more comprehensive than the ordinary expressions "derivation of meaning" or "interpretation". Engendering and processing signs and making them meaningful is more than merely getting information out of them or making sense of them. (Merrell, 35)

As expressed by Floyd Merrell above, it is important to focus on the processes, the relations, and the mediation, which encompass the existence and the use of specific *signs*. Furthermore, it will also be useful to analyze these signs in terms of the *character* of each of its relations. Pierce developed another conceptual triad for the analysis of a *sign's* relations as paraphrased below:

... any sign can be analyzed in three aspects which correspond to the first three formal conditions of the sign: the sign qua sign, that is, the sign in regard to its ground; the sign in regard to its object; and the sign in regard to its interpretant. Following the logic here, the first – the aspect of the sign qua sign – might be called the sign's *presentative* character; the second, the relation of sign to object, might be called its *representative* character; and the third, the sign's relation to its interpretant, its *interpretative* character... (Liszka, 35)

To be more precise: when analyzing the sign in relation to *itself* or its *ground* (its presentative character) we are looking at the *sign's* singularities, its particular qualities. However, when analyzing the sign in relation to the *object* (its representative character) we are looking for the particular *type* of relation or correlation that exists between the sign itself and the object it is attempting to represent or refer to. And when analyzing the sign in relation to the *interpretant* (its interpretative character) we are looking at the sense, the connotation or the cultural meaning deposited in the sign and the sign's ability to *determine* or *direct* an interpretant towards a specific *perception* of the object it refers to. This is how we can analyze the ideological or discursive purpose for the creation of that sign by the collective.

While a Peircian semiotic analysis will allow for the analysis of cultural meaning as constructed by the "sign-object-interpretant" triad, a Barthesian analysis of denotative and connotative meaning will also contribute to this analysis.

Roland Barthes' fundamental argument is that no single text or image can be 'innocent' or neutral, but rather, that all communicative expressions are mediated by cultural codes (or systems of signification) of which we are often completely unaware. He tried to show through his semiotic analyses of popular culture phenomena that "any kind of popular culture could be decoded by means of reading the 'signs' within the text." (Sardar and Van Loon, 38)

When we consider advertising, news, and TV or film texts, it will become clear that linguistic, visual, and other kinds of sign are used not simply to denote something, but also to trigger a range of connotations attached to the sign. Barthes calls this social phenomenon, the bringing together of signs and their connotations to shape a particular message, the making of 'myth'. Myth here does not refer to mythology in the usual sense of traditional stories, but to ways of thinking about people, products, places, or ideas, which are structured to send particular messages to the reader or viewer of the text. (Bignell, 16)

In the case of photography, Barthes points out that a photograph will never be a 'pure' or 'natural' image, because the criteria for selection, style and processing imbue the photographic image with a series of (conscious or unconscious) connotations. He refers to six specific procedures which alter the 'denotated' image and imbue it with a myriad of connotations: first, 'trick effects' using computer technology; second, physical pose, gestures and expressions; third, the presence of certain objects rich in connotative

meaning; fourth, the photographic quality and expert use of lighting, exposure and printing techniques; fifth, *aestheticism* or a purposeful use of artistic aesthetic codes; and sixth, *syntax* or the connotations created by the particular 'placing' of the photograph within a photographic sequence or amongst text. (Bignell, 100-102) This forms part of what is usually expressed as Barthes' paradox of photography:

To call photography a language is both true and false. It's false, in the literal sense, because the photographic image is an analogical reproduction of reality, and as such it includes no discontinuous element that could be called sign: there is literally no equivalent of a word or letter in a photograph. But the statement is true insofar as the composition and style of a photo function as a secondary message that tells us about the reality depicted and the photographer himself: this is *connotation*, which is language. (Barthes, 1985: 353)

So in the decoding of a photographic image, Barthes looks at three types of messages: the linguistic message, the "coded iconic" message and the "non-coded iconic" message. The linguistic message is simply the mix of denotations and connotations given by the words apparent in the photograph/ad/poster/etc (if indeed there is text in the image). The "coded iconic" message essentially refers to the *connotations* in the photograph, which are usually "derived from the larger sign system of society". The "non-coded iconic" message refers to the 'literal' *denotations* or the identifiable objects, which were photographed. (Cobley and Jansz, 47-49)

For Barthes "culture is a fate to which we are condemned" (Barthes, 1985: 153) and thus, there is no escaping either its language or its cultural codes. This is important for the analysis of so-called "counter-information" or "counter-culture" movements such as *Argentina Arde*. Barthes warns that "To engage in radical countercultural activity is therefore simply to move language around, and, unless one is very careful, to rely on the same stereotypes, language fragments which already exist." (Barthes, 1985: 153) The deconstruction of the denotated and connotated messages contained in *Argentina Arde's* work may indeed bring us to this very conclusion.

The concept of *discourse* conveniently brings together the theories discussed above as well as those to be discussed as follows.

A *discourse* consists of culturally or socially produced groups of ideas containing texts (which contain signs and codes) and representations (which describe power in relation to Others). As a way of thinking, a discourse often represents a structure of



knowledge and power. A *discursive analysis* exposes these structures and locates the discourse within wider historical, cultural and social relations. (Sardar and Van Loon, 14)

For this project, I will use a *deconstructionist* approach to the analysis of *Argentina Arde*'s discourse. I hope to identify both the *overt* and the *underlying* discourses that are being conveyed in *Argentina Arde*'s work, and to discover their relationship to the structures and discourses of exclusion, power and dominance within Argentine society

## **CHAPTER 2 A POLITICAL-ECONOMY ANALYSIS OF THE ARGENTINE CRISIS**

One of the most significant turning points in the history of the Argentine nation-state was the rise of Peronism in the 1940s. Peronism represented a new populist political style, which brought with it a broad restructuring of the national economy and the cementing of corporatist and clientelistic relations between the three main power holders of Argentine society: the government, business and the trade-unions (Véganzonès and Winograd, 34).

Widespread scarcity in Europe and the heightened demand for agricultural products during the Second World War, as well as the professed neutrality of the Argentine government, provided the perfect conditions for exporting Argentine agricultural products to both the Allied countries of Europe and the Axis powers (Lewis, 177). While exporting was profitable, importing was nearly impossible, especially due to the United States' boycott against Argentina as punishment for its neutrality. And so, the excess revenue from increased international exports was used by Perón's government to launch a very ambitious Import Substitution Industrialization Drive focused specifically on the creation of a broad industrial front that would make Argentina capable of providing for the demand of the internal market (de la Balze, 40), as well as opening up new channels for industrial exports to neighbouring countries.

Peronist economic policy was geared towards a strong managing and regulating role for the government, which intended the nationalization of as many foreign investments and companies as possible (de la Balze, 30) in order to ensure Argentina's so-called "independence" from the North. Key to Perón's "economic independence" was the nationalization of the Central Bank, because through the Bank he could manage monetary, credit policies and also foreign trade (Romero, 104; Véganzonès and Winograd, 34; de la Balze, 45). Through these policies, Perón's government acquired the tools it needed for increasing its control over the economy, and it used these new powers to protect and to support the industrial sector.

Perón also saw in this industrialization drive the chance to create mass employment opportunities in the industrial sector; where workers were controlled by the

trade-union movement that he himself had helped to build up through the development of a corporatist relationship between the *Confederación General de Trabajadores* (CGT) and his government. The spoils of Argentine international exports during the booming war years were used to restructure the national economy, creating a veritable welfare state, which through its plethora of new services for the working class (Véganzonès and Winograd, 34), was able to garner incredible popular support among the generally marginalized and subaltern sectors of the population, thus consolidating the legitimacy of the Peronist regime and its inevitable continuation at the helm of government through re-election.

Perón's policies resulted in considerable wage increases, as well as the creation of social programs related to worker rights, health care, tourism, public housing, retirement, and the construction of many new primary and secondary schools, making education more readily accessible to the working classes (Romero, 104). The creation of a welfare state at this time was possible precisely because of the surplus in foreign exchange accumulated during the war years, but as the war came to an end, it became increasingly clear that Perón's lack of fiscal restraint and largely inefficient industrialization drive (de la Balze, 40; Lewis, 180-1) would catch up with him.

Around 1949, with the end of WWII, the unusually high prices on the international market for grains and meat, the principal exports for Argentina, returned to normal. Furthermore, the highly subsidized industrial and agricultural production of the United States became more difficult to compete with, thus the markets for Argentine agricultural production shrank drastically, leaving the country with very little export revenue with which to subsidize the increasingly stagnant industrial sector and to continue its fervent social spending spree. This marked the beginning of a downward slide in the national economy from which the country was never to recover. To this day, Argentine politics continues under the shadow of the Peronist welfare state and the expectations it created in the shared consciousness of the nation's working class.

The economic crisis that followed the Second World War occurred at a time when protectionist and internally focused economic models such as the one implemented in Argentina and most of Latin America were being questioned by influential Western economists and financial institutions. After the 1947 signing of the Bretton Woods monetary agreements, the concept of modernizing the economy and opening it up to foreign investment became one of the most widely pronounced "solutions" for the inflation and balance-of-payments problems of Southern countries.

When Arturo Frondizi won the presidency in 1958, it became imperative that he address the recurring economic crisis, which was rapidly deteriorating the economic and political stability of the nation. Frondizi's government negotiated Argentina's entry into the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, promptly asking for their aid. The requested assistance was provided with the concomitant set of recommendations for the stabilization of the economy (Manzetti, 1-2; Romero, 136). Frondizi's government carried out the IMF's Stabilization Plan, which included the dismantling of the structures of government intervention in the economy, and as part of this, the implementation of an orthodox austerity program, which included a devaluation of the peso, the freezing of wages, and removing price controls and state regulations (Lewis, 277; Romero, 142). These measures resulted in a wave of unemployment and a significant drop in workers' incomes. The IMF recommendations also included a set of laws on foreign investment and industrial promotion, making Argentina more enticing for investors (Véganzonès and Winograd, 36). The results of Frondizi's policies on industrial investment were notable, but did not reach the 1 billion dollars per year that he was hoping for: foreign investment, which was close to 20 million dollars in 1957, increased to 248 million dollars in 1959 and to 348 million dollars by 1961 (Lewis, 303; Romero, 141). Although most Argentines supported both modernizing and opening up the economy, there was no clear consensus in terms of strategies to achieve this (Lewis, 301). Many people were distrustful of foreign investors and anxious about the drastic changes taking place in a context in which the government was consistently losing the ability to regulate business and the financial sectors. Just a few years later, the recurring cycles of economic crisis reflowered with the concomitant runaway inflation, balance-of-payments deficits and high unemployment, which once again called for drastic measures to be implemented (Lewis, 278; Véganzonès and Winograd, 36).

The year 1976 marked another key turning point in modern Argentine history. Facilitated by the Armed Forces' elimination of over 30,000 people, the military junta managed to consolidate the neo-liberal economic model that the United States so ardently promoted. This period of military rule was referred to as the "Process of National Reorganization". General Jorge Rafael Videla was assigned the role of "President" of the military regime and he appointed José Martínez de Hoz as "Minister of the Economy", Together they violently rearranged the political and economic structures of the country in such a way that these changes would be cemented into posterity.

The Military Junta considered the Peronist welfare state and interventionist structure to be one of the core causes of the economic and political problems they were trying to eliminate (Fasano-Filho, 51; Romero, 221; Véganzonès and Winograd, 38). The Junta looked upon the recommendations of the IMF as the only solution for Argentina. They saw the market as the force that would be able to “discipline” social actors for their “inflationary” behaviour, and in this way they sought to reward efficiency and discourage interest-group behaviour (Romero, 221; Véganzonès and Winograd, 38). Part of the Junta’s mission was to dismantle the corporatist relationship that Perón had encouraged between the trade unions, business and the state (Nochteff and Abeles, 21; Teichman, 102). The continuous tug-of-war between the trade unions and business over state resources had often created stalemates that made implementing austerity measures and risky economic policies impossible.

Martínez de Hoz used strong state intervention and focused political violence to push through a difficult restructuring process, which was meant to replace state intervention with the rules of the market. His specific goal was to dismantle the tools of state planning, regulation, and control of the economy; this included exchange controls, regulation of credit and interest rates, and tariff protection (Lewis, 450; Manzetti, 3; Romero, 231). The immediate result of Martínez de Hoz’s economic policies was catastrophic for local industry. The elimination of exchange controls and tariff protection for national industrial production resulted in a great influx of cheap foreign goods, with which national industries were not able to compete. The more vulnerable industries crashed and burned, the stronger and more established industries suffered harsh blows and became heavily indebted.

During the first five years of the military government, industrial production declined by some 20 percent, as did the employed labour force. Many factories shut down, and all together industry experienced an involution. The most serious result of this was that, rather than increasing efficiency, as was the stated objective, industry went backward... At a time that significant technological advances were occurring globally in those industries, the breach that separated Argentina from the rest of the world, reduced during the previous twenty years, grew irreversibly wider again. (Romero, 227)

This involution in industry did not go without a hefty price for the Military Junta. Between the deregulation of the financial sectors, and the high interest rates and government guarantees on deposits, Argentina became ripe for speculation. Foreign investment

during this time went mostly into the money markets where investors earned hefty returns on their deposits and later pulled them from the country as they saw fit. National corporations also made up for their productive losses by taking out loans and putting them into highly speculative deposits in the financial sector. The lack of productive investment and this high level of speculation made the economy very unstable (Lewis, 469).<sup>1</sup>

Also around this time, international credit became readily available and the interest rates very affordable due to the abundance of petrodollars circulating through the Americas, following the increase in international oil prices. However, after 1980, the United States decided to suddenly raise interest rates to dramatic new levels, which affected mostly debtor countries. The result was an international economic crisis (de la Balze, 53; Véganzonès and Winograd, 38), which began with Mexico's 1982 default on its external debt and continued with balance-of-payments difficulties in most of Latin America.

During this complicated time in the international economic circuits, perhaps the greatest policy error made by Martínez de Hoz was the retainment of state guarantees on bonds it emitted and on savings accounts. In the case of bankruptcy, the State covered savers' losses with government funds. Most companies had financial problems during this period, bankruptcies became epidemic and creditors began to get anxious about the loans piling up with little chance of recovery. (Romero, 225) In 1980, when four of the country's most important banks and the heads of three major holding companies declared bankruptcy, it created great anxiety in the country. In order to stop an inevitable run on the banks the government had to agree to bail them out, but to do so, Argentina had to ask once more for aid from the IMF, thus once again increasing its foreign debt (Romero, 225).

At that point, the exchange parity the state had attempted to maintain, had to be abandoned, causing inflation to spiral to 100 percent annually and the peso to be devalued more than 400 percent. This became the worst-case scenario for all the private companies that had previously taken out loans in dollars and now found it impossible to pay them back. In 1982 the government, having already covered the debts of the banking system, decided to nationalize the private debt of many of the bankrupt companies and industries (de la Balze, 47; Romero, 226; Teichman, 125), while many of

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<sup>1</sup> The state's policies actually rewarded agility and speculation rather than entrepreneurial risk-taking (Lewis, 465; Romero, 225).

the owners of these companies had been slowly sending money overseas in order to later take advantage of the state's "generosity". A speculative fever took hold of all sectors of the population, and it resulted in all these private debts simply being added to the much smaller (but still significant) public debt previously accumulated by the state.

The Armed Forces were also direct beneficiaries of the state's foreign debt, receiving millions of dollars in borrowed money put towards the modernization of the Military, Air Force and the Navy, as well as a significant arms build-up supposedly justified by the "imminent threat of war" with Chile or with Great Britain (de la Balze, 52; Romero, 232). *Fabricaciones Militares*, the group of industrial factories and companies administered by and for the Armed Forces, estimated its losses in 1980 at approximately \$600 million dollars. To put military spending in perspective, one need only look at the millions of dollars borrowed by Argentina during the year 1978, of which, at least 30 percent were used for the purchase of military equipment (Lewis, 454).

At the time of the military coup in 1976 the foreign debt was at 9,700 million dollars, by the end of the regime's term in power the debt had increased to 45,000 million dollars, that is a 364 percent increase in just 7 years. It was an increase that would forever change the route of the Argentine economy, functioning from then on as the principal disciplining factor in the management of the nation's finances.

As urgent as the economy may have seemed for Raúl Alfonsín, who was voted into power in 1983, the democratization process took centre stage during his presidential term (Véganzonès and Winograd, 39). Alfonsín prioritized cultural and educational policies in the hope of transforming the authoritarian nature of the Argentine nation and creating processes for full participation and representation in the democratic system (Romero, 257). Though Alfonsín could boast some moderate successes as far as his democratization project is concerned, it was the worsening economic crisis, which in the end cost him public support.

By 1985 the already high level of inflation was on the verge of becoming hyperinflation and foreign creditors began to get wary. Alfonsín finally announced his *Austral Plan*, and began implementing policies to try to stabilize the economy in the short term, with a vision towards future structural reforms. Prices, wages and public utility rates were frozen, foreign exchange and interest rates were fixed, monetary emission was eliminated, and a rigid discipline was assumed in terms of revenue and spending (Falk, 40; Romero, 270). Alfonsín also tried to attract more foreign investment and began to plan for the privatization of state companies and for the further deregulation of the

economy (de la Balze, 68; Lewis, 484; Romero, 272). However, after only a short period of apparent success, Alfonsín's plan began to show its weaknesses. Hyperinflation rose once again, reaching such drastic levels that social conflict was simply inevitable. Soon afterwards, the lootings of supermarkets and the riots in both the capital and the provinces, would force Alfonsín to step down, handing over power to Carlos Saúl Menem, the Peronist candidate who promised a magical solution to the Argentine crisis.

This transfer of power was significant in that it was evidence of a growing democratic commitment in the country. It was the first time that a democratically elected government peacefully handed over power to another democratically elected government since 1928 (de la Balze, 66).<sup>2</sup> This transaction, in many ways, seemed to consolidate the transition from military to civilian rule, but there was, nevertheless, the threat that a continuation of the economic crisis would result in an increased social resistance, which could inspire a military reaction or a delegitimization of civilian governance. Menem could not afford any of this, so he adopted drastic measures in the hopes of halting this chain of events, which seemed rather inevitable.

Menem had the charismatic pull typical of the populist style of Peronism. He had also learned from Peronism the art of "using both of his hands" as Perón himself used to say: the leftist and the rightist. In private, Menem negotiated deals and alliances with influential business and church leaders, as well as high-ranking military officers. In public he made grandiose appeals to the "downtrodden" referring to himself in messianic tones and promising to save Argentines from increasing poverty (Romero, 281). At a time when hopelessness had become generalized in Argentina, Menem's messianic discourse seemed the only alternative. He won a majority in the elections and became comfortable in power. He took advantage of the divisions within the Radical party to speedily implement a new economic plan. Two laws were quickly passed: a) the Law of Economic Emergency, which suspended subsidies and special privileges for the private sector, as well as all extraordinary government spending, thus authorizing the layoff of public employees, and b) the Law of State Reform, which set up a regulatory framework for the privatization of a large number of state-owned companies (de la Balze, 71-2; Romero, 288-9) Their objective was to produce quick results that could renew Argentines' and the international financial institutions' confidence in the government. To gain some surplus revenue, the privatization of state companies began almost

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<sup>2</sup> And it was the first democratic transfer of power to an opposition party government since 1916 (de la Balze, 66).



immediately (Végonzònès and Winograd, 40-41) followed by increases in taxes on sales and income (Romero, 289).

Apart from the fiscal deficit and the approaching payments on the foreign debt, the state also had to find a way to halt rising inflation. Domingo Cavallo, a prominent economist with close connections to the World Bank, took office in 1991 as Minister of the Economy and shortly afterwards introduced his Convertibility Law. This law fixed exchange rates at one peso to one U.S. dollar. Due mostly to the excess revenue amassed through the privatization of state-owned companies and to the halting of inflation, Argentina enjoyed three profitable years. But, behind the scenes and on the streets, this economic “miracle” touted by Menem and Cavallo had some very unfortunate consequences. Each privatization resulted in extensive layoffs, increasing unemployment dramatically (de la Balze, 80; Nochteff and Abeles, 35). Social unrest mounted steadily as people realized that Menem’s “miracle” was never meant to benefit the working class or the poor, despite the many promises Menem had made to them.

In 1994, Mexico was forced to devalue its currency, kicking into action what is commonly referred to as the “Tequila effect”. Latin American countries were hard hit by this crisis in the international financial community. In Argentina, it resulted in massive withdrawals of foreign capital, which triggered another recession as the government’s deficit continued to grow (Teichman, 111). Unemployment hit an all-time high of 18 percent. The IMF’s suggestions for dealing with the recession included trimming the national budget, reducing public-sector wages and increasing taxes. Menem followed their cue, thus preventing a collapse in the economy, but never finding a way out for the steep recession the country had fallen into (Romero, 306).

Menem kept confidential the actual amount of the increasing government deficit, thus deceiving the public through false financial statements. This was neither his only nor his worst instance of corruption. Within his government, corruption had been a fundamental rule of the game. “The right to steal was apparently a sign of membership in the highest circles of power. Just as a way to stabilize the economy was found, so also was it learned how to transfer public resources discreetly to private fortunes... Technically speaking, the country was governed by a gang, by a coterie of corrupt and unscrupulous officials.” (Romero, 298) In the particular context characterized by

squabbling within the Peronist Party, upcoming national elections and the failure of Menem's so-called "economic miracle", the media saw fit to make public the widespread corruption of Menem's team.<sup>3</sup>

The neo-liberal economic policies implemented during the 1970s and which finally concluded in the 1990s through the policies of Domingo Cavallo have strongly shaken the productive apparatus (Romero, 320). For Argentina to be able to pay off some of its foreign debt, it would need a strong export economy where industrial and agricultural production is key. However, the weakening of both of these sectors through the policies of the last decades has made this task a nearly impossible one. Further cutbacks in state spending are also difficult, considering both rising social unrest and the constant levels of high unemployment. The Argentine economy is now burdened by the foreign debt and the conditions it must bow down to in order to receive further aid. Under these conditions the country will continue to be dependent on foreign creditors, perhaps indefinitely.

The structural characteristics of the Argentine economy, however, have changed. By 2001, unemployment was near 20 percent and under-employment also hung around 20 percent. Another 15 to 20 percent of the population was self-employed, and many others survived by participating in the "underground economy" (Nochteff and Abeles, 38-9; Romero, 321). Even among those who were employed full-time, there were many who suffer from low wages and precarious living conditions. The state, by reducing its role as an agent of economic development as well as its role in providing health care, education, social security, defense, public safety, and public works, attempted to transfer these responsibilities to the general public which was already over-burdened and incapable of covering these new expenses (Romero, 323). Social inequality is growing and transforming Argentina, from the largely middle class and homogeneous country that it was, into a newly polarized and more hierarchical society, which discriminates between the small economically successful elite and the large marginalized sectors of the population. In this process a large "marginalized" or "subaltern" class has emerged composed of seasonal workers, the self-employed in small-time endeavors, retired

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<sup>3</sup> Investigative journalism focused on uncovering the governments' illicit business deals and cover-ups. Domingo Cavallo began to denounce Menem's dealings as did Menem's rival for power in the Peronist party, Eduardo Duhalde. In the end, it became clear that corruption in the government had seen no limits, seeping into all levels of command in nearly all public institutions (Romero, 314). This increase in corruption was in part due to the cutbacks and layoffs of public sector employees, because as decision-making power became more and more concentrated in fewer hands it became easier to abuse both that power and the limited government supervision for one's own personal benefit.

people, the under-employed, the unemployed and youth. This subaltern class has been deemed by society as a dangerous sector, which lives with one foot in, and one foot outside the law (Romero, 326). It is just one part of the approximately 35 percent of the population which now lives under the poverty line.

Fernando de la Rúa, who took over the presidency in December 1999, inherited the complete failure of Menem's neo-liberal economic model. One of its components was the once praised Convertibility Law, which was now a rigid straightjacket that made the cost of exporting exorbitantly high, but if abandoned, it threatened to unleash terrible social chaos (Romero, 334). Menem had left behind a 15 billion dollar deficit; three times the amount that he had declared to the public. The country was in a deep recession and nearing default on the foreign debt.

De la Rúa called in Domingo Cavallo in the hopes that some last minute solution could be found. On December 1, 2001, Cavallo called for the freezing of all bank deposits in what came to be called the *corralito* or the "little corral", the people interpreted this as a government confiscation of their savings and thus, social resistance mounted rapidly and furiously (Romero, 342). Not only the legitimacy of the government was being questioned, but also the capabilities of all political representatives, who were seen as self-serving, corrupt and out of touch with the realities of the Argentine people.

In the midst of a wave of social protest, rioting and the looting of supermarkets, de la Rúa realized he could no longer remain in power. On December 21, 2001 he abandoned the presidential palace in a helicopter as protesters outside tried to force their way into the *Casa Rosada*. Between December 21 and January 2, five different presidents were sworn into power, each one resigning the post after only days or weeks. On January 2, 2002, Eduardo Duhalde of the Peronist party was selected to carry out the rest of de la Rúa's term.

In the elections of 2003, Peronist Nestor Kirchner was elected president and quickly began to respond to the demands of the various sectors demanding more government transparency, an end to corruption, an end to the impunity laws that protected the military from human rights trials, an end to police corruption and violence and attention to the socio-economic needs of the unemployed and marginalized.

It is still too early to tell what lies in the future for Argentina, but it is probably fair to assume that unemployment, polarization and marginalization will not be eradicated overnight, and may still become worse. A democracy necessarily requires political equality for its populace, but its success also depends on the existence of a populace

which shares some level of socio-economic equality, without which, the democratic project ceases to be credible (Romero, 332). This is the issue at the heart of the current Argentine crisis and expressed by the social resistance movements, whose objective is the creation of a “popular and direct democracy”.

## CHAPTER 3 SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, THE LEFT AND MILITARISM IN ARGENTINA

An analysis of contemporary Argentine social movements needs to focus on the impact of Peronism on both the labour movement and the Left. The rise of Peronism changed the face of the labour movement, transforming it from a mostly socialist and anarchist-oriented movement into a highly corporatist structure of unbending loyalty to Perón. The creation of social welfare programs under the guise of Peronist “social justice” resulted in widespread popular support for the regime (Tedesco, 3). For the trade unions, which administered a great number of these programs, it also provided them with a level of power and legitimacy seldom seen before in Latin America.

Perón’s nationalist and anti-communist ideology, however, would not allow for a free association of workers or for trade unions formed under the banner of revolutionary ideals. Communists, anarchists, and all those who opposed his rule were intimidated or persecuted, some suffering torture, imprisonment and even assassination (Tedesco, 3). The result of this wave of repression, together with the political appointments of loyal labour leaders during the rise of the trade-union movement, was the development of a movement that was parasitically attached to the state apparatus. The trade unions, united under the name *Central General de Trabajadores (CGT)* engaged in complex negotiations with the business sector and the state, so the benefits received were often the result of compromises.

As a result of this relationship, the CGT became Perón’s principal tool for the control of the trade-union movement. At the top, the trade unions were led by mediocre figures who were responsible for carrying out Peron’s orders, collective bargaining negotiations with the government, administering social services and assuring the discipline and obedience of the rank and file union members (Romero, 105). The power holders within the CGT had been transformed largely into corporative bureaucrats and administrators. The rank and file activists still believed that the State was on their side, providing the benefits they demanded and facilitating their work through the creation of open and fluid communication and participation lines between them (Romero, 106). This is why, no matter how much control Perón maintained over the workings of the trade

unions and the CGT, he could not control the socio-political expression of the working class, who took his message of “social justice” to heart and defended it at all costs. At times, feeling that he was losing his grip on the working class, Perón “sought to resolve conflicts through arbitration procedures and, that failing, chose to repress them, whether at the hands of the union itself or of the public security forces.” (Romero, 106)

No amount of control or repression, however, especially after Perón’s exile, was able to take away the strength the trade-unions had gained, and this would become Perón’s legacy for decades to come: the creation of an organized working class that would eventually put to question even some of Peronism’s own principles. As Smith elucidates: “A key feature of Perón’s legacy was an ‘organized working class’ that now wielded tremendous political and economic bargaining power and was fully prepared to defend aggressively its corporate interests, even if this meant clashing with the state and the military.” (Smith 1989, 101) Subsequent governments came up against a labour movement of superior organizational development, with a sophisticated political consciousness and decades’ experience of political and economic militancy (Smith 1989, 102).

Having mobilized the working class under Peronist trade unionism, Perón then sought to gain the support of the largely unorganized popular sectors (Romero, 107). The mobilization of the *descamisados* was conducted through the work of his wife, Eva Perón and the Foundation that carried her name. The Foundation practiced direct action, receiving a tireless procession of petitioners, to whom Evita personally doled out contributions<sup>4</sup>. The Foundation also was responsible for carrying out important public works projects like building schools, orphanages and senior’s homes, financed by the State and somewhat voluntary private donations. “Eva Perón thus turned out to be the very incarnation of the welfare state, which through the Lady of Hope acquired a personal and emotive dimension.” (Romero, 107) Evita’s greatest contribution to Perón’s government was the incorporation of the popular sectors into the Peronist movement; a constituency that would turn out to be the most loyal to his mantra.

The military coup that ousted Perón, also outlawed the Peronist party and thus created a void in the political representation of the working class masses. As a result, the Peronist trade-union movement came to function as political representative of a heterogeneous mass movement as well as corporative negotiator for the working class

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<sup>4</sup> Contributions such as: sewing machines, bicycles, and homes, and provided aid to those seeking a hospital bed, a retirement pension or employment (Romero, 107).

(Smith 1989, 109). The trade unions amassed such a level of power and influence, that if provoked, they threatened to destabilize the government in power (Smith 1989, 109).

During the 1960s a younger, more militant generation of trade-union activists renewed their ties to the popular sectors through a more radical leftist interpretation of Peronism, one which provided a strong unifying focus between them and different social movement sectors (Romero, 137; Smith 1989, 107). In March 1968, the CGT split into two factions: the CGT de Azopardo, controlled by the more traditional and collaborationist Peronist leaders and headed by Augusto Vandor; and the CGT de los Argentinos which held a more radical class-based political ideology while still maintaining Peronist roots (Smith 1989, 118; Tedesco, 9).

The CGT de los Argentinos responded with a strategy of mass mobilizations linking workers' struggles with the protests of small businessmen, student resistance to the restructuring of the university system, the emerging Third World Priests Movement, and other popular causes. This strategy culminated in the launching of a broad-based Frente Cívico de la Resistencia in June 1968. (Smith 1989, 124)

It would not be long before Marxist and revolutionary ideals became incorporated into the newly radicalized sectors of the Peronist movement. Through mass resistance to authoritarianism and dictatorship and ties to many sectors in resistance, this new tendency within Peronism and the trade-union movement would stand up to challenge the reformist-controlled trade-union bureaucracy and would soon become the leading opposition force in the country (Smith 1989, 126). The political identity of the working class had become unwaveringly linked to Peronism, becoming even stronger after Peron's exile (Romero, 134). This particular political identity has greatly influenced the makeup of social movements from the 1940s onwards, either as an identity to adopt, to co-opt or to struggle against.

The new left was formed looking first to Peronism for inspiration and then to the Cuban Revolution. It was characterized by the spectacular growth of Marxism in the society, the source of all beliefs: One either was or was not a Marxist. In Marxism, the varieties were endless. Orthodox Stalinism retreated in the face of new doctrinal sources: Lenin, whose central place was maintained because of his thesis on imperialism, Sartre, Gramsci, Trotsky, Mao, from whom were derived every imaginable interpretation – leading to everything from

condemning Peronism to embracing it – legitimized by a Marx who lent himself to all points of view. (Romero, 167)

The Argentine revolutionary left developed a deeply factional and splintered character, a real mish-mash of diverse Peronist and Marxist tendencies (Smith 1989, 140). The new left was largely built on the experience of the *Resistencia Peronista* of the 1950s, closely linked to radical and militant trade unionism and now fuelled by the new influences of the Cuban Revolution and Guevarist revolutionary ideology. “These antecedents were a powerful impetus propelling many students, intellectuals, and other sectors of the middle class toward involvement in radical politics, whether Peronist, Marxist, and/or Guevarist in orientation.” (Smith 1989, 140)

Perhaps the most explosive indication of this new resistance front was the *Cordobazo*, the May 1969 social uprising led by trade-unionists and students that sent shock-waves to Onganía’s military government (Romero, 180; Tedesco, 10)<sup>5</sup>. The *Cordobazo* served as a model to follow for Leftist popular uprisings (Brennan, 139), and in the following years similar protests would take place, as in the *Rosariazo*, the *Mendozinazo*, and a sequel in Córdoba city – the *Viborazo* of 1971.

As [Samuel] Huntington reminds us, in such situations “social forces confront each other nakedly ... and each group employs means which reflect its peculiar nature and capabilities. The wealthy bribe; students riot; workers strike; mobs demonstrate; and the military coup.... [All] these forms of direct action are found on the political scene.” After the *cordobazo* each new strike or demonstration created the sensation of a new confrontation, of a recurrence of the events of May. Some longed for, and others feared, a national conflagration, a true *argentino*. (Smith 1989, 133)

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<sup>5</sup> A general strike was called by the trade unions and a march into the downtown core was organized for the same day; workers were joined by thousands of students and common citizens filling the streets in a rowdy protest over the policies of General Onganía’s regime (Brennan, 158; Smith 1989, 128). The uprising was spontaneous; there were no organizers, no recognized leaders, no banners, slogans or proposals. But they were met with such excessive police brutality that the protestors responded with an equally violent confrontation; barricades were erected, tires and mattresses were used to light bonfires to combat the effects of tear gas (Romero, 181; Smith 1989, 128). At the height of resistance, the protestors controlled 150 square blocks of the downtown core of Córdoba City (Smith 1989, 128). The protesters were unprepared for the confrontation, but they reacted rapidly and effectively. After the Army was called in, they retreated into the student neighbourhoods, *Barrio Clínicas* and *Barrio Alberdi*, and defended them with barricades, molotov cocktails and snipers on the rooftops (Brennan, 140 and 155), while others attacked the local police stations. It was not until May 31<sup>st</sup> that order would be re-established, it would take 5,000 soldiers on top of the 4,000 police officers on the scene to quell the uprising (Smith 1989, 129). “Between twenty and thirty persons had been killed, some five hundred were wounded, and another three hundred arrested.” (Romero, 181)



These uprisings were threatening enough. "What made the *viborazo* and the growing social unrest so threatening was that they occurred in the context of a parallel upsurge in guerrilla activity." (Smith 1989, 184)

Cuban and Guevarist influences in the upsurge of guerrilla activity in Latin America have been well documented. In the case of Argentina, however, it was more so the country's experience with authoritarianism and dictatorship that deepened the conviction that the only possible resistance was armed resistance (Romero, 189). Many groups emerged around this time: the *Fuerzas Armadas Peronistas*, *Descamisados*, *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias* (FAR), *Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación*. Later on, many of these groups merged and created the *Montoneros*, a group made up of radical peronists, nationalists, and liberation theologians. Most of the non-peronist radicals joined the Trotskyist guerrilla group called *Ejercito Revolucionario del Pueblo*, which was closely tied to the *Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores* (Romero, 189).

A series of spectacular kidnappings, executions, bank robberies and town occupations began in 1970 and from that point on until 1973, these acts increased in number and in extremity (Anderson, M., 78; Romero, 1989). A major aspect of guerrilla action was revolutionary propaganda carried out through Robin-hood style town and neighbourhood occupations, where food, money, toys and pamphlets were distributed (Anderson, M., 78; Smith 1989, 184). In these cases, "... operations were designed not to inflict military defeat on the enemy; rather, the 'propaganda of the deed' was designed to build mass support for revolutionary contestation of the regime and the existing order." (Smith 1989, 184) Although there were many differences among the various armed leftist organizations, there was a common spirit in their actions and philosophies, which was invigorated by a political culture that supported radical philosophy and action. That political culture had united intellectuals, students, workers and community organizers during the mobilizations and uprisings of recent years, and though many supported the *guerrilleros*, they were not able to express this publicly, nor turn to clandestinity (Romero, 190). Soon, many of these people would fall victim to the *Triple A* (Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance) paramilitary squads created by Perón's Minister of Social Welfare, López Rega (Anderson, M., 95; Romero, 212; Smith 1989, 228) or to the so-called "task groups" of the Armed Forces, who were in charge of political kidnappings, torture and assassinations.

The presence of armed leftist organizations provided the justification the Armed Forces had been looking for to intervene more directly in the repression of all political opposition. Thus, in 1974, their national defense mission was officially transformed into a priority mission of counter-insurgency warfare and the elimination of all possible “subversives” as justified by their national security doctrine. Various sectors of the government and the Armed Forces began a somewhat clandestine, but state-sponsored campaign of illegal repression: intimidation, kidnapping, imprisonment, torture, assassinations and the disappearance of activists were methods of choice (Romero, 194; Tedesco, 25).

Military intelligence, however, was deeply aware of the *real* strength of the guerrilla forces, a strength, which was nowhere near that portrayed through revolutionary propaganda and spectacular actions.<sup>6</sup> The conditions for armed revolutionary combat after 1974 were not just difficult, they were suicidal, and it forced the guerrilla forces to retreat into greater clandestinity and even into exile, where, in some cases, leaders had to command the groups' actions from outside the country.

Where, then, was the “subversion”? Of course, it was in the guerrilla organizations – but they had been in retreat since 1975, and their political clout had greatly diminished after Perón excommunicated [the Montoneros] in a terrible ceremony in the Plaza de Mayo. The problem, thus, was not deemed to reside in the state apparatus or in the great arenas of politics, but in society: in countless wildcat strikes, in belligerent negotiations over salaries and work conditions (not infrequently carried out at gunpoint), in innumerable day-to-day behaviours that those at the top perceived as unacceptable insolence, and in universities gone mad. (O'Donnell, 95)

The so-called “*Proceso de Reorganización Nacional*” set out in 1976 by the Military Junta is particularly representative of this mission to eliminate not only the armed opposition but also the socio-cultural “subversion” which the Armed Forces interpreted to be the result of foreign, atheist and communist influences (McSherry, 6, 79; Tedesco, 24). The over-inflation of the “guerrilla threat” (Anderson, M., 125; McSherry, 97; Tedesco, 26) and the fear instilled in people through false reporting in the media allowed the repression to expand.

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<sup>6</sup> The guerrilla forces, and especially the Montoneros, were in a clear disadvantage having previously been known activists and leaders; going into clandestinity so suddenly and with such weak preparation made them easy targets. Likewise, military infiltration into the various armed organizations was widespread and had been in place since the early 1970s (Anderson, 117; McSherry, 82).

The Armed Forces unleashed a “cultural war” against spheres like education and culture, which to them represented the “philosophical-ideological bases of subversion.” (Anderson, M., 194; McSherry, 86)<sup>7</sup>. The prime targets of this “cultural warfare” were the colleges and universities, its professors and students.

“In reality,” said Gen. Acdel Vilas, “the only total warfare is cultural warfare. ... We do not confront an opponent who fights to defend a flag, a nation or its borders. He who attacks us doesn’t do any of that. He is, simply put, part of an army of ideologues whose headquarters could be in Europe, America or Asia. He lacks a national identity. He is the product of a counterculture with a well-defined objective: to destroy the foundations of the Western civilization of which we Argentines naturally form part. ... What we create in the individual is his mind. ... The fight isn’t one to conquer terrain, physically, but to conquer minds. Not to take advantageous physical positions but to mold mental structures in his favor. (Anderson, M., 195)

The universities were interdicted and stripped of their academic autonomy. Military intelligence infiltrated educational institutions through an intricate network of informants, their own members holding posts as secretaries, teaching assistants and professors (Anderson, M., 197). It would not be the first time the universities were interdicted, nor the last. The Armed Forces suspected that the student movement had been infiltrated by the *Juventud Peronista*, and by extension, the *Montoneros* and other armed organizations. An all-out repression was unleashed on the student movement, beginning with raids on the more radical universities and continuing with the detention and disappearance of thousands of high school and university students (McSherry, 98).

The Armed Forces designed an intricate and complex plan for carrying out their mission of “national reorganization”. The paramilitary groups set up by López Rega were dissolved and the members were incorporated into the junta’s repressive machinery (McSherry, 78; Romero, 216). So-called *Grupos de Tarea* (Task Groups) were formed by the Armed Forces to carry out raids and ambushes, kidnapping their targets and transporting them to one of the more than 340 *Centros Clandestinos de Detención* (Romero, 216-7). Clandestine Centres of Detention were set up throughout the country for the express purpose of containing suspected “subversives”. It is in these centres that victims were physically and psychologically tortured during interrogations.

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<sup>7</sup> Almost 40 percent of the known victims of military repression during these years were not *guerrilleros*, but rather, students, intellectuals, professionals and workers in the cultural field (Anderson, 196; McSherry, 54; Tedesco, 25).

Some cracked under the pain, revealing names and whereabouts of other activists, others were convinced into working for the intelligence services, reintegrating their old groups in order to rip them apart (Tedesco, 26), but a great number of those tortured had no information to give or refused to give up their loved ones despite the pain and degradation of the torture sessions. While the principal objective of torture was to extract information, there was a more profound purpose to these sessions. They were meant to break the victim's spirit of resistance, to destroy the very dignity and personality of the abductee, leaving the person completely defenseless before the power of the State (Romero, 217).

By the end of the dictatorship, human rights organizations estimated that 30,000 people had disappeared (Romero, 218; Tedesco, 12) and that ten thousand more had fallen victim to torture and imprisonment or had been forced into exile. The military had accomplished precisely what they had planned.<sup>8</sup> They had literally erased from existence a whole generation of young people, amongst them, some of the most capable leaders and social activists of Argentine history. They had forced into exile hundreds of professionals as well as the intellectual elite who had built one of the best post-secondary systems in Latin America. They had destroyed the Third World Priests Movement and the progressive sectors of the Catholic Church. Political and trade union activity were prohibited, and the press was extensively censored. All means of expression were closely monitored and controlled. The total transformation of society was assured through the terror instilled during the first wave of repression. After that the only voice to be heard was that of the State (Romero, 219) drowning out all independent thought.

In 1977 a group of women began to challenge society's numbness and silent complicity by daring to bring to light the true scope of the repression carried out by the military. They were the mothers and relatives of those who had been detained and disappeared by the Armed Forces. They met every Thursday, and wearing white handkerchiefs over their heads, they circled the *Plaza de Mayo*, located in front of the Presidential Palace (Romero, 239; Tedesco, 25). Because their quest to find their

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<sup>8</sup> "Military leaders were remarkably candid in explaining the rationale of state terrorism. General Luciano Menéndez, then head of the strategic Third Army Region in Córdoba, offered a particularly blunt explanation. He observed that there existed a division of labor within the regime: "While Videla governs, I kill." He also acknowledged that "We are going to have to kill 50,000 people: 25,000 subversives, 20,000 sympathizers, and we will make 5,000 mistakes." (Smith 1989, 232)

'disappeared' children was framed within the principles of motherhood and Christian family values, it became very difficult for the Armed Forces to attack them publicly (Romero, 239). An attack on the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* would have represented a public confession of guilt, not only at the national, but also at the international level. Though there were many *Madres* who were detained, tortured or disappeared, on the whole, the Junta chose to tolerate the weekly protests, while at the same time, trying to discredit the group through the media.

The defeat suffered by the Argentines in the Falklands/Malvinas war, coupled with a growing awareness of the sinister human rights violations committed by the Armed Forces resulted in a new awakening of Argentine society (Romero, 249). In this context, the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* were imbued with a new legitimacy, thus inspiring other human rights organizations to grow both in strength and numbers. The "ethical question" now took centre stage and the growing human rights movement diverted older social movements away from the revolutionary politics of the past, and into a new more pluralist quest for democratic elections (Romero, 253). The Armed Forces had been greatly weakened, first by the human rights movement and then, by division between branches and internal dissent (McSherry, 105). However, they were not *expelled* from power, but rather, withdrew of their own accord (McSherry, 86; Romero, 261). This situation made it infinitely more difficult for Raúl Alfonsín's newly elected government to subordinate the Armed Forces to civilian governance.

Alfonsín had campaigned on the promise of ensuring that human rights violators be put on trial, and that the truth be disclosed regarding the whereabouts of the detained-disappeared (McSherry, 111; Roehrig, 52; Tedesco, 65). It soon became apparent, however, that the Armed Forces were completely unwilling to take responsibility for their actions (Romero, 262), to which Alfonsín responded by passing the cases on to civil courts. A long judicial process took place, through which the true extent of the atrocities committed by the Armed Forces became known and officially condemned by the courts (Romero, 263).

Alfonsín formed the presidential *Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas* (CONADEP), presided over by the writer Ernesto Sábato. The *Nunca Más* report published by this National Commission on the Disappeared included descriptions of the atrocities committed and of the Clandestine Centers of Detention, lists of the known victims, conclusions about the past and recommendations for the future (Roehrig, 62; Tedesco, 66-7). The public trials, the *Nunca Más* report and the explosion of media

coverage regarding this issue forced the Argentine populace to open their eyes to a reality they had fervently denied (Romero, 261). The evidence against the Armed Forces was absolutely incontrovertible; it further confirmed that the inflated “subversive threat” had been a false justification for state-sponsored genocide.

The Armed Forces refused to admit to anything more than a few “excesses” in what they regarded as a victorious war against subversion. They did not take the court rulings lying down. The rumblings in the barracks did not go unnoticed by the *Casa Rosada*; Alfonsín was well aware that too much pressure on the military could result in another uprising or coup attempt (Roehrig, 61). It was no easy task to rein in both the human rights organizations seeking justice through the civil courts (Tedesco, 70) and, at the same time, rein in the Armed Forces seeking protection from lawsuits through impunity laws (Tebesco, 164). It would not be long, however, before the military made a public demonstration of its strength and resolve.<sup>9</sup> Alfonsín came up against two mutinees and several coup threats. He eventually negotiated the submission of the Armed Forces by agreeing to pass two impunity laws: the *Ley de Obediencia Debida* and the *Ley de Punto Final*. The populace interpreted this as the government having capitulated to the Armed Forces, and a great disenchantment with the “democratic promise” took hold of the country (McSherry, 9; Romero, 265). In passing those two laws, Alfonsín showed that his government did not have either the strength or the resolve to subordinate the Armed Forces to civilian governance (McSherry, 129; Tebesco, 164). It was a quick and bitter end to the democratic illusions of the population and the expectations of human rights movements that real justice would be made.

The presidential elections of 1989 upped the expectations of the populace. Carlos Saúl Menem, a populist Peronist leader, and a former political prisoner under the dictatorship, appeared to have a vested interest in eliminating the impunity laws passed by Alfonsín. But Menem’s plan was to neutralize and weaken the Armed Forces so that they could no longer pose a threat to his presidency. In 1989 Menem provided the

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<sup>9</sup> In 1987 a group of military officers took control of the Campo de Mayo military base, demanding a reconsideration of the Armed Forces’ conduct and the government’s promise of a general amnesty for the accused commanders and lower-ranking officials (Romero, 264; Tedesco, 159). The following year, the so-called *Carapintada* mutineers rose up again. Though citizens quickly mobilized to express their support for democratic institutions and governance, their impressive vigilance outside the presidential palace was not enough to make the mutineers submit to civilian authority (Romero, 264; Tebesco, 126). Alfonsín engaged in long negotiations, which resulted in some promises that would be difficult for victims and human rights organizations to accept (McSherry, 114). The mutineers agreed to jail-terms for the uprising, while the government put forward the *Ley de Obediencia Debida*, which freed lower ranking officers from having lawsuits brought against them on human rights grounds. Soon afterwards, the *Ley de Punto Final* was passed, setting an end date for all lawsuits against the Armed Forces (Roehrig, 71; Tebesco, 123).

Armed Forces with a general amnesty and he pardoned and released the former Junta commanders from prison (McSherry, 232; Romero, 301). As a consequence, the Armed Forces couldn't complain when their budget was cut as part of Menem's overall cutbacks in government spending (Romero, 302). The transformation of the Armed Forces into a voluntary professional force<sup>10</sup> with a greatly reduced budget, made it much easier for Menem to govern without their interference.

The new amnesty laws further provoked the anger of human rights organizations and resulted in a resurgence from the Left, one that condemned not only the authoritarianism of the past, but also the corruption of the democracies of the present. Human rights organizations, aware that the government would not ensure that justice be made, decided to take matters into their own hands. During the early 1990s these organizations became more militant, intransigent and aggressive.

The year 1995 marks an important transition point in the human rights struggles of Argentina. That year Army Commander General Martín Balza publicly affirmed that "due obedience" did not justify the horrific crimes committed by the Armed Forces during the dictatorship of 1976-83. It was the first instance of official self-criticism by the military as an institution (Romero, 302). Earlier that same year, a retired navy officer, Adolfo Scilingo, agreed to a television interview where he admitted to having piloted so-called "death-flights" during which, prisoners were drugged, disrobed and thrown alive into the ocean (McSherry, 263). He claimed he could no longer live with the ghosts of his past.

These two events were essential in breaking many myths surrounding the dictatorship. Until then, the human rights organizations accused the Armed Forces of a myriad number of aberrant human rights violations, but the general populace still tried to deny that the repression ever reached the levels denounced by these activists. They preferred to believe that the victims "must have done something" to deserve the punishment. However, the descriptions given by Scilingo and the self-criticism expressed by Army Commander Balza were shocking enough to show that the "*por algo será*" justification did not stand up to any serious scrutiny. A period of societal self-reflection followed these events. Many people who had lived in the shadows of this past, began to speak out about what they had suffered. Many began to write books, produce videos and artistic works to document their stories. New human rights organizations began to form, such as H.I.J.O.S. (*Hijos e Hijas por la Identidad y la Justicia, contra el*

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<sup>10</sup> Menem also eliminated military conscription, since a great scandal had erupted when three young conscripts died from injuries incurred as a result of abuse during basic military training (McSherry, 255).

*Olvido y el Silencio* / Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice, against Oblivion and Silence), a group of youth whose parents had fallen victim to the political repression. When H.I.J.O.S. began to speak, together with the ex-detained-disappeared (who had formed the *Asociación de ex-detenido-desaparecidos*) and the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, the human rights movement was transformed into a widespread inter-generational and complex movement with far-reaching effects.

The focus of the human rights movement became the strengthening of a process of collective, historical remembering, keeping alive the memory of all the dictatorship stood for, all it destroyed and all that must be avoided in the future. Remembering the dictatorship and its victims has now become an established rite in many high schools and universities across the country (Romero, 331). The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo have gone so far as to establish their own university: *La Universidad de las Madres*, where teaching focuses on analysis of the past and forms of resistance for the future.

As a response to the impunity enjoyed by the former commanders and lower-ranking officials of the Armed Forces, H.I.J.O.S. began organizing *escraches*, a form of popular justice protest, which seeks to publicly disclose the identity and the track-record of human rights violators, both military and civilian, targeting one individual or institution at a time. The *escraches* were widely popularized by the human rights movement, with thousands of people gathering at the target's home or place of work. The popular slogan used is: "*Si no hay justicia, hay escrache*", "If there is no justice, then there is *escrache*". The *escrache* is a way of pressuring so that justice be made. Key to impunity is the anonymity of the victimizer. Once people started to recognize human rights violators in the streets, they began to refuse them service, they screamed out "assassin" and "torturer" to them in the streets, they have been punched, insulted and generally humiliated and threatened. Many of these individuals were forced to move from their city or province, others were afraid to go out alone into the streets, or were forced to leave their jobs. It may sound like vigilantism to some, to others it is an attempt to pressure the government to eliminate the amnesty laws which allow human rights violators to enjoy impunity. The *escrache* style of protest was later adopted by other social movements and used to denounce the injustices of the government, of the communications media, of the banks and other institutions.

There have been some legal advances. The Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo found a loophole in Menem's amnesty laws: they did not prohibit lawsuits against the Armed Forces in cases of kidnapping of the babies of disappeared women (Romero,



331). Legal proceedings were undertaken and many of the former Junta leaders were jailed. In 2002 a lawsuit was launched to challenge the constitutionality of the Due Obedience and End Point Laws. The courts concluded the suit with the annulment of both laws and a judicial opening for new lawsuits against those responsible for human rights violations. The human rights movement has gained a strength seldom seen before in Argentine social movements. Human rights activists are linking their struggle to the struggle for socio-economic rights and have now taken on the role of guide and model for many new social movements.

As Menem's cutbacks hard-hit the increasingly impoverished middle class, more and more people left their homes and took to the streets to protest social and economic conditions (McSherry, 260; Romero, 311). Disillusioned by the apparent failure of "political solutions" and representative democracy, social movements began to form and grow at a vigorous rate. The year 1995 was a crucial moment in the development of Argentine popular resistance. Menem's so-called 'economic miracle' had proved to be nothing but a smokescreen for the massive privatizations and corrupt backroom dealings, which made of Menem and his gang some of the wealthiest Argentines of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Public employees, especially teachers, were the first to rise up in violent protest in various provinces of the country (Romero, 336). The CGT and the CTA seized this opportunity, organizing two general strikes against the government's economic and labour policies. The FREPASO and the UCR parties mobilized the citizenry in support of these strikes, and thus, the first Argentine *cacerolazo* was born (Romero, 311). Organizations of all sorts collaborated to create a collective blackout and pot-banging session symbolic of the hunger the country was being plunged into.

Though hunger and poverty are certainly not new to Argentina, they had never before reached such alarming levels as they did following 1995. By 2002, forty percent of the population was living below the poverty line (Jordan and Whitney, 92), nearly half of the population suffered from unemployment or underemployment, and in some severely affected towns the unemployment rate had reached as high as 75%. An example of these, are the towns of Cutral C3 in Neuqu3n province and Tartagal in the northern province of Salta. Both of these oil-producing towns were devastated by the privatization of the national oil company YPF and the subsequent closures of plants in their areas (Romero, 311, 336). After attempting to survive on small self-employment ventures that on the whole failed miserably, in 1997 the inhabitants of these towns decided to collectively mobilize to demand "bread, employment and dignity" from the

government (Trigona, see website). These were the humble beginnings of what is now known as the *Piquetero* Movement. They proposed that the only way to really pressure the government into taking action on the question of unemployment was to cut off important access roads and routes used by businesses for the transport of commercial goods (Romero, 336). If the government wouldn't listen to the complaints of the hungry, they would definitely respond to the complaints of business owners.

### 3.1 The *Piquetero* Movement

The *piqueteros* show up at a particular juncture, quickly line tires across the street and light them afire. Behind the flames, the women set up soup kitchens and gather with their families and friends, with unemployed workers, impoverished young people, students, and human rights activists who join the protest as a show of support and protection (Romero, 312). The *piqueteros*, 65% of whom are women (Trigona, see webpage), set up pickets with full awareness of the possibility of police repression, and they set out to defend themselves with what they have at hand: sticks and stones (Romero, 312; Trigona, see website). There have been many cases of violence, injuries and some deaths at the hands of police, however, instead of retreating, they have increased their mobilizations and have connected their struggles to those of other *piquetero* communities. In 2001 *piquetero* communities organized the first National Piquetero Congress in Buenos Aires and came together to coordinate a national day of action, during which, they blockaded over 300 highways throughout the country (Jordan and Whitney, 91).

*Piquetero* groups and communities practice direct democracy through neighbourhood popular assemblies (Trigona, see website). All issues are actively debated and decided upon by the group in a show of hands. In many ways, this decision-making process has ensured that neither the unions nor the political parties dominate the decisions of the communities. Whereas the Left often pushes for more structured action and more sophisticated demands, the majority of the *piquetero* groups let up their piquetes (road-blocks) as soon as basic demands are met, as in the provision of food, clothing, building materials or employment subsidies (Romero, 336).

The state essentially subsidizes the hostile mobilization and achieves a kind of compromise – an extremely fragile one – with the pickets... Their actions are continuous, tenacious, and at times explosive. The

government can neither satisfy their demands permanently nor repress the protestors. The government has no moral justification to do so nor does it have sufficient strength. (Romero, 336-7)

The most militant and threatening *piquetero* mobilizations saw their combativeness rewarded by the State, and in this way, the State contributed to the increased militancy with which *piquetero* groups organized and struggled.

Some of the *piquetero* communities, like those that belong to the *Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados* (MTD) / Movement of Unemployed Workers have taken the meagre resources received during negotiations with the government and they have used their creativity and hard work to turn them into sustainable community development projects.

A sign over the entrance to an MTD community center in the town of Lanús reads "Trabajo, Dignidad, y Cambio Social" (Work, Dignity, and Social Change). Center activities include running a community bakery where bread is sold at cost, maintaining a community kitchen offering free meals, providing afternoon snacks for children, conducting popular education sessions, and running sex ed workshops. (Trigona, see website)

The popular education sessions are a key part of the *piquetero* movement's work and almost entirely organized by women. They use these sessions to reflect upon and debate issues of identity, social change, and organization (Trigona, see website) and through these workshops they have been able to increase women's leadership and participation in popular assemblies.

The *piquetero* movement's organizing and decision-making methods have become an on-going inspiration for new and old social movements alike. Student protesters have set up their own roadblocks and farmers in several cities have taken to driving their tractors en masse into the downtown core to tie up traffic (Romero, 312). The *piqueteros* have certainly inspired others into using roadblocks, but more importantly, they have been influential in structural-institutional ways, encouraging other organizations to practice direct democracy decision-making methods. The movement has forced political parties and the traditional Left to take a backseat to what *the people* need and think. The change has been so widespread that the traditional leftist term *compañero* (comrade) used for decades in Latin America to refer to fellow activists in

social movements has in many groups been replaced by the term *vecino* (neighbour). This new term implies a greater inclusion of different peoples in the struggle and a move away from elitist and leftist political culture and doctrine. It should also be noted that the principal mobilizers now in Argentina are neither political parties nor labour unions nor leftist organizations, but rather, neighbourhood popular assemblies, which are loosely modelled after *piquetero* communities' organizing methods. Of course, some of the downfalls of this type of organizing are the lack of a cohesive ideological position, the increasing fragmentation of the left, and the result of this, which is a void in political representation.

The *asambleas barriales* (neighbourhood assemblies) meet weekly at local parks or community centres, where they discuss and make proposals on issues of concern to the neighbourhood (Jordan and Whitney, 92; Klein, see website). All decisions are made using direct democracy methods and leadership is rotated so as to share the role amongst different members of the community. In negotiations with the government a one-time representative is chosen for that particular occasion and then switched with another to avoid the possibility of their being bribed or co-opted by government officials. They have functioned with a general autonomy from traditional political parties and have thus been able to keep their demands and actions close to the needs of the community.

The assemblies also provide a space for popular education workshops, lectures, community and recreational activities (Trigona, see website). In the neighbourhood of Villa Crespo, for example, where community members had no centre or public space that could be used for assemblies, they decided to take over a bank that had been abandoned for over five years (Trigona, see website). They have turned it into a community centre where social activities now take place. "For example, women come to collaborate to repair donated clothes." Maria adds: "This is a community space in the neighbourhood that allows us to work in solidarity, building culture ... families come here to work to change history" (Trigona, see website). Many other neighbourhood assemblies have also appropriated public buildings and spaces for their community's needs, and in some cases, these have been appropriated not just for community incentives, but also as sustainable employment projects.

Since 2001 there has been a great move towards the occupation of abandoned industrial factories by workers. Many of these factory occupations came about after owners excessively delayed or failed to pay workers, claiming bankruptcy or shutting down the factories without giving workers appropriate notice. The most high-profile and

successful occupations so far were also among the first to take place: the occupation of the Zanon ceramic tile factory in the southern province of Neuquén and that of the Brukman suit factory in Buenos Aires (Trigona, see website). In the Brukman case, the owners had been decreasing workers' wages over the years, wages had reached such low levels that many of the employees could not even cover the costs of public transportation to get to the factory (Trigona, see website). Suddenly, payment stopped altogether and the owners disappeared. The workers decided to occupy the factory on December 19, 2001; the decision was not difficult; they could either continue production under worker control or they would have to resign themselves to guaranteed unemployment.

We want a dignified solution for all workers," says Yuri Fernandez, one of the first Brukman workers to argue for occupation of the factory. "Autonomous, self-generating production will be the solution," he adds. Production has grown under worker management, says Martinez. "We are happy because we know the little money that comes in from what we sell is for all of us workers, it is not for the bosses," she notes, adding: "We hope to grow to 400 workers, to alleviate the unemployment in the city. (Trigona, see website)

As the above statement shows, the objective behind the occupation of the factories goes beyond ensuring the current workers' employment. The workers recognize the general need for further job creation and they hope to make a positive impact in this area. Other groups such as the *piqueteros* and neighbourhood assemblies are very supportive of these worker-controlled factories (Trigona, see website), they see them as a sort of popular experiment that if protected from legal action or police repression may have a chance to grow and spread to other regions of the country. Oftentimes, *piquetero* groups, student and human rights organizations take turns guarding Brukman and other such factories, especially at night as to avoid police action in these more vulnerable hours. Likewise, the worker-controlled factories try to provide more jobs for those who have supported them in their struggle.

Since 2001 all types of industrial and service sector workplaces have been occupied, have reinitiated production and have reopened service to the public under worker control. There have been shoe and clothing factories, bakeries, medical clinics and other work-places reopened to provide products and services to the public at much

more affordable prices or through the national organized bartering system – *el Club del Trueque*.

All of the aforementioned popular mobilizations give evidence to the increasing desperation of the populace and the heightened militancy in new social movements. The late 1990s saw a marked resurgence of street protest, which often harked back to the mobilizations of the 1960s. Increased street protest, organized mobilizations of workers through the CTA and CGT and the spontaneous anger and rebellion that burst out on the 19<sup>th</sup> of December of 2001 would finally give way to what the Armed Forces had feared ever since 1969, a massive popular uprising that would shake the country to its core: the *Argentinazo*.

### **3.2 The *Argentinazo* Uprising**

The *Argentinazo* uprising began on the 19<sup>th</sup> of December with supermarket sackings in the capital. Groups of impoverished and unemployed people surrounded the supermarkets threatening to loot them if their demands of bags of food were not met (Romero, 347). Some were rewarded with food, others were not, and these then looted the markets taking what they could as the police stood by seemingly incapable of stopping them. The looting of supermarkets brought to mind memories of the lootings that had triggered Alfonsín's fall from power in 1989 (Romero, 347). This helped create an atmosphere of severe instability, which also set the stage for the massive mobilizations that took place over the next two days.

One day later, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of December of 2001, large contingents of the Buenos Aires middle class joined the masses who gathered in the city's important street corners and in the *Plaza de Mayo* in front of the presidential palace. Banging empty pots and pans in a symbolic expression of hunger, the enormous mobilization protested against the so-called *corralito*, Economy Minister Duhalde's policy freezing bank deposits and savings accounts (Romero, 348). They also called for the resignation of all politicians in a now famous protest chant: "*Que se vayan todos... Que no quede ni uno solo...*" loosely translated it amounts to chanting "Let them all go away... every last one". What was most shocking about the *Cacerolazo*, was the overwhelming presence of a formerly quiet and docile middle-class that had finally taken to the streets in opposition to the government (Jordan and Whitney, 91).

Later that day, the sit-in at the *Casa Rosada* continued and this time, the mostly peaceful middle-class protestors were joined by many more militant, hardened and

younger activists who began throwing rocks at banks and breaking store windows (Romero, 348), destroying any symbol of foreign imperialism or corporate culture. When the police advanced on the crowd, the youth began hurling rocks at the police to ward them off while others ran to safety. Suddenly it seemed that they might attack the presidential palace, at which point the police were ordered to carry out a repressive attack, unique in Argentine history for its relentless violence, and which did not distinguish in the least between the violent and the peaceful protestors (Gaudin, March/April 2002, 7; Romero, 333 and 348). The media images from the police repression were extremely harmful to the government and they served only to infuriate people even more. Almost 30 protesters had been killed during the repression and many more lay wounded in hospitals. That night, President Fernando de la Rúa resigned, leaving the presidential palace in a helicopter.

Between December 20 and January 2, Argentina would face thirteen days of chaos, trying out no less than four new presidents (Gaudin, March/April 2002, 6; Romero, 333). Social mobilization continued at an all-time high and every corner of the country feared the military might step in as it had always done in the past. Nonetheless, people continued to organize. The *cacerolazos* became a weekly event. Roadblocks were increased throughout the country, and through the national coordination of the different *piquetero* communities, these roadblocks were made even more strategic, shutting down key transportation routes for weeks on end. Neighbourhood assemblies were created everywhere and they began coordinating amongst themselves to create *Asambleas Inter-barriales* (Inter-neighbourhood assemblies) to discuss issues affecting the whole region. A proposal was even put forward to create a national popular assembly that could coordinate national demands and function as a parallel body to the government for a greater negotiating power of the people.

One thing remains clear: the state is unable to appropriately respond to the deepening socio-economic crisis the country has plunged into. The government is desperately trying to survive amidst a profound crisis in its political legitimacy. While social resistance continues to grow, socio-economic conditions do not improve. People are taking matters into their own hands, working collectively to try to find ways to survive. Grassroots movements are finding ways to turn meager community resources into alternative self-sustainable projects and in this way are rebuilding Argentine society according to the *piquetero* demands of “work, dignity, and social change (Trigona, see website).

## CHAPTER 4 ART AND CULTURAL-POLITICAL EXPRESSION IN ARGENTINA

Though some important changes in the artistic sector began to take place in the late 1950s with the appointment of the influential Jorge Romero Brest as director of the *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes* (National Fine Arts Museum) and the inauguration of the *Museo de Arte Moderno* (Museum of Modern Art), it is the years 1960 and 1968 which mark fundamental turning points in the history and traditions of artistic and cultural expression in Argentina. In this chapter, I will mostly focus on the years 1960-1973 as they were filled with artistic experimentation and politicization that paved the road for the artistic vanguards of the “Golden 60s” and beyond, continuing to be a great influence for political-art movements such as *Argentina Arde*, even today.

The year 1960 saw two very influential exhibitions take place, which in different ways called for both a revision of past national artistic development and the launching of programs for renovation and a look into the future for Argentine art. These exhibitions were: *150 años de arte argentino* (150 years of Argentine Art) at the *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes*, and the inauguration of the new site of the *Museo de Arte Moderno* with the *Primera Exposición Internacional de Arte Moderno* (First International Exhibition of Modern Art) (Burucúa, 69; Giudici, 20). These two exhibitions represent a reinterpretation of Argentine art and its role in the national and international art circuits.

There was a very purposeful move around this time towards attaining international attention as an attempt to turn the city of Buenos Aires into one of the world's important artistic centres (Burucúa, 70). The dream was to build an artistic centre that could compete with Paris and New York, one that would catapult Argentine artists to instant fame in the international scene. Jorge Romero Brest, one of the “grandfathers” of this dream set out to fulfill it through the direction of the *Centro de Artes Visuales* at the newly inaugurated *Instituto Torcuato di Tella*, which became, at a national level, the key institution for artistic development and experimentation, and for the creation of avant-garde art movements during the tumultuous 1960s (Burucúa, 70; Giudici, 28-9; Romero, 162-3).



Just as Argentine art institutions were struggling for international attention through the creation of a “national art” for export, the events of international politics were also influencing Argentine artists in their forms, content and objectives. The Cuban Revolution, the assassination of Ernesto “Che” Guevara, The Vietnam War, the Cold War which slowly began to encroach on national territory, and escalating authoritarianism across the continent, all had an important effect on the consciences of the young artists who would later make up the avant-garde art and political movements in Argentina (Giunta, 2001, 335-6). The effects of these international events on Argentine artists were not immediately, nor clearly foreseeable. As the artistic and cultural arenas became more politicized throughout Latin America, Europe and the United States, artists in Argentina differed amongst themselves in the content they decided to focus on, in the media they chose to work in and in their artistic and political objectives.

One of the first collectives in Argentina to propose a political objective for their work was a group of artists greatly influenced by the Mexican muralists. It was called *Grupo Espartaco* (Spartacus Group), founded in 1957 and officially disbanded in 1968. The participants wanted to contribute in the creation of a truly popular “Latin-american art” committed to representing the struggles of the working class masses.

Este proposito quedó explicitado en un Manifiesto que dan a conocer en 1959: "El arte revolucionario latinoamericano debe surgir como expresión monumental y pública. El pueblo que lo nutre deberá verlo en su vida cotidiana. De la pintura de caballete, como lujoso vicio solitario, hay que pasar resueltamente al arte de masas, es decir, al arte. (Giudici, 17)

This objective was explicitly expressed in their Manifiesto of 1959: “Latin-american revolutionary art must come forth as a monumental and public expression. The people who inspire this art must see it in their everyday lives. From easel painting, a luxurious and solitary vice, we must resolutely move towards an art of the masses, that is to say, towards art itself.<sup>11</sup>

The members of the *Grupo Espartaco* proposed two main and inseparable goals for this art: 1) that all militant art be an art of the masses and 2) that all militant art, in Argentina, must reestablish its commitment to a collective national culture, which because of its

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<sup>11</sup> From here on in, all translations are my own.

obvious linguistic, historical and social ties, must also be a commitment to Latin America as a whole. (Giudici, 186) They vindicated the use of murals and posters as a way of taking art out of the elitist spaces of the museums and galleries and exhibiting it in the streets, thus making it accessible to the masses (Giunta, 2001, 341). By 1961, however, two of the group's pillars, Ricardo Carpani and Pascual Di Bianco had decided to leave the group in order to work more directly in the service of militant politico-sindicalist movements (Giudici, 17). With the politicization of the artistic sphere, many artists in years to come would end up questioning their work or giving up their art altogether in order to serve political, syndicalist and social justice movements much more directly (Giunta, 2001, 343, 347).

Just as the members of the *Grupo Espartaco* looked for a Latin-americanist expression for their art, inspired by the struggles and the iconography of Latin America, many other Argentine artists also began to look inward around this time, in search of a truly national expression.

In 1961 a group of artists returned to Buenos Aires after an exhibit in Europe entitled: *Otra Figuración* (Another Figurative Imagining). They presented themselves simply as: "un conjunto de pintores que en nuestra libertad expresiva sentimos la necesidad de incorporar la libertad de la figura" (Burucúa, 72) that is, "an ensemble of painters who in our freedom of expression feel the need to incorporate the freedom of the figure". Four of these artists, Luis Felipe Noé, Rómulo Macció, Ernesto Deira and Jorge de la Vega would come to be known as the group *Nueva Figuración* (New Figurative Imagining). On their return to Argentina they had begun to reflect upon their roles as Argentine artists, and they proposed for themselves a mission:

Volví a la Argentina – escribía Noé – para contribuir a la formación de una expresión nacional por medio de una imagen viva resultante de un proceso de invención nacido de exigencias interiores. Es hora de elaborar nuestras propias vanguardias. (Burucúa, 73)

I returned to Argentina – wrote Noé – in order to contribute to the formation of a national expression through living images that are the result of a process of invention born of internal needs. It is time that we elaborate our own vanguards.

The birth of the group *Nueva Figuración* had an overwhelming effect on the Argentine art scene. The group emphasized the artist's subjectivity, his/her personal view of and relation to the world (Giudici, 30) and above all the search for a national art and

iconography that could still make use of the international language of the art world (Giunta, 2001, 343). Argentine poet and critic, Aldo Pellegrini, says the following in reference to the group's members:

Ellos rompen con una serie de prejuicios que ataban al artista argentino, entre ellos el del buen gusto, el del rigor, el de la buena factura y el de la unidad del cuadro, y antes que nada rompen con el prejuicio de la misión sagrada del arte.  
(Giudici, 30)

They break with a series of prejudices which tied down the Argentine artist, amongst these is that of good taste, that of rigour, that of good manufacture and that of the unity of the painting, and above all, they break with the prejudice of the sacred mission of art.

In these new works, content, methods and materials become interwoven and thus open up a whole new space for expressive freedom and experimentation, a space to mix humour, sarcasm and a sort of desacralizing violence (Giudici, 30-1). The influence that *Nueva Figuración* had on the Argentine art scene would be seen for decades to come.

Another influential artist in this same genre is Antonio Berni. He had an incredible ability for taking the reflections of the national and international artistic vanguards and integrating these with pastiche and imagery of Latin American and popular roots. He considered his work to be a political act (Giudici, 26).

La obra - señaló en una ocasión - 'se realiza plenamente conviviendo con el drama del hombre en su totalidad, en el infortunio y el sobresalto de cada día'. ... Desde su propia voracidad creativa, Berni deglutía y vomitaba un país de opulencias y miserias, donde los poderosos son pocos, groseros e insensibles y los humillados y ofendidos, demasiados. (Giudici, 26)

A work of art - he pointed out in one occasion - 'must be created by living wholly within the drama of man in his totality, in the disfortune and the fear of each passing day'. ... Out of his own creative voracity, Berni swallowed and regurgitated a country of opulence and misery, where the powerful are few, rude and insensitive and the humiliated and offended, are much too many.

Berni found a way to narrate this crude reality through a series of collages that attempted to personify the humiliation and poverty experienced by so many Argentines in the form of two repeating characters: those of Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel. The series entitled *Juanito Laguna* represented the life of many children who dwell in shantytowns, while the series of *Ramona Montiel* showed the life of a Buenos Aires sex-worker. Berni explains: "Yo, a Juanito Laguna lo veo y lo siento como un arquetipo que es; arquetipo de todos los Juanito Lagunas que existen. Para mi no es un individuo, una persona: es un personaje" (Giudici, 26-7) / "I see and feel Juanito Laguna like the archetype that he is, an archetype for all the Juanito Lagunas that exist out there. For me, he is neither an individual, nor a person: he is a character". What made Berni's collages so important was that not only the content was a socio-political critique, but the materials used in the collages also formed part of this critique. He formed the collages by putting together materials found in the shantytowns and garbage dumps: tin cans, corrugated cardboard and other types of "waste" materials. He brought together content, methods and materials in a way that not only aimed at raising consciousness about the plight of people living in poverty in Argentina, but also to desacralize the purity and cleanliness of the elitist spaces of the art museums and galleries.

Between the years 1961 and 1966, the country saw the birth of a plethora of new programs, awards and exhibitions, groups, collectives and manifestos with vanguardist proposals. During this first period, the Argentine artistic vanguard was primarily concerned with the renovation of artistic language, with the rupture between artists and the elitism and rigidity of artistic institutions and structures, and with the need to anticipate movements within the art world in order to create something new, something tied to the national consciousness and to local necessities that could also appeal to an international audience (Burucúa, 78).

The role played by Jorge Romero Brest and the *Instituto Torcuato Di Tella (ITDT)* in the process of internationalization of Argentine art and the development of an artistic vanguard must not be under-estimated (Burucúa, 89). Brest took on as a sort of personal mission the achievement of international recognition for Argentine art. He put into motion a series of strategic events meant to raise the presence of Argentine artists abroad and to attract important artists and critics primarily from Europe and the United States to travel to Buenos Aires. The ITDT organized several exhibitions in Buenos Aires for prestigious international artists, as well as "travelling exhibitions" of Argentine artists through Europe and the United States; it created a series of prestigious awards that

would pit Argentine artists against some of the most renowned artists in the world, also inviting important international critics to be jurors of these competitions. Romero Brest imagined that in this way he could bring Argentine art out of its “under-development” (Burucúa, 83).

The ITDT became a breeding ground for experimentation. It was, in fact, one of the only institutions where artists felt a real freedom of expression. In 1967 Romero Brest began organizing a highly publicized series of annual exhibitions called *Experiencias*, which were meant to be a kind of showcase for the most experimental artists of the vanguard movements. But by 1968 the artistic sphere had become so intensely politicized that stating one’s political or ideological position almost seemed mandatory (Giunta, 2001, 359). *Experiencias ’68* was an exhibit teeming with socio-political critique, as in, for example, the works by Jorge Caballa and Roberto Jacoby against the Vietnam War. However, these obviously political works were not what caught the attention of the authorities. It was rather, the work presented by the artist Roberto Plate, which brought the whole exhibit to a close. Plate had created a row of simulated bathroom stalls within the exhibit space, which very quickly became taken over by the public in the form of political and erotic commentary written on the inner walls of the bathroom stalls.

*El público*, que en el transcurso de la década había sido un elemento central en el diseño de las estrategias institucionales del Di Tella, era considerado un elemento *activo* y que podía llegar a ser *determinante* para quienes estaban decididos a *hacer del arte un factor capaz de intervenir en la realidad*. (Giunta, 2001, 364)

The *public*, who throughout the decade had been a central element in the institutional strategies designed by the Di Tella, was considered to be an *active* element and one that could become a *determinant* element for those who were committed to *transforming art into a factor capable of intervening in reality*.

So on that 23<sup>rd</sup> of May, 1968, upon contemplating the censorship and closure of their exhibit, the artists decided to rise up in an act of protest and rupture with the art institutions, destroying all of their works of art in the street at the entrance to the ITDT (Giunta, 2001, 364). Many of these artists were detained, thus radicalizing even more their perspective on the artistic scene. The highly publicized event became the starting point for the rupture between the vanguard movements and almost all official art institutions and structures.

The rupture between the artistic vanguard movements and the art institutions began as a breaking away of the politicized sector of the vanguard from the more institutionalized vanguard (Giunta, 2001, 339), whose upmost representative was the Di Tella and Jorge Romero Brest. Romero Brest's relentless quest for the internationalization of Argentine art through the creation of vanguards could be clearly seen in the way the Di Tella publicized its artists as the "great new thing", and then quickly discarded them for even newer novelties. The changes seemed so abrupt and so irrational at times, that many came to question the Di Tella's true commitment to the creation of a national art.

Esta diseminación de un estilo que aplastaba de un modo contundente las expresiones inmediatamente precedentes, respaldaba la posición de quienes veían en este cambio incesante una expresión servil a las modas internacionales y en el Di Tella el escenario central de introducción de las novedades foráneas. Es esta imagen la que serviría a la crítica Marta Traba para hablar de los sesenta como la década de la entrega y de Romero Brest como uno de sus principales responsables. Imperialismo y dependencia son dos términos que desde mediados de la década, impregnan los discursos que debaten los problemas de las sociedades latinoamericanas y el lugar que en éstas tenía la cultura. (Burucúa, 100)

This dissemination of one style, which in a rather forceful way stamped out the expressions that immediately preceded it, backed up the argument of those who saw in this incessant change an expression of servitude to the international trends and saw in the Di Tella the primary stage for the introduction of foreign novelties. It is precisely this image that would aid the critic Marta Traba in her analysis of the sixties as the decade of surrender and Romero Brest as one of the most responsible for this. Imperialism and dependency are two terms that as of the mid-sixties, would impregnate the discourses of those debating the problems in Latin American societies and the role that culture plays within these problems.

The sixties were a time of experimentation, internationalism and enthusiasm (Burucúa, 96). It was a decade that began to question the poverty, repression and injustice, which had become established in nations throughout the third world; and a decade, which searched for urgent solutions to these problems. The success of the Cuban revolution had a profound effect in Latin America. It suggested a more radical transformation of society as an alternative to the ideology of "development" as promoted by J.F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress, which was a much slower process and highly dependent on foreign investment and aid (Burucúa, 96). The increase in revolutionary

and social movements throughout the world also inspired and radicalized the Argentine left and the artistic vanguards. The utopian dream became increasingly marked by politicization, revolutionary commitment and politically motivated violence.

The escalation of U.S. intervention in Vietnam also had a profound impression on the Latin American left. It became a symbol of national liberation and anti-imperialist struggles, which many Argentine leftists and artists identified with (Burucúa, 97). A number of Argentine vanguard artists, amongst them León Ferrari, Eduardo Ruano and Roberto Jacoby, produced works meant to denounce U.S. aggression in Vietnam. But in order to do this, they also felt they needed to cut ties with U.S. institutions and structures, thus furthering the rupture between the vanguard and the institutions, which for the most part, received funding from the United States.<sup>12</sup>

As of 1968, the vanguards and the art circuits, which were already very politicized, suddenly became explosive.

Todo hacía sentir que en distintas ciudades del mundo se estaba jugando una partida crucial, capaz de determinar el curso ulterior de la historia. Las acciones de estudiantes y obreros se encadenaron en las insurrecciones urbanas que estallaron en las calles de París, Berlín, Madrid, Río de Janeiro, México, Montevideo y Córdoba. (Giunta, 2001, 363)

Everything made one feel that in different cities of the world a crucial struggle was being played out, capable of determining the ulterior course of history. The actions of students and workers that unchained a series of urban uprisings that broke out in the streets of Paris, Berlin, Madrid, Río de Janeiro, México, Montevideo and Córdoba.

This feeling of imminent revolution was so effervescent, so strong, that it seemed impossible not to respond to it (Giunta, 2001, 379). Artists were quick to jump on the bandwagon and they thus risked the national and international success that they had achieved (through their involvement in the institutional sectors of the artistic vanguard along the Di Tella and Romero Brest) for the opportunity to participate more fully in the revolutionary process. As the censorship and detention of artists for political reasons escalated between 1965 and 1968, these artists became even more certain that their

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<sup>12</sup> For example, during the inauguration of the *Ver y Estimar* Award at the Museum of Modern Art in Buenos Aires, Eduardo Ruano entered the museum with a couple of friends and after yelling: "Fuera Yanquis de Vietnam" / "Yankees get out of Vietnam" he threw a brick through a window pane behind which, was his own artwork on exhibit: a blown up photograph of John F. Kennedy (Burucúa, 103).

work should be used as a tool for the revolution. Many decided to put their own work and the art circuit in general on the ideological-political battlefield (Giunta, 2001, 379). One might say that the year 1968 marks the end of the utopian dreams of the sixties and the beginning of the revolutionary militancy of the seventies. Giunta points to several events characteristic of this change:

¿Cuándo terminan los sesenta en artes visuales en la Argentina? Hay varias fechas posibles: en 1965 cuando se suicida Greco, cuando Noé deja de pintar, o cuando Ferrari elige la política en lugar del arte; en 1966, cuando Santantonín decide quemar su obra; en 1968 cuando los artistas se enfrentan a las instituciones en las que hasta ese momento habían participado. Los datos son, todos, sintomáticos respecto del final de un proceso que, como señalé desde un principio, no puede establecerse a partir de un hecho único. (Giunta, 2001, 384)

¿When do the sixties end in Argentine visual arts? There are several possible dates: in 1965 when Greco commits suicide, when Noé decides to stop painting, or when Ferrari chooses politics over art; in 1966, when Santantonín decides to burn his work; in 1968 when artists confronted the institutions in which they had participated until that moment. These dates are all symptomatic of the end of a process that, as pointed out earlier, cannot be established as parting from one particular event.

The military coup of 1966 and Gral. Onganía's messianic and repressive rule furthered the commitment of the left and the artistic vanguard. Onganía's policies increased the social, political and cultural crisis and created the absolutely unbearable conditions, which erupted into the *Cordobazo* uprising of 1969 (Burucúa, 102).

What changed in 1968 was that art was no longer seen as a simple expression of the revolution, but rather as a force capable of acting as a *detonator* for or a *motor* of the revolution (Giunta, 2001, 338). All of the extreme aesthetic and conceptual experimentation of the 1960s suddenly became these artists' best resource (Giunta, 2001, 362-3). A wealth of symbolic strategies was available to be used towards the social transformation of the country.

This more aggressively militant political conviction greatly affected both the artists' aesthetic projects and experimentation as well as their relationship to the art circuits and institutions themselves. For many of these artists, the idea of continuing to work within or even in collaboration with the institutions became absolutely unbearable, and the separation between these two was a conflicted one. One of the most notorious



symbolic attacks on the institutions erupted around the *Premio Braque* awarded by the French Embassy during an exhibit at the *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes*. The French government's repression and imprisonment of the students, artists, and workers (who had managed to paralyze the whole country during their May 1968 uprising in Paris) had not fallen on deaf ears in Argentina. The social movements in France served as inspiration for the left in Argentina, and the actions of the artists of the *situationist international* proved quite influential for Argentine artists as well.<sup>13</sup> So when the French Embassy placed a number of conditions on the works of art accepted for display at the *Premio Braque* exhibit (as a strategy for avoiding mention of the May 1968 uprising), Argentine artists reacted by storming into the *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes*, proclaiming themselves in favour of the "french students in struggle against the fascist regime" and in support of Argentine artist Julio Le Parc, who had been deported from France for supporting the student and worker uprising (Giunta, 2001, 366). The artists were quickly detained and many were jailed for their action.

Of course, not all artists reacted to the politicization of the artistic sphere and to the break with the institutions in the same manner. Many artists decided to give priority to their political militancy, collaborating with trade unions, political parties and leftist armed movements in order to use their art for creating a revolutionary consciousness (Burucúa, 110-1). There were also artists (many of whom were just arriving on the artistic scene) who decided to occupy all available artistic, cultural, political and public spaces possible in order to have their art and their message reach the greatest number of people. These same artists often took advantage of exhibits, official and private awards and when faced with exclusion and censorship, they repudiated these acts (Burucúa, 110-1), thus denouncing the continuous control of the art institutions by the state and their right-wing elites.

There were various different artistic and political strategies and leftist ideologies undertaken by the artistic vanguard in the late 1960s. However, what remained clear across the board was their commitment to contributing as artists to "the *detonation* of a social transformation" as the specific goal for the vanguard. It is important to bring

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<sup>13</sup> "In 1957 a few European avant-garde groups came together to form the Situationist International. Over the next decade the SI developed an increasingly incisive and coherent critique of modern society and of its bureaucratic pseudo-opposition, and its new methods of agitation were influential in leading up to the May 1968 revolt in France. Since then – although the SI itself was dissolved in 1972 – situationist theses and tactics have been taken up by radical currents in dozens of countries all over the world." (Knabb, ix)

attention to the language being used by the artists. It clearly parallels the type of language used by the leftist armed groups of the time period.

... ahora la realidad misma era la arcilla en la que debían hundirse las manos sin prejuicios esteticistas: contra una estética de la negatividad, proponían una estética que sostenía como valores la heteronomía y el compromiso. La vanguardia, entonces, ya no debía renovarse sólo en sus formas, sino también en sus significados. En este sentido León Ferrari escribía “El arte no será ni la belleza ni la novedad, el arte será la eficacia y la perturbación. La obra de arte lograda será aquella que dentro del medio donde se mueve el artista tenga un impacto equivalente en cierto modo [al] de un atentado político en un país que se libera (Giunta, 2001, 369)

... now reality itself had become the clay in which to immerse one's hands without aesthetic prejudices: against an aesthetic of negativity, they proposed an aesthetic that maintained heteronomy and commitment as its values. The vanguard, then, had to renovate itself not only in form, but also in significations. In this sense, León Ferrari wrote: “Art will be neither beauty nor novelty, art will be efficiency and disturbance. The well-achieved work of art will be the one that within the artist's sphere will have an impact equivalent, in a way, to a political assassination attempt in a country that is liberating itself”.

The two main goals of the artistic vanguard movement of the late 1960s were essentially, the rupture with the official and private art institutions and awards, and the contribution of the vanguard to the revolutionary transformation of the country by using their art as one more tool of the struggle. In August 1968, the vanguard artists from Rosario and Buenos Aires came together to debate and establish a base of unity and working methodologies in what they called: *El Primer Encuentro Nacional del Arte de Vanguardia* / The First National Encounter of Vanguard Art (Burucúa, 104). Apart from reconfirming the aforementioned goals as their priority, they also called for the creation of a “culture of subversion”.

In the following years, a great many political art exhibitions and projects spread through Buenos Aires and Rosario. Some of those that especially stand out in the history of the artistic vanguard of the 60s and 70s are: the collectively produced *Homenaje a Latinoamérica* / *Homage to Latin America* exhibit in honour of the memory of Che Guevara, the production of political art posters repudiating the arrival of Nelson Rockefeller to Argentina, the *Exposición Arte e Ideología*, *CAYC al aire libre* / *Art and Ideology Exhibit*, *CAYC Out in the Open* organized in 1972 in the Roberto Arlt Plaza

repudiating the massacre of the political prisoners in Trelew and the increasing military repression (Burucúa, 111). But with the increasing political repression of the times, came increasing artistic censorship, and many of these exhibits did not last more than a day before the police or the military shut them down, often even jailing some of the artists.

An aspect which is especially important in terms of understanding the innovations and the reasoning behind the techniques utilized by the most provocative political-art collectives is the influence of mass media communications on the artistic and political spheres. In the mid 1960s the *Instituto Torcuato Di Tella* managed to attract the attention of much of the communications media. Particular artists were at times built up in the media as new “cultural icons” gracing even the front pages of magazines and newspapers (Burucúa, 94) or showing up on television shows and newscasts. Art had begun to be “newsworthy”. At the same time, for the artists, the communications media had begun to be “artworthy”. Vanguard artists started exploring the mass communications media not just as a resource for publicizing their exhibits, but more so as a set of sophisticated marketing and publicity techniques, (Burucúa, 94-5) which they could learn from and subsequently use for their own political goals. They recognized that the mass communications media were being used as tools for the manipulation of the people in order to protect the self-interests of the corporate elites who controlled that same media. The artists, however, also saw a great potential in mass communications technology for consciousness-raising, as through this medium, they could obviously reach out to a greater number of people in order to “act upon them” (Burucúa, 95).

In a work that has come to be known as “*el falso happening / the false happening*” Roberto Jacoby explored the power of the communications media to create a “reality” that does not exist. He sent out pictures, descriptions and critiques of a supposed happening that he had produced and then he sat back and watched how the media communicated all the details of this event and how the public was convinced of its existence. In this sense, they had made the happening “real” but only within the media, as the happening had never actually existed outside of the media’s realm. Thus the name: *the false happening*. Through this kind of experimentation and exploration of the mass communications media, the vanguard artists came to see the value of adopting some of its techniques in their own artistic-political productions. They had two main goals: to use these mass media techniques to reach greater numbers of people for consciousness-raising and to use these techniques to counteract the misinformation and

the lies sold through the elite-controlled media circuits. The use of these mass media techniques for the production of political art and the specific goals of breaking with the art institutions and using art as a tool or detonator for social transformation is best exemplified in the 1968 collective exhibit known as *Tucumán arde*.

#### **4.1 The *Tucumán arde* Exhibit**

The union between the vanguard artists of Buenos Aires and Rosario and the discussions, debates and suggestions that came forth at the *First National Encounter of Vanguard Art* resulted in a concrete plan to produce a large, well-coordinated and collective artistic-political action. But they needed a theme, something that would give them a practical focus for their work; an aspect of Argentine reality that could symbolically encompass the suffering of the whole nation and in this way inspire different sectors of the population to join existing social movements in working towards a radical transformation of society. That theme was found in the socio-economic crisis hitting the workers of the sugar-cane industry in the province of Tucumán.

At that time, Tucumán was a province that depended heavily on sugar plantations for its revenue. During Perón's reign and Import Substitution Industrialization drive he had rewarded the sugar plantation owners with heavy state subsidies of the industry. However, the plantation owners had refused to invest in modernizing equipment, preferring instead to pocket the core profits, thus maintaining a near feudal agricultural system (Anderson, M., 126). As the price of sugar dropped on the world market, the Tucumán sugar industry became even more dependent on state subsidies to be able to compete in the world economy. But in 1966, under Gen. Juan Carlos Onganía's dictatorial rule, these subsidies were suddenly cut. As the government began its move towards free market policies and lessening state intervention in the national economy, the national sugar industry was simply unable to survive. In 1965 Tucumán had twenty-seven mills and by 1968 only seventeen of these were left (Anderson, M., 126). And of those mills still left standing, many passed from ownership of the national elites to the hands of U.S. multinational corporations.

The result for the workers was a skyrocketing level of unemployment, which provoked tens of thousands to leave the province in search of work in the urban centers of Buenos Aires and Córdoba. The urban shantytowns grew, while whole towns were left empty, becoming ghost towns (Anderson, M., 126). The workers who had managed to stay in the sugar plantations presented, perhaps, an even sadder picture: high levels

of illiteracy, extremely unstable living conditions, lack of medical care and other essential services, poor hygienic conditions on the plantation and in the surrounding shantytowns where the majority of workers lived, disease, abuse and violence, and little access to policing and the justice system. They were people who had been abandoned by the state.

The artists decided that this subject would effectively show the consequences of current government socio-economic policies and that a deep analysis of the Tucumán situation would make evident the effects of these policies for the working class throughout the country. It was also a very timely project. The government had just launched a publicity campaign, aptly called "*Operación Tucumán*" which claimed to be an accelerated industrialization drive, when in reality it was about the destruction of small and middle-sized plantations in order to let in foreign multinationals to establish monopolies in the area (Giunta, 2001, 367). The artists felt it was their responsibility to fight this campaign of misinformation, using the same tool: mass communications techniques to make the government's lies more apparent by producing a political-art action as a tool that they referred to as: *counter-information* (Giunta, 2001, 367).

The vanguard artists teamed up with people from different professions and orientations using the *tools* of all these trades (Giunta, 2001, 368) in order to create a bombardment of images, sounds and texts sure to make people open their eyes to the plight of the most excluded sectors in Argentine society. Researchers and academics from the social sciences contributed with factual reports and socio-economic analyses of Tucumán's reality, which were used to provide evidence to legitimate the claims of the Tucumán *arte* artists and the workers interviewed for the exhibit. Advertising experts used the techniques of their industry to create the kind of buzz needed to pull off this huge event without the financing and the help of the arts institutions and their media circus. The leftist activists contributed with their experience in consciousness-raising and popular education methods. The idea was to bring together all the tools they had available to them, in order to make the exhibit as efficient as possible (Giunta, 2001, 369). They envisioned the creation of a *counterinformational* circuit that could both unmask the biases of the official media and, at the same time, work to create a *culture of subversion*, that would question and challenge the "marmalade" culture of the art institutions and the dominant classes (Giunta, 2001, 369). The vanguard artists defined the new aesthetic creation as an action both *collective* and *violent*: "La violencia es, ahora, una acción creadora de nuevos contenidos: destruye el sistema de la cultura

oficial, oponiéndole una cultura subversiva que integra el proceso modificador, creando un arte verdaderamente revolucionario” / “Violence is now, an action capable of creating a new content: it destroys the system of official culture, opposing it to a subversive culture which has become part of a process of transformation, creating a truly revolutionary art” (Giunta, 2001, 370). Through this political-art exhibit, the artists hoped to appeal to both the senses and the conscience of the audience, thus forcing them to deeply analyze the information and urgently take a side on the issue.

The collective action that ended in the Tucumán *arde* exhibit was developed through several stages. In the first stage of this process, a team from the *Centro de Investigaciones en Ciencias Sociales (CICSO) / Centre for Investigation in the Social Sciences*, produced a report on the state of Tucumán’s economy in order to give the investigators, journalists, photographers, and videographers some background before leaving on their trip to Tucumán (Burucúa, 106). The purpose of the trip was to collect additional material: information, interviews and testimonies, audio and video-footage of the sugar plantations and the surrounding shantytowns. During this initial period, the artists and collaborators took to the streets and practically overnight, wallpapered the whole city with posters that said simply “*Tucumán*”, this was meant to attract people’s attention, without giving away the full intention of the action. Some time later, before leaving on their trip, they took to the streets again adding the word “*arde*” to the posters, completing the concept for the exhibit: “*Tucumán arde*” (Giunta, 2001, 370). This was part of the mass communications strategy that had been developed to promote the exhibit and to raise consciousness about the issues discussed therein.

The second stage of the process took place in Tucumán. The strategy borrowed techniques from leftist social movements: a sort of game was played out between the *official* and the *clandestine*. An “official” group of vanguard artists was sent into the province to make contact with the institutionalized and elite cultural sectors, to whom they presented their proposal of producing a work of “artistic-cultural information” about the province of Tucumán (Giunta, 2001, 370). But while these artists were busy presenting at press conferences organized in their honour and attracting the attention of the official cultural scene, the other “clandestine” artists went into the sugar plantations in order to document the situation experienced there. They photographed, recorded and filmed the workers, labour leaders and their families, interviewing many of them in an attempt to capture in images and sounds the reality of these people’s lives (Giunta, 2001, 370).

The third stage of the process was the exhibit itself, presented first in the city of Rosario and then in Buenos Aires. The first exhibit opened in Rosario on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1968 at the provincial headquarters of the CGTA. The streets had been wallpapered with new posters announcing the Tucumán arde exhibit quite ironically as the “First Biennial of Vanguard Art”.

Además de citar a las prestigiosas bienales que organizaban las instituciones importantes, llamar así a la muestra llevaba implícita la disputa por el sentido del término “vanguardia”: la auténtica vanguardia artística no era la que se ubicaba junto a los poderosos, sino en los sindicatos, al lado de los trabajadores. (Giunta, 2001, 370-1)

Apart from making allusion to all the prestigious biennials organized by the important institutions, to call the exhibit by this name was to implicitly dispute the real meaning of the term “vanguard”: the authentic artistic vanguard then, was not the one that placed itself on the side of the powerful, but rather in the unions, at the side of the workers.

The diverse types of documentary material brought together for the exhibit: video footage, audio recording and photographs, together with posters, diagrams and explanatory texts were put on display taking advantage of all the floorspace of the CGTA building (Giunta, 2001, 371). The posters with the word “Tucumán” were used to wallpaper the entrance into the building. Once inside one wall had been completely covered with diverse newspaper cutouts, strategically collected and organized by León Ferrari in an attempt to make people see that a critical reading of the biased official stories in the mass media one will find the truth hiding beneath the surface, and that the hidden truth was that of a deep socio-political and economic crisis about to unfold (Giunta, 2001, 371). On the other walls were countless photographs taken in the sugar plantations, which were displayed together with statistical data, diagrams and academic analyses put together by the sociologists in order to support or legitimate academically the arguments implicit in the works of the Tucumán arde exhibit. The slides and the video-footage were projected onto the walls and the audio portion of the interviews was played over the loud speakers. Synoptic charts designed to show the connections between the government and the sugar plantation monopoly industries were placed on the floor where the audience had to chose to either walk right over or around them (Giunta, 2001, 371), but in either case, the audience was forced to interact with the information being displayed, which was all around, from the floors, to the walls, to the

entrance ways and up to the ceilings. The audience was literally surrounded by this so-called bombardment of text and images, which begged for them to become conscious and to show allegiance (Giunta, 2001, 371-2). Political posters lined the exhibit with diverse messages such as: "*Visite Tucumán, jardín de la miseria / No a la tucumanización de nuestra patria / No hay solución sin liberación*" (Giunta, 2001, 372). "Visit Tucumán, the Garden of Misery / No to the tucumanization of our country / There is no solution without liberation". On their way out, members of the audience were interviewed about their thoughts and feelings regarding the exhibit in order to make the audience another part of the counter-informational communications strategy. And just so that no one could question the arguments displayed within the exhibit, the group of social science researchers had put together an 18-page report explaining the root causes of the situation in Tucumán, which students and workers handed out to people as they left the exhibit (Giunta, 2001, 372).

The exhibit ran for two weeks in Rosario, but when it opened in Buenos Aires, in the *Federación Gráfica Bonaerense* / The Buenos Aires Graphics Federation building, the government and police pressure to close it was so great, that it only lasted a day (Giunta, 2001, 372). One of the main reasons for this rapid closure was the opening speech given by the eloquent, Raimundo Ongaro, secretary general of the CGTA.

Hemos caminado mucho por el país, por nuestra tierra. Hemos estado en las ollas populares. Hemos visto el grado de humillación y vejación que significan. Nuestra palabra no podía transmitir todos esos dramas [...] Gracias a estos artistas es posible que más trabajadores en todo el país conozcan lo que pasa en la Argentina... Ellos tienen los tanques, las ametralladoras, tienen perros. Nosotros tenemos hoy este pedacito de lienzo y esta casa modesta y nos basta mostrar estas imágenes para que tengan miedo, porque saben que no podrán contra el despertar de las conciencias que nosotros convocamos para liberarnos... (Burucúa, 108-9)

We have walked far and wide through this country, through our land. We have been to the community kitchens. We have seen the kind of humiliation and abuse that these represent for many. Our words could not transmit all these dramas [...] It is thanks to the artists that it is now possible, for many more workers from throughout the country, to find out about what is happening in Argentina... They have the tanks, the machine guns, the dogs. Today we have this little piece of canvas and this modest little house, but it is sufficient for us to exhibit these images, for them to fear us, because they know that they will not be able to hold back against the awakening of consciousness that we are provoking today for the sake of our liberation...



If any consciences were truly awakened by the *Tucumán arde* exhibit it was most likely that of the artists' themselves. In fact, the process of producing this collective action had been intense, and for some, traumatic. The artists had become so radicalized by it that it suddenly seemed impossible for them to justify working within the official art sectors (Giunta, 2001, 374) while the socio-economic crisis continued to burn its way through the country. The urgent need for a strong movement of resistance against the increasingly repressive military dictatorship headed by Gen. Onganía, led many to abandon their previous ambitions of using art as a *detonator* for social change, committing themselves instead, to leftist social and/or armed movements in order to *accelerate* the revolutionary process (Giunta, 2001, 374). They gave up on the galleries and the institutions and opted instead for the streets and the plazas as their aesthetic-political battleground. In the Argentine cultural-artistic field, the *Tucumán arde* exhibit functions as a landmark that divides all of the artistic production of the period into "before and after" 1968.

From 1968 onwards the radicalization of the left in general increased ten-fold and with it both military repression and censorship. Many of the leftist social movements transformed themselves in the early 1970s into clandestine revolutionary armed movements. At that point violence began to be used as the tool of choice on both sides of the political spectrum. The artists who had previously envisioned their art as symbolically having the effects of a *bombardment*, a *terrorist attack*, a *detonation* or an act of political violence, were now seeing violence spread *literally* through the country, and though the battleground was mainly in the streets, the violence became so widespread that it began to reach even the official artistic-cultural spheres that the artists had previously shunned (Burucúa, 113).

The year 1973 represents perhaps the pinnacle of the politicization of the art world, but it also marks a point of rupture. The artists had made their statements in the streets, but the political violence had become so central to Argentina, that there was no public space left to present alternative aesthetic-political projects that could attract the attention of an increasingly scared public (Burucúa, 113).

Afectados por la fractura de un proyecto de transformación inminente que ellos también habían ayudado a pensar, los artistas, como el resto de la sociedad, tuvieron que gestar ahora estrategias que les permitieran resolver en los años subsiguientes a las interrogantes más

urgentes. Entre otros, cuáles eran las maneras posibles de resistir. (Burucúa, 113)

Affected by the fracturing of a project of imminent transformation, which the artists had also helped to dream up, they, just like the rest of society, had to suddenly come up with new strategies that would allow them in the subsequent years to resolve the most urgent questions. Amongst others issues, finding possible methods for resistance.

One of the proposed solutions was, ironically enough, to return to the galleries. The argument was that the Argentine reality was lived out and played out in the streets, but because of the limited possibilities to interact with that reality on an artistic-political level in the same streets, due to increased repression and censorship, then why not take the streets *into* the galleries and art institutions. There was one exhibit that perfectly exemplifies this idea and is perhaps one of the most significant of this time period regarding the issues discussed above.

This group of artists managed to display their work in the *Museo de Arte Moderno*, during the presentation of one of the Museum's most prestigious artistic awards: the Premio Acrilicopaolini of 1973. The work was controversial even during the production of the catalogue. Instead of placing a photo of the artists beside the description of the work, they decided instead to use a photo of a political act, where amongst the crowds, one could pick out signs of the leftist Peronist organization Montoneros. And in the space reserved for the group's name or the names of its members, they added "*Grupo realizador: participa activa y concientemente en el proceso de liberación nacional y social que vive el país / The Artist Group: actively and consciously participates in the process of national liberation being experienced in the country*" (Burucúa, 111). Even greater than the impact of the catalogue, was the impact of the artwork itself. They had built a cement-block wall about seven meters wide and two meters tall inside of the MAM and they completely covered the wall with political posters, slogans and acronyms (Burucúa, 111).<sup>14</sup> The wall was a representation of the many similar walls that proliferated in Buenos Aires, the only vestige of free expression left in the country. This piece was entitled simply: "Process Towards our Reality" (Burucúa, 112).

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<sup>14</sup> On one side of the wall the phrase "Ezeiza es Trelew" was scrawled in memory of the two massacres that had taken place that year.

El conjunto trabajaba sobre un intrincado punto de inflexión tanto histórico como estético. Porque si bien el enlace entre los hechos de Trelew y de Ezeiza proponía una lectura que hacía necesario un giro en el rumbo de la acción política, volver al espacio institucional y aún más, invadir el espacio del museo con el espacio de la calle, definía un itinerario de signo inverso o aquel que, en un violento corte institucional, los artistas habían trazado en su acelerado recorrido del '68. (Burucúa, 112)

The collective worked around one intricate point of historic and aesthetic inflection. Because, even though the link they made between the events of Trelew and those of Ezeiza proposed a critical reading that led towards political action, to return to institutional spaces and especially, to invade the space of the museum with the space of the streets, defined an itinerary quite opposite to that of the violent rupture with the institutions that the artists had set out to accomplish at an accelerated pace during 1968.

But this was a work that called for political action. It attempted to act as a testimony and a denunciation of the repression that had taken place. The work also included a card with a drop of blood painted on one side and on the other was the political call to action. It said: "*Castigo a los culpables de las masacres de Trelew y de Ezeiza*" / "Punishment to those responsible for the massacres of Trelew and Ezeiza" and it called for an anti-elitist, national, popular, collective art in the service of the interests of the people (Burucúa, 112).

The idealism and the creative freedoms of the 60s were coming to an end, so the artists of the 70s had to find new ways to take advantage of *any* and *all* spaces available to them in order to circulate their political-art works. This change could be interpreted as a strategy that surfaced out of the realization that they were censored, silenced, and constantly threatened with repression and violence in a historical context of increasingly violent military rule. At this point, they had only begun to see the tip of the iceberg in terms of how far that repression and violence would reach in coming years.

The gruesome human rights violations that characterized the late 70s and the early 80s created a new conceptual focus for artists. The military attempt to completely silence the victims and to erase from national historical memory the abuses committed during the dictatorship, revived the collective intellectual and aesthetic reflections of the artists concerning these crimes and what these represented for Argentine society and history. Art did not abandon the political arena, but rather, was transformed in its specific objectives. Instead of operating as a *detonator* for revolution, it now concentrated its

efforts on *revealing* the crimes of the junta and legitimizing the work of the human rights movements who denounced these abuses all along. The Falkland/Malvinas war also marked a turning point in terms of intellectual/aesthetic reflection amongst the artists of the time. It was the last vestige of Argentine nationalism, and with military defeat, came a tumbling down of the pride that once characterized Argentine national identity. Many things changed after 1982, socially, politically and culturally as well.

The end of the military dictatorship and the return of democracy in December 1983 resulted in what could be called a cultural “release”. Academics and intellectuals who had fled the country from 1966 onwards, now began to return to Argentina (Romero,258). In the cultural and communications media spheres, there was a sudden and broadly exercised freedom of expression that characterized the period. The new activism was most visible in the arts: there was a productive explosion in Argentine film, literature, theatre and music. (Romero, 250) Many of these works focused on the crimes of the dictatorship and their effects on the people and the nation. This seemed a logical route to take in dealing with the atrocities committed in that very recent past.

The hyperinflationary period and the crisis in political representation during the late 80s and early 90s, threatened to blot out Argentine nationalism. The exodus of Argentines, first due to the dictatorship, and later to the economic crisis, resulted in a further weakening of national identity and purpose. And although with the passing of time, new concepts and methods were inevitably introduced into the cultural sphere, the scars of Argentine history could not be erased from the intellectual/aesthetic discourse of the artists.

The mid-90s saw another important change in national identity and social movements in Argentina. The increasing economic crisis and the austerity measures imposed by Menem in an attempt to appease the International Monetary Fund created a level of poverty and exclusion that in many senses was new to Argentina. Human rights movements began to also demand civil and socio-economic rights for the growing marginalized sectors in the country. Artists were inspired by these new interpretations of Argentine reality and they continued to use their intellectual/aesthetic tools in order to *reveal* the consequences of these government policies.

The events of December 2001 resulted in a concrete change in the mentality of the Argentine people. For the first time in many decades, Argentines from nearly all social sectors and political/ideological persuasions gathered together, confronting their fears of repression and filled the streets to demand the resignation of their highest-

ranking government officials. They would no longer sit back and wait for events to be miraculously resolved by messianic leaders; they now demanded to be active participants in the political process. It was a moment of profound radicalization. In this context, it is hardly surprising that artists would turn to the experience of the *Tucumán arde* exhibit of 1968 for inspiration. It is this political/economic junction that gives birth to the *Argentina Arde* artist collective that I will describe in detail in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 5 A HISTORY OF THE ARGENTINA ARDE COLLECTIVE

*... que se prefiera un contenido a una técnica,  
un sentido imperfecto a una perfección sin sentido...*  
- Fernando Birri

*... that content be preferred over technique,  
an imperfect meaning over a perfection without meaning...*  
-Fernando Birri

On the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of December, 2001 various sectors of the population came together to manifest their opposition to both the neo-liberal policies put in place decades earlier and to the current government which had done nothing to soften these policies' horrific effects on the population, thus hastening unemployment, poverty and desperation throughout the country.

It is within this context that over 120 young artists and students met and came together to form a counter-information collective committed to working side by side with different Argentine social movement organizations. They were youth who met in the trenches of the *Argentinazo* uprising, while some were filming the police repression, others were photographing the chilling images of the dead in the streets, and others were documenting in writing instances of mass mobilization. They exchanged names and contact information in order to create a network for sharing video footage, photographs and testimonies of the events of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of December 2001, as well as for supporting each other in the production, exhibition and dissemination of counter-informative materials.

*Boedo Films, Cine Insurgente, Contraimagen and Indymedia Argentina* put out a call to all artists and cultural workers to attend a special meeting on January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2002 at the University of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo located in the capital city of Buenos Aires. The original purpose of the meeting was to find a way to bring together all the video footage and photographic material which documented both the popular uprising and the police repression of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of December, so that all alternative visual

materials could be shared and circulated amongst the groups present, creating an exhaustive archive.

It did not take long for the popular assembly of young artists, filmmakers, students, and independent journalists to take on a life of its own. Several proposals were put forward, discussed and agreed upon, leading to the creation of the *Argentina Arde* collective and the consolidation of its main objectives.

... lo más importante de la reunión quizá fue el solo hecho de que nos comenzamos a organizar: desde intercambiar los materiales de cada grupo, coordinar actividades de producción y difusión, romper el cerco des-informativo de los medios de comunicación, ayudar a que todo el material llegue a las asambleas, conflictos, huelgas, piquetes, en resumen; poner nuestra producción y nuestros conocimientos al servicio de los que luchan. Author unknown, "Argentina Arde: Algo nuevo comienza a nacer", <http://argentina.indymedia.org/>Indymedia Argentina (Dec 3, 2002)

... the most important thing that came out of the meeting was, perhaps, just the fact that we began to organize: from sharing the materials of each of the groups, coordinating activities for both production and dissemination, breaking the wall of dis-information built by the communications media, helping to get this material to the assemblies, the conflict zones, the strikes, the pickets, in summary; putting our production and our knowledge in service of those who are part of the struggle.

The assembly decided to adopt a horizontal structure with no hierarchy, leaders or representatives. The collective was to be divided into three main commissions: photo, video and press, which would work more or less autonomously, focusing on their specific tasks but, nonetheless, coming together at a weekly general assembly in order to update each other and coordinate joint tasks, projects and events.

The collective got off to a running start: after just one assembly they were already planning a public showing of video-documentaries and photography for the 25<sup>th</sup> of January at the University of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo; another showing on the 27<sup>th</sup> at the Salón Pueyrredón, a large cultural-artistic space used for film screenings, art exhibitions, theatre and music presentations in downtown Buenos Aires, followed by several other smaller events, culminating the month in a "mega-event" in the Plaza de

Mayo where they would display the totality of their video and photographic production, along with several theatre and performance works.<sup>15</sup>

At this assembly a particular proposal was greeted with great enthusiasm and total accord amongst the participants: to take on the name *Argentina Arde* in honour of the work of the artists who put together the “Tucumán arde” exhibit of 1968 and who tied their artistic production to the social movements and organizations of the 1960s and 1970s.

The groups that responded to the call to join the *Argentina Arde* collective included students from different universities and schools, cinema groups, arts and media associations, as well as other popular organizations.<sup>16</sup> The *Argentina Arde* collective, however, does not limit its events to showing only the work produced by the groups and independent cultural workers that conform it. The collective also functions as a sort of umbrella organization with the power to bring together the hundreds of cultural workers, artists, students and political-art groups of Argentina. For example, the Art Commission of *Argentina Arde* put out a call for all artists and political-art groups to come together in La Boca<sup>17</sup> on June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2002, for a day of “Art, Action and Reflection” where they would show: video-documentary works, photography, drawing, painting, multimedia, street art, action-art as well as slide projections with oral presentations on the work of *Tucumán Arde*, among other political-art happenings of the recent Argentine past.

The large number and variety of groups and individuals involved in the work and the proposals set forward by *Argentina Arde* suggests the wide reach the collective has in terms of the Art and Culture communities of Buenos Aires.<sup>18</sup> But the influence of the

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<sup>15</sup> They successfully pulled off all the events as planned and became greatly motivated by the high level of support shown by the public.

<sup>16</sup> Grupo de Cine Insurgente, Boedo Films, Contra-imagen, Indymedia Argentina, Grupo Cine Piquetero, Grupo Ojo Obrero, Adoc (Asociación de Documentalistas), Venteveo Video, the Escuela de Cine de Avellaneda, Film students from the Universidad de la Plata, Film students from the Escuela Prilidiano Pueyrredón, correspondents from the FM radio La Tribu, Communications students from the (UBA) Universidad de Buenos Aires, the Agrupación Rojo Granate conformed of students from the UBA, Video-documentary and Muralism students from the Universidad Popular de las Madres de Plaza de Mayo, Lamarencóche, press commissions from different organizations and neighbourhood assemblies, photographers, and independent and neighbourhood journalists.

<sup>17</sup> La Boca is a neighbourhood in the city of Buenos Aires reknown for its cultural activity and also because it is predominantly working class.

<sup>18</sup> Those who answered this call included groups such as: Mínimo 9, an artistic group which calls for the use of art in a free and creative way to aid in the social transformation of the country; Grupo de Arte Callejero (GAC), a group of artists who reject the institutional spaces of the museums in favour of the streets as a space to bring attention to all that the state has omitted, disappeared and tried to banish to oblivion; Ejército de Artistas, an association of artists from different schools, disciplines and sectors who coordinate their work to produce critical cultural actions in public spaces; Aerosol Urbano, a group that uses and teaches how to use graffiti as a tool for critical muralism in the downtown core; Mesa de Arte y Política de H.I.J.O.S., this committee of the human rights organization H.I.J.O.S. uses art as a tool for education,



collective is not limited to the confines of the province of Buenos Aires; there have been a number of public presentations, video and photography shows and other coordinated activities with groups in the interior as well. On February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2002, in the city of La Plata, in Buenos Aires province, a group of around 25 students and workers from several different disciplines came together to form *Argentina Arde – La Plata*. Since then, the collective has been growing exponentially. They started with two committees, and now they have five: Photography, Dissemination, Finances, Screenings and Press. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of the same month, at an *Argentina Arde* video-documentary screening organized by Indymedia Argentina in the capital city of Córdoba province, the participants decided to form their own regional chapter of the collective, calling on all artists and cultural workers to join them in forming *Argentina Arde – Córdoba*. The 2<sup>nd</sup> of March, at a photography and video exhibit in Neuquén province, discussion began for the creation of *Argentina Arde – Neuquén*. That same day, a first assembly was called in the Southern zone of Buenos Aires, in Lomas de Zamora, to form *Argentina Arde – Zona Sur*, which very quickly began to organize public exhibits and video screenings. Aside from the regional chapters of *Argentina Arde* which have been established in 2002, there have also been a substantial number of video and photography exhibits which have traveled throughout the country, and, more recently, both in Europe (England, France, Belgium, Spain, Germany and Italy) and North America (Canada and the United States).

The objectives of the regional chapters of *Argentina Arde*, which we reproduce here in their entirety, are essentially the same throughout the country and are listed in detail on their website:

- 1) “to build a network for multimedia, which parting from the concept of counter-information, can generate new forms of expression and production as tools in the struggle against the current socio-political system”;
- 2) “to combat the ‘dis-information’ monopoly held by the large communications media, to dismantle their exclusively neo-liberal thought and to destroy the myth of objectivity which emanates from their discourse”;
- 3) “to produce materials with counter-informative content and a clear commitment to social movements in struggle, giving a voice to those who are exploited”;

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maintaining historical memory and for social transformation; but there are many more groups involved such as: *Tierra del Sur*, *Por el Ojo*, *La Piedra*, among others.

- 4) "to create a national network of correspondents, which will be able to accurately reflect the problems and needs of our people and to thus form part of the struggle for social change";
- 5) "to use the different art and communications media (photo, video, press, internet, radio, TV and alternative news agencies) in order to generate new spaces for neighbours to participate in both news production and their own forms of artistic production";
- 6) "to build new channels for the distribution of our materials, with the specific goal of reaching those sectors with few resources. Our gaze must not only reflect multiple voices, but it must guarantee that the real news, which the mass media covers up to the benefit of their political and economic interests, reach those sectors as well";
- 7) "to achieve, through the organization of workshops in different neighbourhoods, the training of hundreds of neighbours so that they will be able to carry out the production of videos, photography, journalistic writing, etc. We see this as the only possible road towards the demythification and the dismantling of the over-arching hegemonic discourses and for the achievement of a true multiplicity of voices."  
("Argentina Arde: Objetivos",  
<http://www.argentinaarde.org/objetivos.htm> [Dec 2, 2002])

The objective of creating counter-informative and independent information networks as a strategy of resistance against the disinformation spread through the communications media monopolies, is not necessarily new. Pablo Renzi and the artists who put together the Tucumán arde exhibit in 1968 had similar goals. The creation of Independent Media Centres throughout the world and in Argentina, is also a logical response to the issue of elite control of the mass communications media. However, there *is* something new about the objectives of the Argentina Arde collective, and that is the conscious attempt to take these counter-information publications and networks out of the hands of the intellectual and leftist middle-class (the vanguards of yesteryear). Instead, they are placing the emphasis on providing the tools and the training to the workers, to the unemployed and to the subaltern in both urban and rural areas of the country, so that they may take those new tools and represent *themselves*, their needs, their demands and their own struggles through their own eyes, as opposed to being the object of a constant interpretation by the "professionals", whether left or right-leaning on the political spectrum. In *Argentina Arde* there is an attempt to create a space for a multiplicity of voices, something that

strays from the strategy of the 1960s and 1970s that tried to mold all the disparate, and often conflicting, voices of the left into one neatly packaged Marxist discourse.

It is difficult to assert whether *Argentina Arde* would exist if it were not for the uprising of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of December, if it were not for the *piquetero* movements, the *cacerolazos*, the popular assemblies and the provincial and national inter-neighbourhood assemblies, the labour union mobilizations, the factories under worker control, the creation of the parallel bartering economy of the *Club del Trueque*, the re-mobilization of the student movement and the repression which has reached every one of these groups and has taken the lives of nearly 50 people. What can be affirmed, however, is that *Argentina Arde* has been shaped by a popular uprising that included diverse groups of people and sectors of the population. The members of the collective were touched personally by the crisis, whether it be as unemployed workers, as *piqueteros*, as students who no longer had access to an adequate education, as human rights activists who saw repression against them rise, as cultural and art workers who no longer had a possibility of finding work, and as sensitive people who wanted to participate in changing the course of the deepening social crisis of the country. The founders of *Argentina Arde* are all members of neighbourhood assemblies, labour or student unions, or organizations involved in the struggle for social transformation. It is their interest and skills in the area of the communications media and art that brought them together to try to put those skills to work for the marginalized and subaltern sectors which were being increasingly isolated from the mass media channels and newspapers.

The members of *Argentina Arde* are both participant-insiders and observant-outsiders. They are *participant-insiders* in the sense that they identify individually as *piqueteros* or members of their neighbourhood popular assemblies, they are unemployed workers, and in general, people who have been affected by the socio-economic policies of the government and who personally *participate* in these sectors' struggles. But at the same time they are also *observant-outsiders* in the sense that they also identify as artists and audio-visual media workers who are trying to appropriately document and *represent* the different struggles of the Argentine people. They are attempting to find a way to document what is happening without taking over the task of *interpreting the truth* which is precisely what they accuse the mass communications media of doing.

The ideology behind *Argentina Arde*'s work is born out of the members' criticisms of the current political power structure, the effects of neo-liberal policy and the role of the

mass media in this time of national crisis. They trace the root causes of the current crisis back to the time of the last military dictatorship, interpreting the widespread repression of the 1970s as a way of silencing the voices, which spoke against the system. During the 1970s the infrastructure necessary for neo-liberalism was put in place, but it was under *Menemism* that those neo-liberal policies were entrenched, disastrously increasing the levels of unemployment, and poverty throughout the country.

Precisamente en la Argentina, la década de la llamada “cultura Menemista”, llevó al paroxismo la política neo-liberal aplicada en Latinoamérica a partir de los '70. Así, impuso la ruptura de los lazos sociales, de la trama de solidaridades, la atomización perversa y la concentración de los medios masivos de comunicación que se privatizaron en esa década, en forma paralela al desmantelamiento de la educación pública en todos sus niveles. Author unknown, “Nos juntamos bajo el lema: “Vos lo viviste, no dejes que te sigan mintiendo” <http://www.argentinaarde.org/nosotros.htm> (Dec 2, 2002)

It was precisely in the decade of the so-called “Menemista culture” that the neo-liberal policies applied in Latin America beginning in the '70s came to their paroxysm in Argentina. This is how they imposed a rupture in the social and solidarity networks of the country, the perverse atomization and concentration of the mass communications media privatized during that decade, and at the same time the dismantling of the public education system at all levels.

It is this particular understanding of Argentine history which brought the collective to publicly take an Anti-Capitalist and Anti-Neoliberal stance, while revindicating the social struggles of the 1960s and 1970s and merging their legacy with the social struggles of today.

The youth in Argentina have many reasons to be angry and cynical with regards to a political system, that has erased their last hopes for building a just future. Political corruption in Argentina reached unprecedented levels in the last two decades, extending from the highest ranks of power into all corners of the country and reaching even the most insignificant government representatives and employees. The blatant corruption plaguing institutionalized political parties has resulted in a generalized backlash against politicians, party members and activists, clearly evident in the new popular refrain: “*Que se vayan todos*”. In *Argentina Arde* this backlash has been reflected in an attitude which generally looks down upon political party work and which attempts to steer clear of even left-wing parties, preferring instead to use the structure of popular and neighbourhood

assemblies and supporting the attempt to create a national inter-neighbourhood assembly. Consequently, the collective adopted a horizontal structure where all decisions were to be made by voting in an open and public assembly. Protagonistic, paternalistic and authoritarian attitudes are frowned upon by the collective and are in constant review in the internal dynamics of the group. It should be noted that *Argentina Arde* is one amongst hundreds of organizations, groups and assemblies that are increasingly adopting a more direct form of democracy, thus minimizing, if not erasing completely, the role of individual leaders:

Argentina Arde fue y es parte de este proceso de lucha que dió origen a un movimiento asambleario inédito en nuestro país. Las asambleas populares, organizaciones sociales de base, local o barrial, junto a los movimientos piqueteros abren nuevos espacios de participación pública y se inscriben en esa cultura resistente y de oposición que constituyen las prácticas populares. Author unknown, "Nos juntamos bajo el lema: "Vos lo viviste, no dejes que te sigan mintiendo" <http://www.argentinaarde.org/nosotros.htm> (Dec 2, 2002)

Argentina Arde has been and continues to be part of the processes of struggle, which gave birth to the popular assembly movement in our country. The popular assemblies, the local or neighbourhood grassroots social organizations, together with the piquetero movements are opening up new spaces for public participation and they identify as part of that culture of resistance and opposition that constitutes popular practices.

The *Argentina Arde* collective presents itself as a part of this process of social struggle in the country. Their positioning in the popular assemblies is two-fold: to participate in the decision-making process and the organizing purposes of the neighbourhood assemblies, but also to document these popular assemblies through the use of video, photography and writing. They play both the insider-participant and the outsider-observant role, and this is a pattern that permeates all of the collective's work.

The collective itself began in part out of a process of reflection about their own role as artists and cultural workers within the crisis, the biggest challenge being to figure out their ethical responsibilities towards a society in turmoil.

Desde Argentina Arde creemos que es imprescindible que, como parte del arte y la cultura, nos replanteemos la posición que debemos tomar frente a todo lo que está ocurriendo. Y

de ahí partimos para comenzar con este colectivo que, entre fotógrafos, cineastas, comunicadores y artistas, intenta sacar del estancamiento al arte y la cultura, llevándolo a un lugar de compromiso con la transformación social. Author unknown, “¿Qué es Argentina Arde?” <http://www.argentinaardelp.cjb.net/QuienesSomos> (June 10, 2002)

In Argentina Arde we believe that it is essential that, as part of the art and culture industries, we reevaluate the role that we should take on with respect to all that is happening. It is out of this questioning that we evolved and formed this collective which, between photographers, filmmakers, journalists and artists, attempts to bring art and culture out of their stagnation, and to put them in a position of commitment to large-scale social transformation.

This process of constructive self-criticism was part of a larger analysis of the role currently played by the mass media and by the art and culture industries in Argentina, coupled with the creation of proposals about the roles those industries *should* play in a more just society.

The mass media is seen by *Argentina Arde* as a tool used by the political and economic sectors in power to mis-inform the public so that it will conform to the status-quo and to discourage any opposition to these sectors' own projects and neo-liberal policies. Specifically, the monopoly held by the mass media corporations (who buy out all the smaller media groups) is believed to promote and disseminate the hegemonic discourse of the Capitalist system. The various media, such as newspapers, radio and TV news broadcasts originally meant to make the news available on a wider scale, have now been completely commodified. They are now a commercial product increasingly complacent regarding content, and economically inaccessible to those sectors with few economic resources.

De alguna manera nos impusimos salir a la calle a decir que la movilización de diez mil personas todos los viernes con sus cacerolas frente a la casa de gobierno no podía quedarse sin llegar a la gente. Que miles y miles de vecinos en estado asambleario cuestionando al sistema, reclamando *que se vayan todos*, debían tener un lugar en un medio que de a conocer sus propuestas, sus necesidades, sus luchas. Que la lucha de años de los sectores obreros y desocupados tomando fábricas, cortando rutas, levantando comedores para los niños no merecían el silencio cómplice de las grandes empresas multi-media y sí una cobertura de sus acciones y sus discursos y un aporte comprometido a su pelea de todos los días. Author unknown, “En cada luchador, un

corresponsal” <http://www.argentinaarde.org/prensa.htm> (Nov 20, 2002)

In a way, we set out to say that the fact that mobilizations of ten thousand people with their pots and pans were taking every friday in front of the presidential palace could not continue to be withheld from people’s knowledge. That thousands and thousands of neighbours questioning the system during their assemblies, demanding *that they all go away*, have a place in the media in order for their proposals, their needs and their struggles to be known. That the years of struggle of the workers and the unemployed taking over factories, blockading roads, opening soup kitchens for the kids does not deserve the complicitous silence of the great multi-media companies, but rather, they deserve to have their actions, speeches and commitment to the struggles of each day covered in the media.

The blatant silence and misinformation surrounding the events of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of December, 2001, in all the media owned by the Clarín Media Corporation, by far the most powerful media monopoly in the country, proved their complicity with the government and the economic sectors, which were eagerly trying to downplay the negative consequences of the crisis as well as the strength of the popular resistance that threatened to bring down those in power. Thousands of people responded by organizing an *escrache* (a public demonstration meant to ‘expose’ abuses) to denounce the complicity of Clarín<sup>19</sup>. The demonstration was massive and the message was clear: that no mainstream news media could be trusted. It is that void which both *Indymedia Argentina* and *Argentina Arde’s* Press Commission are now trying to fill. And it is in this context that the *Counter-informative* objective of the collective became so necessary for its members.

Nos proponemos intervenir en el terreno de la contra-cultura, entendiendo a la cultura no como un espacio neutro ni secundario con respecto a otros campos, sino como un campo de disputa, como un terreno de la lucha de clases, en donde el poder de contestación de las clases subalternas construye sus propios sentidos de acuerdo a sus intereses. Trabajamos diariamente para contestar con nuestras prácticas, con nuestras producciones, con nuestro discurso y nuestras vivencias a una cultura oficial esquematizada y fraudulenta. Author unknown, “Nos juntamos bajo el lema: “Vos lo viviste, no dejes que te sigan mintiendo” <http://www.argentinaarde.org/nosotros.htm> (Dec 2, 2002)

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<sup>19</sup> The *escrache* was a method for public repudiation created by the human rights group H.I.J.@.S. in 1995 and then borrowed by *Argentina Arde* among other socio-political groups.

We propose an intervention in the terrain of the counter-cultural, understanding culture to be neither a neutral space, nor a space secondary to any other, but rather a space that is in dispute, a space of class-struggle, where the power of the subaltern classes to contest is what builds their own set of meanings in accordance with their interests. We work daily in order to use our practices, our production, our discourse and our experiences to contest the schematized and fraudulent official culture.

*Argentina Arde* thus made it its objective to find ways to generate actions which would contribute to the dissemination of alternative visions, counter-hegemonic gazes and interpretations of the world in which we live. Through the production of a series of video news reports, the distribution of the monthly *Argentina Arde* newspaper, the photography exhibits and video-documentary screenings which take place in the streets, in popular assemblies, in public *plazas*, in the *cacerolazo* protests, and in the *piquetes* (road blockades), the collective has been able to reach remote areas spreading the news of the mobilizations and the repression taking place throughout the country. This has been possible only because of the establishment of a national network of correspondents who contribute to *Argentina Arde* by sending their own local photographs, video footage and news reports to be incorporated into the various media used by the collective.

De esta manera la unión de periodistas con desocupados, de diagramadores y distribuidores con vecinos assembleistas y piqueteros nos llevará a hacernos cada vez más fuertes en esta lucha por la imposición de sentido. De otra forma no hay, bajo este régimen monopólico de noticias, forma de enterarse de los conflictos obreros en Río Turbio o de la lucha de los piqueteros en Salta, ni de los cortes de ruta en Santiago o de las resoluciones de las asambleas del conurbano Bonaerense. Author unknown, "En cada luchador, un corresponsal"  
<http://www.argentinaarde.org/prensa.htm> (Nov 20, 2002)

In this way, the union of journalists and unemployed workers, of designers and distributors with piqueteros and neighbours from the popular assemblies will strengthen us in this struggle for the impositions of meaning. Under this regime of news monopolies, there is no other way to find out about the worker conflicts in Río Turbio or about the piquetero struggles in Salta, or about the road blocks in Santiago or of the resolutions taken at the assemblies of the urban core of Buenos Aires.



It is through this network that hundreds of people from all over the country have contributed to the publication of the *Argentina Arde* newspaper, but the collective has not left it at that. They also routinely organize workshops in different regions for people who are interested in training in written journalism techniques. It is through this training that the collective hopes that those involved in this social struggle will be able to recuperate their right to write, to express themselves and their reality, and thus expand the multiplicity of voices reflected in the work of *Argentina Arde's* newspaper and in its slogan: *todos somos corresponsales* / we are all correspondents.

Coupled with the collective's analysis and criticism of the role of the mass media corporations, is its analysis and criticism of the role of the Artistic and Cultural sectors.

No aceptamos un arte enclaustrado, momificado, preso de un sistema social que lo condena al rol de una simple mercancía y que cada vez más niega al hombre la libertad del acto creativo. No aceptamos un arte hecho por unos pocos, y consumido por unos pocos. Aislado de las necesidades más profundas de los explotados, los oprimidos, los humillados. A la vez que defendemos el derecho a la plena libertad creativa, también bregamos por un arte que huya a la frivolidad y la indiferencia, en la medida que creemos que su sentido más profundo se encuentra íntimamente ligado a la realidad social circundante y cambiante. Author unknown, "Fiesta Argentina Arde Zona Sur", <http://www.argentina.indymedia.org/news/2002/05/24971.php>, (June 21, 2002)

We do not accept an art that is locked in, mummified, incarcerated by a social system that condemns it to the role of a simple commodity and that increasingly takes away from people the freedom of the act of creation. We do not accept an art that is produced by a few and consumed by a few. Isolated from the deepest needs of the exploited, the oppressed and the humiliated. Just as we defend our right to complete creative freedom, we also fight for an art that will evade frivolity and indifference, since we believe that art's most profound meaning is intimately tied to the constantly changing environment of our social reality.

*Argentina Arde* sees its work as part of a national process moving towards the creation of a great *Cultural Front* that will join this popular struggle, using its knowledge and skills as tools for social transformation. This is how the collective interprets the role of the artist and cultural worker in today's socio-political context: her/his role is to commit to working towards the transformation of reality and to do so as an inherent part of the

(unedited) experience of the Argentine people. Of course, the role played by a photographer, a documentary video-maker, a journalist, an actor, a painter, a graphic designer, a web designer, etc., will have particular characteristics related to the media utilized by that individual or group. Below I will look at the characteristics of the Photography Committee and the Video Committee in more detail.

## 5.1 The Photography Committee

The Photography Committee is perhaps the most influenced by the experience of the *Tucumán arde* exhibit of 1968. The experiences of the *Tucumán arde* photographers provide them with a model to follow, particularly in the use of photography as a way to give testimony of the “hidden” reality of a society under exploitation. As in the case of *Tucumán arde*, *Argentina Arde* members also feel the urgent need to document through photography the consequences of the crisis; giving testimony of the harsh living conditions and the poverty, that communities have been subjected to and which have been routinely ignored by the system’s mass media. The focus of *Argentina Arde* has been the denunciation of violations of human rights, repression, poverty and injustice without discussing or questioning the ‘artistic merit’ of the works, nor giving ground for the protagonism of particular photographers over others.

Decidimos salir a la calle a dar un mensaje: no discutimos sobre la calidad o capacidad comunicativa de cada autor, de cada fotógrafo, buscamos en todo caso construir un mensaje colectivo. Intentando representar a los que no están representados. Author unknown, “Memoria Histórica y Compromiso Político” <http://www.argentinaarde.org/fotos.htm> (Nov 20, 2002)

We decided to go out into the streets to send a message: we do not debate the quality or communicative capabilities of each author, of each photographer, but rather we are trying to construct a collective message. Attempting to represent all those who are not already represented.

*Argentina Arde*’s goal is to create a visual alternative to the mass communications media, one that will be more representative of the current reality. Through this media the hope is that people’s generalized dependence on the mass media monopolies will be broken and that they will finally become aware of the hardships and the struggles that

unite the majority of Argentines. In other words, to create a sense of commonality and collectivity out of that suffering, which is a consequence of the political/economic collapse in the country and the decades of economic mismanagement which preceded the collapse.

However, the goal of *Argentina Arde*'s photographers goes beyond simply supplying information or denouncing injustice, and this is perhaps where their work has advanced a few steps beyond that of *Tucumán arde* and the art movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Whereas the art movements of that time period included intellectual figures recognized as a vanguard in the sense that they proclaimed to give a voice to the 'voiceless', or illuminating the masses through their work, the fact of the matter is that many were part of an intellectual middle class often subjected to the interests of the elites who maintained control over artistic production, national and international exhibitions and patronage. In the case of *Argentina Arde*, there is a conscientious attempt in all committees and all projects to give (as much as possible) the 'voiceless' a space to speak, to gather the materials and the skills they will need for their own artistic and journalistic production. They see this as a fundamental necessity in order to create alternative communications media that can break the dependency on the mass media monopolies.

A su vez creemos que para lograr este objetivo es esencial dar herramientas para que cada individuo de la sociedad pueda ser un comunicador de la realidad que se vive en su pueblo o ciudad. Creemos que la fotografía puede brindarse a la sociedad como una herramienta y un instrumento que ayude a lograr la pluralidad de miradas para poder tomar conciencia de la complejidad de las situaciones del país. Author unknown, "Memoria Histórica y Compromiso Político" <http://www.argentinaarde.org/fotos.htm> (Nov 20, 2002)

We believe that in order to attain this objective, it is essential that we provide the tools needed so that each individual in our society could become a communicator of the reality that is lived by our people in our cities. We believe that photography can serve society as a tool or an instrument that will help attain the plurality of perspectives which will make people conscious of the complexities of the situations lived in this country.

It is in this way that the *Argentina Arde* collective envisions the change from *object of representation* to *subject of their own presentation*; from passive victims of the socio-

economic crisis being lived in the country, to survivors of the crisis, who are actively resisting the policies of the government in an attempt to transform their lives in a productive and collective way.

The members of the Photography Committee interpret their role to be photographers and social activists, to be active and constant participants in social struggles. However, they also consider it their duty to document all that is happening and to keep a secure archive of documentary material, which in turn can be used to educate and to thus keep alive the historical memory of this national process, so that it can enlighten present day struggles, but also so it can act as a warning call for the future, demanding that the injustice and the repression not be repeated.

Mucho del registro visual de los años '70 se ha conservado gracias al coraje de algunos autores y militantes y gracias a los que por entender el valor de lo registrado supieron conservar y tratar de dar un lugar "seguro" a los documentos. No podemos permitir que con nuestros registros haga lo mismo el sistema que opera basándose en el olvido. Juntamos es una manera de asegurar saber qué fotografías hay. Qué hechos fueron registrados. Qué hechos de represión han quedado atrapados en un instante para que trabajemos en pos de que no se repitan más. Author unknown, "Memoria Histórica y Compromiso Político"  
<http://www.argentinaarde.org/fotos.htm> (Nov 20, 2002)

The majority of the visual archive from the '70s has been preserved thanks to the commitment of certain authors and militants and those who, because they understood the value of those documents, knew how to preserve them and find "safe" places for their keeping. We cannot allow the system to do with our archives now what it has always done for the sake of promoting oblivion. By coming together we make sure to know what photographs exist. Which events were documented. Which acts of repression have been trapped in the instant of a click so that we may work towards these acts never happening again.

Argentina Arde thus considers its role to be pivotal around two main issues: Political Commitment and Historical Memory. The political commitment expressed in their denunciations, in their presence in social organizations, in their documentation of repression and police violence, in their attempt to train thousands of *piqueteros*, unemployed workers, *asambleistas* and others in the skills needed for becoming media correspondents in the national network of *Argentina Arde* are part of what I might call a

more short-term goal. Their long-term goal is to document and archive (as best possible) the social struggles of the late 1990s and the social uprising of 2001, which has changed the face of Argentine social movements, and to use this documentation to keep these social struggles alive in the historical memory of the nation.

## 5.2 The Video Committee

The Video Committee of *Argentina Arde* shares all of the above objectives, but also has particularities of its own. Its criticisms have focused on two types of video production: video news reports and video-documentary pieces, aiming its arrows not only at the mass media corporations, but also at the Film and Video Industry and its various institutions.

La televisión y los medios audiovisuales en general son el aparato de subjetivación más formidable que los poderes económicos tienen a la mano. El papel que cumplió la iglesia en la Edad Media, la filosofía racionalista y la palabra escrita durante la modernidad, hoy lo cumplen los medios audiovisuales. Uno de los mecanismos que utiliza el poder televisivo es el monopolio del saber audiovisual que genera una manera uniforme de recortar la realidad y ofrecérsela a un espectador pasivo que va construyendo sus ideas, opiniones y valores a partir de este recorte previamente digerido por la gran maquinaria simbólica del poder. Author unknown, "El cine como arma de Contrainformación" <http://www.argentinaarde.org/video.htm> (Nov 20, 2002)

Television and audiovisual media in general are the most formidable tools of subjectivization in hands of the economic powers. The role played by the Church during the Middle Ages, rationalist philosophy and the written word during modernity, today are being realized by the audiovisual media. One of the mechanisms utilized by the powerful of the television industries is the monopoly over audiovisual knowledge which generates a uniform way of cutting and pasting reality and offering it to the passive spectator who is constructing his/her ideas, opinions and values based on that cutout which was previously digested by that great symbolic machinery of the powers that be.

Here the Video Committee returns to the idea of creating an alternative communications media that can cause a break in the dependence on the mass media monopolies. They consider their role to be the slow but persistent chipping away at the extensive

audiovisual stupor created by the television and film industries in particular. It is considered to be a slow process because of the overwhelming difference in the resources and capabilities of the mass media corporations compared to that of *Argentina Arde*. In Argentina the mass media corporations have the use of five television channels, hundreds of cable channels, the main film and video distributors with their hundreds of theatres, the *Instituto Nacional de Cinematografía y Artes Audiovisuales* and all of the government's theatres and screening rooms; while *Argentina Arde* has a small (though national) network which depends solely on the militant commitment of its members and allies.

La idea de la comisión de video de Argentina Arde es ligar a un sector de estudiantes y realizadores audiovisuales con las mejores expresiones de lucha de nuestro pueblo y desde allí generar un circuito de exhibición y producción para que estos mismos sectores populares generen una nueva forma de producir y difundir los materiales audiovisuales. Exhibición, debate, formación, producción y retroalimentación de la red. Author unknown, "El cine como arma de Contrainformación" <http://www.argentinaarde.org/video.htm> (Nov 20, 2002)

The idea behind Argentina Arde's video committee is to bring together a sector of students and audiovisual creators with our people's best expressions of struggle and to generate, based on this, a circuit for their exhibition and production so that these same popular sectors may generate a new form of producing and disseminating the audiovisual materials. Exhibitions, debates, formation, production and feedback for the network.

The collective believes in the urgent need to generate a network for the distribution of audiovisual materials uncompromisingly tied to grassroots and popular organizations. They suggest that communities create and/or use popular libraries, neighbourhood centres, clubs, labour unions, solidarity groups, human rights organizations and *piquetero* movements (among others) to distribute and to screen video productions and to open up spaces for debate and training. So far, this has been a very successful process in many communities. Abandoned banks and other municipal buildings have often been turned into neighbourhood centres, where different community activities are organized including: video screenings and debates, sexual education workshops, soup kitchens and other useful projects in the community's interests.

The training workshops and projects planned for different neighbourhoods is an essential part for the subsistence of the national network of correspondents and audiovisual producers. As the Video Committee states: *“El espectador debe en este proceso pasar de sujeto pasivo a productor activo / In this process the spectator must be transformed from passive subject into active producer ”* (Author unknown, “El cine como arma de Contra-información”). This is perhaps one of the most important parts of the collective’s work; several of the video-documentaries first distributed were produced by film-school students, members of *Argentina Arde*, who either dropped out or saw their studies interrupted due to the crisis. However, there is now a real and very conscious effort to provide the training and the tools of audiovisual production to the workers, the unemployed, and the marginalized *themselves*, so that they can perhaps for the first time in their lives, take control of their own representation. This is a fundamental change in terms of the way social movements have tended to work in Argentina and in much of Latin America. By providing audiovisual tools and training to the *piqueteros*, for example, they have given people the opportunity to speak for themselves, instead of struggling to find someone to properly represent them. The *piqueteros* can finally access the media directly, say what they want to say, show what they want to show, and tell their stories without the invasion of professional editing, the cutting and pasting of their life stories into false representations of reality. The formation of the group *Ojo Obrero*<sup>20</sup>, another member of the *Argentina Arde* collective, is a perfect example of this transition from spectator to producer.

En nuestro cine, los piqueteros somos simultáneamente realizadores, protagonistas y espectadores. Se quiebra el modelo burocrático industrial, proponiéndose la utilización del cine político (imperfecto) sin barreras entre protagonistas, realizadores y espectadores.

Se crea un nuevo espacio de exhibición del documental de la corriente negra que es el espacio de la lucha piquetera, al cual nos aventuramos en llamar espacio de exhibición piquetero y que no es más ni menos que el espacio de lucha de los trabajadores. Author unknown, “Piqueteros: Protagonistas y Realizadores”  
<http://www.argentinaarde.org/piqueteros.htm> (Nov 20, 2002)

In our cinema, we the piqueteros are simultaneously the filmmakers, the protagonists and the spectators. The industrial-bureaucratic model

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<sup>20</sup> Ojo Obrero literally means “The Eye of the Worker”. The connotations are that the camera lens sees through the eyes of the workers, thus documenting their particular perspectives.

is broken, proposing the use of an (imperfect) political cinema without barriers between protagonists, filmmakers and spectators.

A new space is created for the exhibition of documentaries of a so-called black current which is a space for the piquetero struggle, which we would dare to call a piquetero exhibition space, and which is no less than a space for the struggle of the workers.

The struggle of the workers, of the piqueteros, of the subaltern classes has depended on the support of the general populace in order to pressure the government to find appropriate solutions rather than simply breaking blockades and strikes with repression. The more visible they were in the media, the safer they were from harm as well. The spectacular actions like the flaming tires in the *piquetes* or the public assemblies in the *Plaza de Mayo* or at the *Obelisco* are also strategies meant to attract the attention of the media so that their message will spread, their demands be more widely known and supported, thus mounting the pressure against the government. But it has always been a struggle in which the marginalized have had to accept the good and the bad press. They have had to resign themselves to the fact that their stories would never be documented and published correctly. But with this new move to make their own audio-visual production and to find new networks to spread the works throughout the country, using the labor unions, the popular assemblies, the national *piquetero* assembly and human rights and leftist social movement connections, as well as the internet and *Indymedia Argentina*, they were able to get their message out and circulate it through broad sectors of Argentine society for the first time.

As in the case of the Photography Committee mentioned earlier, the question of aesthetic excellence is not a priority for these video-documentary producers. The primary objective is to create counter-informative content from the point of view of the working class, the unemployed, the subaltern. Quality and technique are put aside for the sake of getting the information out to the general populace as quickly as possible. Audiovisual production in *Argentina Arde's* terms is born out of austerity measures but it does not resign itself to being a 'lesser' form of video production. Instead, it questions traditional video production whose aesthetics is guided mainly by market forces, whereby all that is human becomes commodified. *Argentina Arde's* Video Committee aims to break this practice and make video production another space in the struggle for people's ownership over their own destiny.



For the reasons outlined above, *Argentina Arde* does not only reject traditional forms of video and film production, it also rejects the traditional Universities and Technical Institutes of audiovisual instruction, as well as the Film and Video Festivals which showcase this mainstream type of audiovisual material. A clear example of their position in relation to mainstream Institutions and Festivals can be seen in their reaction to the 4<sup>th</sup> International Independent Film Festival, which took place in Buenos Aires in April, 2002. Only a couple of their video-documentaries were included in the festival, which they eagerly lobbied for, because of the importance of raising consciousness around the plight of the *piqueteros* and the struggle of the unemployed workers. However, they also decided to take a public stance against the cultural policies of the government, which as mentioned before, only benefit multinational mass media monopolies.

Entonces no vamos a ir al cine como si nada estuviera pasando. No vamos a ir al cine buscando “distracción”. Nosotros no olvidamos. Queremos que la educación y la cultura no sean solo de las clases ricas, mientras la mayoría solamente puede, en el mejor de los casos, trabajar super explotados. Es nuestro deber ser claros: la única política cultural de los peronistas–radicales– frepasistas es la desocupación, el analfabetismo, el hambre, la represión. Vamos a resistir las políticas de desintegración cultural de los gobiernos de turno, que por ejemplo hoy cobran una entrada elitista marginando a muchos del acceso libre al arte, como ya han remarcado los estudiantes de la Escuela Nacional de Cine (ENERC); y lo haremos junto a los trabajadores, piqueteros y Asambleas Populares.

No aceptamos ninguna cooptación por parte del estado, queremos libertad total en la producción y educación en el arte; queremos libre acceso a la cultura para todos los trabajadores y el pueblo. La contradicción más profunda excede a este festival, y es en las calles, en las luchas de los trabajadores y el pueblo, donde nos proponemos resolverla.

Author unknown, “Que todo el mundo lo vea: Argentina Arde”,  
<http://www.argentina.indymedia.org/news/2002/04/22686.php>

So we won't go to the cinema as if nothing had happened. We won't go to the cinema looking for a “distraction”. We won't forget. We want education and culture to be not only for the rich, while the majority can only, in the best of cases, work super exploited. It is our duty to be clear: the only cultural policy of the peronists – radicals – frepasistas is unemployment, illiteracy, hunger, repression. We are going to rise up against the policies of social disintegration of our governments, which, for example, today charge an elitist entrance fee marginalizing

too many people from access to art, as has already been pointed out by the students of the National Film School (ENERC); and we will do so with the workers, the piqueteros and Popular Assemblies.

We will not accept cooptation on behalf of the State, we want total freedom in production and education in the arts; we want free access to culture for all people and workers. The most profound contradiction exceeds this festival, and it is in the streets, in the struggles of the people and the workers, where we propose to resolve it.

They had a few documentaries screened in the official festival, but instead of actively participating in and/or endorsing the festival, *Argentina Arde's* Video Committee organized an alternative and independent video screening, entitled: "*IV Festival Internacional de Cine Independiente: Que todo el mundo lo vea: Argentina Arde*". The screening was held at the main entrance to the Brukman Clothing Factory in support of the struggle of the Brukman workers, who took control of the factory when the owner suddenly closed it down without having paid their salaries. This strategy of participating in both the official film festival and organizing the alternative screening was a way of taking advantage of the large audience of the official film festival for consciousness raising, while critiquing the festival's elitism, and simultaneously proposing an alternative to it.

While *Argentina Arde* has specific political stances on the mass media, the audiovisual industries, and the government's cultural policies, these are for the most part external conditions which they, as individual artists, photographers, documentary video-makers and journalists do not have control over. There is, however, the other side of that battle, most eloquently expressed by the Video Committee, and this refers to the rejection of traditional techniques and forms of video and photographic production. The rejection of the Institution's techniques requires the formulation of new techniques for the creation of a Counter-Video or Counter-Photographic production. And this is an area where the members of *Argentina Arde* have gone through an extensive process of constructive self-criticism to try to put together a *revolutionary* methodology for the production of audiovisual materials.

... no solo la opinión descalifica. Siguiendo con el ejemplo de los cortes [de ruta] hagámonos las siguientes preguntas: ¿Dónde está ubicada la cámara? ¿A quiénes y con qué profundidad se entrevista? ¿Cómo es la edición y la musicalización? ¿Qué palabras y qué "opinólogos" se eligen para hablar de un tema? ¿Cuánto tiempo de

programación se le dedica al hecho? En pocas palabras cómo se reconstruye y se muestra esta realidad tan compleja y contradictoria. Author unknown, "El cine como arma de Contrainformación" <http://www.argentinaarde.org/video.htm> (Nov 20, 2002)

... it is not only one's opinion that disqualifies. Continuing with the example of the roadblocks, let's make the following questions: ¿Where is the camera located? ¿Who is interviewed and with what depth are they interviewed? ¿What is the editing and the musicalization like? ¿What words and what "opinioners" are chosen to speak about a topic? ¿How much programming time is dedicated to the topic? In few words, how do you reconstruct and show such a complex and contradictory reality?

As a response to this process of questioning the traditional techniques of documentary construction, the collective has developed its own methodology for a more liberating and revolutionary audiovisual production. However, theoretical goals do not always translate in practice. Their level of success in attaining these noble, yet idealistic goals will be further analyzed in chapter six.

## CHAPTER 6 *ARGENTINA ARDE* ANALYSIS

*Nuestra es la palabra,  
Nuestra es la historia*  
- Argentina Arde, Comisión de Prensa

*Ours is the word,  
Ours is the history*  
- Argentina Arde, Press Committee

In this chapter, I will analyze the working methodology of the *Argentina Arde* collective, the collective's aesthetic-political discourse, leftist and nationalist symbolism as reflected by two of their works, as well as how this relates to new social movements in Argentina. Specifically, I will use a structuralist-semiotic framework for the analysis of two of *Argentina Arde*'s political-art works. The first of these is the *Argentina Arde* logo itself, a design that resembles a road-sign triangle with flames inside, very significant in terms of the social movements that inspired both the *Tucumán arde* exhibit of 1968 and the *Argentina Arde* collective of 2002. The second is a street performance art piece entitled *LaBala Bandera*, which uses very obvious, and I would add, very traditional leftist and nationalist symbolism. I will pay special attention to the collective's seemingly new interpretations of old nationalisms and national identity in artistic-political production and the relationship between these interpretations and the characteristics and needs of new social movements in Argentina today.

### 6.1 The Methodology of *Argentina Arde*

As an umbrella organization, the *Argentina Arde* collective brings together several groups, with differing, and yet complementary aesthetic-political focuses and proposals, but in this union, it also brings together an amalgam of methods and techniques that the groups are then able to share and incorporate into their own work. Many of the collective's methods are not necessarily *new*, but rather, borrow from the rich history of popular education and critical pedagogy in Latin America and use these

techniques in *innovative* ways in order to produce artistic-political work that emphasizes widespread participation of the population and the goal of social transformation.

The three most well developed committees within the *Argentina Arde* collective: the photography committee, the press committee and the video committee all have strong participatory and emancipatory components to their methodology. The press committee's chant "*todos somos corresponsales*" / "we are all correspondents" could very well represent the participatory character of the *Argentina Arde* collective as a whole. In all three committees there is a conscious attempt to steer away from the traditional leftist artistic vanguards' distinction between the "experts" and the "masses". In *Argentina Arde*, the youth who have the technical audio-visual production skills take on a political commitment to transmit those same skills on to the subaltern classes in order to help them *present themselves* and their own struggles through audio-visual media as opposed to the "experts" *representing them* from an outsider point of view. This is where the photography, video-production and journalistic writing workshops come in. They are fundamental when considering the two main concepts the collective focuses its work around: the idea of *political commitment* to popular struggles and the "witnessing" or truth-telling through media that can be used to document the events of the present in order to build the *historical memory* for the future. The collective sees this widespread participation as essential to the documentation of events in order to ensure the multiplicity of voices and perspectives in the denunciation of present-day events as well as in the passing on of historical memory in the future. The documenting of a *multiplicity* of voices is also a direct questioning of the mass-media representation of the "Argentine reality" in regards to its monopolistic, dominant and exclusionary perspective.

Parallel to the conscious attempt to increase popular participation in the documenting and creative representation of the crisis, there is also an impassioned debate within the collective concerning the issue of representation of the *Other*. Many of the members consider themselves to be both *insider-participants* as well as *outsider-observers*. They are insider-participants in the sense that they are victims of the Crisis and the policies of hunger and oppression they accuse the government of. They are unemployed cultural workers, they are students who had to quit school for lack of financial means to continue their studies, and they are members of *piquetero* organizations. They are active participants in their neighbourhood assemblies or the *Club del Trueque* and they are members of human rights organizations or other groups involved in the struggle for social justice in the country. In this sense, they are

documenting through artistic-political means their own oppression and their own struggles for social justice. However, they are also aware that as youth who have certain technical audio-visual skills or training, and who have a higher level of education than many of those they work with, they also have a level of privilege which grants them a certain monopoly over the representation of these struggles. In this sense, they also function as *outsider-observers*. In order to avoid becoming a “vanguard” of artists of the Left, they have committed themselves to sharing their knowledge and skills with the most marginalized sectors for there to be a true multiplicity of voices within the collective’s productions. Upon further reflection, they have also made an attempt to curb and limit the use of some of the technical elements in audio-visual production that are often used by the mass-communications media for ideological manipulation of the viewer/reader/spectator.

Out of the *Argentina Arde* collective’s overall work, it is the video committee which has most ardently reflected upon and worked on this issue, developing a set of strict rules for video production meant to counteract the techniques of ideological manipulation which have become, to a large extent, institutionalized in the audio-visual production training institutes and programs throughout the hemisphere. Below I will describe three of these rules as an example of the collective’s attempt to provoke a change in the methodology of participatory and emancipatory video-production among the Argentine *New Left*.

First, is the question of the camera lens: it must be at eye level, it must ‘see’ as if through the eyes of the protagonists. As the name of the Group *Ojo Obrero* suggests, the lens must transform itself into the eyes of the working class, of those in struggle, so that spectators will be able to identify with the protagonists and understand their reality. Commitment to this task requires never filming from behind police lines or from a rooftop or at a ‘safe’ distance, as is the common practice of the mass media reporters and photojournalists. And after all, when many of the video producers are also *piqueteros*, workers in struggle, *asambleistas* and social activists, a detached attitude to filming or photographing is nearly impossible. For members of *Argentina Arde*, it is also deemed unnecessary. They hope to, through their art, break the myth of journalistic objectivity, which has been so fervently defended by the mass media corporations.

Second, is the question of interviews. *Argentina Arde* members see interviews as a communicative process where the filmmaker holds all the cards, and can manipulate the result of the interview through their decision of whom to interview, the types of

questions they ask, the order of the questions and the way in which they are asked. The interviewee can only hope that the finished product will hold intact some tiny part of all that she/he said. In *Argentina Arde* there is a deliberate attempt to stay away from rigid interviews, instead, they prefer to film everyday scenes in which people speak in a more relaxed manner about their lives, about their struggles, and they do so in the midst of that experience. The filmmakers take a sort of fly-on-the-wall attitude to filming, where they try to become part of the scenery and to film with as little equipment and crew as possible, trying not to disrupt the normal chain of events, and thus trying to capture on video a more profound and realistic portrayal of the protagonists and events being filmed.

And third, is the issue of manipulation in the editing, narration and musicalization process. One of the greatest tools used in video production by mass media corporations is the cutting and editing of images and the coordination of these images with the music and the rhetoric best suited to the needs of the said corporation.

El tema del tiempo es fundamental. Se dice (ya como lugar común) que el tiempo en TV es tirano pero ¿Cuales fueron los tiempos que llevaron a los compañeros desocupados a cortar las rutas? ¿No fueron acaso décadas de humillaciones, ninguneos y atropellos? ... ¿Este genocidio en cuentagotas lento pero seguro que se lleva 20 000 niños argentinos al año nos interesa más o menos que el ataque a las torres gemelas o las preferencias sexuales de los “famosos”? Los que sobreponiéndose a la penosa situación a la que fueron empujados recuperan su dignidad, se organizan, y salen a la lucha, ¿pueden decir cuánto tiempo estarán en las noticias? ... Solo pudieron observar como las imágenes de los hechos que ellos mismos generaron se fueron extinguiendo en la maquinaria simbólica de los medios reemplazados por sesudas reflexiones sobre los “costos sociales del ajuste”, las reflexiones de ministros ex-luchadores o las mediciones de intención de votos de una elección que no le interesa a nadie. Author unknown, “El cine como arma de Contrainformación” <http://www.argentinaarde.org/video.htm> (Nov 20, 2002)

The issue of time is essential. It is commonly said that in television, time is a tyrant but How much time did it take for the unemployed comrades to organize the roadblocks? Were there not decades of humiliations, contempt, abuse? ... Does this drop-by-drop, slow but certain genocide that takes 20,000 argentine children per year interest more or less than the attack on the twin towers or the sexual preferences of the “famous”? Those who overcome the unfortunate situation they were thrown into and recuperate their sense of dignity, who organize themselves, and rise up in struggle, may we ask how

long will they be shown in the news media? ... They will be able to observe only how the images of the events that they themselves generated were quickly extinguished within the symbolic machinery of the media replaced by brainy reflections about the “social costs of adjustment”, the reflections of ministers who are ex-activists, or the calculation of votes for an election that no one is interested in.

The criticism cited above is what led the *Argentina Arde* collective to look for new ways of producing audio-visual materials without falling into the same traps. A decision was made to discourage the use of narration as it was seen as a way of speaking for others instead of letting them speak for themselves. A video-documentary without narration also allows for a greater variety of voices, not letting any one of them carry greater legitimacy than any other. As far as editing is concerned, there was not a great deal that could be done to avoid misrepresentation, except for maintaining a clear and constant commitment to edit as little as possible, trying to maintain the natural flow of events in the video, even if at times it may seem slow or tedious, the purpose is precisely that: to have the public go through those moments along with the protagonists of the documentary and to do so in the most realistic manner possible. There is musicalization in some of the video-documentaries, however, it is also something which the collective tries to avoid as it inevitably creates a mood or a sort of backdrop to the images on the screen, which may serve to misinterpret the reality of the images being shown. There are instances in which music is used purposely and this is generally done because it is music created by the groups that are being documented, it is *piquetero* music, or protest music that, through its lyrics, tells the story of injustice or police repression faced by certain communities. This music is added, not as a sort of commentary or narration, but rather as one more voice to be added to the multiplicity of voices that are documented in their various forms of expression: interviews, speeches, casual conversation, singing, chanting, laughing and yelling.

*Argentina Arde*'s methodology for the production of audio-visual materials are now seeing overwhelming results in the dozens of new video-documentaries regularly being produced, in the hundreds of photographs being exhibited and in the constant appearance of new street-art groups committed to working as part of new social movements in Argentina. Their success, I propose, has a lot to do with their use of signs and symbols of leftist Argentine history and of national identity in the creation of meaningful works. I will now turn to the analysis of the *Argentina Arde* logo for further clarity on this subject.



## 6.2 The *Argentina Arde* logo

The *presentative character* of the sign, as defined by Charles Sanders Peirce, refers to the relationship between the sign and itself, or its *ground*. In other words, the presentative character can be seen in the elements that visually make up the sign. Some of these elements are colour, shape, text and font, the visual image and the size of the sign. The most immediate element of the *Argentina Arde* logo's<sup>21</sup> design is the outside shape: a balanced triangle with the tip pointing upwards in the likeness of the road signs meant to express "caution". Within the triangle is the image of a fire that sweeps towards its left side (the viewer's right side) as though being pushed by a gust of wind. Laid over top of the image of the fire and still within the confines of the triangle is the text "Argentina Arde". The font size used for the word "Argentina" is smaller than the font used for the word "Arde". The text is in a bold block font. While the triangle and the fire are red, the text and the background are black. However, when the materials are photocopied into black and white, the logo is changed either to a white triangle and flames on black background or to a black triangle and flames on white background. Obviously, the size of the design also changes significantly depending on the type of work being produced. Though the sign tends to be quite small in order to be able to add it to a corner or edge of a work, it is often also made quite large and incorporated into the materials used for street performances.

The *representative character*, within this theoretical framework, refers to the relationship between the sign and the object(s) that it represents. This representative relationship can be observed in the particular historical elements that were chosen for the composition of the sign itself. The geometrical form that encases the logo's image is a triangle, which refers to a road sign. This type of road sign is used to depict an obstacle on the road, which requires caution by the driver. This is a brilliant way to refer quite literally to the *piquetes* or road blockades that are the method of resistance of the *piquetero* movement.

Within the triangle there is the image of a flame, which is highly significant as well. Since the obstacle used on the road during *piquetero* blockades is a series of flaming tires, the image seems to be a very direct reference. It is also quite likely a

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<sup>21</sup> a copy of the logo can be found at: <http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiattiv/agp/free/imf/argentina/> (June 11, 2005)

reference to the roots of the *piquetero* movement, referring to the very first town that used road blockades as a method of protest against mass unemployment. That town is called Cutral-Có, which is an indigenous word that literally means: *water of fire*, the term used by the indigenous people of the area to refer to petroleum. Ironically, the mass unemployment in the town of Cutral-Có was the result of the closure of the YPF petroleum company.

However, the flame (as well as the text in the logo) refers back further in time, to the artistic exhibit *Tucumán arde* of 1968. That exhibit had taken its name from the burning of the sugar cane fields in the province of Tucumán in the late 1960s during the process of privatization of the Argentine sugar industry.

The concept of “burning” represented both in the image of the flame and the word “Arde” included in the text has further significance, which can also be seen in the colours chosen for the logo. The triangle is black and the flame is red. The colours black and red are a quite literal representation of the black tires and the flames that burn red within them on the roadblocks. However, the symbolism of the colours red and black also goes back to the 1960s, when the red and black flag represented the revolutionary movements of that time period.

The text within the logo (*Argentina Arde*) also references the 1960s by paralleling the name of the *Tucumán arde* exhibit. The artists who conceptualized the *Tucumán arde* exhibit considered the situation in the province of Tucumán to be the perfect symbol of the consequences of the implementation of the neo-liberal project in Argentina; thus, their slogan: “*Contra la Tucumanización de la Argentina*” / “Against the Tucumanization of Argentina”. The concept of the exhibit was to not let the part (Tucumán) become the whole (Argentina). By taking on the name of the exhibit, but changing it to *Argentina Arde*, the collective is saying: the part has now become the whole. The whole nation-state is now suffering the consequences of the failure of the neo-liberal experiment. However, there is much more connotative meaning in the composition of this logo, as will be seen by the analysis of its interpretative character.

The interpretative character refers to the relationship between the sign and the interpretants of that sign. There are two types of interpretants: encoders and decoders. The encoder of a sign attempts to *make the sign meaningful*; whereas the decoder of a sign attempts to *make sense out of the sign*. I will first look at the sign’s meaning as *encoded* by the *Argentina Arde* collective and then I will look at the sign’s meaning as

*decoded* by the public who observes and makes sense out of the collective's artistic production.

Encoded within the design of the *Argentina Arde* logo are various elements which refer to the 1960s, to revolutionary struggles and popular resistance, but which also attempt to link these movements to what is happening today. The colours of the logo immediately identify the group with a leftist ideology by referring to revolutionary struggles, but since the colours also represent the black of the tires and the red of the flame, it becomes a way of placing the struggles of the 1960s on a historical continuum of resistance leading to the piquetero struggles of today. Since the movements of the 1960s and 1970s were the strongest in Argentina's history of organized resistance, their connection to the piquetero struggles of today is a way of connoting a renewal or a resurgence of this same strength.

The image of the flame, along with the textual reference "Arde" in the logo, bring up several different connotations. The artistic exhibit *Tucumán arde* was a symbol of artists' commitment to producing art to raise consciousness about social inequality and to support the social transformation of the nation. By taking on the parallel name *Argentina Arde* the collective tried to connote that they were taking on the same type of commitment today.

Furthermore, in Spanish to say that a situation "está que arde" (is burning up) means that conflict is so high it is on the borderline of becoming chaos. It connotes anger, uprising, rebellion. It is also a term that could describe the kinds of popular uprisings that have taken place in contemporary Argentine history, beginning with the *Cordobazo* uprising of 1969 and ending in the *Argentinazo* uprising of 2001. To burn something down, to destroy it, can also be symbolic of starting anew. The symbolism of purification through fire, or rebirth out of the flames of what was destroyed is a very convenient way of connoting the death of the *Old Argentina* and the creation of a *New Argentina*. I will take a deeper look into the issue of nationalism and national identity later on, but for now suffice to say that this is a key component of the meaning that the *Argentina Arde* collective was trying to create through the composition of their logo.

The decoding of the sign, in other words, the process of making sense of the logo by the general public brings to mind slightly altered interpretations, dependent on both the age and ideological background of the decoder. An older, left-leaning or intellectual crowd would pick up on the more specific symbolism. Younger audiences

would probably make similar connections, but without the experience or the knowledge of the historical references, the meaning decoded from the sign would not be as specific.

The colours of the logo may bring to mind either the ideological references to the communist and anarchist movements of the 1960s and 1970s or it may simply bring to mind a general radicalization of young artists.

The text, *Argentina Arde*, brings to mind the popular uprisings, the rebellions, the burning of cars and mattresses in the streets during the *Cordobazo* of 1969 and the burning and looting of the *Argentinazo* of 2001. It brings to mind the *piquetes* and the *piquetero* movement and the image of a whole nation aflame with anger. It is a symbol of the destruction of not just Tucumán, but the whole of Argentina. It represents the death of the nation, not a tragic death, but rather, the death of the old so that something new may be created. The attitude portrayed by the work of the *Argentina Arde* artist collective in general, and in their logo specifically, shows a distinct sense of empowerment. By empowerment, I refer to the socio-political strength gained by people who have traditionally been excluded from decision-making processes and the management of their own lives. The image of the *Argentina Arde* logo seems to imply that this empowerment will develop by organizing people towards the creation of a new nation out of the ashes of the old.

### 6.3 The “*LaBala Bandera*” Street Performance

The *presentative character* of the sign refers to the relationship between the sign and itself. It is what is seen or presented by the elements that make up the sign. In the case of the “*LaBALA Bandera*” Action there are both a street theatre performance and a poster that accompanied the action. The poster that called for the action to take place contained the following text:

Acción “*LaBALA Bandera*”

El 9 de Julio lavemos la bandera en la fuente de Plaza de Mayo.

No queremos dejar que se oculte el verdadero color del pueblo que resiste ante los asesinos. El celeste y blanco es un espejo, refleja la sangre robada por la justicia corrompida, por los políticos ladrones, por los grandes capitales genocidas. Recuperémosla, es de nuestros oprimidos, de los muertos por la represión.

Llevá jabón, agua, guantes, esponja, lo que se te ocurra.

Llevá tu bandera, para limpiarle la impunidad.

Argentina Arde

Action "LaBALA Bandera"

On July 9<sup>th</sup>, let's wash the flag in the fountain of the Plaza de Mayo.

We don't want to allow the hiding of the true colour of the people that resist before the assassins. The light blue and white is a mirror, it reflects the blood stolen by the corrupt justice system, by the thieving politicians, by the large genocidal capital. Let's recuperate it, it belongs to our oppressed, to those who died from the repression.

Take soap, water, gloves, a sponge, anything you can think of.

Take your flag, in order to wash it of its impunity.

Argentina Arde

The main elements that composed the action and poster are, therefore: the Argentine flag, text, the fountain of the Plaza de Mayo, water, red paint, and the actions of washing the flag with sponges, gloves, soap, and a washing board.

The *representative character* of the sign is the relationship between the sign and the object that it refers to. In the case of the "LaBALA Bandera" Action, the most overpowering element in the composition of the sign is the Argentine flag. The use of the flag is a direct reference to the Argentine nation-state and to national identity. This is emphasized by the fact that the event took place on July 9<sup>th</sup>, Argentina's independence day. The colours of the flag, the light blue and the white are emphasized by the text in the poster, which brings specific attention to these colours. This leads us to look at what the colours signify. The light blue is a symbol of the clear sky, which implies vastness and freedom, while the white is a common reference to purity and cleanliness.

The fountain in the Plaza de Mayo is obviously a very symbolic choice for this action, considering the history of that particular plaza in the struggle for human rights and its importance in the creation of a national identity. The Plaza de Mayo immediately conjures images of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo and of their relentless struggle against state repression.

The water is clearly an inseparable part of the fountain, however, it also has its own representative meanings. While the natural condition of water is clean and pure, in this case, the water in the fountain is of no use for washing the flag clean, as both the water and the flag are tainted with red paint. The red paint symbolizes blood, specifically, the blood spilled because of police repression, and this is emphasized by the name of the performance, which makes clear that they are referring to those who were wounded or killed by the bullets of police or other state agents.

The fact that the flag, the symbol of the nation-state, is “tainted” also brings to mind references to “dirty” politicians and corrupt state officials. These references are made strikingly clear by both the name of the action itself “LaBALA Bandera” and the text included in the poster. The characterization of the flag as a *bullet* flag shows the relationship they are trying to emphasize between the nation-state and acts of police repression. The current nation-state actually depends on police repression in order to maintain the status quo.

In Argentine Spanish “lavala” means “wash it”, therefore, by putting the article “La” and the word “BALA” together the artists give the title of the performance further meaning. With just one utterance, it refers both to the need to wash the flag as well as characterizing that flag through its relation to a bullet. The act of washing the flag obviously has significant symbolism. To wash something is to transform it, from something dirty to something clean. Each element is an essential part of the process. The gloves allow for one to clean without “becoming dirty” oneself. Soap is used to disinfect, to loosen dirt and to take away stains. The sponge and the washboard both use force to clean an object. Furthermore, the action is collective, and the public is invited to participate in washing the flag, this implies that the action of transforming the nation-state from a dirty to a clean one requires collective national action.

The *interpretative character* reflects the relationship between the sign and those who interpret the sign. The encoder, in this case, the *Argentina Arde* collective, tries to make the sign meaningful. The decoder, or the general public, will observe and try to make sense of the sign.

First I will analyze the meaning of the sign as encoded by the artists of *Argentina Arde*. Obviously, the central element of the “LaBALA Bandera” action is the use of the national flag. It is used visually and textually in both the presentation and the poster that accompanied it. The intent of using the flag as the centerpiece of this street action was likely to bring attention to the present condition of the *nation-state* and for people from

differing backgrounds and political persuasions to come together under the concept of *national identity*. Apart from the image of the flag in the poster, the text refers to the flag in the sentence: “El celeste y blanco es un espejo...”. The flag is a mirror that reflects the condition of the nation-state. This particular flag is defined by the name of the street action as a “bullet flag”. The bullets are what stained the flag, and thus the nation, with blood. However, the bloodstain refers to more than just the violence that took place. The text included in the poster associates this stain with the government’s impunity: “Llevá tu bandera, para limpiarle la impunidad.” Obviously the second meaning of the title of the action is succinct here: “lavá la bandera” wash the flag. The first meaning (the bullet flag) implies the symptom, while the second (wash the flag) is the suggested solution.

This action of washing the flag has the implications of not only cleaning away the corrupt, but also, of *recuperating* the flag, and thus, the nation-state. The text in the poster characterizes the stained flag (or nation) as belonging to the corrupt justice system, the thieving politicians and the genocidal large capital. The text then proposes that people recuperate the flag (or nation) for the oppressed and for those who have died as a result of the repression. The collective is thus presenting two images of the nation: the rightwing and the leftwing. This is made clear by the text, which refers to the “true colour of the people who resist before the assassins” and that colour is red. Once again, red is used symbolically in the work of *Argentina Arde*, and I believe it is meant to bring to mind not only the blood spilled today, but also, the communist or socialist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. As in the analysis of the *Argentina Arde* logo, red is used to refer to the flaming tires, which are the road obstacle of choice for the *piqueteros*. Red is used here to symbolize a continuation of that organized resistance of the past through to the *piqueteros* in the present.

The meaning decoded or interpreted by the general public will bring to mind similar references, with perhaps, slightly differing emphases. The flag immediately brings to mind the nation, nationalism and national identity. It is a national identity that has been stained by the blood spilled during state-sponsored repression. The stained flag becomes a symbol of a wounded nation. The nation-state’s wounds are those committed by the corruption of the justice system, the theft committed by politicians and the genocidal actions of large capital.

The textual references to washing the flag and recuperating it use the subject pronoun “we”, thus inviting the reader to participate. It is a way of calling for *collective* action. To wash the flag, is to change the nation, to improve it, while recuperating it

implies taking back control of the nation. The references to left vs. right-wing sectors indicate that the nation is to be recuperated from the right by the left. In this sense, the meaning interpreted from the “LaBALA Bandera” action points to the continuation of the left-right political struggle for control of the nation-state.

## **6.4 Nationalism, National Identity and New Social Movements in Argentina**

Since many of the signs produced by the *Argentina Arde* collective have been created in reference to Argentine nationalism and nationalist movements, as well as social movements from the 1960's and 1970's, an analysis of Argentine nationalist ideology is pertinent to this project.

Signs give myths and values concrete form and in so doing both endorse them and make them public. In using the signs we maintain and give life to the ideology, but we are also formed by that ideology, and by our response to ideological signs. When signs make myths and values public, they enable them to perform their function of cultural identification: that is, they enable members of a culture to identify their membership of that culture through their acceptance of common, shared myths and values. (Fiske, 150-1)

I believe this concept to be especially pertinent to the analysis of *Argentina Arde*'s work, considering the artist collective's discourse of creating a “New Argentina” through a set of shared and collective values and proposals.

The creation of a so-called “New Argentina” is precisely what Benedict Anderson refers to in his analysis of nationalisms. Anderson's conception of the ‘nation’ as an *imagined* political community offers a framework through which one may analyze the social construction of the Latin American *nación/país* from colonial times to the present, without necessarily negating the very concrete historical, material and political conditions which have led to the development of the modern ‘nation-state’.

In the analysis of Latin American nationalisms it is useful to go back to the era of the independence movements in the Americas (1810-1825), with special attention paid to both the reasons behind the creation of the nation-state in Latin America, and the political needs and interests of those who achieved power after independence from Europe. Key to understanding the root causes of the Latin American independence



movements is the complex and multi-tiered structure of exclusion established by the Crown for the governance of its colonies. The 'pioneers' of the independence movements were almost in their entirety *criollos* (of Spanish descent but born in the Americas); *criollos* were considered to be a class apart from their Spanish parents and were excluded by the Spanish Crown from positions of political power. It was precisely this segment of the Latin American population, which had the sufficient freedom and resources to be able to carry out such a wide-scale affront to the Crown and the Spanish colonial governors, and they did so with the primary objective of bringing down the structures that guaranteed their exclusion from political power.

After having defeated the European forces in war, it became necessary to establish a new system of governance, which would assure this group's access to power, while also safeguarding their own position against the growing demands and the revolutionary actions of different segments of society: the Indigenous who had suffered genocide at the hands of the Europeans, the Africans who were brought to or born into slavery by the Spanish and the Portuguese, the *Mestizos* who had suffered exclusion under the Spanish Crown. These different groups had been forcefully trapped within arbitrary political borders, first chosen by the Crown and then redefined by the pioneers of independence. There was very little that could concretely tie these groups together. In Anderson's terms, a *political community* had to be *imagined* so that all the disparate segments of Latin American society could be brought together under one flag and under one shared collective identity based on the concept of belonging to a particular "nation". Ernest Renan wrote that: "...the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things." (Renan, p. 892) It was only through the erasure and silencing of Indigenous, African, and *Mestizo* history that the creation of a 'homogeneous' and modernist national identity could be imposed.

The benefits of a strategic use of national symbolism have not gone unnoticed by contemporary politicians and military leaders. Juan Domingo Perón used national symbolism and nationalist sentiment to rally together popular, middle-class and dominant sectors to support his leadership in the 1940s. Likewise, the military junta of 1976-83 used nationalism to try to justify the human rights violations they committed as part of the war against the so-called "traitors" of the nation. The military junta also used national sentiment to fuel the Falklands War in an effort to regain support in 1982.

I propose that the artists of the *Argentina Arde* collective are conscious of the historical uses of national identity and nationalism in establishing control over a territory

and its peoples as part of the process of “creolization”. This understanding of how nationalist symbolism can be used to rally people together has provided the artists with strategic tools for inspiring action in individuals and for promoting collective organization and political mobilization. Each different sector has particular characteristics and symbols of kinship that unite their members. To cut across all of these characteristics in order to unite *piqueteros*, intellectuals, students, unemployed men and women, artists and cultural workers, neighbourhood assembly participants, middle-class *ahorristas*<sup>22</sup>, the elderly, independent journalists and film-makers, labour unions, street youth and human rights activists (among many others) the only set of symbols that was guaranteed to work without dividing people along ideological-political lines is the symbolism of Argentine nationalism. In the absence of a new type of unifying discourse for the creation of the “New Argentina” the collective relied on the old symbols of Argentine nationalism. In this sense, the artist collective is trying to create an *imagined political community* as defined above by Benedict Anderson.

In regards to contemporary social movements in Argentina, the above framework for the analysis of nationalism is useful in that these new movements in many ways mimic the independence movements of yesteryear. The primary objective of contemporary social movements in Argentina is to bring down the structures of exclusion, which are responsible for the poverty, unemployment and dissatisfaction of the majority of the population. However, to be effective, this requires bringing together the inhabitants of shanty-towns, unemployed and under-employed workers, human rights activists, members of NGO's, students, seniors, executives, business people and all those who were affected by the socio-economic policies of both the IMF and the Argentine government. This is especially evident in the work of artist-based movements, such as *Argentina Arde*, where the symbolism used to bring all these groups together under one 'revolutionary' flag is the symbolism of Argentine nationalism. Using this approach to the analysis of 'nation' and 'nationalism', it is possible to see the many ways in which new Argentine social movements are now socially and collectively reconstructing the concept of *nación/país* in order to better mobilize people against the current power structure and its exclusion of the populace.

The definition of social movements elaborated by Marcy Darnovsky, Barbara Epstein and Richard Flacks provides an excellent starting point for the analysis of

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<sup>22</sup> “Ahorristas” is a term used to refer to the middle-classes that earn enough to be able to put some of their income into savings accounts, investments or other financial endeavours.

Argentina's recent grassroots rebellion; a social movement that could be entitled the "Que se vayan todos" movement, primarily composed of: regional and national *piquetero* movements, neighbourhood, inter-neighbourhood and national popular assemblies, human rights organizations, counter-information and artist-based movements, the national student movement, and many others, coming together to create the *Club del Trueque*, a parallel bartering economy, and organizing the mass mobilizations and *Cacerolazos* which brought down over a dozen politicians in just a few months.

... social movements are collective efforts by socially and politically subordinated people to challenge the conditions and assumptions of their lives. These efforts are a distinctive sort of social activity: collective action becomes a "movement" when participants refuse to accept the boundaries of established institutional rules and routinized roles. Single instances of such popular defiance don't make a movement; the term refers to persistent, patterned, and widely distributed collective challenges to the status quo. (Darnovsky, Epstein and Flacks, p.vii)

Some elements of Marxist theory may also be useful in explaining the root causes of the uprising or of the formation of a social movement such as this one:

For Marx, movements arose from the reality of subordination and exploitation and were best understood as authentic collective problem-solving efforts... The promise of movements rested on the possibility (indeed likelihood) that as people struggled collectively they would abandon religious, ethnic, and other irrational traditional belief frameworks and become increasingly ready for rational collective action. Such rationality would be found particularly in movements based on class organization and interest... Moreover, if and when the working class movement fulfilled its aims, its victory would set the stage for the creation of the first rational society: a fully realized democracy. (Darnovsky, Epstein and Flacks, p.viii)

This concept of social movements as "authentic collective problem-solving efforts" helps put into clearer perspective the aims of social movements such as that of the 2001-2002 Argentine rebellion where there is a very obvious void in the democratic system, which contemporary movements were trying to fill with their own popular, inclusive and inherently more democratic alternatives.

Sonia E. Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino and Arturo Escobar focus even more on issues of social movements in relation to civil society and democracy, to the influences

of neoliberalism and globalization, and to the entanglement between the cultural and the political:

By calling attention to the cultural politics of social movements and to other less measurable and sometimes less visible or submerged dimensions of contemporary collective action (Melucci 1988), our authors offer alternative understandings of how movements have contributed to cultural and political change since economic neoliberalism and (limited, and largely protoliberal) representative democracy became the twin pillars of domination in Latin America. (Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar, p.14)

Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar place much hope in the possibility that through the actions of new social movements democracy can be extended and deepened in Latin America. They believe that it is essential for social movements to challenge the rules of the political game and to actively participate in the definition of the political system in which they wish to be included. This includes the struggle to "resignify the very meanings of received notions of citizenship, political representation and participation, and, as a consequence, democracy itself." (Alvarez, Dagnino, Escobar, p.2) In their analysis of social movements and democratic participation, Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar touch on a point, which is directly relevant to the analysis of *Argentina Arde's* work. They believe that we should be looking beyond social movements' interactions with official public environments, focusing much more on the ways that other public spaces are constructed or appropriated by social movements and examining the cultural politics that are enacted therein. (Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar, p.19) Nancy Fraser conceptualizes these alternative spaces as:

"subaltern counterpublics" in order to signal that they are "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, so as to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs" ... Social movements' contribution to Latin American democracy; then, can also be found in the proliferation of multiple public spheres, and not just in their success in processing demands within official publics. (Fraser in Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar, p.19)

Fraser's concept of "subaltern counterpublics" is useful in understanding *Argentina Arde's* consistent and creative use of public spaces as centers for consciousness-raising and mobilization. Their appropriation of public spaces of 'national' significance and the

use of these spaces to challenge the Argentine systems and structures of institutional power are an example in practice of Fraser's concept of counterdiscourses and oppositional interpretations.

## CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION: OLD SYMBOLS IN A NEW CONTEXT

For this research project, I chose to focus on an Argentine artist collective founded in early 2002, which uses art as a tool for participating in the social struggles that erupted after the collapse of the economy in December 2001. I believe that the work of the *Argentina Arde* artist collective holds important insights into the changes that are taking place in the country in terms of national identity and new social movements.

The collapse of the Argentine economy, and the country's default on its foreign debt payments, were but the climax of a crisis that had begun decades before. Argentina reached its economic boom in the 1940s when its agricultural export sector took advantage of the need for agricultural imports in Europe and sold its products at exorbitant prices. However, with the end of World War II, the changing prices on the world market began to cripple Perón's Golden Era and put Argentina on a course of economic stagnation from which it would never recover. This situation opened the door to the implementation of many diverse economic experiments over the decades that followed. The Import Substitution Industrialization Model, adopted in many countries of Latin America, failed mainly due to the dependence on Northern countries for the materials and technology needed to produce their goods, as well as markets in which to sell them. They also found themselves unable to compete with the technological advances of the corporations of the North who could produce the same goods faster, cheaper and with the aid of large government subsidies.

Military governments of the 1960s and 1970s began taking out loans from international monetary organizations to fuel their Dirty War and to create their own military industries and corporations. The intermittent civilian governments followed the same model. However, with the international oil crisis, those "cheap" loans suddenly became very costly. In order to find a solution to the destabilization of the Argentine economy, the military turned to the IMF and the World Bank for aid. The IMF and World Bank provided suggestions based on experimental neo-liberal models as conditions for the renegotiation of debt payments and new loans. This led to a rapid privatization of all state enterprises, and consequently, many high-ranking political leaders were tempted to

dip into the vast amount of money moving through the state. Billions of dollars ended up in over-seas accounts, while the country was quickly bankrupted of all its assets and left with very few income-producing enterprises.

With the completion of the neo-liberal economic model began the rumblings of a crisis that would surpass all the previous ones. In December 2001, a run on the banks prompted the government to declare a state of siege and to freeze all bank accounts in the country. This was the last straw for a population, which had been victim to the spiraling downswing in the economy and had felt it first-hand through unemployment, massive layoffs, cutbacks or extreme delays in salaries, as well as the general economic insecurity felt throughout the country.

Argentina has one of the highest levels of education in Latin America, as well as a long history of political and social activism. I believe that these elements, added to the mounting frustration of the populace, were key in creating the conditions for a veritable uprising to respond to the government's economic failure.

From before Perón's reign, there already existed a strong labour movement based on mainly anarchist and socialist ideological principles. After Perón, that movement was "peronized", meaning that it became more bureaucratic and corporatist, but at the same time, it also became larger, stronger and more experienced. In fact, by the 1970s, when Perón returned, the labour movement became more than Perón could handle, with factions splintering off and many of them forming armed revolutionary organizations.

The success of the Cuban revolution and the spread of Guevarist ideology in the 1960s and 1970s inspired an extreme radicalization of the left. Set against the repression and censorship of the Cold War Era and the militarization of Latin America, the politicization of many sectors of the populace was practically guaranteed, especially intellectuals and academics, artists and cultural workers, educators of all levels, catholic missionaries, workers and young people from all social classes and sectors. Though the military junta of 1976-1983 effectively dismantled the different armed revolutionary organizations and unarmed social and political movements of that era, it not only failed to destroy the human rights movement, but because of its particular ruthlessness, it inadvertently propelled the human rights issue to take center-stage in the national political arena.

Since the return to civilian governance, social movements and organizations have become stronger and more organized. The widespread poverty and unemployment

brought about by Menemism has also widened the scope of social movements and has led to the creation of unemployed workers movements, local and national piquetero organizations, neighbourhood assemblies, bartering associations, and employees banding together to take over factories, medical clinics, schools and other workplaces in order to avoid being thrown out under the rubric of “bankruptcy”. These new social movements have inevitably learned a lot from the turbulent history of decades past, but they have also learned to make strategic changes in their organizing ideology and methods. People are now coming together as neighbours, as colleagues, as people who simply want to band together to help each other and thus also help themselves.

Political ideology and party loyalty are no longer the predominant glue that binds. This became only too obvious when on December 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>, 2001, people filed into the streets surrounding the *Casa Rosada* presidential palace banging pots and pans and chanting: “*Que se vayan todos, que no quede ni uno solo...*” In reference to politicians, supreme court justices and high-ranking bureaucrats and bank officials, the chant can be loosely translated into: “They should all go, every last one of them...” No political party, no individual politician, and no bank was able to maintain legitimacy after this popular uprising. Banks closed and left the country, bureaucrats and politicians resigned daily, and Argentina went through five presidents in only three weeks, none willing to take responsibility for the chaos that had erupted.

One of the sectors targeted by social movements after the eruption of the crisis of December 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> was the communications media multinationals. They were accused by social activists of being complicit with the government due to their outright refusal to cover the stories of the social movement organizations and of the individuals who had fallen victim to the police repression. The issue of representation, information and the media has been a charged one since the 1960s, when the artistic and cultural sector began to criticize the media for its biased portrayal of the socio-economic and political realities of the country. It is in part due to this historical absence of “objective” media coverage that artists began to take on a role of documenters, archivists, historians, educators and relayers of information.

The years 1960-1973 were filled with artistic and cultural experimentation, which paralleled the growing politicization of the artistic sphere during that era. The Cuban revolution, the assassination of Ernesto “Che” Guevara, the Vietnam War, the Cold War, the increasing repression in Argentina and the course of international politics in general, greatly influenced artists in their forms, content and objectives. It made these young



artists conscious of the socio-political reality they were living in and it inspired them to political action.

Between 1961 and 1966 a myriad of new programs, awards, exhibitions, groups, collectives and manifestos with vanguardist proposals emerged. At that time, vanguard artists were primarily concerned with the renovation of artistic language, with the rupture between artists and the elitism of official artistic institutions, and with the creation of a new art based on Argentine history, social consciousness and local necessities that could be put into the international spotlight. By 1968, the artistic sphere had become so politicized that stating one's political or ideological position seemed mandatory. The increasing censorship of art exhibitions and the arrests of artists for political reasons provoked a rupture between the more politicized and the more institutionalized vanguard artists.

The more political artists started a symbolic war against the official art institutions and structures. They had witnessed the *Cordobazo* uprising, as well as the May 1968 uprising in Paris, among other uprisings in Latin America, where artists had played a key role in representing and inspiring political action. They began to see that it was not enough for art to represent or document the revolution, but rather, it had to use the techniques at hand to become a "detonator" of the revolution. These artists already had a wealth of symbolic strategies available to them, and they committed themselves to using them towards the social transformation of the country.

The growing influence of the mass communications media in Argentina piqued the interest of artists who saw great potential in this type of technology for consciousness-raising, as through the use of these media they could reach out to a much wider audience than through the art galleries and institutions. So they began to study the techniques of the media and to find ways of putting them in service of the revolutionary movements.

During a meeting of vanguard artists from Rosario and Buenos Aires in 1968 a proposal emerged for the development of a large-scale, well-coordinated and collective artistic-political action. They decided to focus on the situation of the impoverished sugar plantation workers in the province of Tucumán as a theme that could be made symbolic of the destruction of the whole nation as a result of the government's imposition of neo-liberal economic policies. The artists envisioned the creation of a counter-informational circuit that could both tear apart and make obvious the biases of the media and to create a culture of subversion meant to question and challenge dominant discourses. They

pooled together their different artistic styles, techniques and individual strengths in order to create a “bombardment” of images, sounds and texts that would force people to open their eyes, ears and hearts to the plight of marginalized communities in Argentina. The exhibit was named *Tucumán arde*.

Unfortunately, after the censorship and closure of the exhibit of *Tucumán arde*, many of the participant artists became disillusioned and impatient, and began to search for new ways to raise consciousness in a country that was becoming more and more violent by the day. Some decided to abandon art altogether in order to commit more directly to political, syndicalist, armed or unarmed social organizations. Others decided to take their art into the streets and the public plazas to counteract the elitism of the artistic institutions. However, by 1973, the political violence had become so explosive that it became nearly impossible to continue to work in the streets. One reluctant solution was to head back into the galleries, another was to go temporarily into exile, another was to stop creating art.

The atrocities committed by the Military Junta of 1976-83 revived the convictions of the vanguard artists. Less idealistic, more fearful and inevitably resigned to their political defeat, they no longer saw art as a ‘detonator’ of revolution, but rather, as a tool for revealing the crimes of the military and for maintaining the historical memory of the human rights abuses that were committed in order to combat the official policy of “forgetting” as imposed by the Junta.

With the return of democracy in late 1983, came a return of exiled artists and academics. Alfonsín’s government promoted a period of cultural “release” that resulted in a productive explosion in film, literature, theatre, music and fine arts. Though the majority of these productions focused on the experience of dictatorship and human rights violations, many believed that it was a “phase” that would soon end. Artists, however, have continued to use the tools at hand to document, archive, educate, relay information and to inspire debate concerning the socio-political reality of the country.

The events of December 2001 had a great effect, particularly on the younger generation of artists who had not lived through the horrors of the dictatorship, but who had learned from that history. They had a long history of artistic and cultural experimentation that they could look back at and take inspiration from, while adapting those techniques and methods to the present conditions.

It was precisely in this context, during the “Argentinazo” uprising of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of December that several young people met while filming and photographing the

police repression and the mass mobilizations in the streets. They exchanged names and contact information in order to collaborate later on, sharing footage and information. In early 2002, over 120 young artists and students came together to form the counter-information artist collective that took on the name “Argentina Arde” in honour of the artists who had created the “Tucumán arde” exhibit of 1968 and who had tied their artistic production to the social movements and organizations of the period.

The collective decided to take on a horizontal structure with no hierarchy, official leaders or representatives. They modeled their decision-making structure and process after the neighbourhood and popular assemblies. They hold weekly meetings, mainly to check in with each other and the work of their committees: photography, dissemination, finances, screenings and press. Each committee, however, maintains a large degree of autonomy. The group also functions as an umbrella organization with a great capacity to bring together various artistic and cultural-political collectives and organizations.

Their goal is to build a national network for new forms and methods of expression and cultural production as tools at the service of the social movements that struggle against the current socio-political system. In order to combat the homogenizing power of the communications media over national consciousness, the *Argentina Arde* philosophy parts from the concept of creating a “counter-informative” discourse that will be able to counteract that power by presenting a multiplicity of voices that are traditionally delegitimized and excluded by the mass media channels. (“Argentina Arde: Objetivos”, <http://www.argentinaarde.org/objetivos.htm> [Dec 2, 2002])

The above-mentioned objectives are not necessarily new. The artists who participated in the *Tucumán arde* exhibit had very similar goals in the 1960s. What is new about *Argentina Arde*, however, is their conscious attempt to put the tools of cultural production in the hands of the subaltern sectors instead of keeping all the control in the hands of the intellectual middle-class. By teaching the methods and providing the tools of cultural production, they are trying to give the marginalized a way of expressing themselves and representing their struggle using their own words, images and symbols. Of course, those who do the editing, script-writing, musicalization, and screening of videos or the cutting, pasting, commenting and publishing of photographs and text are the ones who ultimately have the last word, and thus, control over the final image. Nevertheless, they maintain the slogan: “*El espectador debe en este proceso pasar de sujeto pasivo a productor activo*” / “In this process the spectator must be transformed from passive subject into active producer” (Author unknown, “El cine como arma de

Contra-información”). The ideals and goals of *Argentina Arde* clearly show that they have been influenced by popular education theorists, such as Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal. Boal’s primary goal in his *Theatre of the Oppressed* is to turn the passive spectator into an active participant (a spectator) in the construction of a new reality<sup>23</sup>. The end goal is self-empowerment. I believe that this is also one of the more general goals of *Argentina Arde*: to empower people to express themselves and to represent their own realities.

*Argentina Arde* sees its work as part of a national process moving towards the creation of a great *Cultural Front* of artists and cultural workers that will join the popular struggle, using their knowledge and skills as tools for social transformation and to do so as an inherent part of the (unedited) experience of the Argentine people. But *Argentina Arde*’s commitment to teaching marginalized communities audio-visual, photographic and journalism methods shows that it is also a Cultural Front that social movements are meant to penetrate and take ownership of through their own cultural production or active collaboration with other artists. Though this goal may seem grandiose, I think the success of the collective lies not so much in the end product as in the process of empowerment that they have initiated.

The role played by *Argentina Arde* members in relation to social movements is not clear-cut; they are neither fully *participant-insiders* nor *observant-outsiders*. The members of the collective are people who have also been affected by the crisis and the uprising that is the central theme in their work. The founders of *Argentina Arde* are members of neighbourhood and popular assemblies, labour or student unions, human rights and social movement organizations. What sets them apart from the people they feature in films, photographs, articles and other cultural production is the fact that they have a distinct set of artistic skills, knowledge and tools at their disposal that help them express their views in a more provocative and effective manner. It is precisely this shared skill-set, which when coupled with their socio-political commitments brought them together and led them to form the *Argentina Arde* collective.

The two-fold character of the members of the collective puts them in a special relationship within the social movement dynamic. They present themselves as part of the process of social struggle in the country and thus, when at popular or neighbourhood

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<sup>23</sup> “The poetics of the oppressed is essentially the poetics of liberation: the spectator no longer delegates power to the characters either to think or to act in his place. The spectator frees himself; he thinks and acts for himself! Theater is action!

Perhaps the theater is not revolutionary in itself; but have no doubts, it is a rehearsal of revolution!” (Boal, 155)

assemblies, they participate in the decision-making process by voting like everyone else. However, their second role is to document the events of this incendiary historical period through video, photography and writing and to develop an archive of footage that can be used in the present to educate, raise consciousness and denounce, as well as to serve future generations in order to maintain the historical memory of all that has taken place.

We are inevitably the culture and society that we live in. For Barthes “culture is a fate to which we are condemned” (Barthes, 1985: 153) and thus, there is no escaping either its language or its cultural codes. There are cultural patterns of thought and behaviour, which are so routinized that they become “naturalized”. Conscious of this, the mass media has created certain models for the relaying of information and the interpretation of reality that people have come to expect. The Left has been unable to create a truly different model and thus has turned to *Alternative Media*, a media that uses the same equipment and similar methods of cultural production as the mass communications media, but with a distinct leftist political proposal behind it. In the case of *Tucuman arde*, for example, they were not going against the methods of the mass communications media, they were appropriating them and putting them at the service of “the revolution”. Likewise, *Argentina Arde* is using the tools of the mass communications media (journalism, photography and documentary video) to put them at the service of the *Piquetero* and *Asambleista* movements. Both groups claimed as part of their fundamental goals the creation of *counter-informative* cultural production. But there is a danger in this type of production. Barthes warns that “To engage in radical countercultural activity is therefore simply to move language around, and, unless one is very careful, to rely on the same stereotypes, language fragments which already exist.” (Barthes, 1985: 153) I believe that *Argentina Arde* partially falls into this trap.

*Argentina Arde*'s video committee uses the slogan “*Un Nuevo Cine, para un Nuevo País*” / “A New Cinema for a New Country”. It is also the title of a video documentary made by the *Asociación de Documentalistas (ADOC)* who are members of *Argentina Arde*. However, in my analysis of the *Argentina Arde* logo and their “LaBALA Bandera” performance piece in the previous chapter, it was clear that their work is teaming with traditional leftist and nationalist symbolism. There are countless references to leftist revolutionary movements of the 1960s and to the symbols of their Socialist political ideologies. The use of nationalist symbolism is widespread, but, it is used without any deep critical analysis in terms of whom that national identity benefits and all the problems associated with nationalist types of movements. This begs the question:

What exactly is *new* about this country? What exactly is *new* about this Cinema? What is happening in Argentina cannot be disassociated from the past. It is rather, the logical conclusion to a long series of events, which form part of a general process of deterioration in the country. This is precisely what *Argentina Arde*'s cultural production reflects, not the creation of something new, but the continuation of an old process of radicalisation and resistance.

Nevertheless, I do believe that politico-cultural groups, like *Argentina Arde* could have great significance for the expression and proposal of alternatives. But ironically it was *Tucumán arde*, not *Argentina Arde*, which proposed a more far-reaching concept: the creation of a "culture of subversion". Counter-informative production inherently implies an immediate and oppositional reaction to what the dominant sectors present as "information" in the media. This may help to counter-act lies and misrepresentations of specific events or phenomena in the mass communications media, however, a counter-informative network, can only go so far. It is limited in its scope, since logically, it can never compete equally with the big monopolies in terms of the amount of material that can be produced, the speed in which it can be produced and the extent of that material's distribution each day. A constant counter-informative network like *Indymedia Argentina* theoretically can have a more long-term effect, however, it is limited in its scope because not everyone has easy and affordable access to the Internet, especially not in Latin America. If as Barthes says, we cannot escape our culture, our language and our codes, perhaps what is required is a more profound and conscious analysis of our culture, of our national identity, of our language and our patterns of thought and behaviour in order to find a way to slowly transform that culture not only into a culture of subversion, but also into a culture of empowerment and creation.

The question of Argentine nationalism and national identity is an issue that has not been critically analysed by the *Argentina Arde* collective, furthermore, it has been naively adopted into their toolbox of symbols and used indiscriminately as a mobilizing tool by the artists of the collective. Their constant use of nationalist discourse definitely has disadvantages in terms of the creation of a "culture of subversion" or the transformation of our culture into a "culture of empowerment and creation".

My analysis of the signs that make up the *Argentina Arde* logo and the "LaBALA Bandera" performance piece served to indicate that the artist collective uses nationalist symbolism to unite disparate groups under one banner and to inspire their mobilization based on this supposed "connection". Nationalist discourse has been used expertly by

both the military and the political rightwing to continuously manipulate the Argentine populace since the times of the creation of the nation-state itself. It has been used to justify military rule under the rubric of “protection of the Christian and western nation-state from foreign, atheist and communist influences”. It has been used to justify the disastrous Falklands War. It was used during the 1978 World Cup of Soccer, which took place in Argentina, in order to distract attention from the human rights abuses committed. I would even argue that the government uses the nationalist fervour of soccer fans and the timing of soccer championships to distract the populace from the laws being passed and the decisions being made within government institutions. Argentine national identity has also been built upon ethnic stereotypes that misrepresent the true ethnic makeup of the populace and serve to make invisible the existence of indigenous peoples, peoples of African descent, Asian immigrants and immigrants from bordering countries like Perú, Bolivia and Paraguay. By creating a (false) nationalist sentiment of ethnic and cultural superiority of Argentines over the rest of Latin America, governments also assured Argentina’s cultural isolation from Latin America and its increased communication with Europe and North America. This was also meant to isolate Argentines from the radicalisation of Latin American social movements, and though they did not necessarily succeed in this endeavour, I believe that this has contributed to the difficulties in creating good collaborative relationships between Argentine and other Latin American social movements. If national identity and nationalist sentiment has been utilized so much by the military and rightwing civilian governments to manipulate the populace, it is precisely because it is effective in mobilizing people towards certain goals.

A historical understanding of how nationalist sentiment can be used to rally together people from different sectors under one banner may have provided the artists with strategic tools they could use for inspiring action in individuals and for promoting collective organization and political mobilization. Obviously each different sector has particular characteristics and symbols of kinship that unite their members. To cut across the peculiarities of all these sectors and to unite *piqueteros*, intellectuals, students, unemployed men and women, artists and cultural workers, neighbourhood assembly participants, middle-class *ahorristas*, the elderly, independent journalists and film-makers, labour unions, street youth and human rights activists (among others) the only set of symbols that was guaranteed to work quickly and easily, without dividing people along ideological-political lines, is the symbolism of Argentine national identity. The

artists of the Argentina Arde collective are therefore, trying to create an *imagined political community*, as defined by Benedict Anderson, in order to unite all these sectors.

Ideally, the creation of a “New Argentina” would necessitate the creation of a new type of unifying discourse or identity relevant to the present reality, or at least, the renegotiation of an old symbol by incorporating into it a new set of meanings. But, in the absence of a more relevant unifying discourse, the collective relied once again on old symbols of Argentine nationalism.

However, to be fair to the *Argentina Arde* collective, I think that the particular way in which these nationalist symbols are being used is a little different and deserves some appreciation. In a sense, it is like a call to all Argentines to come together to witness the final destruction of their country, of their nation, as they had known it. *Argentina arde*, so if the nation is on fire, this calls for an end to the old and the creation of something new out of those ashes. “*Que se vayan todos*” reflects the desire to have it end quickly and definitively. It expresses the people’s impatience in having to watch this slow excruciating death take place, when they are desperate for radical changes, for a new country to be built up with new leadership, new models, and new energy. However, it is not entirely clear what type of political structure is being proposed to replace the old politicians with. There is obviously a lack of deep analysis of the social and political roots of the current situation and there is no clear ideological position in terms of working proposals for radical social change, which inevitably leads to a void in class consciousness, making mobilization subject to concrete and immediate demands, instead of long-term structural change.

In the context of this period of the growing globalization of capital and the concentration of political power in the hands of a few powerful nations and institutions at the international level, the possibility of state autonomy and sovereignty for Third World nation-states is rapidly corroding. For social movements of the South, to take on and assert symbols of national identity and to try to recuperate them, may also be a way of confronting neo-liberal globalization, and in the process, revalidating peripheral and regional identities. The artist collective’s interpretation of Argentine national identity as one of confrontation and opposition to the representatives of international capital, like the IMF and the World Bank, is perhaps the beginning of this process of transformation of the Argentine culture into a culture of empowerment and creation.

The factory occupations, the popular and neighbourhood assemblies, the creation of neighbourhood self-sustainable projects by *Piquetero* communities and the



movement of unemployed workers, as well as the popular mobilizations, the *Cacerolazos* and the now famous slogan of “*Que se vayan todos*” has provided a symbol of empowerment, hope, creative transformation and militant struggle for social activists throughout the Americas. The proof that Argentine nationalist symbolism is being transformed can be seen in the ways that Argentine symbols of protest and resistance are being adopted in diverse protests in North, Central and South America. At the gates of Fort Benning, Georgia, a US Army military training school for Latin American soldiers, US and Canadian citizens marched in protest, banging pots and pans and chanting in Spanish: “*Que se vayan todos*”, interspersed with the English version: “They should all go”. In British Columbia, Canada, at a mobilization against the neo-liberal economic policies of premier Gordon Campbell, Canadians protested with signs that said: “We are all Argentina”. At the international level, and particularly in the eyes of social movements, Argentina has become a symbol of the failure of the neo-liberal economic model, but also a symbol of a people unwilling to silently accept that fate.

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