THE RHETORIC OF DISOBEDIENCE
Art and Power in Latin America

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Abstract: *The transformation of Latin American societies from the 1970s onward and the recent sociopolitical and economic changes at a global scale call for reconsiderations of the relation between art and power and its role in processes of democratization. This article examines art's social function and its understanding as transformative social praxis—an activity that reflects upon the world and seeks to change it, and that at the same time critically reflects upon its own condition and relation to that world. It specifically suggests the idea of art's rhetoric in order to conceptualize art's critical potential and identify processes that generate and displace meaning across artistic, sociopolitical, and discursive contexts.* Tucumán Arde *(1968) in Argentina, Colectivo Actiones de Arte's* Para no morir de hambre en el arte *(1979) in Chile, and* Proyecto Venus *(2000–2006), based in Buenos Aires, use interdisciplinary methodologies to critically intersect the public sphere. They scrutinize art's position in society, seek to raise awareness, and act as alternative networks of information and socialization.*

Tucumán Arde used art in order to make politics. The majority of conceptual art and of certain manifestations of "contemporary political art" uses politics as the theme to make art. . . . The group also abandoned another obsession of the avant-garde: originality.
León Ferrari, "'Tucumán Arde' Arg. Respuesta a un cuestionario"

The investigation of the relation between art and politics has particular importance in Latin American studies. The visual arts have historically been understood as one of society's fundamental transformative forces (Craven 2002), and the power of discourse is paradigmatically evident in the formulation of Latin American societies where processes of industrialization and consecutive civico-military dictatorships regulate social and political life (Castañeda 1994; Laclau 1977). More recently, the transformation of post-1970s societies in Argentina and Chile alongside economic, social, and educational reforms calls for reconsideration of the role of art in processes of democratization and social integration.

While the sociopolitical milieu shapes artistic practices, these challenge, and can change, the context in which they develop and are encountered. In order to understand this process, one must consider how new modes of cultural production emerge from artistic experimentation and political mobilization, as well as the theoretical, methodological, and historiographical frameworks that become available to such practices and which, in turn, they produce. Put differently, such activities advance new social behaviors and structures and reconfigure the nature and scope of artistic practice in a way that requires new models of analysis.

This article examines art's social function. It specifically negotiates the conception of art as transformative social praxis—an activity that reflects upon the world and seeks to change it, and that at the same time critically reflects upon its own condition and relation to that world. Moreover, in order to conceptualize art's critical potential, this article suggests considering art's *rhetoric* in the sense of identifying how artistic practices generate and displace meaning across artistic, sociopolitical, and discursive contexts.

Tucumán Arde (1968) by the Grupo de Artistas de Vanguardia in Argentina, *Para no morir de hambre en el arte* (1979) by the Colectivo Actiones de Arte (CADA) in Chile, and *Proyecto Venus* (2000–2006), based in Buenos Aires, are three projects that employ interdisciplinary methodologies to critically intersect the public sphere, scrutinize art's position in society, and raise awareness. Their political interventions include street actions, projects in marginalized neighborhoods, multimodal installations, and local collaborations; in parallel, such activities advance a critique of cultural production and the mass media. They appropriate and recontextualize signs, symbols, and meaning, subvert the habitual chains of signification and semiotization, disrupt official discourse and act as alternative networks of information and socialization. In doing so, they determine new modes for a creative practice that is socially engaged, and assess social responsibility.

TUCUMÁN ARDE

Argentina's historical context under General Juan Carlos Onganía's dictatorship (1966–1970) is defined by two leading political protagonists, the armed forces and syndicalism (Terán 2006). This period is characterized by fierce state violence, censorship, and repression, the systematic dissolution of public life, and the closure and strict control of educational and cultural institutions. In parallel, a series of neoliberal experiments initially applied in the primary and secondary sectors of the economy result in consequent financial crises. Big corporations centralize and commercialize cultural production and control the media of communication and the main exhibition venues, leading to a new breach between elite art and mass culture (García Canclini 2005). The private sector (notably banks and industry) regularly sponsors art shows and offers prizes in line with its political-financial interests (Gonçebate and Hajduk 1996);[1] while the discourse on the internationalization of culture that had dominated the postwar era is now being challenged for being explicitly part of the US hegemonic project (Herrera 1997). Furthermore, technological advances facilitate the cultural marketing of art and its wider diffusion by the press alongside state propaganda and sensationalism that manipulate public sentiment.

Tucumán Arde was a multilayered collaborative project of artists and nonartists from Buenos Aires, Rosario, and Santa Fe, including Beatriz Balvé, Graciela Carnevale, León Ferrari, Roberto Jacoby, Margarita Paksa, Juan Pablo Renzi, and

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1. Notable examples include the Argentine Industrial Union, Acrilico Paolini, the Kaiser Industries, Ítalo, the Di Tella Institute (part of the Siam-Di Tella Group and recipient of funds from the Ford Foundation), and Citibank (which negotiated an expanding external loan for Argentina in the 1980s).

Pablo Suárez.[2] It aimed to raise awareness regarding the conditions of extreme poverty and corporate exploitation in the sugar industry province of Tucumán, and to negate the official discourse about presumed economic progress (TA 1968a, 1968b). Professing modernized industrial development, productivity growth, and efficiency, the state program Operativo Tucumán systematically closed down small- to middle-scale suppliers, dismantled sugar mills, and centralized production leading to loss of wages, termination of contracts, mass unemployment (35 percent of the workforce in 1967), and increasing internal migration (20 percent of the 750,000 population by 1968) (Ramírez 2008). These measures were resisted through general strikes, workers and students' demonstrations, and factory takeovers in Tucumán as well as in Cordoba and Rosario, where trade unions had a strong presence. They were met by violent state repression.[3]

Tucumán Arde consisted of several stages. First, participants organized two trips to Tucumán in order to gather concrete information about the local living and working conditions, which they documented in numerous photographs and short films. They collaborated with local groups and interviewed workers, union delegates, students, teachers, and militant priests (Longoni 1995a; Longoni and Mestman 2008). While these activities caused suspicion and the police issued warnings to the public not to collaborate, the group coordinated two public talks with local artists and journalists. The first was held at the regional Museum of Fine Arts and took advantage, the group explained, of the *cultural* diffusion of these activities in order to conceal their political nature. Parallel to this, project participants had circulated false information to the press. The second talk was on the group's last day in Tucumán, where they revealed the denunciatory objective of their project and the results of state policy: hunger and mass unemployment, impoverishment and repression, exploitation and concentration of land ownership by a few powerful landlords, malnourishment, illiteracy, and a high infection rate (e.g. tuberculosis and rickets) (TA 1968b).

In November 1968, the group organized two show denunciations, or *"muestras denuncias"* as they called them, at the offices of the General Confederation of Labor of the Argentines (CGTA) in Rosario and Buenos Aires, while one was also planned for Santa Fe. Relocating cultural production within sociopolitical

2. The declaration for the Rosario show (TA 1968a) lists the following participants: Ma. Elvira de Arechavaia, Beatriz Balvé, Graciela Borthwick, Aldo Bortolili, Graciela Carnevale, Ricardo Carreira, Jorge Cohen, Rodolfo Elizalde, Noemi Escandell, Eduardo Favario, León Ferrari, Emilio Ghilioni, Edmundo Ghiura, Ma. Teresa Gramuglio, Martha Greiner, Roberto Jacoby, José Ma. Lavarello, Sara López Dupuy, Rubén Naranjo, David de Nully Braun, Margarita Paksa, Raúl Pérez Cantón, Oscar Pidusiwa, Estela Pomerantz, Norberto Púzzolo, Juan Pablo Renzi, Jaime Rippa, Nicolás Rosa, Eduardo Ruano, Domingo Sapia, Carlos Schork, Nora de Schork, and Pablo Suárez.

3. In 1966, clashes with factory workers resulted in one death, and public reactions intensified throughout 1968. In 1969, students took over the Faculty of Letters, University of Tucumán, and a demonstration to the prestigious Jockey Club in the centre of the province's capital, San Miguel de Tucumán, was subdued by military troops that kept the city under occupation for several days (Ramírez 2008). The regional GCT (Confederación General del Trabajo), FOTIA (Federación Obreros Tucumanos Industria Azucerera), and later UCIT (Unión de Cañeros Independientes de Tucumán) played a definitive role in the workers' movement. See also note 7.

describing the local conditions, the interests of the politicians, and their relation to the socioeconomic crisis. Banners hung across the rooms and heaps of food destined as aid to Tucumán were piled up. Other symbolic gestures included the lights being switched off every few minutes to denote the infant death rate in Tucumán. The material that the group had collected from its fieldwork was presented on panels together with photographs, letters, and testimonies from settlers, teachers, and workers. Likewise, documentary films were shown, interview recordings were played, and sociopolitical material was handed out. This included the text "Tucumán Arde ¿Por qué?" by CISCO investigators.[5]

As planned by the organizers, visitors were overexposed to and constantly bombarded with endless information. Moreover, new material was progressively added, and the exhibition was extended from one to two weeks. At Buenos Aires, a banner reading "Visit Tucumán—garden of misery" welcomed visitors by reversing the tourist slogan "Tucumán—garden of the republic." Another ironic juxtaposition was the upbeat background music by the Tucumán singer Palito Ortega, popular in the capital. This exhibition, which included additional artists, was closed after only one day due to threats from government security agencies to suspend the syndicate's legal standing.

The texts of *Tucumán Arde* develop a line of enquiry that critically examines both political and artistic practice. The project's "Operativo Denuncia" condemns state policies and the media's complicity in concealing the true conditions in Tucumán (which they called "Operativo Silencio") by verifying, revealing, and disseminating the truth about local exploitation and political mobilization, as explained above. This relating to particular interests of the dominant classes, the project further criticizes the official bourgeois culture for the aestheticization of art and for the elitist detachment of artistic production (TA 1968d).

The declaration for the Rosario exhibition specifies how *Tucumán Arde* put forward a new kind of artistic creation as a *collective and violent act* (TA 1968a; original emphasis). It advocates a revolutionary art that destroys the bourgeois myths of the artist's individuality and the passive and unique artwork, and that modifies the environment that generates it.[6] This double premise can be understood as respectively referring to the Anglo-American modernist art discourse, which was embedded in hegemonic politico-cultural programs; and, affirming art as part of social life, to a central position in the Marxist dialectics of class struggle and revolution.

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5. CISCO, the Centre for Investigations in the Social Sciences, included Beatriz Balvé and Roberto Jacoby in 1969. The text, a socioeconomic analysis of Tucumán, was prepared by Miguel Murmi, Silvia Sigal, and Carlos Waisman. Its first part was published as "Arde Tucumán," *América Latina* 1, no. 10 (December 1, 1968): 2–5, 30 (International Center for the Arts of the Americas [ICAA] record ID: 751376). In Rosario, project participants also collaborated with the Centre for Studies of Philosophy and Human Sciences and the community library Constancio Vigil.

6. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimpson's *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001, 76–79) incorrectly translates and abbreviates the declaration as follows, omitting the text in square brackets: "The recognition of this new conception drove a group of artists to postulate aesthetic creation as a collective and violent act destroying the bourgeois myth of [the individuality of the artist and of the passive nature traditionally attributed to art. The intentional aggression becomes] the new forms of art [the form of the new art]."

This revolutionary art, the text continues, derives from sociopolitical aware-
ness and rejects the division between artists, intellectuals, and technicians. It is
a *total art* aiming to modify the totality of the social structure, a *transformative art*
because it opposes the separation between the work and the world, and a *social art*
seeking to be integrated in the revolutionary forces that fight against class oppres-
sion and economic dependence (TA 1968a; original emphasis).

This position articulates a critical interest in reconnecting art with life through
a process that challenges and seeks to change the social conditions and the pre-
dominant modes of producing, circulating, and evaluating art. This draws on
historical avant-garde movements and in particular the Russian avant-garde in
the first quarter of the twentieth century. Moreover, while it shares a critical fo-
cus with other artistic activities in the late 1960s and 1970s, such as conceptual
art practices as discussed elsewhere (Kalyva 2015), the project's critical orienta-
tion is shaped by the Latin American sociopolitical context of consecutive dicta-
torships, neoliberal policies, and foreign exploitation (Balvé 2001). Indeed, Luis
Camnitzer (2007) speaks in terms of conceptual *strategies* that extend into politics.
For Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman (2008), *Tucumán Arde* can be understood
as a political act, a network of relations and collaborations that demonstrate the
irreducible desire to transform the world. Let us identify, then, how this project
formulated a new mode for artistic-political practice, and evaluate its efficiency to
communicate in different contexts.

Tucumán Arde is an interdisciplinary collaborative project that seeks to raise
social awareness. It is shaped in a sociopolitical context of anti-imperialist libera-
tion struggles, the Cuban revolution, and workers and students' uprisings, and
engages with social reality and the workings of the dominant ideology. This is
realized at the level of content (the project's theme), form (the structure of its pre-
sentation), and mode of execution. Here, the work's critical theoretical framework
is not external to its production. Rather, it incorporates a sociological method of
analysis (fieldwork, interviews, documentation) and sustains its critical enquiry
through its multilayered structure and presentation: public talks and interven-
tions, use of the press, multimodal open-form installations, audiovisual material,
and analyses. In this way, the project resists in practice the insertion of any privi-
leged artistic subjectivity and the investment in any final art product. These are
the premises of the prevailing modernist art discourse and its art markets that
Tucumán Arde challenged both in its texts and through its realization as a collec-
tive and participatory act.

Second, the nature of the project and its multimodal presentation paradigmat-
ically engage the relation between artistic and political activity. Néstor García
Canclini (1979) observes how *Tucumán Arde* adapted to the architectural and com-
municational structures of the institution that hosted it. One could add that it
also adopted these structures. True, choosing a trade union building to mount
an exhibition was a rather radical endeavor. However, its presence there was not
symptomatic. *Tucumán Arde* notably appropriated discourses, proceedings, forms,
and spaces inherent in political practice. Thus the project does not only demon-
strate a material takeover of the political space of its location. It also discursively
inscribes artistic activity within that political space, which now becomes public.

More specifically, it advances new ways of collective production and visual presentation and generates a new mode of articulation, a rhetoric, that combines images with symbols, language, and codes from different facets of public life (state propaganda, sociological analyses, first-person accounts, and the journalistic register). As such, it acts as counterinformation to official discourse and takes over public space in a more direct sense: it participates in the processes of production and construction of that public and political space as a shared activity.

From within its discursive and art historical context, León Ferrari (1973) evaluates *Tucumán Arde* in a meeting in Havana. He explains that art should not be evaluated according to beauty, originality, novelty, or school, but by whether or not it serves the revolution or the counterrevolution. Here, any means are valid (photographs, realistic painting, prints, magazines) as long as they communicate their message efficiently. For its part, *Tucumán Arde* abandoned the obsession with originality and characteristically used art to do politics rather than using politics as the topic of its art, as certain manifestations of "contemporary political art" did (Ferrari 1973; original quotation marks). Ferrari's position can be understood with reference to other activities in the late 1960s that challenged the military regime and the official culture and its carriers.[7]

Further, Ferrari continues, the project might have been promoted as "avant-garde" in a language created by and serving the elite, yet it demonstrated a way of breaking and transforming such elitist circles and acted as a destructive agent that established a new relation with the public as coauthor. Likewise, it may not have realized all its aims or concluded developing new modes of communication with or by its public, yet it did provide a language to articulate exploitation, created the conditions to raise political awareness, and offered a study of the complex relation between art and politics, while its participants continued their political engagement elsewhere (Ferrari 1973). Indeed, in a period of marked political struggle, neither this project nor its aims were singular events, and participants in *Tucumán Arde* engaged variedly with artistic practice and political mobilization, including armed struggle.[8]

7. Prior to *Tucumán Arde*, several participants from this project exhibited at *Homenaje a América Latina* (1967, SAAP) in homage to Che Guevara, and at the I Encuentro Nacional de Arte de Vanguardia (August 1968), which focused on the nature of art's participation in the revolutionary struggle. Other activities that contested the official culture included the disruption of the inauguration of the *Ver y Estimar* prize in May 1968; the boycott of the *Braque* prize in July 1968; the interruption of a lecture by Romero Brest, director of the Di Tella Institute, in Rosario in July 1968; and the return of the Institute's funding. In Buenos Aires, politically engaged works at the Di Tella's *Experiencias '68* provoked censorship to which the artists responded by dismantling the exhibition and piling their works in the street. See TA 1968c; Longoni and Mestman 2008.

8. Protests intensified throughout 1969–1970 (cf. the Cordobazo, Rosariazo, and later Tucumanazo). Revolutionary movements spread in Tucumán and were crushed by the military operation Operativo Independencia in the mid-1970s. This was the opening act of the widespread Operation Condor, supported by the CIA, which marked the much more brutal dictatorships of 1976–1983. Participants from *Tucumán Arde* joined militant political organizations (Favario and Ruano joined the PRT/ERP, and the former was later murdered by the oppressive forces), supported human rights' groups (Naranjo, Ferrari), participated in workers' mobilizations, and organized diverse cultural-political activities such as film showings, clandestine publications, and designing posters for strikes (Paska, Jacoby, Carnevale, Suárez). See Ferrari 1973; Longoni 2005.

To conclude, *Tucumán Arde* set real life in focus and challenged official discourse with reference to both art and politics. It did so not only because of its theme but also through its mode of production and form. It incorporated a wide spectrum of activities, reconnected artistic and sociopolitical activity, and opened new sites for expression and imagination. It did not merely present information but sought to reconfigure the nature and scope of artistic enquiry across concept and execution, work and context, artists and the public, and production and consumption. Most importantly, it initiated a series of exchanges, critical reflections, and committed action that contributed to the wider movement toward social change and democracy.

Whether it is an avant-garde or conceptual work is a matter of classification and evaluation standards. It is more constructive to consider how it allows us an external view of this binary, and equally of the binary whether it is art or not. Specifically, *Tucumán Arde* uncovers the processes by which the dominant culture evaluates its contents according to a set of value systems and defines art as part of those contents—a process that first and foremost serves to uphold that culture's status and to reproduce it. As a result, this project opens the possibility for reflection not only on that discourse and culture but also on its own condition.

In considering art as transformative social praxis, *Tucumán Arde* determines a *mode* of generating reflection on the production of art and its function in society: a dialectical relationship of the work with the world, between self-criticism and critique of the sociopolitical context wherein the work relocates itself. This relationship is sustained materially and discursively, structurally and thematically, and is carried through a series of rhetorical operations: juxtapositions of languages and voices, shifts in visual and textual signification, and layers of symbols, references, and information narration. Within both their historical and contemporary contexts, these rhetorical operations cause shifts in the material, discursive, and symbolic order and critically engage with social reality, the workings of ideology, and the role of the media. Moreover, they configure a new kind of aesthetic where the work sets its own realization under the same problematic of alienation, mystification, and class struggle that it partakes of and dialectically interrogates.

COLLECTIVE ACTIONS IN CHILE

The Chilean Colectivo de Aciones de Arte (CADA) was active between 1979 and 1985 and offers another example of artistic practice that engages social reality and seeks to reconfigure art's position in society. The group consisted of Diamela Eltit (writer), Raúl Zurita (poet), Fernando Balcells (sociologist), and Lotty Rosenfeld and Juan Castillo (visual artists). Following the previous discussion, the relation between art and politics is not something that can be singularly exhausted by the *theme* of an artistic activity. Rather, the act must critically and self-reflectively engage with art's mechanisms of production, reception, and diffusion; this determines the act's resistance to be assimilated by the dominant culture and articulates its criticism of that culture and society.

CADA specifies art as an act of social and collective creation that is integral to the struggle for a better life, dignity, social equality, and political freedom; being

part of a society's culture, art can transform that culture toward a new type of society (CADA 1979a, 1979b). Therefore, artistic creation is one of the ways in which social transformation can be achieved and differs from other forms of intellectual labor in its location and mode of operation within history (CADA 1979a, 4).

CADA's collaborative practice takes place within the public, social space. It contests the symbolic and material limits of the art institution and generates new sites for dialogue and interaction. CADA members describe themselves as a group of cultural workers that incorporate scientific investigation in their work, "an operative mode of reassignment of socioaesthetic values and parameters to consider in the collective creation of a new reality" (CADA 1979a, 6). Their multi-layered works utilize mixed media in order to generate metaphors and manipulate the chain of signification across social, political, and discursive contexts. In retrospect, Eltit notes how CADA sought to convert the entire city in a metaphor (quoted in Katunaric 2008, 304). Santiago, in this case, and Chile as a whole had been under the fierce military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet since 1973 and at the onset of the crisis of his neoliberal financial model. This historical context was characterized by extreme oligarchic accumulation of wealth, on the one hand, and poverty, on the other, and by market regulation and US interventionism, censorship and surveillance, torture and disappearance.

One of CADA's first actions was *Para no morir de hambre en el arte* (1979; hereinafter cited as *Para no morir*). The work evolves at different sites and conceptual layers and generates a series of metaphors and associated meanings. At a first stage, it consisted of giving out one hundred bags of milk in La Granja, a slum neighborhood of Santiago. The act was carried out on October 3, 1979, in collaboration with the local cultural center Malaquías Concha, and was documented by photographs and on film. The bags were labeled "1/2 litro de leche" evoking Salvador Allende's campaign to secure half a liter of milk for every child per day. On the same day, a minimal text appeared in the magazine *Hoy* prompting the reader to imagine the white page as milk, and its countrywide private daily consumption as empty pages to be filled.[9]

In the homonymous text, the group discusses the work's theoretical-critical context with reference to history, culture, and ideology and to art's relation to the everyday, social responsibility, and political struggle. Interweaving a series of superimposed metaphors, the text conceptualizes the distribution and consumption of milk as a work of art, the work of art as proteins, and the distribution of information as bags of milk to be consumed; likewise, the bags become a way to equate the recipient, who consumes the milk, with the art product, which uses milk as its material support and means of information (CADA 1979a, 12–13). At a later stage, the project would include sending the empty milk bags, once these were collected, to one hundred artists and intellectuals to be used as the basis for art production. This aimed to set art parallel to life and to definitively reintegrate it into the impoverished community (CADA 1979a, 12).

9. Lotty Rosenfeld recalls how they wanted the page to remain completely empty bearing only the word CADA, but the editors of the magazine insisted on a text (quoted in Neustadt 2001, 25–26). Their original manuscript text (CADA 1979a) also indicates an entry to the newspaper *La Tercera de la Hora*.

the group explained, of signifying a type of contrasted reality and technological appropriation that was taking place in Latin American reality (CADA, "La función de video," in Neustadt 2001, 139).

Like *Tucumán Arde*, CADA's work interrogates how the mass media mediate reality and diffuse state propaganda—in this case, regarding the presumed economic growth for all Chile as advocated by Pinochet's regime. The use of the press duplicates the parallel between a wider distribution and consumption of milk with that of information. At a basic level, it discursively engages the activities of an art group giving out bags of milk and writing texts—activities that are traditionally external to the category of art. At a more critical level, it implicates the media's representation of reality and its contrast with lived experience. It juxtaposes the whiteness of the milk with the blankness of the page, emptiness and hunger, social reality and media coverage, negation and absence.

Regarding the use of TV sets at the gallery installation, new media outlets advocated the so-called miracle of Chile; such carriers of propaganda became, with the advancement of technology, new consumerist goods. Between the two monitors, a transparent box of similar size seems to be revealing, or inverting, what such apparatuses usually conceal. Yet its own contents—symbols of that advertised prosperity—are sealed off and left to rot. Building on this metaphor of violence, the inscription on the box alludes to the physical violence, torture, and disappearance that characterized people's everyday lives.

In addition, the work's formal presentation juxtaposes the concept of preservation of artistic value with material value and social values. *Para no morir* was reviewed by *Hoy* magazine as an act that contests individualism and the sites of the elite and that creates actions which embrace general participation (Lipthay 1979). Operating both within and outside the gallery space—an exclusive site that qualifies art and its audience—CADA's actions raise awareness regarding depravity and repression, hunger and oligarchic domination, violence and imperialist exploitation.[11] Likewise, they offer new modes of artistic and social practice. Specifically, the social critique that their work advances also reflects on art's own position within society. As they explain, they propose a new type of work that recuperates art's sociability as a verification of its value (CADA 1979a, 6). This means that art's value is measured against the efficiency of its critical interrelation with the world; in this case, a social reality that the artist wishes to challenge by an act that in the same process must also challenge the methods and scope of artistic activity.

A wider framework for understanding artistic production in Chile from the 1970s is what Nelly Richard has defined as "escena de avanzada." This "advanced scene" was characterized by the reformulation of the creative vocabulary with efficiency and operative rigor; the transformation of the mechanisms of production and subversion of the codes of cultural communication; and rhetorical tension

11. For their *Inversión de Escena* (1979), they arranged for ten trucks of Soprole, the same brand of milk used in *Para no morir*, to park in front of Santiago's Museum of Fine Arts, blocking its entrance, which was additionally covered by a white cloth. *¡Ay Sudamérica!* (1981) consisted of releasing four hundred thousand flyers from airplanes. *No+* (1983–1984), during the plebiscite on whether or not the Pinochet regime continued, included graffiti and posters of the word "no" where additional words and signs were added, or left to be added, such as "dictatorship," "torture," "guns," etc.

that causes rupture of the networks of signs and raises awareness. Such practices rearrange the signs that codify the real and erode the language of power; in this process, the artist's own subjectivity is dematerialized (Richard 1987, 2006). This can be further understood with reference to the conceptualization, discursively and materially reproduced by the art press and the art market at the time, of the artist as a solitary genius and of the art product as being reserved for, and preserved by, a managing elite.

Regarding rhetorical tension, consider the text "No es una aldea" (1979). It is a highly poetic text that uses word repetition, third person plural, and a series of metaphors and elliptical tropes. It foregrounds the precariousness and marginalization of the country as shared, collective suffering; and a desire to positively produce life, improve living conditions, and end the country's hunger, pain, and exploitation of physical and mental forces:

> . . . ir creando las verdaderas condiciones de vida de un país no es solo un trabajo político o de cada hombre como un trabajo político, no es solo eso, corregir la vida es un trabajo de arte, es decir, es un trabajo de creación social de un nuevo sentido y de una nueva forma colectiva de vida.
>
> (. . . to go on creating the true conditions of the life of a country is not only a political task or [the task] of each person as political work, it is not only that, to improve life is a task for art, that is to say, a work of social creation of a new meaning and a new collective form of life.) (CADA 1979b)

Returning to the title of CADA's work, "so as not to die of hunger in art," it is as absurd as it is alarming, calling for the pressing need to transform both artistic and social practice. Operating at the margins of censorship, CADA's work interrupts the highly regulated social life under Pinochet's long dictatorship. Through a series of displacements and resignifications, progressive accumulation of contextual references and metaphors, social criticism, and self-reflection, it disturbs prevailing symbolic and discursive orders. Despite the brief material presence of their interventions in the public sphere, CADA's poetic-discursive strategies furnish the impoverished collective imagination with a new language, a rhetoric of disobedience, which occupies the silenced public space and inscribes it with alternative modes of critical thinking and social action.

If we follow Robert Neustadt's (2001) suggestion to compare the manifestos of *Tucumán Arde* and "No es un aldea," both texts utilize a series of rhetorical devices (metaphors, allegories, and shifts of voice and register). Both aim to motivate the public, superimpose different references and meanings, and address human dignity, poverty, and exploitation; yet they do so differently. While the latter has a more homogeneous pattern of narration and rhythm, the former has a more direct and agitative tone that combines an overflow of factual information with graphic imagery: "Tucumán grita. Tucumán arde. Tucumán muestra el precio de sangre que está pagando para alimentar la voracidad de los cañeros terratenientes apoyados por un gobierno reaccionario y clasista" (TA 1968e; Tucumán shouts. Tucumán burns. Tucumán shows the price in blood that is being paid to feed the voracity of sugarcane plantation landowners supported by a reactionary and classist government). A decade later in Chile, public speakers echo: "Aquí, hoy día, el cielo que miramos se contempla desde la basura, no desde las torres de Manhattan ni de

Estocolmo" (CADA 1979b; Here today, the sky that we see is being looked at from the garbage, not from the towers of Manhattan or Stockholm).

CADA's activities gain political momentum through their mode of realization rather than by mere proclamation. Such a critical intersection of art with life is not achieved by symptomatically aligning artistic with some other type of practice (political, humanitarian, journalistic, etc.), nor by expanding the category of art in order to include new manifestations while safeguarding the artwork's function as a placeholder for bourgeois values and corresponding marketing practices. By the same token, the relation of art to politics cannot be exhausted by the claim that artistic practices are de facto political simply because they are located in a public site. Rather, they must generate and sustain processes that reconfigure their space as a social space, a critical site of socialization and production.

NEW COMMUNALITIES ACROSS THE VIRTUAL AND THE MATERIAL

Proyecto Venus (2000–2006) was a social network and collaboration platform for artists and nonartists developed by the artist and sociologist Roberto Jacoby. It was created amid the Argentine socioeconomic crisis at the turn of the millennium, at a time of unprecedented unemployment and massive impoverishment, overt corruption, and collapse of public institutions. The project responded to the demanding need for new means of socialization and interaction. Taking advantage of new media technologies, it offered new modes of coexistence and co-creation.

The conceptualization of the project follows a trajectory of activities and collective projects that sought new forms of a politically engaged creative production and a sociological approach to art across various media. Jacoby participated in *Tucumán Arde* and other interdisciplinary projects such as the 1969 clandestine artistic-sociological publication *SOBRE la cultura de liberación*.[12] He also shared the critical position toward the Di Tella Institute in the late 1960s that marked a break between commoditized, apolitical, and internationalized pop art and new forms of artistic practice that critically intersected the social and public spheres (Jacoby 1967; Giunta 2001). His "Mensaje en di Tella" (1968) at the latter's *Experiencias '68* exhibition, which was closed down in protest by the participating artists (see note 7), challenged the official circuits of creation and promotion of art and advocated social struggle and the liberation of man. It characteristically argued: "The future of art is not tied to the creation of works but to the definition of new concepts of life."

Interested in alternative communication networks and participatory cultural experimentation, Jacoby developed the network project *Internus* during the last Argentine dictatorship (1976–1983), a predecessor of project *Venus* that never materialized, aiming to reconnect artists, nonartists, and cultural workers who had been isolated by the repression. Other projects led by Jacoby include the START

12. The name puns on the format of the publication, which appeared as an envelope. Other members included Beatriz Balvé, Antonio Caparrós, Octavio Getino, and Fernando Solanas; the last two were creators of the critically acclaimed film *La hora de los hornos* (1968). On *Sobre* see Longoni 1995b.

Foundation (Society, Technology, and Art) founded in 1999, the art magazine *ramona* (2000–2010, now continuing online), the monthly meeting and open art space Sociedades Experimentales at the Ricardo Rojas Cultural Center, University of Buenos Aires (2004), *Bola de nieve* (2005), the most complete artists' database in Argentina; and the Centro de Investigaciones Artísticas, Buenos Aires (2008), an artist residency, exhibition space, and educational facility.

Structurally, *Proyecto Venus* consisted of a website with pre-Facebook elements (personalized profiles, chat rooms, support and exchange of visual material) and a rotating administration team. This was responsible for maintenance, event coordination, and assistance with and facilitation of the project's activities within and outside the network; the team also oversaw the circulation of the project's bulletin. *Proyecto Venus* received financial support from the START Foundation, the Secretary of Culture of the City of Buenos Aires, and voluntary work. It included about five hundred participants of mixed backgrounds and interests (artists, lawyers, doctors, sociologists, architects, workers, musicians); there were nine hundred subscriptions to its monthly news bulletin and more than twenty thousand monthly visits to its website (Sainz and Solaas 2007). As part of the project, about two hundred events were organized in the capital and nationwide, attracting an estimated ten thousand visitors.

The project can be understood as an evolving organism that had two main characteristics, polymorphism and spontaneous multiplicity of objectives. It had no set rules, and participation was by invitation or recommendation and the condition to offer a good or service for sale or donation. This was conceptualized as "tecnologías de amistad," a system of relations of friendship that proliferated through networks of skills exchange and mutual support, group collectives, and collaborative creation (Krochmalny 2007). Moreover, the project had its own money called *venus*, which circulated in physical form and which could be used to buy or sell a product or service. Thus one could pay at a bar or a spa or for the translation of a text or the design of a website, a session with a psychologist, or a taxi ride. *Proyecto Venus* financially supported projects based on an open ranking system (projects were funded in order by vote until the funds were exhausted); it also offered intensive courses at the Venus Academy, launched in 2005, payable in mixed currency (Argentine pesos and venus). The physical space of the project was located on Salta Street in downtown Buenos Aires and called "Tatlin" in reference to the Russian avant-garde artist who designed the *Monument to the Third International* (1919) and advocated for art's integration in everyday life. It was a place to meet, organize events, produce, exhibit, exchange, sell, and lodge.

The project's organization as a self-managed microsociety was based on accessible digital technologies to support its growing network; nonetheless, these were not to be taken as self-sufficient. Rather, and made evident by their plurality and wider reception, social and public activities were the project's focal point. These ranged from gatherings—the so-called banquettes, punning on Plato's symposium—conversations and projections, to festivals and exchange of objects, services, knowledge, and skills (*Proyecto Venus* 2003). Likewise, the collaboration of groups and people was supported and encouraged in activities such as the series of events "Tecnologías de amistad" at Periférica (Borges Cultural Center,

rency devaluation. The disintegration of social structures, lack of money, and unemployment were met by unprecedented social mobilization, and new forms of solidarity rose such as *el trueque* (an organized practice of goods exchange at a community level using credit coupons), the creation of cooperatives, and the exemplary recuperation and self-administration of factories. In this context, *Proyecto Venus* sought to fill in a void that the collapse of social structures created and materialize the desire to reconstruct society (Kalyva 2014).

The project's own currency can be understood as part of such initiatives of social restructuring. Jacoby explains that the venus was not only a measurement unit and a means to interact and cooperate but also an ethical artifact, which we can understand as a measure of mutual respect and support: "Project Venus is a world of desires realized by means of exchange and cooperation" (Jacoby 2005a, 30). Indeed, exchange and cooperation bring people together and actualize concrete moments of socialization. Still, requiring a currency to do so may be seen as corroborating, rather than contesting, the existing socioeconomic structures of capitalism that the project sought to criticize. Nonetheless, the manipulation of a nominal exchange value allows for two things: first, to conceptually engage with the value of cultural production in a capitalist economy and to actively participate in processes that confer value and specifically use value. Second, using invented money, as real and as arbitrary as the official currency, harbors the potential of expanding this activity into the real world, of regulating and defining real work relations from the bottom up not only as a parallel but as an antagonistic value system to the capitalist one. As such, it makes it possible to *re*-evaluate goods and services, and one's own producing and exchanging activity and the responsibility that comes with it as a shared social activity.

To conclude, *Proyecto Venus* challenged how the media create rather than reflect reality, and took advantage of new technologies and social networks to enhance the creative and productive forces of an expanding and diverse community. The project encouraged experimentation with desire and social change that resonated within the sociopolitical climate that shaped it. This endeavor did not remain in some abstract realm modeled by interactive media but shaped a prototype of a society fundamentally oriented toward alternative and more direct ways of coming together, co-creation, and social interaction. Equally important, these practices developed parallel to other social structures and were materialized and tested against real living conditions and concrete possibilities of new forms of production and organization. As Jacoby (2005b) insists, one should keep in mind that the *how* is more important that the *what*.

In 2006, the project was terminated because of rising antagonistic relations (professional opportunism, personal rivalries, and defamation); nevertheless, it gave the impetus to meet, to do, to act, and to self-manage in microcircuits but also across networks at different communal sites. Its spontaneous and organic growth of interconnected clusters supports a political argument to the extent that it sustains a positive vision for social change, and generates a critical framework for the modes of production of a creative and sociopolitical practice.

This experience created opportunities to redefine the norms and evaluation

systems of social behavior, political action, and cultural production within the capitalist economy and beyond it. It offered new conceptualizations of social praxis across the artistic and the social, and incorporated a rhetoric of disobedience in new vocabularies and means to imagine a new type of society, as well as ways to achieve this. Likewise, it incited critical reflection on theoretical and practical questions around self-organization and the reevaluation of social responsibility at a collective and personal level. In this way, *Project Venus* reconfigured and actualized a communal, public, and political space.

CONCLUSIONS

Studying art's intersection with the public sphere allows us to discern its relevance to social life and evaluate how participatory activities can offer new channels to voice social concerns and means to create more inclusive and democratic social structures. Juan Pablo Renzi (1968), one of *Tucumán Arde*'s participants, clarifies that the artist must do away with a position distanced from the public realm and incorporate class struggle and his or her ideological consciousness in the problematic and realization of the work. This calls for a new function of art as well as new materials and forms that escape the circuit of bourgeois art and remain structurally and organically related to their social context. Four decades later, and in view of an increasing number of social art practices supported and promoted by corporations, Grant Kester (2011) discusses the pitfalls of NGO-led projects and the fashionable model of "ethical capitalism"; here, not only a revised consideration of the category of art is necessary but also a revised concept of labor. For Kester, collaborative nonhierarchical and participatory practices must have a pragmatic openness to their site and situation, a critical and self-reflective attitude, and a desire to cultivate and enhance local forms of solidarity.

Tucumán Arde, Para no morir de hambre en el arte, and *Proyecto Venus* were actualized in different sociopolitical contexts and incorporate social criticism in different ways. Yet they share objectives, historical references, genealogies of artistic practices, and theoretical and methodological frameworks. Most importantly, they share a sociological approach to art and the positive vision to transform the world.

They engage with the mediation of reality, the mass media, and official discourse through various strategies such as juxtapositions of discourse and layers of information, series of metaphors that revive the impoverished public imagery, and new platforms for interaction, collaboration, experimentation, reflection, and dialogue. These formulate a new type of aesthetic (a way of doing and communicating via art), and a new mode of practice that engages the political, economic, and cultural spheres of activity. They reinsert art in social life and reject concepts such as the artistic genius and any privileged subjectivity, as well as the investment in an art object that is to be managed and enjoyed by an appropriately able elite. Here, as CADA reminds us, sociability becomes the verification of art's value.

Returning to Ferrari, his discussion of *Tucumán Arde* raises questions that are pertinent to any socially engaged activity: Did it reach the public? Did it change

social reality? For a practice to advance new modes of engaging with art and politics, as well as to address the responsibility of engaging with art and politics, is no small task; reflection is fundamental to the process of social change, of change in attitudes, behaviors, and practices. The practices discussed here negotiate cultural production and political activity and reformulate cultural production as a political activity aiming to transform both the activity's own premises and their wider context. This underlines the dialectics of criticism between the work and the world, a critical operation that must be sustained materially and discursively. Through different rhetorical operations, varied presentation, the multitude of voices that they articulate, and the availability of references used to talk about them, these projects set their own realization under the same problematic of alienation, class struggle, propaganda, and fragmentation of the social fabric, to which they critically respond.

To put it differently, the projects discussed here advance a self-reflective and critical practice that expands across the public space that they occupy, and which they rearticulate as the site of social life. These activities are generally considered in the line of artistic practices that challenge the institutionalization of art and its market and extend the historical concept of art's dematerialization in alternative means of production, communication, and distribution. However, we should also consider how they rematerialize in new communal and collective forms. Keeping this in mind, we can acknowledge how they cause paradigm shifts in the conceptualization of cultural production as a shared social practice and develop new modes and vocabularies not only of critical expression but also of political action.

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