

Is Tucumán Still Burning?

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Posted on | April 18, 2009 |

Sociedad (B. Aires) vol.1 no.se Buenos Aires 2006

“Tucumán is still burning”, declares a stencil that appeared on several street advertisements on Buenos Aires walls over the last few months, anonymously authored by Leandro Iniesta, a solitary 23-year old artist. The black and red statement replicates the slightly psychedelic typography of the sticker sketched by Juan Pablo Renzi in 1968, and -to those who have at least heard about- it cannot but stand as a reminder of the political and artistic collective work that marked the peak of the radicalising avantgarde experience that took place in the cities of Buenos Aires and Rosario after the midsixties. The stencil was accompanied by an unsigned text recording recent statistical data about Tucumán’s socio-economic situation, starting from the following description: “Tucumán [is a] small province, densely populated and historically impoverished as from the 60’s thanks to the shutdown of its sugar mills and the ensuing de-industrialisation processes.”

Thus, this intervention, which at first sight might be taken for a private wink aimed at the art circuit stemming from a quotation of the History of Art, and whose full comprehension would seem to be restricted exclusively to those who have some knowledge of the mythical reference to the work of the 60s, provides the possibility of a different reading, exercised by the uninformed pedestrian who, coming across the statement as he walks the streets, can read information about the province without having to refer it to an episode that occurred over thirty years ago or being forced to understand it as meta-art. Our hypothetical pedestrian would infer that Tucumán is still burning because this northern province is still an exponent of the most chronic form of squalor, as has not long ago been pointed out by the front pages of our newspapers. Tucumán is a place where malnutrition keeps furnishing the news through the recurrence of child mortality in the province’s public hospitals. Iniesta’s simple strategy, then, reaches far beyond a mere reference to an emblematic name. In a small scale, he is reproducing, in three different ways, the complexity involved in the actions that took place in Tucumán Arde.

The first way is related to the fact that the artist becomes a social researcher: in 1968, artists explored the causes for the crisis that was tearing the province to pieces. While it is true that that they turned to sociologists and economists for help, they also travelled to Tucumán themselves, in an effort to become involved in the events as eye witnesses of the consequences brought upon the population by the shutdown of tens of sugar mills. The artists resorted to photographs, interviews, films, and other documentary media to show the falseness of official propaganda regarding the course of the crisis.

Consequently, the second way consisted in the construction of counter-information within the public space, addressed to a mass spectator outside the limited art circuit. Tucumán Arde intended to set itself up as a counter discourse; in order to achieve their goal, its makers carried out an elaborate strategy installing Tucuman’s problems in mass circuits through sundry means divided into various stages, such as misleading press conferences, mysterious advertising campaigns (a part of which was the above mentioned sticker), mass exhibitions of the research outcomes, held at the premises of the opposition Trade Unions in Rosario and Buenos, in open defiance to the ban on public meetings imposed by Onganía’s dictatorship.

The third coincidence lies in the questioning of the spaces allotted to the exhibition of art. Throughout 1968, and before moving on to work at the heart of the CGT’s Commission of Artistic Action, the avant-garde had been at the head of an itinerary composed of actions and definitions

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

Does it follow from these coincidences that *Tucumán is still burning*? Iniesta’s stencil is not exceptional as far as its recovery of the mythical work of ‘68 goes. Quite the contrary; references are as frequent as they are varied. For instance, a bar located on the main avenue of Luján City pays homage to the event by bearing the name Tucumán Arde, just as one of the counter-information groups that arose after the popular revolt staged at the end of 2001 was named “Argentina Arde” [Argentina is burning]. In the last few years, Tucumán Arde has become the most frequently revisited work of Argentine art, and it is certainly the one that has been written about the most, not only by art historians, curators, and critics, but also political activists. Besides the risk of being engulfed by the art institution, added to the reductionism involved in reducing it to stand for an early instance of conceptual art (a risk the protagonists themselves soon pointed out),¹ the question that matters now is how Tucumán Arde is read by activist artists that have thrown themselves into street agitation, an activity that present artistic -and- political practices have taken over from the original ‘68 experience.

Texto publicado originalmente em
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