

Images between reality and utopia: A curatorial narration

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Boxes for Thinking

I.

Three boxes of different sizes are placed in an ideal space. Each one defines its place. Though they were all made recently, the boxes seem like trunks of relics: silent, they hold keys to reviewing certain aspects of the history and cultural memory of Argentina.

The first one, which is made of metal and glass, holds soil from different parts of the Argentine territory. Beyond their materiality, the soils here are “witnesses of the cultures that developed in them”. While its qualities vary, the soil can be seen through the inflections in the light and the texture on the surface. Numerous winding lines of different thicknesses furrow the surface of the glass as precisely as superimposed maps. The names indicate remote places, rendering each particle of soil meaningful. These maps describe and, through juxtaposition, bridge distances geographical as well as cultural and social. Maps to be read ‘from within’. In *Caja para soñar una patria posible [Box to Dream a Possible Homeland]* by Teresa Pereda, paths that might not cross in reality cross. As such, it makes possible the symbolic materialization of the dream of a homeland of encounters and convergences in which the soil –and its vast cultural connotation– is a “space for utopias to unfold” rather than the scene of disputes.

II.

In another box –this one made entirely of glass–, a cubic meter of sand reinstitutes the cultural metaphor put forth by Jorge Luis Borges in his *Libro de arena [The Book of Sand]*. A light indicates the center of the irregular square surface that latently waits for the viewer to set it off. Suddenly, a hand that comes between the light and the sand causes a rush of texts in different colors of light to fill the inert space. That is when the work reveals its secrets. Letters, phrases, paragraphs in different typographies and languages demonstrate the breadth of texts by Borges on the Internet. In this work, Mariano Sardón makes use of Borge’s title and activates the image of the endless library. This piece is a point of reference in thinking about cultural traditions so diverse that they give our culture of mixture -as Beatriz Sarlo defined it some time ago- a unique form.

The aesthetic experience proposed by this *Libro de arena* is recreated and diluted with each viewer. What endures is precisely the fleeting, the intimate instant with the work, with those slippery texts that appear time and again -though always different. The work entails a series of paradoxes capable of representing the complexity of meaning in these times. By dealing with the dissolution of printed matter which, for centuries, was responsible for nourishing thought and

imagination, this work sheds light on different aspects of contemporary experience so marked by fragmentation and discontinuity. At the same time, Sardón's work considers the expansion by means of the Internet of texts spread through space and time, an expansion that gives a feeling of unlimited access but that undermines any attempt at possession or totality. For Sardón, the *Libro de arena* that Borges describes prefigures an endless library –one with no walls or shelves– that is built, and also scattered and diluted, every day. That is the library that Sardón ventures to represent. In different ways, different spaces and times come together here in pursuit of other meanings capable of revealing aspects of an unstable reality. Past and present: from the imaginary configuration of the library of Alexandria as a universal library to the no less imaginary library of the Internet; the memory of Western culture and contemporary experience; the material weight of the book and its disappearance on the screen; Borges and Sardón. [1]

III.

The third box, which occupies three cubic meters, was constructed by Graciela Sacco. Three cubic meters delimited by metal tubes and tensors. It is possible to see straight through the structure, making it a visual screen that shows the space within this large cube. Another smaller cube floating inside asks the question “How much is a square meter?”. On the surface of this cube-balloon are printed the prices of a square meter of real estate in different cities in the world, including several cities in Argentina. With an ironic synthesis, the work problematizes contemporary limits on exercising the right, imagined by Sacco, to be able to use at least one square meter of land.

Sacco maintains that it is in this small space that everything begins. She believes that there is a birthright to a square meter since, as she would say, “you have to be somewhere”. This gives rise to a reflection on “the measure of desire” and the difficulty of grasping it and this, in turn, leads to some of the questions that underlie the *M2* project: “How many meters are there from here to the horizon? What is the measure of thought? How much is a square meter of knowledge? How much is a square meter of incarceration and how much is one of exile?” [2]

Space as infinite vastness and its social limits, the possibilities of using this dimension to measure others, like knowledge, power, prison, exile. These questions make *M2* a disturbing metaphor where the individual and the collective come together and evidence a single history. In the *M2* project, space is a site where presences are both conveyed and vanish, lingering like auras of different times, thus giving us the impression of witnessing, in each work, a continuous present.

Time, then, is shown in a very peculiar way here: by occupying a place in the imaginary, this continuous present does not narrate, but rather is. It disturbs and incites reflection by rendering present and visible that which, perhaps due to an excess of presence, seeks to go unseen. At the same time, to use the words of Georges Didi-Huberman, “the image often has more of memory and the hereafter more than he who looks at it”. [3]

Present and past flow, and images are particularly rich as they are located in time like illuminations –profane illuminations, Walter Benjamin would say–, sparks of realities that enlighten diverse times, formal revelations that bring together distant elements and set off meanings that, though social, are only possible in terms of art. In this sense, these three cubes, created by three contemporary Argentine artists (Teresa Pereda, Mariano Sardón and Graciela Sacco), are devices that give rise to a number of questions on the basis of which it is possible to write some fragments of our history. The materials chosen –soil and light in the first box, sand and light in the second, and air and light to give shape to meaning in the third– refer on a symbolic level to the originary as well as to the present. They speak of the continuity of a time and

of the memory of a complex past marked by diverse traditions combined time and again, a past riddled with tensions that put to the test imagined projects and promises that still merit fulfillment.

In different ways, the singular type of cultural objects that are the visual arts act as active agents, constituting a form of critical knowledge that makes way for the configuration of various aspects of the real. [4]

Thinking in Images

“I saw at the same time every letter of every page (as a child I used to be amazed at how the letters of a closed book didn’t get mixed up and lost in the course of the night)”. Jorge Luis Borges, *El Aleph [The Aleph]*, 1949

Identifying each letter on a page and, at the same time, knowing that they form part of other units that, even when the book is closed, are not lost but rather remain, latent, awaiting another reader to set them off. That means, among other things, being surprised by the possibility of constructing a story from minimal units that, in turn, form words that evoke meanings, words that in association and succession are capable of building a narrative.

That suggestive phrase from Borges’s *El Aleph* presents a series of questions connected to the origin of this text thought in images. The images are there; they are produced by different hands and eras; they appear in different formats and supports; they wait in different collections; they give shape to different series in art books, in each installation of the collection to which they belong, in the exhibitions to which they are invited. Or they remain in the dark, like that book to which Borges referred which, though closed, does not lose its meaning.

Each image contains countless significant elements with which it constructs meanings, presents aspects of reality, and offers alternate constructions and approaches. That’s why it is an interesting challenge to think in images and thereby review the past and the present.

From the last decades of the 20th century and into the early 21st, globalized societies have taken a growing interest in the past. At times critical and at times nostalgic, this interest focuses on the problem of memory –or, rather, of memories and imaginaries– and the politics of their construction.

In late modernity the problematics of memory and forgetting became central, especially in countries like Argentina where a number of identity-building processes are ongoing, and spaces of memory yet to be established or set to rest.

The visual arts were one of the discourses that offered different responses to this problematic from the intersection of ‘real’ and ‘mythical’ memory. The visual arts positioned themselves beyond the global discourses of memory and dwelled on Argentinian history. It is there, in history and its plots, that images have operated –and continue to operate– by contributing to the construction of visions that tend to indicate aspects of Argentinian reality and, with those visions, trace the outlines of imaginaries and utopian projects, universes conceived and recreated time and again.

Both contemporary and rooted in history, from the perspective of the 200th anniversary of the Revolución de Mayo in 1810, this account attempts to recover the sense of utopia, and of criticism and transformation, in Argentinian visual

arts. It sets out to show how, at different historical junctures, an imagined project was ventured and a world capable of operating symbolically at contemporary intersections was invented.

“La manera en que el pasado recibe la impresión de una actualidad más reciente está dada por la *imagen* en la cual se halla comprendido”, wrote Walter Benjamin. This statement speaks of the problem of historical time and of the power of images, whatever their nature may be. In this, it addresses concerns at the base of the narrative proposed in this exhibition: writing is activated in the works selected insofar as the account of the past is located in the present that organizes it. A single present can refer to different pasts; this is one of many possible histories, one constructed on the basis of a series of questions formulated from an equally plural and complex present. This is an account written at the intersection of texts and images, of different visions. In these crossings, this account attempts to recover the intense and active dimensions of contemporary visualities born of an imaginary enriched by time and memory.

These artists’ ability to intervene in and reinvent reality, to act on different aspects of memory –its most specific or most far-reaching dimensions– and to undertake utopian projects takes the form, in this exhibition, of attempts to forge a common repertoire. A repertoire constructed through permanent selection and reselection of the past and the present in an attempt to invent possible futures.

Of course, the point of view from which a story is told changes the meaning of the story and exposes different intentions. Invention, historic revision and the exercise of memory are some of the procedures that have driven the selection of the artists and works here. These are also the operations undertaken by the artists themselves as they make images. As they discover and offer new meanings, these artists both reveal and create the encoded messages imprinted on the real, the landscape, the social dynamic, politics and symbolic productions. Like Eduardo Sívori, for instance, when, in the late 19th century, he used minimal brushstrokes to show the vastness of the Pampa in a small painting; or Matilde Marín who, in the early 21st century, offered a re-reading of the horizon on the Pampa; or Neo-figurativist artists whose re-readings in the early 1960s served to enlighten the meaning of the historical past and conflicts of the 19th century, giving rise to another vision of that history while also shedding light on their own times.

History, then, is a resource to return images to a possible sequence. Some images aimed to shock the viewer; others, to disturb a narration in order to dismantle or parody it. Along these lines, we might think of the dramatic tension of the images produced by Antonio Berni, Raquel Forner and Lino Enea Spilimbergo in the 1930s; by Luis Felipe Noé and Jorge de la Vega in the 60s, and by younger artists like Graciela Sacco and Tomás Espina working today. Their images generate new meanings, inversions and sometimes anachronisms that, surprisingly, do not further undermine the possibility of a revision of the past, but serve to empower such a revision. They subvert meaning, exposing the different perspectives that coexisted in the past and continue to do so today.

And since this is a question of thinking in images, *Mnemosyne*, the text by the German art historian Aby Warburg, is an inevitable point of reference. Warburg speaks of “the polar function, specific to artistic creation, between vibrant magic and soothing logic in the full range of the possible bank of interpretations of the production of images”. On the basis of this principle, which endows images with an anti-chaotic nature as they entail a selective ordering of the real, Warburg organizes his *Atlas Mnemosyne*, a vast repertoire of images that, from a given present, seeks references in pre-existing images. Bearing the Warburgian method in mind, as well as visual studies and other voices from the history of art and culture, this exhibit ventures some *Bildatlas* operating on the visual horizon of our cultural imaginary and, hence,

dialoguing with or constituting a crucial part of the contemporary works chosen. [5]

This selection of works brings together images produced at different times. The intention behind including these 'anachronisms' is to effect a co-mingling that serves as a catalyst capable of setting off new meanings and connecting these pasts with a present still concerned with finding possible ways to recover utopias and to realize pending projects. The images, which are organized in clusters and brief series, attempt, two centuries after Independence, to reinstitute a possible account.

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Footnotes

[1] Fragments from my text "Imagens entre o espaço e o tempo", in Jozami, M. (coord.), *Argentina hoy*, São Paulo, CCBB, 2009, pp. 12-24.

[2] Sacco, G., *Metro 2*, Rosario, Ediciones Castagnino+macro, 2009, pp. 109-124.

[3] Didi-Huberman, G., *Ante el tiempo*, Buenos Aires, Adriana Hidalgo, 2006, p. 12. (English title: *Before Time*.)

[4] Cfr. van Alphen, E., "¿Qué historia, la historia de quién, historia con qué propósito? Nociones de historia en historia del arte y estudios de cultura visual". In *Estudios Visuales*, nr. 3, December, 2005, Murcia, Cendeac, pp. 79-99.

[5] This work draws from, dialogues with, gathers the concerns of, and in some cases revises a wide range of texts from an array of sources. I will cite a few of the most important references here: Warburg, A., *Atlas Mnemosyne*, Madrid, Akal, 2010; Eco, U., *El vértigo de las listas*, Barcelona, Lumen, 2009 (English title: *The Vertigo of the Lists*); Burucúa, J. E., *Historia, arte, cultura*, Buenos Aires, FCE, 2002; Guinzburg, C., *Mitos, emblemas, indicios*, Barcelona, Gedisa, 1994; Berger, J., *Mirar*, Barcelona, Blume, 1987 (English title: *Ways of Seeing*); Crow, T., *La inteligencia del arte*, Mexico City, FCE, 2008 (English title: *The Intelligence of Art*); Grüner, E., *El sitio de la mirada*, Buenos Aires, Norma, 2001; Huyssen, A., *En busca del futuro perdido*, Buenos Aires, FCE, 2001 (English title: *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*); Didi-Huberman, G., *Ante el tiempo*, Buenos Aires, AH, 2005 (English title: *Before Time*); Jameson, F., *El giro cultural*, Buenos Aires, Manantial, 1998 (English title: *The Cultural Turn*); Benjamin, W., *Obras*, Madrid, Abada Editores, 2007; Said, E., *Representaciones de intelectual*, Barcelona, Paidós, 1996 (English title: *Representations of the Intellectual*); van Alphen, E., *Art in Mind*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2005; Fernández Polanco, A. and Larrañaga, J. (dirs.), *La distancia y la huella. Para una antropología de la mirada*, Cuenca-Spain, 2002.