

# ART AND BIOPOLITICS

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What is it that has brought about the unblocking of a notion like “biopolitics,” and made it into such fertile ground for thinking about new processes of artistic creation? In the last few years, the discussions surrounding the genealogy of the irruption and theoretical formulation of this concept have been intense. While the debate over its employment and meaning was coming together, rewritten through the contributions of a number of thinkers—from Michel Foucault to Giorgio Agamben and Antonio Negri<sup>1</sup>—who twisted and complicated the original sense of the term, a series of fields for the application of the concept emerged.<sup>2</sup> In the field of art, this interstitial notion, one which promotes the intersection of disciplines, has enabled fresh perspectives, leading both to new ways of analyzing existing dynamics (like those of the exhibition, the archive, and curatorship<sup>3</sup>), and to the devising of new ones. In this case, I am referring to the set of dynamics that have influenced what at first were the emerging, and have since become the dominant, pathways of artistic production over the past fifteen years. To consider the new developments from the perspective of biopolitics allows us to turn from

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the simple description of the changes that have taken place towards possible ways of conceptualizing those developments.

The urge to reflect on one's own time is a common one. Let us recall the measuring of the field of intervention that Susan Sontag proposed in her "Notes on 'Camp,'" where she sought to grasp what "camp" was solely by descriptive means, without adopting any stance in regard to it:

Many things in the world have not been named, and many things, even if they have been named, have never been described. One of these is sensibility ...which goes by the cult name of "Camp."<sup>4</sup>

We can begin, therefore, with the mere description of the facts that provide evidence of change, and focus all of our attention on the emergence of the new. We can attempt to derive all of our findings via this process of enumeration, without having to weigh the evidence, without making a value judgment, but simply ascertaining the facts that indicate that we are now in a different landscape.<sup>5</sup>

Viewed from this perspective, we see before us the unfolding panorama of a new circuit for organizing art. Among its elements are new chan-

nels for distribution (biennials, on-site events, art fairs), new dynamics of artistic training that lie outside the academic system (workshops, residencies, seminars); different ways of organizing production (collectives and networks); and new arenas for the dissemination of information and publishing (online and through networks). The very concept of what constitutes “an artist” becomes diluted, as ephemeral communities are brought together by a particular event or a common interest, whether it be sharing food at an opening, chatting at a stand or a booth at a biennial, watching videos, reading magazines, or listening to music. We now speak of an “art of post-production,” a term inseparable from its relationship to the culture industry.<sup>6</sup> We speak as well of an art that has been de-localized and re-localized, an art that has detached itself from the sphere of nations and re-situated itself in the urban sphere and into itinerancy between the farthest-flung corners of the planet; an art that has abandoned its almost exclusive focus on the context of the artist’s own origins in order to engage with the contexts where the works are situated. There is talk of an art that values a state of joy, and the possibility of sharing as a site-specific utopia—specific to a precise, perennial place where it is realized—without a project for another future, but centered on the dynamics of exchange.

What allows us to conceive of a biopolitical perspective on art? First, and most obvious, is the fact that images have functioned in close proximity to power, as devices for the propagation of beliefs, systems of control, state structures, ideas about the family, educational programs, and religious dogmas. But beyond this propagative sense, I’m interested in thinking about the resilient residue that images articulate in order to reinforce alternative life systems. In their own life histories, intact or modified, images survive every attempt to control them. Freed from the structures that would allow the standardization of their inadequacy, they redesign themselves in order to live on. I’m also interested in the process of linking art to political life. It is the tension inherent in the instrumental notion of the avant-garde—the struggle to reunite art and life—which in recent years has brought artists into the streets, and has

led them to design forms of art production located within a collective and ephemeral time and space, such as that of a public demonstration. Finally, I'm interested in considering to what degree certain images, ones that oscillate between the realm of artistic production and that of mass communication, take the place of remembrance. Remembrance as re-collection, as a revisiting within the heart, within the sensibility, of the disappeared, of the presence of an absence. *Re-cordis*: memory, the opposite of forgetting.

This brief essay seeks to highlight some facts and activities that take on new dimensions when we inscribe them within the territory of the biopolitical. From this perspective, they're no longer chronological facts; they aren't events; they are *images* that set the parameters for a concept of life. They are generated within the tumultuous center of life itself, and seek to perpetuate that life. They do so not by means of the kind of passive reproduction that institutions favor, but in the form of records that keep memory alive, in the form of dynamics aimed at producing forms of association—that is, of life—which, though they do not exclude the use of any medium, are largely expressed not through the two-dimensional surface of the canvas or the three-dimensional surface of the sculptural block, but through the ephemeral and social moment of joint actions.

During the past few years, Latin American cities have inaugurated an impressive series of contemporary art museums, meeting, exhibition and residency centers, and online programs. In doing so they have created a dynamic that is aligned with that of the international art world in terms of itinerancy, if not necessarily of visibility. The residency programs went through a preliminary phase with the Triangle Arts Trust project, founded in London in 1982 by Robert Loder and Anthony Caro, and were adapted locally through initiatives that multiplied with particular speed after the year 2000. Examples include Argentina El Basilisco, Casa 13, El Levante and RIIA in Argentina; CRAC in Valparaíso<sup>7</sup>, among many others.<sup>8</sup> These residencies have been presented as opportunities for learning, production, and sociability. They create a

time of communal living, discussing joint projects, searching for ideas, exchanging insights about images—moments that culminate in celebration, parties, the exhibition of completed work, beer, and table football. The medium for communicating and making tangible a shared time in which priority is placed on experience rather than producing marketable objects is often the production of a publication. This sociability, and its pronounced relation to the city, are likewise present in discussion groups and networking initiatives such as Duplus or Trama in Argentina, the gallery Metropolitana and Hoffmann's House in Santiago de Chile, Capacete in Rio de Janeiro, La Rebeca in Colombia, Espacio Aglutinador in Havana, and others.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to these initiatives, contemporary art collections, as well as museums in various cities designed to house those collections, have proliferated. What is interesting is the manner in which these initiatives have been carried out. For example, by 2004, in the context of recovery from the greatest economic and social crisis Argentina has undergone in twenty years (following the events of December 19 and 20, 2001), museums were opened in Neuquén, Rosario, Salta, and Misiones. During the same period a policy for collecting "emerging art" was put into effect in Buenos Aires, a policy which, even if it failed to establish a solid market, managed to create a new valorization of the most recent art. This movement contributed to the gentrification process in cities, to the modification of urban social fabrics, to the appreciation of places, and to the creation of new routes. As museums, cultural centers, and residencies became directly engaged in the restructuring of the city, they exercised various degrees of impact on the growth of new areas, and in the surge of movement to areas of the cities that hadn't previously been frequented by young artists, areas such as Avellaneda with El Basilisco, or the Abasto with the new Centro de Investigaciones Artísticas. Art played a crucial part in the process of redesigning the urban dynamic during a time of crisis. It shifted epicentres that had been traditionally linked to the gallery circuit. Residencies, rather than cafés, became the new preferred external gathering places for artists. Parties

and workshops became the new spaces for sociability, the gathering spots along the city's new art routes.

At the same time, forms of collective production multiplied. In certain contexts, such as that of Argentina, those forms made it possible for a crisis situation—one similar to what Agamben calls a “state of exception”<sup>10</sup>—to be transformed into a creative moment. The art collectives fostered the design of formats that filtered art productions through the contemporary situation of impoverishment. In some cases, this was simply because creating in shared spaces and dynamics lowered production costs. In other cases, where artists were faced with the impossibility of paying for materials after currency devaluation, they poeticized impossibility. An example was Oligatega Numeric, whose members explored conversions between technologies—from analog to digital—that were never intended to communicate with each other. In still others cases, art groups became engaged with urban movements, leading to a special productive relationship between public protest and the production of images. When, for example, workers evicted from recovered factories in Argentina, such as Bruckman, occupied the city square next to the factory, individuals and art collectives installed their work at the same location. These installations served as additional ways of making the protests visible, of keeping them going, alongside other potent forms of visibility, like the roadblocks where black clouds of smoke from burning tires rose up like tornados in the sky.

We are referring, in a sense, to the life that is lived by images. One remarkable development, also in Argentina, was the incorporation of iconographies from the past. In an unprecedented synchronization between history, academia, and artistic production, many of the key works of Argentine art housed in museums were “re-semanticized” and “re-appropriated” from the perspective of contemporary artistic discourse. The guiding purpose of this project was to provide access to the hidden sides of those familiar images, thus revealing a critical history of art that simultaneously was approached from the university. As the images were exposed to this process (here it is appropriate to cite

artists like Daniel Ontiveros, Leonel Luna or Daniel Santoro<sup>11</sup>) new facets were discovered in them.

At the opening of the Museum of Contemporary Art of the UNAM in Mexico, Miguel Ventura's horrifying installation juxtaposed scientific and political discourse with the full power of montage. Hundreds of rats, tamed by specialists, traversed the heart of what the artist himself described as an "excessive and crazed" labyrinthine structure, in which hundreds of photographs and documents from Nazi Germany were hung next to foam swastikas or photographs of feces fashioned into ornamental shapes.<sup>12</sup> The various elements were gathered in an animal research laboratory space whose chaos brought to mind Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau* in Hanover, destroyed during World War II. A web of archives found articulation in a montage whose critical effect of distancing was intensified by the revolting sensations their repugnance produced, and through the critical element that informs laughter, irony, and sarcasm.<sup>13</sup> A new form of thinking about new world geopolitics was being proposed, in which, as Sarah Thornton<sup>14</sup> demonstrates, wars multiply while the art market becomes more spectacular. "The language of contemporary art," Miguel Ventura declares, "is very similar to the language of finance; they both derive from homogenous strategies covering every part of the world."<sup>15</sup> He made this explicit with the monumental montage of text and image that documented his animal laboratory. Among the texts were several written by José Vasconcelos, the first Education Minister of the Mexican Revolution, after the pro-Nazi party financed a publication for him. The present mixed with substrates from obscured pasts; a confrontation in which elements from every era were detonated together. The passage through the installation showed us that facts and our beliefs were at odds, that the past could be re-activated and re-launched into the present and the future. This iconographic display provoked reactions and legal actions that reactivated the life of some of images, highlighting the conditions of their emergence and their mutability, as well as the attempts to control them, domesticate them, serialize them and systematize them, limits that were all put continuously to the

test and subverted according to the reactivity of the images themselves. But the application of biopolitics to the field of art is also about images of life and death, or, more specifically, about the right to life. These are images whose purpose is to intervene, from their specific and uncanny power, in the strategies that are articulated by human life, and to make demands on behalf of both the existence and the dignity of that life; to intervene against wars and massacres; to demand that those who have disappeared reappear alive; to take a stand, together with political discourse, on behalf of the meaningfulness of lives that are no longer, that were surrendered and taken away for the sake of ideas in the revolutionary confrontation. Images that intersect the fields of politics and esthetics; that are produced within the circuit of the art world, or that come from a visual realm external to the art world, distributed on a daily basis by the press, as happens with the notices that are published in the newspaper *Página /12*. Images and exhibitions that are produced collaboratively, with very precise objectives.

It's surprising how much of a relationship there is between artistic productions, an expanded body of mass media imagery, and the politics of human rights. The notion of biopolitics allows for borderlands thinking,<sup>16</sup> in this case, about a heterogeneous body of images, created under a variety of circumstances and in different contexts, sharing a meeting point characterized, in the first place, by the idea of acting in behalf of life, and in the second, by a continuous transformation of its strategies for visual formulation, with the aim of avoiding the erosion caused by repetition. In this sense, these images are versatile; they carry on a dialogue among themselves and with their own genealogies, with agreements and frictions that make them into shifting representations whose dynamics reproduce the conditions of their own survival.

One case is particularly eloquent: the power of the portrait, of the images of identification card pictures, in the shaping of the political strategies of human rights organizations and in the poetics linked to those strategies. Consider the case of Chile, where the portrait played a leading role in the work produced during the transition period from dicta-

torship to democracy. Consider Eugenio Dittborn's work and the portraits he created from newspaper photographs which had in turn been obtained from police archives<sup>17</sup>; consider Gonzalo Díaz and his portraits of heroes, artists, and saints, overprinted in a true palimpsest of images and historical periods, overlapped so as to operate through transparency and superimposition. Unlike *juxtaposed* times, which are compared with the intention of producing confrontation, these are *superimposed* times in which the past never stops acting along with the present, in which both are simultaneously active. Here we have a biopolitics of the image reactivated by the passage of the iconography of human rights organizations through the erudite world of art. As happens with the scarves that the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo wear covering their hair and that Daniel Ontiveros groups together into the form of daisies, inscribing between them the phrase pronounced by Belgrano, "*Ay Patria Mía*" (Oh My Homeland); or when Rosana Fuentes paints scarves in tiny squares in order to reach 30,000, the emblematic number that guided the demands of human rights organizations—a work of art that began in 1997 and is still in progress—or with the images and texts that, day after day, withstand all forms of forgetting, like the notices that the newspaper *Página/12* publishes at the request of relatives of people who were taken alive on that date to a place from which they never returned. Texts—like epigrams, in the sense of inscriptions—that accompany the images chosen by family members to give a better account of who that person was, of what their moments of happiness were, and to remind us that nothing is forgotten.

Faced with the question of what the connection might now be between art, politics, and society, an approach from the notion of biopolitics declassifies the avant-garde's classic urgency to unite art with life, as well the rare moments in which this link is fulfilled. Images, as shifting, living representations; the presence of bodies in collective expressions; the fact that the new institutionalization of art—more flexible and more mobile—intervenes in the processes of urban transformation, acting as a trendsetter; the close relationship between the politics of the

image and the politics of life put in practice by human rights organizations: these are the new scenarios that permit us to analyse, from an interstitial perspective, the articulation of the connection that, far from weakening in the face of the challenges of formalism, speaks of the new scenarios of art work and sociability that keep the art world alive. To be clear, not the world of art spectacle, but the world of frictions and critical reformulations, which lend the richest sense to any poetic—and therefore also political—proposal.

1 We can cite, as a selection of some of the fundamental texts, Michel Foucault, *Historia de la sexualidad. I- la voluntad de saber*, Buenos Aires, Siglo XXI, 1987, p. 161-194; “La gubernamentalidad” and “Las mallas del poder”, in *Estética, ética y hermenéutica. Obras completas III*, Barcelona, Paidós, 1989, p. 175-197 and 235-254 respectively; Giorgio Agamben, El campo de concentración como paradigma biopolítico de lo moderno, in *Homo Sacer. El poder soberano y la nuda vida*, Valencia, Pre-Textos, 2006, p. 151-239; Antonio Negri, El monstruo político. Vida desnuda y potencia, in Gabriel Giorgi and Fermin Rodríguez (Comp.), *Ensayos sobre biopolítica. Excesos de vida*, Buenos Aires, Paidós, 2005, p. 93-139.

2 See, for example, Ignacio Mendiola Gonzalo (Ed.), *Rastros y rostros de la biopolítica*, Barcelona, Anthropos, 2009.

3 Cf. Borís Groys, El arte en la era de la biopolítica: De la obra de arte a la documentación de arte”, in *Obra de arte total Stalin. Topología del arte*, La Habana, Criterios, 2008, p. 165-183; Joaquín Barriados, (2009) “(Bio)políticas de archivo: archivando y desarchivando los sesenta desde el museo de arte / Archive (bio)politics: archiving and de-archiving the 1960s from the art museum” in *Artecontexto*, No. 24, Madrid, 2009, p. 17-23.

4 Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’”, in *Against Interpretation*.

5 Cf. Jacques Rancière, *El maestro ignorante. Cinco lecciones sobre la emancipación intelectual*, Buenos Aires, Libros del Zorzal, 2007.

6 Cf. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproducción*, Buenos Aires, Adriana Hidalgo, 2007.

7 Cf. *Crac Valparaiso*, Residency center for contemporary artists. Report 2006-2008 and 2009

8 For a provisional list of residencies see: <http://www.artscollaboratory.org/organisations/triangle>

9 Cf. *Memoria de las experiencias, encuentros y actividades que se desarrollaron en torno a las residencias de artistas, CRAC Valparaiso, Chile, 2007-2008*, CRAC, Valparaiso, 2009; Duplus, *El pez, la bicicleta y la máquina de escribir. Un libro sobre el encuentro de espacios y grupos de arte independiente de América Latina y el Caribe*, Buenos Aires, Proa, 2005.

10 Giorgio Agamben, *Estado de excepción*, Buenos Aires, Adriana Hidalgo, 2007.

11 Regarding Leonel Luna's work see Laura Malosetti Costa, Tradición, familia, desocupación, in *Seminario Los Estudios del Arte desde América Latina*, at <http://servidor.esteticas.unam.mx:l6080/edartedal/bahia.html>

12 Miguel Ventura, *Cantos Cívicos. Un proyecto de NILC en colaboración con Miguel Ventura*, Mexico City, UNAM-MUAC, 2008.

13 For a brilliant analysis of the powers of montage see Georges Didi-Huberman, *Cuando las imágenes toman posición, El ojo de la historia*, Madrid, A. Machado Libros, 2008.

14 Sarah Thornton, *Siete días en el mundo del arte*, Buenos Aires, Edhasa, 2009.

15 Ventura, op. cit. p. 142.

16 Ignacio Mendiola Gonzalo, *La biopolítica como un pensar fronterizo*, op. cit. pp. 9-14.

17 Regarding Dittborn's portraits see Miguel Valderrama, *La aparición paulatina de la desaparición en el arte*, Santiago de Chile, Palinodia, 2009.