

Art, Body and Politics in the 80s: Disobedient Aesthetics in the Underground Scene of Buenos Aires

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1. Art and dictatorship: to do in spite of everything

Our research is in line with an approach that has recently appeared in numerous studies on the symbolic production during the 1976 military dictatorship in Argentina. This approach is based on an outlook that, instead of focusing on the paralyzing effects of the disappearing power that shaped a docile and terrified body, centers on the several efforts and strategies - of flight, of confrontation, of resistance, of disobedience - undertaken by some cultural producers during those years.

We will particularly focus on a series of aesthetic experiences which can be understood as part of the concept the Argentinian visual artist and sociologist Roberto Jacoby defined as “strategy of joy”, consisting of the “effort to lift the mood through actions linked to music transforming them into a type of molecular resistance and creating a territoriality of their own, intermittent, and diffuse” (Jacoby, 2000: 16). Having emerged during the 1976 dictatorship in the field of rock to “unchain the terrified bodies” of the youth, later on, during the democratic transition, the strategy of joy assumed

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different shapes in a series of venues, parties, performances,
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~~concerts, and exhibitions that shaped a corrosive and carefree~~
underground scene revitalizing the *porteña* scene [i.e.: of the City of Buenos Aires].

Taking this definition as a starting point, we have included in our object of study the following examples and experiences: the pop/ rock band *Virus*, the workshop *La Zona*, and the trio *Loxon*, the *Café Einstein*; the group of performers *Las Inalámbricas*; the exhibitions at the disco *Cemento*; the center *Parakultural*; *Body Art* at the *Museo Bailable* of the disco *Palladium*; *Medio Mundo Varieté*, and *Bar Bolivia*. The abovementioned share distinctive features that we have summarized in relation to the following aesthetics: a collaborative aesthetic; an aesthetic of precariousness; a clothing (counter)aesthetic; and a festive aesthetic.

The general hypothesis is that this web of aesthetic actions can be understood as a response of resistance and confrontation in which art, bodies, and politics intermesh in an unprecedented and radical way to create relational practices, festive moments, and venues for enjoyment and production, as opposed to the disciplinary mode of the body and the atomism of social life that the dictatorship had given way to.

2. A collaborative aesthetic

The live exhibitions of paintings by the trio *Loxon* during the shows of bands today considered legendary in the history of rock; the performances of Emeterio Cerro, Vivi Tellas, Omar Chabán, or

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the group *Las Inalámbricas*, along with visual artists,

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~~the productions of the group of actors of the *Parakultural*,~~
the art and theater exhibitions at disco *Cemento*, the fashion shows of *Body Art* at *Palladium*, the shows and wardrobe of the band *Virus*, whole nights dedicated to hairdressing and the dinners at *Bar Bolivia*: these are some of the projects which emerged and were sustained through joint work. These experiences among many others where visual artists, musicians, and actors participated together are signs revealing the cooperative links forged during those years. The final result was not as important as the process, everything that occurred during the creation of the works, the links and relations emerging from that production.

These types of collaboration are based, as we have identified, on three elements that fostered joint interactions: scarcity of economic resources, making individuals gather together to fulfill their tasks; adherence to a shared body of aesthetic conventions, the reason why innovative and experimental styles unintelligible to existing institutions were valued, and especially, a common type of action against censorship. That is to say, even if not everyone had explicitly planned their exhibitions to become efforts against censorship, the internalization of censorship gave way to their planning their works having in mind how potential repression could affect them. Censorship was a major external limitation artists had internalized: all of them shared experiences, interpretations, and forecasts regarding repression and the action of the police and the military. Nevertheless, this situation, instead of resulting in their inaction and isolation, gave way to a series of efforts and to the active intervention of artists. Even though these actions were not programmatic or consciously planned, they led to an alternative, vital, festive, and joyful web of sociability facing the hardships of terror and the dictatorship, its effects stretching into the democratic opening.

3. An aesthetics of precariousness

Being freed from external determinations and models, artists managed to produce an aesthetical practice strengthened in that collaborative web. Deconstructing, dismantling, and altering the classical models of representation gave way to liberating strategies that created new affectivities which strengthened their abilities to act.

Regarding the birth of the *Parakultural*, Omar Viola recounted that they benefited from the nonexistence of means: “How nonexistence can be transformed into existence. That lack of comfort resulted in favor and not against what we wanted to say” (1998). A new lifestyle brimming with vitality emerged against that precarious background. At a point when power penetrated bodies to impose the reproduction of a social order declaring that it would be impossible to make any moves, a paradox was posed: those that were part of these experiences found that anything was possible, as if hinders had become motivation.

Precariousness became the condition of possibility for something to occur in the middle of that catastrophic moment. The expression of a new type of lifestyle was activated from the inside of what the repressive practices of the dictatorship aimed to empty. In accordance with the exercise of freedom enabled by their experimentation, baroque styles were developed, inclined towards excess, an aesthetic of “waste”, of that which is considered residual, and of jumbles of waste, all of which became a unique expression where everything was mixed giving way to the merge of the various parts with the stamp of a preoccupation for what is ephemeral and temporary.

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In the same spirit of freedom, many artists allowed themselves to
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~~create their own language, to use any register and any available~~
materials, regardless of conventions, to communicate. Using “minor
genres”, many created a microcosm whose particular feature was to draw
its power from precariousness.

4. A clothing (counter-) aesthetics

In a similar way, new clothing aesthetics gave support to alternative
and countercultural identities, differentiating themselves not only
from the hegemonic fashion at the time -extolling brands and
standardized bodies- but also from its counterstyle that was closer to
the hippie style. In the underground web, interdisciplinary
cooperation led to several performative clothing/ bodily practices,
that dislocated and tensioned the triad body-clothing-society.

The dictatorship had triggered disciplinary mechanisms shaping a
bodily and aesthetic order taken as “correct” and “proper” for
the youth, therefore, imposing a social and moral order through
clothing, which normalized bodies. The clothing and
counter-aesthetics emerging from these underground venues
collided with the bodily order internalized by society. Bodies
that threatened what was expected from them in public spaces
were considered as potentially subversive, stirring up unrest
and misunderstanding among the social milieu which had
interiorized the mechanisms of (self) censorship and obedience
while condemning transgressions to the codes of proper clothing.
This was the case of Federico Moura, leader of the band *Virus*, whose
ambiguous practices in relation to clothing were deemed unacceptable
in the field of rock, who did not take long to censor him from an
authoritarian viewpoint, which was somehow sexist and homophobic.

Just like the case of Moura, several artists, musicians, and actors developed clothing practices deterritorializing themselves by being vague, ambivalent and impossible to classify, all of which placed them outside obedience and, at the same time, raised a challenge disturbing binary sexuality and traditional gender assignment. Challenging conventions involved being made fun of, being rejected, and being censored. Referring to those years, Carlos “el Indio” Solari, leader of the band *Patricio Rey y sus Redonditos de Ricota*, asserts that during the military dictatorship “constructing underground refuges for all those who were Dionysus was necessary”, refuges where it was possible “to lose the human form in a trance dislocating current categories and supplying revealing emotions” (2011).

Being able to build new affectivities, various members of this generation transformed the act of dressing themselves into an emotional and enjoyable experience of search allowing them to assign meaning to clothing, as a refuge in a hostile environment, as a way to inhabit an uninhabitable country. Regarding the dresses of *Las Inalámbricas*, Ana Torrejón mentions her aim to “flood everything” (2011), injecting life and paradoxes into that canvas as if it were the bodies that were worn, and as if in that blend of expressions a Dionysiac spirit could rise, elusively deviating from the historic conditions who would target that same body.

However, without doubts, the boundaries of transgression regarding clothing as a naturalized social fact were firmly pushed by Batato Barea, whose body was cross-dressed with women clothes, accessories, and make up. Despite the aggressions suffered in the street because of this cross-dressed body - ranging from insults to imprisonment on the grounds of the existence of police edicts criminalizing transvestism -

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Batato defied the repressive fiction that imposed sexual identities
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~~and fixed essential genders, expressing his poetic-politic radicalism~~
through his transvestite practices as well as the decision to get
breast implants,

5. A Festive Aesthetic

"We lived in a state of endless celebration". The artists and members interviewed described in this way the atmosphere in those venues called the *porteño* underground. The most eloquent testimony in this respect might be that of the art critic Renato Rita: "Complicity with the spirit is always festive. Besides, the outside world was too hostile. A place with encapsulated joy became a fundamental need. The rest was terror. Celebrations also became a way to fight against it" (2011).

Against the repressive background of the dictatorship, the bustling of the parties offered the opportunity of living in another world, a different and enjoyable place of freedom, where its members were backed, supported, and transformed. Parties know more than those who hold them, asserted a press account dated back then, referring perhaps to the (re)creative dimension of those festive gatherings. Thus, their political power: parties fostered gatherings capable of intensifying vital flows of energy and states of collective effervescence which resignified crystallized concepts as well as collective life as such.

Therefore, we suggest that citizenship and social life atomism created by the dictatorship were faced with the challenging values of

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collective production and creation of the celebrations held during the
80s. Isolation, seclusion, and secrecy were exchanged for group
gatherings, for becoming visible, and for the rejoicing of coming into
contact with others. As opposed to martyrdom, and the suffering of
torture, the heightening of senses and the recovery of the body as a
surface for pleasure were fostered. The structured and hierarchical
organizations of the military -and the guerrillas- were criticized
from the viewpoint of those who upheld self-managed work, without
bosses, and the merging of artistic languages. New outrageous and
androgynous clothing practices were created, disrupting the
traditional gender assignments and confronting bland and homogenizing
impositions by the power in matters of fashion. Disciplinary and
normalization techniques implemented by the military power were defied
through a political strategy, which aimed at mutation, the protection
of states of mind, and the dispersion of joyful affections. Moreover,
several ideal conceptions and values were developed which burst in as
a visible alternative to the military dictatorship. Ideals
superimposed to the real with a strong revitalizing power that
contributed to the reconstruction of the social fabric torn by terror.
New models of being and doing were woven into the society bearing a
liberating potential and becoming starting points and references for
coming generations.

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