The Aesthetics of Global Protest

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4 Political Street Art in Social Mobilization: A Tale of Two Protests in Argentina

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Abstract
Separated by almost two decades, the large-scale social mobilizations known as *El siluetazo* and *El argentinazo* have been understood by some scholars as watershed moments in Argentine politics. At these times of heightened political contestation, it has been possible to observe a dissolution of the status quo and the emergence of new or alternative political paradigms. Less recognized, however, is the central role that ‘the aesthetic’ has played within such processes of political transformation. By focusing on the spectacular outpouring of street art that accompanied these two protest events, the chapter aims to illuminate some of the analytical gaps and grey areas that exist between art, aesthetics and social movement studies today.

Keywords: street art, Argentina, aesthetics, social mobilization, affect, performativity

Introduction

Consider these two vignettes.

*The year is 1983 and Argentina has been in the grips of a brutal dictatorship for seven years. Up to 30,000 have been forcibly ‘disappeared’ and there is*

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1 During Argentina’s period of military rule, lasting from 1976 to 1983, the security forces abducted (forcibly disappeared) around 30,000 people, many of whom are still unaccounted for (Amnesty International 2018).


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virtually no familial or friendship network that has not been touched by loss. For years, public manifestations of resistance have been declining due to the seeds of fear and mistrust successfully sown by the governing regime. One of the few remaining symbols of active resistance is the haunting presence of the mothers of the ‘disappeared’, who march weekly on the Plaza de Mayo, calling silently for the safe return of the sons and daughters that have been taken from them. On 21 September, coinciding with a public opposition march mobilized by the Mothers, hundreds of life-sized paper bodies appear in the Plaza de Mayo. The scene is saturated with silhouettes representing the ‘disappeared’. Hundreds of people of all ages pour into the square to create their own silhouettes – of mothers, brothers, fathers, daughters, all snatched away – and, for a temporary period, the plaza becomes a liberated zone where porteños (residents of Buenos Aires) overcome their fears and band together to make a visual call for their ‘reaparición con vida’ (return alive and well).

The year is 2002 and Argentina is reeling from a spectacular economic and political collapse. The country has just defaulted on its $155 billion public debt, output is falling rapidly, inflation is reaching new highs, cash and credit are unavailable for consumers and businesses alike, and government after government has tried and failed to resolve the situation. Tensions are mounting, in the halls of power and on the streets. The walls of Buenos Aires are flooded with hastily graffitied inscriptions and crudely cut stencils; common refrains include (the now emblematic) ‘Que se vayan todos’ (Throw them all out) ‘Violencia es robar’ (Violence is robbery) and ‘Congreso traidor’ (Traitor Congress). Perhaps most poignantly, protestors invoke the memory of the Dirty War with allusions to the year ‘1976’ and the phrase, ‘Nunca mas, bancos’ (Never again, banks).

Each of these episodes recalls a moment in recent Argentine political history where the streets and squares of the country’s capital, Buenos Aires, have provided the setting for a sudden and remarkable outpouring of political street art. Separated by some nineteen years, these episodes are testimony to the pervasive utility of street art as a mode of protest. For the purposes of this chapter, street art is understood to include murals, wheatpastes, graffiti,

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2 The extent of Argentina’s debt and the dramatic unfolding of the country’s 2001/2002 economic collapse has been well documented and extensively discussed by economists and political scientists (see, for example, Blustein 2005; The Economist 2002; Levey et al. 2014).

3 This is a reference to the 1976 military coup and the period of violence that it ushered in.
stencils and other ad hoc painted expressions found outdoors. Street art is considered a mode of protest in the sense that it is one manner through which political messages or sentiments are expressed and communicated to governments and publics. Messages or sentiments are defined as political to the extent that they illuminate, challenge or otherwise engage with the existing constellations of power within society. From the early twentieth century, street art has been used by individual and collective non-state actors to announce and denounce, educate and inform populations in both urban and rural areas. These kinds of expressions are by no means new. And yet, in recent years, they have seen a manifold increase all across the globe, often emerging against the backdrop of popular protests and political uprisings (see Tulke, this volume). At these junctures, where activism and aesthetic practice combine and collide in impulsive and sometimes unexpected ways, scholars should take pause to examine and ask questions about what exactly is going on: What prompts such a sudden ‘outpouring’ of street art? How can we best understand the dynamics that bring individuals to the street? And what, if anything, is unique about street art as a form of political expression and claim-making?

In pursuit of answers to these kinds of questions, we might logically turn our attention towards social movement theory (SMT), defined as the interdisciplinary assemblage of works from political science, sociology, cultural and organizational studies that explore the causes and consequences of social mobilization, activism and protest. But perhaps surprisingly, mainstream SMT has been relatively slow to make inroads and advances in the area of art activism and aesthetics. This is due in part to the lingering prevalence of methodological rationalism and structuralism that limit the scope of visual and aesthetic analysis. As this chapter will argue, the political importance of street art cannot be understood through a purely rationalist lens. Taking the two episodes from Argentina referred to above as cases in point, it seeks to demonstrate how an approach grounded in ‘practical aesthetics’ can better enable researchers to understand how street art impresses on individuals and environments, how it functions, and what it produces in relation to protest events.

Social Movement Theory and the Structuralist/Rationalist Bias

Studies of social mobilization have proliferated since the 1960s as theorists have rallied to adapt and develop new tools for understanding major protest events, including the ‘Paris Spring’ of 1968 (see Tarrow 1993), mobilizations for civil rights and black power in the United States (see Morris 1986), and
transnational anti-war demonstrations in the 1970s (see McAdam and Su 2002). New and different lenses for the analysis of these moments and movements were proposed on either side of the Atlantic. In the United States, the resource mobilization (RM) framework placed an emphasis on the variety of material and ideational resources that must be brought together for movement success as well as the importance of the links and networks that exist both within the movement and beyond it for developing unity, cohesion and support (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Political process theory (PPT) approaches aimed for a more extensive conceptualization of the political environments that movements face and, in particular, promoted a thoroughgoing assessment of the structure of ‘political opportunities’ that could accelerate or constrain political action. Meanwhile, in Europe, new social movement theory emerged to highlight the discontinuities between older Marxian and vanguardist models of political action as a response to economic grievances, and the new and sometimes decentered movements of the post-industrial era with their focus on identity, culture and lifestyle (Melucci 1994).

Since the 1990s the lines between these different theoretical schools and approaches have become increasingly blurred as they have been variously adapted and appropriated by a new generation of scholars eager to make sense of a fast-evolving landscape of local, national and transnational protest activity that simultaneously pushes at the boundaries of the political and cultural status quo. A tacit consensus has emerged around the use and utility of certain conceptual tools inherited from RM and PPT, which include mobilizing structures, political opportunities, and framing processes. Whilst each of these conceptual advances has provided useful insights into how, why, and when mobilizations occur and gather pace, the argument presented below is that the prevalence of rationalist and structuralist biases in mainstream social movement theory obscure certain practices and processes of power, resistance, and change from its field of vision.

The term ‘rationalism’ is used here to describe an epistemological position that regards human reason as the paramount source and means for gathering and testing of knowledge. Rationalists tend to place a great deal of emphasis on the ideas of progress, universality and truth. Each generation is able to advance beyond the previous one through the exercise of human reason and a gradual accumulation of knowledge, bringing them ever closer to an assumed truth. In pursuit of that goal, the human intellect can and must overcome emotional impulses; scientific knowledge can and must overcome the temptation to custom and superstition. The pursuit of knowledge and truth must not rely upon the sensory but rather upon intellectual and deductive processes.
In order to explain the prevalence of rationalism within today’s social movement theory, it is necessary to wind back the clock and examine RM and PPT not as abstract processes of theory generation but rather as political acts of counter-framing. Prior to the 1960s, the major formulations used to examine and explain social mobilization were mass society theory, relative deprivation, and collective behaviour theory. These approaches variously pointed to sudden increases in individual grievances that had been generated by the ‘structural strains’ of rapid social change. As Jenkins (1983: 528) notes, ‘while specific hypotheses varied, these traditional theories shared the assumptions that movement participation was relatively rare, discontents were transitory, movement and institutionalized actions were sharply distinct, and movement actors were arational if not outright irrational’. Engaged in close observation, if not participation in, of the social movements of the 1960s and after, scholars of RM and PPT objected to these characterizations of protestors as lacking agency and rational capacity. These new perspectives instead ‘emphasized the continuities between movement and institutionalized actions, the rationality of movement actors, the strategic problems confronted by movements, and the role of movements as agencies for social change’ (ibid.).

Structuralism refers to the tendency to focus on the material conditions and broader social, economic or political forces that operate to contain and shape the actions and activities of social movement actors. Goodwin and Jasper (1999) famously referred to structuralism as ‘a winding snarling vine’ that weds social movement theory to forms of analysis that are tautological, inadequate or just plain wrong. Their argument suggested that structuralist analyses impose a kind of universalist straight jacket onto circumstances, processes and events that are both dissimilar and contingent. It is possible to detect echoes of both rationalism and structuralism in many of the major works on resource mobilization, political opportunity, and framing.

Mobilizing structures are described by Sidney Tarrow (1998: 123) as the various elements that ‘bring people together in the field’. Whilst there are innumerable factors that could help to cement bonds between individuals and groups in society, such as ideology, ritual, culture, collective memory or emotion, Tarrow (1998) focuses more specifically on models of organization, looking at the relative merits of hierarchical versus more horizontal membership structures within and between movements and non-profits. Other works in this area have tended to pay close attention to material factors like financial resources, size of pre-existing or overlapping membership bases (Zald and McCarthy 1979). The focus here is on the number of
bodies that make up an assemblage rather than the feelings or sensations of commitment, anger or hope that might be shared among them.

Most works on political opportunity have focused heavily on the structure of regimes and cohesion of elite politics. Tilly (2008: 179) argues that ‘regime openness, coherence of the elite, stability of political alignments, availability of allies, repression and facilitation, and [the] pace of change in those elements define [the level of] opportunity and threat for potential claimants’. Meanwhile, McAdam (1996) outlines the following four main dimensions of political opportunity: (1) the relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system; (2) the stability or instability of that broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity; (3) the presence or absence of elite allies; and (4) the state’s capacity and propensity for repression. However, these approaches largely overlook the mediating presence of different ideologies and belief systems as well as situated experiences – of classed, raced and gendered discrimination, for example – that can affect how political processes are perceived, how risks are calculated and how they are felt or internalized by different groups of actors. Also neglected in this literature are the ways in which the manipulation or transformation of physical environments themselves can affect the individual and group behaviour, variably invoking fear and mistrust or collectivity and confidence.

Neal Caren (2007) describes ‘framing’ as one of the ways that scholars have attempted to bring agency back into the conversation about social movements. Receiving the most thoroughgoing exposition by scholars Snow and Benford in the 1990s, the concept of ‘framing’ has been used to describe the ways that movement activists and leaders construct their actions and identities in order to draw support. Inspired by the work of the social theorist Erving Goffman, ‘framing’ describes different strategies that are pursued with the aim of reaching new audiences, galvanizing existing supporters and extending the resonance of protest demands. The success or resonance of a frame is said to rest on its measures of credibility and salience: Are the claims understood to be legitimate and do they have a basis in real world experience? How well do they match up with the priorities, values and ambitions of their target audiences?

To the extent that art within social movements has received attention from mainstream social movement scholarship, it has largely been under the rubric of framing, where cultural innovations and aesthetic practices have been understood as a part of conscious and rationalized strategies to mobilize support (Adams 2002). Interestingly however, even Goffman’s original discussion of what he termed ‘impression management’ reserved
a role for what we might call embodied behaviours or non-rationalized actions. As Goffman put it, ‘[s]ometimes the traditions of an individual's role will lead him to give a well-designed impression of a particular kind and yet he may be neither consciously nor unconsciously disposed to create such an impression’ (Goffman 1959: 6). The underlying takeaway for social movement theorists interested in manifestations of art that occur in and around sites of protest is that although art can evidently help to market, promote or resist a particular cause, not every animating and/or aesthetic action undertaken during processes of social mobilization is meticulously planned, or consciously executed.

Taken together, these criticisms demonstrate some obvious blind spots or omissions from mainstream social movement analysis as it relates to art within social mobilization. Quite notably, many of these gaps and omissions could be usefully addressed through a greater cross-fertilization of ideas and concepts drawn from practical aesthetics. The proposal for a keener ‘aesthetic sensibility’ in SMT, as articulated more fully below, can be seen as an added dimension in the wider emotional and cultural ‘turn’ that has been taking place in social movement studies, spearheaded by scholars such as James Jasper, Jeff Goodwin, Francesca Polletta, Bert Klandermans and Hank Johnston (see Johnston and Klandermans 1995; Jasper 1998, 2008; Goodwin et al. 2009).

An Aesthetic Sensibility for SMT?

The term ‘aesthetics’ comes from the Greek word ‘aesthesis’, which refers to sensory perception. Until very recently, the field of aesthetic inquiry in the Western philosophic tradition has been dominated by questions about beauty and taste in art. Aesthetic philosophers have been occupied with endeavours to derive standards and principles for making proper aesthetic judgements, based on the notion that the aesthetic constitutes an autonomous realm of value that should remain shut off from the social concerns, moral considerations and/or power relations that are encountered in everyday life. In this view, which has among its forebears seminal works such as Kant’s Critique of Judgement and Schiller’s On the Aesthetic Education of Man, artistic expression is understood to be, according to Kant, ‘purposive without a purpose’ (cited in Belfiore and Bennett 2008: 178). The value of art is not tied to any prior function; it is to be appreciated for its own sake.

However, this ‘autonomist’ view has increasingly been called into question. Aesthetic philosophers, including Noël Carroll (1996, 2001), have broken with tradition by arguing for the acknowledgement of multiple realms of value for
the arts. Moreover, in recent years, an increasing number of social scientists and art historians have taken up an interest in the ways that images and sounds work over individuals and collectivities to elicit responses that have implications for social and political practice. Hence, where some scholars still use the term ‘aesthetics’ to denote an autonomist reading, others refer to the aesthetic as a field of knowledge through which power and resistance can operate (Rancière 2004; Panagia 2009; Bleiker 2009; Bennett 2012). This more ‘practical’ understanding and application of aesthetics tends to underline the interconnection between art, image-making and the sociopolitical sphere, including the ways in which artistic expression, popular culture and embodied sensory encounters of various kinds interact with – even alter – the prevailing landscape of power and possibility.

Roland Bleiker’s Aesthetics and World Politics (2009) provides a useful starting point for thinking practically about aesthetics. In this book, he offers up a distinction between ‘aesthetic’ and ‘mimetic’ approaches to studying the social world (and in his case global politics). He uses the term ‘mimetic’ to describe research methodologies that aspire to represent events and processes as realistically and authentically as possible. Inspired by rationalist-positivist social science, these approaches attempt to act as a mirror unto the social world and come as close as possible to a singularity of truth and meaning. The trouble with such approaches is that there is a continuous impulse to try and close down on doubt and to clear up all ambiguity through research in order for us to tell a neat, linear and bounded tale – whether one of resistance or oppression, continuity or change. However, it is important to acknowledge what we may lose when we try to impose singular meanings on events and/or rationalize away the ambiguities. In the first instance, we remove the opportunity for the reader to participate actively in the creative process by drawing on her/his own stock of knowledge and experience to help understand phenomena. In the second instance, scholarly practices of storytelling become manifestations of power in themselves that can promote a single vision, standpoint or experience – at the expense of others.

For these reasons, Bleiker promotes a more nuanced aesthetic approach or sensibility for social scientists. Such an aesthetic approach entails a much higher level of sensitivity to what one sees and discovers in the world, including an alertness not just to one’s thoughts and cognitions but also to the intuitions and alternative forms of knowing that are generated when we experience an event or process. Hence, ‘aesthetics refers not only to practices of art – from painting to music, poetry, photography, and film – but also, and above all, to the type of insights and understandings they facilitate’ (Bleiker
These are the affects, feelings and embodied responses that we might not have quite the right words to pin down in our everyday language and discourse, and that remain somehow in excess of language and therefore always clouded in some level of ambiguity. To have an aesthetic sensibility then is to be attuned to the ways in which visual, aural, and tactile encounters with objects, spaces or indeed other bodies can engage the senses in ways that produce (political) effects. It is to tip the balance back towards the study of ‘affect rather than reason, judgement rather than fact, sensation rather than intellectualism’ (Moore and Shepherd 2010: 299) in order to generate a wider analytical and methodological toolkit. Crucially, aesthetic sensibility is to expand the territories of what we can know, and how we can know, about political events and processes.

Considering this theoretical debate with particular reference to the production and experience of street art, we can then think about a number of ways that an ‘aesthetic sensibility’ can revise and extend SMT. By paying closer attention to the expressive, embodied and performative elements of street art production and reception, it is possible to shed new light on sources and processes of individual transformation and wider political change.

Silhouettes, Stencils, and Aesthetic Sensibility: Argentina Revisited

This section extends two the vignettes that appeared at the beginning of the chapter. By offering further contextual information and analysis it endeavours to demonstrate how and in what ways an aesthetic sensibility aids our understanding of the dynamics and processes at play in these street art outpourings.

El Siluetazo

By the early 1980s small cracks had started to show in the machinery of the Argentina’s brutal dictatorial regime. From 1981, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo) – several of whom had themselves disappeared – had been calling on human rights organizations and others to participate in annual marches of resistance, which were also gaining increasing coverage abroad. In 1982, Argentina’s defeat to Britain in the Malvinas/Falklands War signalled a weakening of the regime and encouraged civil society actors to cautiously intensify their criticism of the dictatorship. Nonetheless, the climate was still one of severe repression and fear. Garreton (1992) explains that while ‘fear’ is inherent in human society and forms a fundamental part of the human psyche, within Latin America’s military regimes, authoritarian elements worked to cultivate a ‘politically
determined fear’, one that shaped not only the type of relation that existed between state and society but also between citizens and neighbours who came to distrust one another. This kind of fear was cultivated in a number of ways, including the use of outright violence, the insidious ‘removal’ of opposition members and sympathizers from society, veiled threats and hushed murmurings about clandestine torture centres as well as a total and suffocating silence around the fates of ‘the disappeared’. Fear was also reinforced through aesthetic and visual cues: unmarked Ford Falcons crawling menacingly along the roads; city plazas eerily devoid of celebration, collectivity, and voice; naked – sometimes mutilated – corpses washing up on the desolate banks of the Rio del Plata, where the mouth of the river meets the churning Atlantic.

In 1983, during the planning stages of their third annual march of resistance, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo received an unusual proposal from three visual artists: Rodolfo Aguerreberry, Julio Flores, and Guillermo Kexel. Sometime earlier, the three artists had come across a poster image by Jerzy Skapski, which had been featured in the 1978 edition of The Courier, an international magazine compiled by UNESCO. Skapski was a Polish artist whose work dealt with the theme and memory of the Holocaust. The poster in question placed 24 rows of human silhouettes of different sizes and shapes against a black background, together with the caption: ‘Every day at Auschwitz brought death to 2370 people, and this is the number of figures represented above. The concentration camp at Auschwitz was in existence for 1,688 days and this is the exact number of copies of this poster printed. Altogether some four million people died at the camp’. Aguerreberry, Flores and Kexel became captivated by the idea of scale that had been so exactingly articulated in Skapski’s work. And, similar to Skapski, they sought to devise visual representations that could call heightened attention to the staggering number of human bodies that had been fatally harmed in repugnant acts of political violence and genocide. One of the artists, Julio Flores, explains that ‘The objectives were to reclaim through representation, the lives of the disappeared […] to create a graphic that would shock the Government through its physical scale and its formal development, and to create something so unusual as to renew the attention of the media and cause a provocation that would last many days before leaving the streets’ (Flores 2004, cited in Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Rosario 2009).

Initially, the artists devised a work of enormous scale – the aim was to fill an exhibition space with hundreds, even thousands of life-sized silhouettes, as many as could fit – using visual spectacle to drive home the message of just how many individuals had been ‘disappeared’. They hoped to realize this
plan at an Esso Foundation-sponsored exhibition on ‘objects and experiences’ that had been planned in Buenos Aires (Longoni 2007). However, that event was eventually suspended due to the Malvinas/Falklands War. Failing to find an institution with either space or willingness to take on a work that called out the military in such dramatic, scalar fashion, the artists turned to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and appealed to them to help stage a public art intervention as a part of the Third Annual March for Resistance.

The Mothers agreed to help execute the planned intervention, but they also sought to enforce certain aesthetic and symbolic principles of their own. As an example, Longoni (2007) writes that the Mothers opposed the idea of placing silhouettes horizontally on the ground because these could be more readily associated with the image of death than life. For the Madres, the call for ‘aparece con vida’ (appearance with life) was paramount to their campaign. Since the regime had refused to release any information on the whereabouts or circumstances of those ‘disappeared’, there remained a trace of hope that some might be alive. For many of the women, this emotional and affective component was a vital ingredient to their struggle. The faint glimmer of possibility that their sons and daughters were alive was something that sustained them and compelled them to return to the plaza week after week even in the face of fear and repression. As one of the Mothers, Margareta de Oro, articulates in an interview with Josephine Fisher (1989: 156), ‘You only become conscious when you lose something. When the Mothers first met we used to cry a lot and then we began to shout and demand, and nothing mattered anymore except that we should find our children.’

Together, the three visual artists and the Mothers pre-prepared a large number of silhouettes on madera paper and collected paints, brushes and rollers. Not having full biographical details of all of those disappeared, nor the time to adequately personalize the images, the artists and Mothers opted to impose a certain aesthetic uniformity on the silhouettes. They created a life-sized stencil and then ran black paint over it, producing – initially – 1,500 identical silhouettes that might represent any one of the disappeared such as fathers, sons, daughters, friends, or neighbours (Longoni 2007; Longoni and Bruzzone 2008).

On 21 September, the artists and the Madres descended on the Plaza de Mayo with their materials. They began pasting up the life-sized figures on walls and gates and trees. They began producing more silhouettes on the

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4 In 1977, three of the founding members of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and two French nuns, who had supported the Mothers’ efforts were ‘disappeared’.
ground, hoping that others would join them. And so, they did. Within hours, ‘the Plaza turned into an improvised and gigantic workshop’ (Longoni 2007). The fervour of fellow activists, who had gathered for the march, as well as those of the passers-by exceeded their expectations by far. The initial plans to create uniform bodies were crushed by the spontaneous initiatives of members of the public, who adapted pre-prepared figures or traced new ones in order to better represent the physical traits of their own disappeared relatives. Longoni notes that Grandmothers who joined the march ‘pointed

Figure 4.1. First Siluetazo, 20-21 September 1983. Two silhouettes on an urban wall. The two silhouettes have identifying labels but the image is blurred and the names are hard to distinguish. Photograph courtesy of Edward Shaw.
out that children and pregnant women should also be represented [and so] Kexel tied a pillow to his stomach and his body profile was sketched for the silhouette. His daughter served as a model for the silhouette of a child. Babies were drawn freehand'. The workshop ran until the early hours of the next day, with children lending their bodies to be traced in representation of missing youngsters and adults cooperating to help one another represent the ‘absented’ bodies of their friends, colleagues, family members. The result was an unparalleled visual spectacle, which has since become inscribed in the collective memory of the nation through re-enactments and exhibitions (Godoy Vega 2014; Argentine Ministry for Education 2011).

Marking a temporary pause or break in the urban visual landscape and repressive atmosphere maintained by the regime, El siluetazo recaptured the public space of the Plaza de Mayo so powerfully that the action was repeated across other locations in Buenos Aires in the months to follow. This was at least partly due to the easy replicability of the silhouettes. However, the ubiquity of loss was also crucial in fuelling these ongoing actions. Longoni

Figure 4.2. First Siluetazo, 20-21 September 1983. Silhouette of a baby/toddler on an urban wall. This silhouette represents a child born in captivity, Carranza-Goites, born on 19 August 1976. Photograph courtesy of Edward Shaw.
(2007: 3) summarizes that *El siluetazo*’s ‘remarkable impact was due not only to its mode of production (the demonstrators lent their bodies for hundreds of artists to outline their contours, which in turn came to stand for each of the disappeared) but also to the effect achieved by the crowd of silhouettes whose voiceless screams addressed passers-by from the walls of downtown buildings the following morning’. Longoni here attributes a performative power to the silhouettes. They did not merely mirror or describe the prevailing political conditions. Rather the presence of these bodies had a constitutive force. As more and more people took up the opportunity to produce figures that represented their lost loved ones, the more that the true extent of state brutality revealed itself. Similarly, the more people that participated in the action, the more the others felt emboldened to do the same. In this way, *El siluetazo* went a long way towards breaking the pact of silent complicity with the regime, encouraging a widespread public acknowledgement of the atrocities of the Dirty War (1976-1983) and opening up political space for critique of the junta.

The artist Leon Ferrari, who participated in *El siluetazo*, reflects that the event was ‘formidable not only politically but also aesthetically’. He relates this to

> the number of elements that went into play: an idea proposed by artists, carried out by the masses without any artistic intention. It is not as if we got together for a performance, no. We were not representing anything. It was a production of what everybody felt, whose material was inside the people. It did not matter if it was art or not. (Ferrari, cited in Longoni 2007)

As Ferrari’s comments indicate, *El siluetazo* produced an unanticipated rupture of the strategic by non-rationalised sentiment. Beginning with a carefully planned protest action, silhouette production soon took on a life and course of its own, so much so that as Aguerreberry attested ‘within half an hour of reaching there we could have left the Plaza because we were not needed for anything’ (ibid.). Members of the public had taken ownership of the intervention and transformed it into something that more adequately served their immediate emotional needs. In as far as the action was carried out by the masses as an expression of ‘what everybody felt’ the episode was powerfully cathartic. Moreover, the event itself marked a sudden and dramatic turning point in public perceptions about the political environment, the balance of opportunities and threats for activism. The sudden outpouring of anti-regime sentiment helped to tip the general mood of suspicion and fear amongst *porteños*. The visual materialization of so
many bodies – of paper and flesh – on the streets signalled a newfound confidence among the populace. In so doing, it foreshadowed the restoration of democracy, renovation of public space. Most importantly, it hastened the end of the political and artistic asphyxia which had characterized the years of the Dirty War (Ryan 2017).

*El argentinazo*

The spectacular economic crisis which befell Argentina in 2001/2002 has received extensive academic and coverage and has been subject to much academic debate (see Levey et al. 2014). The root of that crisis can be traced back at least as far as the early 1990s and the policies adopted by President Carlos Menem and his minister for the economy, Domingo Cavallo. After decades of military rule, Menem had inherited a languishing economy. Between 1976 and 1989, GNI per capita had shrunk by more than 1% per year. Two bouts of hyperinflation and several banking collapses had destroyed domestic and international confidence in the peso. By the start of the 1990s, Argentines preferred to use US dollars for big purchases such as houses, cars, etc. The wealthy simply moved their assets abroad. As a way of remedying this situation and curbing capital flight and hyperinflation, Economy Minister Domingo Cavallo decided to peg the value of the Argentine peso to the dollar on a one-to-one basis. This move had the effect of stabilizing the currency, but it also limited the government’s scope to manage the economy in response to external events. Towards the late 1990s, Argentina found itself increasingly uncompetitive in some of its major export markets, but unable to devalue its currency as a solution. Falling export revenues were compounded by problems of government borrowing and overspend as well as rising costs of living, the latter of which resulted at least in part from the privatization of major utilities providers under Menem.

By 2001 Argentina had a huge external debt and few options for raising the necessary funds to service it. As news of the country’s precarious economic situation reached investors around the world, they promptly began pulling out their cash. Argentines did the same, withdrawing some $15 billion from the banks between July and November of that year. In order to stop the country’s banks from liquidating, Cavallo imposed a cap of $1,000 a month on domestic bank withdrawals. Known as the ‘corralito’, this ceiling dealt a deadly blow to smaller scale businesses and the informal service economy, which functioned primarily on cash-based transactions. With unemployment spiralling, limited access to cash for essential purchases and further austerity on the horizon, Argentines took to the streets in mass mobilizations up and down the country. These mass mobilizations were
collectively referred to as ‘El argentinazo’. A culmination of frustrations and anger on the part of ordinary Argentine citizens, the social mobilizations themselves articulated no concrete long-term political agenda or strategy. The rallying cry was the simple yet evocative: ‘Que se vayan todos’ (Throw them all out). It was an impassioned indictment of the entire political class.

As social tensions mounted in the latter half of 2001, the walls of Buenos Aires, in particular, became flooded with hastily graffitied inscriptions; spontaneous and fervent outbursts against the politicians: ‘Fuera políticos’ (Out, politicians) and ‘Fuera Congreso’ (Out, Congress). Others recalled previous failures of government to uphold the social contract: most poignantly, protestors invoked the memory and betrayal of the Dirty War with allusions to the year ‘1976’. Alongside these inscriptions, a series of stencilled images emerged in the urban landscape. Some stencillers, like the duo Vomito Attack, attempted to project a clear anti-capitalist/anti-consumerist message through their interventions. Their appropriation of the ‘Puma’ logo, shot with bullets and streaming with blood, is one example of this.

However, despite being repeatedly depicted as part of a ‘grassroots democratic movement’ (see Lyle 2007), the political cohesion, ideological unity and sense of purpose of other individual stencillers and stencil collectives was not initially all that clear. Several practitioners have attested that prior to the crisis they would not have considered themselves activists at all: ‘none of us were political activists. [In fact] none of us had ever really painted in the streets’ (GG, BSASSTNCL 2011, cited by Ryan 2017). Rather than identifying an explicit political aim, ideology or strategy, many of the stencillers instead allude to an engulfing energy or ‘mood’ that exploded during the crisis and took them outdoors to paint:

It was in the air. [...] You would see all the people in the streets and think I just have to do something. (GG, BSASSTNCL 2011, interview with the author)

I lived downtown and everything was happening all around me. [...] The City was in the mood. It was hot and no one had any money. (NN, cited by Lyle 2007)

In 2002, I started seeing on my way to work, one stencil, the next day another, and with each passing day it looked like the walls were made of mutating

5 Although it must be noted that these mobilizations later spawned forms of collective and horizontal organizing in abandoned factories, via neighbourhood assemblies and community kitchens/workshops (see Sitrin 2006, 2012).
colours. [...] I asked myself why people would do this [i.e. spend time and money painting pictures on the walls of the city]. [...] Without ever finding the answer to that question, I cut a stencil, I bought a spray can, and that night I went out to paint. (StencilLand 2011, interview with the author)

For many of the stencillers, a political position or consciousness is something that only emerged and crystallized during the process of making and doing street art. Through the practice of expression and experimentation with colours, themes, styles, and slogans, and through the course of interacting with other stencillers on the streets they have eventually formed more decisive political ideas and attachments. In this respect, it is fair to say that the process of street art production could play a role in the constitution of political identity and subjectivity.

Chandra Morrison (2008) similarly recounts interviews with Argentine stencil makers whose motivations to come out in the street were initially articulated in terms of a sensed need to produce, to actualize, to participate, or ‘to do something’ in wake of the crisis. This impulse to act and to actualize a ‘feeling’ through artistic expression is something ill-explained by reference to rationalist/structuralist modes of social analysis. As Sara Ahmed (2001: 11) highlights, emotions ‘do things’ both inside and outside of the body. Emotional encounters can ‘align individuals with communities – or bodily space with social space – through the very intensity of their attachments’. Artistic or aesthetic expression as an expression of feeling is one step in the mediation and emergence of these attachments; it becomes part of the process through which affective intensities are recognized as particular emotions and made socially or politically meaningful. Street art production within and against the backdrop of social mobilizations can therefore be understood as something more than a medium for conveying narrowly conceived and/or propagandist messages. Street art production can and should be understood as a psycho-social and performative process that can help individuals and communities to renew their social attachments and make sense of situations and phenomena.

Beyond the anti-consumerist messages of Vomito Attack, the subject matter of the stencils ranged from the ironic and playful to the surrealist and the absurd. In one stencil, ‘an image of the sinking Titanic appeared to link the prospects for the Argentine economy to that of the ill-fated ship. The accompanying phrase “se cayó el sistema” [the system is down] invoked the computer speak, often heard in Argentina’s banks as well as other service outlets where processing equipment routinely failed to operate, leading to long queues of hot, disgruntled customers’ (Lyle 2007, cited by
Ryan 2017). In another, the face of former US President George W. Bush was crowned with a pair of Mickey Mouse ears and accompanied by the slogan ‘Disney War’. In a similar mischievous style, StencilLand’s ‘El David’, translated Michelangelo’s statue of David the giant-slayer into a stencil and placed a kettle and gourd of yerba mate – a popular traditional tea drunk in Argentina – in his hands. The iconography of this stencil might be readily interpreted as an expression of Argentine national sovereignty vis-à-vis the ‘Goliath’ of the global capitalist system, the United States or international financial institutions. Yet, when questioned about his works, StencilLand refutes the idea that there is a fixed message or ideal ‘take away’:

[B]ehind each of my images is a much darker or twisted story. […] I do not intend to relay a message, I do not expect that the viewer ‘understands’ my ideas exactly; that is not my goal. The main target of my stencils is me. I enjoy the different stages of the process: sketching ideas in a notebook, taking a design from the PC, cutting the templates and then painting. Commonly this combination is what I enjoy. It may be the case that my work leaves a taste of dissent, but it is rather something internal, perhaps my own self-criticism [and] that is transformed into an ‘engine’ which brings me back to continue designing. (Author’s translation)

Running contrary to the more ‘mimetic’ analyses of collective action frames, which tend to suggest that political art will ‘resonate’ only if it delivers a clear and empirically verifiable message about an injustice of some kind, StencilLand gestures towards a deliberate ambiguity. The concept of ambiguity refers to an uncertainty of meaning in which several different interpretations of a word, phrase, event, image or composition are possible. The presence of ambiguity in street art is something that invites the viewer into the creative process. It encourages the viewer to look for some of the answers for them self. In so doing, it can not only engage the onlooker on an aesthetic level. It can also work in a full circle to foster and elicit critical thinking, helping to raise political consciousness without presenting the viewer with a ready-made political paradigm. In this respect, the use of playful, ambiguous stencils can be seen as a reflection of the profound depth of the political crisis embodied in the phrase ‘Que se vayan todos’. All the ready-made political paradigms had been trialled and failed. Street artists like StencilLand, through their interventions in the public space, called on citizens to break with existing repertoires and frameworks for understanding and rather offered them a cue to find new political and social meanings within and among themselves.
Conclusion

*El siluetazo* and *El argentinoazo* occurred in the same urban landscape of Buenos Aires, separated by nearly two decades during which the newly democratized political system in Argentina produced sequential governments committed to the neoliberalization of the economy. *El siluetazo* occurred during the final phases of the brutal Argentine dictatorship. It was prompted by artists’ and activists’ desires to confront and call attention to the scale of state-sponsored violence and the failure of the regime to uphold citizens’ fundamental rights. *El argentinoazo* meanwhile expressed a collective sense of indignation at an elite political class which had emerged from the ashes of the dictatorship, instituted harsh economic adjustments at the behest of the international financial institutions and ultimately steered the country into an intractable crisis. In both cases, there was an ‘outpouring’ of artistic and creative content in public spaces, lending a strong visual character and presence to the protests. In both cases, initial actions in Buenos Aires were followed by copycat actions in other major Argentine cities.

By revisiting these two episodes of street art ‘outpouring’, this chapter has attempted to demonstrate the pervasive political utility of street art over time and illuminate some of the analytical gaps and grey areas that exist within the extant scholarship on art, aesthetics and social mobilization. In particular, it aims to push beyond reductive rationalist accounts of the role of art in social movements, instead arguing for an approach that is better attuned to the complex and sometimes unpredictable interplay of affect and performativity that shapes the aesthetics of protest(s). This complexity is well evidenced in the example of *El siluetazo*. Here, a meticulous plan for a particular kind of action and visual output was distorted and amplified by the sheer intensity of collective desire for the reaparición (reappearance) of the disappeared. As activists produced more and more silhouettes, the true scale of state-sponsored terror began to materialize in an eerie visual form. Without words and without sound, the silhouettes’ presence served as a public and inescapably damning indictment of the junta. The collaborative mood fostered by those coming together to draw the silhouettes also played a role in shifting perceptions of danger attached to collective organization and political action. Thus, the episode as a whole can be regarded as a performative one, helping to erode the fear and suspicion that the military government had so effectively cultivated as a means of controlling the Argentine population and suppressing democratic practice. The more recent example of stencils produced in the aftermath of the 2001 economic crisis further revealed some of the indeterminacies and contingencies involved.
with the analysis of art in social mobilization. Interviews conducted with several of the most prominent stencillers of the period reveal a group whose political opinions were far from fully formed at the outset of the crisis but whose commitments were gradually constituted through expressive, creative and communicative acts involved with the production of stencils. Finally, exploring the work of StencilLand, the chapter also highlighted the unlikely utility of ambiguity within street art. Namely, the ways that surreal, playful juxtapositions can help to spur critical thinking and raise political consciousness without imposing a particular ideology or creed on the viewer.

References


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