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Julián Varas

Crowds: Depicting the Urban Event

Resonances of Gaspar Libedinsky's
Urban Performances_Buenos Aires



Street protests and celebrations in Buenos Aires have intensified to such extent that they can now be said to form an integral part of its fabric: possibly its most distinctive feature. These events are complete urban performances, affecting and directing the functioning of every component of the city: transport, police, fire service, health, planning, the environment, culture, and the economy.

Most of these urban performances concentrate on the city's major institutional squares:

- *Plaza de Mayo, opposite the Presidential Palace: where matters of national concern and political celebrations are held.*
- *Plaza de los dos Congresos opposite the National Congress building: used as demonstration space to demand that specific laws be dealt with.*
- *Plaza Lavalle opposite Tribunales (High Court): to demand justice.*
- *Plaza de la Republica / Obelisk: for sporting and other non-political celebrations.*

These spaces are regularly appropriated and activated on time throughout the week. There is no need for these events to be advertised. The city knows when to expect them to happen: Buenos Aires manifests itself through its daily demonstrations.

This 'intimate diary of the city' is accompanied by the 'installation' and 'operation' instructions of each one of these urban performances. A city-specific 'glossary' describes the terminology created and used within them. The analysis not only describes the terms which have already been created, but also defines new terminology to describe, under the studied circumstances, the specific performance and behavior of every urban component.

The project's three sections concentrate on:

- a - demonstrations that consolidated over the course of the last two decades = arguably, an effect of the restoration of democracy in the 80's;*
- b - public events that emerged more recently, in the context of Argentina's economic and political meltdown in the late 90's, and;*
- c - performances that are activated by cultural or sporting events, seemingly devoid of political content – currently being prepared.*

Welcome to Buenos Aires...

Gaspar Libedinsky studied architecture at the Architectural Association. He works in New York with Diller & Scofidio.

Julián Varas studied architecture and urbanism at the Universidad de Buenos Aires and the Architectural Association. He is an assistant with the Chair of Landscape Architecture, Prof. Christophe Girot at the ETH Zurich.





[FROM OBJECT TO EVENT-MACHINE]

A glance at the systems of representation conventionally adopted by urban practices reveals their dependence on the physical object, as far as the description of their *object of knowledge* is concerned. These systems are characterized by an idealization of stasis and the figural. Their ethos relies on a reverse conceptual alchemy that breaks down the “continuity of nature” into a subject-object-context triad: the subject possesses the rights to action and desire, the object is rendered inert by flattening its temporality, while the context bestows meaning on both. At the base of these idealizations lies the inability to construct genuine problems by “recognizing the natural articulations of the real”...

Obscure in this scene the shimmering figures of the Trinity and allow the diagram to emerge... A machinic assemblage is what is foregrounded when all three agents' luminance is dimmed. The attraction exerted by a mother's breast on a child's mouth is not essentially different to that exerted by a monument on a crowd, a saucepan on a spoon, or a public demonstration on a camera. These effects can only be properly described in terms of machines that are pulled together by an immanent desire, inclination or affinity...

On closer inspection, events and machines can be diagrammed alike. We shall argue that, in the face of an endlessly proliferating representational clumsiness, this operation is strictly necessary in order to reformulate our terms of engagement with the city: what the city is, and what it might become.

Saturday

Saturday: Christians concentrate around the Obelisk to celebrate the Jubilee 2000



[RE-ENGINEERING]

By questioning both the established identity of the city and the validity of the modes of representation through which it has been constructed, the project *Urban Performances_Buenos Aires* attempts to extract generative potential from the city's emerging forms of social organization. In its blunt initial proclamation it embraces the format (and allegedly seeks the effect) of a touristic brochure. But rather than insisting on the depleted repertoire of icons that its institutions have compiled laboriously, it tries to define a new palette of images, sensations, concepts. It engineers a new identity-machine. Unembarrassingly, it embraces tourism as the mode of inquiry that removes all traces of political and ideological residue from the event, thus staging it for consumption. By going beyond the event's ideological coating, the project not only exposes its true diagrammatics but is also able to carefully look at the devices through which traditional urban space is appropriated and reconfigured.





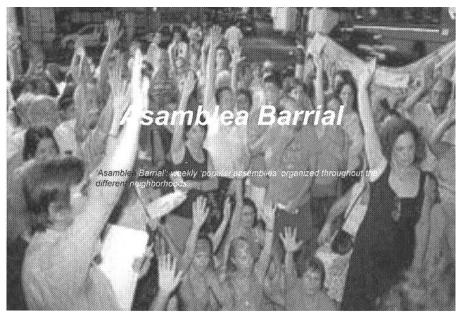
[SOFT-CONTROL]

Through persistent regularity (the Madres de Plaza de Mayo have been *performing* for more than 25 years), the events depicted here have become a feature that cannot be distinguished from the very essence of the city. Each performance is activated by a specific set of devices and activates, in turn, a whole series of responses from the urban infrastructure. Banners, loudspeakers, barricades, vans, mini-stage conditions, collapsible barriers, astonishing forms of music emanating from saucepans... some of the most frequent means for the crowds to assemble, be steered, communicate, distribute and be dismissed... Feedback begins with traffic jams, the spontaneous generation of nano - commercial activity, acts of minor felony... evolves into more barricades (palisades protecting bank from hostile mobs), police-force maneuvers, tear gases... crimes committed by those who are supposed to prevent them...

The streets and institutional squares of the city pulse with the beat of incredibly complex choreographies.

Monday

Monday: every Monday at 9.53 pm, since 1994, Memoria Activa concentrates next to High Court to demand justice



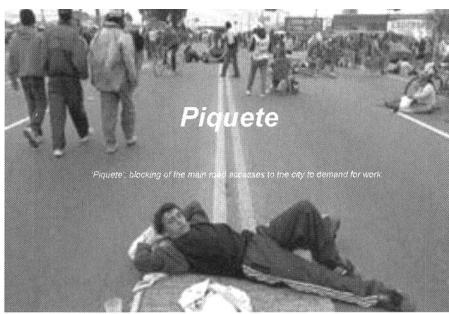
[DIDACTIC]

Unsatisfied with their recent conquest over brand new physical territories (the private balcony at the average petit bourgeois housing block, the local neighbourhood plaza and the bridges and highways leading into the city) the new patterns of public life in Buenos Aires enact a didactic illustration of the decalogue of complexity sciences. Robust forms of collective activity are self-assembled, organized, stabilized, intensified by positive feedback loops... Never-before-witnessed forms of public outcry would delight a roomful of mathematicians. Emitted almost in unison from a thousand independent sources, randomized compositions ridicule the most extravagant music experiments.

Over the course of time, bottom-up manifestations coagulate into hierarchical forms. Following turmoil, the relative horizontality of the original condition gives rise to renewed forms of direct political participation. Local leaderships emerge. Organizations coalesce. Formulae are launched...

Tuesday

Tuesday: "I suddenly find myself next to former president Menem. I touch his head, whilst falling down..."

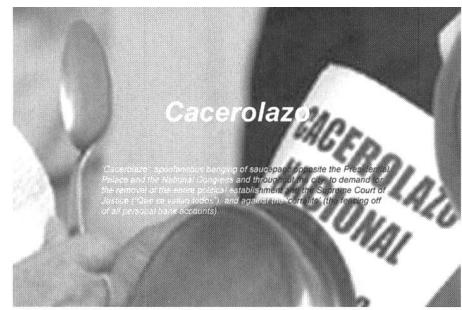


[LEXICON]

Each type of performance develops its own specific lexicon: The creation of a new language is needed in order to describe new phenomena. New words spread out with seeming spontaneity, soon to be captured and institutionalized by the media. Thanks to their infinite malleability, and the system's immanent opportunism, they become ubiquitous. Then, they acquire virtuality: *Cacerolazo* – a term coined only a year ago – returns hundreds of hits on an internet search. *Escrache*, a form of verbal lynching accompanied by graffiting and public humiliation exerted against persons or institutions, was developed as a response to the lack of condemnatory action on part of the legal system. *Piquete(ro)*, now a nationwide political movement, used to refer to the action of blocking major highways in order to disrupt the supply of goods to cities.

Wednesday

Wednesday: every Wednesday at 3 pm, since 1990, the pensioners concentrate next to National Congress to demand for an increase in their minimum benefit



[AFTER-LIFE?]

In relation to the form of the city, how do these performances *perform*? What are their durations? How do they get imprinted on their base? How do they die? Or, more precisely: How do they enter a new (longer-lasting) kind of life? It seems that over the period of their formal existence their impact on the city is ephemeral. Because the mineral substrate on which they unfold has a slower rhythm of change, it is difficult to forecast the ways in which it will index these novel processes. Will they become stiffened and engender new monuments? After they extinguish, will they generate new plazas, universities (this is already the case), theme parks, infrastructure, emptiness? At what scales will they resonate? Looking at it from a cybernetic perspective, it is nonsense to make a categoric separation between *actors and stage*. What we see as *the events and the set*, are in fact part of a large interconnected network where they communicate with each other (through stimulations occurring in both signs and in every direction) as much as they dissolve into a multiplicity of intersecting envelopes.



Escrache

Escrache: 1- against binds, weekly procession throughout the city's financial districts, hammering and grinding the facades of the banks and other transnational corporations, in protest against political and physical attacks on politicians, either in their own homes or in the streets. Some politicians have changed their look in order to make it more difficult to be recognized.

[EXCURSUS]

While almost any form of human agglomeration today can be likened to a city, hardly the same thing can be said about the Urban condition. If, in the end, there still exists a function for art in the context of what we call "Urbanity", it will probably need to exceed the idea of Art as added value. As it appears to us, the growing number of value-adding pieces that lie scattered strategically out there, pale in insignificance when compared to the power released by the city itself when it manifests its anxieties, its euphoria or its vitality.

Let's not fool ourselves about the status of Art. Let's not confine it to representation, to the object, to the image; let's not even think of it as a practice, let's not oppose it anymore to the utilitarian, let's rescue it from the hands of old mysticisms – and perhaps we will create a new mystique... To the bureaucratic idea that Art will make cities better places to inhabit, we should oppose that of Urbanism as Art. Art as a qualitative economy – that pertains to any kind of practice without being in itself a specific practice. As that which consolidates in the process of making things, in our capacity to technically engage their production, in our obstinacy.

Whether this shift in our conceptual circuitry will help the art of urbanism become more essential, is perhaps one of the most interesting questions that we would like to see proved.

Friday
Friday: since 1997, the National Union of Teachers concentrates and lives in a White Tent installed opposite the National Congress to demand for an increase in their salaries