

BUENOS AIRES: MEMORY AND FUTURE OF THE POLIS

by Juan Canela

A journey around different exhibitions and art projects in Buenos Aires illuminates memory's crucial role in the articulation of the polis and underscores the necessity for recollection in the production of new scenarios for the future

My 2014 starts in Buenos Aires, Argentina, the second largest city in the southern hemisphere with twelve million inhabitants, where I've been living for a couple of months doing a curatorial research residency. I'm writing this text fighting with high temperatures and electricity blackouts, enjoying my first summer Christmas. While touring the city streets on the zappy *colectivos*, I've met art practitioners and artists, and visited exhibitions and project spaces. During this time, I've been looking for a suitable project to write about for this issue of *South as a State of Mind*, which is dedicated to the polis. The connection came naturally when I acknowledged something often in the air in cities like Buenos Aires. On the one hand there is the will to reflect and re-think the memory of the polis; on the other, an attempt to imagine and build new possibilities for the future.

Memory was a crucial element in the ancient Greek notion of the polis. Mnemosyne was known as the muse who had the capacity to remember, so she hoarded up all the memories of the group and kept them so as to preserve their identity. In that sense, memory overflows from the individual and becomes an inherent quality of the human community. It functions as a cohesive force within society. Therefore, memory has always had a political character, because the organisation of a society's memory is established through its living conditions. It is not surprising then, that memory plays a major role in contemporary political scenarios.

Argentina has a tumultuous history, as is the case with other Latin American countries. There was a period of political turmoil and military dictatorship that lasted until 1983. A concern for memory has arisen in recent years, as has an insistence on not forgetting and being aware of victims. Of course, it is not easy to deal with these memories, and political parties use them in one way or another. But still, this is a praiseworthy process, which I miss, for example, in Spain.

In 2007 the Memorial Park and Memorial Monument to the Victims of State Terrorism was opened in Buenos Aires. It is a large public space located close to Río de la Plata. There is a huge structure dedicated to victims of state terrorism, as well as other sculptures and an exhibition space. When I visited, I saw an exhibition curated by Inés Kazenstein and Javier Villa called: *Aquella mañana fue como si recuperara si no la felicidad, si la energía, una energía que se parecía mucho al humor, un humor que se parecía mucho a la memoria (That morning was as if I recovered if not the happiness, but the energy, an energy which seems a lot to humour, a humour which seems a lot to memory)*. The exhibition displayed works by artists born in the 1970s and 1980s, who experimented with ways of relating to history so as to escape both the expressionism and po-

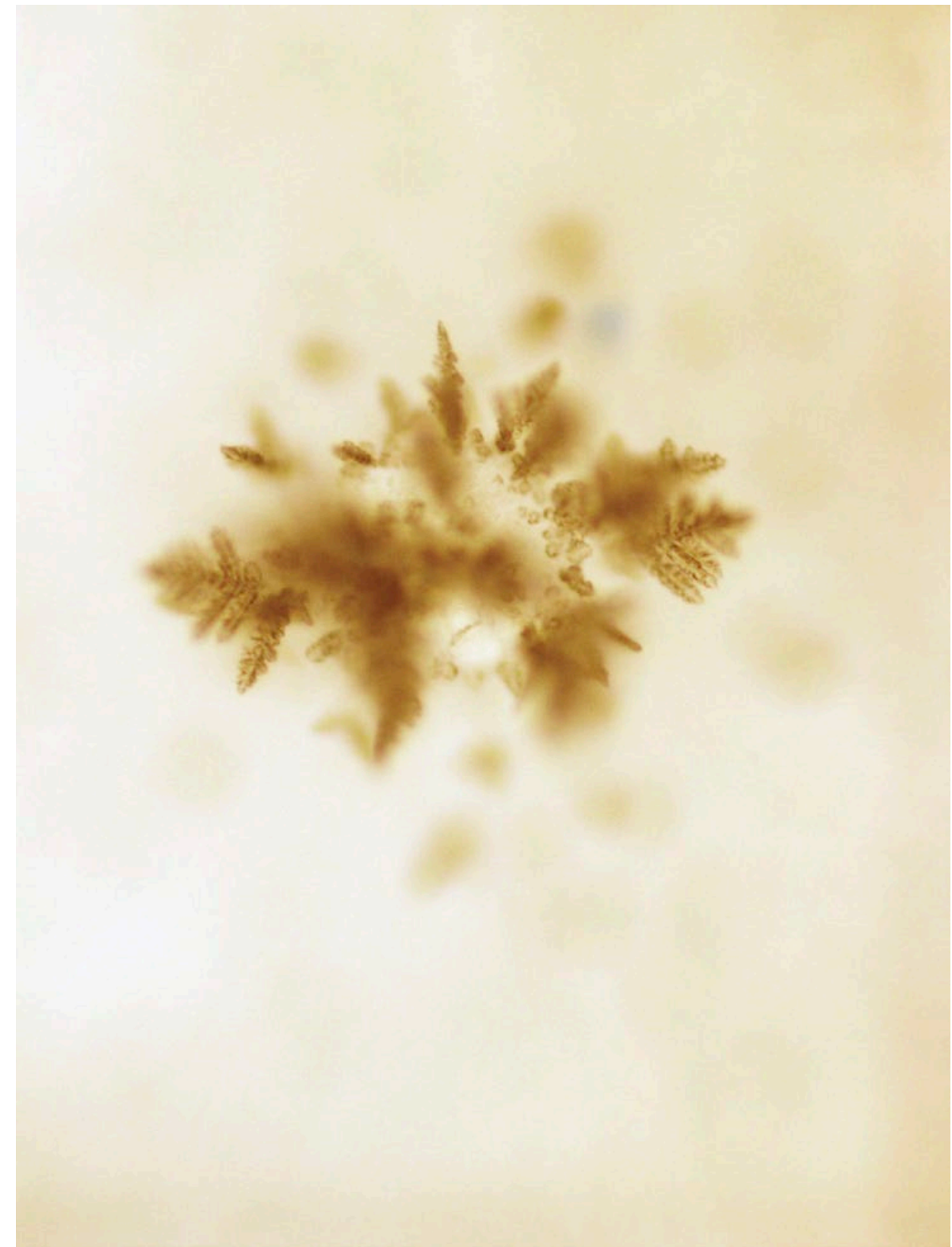
litical conceptualism that had dominated the aesthetic discourses on state terrorism. Taking its title from a Roberto Bolaño tale and the context of the monument as a departure point, the exhibition conceived memory as a vital energy that, like neuronal synapses, is in constant motion. It is an energy that exceeds the past, but also projects itself into the future.

For example, Osias Yanov's work *I<>I<* consisted of an iron structure that functioned as a bar from which a dancer worked. The dancer exemplified form and emptiness, lines and volume. The project – half-sculpture, half-performance – suggested that the monument could be conceived as an active scaffolding that entered into dialogue with an alert body, which was in turn challenged by that body.

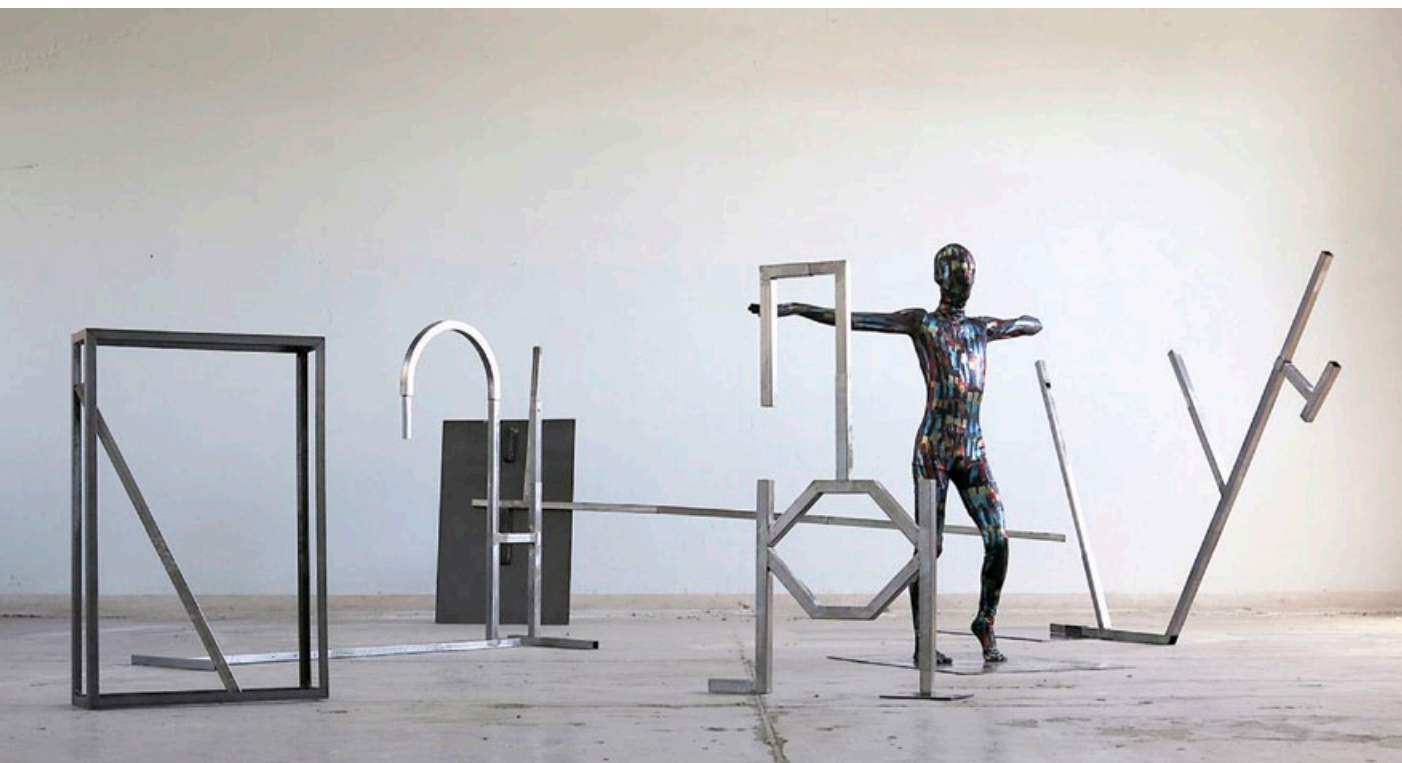
Outside the exhibition space, besides the river, I found a strange artefact. It was a part of *Tratamiento homeopático del Río de la Plata* (Homeopathic Treatment of Río de la Plata), a work by Eduardo Navarro. On the premise that the heavily contaminated river is a sensible organism, he proposed a homeopathic treatment for it based on the power of intention. After all, if there is no certainty that homeopathy may affect such a large volume of water, the possibility of healing it remains in the hopefulness of the act. Perhaps people, when they see the process, could reinterpret how they related to the river.

The exhibition also displayed works by Luis Garay, Carlos Huffmann, Irina Kirchuk, Martín Legón, Lux Lindner, Belén Romero Gunset, Axel Straschnoy, Marcela Sinclair, Cecilia Szalkowicz, and Gastón Pérsico and Santiago Villanueva.

Downtown, near the emblematic Plaza de Mayo, where mothers of the past dictatorship's missing people have been protesting for over thirty-six years, Pablo Bronstein and Amalia Pica presented works at the Ignacio Liprandi Gallery. These established a dialogue between two different ways of addressing memory and history. Pica's $A \cap B \cap C$, a performative manifestation of *Venn Diagrams (Under the Spotlight)* first presented in 2011 at the Venice Biennale, investigated censorship. Models such as Venn diagrams were banned during the Argentinian dictatorship. Pica speculates that this was because they enabled the representation of cooperation as a concept. The set of sculptures that the artist showed at the Ignacio Liprandi Gallery were based on the black and white documentary photographs of a previous action, where a group of performers picked up geometric perspex shapes and made them into a composition in front of an audience. Being an exercise in subjectivity – since Pica had to imagine the colours of the shapes banned during the dictatorship – the work told stories of rising and falling utopias. These were memorials to ephemeral mo-



Eduardo Navarro - Microfotografía de cristal de agua - Tratamiento homeopático para el Río de la Plata. Aquella mañana fue como si recuperara si no la felicidad,...
The Memorial Park, Buenos Aires, 2013

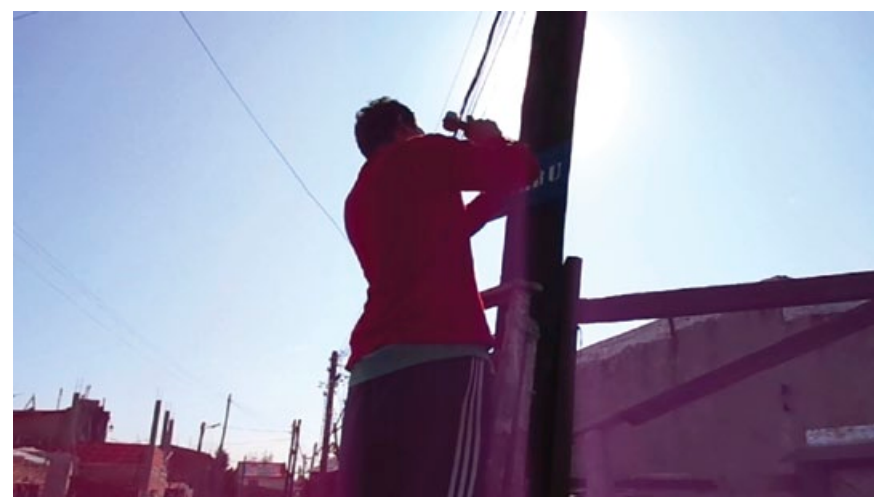


Osias Yanov
I > I < . Aquella Mañana
 Fue Como si Recuperara
 si no La Felicidad
 The Memorial Park, Buenos
 Aires



ABTE - Agrupación Boletos Tipo Edmondson
 Quince Años de Cultura Ferroviaria Abte
 MAMBA, Buenos Aires
 Photo by Jorge Miño

Liliana Maresca
 Mapeos, 2014
 secondary project, Buenos Aires



ments, to episodes and images that lasted only seconds. However, they were also memorials to models that represented – and created – cooperation between individuals.

Pablo Bronstein's *Trojan Horse* (2003), in contrast, transported the viewer to ancient Troy to dismantle the mythical horse of the ancient story and display its contradictions: in shape it resembled an equestrian monument but it unexpectedly hid a military function.

Another exhibition that stood out focused on Argentina's industrialisation. Titled *ABTE (Edmondson tickets group): 57 x 30,5 mm. Fifteen years of railway culture ABTE*, this was an unconventional show for the Museum of Modern Art Buenos Aires, and perhaps signalled a new direction. MAMBA reopened last year with Victoria Northoon as director and a completely new team. The exhibition brought together fifteen years of research focusing on the development of the railways. The exhibition aimed to bring ABTE artefacts to the public and, at the same time, illuminate particular moments of railway history in Argentina.

At the Museo La Ene, an independent and active space, Francisco Lemos curated *Lo bello, luego lo terrible* (The beautiful, Then the Terrible). This was a curatorial essay about the artistic context of Buenos Aires in the 1990s. The exhibition reflected on the past to make the present dynamic, understanding the 1990s as an affective period where different artistic proposals on 'the new' in the artistic scene converged. And clearly, La Ene is one of the spaces where 'the new' is happening today. In many respects an artistic project, *Le Ene* is re-thinking the artistic institution in 2014, within the context of Buenos Aires.

But of course, if we are to think about 'the new' we have to talk about artistic education. *Uno solo y varios lobos* (One and several wolves) was the final exhibition of the Artist Program at Instituto Di Tella. This is an annual course for young artists and curators, bringing together international and local visitors, work presentations and collective processes aimed at providing students with the tools to develop as professional artists. The exhibition – as well as the course itself – took the topic of 'alternative communities' as its inspiration. Organised by the group of curators who par-

ticipated in this year's Artists Program, the exhibition took as its starting point the tension between the desire for communion and the desire to escape as the basis for alternative communities. Overall, the exhibition explored isolated architectures, spontaneous communities and different social rites inscribed into the ordinary. The different works explored ideas of the individual and collective, the artistic and curatorial, and tackled notions of production, reflection, collaboration and utopias, as well as code sharing and system leaks.

I left the Di Tella neighbourhood to view the future through the eyes of the youngest members of the polis. The Liliana Maresca Secondary School Project aims to develop an educational programme focused on the visual arts for a public secondary school in La Cava de Villa Fiorito, a shantytown in Lomas de Zamora. The programme empowers community members through the production of collective works that are born from the neighbourhood's identity and particular – and very immediate – problems. The collective's current members operate not just as educational advisors to the school's authorities, but also as practitioners and educators, integrating visual arts methodologies into the general curriculum. These methodologies seek to develop students' perceptions both as spectators and producers of visual culture, and to foster critical thinking and creative solutions for difficult everyday situations. The artists establish relationships with artistic institutions and alternative art spaces, organise visits to museums, art centres and art fairs and invite artists and art professionals to lecture at the school. The collective – invited to participate in the 2013 Istanbul Biennial – also organises art exhibitions featuring renowned artists, staged in hallways and classrooms, using their work as teaching material for academic subjects.

In my journey around different art projects and exhibitions in Buenos Aires over the last few months, it has become evident to me that memory is not only essential for the articulation of the polis, but also for the creation of new scenarios for the future. Perhaps art can provide us with the tools to revisit discarded and rejected historical narratives, allowing us to look at history with different eyes?