

DOUBT-FILLED REFLECTIONS ON THE MONUMENT

Carlota Beltrame

What is a monument?

Let us begin with the origin, finding out what the word refers to so that, if possible, we may later open up its meaning. The dictionary states:

monument: (Lat. *monumentum-monere*: to warn) Construction, statue, inscription, or sepulcher in memory of an important figure or a heroic or meritorious action. (...) Object or document of utility for history. Scientific, artistic, or literary work that becomes memorable for its great merit (...)¹

From this incomplete definition, we conclude that it is a three-dimensional piece that commemorates an extraordinary person and/or event. But the dictionary is never right, for we quickly notice that this poor definition leaves out the entire symbolic structure that surrounds the monument since, as we know, its logic is traditionally linked not only to sculpture but to the pedestal on which it rests. In effect, a sculpture/monument is a commemorative representation that sits in a specific place and speaks to us in a symbolic language, producing a kind of "marking" with its imposing vertical position and its allegorical figuration, always on a pedestal that also operates as an active signifier, as a vector pointing toward a world of lofty, sublime, eternal, universal, and transcendent ideas that have nothing to do with the everyday. Thus, whatever is being commemorated must be translated into signs easily decodable by citizens, so that it can not only be contemplated without difficulty but must always be erected in an urbanized and public site.

The pedestal, then, contributes to elevating the sculpture itself, optimizing its visibility, but also its symbolic placement above the citizens and in a prominent spot within the urban layout. In this way, the monument always poses a power relationship between the values it represents (which usually embody those of the State) over the values of the subaltern ordinary people.

Now, we know that cities are the expression of an order fundamentally dictated by the economy; it is not for nothing that during the neoliberal fever of the 1990s, we Tucumans saw the old stately mansions of Yerba Buena converted into commercial ventures of various kinds, so that

¹ *Diccionario enciclopédico Quillet*. Volume six. Editorial Argentina Arístides Quillet, S.A. Buenos Aires. 1967.

not only the covered surface but its generous parks and gardens became a vital part of that first-rate productive speculation. All this happened while a minority of the enriched new bourgeoisie sheltered behind the walls of their *countries* and the tinted windows of their imported trucks. As a counterpart, a large segment of dramatically impoverished Tucumans also retreated to swell the periphery with their precarious houses, always surrounded by garbage.

We know, however, that the inequality gap was already long-standing when it received its coup de grâce in 1968, when eleven sugar mills were closed by order of the Minister of Economy Jorge Salimei². Thus, not to mention the entire province, the hybrid and amorphously damaged profile of our capital city, over the years, ended up becoming a clear demonstration of how much the codes of urban coexistence can deteriorate, in which the disappearance of many of its monuments has been but one of its symptoms. Even if only in a bird's-eye view, let us analyze this last statement.

If the physical map of a city is conditioned by its economy, the monument is dictated by politics. Thus, the exercise of state vanity signified by the construction of public spaces and commemorative monuments in our city had been suspended almost since the time when the revered *Generación del Centenario* built and adorned our walkways with sculptural casts brought directly from the workshops of Paris. However, there was an exception during the last dictatorship, when under the mandate of the genocidal Antonio Domingo Bussi, the design, construction, and placement of monuments to Tucuman heroes were carried out in a manifest link with the political. Indeed, if with the *Generación del Centenario* it was clear that Tucumán was thought of with its back turned, looking toward France and ancient Greece and Rome; in the second case, it was the imposition of values attributed to the "true" founders of the homeland, presented as diametrically opposed to those wielded by the militant youth of the 1970s.

Jacques Rancière says that "as collective practices, politics and art have the power to institute a different time and space"³. Perhaps the monument is the genre of visual arts that best

² In the conference titled "*Citizen Encounter with Naomi Klein*" held in Santiago de Chile on April 29, 2008, the famous Canadian journalist asserted that that country was the laboratory for a fundamentalist liberalism that led to the bloody dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in 1973. However, in Argentina, during the *de facto* government of General Juan Carlos Onganía (1966-1970, followed by Generals Marcelo Levingston and Alejandro Lanusse until 1973), the neoliberal experiment had begun five years earlier and its test balloon was "*Operativo Tucumán*" carried out in my province. It originated with the closure of eleven of its sugar mills, leaving 250,000 people unemployed out of the just over 500,000 who constituted its entire population. The effects of that terrible blow can still be observed, which, followed by those of "*Operativo Independencia*" perpetrated during the last dictatorship, devastated the precarious Tucuman economy.

³ Jacques Rancière. *El malestar de la estética*. 2011. Capital Intelectual. Buenos Aires.

reflects this assertion, since its undisguised presence brings us here and now a time already lived by history, while its always public quality confronts us with the political. I do not believe there are difficulties in understanding this if we take, for example, a piece such as the *Monumento a Juan Bautista Alberdi* by Lola Mora.



Lola MORA
Monumento a Juan Bautista Alberdi
Carrara marble and onyx.
1904

In this sculptural group made of Carrara marble and onyx plates—composed of the hero, an allegory of the republic, another of music, and an angel—it is not difficult to notice the allusion to those lofty, sublime, transcendent, universal, and perennial values we spoke of, which dwell in the world of Platonic ideas. The operation is clear and goes beyond the allusion to those exemplary values, for in order for the political to operate in its fullness, the placement of the piece that refers to them in a public space must be realized, so that the profane gaze of the common man may be challenged.

But what happens with current art, indifferent both to Platonic archetypes and to that capacity for *mimesis* that postulates the possession of manual skills we so celebrate in Lola Mora? Is it possible for the political to emerge in the face of such apathy? What has happened to the semantic implications we once attributed to "the political" and which we clearly distinguished not only in Lola Mora, but in Juan Carlos Iramain or Ángel Dato, for example, so formally distant from

the experiences we witness today? We face an apparent contradiction because, when we see pieces like "*Homenaje al ságuche de milanesa*" by the Tucuman artist Sandro Pereira, we do not necessarily discover immediately the place from which the author speaks to us, nor what he is aiming at with this work in a caricature tone. So, why would this piece imply a political action charged with ideology? Ernesto Laclau says, citing Slavoj Žižek⁴, that due to its imperialist expansion, ideology perished by emptying itself of content; that is: if everything was ideological, nothing was. However, he also affirms that it is possible to return to the plane of the ideological from the simple fact that every artistic operation in the realm of "real" reality becomes ideological, and also political, through a paradoxical inversion.



Sandro PEREIRA
Homenaje al ságuche de milanesa (Homage to the Milanesa Sandwich)
Polychromed epoxy putty on expanded polystyrene.
2.10 x 1.60 x 1.60m
2000
Cambiaso Collection

In this way, it is clear that furtively placing a work in public space constitutes a political act *per se*, even more so if this piece is a caricatured self-portrait that Sandro Pereira placed on its

⁴ Ernesto Laclau. *Misticismo, retórica y política*. 2002. Fondo de Cultura Económica. Colección popular N° 605. Buenos Aires.

pedestal on Avenida Soldati in San Miguel de Tucumán, known locally as the Avenue "of the heroes."



Two sculptural examples from Avenida Soldati in San Miguel de Tucumán, also locally known as the "Avenue of the Heroes" (1976–1980).

Once this operation is clarified from the perspective Laclau points out, the ideology and political action immanent in Pereira's well-known piece become unquestionable. It is interesting at this point to review the dream of social emancipation of which contemporary art has been accused, especially in our country during the 1990s. Regardless of the fact that, following the 2001 crisis, the "spirit of the times" produced conceptual shifts in Argentina's artistic production, it is evident that current art attempts a reconciliation between the Platonic worlds of archetypes and the "sensible world" that acquired primacy starting from that emblematic object called "Fountain"⁵, which did not point toward anything lofty, sublime, transcendent, universal, or perennial. There is, however, an intermediate position, as many contemporary artists who do not believe in archetypes do echo the Platonic operation of making reference with their pieces to aspects external to the work itself, though also belonging to the sensible world. It is not, then, a celebration of truth, beauty, and goodness (*virtue*, in short), but of B-class objects that refer to B-class realities.

⁵ I refer to the world-famous work by Marcel Duchamp, consisting of a urinal, a rectified ready-made with which the artist revolutionized the art world in 1917.

Let us move even closer in time to observe how the recently restored "*Monumento al Dr. Manuel Belgrano*" by Francisco Cafferata dialogues with the piece by contemporary artist Florencia Vivas, installed in the same Tucuman square where, since 1904 and by order of President Julio Argentino Roca, the former has been placed.



Francisco CAFFERATA
Monumento al Dr. Manuel Belgrano
Patinated bronze
1904



Florencia VIVAS
Imagen de la Batalla de Tucumán (Image of the Battle of Tucumán)
Stainless steel cutout
6m x 2.50m

2012

(The final drawing is executed in digital format, using AutoCAD, which allows for its reproduction and the substitution of parts).

It is clear that Cafferata's work, like Lola Mora's "*Alberdi*," presents itself as vectors that, from the height of their marble pedestals, point toward the Platonic virtue that dwells in the intelligible world. Florencia Vivas's bas-relief, on the contrary, does not even reach the height of a child and, faithful to the Duchampian wake, allows itself to be contaminated by the sensible world, which deconstructs not only the concept the artist works with but the very material with which every monument was traditionally built. In effect, marble has been replaced by cement, bronze by stainless steel, and naturalist representation by the style of a comic strip. Each of these formal mutations alludes to a different conceptual perspective, though perhaps the most notable and irreverent change is the submission of the eye to the forced contemplation of an iridescent image that operates as background and figure alternately, thus suggesting a mutation of History into histories.



Florencia VIVAS

Imagen de la Batalla de Tucumán (Image of the Battle of Tucumán)

2012

A radical antecedent in this Foucaultian conception of the monument is, in my view, Thomas Hirschhorn's homages to Georges Bataille, Baruch Spinoza, or Gilles Deleuze, made with

cardboard and packing tape in clear reference to the spontaneous popular offerings made in many cities around the world⁶.



1



2

Thomas HIRSCHHORN
Deleuze Monument (details 1 and 2)
Avignon, 2000

However, Paul Ricœur tells us: "memory is no place that can be visited"⁷. This lapidary phrase seems to shatter any pretension of accounting for the past, whether glorious or fateful. For this thinker, a monument is not exhausted in memory but also has the task of helping to understand, "recovering the perception of the hesitations, ambivalences, and failures that include the attempts of a people to orient themselves and decide"⁸, thus moving beyond the traditional monument's tendency to attribute to itself a closed and unequivocal sense eternally referred to the past.

⁶ The reference cited by Hirschhorn was the enormous piles of flowers left by people at both the site of the accident that cost the life of Lady Diana Spencer in 1997 and in front of Buckingham Palace.

⁷ Paul Ricœur. Hay que volver a encontrar lo incierto de la historia. 1999. Internaciones. Revista Humboldt N° 127.

⁸ Ibidem.



Jorge GUTIÉRREZ Agosto, mes de los vientos (August, Month of Winds)
From the series Barricadas invisibles (Invisible Barricades)
Photograph
2002

As in many cities in our country and Latin America, at the beginning of this century, Tucuman artists responded to the economic crisis and the State's disinvestment with actions that involved the public "thing" (*res publica*) more than public space. Much has been studied⁹ about them, so I now wish to focus attention on the work of artist Jorge Gutiérrez, often carried out with members of the collective "La Baulera" under his charge. Under the influence of that French philosopher and anthropologist whom we read with rapture, Gutiérrez conceived the idea of the "non-failure," in reference to those actions born of the agonizing effort to move forward despite contradictions (I am thinking of the teacher of *Shunko*¹⁰, who every year stubbornly planted little trees in the salt flats of Santiago del Estero). Thus, Gutiérrez's "non-failure" entailed the idea of history understood in a less moralizing way than how it was conceived in antiquity, because it

⁹ See *Imágenes, relatos y utopías. Experiencias y proyectos en el arte contemporáneo argentino* (2002) and *La red como lugar común. Estrategias de participación y cooperación en proyectos de artistas contemporáneos en Argentina* (2003), both publications of TRAMA. Programa de cooperación y confrontación entre artistas, with the sponsorship of the Fundaciones Espigas, Antorchas, FunCEB, Centro de Estudios Brasileños, DOEN (Netherlands) and Organización de Estados Iberoamericanos (OEI). Also *Shifting Map. Plataformas de artistas y estrategias para la diversidad cultural* (2004), RAIN's Artists Initiatives Network, Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten Amsterdam. Finally, *Manual Tucumán de Arte contemporáneo. Hacia la comprensión de nuestro arte en el siglo XXI*, subsidized by the Fondo Nacional de las Artes, the Ente Cultural de Tucumán, and the Consejo Federal de Inversiones (C.F.I.), 2010, authored by myself.

¹⁰ In reference to *Shunko*, a novel by the Argentine writer, teacher, and scientist Jorge W. Ábalos, published in 1949, which constitutes one of the classics of Argentine literature and has been frequently used as a reading book in our school system. Its theme, the relationship between a Quechua-speaking child from Santiago del Estero and his teacher from the big city, relates both to the discrimination and marginalization of indigenous people in Argentina and to a more democratic vision of the educational process, in which both teacher and student teach each other, learning from one another.

included uncertainty. Indeed, that artist, alone or with the collective he directed, created works that, commemorating everything and nothing, everyone and no one, were placed in public space, vindicating the utopian gesture as part of daily life, influenced by the context and therefore intimately linked with the political.

As a hopeful and subtle way of restoring a future to a society that felt stripped of it, "Agosto, mes de los vientos" (August, Month of Winds) is a piece that shares its genealogy with that of the monument because, working with the same categories, it deconstructs history, memory, heroic actions, the hero, Platonic archetypes, virtue, the notion of authorship, artisticity, and even the pedestal. Indeed, the "marking" of the precarious kites that have stopped their flight, running aground among the cables, postulates a displacement from the "*objet trouvé*" to the "*voyeur trouveur*"¹¹ because it demands not only the finding of the pieces but the construction of new meanings around those categories to rediscover the utopian potential of the history of everyday men and women which, although apparently thwarted, never ceases to consume itself.

Conclusion

Riskily, I have traversed the more or less recent history of my city and its urban project to assemble my own version, quite far from that of the dictionary, of what a "monument" might be in the 21st century, when nothing constitutes an unalterable value anymore. The selection of examples makes visible the path that takes them from full and unequivocal objectivity (Lola Mora) to their extreme polysemic precariousness (Jorge Gutiérrez), thus facilitating my conclusion that the monument is composed not so much by its almost indissoluble bond with sculpture, but by its intimate link with the public and the political. The monument, then, is a relationship, a bond with memory/history, more than a three-dimensional object per se.

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¹¹ Mónica Herrera. *Decoy for an Andean Condor* (2011). *ramonaweb*, visual arts magazine.
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