

THE JOKER DOESN'T LIKE MUSEUMS

In the first version of the *Batman* movie directed by Tim Burton, the character of *The Joker*, played by Jack Nicholson, enters a museum with his henchmen to destroy all the works of art. While playing and dancing, he razes both classical and modern works, sparing only a piece by Bacon. The previous scene showed The Joker giving a humorous kick to Degas's *Little Dancer of Fourteen Years* (1880-1881), a symbol of the clumsy, unconscious, but tender grace typical of puberty—from, of course, the collective vision of the bourgeois class of its time. In contrast, the work of Francis Bacon (1909-1988) focuses on the problems of man and his loneliness, the absurdity of existence—an ideology he knew how to express in a brutal way using aggressive and often contrasting colors. He utilized extreme physical deformations, whose haunting and distressing character is accentuated through the use of subjective, expressionistic, and cinematographic viewing angles.

In the aforementioned film, the metaphor of the triumph of the ugly over the beautiful or, if one prefers, in a deeper and more encompassing way, the triumph of chaos over cosmos, is perfectly achieved. Let us establish then, based on this, the relationship I suggest with our immediate reality, so far removed from the glamorous film sets of Hollywood.

In 1997, our humble *Museo Provincial de Bellas Artes "Timoteo Navarro"* closed for six years¹ due to the senseless disposition of former General Bussi, twice governor of this punished province, who paradoxically had inaugurated it in 1977 in the presence of the then-president General Jorge R. Videla. Let us look next at some paradoxes in the history of the visual arts museum of Tucumán, whose path I will briefly review.

PARADOX 1: The institution now known as the *Museo Provincial de Bellas Artes "Timoteo Navarro"* was created in 1916 as a result of efforts made by the then-provincial University of Tucumán. Naturally, it possessed no heritage of its own, so its first director, Juan Heller, requested the *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes* to loan many of its works, which remained in our province for years. Nevertheless, the nation gradually reclaimed them until the last piece, *El voto* by Michetti.

The leadership of the local artistic community in the ups and downs of the museum as an institution was late if we compare it with that of other communities such as the Buenos Aires city, where the creation of museums and academies is linked to the active militancy of the artists themselves. As Roberto Amigo recalls:

"The notorious example, always pointed out, is the founding of the Sociedad Estímulo de Bellas Artes (S.E.B.A.) in 1876 by a group of young people, led by the fledgling artists Eduardo Sívori and Eduardo Schiaffino; plus Alejandro Sívori and Alfred Paris, also artists, among others. From that inaugural event, the figure of Schiaffino begins to gain relevance: art critic in *El Diario de los Láinez*, promoter of

¹ Up to September 23, 2003.

the National Museum of Fine Arts, and the writer of the first narrative about art in Argentina, rewritten time and again (1883, 1910, 1933)²."

In San Miguel de Tucumán, on the contrary, the gradual appearance of places destined to promote both the consumption and production of artworks was not due to the interests of artists. In fact, the creation of our museum in 1916 was driven by the institutions themselves (in our case, the university), and with a forty-year difference, it would not be until 1922 when Teófilo Castillo began to write his first critiques in the magazine *Sol y Nieve*, thus performing the role that Schiaffino embodied in Buenos Aires. I am interested in highlighting in this brief review of the history of the *Timoteo Navarro* that its directors prioritized pedagogical criteria from its origins, always attempting to train a public that could become a spectator capable of an increasingly refined aesthetic discernment. In 1941, the first Salon was convened and the *Asociación de pintores y escultores de Tucumán* was created. In 1947, the mythical peña *El Cardón* was founded, where the first independent artist exhibitions began to take place. However, it was in '48 when the artistic scene of our provincial capital was revolutionized by the arrival of Lino Enea Spilimbergo³ at the request of the Director of the *Instituto Superior de Bellas Artes*, Guido Parpagnoli. This institution, created in 1941 and belonging to the already nationalized *Universidad de Tucumán*, was the first in Latin America of such complexity. Consequently, new visual arts critics emerged, and it can be said that the most prestigious was the recently deceased Ramón Alberto "Tito" Pérez⁴, who began publishing in 1950 in *La Gaceta*, where he also provided an annual overview of local and national production. But let us return for a moment to Borges:

I imagine that a nation develops the words it needs. This observation made by Chesterton (I believe in his book *Watts*) is equivalent to saying that language is not, as the dictionary suggests to us, an invention of academics and philologists. Rather, it has been developed over time by peasants, hunters, and gentlemen. It does not arise from libraries, but from the fields, the sea, the rivers, the night, the dawn⁵.

Thus, if we understand the arts in general—and the visual arts in particular—as languages, we could suppose, in the manner of Borges or Chesterton, that a community generates the artists it needs at the time it requires them. This might be too heavy a burden for that community but, ironies aside and in a more prosaic way, we learn from the aesthetic analyst Juan Acha⁶ that "art is

² AMIGO, Roberto, *Untitled. Apuntes para la discusión sobre la gestión de artistas*.. Text written following the author's participation in the "Taller de Investigación en gestión cultural para artistas" organized by TRAMA. Programa de cooperación y confrontación entre artistas. 2002. www.proyectotrama.org

³ Along with this prominent artist, the Chilean Lorenzo Domínguez (sculptor), the Hungarian Lajos Szalay (draftsman), Antonio Rebuffo, and later the Catalan Pompeyo Audivert (both engravers) were also hired.

⁴ Ramón Alberto Pérez passed away on March 19, 2005.

⁵ BORGES, Jorge Luis. *Arte poética. Seis conferencias. Pensamiento y poesía*. Editorial Crítica. Letras de humanidad. Barcelona. 2001, p. 101.

⁶ ACHA, Juan. *Arte y sociedad: Latinoamérica. El producto artístico y su estructura*. Fondo de Cultura Económica. Mexico. 1978.

an emergent given from preexisting socioeconomic conditions.” These are undoubtedly coinciding assertions; then: why was the Museo de Bellas Artes in Tucumán not created at the instance of artist militancy, as had happened in Buenos Aires? Because in our province, once much further from the capital than now, there were only a few local artists⁷, and it was certain members of the sugar oligarchy who, due to their Europeanized education, conceived the project of entering modernity by founding not only the first and most important university in northern Argentina but also promoting the creation of cultural institutions such as the museum itself, which artists later joined. Thus, from this initiative, not only the distribution and consumption of artworks brought from Buenos Aires were generated, but also the production itself. In this way, more and more artists, development associations, critics, competitions, and the academy itself⁸ [6] emerged around the museum. However, although the triangle of production, distribution, and consumption became increasingly tangible, the consolidation of true theoretical thought and the strategies of production and exchange as mature alternatives to the permanent anxiety of our artistic community tended to be neglected due to our discontinuous and contradictory cultural policies.

PARADOX 2: Although the museum had already seen some notable administrations (García Hamilton between the '40s and '50s and Ricardo Abraham⁹ between the '60s and '70s), it is possible to say, nonetheless, that a landmark moment began in 1977, one year after the coup d'état that established our last dictatorship and at its behest. In effect, until that year, the museum's headquarters had been located at Congreso 56¹⁰, but it was moved to the old manor at 9 de Julio 46, meters away from Plaza Independencia and the Casa de Gobierno—that is, in the heart of San Miguel. To finalize this move, the Consejo de Educación de la Provincia de Tucumán had to be dissolved, leaving the building where it operated vacant and ready to receive the works of the already remarkable provincial art collection. Celia Terán was the chosen director and served as such until 1983, the year of the advent of democracy. In an interview granted to me, Celia Terán explained that during her administration, she created a team of researchers, restorers, and

⁷ For example, the prominent artist Atilio Terragni, born in Buenos Aires on February 9, 1887. He had trained at the Academia Nacional de Bellas Artes, then directed by Ernesto de la Cárcova and Eduardo Sívori. Having just turned 21, he graduated with the title of profesor de Dibujo, and the Comisión Nacional de Bellas Artes honored him with the Premio Roma, which included a four-year scholarship to study in Europe. After completing his training, he moved to San Miguel de Tucumán in 1915, a city where he remained for 20 years. Atilio Terragni contributed to the founding of the Escuela de Bellas Artes that today bears his name, as well as the organization and direction of the Museo Provincial, but he did so within the context of the initiatives promoted by official institutions and other personalities. In addition to excelling as an artist, Terragni wrote numerous articles in the local press. He finally returned to Buenos Aires, where he remained until his death on February 17, 1962.

⁸ Today, Facultad de Artes, UNT.

⁹ Ricardo Abraham had been a member of the *Consejo de Difusión Cultural* representing the Visual Arts area. This Council possessed its own independent funds sourced from the Tucumán lottery, the casino, and gambling in general, and had been created following a project by the writer Julio Ardiles Gray. It was rendered void starting with the last military dictatorship.

¹⁰ Current *Museo Histórico de la Provincia*.

montajistas, and highlighted that during all those years, the museum had its own budget¹¹, which was approved one year in advance.

Regarding exhibitions, her criteria had been to showcase Tucumán painting through two conceptual lines:

1. Historical sequences such as "El retrato en Tucumán desde el siglo XVIII al XX" (The Portrait in Tucumán from the 18th to the 20th Century).
2. Retrospectives (of artists Teófilo Castillo, Luis Lobo de la Vega, Nemirosky, Santos Legname, and the Iramain brothers),

all of these were accompanied by voluminous catalogs that included texts by researchers and technical sheets for each work exhibited. During her management, she also organized and produced exhibitions in which she interspersed foreign artists—such as Luis Bénédict, Pablo Bovio, María Simón, Rómulo Macció, Jorge Dermiján, or Norberto Gómez—with local ones like Nilo González (a painter from the province's interior), Aurelio Salas (draftsman), Tito Mangini (photographer), or Víctor Quiroga (an emerging painter and draftsman in the '70s). Likewise, Celia Terán organized two painting salons: the annual salon and the one sponsored by the *Banco de la Provincia*. She also supported the opening of an experimental art room¹² where the controversial "ambientaciones" (installations) "Registros I", by emerging artists Marcos Figueroa, Sergio Tomatis, Eduardo Joaquín, Vicky Muro, Ricardo Abella, Kelly Romero, and Víctor Quiroga, and "La nube II" by Mireya Baglietto were held¹³. Finally, she organized courses on the Art History of Tucumán, which reached more than three hundred enrollees.

However, Celia Terán stated that her premise was not the creation or consolidation of an art scene, nor the promotion of emerging art. Rather, she intended for the salons to be the entities that legitimized artists and trends through their prizes and, above all, not to lose sight of the didactic purposes of her administration.

Thus, the concept of "asistencia" (assistance/attendance), conceived as a mode of operating within official institutions, prevailed. In this context, there was no articulation of artistic practices with concrete cultural and historical experience and, above all, no assessment of those practices regarding those conditions¹⁴. Indeed, despite the presence of researchers and those

¹¹ During the harsh years of military repression in our province, enormous sums of money from the well-known "Plan Cóndor" and the IMF were allocated to present an orderly face of government management, not only to the outside world but to the unsuspecting local population itself. In turn, much of this money was invested in cultural management, which depended directly on the governor's office. During this period, not only were the referenced art exhibitions held, but memorable "Setiembrés culturales" (Cultural Septembers) were organized, featuring world-class musicians and dancers.

¹² Sala de arte experimental in the interview.

¹³ Both installations were the first to be created and seen in San Miguel de Tucumán; "Registros" in particular drew suspicion and resistance from the provincial government, which sent a representative to inspect the exhibition. The representative made several observations regarding the work of the artists (Marcos Figueroa, Kelly Romero, Sergio Tomatis, Eduardo Joaquín, Tito Quiroga, Ricardo Abella, and Vicky Muro), allowing the exhibition to finally open after a brief postponement.

¹⁴ Such an assessment would have been impossible in the midst of our bloodiest dictatorship, which, in Tucumán, used culture as a screen to hide the horror of the repression.

voluminous catalogs, their texts did not contribute to creating a reflective and critical historical body regarding the artistic products they addressed¹⁵.

PARADOX 3: With the advent of democracy, the museum continued an interesting pedagogical policy of distribution and consumption under the administration of Ricardo Abraham, a collector and former director of the museum. Much more committed to emerging generations, he nevertheless had to work with an increasingly meager budget. Despite this, he managed to organize several annual salons, including one for students, whose participation had been restricted during the previous administration. However, a scandal removed him from his post in 1986, and our museum began its slow but inevitable descent into disarray.

During the nineties, some poorly conditioned rooms operated, which our officials referred to by the pompous name of *Museo Provincial de Bellas Artes*¹⁶. These rooms lacked a specific director or curators and usually exhibited part of our collection, mostly composed of works of little aesthetic value, though of high symbolic one for our community. It is worth noting that this collection is made up of works originating from donations and acquisition prizes; thus, it is possible to appreciate works by the Argentine conceptualist Luis Bénédict, who was part of the CAYC¹⁷, as well as by Camilo Ambrosio, a graduate of the Facultad de Artes who won a first prize in 1989 but whose artistic career eclipsed many years ago, alongside pieces by Antonio Berni or Quinquela Martín.

The outlook could not have been more bleak, even more so when the pieces exhibited there were and are treated with an absolute lack of love. I use the word "love" because I understand it to be the initial motive for which a community decides to shelter certain kinds of objects produced by that same community at any point in its history from time and its effects, due to the symbolic value those objects convey. At times, museums lack sufficient expertise or updated work programs, but there is love and respect for the objects they work with, which simply results in them being well treated. It is the symbolic value, and therefore the legitimation of a representation, that is expressed through love and also through the veneration or respect the community experiences for those objects.

Let us examine, then, the serious implications this phenomenon has had on the artistic community of our city on one hand, and on the public that consumes culture on the other. I propose to investigate what kind of function a museum fulfills in a society.

It is often said that a museum is a reservoir of the collective memory of the society in which it exists. Its dictionary definition is as follows: "Museum: (Lat. *muséum*, Gr. *museion*: a place

¹⁵ These abound in specifically technical data sheets and biographies and/or chronicles.

¹⁶ It should be noted that on September 29, 2003, the main hall of our old Museo Provincial de Bellas Artes "Timoteo Navarro" was inaugurated, while work continued on the rest of the building. For the occasion, a curator from Buenos Aires was invited, who presented an exhibition of engravings by the artist Iglesias Brickles.

¹⁷ CAYC, Centro de Arte y Comunicación, integrated by the "Grupo de los trece," whose objectives affirmed "the role assigned to experimentalism; the intention to elaborate a Latin American problematic; the search for an impact on social reality; the rejection of the mercantile circuit of the artwork; and the proposal of an educational and humanist art." This collective was composed of Jacques Bedel, Luis Fernando Bénédict, Gregorio Dujovny, Carlos Ginzburg, Víctor Grippo, Jorge González Mir, Vicente Lucas Marotta, Luis Pazos, Alfredo Portillos, Juan Carlos Romero, Julio Teich, and Horacio Zabala.

consecrated to the Muses). A building or place destined for the study of sciences, humanities, and liberal arts – A place where notable objects belonging to the sciences and arts are kept, such as paintings, medals, machines, weapons, etc.”¹⁸.

It is easy to establish, then, the relationship between the collection of a certain class of objects (their classification, cataloging, relevant conservation tasks, and finally their exhibition to the interested public) with the desire or need to preserve and analyze aspects of the collective memory of a community through such objects. Museums would thus be a necessary luxury, a public service, often sustained by private contributions, that exists for the benefit of the public; repository institutions of a nation's or community's culture, with the duty to preserve and share heritage with the public. For this reason, they easily become legitimizers of the taste of the ruling class, but also the means through which to “exoticize” or “fetishize” the other.

Ellsworth H. Brown states: “The most powerful force of museums stems from their mission to be repositories of cultural heritage. The art of a nation, its historical and prehistoric past, and its scientific achievements reach us through objects”¹⁹.

These objects can be made known through the exhibition of originals, their replicas, or through virtual images, depending on the type of museum. For the common person, it is possible to perceive in the exhibition halls or the storage areas of a community or nation's museums the evidence of what a people values most. For a people, it is possible to remember through museums, and inversely, not to remember due to the absence of things.

Nicolás Casullo maintains:

“...the problematic of memory that today seems to awaken ancient ways of questioning within philosophy, to revalue ancestral capacities of art, to proceed toward a new dialogue with the dimensions of “non-forgetting”; it indicates to us that, faced with the threat of a certain death of memory in a neoculture that de-temporalizes referents, the profound value of human memory reappears as the irreplaceable source of granting meaning to the human...”²⁰.

In turn, the Chilean critic and independent curator Justo Pastor Mellado asserts that “*a museum is the expanded reproduction of local memories.*” That is, the presentation of fragments of thought through the memory underlying the objects produced by a specific society, not based on the idea of evidencing an absence, but rather on updating said thoughts in order to positively resignify the experience of the present times. In other words, while the professional class tends to consider museums as places of knowledge, rational data, and ordered collections, it is often memory and emotion, pride and nostalgia, admiration, inspiration, and naturally vanity, that

¹⁸ Diccionario Enciclopédico Quillet. Op. cit.

¹⁹ BROWN, Ellsworth; CABANELLAS, Guillermo; DITRICH-VAN WERING; Katrinka *et al.* Lo público y lo privado en la gestión de museos. Alternativas institucionales para la gestión de museos. Fondo Nacional de las Artes, Fundación “Antorchas”. Fondo de Cultura Económica de Argentina S.A. Buenos Aires. 1999.

²⁰ CASULLO, Nicolás. La memoria de las cosas. This text, which I could not fail to cite, came into my hands via a photocopy without bibliographic reference.

produce the greatest effect. For is it not true that humanity is moved more by what it loves, hates, or fears than by what it merely knows? This, I believe, emerges from the reflections of Brown, Casullo, and Mellado.

Now, I will continue by defining more specific aspects inherent to the role of museums in a community, in order to compare them with the functioning of our own. According to Ellsworth H. Brown[1]²¹:

- A museum is a repository of a cultural heritage. They are often the sole owners of a nation's heritage.
- The cultural symbolism of a collection does not need to be very elaborate; it only needs to be visible.
- Museums are singular mirrors of a culture that, as places of learning, differ from schools and other institutions intended for this purpose.
- In the same way, museums as research centers differ from other institutions dedicated to that activity, since universities share most of the demands of school life along the paths indicated by science or the nation. Museums do not, as they adjust to the limits of their collections, for better or for worse, sometimes refusing to abandon a "weak" collection.
- The museum not only provides information but creates meaning and, above all, legitimizes.
- Museums are also places of entertainment. "Entertainment" refers not so much to the circumstances surrounding the visit to the museum, but to the attitude that permeates the visitor's experience and the provision of the service.
- There are differences between museums and other cultural organizations. Dance, theater, cinema, symphonic music, and opera depend on formal presentations structured by the presenter, rather than randomly by the spectator.
- A successful museum is clear about its mission and acts driven by it. All its decisions are directly guided by an explicit mandate. To achieve this, it must undertake a shared analysis by an informed and open working team. It must have a director in charge of raising the necessary funds for management, an advisory board representing the interests of the museum's public, researchers, installers (*montajistas*), restorers, and curators, who may be permanent, specialized, or invited for each occasion.

Regarding each of the points in which, quoting Brown, I analyzed the function of museums, we observe in our Museo Provincial de Bellas Artes "Timoteo Navarro" that:

- In recent years, our museum has behaved irresponsibly regarding its heritage, as works are piled in halls improperly conditioned for the storage of art pieces, where dust, humidity, and insects take their toll, leading to partial or total deterioration. This is when they do not end up in the offices of some politician of the day. Similar phenomena can be

²¹ BROWN et al., op. cit.

observed in the collection of the Facultad de Artes of our University or in the art collection (*pinacoteca*) of the Municipalidad de San Miguel de Tucumán.

- Regarding visibility as an essential condition of a symbolic cultural heritage, in our museum, due to capricious and cyclothymic cultural policies added to the poor state of conservation of the collections and the halls in general, the phenomenon promoted is precisely the inverse: the invisibility of our art. Thus, ignorance and prejudice regarding what is ours have won over criteria that are now outdated, improvised, and lack seriousness, due to the lack of real and continuous contact with our visual art products and the absence of serious publications accompanying each exhibition.
- By differentiating themselves from schools and other educational institutions, museums are not governed by general programs, but by specific and often fleeting ones (the theme of an exhibition may be landscape one month and, the next, the influence of a certain school on local art, etc.). Nor do they demand attendance or measurable learning results from their visitors; nor do they serve a population defined by age. Rather, they provide permanent training on a variety of topics surrounding a specific problematic. Our Museo de Bellas Artes, on the contrary, was characterized by its closed doors during the years 1997-2003, and the consequent absence of extension programs made any enjoyment or learning effectively impossible.
- Regarding museums as natural research centers in any area of knowledge to which they are dedicated; ours, dedicated to Fine Arts, could have encouraged researchers to visit its storage areas despite its closed doors. But the reality, as stated in point I, is that the “Timoteo Navarro” lacks adequate rooms for the storage of its own heritage, making access for researchers very difficult. In fact, there is no research on our heritage promoted by the museum itself, except for that arising from the concerns of the Instituto de Arte Argentino y Regional in 2001. The museum itself lacks professionals dedicated to this activity. Furthermore, what has occurred in recent years is the slow and underhanded expulsion of occasional interested parties who eventually give up on their purpose (such as the case of the Fundación “Lola Mora” (1994-1997), which began a computerized image survey in 1994 that could never be concluded, or that of the Tucumán collector Carlos Alberto Casal, who began a detailed indexing of catalogs, likewise unfinished for lack of support).
- The creation of meaning in a visual arts exhibition is more evident through the clear presence of a conceptual lead: the curator. With few exceptions, our museum has lacked and continues to lack curators; therefore, the exhibitions held there—their production, editing, mounting, and security—are handled by the artists, who sometimes explain their purposes in inexpensive catalogs, but generally avoid doing so or delve into subjective reflections lacking investigative rigor.
- Regarding the museum as a place of entertainment, we must explain that in ours, there are no policies to attract the public nor offers of varied experiences based on the different criteria established for each art exhibition. Exceptionally, “packages” brought from the capital were offered, which were left to the work team accompanying the visiting exhibition—generally more focused on conducting good business than on offering a good

educational service or providing new visual communicative experiences. Such were the cases of the Dalí exhibition (2002), plagued with reproductions of minor works by that artist, or the Molina Campos exhibition (2003) which, although it offered some interesting originals, most of the pieces exhibited were reproductions and period items. All of this was set up in rooms poorly suited for the exhibition of art pieces, such as those of the Secretaría de Cultura de la Provincia, where this department improvised exhibitions from August 2000 until the recent re-inauguration of the Museo "Timoteo Navarro" in October 2003.

- The Museo Provincial de Bellas Artes "Timoteo Navarro" lacks a dedicated director. There is only a position for the Director of the Departamento de Artes Visuales (who must oversee all rooms intended for the exhibition of artworks, large or small, in our province), and a lack of an advisory board, researchers, installers, restorers, and/or curators. Its management depends directly on the Secretario de Cultura, who discusses general policy for visual arts alongside that of theater, dance, libraries, non-formal teaching workshops, folk festivals, and regional craft fairs. Thus, the mission of the most important museum in our province is never fully defined.
- Consequently, our museum is far from being a conducive environment for reflection that encompasses everything from the distribution and social legitimation of visual artistic practices to the discourses that support their relevance and value. Nor can it create favorable conditions to establish its own agendas; as such, at this moment, the Museo Provincial de Bellas Artes "Timoteo Navarro" hosts exhibitions that are projects of curators or institutions external to the museum itself. Examples include "Flores del jardín," curated by Dr. Jorge Figueroa, or the photography exhibition of Annemarie Heinrich produced by the Centro Cultural Recoleta of the Municipalidad de la ciudad de Buenos Aires and curated by Juan Travnik²² [2].

Based on the brief excursion made regarding the function of museums in a community, and visualizing the sad path of our own, we must conclude that the "Timoteo Navarro" has been one of the most punished. It is easy to deduce, consequently, that the visual arts scene has been as severely damaged as the public: in this area as well, there is no "present" as a moment of deconstruction and construction of programs based on the recognition of one's own cultural production and the development of projects for the distribution and consumption of such products.

The cultural policies of our governments tend to work against the valuation of their culture, history, and memory. As an example, we can mention the already famous destruction of a large part of our *Casa Histórica* on the eve of the centenary of the declaration of independence, and the more recent demolitions of buildings such as the old brewery on Avenida Sarmiento²³. Also, the state of abandonment in which our old Mercado de Abasto finds itself today; it was

²² I am writing this in March 2005, when the exhibition "Flores del jardín," curated by Lic. Jorge Figueroa and organized by Lic. Carolina Cazón, former "person in charge" of the Museo Provincial de Bellas Artes, has not yet closed. Indeed, just a few months after beginning her management, she has already been "removed" from her post for political reasons.

designed in the 1930s by one of the most important modern architect of our country, Julio Prebisch—the same man who designed the famous Obelisk in the city of Buenos Aires. Much more serious, perhaps, is the condition of our pre-Columbian menhirs, on whose grounds an amusement park was actually built²⁴[2].

But returning to the exhibition spaces for visual arts in San Miguel de Tucumán, there are undoubtedly others besides the Museo “Timoteo Navarro.” Most, however, suffer from the same defect: none are properly equipped (not only for the exhibition of contemporary art objects but for artistic objects of any era). Some cultural centers have adapted their facilities amidst columns, masonry benches, mirrors, moldings, and unusual display cases; yet the result has remained meager. Take as sad examples the adorned rooms of the splendid “Petit Hotel” style mansion where the Centro Cultural Rougés of the Fundación Miguel Lillo operates, where art pieces are superimposed onto walls plagued with moldings, reflected in vast panes of crystal mirrors or placed near a fireplace of polished gray marble. Another notable case is the Centro Cultural Universitario Eugenio Flavio Virla, designed for such a purpose by one of our eminent architects²⁵. A masonry bench runs along the lower part of the walls intended for the exhibition of artworks, so that a weary visitor may choose to sit with their back to the works they came to contemplate and, what is worse, at the risk of leaning against one of them. Glass spaces, balconies, or wooden arches and porthole-shaped stained glass windows complement this delirium in which, naturally, it is impossible to exhibit pieces of any kind with a minimum of professionalism. All the rooms lack a specific function, so the unsuspecting visitor cannot easily discern the boundaries between a piece of conceptual art, a craft, or a scientific report. Likewise, I highlight that, due to its design (ancillary to the central core of the building) the rooms suggest that what is exhibited there can be viewed indifferently, during the time it takes to wait in line to see a show in the amphitheater, which is often the true objective of the visit to that site. Naturally, it is not far-fetched to conclude that if the exhibition rooms seem ancillary in terms of the global architectural design concept, the pieces installed there will produce the same effect. As a marginal comment, floors with striking and contrasting borders are also cases worth mentioning, such as those of “Casa Club” in the Colegio de Arquitectos de la Provincia or the Sala Alternativa of the Secretaría de Cultura de la Provincia. In all the mentioned examples, the sole purpose is to multiply the function of spaces that might house artworks, posters for some scientific congress, or a Christmas craft fair.

It is not difficult to notice, on the other hand, as I clarify previously, and as a consequence of the previously mentioned paradoxes, that we are facing a subsystem of the symbolic cultural production of a city that fails to close its circuit of production, distribution, and consumption. Indeed, because works do not circulate properly through adequate exhibition, visual arts competitions, and committed curatorial policies, the consuming public has been reduced to the

²³ This beautiful and old disused building was demolished for the purpose of constructing a modern “Carrefour” supermarket. This project was never realized, and in its place remains a completely wasted wasteland that accentuates the state of urban depression in this area of San Miguel de Tucumán.

²⁴ January 2004.

²⁵ Architect Jorge de Lasaletta.

tiny circuit of the artists themselves. The old collectors have almost entirely disappeared, as have most of the institutional supports for creation²⁶.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TRADITION AND HISTORY

History

The dictionary defines the word as follows:

History: Lat. *historia*, gr. *historía-histor*: wise, knowledgeable. The true narration and exposition of past events and memorable things. **In an absolute sense, it is taken as the account of the public and political events of peoples**, but this name is also given to events, facts, or manifestations of human activity of any other kind: *history of philosophy, literature, medicine*. The set of events referred to by historians.[1]²⁷

As things are presented here, as this dictionary refers to them, history would be nothing more than the history of civilization, which is, primarily, a history of religions and states. It was conceived as such until the advent of Marxism, which rejected idealist historiography that considered history as the overcoming of ignorance and superstitions through knowledge and reason. In fact, what that vision excluded was material history—the history of the working class—and therefore denied the idea that man could make himself, in favor of the thesis that man produced his own history.

However, history understood in this way (in either case) is a construction by those who have written it, in fact impregnated by their interests as a projection of their ways of conceiving not only existence itself but of granting it meaning. Thus, meaning would depend on the power of interpretation as the main tool; while it is possible to verify a past event through a document attesting to its existence, an interpretation—that is, history itself—cannot be verified. In history, the only certainties are those surrounding the likelihood of an event. Nevertheless, today it is possible to push the historian toward a sociological analysis that allows for the elimination, at least in part, of the apparent uncertainty of a large fraction of social facts, making it possible to understand the past due to the global information that contemporaries lacked and which is now available. In this way, history would be the explanation of the greatest number of events through the study of the reciprocal play of factual relations of another type. I mean, "today it is possible to affirm that the First Great War was triggered by the expansion of imperialism and not by the assassination in Sarajevo."²⁸

But history is also the way in which a text or any representation speaks of its era, the way in which it expresses its link with historicity. Thus, a difficult problem to understand is the relationship between art and history, since every artistic work, whether it declares itself historical or not, involves a temporality and represents a social-historical moment. Two subjectivities intervene:

²⁶ It should be noted that since 2004, salons to encourage visual arts production have begun to be held, such as the Salón Multidisciplinario de la Universidad Nacional de Tucumán or the Salón "Chandon" in 2005.

²⁷ Diccionario Enciclopédico Quillet. Op. cit.

²⁸ VILAR, Pierre. *Iniciación al vocabulario histórico*. Editorial Crítica. Barcelona (Spain) 1980.

1. That of the historian who judges various discourses on events and takes a side regarding their explanation.
2. That of the artist/author who selects and orders the materials of their fable.

Let us see what the dictionary says about this word:

Fable: Fren: *fable*; Engl.: *plot, fabula*; Ger.: *Fabel, Handlung*.

1. Contradiction of the notion of fable.

a. Origins: From the Latin *fabula* (phrases, account), the term *fable*, which corresponds to the Greek *mythos*, designates the "series of facts that constitute the narrative element of a work" according to the French Robert dictionary. The Latin *fabula* is a mythical or invented account (...). A glance at the innumerable uses of the term "fable" reveals two opposing conceptions of the place it occupies:

- As material prior to the composition of the work;
- **As the narrative structure of the story.**

In this double definition, the opposition between the rhetorical terms *inventio* and *dispositio* overlaps, or between the *story* (history) that Anglo-Saxon criticism opposes to *plot* (*intriga*) (...).

"In arranging the fable, the poet must ensure that **all events are to such an extent dependent on each other that they are linked as if by necessity**; that in the action nothing occurs without appearing as the result of what has just occurred; in such a way that **all facts are so well linked that each one arises as the just consequence of another**" (LA MESNARDIÈRE. *Poética*, 1640, cap 5).

According to this classical conception, fable is almost synonymous with the English term *story*: sometimes we call it "the story," while *plot* corresponds to the intrigue, to the causal series of actions. "A story is a narrative of events ordered in a temporal sequence. A plot also relates events, but emphasizes their causality" (E. M. FOSTER, *Aspects of the Novel*, 1927)²⁹ (...).

I will now make a brief impasse to recall that when we speak of "narrative structure," we are making a tacit allusion to the conviction that every fable implies a narration, as maintained by the Indian sociologist Homi Bhabha in his famous phrase "nation is narration" (see Ch. XIV "Who are you? The problem of identity vs. identity clichés"). Let us now look at the definition given by another dictionary³⁰:

Fable: (Lat. *fábula*: conversation, account, tale - *fari*: to speak). Literary narration.

In epic and dramatic poems and any other analogous ones. **The series and context of the incidents of which the action is composed and the means by which it**

²⁹ PAVIS, Patrice. *Diccionario del teatro. Dramaturgia, estética, semiología*. Paidós Comunicación N° 10. Teatro. Buenos Aires-Barcelona-Mexico. 2003.

³⁰ Diccionario Enciclopédico Quillet. Op. cit.

develops. A fictitious event or action that is narrated or represented to delight (...).

Lit. The fable or *apologue* is the **brief narration of an allegorical action**, whose characters are, commonly, irrational beings; inanimate people and things can also be characters. **The apologue encloses, without acrimony, a truth of a practical nature, a general principle, moral or literary, that emerges from the particular case it refers to.** Fables, says Gaston Paris, come with few exceptions from oral tradition. They have the merit of **reflecting real life (...).**

In ancient times, the eloquence of the apologue was common in important cases. **The precept supported by the apologue is called the moral (*moraleja*) (...).**

Regarding characters, animals are assigned qualities and actions that bear an analogy with their instincts or attributes usually applied to them. For example: the lion will always be brave, the mule stubborn, the dog faithful, the lamb gentle, the fox cunning, etc. (...).

The style of the narration must be easy and simple (...).

From the definition of fable, one can infer the notable similarities that the apologue has with the artist of realisms, since in their works it is easy to observe the moral, the construction of stereotypes, the easy-to-access style, etc. Therefore, it is feasible to assert that it is impossible to print the richness of historical facts in any work as a representational fact, because a systematic judgment is imposed from the start—the judgment of the artist not only on the reality they want to describe but on their own. Therefore, they will make their presence as a narrator felt in an epic or, if you will, didactic way, as we have seen in Chapter IV, "Critical Realisms/Critical Reality." Indeed, in the case of the Critical Realisms I have mentioned so much, the author multiplies the description of events and intervenes in their organization because, for them, the essential thing is to offer the illusion of movement by concentrating conflicts on the backs of typical characters representing universally historical individuals endowed with particular ends that encompass the will of the world spirit³¹, what Karl Marx called "the spirit of the time"³². At best, the critical realist aspires to represent the movements of society from a distance, attempting to restore a complete image, despite its fragmentation, of human evolution. Naturally, in all these assumptions, the desire or need to historicize one's own artistic discourse will arise, showing an event or character under its social, i.e., historical light; all this with the didactic purpose of inducing the spectator/reader to think that their own reality is historical and therefore not only criticizable but transformable.

From this point of view, it can be said that with their artistic work/text, the artist restores coherence to history. "Their silent work consists of letting themselves be traversed by a moment of history and knowing how to think everything else subsequently and weaving the isolated elements of a whole."^[8]³³

³¹ LUKÁCS, G. La signification présente du réalisme critique. Editorial Gallimard. Paris (France) 1961.

³² MARX, Karl., ENGELS, Friedrich. Die sickingen Debatte. Über Kunst und Literatur Vol. 1. Ed. Dietz Berlin, 1967, p. 181.

³³ NIETZSCHE, Friedrich. Sobre la utilización y los inconvenientes de la historia para la vida.

This model of thought, this model of encoding one's own artistic discourse, undoubtedly assumes:

- An idea of history based on the archaeological practice of searching the past for the origins of great moral truths.
- The coincidence of the intellectual (in this case, the artist) with an ideal of state to which they incline and induce others to follow with their work.

However, I have already cited Paul Ricoeur, who affirms:

One must find again the uncertainty of history, that is, the task of the historian consists in finding the element of indecision present in the actors of history themselves (...) I often speak of the "repercussion of the future in the past." Historians tend to conceive the past as something closed, concluded. It is a very strong temptation to believe that the past is determined and the future is indeterminate. What it is truly about is putting the incompleteness of the past safe from oblivion. The protagonists of history had dreams, sublime hopes, projects...³⁴

And Borges states: "I have suspected that history, true history, is more modest and that its essential dates can likewise be, for a long time, secret."³⁵

Thinking about this open concept of the history of humanity and, consequently, of its past, allows us to deconstruct the images we have forged of our own history, imagining our present as the inevitable result of a dialectical relationship between causes and consequences, as if history and time had a necessary direction. Thus, thinking of these premises as mere cultural prejudices will allow us to bring the past closer to the present, facilitating both new approaches through this proximity and revisions of that part of history that touches us, belongs to us, has marked us, and from which we come. That is: the present cannot be seen simply as a link between the past and the future or as a mere synchronic presence, because our direct presence in the present reveals itself with its discontinuities and inequalities that are closely linked to both the past and the future.

The history of the everyday (because it also involves the insignificant, the unreflective and almost mechanical repetition of alienating work and ideological stereotypes) starts from a minimal and voluntarily mutilated vision of the other history, the one we have pompously called "the history of humanity" for years, to cast a furtive glance at the present from this new perspective. Already Nietzsche, in his *Genealogy of Morals*, questioned the notions of rationality and absolute truth while reclaiming irrationality and the limited for history. Precisely this work allowed Michel

³⁴ RICOEUR, Paul. Hay que volver a encontrar lo incierto de la historia. Interview by Jörg Lau. Revista Humboldt N°127. pp. 6-9. Inter Naciones 1999.

³⁵ BORGES, Jorge Luis. El pudor de la Historia. Otras inquisiciones. Emecé Ediciones. Buenos Aires. 1960, pp. 213-218.

Foucault to challenge the archaeological gaze that the moderns had built over history, in order to build the foundations of a genealogical analysis of it. This type of analysis, conceived on irrationality and the contingent, possesses multiple series provided with branches of unlimited proliferation, some of which lead nowhere, such that it will be difficult, if not impossible, to seek a logic in that progression. Thus, for Foucault, following the complex course of the origin is mainly to identify the accidents, errors, false appearances, and failed calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth or being do not correspond to the root of what we know and are, but to the exteriority of their accidents.

Thus, today it is possible to affirm that history is a text that flows and changes constantly, inexorably subject to correction and verification. It is for this reason that the search for the origins of stable and universal great moral truths appears out of place. This is the characteristic that, in my view, interests young contemporary artists, not only in San Miguel but in the country and the world, because it allows for the introduction into its structural fissures the possibility of offering a fragment of one's own subjectivity, of one's own personal history. For example, since December 2001, it has been possible to see in Argentina a large number of works that operated in this sense, such as "La búsqueda de la libertad" by the collective *La Baulera*. Another example is "Hora cátedra," the light installation performed by Amalia Pica at our *Casa Histórica* in October 2002[11].³⁶ In any case, both examples underline that history as narration allows for reinterpretations and includes the active role of the individual in the full act and exercise of their life; this consequently offers new alternatives to the structures of the self—that is, the taking of positions that are more eccentric than ego-centric.

Tradition

Tradition, on the other hand, has frequently been taken as that inert portion of the past that still lingers and which certain segments of power strive to preserve intact. Thus, it is feasible to say that it clearly manifests the pressures and limits of the dominant and the hegemonic. If history is subject to all types of manipulation in order to orient the exercise of memory among the inhabitants of a community, these manipulations are exercised by power over tradition with even greater vigor, as tradition affects the daily and everyday practices of those inhabitants. It can be seen in the music they listen to, their clothing, their diet, their linguistic idioms, etc.

Raymond Williams states: "What we have to see is not just 'a tradition' but a selective tradition: an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification."^[1]³⁷ Indeed, most versions of tradition respond to this typology, configured by the manipulations of

³⁶ PICA, Amalia. An artist from Río Negro who received a grant from TRAMA (a program for confrontation and cooperation between artists). She performed this in San Miguel de Tucumán within the framework of the "Taller de investigación artística y contextos de producción." The project focused on investigating if the "casita de Tucumán" was effectively egg-yolk yellow, as represented in the iconography of children's educational magazines. The intervention consisted of bathing the facade of the Casa Histórica in yellow light for forty-five minutes, thus alluding to the duration of a class hour. The intervention was announced with a school bell and ended the same way, while the author appeared dressed as a typical Argentine teacher.

power that correspond to the image of ourselves that is convenient to hold and to offer to others. Its selective aspect "fixes features," denying the necessary negotiation that seeks to authorize the hybrid cultural products emerging in every moment of transformation. Such negotiation is essential, as its right to signify resorts to the power of tradition in order to inscribe and recognize itself. This implies, however, a partial form of identification, since every emerging cultural product obstructs immediate access to the idea of an original identity—to a received tradition.

There are, however (and we must recognize them), strongholds—cultural pits where tradition is not so sullied by this type of perverse operation. Take as an example the gatherings in remote and isolated areas of the Tucumán *Valles Calchaquíes*, where the locals meet, retreated from the advance of tourism, to pay homage to the Pachamama, while the government does the same on the main stage of Amaicha del Valle.

The dictionary states:

Tradition: (Lat.: *traditio* - *trádere*: to deliver) Communication or transmission of news, literary compositions, doctrines, rites, customs, made from parents to children over time and through succeeding generations. News of an ancient fact transmitted in this way. Doctrine, custom, etc., preserved in a people by transmission from parents to children. Traditionalism: Phil. Doctrine that places the origin of ideas in revelation and successively in the teaching that man receives from society.[2]³⁸

Let us now review the dictionary definition with which we opened this chapter:

History: (Lat. *historia* - *histor*: wise, knowledgeable). The true narration and exposition of past events and memorable things. In an absolute sense, it is taken as the account of the public and political events of peoples, **but this name is also given to the events, facts, or manifestations of human activity of any other class.**³⁹

From both meanings, it is possible to deduce that while tradition leaves no room for the revision of concepts or questioning, nor does it grant any agency to the individual with their temporal contingency (as the individual must obey what they inherit and love it without question under the weak argument of belonging), history as narration allows for reinterpretations and includes the active agency of the individual in the full act and exercise of their life—the individual today, immersed in the here and now. Furthermore, as explained previously, it is always possible to return the future to the historical past, for history contains not only the great deeds that modify the course of societies but also the small, minimal, everyday behaviors of the anonymous person

³⁷ WILLIAMS, Raymond. *Marxismo y literatura*. Editorial Península/Biblos. Historia, Ciencia, Sociedad. N° 265. Barcelona. 1997, p. 137.

³⁸ Diccionario Enciclopédico Quillet. Op. cit.

³⁹ Op. cit. (bold emphasis is mine).

who, nonetheless, contributes to building a given reality with its particular colors, tones, and registers.

On several occasions, we have been the recipients of claims regarding a lack of respect for our traditions by some of our younger artists—more specifically by Sandro Pereira, who, with his aforementioned work "*Homenaje al ságuiche de milanesa*," achieved national prestige at the Arte B.A. gallery fair in 2002. He is accused of joining foreign fashions as well as making mere copies of trends that took place in the U.S. during the '50s (an obvious reference to Pop Art).

In the previous chapter on identity, I argued that these discussions generally develop around false assumptions regarding what identity, the homeland, the nation, or tradition are. Borges, less tolerant, considers these discussions rhetorical and fit only for pathetic developments; rather than a true mental difficulty, he understands them as an appearance, a simulation, a pseudo-problem.^{[4]⁴⁰}

For this writer, who analyzes Argentine literature, there is an unbridgeable difference between the poetry (the speech) of the gauchos and "gauchesca" poetry. Thus, being "popular" (of the people) is not the same as seeking to be so. Borges finally asserts that *gauchesca* poetry has produced admirable works, but it is a genre as artificial as any other; this is not the case with truly popular poetry, that which emanates spontaneously from the speech of the people, seeking nonetheless in that elaboration a grace and elegance of speech that guarantees its belonging to the world of the arts.

"*Muchachito de pueblo*," the installation by Sandro Pereira mentioned in the chapter "*Cartas entre Robin y Baticica*," is to urban popular imagery what *gauchesca* poetry is to the pastoral poetry of our valleys; specifically, insofar as Sandro recognizes himself as a "village boy" (*muchachito de pueblo*), he no longer is one. An example of greater acceptance in local criticism is the work of Blanca Machuca, who works from popular altarpieces and *ex-votos* using extra-academic materials, configuring collages and assemblages that clearly allude to the pastiches that occur over time, spontaneously, in semi-pagan altars of popular origin created by anonymous hands. In my view, even with that clear allusion to the source, more evident than that of Pereira (who is formally closer to North American Pop than to ours), Machuca instinctively shuns the commonplaces of high art, seeking voices and idioms that bring her closer to the popular. This undoubtedly occurs, but the result is not the "popular" per se, but a refined, cultured, and measured version of it. A true popular artist, on the contrary, would have performed the opposite operation to Machuca's, instinctively shunning common images and seeking elevated tones and turns of phrase more proper to artistic expression.

⁴⁰ BORGES, Jorge Luis. *El escritor argentino y la tradición*. "Discusión". *Obras Completas*. Emecé Editores. Buenos Aires. 1974, p. 267.

In reality, Borges affirms, the idea that the Argentine must abound in differential traits and local color is a mistake. An ingenuity, I would add, for is it even possible to produce a work that is truly good and not crossed by the history that preceded it? Personally, I think we cannot imagine ourselves eating a "sánguche" de milanesa⁴¹ in Frankfurt or even in Trelew, as such a sandwich is a Tucumán invention. Indeed, Borges ends his essay saying: "I believe that if we abandon ourselves to that voluntary dream called artistic creation, we will be Argentines and we will also be good or tolerable writers."^[6]⁴²

Likewise, it should be noted that if the popular frequently approaches *kitsch* as a result of the successive processes of hybridization to which it is captive, in its ingenuity there is, as we explained previously, a good measure of authenticity and coherence that gives it another hierarchy and forces us to be prudent when judging it. In contrast, any forced and/or affected imitation of the popular—of that which is imposed on us as ours as an unquestionable heritage—will be false in every light and frequently without any aesthetic resolution, typical of those who believe they enjoy the legitimate representation of their culture but in reality enjoy an imitation. This, and not the former, is what should be considered *kitsch*. On the other hand, it could be said that distancing oneself from a tradition—meaning, being on the outside—appears as a basic condition for being able to take elements from it and turn them into a work of art. History, on the other hand, does not present itself as rigid and intolerant as tradition. Indeed, finding the uncertainty of history allows one to escape the discourse of guilt and prevents us from being unfair through the gesture of permanent pointing toward its actors. What we are interested in rescuing from the new conception of history proposed previously is that it allows for a greater understanding of the work of emerging Tucumán artists, who are distanced from the committed political and social art of previous years—an art imposed as "ours" and which artists of later generations were expected to accept as part of an unquestionable and unwanted heritage. The conscious refusal to do so (or indifference) often generated the contempt and criticism of the art of recent years in our community. A finer reading of emerging Tucumán production will allow us to see that, while it falls within the postulates stated in Chapter V, "The Reaction of the Nineties"—and naturally, these postulates are shared with artists of the same generation elsewhere on the planet—there is in their works a position explicitly or tacitly adopted regarding our heavy historical legacy, both recent and distant.

The idea of history as a cemetery of unfulfilled promises is something with which the emerging artists of San Miguel de Tucumán do not identify. That is to say, the nostalgia that anchors the survivors of the '60s and '70s generation to the past is not something these artists wish to take on. There is a perhaps muted consciousness (we must not forget that they are the children of that generation severed by the last dictatorship) of the danger of abandoning oneself to the belief that through the simple repetitive remembrance of facts, the reiteration of horrors can be prevented—a belief widely spread by all media. For them, life is what counts, or perhaps

⁴¹ Allusion to the work "Homenaje al sánguche de milanesa" by Sandro Pereira, mentioned earlier in this dissertation.

⁴² BORGES, Op. cit, p. 267.

the way to continue an active production despite the historical fixation that tends to paralyze them. History, then, allows—as tradition does not—the possibility of undertaking the work of remembering without falling into mere repetition. This is what interests these young people, who are saturated with the obscene *kitsch* that, in my view, the commodification of memory implies.