

THE ARTIST AS CURATOR

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Avant-Garde Argentinian
Visual Artists Group,
Tucumán Burns, 1968

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Liam Gillick and
Philippe Parreno,
The Trial of Pol Pot, 1998

DEAN INKSTER

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* Author's note: The authorship of *Tucumán Burns* is a very complex issue. It is sometimes attributed to the Rosario Group, but this attribution is something I can't agree with. First, because this reinforces the usual mistake of concluding that the work was carried out exclusively by artists from Rosario. Second, because this group as such has never existed. What did exist was a group called Grupo de Arte de Vanguardia de Rosario (Rosario Avant-Garde Art Group), but only some of its members took part in *Tucumán Burns*. Initially, *Tucumán Burns* was meant to be an anonymous work. But afterward, in the final stage of the process, some documents were released that had been signed by 28 people, artists and non-artists, from Rosario, Buenos Aires, and Santa Fe. These 28 people never decided on a fixed name for themselves as a group. Sometimes they signed as Grupo de Plásticos Argentinos de Vanguardia (Avant-Garde Argentinian Visual Artists Group), others it was Comisión Artística de la CGT de los Argentinos (Artistic Committee of CGT of the Argentinians), and in some cases they simply appeared as a list of individual names. Consequently, the question of the work's authorship remains a delicate topic, and the way we choose to relate the story of *Tucumán Burns*, authorship included, is neither innocuous nor naive—all the more so because today there are still disputes about the legacy of the experience.

1 On this wide and sometimes hilarious variety of readings, see Roberto Jacoby, "Tutucu mama nana arara dede dada," *ramona* 55 (October 2005): 86–91. *Tucumán Burns* has also been the object of dozens of international exhibitions, from *Global Conceptualism* (Queens Museum, New York, 1999) to Documenta 12 (Kassel, 2007) and the 29th São Paulo Biennial (2010).

2 On the Instituto Di Tella and the artists' radical rupture with this avant-garde institution, see John King, *El Di Tella* (Buenos Aires: Gaglianone, 1985), Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman, *Del Di Tella a Tucumán Arde* (Buenos Aires: El Cielo por Asalto, 2000), Andrea Giunta, *Vanguardia, internacionalismo y política* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2001), Alberto Giudici, *Arte y política en los '60* (Buenos Aires: Salas Nacionales de Exposición, 2002), Inés Katzenstein, ed., *Listen, Here, Now! Argentine Art of the Sixties* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2004), María Fernanda Pinta, *Teatro expandido en el Di Tella* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2013), and Jaime Vindel, *La vida por asalto* (Madrid: Brumaria, 2014).

Avant-Garde Argentinian Visual Artists Group, *Tucumán Burns* (1968)

Some may say that what we propose is not art. But what is art? Are elitist forms of pure experimentation art? Are those so-called corrosive creations art, when in fact they do nothing but satisfy the bourgeoisie that consumes them? The words in their books, and the books in their libraries, is that art? And what about dramatic action on screen and stage, in cinemas and theaters? And paintings in art galleries? All motionless, all in order, in a bourgeois, conformist order; all useless.

—Declaration by the Avant-Garde Visual Artists of the CGT-A's Artistic Action Committee, Buenos Aires, November 1968

Tucumán Arde (hereafter referred to by its English translation, *Tucumán Burns*), nearly half a century after its opening in 1968, still remains largely unclassifiable. Part information campaign, part research endeavor, part political action, part counter-information exhibition, part collective art happening, part mythical legend, and part abysmal failure, it sought to have a direct impact on the revolutionary process then regarded as imminent by its artist-participants. More has been written about *Tucumán Burns* than about any other Argentine art event, and it continues to have a surprising capacity to be appropriated by very different arguments, positions, and genealogies, many of which seem to separate themselves from and even contradict the organizers' original and radical intentions.¹

To understand what *Tucumán Burns* was, to situate it, and to understand why its organizers opted—among the many strategies they employed—for the exhibition as a form in the first place, it is necessary to trace the context of the general political and institutional pressures informing the group's motivations and their political agenda as artists.

THE ITINERARY OF '68

In 1966, a new military coup shook the already unstable political life of Argentina. In addition to banning all political parties, the de facto regime pursued an authoritarian and clerical cultural agenda, manifested through censorship of the press, the shutting down of theaters, sanctions on radio stations, legislation restricting freedom of speech, and outrightly repressive policies against institutions such as the Universidad de Buenos Aires.

There were also acts of harassment and intimidation against the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, called Di Tella for short, a pioneering institution that provided resources and visibility to avant-garde cultural manifestations in the 1960s, and which now stood accused of offending public morals and decency.² Simultaneously, the creative ebullience of the art scene was so intense that journalists dubbed 1966 "the avant-garde year." It witnessed works in the tradition of Pop art, Happenings,

and the incipient media art, which proposed a new kind of artwork whose materiality would take the form of circulation in the mass media.³

Two years later, in 1968, a significant number of artists belonging to avant-garde groups from Buenos Aires and Rosario effected a radical rupture with art institutions, and, as paradoxical as it may seem, especially with the institution that had supported the most experimental and revolutionary of practices, the Di Tella. Deeply influenced by the increasing radicalization of politics, these artists established an active relationship with the CGT-A and sought to make their own contribution to the revolutionary process.⁴ It was within this historical context that *Tucumán Burns* took place, not as an isolated landmark but as a phenomenon that can only be fully understood as the result of a radicalization process intended to transform both aesthetics and politics. Mariano Mestman and I call this process the “Itinerary of ’68,” a designation that, by underscoring the year, relates it to the general atmosphere of the period, epitomized by the popular and student uprisings in France and Mexico.⁵

The Itinerary of ’68 was a series of politically charged art actions and statements that were carried out collectively. The artists conceived a plan of action that they called the “new aesthetics,” implying a progressive dissolution of the boundaries between artistic and political action. Political violence was turned into an aesthetic medium, not only as a metaphor or a call to action, but as a co-opting of the resources, methods, and procedures used by radical left-wing organizations and guerrilla groups.

THE ATTACK

On April 30, 1968, the opening reception for the exhibition *Premio Ver y estimar* (Ver y estimar Prize), one of the main showcases in Buenos Aires for the newest experimental trends in art, was abruptly interrupted. One of the participating artists, Eduardo Ruano, entered the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, followed by several friends. Yelling “Yankees, out of Vietnam!” and similar slogans, the group walked over to the piece that Ruano had made in the days before the opening (which had been regarded as his contribution to the contest). It consisted of an official image of the assassinated United States President John F. Kennedy protected by a glass pane—a reproduction of a similar image exhibited in Buenos Aires’s Lincoln Library, an institution attached to the American Embassy. A few meters away, Ruano had placed a lead brick on the floor, with the implication that it was part of the work. Ruano quickly smashed the glass with it, and then struck and scratched at the image. Museum authorities called the police, but by the time they arrived the demonstrators had already left the premises. Ruano was banned from the exhibition and the remains of his work were removed, but the impact had already been made. For him, his artwork had been neither the intact installation as it had previously stood nor its remains. Rather, it was the act of carrying out a political demonstration in the middle of an exhibition reception—a formal ceremony at the heart of the art institution.

THE EXIT

Just a few days later, on May 8, *Experiencias 68* opened. It was the latest iteration of an annual event devoted to new artistic trends organized by the Di Tella.⁶ During the few weeks it lasted, the artist Pablo Suárez stood at the door distributing copies of a letter addressed to Jorge Romero Brest, director of the Visual Art Center at the institute, in which he announced his refusal to participate in the show in any way other than that. The contents of the letter called into question the validity of the

³ See, for instance, Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman, “After Pop, We Dematerialize: Oscar Masotta, Happenings, and Media Art at the Beginnings of Conceptualism” in Katzenstein, *Listen, Here, Now!*, 156–72.

⁴ The CGT-A (CGT de los Argentinos, or General Confederation of Labor of the Argentine) was an offshoot of the General Confederation of Labor created during the Normalization Congress of the CGT on March 28–30, 1968, and which lasted until 1972. It gathered many unionist delegates who refused to participate in the Normalization Congress. It had support from various artists and it gathered opponents to the “participationists,” who supported collaboration with Juan Carlos Onganía’s military dictatorship.

⁵ See Longoni and Mestman, “After Pop,” 156–72.

⁶ *Ibid.* See also Patricia Rizzo, *Instituto Di Tella Experiencias ’68* (Buenos Aires: Proa, 1997) and Katzenstein, *Listen, Here, Now!*

institution itself: “What I refuse to accept today is the Institute, which represents the centralization of culture. . . . What’s the point of doing something inside the institution, even if you contribute to its destruction?” He added, “These four walls enclose the secret of transforming all that is within them into art, and art is not dangerous. . . . Those who want to be understood in some form: Say it in the street or where your words won’t be twisted.”⁷

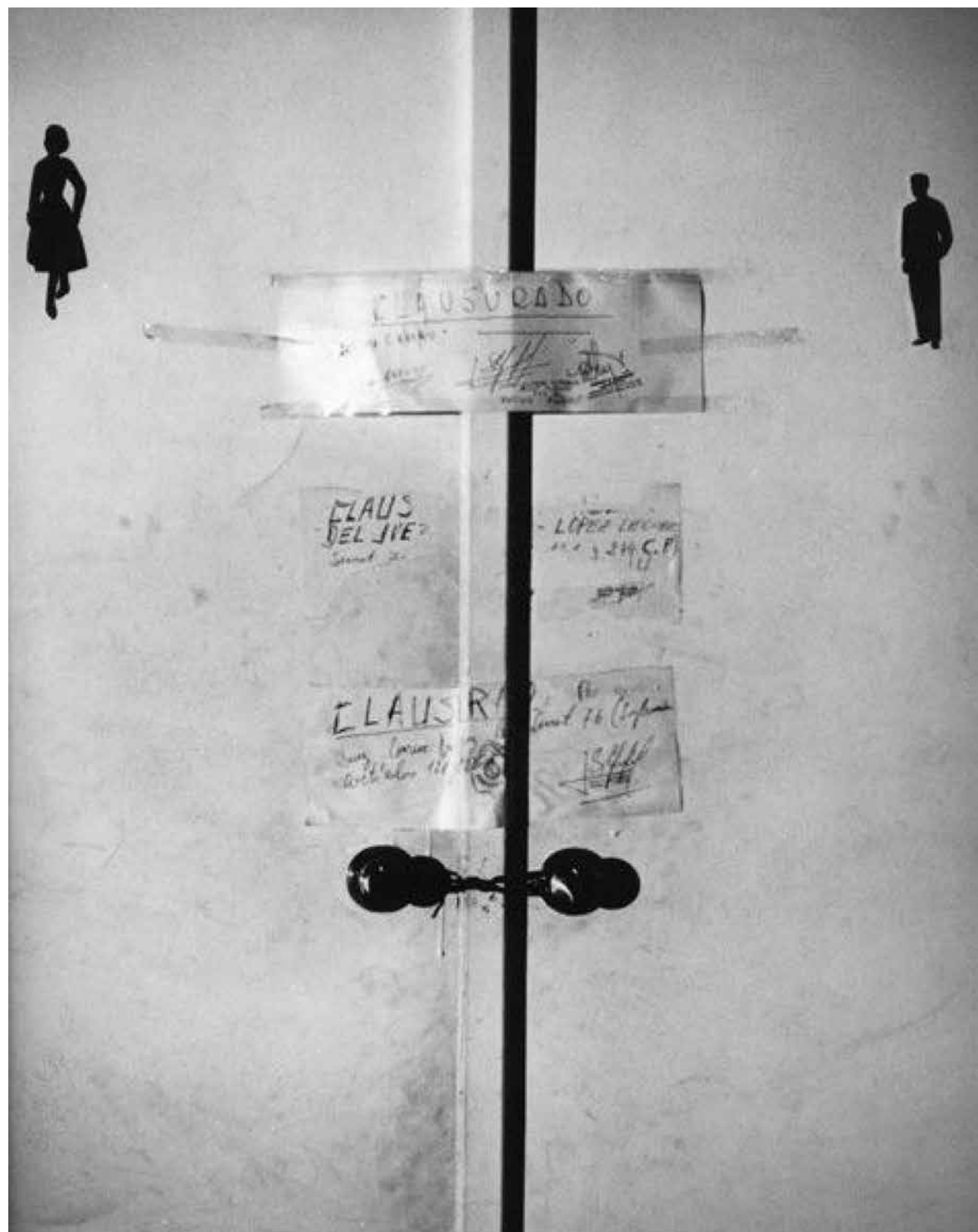


Roberto Jacoby, *Mensaje en el Di Tella* (Message in the Di Tella), 1968; telex transmitting news from the events of May 1968 in France as installed in *Experiencias 68*, Instituto Di Tella, Buenos Aires, 1968

Roberto Jacoby presented a large panel bearing a manifesto, titled *Mensaje en el Di Tella* (Message in the Di Tella, 1968). In it he proclaimed, “Aesthetic contemplation is finished because aesthetics dissolve in social life. The work of art is also finished because life and the earth itself are beginning to become art.” This was accompanied by a photograph of an African American protesting racism and a telex connected to Agence France-Presse, which—for the 15 days of the exhibition—transmitted news from Paris and other French cities reporting on the labor and student riots that were taking place there.

Another of the pieces exhibited in *Experiencias 68* was Roberto Plate’s work *El baño* (Bathroom, 1968). Although it lacked explicit political content, it nevertheless instigated police intervention. As its name implied, *El Baño* simulated a public restroom where visitors found themselves alone within its walls. Some of the anonymous graffiti that soon covered them condemned the regime of de facto president

⁷ Pablo Suárez, letter of resignation, May 13, 1968, reprinted in Longoni and Mestman, *Del Di Tella a Tucumán Arde*, 82–83.



Roberto Plate, *El baño* (Toilet) as installed in *Experiencias 68*, Instituto Di Tella, Buenos Aires, 1968

Juan Carlos Onganía. As (in)offensive as any graffiti in any public toilet, the inscriptions were found to “disturb the peace” because of the symbolic status of the space in which they appeared. Somebody alerted the authorities, and the police decided to shut down Plate’s installation. In the course of that day, visitors saw a transformed (and deformed) artwork: A policeman, now part of the work, preventing access to it. The following day, the remaining artists decided to withdraw from the exhibition



View of Florida Street with artworks destroyed by the artists, end of *Experiencias 68*, Instituto Di Tella, Buenos Aires, 1968

and issued a statement repudiating this censorship. Some days later, they destroyed their works and threw the remains out into nearby Florida Street. The police arrested several of them.

THE ASSAULT

On July 12, another action was carried out, this time by vanguard artists in the town of Rosario. These interrupted Jorge Romero Brest while he was delivering a lecture in the Amigos del Arte conference room. The 10 artists variously defined their act as “an assault,” “an action,” “a little act of violence we have committed,” and, finally, “a work of collective action.”⁸ Following the tactics of a guerilla unit, each member was assigned a specific task: One took Romero Brest to the back of the room, another cut the lights, and others stood in front of the audience chanting slogans, while two laid out the motives for their action:

We believe that art is neither a peaceful activity nor the decoration of anybody’s bourgeois life. . . . We declare that Che Guevara’s life and the actions of the French students are works of art more important than the greater part of the rubbish hung in the major museums of the world. We aspire to transform every piece of reality into an artwork capable of

⁸ Assault Text on Romero Brest’s Lecture, Rosario, July 12, 1968, reprinted in Longoni and Mestman, *Del Di Tella a Tucumán Arde*, 97–98.

addressing the conscience of the world and revealing the intimate contradictions of this class society.⁹

The following day, they returned the grant money that Romero Brest and the Di Tella had given them to finance the *Ciclo de Arte Experimental* (Experimental Art Cycle), a series of works presented in a small rented gallery in a shopping mall that had opened on May 27. They also formally broke with Di Tella. The *Ciclo de Arte Experimental* remained open as a self-financed effort until October. As the last three events in the series, Eduardo Favario simulated the gallery's closure, Emilio Ghilioni and Rodolfo Elizalde faked a street fight, and Graciela Carnevale locked visitors inside the gallery and then left. All of this represented both a literal and a symbolic shift away from formal exhibition spaces and the moving of art to other circuits and modes of relation. The spark may have been the police intervention at the Di Tella, but the true feelings of the artists were that formal exhibitions in traditional institutions simply “no longer mattered.”¹⁰ The Rosario Avant-Garde Artists Group and several avant-garde artists from Buenos Aires (Léon Ferrari, Roberto Jacoby, Pablo Suárez, Eduardo Ruano, Margarita Paksa, Ricardo Carreira, and others) were already engaged in preparations for *Tucumán Burns*.

FIRST MEETING OF AVANT-GARDE ART

After breaking with the Di Tella and other art institutions, the group of vanguard artists organized what they called the First National Meeting of Avant-Garde Art.¹¹ Held in Rosario on August 10 and 11, 1968, this meeting functioned as a collective arena for the elaboration of the aesthetic and political ideas underlying the Itinerary of '68. The artists were acutely aware of the predicament they were in, and decided to convene a meeting in order to evaluate the turning point they were facing and set a goal “for their future action.”¹² They discussed art's true role in the revolutionary process. For them, a subjective commitment to the cause was no longer enough; indeed, even political militancy was deemed insufficient. It was agreed that an “objectively revolutionary” artwork—that is, a work that would itself actualize the creators' will to generate political and artistic change—was necessary. According to their beliefs, the revolutionary condition of the artwork wasn't merely a matter of its content or its creators' political views. Rather, it represented the search for a new type of work that might have an impact on reality. *Tucumán Burns* was a collective experiment with this new aesthetics.

The artists decided to strengthen their links with the trade unions that were rallying against the dictatorship, and to take the current crisis in Tucumán, which was one of the issues of the CGT of the Argentine emergency program, as the ideal site for their collective artistic-political action. Situated in the north of Argentina, Tucumán was then a hotbed of social and political conflict. *Tucumán Burns*—as a direct and politicized offspring of the new media art in Argentina¹³—aspired to build a counter-discourse that would expose the falsehoods of official propaganda concerning the dire social crisis resulting from the shutdown of the sugar mills there.

STAGES

A few weeks after the First National Meeting of Avant-Garde Art, the project started to gain momentum. Four stages, discontinuous in time and space, were designed for the realization of this collective work. The first stage was research. The artists became researchers working in close collaboration with sociologists, economists, journalists, and trade union members with the aim of collecting, in situ,

9 Ibid.

10 These were the words Aldo Bortolotti used in an interview with the author in Rosario in 1993.

11 The Meeting was held at Centro de Estudios de Filosofía y Ciencias del Hombre, located at a large house in downtown Rosario, a meeting place for several professors who had either been expelled or had resigned from the university in 1966, such as Adolfo Prieto, Nicolás Rosa, and María Teresa Gramuglio. Many Rosario and Buenos Aires artists also participated in the meeting. We compiled four papers discussed in the meeting by Ricardo Carreira and León Ferrari, from Buenos Aires, and by Nicolás Rosa and Juan Pablo Renzi, from Rosario. See Longoni and Mestman, *Del Di Tella a Tucumán Arde*, 132–46.

12 Juan Pablo Renzi, “Proyecto de Temario del Primer Encuentro Nacional de Arte de Vanguardia” (Project to Establish Foundations for the Agenda for the First National Meeting on Avant-Garde Art), Rosario, August 1968, reprinted in Longoni and Mestman, *Del Di Tella a Tucumán Arde*, 132.

13 *Tucumán Burns*'s aspiration to reach out to the mass media links it directly with the media art group active in Argentina at the time and promoted by Roberto Jacoby, especially through his foundational art piece *Antihappening* in 1966.

information about the causes and consequences of the crisis. Putting themselves at some risk, they traveled twice to Tucumán, once in mid-September and again at the end of October, to interview and question a number of people, take photographs, film, and otherwise record all that was happening but that the mass media had ignored or even denied. During their second trip, the artists called a press conference upon arriving in Tucumán and then again before departing.



Tucumán Burns, publicity campaign sticker, Rosario, 1968

The second stage, starting in the last days of October, consisted of a massive undercover campaign using agitation tactics and publicity techniques in the streets of Rosario (and, to a lesser extent, in Buenos Aires and Santa Fe). This campaign was launched to raise expectations in large sectors of the population, first with enigmatic posters bearing only the word “Tucumán,” and then using graffiti and stickers with the slogan “Tucumán Arde.” The general public would puzzle over their meaning: Was this a travel agency advertisement? A political campaign? The announcement of a new film?¹⁴

When the artists returned from Tucumán after their second trip, they began distributing a new poster that seemed dissociated from the previous “ads,” since it used different typography and made no mention of Tucumán. Interestingly enough, it invited the public to come to the *First Biennial of Avant-Garde Art*, to be held in Rosario at the headquarters of the CGT-A. As to this tactical use of the word “biennial,” there are two possible interpretations. One is to see it as a legal cover—a clever usage of the prestige that other international biennials possess—in the hope of attracting the usual art public and press coverage without raising the authorities' attention. Another is to take it as an ironic wink in reference to their recent break with art institutions—a parodic reiteration of the rhetoric they had so recently left behind.

The third stage in their larger project was the exhibition of the results of the

14 According to the artist Margarita Paksa, the choice of *Tucumán Burns* was meant to allude to *Paris brûle-t-il?* (Is Paris Burning?), the 1965 film by René Clément that had recently debuted in Argentina. See Longoni and Mestman, *Del Di Tella a Tucumán Arde*, 310.



Tucumán Burns, first part of the publicity campaign, Rosario, 1968



Tucumán Burns, second part of the publicity campaign, Rosario, 1968

1ª bienal
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ROSARIO · CGT DE LOS ARGENTINOS
CORDOBA 2061 · 3 AL 9 DE NOV. 1968.

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ROSARIO · CGT DE
CORDOBA 2061 ·

ROSARIO · CGT DE LOS ARGENTINOS
CORDOBA 2061 · 3 AL 9 DE NOV. 1968.



research campaign, which took place at the trade union headquarters, opening first in Rosario (on November 3) and then traveling to Buenos Aires (where it opened on November 25). Far from a conventional exhibition, it took the form of an “occupation” of the premises that deeply affected the normal functioning of the CGT-A. Attendance far exceeded the organizers’ expectations. Although public meetings had been banned under the dictatorship, thousands of people gathered for the event during the two weeks it lasted in Rosario, turning the exhibition into a compelling act of political defiance.

To fully understand *Tucumán Burns*, it is not enough to consider its exhibition devices, which I will elaborate shortly. Researchers and curators now tend to confuse the different installments of the exhibition with the whole event, but they were just one phase—and not even the final one—in a sequence whose fundamental goal was to produce a massive work of counter-information.



Tucumán Burns, poster, Confederación General del Trabajo de los Argentinos (CGT-A), Rosario, 1968

The display in the first installment of the exhibition, which opened in Rosario a few days after the artists’ second return from Tucumán, was not restricted to a limited area of the premises. Indeed, the idea was to deliberately avoid cornering the exhibition in a single room so that it resisted being summarily scanned like a conventional exhibition. Instead, upon entering the large building, visitors were forced to step on posters bearing the names of Tucumán’s rich landowners. The walls of the entrance hall were covered with collages of cutouts arranged by León Ferrari with the results of a thorough search in the press for official information about Tucumán that openly contradicted the information uncovered by the artists’ research.

In the central lobby, banners with hand-painted slogans hung everywhere, and visitors saw huge, blown-up photographs of Tucumanians taken by the artists. They were basically images of misery and poverty: kids chewing pieces of sugarcane, women working on the harvest with their babies tied to their backs, very old men shouldering huge bales, families standing in front of their ramshackle homes. There were also pictures showing protests, demonstrations, rallies, and “soup kitchens.” Not to mention the effects of repression, for instance the burial of a woman murdered by the police. Texts and charts reinforced these denunciations. Posters bearing the

word “Tucumán” were accompanied by estimates of child mortality, unemployment, malnutrition, and illiteracy among the population. Simple charts explaining wealth concentration and the relations of power in the province were also displayed.

A comprehensive report titled *Tucumán Arde . . . ¿por qué?* (*Tucumán Burns . . . Why?*), written by a group of sociologists, was distributed to the public. Letters were also exhibited, in which, for instance, a mother wrote to a teacher explaining that her child was dropping out of school because he had no shoes to wear. Testimonies from trade union leaders, workers, and inhabitants were audible through loudspeakers; interviews that had been transcribed and mimeographed were handed out to the public; slides and documentaries about particular issues related to the Tucumán crisis were projected on the walls. Some of these—lost today—had been produced by the team with data collected during their second visit. Others, such as Fernando Solanas



Tucumán Burns, poster, Confederación General del Trabajo de los Argentinos (CGT-A), Rosario, 1968

and Octavio Getino’s film *La hora de los hornos* (*The Hour of the Furnaces*, 1968), had been made by political-cultural groups who were in close contact with the artists. The floor was obstructed with heaps of donated food to be delivered to Tucumán. A carefully rigged blackout left the building in the dark every two minutes as a reminder of the interval at which children were dying in Tucumán.

On the opening day, sugarless coffee was served as a direct reference to the sugar shortage brought about by refinery owners hoarding sugar. A whole array of strategies that relied on saturation and redundancy were deployed in the pursuit of a didactic aim: to raise public awareness through emotional impact. The montage as a whole sought to over-inform visitors while moving them at both an intellectual and an emotional level, affecting all their senses with a bombardment of visual, acoustic, and even gustatory data. The campaign brought to public light the causes and consequences of the crisis in Tucumán: its victims, its beneficiaries, its accomplices.

In the Buenos Aires version of the exhibition, the same resources were used but the larger dimensions of the building forced the organizers to situate the exhibition on the ground, first, second, and ninth floors (this last was to be a screening

room). Stairs and doors were also used. By means of blown-up photos, the interior of a humble shack was re-created in an elevator. Two other versions of the exhibition, one in Santa Fe and another in Córdoba, had been scheduled, but all of that was thwarted when the Buenos Aires exhibition was shut down only a few hours after it opened due to direct pressure from the dictatorship.



Tucumán Burns, opening of the exhibition at Confederación General del Trabajo de los Argentinos (CGT-A), Rosario, 1968

The fourth, concluding stage of the original plan never materialized: to collect and publish all the documents generated throughout the entire process. The sudden interruption of *Tucumán Burns* precipitated the disbanding of the avant-garde collective, with most of the members abandoning art. Some of them took up (armed or unarmed) political militancy, convinced that revolution was the only force capable of giving meaning to their actions. The Rosario Avant-Garde Artists Group decided to disband in summer 1969, promising never again to take part in galleries, museums, prizes, awards, or any other institutions of what they called “bourgeois art.” The decision to give up art was also generally adopted by the Buenos Aires artists. As María Teresa Gramuglio points out:

*Most of the visual artists who took part in Tucumán Arde stopped painting, momentarily or definitively. This fact could be said to reveal one of the most extreme forms that the relationship between aesthetics and politics can assume, and which consists in the absorption of the aesthetic practice by the political function. But even if we are dealing with an extreme case, it sets the tone of the general atmosphere . . . without the understanding of which, a great part of the aesthetic experiments of those years would be almost incomprehensible.*¹⁵

When some of the artists resumed producing and showing their works decades later, somehow deciding (or managing) to reenter the art world, they did so with a sense of shame and guilt, even treason. Perhaps this was one the saddest consequences of their radical attempt to formulate a collective program that would allow them to keep making art outside the art world, and carry out a “direct action to produce a political event.”¹⁶

15 María Teresa Gramuglio, “Estética y política,” *Punto de Vista* 26 (April 1986): 3.

16 Statement of the Coordinating Committee for the Revolutionary Imagination, “La nueva vanguardia cultural Argentina,” March 1969, reprinted in *Sobre 1* (May 1969).

17 The first researchers to treat *Tucumán Burns* as Conceptual art were Lucy Lippard, in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), and Simón Marchán Fiz, who inscribes *Tucumán Burns* within an art movement that engages what he calls “ideologic conceptualism” in his *Del arte objetual al arte de concepto*, 2nd ed. (Madrid: Akal, 1986).

18 Stressing the artistic function of propaganda, artist Juan Pablo Renzi made the series of numbered pamphlets (no. 1 corresponded to *Tucumán Burns*) in the early 1970s and presented them in several exhibitions organized by the

curator Jorge Glusberg in an attempt to include some Argentine works in the international Conceptual art movement. In the third pamphlet, titled *La Nueva Moda* and presented in the exhibition *Arte de Sistemas* (Systems Art) at the Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires in 1971, Renzi stressed, in addition to his absolute refusal to be considered one of the founders of Conceptual art, the political nature of the disbanded revolutionary group's works. León Ferrari expressed similar objections to a retrospective of *Tucumán Burns*. In 1973, he wrote: “Those who link it with Conceptual art, which is a new ‘avant-garde’ for the same old elite, forget that the participants of *Tucumán Arde* started by turning their backs on the elite.” See Ferrari, “Respuestas a un cuestionario de la Escuela de Letras de la Universidad de La Habana sobre la exposición *Tucumán Arde*,” in Ferrari, *Prosa política* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2005), 38.

19 See Longoni and Mestman, *Del Di Tella a Tucumán Arde*, 267–66, wherein several of the interviewed artists refer directly or indirectly to this question. Rubén Naranjo, for instance, recalled that when people went into the exhibition “they entered the world of poverty.” Margarita Paksa pointed out, “*Tucumán Arde* was the total occupation of the building, with a number of actions prepared for that occupation.” Beatriz Balvé declared, “The concept was that of an occupation designed to avoid the possibility of having the exhibition confined to a specific area. The entire building was *Tucumán Arde*; everything was occupied by the exhibition, the stairs, the walls, everything.”

20 These readings point out the existence of an affinity between Argentine practices in the 1960s and some Russian avant-garde endeavors in the early years of the Russian Revolution, identifying in particular the key concepts of “factography” and “operativity” and the format of propaganda exhibitions. Here, I revisit those arguments to examine the exhibition dimension of *Tucumán Burns*. See Jaime Vindel, “Tretyakov in Argentina: Factography and Operativity in the Artistic Avant-Garde and the Political Vanguard of the Sixties,” *Transversal*, August 2010, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0910/vindel/en>, and Olga Fernández López, *Dissenting Exhibitions by Artists (1968–1998): Reframing Marxist Exhibition Legacy* (PhD diss. Royal College of Art, 2013).

21 Fernández López, “Dissenting Exhibitions,” 40.

CONTROVERSIES

In spite of its radicalism, *Tucumán Burns* was soon afterward affiliated with, and read in relation to, art-world terms and categories, Conceptual art in particular.¹⁷ This attempted taming of its unruly nature was, of course, immediately resisted by



Tucumán Burns, view of the exhibition in Buenos Aires, 1968

some of the participants.¹⁸ But however much one might associate an “exhibition” with art—and the artists very willingly and provocatively deployed that specific term and format (even deliberately calling what they were doing a “biennial”)—*Tucumán Burns*, the exhibition, was much more than that. The result of a complexly designed set of operations, it was only one segment of a larger project in which the fundamental goal was to provide counter-information as a means of undermining the dictatorship's official propaganda. It was truly an experiment in which art occupied foreign territory; it seized and merged with a public space that was alien to art circles. It was impossible to visit and look at like a typical art show since the public no longer stood in front of the artwork, but *in it*.¹⁹

Some recent articles have inserted *Tucumán Burns* into a genealogy of political propaganda exhibitions that can be traced back to the Russian avant-garde.²⁰ In her doctoral thesis “Dissenting Exhibitions by Artists (1968–1998): Reframing Marxist Exhibition Legacy,” the Spanish researcher Olga Fernández López advances a suggestive hypothesis:

*If we were to establish visual comparisons, we could relate [Tucumán Burns] formally to a previous tradition of photomontage and propaganda shows, such as El Lissitzky's exhibitions to endorse the Soviet Revolution (1928–1930), the Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista (Rome, 1932), the Spanish Republican Pavilion in Paris (1937), and the exhibitions undertaken by the United States during World War II, such as The Road to Victory (New York, 1942).*²¹

The Argentine artists had no doubt heard of El Lissitzky, Sergei Tretyakov, and other Russian avant-garde artists, but rather than trying to make concrete

connections, it might be more accurate to think of this affinity as “secret reverberations”—as Greil Marcus describes the connections between Dadaism, Lettrism, and punk in his book *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*—comprising the powerful threads of a subterranean network. *Tucumán Burns*, unlike Fernández’s examples, was meant as a denunciation of the misery brought about by capitalism, the misinformation of the so-called official version of the truth, and a pernicious dictatorship, not as exalting, positive propaganda celebrating the achievements of a Communist regime. As opposed to these models of propagandistic exhibitions, *Tucumán Burns* is perhaps better thought of as a counter-information exhibition.

This is not to say that the Russian efforts of the 1920s and the Argentine efforts of the 1960s did not have much in common. Both used the “exhibition” format to participate in a political struggle, enacted the “recuperation” of a didactic function that went against the modern defense of the autonomy of art, and abandoned, as in El Lissitzky’s case, “the role of the modernist artist for that of the producer of political propaganda.”²² Both experiences also shared a preference for a collective work—the dilution of individual authorship—and a collective, massive reception that spread far wider than the usual elite art audience. As Fernández López points out: “The exhibitions were also punctuated with politically charged texts and slogans so as to raise political and historical consciousness in the visitor.”²³ And they both heavily relied on what Benjamin H. D. Buchloh has called “the *factographic* capacity of the photograph, supposedly rendering aspects of reality visible without interference or mediation” as well as a trust in the inexorable course of history toward imminent revolution.²⁴

They also held in common an effort to question art’s boundaries, to expand its borders, even to abandon its sphere. They likewise shared the same evident intention to affect social reality. Both were attempts to conceive an art capable of mobilization—not just an art that would go against the consolidated ideology of the autonomous aesthetic object but an art that would be useful and effective, that would overthrow the decorative or merely illustrative place that political conventions traditionally assign to art.

The Itinerary of ’68 signaled a radical avant-garde confrontation with the artistic milieu, carried out through politically charged and explosive events that led to a final break with the art world. If *Tucumán Burns*, as its culmination, revisited the “exhibition” format, it did so by transposing it onto a realm that lay far away from the art world. Its organizers seemed to be leveraging the legitimacy of their status as artists, for instance when they called a press conference in Tucumán or invited the public to a *First Biennial of Avant-Garde Art*. Its alliance with the trade unions imposed new rules, new forms of negotiation, and a different mode for the circulation of the artwork. This alliance, together with collective authorship, the search for a new political language, and the ambitious effort to reach out to a massive, working-class public are clear evidence of a radical quest: the redefinition of the relationship between art and politics, guided by the imperative of achieving a high-impact artistic action leading to radical social transformation.

Translated from the Spanish by Jorge Salvetti. All quotations originally in Spanish were translated to English as part of the translation of the essay.

²² Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “From Faktura to Factography,” *October* 30 (fall 1984): 109.

²³ Fernández López, “Dissenting Exhibitions,” 43.

²⁴ Buchloh, “From Faktura to Factography,” 103.

Liam Gillick and Philippe Parreno, *The Trial of Pol Pot* (1998)

In the last analysis, structure and detail are always historically charged.
—Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Baroque Drama*, 1928

July 1997: Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge leader responsible for the atrocities perpetrated by the Khmer regime in the mid- to late 1970s in Cambodia, stands trial for treason and is sentenced to house arrest. Having taken over leadership of the remaining Khmer Rouge, Pol Pot's former military chief, Ta Mok (known as "The Butcher" for his own role in the Khmer atrocities), ordered the trial following the murder of Pol Pot's former defense minister, Son Sen, and 13 members of Sen's family. The Khmer Rouge invites two United States journalists to cover the trial, which takes place in Anlong Veng, the Khmer headquarters isolated in the Dângrêk Mountains along the Thai border in northern Cambodia. Images of the trial are subsequently broadcast around the world. The Cambodian government claims that the Khmer Rouge, under the leadership of Ta Mok, staged the trial as a media event with the intent of gaining political immunity from Phnom Penh.

July 1999: Pol Pot, still under house arrest, dies of an apparent heart attack, thus ending any possibility of bringing him to trial in an international court of justice. When the Khmer Rouge announces Pol Pot's death, the Cambodian government claims again that Khmer leadership orchestrated the event in the hope of ending the U.S.-led operation to arrest him alive.¹

November 1998: Eighteen months after the trial and nine months before the announcement of Pol Pot's death, Liam Gillick and Philippe Parreno present a collaborative exhibition at Le Magasin in Grenoble, France, titled *Le procès de Pol Pot* (hereafter referred to by its English translation, *The Trial of Pol Pot*). The exhibition, which represents an unprecedented turn to recent history in contemporary art, runs from November 8, 1998, to January 5, 1999. The two artists describe their motivation for developing the exhibition as a response to the impenetrability of "one of this century's greatest tragedies." In the wake of that tragedy, they understand that historical and collective memory must confront the paucity of existing visual documentation and the oppressive restrictions placed on journalism under the Khmer dictatorship, along with what they see as the "illegibility" of the trial itself.² The trial holds a figurative meaning as well, in that the exhibition also arises out of a desire to interrogate, in what Gillick subsequently refers to as "a trial model," the institutional and discursive conventions governing the production and exhibition of contemporary art.³

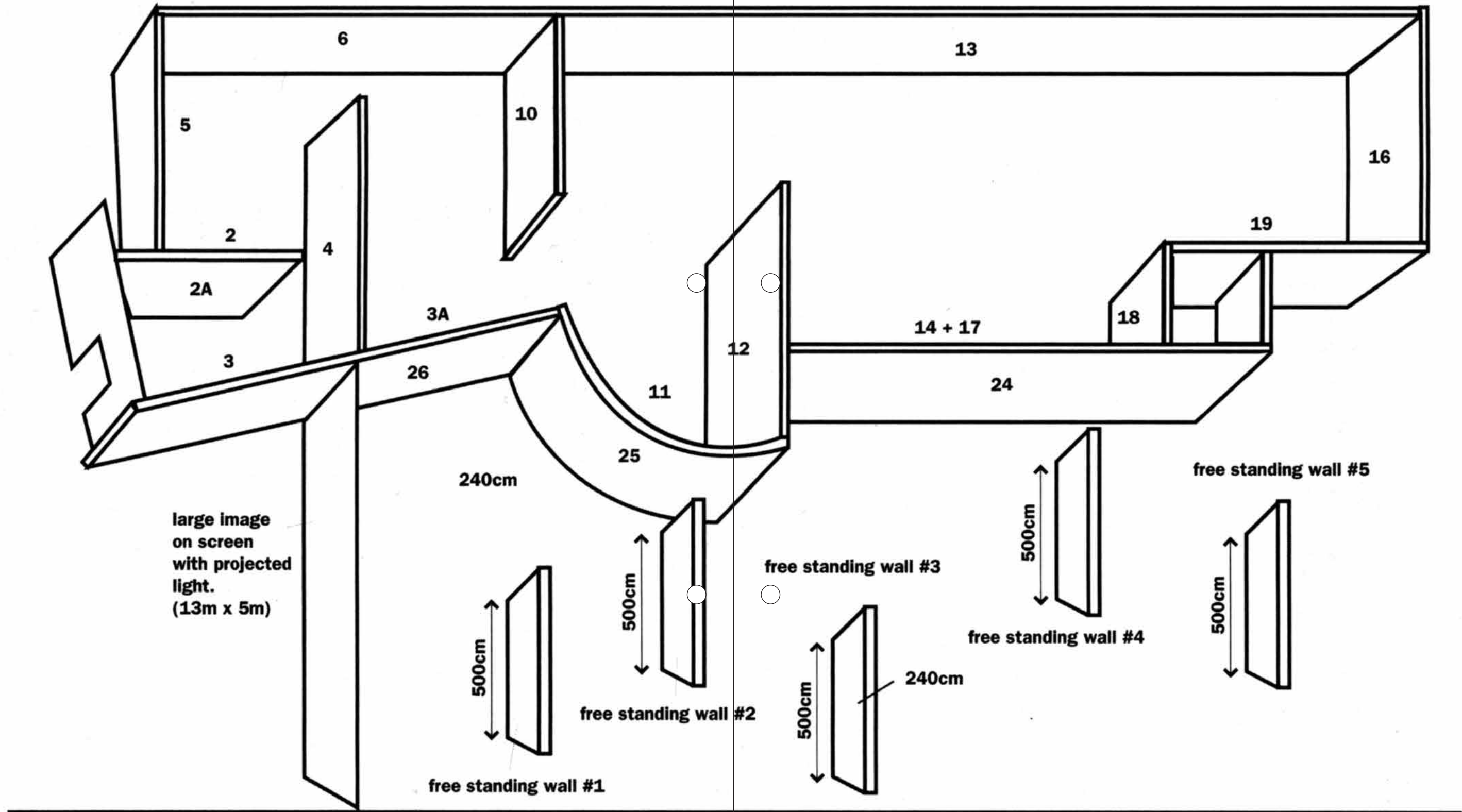
Opening in 1998, *The Trial of Pol Pot* coincided with the French publication of Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*. Both Gillick and Parreno figured prominently among the new generation of artists who had emerged in the late 1980s and early to mid-1990s and inspired Bourriaud to interpret what he saw at the time as a major shift in artistic practice. Indeed, both artists had participated in the exhibition *Traffic*, which Bourriaud had curated in 1986 at the CAPC musée d'art contemporain in Bordeaux, France, and which served as a catalyst for Bourriaud's subsequent

* This essay expands upon my text "Defense de la lecture: *Le procès de Pol Pot*," which appeared in *Oublier l'exposition*, guest edited by Pierre Leguillon, a special issue of *Artpress* 21 (2000): 64–69.

¹ Concurrent with these two events, but largely ignored by the media, the Cambodian Genocide Project at Yale University and the University of New South Wales in Australia established an electronic database in order to store and analyze the historical evidence of Khmer rouge crimes. The database, which exists in various forms, including CD-ROM, is publicly accessible on the Internet (in the mid- to late 1990s, such use of electronic media for the storage and retrieval of historical memory and juridical evidence, and its global accessibility, was unprecedented).

² See the exhibition brochure *Le procès de Pol Pot* (Grenoble: Le Magasin, Centre National d'Art Contemporain de Grenoble, 1998): 14.

³ "I don't only mean trial in a judicial . . . sense, but the ongoing testing of something institutionally. You question, you investigate, and you reach out to people who do not necessarily have vested interests in art but specialize in certain areas." Liam Gillick, "Selected Transcription from Talk at UN Plaza, Berlin," *Printed Project 6* (2006): 42. Gillick's understanding of the "trial model" as it applied to *The Trial of Pol Pot* will become apparent in what follows.



efforts to define his theory of relational art. It is not within the scope of this essay to undertake a comparative reading of Bourriaud's publication and Gillick and Parreno's exhibition. Suffice to say that *The Trial of Pol Pot* diverges significantly from the relational aesthetics that Bourriaud advocates.



Liam Gillick and Philippe Parreno, stack of posters/publication for *The Trial of Pol Pot*, 1998

In his essay, Bourriaud maintains an optimistic belief that contemporary art and its various institutions can provide an autonomous and exemplary sphere of social exchange and conviviality, otherwise freed, albeit momentarily, from reified social relations and capitalist spectacle. Yet it was precisely the demise of that optimism in the late 1960s that precipitated the emergence of institutional critique: as contemporary art became increasingly institutionalized and open to the dictates of the culture industry, it could no longer preserve its promise of a sphere of relative creative and public autonomy; this was a reality that the early practitioners of institutional critique had clearly understood. Although *The Trial of Pol Pot* did not appear to endorse Bourriaud's optimism, neither did it side with the second wave of institutional critique being developed in the 1990s by a number of Gillick and Parreno's peers. The "trial model," which served as the basis of the exhibition, aimed at "the ongoing testing of something institutional," to quote Gillick.⁴ Yet the two artists nevertheless remained wary of the demand for transparency that institutional critique, in unveiling the ideologies that underpin contemporary art, continued to advocate. As Gillick claims in his response to Claire Bishop's critique of *Relational Aesthetics*, he shared with Parreno and other artists he collaborated with at the time the understanding that, on the contrary, "a sequence of veils and meanderings might be necessary to combat the chaotic ebb and flow of capitalism."⁵

If such an understanding informed Gillick and Parreno's joint endeavor in 1998, *The Trial of Pol Pot* also represented an unparalleled ambition to map out the institutional and discursive limits of Post-Conceptual art. That ambition is registered in the way the exhibition combined an acknowledgment of its discursive provenance (the legacy of Conceptual art's "linguistic turn"—namely, the explicit debt to the

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Liam Gillick, "Contingent Factors: A Response to Claire Bishop's 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,'" *October* 115 (winter 2004): 106.

grammar and typographical display of Lawrence Weiner's statements), an unprecedented turn to historical content and memory (which Conceptual art, in its canonical form, had eschewed), and, finally, a confrontation with the dominant forms of social communication and image production.

In developing an unorthodox set of protocols and format for the exhibition, Gillick and Parreno designated themselves "coordinators." Furthermore, they invited a group of artists, critics, and curators to both act as outside "supervisors" and represent a jury of sorts (although there were ultimately 14 such supervisors, the exhibition brochure suggests that there were originally meant to be 12, the same number typically found in a criminal jury).⁶ Throughout the preparation of the exhibition, Gillick and Parreno kept the jury of supervisors informed via email of their intentions and decisions, and invited them to respond. In submitting their representation of the "absent" trial to a virtual judicial proceeding or "trial model," they tested the institutional divisions of labor that govern the production and mounting of an exhibition. In so doing, they extended their role to that conventionally attributed to a curator, thus determining, in dialogue with the supervisors, the relation between artwork, exhibition space, and conditions of spectatorship. By foregrounding, within the exhibition itself, the social and institutional relations governing contemporary art, Gillick and Parreno acknowledged the ways in which those relations inevitably influenced and shaped their artistic practice.

Although it purposefully maintained the spatial and temporal format of an exhibition, *The Trial of Pol Pot* began and ended as a resolutely textual endeavor, encompassing the artists' initial statement of intent, the email exchanges between the coordinators and supervisors, and numerous wall texts (in both English and French) that served as the exhibition's primary medium. A stack of posters on the floor at the entrance, available for visitors to take away, underscored that endeavor: superimposed on a beige background, numerous textual fragments, in bold Helvetica font, obliquely offered traces of the supervisors' alternative proposals for the exhibition's final form, and thus formed a palimpsest of the collective process itself.

Beyond the stack of posters, a large semi-translucent fabric screen stretched across Le Magasin's principal exhibition space, virtually curtaining off its entire width. Its shape and size matched the widescreen format of cinema, while its expansive blue background evoked the chroma-key technique used in cinema and video. Two motifs adorned the screen, serving as visual emblems of projected light and shadow: to the left, a white sphere, and to the right, a cluster of variously scaled and intersecting black trunks and branches. Together they formed a schematic landscape: a sun or moon poised above a forest or jungle. At the same time, the sphere alternately read as a spotlight, with an actual theatrical lamp, discernible through the screen's fabric, projecting light from behind, just as the second motif resembled so many fragmented bars of indiscernible black typography, which, not unlike the exhibition poster, formed a "forest of signs."⁷ Thus, the screen displayed the motifs of a dialectic that the exhibition would henceforth unfold both in form and content: on the one hand, the spotlight and its suggestion of spectacle and simulacrum, made all the more apparent in that the natural lighting of the central exhibition space impeded the actual spotlight from concurring with its virtual effect on the screen; and, on the other, the complex spread of information, its global dissemination or "coverage," and the discursive crisis that it generates.

Obligated to bypass the screen in order to enter the exhibition space beyond, viewers engaged in a symbolic crossing from spectacle to exhibition. On the

⁶ The 14 "supervisors" were Terry Atkinson, Zeigam Azizov, Carsten Höller, Pierre Huyghe, Douglas Gordon, Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt, Ronald Jones, Pierre Joseph, Gabriel Kuri, Jeremy Millar, Thomas Mulcaire, Josephine Pryde, Adrian Schiesser, and Rirkrit Tiravanija.

⁷ I am referring to *A Forest of Signs: Art in the Crisis of Representation*, the title of the influential exhibition curated by Ann Goldstein and Mary Jane Jacob at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 1989. The phrase is a translation of André Breton's "un forêt d'indices," from the surrealist novel *L'Amour fou*, which Breton borrows from Charles Baudelaire's "un forêt de symboles" in the poem "Correspondences." As Jonathan Culler has argued, Baudelaire's poem "seems to disrupt the one-to-one correspondence between natural sign and spiritual meaning." In other words, Baudelaire enacts a rift between sign and referent, in which the referent oscillates between natural and artificial meanings, not unlike the way the visual emblems function here. See Jonathan Culler, "Intertextuality and Interpretation" in *Nineteenth-Century French Poetry: Introductions to Close Reading* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 118–37.

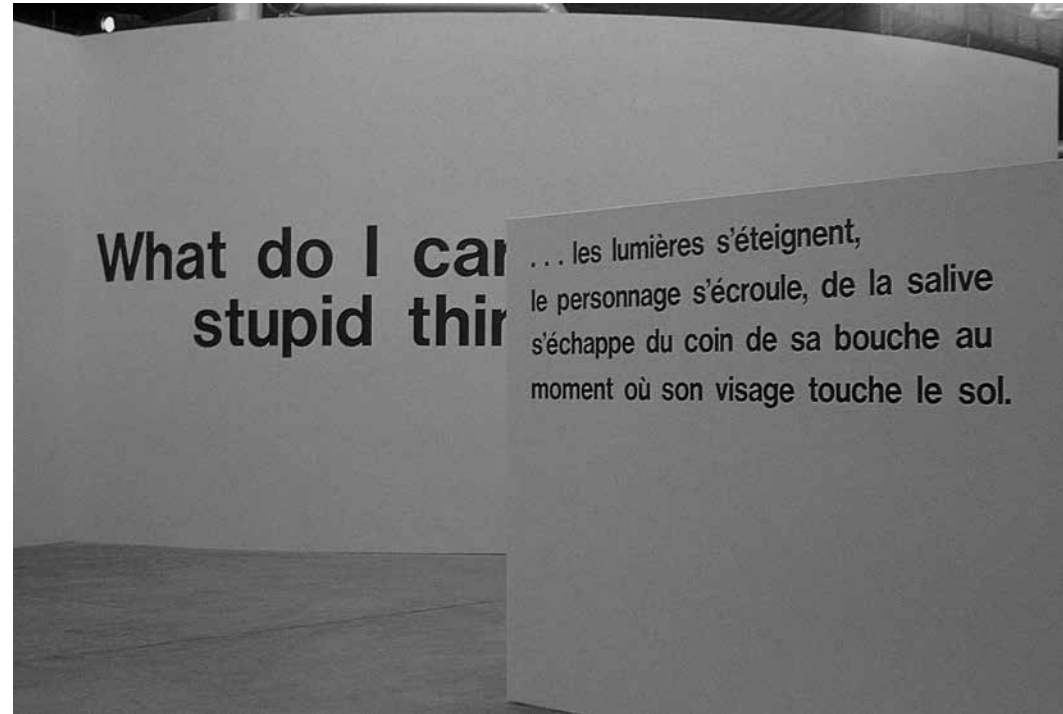
What do I care about the
stupid things I did yesterday

À quel
moment devrai-je être né
de nouveau afin d'envoyer une si
singulière applique

simultanément à la
non-questions

Les lanternes s'éteignent,
le personnage s'écroule, de la salive
s'échappe du coin de sa bouche au
moment où son visage touche le sol.

opposite side, five freestanding walls extended to the back of the exhibition space; each displayed a vinyl wall text in bold Helvetica font (as did some of the surrounding walls), and together they evoked a spatial projection of hypertext windows. The wall texts continued throughout Le Magasin's second, enclosed gallery, but here the natural lighting of the first gallery gave way to a series of spotlights washing the walls and texts in various hues. Underscored by various phrases arrayed on the walls, such as "normal cross questioning from a studio anchor," the spotlights lent this second space a spectral quality, evoking an all-but-empty production studio or stage set.



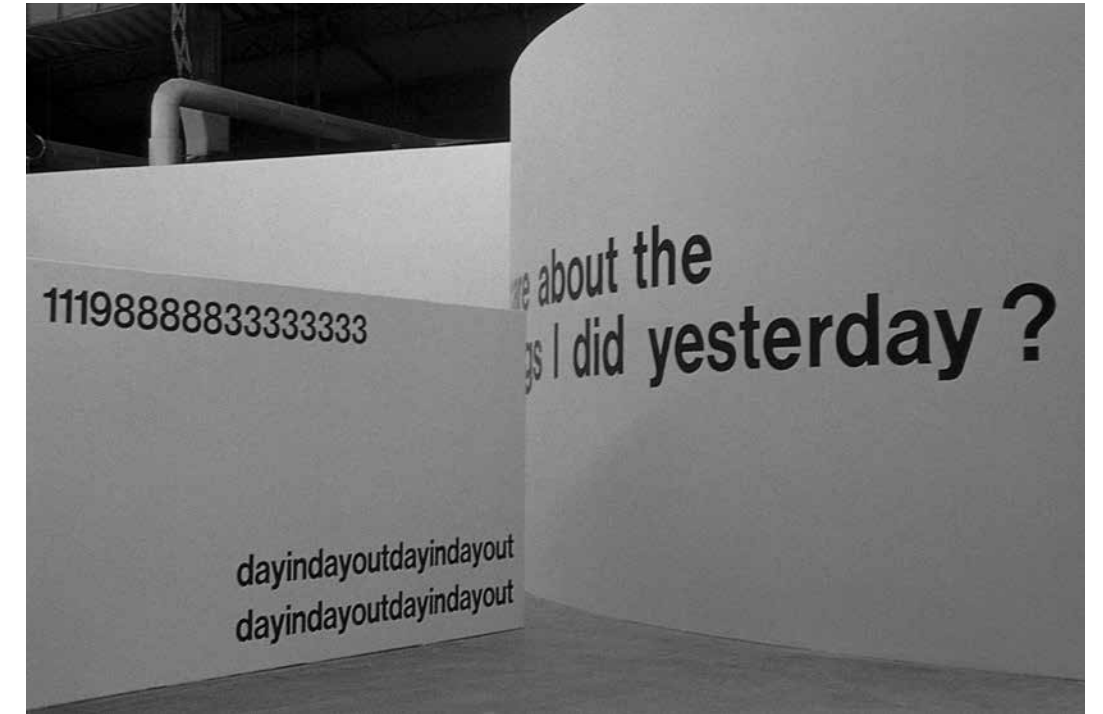
Liam Gillick and Philippe Parreno, installation view of *The Trial of Pol Pot*, 1998

Of the 29 wall texts spread throughout Le Magasin's two galleries, the first (in the open expanse of the main gallery, immediately facing the screen) represented the only narrative or descriptive element, and the only one to give an account of injustice: "... Lamps fading as the character slumps forward his face dripping with spit." In the present, impersonal tense and beginning with an ellipsis, it reads as much like a stage direction as a concise description of an act of physical brutality (an interrogation or torture). Conspicuously borrowed from the artist Lawrence Weiner, the impersonal tense (albeit shifted from past to present) and ellipsis immediately invited a cognitive and participatory response from the viewer in establishing the exhibition's meaning.⁸ It therefore held a specific discursive place in the spatial and temporal layout of the exhibition. Firstly, it opened the exhibition to the abject violence of the events that led to the exhibition's title and the question of justice (or, as a subsequent fragment indicated, "event led... et faire jurisprudence"). Secondly, it raised the question of spectacle, underscored by the reference to a fictional "character"—or, more accurately, to the extinguishing of spectacle, as the participle phrase "... Lamps fading" figuratively suggests. In this sense, the phrase could be read in relation to the lighting of the exhibition space itself: the existing or natural lighting of the open space of the main gallery, which contrasted with the staged, artificial lighting in the second, enclosed gallery. Something of what the exhibition sought to articulate in its confrontation with recent history and media can be summarized here in what amounted to a series of

8 On this aspect of Lawrence Weiner's work, see Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "The Posters of Lawrence Weiner" in Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 564–65.

ascetic gestures: that historical memory and justice are not reducible to—and must therefore both confront and negate—spectacle.⁹

Resisting the spectacularization of historical memory, the exhibition made no claim to present a factual account (visual or otherwise) of the events leading to the trial of Pol Pot. Nor did it subject those events to the repetition of ritualized exposure and violence that, to refer to a related example, the Museum of Modern Art in New York manifested a year earlier when it exhibited a selection of black-and-white photographs of prisoners from the archives of the notorious Khmer Rouge prison



Liam Gillick and Philippe Parreno, installation view of *The Trial of Pol Pot*, 1998

(known as S-21) at Tuol Sleng in the suburbs of Phnom Penh. In displaying the photographs according to the conventions of traditional portraiture in MoMA's photography galleries, the exhibition belittled the bureaucratic obscurity with which prisoners were routinely photographed at S-21; the selection alone raised questions as to what aesthetic or other criteria influenced the museum to exhibit approximately 20 photographic prints from more than 6,000 surviving negatives.¹⁰

What *The Trial of Pol Pot* lacked in historical references and visual documentation did not exempt it from critical scrutiny nor undermine its reading, even if certain wall texts appeared to deny meaning altogether: "bnmvm,cmnxmnmvnm, x-fjkdllksajfj," "1,056,783,210,932." Of the exhibition's 29 wall texts, only three contained explicit, albeit laconic, historical references: "Khmer Rouge," "1979 1979 1979," and "which 1982." Clearly, 1979 refers to the year Vietnamese troops invaded Cambodia and overthrew the Khmer regime, thus ending four years of terror and genocide. Its repetition serves as a reminder that, in its potential to designate events in time, a date must be capable of both repeating itself and thus erasing its uniqueness. This is how Jacques Derrida defines the discursive property of a date, which he further describes as the underlying condition of any genuine text. A text's unique traces or marks, like the uniqueness of a date, require that it be repeated and "re-marked" in order to become both linguistically and historically legible.¹¹ For a date to take effect, to be read and interpreted, "one must also efface it, make it readable, audible, intelligible beyond

9 "What we have to begin with is this: injustice is clear, justice is obscure. For he who undergoes injustice is the irrecusable witness to this. But who can testify for justice? There is an affect of injustice, a suffering, a revolt. Nothing, however, signals justice, which can be presented neither as a spectacle nor as a sentiment." Alain Badiou, "Justice and Truth," trans. Thelma Sowley, in *Law, Justice, and Power: Between Reason and Will*, ed. Sinkwan Cheng (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 223.

10 *Photographs from S-21: 1975–1979*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, May 15 to September 30, 1997.

11 See Jacques Derrida, "Shibboleth: For Paul Celan," trans. Joshua Wilner, in Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 9.

the singularity of which it speaks.”¹² But Derrida adds that if a date requires that its singularity be both effaced and repeated in order for it to take effect—and, indeed, to be preserved—what lies beyond its singularity is not a generality. Rather, its repetition and erasure, as the marker of a unique and thus historical event, must occur “in front of another date.”¹³ Thus, any genuine act of reading must openly respond to what is read with an equally singular countersignature and date.

The second fragment containing a date, “which 1982,” surprisingly reaffirms Derrida’s understanding of the way in which a date becomes legible. Although less readily decipherable than the year 1979, it nevertheless suggests a possible date, in its own potential repetition and effacement, in front of which the previous date might be equally demarcated and re-marked. Few significant dates appear in the press coverage of the 10 years in which the Vietnamese ruled Cambodia following the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge in 1979. Yet the interrogative phrase “which 1982” conceals, in “the outside-of-meaning where [the date] holds itself in reserve,”¹⁴ everything that the exhibition otherwise appeared to withhold. In 1982 a research committee was established under the Vietnamese occupation to gather evidence and testimony of the events of 1975–79 in Cambodia. Over a two-year period the committee compiled significant archival material pertaining to the humanitarian crimes of the Khmer regime. The Renaske petition, as it is known, consists of more than 10,000 documents bearing the signatures and fingerprints of upward of a million people. As the committee gathered evidence, they asked those they solicited to sign a petition condemning Khmer Rouge crimes, which they intended to submit to the United Nations (UN) as a plea to bring Khmer leaders to international trial; at that time the Khmer Rouge remained the legal representative of Cambodia within the UN and continued to receive support from foreign nations, notably China and the United States. The petition, however, never reached the UN. Thus, in its elision, the simple phrase “which 1982” encrypts and seals within itself not only one of the most important sources of evidence of the history of the crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge, which, as the Cambodian Genocide Program states, “remains to be read and interpreted,”¹⁵ but equally a million other ciphers in the form of signatures and fingerprints, which together constitute an alliance in the name of justice.

As a textual endeavor, *The Trial of Pol Pot* provokes questions as to the moral status of art in responding to such events. Those questions do not merely pertain to visual representation and the risk of transfiguring the horror of genocide into the impropriety of a redemptive aesthetic experience. More fundamentally, they pertain to the limits of discourse itself: the failure of language—and not merely visual language—in its capacity to respond to a historical reality that exceeds the limits of language and is, therefore, resistant to history. Added to this is the sense in which the events of radical inhumanity during the 20th century have led to a failure of discourse itself.¹⁶

Gilles Deleuze points to that failure in his analysis of Hans-Jürgen Syberberg’s epic film *Hitler, ein Film aus Deutschland* (Hitler: A Film from Germany, 1977). For Deleuze, Syberberg’s “trial of Hitler” generates, first and foremost, an exhaustion of discourse. In so doing, it acknowledges the intrinsic limits of language in the face of inhumanity and at the same time offers an expectation that through its exhaustion language itself might remain open to an alternative discursive mode, one more commensurate with the call of justice. A comparison between Syberberg’s “trial” and *The Trial of Pol Pot* can be found not only in the way in which the exhibition dialectically staged and negated its spectatorial form, which reflected the film’s Brechtian “distancing effect” (*Verfremdungseffekt*), but also in what Deleuze,

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question*, 27.

¹⁵ See Helen Jarvis, in collaboration with Nereida Cross, “Documenting the Cambodian Genocide on Multimedia” (Mellon Foundation Sawyer Seminar Series, October 1, 1998), Yale University Cambodian Genocide Program. Accessed March 16, 2014, <http://www.yale.edu/cgp/documenting.html>.

¹⁶ “Somewhere, discourse shattered, but it’s hard to say exactly where. And it’s not as if we have another discourse to fall back on. For a long time yet we will have to extend ourselves in the search for discourses that might supplement the one we have, relay it, start it over. And while this is going on, the nature of the rift is only going to become more evident. We have no other discourse; all we know is that something has been interrupted, broken down at the heart of discourses that, once cherished, have now become untenable.” Jean-Luc Nancy, “Changing of the World,” trans. Steven Miller, in Jean-Luc Nancy, *A Finite Thinking (Cultural Memory in the Present)* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 304.

following Jean-Pierre Oudart, names Syberberg’s “media-effect.”¹⁷ As Deleuze describes it, the disjunction of image and sound “is an essential aspect of Syberberg’s work because [it] will be specifically entrusted with experiencing [the] complexity of informational space.”¹⁸ That complexity “exceeds the psychological individual just as it makes a whole impossible: a non-totalizable complexity, ‘non-representable by a single individual.’”¹⁹

Likewise, Gillick and Parreno refrained from any representation, psychological or otherwise, of Pol Pot as a single individual. Rather, they were concerned with questioning how the events of the Khmer regime survive as historical memory. As such, they understood that it is only in “exceeding” information that justice and historical memory can manifest themselves. Yet, unlike Syberberg’s “trial,” Gillick and Parreno’s exhibition exceeded the flow of information not by amplifying it to the point of exhaustion but rather by fracturing it and hollowing it out in advance. Hence the textual fragments—those questions, phrases, words, letters, and figures disseminated across Le Magasin’s exhibition space—which, in the disjunction of image and text and the splintering of signifier and referent, resisted any predetermined claim of referential meaning; one wall, for example, bore the following string of questions: “What degree of distress? What analysis? What woman? What extended friends and family? What report? What commentary?”



Liam Gillick and Philippe Parreno, installation view of *The Trial of Pol Pot*, 1998

Those fragments, however, did not (as it has been argued elsewhere) merely replicate or cynically reinforce the “fragmentation” and “*brouillage*” of the media.²⁰ Nor, in suspending any immediate correlation between reality and knowledge, language and action, did they leave the viewer in a state of pathos or indecision. The discursive procedures the exhibition deployed essentially followed those that Benjamin Buchloh, in following Walter Benjamin’s influential reappraisal of allegory, enumerates in his 1982 essay “Allegorical Procedures”: “appropriation and depletion of meaning, fragmentation and dialectical juxtaposition of fragments, and separation of signifier and signified.”²¹ In the allegorical procedures of montage, as Buchloh explains, the reified and devalued signs of commodity or media culture give way to a

¹⁷ Jean-Pierre Oudart, *Cahiers du cinéma* 294 (November 1978): 7–9, quoted in Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1989), 269.

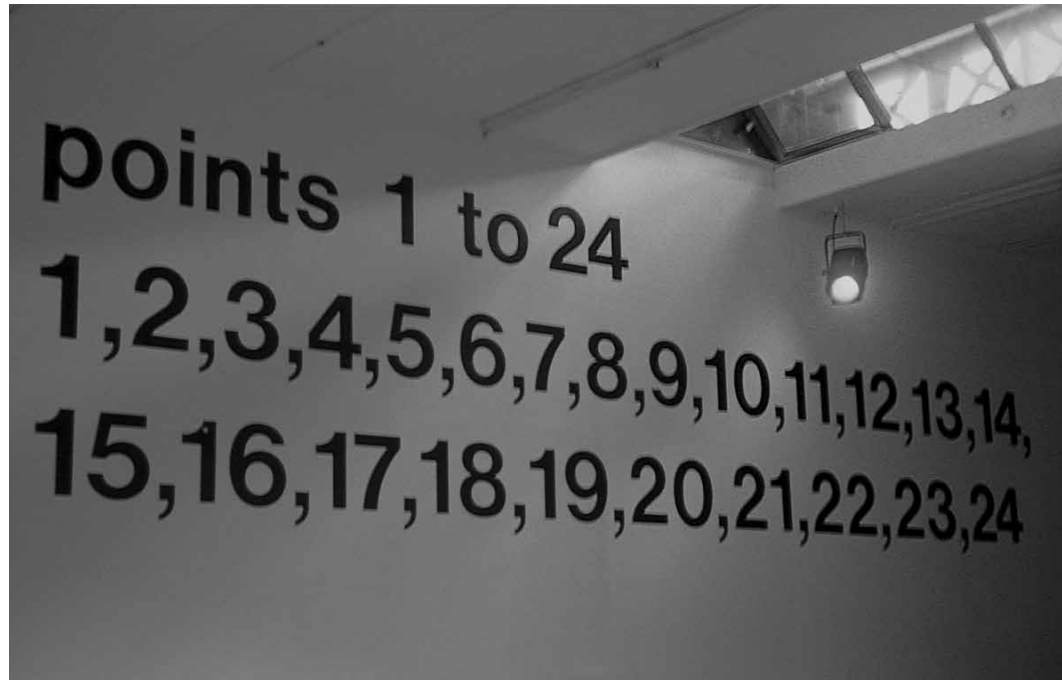
¹⁸ Deleuze, *Cinéma* 2, 269.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ See Brian Holmes, “De l’interaction en art contemporain,” *Parachute* 95 (1999): 52–54.

²¹ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art,” *Artforum* 21 (September 1982): 44.

secondary devaluation and subsequently allow for an inscription of critical meaning to take place. Buchloh, in reference to Walter Benjamin's analysis of melancholy and allegory, points out that in so doing there remains an "inherent danger of melancholic complacency and [...] the violence of passive denial that the allegorical subject impos-



Liam Gillick and Philippe Parreno, installation view of *The Trial of Pol Pot*, 1998

es upon itself as well as upon the objects of its choice."²² Such complacency thus risks, at all times, thwarting the critical negation that allegory otherwise effects. Yet, if it is to proceed without reservation, allegory must forgo the pathos and indecision that bind it to melancholy, in that the latter remain signs of ambivalence toward the object that allegory critically negates. For melancholic complacency continues to lament the loss of the allegorical object's prior meaning, whose purported immediacy allegory undoes, just as it remains equally ambivalent toward the critical negation that the allegorical object must undergo in order to reappear as an object of knowledge and criticism.²³

Rather than remaining complacent before the disjunction of signifier and signified, allegory maintains this disjunction as the necessary distinction between two value systems: language as a system of signs and syntax (its material condition) and language as a system of signification (its referential mode). In this sense, allegory can be understood as an ethical trope—one that, when fully undertaken, enacts a displacement from pathos to ethos, from a passive to an active engagement.²⁴ Thus, in its textual deployment of allegory, *The Trial of Pol Pot* can be seen to indicate something of the ethical imperative of language itself. Despite their referential depletion, the exhibition's textual fragments nevertheless demanded to be read. Yet this imperative of reading is not the function of rhetorical persuasion as such (something they again borrow from the rhetorical mode of Lawrence Weiner's statements). Rather, in their fragmentation and depletion, they maintain something of the referential imperative that language demands. If language is unconditional in this way, its referential imperative must be understood as irreducible to—and thus preceding—its various empirical conditions and uses.

There is thus a responsibility of and for language that introduces a radical discontinuity into the knowledge, norms, and rules with which decisions are made.

²² Ibid., 53.

²³ See Alexander Garcia-Duttman, *The Gift of Language: Memory and Promise in Adorno, Benjamin, Heidegger and Rosenzweig*, trans. Arline Lyons (London: Athlone Press, 2000), 60.

²⁴ See Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 206.

And, as such, its place and time are estranged from that of a determined or calculated subject. *The Trial of Pol Pot* perhaps made its most pertinent statement, therefore, in undoing the place and time of a guaranteed "addressee" of the enunciations it deployed. Extricated from an assignable subject of address, the discursive fragments that made up the exhibition's wall texts allegorically revealed what underlies all ethico-political decisions. If this took place in the allegorical depletion of the place and time of the media, it can thus be interpreted, among other things, as a resistance to the ideologies of contemporary humanitarian intervention and its media coverage.

Unable to offer a public sphere for the collective and historical appraisal of the events it transmits, the media incessantly forestalls collective and political responsibility (or, to quote from one of the exhibition's wall texts: "broadcasting from one location while receiving from another location and suppressing the results in the entire process"). In allegorically depleting the dominant forms of contemporary communication and image production, curators Gillick and Parreno did not declare as hopelessly foreclosed the reality and memory of the historical events to which their exhibition otherwise referred. Rather, that depletion might be seen as foregrounding an understanding of appearance as it properly applies to politics and collective memory. For, as Slavoj Žižek points out, it is not the real itself that is ultimately lost or undermined in "the era of universalized simulacra," but *appearance*—that is, if one makes the distinction, as Žižek does, between the imaginary, the realm of illusion and simulacra, and the symbolic, the realm of language and meaning.²⁵ The merit of *The Trial of Pol Pot* thus ultimately resided in its attempt to establish an allegorical aesthetic of appearance even as it confronted, with unyielding asceticism, an event that otherwise remains resistant to representation.

²⁵ See Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), 195.

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This is issue #2 of a serial publication that examines a profoundly influential but still under-studied phenomenon, a history that has yet to be written: the fundamental role artists have played as curators. Taking that ontologically ambiguous thing we call “the exhibition” as a critical medium, artists have often in the process radically rethought the conventional form of the exhibition as such. This project is about precisely those exhibitions. Each subsequent edition of *Mousse* over two years and ten issues will contain a new installment closely examining one historic and one more recent seminal artist-curated exhibition, spanning a period from the postwar to the present.

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