



Magdalena Jitrik

Never touch a paintbrush without a good reason

I WONDER why I became a artist, or why—or how—the works I did came about, and I decided to trace the movements and events of my life that led me to the visual arts and the particular themes that ended up asserting themselves in my work.

I've gone down forks in the road that presented themselves along the way, and left bits of myself—sort of waiting for something—at places, to then go down one of the other roads where those bits had been abandoned at some other time. So this reading will not be chronological. It has leaps forward and backward in time, with themes that will come and go.

I'm looking for details that stand out and that can bear witness to human events, and I'll try to represent them:

Based on all that, I established a personal ethic wherein art stops being an area of privilege and moves on to serve a political/aesthetic function; a personal (perhaps pointless) contribution to the revolution, to the construction of new values, that can be summed up in Victor Grippo's program: "Till art and work can be united in an unique human ritual."

Then I constructed a production- and materials-selection system that allowed me to maintain my independence and develop my work, strictly with the media, materials and tools I have within reach. Apart from painting, I got into constructions with stone, adobe and cement blocks; then reed and cornstalk weaving. These are materials with cultural memory, symbolic in themselves. One constant along these lines has been the use

of methodologies and political propaganda formats like flyers, flags and protest banners.

Somehow, as an artist, I concern myself with showing what I've seen or imagined. The difficulty of that task is constituted in the quality my objects evince.

Dreaming is for everyone. In dreams, we're all artists; we create images, we're extraordinary and we live extraordinary things. The next day... there's nothing... our lives.

But whoever finds himself upset, or moved, by a dream needs to prolong that state of being, its sensation, the brilliance of its images. Art could be the attempt to prolong—to reproduce—the dream state within daily life. Art is the product of attempts at representing the imagination, or perception itself, and, within that attempt, an object is produced. It is a more effective story than the story of a dream.

Memory is the same, art could be a condensation of memory in material, sonic or luminous form. Art shows something we've all seen, or felt. With something extra—unexpected and new—and that's where you find the artist.

Political movements, above all the ones produced in the form of a destructive wind, produce a displacement of the ordinary, just as in dreams. Reality is transfigured. Just as exceptional as dreams, situations of mass movement have always attracted me.

I work with people's souls, as well as the souls of things, filtered through the repertory of my creations. I see the light of certain things and try to reproduce it in my work. I saw a guitar, I saw a basket, I saw paintings, I saw mass movements, I saw scenes that gave off light, I read texts that identified me. Drawings with text sought to represent my emotions as I read them. They were paragraphs that went right through me. Then drawing was a call to action: *read this*.

That's what my work is: an attempt to present my images, my visions, my ideals, my desperation and my solitude. The possibility of sharing relief.

When I got to Mexico in 1974, at the age of eight, it marked my third residence in a new nation. I was born in Buenos Aires, twelve days before the 1966 coup d'état, the first event that altered my family's path. Months later, the dictatorship laid off my father from the University of Córdoba. The following year, we sailed for France, where my father accepted a job as a literature professor. I have scant memories of my life in France, but through photos and stories, my parents' European adventure and the political events of those years—like May 1968 or the death of Che Guevara in 1969—are there in the background of my life.

In 1970 we returned to Argentina, the same year armed movements came on the scene. From these years I remember that politics was completely dominated by conversations that they, my parents, would have, as well as mass movements we attended, where I liked to collect flyers I'd pick up from the ground, later to be pasted into a sort of scrapbook.

Political struggles were acute, not just due to armed conflict: all of society was mobilized, culminating in the September 1973 elections. A year later, in October 1974, we left for Mexico, in the first wave of exiles, produced by a constitutional government that was already practicing state terrorism.

Fleeing to Mexico once again changed my destiny. From the very first I proposed to accept it as a form of love for Mexico—and the fight against dictatorship in my country. On the one hand, in order to grow up in complete liberty, and on the other, to find other people and circumstances that are absolutely the reason I'm here today.

To begin with, my first school had its own origin another exile: that of the Spanish in Mexico after the Spanish Civil War. They put us in the Colegio Madrid, already home to a number of Chileans who'd arrived after the overthrow of Salvador Allende. At the Madrid School they immersed me in the pride of having been expelled from fascism. Then in 1980, at another school, the Centro Activo Freire, I connected with the entire Latin American exile community, where the notion that all dictatorships are really one was consolidated for me.

Visits to Trotsky's house were a special event in my family. Somehow the figure of Leon Davidovitch synthesized Argentine destiny—the expulsion,

the suppression of its revolutionary political project and the disappearance of its children. The house's physiognomy, its objects, all dedicated to political struggle, is an atmosphere that was somehow transmitted to my installation *Ensayo de un Museo Libertario* (*Essay on an Anarchist Museum*).

When I was putting together my installation at the Federación Libertaria [*Anarchist Federation*], I thought, "I am that house."

That's how I began the Domingo Trama and Ramiro García drawings.

It was a moment of condensation...starting with the 1995 premiere of the film *Tierra y Libertad* (*Land and Freedom*). I began to frequent the Federación Libertaria Argentina [Argentinian Anarchist Federation], in search of anarchist literature; to find, philosophically, a system of ideas that during the 90s had been given over for dead, along with every other revolutionary ideology. The 90s were years of disdain for utopias; years for negating history's revolutions and for negating history itself.

Within that climate, my work had no possibility of finding an audience. There was something in it that referred to other times and that very few people cared to remember. As well, my paintings had to fight against an avalanche of pronouncements regarding the death of painting. One time I thought, "I need a revolution; I need the world to change so my work can be seen."

So, one day, having seen Ken Loach's *Land and Freedom* and then after attending a May Day anarchist assembly in Plaza Once, I thought that the literary form of political manifestoes, of declarations of principles, could be recuperated in the form of an unredeemed, disobedient attitude. The 90s were the years of consolidation for "due obedience," whose mere formulation seems immoral to us today.

So I took the first step: I applied a certain kind of phrase to the titles of seven paintings from that time, under the general title of *Manifiesto* (*Manifesto*).

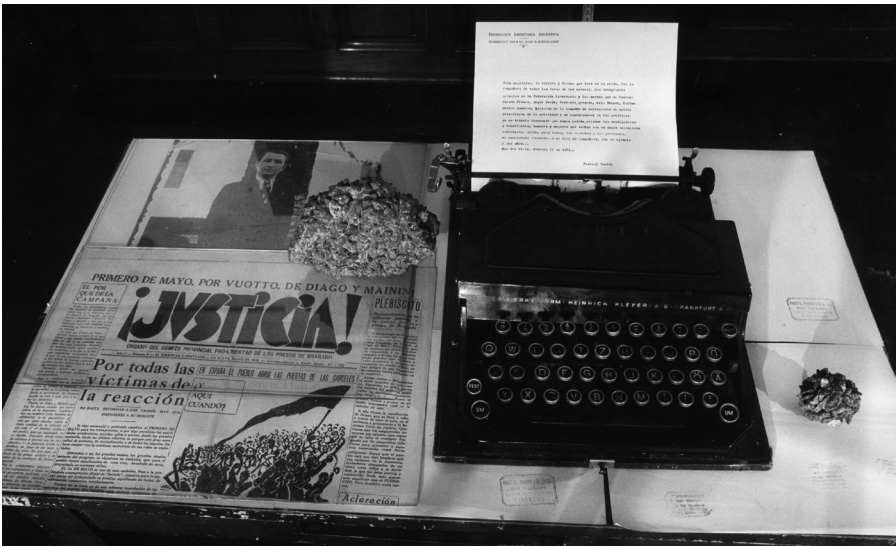
My visits to the FLA grew more frequent; I collaborated on archiving tasks; and that's when the idea of putting together a small museum first came up. If nothing else, placing some historic objects into a display case. We

chose a display case that was full of papers. Among them I found the complete documentation for the 1956-1957 strike carried out by the Naval Yard Construction Workers for a six-hour shift.

I began to read press communiqués, one after the other. They recounted the strike's day-to-day events: the problems, the assemblies, the latest news; they are typewritten sheets in carbon-paper quadruplicate; they're signed by Domingo Trama, Union Press Secretary.

There are some amazing paragraphs. I found this passage about the death of a worker in Rosario, during a strike-breaking incident. Ramiro García, originally from Spain, a combatant and survivor from the Spanish Civil War. The text itself was very emotional and strident, and at a certain point decries, "he came come to Argentina only to have a dark authoritarian instrument wipe out his existence, at a time when it might have been expected that workers' struggles might not encounter such sinister opposition on the part of authoritarian instruments along with the regrettable participation of official institutions."

As I read this, I realized I wanted to have those texts. So I grabbed some papers that I found there along with a typewriter, and I began to copy passages from communiqués that led to a series of drawings, "Compañero Ramiro García" ("Comrade Ramiro García") and "Compañero Domingo Trama" ("Comrade Domingo Trama"). That same text told of another dramatic event from that strike: Trama's three-month imprisonment.



Just as soon as I took the typewriter, I was Domingo Trama. That's how a typewriter became the transference instrument for the texts' intensity or the intensity of my readings. Doing the drawings was also an exercise in stabilizing and solidifying them, like some ritual act—the repetition of the event itself in my imagination.

At the FLA I also found *La Protesta*'s letterhead from the 1950s. It was fantastic to use that letterhead as a medium for a contemporary work. *La Protesta* was one of the first newspapers published in Argentina at the end of the nineteenth century.

I could define this sensation as a possession by ghosts from other times, as a determining factor in the production of my work. If this isn't present, then I do nothing—I prefer to do nothing.

I remember back then I imposed a strict condition on myself: never touch a paintbrush unless I had a really good reason for doing so.

In the meantime, I painted my pictures—that were sort of an Arp/Leger/ Malevich/Aizenberg remix—which created a strange temporality within their contemporary setting.

That's why I've repeated Malevich paintings, as if to proclaim my adhesion to his work. When I see an artwork, I am that artwork. The object represents me.

Parenthetically, I'd like to mention Roberto Aizenberg here. He was the first painter I knew, when I was seven.



In 1994 I reactivated that relationship and had a number of discussions with him. This time I allowed myself to be influenced and I adopted, to a certain degree, his political/artistic program. After he died, I painted the “*Revueltas*” painting series, believing myself to be him.

In my 1997 *Revueltas (Uprisings)* show, I put names and dates of uprisings and revolutions I’d managed to study—some resonated with anarchism, others with guerrilla actions—into the works’ titles: the extraordinary “Mexican Revolution”, “Kronstadt 1921”, some phrases taken from Albert Camus. “Neither victims nor executioners,” “Either Utopia or War.”

The Kronstadt affair is a very sad story. It makes reference to the drama of rupture from within the left. A commune emerges within the revolution and the revolution crushes the commune. This fact weighs heavily on me, to be sure. Today’s socialism should focus on overcoming this wound, to re-appropriate its symbolic power and its potential for the future.

I must speak of fissures within the left, because that is what I have witnessed and, I would, say, studied during my five years of political militancy from 2002 to 2007, when I organized and contributed to events like the Asamblea Popular de San Telmo (San Telmo People’s Assembly), Arte y Confección en apoyo a la fábrica Brukman (Art and Tailoring for the Brukman Factory), or the Taller Popular de Serigrafía (The People’s Silkscreen Workshop) (TPS), and which at the same time was a credential for participating in political meetings where acts and activities, as well as the spaces in which we sought to make a contribution, were organized. My personal and extremely ambitious objective, infused with a real anxiety to succeed, was providing the left with a complex and effective visual discourse capable, precisely, of bringing together the masses. My utopia pointed as well, to a visual discourse that could put the fragments of division back together again, and to fight for power based on a previously unknown situation in Argentina in 2002 that took the form of economic crisis: the rise of recuperated factories, movement on the part of the unemployed, classist labor unions, popular assemblies, artists’ collectives, alternative media, leftist political parties.

For me it was a political adventure to try to explain these ideas about the visual in front of interlocutors who are not part of the art world. But that’s

one of the places—and I think this is lamentable—where the art of Cold War Communist parties, hovering somewhere between the Picasso-esque and Muralism, is still legitimate.

In the course of the hundreds of demonstrations in which I participated, I conceived of a hypothesis about which a column could become a complete Mass Communication Medium, where people, as they move about the city, are the channels. What it was really all about was using political methodologies for art. Back then things got so inverted that art came to intervene in politics. It was a very favorable moment for me.

That was how the TPS constituted a method for the production of collective artwork, built on top of an exquisite cadaver. We based ourselves on popularly used colors and typefaces. In reality, those original mass images were a source of inspiration.

The People's Silkscreen Workshop (TPS) came about as an initiative on the part of two artists, Mariela Scafati and Diego Posadas, friends who joined the same assembly I was in. We combined our desires to participate in the assemblies of summer 2002, an impressive social phenomenon. Everyone wanted to see it with their own eyes: those immense plaza gatherings where everything was questioned. Raising your hand and voting at a popular assembly was a political experience many of us were seeking but we hadn't before found a place to do it.

In 1987, I took advantage of my last significant stay in Mexico to actively participate in the university strike, as a way of saying goodbye to a country that, as I said, I loved, but in whose inequities I could not get politically involved.

Two weeks after my arrival in Argentina, there was a series of coup attempts against the government of President Raúl Alfonsín. Once again I had the opportunity to live through a state of unrest and mass gathering: the famous activities during Holy Week 1997. The people took to plazas to defend democratic government. Democracy struck the first blow. There in the plaza, the president announced his settlement with the armed forces and soon thereafter the abominable concept of Due Obedience.

Obedience set itself up in every sense during the Menem years. Starting in 1990, I began studying Art at the Philosophy and Letters department and searching for places to present my work. I applied for a Guillermo Kuitca endowment in December of the same year, at the same time I opened my

first solo show at the Rojas Museum. Guillermo Kuitca was legitimately trying to establish a beachhead for Argentine contemporary art in New York. He brought half the world's population to the workshop. In a certain way, we were married to the idea and traveled to New York several times with an arsenal of slides, trying our luck. In the case of my work nothing happened. I didn't know how I could do work in tune with the times, nor how I could give up painting. Until 1998, I hardly received any proposals and/or signs of interest with regard to my work.

That's where I was at when I left for France in 1998. There, Philippe Cyrournik, a curator and the director of the Centre de' Art Contemporain de Montbéliard, started following my work somewhat; he'd seen my paintings on his two first visits to Buenos Aires. In the art of the South, Philippe sees precisely what defines it, what makes it complete and he has a link to our history. I and more than forty artists with which he has worked over fifteen years have exhibited in Montbéliard, a city no one knows, but that has fortunately become a privileged space for viewing contemporary Argentine art.

Philippe is a Trotskyite, and for some reason then unknown to me, he saw something in my work. He realized that what I did was not being seen in Argentina. He invited me to participate in the *L'abstraction et ses territoires* show and spend four months painting in the east of France. While there, I



Magdalena Jitrik, *Essay of a Anarchist Museum* (left wall), photography, 2000

read about Nazism, I carried out a series of drawings with a typewriter, I collected books and readings, I studied histories such as the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Years later Philippe told me, “Your greatest political gesture is your painting.” Today, as then, I believe he’s right, because I believe more in art than in anything else. It leads me to ask, whenever I can, the question of whether art as a thought system could replace political economy, wherein the object of every social organization might be the enjoyment of free time, which would include feeling and producing art. So all the energy spent today on war could be spent on art.

Years later, New York had lost interest for me: artists I met sought to convince me of the pointlessness of then undertaking work like mine. This unanimous negative attracted my attention. But my work was getting more and more diverse: there was painting, sculpture in stone, typewriter drawings, super-8 films. I filmed things and then with some of the cartridges I’d overexposed I began to do experimental cinema, attacking the celluloid with bleaches and dyes.

Flash forward to 2000: I finally opened up the museum I’d conceived of in 1996. It had a long name: *Ensayo para un Museo Libertario y Homenaje al 1 de mayo* (*Essay on an Anarchist Museum and May Day Homage*). The installation mixed my paintings, sculptures in stone, typewriter drawings, originals and silkscreens, with objects that originally were going to be in the display case where I’d found documents from the strike for six-hour shifts. Every theme I touched upon at the museum I later returned to, in other formats, for the People’s Silkscreen Workshop.

On 20 December 2001 there was an uprising in Argentina that culminated with the fall of the president. That day I saw civilian automobiles pass by with snipers who fired guns; I experienced the uprising with camera in hand. I was about to finish up my *Socialista* show when the uprising began. It was an experience I lived with great intensity because my show had had a certain amount of impact. As always, that’s a bit of nostalgia, but there was something else going on in *Socialista*: an inevitable association with socialist realism.

As if in that year, after all the abstraction, my paintings had been subject to a “Soviet” spin. It passed. In 2000, when I was doing the *Filles indignes de l’art*

concret show, I began a series of portraits based on a number of photos from books and periodicals I'd been collecting, though to what end I didn't exactly know, until I did the first painting: workers at Renault. I painted the first of the two figures and then, naturally, I brought out the red for the background.

Back then I didn't know what sort of talent I had for portrait painting. Portraits depend on being able to be the person you're portraying, and somehow reflect the readings you've made. There's a book by Anita Lasker, an Auschwitz survivor who—thanks to being a cellist—was allowed to “work” in the concentration camp orchestra and stay alive until the Allied liberation; there's also Michel Borwicz's book about the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. There's the case of the underage cigarette vendors, escaped from the ghetto, reassembled as street gangs who managed to survive the last year of the Warsaw occupation; many other characters were added to the *Socialista* title as a concept that brought together resourcefulness, solidarity, the fight for survival, disobedience; and those are the attitudes that offered a chance to stay alive. It's Michel Borwicz's concept of “prohibited lives.”

Another project that emerged starting in 2002 from the uprisings and assemblies were the *Edificios Palabra* (*Word Buildings*), when my assembly proposed constructing a popular commissary. Thinking about a façade, a building appears that denotes the program along with the condition of the people that inhabit it. The building was called “Libres” (“Free”). I developed it in all kinds of formats, except in its real format, which the assembly rejected.

The theme of the strike for a six-hour shift reappears in 2004 in the form of a Buenos Aires subway strike. This incident happened just as I was putting together the TPS. Personally, I was quite affected by this strike because what was nostalgia in 1996 was a reality in 2004: a four-day strike that roiled Buenos Aires. We heard an univocal reactionary voice, opposed to free time, opposed to decent salaries and absolutely in favor of a union bureaucracy that guaranteed labor relations remain exactly as they were and, preferably, without any meaningful salary increases or improvements.

The strike prevailed, setting a precedent whereby some time later the same delegates called the formation of the *Movimiento Nacional por la Jornada*

de 6 horas (National Movement for a Six-Hour Workday). Things started to really happen. Those papers I'd found came back into play, at full force, as part of a real movement, and the door was open to us because absolutely every convocation from the 2001/2006 period would say "we convoke organizations for the unemployed, leftist political parties, assemblies, recuperated factories, the student movement, the alternative media, culture workers, artists' collectives"... We became a new class of activists called upon to participate in those movements. So we were able to join the Six-Hour movement, be heard, make proposals, etc.

That was how I was able to implement the TPS movement agenda. It was up to us to lay out and illustrate bulletins, flyers, banners, and images that were put onto tee shirts. I believe it was one of the political activities that made the most sense to me, but this time with an equation: time allowance for work=less time for work=more time to produce and enjoy art. Society's most valuable aspect would be time—free time.

I'd like to bring up Karl Marx's remark, from the movement's first documents: "Time is the space where man develops." Every word in that sentence constitutes a philosophical world in itself.

The TPS's political experience sought to propose an aesthetic within a medium that is not created to be subsequently appropriated by contemporary art strategies. As such, the TPS was subject to conflicts with almost all the other groups that it came into contact with. Several times we "deratified" agreements from earlier encounters and violated the previously established norms. The first May Day act took place in the Plaza de Mayo, a place made famous for the eight-hour workday struggle in 1911, on another May Day that produced what is known as "Red Week," during which the police fired into the crowd, killing eight workers and wounding more than 100...

This pattern of bloody May Day repressions, in different times and in different countries, lead me to do the May Day collage-drawings that I showed at my most recent exhibition, *Fondo de huelga (Strike Fund)*, in 2007. My idea was to do them in the format of a political newspaper, with one fold and five pages, but the idea came together in three collages, using a technique similar to the one I employed in political prisoner

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In 2007 I saw a film by Hans Richter called *Pintura en movimiento* (*Painting in Movement*). I remembered my small foray into experimental film, that had offered an avant-garde, liberational practice for current times. But this time there was something more, I think: a psychedelic component. .

The psychedelic reappears in my outlook as a type of avant-garde, a political discourse in which Woodstock is the commune where music manages to override every material need on the part of the thousands gathered there.

I saw *Woodstock* for the first time at the Che Guevara auditorium of the Philosophy and Letters Faculty in Mexico City, probably in 1980.

My love of free time leads—among other things—to my work around Red Cloud and the Lakota Indians, whose simple economic system along with their plains homeland provides them with everything necessary to enjoy their freedom in time and space. Again it was a photo I'd found quite by coincidence: a photo from the nineteenth century that shows a Lakota delegation at the White House. Based on the photo's date, we can infer it portrays a delegation that has come to negotiate terms of defeat in the so-called Sioux Wars, which resulted in the reservation system and which Red Cloud describes thus: "Our days are over." Nevertheless, they had defeated the US Army eleven years earlier in the Red Cloud War. That war and Vietnam are the only two defeats that particular empire has suffered.

I saw the photo and wanted to copy it no matter what. I consulted with my friend Federico Navarrete and he told me that details of the subjects' dress did not necessarily indicate military rank, but rather anecdotes and virtues that had been a part of each subject's life. In other words, their dress was the story of their lives, just like their names were.

Somehow Red Cloud's story is related to Argentina's, like when Chief Cafulcurá said, "Do not deliver *Carhué* to the *Huinca*," meaning don't deliver water to the white man.

The painting tree is a kind of Indian cemetery with Malevich's work: it features the indigenous, the psychedelic and socialism.

My arrival in Mexico was in fact my first contact with the culture of the indigenous world, something that's not easy to find in Argentina. That contact also had consequences in my artistic work, particularly with regard

to mystical visions and a compulsion when it comes to fibers, weaving, adobe, stone walls and pyramids. Once I took an hallucinogen and I saw two suns. Yes: there are two suns.

This painting, that also condenses numerous aspects of previous paintings—the speaker’s platform, the horizon line, geometric abstraction, uprisings, the commune, a Mixtec pyramid and socialism—was a result of the 2006 Oaxaca uprising.

Magdalena Jitrik, *Tree of Paintings*, photograph, 2008

