The Sea in the City
Art and Politics in Environmental Conflicts in Argentina

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Recently the seaside city of Bahía Blanca, located in the south-west of the Province of Buenos Aires, has witnessed an invasion of seagulls, crabs, flamingos and fish. Marine fauna has burst onto the streets of the city, entered protests and events, occupied the walls through murals, and has even managed to intervene in the local press. A new aesthetic has been shaped around the struggle of the socio-environmental movement that has emerged out of the ecological problems faced by the city. More than anything it is opposition to the project to dredge Bahía Blanca’s estuary, and subsequently to expand the port and industrial complex, that has given life to this movement. Seagulls, crabs, flamingos and fish have opened a crack in the industrial belt that surrounds the coast of Bahía Blanca, saying *no to dredging – yes to life* and questioning the current model of city development.

**A SEASIDE CITY WITHOUT A SEA VIEW**

For decades, the coast of Bahía Blanca was more than merely a port for industry; it was also synonymous with beach, sun, swimsuit, fishing rod, family and friends. Work and recreation were not always antonyms and it was possible to enjoy the beaches in Maldonado, Colón and Galván.¹ Until a few years ago, the port was a popular destination for weekend promenades that offered the opportunity to observe ships and fishing on the docks. But today those beaches have disappeared and few areas for walking remain. Bahía has not only been blocked from the sea; the sea seems to have been forgotten. So what has happened?

While the coastline has been undergoing modification for over a century now, in recent decades intense transformations have produced seaside spaces that are increasingly inaccessible to the public. These changes have come about with the emergence of new actors and dynamics in which local processes reflect global forces. With the introduction of neoliberal policies of economic deregulation and the reform of the Argentinian state during the 1990s, the national government ordered the dissolution of the General Administration of Ports, a state entity that had been responsible up to that point for all national docks. As a result of the decentralization process, in 1993 Ingeniero White became the first autonomous port and was placed under the direction of the Consortium for the Management of the Port of Bahía Blanca.² Overseen by this new non-state public entity, whose board was comprised of mostly private representatives, the port pursued maximum modernization, efficiency and productivity in the hope of attracting a greater volume of ships and new investments. Having under its jurisdiction the management of the seaside area, the Consortium implemented a process of rationalization and the gradual privatization of the port space, which has largely closed off the area to those outside the shipping industry and related corporations. Today it is impossible to move freely on the docks; what remains of the once public space is a small square with a bit of sea view built by the Consortium. The neoliberal 1990s also witnessed a dizzying
expansion of transnational agribusinesses, such as Cargill and Toepfer, and petrochemical companies, such as Solvay and Repsol. The port and industrial complex continued to grow, and fences advanced along the coast, leaving the estuary of Bahía Blanca behind the industrial belt and intensely polluted by the petrochemical industry. In this way seaside space was privatized without consideration for other possible uses and the natural environment was irreversibly modified.

The industrial belt, built between the city and the sea, represents an economic enclave that employs few people, because it functions with automatic systems, and exports large profits. And while it generates little impact on the local economy, it produces a great impact on the environment. The industrial complex consumes enormous natural resources like gas and water, pollutes the estuary and the air, damages local fishing activity, and creates health problems in the population. At present the Consortium is promoting further dredging, a new mega project that would intensify the area’s industrial development. With the mud obtained from the dredging, the port would grow into the sea, expanding the port and industrial complex. The plan is to construct two new islands in order to overcome the current geographical limitations of the port and to accommodate new companies and the expansion of the docks. The capacity in terms of physical space would be doubled. Against this development project a socio-environmental movement has risen up, contesting the current city model.

**SEAGULLS IN THE CITY**

There are several problems that have given life to the socio-environmental movement: the water crisis faced by the city; the intention of the Vale mining company to establish itself in the local port; the death of a worker at the Petrobras refinery; the difficult situation of fishermen; local health problems; and, mainly, the dredging project. All can be explained by the model of industrialization that may be intensified in the near future. What characterizes the socio-environmental movement is its heterogeneity. Neighbours, environmental organizations, teachers, students, scientists, artists, unions, and various political parties merged into the Environmental Assembly Buenos Aires South (Asamblea Ambiental Buenos Aires Sur, or AABAS, in Spanish) this year in January. Enormous social energies have been set in motion to organize a multitude of activities: lectures, marches, mural painting, bike rides, press conferences, interventions in public spaces, tours around the estuary. The objective of these actions has been to spread awareness of the negative social and environmental impacts of the dredging project. The goal has been to create an alternative message to that circulating in the hegemonic media, which views the expansion of the industrial area as necessary for the economic development of the city and plays down the environmental impact.

The work of the movement has been characterized by vertiginous speed and intense social creativity wherein the aesthetic dimension has played a central role in developing a positive public position and drawing together a proactive group of participants. In public events, neighbours and students have burst onto the city streets wearing seagull masks. They have carried flags and banners, including a poster showing a flamingo on a common traffic warning sign, indicating the presence of this animal in a seaside city that does not usually look to the sea. The demonstrations have also had a performative character. Another of the actions has been the printing on the clothing of activists, drawing on a repertoire of slogans and images. As a result, the images move and spread
beyond the time and the place of the demonstrations. The movement also participates in carnivals that take place in various neighbourhoods, including the city centre. AABAS formed From The Mud – a murga or musical group who perform a type of popular theatre. This street band played and danced along the streets wearing green and yellow suits. A huge seagull, collectively built, was carried alongside as if flying among the people, accompanied by members of the assembly wearing seagull masks and crab costumes and carrying flags.

At the same time the walls of Bahía Blanca have been occupied by The Crabs. This group is part of Aukan – Asamblea Ambiental del Sur or Southern Environmental Assembly – which has taken an active part in the struggle against the dredging project by creating murals. In their murals The Crabs introduced an image that went on to become a distinctive emblem of the socio-environmental movement: Blinky, the three-eyed fish, adopted from the television series The Simpsons. This character is a mutant fish generated by the toxic waste thrown into the waters of the town of Springfield by a nuclear power plant. ‘Bahía Blanca is half Springfield,’ says one member of The Crabs. In Bahía Blanca, Blinky’s image has been updated by linking it to the pollution of the estuary by the petrochemical complex. The three-eyed fish appears in bright colours on numerous city walls, challenging the residents of Bahía Blanca with slogans like No to dredging – yes to life! and Inform yourself, protect the estuary! Several interventions by The Crabs have been short-lived, for two reasons. Some paintings were made on billboards, using the high visibility enjoyed by those spaces, which, for the same reason, have been contested by other actors. After a time, some murals were covered over with new advertisements. On other occasions, interventions have lasted only a few days, suffering direct attacks by those following orders from the municipal government, which has expressed its support for the dredging project.
With these many interventions, in which the expressive powers of the image and live performance occupy a prominent place, a creative repertoire of images and slogans has grown, whereby the socio-environmental movement registers and visualizes its words and actions. A whole new aesthetic of marine fauna has burst onto the city, provoking a political clash of heterogeneous elements. Seagull, crab, flamingo and fish are now prominent in the public space of a city that lives with its back to the sea. These images draw together a mix of elements from different areas of experience that are normally thought of as opposites: urban space and industrial space; the city and the maritime environment; society, economy and nature; the visible and the invisible; the ordinary and the extra-ordinary. This meeting of heterogeneous elements produces a space in which the relations between disparate subjects and objects are reconfigured: new actors are brought to the scene, the invisible becomes visible, distant things appear closer and the sea is brought into the city. This space shows a political reality in conflict, and the shock opens cracks in the existing city model through which it becomes possible to think of and construct new ways of life and to establish inclusive relationships between society, nature and economy.

**A PUBLIC AND COLLABORATIVE ECOLOGY**

The interventions of the movement have redefined the relationship between art and politics, not only producing alternative messages but also intervening in public space and inspiring collaborative methods. In this regard, the practice of muralism has been key. One of the first murals was made in the town of General Cerri, organized by Tellus, a conservation entity, and Francisco Felkar, an artist born in Cerri. Tellus was one of the first organizations to speak out against the dredging project and to organize different activities as part of the campaign to protect the estuary. Felkar is an artist of local importance who has significant past experience of working in
environmental issues. When Felkar heard about the activities that were being organized by Tellus, he made contact and began to participate, helping to organize the creation of the murals. The first was done in August 2011, the second the following month. The Self-Organized Neighbours of Cerri (Vecinos Autoconvocados de Cerri) recently formed as a group against the dredging project, joined Tellus and Felkar for the creation of the second mural. In both cases walls for the murals were offered by neighbours opposed to the dredging.

The animals of the estuary became the protagonists of the murals and were represented naturalistically. Felkar notes, ‘I did not invent anything. Except for the lights and shadows for high contrasts, I worked the murals in a very realistic way.’ In the first mural, two seagulls and a crab appear with a speech bubble that says: Neighbours! Let’s say yes to life and no to dredging! In the second mural, the animals become more dynamic and intense: The crab raises his claws in the air, the seagull puts her wings in the landing position and two flamingos, one with a stern face, say The health of our children is worth more than any enterprise!

Mural in General Cerri, executed in August 2011, photo: Emilce Heredia Chaz, 15 October 2011
Through these murals, the crab, seagull and flamingo began to speak, or rather, to shout clear and concise messages to the city. The aim of these murals was, in a simple and didactic way, to invite people to learn about, love and protect the estuary that is only a few blocks from their homes. Felkar explains that the muralists wished that:

those animals, which live within a few metres or, in some cases, a couple of kilometres, begin to be everyday animals like cats and dogs, that seagulls and crabs, which live on the coast, are brought to the city centre… A huge seagull starts to walk around the city. ‘What is that thing?’ Those who do not know begin to ask ‘What is that dove?’ ‘No, it is not a dove, it is a seagull.’ ‘And that kind of spider?’ ‘No, it is a crab.’ ‘That pink bird?’ ‘No, it is a flamingo.’ What was not everyday becomes an everyday thing. What was unknown, buried and lonely, comes to the city and reminds us of its existence. 5

Mural painting in Bahía Blanca is resolutely public. The murals occupy the streets of the city and remain outside the conventional spaces of art exhibition and the legitimacy of art institutions. In this way, the movement defines its own area of intervention based on its own social and political objectives and participative processes. 6

To paint these pictures, an open call invited people to bring brush and friends. The designs were drawn on the wall by Felkar and Tellus members. During working hours, people of different ages from Cerri and Bahía Blanca filled the drawings with bright, contrasting colours according to the designs. Although there was previous planning, spontaneity and improvisation took place during the creation process. As Felkar explains,

At any moment, it is possible that a colour runs out and it is necessary to invent another one or fill a space with another colour. As always, everything can change. Kids paint and drip, and it becomes necessary to draw something else to fill that spot.
Although Felkar acted as a co-ordinator preparing the colours and distributing them along with brushes, he feels that collective work, in some way, unfolds organically. ‘Nothing controls or blocks the other’s action. Each thing is in its place, everything happens as it should happen. It occurs harmoniously and it’s really good how it comes about.’

During the painting, people took turns, came and went, generating an interchange that went beyond passing a brush from hand to hand. As sites of collective work, the murals created spaces of meeting and exchange, where neighbours, children, artists, members of environmental organizations, scientists, students, teachers came together.

At the time of painting, next to a neighbour is a scientist. That scientist, while he is painting, is also telling what he knows, and then the information is spread. The construction of a collective work, a public work, begins to get together people without access to information with scientists who have all the academic knowledge but have to transmit it in a didactic way, which generates an amazing human exchange.

This collaborative process establishes a social ecology of horizontalism that breaks down barriers between artists and non-artists, scientists and less formally educated people. At the same time, it makes possible a place of knowledge exchange and contributes to the consolidation of the movement.

**CARTOGRAPHY OF CREATIVE RESISTANCE**

*No to dredging – yes to life!*, the emblematic slogan of the socio-environmental movement, is at the same time a statement common to similar movements that have spread over Argentina and Latin America and maintain a multitude of struggles in defence of life and against the plunder and pollution of common resources and lands. Despite differences and local specificities, the emergence of these struggles as a whole responds to the radical redefinition of world capitalism under the logic of neoliberal globalization, which has meant an acceleration and deepening of the processes of expropriation of natural resources. During the 1990s a new round of intensive exploitation of natural resources was opened by large transnational companies in alliance with the states of the region. Its export-based model of development has focused on non-renewable natural resources – including mining, agribusiness, the petrochemical industry and forestry – which has intensified pollution and the loss of biodiversity.

It is therefore not surprising that new forms of social mobilization have emerged that focus on environmental protection. They are producing a new cartography of resistance in the region, contesting the current development model. These various struggles, mobilized by different classes and social groups, often take the form of non-hierarchical and flexible organization. As in the case of Bahía Blanca, they activate modes of political intervention in which the aesthetic dimension plays an important role.

Many environmental movements share a creative repertoire of images, slogans and activist practices that are redefined according to the social actors and renewed over time. Their repertoire also includes the internet as a site of dissemination and exchange. In Argentina, the creation of the Union of Citizen Assemblies (Unión de Asambleas Ciudadanas or UAC in Spanish) has brought about a space to articulate and promote the different
struggles. The spread of certain shared activist slogans – such as No to mining – yes to life!; Water is worth more than gold!; Do not touch Famatina! – can be observed in the work of various assemblies that extend along the Andes. In Bahía Blanca, some of these were adopted and re-used: No to dredging – yes to life!; Water is worth more than the petrochemical complex!; Do not touch the estuary! Murals, murgas, flags, costumes and songs also feed into the creative reservoir on which the different movements draw to make their demands visible in public space.

The use of such creative resources in various environmental struggles relates to the recent history of activist art in Argentina. In the context of the 2001 financial crisis, a number of activist art groups emerged and invented new forms of intervention. In the more recent protests (as with the socio-environmental movements), these forms of action expanded without requiring the mediation of artists. Conversely, some recent practices move beyond the classic tools of political struggle. These are activities that are impossible to evaluate exclusively as art, either because they are performed by non-artists, the performers might not consider what they do as artistic, or the works do not circulate in conventional art spaces. They are rather best seen as a reservoir of socially available resources that do not exist strictly in either the artistic or political realm, but make art a political process and protest a creative act. In other words, this set of practices takes place in public space, unifying art and politics and redefining each as a result.

Through this multiplicity of practices, social and environmental movements shape and promote new languages of valuation, different from those spoken by states and companies. On the one hand, governments and corporations promote extractive and environmentally destructive activities as part of their utopian narratives of development, which accord the highest value to economic growth. In these narratives it is presupposed that the language of economics is supreme, and alternative points of view are misrepresented and discredited. By contrast, the socio-environmental movements create different languages of valuation centred on the defence of the commons and of nature’s goods as the condition that make life possible, rejecting the primacy of economic value. In this way, socio-environmental conflicts are defined not only as conflicts of interests, but also conflicts of value. This clash between systems of valorization produces fissures through which environmentalist struggles not only introduce a questioning of the current model of development but also suggest creative thinking and building new forms of life.

1 This development has been addressed by Ferrowhite Museo Taller (Ferrowhite Museum Workshop) through the project La Rambla de Arrieta. Using the museum as its base, it has been working to recover the seafront next to the ex-power plant General San Martín and transform it into a walk with a view of the sea. Currently La Rambla de Arrierta is the only site where it is possible to access the coast around the port. More information is available on the museum’s website: http://museotaller.blogspot.com.ar/.

2 Ingeniero White and General Cerri are two towns that belong to the district of Bahía Blanca. Both towns are important in this text because the port and industrial complex are located in White and the complex could, through the dredging project, extend to the area of Cerri. When the city of Bahía Blanca is mentioned, the two towns are included.
My reconstruction of the actions of the socio-environmental movement is based on interviews with AABAS members during 2012, on diverse media sources and documents produced by the movement, and on a survey of images and information in social networks, in addition to my own participation in different activities.

The present discussion draws on the following texts by Jacques Rancière, not as a complete theory, but as a set of materials for reflection on the political or critical aspect of art. Jacques Rancière, Sobre políticas estéticas, Museu d’Art Contemporani, Barcelona, 2005; ‘La política de la estética’, Otra Parte 6, 2006

All quotes are from conversations with the author on 21 March 2012.

These characteristics correspond to what is known more specifically as community public art. See Ignacio Szmulewicz, ‘La ciudad del margen: Más allá del arte público comunitario’, in José Cirillo, Carolina Venegas and Teresa Espantoso, Arte público y espacios políticos: interacciones y fracturas en las ciudades latinoamericanas, C/Arte, Belo Horizonte, 2011, pp 519–528


Ximena Cabral and Leonardo Marengo, ‘Plásticas de la resistencia en el marco de la depredación’, Boletín Onteaiken, vol 5, no 9, 2010


For further elaboration on these reflections, see Ana Longoni, ‘¿Tucumán sigue ardiendo?’, Sociedad 24, 2005, in which she writes about the relationships between art and politics, analysing groups of activist artists who acted in the context of the 2001 crisis in Argentina.

Joan Martínez Alier, El ecologismo de los pobres: Conflictos ambientales y lenguajes de valoración, Icaria, Barcelona, 2006


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