

Caterina Preda, Department of Political Sciences, University of Bucharest, (caterinapreda@gmail.com)

The artist as witness in dictatorial regimes in Eastern Europe and South America

[DRAFT]

"The artist's job is to be a witness to his time in history." Robert Rauschenberg

"If people cannot rule they should at least criticize!" Ion Grigorescu¹

Introduction

The artist can be a powerful witness of his social and political context and is often drawn to react to his immediate setting. We can see this today both in nondemocratic contexts (Ai Weiwei) or democratic ones (Dan Perjovschi). This is even truer in dictatorships where the political belongs exclusively to the regime and its institutions, state owned or not. Artists are among the first ones to be disciplined, drawn into submission or, on the contrary, marginalized for the political power always fears their symbolic power.

Artists are the first ones to rebel, to disrupt the real in a dictatorial regime. Political power is attentive to artists because, as Herbert Marcuse said, "the truth of art lies in this: that the world really is as it appears in the work of art".² More than representing the world, artists might seek to change it as the Polish artist Krzysztof Wodiczko reminds us: "artists are concerned with the exploration of reality, [and] they even attempt to transform it."³ Thus, if artists cannot be subdued and brought into submission, they are among the first to be excluded, annihilated because of their symbolic power upon the minds and souls of their fellow citizens. This is the reason for which their gestures should be analyzed not only artistically, but also in order to understand new meanings of the *political*. Artists show possibility⁴ or, by their gestures of intervention into the real defined politically and controlled as such, they show the way to freedom and out of the voluntary servitude (La Boétie). Or, as Paul Klee affirmed, "art's role is to render possible", to open up possibility, and even more so when the absence of such is complete as it is the case with modern dictatorships.⁵

There is a multitude of meanings of disobedience in dictatorships. As such, any gesture can reach this status given the overall surveillance of behaviors. Sometimes thus, a mere photograph that registers a daily scene, an ordinary event that disrupts the official portrayal of reality that is always ideologically driven can be read as a disobeying act and punished if discovered. Artistic discourses created in contexts of dictatorships also show slides of the reality as lived by its citizens and help us better understand the complexity of such regimes. Artists show the dark, dirty, muddy and sometimes boring reality (the equal passing of the days) of the dictatorial life. They present the complexity of the dictatorial experience (collaboration, survival techniques, the necessity to

¹ Ion Grigorescu, *Dialogue with Ceaușescu*, 1978.

² Herbert Marcuse, *The aesthetic dimension*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1978, p. xii.

³ "I am for the Academy" in *Sztandar Młodych*, August 4 1977, quoted in Andrzej Turowski, "Krzysztof Wodiczko and Polish Art of the 1970s" in Laura Hoptman & Tomas Pospiszyl (eds.), *Primary Documents. A sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s* (The MIT Press: Cambridge MA, London, 2002), 154.

⁴ "In an epoch in which the individual has lost his power to conceive a world different from that in which he lives 'negation only survives in works of art'. As Horkheimer commented" quoted in David Held, *Introduction to critical theory: Horkheimer to Habermas*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1980, p. 88.

⁵ "...you can deliver yourselves if you try, not by taking action, but merely by willing to be free." Etienne de la Boétie, *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*. Accessible at: http://www.constitution.org/la_boetie/serv_vol.htm#03

comply, to get by etc.) and document a world that is otherwise forgotten. By doing this they disobey the central authority that forbade such actions. For example, Romanian artist Ion Dumitriu took a series of photographs at the garbage bin just outside Bucharest where Roma citizens dwell to find recoverable goods; ideologically integrated in the socialist society, the Roma remained outsiders, on the outskirts of society even during that time. Disobeying, Dumitriu kept a furtive image of the marginal life of the excluded *par excellence*.



Ion Dumitriu, *Groapa de gunoi* (1975-8)

This presentation interrogates: What do artistic sources bring us more compared, to “traditional sources” political science uses in its understanding of modern dictatorships? Three hypostases in which artists act as witnesses are evoked in what follows. During dictatorships artists register, chronicle and offer an escape from the surrounding reality. After dictatorships end, they provide proofs or express one’s experience so as to deal with a trauma. Artists testify of their context through artistic means and their experience helps us understand these regimes from the point of view of living under a dictatorship, from the citizens’ perspective. The main examples are drawn from the Romanian (1970s-1989) and Chilean dictatorships (1973-1989) with several references to other dictatorial regimes in Eastern Europe and South America.

The artist can be seen as a documentalist (Baqué), recording the real, and “there where art failed, attempt, modestly, patiently, to elaborate new visual and discursive forms that allow...to articulate the real in its complexity, its richness but also its shady areas or of unthinking”.⁶

In both geographical and politically different areas, Eastern Europe and South America, the artworks’ I refer to “subversive potency and political relevance were expressed in very different ways, yet they indeed coincided in one common point: in the creation of free spaces of thinking and agency, in smaller or larger collectives respectively”.⁷ In the same time, there are some limits to the comparison brought forward here because of the nature of the communist regime in Europe that only permitted small, often insignificant acts of dissent.⁸ In Romania, where the public space

⁶ Dominique Baqué, *Pour un nouvel art politique*, Flammarion, coll. Champs, Paris, 2004, 201. My translation from French.

⁷ Iris Dressler, “Subversive practices. Art under conditions of political repression 60s-80s/South America/Europe” in Iris Dressler and Hans D. Christ (eds.), *Subversive practices. Art under conditions of political repression 60s-80s/South America/Europe*, Exh-Cat, Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart, Ostfildern, 2010, p. 51.

⁸ “In the historical Eastern Europe, political art in the Western meaning of the term is very rare. Works referring directly to political situations were few and far between before the 1980s. (...) But whereas openly political statements were extremely rare, it was common for political significance to be attached to gestures, often minimal,

was under surveillance, artists often created inside their studios or private apartments with minimal spectatorship or none. Even though, surveillance was also organized in “the domestic sphere which people established in their private (albeit state-owned) flats”⁹.

In what follows we will discuss the three cases in which the artist is a witness: as an observer of traumatic events in dictatorial regimes (repression, violence, torture), as well as of the daily routines and their witnessing role once dictatorships end as those that recall unresolved issues such as that of those “disappeared” by the right wing dictatorships in the Southern Cone of South America. Thus, artists register “another reality” than the officially prescribed one that is mandatorily happy, optimistic, ideologically driven. As such, their work is often considered as illegal because to see the real without ideological lenses is unacceptable. Along with the Romanian and Chilean examples, further illustrations from neighboring dictatorships (Argentina, Poland, Bulgaria, etc) are quoted. Often, artists witness the desolation, the dirt, the equal passing of days far away from the obligatory joyful attitude. They chronicle events as they happen, they play the role of an archivist (Rancière), of a collector of signs of their environment, and they often hide these “proofs” away from the public eye. In dictatorships the artist is a hidden, unseen witness that can contribute to the *a posteriori* understanding of past experiences and shared realities. Finally, in some circumstances artists do more than witness, they change the status-quo, they transform reality through artistic or direct means.

The forbidden reality/The hidden truths

One of the first roles in which artists act as witnesses is when they criticize their reality by registering those elements that are forbidden to the gaze because they show how the dictatorship function, or what is like living during such a regime.

This simple documenting of the surrounding reality is relevant. As Martha Rosler observed, documentary photography has an ideological aesthetic, it always carries a political significance. “The photographs are powerless to *deal with* the reality that is yet totally comprehended-in-advance by ideology”¹⁰. Or, as Rancière recalls, “artistic strategies advance a new understanding of what is visible or formulated, to make seen what was unseen until then or to see differently what was too easily seen, to relate what was not so as to provoke ruptures in the sensible”¹¹. I argue this is even truer in dictatorships where the point of view on the real is controlled or determined by the regime. “Les images de l’art ne fournissent pas des armes pour les combats. Elles contribuent à dessiner des configurations nouvelles du visible, du dicible et du pensable, et, par là même, un paysage nouveau du possible”¹².

that could be deemed anti-institutional. Very often these gestures concerned a transgression of the boundary between the private and public spheres. (...) Even the smallest gestures could be viewed as attempts to make the oppressive public space more familiar, such as the actions of Jiri Kovanda... (...) Artists, usually seen in black-and-white photographs, often appeared unexpectedly, claiming the stage of reality and simply changing the script of the show taking place there.”...”Instead, artists and cultural agitators demonstrated a great deal of ingenuity in generating areas of creativity within the system, mostly in the private sphere, using irony and distance”. Christine Macel & Joanna Mytkowska, “Promises of the past” in *Promises of the past A discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe*, exh. cat., Jrp Ringier, Zurich, 2010, p.20.

⁹ Vit Havranek, “The post-bipolar order and the status of public and private under communism” in “Promises of the past” in *Promises of the past A discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe*, exh. cat., Jrp Ringier, Zurich, 2010, p. 28.

¹⁰ Martha Rosler, “In, around, and afterthoughts (about documentary photography)”, p. 322. http://education.victoriavesna.com/sites/default/files/pdfs/Rosler-In_around.pdf

¹¹ Jacques Rancière, *Le spectateur émancipé*, La Fabrique, Paris, 2008, p. 72.

¹² Jacques Rancière, *Le spectateur émancipé*, La Fabrique, Paris, 2008, p. 113.

A posteriori, they also show us the common, the everyday perspective that gets lost once those that participated to it disappear, and thus artists collect these signs and save them for posterity. For, as Jacques Rancière recalls us, “the artist [is] a collector, archivist or window-dresser, placing before the visitor’s eyes not so much a critical clash of heterogenous elements as a set of testimonies about a shared history and world.”¹³

Demystifying the regime

Photography was not acknowledged as art during Romanian communism and thus it was not exhibited.¹⁴ Its use is thus in itself defiant of official rules and becomes even more bold by the subjects chosen by an artist such as Ion Grigorescu that registers those responsible of the surveillance, the members of the Secret Police. In *Electoral meeting* (1975) Grigorescu includes photographs of the Securitate members that survey a “spontaneous” manifestation of support of Romanian citizens carrying the portraits of the communist leaders and placards with political slogans. By turning the camera on those that use it to instill fear into citizens minds and behaviors, Grigorescu deconstructs the official myth put forward by the Romanian communist regime that proclaimed the voluntary, spontaneous manifestations of support to the official policies. By his secretive shots, Grigorescu shows us the farce well known by everyone but absent as a proof from our memory.



Ion Grigorescu, *Electoral meeting* (1975)

“La imagen denuncia”

What we know about dictatorships and their repressive measures is usually represented by a study of the infrastructure used, a collection of torture techniques, of the personnel used and/or those responsible of its control. Oral accounts of those that suffered in prison or that survived torture accompany traditional sources of political science. Erstwhile, artistic sources can help us better place and understand such an experience by providing symbolic interpretations or direct citations of repression itself or of its effects as it is the case of those disappeared in the South, and still missing.

In the South, artists also register repression as their personal experience, or as the background of their lives. Torture techniques, violence as such, the effects of living in fear, all are witnessed by

¹³ Jacques Rancière, *The future of the image*, London, NY: Verso, 2009, p. 25.

¹⁴ Because the communist regime was much more complicated than simple dichotomies could put forward, Ion Grigorescu was also able to show albeit briefly some of his most progressive work (including photos of his actions showing him naked) inside the German cultural center for example.

artists and used in their work as a documentation of the repression these regimes put in place. Images are used to denounce the violence that is denied officially, artists use symbols to evoke those horrible techniques that are negated by the regimes in place. Artists also recur to self-inflicted violence to show their pain as the works of Carlos Leppe show. In *The clothes rack* (1975) Leppe shows three photographs that present the male body transformed into a woman's body by hiding or showing the sexual parts. In the same time, the title and the positions of the bodies shown remind one of the torture techniques used by the military who hung the detainees by their legs or hands.



Carlos Leppe, *The clothes rack* (1975)

More symbolic, with several layers of meanings that discuss violence and its aftermath is Catalina Parra's *Imbunches* (1977).

“Imbunche refers to the Araucanian Indian practice of sewing a baby's orifices shut, either to prevent the escape of evil from the body or to ward it off. The idea for this series was in part stimulated by a reading of Jose Donoso's *The obscene bird of night*, in which he used the *imbunche* as a metaphor for silencing. Parra's *Imbunche* series consisted of collages of newspaper fragments, gauze, animal hides, barbed wire, burlap, potato sacking, and threads (materials associated with wounds, killings, confined spaces, and corpses)”¹⁵.

Eugenio Dittborn's work on the disappeared using their photographic traces is equally interesting (*Todas las de la ley*, 1979-80, *Debe llamarse a las que faltan*, 1979-80, *Fosa comun* 1977). The Chilean artist uses black-and-white photographs of women and mixes this record of their presence with written text, making his artwork similar to official documents. The photos he uses are archive photos, so the artist places his work in the past to be able to talk about his present. In fact, in order to escape the Pinochet regime censorship Dittborn initiated a practice of “airmail painting” sending his often huge paintings through mail to different exhibition spaces. “In the context of Chile's military dictatorship, these anonymous images can be taken as a metaphor for that nation's

¹⁵ Jacqueline Barnitz, *Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America*, University of Texas Press, 2001, p.289.

thousands of desaparecidos, persons regarded as political opponents of the regime who were "disappeared" and presumably killed by its security forces."¹⁶

In other Southern Cone countries as well we can see the reaction of artists to violence and its effects. For example, Juan Carlos Romero in Argentina presents in his exhibition titled *Violence* (1973) a work that shows the huge word imprinted on the walls of the gallery and surrounded by news clippings of violent facts taken from magazines. This surrounding violence is directly quoted as the background, as reality.¹⁷ Still in Argentina, Marcelo Brodsky in his project *Good memory* (1997) uses a photo with all his class mates from the time he was in school, *1st year, 6th division* (1967) to trace back those that are no longer, either killed or disappeared by the military dictatorship (1976-83). The artist's brother, Fernando was one of those that disappeared at age 22 and he thus uses his personal memory to show the faces of those that are quoted just as numbers of the tens of thousands that were assassinated by the regime.¹⁸

Under the very long Stroessner dictatorship (1954-1989), Paraguayan artists used traditional art techniques (xylography, painting, sculpture) to express violence or its effects in such works as *Fear* (1959), *Terror* (1972), *The spy* (1975), by Olga Blinder. Osvaldo Salerno's artworks inspired by the Stroessner dictatorship (1954-1989) include *Composition* (1974), that shows a series of rows with locks, the last one on the last line being opened; in other series, the trace of his body is imprinted on paper as in *Document* (1976/81), *Diptych* (1983) or *Homage* (1981) – a body on a cloth rack hanging, that show parts of the body as that of a tied down prisoner.¹⁹ Carlos Colombino directly quotes repression during the *Stronato* in *The tortured* (1962) or *The stringed General* (1968).

Conversely, during the Ceaușescu regime (1965-1989), in Romania, Julian Mereuță's, *Captured* (1970) shows the artist, naked in fetal position and trapped in fishing net as a direct portrayal of how one felt inside communist Romania. Several other Romanian artists have artworks in which they allude to the feeling of being trapped, of enclosure, of loneliness and silent resistance (Amalia Perjovschi, Geta Brătescu, Tudor Graur, Ion Grigorescu, etc.)

The equal passing of the days, living in a dictatorship. Des bouts de vie parmi les désastres

Living under a dictatorship does not encompass only repression and the violence the regime unleashes so as to control citizens. It also includes everyday life with its political and economic restrictions, as well as its joys, although limited, that explains why some people are nostalgic about such regimes.

There are several ways in which artists testify of their experience: in literary forms, they fictionalize it using other places or other epochs to talk about their present; they can also include in their diaries their quotidian experiences and give us a feeling of their times. In visual arts they can simply photograph an everyday image, very common, but so far away of the propaganda images permitted by the dictatorships. Their registering of the real is important for our

¹⁶ Mari Carmen Ramirez, "Blue Print Circuits: Conceptual Art and Politics in Latin America", http://www.vividradicalmemory.org/descargas/textos/descarga_62/desc_blueprint_circuits_conceptual_art_and_politics_ramirez_mari_carmen_imagenes.pdf, p.161.

¹⁷ Ana Longoni, "El arte, cuando la violencia tomó la calle Apuntes para una estética de la violencia" <http://servicios2.abc.gov.ar/lainstitucion/sistemaeducativo/educacionartistica/34seminarios/htmls/descargas/bibliografia/problematicas-arte/10-Longoni.pdf>

¹⁸ <http://www.zonezero.com/exposiciones/fotografos/brodsky/menusp.html>

¹⁹ Osvaldo Salerno, "7. Los Archivos de la Imagen. El arte en los tiempos de Stroessner", *Paraguay: Los Archivos del Terror. Papeles que resignificaron la memoria del stronismo*, Alfredo Boccia Paz, Rosa Palau Aguilar, Osvaldo Salerno (eds), Asuncion, Servilibro, 2008, p.107.

understanding of dictatorships because their gaze selects what counts, what can transmit us more than the anodyne.

This quote about unofficial painters in Soviet Russia is also useful to understand the perspective used in the rest of communist countries in Eastern Europe, such as Romania.

“They depicted life in a barrack, of which they possessed firsthand knowledge, since they lived there themselves; they also portrayed undernourished prostitutes from the nearby neighborhood, drunkards, and all other human ‘refuse’, a category in which – to a certain extent and with certain artistic stylization – they placed themselves. Of course, a particular program can be detected here – to provide a nonofficial image of reality, to cast a glance at it through the eyes of ordinary people; but we also see that the artists, like foreigners, kept a safe distance from this by means of delicate stylistics, and shut themselves off from the miasma of everyday life by painting, using it as a protective mask”.²⁰

In the East, most often than not artistic gestures are minimal. A good example in this sense is Miklos Onucsan’s, *Self-portrait Along the Way C’est ici que j’arrive tous les matins* (1982). For Magda Radu, in this work, “Onucsan displaces...the meaning of productive work in socialist Romania when posing in the courtyard of a factory where he had once been temporarily hired, holding a placard that reads (in French): ‘I come here every morning!’ (1982) A more pointed translation might be: ‘It is here that I come every morning!’) An underlying sense of infinite duration, of inescapable, mute struggle, coupled with the lack of a stable and readily-available meaning (...) expressions of social and political helplessness”²¹



Miklos Onucsan, *Self-portrait Along the Way C’est ici que j’arrive tous les matins*, 1982

The minimal signs used by two Chilean artists in their works are an useful reminder of how the public space was also surveyed in the South. Alfredo Jaar’s *Studies on Happiness* (1981) series

²⁰ Andrei Erofeev, “Nonofficial art: Soviet Artists of the 1960s”, *Primary Documents*, Laura Hoptman and Tomas Pospiszl (eds), Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 2002, p. 51.

²¹ Magda Radu, “Here and then. Artists at work” in *Romanian Cultural Revolution*, exh.cat., Alexandru Niculescu & Adrian Bojenoiu (eds), Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011, p. 219.

and Lotty Rosenfeld's drawing of the + signs (*One mile of crosses on the ground* 1979-1984 and *Public prison*, 1985). In the first example, the work of Jaar, the artist inserted the question "Are you happy?" on billboards in authoritarian Chile, interrupting the daily routine by a simple question, but so complicated in a country living under surveillance and with a violent threat menacing its citizens every day. Lotty Rosenfeld has since the time of the Pinochet dictatorship painted a simple white line crossing over sign roads and making out crosses which in itself was a disobeying gesture, especially in her Chilean intervention in front of the presidential palace, La Moneda, which was bombed by the military at the time of the coup of September 11th, 1973. This kind of minimal gestures show how limited the impact of other voices was in a repressive regime such as the Chilean one, but in the same time they convey how brave some citizens were through their simple act of disobedience, often marginal.



Alfredo Jaar, *Studies on happiness* (1981)

The Romanian artist Ion Grigorescu has a collection of photographs of the desolate communist landscape (*In our beloved Bucharest*, 1977), of the destruction of churches so as to leave space for the new building sites (*Văcărești*, 1975) and of his life inside the walls of his apartment (*In prison/Pyjamas*, 1978). These furtive shots are contradictory to the official portrayal of "reality". In the same time, Ion Grigorescu photographed his everyday life, taking the very crowded bus, waiting in line for something to buy, or even partying with some friends, along with some images that portray the artist as a loner in desolate landscapes.

"[In *Balta Albă*, (07:55, colour, 1980)] The camera enjoys "the savage poetry of these places", recording the day to day activities and social behaviors (children playing in front of the block of flats, the people queuing for fruits in the market) from the newly built district of Bucharest that gave its title...capture the city "from below" – pointing to its contemporary ruins, peripheries and its rebuilt representations"²².

²² Alina Șerban, 2009 in "Promises of the past" in *Promises of the past A discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe*, exh. cat., Jrp Ringier, Zurich, 2010, p. 91



Ion Grigorescu, *Balta alba* (1980)

In *In our beloved Bucharest* (1977) “Grigorescu uses a hidden camera to make a documentary film of life in the capital, seen from tram no. 26. The film was made in 1977, after the earthquake that had struck the city and engendered a series of systematic demolitions for the dictator’s megalomaniac project of erecting a new town on the ruins of the historical center.”²³

Far away from the propagandistic image supported by the regime are also Ion Dumitriu’s photographs *Groapa de gunoi* (1975-8) already showed above, and that show us images from the garbage bin from where the Roma collected different items that they resold. Both the landscape and the Roma we can see in his photographs were not part of the images one has of the communist regime in Romania that promoted an only positive image of it.

Professional photographers also collected the signs of their reality, along with their other assignments, official or not, during the dictatorial regimes. A good example is that of Andrei Pandele’s photographic record of life during communism in the 1980s when Romania was a closed upon itself country, similar to how North Korea is seen nowadays in the Western imaginary.

The same type of gaze on the immediate reality is bestowed by Chilean photographers such as Helen Hughes, Kena Lorenzini, or Leonora Vicuna.²⁴ Their shots immortalize not only the irregular protests against the Pinochet regime but also the details of life in the shantytowns so far away from the glorious neoliberal revolution for which the military government is still praised; apparently uninteresting aspects of daily life that point to a sense of loneliness, loss inside the city (Vicuna’s photographs) accompany the selection. Leonora Vicuna’s photographs are the most interesting of the three as they show the hidden life during the regime dominated by the curfew, in bars, restaurants or private homes. Colored by the author, these images have something poetic in them, that surpasses their testimonial character. Vicuna’s photographs also show that life was not only repression, protest, but included short moments of leisure although in a context surveyed “from curfew to curfew” or with the risk of being killed if one got out in the streets at night.

²³ <http://coolessay.org/docs/index-136575.html?page=6>

²⁴ Montserrat Rojas Corradi and Laura Gonzalez, Mario Fonseca, *Visible/invisible Hughes/Lorenzini/Vicuna Tres fotógrafos durante la dictadura militar en Chile*, Santiago: Ocho libros, 2012.



Leonora Vicuna, *Poet or waiter*

The secret registering of the apparently uninteresting surrounding reality can be seen in the case of Miroslav Tichy that, with a self-designed camera photographed women bodies almost nude or dressed but always secretly and unperceived by the subject. Tichy's shots also include details of daily life in communist Czechoslovakia, unfocused, blurry pictures of an un-idealized society so far away from the propagandistic, colorful, plain, and joyful reality of the party. They reconstruct *a posteriori* life from small bits of fuzzy images that offer a glimpse into living in a communist society from the point of view of an outcast of society as Tichy was.

After the dictatorships: the disappeared

Another version of history is advanced *a posteriori* by often hidden artistic renditions of life in dictatorships that can provide a better understanding of that past and frequently, contradict the official memory constructed in the new democracies.

The case of the missing persons in the Southern Cone or the *desaparecidos* by the military regime is a topic often used by contemporary artists in these countries. In Chile, Carlos Altamirano's *Portraits* (1979-2007) series shows the artist's recent past mixing everyday colorful images on top of which a black-and-white photograph of a missing person is displayed. Those missing are reinserted in Altamirano's version of history by pasting their image all over the colorful reality that has excluded them.



Carlos Altamirano, *Portraits*

El Siluetazo (1983) is a collective artwork that provoked passers-by in Buenos Aires in 1983 at the end of the “Dirty War”²⁵, the last military dictatorship by displaying only the silhouettes of the thousands of disappeared. Revealing the allusion to their missing bodies remains one of the most important artistic gestures in post-coup Argentina that also saw the involvement of the communities, especially of the members of the organizations of those disappeared (*The Mothers of the May Plaza* being one of the most important ones). Volunteers lent their bodies lying on the ground so that their silhouette be drawn and thereafter pasted onto the walls of downtown Buenos Aires. These silhouettes, along with the black-and-white photographs of those disappeared families use in their protests for the truth, were a powerful reminder of the darkest side of the military dictatorship.

Although realized in exile, two other works are worth recalling for their symbolic power that surpasses the borders of their respective countries. The first one, by Argentine artist Leon Ferrari is perhaps one of the best examples of the role quoted from Rancière, that of the artist as collector, archivist. In *Nosotros no sabemos/We didn't know* (1976-84) the artist collected newspaper clippings with news about the violent crimes of the junta that took power March 24 1976. Afterwards he was forced to leave the country into exile in Brazil (itself a dictatorship...) and only used this material that he later exhibited in Argentina after 1983 when the end of this bloody dictatorship was seen. The title refers to what many of those that did not suffer from the violent policies of the military junta used to say: we didn't know they were killing people, that people disappeared, etc (see also his work *Nunca mas* that combines some of these newspaper cuttings with images of the junta, etc.) Luis Camnitzer, also from exile, realized his *From the Uruguayan Torture series* (1983-4) composed of 35 Polaroid photos of different parts of the body showing torture marks and accompanied by handwritten text. They “evoke strange scenes of horror and sinister ambiguity. Some could be shadow-steeped polaroids taken in haste during the aftermath of a violent atrocity, while others only go so far as to suggest darker contexts. One simply presents us with a photograph of an empty glass bottle placed on a table with the words “the instrument was explained in detail.”²⁶

Sometimes, after the dictatorships, certain artists can provide us with still unique points of view on that experience. An interesting example is that of the docu-film *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* (2010) by Andrei Ujică that presents the world from the point of view of the Romanian dictator. Equally so, other recent Romanian contemporary art has sought to portray the defunct dictator as a more complex character than the official memory of his persona would let us believe, that of a tyrant/clown by presenting him in a more human light.

Artists not as witnesses but as game-changers

In some contexts, artists act as more than witnesses, an artist intervenes and changes things²⁷, transforms reality albeit briefly through his artistic gesture that becomes political. Artists are witnesses but they also propose alternatives as it is the case of CADA in Chile that advances a new understanding of the relation between the artist and society based on a transformation of life

²⁵ Between 1976 and 1983 a military junta ruled Argentina and was the most repressive regime in the Southern Cone. The Human Rights associations estimate the number of victims (killed, tortured, disappeared) at more than 30.000.

²⁶ ““The Uruguayan Torture Series” is Camnitzer’s most explicitly political work and it is also his most unsettling. The links between each piece — the nightmare narrative that lingers between them — is up to the viewer to weave. We are abandoned to the images and their implications. The references the works cast are no longer to the guarded world of art theory and academia, but to reality in its most visceral form — violence, specifically the kind inflicted upon Latin America during the dictatorships of the late twentieth century and Operation Condor.”Kieran McGrath, *The Santiago Times*. http://prod-images.exhibite.com/www_alexandergray_com/Camnitzer_Santiago_Times_6_1_2013.pdf

²⁷ In Western art, *artivism* of contemporary art is more and more common especially from the 1970s on.

by the artistic gesture. Several of their art-actions break the limits imposed by the Pinochet regime. The best example is perhaps *No+* (1984) that transforms the anonymous participant in an equally important participant as the artist because he completes the sign by adding other words or images: No more dictatorship, torture, Pinochet, etc. This sign became, at the end of the Pinochet dictatorship, one of the most important signs of the democratic opposition that finally removed the general from power through democratic means, in 1989/1990.



C.A.D.A, *No +* (1984)

In Argentina, a turning point for the relation between art and politics was seen through *Tucuman Arde* (1968) when artists directly intervened into politics. “The ‘new aesthetic’ that those artists postulated advanced the abolition of boundaries between artistic and political action: political violence became aesthetic material, not only metaphorically or as an invocation, but even appropriating resources, modes and procedures from politics or, better, from radicalized left-wing organizations”.²⁸

In Eastern Europe this kind of direct and open intervention in the public space was less common if not completely absent. Examples include other cases than the Romanian one such as Ewa Partum (*Self-Identification*, 1980, *Legality of space*, 1971), Jiri Kowanda in Czechoslovakia, and Tomislav Gotovac in Yugoslavia, countries where this kind of intervention was allowed or at least tolerated. This time the artist stops being a witness and advances a change, an interruption of the rhythm by a new perspective he participates directly to.

Concluding remarks

This presentation has tried to recapture three understandings of the role of witness artists plays in dictatorships: they document their surrounding reality (daily life and exceptional conditions in violent contexts), as well as provide proofs for the unresolved issues of the past once dictatorships end (the disappeared). At the same time, artists can be agents of change and can transform their reality by opening up possibilities that seem unthinkable in such regimes where the horizon of change often is no longer even conceptualized. Political science analyses of dictatorships are enriched by taking into account artistic accounts as these often include details that are otherwise obliterated from the memory of such regimes; they detail living under a dictatorial regime, as well as provide an *aperçu* into the complicated structure, and the intricacies of living in dictatorships

²⁸ Ana Longoni, “Action art in Argentina from 1960: The Body (Ex)posed” in *Arte ≠ Vida. Actions by Artists of the Americas 1960-2000*, Deborah Cullen (ed), New York, El Museo del Barrio, 2008, p. 89.

that are otherwise harder to grasp. Finally, artistic points of view are broader than those of “ordinary people” having experienced the same conditions as they tend to select important details or innovative perspectives that are useful to our *a posteriori* understanding.