

Tucumán Is Burning

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In tune with the ubiquitous politicization of intellectual life, some artists began to question the bourgeois definition of art as a collection of autonomous works created to provide aesthetic pleasure and provoke metaphysical insights. In 1968, a group of painters, photographers, and filmmakers allied themselves with the peasants working in the sugar mills in the northwestern province of Tucumán and organized an itinerant exhibition entitled *Tucumán Is Burning*. Properly speaking, there were no individual works. The exhibit consisted of a giant collective collage of photos, newspaper clips, recorded interviews, and nonfiction short films, assembled to inform the public of the real social conditions of the poor. Displaying their rejection of both official and avant-garde institutions devoted to art, such as the National Art Museum and the Di Tella Institute, the artists chose to exhibit their controversial works in the labor unions' various headquarters. The group's manifesto underscores the political content of all artistic creation and calls for revolutionary art committed to the proletarian cause.

This year, 1968, a series of aesthetic acts has burst on the world of fine arts in Argentina. These acts have broken with the elitist attitudes of the artists who worked within the Instituto Di Tella, the institution that has claimed until now to be the sole arbiter of new modes of expression, not only for its own artists, but for all of the new artistic experiences that have been springing up across the country.

These new modes of artistic expression erupted in the midst of the overly exquisite aesthetic atmosphere of the false vanguards sheltered within the institutions of official culture. Initially these expressions outlined a fresh approach that would lead to seeing artistic acts as positive and real actions that tended to reshape the society that produced them.

This attitude aimed to make evident the implicit political content of every work of art. The idea was to put forth this content with a violent and active symbolic charge so that an artist's production would become part of reality with a truly vanguardist, and therefore revolutionary, intent. Aesthetic acts de-



Tucumán Is Burning (1963). Art exhibition. The province of Tucumán, traditionally called the garden of the republic, here is renamed the garden of misery by the participating artists.

nouncing the cruelty of the Vietnam War or the hypocrisy of American foreign policy plainly indicated the need to create, not just a relationship between the work and society, but an artistic object that could by itself produce changes just as a political act would.

The recognition of this new concept led a group of artists to postulate aesthetic creation as a *collective and forceful* act that would destroy the bourgeois myth of the individuality of the artist and the passive character traditionally assigned to art. Planned aggression became the form of the new art. To be aggressive is to possess and to destroy the old forms of art based on private property and the personal enjoyment of a unique work. Today, aggression is a creative act that produces new meanings: it destroys the network of official culture, opposing it with the subversive culture of the process of change, creating a truly revolutionary art.

This revolutionary art is born from the artist's political awakening to his present-day reality as part of the political and social context that surrounds him.

Revolutionary art proposes the aesthetic act as a focal point where all the elements that make up human reality are joined. This includes economic, so-

cial, and political elements, thus bringing together the contributions of distinct disciplines and eliminating the sense of separation between artists, intellectuals, and technicians. It is a unified action of all of those elements, propelled by the desire to change the total social structure. That is to say, it aims at *total art*.

Revolutionary art acts on reality by intervening in a process of harnessing the elements that compose it, starting with a clear ideological conception based on principles of materialist rationality.

Revolutionary art, in this way, is a partial form of the reality that is integrated into the total reality. It destroys the idealistic separation between the work and the world to the degree that it carries out a true transformation of social structures: that is to say, it is a *transforming art*.

Revolutionary art is the manifestation of political ideas that struggle to destroy the worn-out cultural and aesthetic underpinnings of bourgeois society, joining the revolutionary forces fighting against economic dependency and class oppression: that is to say, it is a *social art*. . . .

This collective work, called *Tucumán Is Burning*, bears directly on the present national crisis, which takes particularly radical form in one of our poorest provinces, Tucumán, which has long been subjected to a tradition of underdevelopment and economic oppression. The present Argentine government, embarking on a disastrous colonialist policy, has closed down most of the Tucumán sugar refineries, a vital resource of the provincial economy. This has caused the spread of hunger and unemployment, with all the social consequences that they produce.

An "Operation Tucumán" designed by government economists is trying to disguise this overt aggression against the working class with a false program for economic development based on the creation of new, hypothetical industries financed by capital from the United States. The hidden truth of the Tucumán operation is this: it aims to destroy a real and explosive trade union movement that reaches across Northeast Argentina. The plan is to do this by breaking up workers' groups, atomizing them into small industrial sites, and forcing them to emigrate to other regions in search of underpaid and unstable temporary work. One of the serious consequences of this is the breakup of workers' families, whose survival is left to chance and improvisation. The economic policy followed by the government in Tucumán Province is a kind of pilot program intended to measure the degree of resistance of the worker population so that, after the neutralization of trade union opposition, this program can be applied to other provinces with similar economic and social profiles.

"Operation Tucumán" is reinforced by a campaign of silence, organized by government institutions so as to confuse, distort, and hush up the serious situa-

tion in Tucumán, a campaign that the so-called free press has joined out of shared common class interests.

Faced with this situation, taking up their responsibility as artists committed to the social reality that includes them, the avant-garde artists have responded to this "campaign of silence" by producing this work, *Tucumán Is Burning*.

This work consists of the creation of an information overload network, to bear witness to the underhanded misconstruing of events in Tucumán by the information and diffusion media in the hands of official power and the bourgeoisie. The communication media are powerful mediating forces that can be filled with varied contents; the positive influence that those media exercise on society depends on the reality and veracity of those contents. Information about what has been happening in Tucumán has been controlled by the government and the official media. They tend to keep silent the serious social problems unleashed by the closing of the sugar refineries and to provide a false image of economic recuperation of the province that the actual facts scandalously belie. So as to gather facts and to put in evidence the fallacious contradictions of the government and of the class that sustains it, the avant-garde artists, accompanied by technicians and specialists, traveled to Tucumán. They verified the social reality that exists there. The process culminated in a press conference where the artists made a public and violent repudiation of the actions of the authorities, of the complicity of the cultural media in keeping the workers of Tucumán in a shameful and degrading social state. The artists' action was carried out in collaboration with student and worker groups who united with them to show support for their efforts.

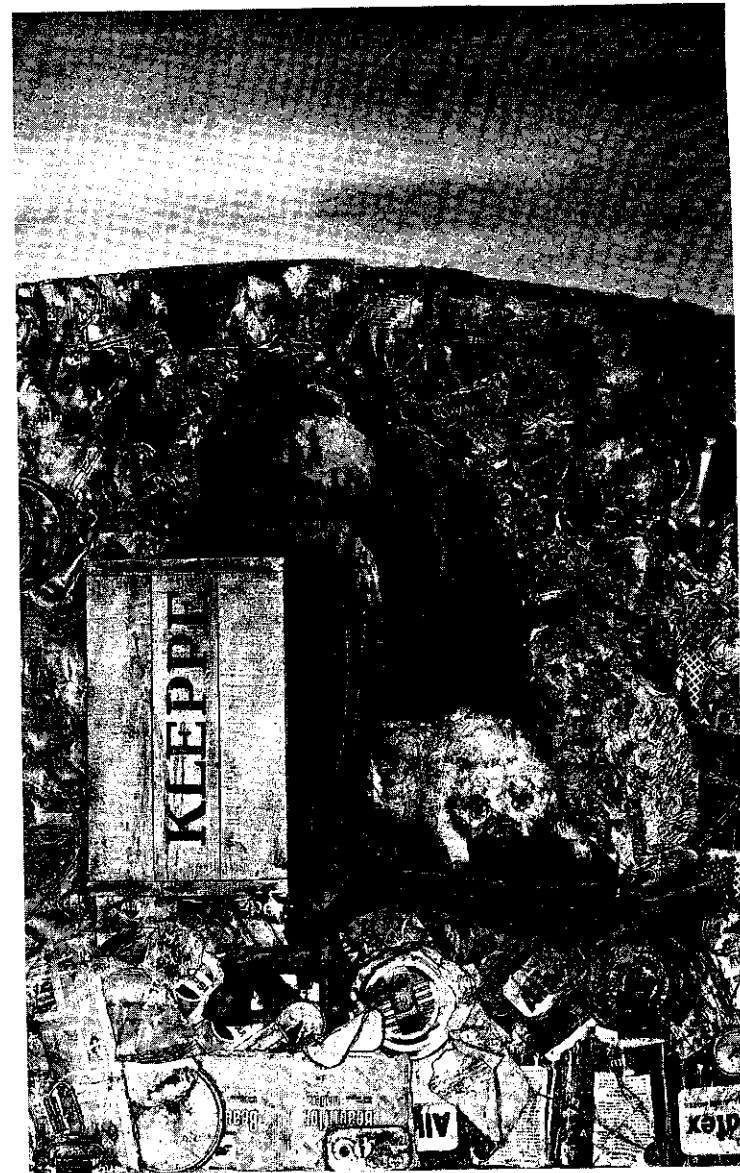
The artists went to Tucumán with abundant documentation concerning the economic and social problems of the province as well as detailed information about the stories that the media had produced about the problems in Tucumán. These findings were then analyzed in order to weigh the degree of distortion and adulteration of the facts. Later, artists and technicians wrote up the information that they had collected, which will be used for the show in the union halls. And, finally, the information that the media have produced on the artists' actions in Tucumán will be incorporated into the first stage of the information network.

The second part of the artists' efforts will be the actual presentation of all the information gathered about the situation in Tucumán. Part of this will be circulated in trade union halls and student and cultural centers. The full show with audiovisuals and performances will be carried out at the Argentine CGT [Confederación General del Trabajo] union hall in Rosario and later will be brought to Buenos Aires.

Our information overload network, whose basic aim is to discredit the image of reality in Tucumán produced by the mass media, will have its culmination in a third and ultimate stage, where all the third-degree information (reports on reports on reality) that has been sparked will be collected in a publication that will show all the processes of conceiving and carrying out the work, together with all the documentation produced, as well as a final evaluation.

The protesting artists demand that their works not be incorporated into official, bourgeois institutions, but be placed in a different context; that is why this show is taking place in the Argentine CGT because this is the body that represents the class that is at the vanguard of a struggle whose final objectives are shared by the authors of this work.

Translated by Patricia Owen Steiner



Antonio Berni, *Juanito sleeping* (1974). Courtesy Lily Berni, and Inés and José Antonio Berni.

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