

## Kaleidoscope.

### On *Not Reconciled* by Marcelo Expósito<sup>1</sup>

Ana Longoni (2009)

Translation: Nuria Rodríguez

An anti-realist documentary, an anti-naturalist realism: given the paradox posited by these usually antithetical formulas, is it possible to make a film that is at once experimental and testimonial? Is there any form capable of combining languages that were regarded as antithetical oppositions in the aesthetic debates of the left throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, polarized in terms of realism versus avant-garde or abstraction? Is it possible to achieve an encounter between the luxuriant complexity of a representational device and the attempt to communicate collective experiences of an unbounded, proliferating nature?

*Between Dreams*, the series of videos that Marcelo Expósito has been making since 2002 (of which *Not Reconciled* is the fourth instalment), takes this unusual confluence as a programmatic starting point. In the filmmaker's own words, its aim is to "force an estrangement with regard to the archival images, which are used in a way that is sharply differentiated from the naturalism of reportage or the militant documentary. To simplify it in a formula: anti-naturalist realism".<sup>2</sup>

Incidentally, Expósito bases this formula on a reactivation of the legacy of the historical avant-gardes, as in the experiments in the radical politization of art of the Russian avant-gardes, and points to invisible bridges—daring but solid—between movements that date back one hundred years and recent and even future practices: "When avant-garde art had to debate openly its political function and face up to its communicative dimension, no longer debating these at the level of content but incorporating them *structurally*, almost a century ago now, I think that was the moment that marked the start of what we are now, or what we may still become."<sup>3</sup>

The continuous present in which Expósito situates the reinvention of the avant-garde (not completing but comprehending the project of the historical avant-garde, as Hal Foster once said) is fuelled by new political experiences that have been taking place in many parts of the world since

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<sup>1</sup> Let me make explicit this dilemma in setting out to write this text: the suspicion that a descriptive/explanatory register might deactivate the mobilizing effect that watching *Not Reconciled* (*nobody knows what a body is capable of*) provokes in me (a bit like immersing myself in a kaleidoscope). At the same time, the complex assembling of the operation of montage proposed by this (self-defined) "didactic piece" seems to demand these marginal notes.

<sup>2</sup> Marcelo Expósito, correspondence with the author, September 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Marcelo Expósito, "Inside and Outside the Art Institution: Self-Valorization and Montage in Contemporary Art", in *transversal: progressive institutions*, April 2007, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0407/expósito/en/>.

the eighties. In these, avant-garde experimentation is not read as mere formalism but reverberates in the body, in subjectivity, in the affects. In the conviction that estranged perception transforms certain things, Expósito does not conceive his practice as a form of recording/witnessing, or as a merely descriptive distancing, but as an acting out. The new political languages have inherited from the avant-garde the desire to give form to intense situations. To generate shock, emotion, strangeness, unease.

This approach does not identify with the formulas of militant cinema or the conventions of “political art” based on solid ideological certainties without cracks, which seek refuge in mechanisms of naturalization and the construction of a clearly differentiated and opposed “them” and “us”. More interested in exploring the complex ways in which the “us” of social movements is configured without falling into an essentialized identity, Expósito prefers to compare his efforts at constructing an “analytical artefact, which renders visible its rhetorical and narrative devices, its hypothesis”, designed to “promote *representations* of the new forms of politization characteristic of the current cycle of protest”, with one of Gustav Klutis’ photomontages or a novel by the Italian writer and militant autonomist Nanni Balestrini.<sup>4</sup> It is, in short, a question of “thinking simultaneously the representation of political action and the politics of its representations”.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, this platform positions itself against the habitual split between art practice and production of theory. Brian Holmes notes of this articulation that: “in the videos, a shift in the philosophical conception of the capital/labor relation is articulated with the emergent forms of militant organization and with historical practices of audiovisual editing”.<sup>6</sup> From this articulation, Expósito sees his videos as “another way of contributing to the processes through which movements model both politics and subjectivization, to the multiplication of their tools and modes of expression”,<sup>7</sup> which requires “both the *Communist Manifesto* (that is: quick, effective, agitation literature, to be passed from hand to hand) and the *Critique of Political Economy* (‘weighty’ artefacts, conceived and produced more to be useful at the slower pace, that of thought and discussion)”.<sup>8</sup> He also defends a tactical and contextual use of the art circuit: “it is extremely important to be aware that the ‘artisticness’ of what is made is not an identity or an essential or pre-established condition: it is a contingency that may respond to tactical or political functions, whose

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<sup>4</sup> See Nanni Balestrini, *Vogliamo tutto* (1971), *Blackout* (1980), *Gli invisibili* (1987) and *L'orda d'oro* (with Primo Moroni, 1988), all published in Spanish by Traficantes de Sueños, Madrid, in 2006 and 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Marcelo Expósito, introduction to the series *Between Dreams*, <http://marceloexposito.net/entresuenos/introduction/>.

<sup>6</sup> Brian Holmes, “Marcelo Expósito’s *Entre sueños*: Towards the New Body”, in *OPEN. Cahier on art and the public domain*, No. 17, Amsterdam, May 2009; <http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2009/01/20/marcelo-exposito-entre-suenos/>.

<sup>7</sup> Marcelo Expósito, introduction to the series *Between Dreams*, *op. cit.*

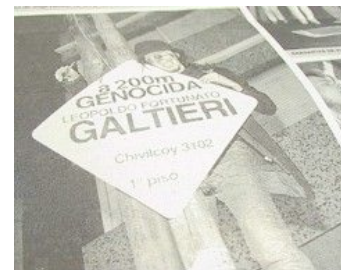
<sup>8</sup> Marcelo Expósito, correspondence with the author, September 2009.

sanctioning as an 'art work' has to be disputed and challenged in discursive and material terms against the 'common sense' of the institutional field through conflict and negotiation".<sup>9</sup>

### Didactic Piece in Five Acts

The video is self-defined as a "didactic piece": a didactic aspiration that is not in the least facile, in as much as its devices of montage and fragmentation tend to affect and hamper any attempt at a linear reading. Its demands on the viewer could be compared to the commitment of the body itself in the production of the *Siluetazo* or the participation in the *escraches*. "Nobody knows what a body is capable of", the subtitle of the video declares: its limits, but above all its possibility and its potency. "The statement is always collective", *Not Reconciled* quickly harangues.

The video is structured in acts or episodes whose linkage is not underpinned by any linear storyline. The first two acts uncircuit any comfortable supposition the viewer may have as regards the conventions of documentary film. Then, after the initial unease or disconcert provoked in the viewer, having broken with the familiar forms of crossover between art and politics, the video suddenly shifts to another territory and adopts a different register.



The last three acts present "non-exemplary cases", which operate through an abundant, miscellaneous set of testimonies, recordings and visual documents (photos, graphics, television material) around "experiences sited in order to be multiplied": one, the *Siluetazo* (the mass production of silhouettes representing the 30.000 "disappeared", at the 3rd Resistance march organized by the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo towards the end of the last Argentinean dictatorship, in September 1983); two, the *escraches* (the mode of direct action devised by the group HIJOS to draw society's attention to the impunity—from the mid nineties on—of those responsible for the genocide) and the art-activism that has emerged over the last decade (through the accounts of GAC, Etcétera and Arte en la Kalle); three, the Parque de la Memoria, a still unfinished monument in memory of the "disappeared" and those murdered by state terrorism, located on the banks of the

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<sup>9</sup> Marcelo Expósito, "Inside and Outside the Art Institution", *op. cit.*

River Plate (which was the unmarked grave of many of the kidnapped, who were dropped into from the death flights).

The exploration of these events, through extensive, does not recreate a linear history but adopts a polyphonic and polymorphous approach. A lot is left out, barely hinted at or suggested in this vast collage that refuses to lessen the complexity and even the opacity of the events, to embark on a futile attempt at a univocal, all-embracing account.

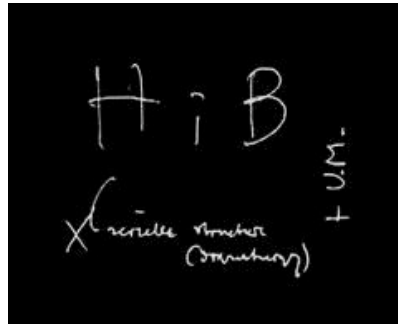
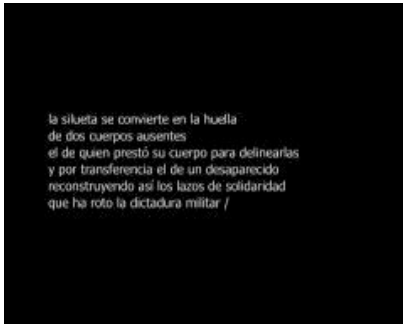
*Not Reconciled* thus puts forward two zones that might at first seem to be split or to derive from different artefacts but nonetheless have a close and intense articulation: no quote or fragment is offered up randomly. The cryptic passages (as enigmatic as dreams) are followed by other that relax us and allow us to let go and give ourselves up to the belief that we understand—a belief that is suddenly dismantled again.

In this constellation of quoted imaged and assemblages of texts, the principle of construction in force is clearly montage. A montage of images, writings, testimonies and circumstances, experiences and perceptions. Expósito is fully aware of this resource as a pillar of his poetics/politics: “For me, the most momentous invention that the artistic avant-garde movements contributed in the last century to culture *and* to politics is montage. I'm referring to the montage that, whether in Tucumán Arde, Heiner Müller or Alexander Kluge, is not an exercise in style that folds over on itself but constitutes a tool for thinking, for thinking critically. In this sense, montage is bringing heterogeneous things together into a fragmented whole that *highlights its structural discontinuity*, shattering the illusion of self-coherence and unity of the form and the discourse *without in so doing relinquishing the production of meaning*, things whose collision deserves to be *thought* as a whole that through itself *points to somewhere else*. [...] Almost all of the art that I continue to learn from consists in constructing, (re)structuring, combining, putting together.”<sup>10</sup>

The radical nature of the montage operation of *Not Reconciled* is evidenced by the treatment of the texts incorporated into the video which never function as explanations or epigraphs, but as other images: there is no set language, punctuation, or authorship. The break with grammaticality in this language-grinding machine does not subtract meaning but calls instead for a redoubled attention that is inevitably frustrated by the impossibility of reading, understanding or stringing together everything. The words, the ideas are left incomplete, in progress, like blurred but latent memories. They take on new meaning, backwards or forwards, by reverberation, by unusual association, by decantation.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

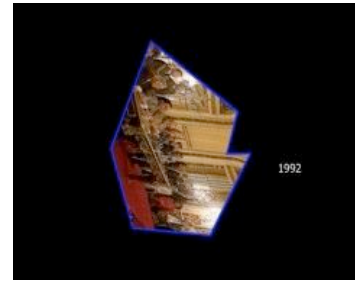
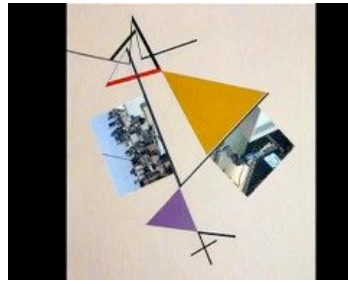


The place of enunciation is set up from a camera that is never neutral or distant from what it is showing. This is not a subject who conceals himself behind impersonality or a royal "we" but a point of view that is involved – which is not to say blurred. As Holmes writes, "Unlike conventional documentaries establishing the historical facts, this videography records the nascent movements of history in the gestures and the stories, or indeed the imaginations, of those who attempt to make their own history in the streets".<sup>11</sup>

### **The Avant-garde as a Factory to Be Recovered by Its Workers**

The first act of *Not Reconciled* opens with a storm. From a window of the Bauen, an emblematic hotel recovered by its workers right in the microcentre of Buenos Aires, the camera captures the incessant rain falling on roofs, balconies and terraces, and the people below hurrying to cross the avenue to the rhythm of the traffic light. Suddenly, the image fragments, taking on the forms in motion of one of the paintings by Tomás Maldonado from his time as leader of the Arte Concreto Invención movement in the mid forties, during the period of his active participation in the ranks of the Communist Party of Argentina, interrupted by his expulsion in 1948. The video recurrently returns to the recourse of Cubo-Futurist/Constructivist imagery, sometimes in reverse: geometric planes are inserted into images of Buenos Aires, stressing the parallel between the constructive dimension of the picture and urban forms. This is an unmistakable reference to Klutsis' photomontage *The Dynamic City* (1919) and its (fictitious and playfully forced) dialogue with the experience of the Argentinean Concrete avant-garde, repoliticizing its history as a first (and failed) radical attempt to connect the art avant-garde and the political avant-garde, in line with more recent experiences of the politicization of art, against the tide of the canonical readings that insist on the group's shift towards a "pictorial style" and—in the case of Maldonado—the turn to design as a withdrawal from or renunciation of art. Seen in this light, the concrete artists' ideas about the future of art as a transcending of its bourgeois status to become an art that can potentially be produced by and for all are reinvested with meaning.

<sup>11</sup> Brian Holmes, "Towards the New Body", *op. cit.*



This connection traces a secret and even arbitrary—but no less revealing for that—history that connects with other experiences of the socialization of art and its spilling over into political action as part of the “visual politics“ of the human rights movement in the eighties and nineties.

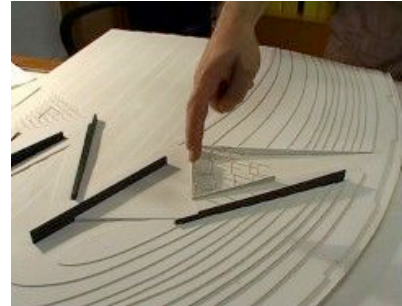
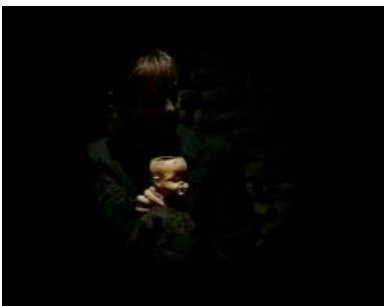
### **Beyond (on this side of) the Myth**

Marcelo Expósito’s perspective on the “Argentinean case“ springs from a sustained involvement (as well as a dialoguing distance) over four years of work *in situ* (four increasingly lengthy stays in the country between 2005 and 2008) and rests on a rich network of relations, affects and activations. The (e)strange(d) reading that he initiates from the Bauen is manifestly distanced from the host of supporting and even romantic versions (many of them in video format) that have been made about factory recoveries, unemployed workers' movements and other aspects of the Argentinean revolt which had its epicentre on December 19th and 20th, 2001. Until it moved on elsewhere, its exemplary nature (in terms of the devastating effects of neoliberal politics and the new social movements and organizational experiments that it made visible) generated the proliferation of mystificatory versions of the Argentinean experience. In this context, the unexpected/unusual decision to avoid—among the episodes of *Not Reconciled*—something as important as the Argentinean revolt of 2001 and 2002 and to propose a reading that goes back much further and carries on up to the present, shifts away from that commonplace without shying away from exploring the conditions that emerged at that time.

### **I Am and I Am Not**

Right from its opening *Not Reconciled* insistently quotes different specific re-workings of the Shakespeare play that steer clear of the existential dilemma and present themselves as incisive appeals in the midst of convulsive historical contexts dominated by censorship, exile or impunity. The video opens with an excerpt from Grigori Kozintsev's *Hamlet* (1964) in which Hamlet faces the surging waves, very like the start of Heiner Müller's *Die Hamletmaschine* (1977): “I was Hamlet. I

stood on the shore and talked with the surf BLA-BLA, the ruins of Europe in the back of me."<sup>12</sup> *Máquina Hamlet* was translated and staged in Buenos Aires by the experimental theatre group Periférico de Objetos in 1995 (the same year that the group HIJOS was formed, a coincidence that the film takes as a sign of the times). There is also Celestino Coronado's film version (1976), which starts with the body of Hamlet lying laid out on a stretcher or sacrificial table. Marcelo Expósito makes this dialogue with the first (and undiscovered) film made in Argentina in 1899: Dr Posada's operation (or autopsy?) on the body of an anonymous, ill-treated patient. The camera is complicit with the manipulation, unscrupulous filling and suture of a body, in a scene in which extreme instrumental and scientific rationality comes very close to a nightmarish evocation of bodies devastated by torture. The image is not only a clear reference to Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Nicolaes Tulp* (in the arrangement of those portrayed and the viewpoint of the observer), but it also anticipates Freddy Alborta's famous photo of the dead of Che Guevara in Bolivia in 1967.



The questions of identities torn apart (who am I from the moment I find out that my father was murdered by a political plot?) and the disturbing figure of the dead father's spectre inevitably take on connotations of subjects that are still acutely painful in the Argentinean context (and in the Spanish context too, I suspect, all the more so as the existence of disappeared people begins to come to light among the unresolved consequences of Francoist repression, along with unnamed mass graves and hundreds of children stolen in order to be "properly brought up" by Falangist families). The perverse machinery of state terrorism in Argentina caused thousands of unnamed "disappeared" or murdered, as well as five hundred stolen children and babies who had their identities torn from them by their captors. The breaking and concealing of identity, the doublings, the wiping out of people's names and origins are here not so much existential dilemmas as political urgencies that can no longer be postponed.

In fact, the act that deals with the *escraches* closes with the moving speech of a young woman, Victoria Donda, who recovered her identity a few days before March 24th, 2006 (the thirtieth

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<sup>12</sup> See Heiner Müller, "Hamlet Machine", in *Hamlet Machine and Other Texts for the Stage*, English translation by Carl Weber, PAJ Publications, 1984.



anniversary of the last military coup in Argentina). Now she can say who her parents were and who murdered them, and she tells this “public” story to a crowd gathered in front of the house of Jorge Rafael Videla, the man in charge of the genocide. The dilemmas (individual and collective) that she privately confronts, her hesitations and contradictions, and those of dozens of other young people who have “recovered” their identities in the last few years thanks to the unflagging, loving perseverance and investigations of the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo occupy the scabrous and abysmal territory from which Hamlet confronts a hostile sea.



The video ends as it began (spectrally and spectacularly) with an image of the River Plate in the middle of a storm, lived through/seen from the Parque de la Memoria. This overdue space, shot through by controversies and disputes, shows its ruined and half-finished state before it has been officially opened. What has not yet been completed is already rusting. A precise metaphor for the socially unresolved. The unburied.

(For further information on the video: <http://marceloexposito.net/entresuenos/notreconciled>)