

Transatlantic Practices of Fascism(s) and Populism(s) from the Margins

The Cultural Politics of “Us” versus “Them”

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Antonio Berni, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and the Transnational Cultural Politics of Anti-Fascism

*Laura Moure Cecchini*¹

Introduction

In 1932, Elena Sansinena de Elizalde, the president of the Buenos Aires cultural association Amigos del Arte, and prominent Argentine intellectual Victoria Ocampo, who had just launched the journal *Sur* (South), invited Mexican muralist painter and well-known anti-fascist David Alfaro Siqueiros to exhibit in Buenos Aires. As an Argentine journalist wrote, Siqueiros' visit to Buenos Aires would create a "bridge between two groups of intellectuals and two aesthetics, the Mexicans and the South Americans, so that their reciprocal understanding could encourage the artistic development of all America" (qtd. in Pacheco, *Coleccionismo de Arte en Buenos Aires* 203).

Amigos del Arte was the ideal venue for Siqueiros' visit. Firstly, this association had been the location for the controversial visits of notorious Italian fascist cultural players Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1926) and Margherita Sarfatti (1930) (Schnapp; Montgomery). Thus, its audience was already familiar with Italian fascist aesthetics and rhetoric, both in its Futurist and its return-to-order versions, and could understand how radical Siqueiros' anti-fascist position was. Secondly, Amigos del Arte complemented its attention to Argentine and European modernism with an attention to the idea of "Latin American" art, hosting exhibitions of Peruvian, Chilean, Uruguayan, and Brazilian artists; its audiences were thus also very interested in seeing the most recent developments of Mexican art. By the 1930s there was a wide-spread sense in the continent that Mexico City and Buenos Aires were the two poles of Spanish-American intellectual life. Important Mexican intellectuals had recently visited or were based in Buenos Aires. For example, philosopher José Vasconcelos, the first theoretician and supporter of the Mexican muralists, who became a ferocious anti-Communist after 1929 – visited the city in 1922 and then in 1933, coinciding with Siqueiros and publicly polemicising with him about Mexican politics. Writer Alfonso Reyes served as the Mexican ambassador to Argentina from 1927 to 1930 and then again from 1936 to 1937, engaging in a dialogue with prominent Argentine conservative intellectuals such as Ricardo Rojas and Leopoldo Lugones, who like him promoted a pan-Latin American alliance of strongmen as an alternative to rampant U.S. political and cultural power in the region (Yankelevich).

Siqueiros's radical political views as an avowed Stalinist were well-known, and he openly clashed with many of those who patronised and attended Amigos del Arte (Indych-López; Fantoni). As Siqueiros himself noted during his visit to Argentina, it was a “contemporary paradox” that upper-class Argentine aristocrats (like those associated with Amigos del Arte) supported leftist artists and intellectuals despite often expounding conservative politics (Siqueiros, “Paradojas contemporáneas” – “Contemporary Paradoxes”). Siqueiros, by contrast, encouraged a radical change in the conditions of production and circulation of art so that it could become an instrument of radical change in society. He also embodied a new kind of artist: someone who did not just produce art but who also wrote in the press, gave talks, and activated audiences against capitalism and the bourgeoisie.

In this essay, I will argue that for Antonio Berni and other Argentine artists, Siqueiros' visit to Argentina was a pivotal episode in the cultural politics of Argentine anti-fascism at a moment in which fascist ideologies were widespread in the country and in Latin America more broadly. His visit provoked harsh reactions from the local fascist press marshalling a series of tropes inspired by Italian fascist and Nazi rhetoric. In response, anti-fascist artists and intellectuals like Berni were compelled to clarify to themselves what sort of art they would (and could) produce in the context of fascism's spread throughout Europe and Latin America.

Berni and Siqueiros' Shows in Buenos Aires

Siqueiros' visit to Buenos Aires from May to December 1933 took place at a knotty juncture in Argentine and international politics. José Félix Uriburu's coup on 6 September 1930 had deposed Hipólito Yrigoyen, the first Argentine president elected through universal male suffrage. While partly inspired by Italian fascism, Uriburu's coup expressed the intertwining of the conservative party, the military, and the Catholic Church, which Federico Finchelstein has argued was the distinctive feature of Argentine *nacionalismo* (nationalism) (68). Uriburu attempted to respond to the economic crisis brought by the 1929 Wall Street crash by using some of the strategies of Mussolini's corporatism. He also derived from the fascist playbook the idea of a paramilitary association (the *Legión Cívica Argentina*, the “Argentine blackshirts”) which appealed to recent emigrants as well as members of the military. Uriburu's regime made violence and abuse an every-day occurrence – Leopoldo “Polo” Lugones (son of the poet and right-wing intellectual of the same name) was named chief of police and implemented for the first time some of the torture practices that the Argentine military would continue to use in its successive military coups throughout the rest of the twentieth century (Rodríguez Molas; Azcona Pastor; Dalmazzo).

Sarfatti (Cannistraro and Sullivan; Urso; Barisioni), who had been tirelessly organising a show of Italian fascist art in Argentina for a couple of years, was in Buenos Aires during Uriburu's coup – the opening of her *Exposición del Novecento Italiano* (*Exhibition of the Italian Novecento*) in Amigos del Arte was actually delayed because of the military insurrection. Italy was the first country to recognise Uriburu's government, and Sarfatti herself attended his inauguration as *de facto* president. In the intentions of its organisers (who had begun planning the show

years before, when a fascist government in Argentina seemed out of the question), Sarfatti's exhibition was supposed to celebrate Italian identity while concealing the fascist commitments of the artists she showed. Yet after Uriburu's coup, such obscuring efforts became irrelevant. Sarfatti noted that after Uriburu's "revolution" (her term and that used by Uriburu's supporters), Argentine audiences spoke only of two things: "the national revolution and the Italian exhibition" (Spain). Indeed, the vast majority of the Argentine press celebrated Sarfatti's show both as an expression of Mussolini's renewed Italy and as a blueprint for Argentine right-wing politics (Moure Cecchini). Thanks to the *Exposición del Novecento Italiano*, Amigos del Arte became an important settings for discussions around fascist aesthetics in Argentina, and therefore it was also the appropriate location for anti-fascist debates such as those sparked by Berni and Siqueiros' exhibitions.

Although he had vowed to be a provisional president and to restore constitutional order, Uriburu annulled the elections of April 1931 for Governor of the Province of Buenos Aires, where his conservative party had been defeated (Halperin Donghi). After Uriburu called elections for the office of president, conservative candidate General Agustín P. Justo won in November 1931 through intimidation of the opposition parties and electoral fraud. Justo had supported Uriburu's coup even though he disagreed with some of Uriburu's politics. In particular, Justo believed that a conservative regime must rely on consensus and mass-support and balance the support of the nationalists with that of other conservative sectors of the population who were alarmed by some of Uriburu's most radical policies. Like other interwar leaders, Justo adopted a policy of heavy public investment in infrastructure to face mounting levels of unemployment. He allowed the existence of opposition parties, although rigged elections – "the patriotic fraud", as his party called them – continued. Justo's regime began the *década infame* (infamous decade) that ended with the 1943 coup d'état – a decade marked by corruption, persecution of political opposition, and widespread poverty.

As noted, Amigos del Arte had been the setting of Sarfatti's presentation of Italian fascist aesthetics. It was also the location for one of the first exhibitions critiquing (albeit indirectly) Argentine fascism – yet one that clearly showed the limits of using easel painting in a private art gallery for anti-fascist aesthetic interventions targeting concrete political actors. In June 1932, Antonio Berni – an artist from Rosario who had lived several years between Madrid and Paris, befriending Louis Aragon and the Surrealists – exhibited 18 surrealist works made between 1928 and 1932. As he explained years later, when he returned to Argentina in the aftermath of Uriburu's coup, Berni felt compelled to address "the terrible reality" of "the dictatorship, unemployment, misery, strikes, open struggles, hunger, popular pots" (Viñals 56). Berni adopted a combative attitude towards Argentine politics, the *década infame*, and its connections with European fascism, the rise of which he had followed when living in France.

One of the works known to have been on view in Amigos del Arte, *Susanna and the Old Man* (1931), exemplifies Berni's practice on the edge between Parisian Surrealism and a commentary on Argentine reality (Constantini and Wechsler) (Figure 7.1). The work includes found photographs of Greta Garbo and of an



Figure 7.1 Antonio Berni, *Susana y el viejo* (*Susanna and the Old Man*), 1931, oil and collage on canvas, 72 × 116.5 cm, Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires, Ciudad de Buenos Aires. Photo credits: Oscar Baldacci.

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unknown man, which Berni has altered by painting hair on the former and a moustache on the latter. Although Susanna's body is turned towards the viewers, her head (the collaged element, off scale with the rest of the figure) is not, and her gaze is distant and lost. The jarring yellow of her hair contrasts with the careful rendering of her body. In the background, behind a semi-open door, a man looms. His military moustache is reminiscent of Urriburu's facial hair and his baldness of Agustín B. Justo. As in other surrealist works, in *Susanna and the Old Man* Berni creates a sense of impending danger by depicting seemingly accidental encounters between images and figures who belong to different realms. The disconcerting space and incongruity of the collaged elements prevent any straightforward reading of the meaning of the composition. Does it depict, as its title claims, a biblical episode, and is it a tribute to masters such as Tintoretto, Rubens, or Rembrandt? Or is it inspired by the squalid brothels of Rosario that Berni photographed with his friend Roberto Puiggrós, denouncing the conditions of prostitutes and the hypocrisy of Rosario's bourgeois men who frequented them? Whatever the case, these collages provoked a feeling of alienation in the viewers, who approached these deceitfully realistic paintings and were stunned by their inability to make sense of them (Artundo; Amigo).

We know, from one of the rare reviews of Berni's *Amigos del Arte* show that works 4, 12, and 13 (described in the catalogue as a "Realist Subjective Composition", the former, and as "Nightmares", the latter) were not exhibited. According to this review, written by prominent Argentine art critic José León Pagano, purely aesthetic concerns guided *Amigos del Arte* recommendation to not leave them on view (Pagano). The scholarship since, however, has suggested

that it was their political content and potentially incendiary critique of Agustín B. Justo's government that determined their censorship (Llinás 20). If any of Berni's 1932 collages were explicit critiques of Argentine political reality, they have been lost. *Susanna and the Old Man*, which in later years Berni himself interpreted as an indictment of Argentine fascism, was on view – which suggests that its political critique was not considered as offensive enough to justify an act of censorship (Berni. *El surrealismo 1928–32*). Years later, Berni described this show as “too premature...those who understood it were, at most, ten people, and those who accepted it, five. My work was...like a meteorite that arrived by surprise” (qtd in F. García 51). As an intervention in Argentina's social reality, Berni's surrealist show failed; its provocations fell on deaf ears, and the audiences of Amigos del Arte might have been too stunned by the formal features of his work to actually pay attention to their political content. A different kind of aesthetic proposal was needed if art was to be used as a political tool. Siqueiros' visit to Argentina six months later would represent such alternative.

Siqueiros' trip in the River Plate region began with an exhibition in Montevideo, where he was invited by the Uruguayan Communist Party. He arrived in Montevideo in February 1933, only a couple of weeks before the military coup of Gabriel Terra (31 March 1933) – which abolished the constitution – implemented press censorship and concentrated all powers in the presidency. Although he mostly aligned with Latin American threads of conservatism and authoritarianism, Terra was also encouraged by the spread of European fascism. For example, he called for a “March on Montevideo” inspired by Mussolini's March on Rome (Carusi). He thus alarmed a militant anti-fascist such as Siqueiros, who was already preoccupied by Hitler's recent landslide electoral victory. In Montevideo's Círculo de Bellas Artes (Fine Arts Circle), the Mexican muralist gave three lectures which, like the other talks that he had recently given in Mexico and in the United States, condemned easel painting and defended mural painting as spearheading an era of politically committed art at the service of progressive politics. Although Siqueiros encouraged Uruguayan artists to take possession of public walls and to produce a politically committed mural art, the circumstances there were not ripe for this takeover because the state – unlike Mexico at the time – was not willing to tolerate revolutionary messages on its public spaces. Like-minded Uruguayan artists, however, founded the Confederación de Trabajadores Intelectuales del Uruguay (CTIU, Confederation of Intellectual Workers of Uruguay), which published journals and organised exhibitions and conferences, protesting Terra's para-fascist dictatorship.

Siqueiros arrived in Buenos Aires in May 1933. His friend, sculptor Luis Falcini – who was, like him, a communist and anti-fascist – helped organise his visit. Amigos del Arte had an ambiguous relationship with artistic and political dissidence. While on the one hand the association was ecumenic in the exhibitions it sponsored, it received on the other public funding from the state, and most of its members belonged to the Argentine upper classes (“Amigos del Arte realiza una feliz iniciativa” – “Amigos del Arte Undertakes a Commendable Initiative”). Such ambiguity was also shared by Siqueiros, who condemned his hosts' political and economic positions while aspiring to expand his market in Argentina. “I am

working with a lot of restraint”, he wrote to his partner, Communist poet Blanca Luz Brum, “to obtain a positive moral and material success” (Peluffo Linari 212) – although any caution was thrown to the winds in the heated political debate that his visit provoked, as I will show below.

Siqueiros’ show opened on 1 June 1933 (almost an exact year after Berni’s own at the same venue) and remained open for a month. The exhibition included fourteen easel paintings, several lithographs, and photographs of some of his massive recent works *Accidente en la mina* (*Accident in the Mine*), *Madre proletaria* (*Proletarian Mother*), and *Madre campesina* (*Peasant Mother*), in the catalogue titled *Los deportados* (*The Deported*; see Oles 196). Although Siqueiros chose to exhibit what he himself deemed to be “bourgeois” easel paintings such as portraits and a landscape (unlike what Berni had recently done in his own show), other works on view were explicitly political: a portrait of Mexican Revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata or *Víctima proletaria* (*Proletarian Victim*, 1933, Museum of Modern Art, New York), a claustrophobic but monumental painting depicting a kneeling Chinese woman stripped nude and shot in the head, which addressed recent political violence in Manchuria. Such choice of works was representative of both Siqueiros aesthetic and political allegiances. They reveal the impact of ideological and economic oppression over the bodies of the most vulnerable members of society by depicting them in compressed spaces with the monumental dimensions that had for centuries been denied to them. They also employ modern materials such as pyroxylin or enamel painting over unconventional supports such as burlap – a coarse, textured, industrial material which ties Siqueiros practice to the labour of agricultural workers and which Berni would later also use in his most famous 1930s political paintings, such as *Manifestación* (*Demonstration*, 1934, Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires), on which more will be said below, or *Desocupados* (*Unemployed*, 1934, private collection). However, the works Siqueiros exhibited in Amigos del Arte were easel paintings and circulated in the private art market; they could not achieve, according to the Mexican muralist’s most recent thinking, any effective political change. Only veritably public art, in his view, could do so.

Siqueiros’ Lectures at Amigos del Arte

In addition to his exhibition, Siqueiros was scheduled to give three lectures at Amigos del Arte. The first one, on “The Mexican Renaissance”, took place the day the show opened, and as he reported, it was

an enormous success with more than a thousand attendees ... My painting is black and rude compared to the “chic” formality of the “porteños” [Buenos Aires residents] ... The comments are exalted of affirmation, or horror. At the conference I spoke an hour exactly in the middle of intense attention.

(qtd. in Peluffo Linari 212)

In his second conference titled “The monumental modern painting”, Siqueiros encouraged Argentine artists to take over public walls and engage in a politically

committed form of art, as he had recently done in Montevideo (“El pintor Siqueiros: el debate de la pintura mural es el tema del día en el ambiente artístico” – “Painter Siqueiros: the Mural Painting Debate Is the Topic of the Day in the Art Scene”).

He reiterated this message in his article “A Call to Argentine Visual Artists” (Siqueiros, “Un llamamiento”). Here, Siqueiros called for a River Plate-wide – or even a South American-wide – movement of “open-air monumental visual art... for the great masses of the people”. Encouraging art to get “out of the aristocratic sacristies, where it has been rotting for four centuries”, Siqueiros envisioned an art that would be in the spaces attended by most people: on the sides of skyscrapers, in working-class neighbourhoods, and in public squares, theatres, and sports facilities. With a rhetoric that echoed the one marshalled before World War I by the Italian Futurists (a rhetoric well-known to Argentine audiences, as Harper Montgomery has shown), Siqueiros described museums as cemeteries and encouraged artists to move beyond the private art market and towards a more integrated relationship between architecture and visual arts. Such art addressed to a collective viewership must be produced by a collective group of artists, by *teams* (Siqueiros’ term, in English), in which art training would also take place, along the model of medieval guilds. Inspired by the Italian Renaissance, Siqueiros believed art should be triggered both by daily events and by what he called “social convictions” and produced by artists organised in corporations. It is worth noting that (although proof of any reciprocal knowledge of these experiences is scant) at exactly this same moment in fascist Italy artists like Mario Sironi, Massimo Campigli, Achille Funi and Carlo Carrà were calling for a very similar politicisation of painting through mural art and encouraging artists to transcend their “egocentrism” in order to become “militant” and “subordinate to collective enterprise” (Sironi 10–11). From different ideological perspectives, then, calls for artists to engage in public art were widespread in the Thirties, and in Latin America continued as well throughout the next decades in the context of Cold War politics (Giunta; Craven).

Not every Argentine artist responded well to Siqueiros’ suggestions. Painter Mario Canale, for example, organised the *Corporación de Artistas Plásticos* (Association of Visual Artists), one of the first professional organisations of Argentine artists which included prominent modernist painters solely working for the private art market such as Emilio Pettoruti and Ramón Gómez Cornet, polemicalised with Siqueiros. Canale found that Siqueiros encouraged a form of visual production that was a “provocation... a cry of war and destruction” while, in his view, authentic art should “elevate the people, rather than lower itself to the people” (Canale). Other artists pointed out that Siqueiros’ suggestions were not applicable to the Argentine context – a critique that Berni would reiterate too in later years, as I will show below. As Cipriano Acosta observed, “We have problems, but they are different, very different from yours, from the ones of your people. Here we do not have great joys but neither do we have great pain. Here there is no imperialism or slavery” (Acosta).

Politically committed art already existed in Argentina – including art by the leftist *Artistas del Pueblo* and members of the *Escuela de la Boca* – yet Siqueiros’ inflammatory declarations and openly Stalinist positions alarmed the conservative

and nationalistic press, especially the Catholic nationalist newspaper *Crisol* (Crucible) and *Bandera Argentina: periódico nacionalista* (*The Argentine Flag: Nationalist Periodical*), directed by Juan Carulla, head of the paramilitary group Legión Cívica Argentina launched in 1930 by Uriburu as the Argentine equivalent of Mussolini's blackshirts. While Berni's surrealist paintings did not shock conservatives despite attempting to intervene in local politics, Siqueiros' works and provocative public lectures did achieve this aim, forcing them to confront the role of art in political struggles.

Crisol's initial coverage of Siqueiros' visit (before he gave his first presentation at Amigos del Arte) was neutral, if not positive. Reporting in the same article on the importance of avant-garde painting (Cubism, Expressionism, and Futurism), the anonymous journalist described him as a "great Mexican painter" and conveyed U.S. journalist Anita Brenner's assessment of him as someone "who put his painting ability at the service of the builders of the new order, with the same earnestness with which he had offered his ability as a soldier for the destruction of the old order" ("David Alfaro Siqueiros"). *Crítica* (*Critique*), a leftist newspaper (discussed further below), had described Siqueiros as a "Trojan Horse" infiltrating Amigos del Arte, and *Crisol's* initial positive reaction proves indeed that this strategy initially succeeded, at least until Siqueiros' more inflammatory statements became public ("David A. Siqueiros es un caballo troyano" – "David A. Siqueiros is a Trojan Horse"). Although I have not been able to identify what exactly provoked *Crisol's* changed attitude against Siqueiros, the newspaper conducted a virulent campaign against the Mexican muralist only three weeks later.

The first sustained right-wing critique of Siqueiros, however, appeared not in *Crisol* but in *Bandera Argentina*: on June 10, two days after Siqueiros' second conference, the newspaper published in its cover an indictment of Siqueiros "aesthetic and ideology" ("El pintor Siqueiros: su estética" – "The Painter Siqueiros: His Aesthetics"). As it covered his visit in increasingly frantic tones, *Bandera Argentina* also gave space to the memoirs of "Polo" Lugones, Uriburu's chief of police, who had become infamous for his indiscriminate use of torture against political opponents. Additionally, the newspaper regularly featured a column with press releases from Roma Press, a news service provided by the Italian embassy and Mussolini's Ministry of Popular Culture (Aliano 70).

Bandera Argentina's coverage of Siqueiros began with a criticism of his art, describing it as "repulsive...deformed...beastly" and utilising a series of tropes that at the time were being marshalled against avant-garde aesthetics in both Germany and (to a lesser extent, for example in Roberto Farinacci's circle) also in Italy – four years before the infamous *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) exhibition in Munich. It might be worth pointing out, though, that exhibitions against "Degenerate Art" were already underway in Germany way before 1937; in April 1933, for example, artist Hans Adolf Bühler organised the first of these exhibitions at the Kunsthalle Karlsruhe (Zuchlag). Although we do not know whether echoes of this campaign had already arrived at such an early date to Argentina, *Bandera Argentina* was openly pro-Nazi and received support from the German embassy in

Buenos Aires (Ben-Dror 219), which might explain some of the language it marshalled against Siqueiros.

But *Bandera Argentina* also found fault in Siqueiros' defence of the Mexican Revolution and the post-Revolutionary Mexican state, which the newspaper considered nothing more than an "assassin of Christians and persecutor of the Catholic Church". Evoking instead José Vasconcelos – who as mentioned was in Buenos Aires at the time and after supporting the left-wing Mexican Muralists had become a ferocious anti-Communist and Nazi sympathiser – *Bandera Argentina* questioned Siqueiros' politics. It also criticised Amigos del Arte, "an association of rich bourgeois subsidised by the Argentine state" ("El pintor Siqueiros: su estética"). In the following day, the newspaper concluded that Siqueiros "is not an artist, he is a communist", and his art has no value because "he serves the destructors of Christian civilization, the Russian soviet, and he is an accomplice of the Soviet aberrations that want to destroy all the arts...and replace the spirit with matter, and the noble brush with the airbrush", a reference to Siqueiros' innovative artistic techniques (Tarruella, "Los monigotes" – "The Puppets"). These reviews indicate that for newspapers like *Bandera Argentina*, Siqueiros' politics overwhelmed the response to his art; no comments were made on his actual artistic practice or paintings, but rather his political beliefs trumped any interest in his work as an artist.

Siqueiros and the (Enem)igos del Arte (Enemies of Art)

Under attack for its sponsorship of a radical artist with such a contentious message, Amigos del Arte decided to suspend Siqueiros' scheduled third conference. "The enemies of art have prohibited the third conference of Professor Siqueiros", wrote newspaper *Crítica*, accusing Amigos del Arte of censorship ("Los enemigos del arte han prohibido la tercera conferencia del profesor Siqueiros" – "The Enemies of Art Have Banned Professor Siqueiros's Third Lecture").

Founded by Uruguayan entrepreneur Natalio Botana, *Crítica* was the first Argentine newspaper truly addressed to a massive, multi-class audience. Its motto, derived from Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, was "God put me on your city as a horsefly on a noble horse, to keep it awake". Sensationalist and visually appealing, *Crítica* harshly criticised the government of Yrigoyen and initially supported Urriburu's coup. Yet Botana expected that the coup would give way to democratic elections; when these did not happen, and Urriburu altered the constitution and annulled elections instead, Botana became a critic of his regime as well – so much so that in 1931, *Crítica* was shut down and Botana and his family were incarcerated and sent into exile. In 1932, *Crítica* was allowed to open again and became once more a successful enterprise under new president Agustín P. Justo. Botana, who in the meantime had returned to Argentina from exile, hired prominent intellectuals to write in his newspaper, including artist Emilio Pettoruti and writers Roberto Arlt and Jorge Luis Borges, who directed the weekend supplement with which Siqueiros would be invited to collaborate a few weeks later.

Crítica's journalists concluded that any attempt at censorship of Siqueiros on the part of Amigos del Arte was hopeless, as the Argentine artists and art patrons

who defended *l'art pour l'art* were going to be “forced to learn that painting must have a crucial social role...and cannot avoid the influence of the social milieu in which it is produced and the class that drives it” (“Los enemigos del arte han prohibido la tercera conferencia del profesor Siqueiros”) The article rightly points out that, thanks to the *succès de scandale* of Siqueiros’ previous two conferences at Amigos del Arte, his third would probably attract a great audience. Siqueiros’ final conference indeed took place, but not in Amigos del Arte. The art gallery and association *Signo* (Sign), directed by painter, engraver, and art organiser Leonardo Estarico, hosted this event. “The vanquished fascists”, wrote *Crítica* on June 23, “applauded the Trotskyist delegate” (“Los reaccionarios” – “The Reactionaries”).

Crisol, returning to cover Siqueiros’ visit after some weeks of silence, published a virulently racist and classist article in which it offered an alternative account of the evening. Among the audience, journalist (and, years later, prominent conservative politician) Emilio J. Hardoy wrote, were “many Russian Jews, impossible to ignore because of their nose, their look, and their smell”, while Siqueiros’ unruly hair belied “his African origin” – perpetuating a series of tropes (like those marshalled by *Crisol*) reminiscent of those deployed in coeval German racist art criticism by Alfred Rosenberg and Paul Shultze-Naumburg. Siqueiros gave inflammatory (from the standpoint of *Crisol*) proclamations such as “art is not beauty but a mere commodity” and “liberation will come through Communism and the marvellous Russian example”. Hardoy concluded, “All of those who were cleanly and correctly dressed felt uncomfortable”. Five days later, *Crisol* added:

This Communist can no longer remain among us. He is a red propagandist disguised as an artist. And also, a true madman, a dangerous subject due to his almost paranoid exaltation when the red theme is brought up, which is at every opportunity. Put in a Soviet “trance”, Siqueiros – who is still a brute with a brute strength – runs over everything.

(“Siqueiros o El Bruto” – “Siqueiros or The Brute”)

Siqueiros, however, remained in Buenos Aires for several more months. *Crítica* gave him a platform, including the commission of an illustration for its weekend supplement, and articles on his childhood experiences and his time fighting during the Mexican Revolution. The illustration, titled *Against the tide*, might be a not-so-subtle reference to Siqueiros’ difficulties in Mexico, the United States, and Argentina, as well as a proud affirmation of his artistic and political stances, no matter how unpopular (Figure 7.2). Anti-fascism, it seems to say, is not an easy task in the Thirties.

From *Crítica*’s pages, Siqueiros harshly criticised contributions to the 1933 Argentine National Salon. He condemned their blandness, lack of political commitment, and “typically colonial” stance. These artworks were, for Siqueiros, a paramount expression of bourgeois art – “the mirror of capitalist decadence”, as he wrote. He described the art that Argentine elites collected as “enthralled by European passé concepts that are received, passively, as one receives canned food” and “submissive to the slogans of the International Visual Exchange, based in the

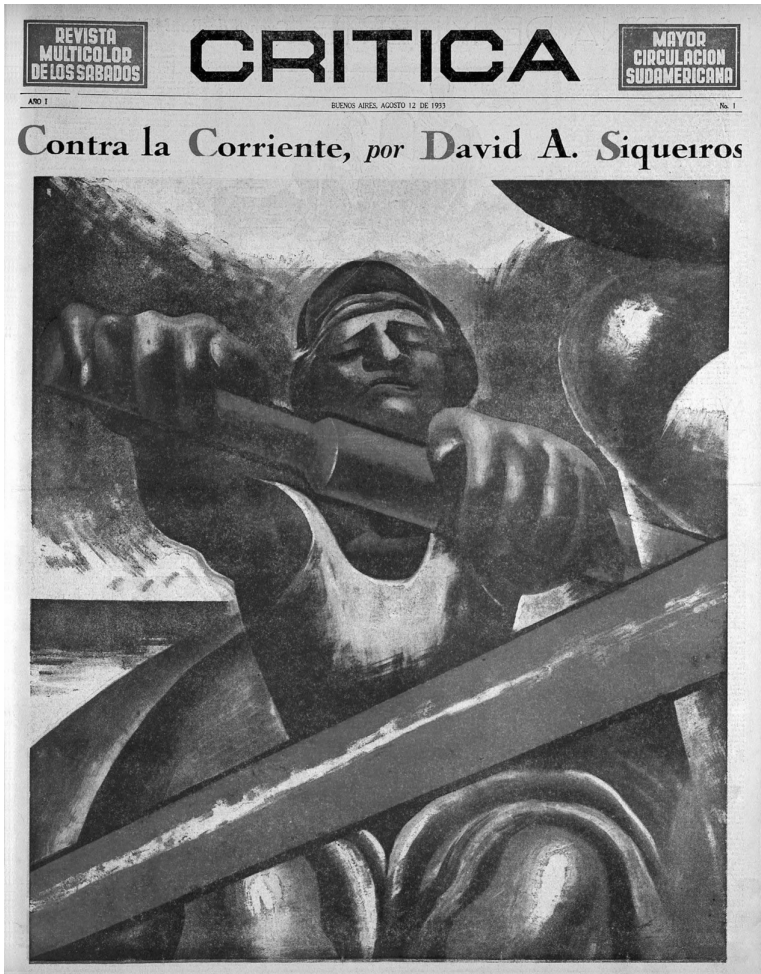


Figure 7.2 Illustration by David Alfaro Siqueiros, “Contra la corriente” (“Against the Current”) *Crítica. Revista multicolor de los sábados*, vol. 1, no. 1, Aug. 12, 1933, cover.

Paris of the gallery owners, enriched with the money of the new international bourgeoisie that emerged from the [First World] war” (Siqueiros, “El Salón”).

Although many Argentine artists balked at his criticisms, Siqueiros’ visit provoked a sustained reflection on the autonomy and social duty of art practice, especially in the pages of the magazine *Contra. La revista de los francotiradores* (*Against: The Snipers’ Magazine*), run by poet Raúl González Tuñón according to the directives of the Argentine Communist Party (Sarlo 144–45; Dolinko 103–21). *Contra* reveals the intertwinement of discussions on Siqueiros’ visit with those on the global ascent of fascism in the Argentine context. For instance, it published

several instalments of an anonymous investigation on “What has not been said yet on Mussolini and the *fascio*” which gave much importance to the figure of Sarfatti and her influence on Mussolini’s political thought (Galli and Martínez de Arroyo). *Contra* also published the translation of Berni’s friend Louis Aragon’s incendiary poem *Front Rouge* (1931), which encouraged the proletariat to attack the police and other para-fascist institutions, the publication of which had marked Aragon’s rupture with Breton and the Surrealists. Politically, then, it was the venue best aligned to Berni and Siqueiros’ political beliefs.

In its brief life (the magazine appeared solely between April and September 1933 before being abruptly closed by the police, who also arrested González Tuñón) *Contra* stimulated a lively debate about the relation between aesthetic and political avant-gardes. The July issue of *Contra* devoted many articles to Siqueiros, who also illustrated its cover. Siqueiros himself published here a short piece titled “Plástica Dialéctico-Subversiva” (“Dialectical-Subversive Visual Art”), the final section of a talk he had recently given at the John Reed Club in Los Angeles. In this text (which reveals the Pan-American horizon of Siqueiros thought about political art, embracing the United States, Mexico, Argentina, and Uruguay), he called for a renewal of art, concurrently with its new task as a co-participant in the proletarian fight against capitalism. From a formal point of view, Siqueiros wrote, this new art “will not be academic or modernist, it will be dialectical and subversive, that is, logically materialist, objective and dynamic. It will resemble the technique of a good Marxist lecturer or an eloquent revolutionary proletarian orator” – just like the orator represented on the cover of this issue of *Contra*, which is rousing and inspiring the until-then disempowered indigenous woman and black man attentively listening to him. The aim, Siqueiros added, was to produce a visual art that “definitely captures ideologically the great masses ... providing a public service” (“Plástica Dialéctico-Subversiva”).

Siqueiros’ text was accompanied by a drawing of an air compressor with the following caption: “Just like in the new society the tractor displaces the plough, in the monumental visual arts the airbrush displaces the traditional brush of wood and bristles. To new elements: new techniques, new visual art” (Siqueiros, “Plástica Dialéctico-Subversiva”). Interestingly, there was no picture of Siqueiros illustrating the article but rather one of Diego Rivera – who, at the time, was in the midst of his polemic with David Rockefeller around his ill-fated commission in New York City – and a photograph of two workers dangerously walking on the scaffoldings of a NYC skyscraper (the Empire State Building can be seen in the background) with the caption “Like the worker, the artists must get out in the streets” (Figure 7.3). Yet in none of the Argentine magazines that I have reviewed were there reproductions of Siqueiros’ mural work; at most, as in this issue of *Contra*, there were articles describing them – and describing him as the “[Sergei] Eisenstein of painting” – but no visual references for the benefit of the Argentine public, which therefore needed to imagine them from the textual descriptions (Stern).

Contra prided itself on giving voice, as its masthead read, “to all the schools, all the tendencies, all the opinions”, so it also hosted views opposite to Siqueiros’. Argentine art critic Julio Payró was one of these voices who questioned the

4

CONTRA

Plástica Dialéctico - Subversiva

por David Alfaro Siqueiros



Como el obrero, el artista debe salir a la calle...

FORMA PLÁSTICA

La marcha diaria por el camino de su objetivo final, el paso por el período de desigualdad para la estética revolucionaria, le dará a la plástica de agitación y propaganda, el estilo dialéctico subversivo que necesita, el estilo correspondiente, su propio lenguaje, su propia metodología. **SIL PROPIA FORMA**, es decir, la forma de la plástica de la época de

lucha proletaria final contra el estado capitalista, forma que nada tendrá de común con las formas secas del pasado, ni con las formas "nobles" y estéticas del presente. Esta forma no será ni académica ni modernista; será dialéctica y subversiva, es decir, lógicamente materialista, objetiva y dinámica. Se parecerá en esencia la técnica que tiene que aplicar un buen constructor marxista o un eficiente conductor proletario revolucionario. La forma será el producto de las necesidades de

una clara expresión y de una poderosa psicología revolucionaria.

IMPULSO CREADOR

La convicción, esa fuerza ideológica generatriz del arte dentro de las sociedades divididas en clases, es por ahora motor de acción impositiva solamente para el joven proletariado revolucionario. La burguesía decreta y está en plena descomposición ideológica. Su convicción es flama sin fango. La vez casada de su moral escrupuloso se enciende ya en todo el mundo y en todos los sectores de la vida. Por eso mismo, los pintores adictos a la lucha del proletariado, tienen exclusivamente la palabra. Solamente ellos pueden producir arte emocional y trascendentalmente representativo de la época actual. Solamente ellos pueden crear la estética del fin de la vieja sociedad burguesa y del principio de la nueva sociedad comunista. Los otros, los adictos a la ideología burguesa, padecen la misma terrible degeneración. Su obra es el espejo de la decadencia capitalista.

PRODUCCION PRESENTE Y FUTURA

HOY...

Plástica subversiva de desigualdad durante el período actual y de acción definitiva al poder por parte del proletariado. Plástica de propósitos materiales revolucionarios, de rápida ejecución, es decir, de ejecución sencilla por la mayor capacidad circulatoria; es decir, de máxima amplitud multidimensional; plástica de máxima psicología subversiva. Utilización de todas las oportunidades posibles de plástica momentánea descubierta, para la liberación de los cuadros que anticipan la técnica personal del tiempo próximo.

MAÑANA...

Plástica de afirmación y edificación socialista para el período transitorio de decadencia proletaria. Plástica de combate definitivo, liquidador de los residuos del poder capitalista.

Plástica de captación ideológica definitiva de las grandes masas. Plástica de afirmación doctrinaria. Plástica monumental de máximo servicio público, es decir, plástica extraordinariamente socio-dialéctica. Plástica multiplicador de vastas perspectivas técnicas con los recursos arcaicos a la especialización burguesa.

DESPUÉS...

Plástica de la sociedad comunista ya edificada. Plástica integralmente humana, libre ya por completo de la opresión de las clases dominantes y de toda perturbación política. Plástica realmente pura por primera vez en la historia del mundo. Es decir, plástica bella de por sí, opera por completo a toda fuerza estética; descriptiva, imitativa, decorativa. Plástica de valor absoluto, intrínsecamente bello, sin nada de manía filosófica o literaria. Plástica generadora por el solo alcebo inmenso de las texturas y de las formas y de los volúmenes y de los colores y de los ritmos de ésta entre sí, por las texturas mismas y por las formas mismas, y por los volúmenes mismos y por la coordinación de todos estos elementos entre sí, sin contar historias, sin pronunciar discursos, sin hablar de moral, etc., etc. Veritablemente plástica de la arquitectura, recordadora de la anatomía de ésta. Plástica PLÁSTICA para el servicio del más fino sentimiento estético de los hombres. La realización de un alto sentido de belleza que los mejores seres de todos los tiempos antalaran para la humanidad entera y por lo cual lucharon antaño, sin saber que un fruto tal solamente podía florecer en una sociedad política, es decir, en una sociedad sin lucha de clases, esto es, en una sociedad comunista integral. Sin saber tampoco que ese fruto no podía ser realidad sino mediante el sacrificio de millones de proletarios y sin la muerte total de la sociedad capitalista explotadora de los hombres y opresora de la belleza.

DAVID ALFARO SIQUEIROS.

Figure 7.3 David Alfaro Siqueiros, "Plástica Dialéctico-Subversiva", *Contra: la revista de los francotiradores*, vol. 1, no. 3, July 1933, p. 4.

"Indian Savonarola who fulminates the 'bibelot' and easel painting". Payró did not question the importance of a socially-engaged art – he compared Siqueiros with expressionist Belgian graphic artist Frans Masereel, whose critical woodcuts were repeatedly published in *Contra*, and Payró's own article was illustrated by a woodcut by Víctor Rebuffo, an Italian-Argentine artist working in the tradition of the *Artistas del Pueblo*. But Payró disagreed with the weight that Siqueiros gave to politics at the expense of art. Payró observed that Siqueiros "aims to ignore that his painting has transcendence for humanity – and will have it beyond our contemporary moment – not because of the themes it addresses but...because of the form with which his individual passion as an artist manifest". The value of Siqueiros art, in brief, lives in his quality as an artist; Payró deemed that sometimes art can be animated by the "correct" ideology but still fail as an artwork because of its low artistic quality, and he observed too that we still appreciate the art of the past for its formal qualities, even if we have forgotten the ideology it expressed. He thus concluded by celebrating both easel and mural painting and encouraging the flourishing of the latter in Buenos Aires, but added,

I think that social painting is not the only thing that can be offered to the people, not even the only thing that the people want, and I declare my most intransigent opposition to all dogmatism, sociological or otherwise, in art matters.

(Payró)

Payró's position was incompatible with Siqueiros', but it reveals how the latter's inflammatory statements sparked and shaped Argentine debates on political art.

The same issue of *Contra* started a survey around the issue “Must art be at the service of the social problem?” and revealed the catalysing effect of Siqueiros’ visit among the Argentine leftist intelligentsia. While intellectuals like writer Jorge Luis Borges defended a separation between aesthetics and politics, *Contra*’s director, poet and journalist Raúl González Tuñón, sided with Siqueiros in his call for an art that is “an element of maximum public service and collective good, useful for the culture of the great popular masses” and condemned Argentine artists that were “mere imitators of the Italians and the French, completely passatists and reactionaries towards social reality” (González Tuñón). However, González Tuñón was sceptical about Argentine artists following Siqueiros’ indications. He feared that these artists were too comfortable in their relations with a private art market and with their academic positions and would not want to risk alienating them. *Contra* thus mocked the Argentine artists who criticised Siqueiros and who were supported by Amigos del Arte with a comical ditty:

They say [Horacio] Butler and [Juan] del Prete
and [Héctor] Basaldúa and other cunning artists
They were telling lies,
that is to say, talking in vain.
The virile mural painting
Of Siqueiros has scared them.
The bourgeoisie is not bad ...
because it always pays in cash.
And they do not have to go anywhere
to paint even the smallest wall.
To them art, only art ...
the art of getting rich (“Enemigos del Arte”).

This comical ditty was accompanied by a caricature symbolising Amigos del Arte and the Argentine art world in general: a small monkey looking through a telescope towards a distant land, simply labelled as “Europe” (Figure 7.4). Not only is the latter out of reach, the artist seems to imply, but even desiring it turns one into a mere imitator – an accusation of primitivism that had weighed for centuries over Latin American cultural production.

Before being abruptly closed by the police after only five issues, *Contra* published three manifestoes written by intellectual and visual artists in response to Siqueiros’ “Call to Argentine Visual Artists”. One, addressed to art students, called for the reformation of the entire system of artistic education, encouraging the production of political and public art (“Manifiesto. A los estudiantes de artes plásticas”). Another, written by a group of revolutionary Chilean writers, denounced the persecution of workers and communists in that country (“Manifiesto de los escritores revolucionarios chilenos”) and revealed the transcontinental role of leftist journals such as *Contra*, which informed readers throughout the Americas of the most recent political and cultural developments on both sides of the Atlantic. The final manifesto, written by the Union of Revolutionary Writers

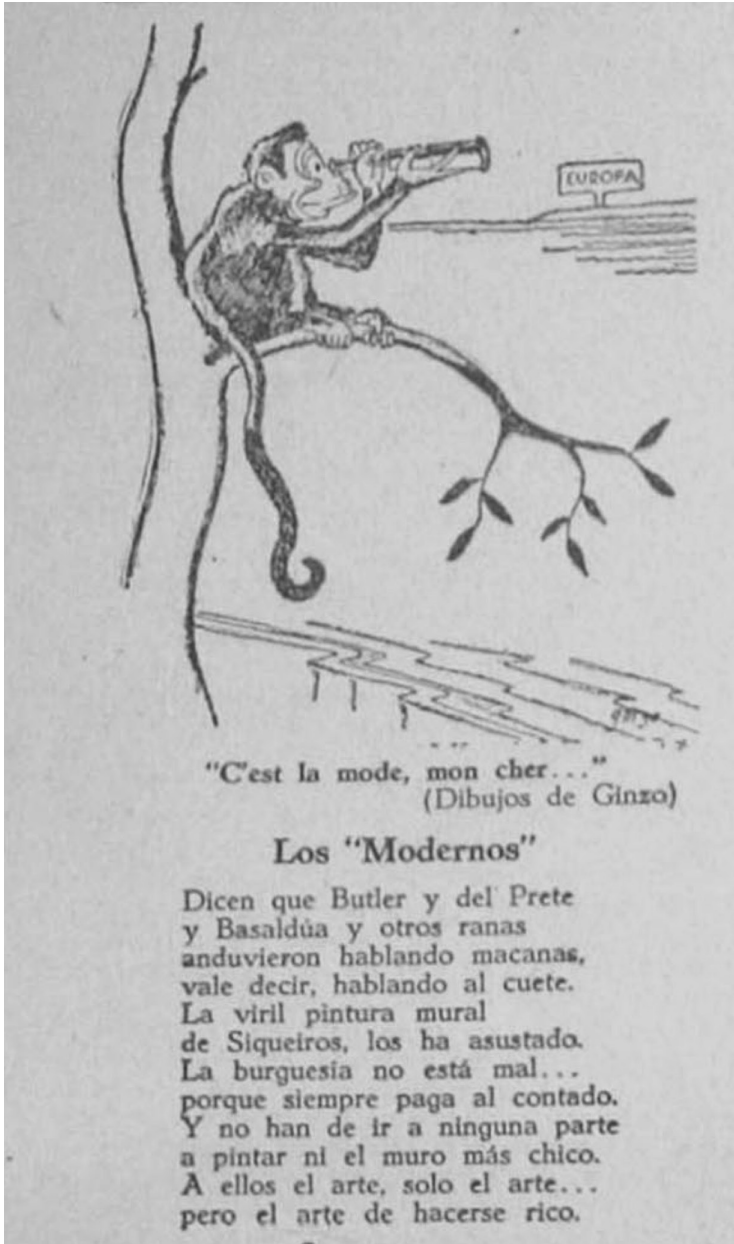


Figure 7.4 Illustration by Guizo, "Los enemigos del arte", *Contra: La revista de los francotiradores*, vol. 1, no. 3, July 1933, p. 6.

and Artists (“Manifiesto de la Unión de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios”), published in the last issue of *Contra*, called for the “creation of a militant art and literature that contribute to education for the revolution the workers, intellectuals, students, and artists in general, waking in them the generous passion to fight for the revolution”. Along the lines of Siqueiros’ call, this group of artists based in Rosario (which we can presume included Berni, as many ideas of this manifesto he reiterated almost *verbatim* in his own texts in the following years) encouraged the production of “a truly revolutionary and truly proletarian art”, and the organisation of like-minded artists in a union (“Manifiesto de la Unión de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios”). Therefore, Siqueiros’ presence in the region and the debates he provoked compelled South American artists to organise themselves in collectives and to rethink their position as cultural actors vis-à-vis local fascist politics.

Berni, Siqueiros, and Mural Painting

Among the rare artists that Siqueiros praised while he was in Argentina was Lino Enea Spilimbergo (his exact contemporary, as both were born in 1896), whom he hailed as “the greatest Argentine painter of all times” (Siqueiros, “Un acontecimiento” – “A Happening”). Spilimbergo had won the first prize as the 1933 National Salon (an event that Siqueiros had openly critiqued, as mentioned before) with his only contribution, *Still Life*, described in the press as having “a plaster figure and a pot with a plant...a very simple composition...with the mysterious beauty of Metaphysics and the tactile feeling of painting...he makes the inert live” (“Hoy por la mañana” – “Today in the Morning”). As an artist who had spent a significant amount of time in Italy, Spilimbergo was working in a Dechirichean language at the time, something that *La Nación*’s journalist picked up by using the word “metaphysics” in their description. It is somewhat of a mystery why Siqueiros singled out Spilimbergo’s work. The latter, despite its aesthetic quality, was precisely the kind of bourgeois, intimist easel painting that the Mexican muralist decried and exemplified the longing for Europe that *Contra* had panned in the cartoon illustrated above. Argentina already had a highly active political art scene, as mentioned, whose art shared some of Siqueiros’ commitments. Still, Siqueiros admired Spilimbergo’s formal experiments and his knowledge of the Italian classical tradition – an unavoidable source for a muralist painter – so it is not surprising that when the opportunity came, he decided to collaborate with him.

Although he admired Spilimbergo’s metaphysical painting, Siqueiros engaged in a very different kind of art while he was in Argentina. In order to illustrate the kind of aesthetic and political practice that he promoted, Siqueiros made a mural titled *Ejercicio plástico* (*Plastic Exercise*) in the basement of the weekend home of Botana, *Crítica*’s director. As was typical of him when practicing muralism, he worked together with Spilimbergo, Berni, and Juan Carlos Castagnino – all Argentine painters – and Enrique Lázaro, a Uruguayan set designer (Schávelzon; Wechsler, “Ejercicio plástico”). They all shared leftist ideas and an artistic commitment both to the international avant-garde and to the specific geographic

problems of their country. They called themselves the *Equipo Poligráfico Ejecutor* (Polygraphic Executive Team) and worked side by side for three months.

The space in which the mural was painted was extremely challenging: a windowless room in the shape of a tunnel, very humid and dark (Figure 7.5). The artists responded to the unusual shape and lightless conditions by utilising artificial illumination. Their mural was extremely innovative in terms of size (200 square metres, including ceiling, floor, and walls) and technique (fresco retouched with silica and use of airbrush instead of traditional brushes). The curved walls required formal innovation; the figures distorted by the curvature were traced thanks to the use of stencils and projected photographs on the walls (Jolly, “Aesthetics of Conflict”).

The aim, as the artists themselves explained in a manifesto, was to produce “a monumental dynamic painting for a dynamic spectator” (“Ejercicio Plástico”). Because of the many anamorphic images and the claustrophobic space, the result was enveloping, a true exercise in plasticism. Oddly (given Siqueiros’ views), the mural also lacked any political content, but rather represented voluptuous female forms for the benefit of the male viewers, as Botana used this underground space as a bar (Anreus, “Muralism’s Hemispheric Influences” 178). As its title indicates, the point of this mural was pure artistic experimentation, not social commitment.

The lack of political content of this mural, as well as its location in the house of a press tycoon (albeit one who had initially dissented with Urriburu’s policies but had then returned to Argentina relatively unscathed by his political opposition), would lead Berni two years later to condemn Siqueiros’ insistence that only mural painting could be a truly revolutionary art form. Writing in 1935, Berni highlighted



Figure 7.5 David Alfaro Siqueiros, Antonio Berni, Lino Enea Spilimbergo, Juan Carlos Castagnino, and Enrique Lázaro, *Ejercicio Plástico*, 1933, Museo Casa Rosada de Buenos Aires, Ciudad de Buenos Aires. Presidencia de la Nación, Argentina. Work in public domain.

that under a regime unsympathetic to leftist politics, such as Argentina was at the time, artists should find other forms of expression while still keeping in mind the need to do an art that was truly popular and not amenable to bourgeois and fascist politics:

The bourgeoisie, in its increasing fascistisation, will not give up today its monopolized walls for proletarian purposes, nor will the contradictions of the same regime reach the point where the bourgeoisie of its own free will put weapons in the hands of its class enemy in order to be defeated

he perceptively wrote (Berni 14). For Berni, the fact that – in all the months he had spent in Argentina – only a tycoon had given Siqueiros the walls on which to paint a mural demonstrated that the latter was doomed as political art in capitalist societies. When working under these circumstances, Berni argued, leftist artists must find new art practices including posters, engravings, photography, cinema, and even easel painting so long as they were informed by leftist politics and challenging the effects of fascism on the most vulnerable members of society.

A painting like Berni's *Manifestación* (1934) with the size of a mural but portable (it is a tempera on burlap) thematises and re-elaborates both the experience of *Ejercicio Plástico* and the debates around anti-fascist art that have been addressed above (Figure 7.6). The dramatic distortion and foreshortening of the human figures as well as the monumental dimensions of the canvas call to mind the mural Berni and Siqueiros collaborated on in Botana's house. The careful rendering of diverse physiognomies and the use of close-up, fragmentation, depth of field, and



Figure 7.6 Antonio Berni, *Manifestación*, 1934, tempera on burlap, 180 x 249.5 cm, Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires, Ciudad de Buenos Aires. Photo credits: Oscar Baldacci.

Copyright Inés Berni and José Antonio Berni, Argentina.

birds-eye view in this painting are also indebted to their experiments with photography, which, as mentioned above, were often used by Siqueiros as the starting point of his murals. Due to the size of the canvas and closeness of the foreground, Berni is actively pulling the viewers into the painting, appealing to their ethical and political conscience – the aim of all politically engaged art (Anreus, “Adapting to Argentinean reality” 106). Moreover, this painting is, like Siqueiros’ most successful murals in Mexico and the United States, firmly located in Argentina. The painting was made on re-utilised burlap bags linked to Rosario’s sugar industry, and *Manifestación* celebrates both the multicultural makeup of Argentina’s population (something that was condemned by the racist rhetoric of *Crisol* and *Bandera Argentina* reviewed above) and the specific plights of its working class in the 1930s. Berni would argue it is precisely because the work is portable and not linked to a specific wall that it is able to challenge so openly the political values of its historical context. Despite being historically linked to the emergence of the private art market, easel painting can paradoxically achieve an autonomy from those in power at the time (and who therefore control the walls on which public art is made) that muralism cannot. Anti-fascist art, Berni concludes, is not linked to a specific medium but to a specific ideology.

Siqueiros left Argentina in December 1933. His stay in the Río de la Plata had lasted ten months. As a legacy, he left a closer relation between Uruguayan and Argentine artists; Berni, for example, would visit Montevideo in 1938, have an exhibition there, and give talks in several institutions, responding to the issues around political art opened up by Siqueiros five years before. Marcelo Pacheco utilises the term “catalyser” to describe the impact of Siqueiros – not an influence per se, but rather an incentive to consolidate a closer political contingent of artists who were already working in the area, leading to the formation of explicitly anti-fascist cultural associations such as AIAPE (Agrupación de Intelectuales, Artistas, Periodistas y Escritores – Association of Intellectuals, Artists, Journalists and Writers), which formed in Argentina only two years later (Pacheco, “Antonio Berni” 230; Cane).

Above all, Siqueiros’ visit and the debates it provoked in Argentina highlighted local tensions “between internationalism and nationalism, between universalism and class politics” which were, as David Harvey has argued, distinctive features of 1930s cultural debates (30). Thus, the episodes addressed in this chapter provide a compelling argument in favour of a transnational approach to the study of anti-fascist visual culture (Jolly, “Animating Internationalism”; H. García), one that considers the echoes of European politics in Latin America but also the hemispheric networks – not only those through the Atlantic – that tied North and South American artists committed to revolutionary politics.

Note

- 1 I wish to thank Monica Jansen, Maria Bonaria Urban, and Reindert Dhondt, as well as two anonymous readers, for their suggestions for revision; the article has greatly benefited from their insightful observations. I am also grateful to Inés Berni and Luis de Rosa for their generosity.

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