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IDEAS IN ACTION



From Trotsky to Puppets: Other Revolutions are Possible

By Graciela Monteagudo

Graciela Monteagudo is an Argentine organizer and street theater maker and performer who has made theater for the streets during recent mass actions against the World Economic Forum, the School of the Americas, and the G8. She also works with Bread and Puppet in Glover, Vermont. Her use of art and theater for liberation grew out of her work as an organizer for human rights in Argentina. Her recent show “Que se vayan todos, a cardboard piece” is currently touring the United States and Europe..

Giant puppets took the streets, visions of a better world and images of the tools to build it were carried aloft, people drummed, sang, danced and chanted through the streets. For many people, I think especially for people who were stretching their courage to even be out in the streets at all, the march was liberating and inspiring. — Starhawk describing the World Economic Forum Protest, New York City, February 2002

photo top: Linda Panetta





A beautiful street theater piece may have a deep impact on the conscience of those who see it, but that impact will soon fade if it is not reinforced by another artistic or political event. By emphasizing democratic process in the creation of social art, I attempt to help people learn how to do this work themselves. My experience participating in direct actions in the streets and engaging in performances has taught me the importance of democratic decisionmaking and of allowing everyone's voice to be heard, and I believe the process of working with people, either in theater or in direct street actions, is far more important than the artistic product. If the process is democratic, people will learn how to work with others, and that is what I want to achieve.

From Trotsky to Puppets: Some Background

I was born in 1959 in Buenos Aires, Argentina. My mother was a maid for middle-class families and my father owned a small metalworking shop. As I was growing up, the warmth of the Cuban fire was spreading to social organizations throughout Latin America, and students and workers were organizing, some with theory and strategy, some with pseudo-Marxist tactics and a few guns. And then in 1973, Salvador Allende fell in a bloodbath in Chile, and in 1976 Isabel Perón surrendered the Argentine government to a military junta. Repression, oppression, torture, and disappearances swept the South American continent. I tried to lead a normal life, ignoring, like many Argentines, the fact that 30,000 people were disappeared, 2 million had gone into exile, and the military was running over 300 concentration camps. In 1981, I crossed the Plaza de Mayo, the Argentine center of power, and saw the Madres de Plaza de Mayo and a few small leftist political parties demonstrating. I found out that the Madres were the working-class mothers of people who had in most cases been kidnapped in the middle of the night from their homes. The Mothers were confronting the dictatorship in the streets, and although some of them were disappeared themselves as a result, they succeeded in bringing the issue of brutal human rights abuses by the U.S.-backed military regime to international attention. In 1984, I entered the University of Buenos Aires as a philosophy student and joined the student union as a human rights activist, becoming deeply involved in the struggle against the International Monetary Fund's structural adjustment plans.

The Trotskyist party that I joined out of sheer ignorance was the place where I discovered that abuse of power, authoritarian politics, and corruption were not only predominant in postdictatorship Argentine society but also inside the leftist parties. In 1990, I was violently expelled from the organization, along with twenty of my friends. We began to work on a nonhierarchical collective, ultimately forming a group called La



Naranja. With our anti-authoritarian politics and our democratic methods, we gained a great deal of student support and we were elected as student representatives to the board of directors of the school. We joined with other organizations that were engaged in a similar process, and integrated into a political front called



Empire and Profit banner encloses the commons in the Argentine Uprising Pageant. School of the Americas, November, 2002.

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Being expelled had caused me to rethink my life and my activism, and after attending an international puppetry festival in Buenos Aires, I started taking commedia dell'arte and puppetry classes with an anarchist artist who also loaned me some books that illustrated the politics of the Soviets toward the leftist opposition. I began to question the theory of the vanguard and instead decided to focus my efforts on democratic collaborations. La Naranja helped organize direct-action resistance to the economic and social policies of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (which included the privatization of the educational system, a plan that would make education unaffordable for all but a small minority of Argentines). At the same time, I started to work on creating big puppets and performances.

In 1994, while performing puppet shows for homeless children in Bahia, Brazil, I met the Vermont-based Bread and Puppet Theater, and felt that I had found the school of street theater I needed. Through thousands of hours of rehearsals, and with the collaboration of artists from all over the world, Bread and Puppet has mastered the technique of street theater with profound political content and outstanding aesthetics. Hardworking and well organized, the group builds hundreds of puppets and performs locally and internationally, creating as many shows as possible each year on issues such as human rights, poverty, labor, ecology, politics, and relationships of power.

Shortly after this meeting, I moved to Vermont and joined the company. I was impressed with their level of organization—in one week they taught approximately 100 volunteers a complex show, *The Passion of Chico Mendez*, staged in a format that they call a "passion play," inspired by the Catholic tradition of the Stations of the Cross. Each scene was set in a



different space, and a brass band took the audience from one scene to the next. Each group rehearsed separately, with all the scenes coming together during the final rehearsals.

After working as a full-time company member for a year, I had the opportunity to direct one of the scenes of the same play when we performed it at the International Festival of Arts and Ideas. By observing Peter Schumann, Bread and Puppet's artistic director, and the work of senior puppeteers as they directed the shows, I learned how to incorporate hundreds of people who do not define themselves as artists into huge street shows and pageants.

I was in awe of Peter, though I became increasingly critical of the company's hierarchical structure. Still, despite the fact that Schumann has final say on artistic decisions, there is a lot of space in the earlier stages of rehearsal for creation and collaboration, and from that environment has come a long list of amazing cultural insurrectionists and popular artists. Bread and Puppet has deeply influenced the visual and the performance aspects of protest in the United States, and puppeteers in the anticorporate globalization movement have learned from their techniques and are experimenting with new ways of leading horizontal creation processes.

Street Theater Actions in Argentina

In 1996, after working for a year and a half with Bread and Puppet, touring in all kinds of spaces and for all kinds of occasions, I returned to Argentina to coordinate the creation of a street puppet show to be performed at a protest to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the most brutal and violent dictatorship Argentina has ever endured.

Tamar Schumann, an American dance theater director, and I traveled to Buenos Aires to work with a group of activists organized by people I had formerly worked with in La Naranja. In group discussions and intensive rehearsals we came up with a simple dance and puppet piece designed to move along with the protest march, honoring the resistance of the Argentine people, especially the Madres de Plaza de Mayo.

We built huge cardboard hands, created simple costumes, and had one stilt-walker who wore a death mask and a military uniform and carried the U.S. flag. This character dragged a dummy dressed as a worker with a paper bag on its head behind him, a symbol of the disappeared. Women in white tunics held the large hands, representing the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, whose distinctive symbol is a white scarf on their heads. Characters



Graciela enters with the Esperanto (hope) contingent that includes birds of liberation with the names of those in prison for resistance to the School of the Americas, November, 2002.

Ulrich Parotta

with Carlos Menem (who was then the president of Argentina) masks danced with shovels, as if burying the disappeared. The women dressed in white would lift the dummy up in the air and subsequently lose him to the Carlos Menem character, evoking the fact that Menem, like many other politicians, was trying to bury the memory of our disappeared. The action repeated itself over and over again, symbolizing a struggle over the human rights issue: would the military and the politicians, with the aid of the United States, prevail over the people and force them to forget the repression, or would the people, led by the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, rescue the memory of the disappeared and honor their struggle? The question, like the actual situation, was left unanswered.

Apart from Tamar and myself, there were no professional performers in the group. However, we were able to create an interesting street theater piece through a democratic process of discussions. Although I very much wanted to direct, I limited myself to suggesting the characters and gave some ideas on how to use the hands. Tamar choreographed the piece, and rehearsals were interrupted several times when proposed movements seemed to imply a statement that contrasted with the message intended by the activists. Whenever that happened, Tamar and I would facilitate a democratic discussion until we all could agree on a movement that reflected the message of the group. This process helped clarify our



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Mothers of the disappeared followed by hope perform at the Argentine Uprising pageant at School of the Americas, Ft Benign, Georgia, November, 2002.

analysis of the repression and how it served the different sectors of society. The process also helped the organizational efforts of La Naranja, as it introduced them to people who were not interested in doing activism without an artistic outlet, and also enabled them to work with and bond with people in a way that no meeting or assembly would allow.

Personally, I was able to integrate two worlds: the Bread and Puppet techniques of creating street theater and working with large groups of people who do not self-define as artists, with the activist world where creation can be a horizontal, nonhierarchical attempt and art can be used as a tool for direct action.

We went back to Buenos Aires in 1998, this time to work with another group called HIJOS, made up of the children of the disappeared, along with a group of young activists from my former school, led by my friends from La Naranja. Tamar and I worked with them to create a street performance for a demonstration in front of the home of a police officer, Miguel Osvaldo Etchecolatz, who had been in charge of several concentration camps in Argentina during the dictatorship. He was also responsible for the disappearance of sixteen high school students. The kidnapping and disappearance of these children, who were protesting to demand an inexpensive bus fare, is known as the Night of the Pencils. The

demonstration was going to be called “Escrache a Etchecolatz.” *Escrache* is a slang word for “expose,” and in an *escrache* thousands of people get together and make a lot of noise to alert the neighbors that a mass murderer lives among them.

Among the Left in Argentina, HIJOS has a privileged status since they are the actual children of the disappeared. Many of them witnessed the violent abductions of their parents, and some saw their parents tortured or killed. Some were illegally adopted as newborns by families connected to the military after their mothers were killed. I admired their courage and their zeal. Two weeks before Tamar and I arrived, one of their *escraches* had been violently attacked by the secret police. This didn’t deter the HIJOS demonstrators, but it did heighten their awareness of risk and safety. As a result, very few of them actually participated in the performance, but they did provide us with a place to work and gave us a prominent space during the protest.

On the day of the protest, the HIJOS banner opened the march, followed immediately by approximately fifty performers with oversized cardboard pencils who engaged in a dance in which ten characters with Etchecolatz masks. The Etchecolatz characters would push the performers with the pencils down and then a little later, the performers with the pencils would regroup and use their pencils to make the Etchecolatz characters fall. The scene repeated itself over and over again. When the protest arrived at Etchecolatz’s building, his bodyguards threw a tear gas grenade from the tenth floor and dropped heavy objects onto the crowd. Everyone disbanded, regrouping in a short while to hear the organizers make speeches. In the end, the police attacked the crowd with tear gas and everybody scattered. When the performers ran from the police, they dropped their props, leaving the huge pencils lying in the streets, and late that night a friend saw one of them being dragged away by a homeless woman.

Insurrection, Repression, and Street Theater in Argentina

In July 2002 I returned to Buenos Aires once more, this time with David Solnit of Art and Revolution. Six months earlier, Argentina had been the site of a spontaneous uprising against the IMF and the country’s entire political and economic system. The civil society was united under the slogan *Que Se Vayan Todos*, “They All Must Go,” meaning that every politician from every party should leave, along with the supreme court, the IMF, and the multinational corporations.



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The people wanted to decide their future for themselves. They created popular assemblies, in which people met to discuss their situation and possible actions, utilizing a direct democracy process. The demonstrations and actions never let up while five successive governments fell in two weeks.

When David and I arrived six months later, the popular assemblies of Buenos Aires were smaller, but they had begun to organize takeovers of buildings and empty lots. We built puppets in a bank that had gone bankrupt three years earlier, which the neighbors had now taken over, cleaned up, and established as a space for organizing and for popular arts and culture. Another assembly had taken over an abandoned clinic and started a free health care program for people at the over eighty factories now being run by workers.

Aníbal Verón, an organization of the unemployed that had recently endured a brutal repression of one of their *piquetes* (road blockades), was organizing for a day of street protest against state terrorism. The three neighborhood assemblies we visited all wanted to participate in the protest, and we decided to create a street theater piece with giant puppets and props. We facilitated workshops with these assemblies and also with the unemployed workers and their children, in their own neighborhoods.

We built dozens of puppets with several different collectives that in turn collaborated with the assemblies, street theater groups, radical students, and feminist and autonomist groups.

The process was far from smooth, and I was constantly aware of the reality that we had a very small budget for street theater in a country faced with a brutal spiral into poverty and hunger. In the past, many of the radical activists and organizations who did work in poor communities had refused to feed people as part of their organizing for fear of attracting those who were hungry but perhaps unwilling to commit to the struggle. This might have made sense in Argentina before the collapse of December 2001, but now the progressive organizations were working to help people to feed themselves.

Since the mid-1990s, groups of unemployed workers had been organizing road blockades, a strategy they used to force the government to pay the meager unemployment subsidies that were always on the verge of being cut off. As Pablo of the Aníbal Verón group explained to us, when the workers had had jobs, they would picket the factories for their right to a decent salary. Now, deprived of that job and collective bargaining power, they used the picket (*piquete*) to block roads to stop the circulation of goods. In this way, they got the attention of the government and the multinational corporations who are responsible for their plight.

Pablo told us that the *piqueteros* (organizations of the unemployed) had organized *ollas populares* (soup kitchens) and day-care centers where they fed the children, and they had coordinated microenterprises where they made bricks, manufactured crafts, and recycled clothing.

We participated in the *olla popular*. Sharing meals with our friends in Aníbal Verón and sometimes spending the night had a tremendous effect on me. I couldn't get this image out of my mind: Darío Santillán, in utter agony, being dragged out of the train station by the police who had shot him. When they executed him, he had been helping Maxi Kosteki, an artist involved in the *piquetero* movement, who was also shot and killed by the police.

Three weeks before the assassination of Maxi and Darío, Oliver North met with the Argentine government. Shortly afterward, when the *piqueteros* of Buenos Aires announced their intention of doing a road blockade on June 26, the government warned them that such tactics would not be tolerated. On that day, the police attacked the *piquete* coordinated by Aníbal Verón. Two protesters were killed and over a hundred people were arrested, beaten, and tortured at the police station. The hall of the



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Three hundred people performed at the Argentina Uprising Pageant to a crowd of 10,000 in front of the gates to the U.S. military counterinsurgency and torture training school for Latin American military dictatorships, Ft Benning, Georgia.

Izquierda Unida, a leftist political party, was raided. The government waged a forty-eight-hour campaign against the *piqueteros*, accusing them of being violent. Fifty thousand people took to the streets to protest against this state terrorism, and finally the newspapers published the photos that showed how Darío Santillán was executed by the police, bending over the dying body of Maxi Kosteki.

On July 26 around 5,000 people gathered under the Puente Pueyrredón Bridge, the main southern access route into Buenos Aires, where the *piquete* had been attacked by the police the month before. The protest was crowded with dozens of oversized cardboard puppets, built after three weeks of intense discussions and rehearsals. It was the first time I had ever seen this kind of massive presence of puppets and props in a protest in Argentina. I had coordinated the construction of a moving collective mural about the repression, and around those “walls” we staged a show based loosely on a Bread and Puppet piece about the death of Carlo Giuliani at the 2001 WTO protests in Genoa. We were able to successfully convey the message that the *piqueteros* of Buenos Aires are honest families who are struggling against corporate globalization in defense of their right to life, dignified employment, and social change.

In 2003, a populist government was elected in Argentina. Under the presidency of Néstor Kirchner, as the economic and social condition of the middle class has improved, the *piquete* has lost its social consensus. Though important *piquetero* groups continue to organize major *piquetes*, many groups have given up on that tactic that seemed to have worked well under more blatantly repressive neoliberal governments. Autonomist organizations and others are instead focusing on organizing their microenterprises and working toward self-sustainment.

After reflecting on the situation of the social organizations in Argentina and their creative insurrection against a doomed system, a few friends and I decided to help create the Argentina Autonomista Project (AAP). The aim of the AAP is to improve the information and communication flows within Argentina, and between activists there and the rest of the world. The AAP has a website (www.autonomista.org) with information about the social movements in Argentina and it organizes delegations and internships for people from the United States and other countries who are interested in the struggle for a better world. The AAP is also touring a puppet show to raise awareness of the struggle of the Argentine social movements and establish partnerships with other social organizations.

Theatrical Strategies and Ideologies

In his seminal work *Theater of the Oppressed*, Augusto Boal traces the history of theater from the Greeks to Bertolt Brecht and reflects on the way this practice was taken away from the people, how it was transformed from a celebration of the people to a hierarchical event where a few would be on stage and the rest would be passive spectators. Boal argues that Aristotle’s “coercive system of tragedy” shows how moral values and political coercion were forced on the population. Under Machiavelli, theater was used to represent the lives of exceptional individuals, thus further removed from the people.

In bourgeois theater, the individual is portrayed as directing the world. Then, in Brecht’s work, social forces are shown to dominate and mold men and women. However, as Boal points out, the Brechtian character is divided, both subject and object. He is the object of surrounding forces and the subject of his own actions. In this way, he can understand and act so that he (and by extension the reader/spectator) can alter himself and improve his situation. Boal claims that his theater complements what Brecht started by destroying the barriers that separate spectators from actors. In Boal’s theater everyone is a protagonist, all are necessary in the



battle for social change. While Brecht's poetics is that of an enlightened vanguard, where the spectator does not delegate power to the actor to think for him, but does delegate power to the actor to act for him, Boal attempts a poetics where the spectator does not delegate this power at all, but thinks and acts for himself.

I am concerned with how we produce our art, what kind of dialogues we establish when working together, how we deal with power in our own process. I believe that social change will come from people working as a community, and that a community is built when people work together in democratic ways.

When we take our puppets, props, banners, and stilt-walkers to the streets, we are attempting to communicate political messages in ways that not only appeal to the general public, but inspire them to engage their own everyday struggles in new ways. The importance of puppets in the streets was proven during the Seattle protests against the WTO and in other conventions and summits later on. The police seem to understand the impact of puppets and street theater, and they have been very diligent in arresting puppeteers, raiding the warehouses where puppets are being built and confiscating the props and tools used for building them, all in a vain attempt to reduce the power of the protesters. But, as a graffiti in Buenos Aires reminds us, "The enemy is not that huge, we are just looking at it on our knees."

