

## Políptico de Buenos Aires

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The artistic duo (Manuel Mendanha and Juliana Laffitte) appropriates images, only to materially question the objective process by transforming them first through drawing and then through the artisanal manipulation of plasticine.

The Políptico de Buenos Aires (Buenos Aires Polyptych, 2014/2016) is the last and most ambitious of a series of retablos, five multipaneled works produced between 2010 and 2017. Here, the artists borrowed the monumental format of the iconic fifteenth-century Ghent Altarpiece by the brothers Jan and Hubert van Eyck to render a biting critique of their hometown, Buenos Aires. While retaining the polyptych's format, they insert local subject matter that in its universality also has global resonance, thereby activating a dialogue of high and low cultures with the Flemish masterwork. The thematic focus of the work is the Villa 31 shantytown, a vast, continually expanding sprawl of poor housing located next to the rails of Retiro, the country's main railroad station. Although not the largest of the Buenos Aires shanty towns, villa 31 is perhaps the most emblematic given its proximity to and visibility from Autopista Arturo Illia, a major freeway that provides access from the city's center to the upper-class Palermo neighborhood.

It is therefore impossible for commuters to ignore such a huge urban eyesore. Mondongo's work makes a provocative statement by emphasizing one of the concrete piers of the overhead freeway (still under construction) that stands at the very core of the Buenos Aires slum. The external and internal panels of the polyptych work together to provide an inside-outside view of the shantytown and the myriad narratives that take place within its paths, back alleys, and rudimentary constructions. On the outside of the polyptych, the artists have portrayed themselves in a bourgeois room reminiscent of the houses (now in a state of decay) favored by the Argentinean elite. Mendanha reads a grade-school primer featuring Eva Perón as the main character in the story of the nation. On the other side of the chamber, a robot-like Laffitte observes. Outside the glass-paned windows, the viewer is offered a panoramic bird's-eye view of the urban sprawl, which seems to extend indefinitely. On the inside of the polyptych, the collective provides us with a Brueghelesque rendition of life within Villa 31, the inverse of the outside view. Their depiction of the run-down shanty town is filled with zoom-like details that are by turns realistic (a cartonero dragging his cardboard refuse cart), or surrealistic (a bikini-clad woman sunbathing beside a dark hole spouting thousands of sperm)."

The capital city's skyline, rife with emblematic buildings such as the Four Seasons Hotel and the Rulero, looms on the villa's horizon, providing a stark contrast to the human and structural overcrowding that characterize the informal, ever-growing communities. To cap off this apocalyptic view of Buenos Aires, Mondongo has turned the top interior section of the polyptych into a candlestick chart that recalls similar charts made to analyze financial activity in major stock exchanges across the world in an ironic twist, they used real candles instead of lines. Fifty-five red candles indicate a downward market turn, while ninety-five white ones represent its upswing. Buenos Aires thus emerges as the focus and locus of Mondongo's critique of the Argentinean longing to catch up with the rest of the world and the predatory impulses of late capitalism. In their view, the metropolis is the product of the failed dream of modernity: despite its lofty universal (say, European) aspirations, it has never overcome polarizing class divisions and, moreover, is now subjected to the aggressive tactics of global capital. Mondongo's critique, however, extends beyond Argentina to global cities that have become the focus of disorderly forms of living and social sharing as well as to "decentralized" notions of place brought about by the dynamics of globalization, which operates at the very core of the sophisticated metropolis. In this context, the city's traditional fixed points of reference have disappeared, giving rise to

extensive poverty that coexists with capital, or to brand-new codes that are embodied in technology and embedded with a mixture of hybrid local and global cultural symbols. In my view, Mondongo's monumental, multipanel work is a conceptual and technical tour de force that is both anachronistic and contemporary. To better understand its theoretical complexity, the artwork's process of production must be further elucidated. After taking hundreds of photographs of daily life inside the shantytown, the duo transferred these photographs to drawings that became the basis for scenes created with plasticine. In the process, they incorporated art historical references to key works of painting and cinema, from Berni to Brueghel (*The Flemish Proverbs*, 1559), Goya (*Witches' Sabbath*, 1798), 76 and Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky (*Stalker*, 1979), among others. As with their highly emblematic and successful *Calavera* series (2009- 13), for the *Políptico de Buenos Aires* the artists approached art history as a reservoir of iconographic quotes. They manually transformed the mechanical medium of photography into a richly emblematic plastic vehicle. As Olea observes, this specific strategy implies more than a creative decision. Instead, it signals a politics of absolute freedom with regard to artistic creation that goes against the grain of the technologically based resources and genres available to their generation. In this context, "the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction becomes an obsolete resource both for their updated idea of 'art' as well as for the anachronistic way they critically activate appropriation and revival.