

# Graciela Carnevale

Graciela Carnevale has been an activist in the arts since the 1960s. She was invited to contextualize the works of artist Matthijs de Bruijne.

## **El Comedor, 2005**

It was in 2003 at his presentation of the project *ExArgentina* (2002–2006) at the Goethe Institute, Buenos Aires that I first met Matthijs de Bruijne and learned about his work. He showed the slides he had taken on his trip to the poor areas of the Tucumán region, in Rosita's soup kitchen and the neighborhood that later would be the subject of his work *El Comedor* (The Soup Kitchen, 2005). They were images in brilliant colors, depicting people's discouraging situations in a tropical landscape, producing a strange tension between the situations shown and the contrast of the reds and oranges, the blues and greens of nature and of people's cloths. I can imagine how shocking it might have been for someone from the Netherlands to encounter those miserable conditions and levels of poverty.

Those slides took me back to a reality almost forty years prior, in 1968, experienced and registered in black and white photographs as part of an avant-garde artists group, the group that made *Tucumán Arde* (Tucumán is Burning, 1968). We went to the Argentine province Tucumán on a research journey to identify and denounce the critical social situation that emerged as a consequence of the economic policies developed by the then military government. This journey was the culmination of a process of radicalization and politicization that caused almost all members of the group to leave artistic practice. We had difficulty finding the kinds of alternatives needed for the languages and meanings we searched for, for an art socially engaged with this context. Those images were similar.

In *El Comedor* there is something interesting that happens on a visual level: the replacement of those color slides with contrasting black and white images. We see the soup kitchen started by Rosita, a local woman who saw a need and organized her community so that more than two hundred children each received a daily meal for free; its neighbors, daily life, and surroundings. What is in these images is not too different from the reality of many poor neighborhoods surrounding the greatest cities in Argentina, where today one third of the population is poor. This work tells a different story than that of a tourist. The elaborate images introduce us to a more real and dramatic depiction of an extreme situation. In art, often the artistic labor of the participants is subsumed under the "artist's" authorship. But De Bruijne doesn't erase the true actors. He leaves space for Rosita's voice, he refuses to occupy her place, and her feelings and her experiences are visible. Here, the artist's voice also tells a daily chronicle of his stay in Tucumán.

## **Liquidacion.org, 2003**

The context of *Liquidacion.org* is the unprecedented 2001 economic crisis in Argentina. Over half of Argentina's inhabitants lived below the poverty level. New social and economic relations with non-capitalist modes of production emerged under the crisis.

While Matthijs de Bruijne was living in Buenos Aires, the *cartoneros*, a group of people who managed to earn a living from collecting and selling garbage and paper, were working in his neighborhood. They began a collaboration that lasted for approximately one year, and from this, the association and work *Liquidacion.org* was born. *Liquidacion.org* was a website that sold objects found by the *cartoneros* and audio CDs each with recordings of a *cartonero's* dreams. All of the money went directly to the *cartoneros*.

In this exhibition, you see only a lightbox announcing the 2001 website release. The objects displayed in the vitrines are the leftovers, still offered on the website among the sixty-four old, rare, used objects found by *cartoneros*, on sale for 20 to 50 dollars. Each found object is accompanied by a description by the person who found it, telling the story of the discovery.

### **Het Afvalmuseum, 2011**

In 2011, the Union of Cleaners of the Netherlands Trade Union Confederation (FNV) invited Matthijs de Bruijne to create an artwork to commemorate the first long, nationwide cleaners' strike, which happened in 2010. An assortment of objects the cleaners found in the trash while at work was presented in a museum-like display and called *Het Afvalmuseum* (The Trash Museum). *Het Afvalmuseum* was displayed at Utrecht Central Station and other Dutch public buildings. The objects were combined with stories from the cleaners about their poor working conditions. Once more, De Bruijne's artistic practice found ways of placing these protagonists, their voices, and their specific demands in the public eye. This particular work began a long-term collaboration between De Bruijne and various sectors of the FNV cleaners that continues today. Within the collaboration, the artistic practice is shared and tailored to different moments for the cleaners and their campaigns.

### **Schoon Genoeg, 2011–2017**

The different handwriting on the placards signals the many hands and many workers engaged in constructing them. One aspect I want to emphasize is that this goes beyond the limits of academic or hegemonic art. This obliges us to think and review art practice from other parameters, parameters that defy the logic of the art field and art market, and make ironic its mechanisms. We are in front of productions and actions, of critical art that resists being trapped by the established categories of what is considered political. These works open new avenues for doing and thinking art practice. I consider this work highly disruptive. Matthijs de Bruijne enters a movement as part of it, from his own competences. And again, as a mediator, invites the workers to appropriate certain communicational codes. These serve as processes of subjectification and empowerment, with the people assuming themselves as subjects of their own conditions and as protagonists of their own futures.

This participation, being inside the groups but with a particular role, does not plunder the workers and rob them of their voices and their names. On the contrary, he encourages them to manifest and recognize their common achievements. De Bruijne's commitment to people is integral in his practice, which questions what art is or is not, placing the figure of the artist inside or outside the institution according to the circumstances. He breaks limits to expand the narrow frontiers of the naturalized notion of art, to open the territories of art practice to a field of potential inquiry. Far from a conception that considers art an autonomous activity that signifies nothing and has little effect on the world outside its own institutional field, De Bruijne advocates for art as a tool for transformation, a critical practice for intervention into everyday life situations; one that intends to make visible the relations that are kept obscure.

This work is now inside the art field. What challenges does this inclusion bring? What new questions arise?