

La Grande Patria in Lower Case
Eduardo Gil photographs in (argentina)

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"Los hombres que están solos ya no esperan" (Eduardo Gil)

"Argentina es Primer Mundo" (Argentina is in/belongs to the First World) was the oft-repeated phrase, both as an assertion of proud accomplishment and as a parody of presumption, during the 1990s, the period of Carlos Menem's presidency, the parity of the dollar and the peso, the triumphalist installation of a neoliberalist, and the virtual pride-engendering pervasive supremacy of corruption.¹ Although Argentina has a long tradition of boastful nationalism,² the prosperity generated by what was to turn out to be the failed neoliberalist experiment brought with a sense of euphoria over the belief that Argentina had finally attained the exceptional status it always felt that it was entitled to, but which always seemed to slip elusively from its grasp: neoliberalism was going to ensure that Argentina was, once and for all, a First-World country meriting a privileged diplomatic tie with the United States and deserving of the same sort of international recognition accorded the Western European societies it always sought to emulate. At least, this has customarily been the official self-image of Argentina--certainly that of a ruling cultural and financial elite--and it was one that most sectors of Argentina society (or at least, the citizens of the hegemonic urban center, Buenos Aires) seemed to subscribe to during the heyday of the Menem government.³

Eduardo Gil's work, particularly the twenty-three images that make up the photographic dossier (*argentina*), can be examined as one cultural response to the triumphalist attitudes prevalent with respect to Argentina, historically in general and specifically, during the neoliberalist 1990s. Gil notes in a colophon to the dossier that "Este trabajo fue realizado en Buenos Aires, que es donde vivo, entre 1985 y 2000. Intenta ser una metáfora de la Argentina desde la dictadura militar hasta el presente." What is interesting about this statement is that, although Gil, like other photographers--and, certainly, an enormous sector of Argentine cultural producers--has dealt with images of the neofascist dictatorship (1967-73, 1973-83),⁴ these images are focused on the period to Argentina's return to constitutional democracy in 1983 and the neoliberalist experiment of the 1990s.

Gabriela Liffschitz, in her review of (*argentina*) underscores Gil's interest in what one could call in English "lower case Argentina." This is as much the Argentina that falls outside the purview of the grandiose Argentina touted by the power elite, as it is the Argentina that has, since the beginnings of the collapse of the

¹Enrique Medina has the narrator protagonist of *X* muse at one point, "[Argentina es] un país donde la corrupción es atractivo turístico" (164; [Argentina is] a country where corruption is a tourist attraction). See Foster on this novel as an exemplar of cultural responses to the Menem period.

²It is reputed that an Argentine ambassador to Washington in the 1960s replied, when asked why Argentina was the only Latin American country not to receive the Peace Corps, "Does the United States send the Peace Corps to France?"

³The recent reelection of Menem as president in May 2003 would appear to be driven as much by a nostalgia for the prosperity of the early to mid-1990s and the promise of its recapture, as by the lack of other viable political alternatives.

⁴One of Gil's most famous images, which does not appear in (*argentina*) because it falls outside the time frame of the dossier, concerns two policemen, assuming very professional stances, guarding a human rights display consisting of the silhouettes of the disappeared. Each policeman is stationed at one end of the life-size panel, providing anchoring by members of the security forces, the very same forces that were complicitous in the disappearance of citizens during the neofascist tyranny.

neoliberal system in the mid-1990s, with the final collapse in 2001, fallen from prosperity into poverty, which as of this writing means fully 40% of that country's citizenry. This distribution is strictly an economic one. Yet there are other axes that must be taken into account for a full interpretation of the difference between "Argentina" and "(argentina)." One is geopolitical: it is easy to confuse Argentina with Buenos Aires and vice-versa, since the hegemonic urban center, with fully one third of the entire population of the country concentrated in the Greater Buenos Aires area, can only exist as such by virtue of the exclusion of enormous sectors of the country from its actual and symbolic wealth and power. The sustainment of Buenos Aires as virtually the only point of reference for Argentina in terms of power and wealth has come at the cost of the increasing impoverishment of the provinces. While it is true that there are pockets of wealth and perhaps even some middle-class prosperity elsewhere in Argentina, the evolution of Buenos Aires into a megalopolitan center, which has taken place since early in the Peronista period (1946-55), has brought with it a cycle of impoverishment. It is an impoverishment that has been driven in part by the industrialization of the city: Buenos Aires is no longer just the port city of the farming and cattle-raising wealth of the provinces, but its industry now competes with the cattle and other rural baronies such that Buenos Aires can exist with its back to the rest of the country--i.e., such that Buenos Aires no longer need depend on those baronies for its reason to exist. Moreover, this impoverishment becomes a vicious cycle, to the extent that the loss of agricultural and other sources of employment in the provinces means a vast migration of citizens to Buenos Aires seeking employment. Whereas Perón had set out to bring provincials to the city (among other reasons) as a form of cheap labor in his attempts to industrialize the country, now those individuals flood into the capital of their own accord. And whereas the Peronist promise was that the so-called *cabecitas negras* would move into the middle class as a protected work force, today they form a precariously situated lumpen proletariat that provides Buenos Aires with a host of poorly addressed and mostly unresolved social issues.

There is still another geopolitical axis, and that is the way in which Buenos Aires, in addition to attracting the provincial unemployed, a certain portion of which remains destitute in the city, moving from rural poverty to urban poverty, also attracts a similar class from the many surrounding Latin American republics, from Bolivia and Brazil to Chile, from Paraguay and Peru to Uruguay, and one comes upon even those from the noncontiguous republics.⁵ In the current rapid transition to generalized impoverishment in Buenos Aires, the ranks of the eternally poor have been swollen by the influx of provincials who either remain unemployed or lose their jobs, by former middle-class individuals who descend into poverty, and by other Latin Americans who have become unemployed (some, but not all, have ended up returning to their native countries).

Other axes come also to mind. The class divisions in Buenos Aires are not driven strictly by economic factors, although these are undoubtedly dominant. While it is true that there has been, historically, an incredible social mobility for Argentines when compared to other Latin American republics, it is also true that it has not always functioned ideally for members of various subaltern classes, such as certain classes of immigrants: Jews, despite a considerable amount of mobility, still suffer from endemic anti-Semitism, and the newer Korean immigrants have yet to acquire much symbolic power, although some may have a measure of economic clout. Women also have enjoyed enviable opportunities in Argentina, but sexism still creates a gender subclass in most venues (hence, the enormous success of Maitena's feminist cartoon art; see the published volumes of *Las alteradas*; see also the critical analysis by Tompkins) and, despite formal constitutional guarantees (por the *Constitución de Buenos Aires* approved in 1996) in categories relating to ageism, sexual orientation, religious beliefs and the like, there remain no effective workplace protections for, for example, lesbians and gays or orthodox Jews.

Gil, moreover, is particularly interested in one other mostly underreported disjunction between "Argentina" and "(argentina)," and that is the intense social marginalization of the mentally infirm. Buenos Aires's sprawling major mental institution, the Hospital Borda, has been used in a number of cases as a metaphor for social marginalization in Argentina, such as the photographic work of the two great Argentine feminist photographers Sara D'Amico and Sara Facio, particularly in *Humanario* (1976); see Foster, "Sara Facio") and in Eliseo Subiela's 1986 film *Hombre mirando al sudeste*, one of the most successful films of the Redemocratización effort (see Foster, *Contemporary Argentine Filmmaking* 80-92); the Borda also appears in Marcelo Piñeyro's 1993 *Tango feroz, la leyenda de Tanguito*; the rock singer Tanguito's death in 1972 is often seen as the demise of the Paris-spring optimism of the 1960s in Argentina, Tanguito's birth name was José Alberto Iglesias. The

⁵Latin Americans can normally move freely from one country to another; what they cannot do is work.

mentally ill are, to all intents and purposes, permanently excluded from the structures of real and symbolic power and their lives constitute something like a permanent locus of radical social exclusion, an Other that confirms the hegemonic social dynamic that excludes them. If there is a transitory poverty (albeit one that can become permanent, or threaten, under current conditions, to become permanent), mental illness, as Foucault has taught us, is so categorically the excluded Other that it becomes an anchor, a ground zero for an exposition of a society set in lower case.

Not surprisingly, easily half of Gil's photographs in (*argentina*) deal explicitly or by a good interpretational guess can be seen to deal with the mentally infirm. Some images are quite straight-forward in dealing with this form of social marginalization, while others are less literal, and it is an educated guess on the part of the viewer to see them as also allegories of real and symbolic power in Argentina by virtue of psychiatric subalternity.

One of the emphases of Gil's photography is on individuals who are radically alone: individuals who are abandoned, have been abandoned, by society. To be sure, it is a cliché that the big city engenders alienation and that its streets are filled with "lonely crowds" (the allusion here is to David Riesman's eponymous study). Yet, perhaps it is an illusion that individuals are always lonelier in the metropolitan mass, since it is a basic condition of humanity to experience a sensation of isolation from other persons. The saying "no man is an island" may be less apophantic than hortatory, subjunctive and/or jussive: "Oh, let it be that no man is an island." Yet the sensation transmitted by many of Gil's photographs is not of lonely individuals, but of abandoned individuals, who may or may not feel their loneliness or may or may not even be aware of it. Since many are mental patients, photographed singly or in groups, there is less of a psychic question as regards their personal feelings and more an ethical one as it refers to our perception, provoked by the photographer, of them in terms of our own lives and in terms of our treatment of them as institutionalized human beings. These too are disappeared citizens, to the extent that they have been confined, if not against their will, more than likely without their consent. It may be for their own protection and, perhaps, even for the protection of society, but the effect is always the same: to remove them from public view, to sever them from society, and to restrict their options for being in the world. One may calculate that the majority of viewers of these photographs are acutely aware of the social injustices of the confinement of mental patients, as well as the confinement of any human beings, although, certainly, one feels that criminals in large measure deserve their fate. This is because there is the inevitable tendency to compare one's own life to theirs and to feel, as the saying goes in English, "There but for the grace of God go I." Moreover, the recovery of constitutional democracy in Argentina has meant for many citizens, including their artistic delegates among the producers of culture, a thoroughgoing accounting of the many ways of disappearing in a society, which must necessarily embrace the question of the ways in which individuals may continue to disappear. This is why these photographs, whose origins date virtually from the beginning of the return to constitutional democracy, are nevertheless of a whole with Gil's and others' concern over human rights issues that were not put to rest simply by the end of military rule.

One of the most eloquent of the photographs comes early in the dossier. It is of an older man decked out in what appears to be his version of full military regalia, which includes lustrously shined boots, a three-quarter length coat with a leather belt, various insignia and/or decorations, and a hat that, although not an example of the typical military beaked hat, is some sort of cap which could be part of a non-Western European tradition or could be a fantasy of the wearer as to what this symbol of authority might look like. He is carrying in his right hand, in stiff and almost perfectly vertical rigidity, a meter-long staff. It looks longer and thicker than the conventional swagger stick of some military traditions, and it has a rubber or plastic tip on it as though it had originated in a walking stick or the leg of a table and had been modified to serve as the symbol of military authority. Its bearer regards the camera in clenched-lip (somewhat sunken because of toothlessness?) determination and, indeed, defiance.

What makes this image particularly interesting is that the man stands beside his bed in an inmate ward. Although he is lucky enough to enjoy a corner and has a large window by his bed, the viewer can see in the left-hand background other beds and another inmate, whose face is turned away from the camera, as though lost in his own world. The beds we can see of the other inmates reveal the customary features of institutional bleakness--the mattresses are thin and swaybacked, covered by identical blankets; there is a simple chest of drawers set against the wall between two of the beds. But the bed of the uniformed man, while it is also somewhat sunken in the middle, is the site of a mosaic of images that involved pictures taped to the wall, numerous framed photographs and images clipped from magazines and newspapers, along with what appears to be several decorated fabrics that are spread out on top of the blanket and wrapped around two pillows at the head of the bed; there are also some images propped up on the window sill. Additionally, there are other military-looking clothes hanging from the wall against which the bed sits, and there are other

carefully arranged displays on a small table by the bed and on a wooden chair of the sort found in traditional cafés. There are additional objects under the bed, a collection of belts hanging behind the head of the bed and, next to the framed images, some other object that may or may not be military in nature.

This extensive clutter is undoubtedly the consequence of years of patient collection and arrangement by the man. He has been allowed by the institutional authorities to create this cramped self-contained world that feeds some delusion of military authority. Indeed, he may even be a former military officer who has become a mental patient. The abandonment of this man to some alienated inner realm of which his visible possessions are concrete metonymies is pathetic to the viewer to the extent that it fails to correspond to any socially integrated behavior. And perhaps the pathos is intensified by the image of military authority, whose enforcement of power through violence is represented by the upraised and at-the-ready staff, since that authority has, for a good part of the recent history of Argentina, been an agent in the disappearance of citizens. It is a case of the victim internalizing and assimilating the manner of the victimizer.

I have placed as an epigraph to this essay a verse from a poem of his own, dated 1992, that Gil includes in his dossier. It is a trope of the title of a famous 1931 sociological essay by Raúl Scalabrini Ortiz entitled *El hombre que está solo y espera*. Written at the height of the heady brew in Argentina of socialism, anarchism, and assorted other forms of radical politics, yet published a year after the first, fascist-inspired, military coup in Argentina, Scalabrini Ortiz contemplates as much the Argentine common man (whom he situates at the popular/populist downtown intersection of Corrientes and Esmeralda) who awaits the fulfillment of the promises of social amelioration prevalent in those decades (Argentina was particularly responsive to the 1917 Russian Revolution) as the Argentine who must now wait out the imposition of military rule.

However, in the universe of Gil's photos--quite aside from a climate of political despair in Argentine seventy years after Scalabrini Ortiz's investment in the image of stoic patience--the alienated have nothing to look forward too, nothing to wait for because of the way in which they are now lost to consciousness of social history. Gil concludes his poem with the couplet: "Solo hay una duda. / Qu[é] corbata estrenar en el propio funeral."

There is an image of a line of a dozen and a half men on an area of the grounds of what is probably the Borda. This line is in the foreground; in the background there are three other men: one leaning against the thick trunk of a tree; one sitting on the ground, reclining against the trunk; and someone walking away from the tree. The thickness of the trunk of this tree and the mature growth of other trees we can see on the grounds gives this outdoor setting an ageless quality, enhanced also by the thick and vegetation-strewn carpet of grass underfoot. It is though this were a forest primeval through which these men were passing, most in single-file, as though to some unknown human destiny. The irregular human beings are transitory life, within a permanent thicket of natural growth. The mysteriousness of the assemblage of these men, with the implication of their being formed to march off or be marched off to some unpleasant fate, augments the timeless/transitory disjunction on which the photo is built.

The first and third man in line look toward the camera, as does someone, obscured in part by the others formed around him, a little more than halfway back in the row; in all three cases, their contemplation of the camera is passive, although the third man does seem to have his forehead wrinkled in an inquisitive manner. The men are all fairly nicely dressed and many carry a cigarette, throwing into question whether these are long-term inhabitants of an institution, and suggesting perhaps the context might be another less threatening one. But the fact that no context is provided--no sign of a goal for the line is seen in front of the first man--adds to the unsettling intensity of the image.

Another image, one that appears on the cover and is included right before the one just commented on, is equally mysterious in capturing the abandonment of human beings. By this point, it should be apparent that Gil has restricted himself as much to mentally alienated men as Facio and D'Amico focused on women in *Humanario*, although it is much less apparent in this photograph that inmates of the Borda are involved. The entire photograph is dominated by a portion of the interior of a circus tent, and the circular wall of the tent and the roof that stretches off, rather irregularly from that wall, make up the top forty percent--i.e., the background--of the image. The central mast of the tent is seen to the right of the photograph, while various other supports are distributed around the portion of the wall that is visible and in the foreground and mid-range of the image; these supports run off at varying angles because of the position of the camera and constitute roof supports. Thus, although there are four men visible in the photograph, it is as though they were caged by these supports, which outnumber them and intersect their bodies.

When I first looked at the photograph, I saw three men and what I took to be a large bundle on the ground. In reality, this bundle is a fourth man, discernible as such because of a barely visible pair of shoes; his body, although he is kneeling, is completely level with the ground. It is an interesting compositional detail that

the other three men are in varying degrees of contact with the ground (which is a sandy stretch with some vegetation, such as one finds in the Reserva Ecológica on the southeast side of the city along the banks of the Río de la Plata). One man is leaning against one of the roof supports, and thus the angle of his body follows that of the support. His head is resting on his right forearm, which, in turn, rests on the support. The pose of his body is one of utter exhaustion and/or, perhaps, one of despair and alienation. A second man, in the central background and to the left of the latter man, someone kneels in apparent prayer. His body is completely perpendicular to the ground and the angle of his legs below the knee, and his hands, which extend from his arms held to his side, are extended in supplication. But it is a modest supplication, since it is not the full, upraised-arm supplication of intense pentecostal prayer; like the other bodies, he does not acknowledge the camera's presence, lost also in his own world. Finally, to his left but most in the foreground, between the man in prayer and the prone man, is a man who is also kneeling. But his left arm is placed flat on the ground and holds his body up so that he is parallel with the ground but not lying on it. His position causes his pants to draw taut across his buttocks, with the bottom portion following the division of the buttocks in the area of the anal fold. This detail is almost obscene, indicating that the man is unaware of what the camera is capturing: conventional Argentine masculinity is no different than that of other Western cultures in proscribing the display of male buttocks which, even when they are covered, implies a (homo)erotic offering that is in violation of heterosexist taboos. Since the context of the photograph as a whole is not (homo)erotic, it is safe to assume that this man, too, is lost in a reverie of alienation.

A final photograph that I would like to analyze from among the appreciable number that have to do with individuals who are "alone but no longer expectantly"⁶ precedes the last one analyzed. The grounds are clearly those of the Borda, with various installations in the background, including the chimney stacks that dominate the skyline and confirm the institutional nature of the place, despite the modest almost residential nature of the buildings to be seen. Once again, Gil's photograph is dominated by five men who are standing immobile. Four are irregularly lined up in a shoulder-to-shoulder position; their backs are to us. They hold conventionally masculine positions, two with their hands in their pockets, one with his arms akimbo, and one with his chin resting in the palm of his hand. They are in their mid-thirties, and they are all staring off into space, although has his head lowered so that he is looking at the ground. In the lower left foreground there is a much older, grizzled and unshaven man. His eyes are closed, and he is slightly inclined toward the camera, but apparently oblivious of its presence. The other four are wearing outer garments, while the old man is wearing only a shirt, as though enured by custom to the cool weather that obliges the other four to wear additional clothing. One could surmise the he is a veteran of the ritual of alienation.

I use the word ritual to evoke Subiela's *Hombre mirando al sudeste*, where the staring off into space (specifically in Rani's case) is a major plot device. No one is certain if Rani is a particularly intelligent mental patient or an alien visitor, whose alienness is confused with the alienation of other inmates of the Borda, and whether his standing stock still in the courtyard and staring off into space is just the confirmation of his mental illness or really the pattern of communication with his extraterrestrial masters. The Borda is located in the southeast corner of Buenos Aires, and the line of sight of someone staring toward the southeast is the vast, open ocean of nothingness, an apt metaphor for psychotic alienation. In another photograph, while others dance hand-in-hand in a form of ring-around-the-rosy in the common area formed by several multistory buildings that are probably also part of the Borda, two men stand motionless, one in the mid-range of the photograph, as though the center of the dance, and one in the right-hand foreground. The latter is looking off vacantly, with the palm of his right hand flat over his right ear, either blocking out the noise the others are making or heeding some inner voice.

The images of mental patients taken at the Borda do not, however, make up the entire body of work contained in (*argentina*): the abandoned are not the only denizens of the homeland written in lower case. Interspersed among these images are photographs taken in various characteristic outdoor venues of the city, such as the street, the Recoleta cemetery, parks and plazas, a stadium, and outdoor areas of other institutions, such as a Catholic high school. Although these images are of "normal" everyday Argentines, there are some images that one could call transition between the latter and those of the inhabitants of the Borda, such as an outdoor mass, full immersion baptism in a soccer stadium, this quirky event by the everyday standards of Argentine life; an outdoor Catholic confession with a child's merry-go-round in the background; another image of some sort of outdoor religious event at the edge of what I believe is the Jardín Botánico in the elegant

⁶I use the rather formal "expectantly" in an attempt to capture the dual meaning of *esperar* in Spanish: "to hope" and "to wait."

Barrio Norte section of the city (the antithesis of the south side where the Borda is located); and one of a woman--perhaps his mother--holding the hand of a bloated youth, who although not precisely someone with Down's syndrome, appears to have some mental deficiency. The images of everyday Argentines in public spaces, including those shading off into the quirky, is reminiscent of the Swiss photographer Robert Frank's groundbreaking 1959 collection of images, *The Americans*, on everyday American citizens. Just as Frank's book captured the unheroic citizens of postwar/cold war triumphalist America, Gil is casting the eye of his camera on the ordinariness of post-dictatorship Argentina, where dead-end loneliness still prevails. In this sense, then, there is a continuity between the radically alienated of the Borda and those who are on the outside but are no less alienated, even if they are not certifiably insane. As the saying goes, the sign saying Lunatic Asylum is always to be found on the outside of the building. . . .

These are pictures, then, of gathered together in a public space; some are motionless and tranquil, while others are visibly agitated. For example, there is an early plate of a group of people vociferating before a low wall topped by a chain-link fence with an overhang of barbed wire, which indicates that it is meant to be impossible to scale either from within or from without. One's first assumption is that it is the wall of a prison, and the people that are gathered there are attempting to communicate with the inmates, who may or may not appear at the windows: this is an arrangement in some prisons where an infrastructure is lacking to permit regularized face-to-face visits with prisoners. The majority of the individuals in the photograph are looking at some objective on the other side of the fence, and are gesticulating; one assumes, in the case of those with their mouths open, that they are shouting. Yet not all are facing the fence. In the case of one couple, the man is, but the woman with him, probably his wife, is facing him, and he is resting a hand flatly on the top of her head as though consoling her for some reason. But what is most disturbing about this enigmatic image--we don't know what exactly is going on or where it is taking place; all we now is that the individuals captured here are emotionally affected by what they are experiencing--is the image in the central foreground of a woman in a wheelchair. She is looking toward the camera and her mouth is open in, perhaps, a silent expression of pain. Her head is tilted back and to the side, and her overall expression is one of intense emotional agitation. A woman with her back to us, in the lower left-hand angle, contemplates her suffering as we do: they are the reflex of something that is going on on the other side of the fence that we cannot see. All the photographer allows us to see is this one woman's suffering as a synecdoche of the response of the other individuals in the photograph, just as the other woman who looks at her reaction is a stand in for the viewer's contemplation of the first woman's pain. These individuals are alone in their pain, whatever it is, and we the spectators are powerless to do anything about it, less because we don't know what the origins of that pain are than because it doesn't matter: this is one more image of the enormous sense of social futility in the universe of Gil's photographs, that of human life in the lower-case homeland. In this sense, then, the emotional agitation of the individuals in the photograph is continuous with other motives for suffering, and one is as exemplary as another to capture the condition of their lives.

The photograph is complemented by others that deal with "common Argentines," such as the one of a group of men being held back by security forces. We don't know why they are being held back or what the nature and the motive for any behavior that would require them to be restrained. The center of the photograph is occupied by the bodies of two young men. One has a diffident look on his face--he is looking directly at the camera--as he is gripped by a security agent in such a way that an open shirt he is wearing over a t-shirt is being pulled back from his shoulder. The other man has more of a look of consternation, and he looks off to the side. He is carrying something that involves a strap over his shoulder, and this may signal he is a student. Other men in the picture--and it is notable that all are men, which suggests perhaps the picture was taken in the male-dominated financial district know as the City--are dressed in suits and ties, while others show the casual dress of the two young men in the center of the picture. There appear to be at least two security personnel in the photograph: the one whose back is to us (he is wearing something like a protective vest) because he is gripping the first of the two young men mentioned, the one whose shirt is being pulled back off his shoulder; the second is somewhat blurred, so it is not clear if he is looking at the camera from his position in the right-hand foreground, although we can see he is wearing an official badge. A third man is gripping the left arm of the first of the two young men, but he is not necessarily a security agent, since we can clearly see his cuff of his suit jacket, the cuff of his dress shirt, and a leather watch band. The camera is taken from the position of what they are watching, but the camera would not seem to be what they are watching. Nevertheless, we have no way of knowing if they are onlookers being restrained at a crime or accident scene, if they are protestors over a perceived injustice, or perhaps oven claimants at the doors of a failed establish-

ment.⁷ The point of the photograph is that there is some sort of collective reaction to a socially significant event taking place, and that reaction is being contained on some basis of authority.

Less ambiguous is the following photograph. Ranged against a wall on which a slogan has been painted in large letters in which the word *salaris* (salaries) can be discerned is a ragtag snare drum group. While they are wearing a suggestion of a satin uniform consisting of a jacket and pants, other details of street clothes can be made out. One man has a cigarette dangling from his mouth, while another has on the sort of flat-topped conical cap (we cannot make out the slogans written on it) that is often seen at soccer matches or in similar populist venues. In the left-hand foreground a boy wears a t-shirt whose legend is not visible, and he is holding the corner of a flag in which we can see, in fancy lettering, the article *Los*. This may be a group that provides street entertainment, or they may be part of a political protest or political campaign. The latter dual possibility is suggested by the graffiti mentioning salaries (undoubtedly a demand for wage adjustments), below which it is possible to make out the letters *ote*, which unquestionably belongs to the imperative *vote* (vote for). Whether there is a connection between the campaign slogan, the graffiti referring to salaries, and the ragtag band is unclear, but the context is more specifically political than the last two images I have referred to.

There is one more detail in this photograph that merits commenting on: the slogan and graffiti are painted on a wall that appears, because of its style, to be of a nonrecent vintage. Beyond the wall, a building rises up that is either abandoned or unfinished--more likely the former, since there are no construction traces such as scaffolding or unfinished portions. Buenos Aires is dotted with the combined blight of abandoned buildings and suspended construction sites, the overt signs of disastrous economic fluctuations. In addition to serving as signs of those fluctuations--and of how the promised universality of neoliberalist prosperity was only a chimera--these buildings constitute a social and legal problem, as they are taken over by squatters: squatters cannot be easily evicted under Argentine law, and they are alleged to bring crime and unsanitary practices with them.

Finally, of particular note in this photograph, in addition to the way in which the ragtag band is standing around without appearing to be engaged in performance, is the vacant look on the part of the boy holding the flag or banner, reinforcing the sense of isolation and abandonment that are the recurring themes of Gil's photographs in this dossier.

While so many of Gil's involve popular classes, there are a number of what one could call upper-class settings. In addition to the images referring to religious contexts, which are interesting insofar as they allow one to speculate on why people have recourse to religion and why, in these images, there is still a sense of isolation and abandonment, there are three consecutive images relating to the Recoleta, the elegant and staggeringly costly resting place for the rich and powerful in central area of the city, on the edge of the most elegant residential districts. These images appear to be in the context of a funeral, and all of the individuals pictured are wearing proper, elegant clothes for a funeral; all have the physical aspects of privilege, of the sort that the Recoleta monumentalizes: the tree-lined streets of this "city of the dead" are flanked by mausoleums bearing the best names of the country. The mausoleums themselves are miniature palaces, architectural signs of their inhabitants' class. Yet, once again, Gil captures the blank expressions on the part of those present, including one woman's half-bewildered, half-defiant stare at the camera in one plate, and another woman's vaguely disdainful stare in another. The socially significant occasion of this assemblage is death, and death among the movers and shakers of Argentina. Nevertheless, there is little sense of human communication between those in attendance: except in the case of the first woman, who rests her hand on the back of the neck of a young boy, there is hardly any expression of warmth or community among these individuals. Indeed, in the same photograph in which the woman is touching the young boy, a noticeably patrician young man, dressed so much in the British tradition cultivated still by a sector of Argentina's elite that he is carrying the

⁷Gil's photographs extend to the year 2000. By that time, the neoliberalist project had already begun to collapse. The definitive collapse in late 2001 brought with it an enormous outburst of violence born of anger and frustration in the face of frozen assets, failed banks and their disappeared funds, and the closing of a numerous businesses whose survival depended on the neoliberalist bubble. The signs of the collapse, including the traces of the violence (such as the boarded-up banks whose glass facades had been shattered as part of the assaults of protest), are still very much visible in Buenos Aires and environs, and the frustration, anger, and despair Gil records in the photographs of (*argentina*) has been exponentially greater.

traditional furred umbrella, stares off in to space, sitting quite apart from the woman and the boy and with his head turned away from them. Although his brow is pinched by some sign of consternation, whatever he is thinking or feeling remains unshared with anyone else. If the pictures of popular gatherings are disturbing--and even more disturbing are those involving inmates of the Borda--the sequence of images taken in the Recoleta are frankly depressing: being rich and powerful certainly has nothing to recommend it here.

Gil's photography is profoundly human in its commitments, not because of any element of engagement or commitment in a social and political sense. Rather, it is profoundly human precisely in its detachment from the subjects being portrayed. By in many cases abstracting them from the immediate cause of their emotions--or their apparent withdrawal from emotion--his goal is not to discount the importance of what produces those emotions, but rather to portray those emotions as manifestations of a historical condition of Argentines whom he senses to be alone, no matter what their class, with no expectations left.

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