

IN SELF DEFENSE

To live with a sensation of permanent insecurity in a social environment where values are being undermined by arbitrary violence; to come to feel that our own identity is the cause of our vulnerability, that one's sensation is multiplied indiscriminately...

Starting with the 2000-2001 economic and institutional crises in Argentina we began to experience a daily sensation of insecurity and violence in society. This was often based on real facts that were later absorbed and processed by political and media apparatuses, which to a great extent helped construct the sense of risk and insecurity and embed it in the social imagination.

Many of us, including me, have been victims of violent attacks such as armed robbery, with its attendant threat of death. The lucky ones who were not victims of fatal acts were contacted by the media, which contributed to the dissemination of a sensation of insecurity and transformed it into a commonplace experience, both on an individual and collective scale.

Fear is an emotion that is experienced individually, but created socially.

How is one's own experience connected with society?

According to Leonor Arfuch, certain themes and emphases in contemporary media make it possible to define and construct patterns of consensus, shared beliefs, and feelings. These themes invade intimate family structures and can easily intrude on our personal history.(1) Social insecurity infiltrates private space. The threat is everywhere. The discursive construction of insecurity produces states of mind centered on the feeling of fear and generates specific behaviors.

First of all, with each citizen assuming the role of inspector and with people resorting to preventive isolation, which leads to the destruction of neighborhood bonds, everyone becomes a suspicious person. Secondly, the tendency to cling to repressive power structures is reinforced, hence the demand for more police control.

One of the most effective means of exercising control over groups of people in today's capitalist system is to foster fear.

Fear occupies a central place in contemporary society, not only because of the increased risks that threaten us such as terrorism, crime, and the environment, but also because of the greater sense of uncertainty that characterize people's lives now. This generates a growing sense of fear, real and imaginary, throughout the world.

What are we afraid of? Who benefits from these fears?

The following are some conclusions and statements published after the September 2008 World Social Summit in Rome, which focused on "global fear." The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, from the University of Leeds, argues that fear comes and goes because it is bought and sold. It is a reflection of the constant struggle between liberty and security, "two of man's primary needs."

The pendulum now swings to security, but we feel a new and all-encompassing fear: "It is the fear of being inadequate, no good for anything. We know that we can be excluded if we are not clever enough, if we do not know how to seize all that life has given us." According to Bauman, this fear is coming from all corners of global capitalism: "The business we work for could disappear; our skills might not be needed anymore." This is where politics and the market come in, giving us a false sense of security.

Bauman says, "Fear is a permanent gain for the politicians, who seem to claim the duty to end it. It is the same for the businesses that offer us private security. Some of them would rather not resolve our fears, because each fear generates new profits."

Manipulating this sentiment, which turns a minority into an object of collective fear, offers big advantages, explains the psychoanalyst and philosopher James Hillman. "It unites the State because it creates a common enemy."

According to the sociologist of communications, David Altheide of Arizona State University, the language of the media creates, designs, and amplifies fear. Political power makes instrumental use of it.

Frank Furedi, a sociologist at the University of Kent posits that, “fear becomes a cultural totem, an ideology completely independent of real risks. When we face unpredictable risks such as the threat of terrorism, preventive policies count for nothing. The result is more vulnerability for the individual, who feels alone and becomes misanthropic and distrustful.”

“Fear and anxiety can destroy the ego... We have a tendency to behave more individualistically, avoiding the community and human contact.”

-Joanna Bourke, Professor of history at Birbeck College, University of London

Foundations of fear and the construction of the other as foreign and hostile

Daily habits are changed by imagined risks and refuge when social insecurity pervades private space.

Quiet, silence, withdrawal, isolation, disdain: to accommodate a contrived reality that frustrates our desires and ignores our basic needs, but which, for very complex reasons could be said to be cultural and atavistic, we accept as the natural order, pre-established and inviolable.

When fear is founded on generalized misgivings, it creates ephemeral communities and destroys open and lasting community.

We are facing the unfortunate triumph of a culture of pistols, double bolts and security cameras, armored and polarized windows; a “multiculture of egocentrism and ethnocentrism, of narrow-mindedness, suspicion, and envy... a multiculture of active boundary marking and ignorant intolerance.”(3)

The Project

With my own life experience as a point of departure, I began to notice that my feelings were duplicated all around me. I was immersed in problems of context. From then on I started to develop this project, in which I attempt to reflect on the mechanisms that succeed in implanting a sense of insecurity in society and the consequences, in terms of the values, that rule and sustain us.

Given the increasingly established trend in Argentina to keep firearms as an individual response to the growing sense of insecurity, I decided to work symbolically around the object: the firearm.

A series of photographic portraits of middle and upper class people in their homes. Each subject has a gun in his hand. The title of this work is "Potential." The decision to work with these segments of society goes against our normal model of people carrying weapons. In each society the collective imagination generates a stereotype of suspicious persons. The media's repeated images of a single theme and context anesthetize one's powers of observation and the possibility of their reflecting on what they see.

In addition to the photographs, I have been conceptually developing other pieces in different mediums such as video, interactive video installation, graphics (infographics- used mostly in the police section of the newspapers), and texts.

People who live with weapons embed the social paradox of insecurity in their private space, their house. Like a household cold war, the hypothesis of imminent danger is manifested in the weapon and the common situation of someone waiting for catastrophe.

"Vigil" is a series of videos with narratives of people who suffer from insecurity and fear and who have decided to live with a weapon in their homes.

The language of video allows me to work with the slow distillation of this desperate and empty time.

In all the different pieces, the portrait photographs, videos, and texts, I am seeking to convey the state of suspense. There is danger, but it is an assumption rather than an event. It is the supposed imminent danger that charges the scenes with tension, scenes that are dealt with elsewhere in familiar domestic settings and according to classic portrait typology. The *punctum*, which informs the hypothesis of potential danger, is the presence of the revolver.

“Lineup” is an interactive video installation project that on one hand literally describes the police device used for criminal identification, which the installation replicates. On the other hand it will point out the symbolic associations that are set in motion by involving the spectator in a game of mirrors. This is where the revolution of the wheel results in an unsettling reversibility between victims and victimizers. Besides identifying a suspicious person, it warns us that everyone is a discursive object, caught in the same anonymous and ubiquitous system based on the reproduction of fear.

Working on different pieces gives me the chance to use different approaches. I am working with documentary, conceptual, and representational elements. I am interested in working on the interconnections between the pieces in terms of their different mediums and approaches in order to explore possible paths in the construction of meaning.

“BANAL CRIMES” is the generic title of a project that encompasses all of the work that I have mentioned.(4) Working on different pieces gives me the chance to use different approaches. I am working with documentary, conceptual, and representational elements. I am interested in working on the interconnections between the pieces in terms of their different mediums and approaches in order to explore possible paths in the construction of meaning.

The works are motivated by concern and reflection on the fact that social relations have deteriorated to the point where the idea of violence is the only perceived means of resolving conflict. This becomes more prevalent every day.

It is about distrust and the negation of the nearness and closeness of the other. It is about an attitude of reclusion and alienation through which one excludes anyone who is unknown to them. This attitude forces the other to become a threatening or suspicious person. Reclusion in this sense eliminates the other.

In this project I attempt to evoke and put into play the words body, identity, identification, threat, imminence, violence, suspicion, and above all, fear.

“It is essential to combat the fear of fear,” says Michel Maffessoli. But how can we not be afraid at a time when the fragility of our institutions does not allow us to hold on to the old ideological dream of a perfect world? We are left with role-playing, he says, “the ability to reinvent ourselves, to simulate another identity, another possible world.” (5)

Quotations:

(1) Leonor Arfuch , *Crítica cultural entre política y poética*. 2007:84

(3) R. Hitzler. Beck, 2000: 143.

(4) ORDINARY CRIMES: “A name used by experts (police and investigators) to refer to deaths by firearms that do not occur during a robbery, but in interpersonal conflicts, accidents, and suicides.”

Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Argentina

Ministerio de Justicia de la República Argentina

(5) Quote from publication of the World Social Summit, “Fearless: discussion on how to combat global anguish.” Rome, September, 2008.

Sources:

Roland Barthes; Leonor Arfuch, *Critica cultural entre política y poética* (Doctor of Letters, University of Buenos Aires)

Valeria Gonzáles, independent curator and Professor of Visual Language, University of Buenos Aires

Rafael Vidal Jiménez (Doctor of Philosophy, University Complutense, Madrid) in the publication: “*El ‘Otro’ como enemigo: Identidad y reacción en la nueva ‘cultura del miedo’*,” *Revista crítica de ciencias sociales y jurídicas*

Eduardo Villar “*El otro en lugar de la amenaza,*” *Revista Cultural* of the daily *Clarín*, 2007.