

Research Master's programme Cultural Anthropology: Sociocultural Transformations (CASTOR)  
Utrecht University, the Netherlands

MSc Thesis *Elke Linders*

**TITLE: The art of social change: An ethnographic study of the cultural politics of a socio-political organization in Quilmes, Argentina**  
May 2012

Supervisor:

*Prof. Dr. Pansters, G. (Wil)*

Second Assessor:

*Prof. Dr. Eisenlohr, P.P (Patrick)*

Preferred journal of publication: *Latin American Perspectives*

Word count: 7,992 (18,473 including boxes)

# **The art of social change: An ethnographic study of the cultural politics of a socio-political organization in Quilmes, Argentina**

By Elke Linders

---

**ABSTRACT** - Through an analysis of the ways in which the socio-political movement Cultura Vallese constructs and inhabits the public sphere, this thesis emphasizes the under-theorized role of embodied participation, affect and emotion in politics. The artistic practices of Cultura Vallese, a movement based in Quilmes, Argentina, are conceptualized as cultural forms of mobilization, constitutive of a public realm in which ideas and knowledge are transmitted to members, audiences and the State. Furthermore, the artistic practices form an alternative terrain for political participation and for practicing a moderate form of activism for social movements that are supportive of the government. At the same time the public sphere created through artistic practices fosters a realm to negotiate the movement's relation to the State and safeguards the movement's continued political visibility. Cultura Vallese's artistic activities are interpreted as constitutive of a counter-public in Hirschkind's (2006) notion of the term, referring rather to the (alternative) *mode* in which ideas are disseminated, than to their *content* (whether oppositional or not). In that sense this thesis forms a critique of the traditional Habermasian interpretation of the public sphere, since it shows the limitations of conceptualizing debates in the public sphere as solely deliberative. In contrast, the members of Cultura Vallese implicitly spread political messages through their materialization and embodiment in images and artistic practices. By analyzing the microphysics of mobilization and participation in a socio-political movement, this ethnographic study contributes to an understanding of the ways in which affective ties and experience based forms of political participation play an important role in local Argentinean politics.

**KEY WORDS** - Latin America, social movements, cultural politics, art, public sphere, participation.

---

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

A train passes by a small crowd of people, gathered on a square near the railway station of Quilmes, a larger city in Greater Buenos Aires, Argentina. Three young women paint colourful flowers surrounded by white and blue ribbons on the trunk of a big old tree, which stands in front of an extensive brick wall and besides a somewhat ruinous playground. A few steps further, a short guy in a blue overall, dark dreads and pilot-sunglasses makes a black and white portrait of Perón that reaches all the way from the bottom to the top of the brick wall. Next to him, a guy covered in tattoos prepares different colours of paint in plastic bottle-bottoms, which are used by four others to repaint the playground equipment. His black sleeveless shirt has the same print as that of the rest. It says: '*Cultura Vallese. El arte de la política. Apoyando el proyecto nacional y popular*' (The art of politics. Supporting the national and popular project).

Cultura Vallese is a socio-political organization based in Quilmes, an industrial city south of Buenos Aires, home to nearly two and a half thousand *quilmeños*.<sup>1</sup> Above vignette is a description of an artistic intervention carried out by the members of Cultura Vallese to commemorate the birthday of Juan Domingo Perón, a former president whose ideology they adhere to. Cultura Vallese forms the so-called cultural part of a broader socio-political organization named Corriente Peronista Felipe Vallese.

Cultura Vallese supports – and is closely related to – the government, yet it simultaneously critiques and makes specific demands upon that same government. The members of Cultura Vallese have come to draw upon – predominantly participative – artistic expressions as a tool for social transformation. Their prime activities consist of running free, creative workshops in their cultural centre and the organization of a wide spectrum of artistic interventions related to various causes of justice, solidarity, and human rights.

The movement is made up of eleven members that run the cultural centre and the artistic interventions on a daily basis. Besides these members, Cultura Vallese is surrounded by a network of approximately twenty other people that attend the cultural centre on a regular basis, including others members as well as workshop teachers and artists. The participation of audiences in the artistic activities is highly valued. Therefore the category ‘member’ is not clearly delineated nor used in a strict manner. As a result the line between member and ‘casual participant’ is (deliberately) vague. Most of the members and participants of Cultura Vallese define their socio-economic status as “working middle-class” (*clase media trabajadora*) and are between the ages of twenty and forty. A considerable share consists of females in their early twenties, many of whom are raising a child under the age of five, without steady occupation. Most of the members between the ages of thirty and forty are male, and these take up more leading roles in the movement. I carried out ethnographic research about the daily activities of the eleven ‘regular members’ over the course of four months, in order to gain insight into the role of the movement’s artistic practices within the broader spectrum of their socio-political activities.

In the first chapter of his recent book on art and social movements in Mexico and Aztlán,<sup>2</sup> Edward McCaughan (2012:3) reminds us of the words of Janet Wolff (1990:1) who stated that “cultural politics [...] is not an optional extra – a respectable engagement in one of the more pleasant sectors of political action. It is a vital enterprise, located at the heart of the complex order which (re)produces [...] divisions in society.” Additional recent attention to the topics of culture and politics can be found in the two latest publications of the academic journal *Latin American Perspectives*. As Ariane Dalla Déa (2012:8) writes in the introduction to the second of these two publications dedicated to art, culture and politics, “artistic representations mediate social issues and criticize political practices that maintain the historic exclusion of women, indigenous peoples, and African descendants.” The authors in the publication stress “the value of art to the struggle for equality and human rights”.

This recent scholarly attention to the role of art in politics underlines that artistic representations of ideologies and claims of social movements in the public sphere should not be conceptualized as mere epiphenomena of ‘real’ political struggles. This argument is emphasized by various earlier case studies such as those of Palestinian graffiti, the wall paintings related to ‘The Troubles’ in Northern Ireland and Chinese pro-democratic student movements (Davies 2001; Chaffee 1993). In China for example, wall posters offered students a public voice through which they could influence and challenge political discourse (Chaffee 1993:26, 28). Latin America has a rich history of popular resistance in which the production of visual arts has often been an integral part of protest activities. In Argentina the development of *Rock Nacional* during the 1976-1983 dictatorship can be considered a cultural movement that provided youngsters with a space of their own, relatively protected from the military, which embodied a form of counterculture directed against the ideologies of the dictatorship (Vila 1987: 129). Similarly, during Pinochet’s regime in Chile, women’s production of tapestries formed the locus of an oppositional voice that allowed them to define the situation on their own terms (Adams 2002:38). Many scholars thus conceptualize art as

one of the means that social movements can use to ‘unfix’ dominant meanings attributed to a wide range of social phenomena (McCaughan 2002:100). In this manner, artistic expressions can be important vehicles to participate in public debates, express and contest cultural ideas, and forms of resistance and autonomous spaces.

Furthermore, the artistic practices of social movements can be thought of as forms of alternative political participation, and co-constructors of a public realm in which such alternative politics can take shape (Sutton 2007; Reséndiz 2010; Zuidervart 2011:122). Rather than merely conceptualizing political discourse in the public sphere as rational deliberation, as described in the influential work of Habermas (1989), we should pay attention to more “affective, expressive and experience based forms of discourse” (Newman & Clark 2009:140 based on Young 1990 and Fraser 1997). Through an analysis of what Auyero (2000:24) terms the “microphysics of politics”, in this case the study of everyday political participation in the socio-political movement Cultura Vallese, this thesis examines the ways in which social movements construct and inhabit a public sphere, and it emphasizes the under-theorized role of affect and emotion in politics. With this thesis I want to make a contribution to existing literature about the artistic practices of social movements as alternative discursive arena and seek to answer the following main research question: How can the artistic practices of Cultura Vallese be described and understood as manifestations of a public sphere?<sup>3</sup>

Based on four months of fieldwork, the argument that I put forward builds on three interrelated components that each form integral and recurring themes in the daily activities and discourses of Cultura Vallese’s members; *visibilidad* (visibility), *arte participativo* (participative art), and *educación alternativa* (alternative education). More than pointing at specific conceptual notions, these are emic terms that arose from the field. Based on an analysis of observations, informal conversations and interviews about these three components I argue that the members of Cultura Vallese, through their artistic activities that have a strong focus on participation, foster a public sphere in which they simultaneously mobilize (new) members, spread their principles and ideologies and negotiate their relationship with the State. The artistic practices of Cultura Vallese are conceptualized as a form of alternative political participation, of which affect and experience form integral aspects.

The thesis is structured as follows. First I situate this research within significant anthropological discussions about social movements, cultural politics, and artistic practices in the public sphere in Latin American context. This theoretical outline is followed by an elaboration of the research methodology. Then I proceed with my main ethnographic analysis in which I first give a short introduction of recent historical and current socio-political activism in Argentina. In this part I describe the process in which a large segment of socio-political movements in Argentina aligned themselves with the governments of Néstor and Cristina Kirchner and relate this alignment to a shift from political to cultural mobilization. The second part of the ethnography situates Cultura Vallese within this context and analyzes its current negotiated relationship with the municipality, while paying attention to the notions of autonomy, authenticity and visibility. In the third part of the ethnography I analyse how the members of Cultura Vallese perform and talk about participative art to explain how they create and inhabit a public sphere of political participation. I deploy Hirschkind’s (2006) notion of counter-public to emphasize that political participation in the public sphere should not solely be interpreted as deliberative. In the fourth and final part I examine the ways in which Cultura Vallese’s artistic practices generate space for alternative modes of education and political participation in which the members of Cultura Vallese share and transmit ideas and knowledges, and mobilize (new) members. I pay specific attention to alternative – affective, expressive, experience based – forms of political

participation and the role of signifying practices in the socio-political movement. In conclusion I reflect on the role of the artistic practices and cultural politics of a socio-political organization in the (co)construction of a public realm that generates alternative modes of political participation and mobilization, which highlights the significance of emotion, experience and embodiment in local Argentinean politics.

## II. CULTURAL POLITICS IN THEORY

### **Social movements and cultural politics**

The notion of cultural politics provides a useful starting point to gain insight into how social movements practice politics through processes of meaning making. Social movement activists' efforts to construct, spread and legitimize alternative meanings attributed to objects, events and experiences make them signifying agents engaged in the politics of signification just like states, local authorities, media and others (Mc Adam et al. 1996; Baumann 2007:57; Snow et al. 2007:384). In other words, they take part in cultural politics by seeking to further counter-hegemonic ideas (Alvarez et al. 1998:7). Their endeavour to establish shared understandings, ideas that were not necessarily widely accepted before, can be considered essential to the process of achieving social change (Baumann 2007:50). We should, however, be careful not to conceive of cultural politics as "disembodied struggles over meanings and representations" (Alvarez et al 1998:2), but pay attention to the pressing reality of material needs in Latin American context (Nash 2005:55). In this respect Escobar and Alvarez (1992:322) state that social movement activists orchestrate their actions both along the lines of their ideological as well as strategic and pragmatic considerations. The alternative terrains of signification that social movements can be said to create and operate in, are irrevocably tied to economic and political power struggles, in an environment in which signifying agents occupy different positions in the social hierarchy and have dissimilar access to material resources (Foweraker and Craig 1990; Jordan and Weedon 1995:463). This means that the symbolic and the material, meanings and practices, and the cultural and the political are entangled; neither can be totally reduced to the other and they are mutually constitutive. In this line, Brooksbank Jones (2000:14) states that "cultural politics in Latin America has never been reducible to culture with political pretensions and/or politics with a cultural dimension". In what way can we understand social movements as "crucial arena for understanding how this perhaps precarious yet vital entanglement of the cultural and the political occurs in practice (Alvarez et al. 1998:5)"?

### **Activist art as an alternative discursive arena**

One of the ways in which the cultural politics of social movements become visible is in their cultural and artistic practices in the public sphere. Social movements often draw upon and play with images, symbols and styles of representation present in traditional and contemporary popular culture that people can understand and are already familiar with (Bonnell 1997:7). In this light Hall (1981:228) argues that popular culture represents an important site for public debate and for individual and community agency. In this site, a struggle is fought to preserve as well as contest hegemonic cultural norms. Popular culture is not something consumed in a passive unconscious manner. On the contrary, and especially in the case of activist art, people creatively employ popular culture in their daily lives to form and convey meanings. As Barajas (2000:14) shows in his exploration of political cartoons in Mexico, artistic representations have the ability to make abstract and complex worlds of politics

accessible to the public by translating it into simple and comprehensible images. Art can therefore be seen as a powerful tool for spreading and defending ideologies. Hence, following Mouffe (2007:4), I do not conceive of art and politics as “two separately constituted fields [...] between which a relation would need to be established”. Artistic practices essentially have a political dimension for they take part in the formation and maintenance of a given symbolic order, or in its contestation. In turn, the political has an aesthetic dimension for it concerns the “symbolic ordering of social relations”.

Various studies of art in social movements describe activist art as a means of engaging in public debate and, mostly following Nancy Fraser’s (1990) notion of counter-publics, interpret activist art as the proliferation of an alternative social space that can be seen as a “parallel discursive arena where members of subordinated groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, so as to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interest and needs” (Fraser 1990:67). Vila (1987:129), for example, sees the socio-cultural movement of Rock Nacional in Argentina as a counterculture directed against the ideologies of the dictatorship, which provided youngsters with a space of their own, relatively protected from the military. Campbell (1993a; 1993b) notes how artistic expressions conveyed specific ideologies of the Mexican COCEI movement,<sup>4</sup> and hence became sites of political debate. Based on her study of art in the protest movement against Pinochet in Chile, Adams (2002) argues that artistic practices can be the locus of an oppositional and counter-hegemonic voice. More recently, Zavella (2012:27) notes in her study of a Latino/a punk band, that popular culture, especially music, can create an ‘important political space for expressing feelings and thoughts about nativist discourses’ within the context of debates about migration from Mexico. Saunders (2012:43-44) conceptualizes the underground hip-hop movement in Cuba as a manifestation of an “Afro-descendant counterculture of modernity”, and understands this counterculture as a “transnational conversation with African and afro-descendant populations” which “offers the excluded an opportunity to address their needs in a democratic space”.

In this manner, artistic expressions are conceptualized as important communication devices to provide cultural ideas, engage in social commentary, influence public as well as forms of resistance and autonomous spaces. These public spheres, that social movements are said to operate in, should not be seen as pre-configured spaces. Public art builds rather than assumes a public sphere for it is a manifestation of the symbolic political performance in which activists make their alternative ideas, claims, and demands visible to a broader audience (Wiegink 2011:2; Zuidervaart 2011:120-121). To be able to analyse how social movements’ artistic expressions inhabit and create alternative public spheres, the following section takes a closer look at the notion of the public sphere.

### **Public spheres, participation and emotion**

Whereas the influential conceptualizations of Jürgen Habermas (1989) and Hannah Arendt (1998) conceive of the public sphere as a place where consent can be reached through deliberation, others have argued that in light of social movement activism, it might be more useful to speak of a battleground in which a multiplicity of voices – in a multiplicity of public spheres – struggle to be heard (Mouffe 2007:3). Accordingly, extensive critiques, most notably by Nancy Fraser (1990), exist on the exclusionary tendencies inherent in the notion of *the* public sphere and have argued for the existence of multiple, alternative public spheres. Such critiques propose the notion of counter-, alternative- or sub-publics. In Fraser’s concept of counter-public, the prefix ‘counter’ refers to the oppositional content of the discourses spread in alternative public spheres,

that oppose hegemonic discourses (Warner 2002:84; Hirschkind 2006:232f3). Warner (2002:84) states that the only thing *different* in such concept of counter-publics (as opposed to a dominant public sphere) is the word ‘oppositional’, whereas the prominence of deliberation in such theories persists.

Hirschkind’s (2006) use of the same term counter-public, which I deploy for the analysis of the artistic practices of Cultura Vallese, adds another component. His use of the prefix ‘counter’ in counter-public does not only refer to the oppositional *content* of the discourse, but furthermore to the different *ways* in which these contents are created and disseminated, which allows room for other forms of discourse, than that generated through deliberation. By emphasizing the act of listening to religious sermons as a new political terrain in which the (Egyptian Islamic) listener founds and inhabits a public sphere, he highlights the ‘sensory’ aspects of political participation (Hirschkind 2006:107). Similarly, Young (1996:120) proposes a theory of communicative democracy as an alternative to deliberative democracy, in which greetings, rhetoric and storytelling are types of communication that, besides argument, play a significant role in political discussion. She refers to different forms of speech and gestures surrounding deliberation, such as politeness and greeting, and the role of emotions and desires that surround and play a part in rational persuasion, but are often overlooked.

Recently, various scholars have drawn attention to the role of affect and emotion in politics (Lazar 2004, Adams 2002, Newman & Clark 2009, Young 1996, Goodwin et. al. 2000, Jasper 1998). For example, besides having an entertaining value, the experiences of the lively atmosphere of a political gathering strengthens solidarity; the feeling to form part of the mass (De La Torre 1992). In this manner, politics have an affective dimension. Lazar (2004:236) points out that in El Alto, Bolivia, through the utterance of slogans, collectively performing songs, and hearing passionate speeches, “politics becomes oral and aural”; politics become about wearing the national colours, about being part of the crowds and the performance. In her study on protest against Pinochet in Chile, Adams (2002:25) describes the role of emotions that art can arouse in people and how emotions and companionship “draw people into collective action, often irrationally.” She notes that such aroused emotions have various uses for socio-political movements, including mobilizing resources and convincing people of the righteousness of their cause. As Rubin (1994:113) found in his study of the Mexican COCEI movement, sympathizers did not pay much attention to strategy, which suggests that solidarity with the movement did not result from “a linear understanding of objectives, strategies, and achievements” but they were rather “embedded in the combination of official (COCEI) history and complex, non-linear political and cultural experiences within the movement and the city”.

The affective and emotional aspects of political involvement lead us to draw attention to activists’ physical presence in the public sphere. In other words, political agency manifests itself in embodied performances of protest. Sutton (2007:139) argues that within social movement theory, the role of the body is understudied and she stresses the significance of “material bodies in the transformation of social relations and history” (130). Similarly, Parkins (2000:60) states that “we cannot think of political agency in abstraction from embodiment”. As Sutton (2007:40) further notes, the physical needs, vulnerabilities, characteristics and courage of activists cannot be detached from protest activities. Activists employ bodily skills and endurance to reach political goals (Peterson 2001:74).

Interpretations of political participation in the public sphere that pay attention to affect, emotion and experience, show that public debate, and hence political participation, does not solely happen through deliberation. The observation that the

affective and expressive dimensions of politics are equally important as their political content perhaps reveals a critique of the public sphere, at least when envisioned as a sphere for solely verbal and deliberative political debate (Lomnitz 1995:32). This theoretical overview relating the notions of cultural politics, social movements and the public sphere serves as a background for the analysis provided in the following ethnographic analysis, in which I explore how art, political participation, and affective and emotional experiences are linked in the practices of a social movement.

### **Research methodology and field methods**

This thesis emerges from a four month qualitative research study on the artistic practices of Cultura Vallese, a socio-political movement in Quilmes, Buenos Aires, Argentina, conducted in 2011. The study is mainly based on informal conversations with Cultura Vallese's leaders and members. It also incorporates ethnographic observations of everyday collective practices, gathered during participant observation in the daily activities of the members of Cultura Vallese. This meant my presence at the organization's cultural centre in the heart of the city of Quilmes. I have been present at and participated in their artistic practices which ranged from the recuperation of a children's playground and the revitalization of an elderly home, to the painting of political murals, forming part of the local mayor's elective campaign caravan, and to undertake a week-trip to the province of Tucuman to support the local indigenous struggle for land rights. The study also includes semi-structured interviews, which I audio-taped (Rubin & Rubin 1995). During these interviews I usually deployed a question guide but permitted flexibility for interviewees to introduce other topics and concerns. Apart from interviews with the leaders and members of Cultura Vallese, I carried out interviews and held informal conversations with participants in Cultura Vallese's artistic interventions, local journalists, local government officials, socio-political activists, local artists, a union member and a co-organizer of the cultural centre in a recuperated factory. Most, though not all, of these research participants were identified through Cultura Vallese's social network.

## **III. CULTURAL POLITICS IN PRACTICE**

### **1. CONTEXT: SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE STATE IN CONTEMPORARY ARGENTINA**

An understanding of recent historical and current socio-political activism in Argentina, serves to contextualize the politico-artistic practices of Cultura Vallese. First I introduce the strategic alignment of a large segment of Argentinean social movements with the national government. Then I describe a 'cultural opening' in contemporary Buenos Aires, referring to the various interactions between culture, art and politics in society at large. These two contextual outlines, aid our understanding of Cultura Vallese's shift from political to cultural mobilization, as well as its relation to the government, both described in the second part of this ethnography. The context provided in this part furthermore serves to demonstrate that Cultura Vallese is not entirely unique in its relationship with the state, nor is the fact that its members employ cultural and artistic activities.

### **From opposition to *kirchnerismo***

A notable recent process in Argentina is the alignment of a large segment of social movements with the center-left government of Néstor Kirchner. Néstor Kirchner took office in 2003 and after his presidential term ended, his wife Cristina Fernández de Kirchner was elected to carry further his political project and hence the relationship with the social movements. She was re-elected for another four years in October 2011. Whereas in the context of the 2001 crisis large scale social protest and discontent culminated in the famous public demand *que se vayan todos* (let them all leave), a widespread discrediting of all political and economic institutions, from 2003 onward important social movements such as *Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* (Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo) started to increasingly align themselves with the government (Boyanovsky Bazán 2010, Biglieri 2007). Aspects of Néstor Kirchner's political discourse proved attractive to a variety of social movements that furthermore recognized the strategic benefits of taking part in a governmental project. Apart from his land regulation policies, the promotion of Latin American integration and his announcement to 'recuperate politics',<sup>5</sup> Néstor Kirchner made certain symbolic gestures such as removing the portraits of former Military School directors Jorge Videla and Reynaldo Bignone, notorious dictators in Argentina's 1976-1983 military dictatorship, from the Military School (Boyanovsky Bazán 2010:7). This act appears as an important reference point in the view of various militants. Furthermore Néstor Kirchner handed over the Escuela de la Mecánica de la Armada (ESMA), known as a notorious torture centre during the military dictatorship, to human rights organizations, including H.I.J.O.S. and Las Madres,<sup>6</sup> after which it was renamed ex-ESMA. The significance of the former act is well illustrated by the following words of Hebe de Bonafini, President of the Association of Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo: "Néstor gave us back our fatherland [...] the day when he said "proceed" and ordered [General Roberto] Bendini to take down Videla's portrait" (De Bonafini 2011).

Various scholars note the populist tendencies of Néstor Kirchner's government (Boyanovsky Bazán 2010, Biglieri 2007, Laclau 2005). Catchphrases about economic protectionism, recuperating public space, and a clear friend-enemy discourse – in which the Argentinean people figure as actors with historical potential and are equated with *kirchnerismo* – point at populist strategies (Laclau 2005:99). Notably, Néstor Kirchner fostered a direct relationship between the State and social movements. By appointing social movement activists to various governmental positions, he secured their voice in the State, but also incorporated them into his project (Boyanovsky Bazán 2010:7).

A large share of previous opposition movements moved away from protest in search of a place in Néstor Kirchner's 'new political process' and became part of the government's social base and militant power. The social activists did not leave the streets but directed their acts towards protecting and supporting the government, their *fuerza popular* now predominantly deployed to carry further the governmental project (Boyanovsky Bazán 2010:13). These activists have been criticized by others who maintain that they should remain independent. Social movements that cooperate with the government, a segment commonly grouped under the label of *kirchnerismo*, are accused of being soft, to have sold themselves out, and to be conciliators, 'bourgeoisified' (Boyanovsky Bazán 2010:12). As one of the co-organizers of the cultural centre in a recuperated factory observed, there exists a co-opted realm of activism, created by the President, in which many people do not find a voice. Furthermore, many of the social movements that formed during the crisis years, with

had its peak in 2001, suffer the permanent allegation of clientelist politics (Boyanovsky Bazán 2010:10). This contention is nourished by the fact that their members are mobilized through social welfare programs and soup kitchens in poor neighbourhoods.

However, to interpret social movements' alignment with kirchnerismo as mere cooptation or another manifestation of the pervasive clientelist practices that seem to haunt Argentinean politics does not do justice to the complexity of political alliances. Drawing a parallel between the socio-political movements of the 2000s and those of the 1970s – despite substantial differences - can provide insights into social movements' strategic alignment with political leaders. In the 1970s, the Juventud Peronista, one of the major activist groups in Argentina at the time, built its militancy around the leadership of Perón while maintaining its own initiatives. Not all their practices were in accordance with Perón's governmental strategy. Similarly, social movements that align themselves with kirchnerismo, strive to maintain a certain distance from the State and its bureaucratic structures. Consistent with the movements' strategic interests, their leaders tighten and loosen the relation (Boyanovsky Bazán 2010:10). In this light we could speak of a pendular relation; at times, social organizations' actions represent the official position, at times not, and may even take a confrontational stance (Boyanovsky Bazán 2010:11).

### **'Cultural opening' in contemporary Buenos Aires**

The new role for a vast segment of social movements has called for different forms of militancy, less oppositional, confrontational and intense, towards more peaceful ones. Many of these movements now draw on cultural activities, which can be framed as a transition from political to cultural mobilization. It is in relation to this transition that we can place a general upsurge of politico-cultural activities in contemporary Buenos Aires. Here, I give an overview of various activities and practices that combine politics and culture/art throughout the research period.

Various socio-political organizations, such as La Campora, Juventud Peronista, and Movimiento Evita run community centres in which they organize a variety of activities ranging from tango classes to homework assistance. In the poor neighbourhood of Baracas, in the south of the capital, Movimiento Evita, for example cooperates with the local cultural centre El Conventillo and a group of former students of La Escuela de Belles Artes, grouped together in Colectivo Carpani, to paint murals in the neighbourhood. On occasion governmental institutions solicit paintings, such as the National Commission of Communication's request for Colectivo Carpani to decorate the office's outer wall with a mural 'Argentina Conectada' (Argentina Connected), which illustrates the national telecommunication plan. According to the commission this plan is "a political and social initiative that changes our way of communication, to secure multi-vocality, democratization of access to information technology, knowledge, entertainment and digital and social inclusion".<sup>7</sup> Another governmental project that involved murals in the spring of 2011 was called 'Pinto la historia' (I paint history), in which the government contracted artists to visit marginalized neighbourhoods all over the country and organize workshops (again through local cultural centres run by kirchnerist groups) in which children learn about the history of their neighbourhood and together contemplate the neighbourhood's future. This process is reflected in the murals they make with the children. Guillermo is one of these contracted artists and member of Brigada Plástica, a collective of artists united in support of President Cristina Kirchner. Having worked in the past with stencils of protest art, he now

cooperates and identifies with the government. Furthermore, Guillermo mentioned to me that he feels that in order to change something, you should get close to it.

In general, during the research period various meetings and conferences paid attention to the intersections of art and activism in Argentina. For instance the two-day seminar ‘Cuerpos Desobedientes: Nuevos cruces entre arte y política en América Latina en los años 80’ (Disobedient Bodies: New intersections between art and politics in Latin America in the 80s) organized by an international group of researchers named Red Conceptualismos del Sur. Another example of the recent interest in art and politics is the ‘Primer Encuentro de Arte y Espacio Público’ (First Meeting of Art and Public Space) organized by CIDAC.<sup>8</sup> CIDAC is a department of the faculty of Philosophy and Arts (Filosofía y Letras) of the University of Buenos Aires (UBA) situated in the neighbourhood of Baracas which opened with the intention to simultaneously improve and research the neighbourhood through alliances with its various cultural centres.

The young journalist Agustina Kämpfer, girlfriend of Argentina’s current Vice President Amado Boudou, launched the youth magazine “Minga!” about rock and politics. A clear instance of direct cultural promotion from the state is the ‘Mesa de Jóvenes para la Cultura’ (Roundtable of Youth for Culture), which builds an alliance amongst various artists and the government to jointly organize cultural activities that support the national and popular project. Artistically supporting Las Madres during their weekly round on the Plaza de Mayo was an initiative that came from this round table of which Cultura Vallese and Brigada Plástica form part. On special Peronist dates, various groups that support Cristina Kirchner’s government gather on the Plaza de Mayo. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of October, for example, these groups together with the government organized a cultural event with music, live painting and a *murga* to commemorate and celebrate Perón’s release from prison in 1945.<sup>9</sup>

The members of Cultura Vallese refer to above developments as an “apertura cultural” (cultural opening). The politico-artistic activities of the social movements aligned with kirchnerismo seem to be incorporated into a realm controlled, or at least facilitated by the state, perhaps even bordering on cooptation. In this sense it is hard to frame such activities as counter-publics, or practices that foster alternative discourses. However, as I elaborate in the next section, the realm of art and creativity proves a key area for Cultura Vallese’s members to negotiate their relation with the State as well as to further their ideologies. As we shall see, the members of Cultura Vallese move back and forth between various degrees of support and critique of the local and national government.

## 2. VISIBILITY & AUTONOMY: CULTURA VALLESE’S NEGOTIATED PRESENCE IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

“Like always, we are going to be in the periphery of everything, doing our own thing” says Cultura Vallese’s leader Lucas to the members of the socio-political movement during a meeting before their participation in an activity supportive of the land rights struggle of indigenous people in Tucuman. Since staff members of the municipality of Quilmes will be present as well, Lucas emphasizes Cultura Vallese’s autonomy with respect to the municipality. This comment is exemplary for Cultura Vallese’s members’ continued effort to voice their independence from the municipality. Even though in their verbal statements the autonomy of the movement

is unquestioned, leader Lucas, as well as two other members, holds a municipal job and wishes that the municipality provides more members with positions in the municipality, so that they can practice their activities with a greater financial security. This is what the movement hoped to achieve after the municipal elections in October 2011, a desire that, to the best of my knowledge, has so far not materialized. The members of Cultura Vallese say that they deserve this recognition from the municipality, because of the efficiency of their supportive activities that “cost little and achieve a lot”. When granted municipal positions, they envision carrying out their municipal work in the morning, and practice their social movement activities in the afternoon. It is difficult to interpret the apparent discrepancies in members’ verbal statements and acts without insights into possible hidden agendas behind either remaining autonomous or receiving support from the municipality. However, it seems valid to interpret these apparent discrepancies as negotiating strategies through which the members of Cultura Vallese try to make their simultaneous support for and desired independence from the municipality intelligible and acceptable to themselves and their environment; as manifestations of the struggle through which they give their alignment with the municipality a place into the overall objectives and principles of the movement. Cultura Vallese can be said to attempt to preserve a peripheral position in relation to the municipality. This means that they support the government and carry further its ideologies, while simultaneously struggling to remain outside of its bureaucratic structures.

Cultura Vallese’s negotiated alignment with the municipality of Quilmes can be illustrated by means of an analysis of its artistic activities. I will precede this analysis by a description of Cultura Vallese’s formation and its shift from political to cultural forms of mobilization. The artistic activities are believed to provide the members with a relative autonomy from the state for their creative and spontaneous nature. Another important function of art is what Auyero (2000:11) calls ‘political objectification’. Auyero uses the term to refer to the part that large scale political gatherings play in political actors’ efforts to perform a political presence and gain visibility in the public sphere. I argue that artistic performances similarly serve as spaces to enact political visibility. Through such ‘image events’ (DeLuca 1999) the members of Cultura Vallese support as well as critique the municipality.

### **Corriente Peronista Felipe Vallese**

The socio-political movement Corriente Peronista Felipe Vallese was formed in opposition to the government in 1999 in the midst of the turbulence leading up to the 2001 crisis. The movement’s name Felipe Vallese is a reference to the first person that disappeared for political reasons in Argentina in 1962, which forms a clear denunciation of contemporary institutions. In contrast, the members of Cultura Vallese, the ‘cultural part’ of the socio-political movement Corriente Peronista Felipe Vallese, now call themselves “super K”; a common way to express kirchnerista identity. While they denominate former President Menem as “anti-fatherland”, they feel better represented than ever – excluding the administration of Perón himself – by both Kirchners. The movement Corriente Peronista Felipe Vallese was founded with the objective of achieving better living conditions for all and one of its key activities was the organization of soup kitchens in poor neighbourhoods, a necessity and widespread social movement activity at the time. Furthermore, its members participated in demonstrations and road blocks to demand social justice. In these years they also assisted workers in the recuperation of the metallurgical factory IMPA (Industria Metalúrgica y Plástica Argentina) and the installation of its cultural centre.<sup>10</sup>

A closer look at the prime objectives of Cultura Vallese, and the strategies employed to realize those, sheds light on Cultura Vallese's current alignment with the municipality. Cultura Vallese's main goal is to foster social change in the sense of creating better living conditions for all with respect to social justice, human rights and equality. These are furthermore key Peronist ideals. In order to reach this goal they follow two strategies. One, they try to generate direct changes in people and places on a day to day basis through their artistic activities, in which they spread notions of solidarity and cooperation, and raise awareness (topics discussed in the following parts of this ethnography). Two, they strive for political power to generate these changes on a larger scale and to change policies and laws. It is in light of the second strategy that we should place Cultura Vallese's alignment with the government.

Joaquín, an energetic young man in his early thirties who is the only professional, although autodidact, artist of Cultura Vallese, explains that "to win the mayoralty" was part of Cultura Vallese's political strategy. The current Mayor of Quilmes, Fransico 'Barba' Gutiérrez, forms part of the Corriente Peronista Felipe Vallese. With regard to Cultura Vallese's alignment with the municipality another member, Marcos, also in his thirties comments that:

The [political] left has a great problem. They always want to be outside of the system. Fighting against the system is like HIV. You attack the body from the inside, and destruct it towards the outside [...] If you want redistribution or equality or whatever other objective you have, you need to engage with the system, and afterwards from there, implode it so that it falls apart.

Even though the members of Cultura Vallese might not agree with every single aspects of 'the national and popular project' carried further by the Partido Justicialista, to which both President Cristina Kirchner and Quilmes' Mayor 'Barba' belong, they support it to be able to influence it from the inside.

### **Towards a cultural activism**

While thus clearly organized in opposition to the institutions of the time (1999), the members of Cultura Vallese say that under both Kirchner's governments much has changed and therefore they "remain activists, but more calm". As a consequence the movement probed for different modes of political practice and started to deploy artistic practices. That the movement's use of art for politics is a fairly recent development can be illustrated by the following quote from Cultura Vallese's leader Lucas, a vigorous man in his forties with a political activist history:

We won the IMPA, and formed its cultural centre. But after that, it wasn't as if we were absorbed by that, because the political activities happened in other areas. The political presence and the form in which you expressed your ideas weren't from culture, it was all very 'under' Today, everything is cultural, but this has to do with the politics of the State.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, under the governance of Néstor and Cristina Kirchner, the members of Cultura Vallese encountered a new political terrain in which to practice politics, namely through cultural activities. Lucas, who was part of the movement from the start, continues to sum up a number of governmental changes that influenced his movement's alignment with the government and subsequent move to cultural activism:

They repatriated I don't know how many scientists, organized tecnópolis,<sup>12</sup> they produce advanced technology in our country. So everything is changing, and as a result your political work is being absorbed. [...] This entire dynamics of

consultation leads you to abstain from particular varieties of activism and struggle. The principles are the same from when we blocked roads and had canteens, when now we practice art.

This shows that Cultura Vallese's transition from political to cultural mobilization is related to specific changes in government policies. Now that Cultura Vallese identifies more with these policies, and supports Quilmes' Mayor Gutiérrez, Cultura Vallese's members do no longer go out on the street to make a *quilombo* (mess) but seek different ways to express their presence and voice their support as well as opposing demands to the municipality.

Cultura Vallese's alignment with the government thus meant a change in its practices; its political activism shifted from soup kitchens and roads blocks towards culture and art. This first translated into a more general focus on schooling people in a variety of competences, which ranged from hairdressing to welding. More recently, in the context of the 'cultural opening' described in the previous part, and because of the fact that members have artistic capacities, they started to draw more on artistic activities, while they retain a focus on schooling. Practicing politics through art is seen by the members of Cultura Vallese as a form of activism, as a modality of doing politics that they choose as a group. This leads to the question why they choose art in particular to practice their activism. I examine three probable explanations for Cultura Vallese's shift to artistic activities.

First, the members of Cultura Vallese ascribe emancipatory qualities to participation in artistic activities. Participative art and the social transformations it is envisioned to entail are topics discussed in the third part of this ethnography. Secondly, while Cultura Vallese's members searched for different, less oppositional modes in which to practice their activism, art offered them a form of militancy that could be labelled more 'soft', but still overtly expressive. In this manner public art safeguards the movement's visibility in the public sphere. This political objectification makes sure that Cultura Vallese remains a visible and identifiable political actor (Auyero 2000:11). This is related to the third explanation of the movement's use of art. Since Cultura Vallese aligned itself with the government, the notion of independence gained weight. For members the artistic and creative activities form a sphere relatively free from interference by the municipality. They ascribe this relative freedom from interference to the spontaneous and hence more authentic nature of their artistic practices. While they searched for something 'mild' but still on their own terms, art and creativity form a terrain for political activism in which the members of Cultura Vallese strive to maintain a peripheral position in relation to the government; to simultaneously support and remain independent from the municipality, as I explain in further detail below.

The following section looks at the way in which the members of Cultura Vallese negotiate their relationship with the state, and support as well as critique the municipality through their artistic activities. I first look at the spontaneity of the acts and how this spontaneity is interpreted to contribute to the movement's autonomy. Then I look at the value that the members of Cultura Vallese attach to visibility, to subsequently elaborate upon three events that exemplify Cultura Vallese's 'pendular relation' of support and critique towards the municipality.

### **Direct Action: spontaneity, visibility and authenticity**

The cultural centre's brightly pink painted hallway is packed with items waiting to be carried to the trunk of the white van parked near the road. Three banners lean against the flowers that are painted on the wall and surrounded by blue and white ribbons that represent Argentina's national colours. Fernando appears in one of the doors and manoeuvres his way through all the items that occupy the floor: a pile of stacked drums, a large bucket containing white paint, two large black music speakers, and a plastic tray filled with small bottles holding an assortment of coloured paint and differently sized brushes. In *el fondo*, the garden, Natalia and Ana last-minutely stamp the logo and slogan of Cultura Vallese on a number of black T-shirts with their serigraphy tools.

This is a typical late-morning scene for Cultura Vallese's members on the day of an activity. In their cultural centre, alternately referred to as *La Rosadita*, 'Moreno',<sup>13</sup> or simply *el local*, members drop in from the early hours on and start to gather materials in the hallway, post the details of the event of the day on their Facebook wall, or upload the pictures taken the day before. Generally, Cultura Vallese's artistic activities do not involve a lot of preparation. Members do not decide in advance exactly where or what to paint. Often only the occasion and the message they want to get across is clear from the beginning. Minimal planning, which the members refer to as 'direct action', allows for spontaneity and in their view contributes to the authenticity of Cultura Vallese's interventions. As they say: "In practice, things never work out as planned, so why waste time on that?" In the words of a befriended artist: "Peronism does not have a fixed time schedule, it is spontaneous."

Their preference for spontaneity, minimal planning and authenticity can be interpreted as the outcome of their wariness to become co-opted by the State and to be absorbed into its bureaucratic structures now that they support the municipality. Hence, this preference can be seen as a manifestation of the endeavour to manage and maintain their independence. Related to the notion of autonomy, the idea of Cultura Vallese's continued visibility as an identifiable political actor is of significance.

The members of Cultura Vallese postulate that to practice politics, you have to make sure you are visible, that you make your presence and demands visible. Similar to the way in which large scale political mobilizations can provide such 'political objectification' (Auyero 2000:11), artistic activities possess a comparable capacity to make the existence of (opposing) claims and ideas visible in the public sphere. Such activities can be named 'image events', a term coined by DeLuca (1999) to refer to, albeit on the larger scale of the environmental movement's use of media, "complex ritual performances" in which activists communicate their messages to an audience. The following quote from leader Lucas illustrates the low costs and high visibility of staging an image event:

Gathering a large crowd for a march, for example, costs a lot in transportation, refreshments, and at least a week organizing time. Then the audience will for a moment say: "Oh there you have those of Cultura Vallese", whereas going with five people and four big dolls attracts a higher visibility and costs less time. You load it in the car in the morning, and in the afternoon you are here, and people are taking pictures the entire day.

Cultura Vallese's interest in visibility also becomes apparent in acts such as the search for the right place to paint a mural: preferably a central location, for example visible from the train. It also shines through their repeated phrase "we are tomorrow's news". Often Cultura Vallese's activities are mentioned in local

newspapers. The artistic interventions, which members accompany with large banners and T-shirts with the name of the movement, make Cultura Vallese visible and identifiable as a socio-political movement in the public sphere. If we think of the public sphere as a realm in which citizens can influence State policy, Cultura Vallese's actions can be understood as constitutive of communicative channels and mechanisms of negotiation between society and state. Their artistic actions open up and generate a specific realm in which support for as well as demands to the State, can be communicated. Whereas in general the practices of Cultura Vallese support Cristina Kirchner and Quilmes' Mayor Gutiérrez, they also voice critique of the government and try to make the government adopt certain laws. Cultura Vallese, for example, participated in the demand for a new media law to de-monopolize the broadcasting industry and for a music law in favour of Argentinean music productions. In the remainder of this part I examine how Cultura Vallese's simultaneous support and autonomy with respect to the state leads to apparent contradictions and I look at the ways in which the members of Cultura Vallese negotiate these contradictions.

Cultura Vallese's leader distinguishes their support of the municipality from other popular organizations that align with the government. Whereas these groups are said to receive straightforward funding to carry out certain activities, the members of Cultura Vallese maintain that ideologically, they cannot accept such funding. The members stress that they choose whether to cooperate and how. For example, the municipality requested a cultural act for the inauguration of a catamaran that was to shuttle from the Puerto Madero harbour in Buenos Aires, to the dock in Quilmes. The members of Cultura Vallese decided to accept the invitation and to make an iron statue of recycled material named La Primavera (Spring). For them it is important to remain autonomous in how they carry out the artistic activity. The spontaneity and creativity of the event, in which they used recycled material, functioned to demonstrate that second-hand material can still be valuable. So in this instance, Cultura Vallese showed its loyalty to the municipality while at the same time seizing the opportunity to spread its ideas. As Lazar (2004:236) argues, creative and artistic manifestations of support for political leaders are "cultural forms" of trying to compel politicians to return the favour and comply with their promises in terms of a "reciprocal duty to the electorate." Later, the municipality bought the Primavera statue from Cultura Vallese, with which the movement financed its trip to Tucuman, where they supported indigenous people's struggle for land rights. A trip arranged to coincide with a municipal delegation's visit to the indigenous community. In this manner the members of Cultura Vallese strategically used informal ties of solidarity and reciprocity to negotiate their interaction with the municipality. The informal request from the municipality on the one hand, and the unwritten expectation of reciprocity from Cultura Vallese on the other, show that Cultura Vallese's artistic activities generate a realm for negotiation. In a way it can be said that Cultura Vallese's members circumvent accepting direct funding from the state by the sale of the statue, which makes the acceptance of resources from the municipality acceptable and consistent with the movement's ideological standpoint of autonomy. Hence, in this instance the paradox of Cultura Vallese's alignment with the municipality of Quilmes became evident. In addition this negotiation forms an illustration of the affective side of politics, a topic discussed more in-depth in part three of this ethnography.

The interactions between Cultura Vallese and the municipality, concerning the Primavera statue are illustrative of Cultura Vallese's desire to receive – and feeling to deserve – greater acknowledgement from the municipality because of what they

achieve with few resources and “a little dedication”. Artistic activities constitute performances in which members of Cultura Vallese demand recognition for the contributions they make to the overall improvement of the city of Quilmes. Even though Cultura Vallese’s members support the municipality, they also voice critique. They criticize the municipal Secretary of Culture in particular, since they hold that she has an overtly elite view on culture. A member contrasts their viewpoints: “When we organize a rock festival, she [the head of the Secretary of Culture], invites a classical symphony orchestra.” In Cultura Vallese’s members’ eyes it is unfair that municipal money is spent on elite events like a classical symphony orchestra, while the movement’s request for support, such as the provision of mobile restrooms, for a popular rock festival was declined. In that sense Cultura Vallese’s co-organization of a rock festival, without municipal support, in which they furthermore demanded the adoption of a national law that secures better formal working conditions for professional musicians, forms a critique of the local and national government. Another instance that made a member of Cultura Vallese furious, was the fact that the Secretary denied fifty young girls of a local dancing group a bus to bring them to a dance competition in Mar del Plata, girls who “for god sakes have never seen the sea in their lives”, whereas she was willing to pay for a bus full of municipal staff to go on a predominantly touristic visit to the ruins of the sacred indigenous city of Quilmes in Tucuman. Although this may be related to petty rivalries, factional disputes or hidden agendas, it is illustrative of the ambiguous relation that Cultura Vallese at times has with (subdivisions of) the municipality.

A clear instance of the tension between support and critique of the municipality occurred during an activity one afternoon at an elderly home named Ave Phoenix. Cultura Vallese was invited to enliven this unheeded elderly home by two students of the University of Quilmes that carried out their final internship in Ave Phoenix. The elderly home falls under the jurisdiction of the municipality. When the members of Cultura Vallese arrived at the scene, they were appalled by what they encountered. The elderly were basically confined in a small area, and mostly watched television. The spacious yard surrounding the elderly home was completely overgrown; the grass reached nearly a meter high, which made it virtually impossible to enter the yard. According to the new manager, the elderly were in addition reluctant to go outside since that would mean that they had to face by-passing neighbours. The elderly were retained by the felt stigma of living in such an unheeded place. During a three-day artistic intervention, the members of Cultura Vallese, in cooperation with the activists of Lucho Stoltzing, mowed the lawn, played music, and repainted the benches and decorated a small music podium in the yard with the participation of the elderly. Cultura Vallese also organized short creative workshops during the day. In this event the paradox of Cultura Vallese’s struggle to maintain its identity as an independent socio-political movement became evident. On the one hand Cultura Vallese appeared as a representative of the municipality that took up its responsibility to look after the elderly home; as such the event appeared in the local newspaper *El Sol* the next day. On the other hand they acted as an independent organization; as such they were invited by the students. Cultura Vallese’s members expressed discontent with the way the media portrayed the event, since for them their act contained a critical component towards the municipality for not having taken care of the Ave Phoenix. Then again, Lucas explains that in the popular view, Cultura Vallese is often equated with the municipality because everybody knows that the movement supports the mayor. To a certain degree, the newspaper portrayal thus also represents recognition of Cultura Vallese’s proximity to the municipality and of their role in local politics.

Cultura Vallese's alignment with the municipality led to a shift from political to cultural mobilization due to a search for more 'soft' activities. The movement's support of the municipal authorities of Quilmes does not always seem as easy to bring in line with the movement's emphasis on autonomy. Artistic activities form a site where this struggle takes place and where the paradox of the alignment becomes evident. Artistic activities form a space in which the members of Cultura Vallese envision to maintain their autonomy, because of the spontaneous and authentic qualities they ascribe to them. These activities form a way to remain outside of the State's bureaucratic structures. Besides, the artistic interventions provide the movement with a continued degree of visibility in the public sphere. This 'political objectification' through 'image events' makes sure that that Cultura Valles remains an actor in the political debate (Auyero 2000:11, DeLuca 1999). Participative art is furthermore held by Cultura Vallese's members to hold transformative capabilities, as elaborated in the next part.

### 3. PARTICIPATIVE ART & SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: GENERATE A SPACE TO GENERATE A CHANGE

Participative art is the phrase that the members of Cultura Vallese use to refer to the artistic practices carried out during their artistic interventions. An analysis of the way in which members of Cultura Vallese perform and talk about participative art sheds light on how they create and inhabit a public sphere of political participation. Throughout this analysis, I interpret this public sphere along the lines of Hirschkind's (2006) notion of counter-publics. The prefix 'counter' in Hirschkind's notion does not so much refer to an oppositional content, but to the fact that this content is spread through sensory, emotive and experiential modes of political practice and participation. This means that rather than a focus on the *content* of the messages in the public sphere (whether oppositional or not), the *mode* in which these messages are spread can be conceptualized as alternative ('counter') in the sense that they reach and mobilize an audience in different ways than only through deliberation. In other words, content might become less important than the praxis itself (Lomnitz 1995:32).

#### **Signing with the name of the group: Individual vs. Collective Art**

La Rosadita attracts the attention in the street, not simply because it is the only low building left in a street with more and more skyscrapers, but more so because of the mural that covers its front wall. The mural is an interpretation of Argentina's history using style and elements of Picasso's Guernica. In the words of one of the artists: "a humble adaptation of the original idea [...] including sad moments in our history." Such a sad moment incorporated in this 'Argentinean Guernica' is the bombardment of the Plaza de Mayo on June 16<sup>th</sup> 1955 during a coup against Perón which caused over 300 civilian victims. This historical event is reproduced in the mural as a *gorila* conducting a plane from which he drops bombs on the Casa Rosada and *obelisco*.<sup>14</sup> On the top of the wall painting it reads 'Espacio Abierto (open space). Felipe Vallese'. On the right all the names of the people who *supposedly* participated in the mural's creation are listed. I emphasize supposedly because Cultura Vallese's leader comments that they want to repaint the front wall since the painting was not made collectively; he says that members do not experience to be true co-authors of this mural. His comment highlights the importance given to participation and collective art and it is a recurring theme in the expressions and interpretations of Cultura Vallese's members. Often this is contrasted with the notion of individual art.

Members of Cultura Vallese differentiate between a *mural de autor*, an individual type of art which is made by a sole painter, such as the front of La Rosadita, and participative art, which could for example be a mural made collectively with the use of a beamer. On the birthday of Perón, while an artist explains members and participants how they are going to use a beamer to make a collective mural, he comments that:

[It] is a much more participative art. We believe that the political [...] requires it all. It requires the art we are going to make right now, and it requires that of Lucio, that of Joaquín, that of other good painters making their contributions as well.

This points at an underlying discussion among the members of Cultura Vallese and some befriended artists, about the role of art and artists in politics and society. Later, the members of the organization decided not to work with a particular artist anymore, since he was believed to work too individualistically. As Cultura Vallese member Marcos notes:

Here we sign with Cultura Vallese, not with individual names [...] When Lucio painted, nobody else painted and the guys felt bad. The intention of painting was for it to be collective and participative [...] that is the difference.

Cultura Vallese's appreciation of collective art is thus a matter of political principle. The opposition between individual and collective art, and the importance attached to it, is also present in the following words of Cultura Vallese's leader: "When the artist works alone he is not entering the public sphere." This means that Cultura Vallese's activities are orchestrated in such a manner that they are open to the public. They intentionally perform their activities in public and want to influence public meanings attributed to objects, events and experiences. Hence, members of Cultura Vallese are signifying agents (Baumann 2007:57; Snow et al. 2007:384). They engage in cultural politics to further counter-hegemonic ideas (Alvarez et al. 1998:7), which are not necessarily spread through words, but through images and practice. The members of Cultura Vallese incorporate people in their activities and seek to influence their thoughts and behaviour. Yet the question remains how they foster a public sphere of participation.

### **Constructing a public sphere**

As Wiegemink (2011:2) and Zuidervaart (2011:120-121) contend, public art does not assume a public sphere, but constructs it through its very performance. What does that mean in practice for a socio-political movement that uses artistic activities? How do the members of Cultura Vallese construct a public sphere for political participation?

As described in the previous part, the members of Cultura Vallese carry out their activities in a spontaneous way. They interact with the context and the people; "working with what we have" as Joaquín says. This means that neither members nor casual participants have pre-assigned tasks, which attributes to the openness of the activities in which participation of members and others is promoted. The specific techniques Cultura Vallese employs allow people with non-artistic backgrounds to participate in artistic performances. For instance, they often use a beamer to make collective murals. The beamer projects a binary image on the wall, and participants

simply paint over the black parts. In addition, the members of Cultura Vallese work together in such a way that those with artistic qualities paint the contours of a mural and anybody else interested to join can participate by following these contours or colouring the background. Often there exist a plethora of other options to contribute to the activity, for example preparing paint in plastic bottle bottoms or starting up the barbecue. In this manner a lot of Cultura Vallese's activities are surrounded by a variety of activities in which members as well as by-passers, friends and family members can participate. This participation is highly valued by Cultura Vallese's members, as I shall expand upon in the next section. For Cultura Vallese everyone who participates in one way or the other to make the activity possible becomes part of the event and its signature.

Participation is facilitated by generating an environment in which one group paints flowers on the trunk of a tree while others for example repaint the playground equipments in the same park. In this manner the members of Cultura Vallese are (co)constructors of a public space for political participation. Their acts do not assume the existence of such public space, but help to build it. Their work instantiates public space. The public sphere is thus constituted by the people's participation in it. The political participation, through artistic activities, *is* the public sphere. Furthermore, in this manner Cultura Vallese fosters a counter-public (Hirschkind 2006) for the way in which the activities attract, address and intend to shape the audiences is not so much through the ideological content of the artistic products and activities, but through the very act of the audience's collective participation in these artistic productions. The next section takes a closer look at Cultura Vallese's appraisal of this participation.

### **Transformative capacities of participation**

We clean up and paint a work of art [...] it changes immediately, and in addition through making people participate [they are given a feeling of ownership]. It is not as if someone from outside does it, no, that they themselves are creating it. So this is the change of a space as well as a transformation of a person. Because the people think they cannot do certain things; that they will never be able to paint, to make a sculpture, to make music, to learn a new language, if they do not go to a college and study for ten years. What we promote and practice here is an alternative, participative education, by means of sharing knowledge [...] that they feel powerful. What we are sharing is to value the human being. That human capital will be more powerful than economic capital. (Joaquín)

Besides looking at participation as a tool for attracting people to the activities, members of Cultura Vallese believe it to foster social transformation. Joaquín concludes: "I hold a participative, transformative view on art." The members of Cultura Vallese do not only seek to immediately change a physical place, by bringing some colour to or cleaning up a public square, but also seek transformations in individuals. These individual are members as well as other participants who can be by-passers, local residents or family members and friends of Cultura Vallese.

When talking about participative art, Cultura Vallese's members often refer to the idea that making people part of their activities leads participants to value themselves while at the same time valuing the acts of the movement. This notion is reflected in the following conversation between Ana, a member in her early twenties, and Lorena, the youngest and newest member of Cultura Vallese:

Ana: The participative [aspect of art] has an added value.

Lorena: It [participative art] has a distinct feeling and it is not only we that participate, but we also let others participate. As a result they value what we do, and, moreover, they value themselves. [They learn] that they can do something and that is good.

Ana: More than anything it is this: the act of giving people the possibility to leave their mark on a wall in Quilmes.

Lorena: That they paint it themselves.

This dialogue exemplifies that the fact that people are drawn into the act of producing something collectively is part of the social change Cultura Vallese wants to generate. Participative art has an empowering connotation, transforming the mindset of people, showing them that they can achieve a lot with few resources, and that cooperation is the way to go. To a large degree the members of Cultura Vallese transmit ideologies through practice rather than words. Phrased in conceptual terms, performances do not only communicate verbal, but also non-verbal messages to an audience, while they let “participants experience symbolic meanings in the context of ritual interaction (Juris 2008:65).”

Similar to Cultura Vallese’s members’ notice of the transformations in participants, their leader observes transformations in members themselves. Lucas says that throughout their involvement with Cultura Vallese, he sees members transforming unconsciously. Participation in Cultura Vallese opens their minds, and broadens the scope of their horizon. Lucas takes Ana as an example when he says:

It is great to see a twenty year old get out of her bubble. That she remains exactly the same when it comes to joking [...] but you understand where you are, what is surrounding you, what was demeaning you, because it was an injustice that demeaned you. We work a lot on such individual questions to grow stronger as a group.

The fact that such personal transformations come about through experience and emotional involvement, also speaks from the following account of Ana about her first experiences with Cultura Vallese. Ana, who described herself before as “in-and-out of a job”, “hanging around on the street”, became familiar with the socio-political movement through a friend of a friend. She decided to join and find out for herself if she enjoyed it. After two weeks the movement needed someone to come along to Nuequén to support the cause of *Familiares de Víctimas de Tránsito* (family members of traffic accident victims). Ana came along knowing that they would paint a yellow star on the road, something the Familiares do to raise awareness in Argentina about traffic accidents. Ana explains that this was a very emotional event:

I said “Oh where am I!” Never in my life could I have imagined that I was going to be here, helping these people [...] When we came back, I came back a different person. By getting into touch with these people you say “Look, I am doing badly because of this or that”, but after [getting into touch with these people] you say “No, there are worse things”. Next to them I am doing very well. [...] It changed me considerably and I said “This is it, this is my place. This is where I have to be”. It changed my mind.

She adds that in order for her to help strengthening the group she has to manage to control her tears from flowing during such emotional experiences. Ana feels transformed through being a member of Cultura Vallese, and sees the benefit of her change in order for the group to strengthen. In other words, her mindset is changed through practice, through emotional involvement in the movement.

Members and other participants are the subjects of the social transformation that Cultura Vallese as a movement envisions. Reminiscent of the earlier work of Rubin (1994) on mobilization in the Mexican COCEI movement, to a considerable degree, Cultura Vallese's members and participants are not mobilized through a clear understanding of the strategies and objectives of the movement. Members are drawn into collective action through emotion, friendship and experiences with participation in altruistic and solidary activities of the movement. They experience on a day-to-day basis what they can achieve and come into contact with often humble people whose lives they try to positively influence. This supports the claim that political solidarity is built through "praxis, rather than discursive unity" (Juris 2008:65). People are not necessarily only drawn into collective action through deliberation, but also through emotions (Adams 2002), which illustrates the 'affective dimension' of local politics in Argentina (Lazar 2004).

Cultura Vallese's focus on participative art stems from both ideological and strategic considerations. Art fulfils a public and popular role and hence is something ideally created and shared together. At the same time participative art functions as a tool to attract people and convince them of the righteousness of Cultura Vallese's activities. Participation in art has the capacity to foster changes in the way in which people perceive themselves and the world around them. Furthermore, political activism through participative art generates a public sphere which allows people to take part in a political act in an alternative and creative way. In addition, this is a realm in which the members of Cultura Vallese, through symbolic performance, carry out a political presence and communicate their ideas and demands to members and other participants, and to the government. The artistic activities of Cultura Vallese can be interpreted as manifestations of a counter-public, in Hirschkind's (2006) use of the concept. The content is not necessarily oppositional, but the mode of activism is alternative since the content becomes of lesser significance than the praxis of spreading ideas through sensory, emotive and experiential modes of political practice and participation (Lomnitz 1995). The next part focuses on the ways members of Cultura Vallese share knowledges and ideologies with participants.

#### 4. ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION & MOBILIZATION: "HOT" STRUGGLES FAR REMOVED FROM "CARTESIAN HEADS"

It is hard to think of activities and relationships that are more overtly emotional than those associated with political protest and resistance.  
(Goodwin et al. 2000:77)

We cannot think of political agency in abstraction from embodiment.  
(Parkins 2000:60)

An analysis of how Cultura Vallese's members transmit their ideas and knowledge through artistic practices while simultaneously mobilizing audiences, reveals the importance of emotion and embodiment in struggles for social change. While considering the two above statements, this final part of the ethnography analyses Cultura Vallese's mobilization and educational practices and examines the role of emotion and embodiment in political participation. As will become apparent, even though the members of Cultura Vallese scarcely express their ideologies in a

verbalized manner, they can still be thought of as signifying agents struggling to influence hegemonic values and meanings attributed to objects, events and experiences. Rather than a focus on words and deliberation to spread ideas and foster popular organization, Cultura Vallese's members rely on the educational capacities of images and the role of affective ties and embodied experiences. In other words, to borrow a phrase from Peterson (2001:69), this part focuses on the "hot" struggles, involving emotion and embodied protest, as performed and experienced by the members of a local Argentinean socio-political movement, which indeed seem "far removed from the tepid bodies and deliberating 'Cartesian heads' of institutional politics". Following Peterson, I use the metaphor 'Cartesian heads' to indicate the deliberative aspects of political participation.

### **Organize to educate and educate to organize**

What I want to generate is an elevation of the quality of the products we have, artistically, sharing the knowledge with everybody, because a young person, an old one, every person can have a better idea than mine. [...] when we make an army of people that knows how to make something artistic, the city will improve. (Joaquín)

Sharing knowledge functions to spread ideologies – such as the advantages of cooperation – while at the same time it can be understood as a strategy of popular organization. One of Cultura Vallese's prime goals is popular organization, which forms an integral part of the social transformation the movement wants to generate. Furthermore within the movement this is seen as a key Peronist ideal: members may come and go, but the organization lives on. This is one of the reasons why they pay a lot of attention to their own functioning as a socio-political movement. After larger events Cultura Vallese's members usually assemble and reflect on the day. Besides, they collectively participated in a social psychology workshop organized in La Rosadita in which they discussed the movement's – and each other's – qualities and shortcomings in order for the group to strengthen.

Through students and participants of workshops and activities, Cultura Vallese hopes to reach their mothers and brothers, and create a social network, (re)weave the social fabric. In that way, accessible and free artistic activities draw people into the movement. An example of such mobilization through artistic activities is the case of Rafael, a teenager initially attracted to Cultura Vallese because of the weekly drawing workshop he attends. One day he was invited to join Cultura Vallese's members in the previously mentioned artistic intervention to enliven the unheeded elderly house Ave Phoenix. Rafael was put in charge of painting a phoenix on one of the outer walls. After this first experience, he continued participating in other, more overtly political, activities. The members of Cultura Vallese also build a network through their relationships with the workshop teachers. An example is Daniela, a young local journalist who has her own newspaper and gave a workshop on journalism in Cultura Vallese's cultural centre. Now they have developed a friendship, organize joint activities, and Cultura Vallese helped Daniela to start a nongovernmental organization for animal rights. Such practices confirm Auyero's (2000) observation that informal networks construct roads for political participation.

One of the features of participation in Cultura Vallese's artistic activities is that participants often learn something new. The members of Cultura Vallese share their knowledge with the public, for example by simply explaining how to hold your brush, or how to convert pictures into binary images which can be used to make collective murals with the beamer. The type of education that takes place in the

artistic activities could be seen as alternative in the sense that the members of Cultura Vallese do not only want to share what *they* know, but what rather takes place is an exchange of ideas and knowledges. Cultura Vallese envisages growing stronger through participant's contributions. This is also the principle upon which they organize the free workshops in their cultural centre.

The leaders of Cultura Vallese define their model of education as *autogestión*, in the sense that if people do not *do* it, experience it themselves, they do not internalize it. In this case social transformation is fostered, and cultural politics performed through interactive learning.

I show you the way, I teach you, I tell you to pay attention [...] I can't open your mind [...] You can learn a lot by observing and participating. If you do not pay attention to what you are doing, you paint a wall, a painting, nothing more. If you pay attention to what we are doing, you form, you get to know, and you improve [...] We work a lot in the area of knowledge. Knowledge is the tool, the weapon, you understand, of the entire revolution.

In these words from Lucas, focus lies on experience based forms of transmitting ideas which explains why during Cultura Vallese's artistic interventions and cultural workshops political topics are rarely discussed. Cultura Vallese's leader told me that at times, when presented with the opportunity, he would mention for instance something about what Perón did for the people, to younger group members. He would for example ask them: "Do you know who built the hospital you and your family go to?"

Strikingly, various Cultura Vallese members (mostly the younger) told me that they were not too interested in politics. They explained that they were drawn in to the movement simply because they liked it and because of companionship. When asked how she joined Cultura Vallese, Norma said that she "fell here and stayed". Ana's response to what she likes best about being a member of Cultura Vallese is the following: "I like to get stains on me, even more when it is for the cause of something good". Another young member, Flor, dissatisfied with the lack of companionship and tedious political reunions of a previous activist group noted: "Where else do you find this combination of art and politics? We want to spread that [approach]." Fernando, in his thirties, told me that he was 'a-political' before he joined Cultura Vallese. He explained that he simply feels good with Cultura Vallese, because he can do what he likes, which is teaching photography. Yet two others told me they participated because of the hope of obtaining a municipal position. Generally the somewhat older participants that fulfil a more leading role in the movement, besides emphasizing that they simply like the movement or as Marcos phrased it have "adopted it as mine", also have more extensive experience with political activism and hold more elaborated political ideas. Leader Lucas has a long political activist history and explained that he does not want to "contaminate the younger participants with political matters, because politics can be obscure". Many members were thus drawn into the movement through affective ties, which illustrates the role of emotions in mobilization for collective action and the construction and maintenance of a collective group identity (Jasper 1998:399).

Rather than relating their activism to specific political ideas, the members of Cultura Vallese see their activism as praxis. They notice that other groups discuss politics more, but they prefer action. This is similar to the experiences Sutton analysed among women activists in Argentina, who cites an informant saying that "words and ideas are necessary but insufficient in social change struggles" (2007:144). Cultura Vallese's leader verbalizes a comparable interpretation of the

insufficiency of words, related to the human rights discourse, in the following manner: “You can have a lot of rights, but you have to *work* them” In other words, in his view, true social change lies in action. Furthermore, as an explanation from Cultura Vallese member Natalia illustrates, *doing* art is the medium for social change. She notes that through the use of art, the movement’s message ‘enters in another way’ than through words. “If you approach teenagers and tell them ‘Hey you have to do this and that’, they are not going to pay attention. In contrast, with a drawing of Néstor you are entering from another side.” In other words, art is believed by the members of Cultura Vallese to provide an effective alternative to verbal or discursive modes of mobilization. As Natalia continues: “It appeals to people, attracts them, participating makes them feel worthy, and owners.”

A word often used by Cultura Vallese’s members when they talk about activism is *aguantar* (to endure). The members use the word *aguantar* in daily conversations when they recount that an entire day of activism in the street led to a sunburn, that they have red eyes as a result of welding all night to finish a statue, or driving all day in the heat to be on time for an artistic intervention in another province. The attention that the members of Cultura Vallese pay to the physical component of their activism is reflected in the words of their leader when he notes that “activism is human work, we are all tired, we worked hard today”. This exemplifies Parkins’ (2000:60) argument that “we cannot think of political agency in abstraction from embodiment”. Activists employ bodily competences and endurance to reach political goals (Peterson 2001:74).

Feelings, emotions, lived and living experiences of oppression and resistance, even bodily secretions such as adrenaline and sweat, are brought directly to bear upon a political struggle. Theirs is a “hot” struggle of passions far removed from the tepid bodies and deliberating “Cartesian heads” of institutional politics (Peterson 2001:69).

Another way in which the activist body gains significance in political performance is during commemorative political gatherings, which Auyero (2000:1) describes as political rituals. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of October, the day of Perón’s release from prison, the activists on Plaza de Mayo collectively re-enacted the well-known scene in which followers of Perón sat on the edge of the fountain with their feet in the water. Borrowing insights on embodied protest from Sutton (2007:138), we can say that the bodies of these activists become sites where a tradition of political protest, from Perón to the 1970’s to the present, is recovered and performed.

### **Aesthetic politics: Appropriating historical and popular images**

Although the members of Cultura Vallese do not explicitly discuss politics, this does not mean that they do not attempt to bring across certain messages to their participants. They are signifying agents, for amongst other notions, they try to make people more aware of their own capacities, value human capital over economic capital, make people support the national and popular project and foster a general appraisal of informal networks of cooperation (Baumann 2007:57; Snow et al. 2007:384). One way they spread their messages is through the constant exposure of participants and members to their political ideology through depicting Kirchnerist and Peronist icons in La Rosadita, as well as in various public places and events. In this sense their socio-political messages are materialized and embodied in specific artistic products and activities.

Cultura Vallese's political messages materialize in artistic representations. The messages materialize, for example, in the various instances that artistic representations make the public aware of Argentinean history. Member Marcos notes that "the problem with Argentina is that people do not read history books." One of those instances is a project called *murales por conciencia* (murals for awareness). A mural, located in Quilmes, which forms part of this project depicts an encounter between the current city of Quilmes and the sacred city of *Los Quilmes*, indigenous peoples living in the province of Tucuman. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century Spanish invaders, after a fierce fight, removed Los Quilmes from their lands in order to relocate them in a settlement, the current city of Quilmes, so that they could be better controlled. Los Quilmes were made to travel the entire distance on foot, during which many died of exhaustion and hunger. Others committed suicide as a final act of resistance. By depicting such historical events the mural project intends to make spectators aware of and open their eyes to such horrific pasts. The mural is to make spectators sympathize with the cause of Los Quilmes who up until today continue the struggle for their land rights in Tucuman.

A different example of making people aware of Argentinean history, which simultaneously situates Cultura Vallese's acts in a Peronist tradition, is the creation of a collective mural from a picture that makes a parody of the historical image '*las patas en la fuente*'. This photo, taken by an unknown photographer, depicts working people sitting on the edge of one of the fountains on Plaza de Mayo, with their feet in the water, on the 17<sup>th</sup> of October 1945, when Perón's followers travelled from all over the country to demand his release from prison. The members of Cultura Vallese accompanied the mural with the text: 'La misma lealtad 1945-2011' (The same loyalty). In this manner they did not only commemorate and bring under the attention this important Peronist date, but also deliberately envisioned a tradition of protest in which they situate themselves alongside the people depicted in the image.

Another illustration, which also refers to Argentinean history, and places Cultura Vallese's militancy in an activist tradition, is manifested in the movement's use of a widely know image of the face (and name) of Felipe Vallese – the first person to disappear for political reasons in Argentina – on their banner. The well-known artist Ricardo Carpani painted this portrait of Felipe Vallese which was used in assemblies in which activists demanded Vallese's '*aparición con vida*' (alive return) and it was used for years during commemorative gatherings of his disappearance. The use of this image by Cultura Vallese is a clear reference to Argentina's recent history, and specifically to two famous historical activists: union member and metallurgical worker Felipe Vallese, and politically engaged artist Ricardo Carpani.

Cultura Vallese's interventions also draw attention to more recent political events. On a particular night in a bar in Quilmes, where Joaquín does 'live painting', he reconstructed the moment in which Néstor Kirchner took down the portrait of former dictator Videla in the Military School. Reproducing such important symbolic and political act in a painting functions as a way to make spectators remember and revalue that moment. We could interpret this as a powerful symbolic act: an elite portrait of a military director, previously honoured with a place on the wall of an important institution, was taken down, and afterwards this very act is reworked into a popular, collective painting.

Similar to the references made to national history, so do the members of Cultura Vallese appropriate images circulating in Argentinean popular culture. An example is the play with the popular image of the cartoon *eternauta*, reworked into the so

called *Nestornauta*, a commonly used image amongst militants of the ‘national and popular project’ in present Buenos Aires. The *eternauta* (he who wanders through eternity) is a popular Argentinean post-apocalyptic cartoon. Written by Héctor Germán Oesterheld, with drawings from Francisco Solano López, it first appeared in 1957. The versions created after 1969 had a more open political tone than the original and started to more and more openly criticize the military dictatorship. After Oesterheld’s disappearance, sequels by other authors appeared. When Néstor Kirchner died unexpectedly in 2010, various political groups related to kirchnerismo started to use the figure of *el eternauta* with Nestor’s face inside the figure’s improvised hazard-suit-mask, sometimes drawn with an uplifted arm marking the ‘V’ with his fingers, a distinctive Peronist symbol. This Nestornauta can be spotted as stencil graffiti on various walls in the centre of Buenos Aires, and a large version covers the wall of a central room of Cultura Vallese’s cultural centre. Variations on the figure can be observed, related to the occasion of its appropriation. During the rock festival, co-organized by Cultura Vallese, in which they demanded a music law to protect professional musician’s formal working conditions, members and participants painted a version of the Nestornauta with an electric guitar hanging on the shoulder of his suit. On the day of commemoration of Nestor’s death on the Plaza de Mayo, Lucio, a Brigada Plástica member brought a Nestornauta statue. Together with members of Cultura Vallese, they finished it on the spot. This version of the Nestornauta contains a white and blue striped scarf around his shoulders, and his costume is covered with colourful flowers. Throughout the entire day people took pictures of themselves with the statue, as well as with the large caricature heads of Perón, Evita, Néstor and Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara. There was also an enormous Nestornauta doll, whose legs and arms can be controlled by a person inside. Guillermo, another member of Brigada Plástica paraded around the square with it which attracted a lot of attention. On this specific day even the lamppost of the square were decorated with flags depicting the Nestornauta.

Another image widely spread in popular culture is the image of a fighting Indian. As Cultura Vallese member Marcos explains, using an image of a fighting Indian has almost become a registered brand. He states that “if you see a fighting Indian painted on the wall, you see liberation. Not only the liberation of the Indian, but of the entire Argentinean people”. Such images refer to earlier activist periods in which pictures were first produced and deployed as high impact images of resistance by fierce, muscled warriors in aggressive poses. The current appropriation of such images thus places artists in a long tradition of activism and appeals to a large popular audience.

These findings resonate with Hall’s (1981:228) contention that popular culture is creatively deployed to form and convey meanings, and that popular culture represents an important site for public debate and individual and community agency. The members of Cultura Vallese deploy popular culture to further their ideologies. The appropriation of symbols from popular culture, as well as historical images, makes their struggle appealing to and comprehensible for a popular audience. Hence, art can be seen as a powerful tool for spreading and defending ideologies (Barajas 2000:14).

Cultura Vallese’s members and participants are thus not necessarily attracted to the movement because of its political ideas and strategies, but through participation in something they like, because of the feelings of friendship and solidarity they experience as group members. In that sense, the public sphere that the members of

Cultura Vallese generate and inhabit, is something open, yet intimate, for it attracts people, but in an informal way, fostering emotional relations of trust, solidarity and companionship. In accordance with the findings of Goodwin, James and Jasper (2000), this ethnography highlights the affective dimensions of local Argentinean politics. Furthermore, as I have described for the case of Cultura Vallese, mobilization happens through practice rather than content and deliberation (Juris 2008:65), and conceptualizing practices of political agency entails paying attention to the role of activist bodies (Parkins 2000:60). In other words, and borrowing from Lazar (2004), but adapted to the case of Culura Vallese, politics is about painting a Nestornauta on the wall, about making the 'V' mark, being and feeling part of the movement and its performances, about getting stains on your cloths, getting sunburned, welding a statue, about cooperating with comrades, cheering up an elderly home, and about building and maintaining affective ties.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Just as many socio-political movements aligned with *kirchnerismo* in contemporary Argentina, Cultura Vallese's practices underwent a transition from political to cultural mobilization in which ideology and traditional rational deliberation about politics became of secondary importance to, and imbued in, practice. These movements now form part of the government's social base and as a result seek less confrontational modes of political activism. The members of Cultura Vallese strive to negotiate their relationship with the state in such a manner that they maintain the greatest possible degree of independence. They are weary of becoming co-opted or bureaucraticized, while simultaneously hope to gain certain benefits through their relation with the municipality. This manifests itself in the daily practices of the members of Cultura Vallese in their refusal to plan the details of their activities in advance. The spontaneity and 'direct action' of the activities are believed to contribute to the independence and authenticity of the movement. Artistic practices then form sites in which the members of Cultura Vallese support as well as challenge the municipality.

The members of Cultura Vallese choose to employ artistic practices for mobilization, not only because many possess artistic qualities, but out of strategic and ideological considerations. The movement's artistic practices are political performances, for they offer the movement visibility and influence in the public sphere. The appropriation of well-known symbols and icons leads to the recognisability of the socio-political movement. The movement implicitly spreads its political messages, through their materialization and embodiment in these appropriated images. Furthermore, the use of historic images not only teaches viewers about Argentinean history, it simultaneously positions Cultura Vallese's activism within a historical tradition, which in turn contributes to the appeal of the movement. Besides, (participative) art stems from the movement's objective to generate small transformations in members and other participants. Artistic interventions function as a tool to show viewers that they can achieve a lot with few resources and to value human over economic capital. Participative art thus has an emancipatory aspect in the sense that it makes people aware of their agency and transformative capabilities. This is seen by the members of Cultura Vallese as an alternative form of education.

How can we further explain Cultura Vallese's focus on *participative* art? The shift from political to cultural mobilization implies a congruent shift from a focus on rational political discourse towards a form of political participation that manifests itself predominantly in practice, experience and emotion. This means that Cultura Vallese's

members are not so much mobilized through a clear understanding of the ideologies and strategies of the movement, but more so through their day-to-day experiences and involvement. In other words, people are mobilized, and their actions and thoughts influenced, through bodily participation in artistic creations and performances, rather than through explicit verbal and discursive practices. Hence, the artistic activities of Cultura Vallese can be conceptualized as constitutive of a counter-public due to the alternative mode in which its members attract and appeal to an audience (Hirschkind 2006). This does not mean that content and ideology lack importance. Through painting murals and other artistic activities, images with a specific historical and ideological content are diffused. These images have an educational aspect which reaches an audience primarily in sensory and emotional manners. In this manner political participation, and political agency, cannot be abstracted from the role of the body. Besides, activists engage in practices in which they employ bodily skills to achieve their goals.

This ethnographic study of the cultural and artistic practices of Cultura Vallese contributes to the understanding of the ways in which social movements construct and inhabit a public sphere. Furthermore, it shows the limitations of interpreting debates in the public sphere as solely deliberative, and highlights the role of affect and emotion in politics. As Auyero (2000:19) notes, we should not let normative models of democracy and political participation that centre on reason become “epistemological obstacles to an understanding of the way in which democracy works.” As we have seen, local politics in Argentina have an affective side, manifested in the practices of cultural activism and mobilization. Socio-political movements’ cultural politics and artistic representations play an important role in the mobilization of popular support. Dismissing affective and emotional dimensions simply as political by-products does not do justice to the complexity of people’s experiences of political participation and activism.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis was made financially possible by the *K.F.Hein Fonds Studie en Individuele Noden*. I would like to thank the K.F.Hein foundation for the generosity of granting me a scholarship to carry out research in Buenos Aires. My parents deserve gratitude for their financial support during my entire academic career. I would like to thank my supervisor Prof. dr. Wil G. Pansters for his guidance, insights and critical comments during fieldwork as well as during the writing process. I am also grateful to my fellow CASTOR students for their constructive feedback and support, and the many coffee breaks. I would like to thank Polle for his love and for his company and support during fieldwork. Finally, I deeply acknowledge the experienced joy of being received with open arms by the members of Cultura Vallese. Special thanks go out to these activists, these friends, whose openness, patience and friendship not only facilitated this research, but also made it an exceedingly rich and inspirational personal experience.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> 2010 census INDEC (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos). Electronic document, [www.indec.gov.ar](http://www.indec.gov.ar), accessed March 11, 2012.
- <sup>2</sup> Aztlán is the “ancient mythical Mexican homeland as some Chicanos re-imagined US Southwest” (McCaughan 2012:6).
- <sup>3</sup> Following Alfred Gell’s (1998:7) interpretation of an anthropological theory of art, this thesis focuses not so much on analyzing the artistic products themselves, a work perhaps more suited for art critics, but instead focuses on the network of social relations surrounding the production and display of artistic objects in a particular interactive setting.
- <sup>4</sup> COCEI is the acronym for Coalición Obrera Campesina Estudiantil del Istmo (The Isthmus Worker-Peasant-Student Coalition)
- <sup>5</sup> The claim to recuperate politics is related to the widespread feelings of discontent and disassociation from politics among Argentines, as voiced in the popular demand ‘que se vayan todos’. As a result of Argentina’s recent history, and dictatorship, for a long time politics was seen as something bad and dangerous, and many people proclaimed to be a-political. In the discourse of Néstor, politics is ‘given back to the people’. However, there remains a tendency to view politics as containing certain inherent ‘obscurity’.
- <sup>6</sup> H.I.J.O.S. is the acronym for *Hijos e Hijas por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio* (Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice against Oblivion and Silence), an organization of individuals whose parents disappeared during the 1976-1983 military dictatorship in Argentina.
- <sup>7</sup> [http://www.cnc.gov.ar/noticia\\_detalle.asp?idnoticia=120](http://www.cnc.gov.ar/noticia_detalle.asp?idnoticia=120), accessed May 2012.
- <sup>8</sup> CIDAC is the acronym for Centro de Innovación y Desarrollo para la Acción Comunitaria (Centre of Investigation and Development for Community Action)
- <sup>9</sup> A *murga* is a popular Argentinean theatrical dance group with carnivalesque outfits containing members from various ages, usually based in one particular neighbourhood.
- <sup>10</sup> Due to the 2001 crisis many factories all over Argentina went bankrupt. Since then, many employees have taken matters into their own hands, often supported by a network of activists and other recuperated factory workers, to form cooperatives and reopen the factories. Opening a cultural centre helped occupying the IMPA building round the clock and was meant to make neighbours identify with the factory and its cause. The popular education realized in the factory made sure more people had an interest in the factory’s survival which provided relative protection against the constant threat of eviction by the police (Interview with Alicia).
- <sup>11</sup> Lucas uses the English word ‘under’, which is very likely a reference to ‘underground’. We should consider this in relation to macro-political changes in Argentina. Before, specifically during the military dictatorship, political activism took place much more underground than in contemporary Argentina. In this light the term ‘under’ also refers to a social and cultural tendency that is ‘alternative’. Nowadays, especially under the governance of Néstor and Cristina Kirchner it is much more common, and has almost become mainstream, to (openly) engage in political activism.
- <sup>12</sup> Mega-exhibition organized in Buenos Aires in relation to Argentina’s Bicentennial (2010) that combines art, industry, science and technology.
- <sup>13</sup> *La Rosadita* is a reference to the governmental building *la Casa Rosada* on Plaza de Mayo which is painted in the same shade of salmon pink. Moreno refers to the street where the cultural centre is located, which is called Mariano Moreno.
- <sup>14</sup> *Gorila* (gorilla) is a derogatory term used by Peronists for those with strong anti-Peronist sentiments.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adams, Jacqueline. 2002. Art in social movements: Shantytown women's protest in Pinochet's Chile. *Sociological forum* 17(1):21-56
- Alvarez, Sonia E., Evelina Dagnino and Arturo Escobar. 1998. Introduction: The cultural and the political in Latin American social movements. In: *Cultures of politics. Politics of cultures. Re-visioning Latin American social movements*, eds. Sonia E. Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino and Arturo Escobar, pp. 1-32. Boulder: Westview Press
- Arendt, Hannah. 1998. *The human condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Auyero, Javier. 2000. *Poor people's politics: Peronist survival networks and the legacy of Evita*. Durham: Duke University Press
- Barajas, Rafael. 2000. The transformative power of art. *NACLA report on the Americas* 33(6):9-14
- Baumann, Shyon. 2007. A general theory of artistic legitimation: How arts worlds are like social movements. *Poetics* 35(1):47-65
- Biglieri, Paula. 2007. El retorno del pueblo argentino: entre la autorización y la asamblea. Argentina en la era K. In: *En el nombre del pueblo. La emergencia del populismo kirchnerista*, eds. Paula Biglieri and Gloria Perelló, pp. 61-84. San Martín: Universidad Nacional de General San Martín
- Bonnell, Victoria E. 1997. *Iconography of power. Soviet political posters under Lenin and Stalin*. Berkeley: University of California Press
- Boyanovsky Bazán, Christian. 2010. *El aluvión. Del piquete al gobierno: los movimientos sociales y el kirchnerismo*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana
- Brooksbank Jones, Anny. 2000. Cultural politics in a Latin American frame. In: *Cultural politics in Latin America*, eds. Anny Brooksbank Jones and Ronaldo Munck, pp. 1-26. Basingstoke: Macmillan
- Campbell, Howard. 1993a. Class struggles, ethnopolitics, and cultural revivalism in Juchitán. In: *Zapotec Struggles. Histories, Politics, and Representations from Juchitán, Oaxaca*, eds. Howard Campbell, Leigh Binford, Miguel Bartolomé and Alicia Barabas, pp 213-231. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press
- Campbell, Howard. 1993b. Tradition and the new social movements: The politics of Isthmus Zapotec culture. *Latin American Perspectives* 20(3):83-97
- Chaffee, Lyman G. 1993. *Political protest and street art. Popular tools for democratization in Hispanic countries*. Westport: Greenwood Press
- Dalla Déa, Ariane. 2012. Representations of resistance in Latin American art. *Latin American Perspectives* 39(3): 5-9
- Davies, Lyell. 2001. Republican Murals, Identity, and Communication in Northern Ireland. *Public Culture* 13(1):155-158
- De Bonafini, Hebe. 2011. 'Néstor nos devolvió la patria.' Discurso del 24 de marzo de 2011 en el Mercado Central de Buenos Aires durante la semana nacional de la Memoria, Verdad y Justicia en repudio al golpe militar del 24 de marzo de 1976. <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=0h8T1WRLEiA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0h8T1WRLEiA)> Accessed March 20, 2012
- De La Torre, Carlos. 1992. The ambiguous meanings of Latin American populisms. *Social Research* 59:385-414
- DeLuca, Kevin M. 1999. *Image politics: The new rhetoric of environmental activism*. New York: Guildford Press
- Escobar, Arturo and Sonia E. Alvarez. 1992. Conclusion: Theoretical and political horizons of change in contemporary Latin American social movements. In: *The making of social movements in Latin America. Identity, strategy, and*

- democracy, eds. Arturo Escobar and Sonia E. Alvarez, pp. 317-330. Boulder: Westview
- Foweraker, Joe and Ann L. Craig. 1990. *Popular movements and political change in Mexico*. Boulder: Rienner
- Fraser, Nancy. 1990. Rethinking the public sphere: a contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text* (25/26):56-80
- Fraser, Nancy. 1997. Rethinking the public sphere. In: *Justice Interruptus: Critical reflections on the "postsocialist" condition*. London: Routledge
- Gell, Alfred. 1998. *Art and Agency. An anthropological theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Goodwin, Jeff, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta. 2000 The return of the repressed: The fall and rise of emotions in social movement theory. *Mobilization: An International Journal* 5(1):65-83
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1989. *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. Translated by Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Hall, Stuart. 1981. Notes on deconstructing the popular. In: *People's history and sociality theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel, pp. 227-240. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Hirschkind, Charles. 2006 *The ethical soundscape: Cassette sermons and Islamic counterpublics*. New York: Columbia University Press
- Jasper, James M. 1998. The emotions of protest: Affective and reactive emotions in and around social movements. *Sociological Forum* 13(3):397-424
- Jordan, Glenn and Chris Weedon. 1995. *Cultural politics. Class, gender, race and the postmodern world*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Juris, Jeffrey S. 2008. Performing politics: Image, embodiment, and affective solidarity during anti-corporate globalization protests. *Ethnography* 9(1):61-97
- Laclau, Ernesto. 2005. *La razón populista*. Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica
- Lazar, Sian. 2004. Personalist Politics, Clientelism and Citizenship: Local Elections in El Alto, Bolivia. *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 23(2):228-243
- Lomnitz, Claudio. 1995. Ritual, rumour and corruption in the constitution of polity in modern Mexico. *Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 1: 20-47
- McAdam, Doug, John D. McCarthy & Mayer N. Zald (eds.), 1996, *Comparative perspectives on social movements. Political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and cultural framings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- McCaughan, Edward J. 2002. Gender, sexuality, and nation in the art of Mexican social movements. *Nepantla* 3(1):99-148
- McCaughan, Edward J. 2012. Signs of the times. In: *Art and social movements: Cultural politics in Mexico and Aztlán*, pp. 1-19. Durham: Duke University Press
- Mouffe, Chantal. 2007. Artistic activism and agonistic spaces. *Art and Research: A journal of ideas, contexts and methods* 1(2), Electronic document, <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html>, accessed March 13, 2012
- Nash, June. 2005. *Social movements: An anthropological reader*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing
- Newman, Janet and John Clark. 2009. *Public, politics and power: Remaking the public sphere in public services*. London: Sage

- Parkins, Wendy. 2000. Protesting like a girl: Embodiment, dissent and feminist agency. *Feminist Theory* 1(1): 59-78
- Peterson, Abby. 2001. The militant body and political communication: the medialization of violence. In: *Contemporary political protest: essays on political militancy*, pp 69-101. Aldershot: Ashgate
- Reséndiz, Francisco Leonardo. 2010. *Gráfica Política Alterna. Estrategia contra-informativa como acción política en Oaxaca, 2006-2009*. Tesis. Centro de investigaciones y estudios superiores en antropología social. Consejo nacional de ciencia y tecnología
- Rubin, Jeffrey. 1994. Grassroots radicalism and regional history. *Journal of Latin American Studies* 26(1):109-136
- Rubin, Herbert J., and Irene S. Rubin. 1995. *Qualitative Interviewing: The art of Hearing data*. Thousand Oaks: Sage
- Saunders, Tanya L. 2012. Black Thoughts, Black Activism: Cuban underground hip-hop and Afro-Latino countercultures of modernity. *Latin American Perspectives* 39(2):42-60
- Snow, David A., Sarah A. Soule and Hanspeter Kriesi. 2007. *The Blackwell companion to social movements*. Malden: Blackwell
- Sutton, Barbara. 2007. Poner el cuerpo: Women's embodiment and political resistance in Argentina. *Latin American Politics and Society* 49(3):129-162
- Vila, Pablo. 1987. Rock Nacional and dictatorship in Argentina. *Popular Music* 6(2): 29-148
- Warner, Michael. 2002. Publics and counterpublics. *Public Culture* 14(1):49-90
- Wiegman, Pia. 2011. Performance and politics in the public sphere. *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 3(2)
- Wolff, Janet. 1990. Prospects and problems for a postmodern feminism: An Introduction. In: *Feminine sentences: Essays on women and culture*, pp. 1-11. Berkely: University of California Press
- Young, Iris Marion 1990. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press
- Young, Iris Marion 1996. Communication and the other: beyond deliberative democracy. In: *Democracy and difference: Contesting the boundaries of the political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib, pp. 120-136. Princeton: Princeton University Press
- Zavella, Patricia. 2012. Beyond the screams: Latino Punkeros contest nativist discourses. *Latin American Perspectives* 39(2):27-41
- Zuidervaart, Lambert Paul. 2011. *Art in public: politics, economics, and a democratic culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

## SUMMARY

This thesis is based on a four month ethnographic study of the artistic practices of the socio-political movement Cultura Vallese, based in Quilmes, Argentina. The research stresses and examines the affective, emotive and experience-based aspects of political participation. Recently, a large segment of socio-political movements in Argentina aligned themselves with the national governments of Néstor and Cristina Kirchner. This alignment led to a subsequent shift from political to cultural forms of mobilization. The members of Cultura Vallese support the ‘national and popular project’ of the government and the municipality of Quilmes, while simultaneously trying to remain independent as a socio-political movement. This research shows how this can lead to an ambiguous relationship with the State, and how the members of Cultura Vallese struggle to make sense of this relationship. In other words, the members of Cultura Vallese support the municipality, but are also wary of becoming co-opted.

One of the ways in which the members of Cultura Vallese hold on to their independence is in their artistic activities, which are believed to form a terrain relatively free from interference by the State. The spontaneity and creativity of the artistic activities are believed to contribute to the authenticity of the movement’s activism. Furthermore, they entail a realm in which the members of Cultura Vallese spread their beliefs and principles surrounding human rights, justice and equality. Participative art is a recurring theme in the everyday conversations of the members. They envision promoting transformations in people as well as places, by letting members and audiences participate in a wide range of artistic activities. The members of Cultura Vallese refer to such practices as alternative forms of education.

Art is believed to provide a valuable alternative to discursive modes of mobilization. Rather than attracting people to the movement through verbal practices, the members of Cultura Vallese try to reach and influence people through their physical participation in artistic creations and performances. Moreover, people are attracted to the movement through affective ties. The members of Cultura Vallese spread their social and political messages by making them comprehensible in simple images. They use images from popular culture that are appealing to a wide audience and adapt them so that they function as a tool for spreading Cultura Vallese’s ideologies. In that manner, artistic representations of social movements’ ideologies can prove significant in processes of social change.

By analyzing the everyday practices of the members of a socio-political movement, this ethnographic study contributes to an understanding of the ways in which artistic representations, affective ties and experience-based forms of political participation play an important role in local Argentinean politics.