

VINDICATING MEMORIES

Inês Valle, exhibition curator, 2018

What are revolutions if not a *fire of ideas* that boils inside us, making us dream of better lives in a fairer world?

Marcelo Brodsky is a revolutionist and a human rights activist. Above all, he is a man who resorts to visual art to raise awareness about our world. In a very critical, conscientious way, he investigates images, words, and documents for specific memories that have shaped our collective history and tremendously impacted his life and family. At the forefront, there is the Argentinian military dictatorship (1976–1984) and its effect on his life—or generation, better yet. It was a regime of terror enforced by a state that systematically executed people and made “disappear” at least 30,000 citizens, including Brodsky’s older brother, Fernando, and the former’s best friend, Martin Bercovich. Luckily, the artist managed to flee to Barcelona, where he lived in exile until 1984. Until then, he learned the art of photography and understood its power in addressing social issues, with a highlight on the psychological ordeals of migrants. The product of his journey into this field is a body of work etched with collective memory—still a strong premise in his artistic practice nowadays.

In a bid to understand his identity, Brodsky, on returning to Argentina at the age of 40, took on a systematic investigation into his personal photographic archives. Upon seeing a 1967 picture of his classmates, a deep curiosity about the fate of each person in it arose. The encounters he had with them in his quest for truth brought forth what is now his most famous work: *Buena Memoria* (1996). In this project, the photograph “Class Photo, 1967” is drastically enlarged and meticulously shows the handwritten fate of each person—killed, missing, exiled, or traumatised during the Dirty War. “Puente de la Memoria” forms another aspect of this poignant project. It is a video that captures one of the most striking and emotional moments of this reunion, celebration, and recognition at the Colegio Nacional de Buenos Aires. This was the first official ceremony the school had, acknowledging (twenty years later) the 98 students who were killed during this tyrannical regime. In “Puente de la Memoria,” the artist intertwines facial representations of his classmates with images captured during that ceremony, along with voices disclosing the victims’ names. Hence, the project *Buena Memoria*: consisting of family photo albums, videos, and intimate, literary records. One can understand it as a collective memorial for both fatal victims and alive ones, having survived the most atrocious episode in Argentinian history. (Regarding Brodsky, although after much delay, due to a lethargic justice system, memorial justice was made

only when those responsible for Fernando’s murder were sentenced, in 2017.)

In his art project *1968: The Fire of Ideas* (2014–2018), providing its title to this exhibition, Brodsky proposes a historical revision of the ideas of the late sixties, still very pertinent in our contemporary times. The project is now a photographic essay of fifty archival images of political upheavals from students and workers around the world in that period. These black and white photographs, with meticulous handwritten interventions, draw our attention to details of strength, energy, and action—and consist as well in a visual recontextualisation enabling a deeper understanding of the past and the impact these fights had on our society.

1968 was a post-war moment when people feverishly demanded human rights and fresh ideals. The streets echoed with voices yearning for change. From the most violent to the most peaceful demonstrations, Brodsky takes us to many nations: Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, United Kingdom, Mexico, USA, Uruguay, Mozambique, Portugal, France, Australia, Senegal, and even former Czechoslovakia—where raised fists demanded the end of oppression. They called for an end to despotic regimes, and promoted human, social, and political rights. In the context of the abovementioned demonstrations, this exhibition also encompasses an installation with excerpts of speeches given by Agustín Tosco, Che Guevara, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Herbert Marcuse, Martin Luther King, and Rudi Dutschke, who fed the minds of many of these protesters.

Perhaps 1968 in Europe is better known as the Paris ’68 maelstrom. There were demonstrations, strikes, and occupations happening across the country. It also chronicles the spreading of this sentiment to other European cities, although neglecting the similarities of those within non-Western contexts. A good example is the connection between France and Senegal, with their strong legal link via Agreements for Cooperation. Senegal, for instance, was known to be a “well-integrated society”: Many African students were enrolled in French universities, while French students attended the University of Dakar. Therefore, thoughts and ideas were effortlessly shared. On May 27, the student’s union of the Senegalese university, eager to gain autonomy from a neocolonialist system, incited a huge boycott to university examinations as rebellion against France. These several riots forced the then president of Senegal Léopold Senghor to declare state of emergency. The strength one notices in Brodsky’s Dakar image (1968)—thousands of shoes covering a street—makes one ponder the number of people involved, not to mention the sheer violence throbbing across the city.

This series by Marcelo Brodsky also features newly intervened photographs from Portugal and its former African colonies. They echo the students' attitudes under Salazar's despotic regime, the effects of their protests, and the consequences of the independence of the concerned African countries achieved. A curious fact in the Portuguese context is the strategy employed by students to overcome the tough censorship while reaching a wider audience: The national football cup was used as a means of propaganda for them to express their discontent with the established system. Alongside Brodsky's powerful imagery, there is Ricardo Martins' documentary *Futebol de Causas* (Football of Causes), which thoroughly unveils this mark in Portuguese history—something that was obviously omitted from all four daily editions of the capital's newspaper (*Diário de Lisboa*) during this period.

The mighty year of 1968 might have shaken "the world," but it took a while to reach Australian shores, as their passive disposition to new ideals, revolutions, and inter-territorial pillage was unchanged: "Other peoples' problems, not ours!" Thus, their revolutionary spirit would fully awaken only in the seventies, around the tail end of the Vietnam War. After a period of loss and grief, it was more than necessary to revive the nation, as a new sense of multicultural identity was being promoted. Marcelo Brodsky's photograph "Sydney, 1972" pulsates with keen Australian nationalist sentiments. The elements therein contained make apparent the numbers supporting the cause. At the forefront, there is the indigenous Australian flag, followed by posters with messages advocating for ethnic equality and land rights. More importantly, Brodsky highlights "freeland," a word that represented a new dream among Australians—an ideal that resonated then, an ideal that still resonates today.

The voices of other artists are very present in 1968: *The Fire of Ideas*. It also comprehends the period when artists and students protested against the Brazilian censorship, and when the Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers played a crucial role in the cultural protest and occupation of the Centre for Fine Arts in Brussels (BOZAR).

These Brazil photographs represent the most important events against the despotic military regime—similar to Argentina's, as people were arrested, tortured, raped, and killed. Violence against women was systematic, targeting pregnant ones too (including electric shocks to their sexual organs), resulting in countless abortions. In one of these iconic photographs, the artist captures in bright colours five actresses on the frontline of a protest—five female idols of the time fighting for women's rights. Brodsky employed the monochromatic style

in other photographs, while assigning colour to the militant messages for democracy and culture that were carried on large banners. Cultural censorship still lingers in Brazil, mentioning the recent closing down of the art exhibition *Queermuseu — Cartografias da Diferença na Arte Brasileira*, whose curator, Gaudêncio Fidélis, is still in court for defamatory allegations.

In the case of Brussels, artists and militants took over BOZAR as a means to contest the country's cultural politics. Marcel Broodthaers was mediator to two requests: a higher level of arts education and a new museum of modern art. The ensuing revolts served as motto to Brodsky, who selected three images. Two of these images capture moments inside BOZAR—one of which shows Broodthaers speaking while Paul Willems, director of the CFA, listens attentively at the corner of the image. The third one captures the Belgian antinuclear walk in 1967, organised by the Total group outside BOZAR: a participatory artistic performance where Jacques Charlier's transparent flag was hoisted amidst other protesters. In this ritual, they have their lips covered with band-aids while handing out transparent leaflets to bystanders.

It was also during 1968's turmoil that Marcel Broodthaers conceived *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*. Afterwards, during Bozar's demonstration, he relinquished his being acknowledged as an artist and appointed himself as the director of his own museum. Without any doubt, this would be a vital project to the debate on the role of art and the function of the museum in society.

Both Brodsky and Broodthaers share a common background in poetry and the use of the word as visual language. Similarly, both artists are skilled in the ability to promote dialectics that question hegemonic narratives. For Lisbon's exhibition, Brodsky's correspondence with Broodthaers (MACBA's collection) brings forth a new series of artworks founded in a methodology of visual dialogue and engagement. For example, in *Project pour une conversation* (2018), while performatively interacting with Broodthaers' film *La Pluie (Projet pour un texte)* (1969), Brodsky positions himself as both the observer and the element between the film's action and audience. Thus, in the photo work, he creates a kind of multidimensional interpretation layer on both visual languages which interacts with the "final observer." Additionally, Brodsky promotes a new conversation about the power of language by fragmenting the original film through photography, by the dichotomy between the moving image and the silence created between each still image. In the film, the water relentlessly erases any word written by Broodthaers; yet, he will not stop writing them. In a similar manner, Brodsky reminds us

that any word—any action—has power and meaning, and that we should pursue our beliefs. It is a strong dialogue, demonstrating the role of the artists in social criticism and pondering how they can contribute to a “revision” on our understanding of the space of art—as well as its impact on society.

Furthermore, Brodsky’s *Acción Visual*, a series of short films, aims to incorporate visual culture in human rights campaigning. “Ley Mordaza” and “Snowden,” initially made for the Argentinian national television channel (although it never broadcasted them), encompass appropriated internet videos. Such kind of aesthetic assemblage creates dynamic visual messages that interrogate and alarm about issues harmful to the people’s freedom. Seen as a body of work that falls under the category of politicised art, *Acción Visual* surely agrees with Tania Bruguera’s notion of “useful art”—not only in its demand for ethical responsibility but also in its quest for social awareness and action.

Marcelo Brodsky’s body of work consists of powerful, aggressive images of an agitating strength, challenging the observer to participate in the struggle. Thus, we are confronted with a series of questions and reinterpretations; stimulating parallels in our time; our public space; our histories; our relationship with memory; our “neighbours.” Yet, it also instigates a debate on the role, the contribution, and the need for the arts to create spaces of freedom. In the 50th anniversary of 1968, celebrating the vindication of all these revolutionary ideas, we have come to realize

we still live through violent times: Brexit, Donald Trump, xenophobia, gynophobia, massacres etc. Art like Marcelo Brodsky’s can only make a difference—proving us the world will not get better if we just let it be.

Cover:

Marcelo Brodsky
Coimbra, 1969, 2018
From the series 1968: *The Fire of Ideas*
Various materials on inkjet print
Original image: © Fernando Marques, Varela Pé Curto, and Carlos Ramos; Photo Section, General Library, University of Coimbra

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1968: The Fire of Ideas,
Marcelo Brodsky

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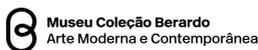
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