

Lyle Rexer, The New York Times, July 2000

Bringing Argentina Out of the Shadows

By LYLE REXER

THE room is dark, like the chamber of a camera obscura. Hanging from a cord is a single flashlight. A visitor approaches it, turns it on and shines it on the nearest wall. A vague image appears, as grainy as a newspaper photograph, as if summoned by the light itself. As the flashlight is moved toward the wall, the image comes into focus, stark and confrontational: a man is pointing a gun directly at the visitor. Wherever the light moves, the gun moves with it. There is no escape except to click off the light and plunge back into darkness.

The Argentine artist Graciela Sacco specializes in provocations of light and shadow. She uses the most primitive forms of photography to turn the tables on the spectator. In her art, images sprout everywhere — on

Using early photographic techniques, Graciela

Sacco sheds light on her country's recent past.

suitcases, pieces of wood, Venetian blinds, refrigerators, spoons, postage stamps and even from light itself.

Ms. Sacco's current installation, "Outside," at the Argentine Consulate, surrounds visitors with unexpected metaphors and forces them to question what they see and what they take for granted. For Ms. Sacco, who began making art at the end of the most dangerous and difficult period of recent Argentine history, photography is not simply a means of personal expression but a tool for changing the world by surprising the eye.

The current installation, which occupies two large rooms of the consulate on West 36th Street in Manhattan, testifies not only to Ms. Sacco's growing reputation but to a transformed political climate that has made her art a calling card for a nation that might once have prohibited it, or worse.

As a photographic artist, Ms. Sacco is not as well known in this country as Latin American contemporaries like Ffif Gaddo and Graciela Iturbide of Mexico or Sebastião Salgado of Brazil. For that matter, the painter Guillermo Kuitza is probably Argentina's best-known contemporary artistic export. But outside the United States, Ms. Sacco's work has been exhibited extensively in locations from Brazil to Den-

Lyle Rexer's most recent article for Arts & Letters was about a photographic exhibition by the painter Chuck Close

mark, and she has recently represented Argentina at both the São Paulo and Havana Biennals. Ms. Sacco came to maturity at the end of a period in which the repression, murder and exile of artists created "a zone of artistic silence in Argentina," as she put it in a recent interview at the consulate. Her task, as she sees it, is to make sure this artistic oblivion into which Argentina disappeared is not permanent.

It is a struggle she wages by rescuing familiar objects from another kind of oblivion, the oblivion of being taken for granted. Ms. Sacco makes the ordinary extraordinary. She employs what she calls heliography, referring to William Fox Talbot's earliest description of photography as "sun writing." Ms. Sacco sensitizes the surfaces of objects with light-sensitive chemicals so they will register a photographic image.

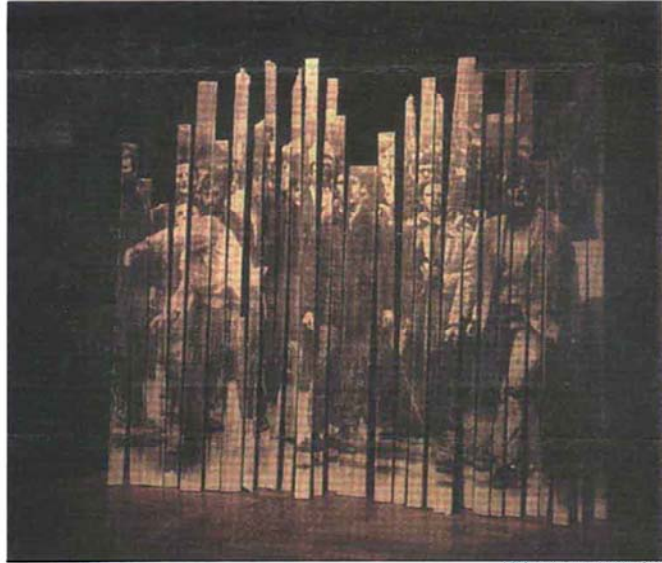
The images — usually photographed from newspapers — that Ms. Sacco projects onto these surfaces transform the objects into complex metaphors, revealing the moral dimensions of everyday things, places and experiences. The result can be as lyrical as a bird's wing or as provocative as a clenched fist. In the 1993 exhibition "Venus Empaquetada" ("Venus Packed"), for example, Ms. Sacco covered suitcases with images of breasts, eyes and lips to dramatize the fragmentation and commercialization of body images in the mass media.

In the consulate installation, visitors are confronted by, among other things, a forest of small spoons hanging from a line. On each spoon an open mouth has been heliographed. Ms. Sacco has used many variants of the mouth image, and depending on where they appear, they suggest a host of interpretations, from a protest against hunger to a warning about political and artistic repression. She has even placed them on postage stamps.

Although Ms. Sacco has a degree in visual arts, she had to master heliographic techniques on her own, through extensive research. This is a comment more on the antiquated nature of the process, however, than on Argentina's artistic provincialism, for her art is nourished by contact with the work of conceptual artists ranging from Marcel Duchamp to Cindy Sherman.

But for years that contact was second-hand. One of the most damaging consequences of repression was the near silencing of Argentina's truly cosmopolitan artistic conversation, a conversation that goes back decades. Buenos Aires, the city of Jorge Luis Borges, had always looked to Europe for cultural models, and since the 1930's its artists had participated in every international avant-garde movement. The critic Jorge Brest has written that at one time all Argentine artists "had to do compulsory military service in Cubism."

For the city of Rosario, where Ms. Sacco was born and still lives, the silence was



"Cuerpo a Cuerpo," in Graciela Sacco's "Urban Presences" series at the Argentine Consulate, is a heliograph printed on wood.

especially heavy. Rosario has long cherished a position closer to the cutting edge than the capital, and it produced Argentina's two best-known modern artists, Lucio Fontana and Antonio Berni. In the 1940's, Rosario even had its own club of photographers who sought to revive obsolete techniques. In this, as in so many other aspects of artistic life, says Ms. Sacco, "we are trying to recover what was effectively destroyed by the military."

That recovery includes coming to terms with the legacy of the radical group of artists known as Tucumán Arde (Tucumán Burns). Formed in Rosario and Buenos Aires in 1968 to protest conditions in the poorest rural province, Tucumán, the group orchestrated a highly visible campaign that included films, posters, newspapers and public actions. Two military dictatorships suppressed knowledge and discussion of Tucumán Arde, and the comparatively abbreviated movement subsequently assumed a mythic status. Ms. Sacco and other contemporary artists set out to uncover the facts behind the myth.

What they found was a source not only of political but artistic inspiration. "Here was a body of work based on absolutely original use of the mass media," Ms. Sacco says. "It showed us how to join art to daily life." It also showed that the past cannot be repeated. Argentina has moved on. "My art engages the dilemmas of my time," she says. "I want to intervene on the level of sensibility."

SO Ms. Sacco's "political" art transcends partisan labels and seeks instead to align itself with broad issues of shared humanity. One of her most provocative "interventions" came in response to a 1994 report on the poor conditions and performance of Argentina's schools. She heliographed large sheets of paper with an image of a bird's wing and bracketed school doorways and windows with them. The wings became a symbol suggesting both loss and possibility and the hope of change. At the Havana Biennial in 1997, Ms. Sacco again courted controversy when she

sought to move her exhibition beyond its approved space by covering walls along city streets with images of a crowd of protesters and a man throwing a rock. In a nation that still held to a revolutionary ideology, the political message was provocative precisely for its ambiguity. "To be political does not mean you have to be didactic," she says.

In a democratic Argentina, being an artist and politically engaged means shouldering a burden greater than mere opposition. As part of the consulate exhibition, Ms. Sacco has hung a series of clear plastic rectangles imprinted with the images of eyes. They cast haunting, interrogative shadows on the wall, as if the art were looking at the visitor, not vice versa.

According to Javier Gollizarrak, the Argentine cultural attaché: "In our country, so much was denied for so long that people got used to shrugging their shoulders and averting their eyes. Now artists such as Graciela Sacco are more important than ever, to bring us out of that, to help recover awareness, to enable us to look." □