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Bocanada (Graciela Sacco, 1993-2023): Thirty Years of ‘Interferences’

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Bocanada (Graciela Sacco, 1993-2023): Thirty Years of 'Interferences'

Abstract. The year 2023 marks the 30th anniversary of the first street intervention in which the Argentine artist Graciela Sacco used her iconic Bocanada images to signal a state of emergency and challenge the power dynamics at play in the urban space. This first Bocanada 'interference' – as the artist used to describe her practice – took place in the Argentine city of Rosario in 1993, when Sacco pasted heliographic posters of her close-ups of wide-open mouths on the exterior walls of a kitchen that prepared meals for the city's public schools but was under threat of closure. The title of the work has been variously translated into English as 'mouthful' and as 'a breath'; both versions aiming to encapsulate the many meanings of the Spanish noun Bocanada. More literal translations would read the term as a compound noun: a 'mouth-nothing'; thereby revealing Sacco's reference, via her somewhat dystopian image, to the neoliberal experiment that submerged Argentina in unemployment and poverty, and precipitated the socio-political, economic and food crisis with which the country began the twenty-first century. This article will explore Sacco's 'interferences', their passage from the streets of various cities around the world to different gallery spaces and museums, and their renewed vitality, thirty years on – and more than five years after the artist's premature passing.

Keywords: Graciela Sacco, *Bocanada*, Conceptual Art, Heliography, Street Interventions, Political Art, Latin American Art

Resumen. El año 2023 marca el 30 aniversario de las primeras intervenciones callejeras en las que la artista argentina Graciela Sacco utilizó sus icónicas imágenes de la serie Bocanada para señalar un estado de emergencia y poner en jaque los juegos de poder que tienen lugar en el espacio urbano. Esta primera "interferencia" – término que la artista solía utilizar para hablar de su práctica artística – tuvo lugar en la ciudad de Rosario (Argentina) en 1993, cuando Sacco

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pegó sus imágenes alrededor de una cocina encargada de preparar la comida para las escuelas públicas de la ciudad que se encontraba en peligro de cierre. Bocanada hace referencia, a partir de una imagen semi-distópica, a las medidas neoliberales que sumergieron a Argentina en la pobreza y el desempleo, y que precipitaron la crisis socio-política, económica y de alimentación con las que el país entró al siglo veintiuno. En este artículo se van a explorar las “interferencias” de Sacco, su pasaje por las calles de distintas ciudades del mundo y su traslado al ámbito de exposición, desde galerías privadas a museos e instituciones públicas considerando su renovada vitalidad a más de treinta años de su primera aparición – y más de cinco desde el prematuro fallecimiento de la artista.

Palabras clave: Graciela Sacco, *Bocanada*, Arte Conceptual, Heliografía, Intervenciones Callejeras, Arte Político, Arte Latinoamericano

The *interfering* image is a disturbing one; it dwells in the interstices, springs from the memory of the objects and of the people, is politically critical when it questions power in relation to the human condition, the established order and the formal attitude that gives it material form. The idea is to show that those gaps are inhabited by other shapes, other discourses, other sounds that question and challenge the truthfulness of the system, the correspondence between significance and signifier, the semantic logic that supports it.

Graciela Sacco² (1996)

Introduction

The 1990s in Argentina have been described as the ‘convertibility’ decade, because the financial scheme implemented in those years and that created a parity of US Dollars to Argentine pesos, caused a profound political, economic and cultural change in society (Seoane 2003, p. 106). The consolidation of a rampant neoliberalist project that was initiated with the last dictatorship (1976-1983), established a society of spectacle and consumerism that culminated in the devastating crisis of 2001. A well-known local description of that period appeared

² Please note that all citations in English appear in the original translations published in the bilingual texts cited. When there are no official translations of the cited texts, I have provided my own translations in brackets.

in Beatriz Sarlo's *Scenes from Postmodern Life* (1994), where she stated that 'Argentina, like any other Western society, [is] liv[ing] a growing cultural homogenization, where the plurality of offers does not compensate the poverty of collective ideals, and whose main feature is, at the same time, extreme individualism' (1994, p. 9). While this depiction of the 'loss of grand narratives' – as Lyotard (1979/1986) defined Postmodernism in his widely-cited book on the matter – was part of a global change, in the case of Argentina, as Sarlo further explained, 'the loss of meaning not only has to do with contemporary issues but also with a haunting past: oblivion of history, and the experience of a time that is not anymore a historical time' (1994, p. 194).

The fact that during Menem's administrations (1989-1999) a politics of national reconciliation allowed no room for revisiting the past had great impact on the artistic production of those years. Whereas many artists felt the need to fill and contest that void, others embraced more independent postmodern aesthetic explorations detached from a direct reference to the socio-political context. This highly contested dichotomous view of the 1990s art scene in Argentina, which was captured in the debate entitled 'Art Rosa Light vs. Art Rosa Luxemburg' (Giunta, Jacoby, Longoni, Montequín, Jitrik, Buenos Aires Museum of Latin American Art, 2003), was the focus of the 2009 exhibition *Te saco el Pombo te pongo el Sacco* (curated by Roberto Echen) that took place at Rosario's Museum of Contemporary Art Castagnino+Macro.³ In a playful and provocative way, the title placed artists Marcelo Pombo and Graciela Sacco as opposite poles of the 1990s Argentine art field, yet the exhibition aimed to serve as a springboard for surpassing the Manichaean debate that had thus far partly defined that period (Contursi 2014). The curator's invitation to rethink this polemic categorization and the supposedly irreconcilable positions that tended to delimit exclusive and excluding frontiers within the Arts, is at the core of this article. Instead of exploring the old debate on the tension between art and politics, 'form versus content', the following pages will delve into a series of street works by Graciela Sacco, pushing beyond the traditional positionings of her work as solely political – after all, the artist always emphasised that *all* art is political per se (personal communication, interview with the artist).

Graciela Sacco (1956-2017) was one of the most important Argentine artists of her generation, whose work is of utmost significance in current aesthetic and political debates in the art world, yet little has been written in English about her work and legacy. An heir of the 1960s era of Conceptualism in Latin American

³ The title of the exhibition is an alliteration that plays with Sacco's surname and a famous pun by comedian José Marrone: 'me saco el sacco y me pongo el pongo'. In Argentine Spanish 'saco' is a word for a coat, but also means 'I take off'. 'Pongo' means 'I put', but that is all – so the pun becomes a nonsense.

art, she came to maturity at the end of a period of artistic persecution and exile in Argentina, a time she referred to as a ‘zone of artistic silence’ (Gregg Duggan 2001). She represented Argentina at multiple international art biennials, including Shanghai (2004), Venice (2001), Havana (1997 and 2000), Mercosur (1997) and Sao Paulo (1996). She was awarded varied distinctions and international accolades, including the Argentine Association of Art Critics’ award for Artist of the Year (2001) and three Konex Awards (2002, 2012, and, posthumously, in 2022). Today, her work forms part of prestigious international collections such as those of Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (Madrid, Spain); Bronx Museum of New York (USA); Frac Lorraine (Metz, France); and the Microsoft Art Collection (Washington, USA). Despite this global reach, she remains largely unknown in Anglophone contexts – a lacuna that this article aims to address.

Indeed, even in the context of more localised academic interest in the role of street art in Argentina in which Sacco came of age, Sacco’s work has been underexplored. In their research on Argentine Street Arts, Lyman Chaffee (1993) and Holly Eva Ryan (2016) both synthesise the socio-political and historical background that led to the emergence of urban art practices in Argentina – from its Golden Age at the turn of the 20th Century, characterised by the arrival of thousands of migrants from Europe, through to Peronism and the subsequent dictatorships that decimated the country. When the last dictatorship came to an end in 1983, there was a need to recover public spaces for the people and, in Ryan’s words, ‘over the course of the 1990s, political street art became a tool and remedy for groups seeking truth, justice or closure related to crimes committed by the junta’ (2016, p. 126). Claudia Kozak (2004), in her genealogy of graffiti and street interventions, also explored the impact that several Buenos Aires-based art group’s actions had at socio-political and cultural levels in the country. However, neither Chaffee, Ryan, nor Kozak analysed the work of individual artists of the nature of Graciela Sacco, in spite of the fact that her urban interventions are key to understanding this period.

Accordingly, the following pages bring into view Sacco’s early art practices in the urban landscape, focussing in particular on her *Bocanada* series and on surpassing an exclusively political-historical reading in order to explore as well moments of aesthetic change in her artistic practices – more specifically her search for the ‘interfering’ image, one that dwells at the interstices of the everyday. Previously unseen images of her 1993 interferences are analysed here with a particular interest in their Dadaist essence, reflections of a movement that corresponded with Sacco’s playful spirit. To conclude, the article delves into the legacy of those first street interventions apropos their 30th anniversary, providing a first historical account of *Bocanada*’s international dimension, and uncovering

new possible readings of the series generated by its reproduction in contemporary settings, and thereby evidencing the verve that resides at the heart of Sacco's oeuvre⁴.

From *Tucumán Arde* [Tucumán is Burning] to the Social Readymade: First Street Interferences and Heliomontages

When democratic order was reinstated in Argentina, forty years ago, a group of artists embarked upon a project to investigate and map the works that were part of Rosario's avant-garde movement. In 1984, gathered under the auspices of the short-lived, unionised cooperative APA – Artistas Plásticos Asociados [Visual Artists Associated] – the group invited Guillermo Fantoni to curate a retrospective exhibition at the Castagnino Museum, covering the convulsive period during Onganía's dictatorship of 1966-1968 (Longoni, Mestman 2008, p. 296).⁵ Sacco's direct participation in that group and in the public talks and seminars that followed the exhibition was no coincidence (Giunta 1994, p. 61).⁶ Inspired by those conversations, together with two fellow Fine Arts students, Andrea Sueldo and Silvia Andino, Sacco wrote a pioneering undergraduate dissertation on the interventions carried out by a collective of artists in Rosario and Buenos Aires in 1968, under the title *Tucumán Arde* [Tucumán is Burning], which sought to spotlight and contest the extreme poverty of residents of that region – now considered a milestone of political Conceptualism in Latin American art (Sacco,

⁴ My thanks to Silvia Chirife and the members of "Sacco Afuera" project for sending the images of their work. My special thanks as well to Belén Antola, Sacco's assistant, and to Marcos Garavelli, Sacco's photographer, for all their support. I am indebted to Emma Staniland, Lesley Wiley and the peer reviewers, who provided valuable comments. Readers should know that I am the co-executive of Sacco's estate – she was my mother. It is because of this familial tie that I've been able to provide unpublished materials and information for this article. I believe my critical work respects objectivity throughout. I would like to express my gratitude as well to the University of Leicester for providing a series of grants to curate exhibitions on Sacco's work that helped develop the research at the core of this article – mainly the KEIPOC FUND (January-July 2023).

⁵ This period was marked by two major student revolts: at a local level, the "night of the long batons" on the 29th July 1966, when after demonstrating at all the universities in the country that were annulling institutional rights to autonomous governance, university students were brutally repressed; and the student revolts of May 1968 in France.

⁶ Members of APA included Sacco, Daniel García, Gabriel González Suárez, Carlos Cantore, Silvia Chirife, Rubén Baldemar, Sergio Mazzini, Anabel Solari, Osvaldo Boblione, Silvia Andino, Anabel Solari, Roberto Echen, Verónica Prieto, Ricardo Pereyra, Miguel Mazocatto, Claudia del Río, Mónica Cosenza, Fernández de Gamboa, Marta Tarsia, Maria Elena Mainieri, Andrea Basualdo, Patricia Espinoza and Gabriel Serrano.

Sueldo 1987).⁷ The themes and aesthetic explorations of the actions they investigated resonated throughout Sacco's work from that moment on. Years later, at an exhibition on Tucumán Arde at Centro Cultural Borges, Sacco declared that 'for the first time after a long period of silence, all this material allowed [us] to put together the puzzle of [our] artistic memory' and it was then that she 'could reflect on and feel the artistic practice from an everyday perspective and with a different ethic-aesthetic awareness' (Sacco 1998, n.p.).



Picture 1: APA meeting at Sacco's home. Daniel García, Sergio Mazzini and Sacco. Picture courtesy of Silvia Chirife.

Sacco continued her research after graduating, obtaining different grants and awards, including from CONICET and Fundación Antorchas.⁸ In an

⁷ In a later interview, Sacco further explained that Daniel García, Gabriel González Suárez and she did the most exhaustive work of data gathering (Sacco 2000, p. 62). Tucumán provided the perfect medium for those artists since, as Camnitzer explained in his canonical book on Conceptualism in Latin American art, 'the dictatorship headed by Juan Carlos Onganía chose the province as a place to exemplify the soundness of his government's policies' (2007, p. 64). Thus, the 'First National Meeting of Avant-Garde Art' started as a way to counteract the government's publicity campaign about Tucumán.

⁸ CONICET (Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas) is Argentina's national funding body for scholarly scientific work. Sacco obtained a 24-month grant in 1989 for the project 'Análisis de los procesos de producción, distribución y consumo de los no objetualismos en Rosario, período 1970-1990' ('Analysis of the processes of production, distribution and consumption of non-objectualisms in Rosario, 1970-1990'), which was subsidised by UNESCO.

innovative article entitled 'From *Tucumán Arde* to the Social Readymade' (1990), she employed a Marxist materialist aesthetics approach to reflect on the continuum of artistic practices in relation to social practices in the country. As its title suggests, she starts with a brief overview of *Tucumán Arde*'s counterinformation actions, including a series of graffiti, stencils and posters that were located in Rosario and Buenos Aires' urban landscape, prompting people to reflect on the situation in Tucumán thanks to the boldness of their warning messages.⁹ With the aim of exploring the legacy for her own time of those 1968 interventions, which broke away from the elitism of art galleries and considered art to be everything that moves and agitates us, she then explored the concept of the "social readymade", coined by Fernando Bedoya and Emei for the street performance and "rally-postal" known as *Bicicletas a la China*. Paraphrasing Duchamp, those artists conceived their actions as artworks that use the social reality instead of manufactured objects as their prime material. That event, which, arguably, has not yet been properly researched, originated as an expression of solidarity with the 1989 Tiananmen Square student protests and massacre.¹⁰ On the 14th July that year, a group of more than thirty artists led by Bedoya and Emei designed a series of postage stamps – mail art inspired by the 1970s political art actions –, incited the mobilization of dozens of cyclists across Buenos Aires to travel from the famous Obelisk to the Congress building, and followed this with a series of urban actions. As Sacco explains, the intervention had the effect of turning the streets into a stage – an intended impact emphasised by the sounding of the "Gong Teatral" (theatre gong) at different points along a route that included protest choreography and the creation of "heroic sculptures" constructed with bicycles (Sacco 1990, p. 90).

⁹ The article was written for the series of talks apropos the cuts on education organised by *Trabajadores del Arte Toman Rosario* (TOMARTE). Sacco was part of the organising committee of TOMARTE's 'Primer encuentro bienal alternativo de arte' (first alternative art biennial), which took place in Rosario, 29th April-1st May 1990.

¹⁰ There has been growing interest in this urban action since then, as evidenced in the reference made by Camnitzer (2007) and in Kelly and Kester's edited volume on collaborative art practices in Latin America (2017).



Picture 2: *Bicicletas a la China* (material gathered by Emei, curated by Fernando Bedoya, and folder designed by Pato Piris). Photographs taken from Sacco’s personal archive.

Although twenty years passed between those two events, as Sacco asserts, the social and material circumstances remained the same. Both art works promote a change of medium for the arts, considering the use of mass media through a semiotic reflection on – and re-signification of – the circulation of its messages (Sacco 1990, p. 93). The actual concept of “social readymade” suggests as well ‘the appropriation of the streets as medium for art and the use of play as an element in the transformation of dogmas’ (Bedoya cited in Sacco 1990, p. 93). For Sacco, both *Tucumán Arde* and *Bicicletas a la China* demonstrated the need to move away from an idealistic separation of the work of art from the world, evincing a clear pathway for what she called “transgressive art practices”. These are characterised, according to the artist, by their attempt to bring art and everyday life closer together; their original use of mass media as resources; their choice of an event (a conflict) from everyday life and its inclusion and assimilation in the artistic proposal; their desire to change the known reality, and their closeness to the political arena (Sacco 1990, p. 91)

These social intentions within the Arts that she was describing as “transgressive”, have marked Sacco’s works in a dominant way, to the point that

it has been suggested that part of her own practice involves a re-appropriation of the techniques developed in the 60s – and also in the 1920s and 1930s avant-gardes, with Antonio Berni's work as named precursor (Sacco 2000, p. 57). For Art Historian Andrea Giunta, who is one of the few scholars that has written extensively about Sacco's work to date, this re-appropriation took the form of 'vanguardist citations that act as intertext' (Giunta 1994, p. 63).¹¹ It can be suggested as well that, inspired by the concept of the "social readymade" analysed in her own article, many of Sacco's works from that point on used the streets as a medium – and in many respects in a playful way. As previously mentioned, Sacco was not alone in this excavation of the past for an interrogation of the present through an exploration of the city's aesthetic pulse. Giunta explains that :

in the Argentina of the 1990s, where an artistic market was almost non-existent, where museums did not have a proper programme or agenda that inserted them into the social space and where art galleries practically disappeared from the cultural sphere, various artists created works challenging urban discourses. They employed citations, parody, and irony as resources to re-formulate, from a position that is both aesthetic and critical, the mechanisms of distribution of cultural goods, political discourses and practices, and the latency of various repressive dangers (1996, p. 82).

Sacco was one of those artists. For her, the urban landscape offered multiple signifiers – sidewalks, ripped advertising and political posters, marked tiles, broken curbs, neon signs – where the artist's intervention could make art of the everyday whilst challenging traditional forms of production, distribution and consumption of art. In this respect, alongside her conceptual/critical scholarly work – or, rather, as part of it – Sacco began an aesthetic search for her true/personal image that would dialogue with her ideological referents. In 1983, she started her research on heliography as a technique for the Arts (Sacco 1994). Heliography involves the transfer of an image onto a chemically treated surface by means of exposure to light. A procedure originally used in architecture to obtain copies from drawings designed on translucent papers, heliography was the perfect medium for Sacco to give form to ideas via images of varied shades of blue, red and sepia. Not only did this technique allow her to pursue her quest to grasp the "interfering image" described in our opening quotation – that image which arises from the encounter, or indeed battle, between light, matter, and empty space –, but it also serves as a tool for architects which, as Sacco noted, are those in charge of imagining and designing the urban landscape (Sacco 2000, p.

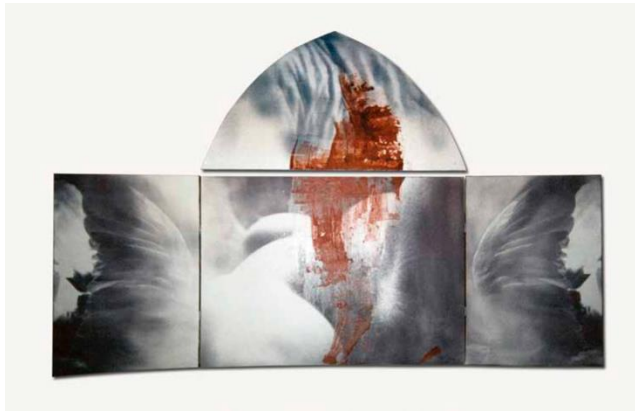
¹¹ Sacco herself commissioned Giunta to write the scholarly texts of the first monographs she wrote about her own practice.

55). In other words, her choice of this technique was not casual or simply aesthetic – but rather, as she declared on multiple occasions, it conceptually embedded cities and the spaces of the everyday as intrinsic elements in many of her works. Moreover, heliography’s potential for reproducibility is in tune with her interest in questioning a solely auratic conception of the work of art – i.e. that artworks should have a unique aura, meaning, linked to a specific time and space. It dialogues with her investigation of the proliferation of publicity images in the urban jungle and her aim to challenge the narrations of the world that those present, subverting their consumerist message to offer instead the possibility of provoking critical thinking amongst the public by enacting, as analysed below, Dadaist gestures that generates the effect of ostranenie in passers-by.

At first, throughout the 1980s, Sacco was only able to obtain a series of photo-serigraphic images from shadows cast by slides. She developed her skills as an avid printmaker/engraver, working with artisanal paper, fabric, kaleidoscopes, whilst exploring the potential of different photographic procedures and the use of mass-media images. Upon finding the right chemicals, by 1990 she was able to create heliographic matrices and emulsify and print on a tremendously diverse range of types of surfaces, including metal, glass, cloth, even bread – works ‘which represented the highlight of a mode of artistic production that addresses both the challenges of theme and those of technical experimentation’ (Giunta 2005, p. 119). There is, furthermore, a temporal dimension inherent to this technique that addresses the past, bringing to the fore the memory hidden in objects, which can be read as a clear reaction against the enforced amnesia imposed in those years by the government. As Sacco explained, ‘photography captures the instant; heliography captures the instant in objects that may not be actors in that same instant. This temporal displacement resignifies the setting of the printed image’ (Sacco 1994, p. 35). Images are not conceived as printed *on* the objects, but rather through chemical fumes they are ‘made to appear, as if they emerge from those surfaces. This is something that undoubtedly forces us to think in historical terms.’ (Sacco 2000, p. 55).

In an extensive essay written for Sacco’s book *Sun-Writings: Heliography in the Artistic Field* (1994), Giunta traces different stages of the artist’s aesthetic discoveries with this technique and explores how the body acts in Sacco’s art practice as ‘a parameter to measure different social constructions of sense’ (1994, p. 65). Human – and, on occasion, animal – bodies rarely appear in their entirety in this early period. As Giunta further explains, ‘Sacco produces disturbing images, expanded visions of the skin, fragments of bodies and faces on the surface of objects such as suitcases, dishes, spoons, glasses, bread, hats, a cot, a fridge and blinds. In doing so, she singles out endangered social spaces’ (Giunta

2005). In those first couple of years of the 1990s there were a few recurring images that Sacco kept turning to and examining from different angles using heliography, with the intention of metonymically bringing to light that social endangerment mentioned in Giunta's analysis. One of those images is a bird wing. She produced a whole series of works with them that establish clear dialogues with the history of art, particularly challenging traditional representations of the female body. Those pieces, *Maja anunciada* (1991-1993), *El tríptico de la Anunciación* (1991), and *Historias de Venus* (1992-1993), have recently been re-analysed and re-conceptualised in the wake of new Argentine feminism – as will be discussed in the next section.



Picture 3: From the *Maja anunciada* [Proclaimed Maja] series (1991-1993): *Triptych of the Annunciation*, 1991 Heliography on paper. Marion and Jorge Helft Collection. Photograph courtesy of Graciela Sacco Estate.

For Sacco, the bird wing possessed a mysterious halo, at the same time real and palpable and yet evanescent and enigmatic, irradiating religious and spiritual undertones. In Giunta's words, 'the feathery textures, similar to x-ray images, articulate different symbolisms. In this case, wings, generally related to the idea of freedom, surround what the artist calls "oppression areas"' (Giunta 1994, p. 82). It is this allegorical capacity that led the artist to use those wings for her first official urban intervention in 1994, known as *Intervención Urbana I* [Urban Intervention I] from the series *En peligro de extinción* [In Danger of Extinction], which focused on a number of public schools in the city of Rosario. These works were also known as 'heliomontages', for their juxtaposition of light and sun with multiple other elements. Whereas the initial intention was to

accompany this urban interference with a series of actions inside the schools and at an art museum that would reflect, as Giunta rightly stated, on the oppressive nature of the institution, the debates surrounding education at a time of political campaigns raised concerns that ultimately shut down the project.¹² With time, precisely because of the wings' evocative features, this urban interference was read as an awareness-raising call in the name of a public education system that was considered under threat due to lack of government investment.



Pictures 4 & 5: Heliography on offset paper. Documenting of *Intervención Urbana I* (1994) from the series *En peligro de extinción* (1994), signalling of public schools in Rosario, Argentina. Photographs courtesy of Graciela Sacco Estate.

The year before she officially took her work to the streets with this urban intervention in 1994, Sacco carried out a series of outdoor tests near her studio in Rosario, placing an heliography of the wrinkled sole of a foot on the pavement, and images of a few open mouths on the wall, to explore the reaction of the prints when exposed to the elements, and to the gaze of and interactions with passers-by (Belén Antola, personal communication).¹³ As a provocateur, she enjoyed when people stopped in the middle of their stroll to look at the images and rip them off the surfaces they were stuck to, or when they purposely stepped on the images on

¹² The public debates on the decline of State-funded education at the beginning of 1994 meant that Sacco's initial installation of wings on schools' facades were misinterpreted as threatening the schools' survival. Yet, 'even though Sacco's visual interventions oppose the repressive character of schools, they are also positive, for they put forward their defence from a critical position' (Giunta 1994, p. 82).

¹³ Belén Antola is an artist and curator and was Sacco's personal assistant from the early 1980s until her passing in 2017.

the sidewalks (Sacco, personal communication). Almost as a Dadaist gesture, her fragmented images of body parts were not just appealing to the sensibilities of common citizens who are not necessarily familiar with contemporary art, but were also intended to offend, to embrace an irrationality that, to a certain extent, was in tune with the imageries of streets she was calling attention to.

The open mouths eventually became one of her most sought-after images, used in multiple formats and pieces known as *Bocanada*. The title of this series of works has been variously translated into English as 'mouthful', and as 'a breath'; both versions aiming to encapsulate the many meanings of the Spanish noun *Bocanada*. More literal translations would read the term as a compound noun: a 'mouth-nothing'; thereby revealing Sacco's reference, via her somewhat dystopian image, to the neoliberal experiment that submerged Argentina in unemployment and poverty, and precipitated the socio-political and economic crisis with which the country began the twenty-first century. This reference to the socio-political context was also highlighted by Giunta in her essay. The scholar states that there are four identifiable themes in Sacco's productions, particularly visible since the moment when she was first able to emulsify different surfaces in 1992: food, sex, work and education, which were 'four territories under threat during the neoliberal reorganisation of economy and social morals' (1994, p. 77). It was in relation to the themes of education and sex that the images of wings were recurrent in most of Sacco's works. Yet, it should be noted that they also appeared in productions related to other themes of concern that originated in these years: migration, borders, exiles, and the challenges of belonging, which would occupy the central focus of her practice from the new millennium onwards. A key example of this are the suitcases imprinted with wings that were exhibited at Museo Sívori in 1993.¹⁴

When it comes to the topics of food and work, she began with images not only of the close-up of open mouths, but also of labour utensils, hands, knives, forks and still life compositions, captured in multiple semantically-charged surfaces – production and consumption are closely intertwined, the lack of one causing, in general, the scarcity of the other. For instance, for the exhibition on the 500th anniversary of the conquest of America, *500 años de represión* [500 Years of Repression], that took place at Museo Sívori (Centro Cultural Recoleta) in 1992, Sacco presented a piece of mail art that combined heliographed rubberstamps and artistamps of forks and knives framing a close-up of soil, calling attention to the multiple debates and tensions surrounding matters of land reform

¹⁴ The installation was called *Transporte crítica: Venus empaquetada* (Critical Transport: Packaged Venus) (1993) and it was formed of 9 suitcases with wings heliographed on their surface, placed over a thin metal pedestal that had real white feathers covering the base.

and ownership that have been taking place since the Conquest. The phrase ‘Latin America, land between water’ frames the soil, itself placed as if ready to be consumed or to be lost, drifting away in those predatory waters.



Picture 6: Mail Art, postal action. Heliographed stamps of the series ‘Latinoamérica, Tierra entre aguas’, created for the exhibition 500 years of repression at Museo Sívori, Buenos Aires, 1992. Photograph courtesy of Graciela Sacco Estate.

This art form became common practice for Sacco, having deep connections to the development of her street interventions. In the book she edited in 2000 for the Castagnino Museum, she actually grouped together the images of her “urban interferences” with mail art registers. Mail art is rooted in the 1960s avant-garde movement with which she was fascinated. It responds to the need to bring art closer to the everyday and to create a dialogue, open channels of communication with the people, removing art from sacralised/institutionalised channels of distribution. Camnitzer has further explained that in Latin America the epidemic of dictatorships made the use of mail a perfect vehicle to allow for communication between isolated artists and the rest of the world, eventually seen by the regimes as subversive enough to warrant the imprisonment of several artists (2007, p. 77). Of the first official urban intervention, described above, Sacco also created a series of artistamps of each one of the schools that she chose to highlight through her work, and a rubberstamp that reads ‘Angelus Novus’. This alluded most certainly to Paul Klee’s oil-transferred monoprint bearing the same title, which Walter Benjamin described as an ‘angel of history’ in his pessimistic reading of history as a never-ending cycle of chaos and despair (Benjamin 1969,

p. 249). Hence, Sacco's rubberstamped mark can be understood to imply the same doomed destiny for the schools in question.



Picture 7: Mail Art, postal action. From the series *En peligro de extinción* (1994). Photograph courtesy of Graciela Sacco Estate.

In 1993, she combined both the wings and open mouths imagery in a triptych piece that included a heliographed bread, which anchored the meaning of those mouths more directly to hunger and the reigning food crisis. She also started to inscribe those mouths on spoons, evincing 'their co-presence in the feeding act' (Giunta 1994, p. 77), as well as dialectically – and conceptually – inviting reflection on the barbarism of that moment when there is nothing to be found between the two. The artist explained that the idea came to her when she saw the reflection of her own mouth in a spoon she was using and came to ask herself: who was eating who? (personal communication). This cannibalistic idea is at the core of her video art piece in this series, where the mouths are set in motion. Inspired by Cuban writer Virgilio Piñera's text, the penetrating sound of chewing accompanies an anthropophagic act of mouths eating each other. Piñera's subtitled words guide the viewer through a story of a starving town where: '[...] the mayor expressed his deep desire that his beloved people would feed themselves, as he did, from their own reserves, that is, from their own flesh [...]'. In this way, Sacco incites us to consider the savagery of our actions and the irrationality of public policies, particularly when hunger takes over. Moreover, these works invite us to consider Sacco as part of a broader Latin American vanguard tradition, in line with other female artists like Anna María Maiolino's *In/Out (Antropofagia)* (1973-74) and *O Pão Nosso de cada dia (Our Daily Bread)* (1978) by Ana Bella Geiger, artists who focussed on the embedded symbolism of the mouth and participated in Brazil's conceptual art scene.



Picture 8: Heliography on bread and wooden board (1993). From the series *Bocanada*. Photograph courtesy of Graciela Sacco Estate.



Picture 9: Heliography on metal spoon mounted on wooden block (1994). From the series *Bocanada*

Her second official urban action, labelled *Intervención Urbana II* [*Urban Intervention II*], this time from the series *Bocanada*, also took place in 1994, upon approval of the constitutional change that allowed the re-election of Carlos Menem, and which started the publicity campaign that led to the 1995 presidential elections. She pasted posters of her open mouths over different billboards containing campaign slogans across the city of Rosario, urging people to look beyond their empty promises.



Pictures 10 & 11: Heliography on offset paper. Images of *Intervención Urbana II* (1994-1995) from the series *Bocanada* (1993-2023), signalling of political publicity campaign for presidential elections, Argentina, 1994-1995. Photographs courtesy of Graciela Sacco Estate.

However, as previously mentioned, the first *Bocanada* 'interferences' – as the artist eventually came to describe her practice – took place in 1993, when Sacco pasted heliographic posters of her close-ups of wide-open mouths not only outside her studio, but also on the exterior walls of a kitchen that prepared meals for the city's public schools but was under threat of closure. Albeit that the specific date of this action is questionable, variously recorded in different publications as 1993 and as 1994 (Sacco 2000, p. 62), the cataloguing of other 'interferences' of this kind that preceded her official events of 1994 was discovered in Sacco's personal archive after her death. This indicates Sacco's urgent need to go out to the streets to provoke change, a fast-paced production process that was stronger than her compulsion to historicise or legitimise these actions. The work had a life of its own. It was being created through the interaction between the specific sites intervened in and the passers-by, and it did not need the artist's signature to be considered as such. The ephemerality of those gestures demonstrated, in short, that consolidating these actions as part of a corpus of works would have major impact, hence the insistence in 1994 to officially name them as "urban interventions" and provide a set number, creating pieces of mail art to accompany them.



Picture 12: Heliography on offset paper (1993-1994). Signalling of centralised kitchen in Rosario, Argentina. From the series *Bocanada*. Photograph courtesy of Graciela Sacco Estate.

One of those 1993 *Bocanada* interferences which has never been mentioned in any literature on Sacco's work, was her signalling of the entrance to the Banco Provincial de Santa Fe [Santa Fe Provincial Bank]. The bank suffered years of misappropriation of funds between 1979 and 1991. Those charged with

fraud and embezzlement were set free in 1993 and the bank was ultimately privatised, costing the province economic damages of more than 500 million dollars (*Rosario12* 2013, n.p.). In 2013, those charges were dropped due to their alleged prescription, and even now, in 2023, thirty years since the bank’s union members made new charges against those released, there are still requests to end the impunity (Aguirre 2023, n. p.). Undoubtedly, Sacco’s ‘interference’ of this bank was premonitory of what happened in December 2001, when the nation’s whole banking system collapsed. It was an unusual action for her at that point: it did not correspond exactly to the themes she was working on at the time, but her assistant explained that the nature of the white-collar crime – bureaucrats saved by a perverse system that punished the workers – urged them to go out to visibilise/externalise what happened indoors. They pasted many posters, but the police, whose presence was extensive at that moment due to the corruption scandal surrounding the entity that had led to the gathering of significant media attention outside the building, forced their removal (Belén Antola, personal communication).



Picture 13 & 14: Heliography on offset paper (1993). Signalling of Banco Provincial de Santa Fe in Rosario, Argentina. From the series *Bocanada*. Photograph courtesy of Graciela Sacco Estate.

In this regard, it is noteworthy that Sacco’s first interferences used heliographies to address passers-by and to act as denunciation. Due to their nature, by exposing heliographic images to the open air, to direct contact with the sun, these first interferences made those images as endangered as the spaces to which they were calling attention – they faded at a faster pace. Making each one of those posters was also a time-consuming artisanal process. Using this technique on posters that were likely to be ripped, vandalised, taken off, discarded, sometimes a matter of minutes from their placement on public walls, was not only painstaking, but an invitation to reflect on the images that dwell in the interstices;

on the materiality that imbued the open mouths with multiple signifiers in dialogue with the walls' hidden past. For gestures like this, many critics have described Sacco's productions as belonging to a "neo-conceptualist" period (Esquivel 2005, n.p.; Alonso 2004, n.p.). According to Alonso, 'the 1980s neo-conceptualism recuperated the importance of the image, reorienting their discursive interest towards the social mass media sphere, where photography gains a prominent position' (2004, n.p.). Yet, as the critic further explains, it is particularly in the 1990s, after going through a historical-aesthetic avant-garde revision, that artists 'recuperate the procedural sense of the artistic practice' (2004, n.p.). Sacco's explorations of heliography in the artistic field runs in line with this recuperation. Her action of taking heliographed posters to the streets displaces the figurative meaning of the images shown by locating part of their signifier in the urban landscape.

Her mail art on the *Bocanada* series presents a few variations from 1994 to 2014. In many of the sheets of artistamp created, she included rubber stamps with different messages that were connected to her urban interferences. In one of them, for instance, she included the provocative phrase 'a falta de pan buenas son tortas' [Let them eat cake], famously associated with Marie-Antoinette, questioning once again, as she did in her video art piece and in the intervention at the Santa Fe bank, the relationship between governance and the reality endured by the everyday person. In that same sheet another rubber stamp states "también" [also], with reference to the interference carried out on the publicity campaign by Rosario's city council (1994-1995). Pictures of different popular cultural personalities born in the city were shown in billboards with the slogan "Son de aquí" [They are From Here]. Sacco intervened in this campaign via posters of the empty open mouths, and created a series of postcards that showed the phrase "también son de aquí" [they are also from here], generating an eye-opening dialogue with the council's campaign.



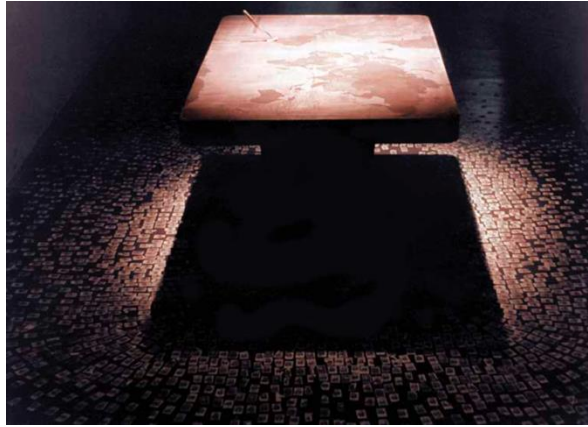
Picture 15: Heliography on stamps. Postal art (1993-1994). From the series *Bocanada* (1993-2023). Photograph



Picture 16: Heliography on offset paper. Street intervention in Rosario (1994-1995). From the series *Bocanada* (1993-2023). Photograph

In 1996, Sacco represented Argentina at the XXIII São Paulo International Art Biennial, considered one of the most important art events in the world, and among the works presented was *Bocanada*, this time in different installation formats, as urban interference, and as mail art. Nelson Aguilar, the Biennial's chief curator, singled out Sacco's contribution as the national entry most coherently interconnected with the biennial's ethos of 'the dematerialization of art' (Lebenglik 1996, p. 90). She infused one of her installations at the Biennial with the spirit of her street interferences, printing thousands of artistamps on the floor surrounding, as if escaping or emanating from it, a table on which was heliographed a map of the world, and on that map she placed a stamp of a mouth which was then stabbed with a fork that marked the location of Sao Paulo. After her participation in this event, which was not without its challenges and

contestation, her career became more international in scope. Other images emerged, which became also representative of her practice – such as the “stone thrower” heliographed on large wooden planks in *El incendio y las vísperas* [*The Fire and Its Aftermath*] (1996), or the pair of eyes that would eventually become the street intervention she carried out at the Venice Biennale in 2001.



Picture 17: Installation. Heliography on table, artiststamps and fork. From the series *Bocanada* (1993-2023). 23rd Sao Paulo International Biennial, Brazil (1996). Photograph courtesy of Graciela Sacco Estate.

It was in the text she wrote for the catalogue of the Sao Paulo biennial that she started to use the term ‘interference’ rather than ‘intervention’ to discuss her practice, particularly in relation to the urban space – see the excerpt cited in the epigraph to this article. The term ‘interference’ speaks of ‘interruptions, cuts, crossings and obstructions; different ways to install signalling forms and attention calls’ (Wechsler 2015, p. 18). As researcher Diana Wechsler explains, ‘if we extend the reach of [her] proposal, it is possible to think of the role of critical productions by artists, poets, writers or intellectuals as *interferences*, as instances of disruption of the established, accepted logic and of the inertia of regulated social functioning. In this regard, Sacco’s work can be likened to that of the critical intellectual able to ‘continually unmask and to smash the stereotypes of vision and intellect with which modern communications swamp us’ (Wright Mills 1996, p. 38). As has been discussed here, several of her interferences are based on the materials and resources of urban graphic communication, but turn them over, question them, reveal their ambiguities and, ‘by appropriating them, generate new meanings’ (Wechsler 2015, p. 18).

Soon heliography became an impossibility, not only for technical reasons – the lack of chemicals available from the only factory that produced them – but also for the artist's commitment to keep challenging people's views on an ever-growing and pressing reality, where the fast pace of communication and the wider reach of social media generates a spectacularization of the political in a growing virtual, de-territorialised space. By the new millennium, Sacco began to experiment with different versions of those original open-mouthed images in more modern photographic formats, in order to take her *Bocanada* interferences to a new level. The 21st century versions of *Bocanada* interferences carried out in various cities around the world use thin offset paper that emulates street poster advertising, with a light granular image that seems to be taken from newspaper printings. In this way, Sacco brought closer to the *Bocanada* imagery the work she further developed with the image of the stone thrower and in projects such as *Ciudades del miedo* (Cities of Fear) and *Sombras del sur y del norte* (Shadows of the South and the North), based on images taken from different newspapers.

Bocanada, Thirty Years On

The variety of places where *Bocanada* has been exhibited in its offset poster format, both as a street interference or within a gallery or museum space, are too numerous to examine in detail in this article. Sacco carried out several *Bocanada* urban interferences in multiple cities around the world after those first interjections in the streets of Rosario, including Buenos Aires (1994, 2014-2015), Sao Paulo (1996), Aarhus (1997), London (1997), New York (1998), Toulouse (2002), Paris (2013), Santiago de Chile (2015), and Bogota (2015) – to name but a few of her most iconic ones. She pasted the images on buildings, walls and fences. Provocative and unsettling, these anonymous open mouths, distinct and identical, keep invading the urban landscape, interfering with political propaganda and other forms of advertising. The accumulation of these images in the public space, as well as in exhibition spaces, interrupts and challenges.

Since the artist passed away in 2017, *Bocanada* in its interference form, continues to interrogate the everyday and to incite thought-provoking debates in multiple cities and exhibition spaces around the world. This is the reason why the date assigned to any new poster actions is always the present of that particular event, to mark that the interfering series started in 1993 but is ongoing. In this sense, each interference has its own life and cultural significance based on the spaces inhabited and the social landscape generated by the visual colonization of diverse graphic campaigns, billboards, and architectonic structures. These provocative images thus still refer to hunger, as previously analysed, but also,

more generally, to the expression of need in a broader sense and, vitally, an inability to communicate thoughts or desires.

In this vein, Sacco's *Bocanada* interferences were recently re-appropriated and re-signified in a 2018 project called "Sacco Afuera", carried out in connection with the exhibition *Fotografía Argentina 1850-2010: Contradicción y Continuidad*, which took place at Fundación Proa in Buenos Aires.¹⁵ A series of workshops led by Andrea Chame were run in conjunction with the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy of the University of Buenos Aires, gathering a group of students that proposed 'an intervention of Sacco's artwork which would take her mouths beyond its bi-dimensional medium, separating them from the codes that were previously inscribed on and proposing a direct encounter with the public' (Vaimberg et. al. 2018, n.p.). Instead of pasting the mouths on walls or fences, Alicia Vaimberg, Agustina Badano, Carolina Weiger, César A. Marino, Fernanda Slavich, Gabriela Petti, Javier Goded, M. Belén Caramanti, Mariana Lahitte, Mariel López, Roxana Bejarano, and Sebastián Zamudio created photographic portraits that replaced the mouth of the people captured on camera with a mouth appropriated from Sacco's interference piece, and then wrote over those mouths the words that those interviewed associated with the artist's image.



Picture 18: Project *Sacco Afuera* (2018). Photograph courtesy of Andrea Chame, Alicia Vaimberg et.al.

They consciously chose one image of an open-mouth from Sacco's work, instead of a plurality of them, because they wanted to emphasise that all were equally important, that their physiognomy did not matter, but what did was the numerous narratives and questions the work sparked in those consulted. As all

¹⁵ The exhibition was organised by The J. Paul Getty Museum, curated by Judy Keller, Idurre Alonso and Rodrigo Alonso.

Sacco's artistamp sheets from *Bocanada* show, as do the different spoons installations created and the multiple poster interferences produced, the artist always used an archive of different people's mouths in order to 'search for the points in common of different stories' ['busco el cruce de historias'] (cited in Giunta 1994, p. 77) and show a plurality of voices. She tried to avoid pasting two mouths from the same person together (personal communication). The members of *Sacco Afuera* went in the opposite direction and chose only one of those open mouths, placing the specificity and diversity of the stories in the written word instead of the image. This marking gesture provoked a resemanticization of Sacco's more ambiguous message. Instead of entering in an anonymous dialogue with any passers-by on general universal topics, the work now anchors its semantic possibilities in contemporary concerns of specific individuals. In this respect, as the artists rightly emphasised, *Sacco Afuera* did not intend to carry out an interference of the public space, but by addressing specific people directly they were aiming to reconstruct the whole from the fragmented body shown. In other words, they aimed to circumscribe previously universal discourses, renewing their message from the standpoint of an individual in order to keep searching for new questions: 'what would these mouths express now?' (Vaimberg, et. al. 2018, n.p.).



Picture 19: Project *Sacco Afuera* (2018). Photograph courtesy of Andrea Chame, Alicia Vaimberg et.al.

Another instance of *Bocanada's* re-appropriation and resignification in recent years took place at the time when the artist passed away in November 2017. Ludmila Polcowñuk explains that a group of artists and scholars, moved by the news of Sacco's sudden death, made a series of statements in social media that were charged not only with sadness but also with a clear political message that sparked the launch of the *Nosotras proponemos* [We Propose] movement (2020,

p. 03) – defined by its proposal of a manifesto that aimed to challenge the patriarchal discourses that have long dominated the arts.¹⁶ The tribute exhibition *Preguntas*, which took place at the Museum of Immigration (MUNTREF's contemporary art centre) a few months after this online debate was originated, could not escape referring to those voices that located Sacco as an exemplar of feminist struggle within the arts, nuancing those comments by declaring that through her art Sacco searched for a better life for everyone, 'independently from any specific ideology or political determinism' (Jozami quoted in Wechsler et. al. 2018, n. p.).¹⁷

But 2017 was also the year that saw the emergence of the #MeToo movement, and *Nosotras proponemos* soon grew in importance, raising awareness in a campaign that urged for more visibility of female artists in all national institutions. Thus, after *Preguntas*, the *Bocanada* series was chosen for the collective exhibition *Siete mujeres a la conquista de la Luna: Doweck-Bairon-Sacco-Porter-Millán-Gerstein-Forner* (2018), curated by Andrés Duprat and Mariana Marchesi for the National Museum of Fine Arts. The curatorial text began by outlining how the History of Art has been dominated by a masculine gaze and that this exhibition aimed to question those gender hierarchies by exhibiting the work of a few of those extraordinary women who have challenged the limits of the prescribed order in the country. When reviewing the exhibition, instead of associating *Bocanada* with hunger or famine, Marcela Costa Peuser talked about it as 'a silent scream that we can first see before hearing it, undoubtedly a symbol that women decided to be heard in their claim for a better and fairer place in the history of art' (In Spanish, 'un grito sordo/sepia que podemos ver antes de oír, símbolo inequívoco de que las mujeres decidieron ser escuchadas en su reclamo por un lugar mas justo en la historia del arte') (2018, n.p.). It was that spirit that led Polcowñuk to reaffirm her reading of Sacco as indeed belonging to the new feminisms – whether the artist defined herself as such or not –, since for the scholar a work like *Bocanada* invites us to question ourselves: 'Could a mouthful be disputed in feminism? Who could challenge it? Is there any room for debate?' ['¿una bocanada en el feminismo se disputa?, ¿quiénes pueden disputarla?, ¿hay lugar para el debate?'] (2020, p. 6).

When the COVID-19 lockdowns kept everyone inside, the limits between public and private, outside and inside, were blurred. As Tara Pixley has explained, the global pandemic 'shifted the international gaze from emptied streets to bustling home spaces' (2021, p. 106). Whereas, indeed, the temporary closing

¹⁶ Please refer to their website for further information:

<<http://nosotrasproponemos.org/nosotras/>> (last accessed 1st September 2023).

¹⁷ The exhibition was curated by Diana Wechsler and Fernando Farina, two of Sacco's oldest friends and supporters.

down of galleries, museums and exhibition spaces, and the drop in visitation of indoor cultural institutions due to high risk of transmission provoked a rise in a certain kind of street art – particularly murals and graffitis (Kostica 2021, n.p.) –, many artists, constrained by closed borders and closed doors, found in their households an opportunity to reframe their works (Pixley 2021, p. 106). The way we experienced and inhabited the urban spaces was subverted, and this forced a re-think and re-conceptualisation of works of the nature of *Bocanada*. At the exhibition *Waiting for the Barbarians* that took place at Ubiq Gallery in London in the summer of 2022, a debate arose in the round table discussion on Sacco's work about the meaning of those open mouths in view of the fact that our households have become a battleground where digital mass media discourses were now invading and defining our life cycles. Locating *Bocanada* in the streets suddenly felt, ironically, out of place. And, in line with the assessment of Sacco's work by the director of the Sao Paulo biennial almost a quarter century previously, the publicity campaigns or political messages she originally targeted in the streets were now invading the private realm in a more *dematerialised* way. Thus, by bringing the posters inside, their capacity for interference gained new meaning: the spaces that merited calling to attention were not in the public eye, but in the limits of our own homes. Equally, by installing these posters in a post-COVID-19 era inside the enclosedness of mediated gallery spaces, they do not simply become museified, legitimised or even commodified, but rather they break down the barriers of the public and the private, the frontiers of inside/outside, allowing the chaotic atmosphere of the streets to disrupt the regulated white walls that usually serve as backdrop to the artworks – operating once again a materialist critique of the artistic field.

Without a doubt, street art 'gains even more importance in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic' (Kostica 2021, n.p.). In Ryan's words, 'street art often appears to have the distinguishing feature of moving along with the times. This stands in contrast to the aims of museums and the more traditional galleries, in which temperature, light, humidity and interactions with artworks are carefully managed so that artifacts might be preserved for the long term' (Ryan 2016, p. 4). Sacco's work resists being frozen in time. In an interview with Rubén Chababo published in the early 2000s Sacco declared that 'I don't know if art has a mission, but if it has, I would not like it to be anything but offering someone the opportunity to formulate new questions about the here and now of their existence' (2000, p. 67). The year 2023 marks the 30th anniversary of the first street interventions in which Sacco used her now iconic *Bocanada* images to signal a state of emergency and challenge the power dynamics at play in the urban space. And, as discussed here, thirty years on the work continues to raise questions and challenge us in provocative ways.

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