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**Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel in the Anthropocene:**

An ecofeminist perspective on the artwork of Antonio Berni

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## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
Chapter 1. Antonio Berni, his characters Juanito and Ramona, Theory and Methodology.....	11
1.1 Framing Antonio Berni: Situating the artist and the activist within a social, political and artistic historical context.....	13
1.2 Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel: Two Allegorical Characters.....	19
1.3 Theory and Methodology:	
1.3.1 Personal perspective: From Dark Ecology in the Arctic to an Anthropocene <i>countervisuality</i> in the South.....	26
1.3.2 Ecocritical Art History and Ecofeminism.....	32
1.4 Chapter Summary.....	40
Chapter 2. The Narrative of Juanito Laguna: The dark side of developmentalism.....	41
2.1 Juanito’s rural background in Neocolonial Latin America .....	42
2.2 Juanito’s urban environment and racialization of poverty.....	49
2.3 <i>La Villa Miseria</i> as content and form.....	54
2.4 Juanito as a disposable but recycled <i>picaro</i> .....	61
2.5 Chapter Summary.....	67
Chapter 3. The Narrative of Ramona Montiel: Expansion of the Empire of consumption.....	68
3.1 A street boy and a prostitute: “different in form but similar in content”.....	69
3.2 Ramona the character: Constructing new urban consumers.....	74
3.3 Ramona the series: A symbol for Third World Exploitation.....	81
3.4 Chapter Summary.....	87
Chapter 4. Contesting of Anthropocene visuality in Berni’s art.....	88
4.1 Juanito and the conquest of space.....	90
4.2 Ramona as cyborg.....	99
4.3 <i>Apocalipsis</i> and the legacy of Juanito and Ramona.....	106
4.4 Chapter Summary.....	110
Conclusion.....	112
Literature.....	114

## Introduction

My first encounter with the artwork of Antonio Berni (1905-1981) was at the Museum of Latin American Art in Buenos Aires (MALBA) in 2002. I had moved to Argentina right after a socio-economic crisis had hit the country hard in 2001 and people were taking to the streets in protest and despair. On the museum wall there was a large painting almost like a mural, with the appropriate title, *Manifestación* (fig 1.1) painted by Berni in 1934. The larger-than-life-size people protesting in the painting expressed disbelief, anger, fear and sadness. Due to the large dimension of the painting, the characteristics of each face were enhanced, and their presence felt. In 2002, Berni's "Demonstration" reflected and confronted the viewer with the social, political and economic turmoil in the streets of Buenos Aires, where people gathered outside of public buildings and banks, claiming their money, work and food. It was the beginning of a new economic depression and increase of poverty. It was this timeless relevance of socio-political urgency and agency that attracted me to the art of Antonio Berni.



Figure 1.1 *Manifestación* (Demonstration), 1934, Tempera on burlap, 180 x 249,5 cm, Private collection at MALBA



*Manifestación* is one of the most recognized and reproduced paintings by Berni and a good place to start when looking at his lifelong critique of developmentalism and its consequences on the marginalized. In *Manifestación*, the large group of people claiming *PAN Y TRABAJO* (bread and work), as stated on the sign in the background, is not transformed into a uniform mass but is composed of individuals. Each face has a personal trait which asserts the variety of ethnicities that the lower, Argentine, working class consists of. Each face is a portrait, leaving an imprint that allows the viewer to see the people both as individuals and as part of a totality. The composition of faces and expressions from an elevated perspective, suggests an influence from the Mexican muralists and the social realist movement at the time. There is a strong sense of depth in the painting, obtained by the decreasing size and detail in the crowd of individuals that disappears towards the upper, right corner and in between buildings. This spatial dimension portrays the demonstration as an endless line of individuals, claiming their rights to food and work. The child holding a piece of bread at the center of the image represents the core of the working-class struggle; finding work in order to provide food for the family. Right in front of the child, a closed fist is raised by a man, reinforcing the notion of struggle and discontent that this large group of people represent. Berni created *Manifestación* early in his artistic career and at a time when his concern with political and social issues were becoming motifs in his work. *Manifestación* is in many ways the beginning of Antonio Berni's long and dedicated artistic commitment to revealing the social injustice and oppression in Argentina and Latin America. The work is also a point of departure for the two, separate series of works Berni developed featuring the fictive characters "Juanito Laguna" and "Ramona Montiel", which are the topic of this thesis. From 1956 until 1981, Berni created more than 150 works documenting and narrating the activities of the prostitute, Ramona and the survival of the street-boy, Juanito in the highly contaminated environment of the urban slums in Argentina.

In this thesis, I analyze Berni's Juanito and Ramona series through a selection of eco-critical/ecofeminist theory. In the current context of global climate change, I believe this approach of analysis adds a new dimension to our understanding of Berni's series. Ecofeminist philosophy claims that there is a link between the exploitation of people and the exploitation of nature through a global, neoliberal marked force. I believe Berni makes a similar claim through his series of Juanito and Ramona, which is why I interpret the work I have selected in this thesis through Ecofeminist Philosophy. The two main ecofeminist philosophers, whose theories I apply in my thesis, are Karen Warren (2000) and Val Plumwood (1993/2002). Other ecofeminist philosophers, historians, authors and activists whose theories and publications are relevant, are Donna Haraway (1988/1991), Carolyn

Merchant (1980), Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (2014). I interpret the series of Juanito and Ramona as a denouncement of the bad habits and dangers of consumer society, which according to ecofeminist philosophy, converts human beings into victims of profound poverty, and our natural environment to the edge of an ecological collapse. Through this new reading of Berni's art, I interpret the series of Juanito and Ramona as a form of "environmentalism of the poor" which visualize the invisibility of *slow violence*. The term *slow violence* comes from the book *Slow Violence and Environmentalism of the poor*, by Rob Nixon. The book is an important reference in my thesis, because it addresses how slow violence is often ignored by a hard-changing capitalism which takes advantage of vulnerable ecosystems and of people who are poor, disempowered, and displaced, reflecting the lives of Berni's Juanito and Ramona. What Nixon refers to as slow violence, "is a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space and typically not viewed as violence at all."<sup>1</sup> This slow violence inflicted by humans upon other humans, other animals and the natural environment, is what has led to a possible definition of a new geological era called the Anthropocene.

Similar to the invisibility of slow violence, Nicholoas Mirzoeff, defines an "Anthropocene aesthetics", that has emerged over the years as a result of visualizing the destructive force of industrialization as normal and even beautiful. According to Mirzoeff, this Anthropocene visibility has anaesthetized our senses and made us incapable of seeing the development of what he calls the "autoimmune climate-changing capitalism syndrome" (AICS).<sup>2</sup> I argue that the series of Juanito and Ramona may be read in terms of a *countervisuality* to the Anthropocene aesthetics. I argue that, unlike and against the Anthropocene aesthetics, the social and environmental violence produced by industrialization, is highly visible in the series. By applying an ecofeminist perspective to the series of Juanito and Ramona, my goal is to emphasize the entwinement of ecological damage with already-existing patterns of social inequality in terms of geography, race, class, and gender expressed in the works.

In these turbulent times of exponential growth and fear of a near future apocalyptic climate catastrophe, I felt compelled to investigate art concerned with the injustices that have caused the current situation. Or, as according to ecofeminist philosophy, art which "analyze the human systems of unjustified domination."<sup>3</sup> In the privileged "Western World", the

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<sup>1</sup> Nixon 2011: 2

<sup>2</sup> Mirzoeff 2014: 215

<sup>3</sup> Warren 2000: 43



historical injustices that have led to the gap between the haves and the have nots, are often erased when discussing the human impact on the climate in the so-called Anthropocene. There is a tendency to universalize the outcome and repercussions of both historical and contemporary colonial and imperialist agendas, which fails to recognize the hierarchical power structures and the great acceleration of capitalism and consumerism that has led to the growing inequality and poverty in the world. In *Planet of Slums* from 2006, Mike Davis makes a connection between historical and contemporary colonial processes and argues that “the brutal tectonics of neoliberal globalization since 1978 are analogous to the catastrophic processes that shaped a Third World in the first place, during the era of late-Victorian imperialism”.<sup>4</sup> *Planet of Slums* is an essential source for this thesis, as it provides an analytical and critical report of the explosive development of urban slums in the global South. The book is a historical account of the reality of Berni’s Juanito and Ramona and an apocalyptic vision of their future.

As part of an ecofeminist approach, there are many concepts and terms that need explanation. For instance, concepts like “advanced”, “modern” and “developed” all imply a positive value for western imperialist socio-economic structures, while in this thesis I often preface these terms with the words “so-called” or use quotation marks in order to question the authority behind these linguistic constructions. When using the term “Third World” I wish to emphasize the construction of a western system that depicts itself as a “First World”, and how so-called Third World countries often adapt this *master model* when referring to themselves and their hopeless economic situations and corrupt leaders.<sup>5</sup> “North” and “West” are also problematic socio-geographical divisions because they tend to ignore the inequalities within societies and the fact that there are rich countries in both the South and the East. However, in general I use the concept “West” to represent dominant European and North American culture and “North” in reference to the global capitalist economy and internationally dominant nation-states.<sup>6</sup> The concept of the West often refers a certain geopolitical formation, political system, values or ideologies; often it connotes to a high level of technological development or scientific progress; at other times it simply refers to the populations who are the richest and consume the most. In the historical imagination, the Western world is based on a series of

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<sup>4</sup> Davis 2006: 174

<sup>5</sup> According to Val Plumwood, the *master model* is a model based on western, masculine domination through exclusion. This will be further explained (Plumwood 1993: 28)

<sup>6</sup> Mellor 1997: 10

interrelated phenomena including Christianity, the Enlightenment, the scientific and industrial revolutions, colonialism, and Cold War.

Chapter 1 begins with an introduction of the artist, Delesio Antonio Berni (known only as Antonio Berni) situating him within a social, political and artistic historical context. Since Berni is a relatively unknown artist outside of Argentina, I find it important to include parts of his biography. I also believe that Berni's biography gives a better understanding of which historical influences and inspirations, both artistically and politically, contributed to making an ecofeminist reading of the series of Juanito and Ramona possible. Then, I introduce the two characters, Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel, and contextualize them within Argentine society. Applying Donna Haraway's concept of "Situated Knowledges", I further situate myself according to my personal motivation and underlying interest in engaging with the North-South perspective of the Anthropocene discourse and the idea of *countervisuality*.

Chapter 1 then, introduces the theories of the ecofeminist philosophers, Val Plumwood and Karen Warren. Both Warren and Plumwood, who claim to speak only from a western perspective, trace the destruction of the natural world to the hierarchical dualisms of western society. Warren calls it the *logic of domination* and Plumwood describes it as the *logic of colonization*.<sup>7</sup> I present Karen Warren's theory about *conceptual frameworks*, which sometimes operates as oppressive systems, creating hierarchical power relations and imbalance between individuals, institutions and nations by practices of unjustified domination and subordination. Val Plumwood, on the other hand, refers to the *framework of assumptions*, where the distinction between human/nature has been shaped in the west through the exclusion and domination of nature by a white, mostly male elite, which she calls the *master model*. I accept these worldviews for my thesis and see these conceptual frameworks as a way of organizing our environment affected by our gender, ethnicity, class, nationality, culture or colonial influences. This thesis is an attempt to see the domination and exclusion which has been made invisible within the *master model*, reflected in Berni's work as oppressive systems that shape the world of Juanito and Ramona.

Chapter 2 traces the background of Berni's character Juanito Laguna, through the migration from rural Argentina to the city and into the slums. Berni makes a crucial observation through his work, connecting rural ethnicity to city poverty, criticizing neoliberal politics and global capitalism for contributing to this development. Inequality rooted in the

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<sup>7</sup> Mellor 1997: 112



sense of “otherness” is at the core of ecofeminist critique as well as in the series of Juanito Laguna. The racialization of poverty as conveyed by Berni in these works of art, can be understood according to Plumwood’s *master model*, where dualism is identified as the logic of colonization.<sup>8</sup> On a national level within Argentine society this model has been incorporated and appropriated into the selfhood and culture of the leading elite, forming their identity as master. I argue that Berni denounces this inequality and the degrading life in *las villas* (the slums) through both form and content. This chapter is about the dark side of developmentalism as it occurred in Argentina after World War II, through the narrative of Juanito Laguna and his transformation from an innocent, rural boy to an urban, “picaro” or slumdweller.

Chapter 3 explores how the constructed “Third World” becomes a space for the expansion of advertisement and consumption of Western commodities and ideologies through the narrative of Ramona Montiel. I look at how the formation of megacities in the Global South with its increasing urban poverty gave rise to the formation of new urban subjectivities, where Ramona plays an ambiguous role. The book *Specular City, Transforming culture, consumption, and Space in Buenos Aires, 1955-1973* by Laura Podalsky is an important source for understanding the historical context of Ramona Montiel. First I look at some similarities and differences between Juanito and Ramona in order to understand why Berni chose a street boy and a prostitute in his critique of neoliberal capitalism. What aspects of society do they represent, and which spaces are they allowed to move in? What role does their gender and ethnicity play in determining their possibilities? This division of space I analyze in relation to Plumwood’s *logic of colonization*, which is the construction of a devalued and sharply demarcated sphere of otherness through the western construction of dualisms. I then examine how Ramona’s contradictory character is constructed in the urban space of desire, before I look at how the series of Ramona in its totality, including her friends in higher places and her monsters, represents the exploitation and/or prostitution of the “Third World”. Here I will apply ecofeminist critique related to the *catching-up development* myth by Maria Mies.<sup>9</sup> Ramona is lured into what Mies calls the Northern “collective schizophrenia”, a belief that a high material living standard is equivalent to a good, high quality life, upholding and legitimizing the constant growth and accumulation model of modern industrial society.<sup>10</sup> According to the myth of *catching-up development*, the rest of the world’s population, being

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<sup>8</sup> Plumwood 1993: 41

<sup>9</sup> Mies 2014: 58

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

“the others” such as women, indigenous people, peasants, the poor, “underdeveloped” countries, etc. can supposedly also reach this standard with a little more effort, more education and more so-called development.<sup>11</sup>

Chapter 4 brings the characters of Juanito and Ramona into the Anthropocene discourse as a *countervisuality* of Anthropocene aesthetics. Here I examine how the series of Juanito and Ramona challenge the idea of science and technology exclusively as progress towards a more “civilized” society. In this chapter the critique of modern science and its acceptance as a universal and value-free system by Shiva and Mies will be applied as well as Plumwood’s idea of mastery as central to western thought.<sup>12</sup> First I examine two motifs from the series of Juanito, where Berni denounces the technological development of the atomic bomb and the Space Race that followed. The same way that ecofeminist philosophy is focused around the unjustified Up-Down systems of power and privilege, I examine the composition in a selection of Berni’s works as a critique of western patriarchy, its institutional structure of power and privilege and its role in creating the enormous division between the Ups and the Downs.<sup>13</sup> I also apply Roald Barthes’ term “myth” in order to see how Berni’s spaceship motif exposes the construction of “universal truths” that belongs to the mythical language of the mass media and advertisement.<sup>14</sup>

The chapter then analyzes the transformations of Ramona into a cyborg, and her friends in higher places into robots, as a metaphor for the development of dehumanizing technology, resulting in social degradation and environmental destruction. The cyborg comparison is interesting in relation to the series of Ramona, because it opens up for different interpretations of the relationship between conflicting discourses and the complex identities Ramona embodies. I discuss Donna Haraway’s article, “The Cyborg Manifesto” which urged feminists to embrace new technologies as tools for feminist ends. I also bring in Plumwood’s *master model* which contains the distorted perceptions of reason and mechanisms of denial that arise from the *master rationality*, an inherent belief in the evolution of technology and development resulting in the failure of situating ourselves as ecological beings.<sup>15</sup> The fact that Ramona is eventually devoured by the monsters that appear in her nightmares, pairs well with

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid: 56

<sup>12</sup> Plumwood 1993: 47

<sup>13</sup> Warren 2000: 47

<sup>14</sup> Barthes used the term "myth" while analyzing consumer culture of post-war France in order to reveal that "objects were organized into meaningful relationships via narratives that expressed collective cultural values." (Ramirez and Pacheco 2014: 90)

<sup>15</sup> Plumwood 2002: 240



Plumwood's theory about the final stage of the colonization process.<sup>16</sup> At this stage, the colonized is offered a choice between elimination or incorporation, a totalizing form of instrumentalization through *devouring the other*. Finally, in chapter 4, I examine Berni's last work of art, *Apocalipsis*, which he finished just before he died in 1981. *Apocalipsis* was inspired by the prophecies of St. John which in my opinion, appropriately synthesizes this thesis, taking into consideration the outbreak of the COVID-19 and the effect it will have on both health and the world economy, especially for the poor.

The way in which the COVID-19 crisis seems to open some new windows for contemplation and discussions about our global ecology, it also, in my opinion, actualizes the narratives of Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel. According to ecofeminism, we are now "in the heat of a historical moment when the interwoven nature of imperialism, ecological degradation, exploitation of workers, racism, and women's oppression is painfully obvious to many", and COVID-19 has, perhaps, created a new space for this reflection.<sup>17</sup> I conclude this thesis with describing it as a patch in what Warren calls an "ecofeminist philosophical quilt", where all is connected and the patches represents different but particular social and historical contexts.<sup>18</sup> Juanito Laguna, Ramona Montiel, Antonio Berni and my thesis are all patches in a quilt in-process of being made. Nobody knows what the quilt will finally look like, but hopefully the narratives of Juanito, Ramona and Berni himself, can contribute to an expanded visibility of the connections between ecological degradation and the many forms of social oppression.

## **Chapter 1. Antonio Berni, his characters Juanito and Ramona, Theory and Methodology**

Antonio Berni is a well-recognized and respected artist in his home country Argentina, and his two characters, Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel, have become symbols for a Latin American resistance to the Imperial North. In particular Juanito Laguna has become a popular character within Argentina. When referring to his character, Berni would say: "with Juanito Laguna I gave a name and surname to a multitude of anonymous, marginalized and displaced people, turning them into symbols."<sup>19</sup> Juanito, despite Berni's intentions of not

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<sup>16</sup> Plumwood 1993: 192

<sup>17</sup> Cuomo 2002: 1

<sup>18</sup> Warren 2000: 66

<sup>19</sup> Archivo Histórico RTA, Radio Nacional, Interview with Berni by Roger Pla, [[www.youtube.com/watch?v=ltX5cs\\_M7cM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ltX5cs_M7cM)]

creating a specific individual but a representative for a whole crowd of anonymous, has become a quite real character to Argentinians. There are numerous of reproductions of Juanito, films, documentaries and even an album with songs about Juanito Laguna, featuring famous Argentine musicians such as Mercedes Sosa and Astor Piazzolla. In Argentina, Juanito has become a cultural hero, the symbol for the poor and exploited in Latin America and together with Ramona, a part of Argentina's artistic heritage.<sup>20</sup>

Despite his extensive production and recognition in Argentina and to a certain extent in South America, both as a politically engaged and aesthetically innovative artist, Berni remains little known in the Western art world. I have found a lot of literature published about Antonio Berni, both biographies and analyses of his work, especially concerning the series Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel, but most of it is in Spanish and without translations. However, due to a recent exhibition called *Antonio Berni: Juanito and Ramona* at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston in 2013, more publications about Berni in English have surfaced. Museum director, Gary Tinterow, called "the possibility given a museum to exhibit such a great artist still unknown to the North American public" for an exceptional occasion.<sup>21</sup> In a four hundred-page book published in connection with the Berni exhibition, Tinterow states, "Berni's Juanito and Ramona series is an extraordinary body of work that has been legendary for decades, yet never before presented in its entirety. This exhibition is unprecedented."<sup>22</sup> He further argues that Berni's trajectory should be read in paradigmatic terms of 20th century Latin American art.<sup>23</sup> In the Spanish language, the artwork of Antonio Berni has been referred to as "arte berniano" or "obras bernianas" for decades, meaning that his art has a unique style and form which is recognized as Berni's signature within the Hispanic world.

During my research, I have not found many eco-critical readings of Berni's artwork, except Lisa Crossman's PhD thesis "Contemporary Argentine Art and Ecological Crisis" and Gisela Heffes' article "Trash Matters: Residual Culture in Latin America." In her first chapter, Crossman incorporates Berni's artwork under the heading "Industrialization's Social and Environmental Violence." Crossman's dissertation is a useful source for my thesis, as it argues the importance of Berni's representations of the urban landscape not only as a denouncement of the negative social and environmental consequences of industrialization, but

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<sup>20</sup> Poloni-Simard 2014: 17

<sup>21</sup> Ramírez y Pacheco 2014: 14

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

also how the mistreatment of the physical environment ties to social violence.<sup>24</sup> In her article “Trash Matters”, Heffes argues that the way in which Berni combined recycling activities with places of social condemnation, places him at the forefront of environmental art. She also mentions that even though Berni is not usually associated with an ecological agenda or recorded as having one himself, “his work established a dialogue between two contemporaneous concerns by raising awareness about the continuous changes in consumption as well as the constantly increasing environmental damage”.<sup>25</sup> While Heffes and Crossman present valuable readings of Berni's art, they are not written from an ecofeminist perspective. Addressing this gap in the scholarship on Berni, I hope my ecofeminist analysis of his Juanito and Ramona series will contribute to an ecocritical art history that, "can help recover a lost world of environmentally-informed looking, where examining the directionality in art can recover forgotten colonial politics and perspectives on environmental history."<sup>26</sup> The works I have selected for analysis in my thesis are all, in different ways, representative of the exploitation of Latin America, where the connection between local and global manifestations of ecological crisis are made visible.

In this chapter I introduce parts of Berni's biography which I find relevant to the development of his series about Juanito and Ramona as well as an introduction of what I must assume is an unknown artist to the reader. Then I briefly present the two characters, Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel, within an Argentine social context. The third subchapter is divided in two. First I explain my personal motivation for the subject matter and how it came about, considering it part of my method and choice of theory. Then I define the difference between what is considered environmental art and ecological art before I introduce some terms and concepts. I present the main ecofeminist philosophers, Karen Warren and Val Plumwood, and some of their theoretical framework of ecofeminism.

## **1.1 Framing Antonio Berni:** Situating the artist and the activist within a social, political and artistic historical context

“I could say that Juanito Laguna, my character, is a little bit of my personality, a little bit of me.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Crossman 2013: 36

<sup>25</sup> Heffes 2017: 9

<sup>26</sup> Slovic, Ranarajan, Sarveswaran 2019: 156

<sup>27</sup> Viñals 1976: 90

In order to emphasize the structural critique of capitalism and consumerism in the series of Juanito and Ramona, I find it essential to contextualize the artist within the different political and artistic movements in Latin America and Europe from the 30s and on. In his hometown of Rosario, Berni is almost as famous and respected as the revolutionary “Rosarino”, Ernesto *Che* Guevara. However, even though their political orientation was similar, their recognition internationally has no comparison. I therefore feel compelled to claim a larger acknowledgement for Berni’s revolutionary vision as an artist, both, in regard to his ability to imagine and portray the consequences of developmentalism in Argentina and Latin America as for his artistic innovation. Berni’s critical gaze remained constant over time, in line with as well as opposed to several different art movements and aesthetic directions. Although he was an innovative artist, it seems to me that Berni always put the thematic expression over the aesthetic which is perhaps why he never became mainstream enough to receive a larger recognition or avant-garde enough to be included in the canon of art history.



Figure 1.2 *Autoretrato con cactus*, (Self-portrait with Cactus), 1934, Tempera and oil on burlap, 110 x 85 cm, Private collection.

In the painting *Autoretrato con cactus* (fig 1.2) the viewer's gaze is met by the direct and intense counter-gaze of the painter himself. The sharp contrast between light and shadow as often seen in Italian metaphysical painting, gives the portrait a vaguely threatening and mysterious quality.<sup>28</sup> Berni seems to be representing himself in the portrait as somewhere between surrealism and realism, through an amplified figure that overflows the first plane as if in a different space than the background. The red shirt and the harsh shadows on his hands and face resembling spots of dirt, can be interpreted as the artist's identification with the communist cause and the proletariat. *Autoretrato con cactus* is painted the same year as his other major work, *Manifestación* (fig 1.1). Both works are painted in a similar style and bear resemblance to the Mexican muralist movement which through social realism conveyed messages of cultural identity, politics, oppression and resistance towards the Latin American colonial history. Berni was personally acquainted with the Mexican Muralist movement with whom he shared a common concern for promoting the rights and lives of the indigenous and working-class poor. Berni also shared the muralists political orientation, either sympathizing with or as members of the communist party, attacking the ruling class, established elites and capitalism.<sup>29</sup> With his arm resting on a small shelf foregrounded by a cactus, a plant chosen by other contemporary artist as an iconographic motif reminiscent of the vital tensions of the time, Berni is in my opinion, making a strong connection with himself to Latin America. The cactus is native to the Americas and the nopal, which is the national plant of both Mexico and Chile, is often used as a symbol for the resistance against the cruel mistreatment of the Latin American people through history as well as a symbol of identity.<sup>30</sup> In this sense, I believe that *Autoretrato con cactus* (fig 1.2) is communicating Berni's strong commitment to his homeland, and to Latin America as continent united in the struggles against the imperialism of the North.

Antonio Berni was born in Rosario, the third largest city in Argentina on May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1905. Rosario is only 300 km from the metropolis Buenos Aires, but as all other cities and towns in Argentina, it is referred to as "el interior", the interior of the country. This figure of speech in popular culture has serious undertones that demonstrates a powerful centralization

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<sup>28</sup> Metaphysical art was a style of painting developed in 1910 by the Italian artists Carlo Carrá and Giorgio de Chirico, the latter whose art Berni studied while in Paris in the late 1920s, leading to his interest in surrealism (Pacheco 2014: 43)

<sup>29</sup> Campillo 2010: 83-94

<sup>30</sup> Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales, "Nopal, alimento y símbolo de identidad", Gobierno de México, published 17.09.17, accessed 18.05.19 online: [<https://www.gob.mx/semarnat/articulos/nopal-alimento-y-simbolo-de-identidad>]

that has created both a social and political division between Buenos Aires and the other provinces. The reason I mention this is because being from *el interior* (the interior) is an important element of Berni's identity. Having lived several years in Rosario myself, I got to understand the importance of Berni as a "Rosarino" and how his achievement and recognition as an artist in Buenos Aires has become of great importance to the identity of the city Rosario and its proud inhabitants.

His father, Napoleón Berni, was an Italian immigrant and his mother, Margarita Picco, a second-generation Italian immigrant. Supported and encouraged by the solidary networks of the immigrant collective that his parents were part of, Berni started taking drawing and painting classes at Centre Catalá in 1916, only eleven years old. At fifteen he had his very first exhibition in his hometown. This exhibition consisted of seventeen oil paintings of suburban landscapes and still life of flowers. Some of the newspaper reviews described him as a "prodigy child".<sup>31</sup> Only one year later, in 1921, he had his first solo exhibition in Buenos Aires at the Witcomb Gallery. The recognition as an artist in the Capital of Argentina, opened up new possibilities for Berni in his hometown Rosario, where he received a prize and a grant from local organizations in order to make a study trip to Europe. In an interview remembering his early years, Berni expressed: "My first great experience was leaving Rosario and launch myself into the world, getting to know it not only in a geographical extent, but in its human distances of ideas and concepts, of accomplishments and concerns."<sup>32</sup>

At the age of twenty Berni reached Madrid in August of 1925, where he experienced his first contact with, not only the classical Spanish painters and the avantgarde, but also with the Futurists. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, an Italian poet, editor, art theorist, and founder of the Futurist movement, happened to be on a conference tour in Madrid that same year. Being exposed to this new expression, Berni writes: "I was very moved by the great Masters, but it was Marinetti that really shook me as well as an exhibition of modern paintings organized by Ateneo himself."<sup>33</sup> Although Madrid was a great inspiration to Berni, he felt deeply drawn to the new approaches and artistic expressions coming from Italy and France, such as Metaphysical painting developed by the Italian painters, Giorgio de Chirico and Carlo Carrà. Three months after arriving in Spain he travels to Paris, the city which becomes a second home for Berni throughout his artistic career.

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<sup>31</sup> Wechsler 2006: 388

<sup>32</sup> Berni 1962: xx

<sup>33</sup> Wechsler 2006: 394



Between 1925 and 1930, Berni continues to develop strong bonds with European artists and intellectuals such as Louis Aragon, Henri Lefebvre, Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel to mention some. Aragon and Breton are considered the founding fathers of the French surrealist movement, but Aragon surrenders his belief in surrealism after visiting The Soviet Union and devoted himself to realism instead. When the Second Manifesto of Surrealism was published by Breton in December 1929<sup>34</sup>, Berni follows the line of Aragon and Lefebvre, moving away from the surrealist movement and towards an art committed to a revolution explicitly devoted to social struggles. This was the beginning of Berni's formation as a political and socially engaged artist as he helped Aragon in his anti-imperialist fight, by illustrating and distributing magazines and newspapers for minorities in France.

Berni returned to Argentina and his hometown Rosario in 1931, with his first wife, Paula Cazenave, a French sculptress and their daughter, Elena Ana Margarita, known as Lily. After his divorce, Berni remarries in 1950 to his second wife, Nélide Gerino, with whom he had a son, José Antonio. At one point he started using photography to document different social realities in his hometown and as research for his art. With his Leica camera he photographed the brothels, the unemployed, labor demonstrations, and the inventive architecture of the new urban constellations, which were to become *las villas miserias*, the urban slums. These photographs became a great resource for some of his paintings and especially the for series of Ramona Montiel and Juanito Laguna.

In 1933, Berni establishes a movement called *Nuevo Realismo* (New Realism) together with three other painters, Castagnino, Giambiagi and Policastro, distancing themselves from the social realism driven by the Mexican Muralist on the Latin American continent. Berni explained that he took traditional realism and added a story, describing a place or circumstances, by incorporating elements that he himself gathered from the environment he wanted to represent. Political art was not to be merely a form of propaganda carried out in favor of any political party, an ideology or a government. Political art, according to the *Nuevo Realismo* was to question and exhibit a social reality according to the experiences of the artist:

Every attitude and behavior that affects and falls on the general, mental and institutional structures of a society is political action and can be developed and reflected in the art of the time, for the simple fact that the artist perceives it and reflects his or her inner world through art [...] All of the critical, philosophical, and aesthetic digressions over 'pure art' are now substituted by Realist reasonings that agree with a collective psychology, with the

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<sup>34</sup> Breton, "Second Manifesto of Surrealism", Website: Art Theory///Texts, Writings & Manifestos, Accessed 05.03.20 online: [<http://theoria.art-zoo.com/second-manifesto-of-surrealism-andre-breton/>]

social situation of the moment. This situation, with its dramatic reality, conquers its right in art. No more of pre-established clichés, a true artist is one who is open to the changing conditions of his environment.<sup>35</sup>

Guillermo Fantoni, professor in Argentine Art History, describes the movement as “a crusade against driven dehumanization for capitalism; as it developed in Latin America.”<sup>36</sup> In 1952, Berni wrote that the “New Realism” which was stretching from Mexico to Argentina was a deep and particular type of humanity. He further called for the “new realists” to confront “the most human cause in Latin America, which in this century that we are walking, is the drama of the people sunk in the colony, with its chain of misery and ignorance.”<sup>37</sup>

In the 1960s and 70s, when most of his artistic production revolves around his two characters, Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel, Berni lives and interacts with art communities in both Paris and Buenos Aires. There were three art movements in Paris at the time, that I believe are relevant to mention in relation to the series of Juanito and Ramona; *nouveau realism* (New Realism), *nouvelle figuration* (New Figuration) and *la figuration narrative* (Narrative Figuration). The French movements shared many ideological as well as formal similarities with Berni, but he identified the most with the narrative figuration artists, who were influenced by the civil, leftist unrest of May 68. The narrative figuration artists opposed the American Pop art movement, which they considered to be hegemonic, formal, indifferent to the political struggles of the time, and not critical enough of consumer society.<sup>38</sup> Berni’s New Realism had argued that the neutrality of work does not exist and therefore, art and politics cannot be separated. As he stated, “In my case, I admit it. I think that a political reading of my work is fundamental, that it cannot be put aside, and if that happens, it cannot be understood thoroughly. A merely aesthetical reading of my work would be a betrayal.”<sup>39</sup>

For Berni, the link between art and politics was inseparable as well as the unfortunate link between art and the market. Berni denounced the launching of carefully packaged art products through expensive catalogs, advertising in art magazines and cultural supplements in newspapers by art galleries and institutions as the same methods used by large industrial and commercial companies.<sup>40</sup> His ability to resist the pressure from national art institutions in Buenos Aires, who at the time were promoting “avant-garde” art as a tool for neoliberal marketing, confirms Berni’s commitment to his art and what he considered the most

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<sup>35</sup> Berni 1936: 14

<sup>36</sup> Fantoni 2014: 20

<sup>37</sup> Ramírez y Pacheco 2014: 298

<sup>38</sup> Ibid: 97

<sup>39</sup> Ibid: 26

<sup>40</sup> Ibid: 312

important cause; the oppression of the Latin American *pueblo* (town and people). This process of internationalizing the Argentine art scene in the 60s formed part of a Cold War rhetoric to keep Latin American intellectuals from identifying with the Cuban Revolution and supporting communism in general.<sup>41</sup> In Buenos Aires in the 60s, when the new and young *avant-garde* of Argentine artists concerned themselves more with artistic innovation and form than the content. The desired goal of the “new artists” together with the art institutions was to transform Argentine art into quality culture and a desired product on the international market, in order for Buenos Aires to transcend its “backwardness” and “catch up” with Paris and New York, as a metropolitan center for art.<sup>42</sup> According to art historian, Andrea Giunta, “Berni did not resort to the use of found objects as a formal display, avant-garde audacity, or as a disrespectful gesture.”<sup>43</sup> On the contrary, Berni continued to present the materials in his collages as testimonies of the world that his characters were submerged in, on the other side of progress and development at the margin of the big, spectacular city.

His series of Juanito Laguna, which I will discuss in the next Chapter, reflects the relationship between social and ecological problems in the rural regions, and was perhaps considered less attractive at the time than the work of those artists who focused on the construction of a new national identity as synonym with modern and urban life. The same modern and urban lifestyle which many argue is part of the larger development project/problem, leading our “civilization” on a path to global, environmental disaster.<sup>44</sup> Due to Berni’s artistic persistence and political engagement over the years, his work has, in my opinion, gained a larger relevance in relation to the ongoing debate about the Anthropocene, the current climate change, the human ecological footprint and extinction of species, including our own. Historical, social and political context is important for a better understanding of the development of the two characters, Juanito and Ramona, and the symbolic value they have as representatives of a Latin American reality.

## **1.2 Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel: Two Allegorical Characters.**

*Juanito en la laguna o Juanito bañándose* (fig. 1.2) is one of many images showing Juanito’s activities in the slum. The lagoon where Juanito is taking a bath with a white lamb,

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<sup>41</sup> Giunta 2001: 25

<sup>42</sup> Giunta 2008: 122

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

<sup>44</sup> Mies & Shiva 2014: xix

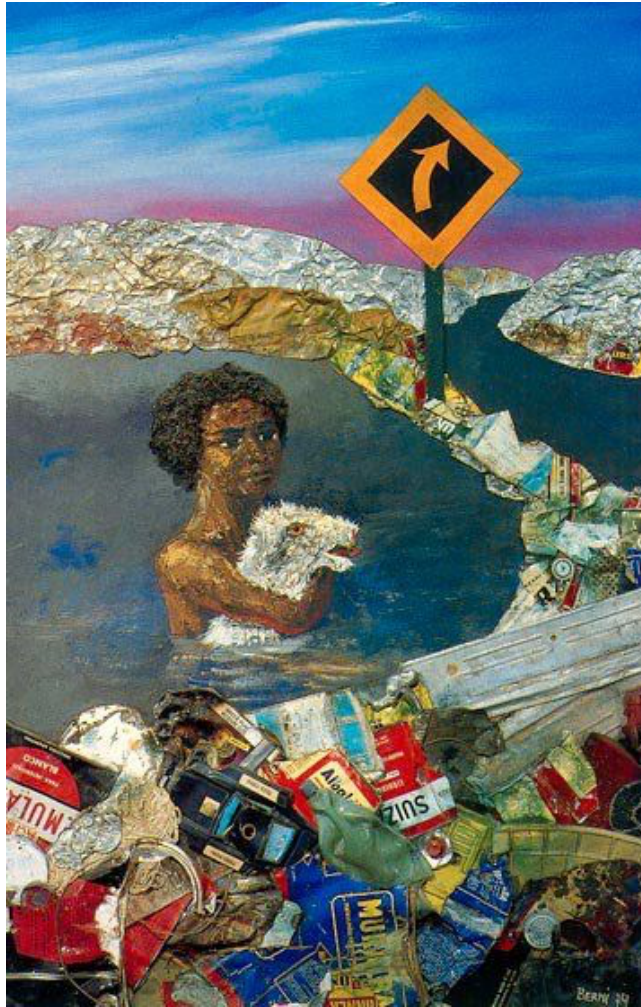


Figure 1.2 *Juanito en la laguna o Juanito bañándose* (Juanito in the Lagoon or Juanito taking a bath), 1974, collage on wood, mixed materials, 160 x 105,5 cm, private collection, Buenos Aires.

is foregrounded by tin cans, plastic and other contaminating garbage materials. The lamb is an animal of great symbolic significance and might have been chosen by Berni to symbolize Juanito's gentleness, purity and innocence. The lamb is known as a defenseless animal, which when taken from the flock, it will either be attacked by a predator or get stuck somewhere and die. In Christianity, the lamb represents the dualism of Christ's suffering and triumph, but it is also the animal presented by God as the perfect sacrificial offering. Jesus fulfilled the role as the "Lamb of God" which led him to his death, voluntarily and without hesitation for the sins of his fellow Christians. Therefore, the lamb is a powerful image which through its weakness conquers evil.<sup>45</sup> Juanito has in many ways been sacrificed by his country's desire for wealth and development. He is left on his own in this specific work, without his family, surrounded by neglect and environmental destruction. Whether Juanito is clinging to the lamb, rescuing

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<sup>45</sup> Kværne, Per: kristne symboler, Store norske leksikon at snl.no. Accessed 12 of June 2020 from [https://snl.no/kristne\_symboler]

the lamb or just playing with it, the relation between the two makes a convincing argument for Juanito's innocence regarding the damage encroaching upon him and his natural environment. Juanito's dark skin color speaks to the relation between ethnicity and poverty, which is an important reference in the series and will be further analyzed in chapter 2.

Next to the lagoon there is a road curving in the same direction as the street sign, into the horizon of more trash and metal looking hills, perhaps suggesting a way out of the misery. "Juanito in the Lagoon or Juanito taking a bath" is, like almost all the works in the series of Juanito Laguna, a collage made out of found objects gathered by Berni in the slums of Buenos Aires. The invention of Juanito Laguna and the use of recycled materials, such as oil cans and objects made out of plastic and aluminum, permitted Berni to unite the social and material elements entailed in the development of slums in Argentina. The objects in Berni's collages serve as physical evidence of the urban transformations that took place throughout Latin America. Juanito Laguna is, as I see it, a continuation of Berni's work from 1934, such as *Manifestación* (fig 1.1), creating an efficient tie between the individual and society.

According to Berni, Juanito Laguna is born in the late 1950s in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Greater Buenos Aires. Juanito is the son of a steelworker, part of the lower working class living in an urban slum called Flores, that had existed since the 1930s. His family had migrated from the countryside in search for work and a better life in the capital. Berni describes the story of Juanito Laguna, as a boy living on the fringes of society, "in the ring of shacks and hovels straggled along the industrial belt that divided the city from its peripheral zones."<sup>46</sup> Over the years, the story of Juanito becomes a narrative series and a social commentary on the issues of industrialization and poverty. After many years of observation and interaction with groups of children in poor neighborhoods, Berni felt that he needed to personalize the children, making them real by giving his character a first and last name. But although Juanito has both a name and an address, so to speak, he represents an archetype of social exclusion in industrialized societies. For Berni it was important to:

seek out and record the typical living truth of underdeveloped countries and to bear witness to the terrible fruits of neocolonialism, with its resulting poverty and economic backwardness and their effect on populations driven by a fierce desire for progress, jobs, and the inclination to fight.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Giunta 2006: 73

<sup>47</sup> Ramirez 1999: 190

At the exhibition *Antonio Berni: Juanito and Ramona* in Houston in 2013, there were a total of 145 works exhibited from both series. Out of these, 42 of the works were part of the series narrating the life and environment of Juanito Laguna. I have not been able to find an answer as to exactly how many works pertain to the series about Juanito, because quite a few are privately owned. The first depiction of Juanito has been identified as watercolor portrait of a boy holding a pot and pail, found in a sketchbook from 1956.<sup>48</sup> Juanito is never identical in the different works of art, not only because of their different formal expressions which varies from painting, collage to xylographs, but also because he is a composition of many different children living in the slums. Juanito is, according to Berni, not only an archetype from Buenos Aires, but he is an archetype from all the cities in Latin America and a symbol for exploited childhood under aggressive capitalism. He is a character, emblematic of the market economy's exploitation, which only two decades later ceased to exist, under the new world order of a neoconservative government.

The Juanito Lagunas and their families were disposed from the production system, along with 20% of the population, during the government of a Peronist party and president Carlos Menem from the end of the 1980s. The Juanito's were converted to a category of "socially disappeared", giving rise to a new type of exclusion, the *cartoneros* (carton collectors). These are people who now live on what they can find and recycle from the trash in the street.<sup>49</sup> *Cartoneros* are not unemployed, they are expelled from the social structure without any hope of return. They are, in statistical terms, considered part of the Earth's population who live below the poverty line. However, Berni did not know then what we know now, and he would often stress that Juanito is "a kid who is poor, but not a poor kid. He is not someone defeated by circumstances but a being filled with life and hopes that overcome the circumstantial misery because he senses how to live in a world filled by a future yet to come." This description of Juanito by Berni, demonstrates the hope for a better future that was still present at the time, a hope which no longer shines so bright in contemporary Argentine society. Therefore, however bleak the present may be, many of the representations of Juanito Laguna can be read as a positive depiction of a playful and innocent childhood, regardless of the dangers of the environment. In his personal memoirs and notes, Berni explains that "Juanito Laguna forms part of a narrative made with elements of his own environment", and he asks, "why collage or glue and not that which is exclusively painted by brush for the

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<sup>48</sup> Rabossi 2002: 15

<sup>49</sup> Ramírez y Pacheco 2014: 23



subject of Juanito?” Berni wanted to achieve a greater expressive intensity and those materials were equivalent to his living environment:

The materials with which I make my work, I find not far from his neighborhood: in the vacant lots, in the paths I find the crates and empty boxes, the cans and the plastic left behind by big industry that are recovered by that adjacent population of immigrants from the Argentine interior, or from the brother from neighboring countries.<sup>50</sup>

Berni chose a narrative mode for Juanito that resembles the figure collection, dedicated to athletes, superheroes and comic characters. This can be read as an expressive critique by Berni, considering that the figure collection was commonly used as a successful promotion strategy for market penetration in the 1950s and 60s.<sup>51</sup> Each painting or collage presents Juanito in his daily life, an antihero and his wanderings in the city slum. He appears in images celebrating Christmas with his family (fig 2.6), going on vacation, learning to read, flying a kite, bathing in the lagoon with his dog or with a lamb (fig 1.2), bringing food to his father in the factory (fig 2.9), being greeted by an astronaut that passes in his spaceship over the slum (fig 4.2), and eventually as a grown man himself, sitting on the sofa, in the slum, watching tv with his own family (fig 3.2). The last one being a scene reflecting the invasion of consumer goods in the slums and the production of desire that the media technology represent, especially in the series of Ramona Montiel.<sup>52</sup>

The second character, Ramona Montiel, appears for the first time while Berni is in Paris visiting flea markets and antique boutiques in 1962. *Ramona costurera* (fig 1.3) is one of the few representations of Ramona before she is lured into prostitution. In this Xylograph-collage, pieces of wood, metal, skin, plastic and fabric makes up the image of Ramona as a seamstress, apparently working day and night under a candlelight. Ramona is nicely dressed in the fabrics found by Berni in Paris, but the pins in her hair and the 10 cents in her right eye, suggests that this is not the life in luxury she has been dreaming of. According to the Argentine art historian, Andrea Giunta, Ramona Montiel could be from whichever big city and unlike Juanito Laguna, the Ramona series is not necessarily located in the slums of a Latin American city.<sup>53</sup> *Ramona costurera* even draws associations to various paintings by Christian Krohg, from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Norwegian metropole, Christiania. Krohg was, like Berni, occupied with conveying social injustice and the brutal

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<sup>50</sup> Viñals 1976: 90-91 and 92-96

<sup>51</sup> Ramírez y Pacheco 2014: 23

<sup>52</sup> Ibid

<sup>53</sup> Giunta 2014: 69

reality of the poor through his art. According to Krohg, the task of a painter was to paint the image of the time expressed through what he referred to as a “heartbreaking and inconvenient truth.”<sup>54</sup> In 1881 Krohg painted the “Seamstress” who has fallen asleep at the break of dawn,

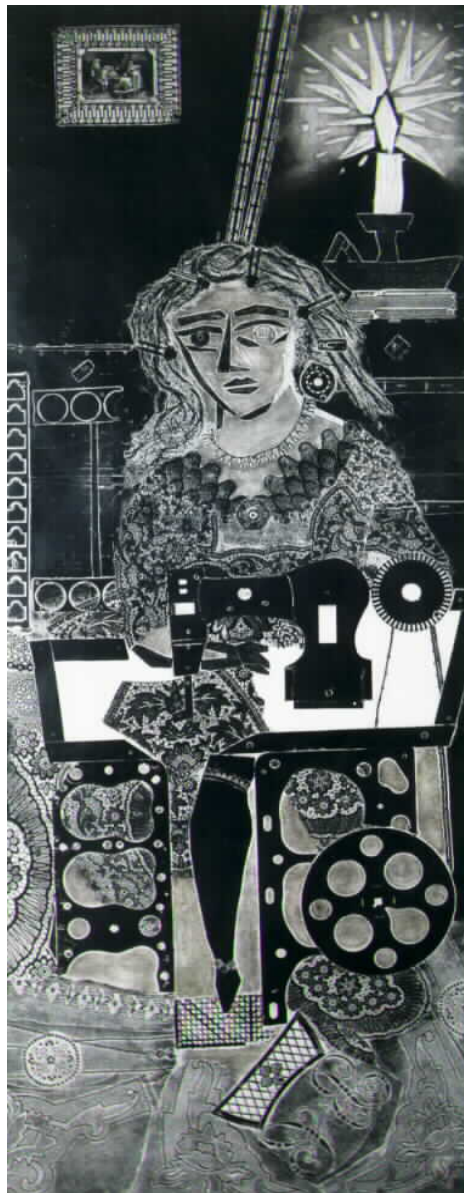


Figure 1.3 *Ramona costurera*, (Seamstress Ramona), 1963, Xylograph collage, 142,2 x 54,8 cm, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

exhausted on a chair next to her sewing machine. The similarities with Berni’s *Ramona costurera* are many, such as the dim light source on the right, a framed picture on the wall, the sewing machine and the fabric surrounding the working women. However, unlike Ramona who is confronting the viewer straight on, Krohg’s seamstress is depicted from the side as her scissors falls to the floor, from the hands of the overworked woman. One of the major

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<sup>54</sup> Thue, Oscar: Christian Krohg in Norsk kunstnerleksikon at snl.no. Accessed 19 of May 2020 from [https://nkl.snl.no/Christian\_Krohg]

contemporary problems in Norway at that time, was the situation for the poor in the big city, and Krohg paints several paintings with the motif of the seamstress as a symbol for the hard, working-class life. In 1886, Krohg publishes a novel called *Albertine* where he follows the destiny of a poor seamstress into prostitution, much like Berni's character, Ramona Montiel, only eighty years earlier and in a very different part of the world.<sup>55</sup> Giunta describes Ramona as the prostitute, the foreigner, the other, as the symbol of a class divided society, representing the feminine margins of urban culture.<sup>56</sup> However, as I will argue in this thesis, she also represents the exploited Latin America, oppressed by dictatorships supported by western patriarchal imperialism in the 60s and 70s.

The story Berni would tell about his character, was that Ramona was a girl from the Pompey neighborhood of Buenos Aires. Her parents had raised her to be a good Catholic and to begin with, Ramona worked long days as a seamstress (fig 1.3). She dreamed of a life in luxury, adventure and travels. She was, according to Berni, a typical Argentine, working-class girl. Seduced by the false promises of the big world and the glittering nightlife, Ramona is allured to the big city. She begins working as a dancer in order to make ends meet, and eventually ends up as a prostitute in one of the many brothels of Buenos Aires. Between the smoke and the last tango, Ramona "makes friends" with men in high places.<sup>57</sup> Contrary to Berni's character Juanito, Ramona is raised on television and therefore she wants the luxury and pleasures promised by consumer society. She is animated by the seductive power she possesses, but in the end, the pressure of society and her own guilty conscience consumes her. In the intimacy of her room, Ramona's nightmares materialize in the shape of ferocious monsters who devour her body as well as her soul.

From the very first collage Berni made of Ramona in 1962, she gradually climbs the social ladder from the street into the finer brothels where she meets powerful politicians and generals. What Berni could not have known at the time, was that the position of these women was to be popularized in the public arena as *gatos* (cats), during the presidency of Carlos Menem from 1989 to 1999. According to Argentine history, the *gatos* were women rented and maintained by politicians, businessmen, celebrities of the *Spectacle*<sup>58</sup>. They were lovers and key pieces in the exchange of favors that went on at the time by illegal organizations that

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<sup>55</sup> Beyer, Edvard: *Albertine* - novel in Store norske leksikon at snl.no. Accessed 19 of May 2020 from [https://snl.no/Albertine\_-\_roman]

<sup>56</sup> Giunta 2015: 4

<sup>57</sup> *Milonguita* is a tango about a prostitute in Buenos Aires, composed by Samuel Lining in 1920

<sup>58</sup> The concept of spectacle in this context, refers to a term invented by Guy Debord in his book *The Society of the Spectacle* published in 1967

plundered the state, the assets of the country and the savings of the citizens, leading to the economic crisis in 2001.<sup>59</sup> The *gatos* became protagonists of television programs and were a constant media presence. They had an outstanding reach within the new political, social and economic leadership, a government that mixed impunity and negotiated with globalized companies through lobbying and bribes. The character Ramona, I will argue, inhabits all these complex and contradictory identities. Through the use of different techniques and concrete materials, Berni confronts the viewer by moving his character through the great, inconsistent appearance of corruption and greed. The imaginary of the prostitute reveals an ongoing process of simulations and ambiguities within the Argentine social and political arena, where money is exchanged for a piece of your soul.

What operates in his series, according to Berni himself, are “two human realities: Juanito and Ramona, different in form but similar in content, because both are victims of an ancient imbalance within the societies of men”, which I will further discuss in chapter 3.<sup>60</sup> I believe that Juanito, Ramona and the recycled objects they are made out of, ranging from fine fabric to trash, operate allegorically due to their symbolic meaning and importance which transcends the time and circumstances in which they were depicted, all the way into the ongoing debate about the Anthropocene. An allegory is defined as: “a narrative device, in which a character, place or event is used to deliver a broader message about real-world issues and occurrences.”<sup>61</sup> It is a way of illustrating and conveying complex ideas and concepts by making them comprehensible to the viewer. Not only do the characters, Ramona and Juanito, convey the different forms of oppression and violence against ethnic groups, women and the working class, they also make a connection between this slow violence of the marginalized and its effect on our natural environment. The relationship is, as I see it, ecological.

### 1.3 Methodology and Theory:

#### 1.3.1 Personal Perspective: From Dark Ecology in the Arctic to an Anthropocene *countervisuality* in the South.

“I think of globalization like a light which shines brighter and brighter on a few people and the rest are in darkness, wiped out. They simply can't be seen. Once you get used to not seeing something, then, slowly it's no longer possible to see it.” -Arundhati Ro

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<sup>59</sup> Ramírez y Pacheco 2014: 23

<sup>60</sup> Ibid: 40

<sup>61</sup> *allegori* from Store norske leksikon på snl.no. Accessed 14 of September 2020 from [https://snl.no/allegori]

This quote by the Indian writer and activist, Arundhati Roy, synthesizes my desire to shine some light on Antonio Berni and the subject matters he brings to attention through his characters Juanito and Ramona. By writing a thesis about Berni's two marginal characters, I wish to make Juanito, Ramona and the people they represent, more visible and part of the contemporary debate about the environment. It seems like ecological crisis has become an integrated part of globalization, ranging from critical threats of climatic disasters to dysfunctional relationships societies have developed with both people and nature. The consequences we suffer depends very much on how visible we are, as Roy points out, and how loud we are allowed to be. In order to write about an Argentine artist and placing his work of art within an ecocritical frame, I feel the importance of 'situating' myself to the reader, both physically and mentally. When applying ecofeminist theory, part of the work is trying to avoid producing yet another Eurocentric gaze. Therefore I wish to refer to *situated knowledge*, which, according to Donna Haraway, "offers a more adequate, richer, better account of a world, in order to live in it well and in critical, reflexive relation to our own as well as others' practices of domination and the unequal parts of privilege and oppression that make up all positions."<sup>62</sup> The gaze bears many negative connotations, which Haraway connects to the history of science, militarism, capitalism, colonialism and an overall white, male supremacy. Haraway argues that it is the combination of partial perspective, visualizing practices and ways of seeing through a split and contradictory self, that individuals can interrogate positionings and be held accountable. The history of science and technology has been powerful narratives of success and development, which of course depends on how you see it, where you see it from and who interprets the visual field. These issues addressed by Haraway in her article "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", leads me to an element in the title of this thesis, and to the beginning of my investigation sparked by a curiosity about the academic and artistic construction of the term 'The Anthropocene'.

As a Norwegian member of the global, upper-middle class I am painfully aware of my own fortunate position in the world and the impact we as individuals are told to have on our environment. In this part of the world we are especially concerned with the rapid melting of the Arctic ice and how we can contribute to this undoing by changing our consumer habits. However, having lived half of my adult life in Argentina, I have also witnessed a total lack of political concern for melting icebergs due to other pressing issues such as the increase of

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<sup>62</sup> Haraway 1988: 579



urban slums and the fact that 40 percent of the population live under the poverty line. This is the twofold challenge in contemporary, global society. A dilemma between raising the standard of living for a large part of the population and fighting climate change at the same time by lowering the carbon footprints for some. Already in the 1960s, Barbara Ward posed the question “how can we speak to those who live in villages and slums about keeping the oceans, the rivers and the air clean when their own lives are contaminated at the source?”<sup>63</sup> Now, after 60 more years of contamination and increase of poverty, in a country like Argentina it is a very farfetched goal for politicians to focus on global climate change when almost half of the population struggle for basic survival. This might be the reason why there are not many Argentine artists who exclusively define their art as ecological or environmental.<sup>64</sup>

My first encounter with the Anthropocene, was at the Dark Ecology exhibition in my hometown Tromsø in 2016. Inspired by the English literature professor and philosopher Timothy Morton’s term ‘Dark Ecology’, the exhibition was the result of a three-year art, research and commissioning project in Northern Norway and Russia. Morton himself held a performative speech during the exhibition explaining the underlying meaning of Dark Ecology, arguing that “the end of the world has already occurred in the sense that concepts such as nature and environment are no longer meaningful horizons against which human events take place.”<sup>65</sup> According to Morton, we now find ourselves living inside a number of *hyperobjects*, which he claims can be climate, nuclear weapons, evolution and global warming as the most dramatic example.<sup>66</sup> A *hyperobject*, he argues, “is the presence of ginormous things that we tend to think of as abstract ideas but that are as real as hammers”.<sup>67</sup> The DE project was an artistic and academic call for action where the participants were invited to rethink the concepts of nature and ecology, knowing the impact of human beings on the planet. But although the project had well intentions of reconfiguring our relations with the earth and all its inhabitants, my experience with the exhibition was a feeling of alienation rather than connecting with and understanding. I think it was yet a reminder of my own privileged position in the world, and the surplus of individual time reflected in our concern for the environment and mostly non-human nature. There seems to be an almost unbridgeable gap between people in the western world who have benefitted from capitalist colonialism for

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<sup>63</sup> Satterthwaite 2006: 45

<sup>64</sup> Crossman 2013: 21

<sup>65</sup> Kramvig og Methi 2016: 1

<sup>66</sup> Morton 2013: 5

<sup>67</sup> Morton 2013: 43

some time now, and people living under the poverty line in the rest of the world. It was this discrepancy that sparked my curiosity to further investigate the Anthropocene discourse in social sciences and in art, as it continues to shape and form our vision of contemporary society.

Although the Anthropocene as a proposed geological epoch has not yet been officially approved, neither by the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) nor the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS), social sciences is applying the term as a label for the cultural activity which is reflected in human modification of the natural environment.<sup>68</sup> It was the postcolonial theorist and historian Dipesh Chakrabarty who was the first to call on social scientist to use the Anthropocene as a tool for analysis in his essay from 2009, “The Climate of History: Four Theses”. As a cultural term, the Anthropocene is not only a period of manmade disruption, but it is a moment of bright self-awareness argues Morton, where the human species is beginning to see itself as a planetary force. “We are not only driving global warming and ecological destruction; we *know* that we are”, noted *The Guardian* in an interview with Morton in 2017.<sup>69</sup> The article continues discussing how we, as a species, are condemned to live with this constant awareness and with a moral calculus that involves anything from garbage recycling to watering the lawn. “Now, doing just about anything is an environmental question” writes journalist Alex Blasdel, “and what is so uncomfortable about this” he continues, “is that our individual acts – as they are performed by an entire species – are a collective act of ecological destruction.” This type of human centric /Anthropocene discourse/view of a world on the verge of an ecological catastrophe has become very common in the global media and even a serious news agent such as *The Guardian*, settles for the alarming, existential sound of the term the Anthropocene “which stresses both our culpability and our fragility as humans.”<sup>70</sup>

Only 18 % of the population account for almost 80 % of the Global Gross Product. At the same time, this small percentage of people has the power of definition in constructing the idea of the Anthropocene as a collective, human responsibility when confronted with the prospects of an apocalyptic climate change. The concept of the Anthropocene as it has proliferated from the natural sciences to the humanities, media and the arts, conveys “a message of almost unparalleled moral-political urgency,” according to the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, who suggests that it would be more appropriate to talk of a

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<sup>68</sup> Gibbard 2016: online interview

<sup>69</sup> Blasdel 2017: Online article

<sup>70</sup> Ibid

“Eurocene” or a “Technocene” initiated by European civilization and its technocratic elite.<sup>71</sup> The term “Capitalocene” has also been suggested, but so far no other terms has replaced the Anthropocene. Who is setting the agenda and who is left out of the conceptual spaces where responsibility is distributed, and urgency decided? Are all humans equally implicated and is the climate crisis more important than the crisis of poverty? The growing inequality and poverty in the world are a symptom of the ongoing repercussions of colonial and imperialist agendas, and therefore not all humans should be equally implicated in the framing of the Anthropocene as a universal species paradigm<sup>72</sup>. The Swedish professor of human ecology, Alf Hornborg, argues that the definition of our present time as “The Age of Mankind” tends to suggest that climate change is the inevitable consequence of how our species have been constituted and therefore fails to recognize the hierarchical power structures and the great acceleration of capitalism and consumerism.<sup>73</sup> Meanwhile the Anthropocene discourse is growing, ideas and visions from philosophers and artists create new meanings and images of the world we live in, feeding the ‘hyperobject’ and making it more real. Therefore, and within this frame and recognition of the Anthropocene as a conceptual “building” where stories are made and art constructed, I believe it is important to be aware of the power of an Anthropocene visuality, or rather, *countervisuality*<sup>74</sup> and consider the Anthropocene as the result of ongoing global political injustices and socio-economic inequalities.<sup>75</sup>

The cultural theorist, Nicholas Mirzoeff, describes the Anthropocene as “a human-created machine that cannot be seen, only visualized. By visualized, Mirzoeff refers to the way visualizing was and is “a hierarchical and autocratic means of imagining the social as a battlefield too extensive and complex for any person to physically see.”<sup>76</sup> The eighteenth-century general’s task, explained by Mirzoeff, would be to visualize the battlefield by using his imagination and other sources, a concept later transferred to the abstract bureaucracies of modernity such as the British Empire in the establishment and legitimation of liberal imperialism, the West of the Cold War and eventually, The Market. All these are Western ways of visualizing imperialism, an authority felt throughout the world allowing a few thousand people to rule over billions. In his article “Visualizing the Anthropocene”, Mirzoeff wants the reader to “recognize how deeply embedded in our very sensorium and modern ways

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<sup>71</sup> Sloterdijk 2018: 14

<sup>72</sup> Todd 2015: 258

<sup>73</sup> Hornborg 2017: 2

<sup>74</sup> Mirzoeff 2014: 217

<sup>75</sup> Chua and Fair 2019:1

<sup>76</sup> Mirzoeff 2014: 217

of seeing the Anthropocene-aesthetic-capitalist complex of modern visuality has become.”<sup>77</sup> Meaning that this power of visualizing has become an *Anthropocene visuality*, normalizing the Western imperial project as it continues to develop through consumption and the constant waging of war against nature. “We now find ourselves confronting an autoimmune capitalism that seems determined to extract the last moment of circulation for itself” argues Mirzoeff, calling it an autoimmune climate-changing capitalism syndrome (AICS).<sup>78</sup> Artwork in the Western world has contributed to an Anthropocene aesthetic or (an)aesthetics by producing seductive images of contamination through human domination over nature and other human beings up through modern history. Making “us” comfortably numb and desensitized to the process. Although a *countervisuality* to the Anthropocene has been in existence for a while, Mirzoeff argues that we still need “to create a mental space for action that can link the visible and the sayable.”<sup>79</sup> In other words, he argues that in order to decolonize climate change there is a need for a larger range of *countervisuality*.

Returning to the beginning and my encounter with the Dark Ecology art project, I believe that my feeling of alienation and lack of ability to identify with the art and discussions performed, comes from the absence of the North/South perspective and the predominant focus on non-human nature as victims of the war on nature by “us” humans. My intention here is not to argue that the subject matter in the Dark Ecology project or that non-human nature is not important in the process of raising awareness of an ecological crisis. However, I do believe that we, the inhabitants of the global North, may need continuous reminders of the fortunate position from where we speak and situate ourselves in relation to other human realities in order to fully grasp the complexity of the twofold challenge in our manmade conceptual and maybe geological Anthropocene. This is my underlying motivation for examining the series of Juanito and Ramona by using Ecofeminism as a theory of Essential Interconnectedness, which connects the oppression of women, people of color and the poor to the similar domination and oppression of nature.<sup>80</sup>

By looking at the western development project through the artwork of Antonio Berni, I wish to underline the connections Berni makes between “White Capitalist Patriarchy”<sup>81</sup> and global poverty. From an ecocritical perspective, I argue that Berni denounces the logic of capitalist colonialism and puts it on trial through his personalized characters, Juanito and

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid: 213

<sup>78</sup> Ibid: 215

<sup>79</sup> Ibid: 226

<sup>80</sup> d’Eaubonne 1974: xxi

<sup>81</sup> Haraway 1998: 592

Ramona, who, in my opinion, transcends into the Anthropocene discourse. Both characters are portrayed by Berni as disposable, just as the trash that gives them life. Products of the waste that society produced, the marginals of a ruthless, industrial system. The fact that Berni chose to narrate the story of his two characters with the waste of the same society that excludes them, leaves a powerful trace of individual and social history. Berni provides a critical history of the social reality that Argentina was going through, with a poverty that was growing steadily. Although, in 1960, little was said about the importance of recycling for environmental conservation, Berni already used paper, wood, cardboard and waste in his works, which he collected in landfills and different urban centers. He did not do so with an environmental purpose, as far as I have understood, but recycling waste by turning it into art was his way of raising social awareness about the situation of poverty and marginality in which thousands of Argentines lived in those years.

Technologies of visibility, as Mirzoeff calls them and argues; “can best be understood from the South where they are practiced”. “The South” in this context is used by Mirzoeff as a metaphor for human suffering under global capitalism.<sup>82</sup> With this thesis, I wish to demonstrate that the essence of the series of Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel, is denouncing the implications of the aggressive growth of liberal capitalism as it unfolded throughout Latin America during the Great Acceleration after WW2. The effect it had on people, is expressed by Berni through his characters by making them both witnesses and victims of the process of producing, what activist Julian Aguon calls, “disposable humanity”.<sup>83</sup> By placing Juanito and Ramona in the Anthropocene, as suggested by the title of this thesis, my intention is to argue that these works by Berni contribute to a counter-visual discourse as defined by Mirzoeff, as a form of resistance to capitalism.

### **1.3.2 Ecocritical art history and ecofeminism**

In *Juanito y sus juguetes* (fig 1.4) the yellow tractor looking vehicle carrying Juanito is shoveling garbage, mostly motor oil cans from the foreign Shell company. The dimensions of the work, containing life size materials, adds to the impact of the garbage against the natural environment in the background. Juanito seems like an ordinary, happy child, playing with his toys, unaware of the dangers of his contaminated environment. Berni leaves it up to the

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<sup>82</sup> Dussell 1973: 30

<sup>83</sup> Aguon 2008: 12



viewer to make a judgement of whether or not to feel guilty about the consequences of our own actions and contributions to the pollution of Juanito's playground. *Juanito y sus juguetes*



Figure 1.4 *Juanito y sus juguetes* (Juanito and his toys), 1973, collage on wood, 125 x 209 cm, private collection of Hugo and Silvia Sigman, Buenos Aires.

was made around the time the development of environmental art emerged for the first time at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s. The development of environmental art was linked to different environmental movements, artistic trends and the advance of technological and scientific understanding of nature.<sup>84</sup> According to surveys made about environmental art, it is apparent that most of the production at the time was centered in Europe and in the United States.<sup>85</sup> Although Berni was in contact with an international art scene, and might have been aware of the development of an environmental art movement at the time, I have not found any proof of his own consideration of his art as environmental or ecological. In general, environmental and ecological art, are terms used to describe art that is defined as such by the artists themselves. Therefore, I do not want to impose the term environmental or ecological art on the series of Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel but rather refer to the work as art that addresses ecological issues.

There are some distinctions made between what is considered environmental art and what is ecological art. Environmental art has been defined as an umbrella term which includes a range of artistic practices, from historical, artistic approaches to nature up until the more

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<sup>84</sup> Crossman 2011: 8

<sup>85</sup> Ibid

recent ecological and politically motivated types of works. Environmental art is a broader, generic term, referring to art that has ecology or the natural environment as its main subject or object. Ecological art is by some considered a distinct genre from environmental art as it involves a more specific functional ecological systems-restoration, through socially engaged, individual and community-based activism, which is intended to have an impact politically, by intervention or reflection.<sup>86</sup> Ecological art is also considered as a genre in the field of contemporary art as a direct response to the global environmental crisis. However, there is a blurred boundary between these different definitions of art, because of the social and intellectual construction of concepts such as ‘environment’ and ‘ecology’ as well as the concept of ‘nature’. Therefore, I will briefly discuss some terms in order to see how themes such as history, human rights, science and poverty can be included in these definitions through an eco-critical approach to Berni’s art and life.

**Environment** is often used to describe the human dimension of nature. A more thorough definition of the term environment is “the complex of physical, chemical, and biotic factors (such as climate, soil, and living things) that act upon an organism or ecological community and ultimately determine its form and survival.”<sup>87</sup> In his book, *Radical Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique*, the sociologist and historian, Ramachandra Guha, reflects on the different understandings of the term environmentalism in the “developed” and “underdeveloped” world. He argues that in the so-called Third World, environmentalism is often a question of pure survival and not an extracurricular exercise in order to enhance the quality of life.<sup>88</sup> This is the reason why many environmental organizations in Latin America are fighting for indigenous rights to land or human rights for the poor, rather than the preservation of natural reserves or a more abstract concern such as climate change. In Argentina, Crossman explains, “the environment is generally considered in relation to political and economic structures tied to studies of poverty.”<sup>89</sup> Early environmental movements focused on the rapid, informal urban development and the contamination it produced.<sup>90</sup> It is this inextricably connection between development and environment, which makes an eco-critical reading of Berni’s art relevant.

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<sup>86</sup> Kagan 2014: 2

<sup>87</sup> “Environment.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, [[https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/environment.](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/environment)] Accessed May 15, 2020.

<sup>88</sup> Ramachandra 2008: 344

<sup>89</sup> Crossman 2011: 30

<sup>90</sup> Ibid: 21

**Ecology** is defined by most encyclopedias as a study of the relationships between living organisms and their environment.<sup>91</sup> "Human acts occur within a network of relationships, processes, and systems that are as ecological as they are cultural", writes environmental historian, William Cronon.<sup>92</sup> In other words, ecology is a complex interrelationship and understanding of the world which depends on where you are positioned. Ecological relationships and perceptions are intrinsically political because they entail complex and often contested interactions, not to mention multiple directions of vision and communication.<sup>93</sup> There is a concept called 'Third World Political Ecology' which is often used when discussing the essentially politicized condition of environmental problems in the global South.<sup>94</sup> Then there is 'deep ecology', a social movement within environmental philosophy founded by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss in 1972. 'Deep ecology' is based on the belief that human beings must recognize that nature has an inherent value and that the conception of the human self as a solitary and independent ego has led to the pitfalls of anthropocentrism and environmental degradation.<sup>95</sup> According to Næss and deep ecology, the human self has to be considered part of nature and not disassociated from it, the "ecological self" has to act in harmony with nature and not in opposition to it.

**Nature** has been defined as anything from all that is non-human such as forests, mountains, individual organisms, to a process or a change over time or as unspecific as an energy flow. When people refer to nature, they speak from their own conceptual frameworks. Some talk about nature as everything that exists, or as the creation. Others consider what is not human, the "wild", untouched nature. Others again consider nature as a resource, a blank sheet that must be processed. Nature is often paralleled with women and as described by Warren, "Mother Nature (not Father Nature) is raped, mastered, controlled, conquered, and mined. Her (not his) secrets are penetrated, and her womb (men don't have one) is put into the service of the man of science (not woman of science, or simply scientist)."<sup>96</sup> In Academia and within social sciences, the concept of 'nature' has been defined as "hybrid" by geographer Maria Kaika, as "cyborg" by Donna Haraway, and as "machine" by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. These models of looking at the construction of 'nature' as a term, blur the

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<sup>91</sup> "Environment." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, [<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/environment.>] Accessed May 15, 2020.

<sup>92</sup> Cronon 1995: 70

<sup>93</sup> Braddock 2014:163

<sup>94</sup> Bailey and Bryant 1997: 34

<sup>95</sup> "Deep-ecology." Madsen, Peter in Encyclopædia Britannica,inc., [[britannica.com/topic/deep ecology](https://www.britannica.com/topic/deep-ecology)] Accessed on January 20, 2020.

<sup>96</sup> Warren 2000: 27

distinctions between what is so called natural and artificial. In relation to the series of Juanito and Ramona, it is useful to keep the construction of nature as a concept in mind, because it facilitates new readings of Berni's art.

It is important to recognize the terms 'environment', 'ecology' and 'nature' as constructions in this inquiry in order to argue that Berni's critique of the development of cities and urban slums should be considered within ecological thought. That the increasing number of people living in slums is part of the social and environmental ecological crisis, equally to the threat of melting icebergs and vanishing non-human species. This brings me back to the literature scholar, Rob Nixon, and his critique of the growing inequalities between disempowered communities in the global South, such as the home of Juanito Laguna, and modern neoliberal elites. According to Nixon, the impoverished communities in the global South already suffers from climate change and other forms of man-made environmental destructions. His appeal to art and literature is that it "must reveal the slow, attritional violence such destruction inflicts on those communities."<sup>97</sup> It is this connection between poverty and the constant scientific and technological "progress" which I will argue becomes an expression of the current ecological crisis in the series of Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel.

**Ecocriticism** is known as the youngest revisionist movements that began to gain some momentum as late as the 1990s. It was originally defined as "the scrutiny of ecological implications and human-nature relationships in any literary text".<sup>98</sup> When it comes to ecocritical art history, the meaning of "text" is expanded to include visual art of all forms, places, and periods. One can also say that there is a shared environmentalist motivation of some sort behind ecocriticism, a shared desire to protect 'nature'. As discussed above, terms such as 'environment' and 'nature' have contributed multiple layers of meaning just like any other conceptual constructions. Depending on how one frames these concepts, ecocriticism can also involve a critique of the way cultural norms of nature and the environment contribute to environmental degradation or catastrophic climate change.

Ecocriticism tends to borrow from other interpretative modes and amplifies them.<sup>99</sup> This means that ecocriticism may adapt aspects from for instance phenomenology or postcolonial theory and giving them an environmental focus. It entails an effort to widen or reorient the scope of cultural studies by emphasizing the ways in which human creativity,

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<sup>97</sup> Braddock and Renée 2014: 6

<sup>98</sup> Braddock 2014:155

<sup>99</sup> Buell 2005: 19

regardless of form or time period, unfolds within a specific environment or set of environments, which can be urban, rural or suburban.<sup>100</sup> Ecocriticism does not limit its visibility range to “landscape” or other preconceived aesthetic categories or notions of environmental perception.<sup>101</sup> According to art historian, Alan Braddock, when it comes to art history, “ecocriticism entails a more probing and pointedly ethical integration of visual analysis, cultural interpretation, and environmental history, including aspects of the history of science.”<sup>102</sup> Many eco-critics accuse late-capitalism of being the culprit of the crisis at hand, which share many parallels with Berni’s critique of development and neoliberal policies in Latin America.

**Ecofeminism** is ecocriticism combined with feminism, which can be defined as a complex set of ideologies and theories, that seek to achieve equal social, political and economic rights for women and men.<sup>103</sup> This further translates in favor of all basic human rights against the discrimination of people for their ethnicity, skin-color, sexual orientation and religious belief. Ecofeminism can be viewed as a branch of both feminism and ecocriticism, because it draws on the concept of gender to analyze the relationships between humans and the natural world. However, there is so much more to ecofeminism than gender. Ecofeminism has been described by Ariel Salleh, as “the only political framework that can spell out the historical links between neoliberal capital, corporate science, worker alienation, domestic violence, industrial toxics, land and water grabs, deforestation, climate change and the myth of modern progress” to mention some.<sup>104</sup> There are several branches of ecofeminism today, one being ecofeminist philosophy which draws on feminism, ecology, environmentalism, and philosophy in its analyses of human systems of unjustified “isms of domination.”<sup>105</sup> It is due to this broad and complex perspective that ecofeminism and ecofeminist philosophy embodies, that I find the connections between Juanito Laguna, Ramona Montiel and the environmental impacts of ‘modernization’. Berni denounces the Western drive to accumulation in a structurally interconnected capitalist patriarchal system, by visualizing the consequences lived and felt by the real, marginalized people whom Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel represents.

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<sup>100</sup> Braddock 2014: 5

<sup>101</sup> Buell 2005: 110

<sup>102</sup> Braddock 2014: 155

<sup>103</sup> Warren 2000: 4

<sup>104</sup> Mies & Shiva 2014: x

<sup>105</sup> Warren 2000: 43

There are several important contributors to ecofeminism, and I will briefly explain some of the main ideas I intend to follow in this thesis. Karen Warren and Val Plumwood are both Western ecofeminist philosophers, who critique modern, western philosophical theories and history. In her book, *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters*, Karen Warren describes ecofeminist philosophy as an-ism of liberation that grows out of and in response to three overlapping areas of concern: feminism (and all the issues feminism raises concerning women and other human Others); nature (the natural environment), science (especially scientific ecology), development and technology; and local or indigenous perspectives.<sup>106</sup> Warren defines a conceptual framework as “a set of basic beliefs, values, attributes, and assumptions which shape and reflect how one views oneself and one’s world.”<sup>107</sup> All people have such conceptual framework, she argues, a way of understanding and organizing the world affected by our sex/gender, race/ethnicity, class, age, nationality, colonial influences and culture, amongst others. Some of these conceptual frameworks are oppressive systems, creating hierarchical power relations and imbalance between individuals, institutions and nations by practices of unjustified domination and subordination. Some examples of what Warren calls “unjustified isms of domination” are sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, and ethnocentrism.<sup>108</sup> Warren further argues that these isms of domination can be distinguished by five features within an oppressive conceptual framework, which I find to be important tools for interpreting and contextualizing Berni’s Juanito and Ramona series.

The first feature is value-hierarchical, Up-Down thinking. A top-bottom organization, that places higher value on what is decided to be Up, be it men and culture versus women and nature which are considered Down. A way of organizing reality that serves to legitimate inequality. The second feature is oppositional and mutually exclusive value dualisms, which by giving prestige and value to one disjunct over the other create favorable positions in society. The third and fourth features conceive power and privilege in ways that systematically advantage the Ups over the Downs, although not always enacted on by the Ups. In a classist society, such as in Argentina, “wealthy people have the power and privilege to mobilize resources to self-determined ends which sometimes enables them to not notice the

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<sup>106</sup> Warren 2000: 44

<sup>107</sup> Ibid: 46

<sup>108</sup> "Feminist Environmental Philosophy." Warren, Karen in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), [<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/feminism-environmental>] Accessed on November 19, 2019.

ways socio economic status is a significant challenge to equality of opportunity.”<sup>109</sup> This is a very accurate description of the Argentine reality where you constantly hear how poor people are viewed as inferior and undeserving of the same opportunities and rights based on a capitalist/neoliberalist idea that their poverty is “their own fault” due to laziness supported by governmental “gifts”. The fifth and philosophically most important feature of an oppressive conceptual framework, according to Warren, is the “logic of domination.” This feature is based on a moral premise that “superiority justifies subordination”, giving the members of Up the moral justification to oppress the Down. In western societies this can be observed in the higher historical value given to consciousness, rationality, science and culture over body, emotions and nature. The people belonging to the upper hierarchical systems are historically white, “rational” men, while women, people of color, poor people and non-human nature supposedly lack this rationality and are therefore of less value.<sup>110</sup> Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel belong to the unjustifiably group of “Downs” or “Others” whom Warren refers to as the excluded, marginalized, devalued, pathologized, or naturalized.

Val Plumwood, on the other hand, talks about “the framework of assumptions”. An assumption where the distinction between human/nature has been shaped in the west through the exclusion and domination of nature by a white, mostly male elite, which she calls the *master model*. This exclusion and domination are not seen from within the *master model*, because it is accepted as simply a “human model”. In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* from 1992, Plumwood traces the dualisms that lay underneath the Western way of thinking. An anthropocentric value system based on an assumption that there is a deep division between humanity and nature where categories associated with nature rather than reason, such as women, the working-class, the colonized and the indigenous, are considered inferior. By demonstrating that this ideology legitimized the domination of other subjugated social groups, she convincingly implies that “environmentalism and struggles for social justice cannot be separated from one another.”<sup>111</sup> The chapter on “dualism: the logic of colonization”, is especially interesting for the readings of Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel, as it demonstrates the power relationships between the *master model* and the marginalized others. By means of dualism, she argues, “the colonized are appropriated, incorporated, into the selfhood and culture of the master, which forms their identity.”<sup>112</sup> This form of oppression

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<sup>109</sup> Warren 2000: 47

<sup>110</sup> Ibid

<sup>111</sup> Mathews 2008: online article

<sup>112</sup> Plumwood 1993: 41

work on multiple levels in the Argentine society and are reflected in the artwork of Berni through his characters who contain the complexity of a master model passed on from the “North” and adapted by the “South”.

Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva are two internationally respected feminist activists and writers who in their book, *Ecofeminism*, raises the question if there is a “relationship between patriarchal oppression and the destruction of nature in the name of profit and progress?”<sup>113</sup> The book was first published in 1993 but is still very current and offers a unique North-South perspective that is useful for contextualizing the artwork presented in this thesis. Carolyn Merchant, the North American ecofeminist philosopher, is also an important influence in my thesis with her theory and book called *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* published in 1980. Merchant traces the gendering of *nature* as it developed from the scientific revolution with the “father of modern science”, Francis Bacon, and connects this to the current exploitation of nature and marginalized others in the name of science and “progress”. Merchant presents a view of the Scientific Revolution which challenges “the hegemony of mechanistic science” as progress and implicates it in the ecological crisis at hand.<sup>114</sup>

I use these theories and worldviews as part of my method for selecting the artwork and framing the narrative of Juanito and Ramona within a global, historical, social and political context of “isms of domination” which according to Warren is systemized injustice. In the following chapters, these theories are operating as part of my perspective at all times, even though I do not always refer to them explicitly in the text. According to the world-renowned environmental leader and thinker, Vandana Shiva, if we continue to live in the old paradigm of capitalist patriarchy, an industrial, capital-centered competitive economy, with a culture of dominance and violence, “we will witness the rapid unfolding of increasing climate catastrophe, species extinction, economic collapse, and human injustice and inequality.”<sup>115</sup>

## 1.5 Chapter Summary

Although Berni did not refer to himself as an ecological artist nor that he was making environmental art as we might think of it today, I still find it appropriate to adapt an ecofeminist approach in the interpretation of the series of Juanito Laguna and Ramona

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<sup>113</sup> Mies & Shiva 2014: 67

<sup>114</sup> Merchant 2006: 513

<sup>115</sup> Mies & Shiva 2014: 269



Montiel. By applying ecofeminist philosophy to Berni's work of art, the goal is to emphasize issues of environmental interconnectedness, because "historically oriented, ecocriticism may bring attention to neglected evidence of past ecological and proto-ecological sensibility".<sup>116</sup> My intention in this thesis is to examine how Juanito and Ramona testify to human inequality as part of the environmental crisis we are experiencing today. Berni's indefinite attention given to motifs such as social inequality and poverty, reflects a contemporary global situation, equally problematic to that of global warming, melting icebergs and the increase of microplastic. The problem of urban development has been denounced by activist and artists like Berni for many years, but it does not seem to receive the fair amount of attention in the debate about the Anthropocene and our universal responsibility and shared consequences. Is it because we have been anaesthetized by the Anthropocene visuality as argued by Mirzoeff, and cannot see the slow violence inflicted upon the poor as suggested by Nixon? In the next chapter, I will be looking at the historical and political context, both nationally and internationally in order to get an in dept understanding of Berni's lifelong critique of the developmentalist project from a South American, Argentine perspective, resulting in the creation of Juanito Laguna.

## **Chapter 2. The Narrative of Juanito Laguna:** The dark side of developmentalism

In this chapter I will analyze the series of Juanito Laguna in the social-political context from the end of the 1930s to the 1970s, in order to eventually place the character Juanito Laguna in a more contemporary social environment. I will include some earlier works of Berni that do not belong to the series, but which I find relevant as precursors to the series and as a background for the narrative about Juanito Laguna. I have divided this chapter in four parts, beginning with Juanito's rural background and how his family ended up as urban poor. Then I will examine Juanito's ethnic background as a component of what is, from an eco-feminist perspective, part of the continuation of colonial racism through the way in which "Third World" nation states have adapted the *master* model of the "Western Empire"<sup>117</sup>. Third I will look at Juanito's social and geographical environment in the urban settlement called *Villa Miseria* (slum) and the way Berni reveals the negative consequences of capitalism

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<sup>116</sup> Braddock 2009: 26

<sup>117</sup> "Western Empire" refers to the economic model shaped and controlled by capitalist patriarchy (usually referring to the USA and other Western countries) based on commodification of everything. (Mies & Shiva 2014: xvi)

through both form and content. Finally, I will analyze Juanito's identity as it, in my opinion, changes over time and through a comparison with the *picaro* from the *novela picaresca* which places him within the contemporary Argentine slum and society. In order to eventually place Juanito within the frame of the so-called Anthropocene, I believe it is necessary to examine the series from a historical, social and political context of Argentina and postcolonial Latin America as depicted by the artist, Antonio Berni.

## 2.1 Juanito's rural background in Neocolonial Latin America

Berni made his first collages at the end of the 1950s and these works are now considered to be part of the series of Juanito Laguna. Although the very first image of Juanito has been dated to 1956, it wasn't until the early 1960s that Berni started naming the series.<sup>118</sup> The use of found objects and recycling became gradually more elaborate in Berni's collages and eventually he started incorporating objects on to the xylographic plate, creating what he defined as "xylo-collages" and "xylo-collage-reliefs".<sup>119</sup> In order to make the prints, Berni developed his own paper, capable of withstanding the straining process that pushed it into high relief.<sup>120</sup> In 1962, Berni was one of the representatives of Argentine Art at the 31<sup>st</sup> Venice Biennial where he received the Grand prize of engraving and drawing for several xylo-collages from the Juanito Laguna series. The five xylographs and xylograph-collages (engravings) exhibited at the Venice Biennial attracted contemporaneous criticism for the experimental use of materials, but perhaps less focus was given to the thematic tension between natural and urban space that Berni presents in his prints.

In the five xylograph-collages presented at the Venice Biennial, the transformation of Juanito as a rural boy to a city boy seem very evident. In the work, *Juanito bañandose* (fig 2.1), Juanito is depicted completely nude and carefree as he is taking a bath with a friend and a dog. Surrounded by an enormous butterfly, flowers and plants, there is no sign of the city or any overshadowing threat from industrialization. The only trace of modernization is the metal formation on the riverbank painted brown, however in this work, the collage element seems like an organic and integrated part of the environment. According to art historian Cecilia Rabossi, at the exhibition in Venice, the rural scenes were mixed with the urban ones,

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<sup>118</sup> Museo Castagnino + Macro: Facts about the series in the museum's permanent collection of Juanito Laguna.

<sup>119</sup> Berni 1999: 192

<sup>120</sup> Fantoni 2014: 58

illustrating the differences in these two spaces inhabited by Juanito.<sup>121</sup> Seen by itself, *Juanito bañándose* (fig 2.1) could easily be dismissed as too “folkloric”, as it was by the influential Argentine art critic at the time, Jorge Romero Brest.<sup>122</sup> But seen in context, the strength of the xylograph-collages exhibited in Venice, is the fact that they reveal the traces of Juanito’s family’s recent rural past, which lingers in the images like a genealogical record on the verge of erasure. It seems to me that Berni questions the relationship between people and their environment by depicting the internal migration from rural spaces juxtaposed against industrial cityscapes. He has managed to capture a brief moment in time, a time of transformation when these two realities still existed simultaneously within one space.

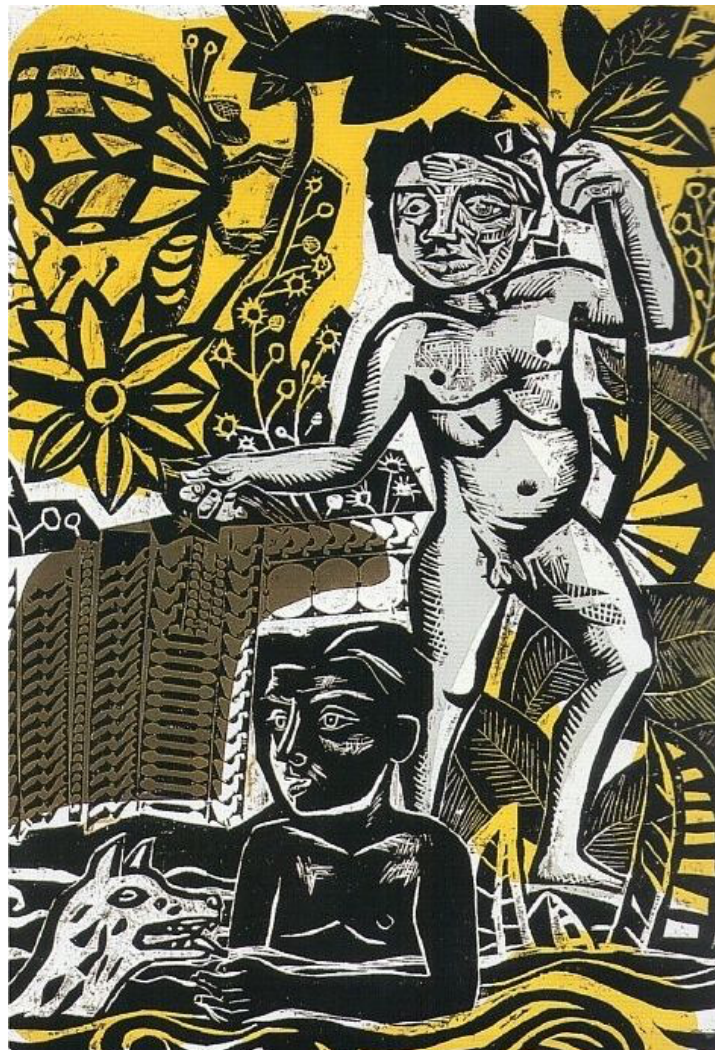


Figure 2.1 Juanito bañándose (Juanito taking a bath), 1961, Xylo-collage, 162 x 117 cm, collection Museo Castagnino + Macro, Rosario

<sup>121</sup> Rabossi 2000: 70

<sup>122</sup> Brest was a fundamental pawn in the cultural political construction of a new, liberal Argentina promoting an international art scene in Buenos Aires which was expected to become the new Paris or New York. Brest had characterized most of Argentine art prior to the 1960s through the notion of “backwardness”, picturing himself as the leading coach in making Argentine art an “up-to-date” product. (Giunta 2001: 262)

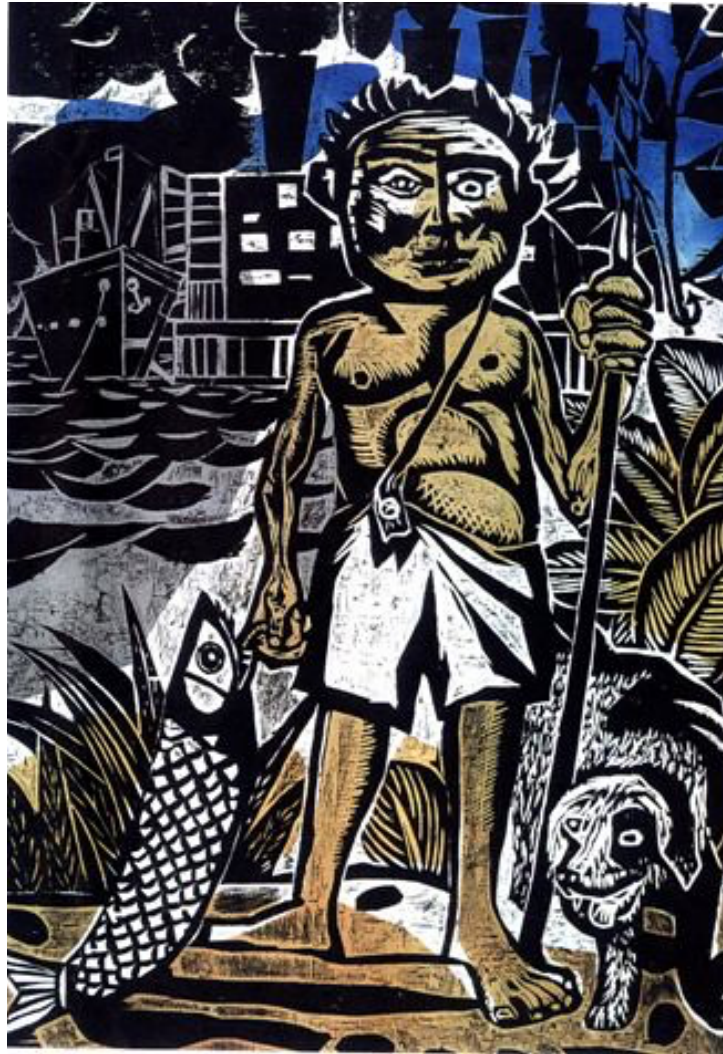


Figure 2.2 *Juanito con pescado* (Juanito with Fish), 1961, Xylograph, 169 x 126 cm, private collection Museo Castagnino + Macro, Rosario

*Juanito con pescado* (fig 2.2), also one of the five xylograph-collages that were exhibited at the Venice Biennial, has a very different ambience and mood than *Juanito bañandose* (fig 2.1). There is a sharp contrast between the urban, industrial elements in the upper background of the image and the elements of nature such as the fish, the dog and the plants in the foreground. In *Juanito con pescado* the river divides the two spaces and are additionally distinguished by the use of different colors. The brownish hues on Juanito's skin are repeated in nature making a connection between the two, contrasting the black smoke from the fabric as it cuts through the blue sky. There is a wild, rural look to the seminude Juanito who triumphantly poses with the fish he has caught, despite the industrial disturbance and apparent contamination encroaching on his environment. The image seems to speak to human determination to survive, under changing and difficult circumstances due to internal migration and industrialization. In light of an ecofeminist approach, it is exactly this so-called

folkloric history and background of Juanito Laguna that provides us with the bigger picture of what Warren calls “unjustified isms of domination” within an oppressive conceptual framework.<sup>123</sup> Rabossi argues that the xylograph-collages “provide a foundation for understanding the prominent place that the villas have assumed as part of a critique against development and a call for environmental protection.”<sup>124</sup>

In order to get the complete understanding of the political and social complexity of the series of Juanito Laguna, we have to go back to the beginning of the Second World War. In 1941, Berni received a scholarship from the National Commission of Culture, giving him the opportunity to make a series of travels through Latin America, from Bolivia to Colombia, with the intention of studying pre-Columbian and colonial art. The Mexican author and poet, Octavio Paz, had begun to call attention to the meaning of modernity in general but especially within a Latin American context. His deep and *avant-gardist* reflection on modernity, which is until today, mostly unknown or just denied by the hegemonic centers and discourses of knowledge, was to inspire Berni on his journey.<sup>125</sup> From the beginning of the 1940s Paz was occupied with the demise of modernity, and he argued that the world was witnessing the end of the modern era and that something very different would arise from this breakup. But this was not in his opinion postmodernity, rather something that was not yet possible to discern. For Paz, the end of modernity was an incomplete project.<sup>126</sup> He also questioned what he considered to be the key building blocks of modernity, the western ideology of progress. This critique of progress itself, the white, western struggle for a better existence at the expense of other civilizations, are consistent with the artworks of Antonio Berni. In his publication, *Posdata*, Paz claims “that the available models of economic development, both capitalist and socialist, were producing disastrous results, and he provided a list of the problems of developed societies, from abandonment of the elderly to the destruction of the environment.”<sup>127</sup>

Within this frame of a Latin American marginal reality confronted with the Western ideal of progress, Berni spent several years in Santiago del Estero, in the northwestern part of Argentina, during the 1950s. As a response to the indiscriminate felling of the forest that took

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<sup>123</sup> "Feminist Environmental Philosophy." Warren, Karen in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), [<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/feminism-environmental>] Accessed on November 19, 2019.

<sup>124</sup> Rabossi 2000: 70

<sup>125</sup> Paz's deep and *avant-gardist* reflection on modernity, which is until today, mostly unknown or just denied by the hegemonic centers and discourses of knowledge, was to inspire Berni on his journey. (Ledesma 2012: 161)

<sup>126</sup> Paz 1970: 76

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*: 55



place here, Berni produces a series of paintings between 1951-53 called *Motivos santiagueños* (Motifs from Santiago del Estero) depicting the environmental tragedy this was for the province and the effect it had on the population. The massive tree felling was not only an ecological exploitation, but it was also social. It was the beginning of a great wave of migration to the urban south, and in this sense the history behind his character, Juanito who is born as an urban poor. During this period, Berni lived with the cotton farmers and the

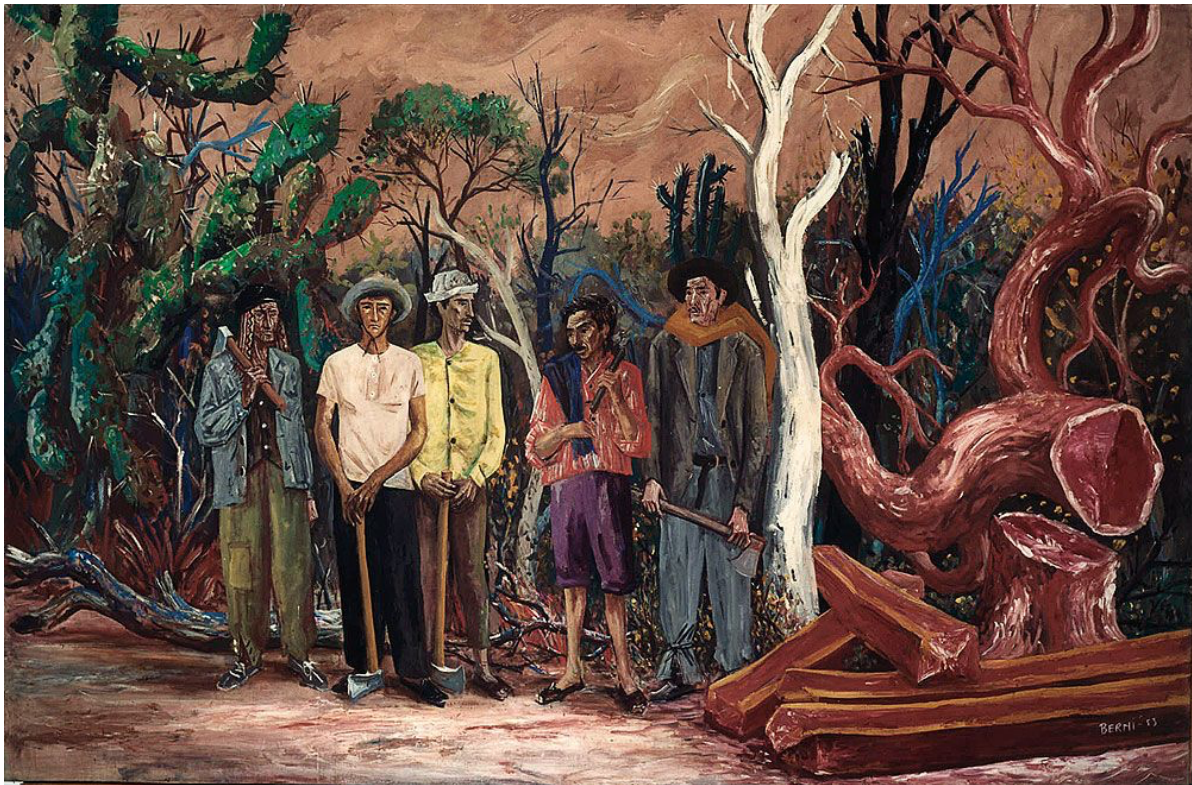


Figure 2.3 *Los hacheros* (The lumberjacks), 1953, watercolor on canvas, 200 x 300 cm, private collection.

lumberjacks, in the forest under poor conditions. In *Los hacheros* (fig 2.3) from 1953, Berni depicts the social reality of the lumberjack workers in front of this ecological and social disaster about to happen. The tree that is chopped down in the lower right corner of the image, seems to consist of living flesh, as if Berni wanted to humanize the pain inflicted upon the forest. The anthropomorphin of the hues happens through Berni's choice of a red-pinkish color on the tree as it falls with what seems to be crouching branches. The fallen tree seems to be the main subject of the image, as the still standing lumberjacks poses quietly and almost shamefully next to their unwilling slaughter. It has been estimated that at this time, around twenty timber merchant companies owned 1,500,000 hectares of the land, extracting wood for the building of railway tracks and to fuel the trains, designed to connect the peripheral provinces with the port of Buenos Aires. The demand for this industry resulted in the sale of

state land suitable for forestry exploitation, leading to massive land privatization.<sup>128</sup> The profit from the deforestation remained with the owners of the companies who were mostly foreign, and neither the workers nor the forests received any benefit.

The whole industry around the timber yards also required a large workforce of manual labor in addition to loggers. This resulted in the migration of thousands of families to the forested regions, leaving their domestic subsistence economy in search of better opportunities. However, not only were the promises of decent wages never fulfilled but the workers were heavily exploited by the owners (*obrajes*) under dreadful working conditions leading to extreme poverty.<sup>129</sup> This system of recruitment, retention and abuse of a highly vulnerable workforce was a type of production and economic activity well integrated into global capitalism. Not only was the fate of the workers very much in the hands of the contractor, the foreman or the employer but the destiny of the entire family. Because the children and women who had moved with their husbands, helping with cleaning tasks and other activities of the household, were also exposed to the exploitation. They were all dependent on the employer for the supply of goods and this created a captive market where workers and their families were permanently indebted.<sup>130</sup> The extractive nature of this industry and the systematic exploitation of the loggers had disastrous socioeconomic and ecological ramifications, because “the ecological predation coexisted with a social one”.<sup>131/132</sup>

In the painting, *Los hacheros* (fig 2.3) the ethnic composition and *mestizaje*<sup>133</sup> of the rural working class is very clearly expressed by the darker skin tones and their clothing. During the colonial era the complex *mestizajes*, the mix between the diverse indigenous, Spanish, Portuguese, African ethnic groups, and some others produced a type of special of resident, characteristic of Argentina and other neighboring countries: the gaucho and its feminine equivalent, "la china" or "guaynaa." The paintings in the series *Motivos santiagueños* are less formal than the series of Juanito Laguna, and perhaps more spontaneous, like snapshots with posing subjects, where one or two, be it a child or a dog, confront the viewer. In the painting *Migraciones* (fig 2.4) a group of people seem to be posing

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<sup>128</sup> Dargoltz 2003: 126

<sup>129</sup> Paz, Jara and Wald 2019: 697

<sup>130</sup> Ibid

<sup>131</sup> Heffes 2017: 8

<sup>132</sup> Dargoltz 1985: 45

<sup>133</sup> “mestizaje” – taking as its root mestizo or mixed – came from the Latin word mixtus, meaning mixed. It is the modern Spanish word coined in the twentieth century for race mixture or miscegenation, the general process of mixing ancestries- (Rappaport, Joanne, *The Disappearing Mestizo*, p. 247)

for a family portrait probably because they actually did pose for the photographer/painter Antonio Berni at one point during his stay in Santiago del Estero. All the members of the



Figure 2.4 *Migraciones (Migration)*, 1954, oil on canvas. (Dimensions and ownership unknown).

migrating group seem to be looking in the same direction, towards the left of the image, with the exception of one child who look directly at the viewer. This direct gaze of the boy establishes a connection between the photographer/painter and the subject. The presence of Berni becomes evident through the child who “disobeys” the pose and who instead confront the viewer and the man behind the camera. This resistance, or counter-gaze, is also present in many of the works in the series of Juanito Laguna. The migrating group are on the move, but in the image, time has stopped for a second. This gives us time to reflect over who they are and where they come from. The group is surrounded by a similar forest as the lumberjacks in *Los hacheros* (fig 2.3). A horse with a simple carriage is transporting a man, a woman, a sleeping girl, the confronting boy and a dog. Next to carriage is another family, consisting of a woman carrying a baby and a heavy bag on her head, a man with a bag on his back and a half-nude boy with no shoes. The clothing suggests that they are poor peasants. Could this group of people be migrating to a possible future in the urban slums?

Returning then, to the likely reason why this group of people in Berni’s painting were on the move, was the phenomena of foreign “land grabbing” which has continued up until



today. In 2013 it was estimated that 15,881,069 hectares of land in Argentina were foreign owned.<sup>134</sup> It has been argued that “land grabs should be embedded within the logics and dynamics of contemporary global capitalism and understood in the context of converging food, energy, climate change, and financial crisis.”<sup>135</sup> These paintings are the beginning of a new period in Berni’s artistic expression that calls into question the misery of rural Argentina with migration as a consequence, eventually giving birth to the character Juanito Laguna. It is the idea of the impoverished subject whose destiny will be proletarianization, just like Juanito Laguna's father, who was a metallurgical pawn in the city; the type of proletarianization that will engender the *villero* (the slum dweller), in case of not acquiring “the revolutionary conscience that will free him from his oppression.”<sup>136</sup> The series of Juanito then, can be interpreted as the urban continuation of the series of motifs from Santiago del Estero. Juanito is the descendant of a family that has been forced to migrate, subjected to exploitation and constant danger. Juanito grows up between trash and rusty cans in a cardboard slum. He is a “child-symbol” of the daily poverty of the so-called Third World and an archetype from any of the poor, Latin American urban slums.

## 2.2 Juanito’s urban environment and “racialization” of poverty



Figure 2.5 *La familia de Juanito Laguna* (Juanito Laguna’s Family), 1960, collage on wood, 211 x 306 cm, Mu.ZEE, Ostende, Belgium.

<sup>134</sup> Paz, Jara, and Wald 2019: 695

<sup>135</sup> McMichael 2013: 52

<sup>136</sup> Giovanni 2010: 1

Seven years after his series of paintings from Santiago del Estero, Berni creates the work, *La familia de Juanito Laguna* (fig 2.5) with six individuals and one dog posing in front of their cardboard home. Although the material and technique of the works have changed and the environment of the characters is different, there are many similarities between the people posing in *La familia de Juanito Laguna* and the ones from the rural North (fig 2.3 and 2.4). It is likely to draw the conclusion, due to the characteristics of the clothing and the variety of ethnicities present, that Juanito's family who live in the slums of Buenos Aires, could be one of the families who migrated from the rural North. The hat worn by the boy and the scarf and clothes worn by the tall man in "Juanito Laguna's Family" (fig 2.5) symbolize *paisanos* or *gauchos*, the people from the countryside. Poverty is present and represented by the barefooted boys against the cardboard house. The darker, older boy with the hat on the right has a visible patch on his pants and the expression of a grown man, weighted down by the responsibility of the child on his back and the other one in the carriage. Could this boy be Juanito? The woman has no face, but she has a visibly lighter skin tone and a European looking dress, and the girl beside her seems to have blond hair. Here there are more references to the Southern European immigrant, perhaps a poor Italian working class.

The link between ethnicity and poverty is clearly articulated by Berni. He visualizes a type of ethnic representation that is not consistent with the standards of a country that imagines itself as "white."<sup>137</sup> These migrants from the interior who were mostly a mixture of indigenous people with conquering Spaniards, constitutes a large percentage of Argentina's population in contrary to what is usually sustained in the Argentine narrative which exaggerates the importance of European immigration.<sup>138</sup> The rural immigrants were referred to, in racist terms by the average Argentine, as *cabecitas negras* (black heads). This colonial, racial superstructure, embedded in the Argentine culture and way of thinking, reflects the emphasis on racialization of inequality as expressed by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*:

The singularity of the colonial context lies in the fact that economic reality, inequality, and enormous disparities in lifestyles never manage to mask the human reality. Looking at the immediacies of the colonial context, it is clear that what divides this world is first and foremost what species, what race one belongs to. In the colonies the economic infrastructure is also a superstructure.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Artinian 2016: 72

<sup>138</sup> *ibid*

<sup>139</sup> Fanon 1963: 19

Fanon who was born on the Caribbean island of Martinique in 1925 while it was still a French colony, was an important inspiration for the revolution in Algeria as well as for many of the revolutionary leaders in Latin America such as Ernesto Che Guevara and Fausto Reinaga. Fanon was, according to recent critics a “militant philosopher of third world revolution” who saw racism as structural discrimination built into capitalism.<sup>140</sup> His theories about race, imperialism and capitalism are very relevant for contemporary Latin America and the cultural embeddedness of racism. In Argentina, the middle class *porteños* (as the inhabitants of Buenos Aires are known), in general defines and links racial identity to national identity, where whiteness equals a form of cultural capital and a sign of belonging to an idealized European or first world community.<sup>141</sup> It is the way in which in a postcolonial, “Third world”, whiteness still lingers as an ideal and as “a passport to privilege”.<sup>142</sup>

Not only *porteños* but most all middleclass Argentines from larger cities, claim a European-ness for themselves and their cities, and thereby distancing themselves from Indigenous or people from the so-called Argentine “interior”. The Argentine whiteness emerges through the simplified and solidified “difference” of their various others, whom have been made invisible or integrated in the big narrative of Argentina as a white nation in Latin America. It was not until the 1980s that this powerful myth began to be deconstructed within Academia. George Reid Andrews has shown that Afro-Argentines did not disappear at the end of the nineteenth century because of yellow fever and wars, as the canonical story argues, but that they were made invisible by the dominant social representations of the nation. The same can be argued in relation to native peoples.<sup>143</sup> In this context, the strength of Berni’s work lays within making visible what has been gradually made more and more invisible in the public sphere in Argentina. By showing the ethnic diversity that do exist despite the myth of a homogenic white Nation, and that there is a link between ethnicity and poverty.

The importance of family ties is continuous in the first representations of Juanito in the new urban settlement, equally to Berni’s insistence on an ethnic melting pot. In the work, *La Navidad de Juanito Laguna* (fig 2.6), the eight family members gathered around the Christmas table all have different skin colors, including yellow and blue. Just barely illuminated by a candle or a gas lamp, the family shares a classical Christian European tradition symbolized by a Christmas tree and a sweet bread that is about to be cut by the father

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<sup>140</sup> Taurus 2016: 67

<sup>141</sup> Bourdieu 1984: 23

<sup>142</sup> Lopez 2005: 2

<sup>143</sup> Garguin 2009: 61-94



Figure 2.6 *La Navidad de Juanito Laguna* (Juanito's Christmas), 1960, oil on burlap, 311 x 210 cm, private collection.

figure. The third element on the table makes a clear reference to the invasion of North American consumer culture through the easily recognizable coca cola bottle made of glass. The bed and table in close proximity marks the intimacy of the family's living conditions, but however cramped the space, the painting radiates a warmth of belonging. Juanito, who is surrounded by his mother, father, grandmother, brothers and sisters, turns his attention towards the dog whom he is feeding under the table. Or rather, this is the character I find most likely to be Juanito in the work. Because, the only real reference to Juanito exist in the title of the work, with little indication of who Juanito is within the frame. Similar to other early works in the series of Juanito, Berni's focus at this point seem to be on the collectiveness of the family rather than Juanito as an individual.





Fig. 2.7 *Retrato de Juanito Laguna* (Portrait of Juanito Laguna), 1961, collage on wood, 147 x 109 cm, Private collection, Buenos Aires.

As the series of Juanito Laguna develops over the next almost twenty years, Juanito becomes more of an individual character with individual activities and with less importance given to his family context. The first portrait of Juanito Laguna and the only as far as I know to be titled such, is *Retrato de Juanito Laguna* (fig 2.7) from 1961. There are some ethnic similarities between what I believe to be Juanito in the Christmas scene (fig 2.6) and the way Juanito is represented in the portrait (fig 2.7). Berni's choice of medium, the collage, becomes an excellent expression of the ethnic melting pot and the racialization of poverty. With black hair, green eyes and multicolored skin, the bits and pieces of scrap metal, wood, iron and garbage that constitutes the boy from *bajo Flores* (the name of Juanito's neighborhood) take on a double significance through form and content. Not only is the ethnic complexity of Juanito Laguna's character reflected and recreated through the collage, but also the context where he resides is multiplied through the use of wooden boxes and grocery containers. The

neighborhoods of the so called “humble people” is a universe of small objects and pieces of garbage: a different space altogether from that of the middle-class city, but at the same time a world within that same metropolis.

The racialization of poverty as conveyed by Berni in these works of art, can be analyzed according to what Plumwood calls the *master model*, where dualism is identified as the logic of colonization.<sup>144</sup> On a national level within Argentine society this model has been incorporated and appropriated into the selfhood and culture of the leading elite, forming their identity as master. The master is defined by exclusion against ‘the other’, which in this case it is the rural Argentine becoming an urban *other*. The Juanito’s and their families are considered by the master as inferior, of a lower class, lazy, stupid or humble and definitely other, and it is this idea of difference that is used to maintain hierarchies. According to Rob Nixon, there exists a “color of disaster” that follows a neoliberal neglect which discriminates and makes poor and racial minorities disproportionately more vulnerable to catastrophes. The fact that certain communities are treated as more expendable than others, points backwards to what should be considered global crimes of environmental racism. Nixon argues that “international whiteness provides a shield for national whiteness, a protective dynamic that has profound consequences for the way slow violence has unfolded across the global stage in a neoliberal age.”<sup>145</sup> The unsustainable, from both an ecological, environmental as well as socio-economic perspective, increase of urban slums in Latin America has probably reached levels way beyond the imagination of Antonio Berni and what he pictured as the future for Juanito Laguna. The Argentine slums from the 1960s have been transformed into a space marked by increased poverty and recurring violence, where ways of survival are in constant metamorphosis ranging from drugs and prostitution to garbage collection and recycling.<sup>146</sup> Buenos Aires, like most contemporary Latin American metropolises, is a city based on both social and spatial segregation where slums and garbage dumps represent the outcome of failed modernity, fragmented and beyond the control of the nation State.<sup>147</sup>

### **2.3 *La Villa Miseria* as content and form**

The poor America, with its migratory native people, arrived from the bottom of the interior provinces and the continent, swarms today in the suburbs of the new capitals. With nothing of their own - except for their own work force - mocked by looting and exploitation, they

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<sup>144</sup> Plumwood 1993: 41

<sup>145</sup> Nixon 2011: 59

<sup>146</sup> Castro 2002: 35

<sup>147</sup> Ibid: 37

build their miserable shelters by transfiguring drawers, unusable cans and all other garbage thrown away by the consuming, bourgeois city.<sup>148</sup>



Figure 2.8 *Juanito lleva la comida a su padre peon metalúrgico* (Juanito brings food to his father a steelworker), 1960, collage on wood, 212 x 154 cm, Modern Art Museum of Buenos Aires.

In the collage *Juanito lleva la comida a su padre peon metalúrgico* (fig 2.8) from 1960, Juanito appears barely visible in front of a massive, industrial looking factory. Juanito is crossing a busy street with his father's lunchbox, whom we learn from the title of the work, is a steelworker, a working class "pawn". I interpret the fact that Juanito is barely a stick figure with no personal traits, as making the conspicuous dimension of the development project apparent. But even if the industrial building seems to have swallowed the whole city, Berni manages to illustrate the importance of family ties through the title of the work. As we have seen in his other earlier works, the family is central at the beginning of the series and can be interpreted as a counterbalance to the development of individual desire. Berni implies that the commodity fetishism of the upper and middle class was an alienating characteristic, gradually spreading through society threatening the communal spirit of the poor. There is a

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid: 74

strong sense of working-class solidarity in this work, as opposed to the supposed individualism that is about to consume the rest of society, including Ramona Montiel.

Another contrast to the small figure of Juanito, is the larger-than-life billboard on the factory wall. Illuminated by three big streetlamps, the temptation and promises of consumer society illustrated by a woman in bikini advertising a bottle of alcohol against a bright red background stands out in the otherwise dark brown collage. The advertisement is framed, an image within an image and visually more important than the dull background it is placed upon, which are the sheets of metal and rust collected by Berni from various urban fabrics and slums. Even the sun, above the factory roof and the smoky chimeneas, has an alien or metallic flare to it. Perhaps to be considered a warning of the future natural disasters to come. But even though the warning of consumer society is present in this work, it is still reflecting a society where people are working, and where the family values are strong. *Juanito lleva la comida a su padre peon metalúrgico* (Figure 2.8) is just the beginning of the era of highly contaminated consumer objects represented in Berni's work and is therefore lacking the garbage which will be piling up as the series of Juanito Laguna advances. Although we do not actually see the slum in *Juanito lleva la comida a su padre peon metalúrgico*, it contextualizes the growth of the industrial mega cities in the South, and with it the slums.

Although the neighborhoods of "misery villages" came into existence already after the crisis in the 30s, the phenomenon grew bigger during the promised years of development. While the Frondizi Government praised the progressive power of modernization by privileging forms of consumption by the new middle-class and especially those of the big cities, Berni demonstrated the human cost of unequal development leaving the poor buried under layers of industrial waste. This type of targeted consumption that had begun in Europe and in the United States after the second world war was now spreading through Argentina. With this possibility of "imagining" Argentina within a US consumer pattern, the aesthetics of the previous political period with strong nationalist images promoting the laborer began to erode.<sup>149</sup> The advertisements from this new modern era, reflects new ways of representing the image of an Argentine middle-class. Consumer goods began to increase, and, in the advertisements, you can see a happy white, middle-class very much like any white, European or North American family. In this respect, not much has changed in contemporary Argentine society where a white middle-class is still the dominant ethnic representation on advertising billboards in public spaces, reflecting the imagined self-image of the dominant classes.

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<sup>149</sup> Artinian 2016: 68



The appearance of the city began to change as metal and glass in shape of skyscrapers started to dominate the skyline as a reminder of the growing foreign capital in Argentine economy. What was left out of the city planning, according to Laura Podalsky, was any acknowledgment of the tremendous growth of *villas miserias* and the rural immigrants living in them.<sup>150</sup> In *Specular City: Transforming culture, consumption, and space in Buenos Aires, 1955-1973*, Podalsky gives an in depth account of how the city reinvented itself by erasing any visible trace of the human cost of unequal development. Berni made the *villas* visible components of the urban landscape and Juanito Laguna the counter image to the false, commercial construction of Buenos Aires as a European, white city. The rural immigrants had different cultural practices which collided with the type of consumer modernization that was being promoted and adapted by the upper and middle class. “The provincial immigrants were a reminder of the other spaces of Argentina”, argues Podalsky, and their presence in the city disturbed “the vision of Buenos Aires as a (white) cosmopolitan center.”<sup>151</sup>



Figure 2.9 *Inundación en el barrio de Juanito* (Flood in Juanito's neighborhood), 1961, collage on wood, 186 x 124 cm, private collection, Buenos Aires.

<sup>150</sup> Podalsky 2004: 17

<sup>151</sup> Ibid: 107

The cruel reality of this other space within the urban center, is vividly depicted by Berni in the works, “Fire in Juanito’s Neighborhood” and *Inundación en el barrio de Juanito* (fig 2.9) from 1961 which I will analyze here. The scenes in these two works are similar and reveals the hopeless infrastructure of the slum as the residents are trying to save their own lives and belongings from the fire and the flood. *Inundación en el barrio de Juanito* (fig 2.9) foregrounds a man rowing a boat with two children onboard, a girl and a boy whom I assume is Juanito. The man rowing the boat has a much lighter skin tone than the other characters in the image who are either mestizo or indigenous. Next to the boat is a woman holding a child as the tears run down her face, and a girl holding a clock or a radio on her head. The water which reaches the girl’s waist, does not come from a lake or a pond, it is water flooding Juanito’s neighborhood. Houses are stacked on top of each other in the background, crammed up to the top of the image, leaving little room for the black sky. The composition is tight and claustrophobic, amplifying the sensation of there being no escape from the situation. At the very upper, right corner of the image there is a sign, which ironically, due to the environmental disaster we are witnessing, announces: “LAND FOR SALE”.

This scene, depicted by Berni, displays the environmental hazard the inhabitants of the slums have to endure. It shows the connection between the dreadful physical conditions of the slums and the poor quality of life that can be achieved within them. There is no doubt who the residents of the slums are, because Berni makes a very critical connection between ethnicity and poverty in his works. The sheets of metal, the black water and muddy hues, paints a bleak future for the characters who confronts the viewer with a look of despair. The overall feeling is that this is a polluted and hostile site constructed by the waste of consumption. The infrastructures, or rather the lack of infrastructure in the Argentine *villa miseria* is an open invitation for environmental disasters to come. In his explanation of how slums begin with bad geology, Mike Davis adds another dimension to Berni’s critical vision:

*A villa miseria* outside Buenos Aires may have the world's worst feng shui: it is built over a former lake, a toxic dump, and a cemetery and in a flood zone. But then a hazardous, health-threatening location is the geographical definition of the typical squatters' settlement: where residents have door numbers written on pieces of furniture because the houses, along with the doors, [are] washed away by floods every year. <sup>152</sup>

According to Davis, everywhere in the global South the most powerful local interests, be it big developers, politicians or military juntas, have positioned themselves to take advantage of

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<sup>152</sup> Davis 2014: 128

peripheral land sales to poor migrants.<sup>153</sup> Throughout the so-called Third World then, between mud and sewage, slum-dwellers struggle for dignity as the commodification of housing in job-poor metropolis creates even greater inequality and greater environmental hazards. In addition to the natural hazards magnified by urban poverty, there are also artificial hazards created by poverty's interaction with lawless traffic, toxic industries and collapsing infrastructures. Thousands of slums all over the world, suffer from the “garbage dump syndrome”, which is a concentration of toxic industrial activities such as metal plating, dyeing, rendering, tanning, recycling, chemical manufacture and so on.<sup>154</sup> Activities and materials that we can see traces of in Berni's collages, uniting form with content.

One cold, cloudy night, while passing through the miserable city of Juanito a radical change in my vision of reality and its interpretation occurred...I had just discovered, in the unpaved streets and the waste ground, scattered, abandoned materials, which composed the authentic surroundings of Juanito Laguna – old wood, empty bottles, iron, cardboard boxes, metal sheets, etc., which were the elements used for the construction of shacks in misery city.<sup>155</sup>

Berni discovered that when he first attempted to portray the reality of Juanito on canvas, he was not able to transmit the hyperrealism he wanted to achieve through the use of oil and tempera. So, he went back to the slums and started gathering materials, which in Berni's own words were “the leftovers from consumer society, which I felt were the silent and apparently unimportant testimony of a terrible reality.”<sup>156</sup> The recycled material in Berni's collages served both a stylistic purpose, as well as proof of the urban worker's poor quality of life, despite the glittering promises of modernity and development. Through the form and content of his collages of Juanito and his depiction of *villas miserias*, Berni denounce the fact that the worker does not profit from the capitalist enterprise. Although Berni declined being a sociologist or politician, it seems as his ethnographic approach through committed field work in the slum, constitutes the complexity of the images that in the end have both artistic integrity and an environmental message.<sup>157</sup> Berni's representations and visualizations of *villas miserias* is one of the central axes in his criticism of developmentalism. By representing *villas miserias* and its inhabitants in his works, Berni gave humanity to the humiliated and offended by the social injustices created by

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid: 91

<sup>154</sup> Verma 2001: 16

<sup>155</sup> Nanni 1984: 55

<sup>156</sup> Documentary, “Antonio Berni-Juanito Laguna”, online [<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x9sibb>]

<sup>157</sup> Crossman 2013: 61

developmentalism.<sup>158</sup> Art historian Laura Malosetti Costa asserted that Berni “began working systematically with the problem, making life in the slums the subject of his production, the belt of extreme poverty which was expanding on the edges of the city and that nobody wanted to see.”<sup>159</sup>

The act of recycling Berni did when creating his collages, reflects a common trend in Latin America, where recycling for personal usage has become the only income-generating opportunity for many people who have lost their jobs and find themselves without a SafetyNet and outside the system. They are called *catadores* in Brazil, *buzos* in Costa Rica, *gallinazos* in Colombia and Peru, *pepenadores* in Mexico and *cartoneros* in Argentina. Their common activity is to make a living out of trash. The consequent practice of recycling, reuse of objects in an integral way has become an activity carried out by many impoverished subjects in *las villas*, who consider the waste of the middle and upper classes as precious commodities not only fulfilling their basic need for survival. According to Giesela Heffes, Berni’s use of waste and obsolete objects in order to create aesthetic artifacts that combine the practice of recycling with denunciation, has made him a precursor of this phenomenon of recycling, which has become a distinctive component of Latin American cultural reality. Recycling has become not only an environmental but a social issue, as it gave and continues to give rise to the emergence of multiple networks of shared efforts where poverty and creative imaginations intersect.<sup>160</sup> As mentioned in the introduction to chapter 1, Heffes places Berni at the forefront of environmental art because of the way which he combined recycling activities with places of social condemnation, claiming that his work “establishes a dialogue between two contemporaneous concerns by raising awareness about the continuous changes in consumption as well as the constantly increasing environmental damage.”<sup>161</sup> I argue that Berni visualized the slow violence of the poor through his commitment to Juanito by documenting the development of the slums as it unfolded and the living conditions became increasingly worse. The documentation of the *villa miseria* lays both within the stories Berni decided to tell about his character Juanito, and in the materials he used which gave the work its form. I guess one could refer to Berni’s recycled garbage as ‘objet trouvé’ which is the French term for found objects, a trend that Picasso was an originator of, and later used

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<sup>158</sup> Artinian 2016: 70

<sup>159</sup> Malosetti: 60

<sup>160</sup> Heffes 2017: 9

<sup>161</sup> Ibid

extensively by dada, surrealist and pop artists.<sup>162</sup> The use of found objects by artists has varied from the conceptual challenge of Duchamp's 'readymades' to appropriation art, such as Salvador Dali's *Lobster Telephone*.<sup>163</sup> The difference being whether the found object was presented as a piece of art in itself or incorporated into an artwork. However, I find that Berni's use of found objects is not restricted to the formal trends defined by the Western art world but speaks of a social reality that the objects then bear witness of.

#### 2.4 Juanito as a disposable but recycled "picaro"



Figure 2.10 *El mundo prometido a Juanito Laguna* (The World Promised to Juanito Laguna), 1962, collage on wood and cardboard, 300 x 200 cm, private collection.

I argue that in Berni's work, we can trace a development from Juanito as a rural migrant family member to Juanito as a street boy or a *picaro*, which is an antihero from the *novela picaresca*. Although Juanito is mostly represented with the innocence of a child, either playing with his spinning top, mounting a kite, learning to read or bathing in the lagoon, there

<sup>162</sup> "found-object" definition from Tate, [<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/f/found-object>]. Accessed on September 12, 2020.

<sup>163</sup> "appropriation art», definition from Tate, [<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/appropriation>]. Accessed on September 12, 2020.

are a couple of images of Juanito that clearly break with this portrayal, one of them being *El mundo prometido a Juanito Laguna* (fig 2.10). In this dystopic and large-scale assemblage measuring 300 x 200 cm, Juanito seems to have taken on a different ethnicity and could be placed within an entirely different time period. In *El mundo prometido a Juanito Laguna*, I find Juanito resembling a Victorian slumdweller with his white pinkish face and reddish-brown hair underneath a Newsboy Cap turned backwards. On his shoulder he carries a burlap bag, as does his blue friend on the left. Like a scene out of a Dickens novel, Juanito Laguna could be a Latin American version of *Oliver Twist* as he rummages through the garbage perhaps on his way to become a small-time criminal.

Although Berni never really refers to Juanito as a criminal or homeless in the sense of not having family, this is the reality for many children in the slums today just as it was in the Victorian Era. However, what makes it obvious that this is not an image from the Victorian London slums, are the mushroom looking clouds behind the wall where Juanito and his two female companions pose. This could of course be a reminder of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but considering that the work is from 1962, it can also be a reference to the Cuban Missile Crisis, the 13-day military and political standoff in October, 1962, where the world was on the brink of a new nuclear war.<sup>164</sup> I will return to the motif of the atomic bomb in *El mundo prometido a Juanito Laguna* (fig 2.10) in chapter 4, for a reading of the work as a critique of science and technology.

In *Slow Violence and Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon discusses the invention of the environmental picaresque, which basically is the story of the neoliberal globalization told from the vantage point of a social outcast.<sup>165</sup> The way in which Juanito is portrayed in *El mundo prometido a Juanito Laguna*, makes it interesting to draw some parallels to *novela picaresca*, the Spanish Golden Age narrative style which emerged between 1550 and 1559 as a counter genre and a reminder that most Spaniards remained poor despite the imperial wealth.<sup>166</sup> According to Nixon, the picaresque subversive counterpoints have since then posed questions about the class and gender politics of crime, contrasting the narrator's small crimes "with the weightier crimes that society's overlords commit and from

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<sup>164</sup> "Cuban missile crisis" by The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, [https://www.britannica.com/event/Cuban-missile-crisis]. Accessed on November 2, 2019.

<sup>165</sup> Nixon 2011: 46

<sup>166</sup> For a fuller account of the economic context of the picaresque in the Spanish Golden Age, see *The Picaresque: A Symposium on the Rogue's Tale*, ed. Carmen Benito-Vessels and Michael Zappala (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994); Giancarlo Maiorino, "Introduction: Renaissance Marginalities," in *The Picaresque: Tradition and Displacement*, ed. Giancarlo Maiorino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), xi–xxviii; and Giancarlo Maiorino, "Picaresque Econopoetics: At the Watershed of Living Standards," in *The Picaresque*, 1–39.



which they are structurally exonerated.”<sup>167</sup> The narrator of the picaresque is an “antihero” or a “picaro” who ties together the episodes. In Argentina the meaning of picaro is double and may be used as a reference to a street-smart person in a positive sense, or to con artist, most likely from the underworld who makes a living by deception and other actions. I interpret Juanito Laguna as a *picaro*, a protagonist, a pragmatic, unprincipled, resilient, solitary figure who just manages to survive in his chaotic landscape, but also as someone who can put that world very much on the defensive. The *picaro* is considered a universal figure who can serve different masters and play many roles, because essentially his personality consist of inconstant life roles or self-identities, characteristics that reflect the flux of an inconsistent world.<sup>168</sup> Just like Juanito Laguna symbolizes abject poverty, the picaro is stigmatized as aberrant and filthy, “embodying everything the socially remote privileged classes, with their ornate rhetoric and social etiquette, seek to contain, repress, and eject.”<sup>169</sup> But regardless the hard efforts of the ruling classes to conceal their socially disposed, the picaro keeps resurfacing as an uncomfortable reminder of social inequality and the consequences it might eventually have for all. According to Nixon:

The picaresque thus inserted itself into a historical moment when a chasm was opening between the exalted, gluttonous classes with their linguistic refinements and perfumed pretensions and the indigent masses for whom life was an hourly scramble for survival. As in our own age of ballooning CEO golden parachutes soaring above a planet of the slums, the picaro achieves a particular potency as a marginal literary figure, a seldom-heard voice, who belongs nonetheless to the statistical majority. His or her existence depends on quick-witted improvisation coupled to expedient parasitism. As such, the picaro survives, as a “tactician of the quotidian.”<sup>170</sup>

Juanito as a picaro resurface, I argue, in Berni’s narrative with the work *Juanito va a la ciudad* (fig 2.11) from 1963. In this work, Juanito is on his own, immersed in an ocean of garbage and industrial waste contrasted by the neatly aligned, skyscrapers in the background. According to Berni, Juanito is on his way to the city in search of work and a better life promised by the advertisements of consumer society.<sup>171</sup> Buenos Aires is a divided landscape between the realities of poverty and the temptation and promise of wealth. The garbage dump is the proof of mass consumption, considered the ugly reality of big cities usually placed in

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<sup>167</sup> Nixon 2011: 55

<sup>168</sup> Wicks 1974: 246

<sup>169</sup> Nixon 2011: 55

<sup>170</sup> Ibid: 56

<sup>171</sup> Pacheco 1999: 59

the background or out of sight in city images. Berni turns this around, foregrounding the collage with the discarded capitalist accumulation which paves Juanito's path to the city. The



Figure 2.11 *Juanito va a la ciudad* (Juanito goes to the city), 1963, collage on wood, 327 x 200 cm, The Museum of Fine Arts Houston.

sky above is dark and threatening and there are monster looking creatures that seems to be jumping out of the contaminated waters, in the lower, left side of the image. This is the first time Berni introduces the monsters that later will appear in Ramona's nightmares. Juanito does not seem to be distressed by his environment, on the contrary, he seems to be full of hope and trust in the promises of a better future painted by consumerism. However, Berni does not romanticize the life of Juanito, the rough texture of the metal pieces, the muddy hue of paint and piles of garbage might transmit a mood of hopelessness for the viewer, challenging "the developmentalist visions of the city as a cosmopolitan center".<sup>172</sup> By using the fragmented elements of waste taken from the world he wanted to reveal, Berni leaves a

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<sup>172</sup> Podalsky 2004: 101



testimony of the contradictions that shatters the discourse of promise. It is difficult to ignore the environmental and ecological undertones in this work watching Juanito all alone surrounded by an extremely hostile and polluted world. The monster looking creatures that crawl out of the garbage have huge beaks pointed at Juanito as he hurries by with his head held high. The slow transformation of Juanito's innocent childhood with a rural immigrant background to Juanito the *picaro*, a well-adapted slum dweller, has occurred over time and at a higher speed after Berni's death. In his comparison of the *picaro*, Nixon describes what could easily be a contemporary Argentine slum dweller:

Like the *picaro*, the environmentally embattled slum dwellers are hell-bent on immediate survival, improvising from day to day, from hour to hour. Their temporal element is "now o'clock," their lives subject to the fickle tyranny of the eternal today. Yet collectively, the city's environmentally afflicted are bound in complex ways to past and future through the metamorphoses wrought by toxicity, the pursuit of social justice, and their collective relationship to apocalyptic time.<sup>173</sup>

According to Davis, since the debt crisis in 2001, many formerly middleclass families have been forced out of their private apartments and now live in slum settlements or as squatters in abandoned buildings and factories in the central Federal District Buenos Aires.<sup>174</sup> As the slums have developed and increased, the violence and lack of safe family structures has created a surplus of street children, a margin within the margin.<sup>175</sup> Out of all the images in the series about Juanito, only one portrays him as actually working as a garbage collector.<sup>176</sup> With kaleidoscopic monsters on each side, *Juanito ciruja* (fig 2.12) recovers waste from the garbage dump with his bag, and then, at least what he would do since the crisis of 2001, selling them to earn a few pesos. In the contemporary neoliberal shantytowns, a much more adapted Juanito is transformed into not just one *picaro*, but thousands, reflecting, what Nixon calls "the global crimes of environmental racism that treat certain communities as more expendable than others."<sup>177</sup> In *Juanito ciruja* (fig 2.12) the viewer is looking at Juanito through an open window, of what seems to be at least a middle-class home suggesting that this is not Juanito's own neighborhood and that there is a mobility in society through the tracing of upper and middle-class trash. Interestingly there are no bars on the window, which

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<sup>173</sup> Nixon 2011: 56

<sup>174</sup> Davis 2004: 52

<sup>175</sup> Ibid

<sup>176</sup> Clarín newspaper, 17/02/15, [[https://www.clarin.com/rn/ideas/Carioneros-Juanitos-siglo-XXI\\_0\\_Hkd2uE5DXl.html](https://www.clarin.com/rn/ideas/Carioneros-Juanitos-siglo-XXI_0_Hkd2uE5DXl.html)]. Accessed on July 5, 2019.

<sup>177</sup> Nixon 2011: 42

signals that these were different times than today, when putting bars on your windows is considered the first, necessary step towards a minimum security for your home and your



Figure 2.12. *Juanito ciruja* (Juanito scavenger), 1978, collage on wood, 160 x 105 cm, private collection, B.A.

family. Today, even the most fragile slum houses have bars on their windows. In Argentina a synonym for *villa miseria* is *barrio humilde* or *barrio de gente humilde* meaning a humble neighborhood or a neighborhood of humble people. This way of referring to poor people as humble people and their living environments the same, has a double connotation. On one hand it makes reference to an archaic notion in the hierarchy of the Ups and Downs, where the poor cannot afford not being humble because they depend on the goodwill of the master. And on the other hand, it refers to the lack of material wealth in the neighborhoods of the have nots. Juanito Laguna belongs to a period where the notion of the poor as humble and peasant was still present, and there is in no sign of “moral corruption” or protest in Berni’s representation of him.

It is of course easier to evoke sympathy for a noble and innocent poor, than a resentful and aggressive criminal. But perhaps when Berni made his collages of Juanito, the hierarchies of Ups and Downs were more internalized and accepted than they are today. Why should the poor be humble, on the contrary, today everybody wants what everybody else has, the challenge is how to get it? Any *Villa Miseria* in Argentina today is considered a dangerous and violent place which you do not enter under any circumstances, unless you live there. The rich people and upper middle class might choose to live in gated communities while the rest of society protects themselves by putting up bars and fences, where quality depends on economy. The slums become a fully franchised solution to the problem of this century’s

surplus humanity and has been growing with more than 25 million per year, since the UN-HABITAT report in 2005.<sup>178</sup>

In the epilogue to *Planet of Slums*, Davis poses the question “if informal urbanism becomes a dead-end street, won’t the poor revolt?” This, he argues, is how and why the Pentagon has developed its own distinctive perspective on global urban poverty and how to combat it. The journal of the Army War College declared that “The future of warfare lies in the streets, sewers, high-rise buildings, and sprawl of houses that form the broken cities of the world.”<sup>179</sup> With studies ranging from tactical mechanics of urban warfare to “the psychology of the abandoned child”, the Pentagon has been preparing for entering the battlespace of the twenty-first century, the megaslums of the “failed Third World” cities. “This is the true clash of civilizations and the highest stage of Orientalism” Davis warns, ending his powerful account of the contemporary neoliberal slums on planet Earth.<sup>180</sup>

## 2.5 Chapter Summary

The racialization of poverty and the process of urbanization as depicted by Antonio Berni in the series of Juanito Laguna, has become part of the increasing problem connected to climate change. Rob Nixon describes slow violence as something that occurs gradually and out of sight, “a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space”.<sup>181</sup> It is this violence I believe we can see denounced in Berni’s art, through his dedication for several years to the same subject matter and the construction of a specific space, *las villas miserias* in urban, Argentina as the environment of Juanito Laguna. The recycling of trash in Berni’s collages in his creation of Juanito, is the most crucial evidence in his denouncement of global neo-liberalism leading to unsustainable ecology and unequal human living conditions.<sup>182</sup>

Nixon asks “how can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention, these emergencies whose repercussions have given rise to some of the most critical challenges of our time?”<sup>183</sup> By converting into image and narrative a disaster that was slow moving, I will argue that Berni has done just that with his character Juanito Laguna. Through Juanito we can

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<sup>178</sup> Davis 2004: 201

<sup>179</sup> Ibid: 203

<sup>180</sup> Ibid: 205

<sup>181</sup> Nixon 2011: 2

<sup>182</sup> Heffes 2017: 8

<sup>183</sup> Nixon 2011: 3

trace, as I have argued in this chapter, the mass movement from rural to urban spaces, with entailing class and racial implications due to prevailing colonial superstructures and the development of urban slums. Environmentalism of the poor is to make visible the unseen poverty and vulnerability of the so-called “disposable people” and ecosystems treated as disposable by turbo-capitalism. According to Mike Davis, cities have absorbed almost two-thirds of the global population since 1950. This means, that cities will account for most all future world population growth.<sup>184</sup> Berni combines industrialization’s social and environmental violence through his character Juanito, who as a picaro becomes a warning of how an embodied social and environmental past, present or future disaster might look like. As a picaro, Juanito is not only a victim of slow violence, but he embraces and grows out of it, assuming his role as disposable, showing us what it means to be reduced to living in subhuman, bestial conditions.

### **Chapter 3. The Narrative of Ramona Montiel:** Expansion of the Empire of consumption

In this Chapter I analyze the series of Ramona Montiel in relation to the construction of a Third World economy and the diffusion of consumer habits in Argentina and Latin America. Ramona occupies a different space than Juanito, both geographically and conceptually, however also within the big city. I will examine Ramona as both a symbol for the oppressed and the oppressors, a double discourse which makes her in many ways a more complex character than Juanito. She embodies the capitalist project and at the same time she is devoured by it. I have divided this chapter into three parts. First I take a closer look at some similarities and differences between the characters Juanito and Ramona in order to examine what might have compelled Berni to create a male/child character and a female/prostitute. Then I analyze how Ramona represents a critique of the consumer culture that developed in Buenos Aires in the 60s. Third, I do a reading of the series of Ramona as a symbol for “Third World” exploitation and prostitution. The construction of the Third World megacity is an important concept in Berni’s work and the background where the identity of Ramona Montiel develops, and her narrative unfolds. The French Marxist philosopher and sociologist, Henri Lefebvre, argued that capitalism has survived by producing a space that helps reproduce the dominant system of social relations. This space is the megacities in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Because, as industrializing cities in Europe surpassed their capacity to consume their

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<sup>184</sup> Davis 2004: 67

own products, capitalism found new markets through imperialist expansion. Thus, cities became organized as centers of consumption rather than as centers of production.<sup>185</sup>

### **3.1 A street boy and a prostitute: “different in form but similar in content”**

Before I begin analyzing the universe of Ramona Montiel, I will examine some of the similarities and differences between Ramona and Juanito that might explain why Berni chose these two, apparently opposite characters in his critique of capitalism and consumerism. In the previous chapter I traced Juanito’s background through earlier works of Berni which aligns with the history of internal migration and racism. But unlike Juanito, Ramona seems to be a product of the city. The signs of national racial and class discrimination that we can observe in the series of Juanito, has been replaced with, as I interpret it, gendered violence as a critique of the construction and oppression of the “Third World” citizen and nation. In an interview from 1976, Berni gives a very detailed description of how he believes his two characters convey similar messages through different forms:

Ramona Montiel, the other character of my narrative, motivate the use of very different materials than those belonging to the world of Juanito, although the game of mutating objects is the same. She is a symbol of another social reality charged with misery, no longer on the exclusively material plane, as in the case of Juanito, but also on the other, a spiritual plane, with her unbalanced neurosis, product of a social condition, caught in the cobweb of consumer society. [...] It is no longer the tin cans or the lagging woods as in the paintings of Juanito, but the props dresses, the false precious stones and the shine of gold-plated metals. Her adventures begin in factories and offices, [...] initiating her trade and discovery that in relationships with employers and company managers her body can be much more profitable. She becomes an actress and possesses her role in the perverse spectacle of the city. Two human realities: Juanito and Ramona, different in their form but similar in content, because both are victims of an ancient imbalance in the societies of men.<sup>186</sup>

Argentina’s history of migration and industrialization, discussed in the previous chapter as part of the series of Juanito Laguna, constructed a gap between the urban, national identity that developed in Buenos Aires and the indigenous, rural population from surrounding territory. The structural changes that took place in Argentina between the 50s and the 70s, started a process of economic modernization which advocated the benefits of the urban, capitalist Enterprise over the rural, so-called archaic values.<sup>187</sup> This was a mindset that turned the focus away from the rural areas in favor of the city center, making the urban core a

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<sup>185</sup> Podalsky 2004: 119

<sup>186</sup> Viñals 1976: 92

<sup>187</sup> Canclini 1995: 55

dominant space for cultural production where the construction of new urban subjectivities would begin.<sup>188</sup> Berni often stated that the streets gave him Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel, “they are urban characters” he would say. With this statement, he would transform the marginalized into a central problem. As expressed by art critic Héctor Olea, “Ramona and Juanito are a pair of marginal sores, whom Berni achieves to rescue from between the lags of society.”<sup>189</sup> Two antiheroes, a child from the indigence of the garbage dumps and a prostitute with access to and exploited by all social strata. Due to the “real life” social transformation of both characters created by Berni, art historian Marcelo Pacheco has suggested that Juanito and Ramona “turned out to be the swan song of an extinguished world, to ensure the festive and anesthetized delivery of Argentina to the expansion of post-capitalism and globalization.”<sup>190</sup>



Figure 3.1 *Ramona bebé* (Baby Ramona), 1962, collage on wood, 97,5 x 124,5 cm, permanent exhibition BAM (Beaux-Arts Mons, Belgium).

Before Ramona becomes a prostitute, she is once represented by Berni as a baby and as a good catholic girl. A first, quick glance at *Ramona bebé* (fig 3.1) gives the impression that this is a baby girl who is born with a silver spoon in her mouth and from a completely different social class than Juanito Laguna. However, at a closer look, beyond the soft pillows and the nice fabric that supports the figure with huge eyes confronting the viewer, the word

<sup>188</sup> Crossman 2011: 167

<sup>189</sup> Olea 2014: 46

<sup>190</sup> Ramírez y Pacheco 2014: 23



baby in the title calls for a disturbing contradiction. This work is the only image Berni creates of Ramona as a child, but due to the troubling, sexualization of the figure, it implies that Ramona has, perhaps more so than Juanito, been deprived of her childhood. She is offered on a silver plate and like any other consumer good she is for sale on the market. She is all alone in the image, but her big eyes and taunting gaze reflects the viewers presence and perhaps an uncomfortable realization of what he or she might be watching.

*Ramona bebé* is, in my opinion, an abusive image which suggests that Ramona did not have an innocent childhood. However, Berni has also depicted Ramona when she went through communion, when she got married, had a job as a seamstress (fig 1.3), worked in the factory as well as a portrait of her together with her middle-class parents. There is a development in the series, although not created in a chronological order by Berni, where Ramona has a “decent” life which she, at one point, abandons for a life in prostitution. But Berni never reveals in the work, the exact reason for her choice. She does not come from extreme poverty like Juanito Laguna, so the question whether Ramona falls victim of a systematic, abusive system or if she willingly uses the system for her personal gain, remains open. In Berni’s own words, Ramona is “lured” into prostitution by the temptations of consumer society. Ramona, a female prostitute, represents a much bigger threat to society than Juanito the street child. Because of this, art historian Marcelo Pacheco, argues that she has not gained the same symbolic value as Juanito although there are many more works pertaining to the series of Ramona:

Bourgeois hypocrisy, taboo sexuality, moral sanction and censorship of any manifestation related to sex, the provincial and prejudicial of Buenos Aires society, its fearful position against the authority of the Catholic Church and its notions about sin; all of them explain the greater visibility that Juanito's cycle has had in relation to that of Ramona Montiel.<sup>191</sup>

Within modern capitalism, class rule and disputes have been somewhat regulated, in the sense that the struggle between the owners of capital and the labor force has defined territories and negotiation that were visible although varied. Prostitution, on the other hand, has since the 19th century, been an inconsistent terrain of power. This is because desire is uncontrollable in its physical and imaginary claims and eroticism is often played out in situations where “roles are reversed and privileged, social emblems are dissolved or mobilized.”<sup>192</sup> Desire also played a big part in the formation of new, urban subjectivities in

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid: 28

<sup>192</sup> McKenna 1984: 4

Buenos Aires in the 60s, as argued by Laura Podalsky in *Specular City: Transforming culture, consumption, and space in Buenos Aires, 1955-1973*. Podalsky gives a thorough analysis of how the city of Buenos Aires developed into the different spaces which Juanito and Ramona occupy.<sup>193</sup> Due to their difference in gender and ethnic composition, Juanito and Ramona are restricted to different spaces within the city, both mentally and physically.

Just like there is only one work of Ramona as a child, there is also only one work of Juanito as an adult, and that is *Juanito y su familia mirando el televisor* (fig 3.2). The difference between Juanito and Ramona is that Juanito does not seem to have a choice when it comes to picking his own urban identity. He is born into a social class with very little opportunity to climb the ladder of prosperity, not even at the expense of his own conscience as Ramona did. According to Berni, Ramona was raised on television and therefore she wanted the luxury and pleasures promised by consumer society. The only “American Dream”

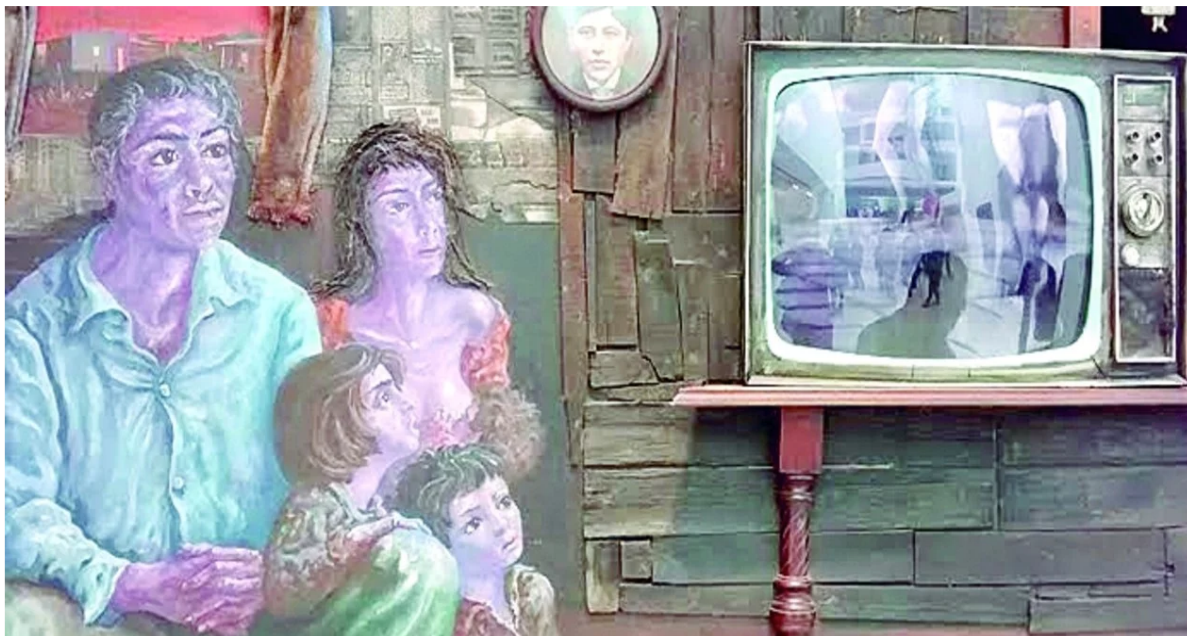


Figure 3.2 *Juanito y su familia mirando el televisor* (Juanito and his family watching TV), 1974, collage on wood, 160 x 250 cm, private collection, Buenos Aires.

possible for the boys from the *villas* is becoming successful football players such as Maradona or Tevez, the latter whose childhood in *Fuerte Apache*, one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in Buenos Aires, was recently made into a Netflix series. However, it is apparent that Juanito did not become a famous football player or was able to escape the slum as he together with his wife and three children is watching a desired but out of reach, mediated reality. The image on the television seems to reflect the environment of Ramona

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<sup>193</sup> Podalsky 2004: 106

Montiel, or rather the television version of Ramona, the socially accepted *vedette* culture featuring dancing, entertaining, seminude women, which is still a big part of Argentine theater and television culture. Or, as mentioned in chapter 1, as a *gato*, women who are considered high class prostitutes, protagonists of television programs and a constant media presence.

The fact that the television occupies a large part of the image, demonstrates the importance of the object that Juanito and his family collectively engage with. The family, which consists of Juanito, his wife and three children, all stare at the flickering image on the tv, expect for the baby who has his head turned against the screen as he is being nursed by his mother. The portrait on the wall, in the middle of the frame, stands out as it is a real photograph of a man confronting the viewer. This triangle of interaction between Juanito's family, the television and the photograph of probably a family member on the wall, seems to mark a distinct division between the past and the future of Juanito. It is an image that warns us of the triviality of mass media and its devastating power to distract from "reality", turning Juanito and his family into passive consumers and Ramona into a merchandize.

The two human realities of Juanito and Ramona, as explained by Berni, "different in their form but similar in content", complement each other through their opposing characteristics. They are both, as according to Berni, "victims of an ancient imbalance in the societies of men" and may be analyzed in relation to what Plumwood calls 'the logic of colonization', which is the construction of a devalued and sharply demarcated sphere of otherness through the western construction of dualisms. The many different forms of oppression such as gender, race and colonization are appropriated and incorporated into the structure and culture of the master.<sup>194</sup> The conflicting nature of Ramona Montiel's character, reflects this identity of the master, which is defined by multiple exclusions expressed through the conception of reason and dualized structure of otherness. There are many different stages in the western accumulation process that have contributed to the formation of a master identity as it is identified by ecofeminist philosophers. The period of colonial conquest for example gave rise to civilized/primitive dualism (similar to those of reason/nature, mind/body) and from the beginning of science arose the subject/object dualism. There are certain favorable qualities on this list of dualisms that are appropriated to a white, male, dominating Eurocentric ruling class, who puts itself at the center of the world by constructing marginal Others from a set of "negative qualities".<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Plumwood 1993: 41

<sup>195</sup> Ibid: 44

Both Ramona and Juanito occupy a space within the city as marginal Others. They move in different spheres of a society that has been divided into hierarchical dualisms, which is considered a central dynamic in western patriarchy. It is this western patriarchy that most ecofeminists identify as the main source of global ecological destruction, in addition to the individual consequence suffered by each and every marginal Other.<sup>196</sup> There is a common understanding within different branches of ecofeminism that, “equality through economic growth and so-called development for women and for working-class, racially and (neo)colonially oppressed peoples, is not ecologically possible.”<sup>197</sup> What Berni shares with ecofeminist critique and which is present in both his series of Juanito and Ramona, is the critique of economic growth as a dangerous illusion.<sup>198</sup>

### 3.2 Ramona the character: The construction of new urban consumers



Figure 3.3 *Ramona en la intimidad* (The Intimacy of Ramona), 1965, collage on wood, 150 x 200 cm, La Fabuloserie, Dicy, Yonne, Francia, private collection.

<sup>196</sup> Mellor 1997: 5

<sup>197</sup> Ibid: 6

<sup>198</sup> Ibid: 77

In *Ramona en la intimidad* (fig 3.3) we can observe a woman resting comfortably on her divan in the privacy of her room, but at the same time she seems fully aware of that she is being watched and her pose transmits a provocative and challenging attitude. Unlike in *Ramona bebé* (fig 3.1) we are now confronted with a grown woman who seem to have accepted her role in the spectacle. In the intimacy of Ramona's room, the intimacy is compromised because it has become a merchandise. This is the space where the exchange of money for intimate relations happens, and Ramona is dressed for the part. She is wearing fine, embroidered underwear and large jewelry. In her hand she holds a cigarette with an elongated mouthpiece, signaling sexiness and femininity. Smoking was at the time marketed as something feminine and sexy but also as a feminist act, where women who smoked were considered more independent and desirable at the same time. Outside Ramona's window, the night has embraced the cityscape, leaving only the sign of the Coca Cola bottle brightly illuminated as a symbol for the advancing consumerism.

Ramona emerges from Berni's imagination of a place where the failure of modernity is a reality which reflects the tensions between the aspirations created by the developmental model and its decadent reality. The values and promises of prosperity collide with the horrific landscape and misery portrayed in Berni's work. The first images of Ramona Montiel comes into shape in 1962 in Paris, at a time when there was, especially in France, a rising awareness of the connections between the Vietnam War, increasing consumerism in daily life and underdevelopment in the Third World.<sup>199</sup> The Latin American continent became an important space for the USA during the postwar era. The Cold War is an inevitable background for Ramona's activities, placing Argentina within the international, political scene which had an enormous impact on the distribution of wealth and power in the region.

*La gran tentación o La gran ilusión* (fig 3.4) is considered one of the first works in the series of Ramona which Berni made in Paris in 1962. In this large-scale collage, measuring 245 x 120 cm, part of the permanent collection at the Museum of Latin American Art in Buenos Aires, the head of a giant, white woman dominates the upper half of the image. In her hands she is holding up a car and what might be silver coins or jewelry. She is looking at a group of people in the lower, right corner of the image and some of them look back up at her. The group consists of four men, a tall, naked woman and a dog. The naked woman wearing only a pair of green stockings, appears to be Ramona Montiel. As the title suggests, this group

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<sup>199</sup> Giunta 2014: 67



of people, including Ramona, are being tempted by the consumer goods the white woman holds in her hands. Or as the continuation of the title suggests, they are being lured into



Figure 3.4 *La gran tentación o La gran ilusión* (The Great Temptation or The Great Illusion), 1962, collage, mixed materials, 245.5 × 120.3 cm, Permanent collection MALBA.

temptation by a great illusion. The hard reality of the group of people restricted to the lower half of the image is visualized by the fragmented ground they stand upon, containing pieces of garbage and discarded materials. The people themselves seem to be constructed in the same way. The upper half of the image pertains to the white woman and her dreamlike sphere of wealth and luxury, stained by a splash of red paint dripping down like blood over the blue car.

*La gran tentación* is, in my opinion, symbolic of the North American invasion of consumer goods, with the false promises of a better life but where everything you touch turn to trash. And from this very trash, the characters in the lower right corner of the collage, arise



as walking dead or zombies, spellbound by the mega blond temptress carrying “gifts”. In her hands with perfectly painted red fingernails she balances the shiny blue car and the silver coins to lure the crowd into temptation. The car culture had just taken off in Buenos Aires at the end of the 50s, through the deregulated import of foreign cars and targeted advertisement for “the modern man”. The car was superior to public transport according to the opinion makers at the time, allowing for the middle and upper classes to move around the city with greater freedom and without having to encounter the lower, working class.<sup>200</sup> Public transportation, and especially the railways, was associated with the working class poor and supporters of Peron, who would travel to downtown Buenos Aires for political rallies, together with the *cabecitas negras*, a racist term for the provincial immigrants, such as Juanito Laguna and his family.

The racist connotations in the urban, commercial setting is underlined in *La gran tentación* by the giant blond who offers a promise of prosperity along with all the projected desires in the society of the spectacle. The classical European or North American ideal of beauty represented in the advertising at the time, paid tribute to the Renaissance ideal of beauty with blond hair and pale ivory skin. A beauty that articulates a promise of wealth embodied by a feminine whiteness. Her soft, comforting gaze seems to hypnotize the followers in the lower right corner. “If you are beautiful and blond, you can have all this,” she conveys from behind a soothing smile, without opening her red lips. Underneath all the peaceful harmony that the gift-bearing fairy princess seems to offer, there is a hidden, persuasive authority that resembles the ideology of the Empire that has created her. The two most dedicated followers in the group, aspiring to become or consume the white beauty and whatever she has to offer, have their heads turned upwards and their gaze interlocked with the hypnotizing blond. They are lost, totally immersed in their own desire for the images they consume and have been consumed by. The female figures that make up the men’s faces resemble a grotesque skin disease rather than a sweet dream. The woman in the group, which I believe is Ramona Montiel, stands tall over the men, adorned with feathers, stockings and garters. Her body is inhabited by a crowd of people, faces of men and married couples from magazine clippings. She is filled with “the hypocrisy of the society that creates and then rejects her”, art historian Andrea Giunta argues, describing Ramona in this collage as “a body run ragged by the experience of reinventing itself every day on the street, designing its face like a mask that turns its bearer into merchandise.”<sup>201</sup> Coming apart, fragmented and old, *La*

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<sup>200</sup> Podalsky 2004: 18

<sup>201</sup> Giunta 2014: 69

*gran tentación* was one of the first presentations of Ramona that Berni created, starting perhaps with the end of her long career as a prostitute.

In the 1960s the advertising business began to play an enormous role in Argentine life as the amount spent on billboards and television advertising increased exponentially. According to Podalsky, many advertising executives felt that advertising was good for the nation and a progressive force that furthered economic development, a notion tying capitalist expansion to an overall improvement of society.<sup>202</sup> The comments of Ricardo Pueyrredón, the founder of Pueyrredón Propaganda, illustrates how the advertising agencies might have felt that they were contributing to lifting the nation out of its backwardness: “Poor countries don’t have advertising. This we can see. Forward-moving progressive countries have advertising.” According to Pueyrredón, advertising went hand in hand with modernization by introducing the new technology that would improve people’s lives.<sup>203</sup> As advertising became an increasingly bigger sponsor of television programs, the idea of advertising as a democratizing force also increased under the banner of providing “freedom” of choice and access both to information and goods for people of all classes. This notion of technology as a liberating, democratic force, echoes the more recent arguments behind the internet revolution as the spread of information and the control of it increases the power of pervasive corporate interest.



Figure 3.5 *Ramona espera* (Ramona waiting), 1962, collage on wood, 300 x 200 cm, private collection

<sup>202</sup> Podalsky 2004: 217

<sup>203</sup> Ibid

The other major painting-collage Berni created of Ramona in Paris in 1962, was *Ramona espera* (fig 3.5), considered to be the very first collage in the Ramona series. The collage supports four female characters and what appears to be a small, robot looking dog in the left-hand corner symbolizing the mechanization of industrial, urban life. The woman at the right stands protected behind walls underneath a huge Pepsi-Cola sign, with her arms in a self-defensive posture staring judgmentally at the three prostitutes on the street. However, they are all selling something which connects them in the universe of consumerism but where the merchandize they offer is distributed different values. There were huge structural changes in Buenos Aires in the late 1950s and 1960s which fostered new types of consumerism, like shopping arcades and kiosks that encouraged the spontaneous purchase in a more rapidly paced environment.<sup>204</sup> The Pepsi logo with its red, white and blue banner represents the desire for immediate gratification in a similar way as the laze, glitter and high heels worn by the prostitutes as they pace back and forth outside the factory wall. It is not clear which of the characters in the image is Ramona, but I will guess from the descriptions of her by Berni, that she is the woman with the big eyes on the far left. She is not quite as old here as in *La gran tentación o gran ilusión* but still very much a street prostitute, far from the luxury brothels and the men in high places whom she will meet, later in the series. The two first works made by Berni in Paris in 1962, *La gran tentacion* (fig 3.4) and *Ramona espera* (fig 3.5), seems to be the only images where Ramona actually shares the same urban space as Juanito, somewhere in the slum.

The factory with its smog puking chimeneas represents the sign of industrial development, progress and slums. Similar to other consumer goods at the time, Pepsi had, according to Giunta, become a symbol of dependency as anti-imperialist discourses grew in both Latin America and Europe. A seductive force that symbolized the corrupting influence of commodity fetishism. In contemporary Buenos Aires, urban advertising was a great influential force with new billboards teasing the urban subject with numerous ways to spend their money.<sup>205</sup> The all-over, omnipresent and unavoidable advertisement had, according to Podalsky, an important effect on the formulation of the subject. In her sharp and critical reflection of the massive changes Buenos Aires underwent for a new, modern definition of itself, Podalsky states that: “Behind advertising’s explicit goal of soliciting or producing desire was an implicit equation of self-realization and consumption. Not simply a response to

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<sup>204</sup> Podalsky 2004: 168

<sup>205</sup> Giunta 2014: 71

a perceived need or desire, buying constituted being.”<sup>206</sup> I believe that this commercial force described by Podalsky, influenced Berni in making visible, through the ambiguity of Ramona, the conflicting and corrupting choices this presented for the individuals living in the Buenos Aires at the time. Berni describes Ramona as a mixture of the local dance-hall characters referred to in Argentina as “Cumparsita-Milonguita” and Marilyn Monroe.<sup>207</sup> She is attracted to the nightlife, the tango and all the desires produced by consumer society which ultimately becomes her damnation. Berni depicts Ramona’s transformation into prostitution as follows:

Her adventures begin in factories and offices, her manual labor loses importance; the only things about her that stand out are her big eyes, her shapely legs, and her calves in the form of champagne bottles. Soon after she has begun in her trade she realizes that her body can be much more profitable in relations with bosses and executives.<sup>208</sup>

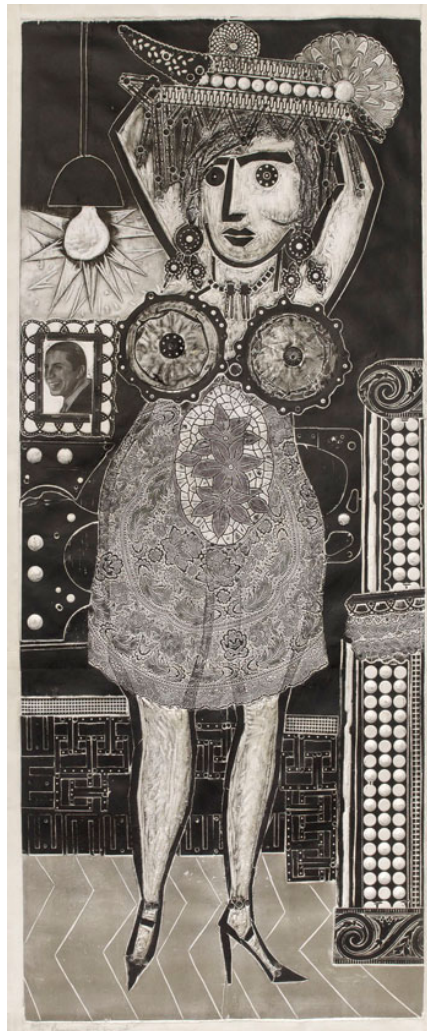


Figure 3.6 *Ramona vive su vida* (Ramona lives her life), 1963, Xylo-collage-relief, 138 x 55 cm, MALBA and The Museum of Fine Arts Houston.

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid: 169

<sup>207</sup> Garcia 2005: 249

<sup>208</sup> Viñals 1976: 92-96

In *Ramona vive su vida* (fig 3.6) we see a strong, independent woman, with Carlos Gardel framed on her wall she is the Milonguita/Marilyn, as described by Berni, a combination of tango and pop. The luxury that surrounds her, attained by her beauty, consolidates both her empowerment and her tragic fate. There are consequences for *living her life*. Berni, in this sense, makes it clear that Ramona had a choice and that she made the wrong choice. There is a moral judgement at play because at one point her choice of life comes back to haunt her in her dreams in the form of monsters. Giving in to the desire for immediate gratification leads Ramona to a fall from grace and is eventually ruined by exploitation. Is Ramona an innocent victim of cultural hegemony or an egotistical perpetrator following her own desire for self-fulfillment? Is she a representation of the new subjectivities, constructed? in the spectacular city where capitalism have turned urban subjects into consuming automatons?

I believe these are questions that the character Ramona Montiel raises. Questions that are highly relevant today as our choices as individual consumers seem to have a broad impact on both the worlds ecology and the creation of global poverty. I think it can be argued that Ramona is both an exploited woman and a victim as well as an independent working woman, who has made some choices within her restrictions as a woman in a third world urban setting. According to art historian, Andrea Giunta, “she is someone who ensures a margin in which to live her life.”<sup>209</sup> Giunta sees Ramona as a strong and violent woman, never as a sad and defenseless young girl and argues that: “Though exploited and marginalized, she is capable of evidencing the workings of power that make her situation possible, because prostitutes like Ramona, in their years of splendor, were both active subjects and a merchandise.” However, in light of an ecofeminist critique, I am more inclined to view Ramona as a victim of the market forces and consumerism encouraged through the growth of publicity.

### **3.3 Ramona the series: A symbol for Third World Exploitation**

*El striptease de Ramona* (fig 3.7) is a diptych Xylograph collage, where Ramona is performing her dance in the print on the left with two men watching in the print on the right. Ramona’s leg is lifted high up in the air and the men are positioned in a low diagonal, looking more or less right up her skirt. However, due to the fact that characters are on different prints, Ramona seems to be at a safe distance and protected from any indecent invasion by what

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<sup>209</sup> Giunta 2014: 16



Ramona is lured into what Mies calls the Northern “collective schizophrenia”, a belief that a high material living standard is equivalent to a good, high quality life, upholding and legitimizing the constant growth and accumulation model of modern industrial society.<sup>210</sup> But as it turns out, this is a paradox because it is based on the assumption that there are no limits to our planet’s resources, which we now know is not the case. In fact, we live in a very limited world where the idea of limitless can only be upheld by colonial divisions such as: urban vs rural, center vs peripheries, modern industrial societies of the North vs ‘backward’, ‘traditional’ and ‘underdeveloped’ societies of the South. These hierarchical relationships are

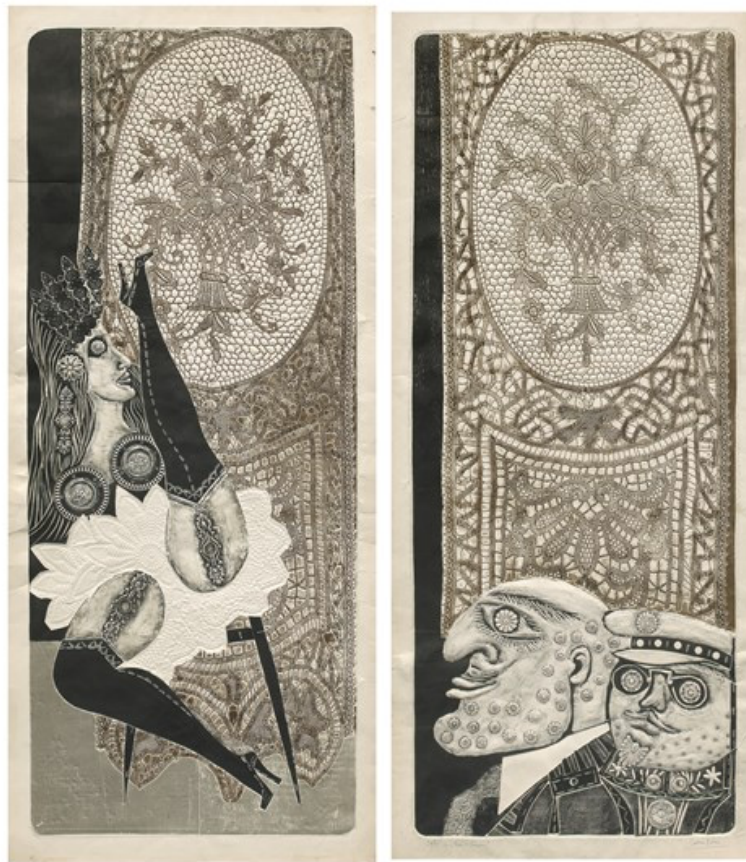


Figure 3.7 *El striptease de Ramona* (Ramona’s Striptease), 1963, Xylo-collage, 2 times 138 x 55 cm, MALBA and The Museum of Fine Arts Houston.

characterized by exploitation, domination and oppression.<sup>211</sup> In my reading of the series of Ramona Montiel, through the additional characters such as the monster sculpture *La hipocresía* (fig 3.8) and Ramona’s “friend”, *El coronel golpista nr. 3* (fig 3.9), Berni makes a reference to the hierarchical relationships between the North and the South, women and men, the colonizer and the colonized. Ramona Montiel reveals a narrative complexity due to the

<sup>210</sup> Mies 2014: 58

<sup>211</sup> Ibid



inherent discrepancy of her character who suffers from nightmares in shape of monsters that consume her because of her constant thrive for luxury and power given to her by “her friends”, the men in high places. The resemblance between *El coronel golpista nr. 3* and the sculpture *La hipocresía* from the series “The monsters from Hell challenge Ramona Montiel”, with their gaping mouths, grotesque and horrifying gestures, highlights the eternal moral battle of human nature as good or evil. In Berni’s own words: "In the forlorn loneliness of the room, Ramona's guilty conscience makes hallucinatory and dark monsters, and at dawn her dreams are filled with nightmares." <sup>212</sup>

In the sculpture *La hipocresía* (fig 3.8) Ramona is caught in the claws of a giant, metal bird-looking creature. Her face is turned upwards, and the claw is wrapped around her neck. Her arms are twisted in awkward positions and her pink body is decapitated by the waste. The monster holds its head triumphantly high over its prey. Ramona is caught by her own nightmare. The monsters produced by Ramona’s guilty conscience, resemble the real monsters, “her friends”, the powerful men who conduct wars and create destruction. Berni created more than 13 portraits of Ramona’s protectors or friends, ranging from several generals to a priest, an ambassador, a count and a sailor. Even if the portraits don’t include Ramona herself, they are linked to her through the titles of the works and are in this sense given a lot of attention and responsibility. In line with ecofeminist criticism they can be called “the fathers of destruction.”<sup>213</sup>

These men in higher places are symbols of Western patriarchy and agents of gender oppression and ecological destruction through racism, imperialism and capitalism, which I will return to in chapter 4. *El coronel golpista nr. 3* (fig 3.9) is a colorful, animated and almost childlike representation of a seriously angry man in uniform. His visible teeth and tongue cry out a command without a blink from his green reptile looking eye. The title suggests a link between a military general from one of the many violent dictatorships in Argentina the last century, and Ramona Montiel. The medal on the general’s chest resembles an iron cross with a coca cola bottle cap in the middle, makes it hard not to think that the artist intended to communicate a connection between fascism and capitalism. The seductive force of the Coke symbol, reveals the corrupt influence of a commodity fetishism “clearly connected to an indictment of the military and its veneration of the foreign.”<sup>214</sup> Several

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<sup>212</sup> *Sitio de la Fundación Antonio Berni Madrid*, 2015 online [<http://enargentina.no-ip.org/sitext/berni/catalogo-razonado/pagina-segunda.html>]. Accessed on April 23, 2020.

<sup>213</sup> Mies & Shiva 2014: xxiii

<sup>214</sup> Podalsky 2004: 172



Figure 3.8 *La hipocresía*, de la serie *Los monstruos del infierno se disputan a Ramona Montiel* (The Hypocrisy from the series The Monsters from Hell confront Ramona Montiel), 1964, sculpture, 199 x 116 x 231 cm, private collection.



Figure 4.8 *El coronel golpista nr. 3* (The Coup General nr. 3), 1964, collage on wood, 52,7 x 43,8 cm, private collection, Belgium.

ecofeminist critiques of the Western development project, stress that capitalism, colonialism, militarism, and fundamentalism as all male-dominated structures that oppresses women, nature and “others.”<sup>215</sup>

I believe that the moral judgement which can be perceived in the artwork is not directed at Ramona the prostitute, but rather denounces the politicians and generals of the “underdeveloped” world. The patriarchy who have led their countries into oppression and poverty by following their own temptation and desire for wealth and power. Whether they were seduced by their own desires for personal gain or because of an internalized devaluation of their own culture due to reinforced propaganda, change of laws and economic dependency to the colonizers, it is my opinion that Berni holds the ruling elite responsible for their participation in the structural violence.<sup>216</sup> Berni’s series of Ramona Montiel, contains all the inherent contradictions of the catching-up-development myth, which she falls victim to. By being lured by the attractive life that consumer society can provide her, filled with pretty things, she is, in the end, exploited by the system that she supposedly willingly gets seduced by. I say supposedly willingly, because the way in which the master model or colonial relationships works, is that “the colonized must accept the lifestyle of ‘those on top’ as the only model of the good life” and devalue their own life, culture, gender, work, class and/or ethnicity.<sup>217</sup> I therefore believe that the character Ramona can be read as both an individual victim of cultural imperialism and targeted advertising, and that the series as a whole can be read as a symbol for third world exploitation, corruption and greed. With all the different elements and characters in the series, it is apparent that Berni wanted to condemn prostitution and not the prostitute. What Berni makes visible is the powerful networks that actually makes this kind of prostitution possible. The series of Ramona symbolizes a Latin America who puts on her high heels to join the North American party, flashing her valuable assets and selling them off cheap to rich, powerful men and nations. However, ultimately, she is also a victim within the larger, global system and its machinery.

Similar to this reading of the series of Ramona as a symbol for “Third World” prostitution, are the arguments made in the four hour long Argentine documentary, *La Hora*

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<sup>215</sup> Mellor 1997: 32

<sup>216</sup> “Structural violence” is a term commonly ascribed to Johan Galtung, which he introduced in the article “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research”. It refers to a form of violence wherein some social structure or social institution may harm people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs. Institutionalized adultism, ageism, classism, elitism, ethnocentrism, nationalism, speciesism, racism, and sexism are some examples of structural violence as proposed by Galtung. (Galtung, Johan. “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research” Journal of Peace Research, Vol. 6, No. 3 pp. 167–191, 1969)

<sup>217</sup> Mies 2014: 57

*de los Hornos*, (The Hour of the Furnaces) made between 1966 and 1968. The film was called an “Argentine Epic” by the New York Times in 1971, and is an important part of the ‘Third Cinema’ movement, which emerged in Latin America around the same time as the film was released.<sup>218</sup> The term ‘Third Cinema’ was coined by the directors of *La Hora de los Hornos*, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, in a manifesto which diminish neocolonialism, the capitalist system, and the Hollywood model of cinema as mere entertainment for consumption.<sup>219</sup> According to Podalsky, in addition to the film’s engagement with decolonization efforts at the time, *La hora de los Hornos*, is also very much a response to a specific moment in the local, urban context of Buenos Aires:

In a key sequence from the film, the camera tilts down a neon sign in front of the Teatro Normandie on Lavalle, before tracking along across this downtown street to reveal an array of theaters featuring imported U.S. films. Traveling shots show well-dressed porteños strolling around the microcenter overshadowed by movie billboards and spy young adults in an open-air record store bobbing to the beat of imported rhythms.<sup>220</sup>

What is evident in this scene, argues Podalsky, is that the filmmakers were claiming the city as the main battleground for neo-colonialism’s new “ideological invasion” through the power of mass media.<sup>221</sup> The film, not only denounces neo-colonial powers such as the United States but similar to my readings of Berni’s series of Ramona, is also an attack on the Buenos Aires middle class and elites, who the directors accused of actively participating in the neo-colonial project.

Solanas and Getino refers to Buenos Aires as an epicenter of neo-colonial politics where “little was to be gained, and much to be lost, by dressing up Argentina to look like a First World metropolis.”<sup>222</sup> In the film, the capital Buenos Aires is implicitly feminized, represented as an Argentine *Malinche*<sup>223</sup>, a historical figure with strongly conflicting meanings ranging from the embodiment of treachery to the quintessential victim. In the film’s rhetoric, Buenos Aires is “the city with its back to the nation, facing the great river, promoting cultural prostitution through the desire to be looked at and coveted by the dominant foreigner.”<sup>224</sup> Solanas and Getino were inspired by another important cultural production from

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<sup>218</sup> Canby 1971: review in New York Times

<sup>219</sup> Solanas and Getino 1969: 40-76

<sup>220</sup> Podalsky 2004: 208

<sup>221</sup> Podalsky 2004: 208

<sup>222</sup> Podalsky 2004: 211

<sup>223</sup> “La Malinche” was a Nahuatl woman from the Mexican Gulf Coast, who played a key role in the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire, acting as an interpreter, advisor, and intermediary for the Spanish conquistador, Hernán Cortés.

<sup>224</sup> Podalsky 2004: 211

1940, Martínez Estrada's *La cabeza de Goliath*, (Goliath's Head) which called into question this type of "cultural prostitution done by despicable men with an underlying desire for money."<sup>225</sup> Both the novel and the film poses a critique to the idea of the city as a modern "civilization" and "progress" project, as the city's bright lights blinded the Argentine citizens to the harsh realities of the nation's underdevelopment. This privileging of foreign cultural products and norms by these so-called despicable men, was according to Solanas and Getino, a big betrayal of the people by the nation. I find strong parallels between *The Hour of the Furnaces* and the way in which Ramona embodies the modernist project and all the contradictions of a political and cultural "Third World" prostitution or rather, exploitation.

### 3.4 Chapter Summary

The same way in which Berni visualized how slow violence is inflicted upon the poor through his dedicated representation of the urban slums in the series of Juanito, I believe that the series of Ramona denounce consumerism as slow violence affecting the poor nations in the global South. Through his lifelong, artistic critique of neoliberalism and capitalism, Berni suggests that the degradation of the environment and creation of poverty are both consequences of the development paradigm gone wrong. His view of the global economy denounced development as a continuation of the colonization process where the Western patriarchy's economic values are assumed universal and forcefully applied to newly independent "Third World" countries. The complexities of the character and the series of Ramona also illustrates, in my opinion, what according to the American feminist philosopher, Marilyn Frye, is efficient subordination based on a structure "that not only not appear to be a cultural artifact kept in place by human decision or custom, but that it appear *natural* – that it appear to be a quite direct consequence of the facts about the beast which are beyond the scope of human manipulation or revision."<sup>226</sup> Cultural penetration is considered closely linked to political-military domination and economic exploitation, the sociologist, Latin American specialist and self-appointed anti-imperialist James Petras argues and contends that "U.S. military interventions in support of the genocidal regimes in Central and South America which protect its economic interests, were and are still accompanied by intense cultural penetration."<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> Estrada 1981:127

<sup>226</sup> Plumwood 1994: 41

<sup>227</sup> Ibid

According to Petras, in his article “Cultural Imperialism in the Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century”, there is a direct relation between the increase in the number of television sets in Latin America, the decline of income and the decrease in mass struggle:

In Latin America between 1980, and 1990, the number of television sets per inhabitant increased 40 percent, while the real average income declined 40 percent, and a host of neo-liberal political candidates heavily dependent on television images won the presidency. The increasing penetration of the mass media among the poor, the growing investments and profits by U.S. corporations in the sale of cultural commodities and the saturation of mass audiences with messages that provide the poor with vicarious experiences of individual consumption and adventure defines the current challenge of cultural colonialism.<sup>228</sup>

As discussed in this chapter, the mass media was, according to Solanas and Getino, the ultimate engine of this type of alienation with its “civilized information” making people more colonized.<sup>229</sup> The neoliberal restructuring of Third World urban economies has provoked an increase of homelessness and poverty, rising crime in big cities and a growing addiction to drugs as well as shopping.<sup>230</sup> Berni demonstrates how advertising encourages the slum residents to keep dreaming in *La gran tentacion* while they drown in industrial waste and garbage from consumer society in the urban core. The environmental challenges that we are facing today have been under development for some time and the characters Juanito and Ramona are therefore, in my opinion, time witnesses of the structural violence inflicted upon poor individuals and poor nations. Slow and gradual violence is hard to see and has become accepted and normalized as part of an Anthropocene visuality, which I will further discuss in the next chapter.

#### **Chapter 4. Contesting of Anthropocene visuality in Berni’s Art**

In this Chapter I examine how Berni’s series of Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel serve as testimony to the period referred to as “The Great acceleration” of the Anthropocene, due to the process of development and the spread of consumerism discussed in the previous chapters. Geologist still argue whether we, the humans, should name an entire epoch of geological time after ourselves, and if we do, when did it start? A panel of scientists appointed to decide if the Anthropocene is a new geological epoch, will submit a formal proposal by

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid

<sup>229</sup> Solanas and Getino: *La hora de los hornos* DVD

<sup>230</sup> Mies 2014: 61



2021 to the International Commission on Stratigraphy.<sup>231</sup> If the Anthropocene is accepted as a new epoch, it will most likely be dated from the mid-twentieth century. A time when human population raised rapidly and accelerated the pace of industrial production. A time when scientific and technological development put man on the moon and set off the first atomic bomb, littering the planet with radioactive debris now embedded in sediments and glacial ice as part of the geologic record. This is also the time when Berni created his series of Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel. Therefore, regardless of the outcome of this proposal, Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel bear witness to this exact time of accelerated and destructive change.

After having analyzed how Berni's work reflects the development project and its effect on Argentine society in chapter 2, how consumerism and north American imperialism was spread through strategies that were implemented and adapted by the Latin American nations in chapter 3, I now look at how Berni denounces Western Science and the development of technology through his characters who observe it from a distance as they suffer the consequences. I argue that Berni contributes to a *countervisuality* of Anthropocene aesthetics, as defined by Mirzoeff, by depicting a different narrative than the successful story of the development of science and technology. Through his characters, Juanito and Ramona, and the narrative series they are part of, Berni offers a perspective that challenges the idea of science and technology as progress for all humanity. I have divided the chapter into three parts. First I examine Berni's critique of the development of the nuclear arms race and the space race through his character Juanito Laguna. Then I analyze Berni's portrayal of Ramona as a cyborg, as a possible critique of the dehumanizing effects of technology and cybernetics. Finally, I analyze Berni's last work before he died, *Apocalipsis*, which bears a strong reference to the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse from the Book of Revelation in the New Testament. Relevant to the analysis of *Apocalipsis* is the current outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, consuming the world's attention on all levels. The intrinsic relation between people's health, their abilities to consume and the World Market, in addition to the economic differences between nations and their capacities or willingness to protect their citizens from the pandemic, has brought to surface a debate about the value of human life. Measurements that has never even been considered during years of climate change awareness and debates, demonstrates how crucial it is to see the concrete consequences of disasters in order to react and act. The impact globally of climate change is much more abstract and difficult to imagine

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<sup>231</sup> Subramanian, Meera, online journal, *nature*, "Anthropocene now: influential panel votes to recognize Earth's new epoch", [<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-01641-5>]. Published, 21 May 2019.

than the thousands of people dying from the spread of the corona virus. The same way in which poverty has become difficult to imagine and change because it has been naturalized or made invisible by the creation of what has become known as “disposable humanity.”<sup>232</sup>

#### 4.1 Juanito Laguna and the conquest of space



Figure 4.1 *Pesadilla de los injustos o La conspiración del mundo de Juanito Laguna trastorna el sueño de los injustos* (Nightmare of the Unjust or the Conspiracy of the World of Juanito Laguna Disturbs the Dream of the Unjust), 1961, 300 x 405 cm, oil and acrylic on canvas, Collection Museo Nacional de Bellas Arte

*Pesadilla de los injustos o La conspiración del mundo de Juanito Laguna trastorna el sueño de los injustos* (fig 4.1) is a 4-meter-long and 3-meter-tall painting hanging at the Fine Arts Museum in Buenos Aires. As the image itself and the title suggests, this is a scene from a real nightmare or from the world of conspiracies which Juanito inhabits. There are different creatures in the painting. Some look like monsters, others look like ghosts, but except for the green, animal gargoyle looking creature in the middle, most of them have a human resemblance. The image is divided in half, between an infernal sky in the upper half with vaguely depicted individuals hanging upside down, and the more concrete looking monsters on the ground in the lower half. At the center is a robot looking figure on wheels holding out a

<sup>232</sup> Aguon 2008: 23

scale in its hand. The rest of the figures watches anxiously as the machine in charge of distributing equality makes its judgement. The scale can be interpreted as the symbol for either justice or judgement. In Christian art, the scale is often connected with the weighing of souls (psychostasis), which decides people's fate in death or on Judgement Day.<sup>233</sup> Often in artistic representations it is the Archangel Michael who measures people's good and bad deeds, while demons try to upset the balance and lure people into damnation. In Berni's psychostasis, there seem to be very little difference between the hell above and hell on the ground. According Berni and the title of the work, the set of monstrous figures in his painting upsets the dreams of those who shape the unjust world of Juanito Laguna.<sup>234</sup> This nightmare is produced by the self-awareness and bad conscience of the people responsible for the corrupted world Juanito has to live in. The fact that Berni has replaced the Archangel Michael with an inhuman, robot looking character as the judge of good and evil paints, in my opinion, a rather apocalyptic vision of the technological development at the time.

The red and yellow infernal sky inhabited by burning, lost souls in the upper third of *Pesadilla de los injustos* (fig 4.1) bears resemblance with the atomic clouds in *El mundo prometido a Juanito Laguna* (fig 2.10) Here Berni makes a strong argument about how the idea of progress and technology is inconsistent with Juanito's reality. The empty look on the children's faces, as they stand with their backs to the explosion, is a haunting gaze full of resignation towards the situation they are in, underlining the inhumane effects of the so-called promising technology. On one hand, the atomic clouds seem to exist in a reality that doesn't pertain to the characters, because they are in the upper half of a divided image. But on the other hand, the colorful mushrooms are right above Juanito who is in the lower half of the image, where the radioactive debris will fall and where the destructive effect will be felt the most. In *Pesadilla de los injustos* (fig 4.1) the threatening clouds of burning, lost souls in the upper half of the image reflects the nightmare looking repercussions of development and technology in the lower half, which shows us that there is hell on Earth. I believe that both these works by Berni denounce the destructive effect technological development and science has on his characters, as well as a devastating effect on nature and environment. The World promised to Juanito Laguna is a hostile place for a child to grow up in and the people in charge of creating this unjust world know it. The Western imperial project has created an Anthropocene visuality which has normalized and given authority to scientific and

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<sup>233</sup> "Psychostasia." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, [https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/psychostasia]. Accessed 14 Sep. 2019.

<sup>234</sup> Berni 1999: 11

technological development as well as the global Market. An Anthropocene visuality “allows us to move on, to see nothing and keep circulating commodities, despite the destruction of the biosphere.”<sup>235</sup> For instance, beautiful red sunsets have been painted for several hundred years and is according to Mirzoeff part of the aesthetics of the Anthropocene which emerged as an unintended supplement to imperial aesthetics, as it came to seem natural, then beautiful “and thereby anaesthetized the perception of modern industrial pollution.”<sup>236</sup> As an example of this, Mirzoeff refers to the famous painting by Claude Monet, *Impression: Sun Rising* from 1873, which he claims reveals and aestheticizes anthropogenic environmental destruction with its bright red sunset behind the industrial smog.<sup>237</sup> By showing us the negative effect on human beings and our environment, I interpret Berni’s series as a *countervisuality* to an Anthropocene visuality, which Mirzoeff describes as a form of resistance to capitalism, a drive for sustainability or a “politics of eating.”<sup>238</sup> Which can be explained as a basic right for survival, both physically and psychologically, for the majority of people on this planet who are still to be recognized as fully human instead of disposable.

The historical context of Anthropocene visuality which the two works by Berni (fig 2.10 and 4.1) contests, started with what is known as the Manhattan Project, a secret US government program during WWII which eventually lead to the detonation of the atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, marking the arrival of a frightening new Atomic Age.<sup>239</sup> Parallel with the development of nuclear weapons, was the development of the ENIAC (Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer), considered the first electronic general-purpose digital computer. The ENIAC was completed by February 1946, and the war it was designed to help win was over. Financed by the United States Army, the computer was originally designed to calculate artillery firing tables and later used to study the feasibility of the development of thermo nuclear weapons.<sup>240</sup> The destructive force of the so-called technological progress such as the atomic bomb and the computer, is from an ecofeminist perspective, caused by the detachment of the scientific model as a masculinist project that produces disembodied knowledge.<sup>241</sup> According to the North American physicist, author and feminist, Evelyn Fox Keller, it is this detachment that has enabled the development of the

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<sup>235</sup> Mirzoeff 2014: 217

<sup>236</sup> Mirzoeff 2014: 220

<sup>237</sup> Ibid: 221

<sup>238</sup> Ibid: 228

<sup>239</sup> “Manhattan Project.” The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, in Encyclopaedia Britannica [https://www.britannica.com/event/Manhattan-Project], published September 10, 2020, Accessed September 14, 2020.

<sup>240</sup> https://snl.no/ENIAC

<sup>241</sup> Mellor 1997: 118

technologies of life or death such as nuclear physics and molecular biology.<sup>242</sup> In *Ecofeminism*, Shiva and Mies criticize modern science and its acceptance as a universal and value-free system. They consider the dominant stream of modern science as a projection of Western men's values and not as objective science. This science they call reductionist science, which just like the development project, is a patriarchal project where the privilege of determining what is considered scientific knowledge and its usage has been and still is controlled by men.<sup>243</sup> Mies and Shiva argue that there is a direct relationship between reductionist science, colonization, patriarchy and capitalism, echoing Plumwood's idea of mastery as central to western thought:

In order to be able to do violence to Mother Nature and other sister beings on earth, *homo scientificus* had to set himself apart from, or rather above, nature... The modern scientist is the man who presumably creates nature as well as himself out of his brainpower. He is the new god, the culture hero of European civilization.<sup>244</sup>

Plumwood imagines the violence of western science towards nature, representative of western man's need to establish himself as separate and above his embodiment.<sup>245</sup> Mies critique, involves the whole development of western liberalism and the basis of capitalism in colonial exploitation, reflecting only paternalistic and patriarchal values. Because, "without turning foreign peoples and their lands into colonies for the White Man, the capitalist economy could not have evolved" she argues.<sup>246</sup>

The same year that Berni created "Nightmare of the Unjust or the Conspiracy of the World of Juanito Laguna Disturbs the Dream of the Unjust" (fig 4.1), Barbara Ward, founder of the International Institute for environment and Development (IIED), published her book *The Rich Nations and the Poor Nations*. Ward played a major part in highlighting the economic problems of the "developing" world in the 50s and 60s and from the 1970s she was especially concerned about the growth of urban poverty and the conflict between economic development and the protection of the environment.<sup>247</sup> Ward was at the frontline in questioning global sustainability and the need for coordinated action in rural and urban areas. In 1966 she published the book entitled *Spaceship Earth* where she noted that "our physical unity has gone far ahead of our moral unity. Our inability to do anything but live together

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<sup>242</sup> Keller 1985: 159

<sup>243</sup> Mies & Shiva 1993: 264

<sup>244</sup> Plumwood 1993: 47

<sup>245</sup> Mellor 1997: 121

<sup>246</sup> Mies & Shive 1993: 47

<sup>247</sup> Ward 1966: 16



physically is not matched by any of the institutions that would enable us to live together decently”.<sup>248</sup> She actively demanded governments and international agencies to give a higher priority in meeting the basic demands for water, sanitation, health and education in both rural and urban areas, a cost she even calculated and called ‘the cost of justice.’<sup>249</sup> The metaphor of Spaceship Earth has been employed by various scientists, economics and politicians, slowly uncovering the connections between Cold War technologies such as nuclear weapons, space travel and cybernetics, and the birth of the first global environmentalist movement.<sup>250</sup> The Cold War rivalry and space race that went on between the United States and the Soviet Union began in 1955 as an extension of the ballistic missile-based nuclear arms race following World War II. Justified as a necessity for national security, both nations continued to develop space technology that eventually lead to the launch of various satellites and spaceships, where Sputnik 1 was the first carrying a human to space in 1961.

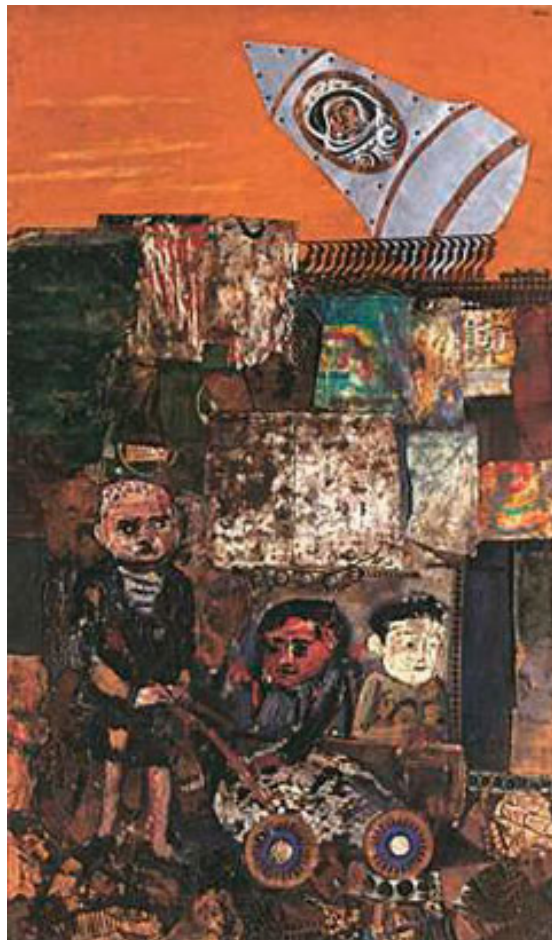


Figure 4.2 *El cosmonauta saluda a Juanito a su paso sobre el bañado de Flores*, (The Astronaut greets Juanito as he passes over the drenched Flores), 1961, collage on hard cardboard, 205 x 122 cm, private collection Buenos Aires

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid

<sup>249</sup> Satterthwaite 2006: 5

<sup>250</sup> Deese 2009: 70-75



The same year the Sputnik 1 is launched into space, Berni creates *El cosmonauta saluda a Juanito a su paso sobre el bañado de Flores* (fig 4.2). Through the title of the work, “The Astronaut greets Juanito as he passes over the drenched Flores”, Berni creates a personal connection between the man in the shiny spaceship hovering above the dirty slum and Juanito who is pushing a stroller with what might be his younger brother and sister. However, the astronaut who is visible in the window of the spacecraft is watching the children below, but the children don’t seem to notice him. Perhaps the children are too busy keeping their eyes on the fragmented road ahead of them, full of trash and other obstacles. The astronaut and Juanito exist in two different realities, which I interpret through Berni’s horizontal division of his composition, placing the astronaut in the upper ¼ part of the image. According to Latin American art scholar, Jacqueline Barnitz, “Berni often divided the surface of his work into upper and lower tiers using the former to envision those modernizing forces that decisively shape Juanito’s life in the latter.”<sup>251</sup> This type of division is also relevant in the other two works of Juanito and the spaceship as well as in *El mundo prometido a Juanito Laguna* (fig 2.10). The fact that Berni made a total of three collages with Juanito and the spaceship as a theme, indicates the enormous interest for the presence of man in space in the social imagination at the time.



Figure 4.3 *Juanito Laguna et les cosmonautes* (Juanito Laguna and the Astronauts), 1962, collage on wood, 245 x 240 cm, stolen in 2008, photo by Interpol.

<sup>251</sup> Barnitz 1993: 126

In 1962 Berni creates *Juanito Laguna et les cosmonautes* (fig 4.3), another example of the visual division of worlds, this time also inspired by Roald Barthes theories about “Myth”.<sup>252</sup> I argue that in *Juanito Laguna et les cosmonautes*, Berni applies subtle strategies with which he exposes the mechanisms of reification of the so-called daily myth or modern myth. He does so, in my reading of the work, by revealing the construction of “universal truths” that belongs to the mythical language of the mass media and the advertisement itself. Berni’s image seems to question whether the aerospace conquest by man was a technological achievement and for whom? The astronauts hovering above the cardboard slum, while Juanito Laguna pushes his two siblings in a homemade stroller, seem to excise the inequality of modern life. The work offers a playful but revealing comment on how the technological progress which enabled man to orbit Earth, was unable to eliminate poverty on the ground. The collage presents what Berni called “the mirage of technology” or the “structural relationship between Third World poverty and First World technology: the greater the technology of the first, the greater the exploitation, poverty, and backwardness of the second”, he would say.<sup>253</sup> The divided space between the golden sky with the silver spaceship and the dark, gritty and brown space of the slum, works as a metaphor for the ascendant First World and the stagnant Third World. The dividing contrast in the image is sharp and real in its critique of the new, emerging Buenos Aires as a garbage dump for First World development.

In *Juanito Laguna et les cosmonautes* (fig 4.3), there is a recognition of what is going on in the upper half of the image by the characters in the lower half. Juanito is, like in *El cosmonauta saluda a Juanito a su paso sobre el bañado de Flores* (fig 4.2), still pushing his siblings in a handmade stroller, but there is also the presence of an older woman and two more children. All the children in the image are looking up at the spectacle in the sky, apparently amazed by the three spaceships and the smiling astronauts. This perfect, advertised reality is constructed by Berni’s by the use of real-life astronaut clippings from newspapers or magazines. The one on the left looks like the North American, Virgil Grissom, the third man to enter space in 1961 aboard the space capsule *Liberty Bell 7*. In 1965, Grissom became the first man who returned to space on the Gemini 3 and in 1967, he and his two fellow astronauts were killed in the test launch of the Apollo 1.<sup>254</sup> Eventually it was the Apollo 11 that first

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<sup>252</sup> Ramírez and Pacheco 2014: 90

<sup>253</sup> Ades 1989: 285, 287

<sup>254</sup> “Virgil I. Grissom”, The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, in Encyclopaedia Britannica [https://www.britannica.com/biography/Virgil-I-Grissom]. Published March 30, 2020. Accessed July 8, 2020.

landed humans on the Moon in 1969, making Neil Armstrong the first person to step onto the lunar surface:

At 10:56 p.m. EDT Armstrong is ready to plant the first human foot on another world. With more than half a billion people watching on television, he climbs down the ladder and proclaims: "That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind." They leave behind an American flag, a patch honoring the fallen Apollo 1 crew, and a plaque on one of Eagle's legs. It reads, "Here men from the planet Earth first set foot upon the moon. July 1969 A.D. We came in peace for all mankind."<sup>255</sup>

Seen in context of Berni's artwork, the whole event and the statement made by Armstrong takes on a rather absurd meaning where the universal "truth" is brought into question. Knowing that the Juanito Lagunas of the world are still poor and there are many more of them now than in 1969, reveals the idea of "one giant leap for mankind" as nothing more than a myth. Just last year, on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019, we "celebrated" the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the moon landing, not only as a great importance to the space industry, but as "a great achievement for all mankind", according to NASA. I believe that the conquest of space is just as relevant today as the next goal is to put the first humans on Mar[s]. In an interview with The Guardian in 2014, the famous physicist and cosmologist, Stephen Hawking stated that "life on Earth is at the ever-increasing risk of being wiped out by a disaster such as sudden global warming, nuclear war, a genetically engineered virus or other dangers...I think the human race has no future if it doesn't go into space."<sup>256</sup> The British astronaut Tim Peake, stated in the same article that "there is no future for us on Earth. If we survive as a human species, it's inevitable – we are going to have to leave the planet – it's in our natural psyche to want to explore, to push the boundaries and take the next steps." These are the distorted perceptions and mechanisms of denial that arise from the 'master rationality', which according to Plumwood is the reason why the dominant culture embodies this identity in relation to nature and cannot respond adequately to the crisis of the biosphere and the growing degradation of the earth's natural system.<sup>257</sup> An inherent belief in the evolution of technology and development seems to be the only response that these scientists can think of to the accelerated man made crisis ahead. They seem to say that the destructive force is unstoppable and that we must develop even more remarkable technology so that we can abandon spaceship Earth for a new vessel.

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<sup>255</sup> "July 20, 1969: One Giant Leap for Mankind." NASA Administrator for NASA, [[https://www.nasa.gov/mission\\_pages/apollo/apollo11.html](https://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/apollo/apollo11.html)]. Published July 20, 2019. Accessed July 28, 2020.

<sup>256</sup> McKie 2014: The Guardian

<sup>257</sup> Plumwood 1993: 194

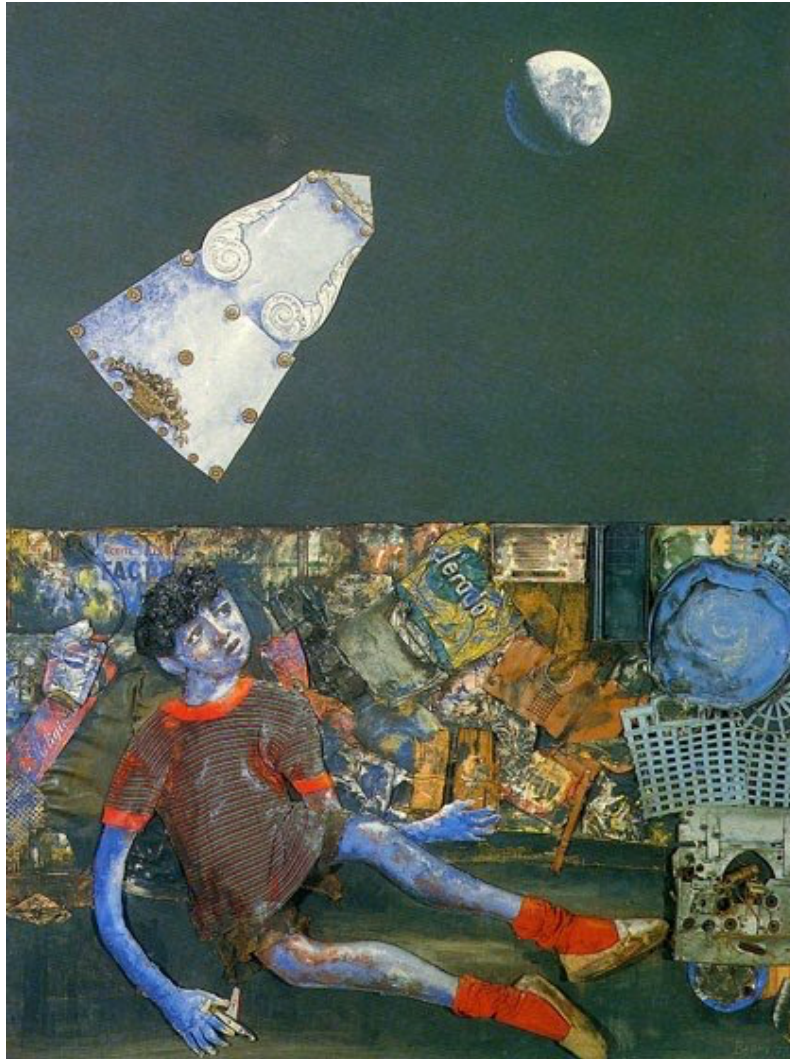


Figure 4.4 *Juanito Laguna y la aeronave*, (Juanito Laguna and the spaceship), 1978, collage on board, 210 x 160 cm, private collection, Madrid.

The last collage of Juanito Laguna and the spaceship was created in 1978, sixteen years after the other two, during the last and cruelest dictatorship in Argentine history, supported by the United States through Operation Condor. The golden sky of the two previous collages is replaced by a solid black and the horizontal division line between the First World and the Juanito's World is clear cut. The space occupied by First World technology in *Juanito Laguna y la aeronave* (fig 4.4) has increased to half the image. The fact that in the other two images (fig 4.2 and fig 4.3), the division line was a quarter and a third of the image, suggests that the modernizing forces gradually encroach upon Juanito's world. In *Juanito Laguna y la aeronave* (fig 4.4), Juanito is alone in the image, his family is gone, and the bluish tone of his skin makes him look sick and contaminated. The red and white colors on his legs reminds of bruises as his limbs, disproportionate, are spread out in an awkward position, as if he is unable to move. In his hand he holds an airplane, as he looks up



at the spaceship, now with its back turned against him and the slum on its way to the moon, or perhaps even further. The spaceship and the inhabitants of the First World are off to conquer new planets, leaving the damaged Earth and equally damaged Third World citizens in the dust, or rather in the pile of garbage they have created in order to sustain their unsustainable way of life. Tragically or ironically, but as envisioned by Berni in his works of the astronauts overlooking the slums, today urban inequality in the Third World is visible even from space.<sup>258</sup> The motif of Juanito Laguna and the spaceships, I argue, is a *countervisuality* to Anthropocene visuality which is, as explained by Mirzoeff, “decolonial politics that claims the right to see what there is to be seen and name it as such.”<sup>259</sup>

#### 4.2 Ramona as cyborg

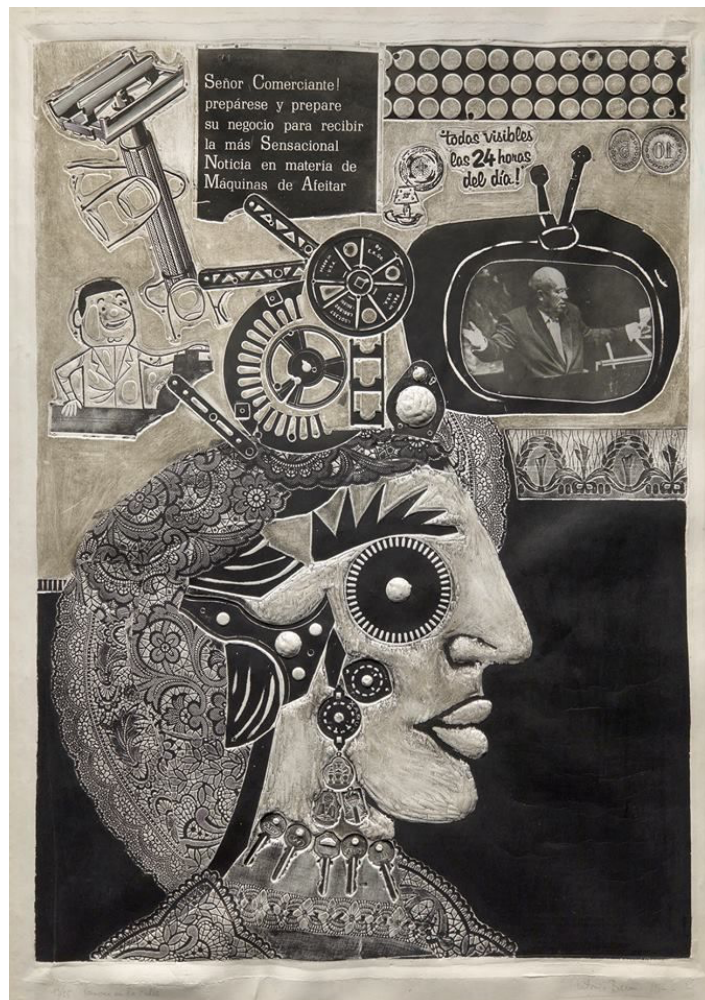


Figure 4.5 *Ramona en la calle*, (Ramona in the Street) from the series of Ramona Montiel and Her Friends, 1966, xylo-collage-relief, 78 x 56 cm, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Alfredo and Celina Hellmund Brener.

<sup>258</sup> Davis 2004: 197

<sup>259</sup> Mirzoeff 2014: 230

*Ramona en la calle* (fig 4.5) from 1966, is one of many xylo-collage-reliefs created by Berni in the series of Ramona. In this work, Ramona appears assembled by dispersed fragments into a mechanism that operates on its own, like a robot. The mix of materials make *Ramona en la calle* an unique combination of hard metal, soft fabric, technological innovation and ancient sculpture. The same waste that surrounds and absorbs Juanito, is restructured in Ramona's fragmented body, creating a complex power relation between human and machine. Similar to the horizontal division line in the images discussed in Juanito and the conquest of space, *Ramona en la calle* is also divided in half. In the images of Juanito Laguna, the upper part of the images represents the modernizing First World, while in *Ramona en la calle*, the components in the upper half of the image might be interpreted as Ramona's subconscious. However, they are also elements from the modernizing First World, fragments from consumer society, driven by advertising and television technology through the wheel above her head marked "made in U.S.A." Another text cries out "They are all visible, 24 hours a day!" next to a commercial for the newest and most sensational shaving machines on the market. The information seems random and connected to the flow of advertisement that is absorbed by Ramona as she walks down the street, suggested by the title. The work shows the proliferation of domestic technology and its invasion of the public sphere.

At this point in his artistic carrier, Berni has been granted credit for inventing a new type of print which he called a xylo-collage-relief.<sup>260</sup> Xylography is a type of wood engraving and is the oldest known relief printmaking technique. It is known as a "woodcut in reverse" where instead of raising the image above the surface the image is carved into the woodblock. Berni created high-relief images by blending the ancient art of xylography with collaging and the papier-mâché technique. Apparently it took him years of experimenting before he arrived at the right consistency of paper dampness and pressure level to avoid paper tearing under the stress.<sup>261</sup> The development of this new technique, allowed for a new expression in his character through the incorporation of different materials:

I can use the textures that occur to me: the wood with its grooves, the factory design, the fabrics, all that is useful to me for the expressiveness I am looking for ... I have learned many things: the humidity of the paper, the pressure it must be given in the press, the inking. All of this is quite a long process, say three or four years. <sup>262</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> Guillermo 2014: 60 (In Ramírez y Pacheco 2014)

<sup>261</sup> *ibid*

<sup>262</sup> Ramírez y Pacheco 2014: 340



I believe that this new printmaking technique, permitted Berni to explore new aspects of his character and her adaption to consumer society. The adaptation of technologies as a natural part of human evolution, has according to Plumwood, led to a distortion of reason and culture resulting in the failure of situating ourselves as ecological beings.<sup>263</sup> The same way in which the Anthropocene visibility is built in to our senses and determines our perceptions, hence making it aesthetic, as argued by Mirzoeff. I argue that Berni makes a similar critique of technology as an aesthetic part of human experience, including the advertising of it, which can be observed in the work *Ramona en la calle* (fig 4.5) and other works in the series of Ramona Montiel and her friends in higher places. When first examining *Ramona en la calle* I thought of her as a robot, but then the concept of *cyborg* came to mind, because of the human traits made out of clay around her otherwise machine fragmented face.

The historical context behind my reading of Ramona as cyborg relates to the evolution of technology and especially cybernetics during the Second World War. This was a development which concerned itself mostly with systems of command and control in nature, in order to imitate these in a wide array of rapidly evolving technologies, such as robotics, aviation and computer science.<sup>264</sup> Cybernetics was all about imitating nature for engineering purposes, by using the phenomena of feedback in meteorological and ecological systems, which eventually has given us the computing infrastructure that we know as the Internet.<sup>265</sup> The birth of the Cyborg was coined in 1960 by Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline, as an outcome of imagining the need for an intimate relationship between human and machine as the new frontier of space exploration was on the rise. The term was a contraction of cybernetic organism which referred to a being with both organic and biomechatronic body parts. A Cyborg is an organism that has enhanced abilities due to the integration of an artificial component or technology that relies on some sort of feedback, very much in line with early Cold War cybernetic theory. There are endless representations of cyborgs in science fictions films and in literature and the fascination with the idea of a human machine can be traced back to as early as 1843 and Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "The Man That Was Used Up."

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<sup>263</sup> Plumwood 2002: 240

<sup>264</sup> "Cybernetics" is a control theory as it is applied to complex systems. Cybernetics is associated with models in which a monitor compares what is happening to a system at various sampling times with some standard of what should be happening, and a controller adjusts the system's behavior accordingly. The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica in Encyclopædia Britannica, [<https://www.britannica.com/science/cybernetics>] Published January 15, 2014. Accessed July 5, 2019.

<sup>265</sup> Deese 2009: 2

When analyzing Ramona as cyborg, Donna Haraway's article "The Cyborg Manifesto" which urged feminists to embrace new technologies as tools for feminist ends, also needs mentioning. It was a proposition for feminists to use the master's tools to destroy the master's house. As put in the manifesto: "the main trouble with cyborgs is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential."<sup>266</sup> Haraway was one of a few cultural critics in the 1980s who wrote about the doubled-edged possibilities of biotechnology, and an early recognition of the fundamental and perhaps irreversible changes digital technology has brought about. However, at the time, "The Cyborg Manifesto" presented a rather Utopian perspective of a world that could potentially be rendered gender free by technology, embracing and welcoming the fusion of humans and machines as a liberating and democratic process. Today, in our all-consuming screen societies, there is a lot of anxiety about science, technology and so-called reason as the consequences of both capitalism's and state socialism's visions of progress have become apparent as at odds with nature and human equality. Therefore, in my reading, this representation of Ramona is not so much a gender critique or an empowerment of a woman who appropriates technology, but rather the cynicism and alienation of a human becoming a machine or a cyborg.

This is perhaps even better illustrated in the various portraits Berni creates of the men in higher place that circle around Ramona. They are, more so than Ramona, almost completely inhuman in their appearances apart from the clothes and medals they are wearing, be it the *El coronel amigo de Ramona* (fig 4.6) or *El marino amigo de Ramona* (fig 4.7). Argentine art historian, David Guillermo, argues that "Ramona's friend The Naval Officer" (fig 4.7) is a sharp and almost undisguised caricature of Admiral Isaac Rojas, who led the military coup that overthrew Peron which ignited the new era of Internationalism in Argentina.<sup>267</sup> So, the male "friends" of Ramona are men in truly powerful positions and their relationships with Ramona are made visible through the titles or the details in the works. An example of this, according to Guillermo, is seen in some of the xylograph-collage-relieves of Ramona, where her earrings are actual buttons from an Argentine navy uniform<sup>268</sup> The disturbing looking, inhuman features of these powerful men, symbolizes the monstrosity of their actions as part of a larger, patriarchal, political or religious system, which has

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<sup>266</sup> Haraway 1991: 151

<sup>267</sup> Guillermo 2014: 53

<sup>268</sup> Ibid



Figure 4.6 *El coronel amigo de Ramona*, (The General friend of Ramona), 1963, xylo-collage, 78 x 57 cm.



Figure 4.7 *El marino amigo de Ramona*, (The Navy friend of Ramona), 1964, xylo-collage, 83 x 56 cm

contributed to the exploitation and degradation of the environment and the poor. There was a total of 6 coups d'état during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Argentina. One in 1930, in 1943, in 1955, and the last three military coups in 1962, 1966 and in 1976 occurred while Berni was working on his series of Juanito and Ramona. So, there is no coincidence, I assume, that many of Ramona's friends are military and navy generals.

According to Val Plumwood, the final stage of the colonization process, is *devouring the other*.<sup>269</sup> At this stage, the colonized is offered a choice between elimination or incorporation, a totalizing form of instrumentalization. "And only those who can be incorporated into the empire of self, who offer no resistance, are permitted to exist", argues Plumwood. It leaves us with a world that is completely instrumentalized, as biotechnology and other master technologies repopulate the world and the master science tunes all global energy-flows towards 'Rational Economy'. And those humans who are outside the participation, who remain unassimilated and considered not useful to the Rational Economy, are discarded and deprived of access to the means of life by the meritocracy of development. In this context, the fate of the poor and the Juanito Laguna's in the world, "is naturalized as they are distanced from the form of reason constructed in the Rational Economy; they are constructed as improvident, incapable (like children and animals) of deferred gratification, and insufficiently (self-) developed."<sup>270</sup>

The difference then, between Ramona and Juanito, as mentioned in chapter 3, is that Ramona has taken the choice of incorporation and participation in the Rational Economy. However, the only reason why Ramona had a choice, is because she had something the Market wanted, her own body commodified and devoured by the master identity of global Rational Economy. But I like to think that there is some resistance in Ramona's character which differentiates her from her male friends in higher places. And that is because Ramona has not been totally converted by the technology of society. She is still part human, slowly adapting to the new way of life through her changing organism in becoming a cyborg. The General and the Naval Officer on the other hand, are completely transformed into machines or robots, assimilated entities, gatekeepers and tools for the aggressive colonizing and instrumentalizing logic of the master rationality and the maximizing logic of the Rational Economy. Ramona, who is still part human and capable of suffering from a guilty conscience, is devoured by a monster, manifested in her own nightmares.

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<sup>269</sup> Plumwood 1993: 192

<sup>270</sup> Ibid: 194



Figure 4.8 *La voracidad o La pesadilla de Ramona* from the series, *Los monstruos del infierno se disputan a Ramona Montiel*, (The voracity, from the series, The monsters of hell confront Ramona Montiel), 1964, sculpture, 91 x 75 x 305 cm, private collection.

*La voracidad o La pesadilla de Ramona* (fig. 4.8) seem to embody, in addition to a half-devoured Ramona, an influence from the Bolivian devil and the allegorical wagons of the Carioca carnival, the largest carnival in Rio de Janeiro. In this colorful sculpture, or *polymaterial* structure which Berni called it, the Latin American culture bites back at its corrupted members of society. *La voracidad* belongs to the same series of sculptures as *La hipocresía* (fig 3.8) examined in chapter 3, called “The monsters of hell confront Ramona Montiel”. In my opinion Berni clearly calls into question western patriarchy as an institutional structure of power and privilege and its role in creating the enormous division between the Ups and the Downs as according to Karen Warrens conceptual framework. The same way that ecofeminist philosophy is focused around the unjustified Up-Down systems of power and privilege, and particularly patriarchal Up-Down systems, so was most of Berni’s artwork throughout his entire carrier. There is a parallel between how all the Downs, including nature, has been exploited by the same patriarchal dominating forces, who are seen as creating order, progress and development through scientific or technological innovation.

In 1980, Carolyn Merchant published the book, *Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, where she presented a view of the Scientific Revolution that challenged the hegemony of mechanistic science as a marker of progress. It made a clear connection between the production of scientific knowledge as it emerged in the seventeenth-century and the ecological crisis and domination of nature, women, and other colonized

others.<sup>271</sup> The book questioned the *grand narrative* of the Scientific Revolution as progress, undermining the valorization of the most respected fathers of modern science such as Harvey, Bacon, Descartes, and Newton. This notion of a “Scientific Revolution”, is according to Merchant, still part of a larger mainstream narrative of Western culture, “that has propelled science, technology, and capitalism’s efforts to ‘master’ nature, a narrative into which most Westerners have unconsciously been socialized and within which we ourselves have become actors in a storyline of upward progress.”<sup>272</sup> Merchant warns us of demounting the “Scientific Revolution” to nothing more than “early modern science”, because this, she argues, obscures the power of the dominant narratives as colonialism and imperialism that has shaped Western culture since the seventeenth century at the expense of nature, women, minorities, and indigenous peoples. I argue that the ecofeminist critique of the *grand narrative* about science and technology is similar to the way in which the Anthropocene’s visualization of itself has created an aesthetic anesthesia of the senses, creating what Mirzoeff refers to as the autoimmune climate-changing capitalism syndrome, (AICS).<sup>273</sup>

The way Francis Bacon advocated “extracting nature’s secrets from *her* bosom through science and technology”, demonstrates, according to Merchant, the subjugation of nature as female and integral to the scientific method as power over nature. Today, issues that women traditionally organize around, such as environmental health, habitats, livelihoods, have been marginalized in debates where climate change is treated as a scientific problem requiring technological and scientific solutions without substantially transforming ideologies and economies of domination, exploitation and colonialism. It is the ongoing conviction and belief in science and technology as our only savior that makes Berni’s artwork relevant today, as it disrupts the Anthropocene aesthetics by providing a *countervisuality* to the commonly accepted, grand narrative of the civilized world.

#### **4.3 *Apocalipsis* and the legacy of Juanito and Ramona**

I believe that our world lives in an apocalyptic state, with a threat of total explosion and this is reflected in my paintings. Although I have hopes in the capacity of man to know how to reflect and realize that this hecatomb will turn against him. <sup>274</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Merchant 2006: 513

<sup>272</sup> Ibid

<sup>273</sup> Mirzoeff 2014: 215

<sup>274</sup> Quote by Berni from article in *Radiolandia 2000*, “Antonio Berni: y la última pincelada la dio la muerte”, 16/10/1981.





Figure 4.13 *Apocalipsis* (Apocalypse), 1981, acrylic on canvas, 290 x 480 cm, Capilla del Instituto San Luis Gonzaga de Las Heras, Buenos Aires.

Berni's last official work before he died was *Apocalipsis* (fig 4.13) where he actualizes the prophecies of Saint John in the Book of Revelation, the final book of the New Testament. The painting shows “The Four Horsemen” from the biblical *Apocalypse* who have come to symbolize different things over the years, but who together represent the setting of a divine end time upon the world. The white horse brings conquest and victory, the red horse symbolizes war and blood to be spilled, the green horse carries death, plague and the destruction of Empire, and finally the black horse spreads famine, imperial oppression and starvation. In addition to the riders follows a series of eschatological images such as the dark sky, stars falling on the earth, landslides and fires, deaths and earthquakes. All this rage and judgement seem to be coming down on the two characters in the lower left corner of the image: a man with big glasses, fangs, clawed hands and a suitcase full of money under one arm and a blonde woman under the other. The blonde is Ramona Montiel and the man is her corruptor. Together they embody the sins of “Third World” exploitation. According to art historian Patricia Corsani, Berni had carried out a series of engravings titled "Beauty and the Monster" from (1967-68) where these two characters appear together with the television, represented by Berni as a transmitter of sex scenes and promiscuity, as seen in his earlier work *Juanito y su familia mirando el televisor* (fig 3.2).<sup>275</sup> The two characters in the lower,

<sup>275</sup> Alifano 1981: b

left corner of *Apocalipsis* are surrounded by material objects such as jewelry, books, papers and dollars, all things that are part of the world of vanity and which are transitory in life and can't be saved from death. The backdrop of flames, burning souls and mushroom clouds reminds us of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I interpret the four horsemen in Berni's apocalypse as attacking a world tempted by the capricious desires of the market and clouded by illusions built by the media. A world with altered or lost values where man turns to his own destruction. Berni's own view of apocalypse was that: "Life in a world of crisis, with the painful consequences of war and human injustice, are elements that will lead to the end if a change is not sought." Having witnessed the most difficult moments in twentieth-century history, Berni condemns, with this work, the effects of wars, the lack of freedom, oppression, addiction-forming habits and dangers in consumer society that make people victims. In her analysis of the work, Corsani argues that the permanent threat to humanity by evils apparent in the prophecy of Saint John, are also recurring themes in the Bernian iconography.<sup>276</sup>

*Apocalipsis* (fig 4.13), which was exhibited for the first time in June of 1981, still decorates the Colegio San Luis Gonzaga de Las Heras in Buenos Aires. *Apocalipsis* was one of two paintings (the other painting was *Crucifixión*), commissioned by Father Pordomingo, despite Berni's background and affiliation with the artistic and intellectual Marxist left. These were extremely dangerous times for anybody associated with the left considering it was during the last and worst dictatorship in Argentina, known as "The dirty War," which lasted from 1976 to 1983. The painting which had themes treated through traditional Christian iconography and modified by Berni in order to serve contemporary concerns, could easily be decoded as the counter message it probably was, of the dangers of neo-liberalism. On one hand, the death of the innocent and the sacrifice of those who fight for ideals of justice, and on the other hand, the dangers of consumer society and vanity of the men. According to Corsani, Berni was supposed to create a third work of the same dimensions (which would be located behind the altar) called "The Last Supper". The scene would be composed of Christ surrounded by characters like Ramona, Juanito, lumberjacks from Santiago del Estero and other characters from Berni's works, occupying the place of the apostles.<sup>277</sup> However, the project was never concluded because Berni died in Buenos Aires on October 13<sup>th</sup> in 1981.

*Apocalipsis* contains, in many ways, the core arguments of this thesis, where the series of Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel are paired with ecofeminist critique, implicating late-capitalism, development and neoliberal policies as the culprit of the human environmental

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid

<sup>277</sup> Corsani 2007: 6

crisis at hand. A crisis where we need to see humans as both victims and perpetrators of the crisis and recognize that we are not all in the same boat when it comes to defining the responsibility and the consequence. Berni's characters, Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel, represent a *countervisuality* to Anthropocene aesthetics by contesting the anaesthetized perception of modern industrial pollution, global inequality and hunger.<sup>278</sup> I believe, it is crucial to bring forward the narratives of the Juanito's and the Ramona's in the world in order to challenge the fact that the majority of people on the planet are treated as "dispensable citizens" or as "disposable humanity."<sup>279</sup> The anaesthetizing effect of the Anthropocene visuality has produced the interactive crisis of democracy, food supply, and climate change, argues Mirzoeff.<sup>280</sup> *Countervisuality* is a resistance to capitalism, like other movements which have appeared in recent history, from the Zapatistas in Chiapas, to the Arab Spring and the recent riots in Chile, Bolivia and Ecuador just last November 2019. They all have in common that people, mostly marginalized, rise up against the authorities and oppressive regimes, locally or globally, as a response to issues such as violation of human rights, low standard of living, poverty and unemployment. Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel have been part of this resistance and *countervisuality* since the 60s but unfortunately the extension of their reach has not been much further than South America, regardless of Berni's recognition and interaction with an international art-scene.

The poverty has grown in Argentina in context of an economic recession that started two years ago, and now the COVID-19 has suddenly worsened the prognostic of the economy dramatically, and with it, more poverty and social exclusion. The rider on the green horse from Berni's *Apocalipsis* carrying death and plague, is heading for the slums at full speed. Because, even though the Argentine government is praised for the rapid and effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to Brazil's hard-right leadership who has downplayed the crisis as media "hysteria", the virus is now spreading fast in the slums of Buenos Aires.<sup>281</sup> In *The Monster at Our Door* from 2005, Davis wrote :

Indeed, today's mega slums are unprecedented incubators of new and reemergent diseases that can now travel across the world at the speed of a passenger jet. As I argue in my recent book about the imminent peril of avian influenza economic globalization without concomitant investment in a global public-health infrastructure is a certain formula for catastrophe.<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> Mirzoeff 2014: 220

<sup>279</sup> Nixon 2011: 17

<sup>280</sup> Ibid: 228

<sup>281</sup> Goñi and Phillips 2020: The Guardian

<sup>282</sup> Davis 2004: 150

No other part of the world has such a big division between the haves and the have nots as the Latin American continent, and we are reminded of this, again, with the spread of COVID-19. According to a recent report by the IMF, the economy in Latin America will drop with 5 % this year, the biggest recess since the depression in the 1930s. The UN fears that this recession will trigger an explosion of poverty, resulting in the most devastating outcome of this pandemic. Alicia Bárcena, UN's leader of the economic commission for Latin America prognosed that the coronavirus will lead to increase of 30 million poor in Latin America this year only, and drive another 15 million more to extreme poverty.<sup>283</sup> This will bring the total of people in Latin America living underneath the poverty line to 90 million people by the end of 2020. The number of people dying from the coronavirus is increasing in Latin America, but the amount of people who will die from hunger, poverty and the social turmoil that will follow, is what worries the experts the most.<sup>284</sup> This triangular connection between poverty, climate and neoliberal ideology is what makes the series of Juanito and Ramona so relevant, because it gives us the opportunity to reflect over the long, unequal development and use of the Earth's resources in the name of scientific and technological progress as a common good for all.

#### 4.4 Chapter Summary

When I first started this investigation into the artwork of Antonio Berni, it was sparked by a question posed Barbara Ward already in the 1960s: "The environment cannot be improved in conditions of poverty-how can we speak to those who live in villages and slums about keeping the oceans, the rivers and the air clean when their own lives are contaminated at the source?"<sup>285</sup> Ward was one of the first to front the idea of sustainable development, but unfortunately the current practice of "sustainable development" more often than not sidelines issues of justice and equality "through a new policy framework that promotes market-led, technocratic approaches to 'greening' capitalism."<sup>286</sup> There is a race going on with a global bet for finding a technological cure to save "our planet", leaving out all other alternatives to 'green' capitalism. "Ecology is the new opium for the masses", the French philosopher Alain Badiou stated in 2008, making evident that a technological fix to our environmental problems

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<sup>283</sup> Stefansen 2020: nrk nyheter

<sup>284</sup> Ibid

<sup>285</sup> Satterthwaite 2006: 23

<sup>286</sup> Kaika & Swyngedouw 2011: 99

in order to assure that the world we know stays the same, is just an extension of capitalism and a continuation of over production and consumerism. Cities are now producing 80 percent of the world's greenhouse emissions which makes cities an ecological challenge and greening capitalism an urban quest. According to professor in geography, Erik Swyngedouw, "the urban environmental catastrophe is not one to come, it is already here", especially in the mega-cities of the global south.<sup>287</sup> The problems that Berni saw with capitalism and which he denounced through his characters and their environment, is very much an ongoing problem as "sustainable development" evolves into a market logic, opening up new avenues for capital accumulation.

Considering Berni's response to the technologies developed during the Cold War, as it is expressed through his series of Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel, I believe one can say that Berni was practicing environmental activism through his art. Through the character Juanito, we observe the environmental impact on his life in the slum as a direct consequence of the so-called scientific and technological progress. The proud astronauts on their way to conquest space, illustrates the extreme contrast between Juanito's reality in a hostile environment either on fire or flooded and increasingly more contaminated by the garbage from consumer society. The slums bear witness of the negative force of a destructive Anthropocene, which argued by Shiva is engraved into the layers of the Earth as well as its inhabitants as the epic contest "between the rights of Mother Earth and the rights of corporations and militarized states using obsolete world-views and paradigms to accelerate the war against the planet and people."<sup>288</sup>

The series of Ramona and her friends in higher places, on the other hand, through the appropriation of the *master model* and embodiment of science and technology, represents a corrupt state acting on behalf of the rich, which Davis argues is the "Treason of the State" due to a colonial past and with the differential effects on women and children of slum ecology.<sup>289</sup> The character Ramona is given the benefit of the doubt, because she is lured into prostitution by desire for luxury, leading to power and corruption. She also has regrets and a conscience, which makes her in the end, "only human" or at least more human than her male friends. Both series of Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel, contests the sustainability of the megacities in the global South. The increase of carbon dioxide levels from cities which aggravates the threat of global warming affects us all, but the poor suffer double because they also lack

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<sup>287</sup> Ibid: 103

<sup>288</sup> Mies & Shiva 2014: xix

<sup>289</sup> Davis 2006: 50

access to basic resources such as water, food, land and medicine which is the number one cause of premature mortality in the megacities in the global south.<sup>290</sup>

## Conclusion

Berni's two allegorical characters, Juanito and Ramona, open a window which allows us to see and perhaps even foresee, the lineaments of "slow terror behind the façade of sudden spectacle."<sup>291</sup> They provide us with a temporal optic which shows us "the interwoven nature of imperialism, ecological degradation, exploitation of workers, racism and oppression" of the poor and nature.<sup>292</sup> They also give us a chance to see, in addition to the uneven economic development, the uneven development of official memory. Because the poor, as argued by Nixon, face a double challenge of invisibility and amnesia from an environmental perspective.<sup>293</sup> In light of Karen Warren's *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, Juanito and Ramona gives us the essence of ecological feminism captured by the phrase "it's all connected."<sup>294</sup> It is a relatively new trend to link North American/European transnational imperialism to socioenvironmental degradation in the global South, and this broadened perspective is made possible through ecofeminism. For a long time, environmentalists focused on issues such as wilderness preservation, the Endangered Species Act and saving old-growth forests instead of i.e. the environmental consequences of consumerism. Ecofeminism stresses the depth to which human realities are embedded in ecological realities and interdependencies which reveals the connections between ecological degradation and other forms of social oppression. Warren describes ecofeminism as a quilt: "An ecofeminist philosophical quilt will be made up of different 'patches,' constructed by quilters in particular social, historical, and materialist contexts."<sup>295</sup> I like to think of Juanito and Ramona as patches in the ecofeminist philosophical quilt and that this thesis might be another. Patches that can contribute to reveal unjust power relations and conceptual frameworks that have been naturalized in a web of oppression and domination over time. Because knowledge is relational and multidimensional, full of social complexity, the patches in the quilt of ecofeminism are all important components in order to form a larger and more complete vision of the world. History like theory is always in-process

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<sup>290</sup> Kaika & Swyngedouw 2011: 97

<sup>291</sup> Nixon 2011: 62

<sup>292</sup> Cuomo 2002: 1

<sup>293</sup> Ibid: 66

<sup>294</sup> Warren 1997: 3

<sup>295</sup> Warren 2000: 44



and therefore one cannot know, beforehand, what the quilt will finally look like. According to Warren the point of these quilts is not to end up with one image or one story based on one view of reality, rather it is to have a variety of images or stories. “These images/stories emerge out of the life experiences and visions of people located in different historical circumstances.”<sup>296</sup> Warren explains that quilts are historical; they preserve the past and create futures, quilts are aesthetic; they display individual and community identities, quilts are political statements; they tell story of the history of a people’s migration and raise awareness about politically sensitive issues. Berni’s contribution to the quilt is the story of Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel. It is the story of the rural immigrants who ended up in the urban slums, and how structural racism is adapted through the logic of domination. It is the story of how Latin America became the “Third World”, prostituted by the corruptors of Ramona Montiel and exploited by the Empire of consumption. It is the story of thousands of anonymous street children living in the megacities in the global South. It is a contribution to an Anthropocene *countervisuality* that may elevate the discourse of the poor to be included in the larger debate about climate change and the challenges we face due to neoliberal market strategies and ideas of growth and progress.

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<sup>296</sup> Warren 2000: 67

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