

*Paranoia and Hope*  
*The Art of Juan Batlle Planas and its Relationship to the Argentine Technological*  
*Imagination of the 1930s and 1940s*

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*To the alerted eye, the front page of a newspaper is a superficial chaos which can lead the mind to attend to cosmic harmonies of a very high order.*

—Marshall McLuhan

One day while reading the newspaper in 1938, the Argentine artist and poet Juan Batlle Planas (1911-1966) encountered the headline, “Lo que nos dice la ciencia acerca de la luna” (What Science Tells Us About the Moon).<sup>1</sup> Intrigued, he carefully clipped out the text and inserted it into one of his collages (Fig. 1). The finished work, which bears the same name as the clipping, blends several scientific diagrams, such as the image in the lower center illustrating the workings of a camera obscura; above it appears an artistic rendering of human kidneys, from which hangs a picture of a tomato. Together the images and text—both with their references to science—paradoxically create an absurd image.

*What Science Tells Us About the Moon* (1938) constitutes one work in a series of thirty-two collages Batlle Planas created between 1937 and 1938, in which he rearranged newspaper headlines and illustrations to elicit new and often foreboding associations between image and text. Social unrest in Argentina may have contributed to Batlle Planas’ frequently somber imagery; the country was in the midst of economic crisis and political upheaval as the result of the New York stock market crash in 1929, and the government takeover in 1930 by a fierce military regime that proposed to remedy the nation’s problems. The following ten-year period of Argentina’s history is generally referred to as the *década infame* (infamous

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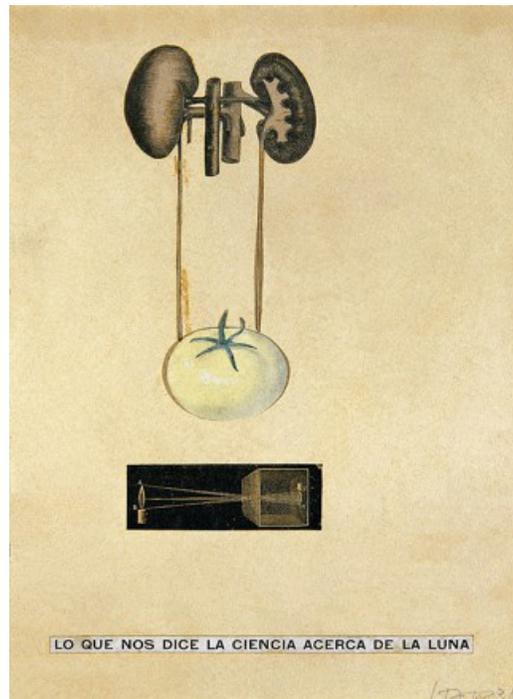


Fig. 1. Juan Batlle Planas, *Lo que nos dice la ciencia acerca de la luna* (What Science Tells Us About the Moon), 1938. collage on paper. 48 x 31.5 cm. Collection of Giselda Batlle, Buenos Aires. Photographer: Adrián Rocha Novoa

decade) since it was characterized by widespread unemployment and government repression, felt especially by the middle and working classes. One writer comments, “Fear of unemployment in this period led to humiliation. You had to be quiet, not talk. The lack of elemental defensive actions led to a moral decline, to cynicism. Within the factory the worker was alone, deprived of all social consciousness.”<sup>2</sup> We will see that such cynicism also permeated Buenos Aires’ artistic and literary circles in the 1930s.

Today Batlle Planas’ works remain relatively obscure, but in the few places where he is written about, scholars tend to note him as one of Argentina’s few surrealist painters, without considering how his idiosyncratic brand of Surrealism related to the political, economic, and cultural contexts of Argentina. The current scholarship—nearly none of which exists in English—tends to focus more heavily on determining Batlle Planas’ artistic influences, usually correlating the artist’s

surrealist experiments with cultural developments taking place among artists, psychoanalysts, and theosophists in Europe.<sup>3</sup> Too often the individual works are left unexplained, making his paintings, collages, and prints appear as a set of incomprehensible symbols, the remnants of the artist's own esoteric thoughts, which seem divorced from everyday life in Buenos Aires. Yet I believe his collages offer an entry point for viewing an artistic engagement with the Argentine daily news that has previously gone unacknowledged.

Through a combination of formal analysis and cultural history, I seek to offer interpretations of several of Batlle Planas' works from the mid-1930s and 1940s, in particular, his *Radiografía Paranoica* (Paranoid X-ray) series (1935-1937), a group of approximately nine tempera paintings. A handful of art historians including Marcelo Pacheco, Jacqueline Barnitz, Gabriela Francone, and Rosa María Ravera each recognize the *Radiografía Paranoica* series as a highlight of the artist's career, but one that has not been analyzed in detail (Figs. 2 and 3).<sup>4</sup> Each of these



Fig. 2. Juan Batlle Planas, *Radiografía paranoica* (Paranoid X-ray), 1936, tempera and graphite on paper. 34.4 x 25 cm. MALBA-Costantini Collection, Buenos Aires. Photographer: Adrián Rocha Novoa

works present vibrant skeletal figures, interlocking and abstracted with a variety of wiry and mechanical forms. Elliptical and biomorphic shapes of black, grey, and sometimes muted blue, red, and yellow encircle the grotesque skeletons, whose distortions appear both amusing and frightening. By layering figurative elements and flat planes of color, each work in the series presents a dynamic composition which seems to be a snapshot of an unstable and constantly shifting world.

Whereas Batlle Planas appropriated directly from the popular press to create collages such as *What Science Tells Us About the Moon*, in contrast, his paintings such as the *Paranoid X-ray* series represent indirect engagements with the scientific and pseudo-scientific discoveries popularized by the news media. Art historian and critic Guillermo Whitelaw has briefly noted that Batlle-Planas' *Tibetan* series (c. 1940-1943) incorporated concepts of orgonomy—a philosophy developed by Austrian psychiatrist Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957) that Argentine newspapers frequently discussed.<sup>5</sup> Expanding on Whitelaw's supposition, I seek to flesh out the possible connections between several of Batlle Planas' early works (his *Paranoid X-ray* series, collages, and *Tibetan* series) and the mass media in Argentina during the 1930s and 1940s—an investigation that I believe can contribute both to history of Latin American art and to the growing field of research concerning Surrealism and mass culture.

In his book *Pulp Surrealism: Insolent Popular Culture in Early Twentieth-Century Paris*, cultural historian Robin Walz brings to light the correspondences between mass culture and the French surrealist movement, arguing that the movement's modernist aesthetic did not derive solely from "high-brow cultural realms of literature and art criticism" but was deeply indebted to popular culture, in particular, to the material found in sensational news stories and pulp novels.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, for Walz, the subject of mass culture provides a significant alternative to the "standard historical thesis" that Surrealism, Dada, and other various modernisms originated in direct response to the horrors and violence of World War I. He warns that "... while the Great War was the most cataclysmic and traumatic event of the early twentieth century, it should not overshadow the multitude of less dramatic cultural connections that bridge the historical break between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries."<sup>7</sup> This assertion, I believe, is especially pertinent for understanding the ways that Surrealism and other modernisms began in Argentina in relation to local conditions, rather than European ones. Just as newspapers and developing mass media technologies like wireless radio and film impacted Paris in the early twentieth-century, they also affected Buenos Aires—Latin America's leading city for education, literacy, and media technologies (newspapers, book-publishing, radio, and film).<sup>8</sup> But the ways these media sources converged and configured information, as well as how

that information was interpreted, varied temporally and locally.

Argentine cultural theorist Beatriz Sarlo has identified that, in the 1920s and 1930s, popular culture in Buenos Aires developed a unique character as local media sources fused together technical material on science and the occult. This blending led the city's literate and semi-literate public to develop a cultural and political sensibility that Sarlo refers to as the "*saberes del pobre*" (knowledge of the poor).<sup>9</sup> Specifically, Sarlo uses this term to indicate popular understanding of science and technology that developed outside of Buenos Aires's official institutions for education, and that seamlessly blended actuality and myth. Using Sarlo's "knowledge of the poor" as a model, I will examine Juan Batlle-Planas' work and its affinities with the mass media to suggest that his surrealist art—with its particular synthesis of science, popular psychology, mysticism, and Eastern philosophy—resonated with a technological imagination that affected Buenos Aires' broader populace during the *década infame*. Specifically, I will argue that the *Paranoid X-rays* series artistically references technology in order to express feelings of terror and moral decay that were the subtext of daily life in Argentina. Likewise, Batlle Planas' later *Tibetan* series derives from the artist's ongoing interest in pseudo-science, psychology and medicine, and may be seen as an artistic attempt to heal his country.

#### *The Presence of Surrealism in Argentina*

Argentine artists, writers and critics have grappled with the label "Surrealism" and debated its relevance in Latin America ever since the term was first popularized by the French poet Andre Breton in his 1924 Surrealist Manifesto. Beginning in 1925, in his article "Neodadaismo y Superrealismo" for *Proa*, a leading literary magazine in Buenos Aires in the mid-1920s, the writer and critic Guillermo de Torre advocated the term "*superrealismo*" over Breton's "*surréalisme*."<sup>10</sup> While both terms referred to those artistic creations inspired by the unconscious mind, de Torre indicated that "*surréalisme*," as well as the Spanish equivalent "*surrealismo*," tied the art in question directly to European sources. In contrast, "superrealismo" could better account for what he viewed as an independent and distinct Argentine sensibility.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to de Torre, several intellectuals in Buenos Aires openly embraced the term "Surrealism" regardless of its European associations. For instance, the writers Aldo Pellegrini, David Sussman, Mario Cassano, and Elías e Ismael Piterbarg and Adolfo Solari formed a "surrealist fraternity" and in 1928 published *Qué* magazine to disseminate their surrealist poetry.<sup>12</sup> Battle Planas befriended de Torre and his wife Norah Borges sometime after the couple's return to Buenos Aires in 1936. Still, it is uncertain as to whether the artist self-identified as a Surrealist and whether he placed any importance on these distinctions between "*surréalisme*" and



Fig. 3. Juan Batlle Planas, *Radiografía paranoica* (Paranoid X-ray), 1937, tempera on paper. 35 x 28 cm. Collection of Giselda Batlle, Buenos Aires. Photographer: Adrián Rocha Novoa

“*superrealismo*.” While Pelligrini and his fellow poets were the earliest group to seek and establish an Argentine venue for surrealist literature, by the 1930s several of Batlle Planas’s contemporaries had made direct contact with European surrealist painting. For instance, artists Antonio Berni (1905-1981) and Raquel Forner (1899-1968) separately traveled to Paris and upon their return, exhibited as Surrealists. In the case of Berni, while abroad he met with Breton, Marcel Duchamp, and Salvador Dalí on several occasions. Shortly upon returning to Buenos Aires in 1932, Berni exhibited a series of his surrealist oil paintings and collages at the *Amigos del Arte* (Friends of Art)—an alternative cultural center that hosted art exhibitions, musical performances, and lectures. Located among the posh shops and cafes on Florida Avenue, *Amigos del Arte* served as a major cultural arbiter in the late 1920s and early 1930s, visited regularly by the writers and artists of *Proa* and *Martin Fierro*, with whom Batlle Planas associated.<sup>13</sup> And *Amigos de Arte* became pivotal in exposing Buenos Aires’s public to surrealist aesthetics—not only through exhibitions such as



Fig. 4. Juan Batlle Planas, *Victima de sus 'nervios'* (Victim of his/her/their 'Nerves'), 1937, collage on paper 31.9 x 24.3 cm. MALBA- Constantini Collection, Buenos Aires. Photographer: Adrián Rocha Novoa

Berni's but also through its film club, inaugurated in 1929 with a season of French surrealist films including Buñuel and Dalí's joint-production, *Un chien andalou* (1928).

Certainly, Batlle Planas was informed by Dalí's films, paintings, and writing; this is most evident by his titling a series of prints and drawings the *Paranoid X-Ray* series, a name that references Salvador Dalí's paranoid-critical method, which he first wrote about in his *Le Femme Visible* (1928). Dalí's paranoid-critical method posited an alternative to Breton's automatism, suggesting that the artist have a more deliberate and controlling role in harnessing unconscious creativity. He explains that "...the moment is drawing near when, by a thought process of a paranoiac and active character, it would be possible to systematize confusion and thereby contribute to a total discrediting of the world of reality."<sup>14</sup> Dalí generally applied his paranoid-critical method to paintings by creating complex optical illusions, or what he called "paranoid images"—works in which a single configuration could be read simultaneously as different, unrelated objects. In contrast, Batlle Planas' *Paranoid*

*X-rays* follow no such pattern; their compositions, although both alluring and puzzling to many viewers, remain in stasis.

Indeed, Dali's call for "systematized confusion" parallels Batlle Planas's own deep interest in "irrationalization" as a creative process with the potential to liberate mankind. In his personal notes, he writes, "Irrationalization is a force, a state of energy...that can inform the world and space with a solvency that is much more important than what science has done until now. With this, I do not declare myself anti-scientific, but let's hope that science achieves this and much more, but for now, it has not reached this point."<sup>15</sup> For Batlle Planas irrationalization could dislodge the presumed authority of positivist science, where classification and empirical investigation constitutes the basis of knowledge. Such deliberate aims are most evident in his series of collages produced between 1937 and 1938. In *Victima de sus 'nervios'* (Victim of his/her/their 'Nerves') (1937), four illustrations—a woman in Victorian dress, a drill bit, an eel, and a pelvic bone—are carefully arranged on the page as if they were specimens that have been pragmatically identified, labeled, and incorporated into a scientific collection (Fig. 4).<sup>16</sup> The placement of the images and the text encourages viewers to perceive links between objects which otherwise have no rational connections.<sup>17</sup> The words "victim" and "*esterilidad de la mujer*" (the sterility of the woman) combined with the eel and the drill—each menacingly references the phallus—create a foreboding impression of misogynistic violence and sexual violation. In this way, Batlle Planas used the scientific appearance of classification to provoke viewers' recognition of irrational sexual desires and anxieties—materials of the unconscious mind that became preoccupations for the Argentine public in the 1930s through the growing popularity of Freudian psychology.

According to historian Mariano Ben Plotkin, psychoanalysis became especially popular in Buenos Aires through the writings of "Freudiano," an advice columnist for *Jornada* newspaper, who published weekly articles on psychoanalytic theory and analyzed dream narratives submitted by readers.<sup>18</sup> Seeking to capitalize on the success of the psychology column, "a popular publishing house known for distributing translations of Tarzan books put out a serial collection of books called 'Freud for All' that became a national sensation."<sup>19</sup> Through pulp editions, dream interpretation became one facet of the popular attraction to understanding the unconscious and its effects on actions and emotions. *Victim of his/her/their 'Nerves'* suggests a particular interest in Freudian concepts of female hysteria—a psychoneurosis Freud characterized by irrationality, emotional excitability, and a fearfulness believed to be caused by disturbances or malformations of the uterus. Historian Julia Rodriguez states that in the early twentieth century "...hysteria

became a medical metaphor for willfulness, volatility, emotion, and a lack of self control. It was often cited as prevalent, even epidemic, among Buenos Aires women of every class and as a common side effect of urban stresses."<sup>20</sup> Very often diagnoses of hysteria served as pretext for families or for the state to police Argentine women who were seen as too sexually active or independent. Rodriguez explains that in extreme cases women could be sued or institutionalized for a "lack of female role" at the request of family members, the police, judges, or even employers.<sup>21</sup> It was more commonplace, however, for physicians to intrude into women's lives and their bodies through routine medical examinations mandated by the state; these examinations sometimes required X-ray studies of the pelvis and uterus.<sup>22</sup> In Batlle Planas' collage, the pelvic bone appears surrounded by a drill, a snake, and an umbrella—everyday objects that present the threat of malice under the guise of science.

Batlle Planas's investigations into Freudian psychology and the irrational mind were also partly indebted to his interactions with Dr. Enrique Pichon-Rivière (1907-1977), for whom he worked as an assistant at the *Hospicio de las Mercedes* beginning in 1936. As one of the founders of the Argentine Psychoanalytic Association (APA, established in 1942), Pichon-Rivière was a central figure in the popularizing of psychoanalysis in Buenos Aires. He demanded the reform of Argentina's institutions for the mentally ill, believing that they functioned as antiquated madhouses that isolated individuals rather than aiding recovery and reintegration into society.<sup>23</sup> He also introduced electroconvulsive shock therapy in Argentina and used psychoanalysis to explain its effectiveness. At the *Hospicio de las Mercedes* Pichon-Rivière studied the sexual disfunctions of the mentally ill and insisted that group therapy could aid his patients. At that time he worked both as a clinical psychologist and as a journalist for Argentina's leading newspaper *Crítica*, producing columns about the role of psychology in everyday life. The combined intellect and approachability of his writings made him well-known to the Buenos Aires public. Avant-garde artists and intellectuals gravitated towards him because, according to historian Mariano Plotkin, "Pichon-Rivière was seen as someone 'with *calle*,' or streetwise, who could see, interpret, and understand the world using psychoanalytic tools beyond the analyst's couch."<sup>24</sup>

Through his contact with Surrealism and Pichon-Rivière, the artist became preoccupied with issues of alienation and the unconscious mind. By working at the *Hospicio de las Mercedes*, Batlle Planas became sensitive towards the vulnerability of the patient as well as toward how medical practice acted both as health care providers and as invaders—concepts that are particularly evident in his *Victim of his/her/their Nerves*' collage. Freudian analysis, shock therapy, and the mental asylum, however, were only partial aspects of the specifically Argentinean cultural contexts to which

Batell Planas responded in his work.

*Recovering the Roles of the X-ray, Popular Science, and the Technological Imagination in Argentina*

In analyzing Batlle Planas' *Paranoid X-ray* series scholars have focused on the impact of European Surrealism and psychoanalysis on the artist, leaving key questions about the works unanswered: What role does the X-ray play within the series? How were X-rays understood by Batlle Planas and others in his artistic milieu? Much contemporary research already documents how the discovery of X-rays in 1896 by German physicist Wilhelm Conrad Roentgen prompted an endless variety of artistic responses in Europe.<sup>25</sup> To date, no study has investigated the cultural responses to X-rays in Latin America. Yet it seems fairly clear that Batlle Planas uses the idea of X-rays to expose an inner life through an alternative negative world. He was fascinated by the X-ray's power to penetrate deeply into materials that do not transmit light. In particular, the energy produced by X-rays was a source of inspiration to the artist since the rays were also produced by heavenly bodies: the sun, stars, and pulsars. In his later *Tibetan* series Batlle Planas seems to be intrigued by the energies found in crystal forms. This subject may relate to his *Paranoid X-ray* series since X-rays are used to analyze the arrangement of atoms in various substances, particularly crystals. When X-ray beams travel through a crystal the planes of the atoms act as tiny mirrors that spread the rays into a regular pattern; the study of how crystals deflect X-rays is known as "X-ray crystallography."<sup>26</sup> The *Paranoid X-ray* series, which was partly the result of psychic automatism, can no doubt be understood as visual patterns corresponding to the energies within the artist's inner mind. However, I believe Batlle Planas' seemingly inward turn and his metaphorical use of the X-ray are significant in how they corresponded to a set of concurrent intellectual trends that affected Buenos Aires' elite literary and artistic circles as well as the general public.

Considering Argentine literature produced during the period, historian Arthur Whitaker indicates that critics repeatedly accuse the literary world of "a loss of vitality, a dearth of new talent, an excess of introspection, and general decline, and that this was connected with Argentina's contemporaneous political decline.... While it is true that Argentine writing in the thirties was introspective, the term could be used in a favorable sense signifying a perhaps overdue self-appraisal."<sup>27</sup> Whitaker cites the work of various writers including Manuel Gálvez, Eduardo Mallea, Oswald Spengler, and José Ortega y Gasset, as evidence for the "pervasive pessimism" that characterized the decade. Above all he asserts that Ezequiel Martínez Estrada (1895-1964) represented the "outstanding exponent" of this literary trend. Martínez

Estrada's seminal book, *X-ray of the Pampa* (1933) is noteworthy here because of the specific way the author utilized the X-ray metaphor. According to historian Peter



Fig. 5. Juan Batlle Planas, *Radiografía paranoica* (Paranoid X-ray), 1936, tempera and graphite on paper, 34.6 x 26.5 MALBA-Costantini Collection, Buenos Aires. Photographer: Adrián Rocha Novoa

Earle, *X-ray of the Pampa* quickly became a point of popular reference as it opened “a new epoch in Argentine literature.”<sup>28</sup> The title of the work reflects Martínez Estrada’s intentions of presenting a piercing account of Argentine colonial history and its resulting burden on contemporary life. He describes a legacy of political corruption and cultural stagnation, and claims that the country has become overly reliant on European economies and intellectual theories. “The years in which we live are in no way superior to the past...” he proclaims.<sup>29</sup> He denounces modern technology for bestowing a false sense of progress, warning that “the nation that adopts the latest forms of progress and of culture, skipping the transitional stages, regresses to the primordial forms even faster than it left them.”<sup>30</sup>

In this sense, *Paranoid X-rays* also constituted a social critique which addresses

questionable advances in the medical field, such as invasive searches into the human body including shock-treatment, psychoanalysis, X-rays, and surgery. The works may also be read as an oblique criticism of life under military dictatorship. An unprecedented wave of government-sponsored violence followed the 1930 coup d'état led by General José Felix Uriburu, as a newly constituted police force rounded up foreigners for deportation and arrested and tortured rival political leaders.<sup>31</sup> According to historian Laura Kalmanowiecki, “the assault on society had a hidden and proactive underpinning...[as] a broad network of espionage and surveillance was established, and police repression was extended to new targets.”<sup>32</sup> Although Uriburu resigned from the presidency in 1932, a set of rigged presidential elections established an oligarchic system in which authoritarian rulers continued to generate a public fear through systems of censorship, intelligence-gathering, and coercion. It is likely that the *Paranoid X-ray* series serves as a testament to these events, as each image depicts a scene of violence and moral confusion. In Figure 5, the skeletal figure stands on a checkered floor surrounded and attached to a combination of



Fig. 6. Juan Batlle Planas, *Radiografía paranoica* (Paranoid X-ray), 1937, tempera on paper, 26.4 X 34.8 cm. MALBA-Costantini Collection, Buenos Aires. Photographer: Adrián Rocha Novoa

medical paraphernalia that elicits a variety of responses: frazzled lines emanate from his brain, an image of a hanged man appears to the right. A variety of stands, wires, cords, and devices engulf him. The image is a look at the human body and psyche being investigated in a clinical manner. In another work, the X-ray reveals three distorted skeletons (Fig. 3). The central figure balances on one leg, its other is obscured by an amorphous pool of red ochre, perhaps an indication of blood and amputation. The figure is flanked by two skeletal onlookers, or possibly attendants. On the left stands a white figure shaded by a patch of light blue; its legs are also covered by the red pool. On the right stands an emaciated red skeleton with a distorted skull and jagged teeth. The figure's red arm adjoins with a large blue microscope shape with three blocky slides stacked atop one another like dresser drawers. Another work in the *Paranoid X-ray* series shows disembodied double skulls hanging from a pole that appears to carry some type of intravenous bag (Fig. 6). The figures and skulls surrounding it have a mutated and not-quite human quality. Against their black-shaped backgrounds, these scenes take on a nightmarish quality and reflect fears of death and terror during a period of government sponsored violence and suppression. Through X-rays Batlle Planas attempts to reach the depths of the suppressed human spirit.<sup>33</sup>

If the *Paranoid X-ray* series shares a tone of disillusionment that was rampant among the artistic and literary circles of Buenos Aires, the work also correlates with a pop culture phenomenon which was broadly affecting Argentina's urban public: a rising popular interest in technology and its mythic possibilities. In her book *Una modernidad periférica: Buenos Aires 1920 y 1930* (A Peripheral Modernity: Buenos Aires 1920 and 1930), historian and theorist Beatriz Sarlo refers to this particular phenomenon as the "knowledge of the poor"—a concept she uses to contextualize the work of journalist, novelist, and science fiction writer Roberto Arlt (1900-1942). In particular, Sarlo highlights the unique blend of popular and elite sensibilities found within Arlt's writing, insisting that the technological references in his work appealed to a diverse readership. She explains that while intellectuals appreciated Arlt's abilities to play with language, to create meaningful neologisms, and to fluidly cross between literary genres,

...Arlt's fictions can [also] be read from the perspective of one who possesses no prestigious knowledge (a familiarity with foreign languages, literature in its original versions, of traditional arts and letters) and resorts to street knowledge: the literature [sold] in cheap editions and pirated translations, techniques learned in manuals or mass-circulated magazines, [in] the catalogues for appliances and machines ...

[and in] the centers of occultism. Practices and a discourse in search of legitimacy that, more than competing with the consecrated, creates its own circuit: there are the popular inventors (of which there were hundreds during the period) who pursue until death the discovery that [makes flowers live eternally.]”<sup>34</sup>

For Sarlo, “knowledge of the poor” refers specifically to technical aspects of Argentine popular culture—a knowledge circulated by the print media rather than academic institutions. In later writings, she defines “knowledge of the poor” more succinctly as “...an approximate and popularized version of scientific discourse, particularly of chemistry and physics, although a discourse of almost fantastic quality on psychology (normality and madness), on physiology (health and sickness, alternative medicine, etc.), on astronomy, and on geography, among other sciences, can be found.”<sup>35</sup> Sarlo bases her assessments of popular culture on her extensive studies of the major newspapers *El Mundo* and *Crítica* (which had the largest daily circulation in Argentina—over 100,000 copies daily during the 1920s), pointing out that a substantial amount of the news content focused on scientific and pseudo-scientific discoveries of the 1920s and 1930s. She also indicates the growing circulation of how-to manuals and radio communications clubs in Buenos Aires—phenomena which she uses to further characterize Arlt’s writing as a series of negotiations between the personal and the popular imagination.

In her view of popular culture Sarlo ascribes a range of culturally symbolic and political functions to the “knowledge of the poor.” Three are pertinent for considering how Batlle Planas’ art relates to transformations occurring in Argentine popular culture. First, she argues that “knowledge of the poor” provided a way for Argentina’s city-dwellers to cope with the trauma of industrialization and the rapid transformation in labor, transportation, and communication taking place in Buenos Aires during the first three decades of the twentieth century. “The impact of these transformations,” writes Sarlo, “had a subjective dimension that unfolded within a relatively brief period of time: in effect, men and women could remember a city different from the one in which they were living. And, additionally, that different city was the backdrop to their infancy and adolescence: the biographical past underscored what had been lost (or what had been gained) in the presence of the modern city.”<sup>36</sup> For those sensing their own displacement in the city, an awareness of technology and science (both real and fictitious) offered a means of adapting to their urban environment. In this way Batlle Planas’ *Paranoid X-ray* series does not merely present a set of visual absurdities but evidences the difficult process of cultural adaptation.

Second, the “knowledge of the poor” represents the formation of a

collectivity in a nation that had hitherto been culturally and economically divided. Film critic Gustavo Sosa-Pujato explains that “until 1930, there were actually two ‘Argentine’ cultures coexisting side by side—one ‘creole,’ that is, grounded in the country’s ancient Hispano-Indian heritage, and another arising from the massive entry of Italian and Spanish settlers in the late nineteenth century, hence, ‘immigrant.’”<sup>37</sup> Under the topic of technology, however, the interests of immigrants and citizens, the elite and the marginalized, intersected. According to Sarlo, non-elites were drawn to technology and its fads because they fulfilled the “dual function of maintaining the myth of upward mobility and of compensating for the lack of symbolic capital...acquired through formal education.”<sup>38</sup> She specifically cites the barrage of news stories spotlighting amateur inventors, for the ways they place emphasis on craftsmanship and inventiveness as a path to fame and fortune, regardless of education, class, gender, or family heritage. And she suggests that this material held particular value for immigrants seeking alternate strategies of assimilation.<sup>39</sup> In the case of Batlle Planas, himself a Spanish immigrant and a high school drop-out, the artist could then integrate himself into the urban community through his technological and surreal imaginings without necessarily participating in Argentina’s fine arts academies and elite artistic salons.

Third, scientific and superstitious thought were not irreconcilably at odds with one another within the context of the “knowledge of the poor.” Expanding on Sarlo’s analysis, historian Mariano Ben Plotkin explains that a “technical imagination revamped old obsessions such as healing, telepathy or communication with the dead into a new language. All these well-worn themes could now be expressed and legitimized through the discourse of science.”<sup>40</sup> Similarly, through the journalistic writings of “Freudiano” and Pichon-Rivière, psychology and pseudo-psychology became a fundamental component of the “knowledge of the poor” in the 1930s. In this way, I believe Batlle Planas may be viewed as a cultural interlocutor: someone who synthesized material concerning international and local subjects, his personal psychology, and the exterior world, to create works that would resonate with his contemporaries and his public. Through the *Paranoid X-ray* series, Batlle Planas presents a fatalistic vision concerning technology and its potentially hazardous impact on mankind. And while Batlle Planas’ artistic expressions are idiosyncratic, they correlate to popular disgruntlement with the city’s modernizations and the fierce political transformations of the 1930s.

#### *Pseudo-Scientific Solutions: Orgone Energy and Transformative Vision*

While the effects of print media and popular culture on Batlle Planas’ works from the 1930s have been understudied, art historians Guillermo Whitelow

and Jacqueline Barnitz have suggested that his *Tibetan* series, begun after 1940, drew inspiration from popular news reports on Wilhelm Reich and the discovery of orgonomy. Reich, a trained psychoanalyst and student of Sigmund Freud, became a leading proponent of the Viennese “sex-political movement” in the late 1920s. Throughout his life he continued to develop a revolutionary psychoanalytic understanding of human sexuality, which ultimately conflicted with Freudian beliefs. Fusing radical Marxist politics with Freudian psychology, Reich began to theorize about the existence of a universal life energy that he called the “orgone”—a



Fig. 7. Juan Batlle Planas, *El Tibet*, 1942, tempera, 30.5 x 22.5 cm. Collection of Dr. Raul Cuello, Buenos Aires. Photographer: H.O. Casenave

reference to the words “organism” and “orgasm,” since he believed that orgone energy could be transmitted and balanced through sexual intercourse. He also became an outspoken critic of Adolf Hitler and the National Socialists. In 1933, he published his controversial book *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, which reasoned that public acceptance of fascism and authoritarian rule was the result of a complex

set of sexual repression and libidinal desires. The book became internationally renowned and a reference point for those seeking to understand the rise of fascism in Europe and Latin America in the 1930s. In 1939 Reich fled to the United States to escape the Nazi regime and to continue his research on orgone energy. But he came under increasing public criticism there as he promoted orgone energy as a source for physical healing and controlling the environment. According to Barnitz, Batlle Planas was particularly drawn to Reich's theories that "centered around cosmic particles that could be concentrated in an 'orgone box' as a source for cancer therapy and cosmic energy...."<sup>41</sup> Through his reading on Reich, Batlle Planas became deeply concerned about harmoniously balancing energy; he writes, "Energetic states are states for which there must be given much care, since if they are spent or if they are debilitated, they are very difficult to repair."<sup>42</sup>

Given his interest in Reich's work it is very possible that the *Tibetan* series is an illustration of orgone energy at work. The series depicts various crystalline beings usually identified as prophets or messengers, floating or carrying fantastical objects within an empty landscape. Many of the figures have unusual characteristics that draw attention to the human senses; some appear to have colored bubbles emanating from their eyes while others such as the central figure in *El Tibet* (1942) have enormous projecting ears and make unusual pointing gestures with twig-like fingers (Fig. 7). In most of these works the mysterious figures direct the viewers' attention towards stones and boulders which may represent condensed forms of energy. In his notes Batlle Planas cites Reich when he contends that "Matter is energy in conflict.... Matter is an accident of energy. But there should be systems of penetration, of vibration." In this way the figures in *El Tibet* may be struggling to penetrate and harness the energetic powers Batlle Planas and Reich believed were locked in nature. This reading may also help us decipher works such as *Tres Personajes* (*Three Characters*, alternatively titled *The Message*, Fig. 8).<sup>43</sup> Here two crystalline cocoon forms appear coupled; on the left, folded arms form an "X" which may represent the scientific unknown, as in the term "X-ray." On the right, a bearded and more fully-formed figure points to a glowing red crystal at his feet and offers a black crystal with his other hand. The gesture suggests the figure is transmitting a message of healing as he functions as a conduit of energy between figures and stones. If Batlle Planas truly believed that matter is simply an accident and that all aspects of the universe are forms of energy, then the boundaries between painter, painting, and viewer are no longer concrete. In fact, Batlle Planas's writing suggests that the crystalline figures are not simply recurring characters in his paintings, but that the artist considers himself a kind of crude diamond. In an interview with Ruth Benzacar he stated, "I feel most connected to the mineral aspect. I prefer to maintain myself in crude form,



Fig. 8. Juan Batlle Planas, *Tres Personajes* (Three Characters; alternatively titled *The Message*), not dated, Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Gift of Arte BA Foundation, 2007. Photographer: Rick Hall

I don't want anyone to look for facets to polish me. It's the only way to maintain feeling like a carbon of 2,000,000 years.<sup>244</sup> Considering that Batlle Planas believed in his own condensed ageless energy, his paintings may be considered versions of orgone accumulators meant to heal and transform those who view them.

Throughout Batlle Planas' *oeuvre* we discover scenes where the science, spirituality, and psychology are constantly melding—a mode of thinking that combines disparate elements, much like the daily newspaper, and reveals the marvelous and surreal within the gaps of scientific theory and technology. In particular his collages, the *Paranoid X-ray* series, and his *Tibetan* series, encapsulate the diverse ways the artist utilized material from popular science and the daily news to create art that resonated with many middle-class and working-class people living in Buenos Aires in the 1930s and the 1940s. His *Paranoid X-rays* and his collages reference a sense of cynicism and irrationality that many Argentines felt as they encountered unemployment and political unrest. Under these circumstances, scientific and pseudo-scientific discoveries became key episodes that fed into a wider

technical imagination where scientists, artists, and the public projected their anxieties and hopes. Batlle Planas was exposed to a confluence of sources through the mass media. And, in turn, he created a surrealist art that spoke to the popular imagination of Buenos Aires and that attempted to express and possibly solve the problems of his time.

For their inspiration and assistance with this project, my sincere thanks go to Professors Jacqueline Barnitz, Andrea Giunta, and Linda Henderson; also to Gabriela Francone, Marcela Roberts, Marius Riveiro Villar, and the family of Juan Batlle Planas—especially Giselda Batlle, Juan Batlle Planas, and Silvia Batlle Planas. An anonymous reader provided editorial suggestions for which I am also very grateful.

1 Juan Batlle Planas was born in 1911 in Catalonia, Spain and moved to Buenos Aires with his family in 1913. At age fourteen, he dropped out of school and devoted himself to becoming an artist and poet; he was largely self-trained but received some guidance from his uncle, the sculptor and print-maker José Planas Casas. Batlle Planas rarely left Buenos Aires, but associated with older, well-known intellectuals and artists such as Xul Solar (1887-1963) and Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986). Eventually he created his own workshop in 1949, where he taught a new generation of artists about surrealist painting, psychology, and mysticism.

2 Gabriela Nouzeille and Graciela Montaldo, eds., *The Argentina Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 291.

3 The artist's retrospective, "Batlle Planas: Una imagen persistente" (Batlle Planas: A Persistent Image) held at *Fundación Alon* in Buenos Aires in 2006, and its accompanying catalogue by Gabriela Francone and Rosa María Ravera, stands as the most comprehensive study on Juan Batlle Planas' life and works to date. While the catalogue aptly highlights his contributions to poetry, collage, painting, and public murals, the catalogue essays and back matter tend to dwell on comparative analyses between the Surrealist movements in France and Argentina, and not on an analysis of individual works.

4 For instance, art historian Marcelo Pacheco identified the *Paranoid X-rays* series as "one of the key works of the early phase of his career," stating that he soon after produced inferior works of "anecdotal Surrealism." See his essay on Argentine art in Edward J. Sullivan, ed., *Latin American Art in the Twentieth Century* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), 288.

5 Guillermo Whitelaw, *Obras de Juan Batlle-Planas*. (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Ruth Benzacar, 1981), 40.

6 Robin Walz, *Pulp Surrealism: Insolent Popular Culture in Early Twentieth-Century Paris* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 6.

7 Walz, *Pulp Surrealism*, 4.

8 Historian Arthur P. Whitaker notes that during this period "the great majority of Argentines were at least literate. The literacy rate of 85 percent at the end of [the 1930s]—the highest in Latin America except for Uruguay, where it was about the same—had been raised to that level from an abysmal 22

percent in 1869.” Whitaker also indicates that “the country’s newspaper circulation was...the largest in Latin America and from two to three times as large as that of much more populous Brazil and Mexico.” See Mark Falcoff and Ronald H. Dolkart, eds., *Prologue to Peron: Argentina in Depression and War, 1930-1943* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1975), 14-17.

9 Sarlo’s term, “*saberes del pobre*,” has also been translated as “poor people’s knowledge” and (by Sarlo herself) as “lore of the poor.” None of these translations (and perhaps not even the original Spanish phrasing) suitably hold the diverse concepts Sarlo attributes to the term. Furthermore, “knowledge of the poor” may be misleading in that it seems to anchor a set of popular cultural phenomena (which bridged socio-economic classes) to a singular class: the impoverished. Nonetheless, I believe Sarlo’s term is useful as it references a body of knowledge that was widely accepted by lower and middle class Argentines and which was developed outside of elite and government-sanctioned education.

10 Guillermo de Torre, “Neodadaísmo y Superrealismo,” *Proa* II, 6 (January 1925).

11 For a further discussion of linguistic concerns with the term “surrealismo,” See Aldo Pellegrini, *Panorama de la pintura argentina contemporánea*. (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1967), 122 n. 2.

12 Gabriela Francone and Rosa María Ravera, *Batlle Planas: una imagen persistente*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Fundación Alon, 2006, 38.

13 *Proa* (1924-1926) and *Martin Fierro* (1924-1927) were two of the best-known avant-garde publications in Buenos Aires in the 1920s. Both were produced and edited by poets, writers, and artists of the so-called Florida group—a set of intellectuals who frequented the fashionable cafes and shops of Buenos Aires’s main street; contributors included Jorge Luis Borges, Oliverio Girondo, Xul Solar, Evar Mendez, Roberto Mariani, Rojas Paz, and several others. See John King, *Sur: A Study of the Argentine Literary Journal and its Role in the Development of Culture, 1931-1970*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 19-35.

14 Salvador Dalí, “The Rotting Donkey,” in Haim Finkelstein, ed., *The Collected Writings of Salvador Dalí* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 223.

15 Francone et al, *Batlle Planas: una imagen persistente*, 42. “La irracionalidad es una fuerza, un estado de la energía,...[que] puede informar del mundo y del espacio con una solvencia mucho más importante de lo que hasta ahora he hecho lo ciencia. Con esto no me declaro anti-cientificista sino ojalá la ciencia llegue a eso y mucho más, pero por ahora no lo ha logrado” (translation mine).

16 While other Spanish speakers may translate the title “Victima de sus ‘nervos’” simply as “Victim of her ‘nerves,’” given the central image of a woman and the textual reference to the “sterility of the woman,” I have deliberately translated it as “Victim of his/her/their ‘Nerves’” to capture the indeterminate meaning of the possessive pronoun “sus” and to suggest the possibility that the “victim” here is not necessarily victimized by his/her own nerves but also can be understood as the victim of someone else’s nerves.

17 When he first exhibited these collages in 1939, Batlle Planas called them “montages,” defining the term in the catalogue as follows: “Montage: exquisite word...full of tears, cruel action...illusion. [It is a] paranoid critical examination of man’s action...by where I approach reconciliation and value all the things that are of the man,...the woman,...the child.” Cited in Francone et al, *Batlle Planas: una imagen persistente*, 72 (translation mine). Although the term “montage” is generally used to describe a film technique, Batlle Planas may have used it as another reference to Dalí since the technique was used extensively in *The Andalusian Dog*.

18 *Jornada* newspaper was first published in 1931 and served as a reconstituted version of *Crítica*, a popular news publication of the 1910s and 1920s that the military dictatorship forced to close in

1930. Mariano Ben Plotkin, "Tell Me Your Dreams: Psychoanalysis and Popular Culture in Buenos Aires, 1930-1950," *The Americas*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (Apr. 1999): 601-629.
- 19 Clifford Krauss, "Buenos Aires Journal; Doctor, Why Do I Keep Dreaming of Argentina?" *New York Times*, May 29, 1998. Available online at the archives of [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com). Mariano Ben Plotkin further explains that the series, called *Freud al alcance de todos* was published by Tor publishing house and was authored by "Dr. J. Gómez Nerea," who was actually the Peruvian avant-garde poet Alberto Hidalgo. See Mariano Ben Plotkin, *Freud in the Pampas: The emergence and development of a psychoanalytic culture in Argentina*. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001), 43.
- 20 Julia Rodriguez, *Civilizing Argentina: Science, Medicine, and the Modern State* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 74.
- 21 Rodriguez, *Civilizing Argentina*, 105.
- 22 An early X-ray image of the uterus can be found in an Argentine medical study by Jose M. Jorge, "Coxalgia histérica," *Revista de la Asociacion Medica Argentina* 32 (1920): 18-29, plate opposite p. 80. This citation comes from Sander L. Gilman, et al, *Hysteria Beyond Freud* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 392, which reproduces the image.
- 23 For more information on Pichon-Rivière's philosophy and his achievements, see Hugo Vezzetti, "From the Psychiatric Hospital to the Street: Enrique Pichon Rivière and the Diffusion of Psychoanalysis in Argentina," in Mariano Ben Plotkin, ed., *Argentina on the Couch: Psychiatry, State, and Society, 1880 to the Present* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico, 2003), 141-174.
- 24 Mariano Ben Plotkin, *Freud in the Pampas*, 102. As an art patron, Pichon- Rivière is often recognized for his role in hosting the first "Grupo Madi" exhibition in his apartment in 1946. He also took a deep interest in the poet Isidore Ducasse (1846-1870), known as "Conde de Lautréamont," publishing several biographical articles on him in the 1940s. Lautréamont had been relatively obscure until the poetry review *Literature* (edited by Andre Breton and Philippe Soupault) published excerpts of his work in Paris in 1919. The nearly psychopathic violence contained in Lautréamont's poetry, along with the mystery surrounding his premature death, established him as an icon of the French Surrealist movement. Batlle Planas likewise shared an interest in Lautréamont's work, identifying himself with the tragic poet. This connection emerges in drawings, such as *Verdadero retrato del Conde de Lautréamont hecho por Juan Batlle Planas quien fue su contemporaneo y amigo* (True Portrait of Conde de Lautréamont made by Juan Batlle Planas who was his contemporary and friend, 1942)—one of two imaginative portraits; the other is dedicated to Pichon- Rivière.
- 25 For more on the effects of X-rays on artists in Europe and the U.S.A, see Linda Henderson's *Duchamp in Context: Science and Technology in the "Large Glass" and Related Works* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), and Henderson's "X-Rays and the Quest for Invisible Reality in the Art of Kupka, Duchamp, and the Cubists," in *Art Journal*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (Winter 1988): 323-340; and her article "Francis Picabia, Radiometers, and X-Rays in 1913," in *Art Bulletin*, Vol. 71, No. 1 (March 1989): 114-123. Further information about X-rays and art can be found in Battyann Holtzman Kelves, *Naked to the Bone: Medical Imaging in the Twentieth Century* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 121-141.
- 26 The science of X-ray crystallography was first established by German physicist Max von Laue (1897-1960) who won a Noble Prize in Physics in 1914 for his discovers concerning the ways crystals diffract X-rays. By the 1930s, the methods of X-ray crystallography were used to study and understand chemical bonds in small organic molecules.
- 27 Falcoff, et al, *Prologue to Peron*, 24.
- 28 For more, see Dwight Heath, "Review [Untitled]" in the *Hispanic American Historical Review*, Vol.

52, No 3 (Aug, 1972): 489.

29 Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, *X-ray of the Pampa*, trans. Alain Swietlicki (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 198.

30 Estrada, 361.

31 One witness to Uruburu's coup recalls hiding in the basement with his family as cavalymen randomly killed men, women, and children they encountered in Buenos Aires' streets. Marguerite Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 95. For further discussion of the coup and its leader, see Marvin Goldwert, "The Rise of Modern Militarism in Argentina," *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, Vol. 48, No. 2. (May, 1968), 189-205.

32 Laura Kalmanowiecki, "Origins and Applications of Political Policing in Argentina," *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 27, No. 2, Violence, Coercion, and Rights in the Americas (March 2000): 38.

33 Batlle Planas was not the only visual artist in Buenos Aires' artistic circles utilizing the X-rayed skeleton as a symbol of social critique. By 1928, Batlle Planas' friend and senior, Lino Enea Spilimbergo (1896-1964), had incorporated the X-ray aesthetic into several monotypes. For instance, his *Idilio I* (Idyll I) and *Día Festival* (Festival Day) depict a skeleton-man courting young women whose bodies appear as if X-rayed. Here, the X-ray aesthetic functions as *momento mori* referring to the transience of life and perhaps signaling that the skeleton man is modern-day grim reaper. The X-ray aesthetic also plays a significant role in Spilimbergo's *Breve Historia de Emma* (The Brief Story of Emma, 1936-37), a series of thirty-four monotypes that follow the life of a young woman who becomes a prostitute to support her family. Spilimbergo loosely based the works on a news report describing the suicide of Emma Scarpini, a thirty-year old woman driven to prostitution by dire poverty. In the series, a fictional Emma enters a brothel where she encounters a number of skeleton-men and -women who frighten and attempt to control her. Spilimbergo presents Emma as both a victim of economic and social pressures and a femme fatale—alluring and dangerous. His X-ray aesthetic functions both to symbolize death and to eroticize, likely playing on the popular portrayal of X-rays used (by men) to see through clothing. For more on Spilimbergo's *Brief History of Emma* series, see Diana Beatriz Wechsler, *La vida de Emma en el Taller de Spilimbergo* (Buenos Aires: Fundación OSDE, 2006), 11-46.

34 Beatriz Sarlo, *Una modernidad periférica: Buenos Aires 1920 y 1930* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Nueva Visión, 1988), 55-56. "En verdad, las ficciones arltianas podrían ser leídas desde la perspectiva de alguien que no posee saberes prestigiosos (los de las lenguas extranjeras, de la literatura en sus versiones originales, de la cultura tradicional y letrada) y recurre a los saberes callejeros: la literatura en ediciones baratas y traducciones piratadas, la técnica aprendida en manuales o revistas de divulgación, los catálogos de aparatos y máquinas, ...los centros de ocultismos. Prácticas y discurso en busca de una legitimación que, más que competir con los consagrados, crean su propio circuito: allí están los inventores populares (de los que había cientos en el período)...que persigue hasta su muerte el descubrimiento que haga posible la rosa metalizada" (translation mine). Sarlo's last reference, "la rosa metalizada" (the metalized rose) refers specifically to Roberto Arlt's novel *Seven Madmen* (1929), which follows the life of Remo Erdosain, a fictitious crack-pot inventor who experiments in metallurgy and struggles to permanently revive a rose.

35 Beatriz Sarlo, "In Pursuit of the Popular Imaginary: From Sentimentalism to Technical Skill" in *Poetics Today: Loci of Enunciation and Imaginary Constructions: The Case of (Latin) America*, Vol. 15, No 4, (Winter 1994): 574. This article represents a short English adaptation of the arguments she elaborates further in her book, *The Technical Imagination: Argentine Culture's Modern Dreams* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), originally published as *La imaginación técnica: Sueños modernos de la cultura argentina*

(Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 1992).

36 Sarlo, *Una modernidad periférica*, 17. "...El impacto de estas transformaciones tiene una dimensión subjetiva que se despliega en un arco de tiempo relativamente breve: en efecto, hombres y mujeres pueden recordar una ciudad diferente a aquella en la que están viviendo. Y además esa ciudad diferente fue el escenario de la infancia o la adolescencia: el pasado biográfico subraya lo que se ha perdido (o lo que se ha ganado) en el presente de la ciudad moderna" (translation mine).

37 Mark Falcoff, et al, *Prologue to Peron*, 136.

38 Sarlo, "In Pursuit of the Popular Imaginary," 574.

39 Sarlo, *Technical Imagination: Argentine Culture's Modern Dreams*, 7.

40 Mariano Ben Plotkin, "Tell Me Your Dreams: Psychoanalysis and Popular Culture in Buenos Aires, 1930-1950," in *The Americas*, Vol 55, No 4. (Apr. 1999): 610.

41 Jacqueline Barnitz, *Twentieth Century Art of Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 106.

42 Francone et al, *Battle Planas: una imagen persistente*, 42. "Los estados energéticos son estados que hay que saber cuidar mucho porque si se gastan o se debilitan son muy difíciles de reparar." (translation mine)

43 This work is referred to as *The Message* in Dawn Ades, et al, *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era, 1820-1980* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 238.

44 Francone et al, *Battle Planas: una imagen persistente*, 53.