

Preface by Naomi Klein

At the start of this century, Argentina was living through a wrenching upheaval that locals called “el saqueo” – the looting. Like in a giant bank heist, everything of value suddenly flooded out of the country: banks loaded their cash reserves onto planes and sent them to foreign accounts; young Argentines lined up outside Spanish and Italian embassies applying for passports and work permits; Argentina’s oil fields, roadways and water systems had already been sold to foreign conglomerates. The country felt like a once-luxurious car that had been stripped down to its shell, left on blocks in a back alley.

It was in the midst of this great hemorrhaging that Gotan Project released “La Revancha del Tango”. Audiences around the world were euphoric but in Buenos Aires, where I was living at the time, the response was, at first, restrained. The country had already lost so much. Now even tango – the quintessential Argentine art form – was being reinvented outside its borders, in Paris no less. The restraint did not last long. By late 2002, the irresistible, hallucinogenic sounds of *Época* and *Santa María (del Buen Ayre)* was wafting from the open doors and windows of the coolest bars and restaurants in San Telmo and Palermo Viejo. The city, starting its slow, halting recovery, embraced a new soundtrack.

Besides, there was always something incongruous about viewing tango through a nationalistic lens. It is an art form born of exile, migration and the crossing of boundaries. In Buenos Aires and Montevideo, tango was port music, smuggled music, a dangerous liaison between African rhythms that came off slave ships and European ballroom dances that spilled, with immigrants, off ocean liners. Bastard child from the beginning, tango was condemned as debauched by Argentina’s elites, who prided themselves on living in the “Paris of Latin America.” Tango only became chic in Buenos Aires after it made yet another ocean voyage, to the actual Paris, in the early 1900s, where it took dance clubs by storm.

Gotan Project represents the latest installment in the tumultuous, transformative dialogue between Paris and Buenos Aires. In the magical hands of Philippe Cohen Solal, Eduardo Makaroff and Christoph H. Müller it is no longer port music, but the sound of the transatlantic flight and the lonely airport lounge, the bandoneon through a laptop. It also captures the spirit of boomerang migration, of a generation of Latin Americans who have returned to the European countries that their grandparents fled a hundred years ago, exiles from nations of exiles.

It is this state of a reality in shards that Prisca Lobjoy’s photographs capture so perfectly in the book you are holding. These photos are far more than tour pictures: they are portraits of music in motion. Like Lobjoy’s films, they are inextricable from the Gotan experience, while succeeding as art in their own right. Each still captures, on some level, the feeling and texture of tango – melancholy, restless sleep, seedy elegance – as well as the distinctive sound of muffled revolution that is Gotan. As she has done with her album art, videos, films and live projections, Lobjoy’s photographs add another artistic layer to the already multi-dimensional work of the Gotan Project: music, dance, theater, film, video. In a band where melodies come in paragraphs, assuming the familiarity and impact of lyrics, these frozen moments fit right in.

“I do not believe in the frontiers that, according to literature’s customs officers, separate the forms”. So wrote Eduardo Galeano, the people’s historian of Latin America and serial transgressor of borders. The thrilling experiment known as Gotan Project shares this defiant agnosticism about borders – both those that separate nationalities, and those that segregate artistic forms.

Other attempts to re-contextualize tango have failed because they merely lift its surface, playing dress-up in its costumes, tourists at the carnival. Gotan Project, in sharp contrast, grows out of the roots of tango, roots in the experience of uprootedness. And this is why Buenos Aires could not resist Gotan Project, even in the midst of the saqueo. Because this music was not a subtraction, but a genuine addition. Like tango itself, Gotan Project has the soul of the smuggler. With “Carnet de Viajes” we have the great pleasure of being smuggled along on the voyage.

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