

## Performative Memorial Sites and Resistance in Argentina

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As Reyes Mate says, genocide “is not only a death factory but a plan to forget.” This sinister Plan, according to Vidal-Naquet, consists of “the denial of a murder within a murder,” with the ultimate aim of totally annihilating a certain community, ethnic group, or social movement by erasing any traces of memory. But the obliteration of all memories is never achieved. That is why it is crucial for us to ask how those who take on the task of reversing this legacy can ensure that memory will endure, and what types of memory they propose.

In this essay, I intend to examine some interventions in the public sphere—in the current Argentinean post-dictatorship (the examples are from Buenos Aires, as a sample of what takes place in the country)—that function as effective resistance strategies that make it impossible for a genocidal project to erase memory successfully. These practices are meant to work, in the present, through the gaps left by genocide (to show that, rather than a past to be forgotten, genocide is a presence that has to be dealt with) by incorporating strategies coming out of the arts. I see this activism as a shift away from the political activism during the 1970s (at that time, denunciation and confrontation called upon the discursive via slogans, rallies, graffiti, and such). Even though these political approaches still take place, they do so in a more tangential way. The most recent movements have been building a cultural memory, as Mieke Bal points out:

The memorial presence of the past takes many forms and serves many purposes, ranging from conscious recall to unreflected reemergence, from nostalgic longing for what is lost to polemical use of the past to reshape the present. The interaction between present and past that is the stuff of cultural memory is, however, the product of collective agency rather than the result of psychic or historical accident. . . . [C]ultural recall . . . [is] something that you actually perform. . . . We can see how this collective agency works if we examine a few of these interventions.

*The silhouettes* sketched by these demonstrators have a strong impact in an urban space: they make the *desaparecidos* visible. The chalk lines made by the

police around a body are erased once their investigation of the crime scene has been completed and the body has been identified; the chalk outlines destined to symbolize the disappeared make up the body instead. These figures not only refute the claim of the dictatorship as they are neither dead nor alive, but rather disappeared. They also reverse it: the missing have been murdered and come back in order to stay. They are reproduced on facades, sidewalks, walls and in demonstrations, where people remember the missing.

One of several events taking place in Buenos Aires each March (a month in which Argentina commemorates the military coup of March 24, 1976) is the intervention organized in San Telmo, Buenos Aires, to remember the *desaparecidos* at the *campo* in that neighborhood. In 2001, I took part in this act (which changes every year) as a former detainee-disappeared. The event started in Plaza Dorrego and ends at the ruins of the camp, which was destroyed in 1977. It lasts all day. In the morning, all that was needed was the set-up at the plaza so that every neighbor, including children, could make silhouettes. Once they were cut out, the participants paste a biography and photo of the disappeared on each silhouette's chest, held from behind by a stick.

This flat figure reveals a *desaparecido*, the gap that his or her kidnapped life has created in the community. What is most striking is the connection established between the missing and those who "hold" them. While the disappeared is the main character wandering around the neighborhood, the citizen becomes the support without which the shadow would not be able to walk. A connection is thus established between the disappeared biography and that of the living, whose existence is now marked by the absent one.

The march starts at sunset and its first stop is on the corner of a little plaza before two walls with the names of those disappeared in the neighborhood. Somebody reads the names out loud and a choir responds: "Present." Candles are lit at this point (a staging that brings to mind a religious procession and gives it a new meaning), while well-known chants are heard ("Just like the Nazis, just like Vietnam, wherever you go we'll be searching for you . . .").

Once in the area of the *campo*, the silhouettes, with their names and biographies, not the anonymous human beings thrown into the river by the dictatorship, are distributed. Their presence starts to fill the space. The mound covering the ruins of the *Club Atlético* is now populated by "identified disappeared," a ghostly crowd that, from the *campo*, poses questions to those on the sidewalk, who become witnesses of their existence. In this way, the strategy of the massive wipe out and the secrecy behind the forced disappearances are symbolically reversed. Afterward, the neighbors yield the floor to us survivors, and listen to our testimonies. We speak in a space that, with this public act, has put on stage what was denied by the regime. And this "staging" remains. Anyone driving or walking on *Paseo Colón* Avenue in the San Telmo neighborhood will run into a street sign reading "Stop." This is an

artistic installation by the *Grupo de Arte Callejero* (GAC/“Street Art Group”). It asks the passerby to look at the sign on one of the columns, which says: “This was the site of the Athletic Club Concentration Camp.” Those going around without paying attention to the city’s secret map will have no choice but to wonder what the signs mean. It might be annoying to these witnesses, but they will not be able to ignore this larger-than-life message.

These actions pay homage, not only to the dead, but to those alive as well, relating to the tragic past through extrapolated cultural rites and traces of cultural traditions that humankind has maintained in order to name that which cannot be named. These rites emanate from a democratic tradition originating, according to Paul Virilio, in the Greek theater: “[Democracy] was born from these people who were nobody, but who assumed the right to comment upon and analyze amongst themselves, what was happening to the heroes.”

From Virilio’s point of view, the choir is a group of “nobodies” who discuss and give an opinion; that is, they practice an intellectual critique. But in the Greek choir, there was also a mix of dance, song, criticism, and performance, just like in the events described above, in which several forms of art combine. In this contemporary event, the choir’s performance includes a *murga*, a band of street musicians and dancers (a traditional form of popular celebration prohibited during the dictatorship), as well as songs, figures, and oral testimonies. This activity occurs on the street, a space regained after many struggles.

During the “ritual” of the main demonstration that takes place on March 24, the families of the disappeared and members of human rights organizations hold up a long piece of cloth with silk-screened photos of the missing. These pictures are mostly black and white photo IDs stamped onto a fabric that is several blocks long. Although the idea of this intervention is not a funeral march, the demonstration appears as a procession that carries thousands of dead on its shoulders. The “flag” moves forward, clutched in the hands of several generations displaying flat, life-size faces, with the names of the *desaparecidos* in alphabetical order.

Every photo is marked by death itself, because they represent a fixed instant that will never come back. In some cases, these pictures are the only traces left by many of those 30,000 lives that were cut short. They reveal, as Nelly Richard points out, how far the abuse of power can go. It starts with the compilation of personal data (that is, the IDs, with their series numbers, destined to control and depersonalize), and ends up with murder. In other words, these enigmatic photos reveal an authority that mutated from controller to exterminator. Many of the photographs show these young people out of context, often dressed in a manner that does not reveal their real lifestyles (wearing ties, well-groomed hair, clothes that the “rebel generation” was not accustomed to wearing). What emotions do all these features generate within

the procession, as well as within the community who is watching these photos pass?

Cultural critic Walter Benjamin offers an answer in his discussion of the role of the artist: "What we must demand from the photographer is the ability to put such a caption beneath his picture that will rescue it from the ravages of modishness and confer upon it a revolutionary use value." Instead of captions, we have a ceremonial frame that gives meaning to the photos. Without this frame, the images would be just beautiful icons of an extinguished past. Literary theorist Susan Sontag warns us that photography embellishes, even when it does not intend to. Do these pictures, emblems of a youth that was left frozen, embellish the horror? Sontag further cautions that the embellishment effect carries the risk of depoliticizing. Even in this case, where the epic dimension of genocide seems to counteract the danger of beatification? (One must bear in mind that these pictures are almost the only proofs that these people existed.) Yes, even in this case. We can always pose the question about how the *desaparecidos* are displayed, and what effect that *mise-en-scène* produces. The answer might be, following Benjamin: it depends on how these marches are framed. This event is surrounded by a never-ending broadcasting of movies and programs by the official state television, radio programs, and related cultural events. Within such a context, the ceremony acquires a hermeneutic potency that the non-official TV channels and newspapers (except a couple of them) try, with no success, to minimize. Moreover, many citizens who want to participate in a human rights demonstration, at least once a year, freely join in. The government supports the march (even if its decision of declaring March 24 a national holiday has been criticized because workers and students are not able to practice memory within their work place). Considering that this demonstration attracts larger crowds every year, and that more young people participate each time, it is evident that (beyond the divisions within the "organisms" and the rise of parallel demonstrations), the march is destined to confirm and consolidate the value of memory.

The *escrache* type of demonstration was created in 1996 by H.I.J.O.S. (acronym for Children [of the disappeared] for Identity and Justice against Oblivion and Silence) to unmask the role played by the genocidal military, including religious and civil figures who collaborated with the regime. During an *escrache*, a procession goes around the neighborhood on foot and in trucks, from which megaphones jokingly transmit the actions of those being socially condemned. The telephone number of the person to be "*escrachado*" is also broadcast, so that any citizen can call this perpetrator from a public phone, as recommended. As the event is announced on the radio, the house that metonymically represents the accused is not inhabited that day, but rather is under security when the demonstration time arrives. The intervention evolves into a street party, at which the participants dance and celebrate their action.

Sometimes H.I.J.O.S. places mirrors in front of policemen so they can see themselves and read the words, “Look at yourself and go.” Other performative strategies are used, such as imitating a religious parade in an *escrache* to denounce the active participation of a priest in the genocidal plans (the Catholic Church was involved the planning leading to massive assassinations, mostly “Death Flights”).

The objective of an *escrache* is social justice, but above all, it wants to reestablish community bonds. This is why H.I.J.O.S. does not work alone. Preparations for the *escrache* take weeks, and are carried out in the neighborhood with the people who live there. This includes doing research about the *genocida* (perpetrator of genocide) being “outed.” Going back to Virilio, any “nobody” can be transformed into a critical social actor, whose actions and demands have real effects—in this case, social rejection. The culminating act happens at the front of the house of the accused. It is marked in red ink with the words: “In this house a murderer lives.” It is evident that, after the *escrache*, nobody will be able to say, “I didn’t know that.” This form of demonstration thus attempts to fill up the vacuum left by the law. H.I.J.O.S.’s motto is: “If there is no legal justice, there is social justice.”

On December 19, 2001, President De La Rúa had just declared a new martial law along with the temporary closing of bank accounts. It was his final speech. The following day, he was brought down by a social uprising, led initially by the middle class. In the capital city, after midnight, a crowd took to the streets and went to Plaza de Mayo and the nation’s Congress, banging empty cooking pans that represented their hunger and desperation; although to some, what was really being conveyed was the protesters’ empty pockets. The banging of the pans did not end until the government fell, but at the end of the day, 39 people had been killed by the police. As a response, the GAC and H.I.J.O.S. organized a march through the places where these people had been killed. Each site was marked with the name of the victim and a little altar displaying flowers along the sidewalk, emulating the funerary tradition of the aboriginal peoples. A voice followed the crowd with a loudspeaker:

The purpose of this march is to transform the everyday physical space into a place charged with meaning, dedicated to memory and denunciation; to leave in the city historical traces and to allow each citizen to participate in the constructing of this space of memory. . . . We propose that other groups take over this way of memory preservation and repeat it in every spot where this type of murder has been committed. (Oral testimony, Buenos Aires, 1/20/2001)

That same night, “non-identified” groups destroyed these meaningful markers. Consequentially, it was decided to hold a demonstration every month

and systematically replace the symbolic trace that would be systematically destroyed. This constant confrontation between the marks of the resistance, on the one hand, and the annihilation by power, on the other, is commonplace in Argentina, illustrating that the fight for (re)presentation and for memory of the murders is still in effect.

“*Barrios* for Memory and Justice” is a movement that was created to identify which neighbors had disappeared within each *barrio* (neighborhood). Even though some commemoration plaques had been placed at workplaces and schools, this movement represents a shift in relation to the type of memory proposed. In front of a house or site of a “popular militant’s” disappearance, a testimony is left (a personalized tile) with his or her name along with the dates of their birth and kidnapping. The event of “laying the tile” is held in a public space: the sidewalk. What summons the audience to such an act is the necessity to point out the void left by a murder amidst the collective life. Since the times of State Terror, the main agents of the struggle for truth and justice in Argentina have been the families of the disappeared. What is new about the *Baldosas* (tiles) is that the movement engages the neighbors and ordinary citizens, showing that not only the family is affected, but also the community as a whole. The neighbors let family members decide the contents and the way of commemorating the life of their relative. In these acts, what is mostly underscored is the life of the disappeared and the meaning of the fight that guided their generation. The idea, according to *Barrios*:

Not to reclaim a far away past, but to bring closer (by remembering the missing) the validity of the ideals of a past we do not feel is so far away, a past that is still valid. It is still valid in the ideals of other collective subjects such as *Barrios* (although the methodology is not the same any more) and in the commitment (in this case, to defend human rights).

*Barrios* investigates, facilitates, connects, presents, registers, and disseminates. In this case, the black and white photo that leads the march of March 24 is not privileged. The sidewalk tile is framed by brilliant colors and some pictures are also shown during the “placing event” at times, so that other, more personal traits of these flesh and blood people who are now treated as equals, not as heroes, come to the surface.

“What place does this tile occupy in the lives of the neighbors involved, in the lives of the families of the disappeared, as well as in the lives of those walking on the sidewalk?” I asked *Barrios*’ members. They replied:

We live it as another milestone in our enterprise of rescuing the history of the disappeared. We have to consider that they suffered every possible hardship: human, social, and political, and that their demonizing and stigmatization by the State of Terror is still current. So, we are trying to undo this legacy, and to leave our trace, the tile, which becomes the trace of the vital presence of the disappeared in each

neighborhood. And the mark we leave also marks us. To the family members, the tile means a before and an after. They all mention the relief they feel after the laying of the tile, and how this is taken as an act of justice and historic repair. . . . With respect to the pedestrians, the tile hardly goes unnoticed. When they see one, they feel questioned. We bet on them finding out some more.

From the epic account of collective ceremonies, we pass here to the anecdotes told by friends, companions, relatives, and neighbors standing on the sidewalk. It is a gathering of storytellers who contribute with their personal testimony. Affection and pain for the loss is summoned with humor and music. The passersby come closer to take a look; some neighbors become interested, others might interrupt. But the tile is not interrupted; it remains by the feet of pedestrians who have no other option than to see it, even if they step on it. The tile is resistant, just like the memory of a member of the community who, being absent, occupies a crucial place among the living: a place that is not ghostly anymore. The tiles generate questions to passersby. The media does not mention them, so the extent of the ceremony is measured in terms of those who know or who are told about it. The idea is that these urban markings, these scars, are themselves, storytellers.

These movements in Argentina are, then, recovering a culture of resistance among a population that, until recently, had mostly chosen oblivion and amnesty. But, are these memories of the resistance and/or memories of the horror? Other memorials (walls with the names of the disappeared by the *Plata* river), even if necessary, are most prone to the danger of crystallization. It is in these places where the memories of horror prevail. The “performative memorials,” on the contrary, have the capacity to change again and again, since they are shaped by and for the present. As soon as they are experienced as crystallized rituals, they, paradoxically, cease to exist. In the face of crimes against humanity, societies need to create their own paths for collective remembrance. Through these actions, citizens who participate become, again, agents of resistance able to redefine how to deal with their present, shaped by such sinister past. This is, in my opinion, a crucial way (beyond legal justice provided or not by courts) for communities to work through a legacy of terror.

## RECOMMENDED READINGS

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