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Collective Memory in Action (and in Motion)

The Argentine Case[1]

> *The topography of cities is made of layers of past memories.*
> *Even if not always visible because of the speed of urban life, buildings, corners, tiles, names of squares and streets play their role and, at the same time, point out vacuums or attempt to transmit messages. The city is a space where the multiple and the heterogeneous converge to show, in its streets, individual stories, collective projects, private and public tragedies.*
> —*Memorias en la ciudad*

FOLLOWING REYES MATE, it can be said that genocide "is not only a death factory but a plan to forget." Its ultimate aim is the total annihilation of a certain group—religious, racial, ethnic, or political—through the erasure of all traces of its existence. But total obliteration is never achieved. There are always sectors of the population who remember, not only the dead, but also the cultural *ethos* that this "criminal service" wants to *disappear.*

The way in which communities in Argentina continue to challenge the methodology of forced disappearances is not well known because—as a character in the movie *The Official Story* tells his history teacher—"history is written by the assassins." Testimony, on the other hand, is told by the witness, by a human being who has suffered from certain concrete historical events and wants to inspire others through the elaboration of her/his traumatic scars. In this essay, I will give testimony regarding several practices devoted to the working-through of a sinister legacy; I'll focus on several public interventions where I was a participant, and show how they construct a particular type of memory for society.

Argentina has created, in the aftermath of state terror, an impressive phenomenon that I call symbolic resistance. This achievement is a result of years of collective interventions devoted toward marking the country with echoes of a "past" that resonates as a powerful present. The military regime that ruled the country for almost eight years (the so-called Process of National Reorganization, 1976–1983) condemned 30,000 human beings

to an ambivalent and sinister limbo.[2] These former citizens, mostly activists, were defined by General Jorge Rafael Videla as *desaparecidos*: "They are non-entities, neither dead nor alive." And yet, in spite of this horrific extermination project, thirty-five years after the coup the missing are still sharing the horizon of daily life, a multitude of phantoms surrounding Argentinians with their unavoidable presence.

Grassroots groups have persevered in the demarcation of territories where the "secret" narratives of former activists, men, women, children, workers, and intellectuals are hidden, and in the unmasking of the extermination centers. Since the dictatorship had kidnapped the public space, most of the urban landscape still had to be reclaimed (except for the Plaza de Mayo—"taken over" by the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo since 1977). What I present here are a few examples of how a single city, Buenos Aires, has been able to rewrite its own, tragic (hi)story from the perspective of the victims; how the *desaparecidos* ended up being inscribed in streets, sidewalks, and squares; and how this new topography has been shaped by a new culture (and supported by important sectors of the population, with an impressive participation of the youth), a culture based on the collective rejection of authoritarianism.

Aware that Argentina's tragic heritage had been systematically silenced during the dictatorship, ever since the '70s, women and men have challenged the regime, forming human rights organizations such as the Asamblea Permanente por los Derechos Humanos, Madres de Plaza de Mayo, Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, Familiares de Desaparecidos, Servicio de Paz y Justicia, and others. The very survival of such groups represents a defeat of the leitmotif of terror—and of its political aim, the erasure of agency, so that society is turned into a disciplined mass of obedient subjects.

From the late '90s onwards, the culture of resistance practiced by small but heroic groups flourished with greater strength, after decades of disregard (not many citizens, except for those inscribed in the activist organizations, seemed to care about that "remote past"). It would be beyond the scope of this essay to explain fully how these human rights organizations managed to persist and finally bloom, but I will mention here two cases: H.I.J.O.S. (Children [of the Disappeared] for Identity and Justice, against Oblivion and Silence), which was created in 1995, and Barrios x la Memoria (Neighborhoods for Memory), which started in 2006. These groups, and others like them, incorporate new social actors devoted to uncovering true accounts of recent history. The Children of the Disappeared are related to the *desaparecidos* by family ties, as are most of the

original groups; Barrios, however, are simply neighbors (i.e., people who consider that genocide is a collective legacy to be worked through by the society at large). Their emerging collective voice, one that incorporates larger sectors of the population, represents a continuation of the struggle by other means. Often, these other means are the arts.

I see such activism—even if full of contradictions, clashes, divisions, and endless confrontations—as a shift away from the political activism of the '70s. At that time, denunciation and confrontation voiced its claims via slogans, rallies, graffiti, and—for some groups—armed struggle. Although most of these approaches still take place, and divisions continue to occur due to crucial ideological differences, the movements I focus on here differ in their emphasis on building cultural memory; for them, cultural recall is something that one actually performs.

Memory attaches itself to sites.
—*Susana Kaiser*

I. MARCHING TO THE ATHLETIC CLUB

I RETURN TO BUENOS AIRES in 1996, just in time for the commemoration of the coup, twenty years ago, on March 24, 1976.

An event organized by neighbors and human rights activists in San Telmo will end in the Club Atlético, the concentration camp where I was taken by the military after being abducted from my home on July 15, 1977. I wonder how Nora, the architect of survival for so long now, will react to *that* place again. Will memory force me to revisit my voyage to that cold black hole where I became a *desaparecida*? Or will I feel that these excavations, begun in 1996 in order to uncover the camp, for me actually work to obscure a narrative that I can tell only within the intimacy of a blank page? Will I even be able to bear the visible ruins of a building that turned my brother, my cousins, my brother's girlfriend, and so many others into names of missing people?

Always Coca Cola

We, the so-called survivors, are going back today to the grounds of the Athletic Club. Long ago I thought I glimpsed the gate through a keyhole. There are no keyholes now; just this barrenness criss-crossed by roads. In the now empty lot the wind stirs up clouds of dust around a café with red-and-white market umbrellas that read "Always Coca-Cola." That makes sense: if there's always Coca-Cola, there will often be Athletic Clubs. Coca-Cola forever, an essential ingredient for Athletic Clubs. That sign is worth a whole volume of political economy, my feet are saying as they tread over clumps of impotence. An impotence that launches a string of rhetorical questions: Is it still the same place? If there are no peepholes, no guards, no stairs, if the walls are gone, if cells and corridors lie buried under the merciless whir of expressways, then is it still the same space?

"It used to be a *club*, and now it's become a road. Pretty symbolic, right? They demolished it and paved a road in its stead." A road paved over our bodies suspended in a space that is no longer ours.

But there is always a "but" after the full stop: as the hours go by, the here-and-now starts to belong to us. Subtle, telltale signs emerge, keys to a landscape that at first looks banal. A sign reads: "This is the site of the Athletic Club." People are writing on neighborhood walls, "Murderers." They sing: *We've come here today/to tell stories/Because they never could/vanquish our memories./It was twenty-five years ago/ on a very dark night/one 24th of March/that the dictatorship began.*

Amnesia-erasing hands labor and the bricks begin to speak. The walls start to reflect white kerchiefs; spray-painted signs begin to demand justice. Even if it looks nothing like my yesterday, the place starts to make some sense.

I walk up and down taking pictures. I want to settle the score with this elusive landscape devoid of any points of reference by capturing angles, curves, and planes that might evoke a memory. I won't resign myself to not penetrating the geometry of my past. I'm intent on making a record of it, but I lose. What I mean is, I lose the camera, and with it photos, frames, focus. I'm left in a fog of uncertainty that the sound of my footsteps cannot overcome. Objects are sometimes wiser than people. My camera has left me with nothing but my eyes.

What do you see?

I see, I see. What do you see? I see splashes of emerald green above the gray cement. The green climbs up a column, and I see green leaves with cloud-colored shadows. The columns hold up the highway; the one that was laid out in 1978 to airbrush the prison camp and the cattle prods. But names cannot be paved over, I tell myself, nor can souls. Names and souls have shapes that I can make out, the papier-maché figures on the columns. I see the shape of time in exhausted wrinkles etched onto faces with India ink. The shape of pain on blindfolds over disappeared eyes. The shape of anger in tempera-painted mouths that refuse to speak. The shape of power in arms and fists upraised in stylized gestures. The shape of life in eyes opened to the beyond. A bouquet of sculpted foreheads and profiles sprouts new green growth that reaches up to the base of the highway above and quivers in the breeze. They are the untamed spaces of history.

It's the birthday of our second skin, almost two decades old, and we celebrate it here, at the ruins of the Athletic Club. The laws of memory and of life demand our presence. That's why it seems appropriate to fill

> this space with wine, hugs, photographs, music, and poetry. Splashes of green blot out all possible blackness, and the apathy of the dust, while the wind plays in our hands. Hands that build a bonfire, fed by printed faces, profiles, and names of torturers consumed behind lengths of taut rope. Strange rituals beckon to us. A witch hunt? No. This is a party that breaks into cheerful songs and gathers around a barbeque while a paper nightmare goes up in flames.

Julia Kristeva coined the expression "witness in process" to emphasize that a witness is constantly trying to redefine him/herself. For me, this is a perfect definition: Survivor, Exile, Writer, Human Rights Activist, Professor, Woman, Jew . . . perennial identities in conflict, redefining themselves over and over, each trying to master the others. But now that I am facing *my* former camp, the Survivor comes to the fore and pushes all others into the background.

> A path leads to the stage where emotions and festivities ebb and flow. A microphone says my name, not my code number but my name. And out of that name springs a voice that resonates despite myself, a voice that stands in front of me determined to speak its own text.
>
> *A certain perverse magic turns the key to the front door. Steps rush in. Three pairs of shoes practice a disjointed stomp on the floor the clothes the books an arm a hip an ankle, a hand. My body.*
>
> I can almost touch people's eyes as they stare at me, stunned by this voice of mine that repeats
>
> *Step on a crack, break your mother's back.*
>
> I turn the page; the paper rustles between my fingers. Am I the one who's reading and closing a circle? I'm a tightrope walker trying to keep my balance between present and past, remembrance and fiction:
>
> *They're taking me away, they are taking me away!*
>
> The secret road between my house and the Athletic Club becomes public, the floodgates open, words spill out. Voices from the past take over my body. I am, we are the poem:
>
> *Murdered*
> *My brother her son his grandson*
> *Her mother his girlfriend her aunt*
> *Her grandfather his friend his cousin her neighbor*
> *Ours yours us*
> *All of us*
> *Injected with emptiness*
> *We lost a version of who we were*
> *And rewrite ourselves in order to survive*
>
> Words written so my voice can pronounce them here, in this place that is neither dust nor cell but a chorus of voices resisting armed monologues that turned so much life into a single, numberless death.

Suddenly, with a voice coming from afar, Nora faces her ghosts, her phantoms. She tells the story of how she was taken to the very place where she now addresses her best possible audience. She suspects that, at that very moment, her traumatic past has finally begun turning into experience. The "witness in process" has reached a plateau of healing—a state which is itself always in process.

In 2001 I witnessed a second march, starting in Plaza Dorrego and ending at the ruins of the Club Atlético camp (destroyed in 1977). It lasted all day. In the morning materials were brought to the square so that every neighbor, including children, could make life-size silhouettes. Once they were cut out, the participants pasted a biography and a picture on each silhouette's chest, to be held from behind by a stick.

Each flat figure incarnates a *desaparecido*, the gap that his/her cut-off life has created in the community. The citizen holding the missing person becomes the support, without which the shadow would not be able to walk. The biographies of the disappeared and those of the living are now linked.

The march started at sunset and stopped at a square emblazoned with the names of *desaparecidos* from San Telmo. Someone read them out loud and a choir responded: "Present." Candles were lit at this point, while chants were sung: *Just like the Nazis, just like Vietnam, wherever you go we'll be searching for you. . . .*

Once in the area of the camp, the silhouettes were distributed. Their presence started to fill the space. The mound covering the ruins of the Club Atlético was now populated by the "identified disappeared," a ghostly crowd facing the sidewalk crowd. The strategy of massive historical erasure and the secrecy behind the forced disappearances was symbolically reversed.

This staging was the proper environment for transmitting the story of the death factory's witnesses, and they were invited to speak. Through this political performance the traces of genocide became visible, and the artists ensure that they will remain visible. Anyone driving or walking on Paseo Colón Avenue still runs into a street sign reading: "Stop." Closer still, the passerby will read, "This is the former concentration camp Club Atlético." Further on, a sign, in the color of red which signifies prohibition, states: "Oblivion." All are part of an installation by GAC (Grupo de Arte Callejero/Street Art Group). It's hard for people to ignore such a larger-than-life message.

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