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And One Day There Was a *Coup d'état*: Notes and Insights from a Photographic Experience at the Paine Memorial

Agustina Triquell

This article reflects upon the expectation, the encounter and redefinition of strategies, based on a concrete field experience: the photographic workshop named “Fotografías Vitales, Memorias Biográficas y Álbumes Familiares” (Life photographs, biographic memories and family albums), developed at the end of 2014 at the Memorial of the locality of Paine, Chile, with participation of members of that Memorial who are relatives of “disappeared” people. This work aims to think ethnographically about the particular ways photographic images can become relevant in life history and memories, as well as how sociopolitical events form part of an individual narration with varying strategies, divergences and convergences, with tensions or omissions.

STARTING-POINT: ON THE WORKSHOP, PAINE AND MY ARRIVAL

The ways by which we arrive in the field are full of judgments and expectations, as we imagine how things are going to happen. Thus in workshops about using photographic images as a research strategy, the work dynamics requires some previous planning, but it also has a versatile structure that must be open to unexpected events, changes of direction, and redefinitions. As Annette Kuhn has said, “the workshop method [...] offers potential in its own right as a qualitative research method, and there is considerable scope for extending into larger scale, and/or intercultural, studies of ‘ordinary’ photography and cultural memory” [2007: 285].

Here I intend to reflect on the expectation, the encounter and redefinition of strategies based on one concrete experience, a workshop named “Fotografías Vitales, Memorias Biográficas y Álbumes Familiares” (Life photographs, biographical

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memories and family albums) that was developed at the end of 2014 at the Memorial of the locality of Paine (Chile), with the participation of members of that Memorial, relatives of “disappeared” people.

The aim of this work is also to think about how the link with photographic images can become particular in each life history, as well as how sociopolitical events form part of an individual’s life history with different strategies, with divergences and convergences, with tensions or omissions. On occasion I will define some relationships between this experience and a similar one developed in Córdoba (Argentina) at the Archivo Provincial de la Memoria (Provincial Archives of Memory, or APM), although this relationship will not be the line of our argument. It should be noted that I do not intend this counterpoint to imply a comparative study, but rather, propose putting into perspective what happens here, and analyzing a broader working horizon in the relationships between photography and the institutional practices of memory.

Paine,¹ a town located just south of Santiago, the capital of Chile, and on the fringes of Greater Santiago, was one of the most affected populations during the last dictatorship, with the highest rate in the country of disappeared people per number of inhabitants. Forty-nine people were kidnapped in two military operations conducted here during October 3–16, 1973.

The proposal of the workshop “Fotografías Vitales” was defined as an artistic and memory project that intended to perform “an exercise of collective remembrance and reparation from the exhibition that serves as testimony of family and biographical photographs preserved by members of the Paine Memorial, with the aim of constructing a collective visual narrative that gathers and links the visual trajectories of the different families.”

The activities were scheduled so that about ten women would participate, all of them members of the Memorial Committee. In the end the number of participants was half that of the initial number: it included four women and a young man who was a member of the committee and an active militant at the Memorial. Two of the women did not contribute images because they had none, at least at the beginning of the workshop. Therefore the work focused on the images brought by Luz, Juana and Diego. However, Mrs. Luz and Mrs. Juana were the ones who participated most actively, and proposed carrying out the challenge posed by the workshop: namely, to elaborate—with the available resources and images—a visual narrative, a small album containing images and words, to stand as a visual (re)elaboration of their life stories.

The particular aspect of this new experience, which differed from the activity proposed initially, lay in the counterpointed works between Mrs. Luz and Mrs. Juana. While both are almost the same age—about 70—Luz is “the daughter of” and Juana is “the wife of” disappeared men. Though of the same age they are thus related differently to the disappeared family member. This particular characteristic set a new direction to the work.

First, there was a long introduction during which the five participants told who their relative was and how he had disappeared, and then we saw the images [Figure 1]. Photos started to “appear” when the relatives spoke of the moments after the disappearance: the formation of the committee, the building of the Memorial, the search for remains—“the small bones”—and the elaboration of



Figure 1 Women in Paine during the workshop.

mosaics at the site. The story is a familiar narrative without images, but when photos appear the story becomes public: when images appear, institutional and collective action takes over.

The narration of the events does not articulate into images; however, the women hold the laminated image—which usually hangs round their necks or chests during public acts—in their hands while narrating the events, the same images they use when participating in every activity launched by the Memorial committee. Thus, here there was a redefinition of our proposal: we were not dealing with photos that “remained kept in the trunk”—as we imagined in our initial proposal—but with images that belonged to spaces in their houses, photographs that were exhibited, framed, zoomed out. They are just a few images—already seen, already narrated—that introduce the character, establish a bond and allow the women to introduce a person as follows: “he is” and immediately “my husband” ... “my father.” Their statement is simple: just name and relationship. The photographs of previous moments, of “happy moments,” appeared framed for later use in the various public activities in which they participated over the last forty years. They were images that had been photocopied, enlarged, laminated. Their materiality accounted for the scenarios and exhibitions in which they had been involved. This variety of forms and reprints accounts for how they are inscribed in the thread of visual economy, where they acquire different materialities that mean as much as their referential content [Edwards and Hart 2004].

Therefore the proposal of the workshop was that the same images might circulate again, but now in a new materiality. To redefine the original proposal, I drew a horizontal line across a sheet of paper, handed out one to each of the participants and asked them to draw a timeline: how they would structure the narration that they wanted to tell, how they would structure the history, and who the characters should be. This didactic resource of positivist imprint, tied to the factual order of the events, allowed us to construct and put into evidence how the visual narration of each of the participants would be. At this moment, Diego abandoned the workshop because he had activities related to the committee, so only Mrs. Juana and Mrs. Luz remained.

While the women wrote and put ideas in order, indicating exact dates—based on the memories and the books they borrowed from the library—I reproduced the images which they had brought, using my digital camera (as they had

previously been reproduced by other cameras). I downloaded them and quickly got them ready for printing right there. Now we had new-old images that could be cut out and pasted, ready to elaborate a new narrative.

We cut out the images and put them on the table. In addition, we assembled small notebooks of unlined sheets to place the images and write the accompanying text that they considered necessary for telling their stories. I tried not to give too many directions about how to build up the visual narration. Mrs. Luz and Mrs. Juana set to work in silence, putting the images in order and carefully pasting them in. Meanwhile, they wrote the text that would finally give sense to the story.

Building up a new narrative with a horizontal structure enables the articulation between epic and anecdotal dimensions [Langford 2001: 175]. These small notebooks worked as a new structure, a new opportunity to articulate these women's life stories through the use of images.

As already mentioned, most of the photos are from the time after the event: militancy and their appearance in the media, the reproduction of the same images in local newspapers, and in institutional material for dissemination. The few photos from the private sphere are here reproduced in their public circulation: images that acquire an added value due to their political-militant performativity.

This clearly does not appear in the previous account, which had related the life history of the disappeared men: in the narrations of women from Paine; "militancy," "revolution," "left-wing" are words from which they need to be distanced. Their disappeared people were "workers who would go from home to work and from work back home" and who "were not involved in strange matters."

At this point I recalled the albums from "Vidas para ser contadas," the albums from relatives of disappeared people that were in the Archivo Provincial de la Memoria in Córdoba [Figure 2], with which I had worked previously [Triquell 2013]. In those albums an overview of the life history of the arrested-and-disappeared person is narrated in the light of events that happened later: highlighting virtues—like intelligence, solidarity, rebelliousness, feeling towards injustice, etc.—which appear from the beginning of the narration, back to the infancy or



Figure 2 "Vidas para ser contadas" at the APM in Córdoba.

early school years. Everything is arranged in such a way as to understand what happened, starting from a narration that introduces exceptional beings, heroic militants.²

Indeed, in the life history of these women, the biographical inscription of disappearance is an identity mark, a starting-point in a posterior trajectory. Narrations do not intend to highlight the figure of the militant; rather, they are a signifier from which to stand at a distance, a “despite.”

The biographical turn is here condensed at the moment when they come to the Memorial, when they start to work collectively. The militant experience, in our terms, is that of women who search, but without referring to their activity at the Memorial as a militant activity—in their terms: they do not take that legacy as if it were their own nor do they load their participation with those signifiers.

The previous militant activity or the political reasons that led to the physical disappearance of their relatives is omitted. What they intend to narrate, through their images but also through their oral narration, is that which came later, how their lives continued and the strategies used to recover from these events. Let’s look at this in detail.

WHAT CAME LATER

Mrs. Juana and Mrs. Luz gradually complement their narration when they tell the history of the Memorial. Each of them puts in her own biography her experience regarding the space, her first impressions and the reasons that brought her to come to the site. However, when it is time to tell the facts—for example, the confusion in public information about the assumed appearance of bone remains that finally did not correspond to any relatives from Paine³—they speak complementarily as they develop the institutional narration; here they shift to the voice of the Asociación de Familiares. Biographical references from the private sphere appear in the background.

Juana justifies the reconstruction of her biography, her new husband; he appears in the middle of the narration, on the fifth page of the little news story that she is building. In the oral narration, Juana refers to her husband as the “present one” or “my current husband,” and when she simply refers to her former husband, the disappeared one, she just uses the pronoun “he.” And she adds: “[...] once it was said that they would come back, that they would appear. So I said to my husband: if he comes back, I will get separated and will not be with either of you. But that never happened.”

The tension between past and present, between tragic course of history and later life projects appears also in the narrative decisions of the piece that is being built. The first pages tell about a happy world, a rural and familiar setting, until “one day there was a *coup d’état*.” There, the narration diverges from the private sphere and moves toward the collective public sphere. As in the Argentine context [Da Silva Catela 2010], the place of the disappeared people here also keeps a privileged place in the field of visual representations, due to its clear—and paradoxically at the same time diffuse—absent condition. Accordingly, Juana states: “at home there are no photos of my husband, but there are photos of him.”

This situation adds even more tension in the make-up of a new couple. “When I started to come here, I had some differences with my husband’s relatives. [...] Not only that, his sister even told me ‘you are like dogs digging up small bones [...]’.”

The questioning from the new family group is permitted in that the struggle for memory is not related to the political factors that led to their disappearance. Here, it becomes evident that the movement from the militant dimension of the subjects to the displacement of the militant dimension is what sustains the activity in space—the clearly militant activity—is an affective bond that paradoxically has already been occupied by a new subject. In Mrs. Luz’s narration, the active participation at the Memorial does not suffer this type of tension, since the bond with it arises from the disappearance of her father.

The modes in which past and present are articulated in the construction of a biographical narration are consolidation strategies of a narrative identity [Ricoeur 1996], whose permanence over time is defined in the character, understood as those lasting dispositions by which we recognize a person—and the utterance, understood as the fact of faithfulness to oneself in keeping one’s word. According to Ricoeur, “faithfulness to oneself in keeping one’s word marks the extreme gap between the permanence of the self and that of the same” [*ibid.*: 119]. These elements allow us to notice the moral component of the elaboration of a narrative identity. From these concepts we can understand the displacements, tensions and arguments that support the biographical structure of both women.

The modes of statement and the narratives proposed by the images allow us to account for the relation of subjectivity as a frontier area, as the bonding space between the individual and the social aspects, in which the subject produces and is a product of the image of the other subject, in which otherness forms the subject [Triquell 2011].

Expectations, Redefinitions and Displacements

The Paine workshop made evident the modes in which we, within the frame of fieldwork itself, crystallize previous knowledge, expectations and concepts that in general are immediately disarticulated. What I found there is a game of temporalities completely different from the one I knew. I found women whose biographical turn was located at the moment of the disappearance of their relatives; but that turn was the starting point of a new narration. The albums generated there were not a heroic narration, as those in the “*Vidas para ser contadas*” exhibition, but were centered in their own biography, what became of their lives after the tragic event of the disappearance: their own elaboration of a narrative identity based on a collective event, signified in an individual biographical key.

The relationships and family bonds operated here in a form different from what I knew, different from the Argentinian context, where the bonds of kinship become a mode of naming a collective organization, such as the Humans Rights organizations Madres, Abuelas, H.IJOS. Here, the age groups were different, markedly different from what I had previously imagined: there was a 70-year-old daughter, who was 27 at the moment when her father disappeared, and a

wife of the same age, who was neither Mother nor Grandmother, unlike what characterizes the Human Rights organizations in Argentina, which are named after those family bonds. Regarding the photographs, the visual representations and uses also seemed particular to me. Luz had her husband's black and white photo painted, which Juana does not approve of, and states: "at the moment the photo was taken there were no color photos, it is obvious that it was painted." Luz's photo is now close to having a pictorial nature, blurred from its photographic referentiality due to an artisanal intervention on the image, in which the photographic aspect is aestheticized and separated from its context.

These small black-and-white ID pictures were not intended to "make history" [Da Silva Catela 2009: 342]. Probably coloring the photograph allowed Mrs. Luz to turn this visible shift, this new use that becomes evident in the marks on the image. Juana has only two or three photos of her husband, but they occupy privileged places in her house. As Ludmila Da Silva Catela indicates, the public and interior spaces of the homes conserve a special place for disappeared people [*ibid.*: 339].

Proposing a new visual narration, made of new/old fragments and enabling new—but repeating old—narrative articulations, constitutes the elaboration of a new present time from which the past is visited visually.

A FINAL OVERVIEW

At the end of the workshop we, along with Mrs. Juana and Mrs. Luz, walked across the mosaics to reach each of theirs. To access each history, it is necessary to move physically across the space, searching for each one's place among many others. The mosaics lay flat on the ground, amid a forest of one thousand wooden poles that materialize the Memorial. Each mosaic builds individual symbols and references that have a particular bond with its "disappeared person" [Figure 3]. In their ensemble, all the mosaics tell a common history.

The mosaic gives place to the coexistence of different temporalities, different symbolic representations that attempt to account for the diverse aspects of the commemorated subject, of the recalled, disappeared person. The outstanding aspects mostly include the representations of the agricultural world, the countryside, the work associated with agriculture and livestock production—there are tractors and animals, orchards and cultivated fields—along with the family and, to a lesser extent, flags, stars and militant symbols, such as red and black colors and the acronym for the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR, the Revolutionary Left Wing Movement). The latter number only seven and some of these were made by militant peers instead of relatives.

The mosaics are a mode of visual representation different from the photographic one. Their technical condition, as a visual representation chosen at the Paine Memorial, also explains a particular mode of relationship with visual culture: a rural community, with scarce access to photographic images, gives place to the use of other representational techniques.

The mosaic, however, is an artisanal and collective technique, with the indexicality, according to Peirce, of the creating hand, the print on the material, the

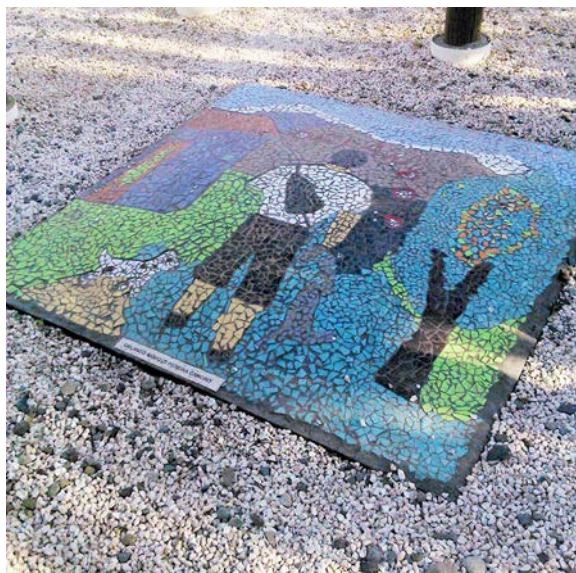


Figure 3 A mosaic at Paine.

collective performance of a familiar visual narration. I recall the difficulties involved at the moment of carrying out the workshop: the lack of images, the repetition of the same images in several commemorative acts. The mosaic then becomes a more suitable technique for narrating the lives of disappeared people in Paine: fragments that, once united in a metonymic operation, try to get close to the symbolic representation of a whole, the life of each disappeared person.

As in the women's visual narrations, in which the biographical turns focus on their own life stories, here indexicality refers to the relatives' hands, is the sign of adjacency of those who pay tribute, who collectively display remembrance.

The experience lived in Paine allows us to understand the complexity of the modes of association with the visual aspect that are present in each specific context. The mosaics also imply a technical and formal equality of all the narrations. Unlike the albums in the "Vidas para ser contadas" exhibition, in which the formal and material decisions—techniques and dimensions—are made by each family, here we find a delimited square in which each history is held within the—institutional—limits of visual representation.

Walking across the site looking at the ground reminded me of a previous trajectory, which is also associated with an operation of memory of our dead: that of the park cemetery. At a distance, it looks like a green, open space with flowers and trees. Sublime, like the experience of death itself. Only when walking around the place do the names, tombstones, relationships appear: here the subjective dimension appears in the word. Likewise, the forest serves as the metaphor for the artificially created natural space, and the mosaics, as a pictorial and biographical representation.

Here, at this meeting point of materialities, temporalities and representations, which is in turn a game of expectations, movements and redefinitions, is when

we must, every time, in each working field, question our certainties—and allow room for doubt—about the place of images in the processes involving memory: this relationship is established in each public institution and in each biography in a particular mode. It is through this unique and specific relationship, at a given space and time, that we can give sense to the experience, and the transformations stemming from it, of the encounter between the subjects and the(ir) image(s).

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NOTES

1. Paine is a town about 60 km. south of central Santiago; population (in 2002) 31,622. The Paine memorial commemorates 70 local victims of repression; and it works together with the Paine Association and the Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos y Ejecutados de Paine (AFDDyE, Association of Relatives of Disappeared and Executed Political Detainees of Paine), which conducts several cultural, educational and dissemination activities at the site.
2. Ana Longoni explored the shifts in the modes of representing the disappeared person, particularly in Longoni [2010].
3. See the official communication of the Agrupación at: www.memorialpaine.org/noticias/585/

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