

# The People's Paving Stones: The Material Politics of International Human Rights in the *Baldosas por la Memoria* of Buenos Aires

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Baldosas por la memoria are memorial paving stones handcrafted by loosely networked activists. Produced continuously from 2006 to an informally established protocol, they memorialize “the disappeared” and others murdered by the state terrorism of the Argentinian dictatorship (1976–1983). As a synecdoche of the “down and dirty” everyday pavements, they function as a metonym for democratic struggle and popular sovereignty. Aesthetically, they work against the “forgetting” and kitschification to which conventional memorials become subject. Through remediation into books and a DVD documentary, they participate in controversies within the international politics of human rights. Using a “material turn” within visual analysis, yet distinct from the “new materialism,” this article explains how they function within familiar genres of memorialization but in wholly novel ways. Baldosas create ethical complexity and moral ambiguity by troubling collective memory. Thus, we examine their relation to guilt, complicity, trauma, and affect.

Les Baldosas por la memoria sont des pavés commémoratifs faits main par des activistes plus ou moins en réseau. Produits continuellement depuis 2006 selon un protocole établi non officiel, ils commémorent les « disparus » et autres personnes assassinées par le terrorisme d'État de la dictature argentine établie entre 1976 et 1983. Synecdoque des pavés « sales et affaissés » du quotidien, ils sont tels une métonymie de la lutte démocratique et de la souveraineté populaire. Esthétiquement, ils vont à l'encontre de « l'oubli » et de la « kitchification » qui finissent par affecter les mémoriaux conventionnels. De par leur remédiation dans des livres et un documentaire en DVD, ils participent aux controverses intervenant en politique internationale des droits de l'Homme. Cet article introduit une « touche matérielle » mais distincte du « nouveau matérialisme » dans son analyse visuelle pour expliquer comment ces pavés jouent un rôle dans des genres familiers de commémoration, mais de façons tout à fait inédites. Les Baldosas donnent lieu à une complexité éthique et à une ambiguïté

morale en troublant la mémoire collective. Nous examinons donc leur lien avec la culpabilité, la complicité, le trauma et l'affect.

Las Baldosas por la memoria son adoquines conmemorativos hechos a mano por activistas que trabajan en una red flexible. Se producen de forma continua desde 2006 a partir de un protocolo establecido de manera informal para conmemorar a “los Desaparecidos” y a otras personas asesinadas por el terrorismo de estado de la dictadura argentina de 1976 a 1983. Como sinécdoque del “duro y sucio” asfalto cotidiano, funcionan como metonimia de la lucha democrática y la soberanía popular. Desde el punto de vista estético, se oponen al “olvido” y al carácter kitsch al que se somete a las obras conmemorativas convencionales. A través de la reparación en libros y un documental en DVD, participan en las controversias dentro de la política internacional de los derechos humanos. Este artículo utiliza un “giro material” dentro del análisis visual, aunque distinto del “nuevo materialismo,” para explicar cómo funcionan dentro de los géneros conocidos de la conmemoración, pero de forma totalmente novedosa. Las baldosas crean complejidad ética y ambigüedad moral al

Politicizing death is hardly a new activity. Indeed, according to most paleoanthropologists, it is the ceremonializing of death that marks the defining line between primates and protohumans (Lieberman 1993). Between simply ritualizing a death and making it unambiguously political, however, there are commonplace distinctions in material genres and social behavior (Yanow 2014). Familiar communicative markers distinguish what is public and political from what is private and personal, what is sacred to the polity from what is sacred to individuals. These markers constitute a communicative vocabulary that works materially and semiotically to make these distinctions intelligible. Moreover, when they work, they have significant effects on individuals emotionally. Politically, they have a powerful role in identity construction (Thrift 2007).

Scholars in international relations have theorized how politics works in and through aesthetic practices, and within that frame how the invocation of memory becomes a potent force for individuals and states (Bell 2006; Bleiker 2009; Edkins 2011). This article focuses on a material practice that invokes yet challenges the genres of memorialization that experience and research have made familiar. The *baldosas por la memoria* of Buenos Aires are communicative objects that do this through a highly unusual, subtly disturbing performativity: they enact the democratic struggle for human rights materially in the everyday (Butler 1993, 12–13; Jelin 1994; Bartelson 2006; Keck and Sikkink 2014).

The practice of making *baldosas* began in June 2006, when an activist group placed the first *baldosa* as a political act in the Almagro district of central Buenos Aires. The number of these objects is not known with accuracy, but according to Espacio Memoria y Derechos Humanos ExESMA's website, more than 1,200 have been placed within this capital city alone.<sup>1</sup> They constitute an ongoing political intervention protesting “the dictatorship” (*la dictadura*) in Argentina (1976–1983).

Building on previous analyses (Bettanin 2010; Guarini 2010; Tufro and Sanjurjo 2010; Bettanin and Schenquer 2015; Benegas Loyo 2016a, 2016b; Dominguez Halpern, Alamo and Alonso 2018), we cover the historical and current contexts through which that politics has been and is experienced. We explain how *baldosas* work as objects within a practice of meaning-making, and explore how they create ethical complexity and moral ambiguity by troubling collective memory. Thus, we examine their relation to guilt, complicity, trauma, and affect.

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.espaciomemoria.ar/baldosas-por-la-memoria/>.

For this analysis, *baldosas* are treated topologically as material objects that are personified rhetorically. Via this trope, they “remember” and “speak” as communicative agents. And as agents they interpellate us to emotion and action (White 1985; Martin 2014). Methodologically, this device is related to a “material turn” in which “objects create subjects as much as subjects create objects” (Miller 2008, 298). Note, however, that we are not invoking the “new materialism,” since there are no claims here of ontological vitalism in matter or of nonhuman agency in objects (*contra* Bennett 2010; *contra* Coole and Frost 2010).

### A Politics of the Pavement

*Baldosas* are “home-made” paving tiles that remember victims of the state terrorism that was practiced by military and security forces in Argentina under the last dictatorship. Activist groups embed the tiles in sidewalk pavements in a tolerated, but largely unofficial, zone of political action at the edges of state authority. They are, perhaps, most commonly observed in the *barrios* or neighborhood districts of Buenos Aires, but exist in cognate forms throughout the country, as did the practices of impunity that they cite in protest.

These memorializing tiles are unusual in that they challenge more conventional material genres of memorialization in the built environment, while also troubling viewers in unexpected modes, as we will show below. This is because viewers encounter them in an unsuspecting way, because the objects fail to cite, and indeed overtly contradict, the usual expectations through which memorials are signified. Hence the *baldosas* are startling, because they abruptly reinvoke the violent past without preparatory signification and ceremonial forewarning of horror and repulsion (Acuff 2012). In an uncanny way, *baldosas* haunt the more conventional genres of memorialization and thus disturb *both* public/official *and* private/unofficial memorializing practices. They are interventions into the material and symbolic fabric of a locality that call out for an ethically responsible and morally sensible way of “being together,” that is, re-establishing “relationality” or “radical interconnectedness” in the words of Jenny Edkins (2006, 99).

These small, silent objects evoke what happened exactly where it happened. Anyone who stops, looks down, and reads a *baldosa* is treading on the very surface where a particular act of state terrorism occurred, because the *baldosa* says so declaratively. In that way *baldosas* not only trouble space, but also trouble time. Working in the present moment, they engage the viewer in an ongoing battle over how the past is to be remembered. And they initiate a further struggle over memory itself, precisely because the textual inscriptions, as we will see, challenge historical closure. By referencing the past in this uncomfortable way, *baldosas* evoke disturbing questions about the present: “How different is it, really?” And about the future: “How do we make *that* difference, that is, ‘never again’?” (Jelin 2002; Bell 2006; Hite and Collins 2009; Olesen 2012).

### Remediating Baldosas into Reference Books

Three informative and revealing volumes, published by the *baldosas*-activist groups, are available, circulating mostly through local channels (Barrios x Memoria y Justicia 2008, 2010, 2013). Even though our focus here is on the *baldosas* themselves as objects, it is noteworthy that this memory practice also has its own books and its own documentary DVD (Guarini 2012).

Such multidimensionality is in itself revealing of a complex political phenomenon. The books document the expansion of the practice, as well as the ways in which it has changed over time: “The neighbourhood-based groups work with family members and with those social organizations that approach them. Thus the register of memory keeps growing and these books express a moment of such work,

of such reflection about memory” (Dominguez Halpern, Alamo and Alonso 2018, 17, our translation).

Over the years, the different groups that place the *baldosas* have sometimes seen their political task becoming intertwined with a variety of demands. For example, in 2012, a *baldosa* was laid, bearing the name of a woman who had been abducted when she was pregnant. That particular *baldosa* joined the *baldosas* generally to the campaigns mounted by numerous human rights organizations for the restitution of infants stolen during the dictatorship (Barrios x la Memoria y Justicia 2013, 162).

Sometimes *baldosas*, via their activist creators, were invited into the memory politics pursued by others. The commissions of the former clandestine detention facilities asked to mark their sites with *baldosas*. The human rights commissions of Uruguay and Chile invited *baldosas* activists to accompany their tributes to compatriots who had disappeared in Argentina. The books, *Baldosas x la Memoria*, have been declared of special interest by the Legislature of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires and by the Chamber of Deputies of the National Congress of Argentina. “All these recognitions for our work comfort us,” the activists have written, and “invite us to continue tiling our city” (Barrios x la Memoria y Justicia 2010, 8, our translation).<sup>2</sup>

Given the apparently endless capacity of states to co-opt emancipatory struggles, this at least partially sympathetic reaction from institutional authorities in Argentina might generate suspicion about the radicality of the movement and its practices (Brown 1995). Even though the potential effects of state recognition for popular causes is certainly relevant, here we focus on the political memory work that *baldosas* actually do, all on their own. In any case, to our knowledge, the activist movement does not present signs of having been significantly co-opted by the state, or notably intimidated and depoliticized.

### Dirty Deaths and Metonymic Memorials

Like other militarized, right-wing authoritarian regimes in Latin America, the dictatorship in Argentina, during the so-called Dirty War,<sup>3</sup> committed numerous human rights violations. It dealt death with impunity, notoriously to “the disappeared” (*los desaparecidos*). That term has become a significant concept and reference point in the international politics of human rights. According to Amnesty International (2019), the dictatorship in Argentina offers perhaps “the best-known instance of mass enforced disappearances in the 20th century.” Of course, criminal acts committed to eliminate “leftist activism,” and to silence ordinary residents, encompassed much more than that extreme form of politicized gangsterism and militarized criminality. Through the intergovernmental networks of Operation Condor, those repressive, illegal extra-judicial activities and executions have been internationally documented, as well as attested through national processes, and have been intensively discussed worldwide over the longer term (McSherry 2005; Montero 2016).

“The disappeared” refers to the extralegal detention, with subsequent torture and murder, of many, many thousands of persons. They were simply “disappeared” off the streets and from their homes and other everyday places, in the sense that their deaths were not reliably recorded, or their bodies ever recovered. In some cases, their bodies were not even recoverable—they were disposed of, alive or dead,

<sup>2</sup>The Appendix to BALDOSAS X la Memoria III (Barrios x la Memoria y Justicia 2013, 306–9) documents instances in which both Carmen Guarini’s (2012) documentary on the *baldosas* and the activities of Barrios x la Memoria y Justicia have been recognized by government at local and national levels.

<sup>3</sup>The expression “Dirty War” is associated in Argentina with the *Teoría de los dos demonios*: the idea that there were two similar demons during that period, the military and the guerrillas, who fought a dirty war. That theory was accepted at first in public debate after the dictatorship, but it was mostly rejected later because the groups involved were not at all comparable in power or in the crimes committed. In any case, state terror cannot be explained or justified by, or analytically reduced to, a “two-sides,” war-like confrontation.

over open waters.<sup>4</sup> Perforce—to follow the way that language is sometimes remade internationally as events take place, and subsequently reiterated to reflect protest and critique—these victims *were* disappeared.

While for the whole country the number of the disappeared is understandably unknown, and probably unknowable with exactitude, and while the estimated totals vary considerably, the highest estimate has itself become an iconic phrase, *treinta mil* (“thirty-thousand”). It has also become a verbal metonym, not merely for however many such victims there were, but for political positioning in the highly volatile territory of claim and counterclaim (Jelin 2002). That positioning involves emotional investments in protest as well as intellectual investments in research, which also functions as a protest device.

The Argentinian human rights movement has been active not only in denouncing violations that occurred during the last dictatorship, but also in disputing how such experiences are narratively framed and remembered. In this regard, note that the *baldosas* themselves are contemporary in the present with the ongoing trials for human rights abuses. The neighborhood activists involved in the practice of making and siting *baldosas*, however, stress the need to go beyond formal justice and thus continue to dispute the terrain of collective memory (Benegas Loyo 2016a, 41; also see Guarini 2012). In that way, the *baldosas* also function within the global struggles dedicated to ensuring that human rights are respected and protected by governments, so that extrajudicial rule by impunity does not become the international/national norm (Olesen 2012; Sikkink 2012).

This form of memorialization, so emotionally and politically charged, arises from and within the everyday activities and activism of the urban landscape. Local activists have made ordinary, unremarkable pavements testify in the everyday to the everydayness of state terrorism and the edgy riskiness of civil resistance. In the realm of meaning—personal, political, Argentinian, civic, regional, global—the *baldosas* are unusually potent because they are semiotically complex. This article will now explain in detail how they work.

### Down and Dirty in the Streets of Buenos Aires

*Baldosas* are concrete rectangular slabs about 60 cm × 40 cm as a rule, even though there are somewhat bigger and somewhat smaller ones as well. They are set permanently into the paved footway, not by city authorities, commercial proprietors, or residential landlords, but by activist groups.<sup>5</sup> Those groups derive from, or identify with, the popular, somewhat informal, assemblies of various neighborhood districts in Buenos Aires (Barrios x la Memoria y Justicia 2008, 2010, 2013).

On a *baldosa* the text message is centered, and typically runs to several lines in a formulaic way. The general formula is as follows:

- A phrase connecting the individual *baldosa* to the specific locale or building, for example, “here lived,” “here was imprisoned,” “studied at this institute,” “taught at this school,” or similar.
- A single name in larger capital letters, where the given name is followed by the surname(s), and sometimes the name of another person or two, but not a more formal columnar listing.
- The phrase *militante popular*, gender neutral.

<sup>4</sup> See the “Never Again” report (EUDEBA, Buenos Aires, 1984) and the *Registro Unificado de Víctimas del Terrorismo de Estado* (Unified Registry of Victims of State Terrorism. <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/sitiosdememoria/ruvte/informe>).

<sup>5</sup> The documentary film/DVD *Calles de la memoria* (“Streets of Memory”) provides a visual introduction to the practices involved in making these objects, including testimony from activists and relatives of the victims of state terrorism, also from foreign observers, local residents, and school children (Guarini 2012).



Figure 1. Baldosa por la memoria—typical.

- A phrase concerning the fate of the victim, gender-specific, for example, *detenid(o/a)* (“detained”) and *desaparecid(o/a)* (“disappeared”), sometimes deploying the character @ to stand for the *o/a* gender-alternate.
- A numerical date or dates, apparently, albeit mysteriously, a kind of factual/temporal reference to a known event of victimization, such as a date of seizure or last sighting.
- A phrase *por el terrorismo de estado* (“by state terrorism”).
- Three words, separated by an informal lexical convention and a standard one: *barrios* (“neighborhoods”) *x* (*x* = “for”/informal) *memoria* (“memory”) *y* (*y* = “and”/standard) *justicia* (“justice”), viz. “neighborhoods [working] for memory and justice.”

The text lines in the *baldosas* are usually framed by small, colorful stones and pieces of glass aligned in a rather jerky, irregular way, perhaps referencing childlike liveliness or stylistically naïve efforts, yet this bordering is not quite whimsical or easily grasped aesthetically (figure 1). The sparkly, almost marquee-framing visibly jars with the otherwise somber background for the lettering and, as one puzzles out the laconic text, a growing realization of horror. Apart from the framing, picked out in rough-cast pseudo-mosaic, the *baldosa*'s text could be read as a drily factual public notice, presumably about what is present, yet the *baldosas* highlight what is *not* present, or rather who has disappeared from view, and presumably from existence.

On the *baldosas* there is a very telling present-absence of official authorization through further lines of text or appended logos, such as signatures or symbols of officialdom. In that way, these objects already tell us that they were not issued by an agency or, in most cases, even by a private or public organization or a grieving individual. We do not know exactly, and they will not tell us exactly, because the identity and status of “Barrios x Memoria y Justicia” is not completely clear. As theorized in Mitchell's (2018) “pictorial turn,” the *baldosas* make us *want* to know more.

### Paving, People, and Politics

The term *baldosa* is usually translated into English as “tile” but actually refers to a paving slab, such as one finds in British pavements or American sidewalks. In Buenos Aires, these slabs are often rather more decorative than Anglo-American

ones, albeit in stylized and repetitive ways. These stylizations are typically displayed by large panels of mosaic-like, tiny ceramic squares, or sometimes individual, slightly larger panels of squares in pale and contrasting colors. This level of physical detail is important for establishing the material context through which this materializing practice of activism, organization, and widespread political intervention has developed (Butler 1993, 9–10). It is also important for understanding the imitative aesthetic construction, and coded mimetic references, through which *baldosas* are able to cite both hurried cheerful banality and solemn stationary grieving.

Given the physical context described above, the activity of adding to, and hence subtracting from, the pedestrian paving stones of Buenos Aires is evidently not hugely difficult, hazardous, or dangerous. Each property owner or responsible occupant has rights and obligations relative to the property lines taken in extension from the building's edges across the contiguous pavement to the curbstones.<sup>6</sup> This policy framework, and its weak enforcement, seems to work as an enabler for a politics of the pavement, such as the one performed by the *baldosas*.

By contrast, in Chile this form of grassroots memorializing would be unlikely, given that right-wing contestation concerning how to remember the past, and what is to be remembered, has been, and continue to be, insidiously ingrained in state activity. Conservative politicians can use, and have used, their veto power to block projects of memorialization that they perceive as biased or leftist (Hite and Collins 2009). In many cities of the world, again by contrast, particularly those in the Anglophone and European spheres, the idea of informally organized meddling with local authority paving schemes, in some physically intrusive and apparently permanent way, is simply unthinkable.

There are other commemorative plaques set into the streetscapes of Buenos Aires, though, in contrast to the *baldosas*, their aesthetics and linear placements alone clearly indicate their institutional origins. These markers range from the touristy, Hollywood-style “street of the stars,” located in the Avenida Corrientes entertainment district, to the gravestone-like memorials for individual victims of a 1994 anti-Semitic suicide car bombing, placed along the street near the Jewish community center where the attack took place.<sup>7</sup>

### Artists and Activists

*Baldosas*, collectively crafted, are quite different aesthetically from other memorializing objects placed in public spaces that have a clearer relationship with art and artists. Some artists have mimicked mass production by representing mass-produced objects artistically, but no one would mistake a *baldosa* for pop art. And some artists have produced their own political art prior to the *baldosas*, and contemporaneously with them, as public markers of memorial and protest. These artifacts occur either anonymously, or *faux*-anonymously and Banksy-like, or personally identified, as with Gunter Demnig's *Stolpersteine*.<sup>8</sup>

However, as folkloric memorials the *baldosas* occupy a provocative space between something that is individually crafted and custom-tailored to memorialize a particular individual, event or idea, and something that is pseudonymously crafted groupwise to follow a disciplined pattern or familiar formula, suited to any and all *desaparecidos* and other victims of the dictatorship. As Guarini's (2012) documentary explains, the descriptive protocols for the *baldosas* are collectively determined and advised, but not artistically identified with an individual or style.

There are many installations, interventions, and projects that memorialize political death elsewhere in the world, in particularly along the Mexico/US border.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.cedom.gov.ar/codigos.aspx>.

<sup>7</sup> See Castro (2014) for a very brief survey.

<sup>8</sup> See [www.stolpersteine.de](http://www.stolpersteine.de).



**Figure 2.** Baldosa por la memoria - pavement context.

Many of those artifacts can be, and indeed routinely are, vandalized or destroyed in counter-protest (Weber 2011; Auchter 2012). *Baldosas* have also been defaced, damaged, removed, and destroyed, but their random ubiquity and lack of artiness work in their favor, as does an everyday knowledge or presumption that they result from local group efforts, rather than from an individual's ambition for self-expression. Indeed, the wear and tear that defaces and damages each and every *baldosa* embeds them further in the everyday, making deliberate vandalism somewhat otiose and even difficult to recognize. Defacing an object that is already being defaced because it is where it is, that is, underfoot, does not make much of a point (figure 2).

*Baldosas* are thus a potent metonymy for ongoing memory work, yet a synecdoche of very forgettable sidewalk paving slabs. This brings us to a comparative exploration of the way that *baldosas* trouble individual viewers by troubling familiar genres of memorialization and the familiar emotions that they evoke.

### Marking Memories and Ritualizing Reminiscence

We instantly recognize a memorializing object, and we know what to do, or rather what officialdom of one sort or another, or public opinion in one form or another, wants us to do, even if we do the opposite, for example, behave disrespectfully and/or deface the object. These objects do their best to interpellate us into a subject position, typically that of a respectful citizen, resident or visitor, worker or mourner, etc. (Howarth 2000, 94–8, 106–8). But how do conventional objects do this? And how are *baldosas* different and troublingly so?



Monuments, gravestones, memorials, cenotaphs, tombs, shrines, eternal flames, inscriptions, mausoleums, and the like are everywhere. When these objects memorialize, they commemorate, that is, they literalize the memories of those who really remember persons who died in a war or similar circumstances. However, they also create memory in those who did not know the individuals, or groups of individuals, but use the opportunity to read and learn, ask questions and take pictures, stand in silence or listen to speeches (Reeves 2020).

Any number of things will serve to mark a death as political and public, rather than private and thus nonpolitical, even though family and community-group remembrances often take place in public, that is, in non-domestic spaces. Insignias, logos, signatures, stamps, seals, and simple statements of proprietorial responsibility and legal license distinguish public and political markers from the normal run of gravestones and/or spontaneously generated messages and massed flowers. Thus, we know what makes the object or site official in some sense, or at least officially allowed or tolerated, given an assumption that spaces in the public gaze are governmentally monitored (Ferguson and Turnbull 1998).

Communicative objects typically work within a framework of binaries that enable us to read them clearly and to act appropriately (Rose 2012). While many of these are contextual, forming a grammar of the built environment, they are powerful precisely because we have to learn what they mean in order to fit in socially or else face disciplinary instruction or pushback. After that learning process, they are then taken for granted. In some cases, though, the “correct” narrative is posed more blatantly and didactically than in others. For example, war exhibitions, and war memorializations in general, tend to be shaped by uncritical and unchallenging visual and textual discourses of victory and patriotism that dispel ambivalence and complexity (Lisle 2006; Zehfuss 2009; McDonald 2010; Reeves 2017).

As weighty objects with surfaces, monuments and memorials are most often up at eye level rather than down by our feet, high and out of reach rather than low-down and touchable, symmetrical rather than asymmetrical, stony and/or metallic, and thus permanent-looking in various ways. They are typographically distinguished from flimsy flyers and placard advertising by large-scale lapidary lettering or ideographic characters and calligraphic formalities. Thus, they are readily, even instantly, identifiable through numerous other semiotic variations on these themes (Chandler 2002, 59–82, 175–210).

In short, within the conventional genre, and including the liminal cases that test the rule, official memorials that politicize death are clean rather than dirty. If they are actually dirty, through poor maintenance, neglect, or defacement, they do not do their job very well. And in that way, they signify disgrace rather than inspire veneration. Some activist groups say that they make efforts to maintain *baldosas* physically, but then, given the context, it is hard to detect what this maintenance might consist of, since the objects are not set apart or upright in a way that would tend to keep them at least somewhat more intact than, and thus distinct from, their material situation. In other words, *baldosas* are necessarily grubby.

In Argentina, institutions and places of work are sometimes required to have a posted list of victims of state terrorism, including the disappeared. At times these lists take the form typical of official memorials and monuments, though the requirements and formats vary. And occasionally these objects and one or more *baldosas*—an obviously contrasting form of memorialization—occur in close proximity, performing the troubling work that *baldosas* do.

As IR scholars have pointed out, official memorials may function as a form of forgetting, rather than remembering. They become simply “a place to drop wreaths” and thus foster an illusion of remembering (Zehfuss 2006, 219). Edkins (2011, 4) makes a similar point: “a limiting of memory to standard tropes that in fact amount to forgetting.” Repetitive rituals thus come to evoke memories of rituals and so

further divide the living from the dead, the over-and-done-with from the still-painfully-controversial.

Moreover, commercialization and “touristification” not only threaten the solemnity usually attached to conventional sites, but also perform a specific way of forgetting. Referring to the 9/11 Memorial in New York City, Edkins (2016, 101) writes: “We have no memorial, no space to remember, nothing but a major new tourist attraction and the new infrastructure to make money from it: shops, hotels, products, apps. No sacred space, no space for the sacred, for the story, for the ambiguity, for the loss.”

However, the peculiar qualities of the *baldosas* work against the ways that conventional memorializations often fail. *Baldosas* resist all of this, because their small size, genre-troubling design, deliberate grubbiness, and otherwise unmarked randomness make them insistent rather than numbly repetitive. Thus, these objects provoke and conserve a startlingly visceral sensation of shock.

### Contradictions and Catachreses

By troubling conventional genres of memorialization, *baldosas* generate a productive catachresis, that is, a fresh meaning that arises from a surprising or unexpected conjunction of concepts or things. Thus, they are different from otherwise familiar objects, yet similar enough to do the troubling (Howarth 2000). Indeed, sightings of the familiar and the different offer ideas for viewers to consider, rather than simply referencing or mirroring similarities and differences that viewers already know. Communicative objects that do political work in overtly emotional terms are specially crafted for the job.

To be both intelligible and puzzling, *baldosas* reference at first sight a number of well-known features of memorialization that viewers of such commonplace objects, including readers of this article, will find familiar. These objects include (though not exhaustively) gravestones in a cemetery; official memorial plaques and markers concerning tragic or heroic events; historical or heritage notices concerning people, buildings, and neighborhoods; and walking-trail signs for thematic tours. In the case of the *baldosas*, though, there is no specific trail to follow. Indeed, their randomness evokes the present-absence of curation and didacticism.

In that way *baldosas* are intrusions of the everyday/anyday dead into the lively street life of the living. Because they are stone-like, rectangular markers of death, they reference public notice and state supervision. However, the objects seem to have produced and authorized themselves, and to be autochthonous products of workaday pavements. At a glance they are both of the pavements and *not* of the pavements. That visual contradiction is a hermeneutic hook: it provokes interpretation and a thoughtful—but always already unsuccessful—attempt at resolution (Zimmerman 2015). In any case, the import of those memories and the pain that they carry are only incompletely apprehensible, whatever the interpretive effort (Scarry 1987; Sneh and Cosaka 2000; Edkins 2003; LaCapra 2009; Hite and Huguet 2016).

*Baldosas* materialize a liminal evocation of local and national political experience: the state was there but in the wrong way; the victim was there but is now nowhere; fear has pushed eyewitnesses into a realm of denial rather than a practice of testimony; an event was a nonevent. It didn't happen; we didn't see anything; nothing took place. But then denial necessarily references a “could have been.” *Baldosas* condense these contradictions and puzzles into a material visuality, which performatively, but metaphorically, enacts what it causes us to name—the terror of the *dictadura*.

Thus, *baldosas* are timely, that is, not only referencing a now historical period but also ongoing controversies and current investigations. In other words, they belong to the “here and now” as much as to the “there and then,” connecting multiple

temporalities through multiple kinds of concrete and abstract experience. Importantly, these objects are also untimely, because the phenomenon of “the disappeared” blatantly contradicts the first rule for the human ceremonialization of death—you need a body (Chambers 2003). Burial sites and grave goods are only burials and graves when there are fragments of human bones *in situ* or other traces of organic human remains, such as ashes. Baldosas affirm and contradict, they mark ambiguity and irresolution—is this memorial marking a place? of what? and when? are we walking in a graveyard? alone, or with ghostly shades? are we reflecting properly on what it might be saying? or just experiencing a fleeting indifference and willingness to forget?

Perhaps the most interesting and evocative material–spatial–phenomenological property of all is the fact that one will never know when or quite where *baldosas* will occur. Indeed—given that in general one is not particularly looking for them—they will suddenly appear into view in quite a random and fleeting way, either holding one’s downward-facing attention or not (Bettanin and Schenquer 2015).

*Baldosas* do not struggle very hard to be obvious amid the flotsam of urban clutter, for example, cast off flyers and flysheets, throwaways and litter of all kinds, fallen leaves, trash bags, old newspapers, animal ordure, etc.—anything that makes up a continuous, running horizontal collage of *objets-trouvés*. Or, in other words, if an activist group wanted to do something immediately eye-catching and easily interpreted in order to advertise its cause, this is an unlikely and quite unexpected way of doing it.

### Objects to Subjects

Now we move from a detailed account of the communicative properties of *baldosas* as objects to the way that humans communicate about the politics through which they have come into existence. Here is testimony taken from one of the *baldosas*’ own books:

The communication and joint work involved in the process of making the *baldosas* ... brought new family members forward [to speak] to the commission, providing new information in relation to ongoing trials and testimonials, as well as reconstructing emotional bonds in families, who, traumatized by the violence of repression, were silent and in denial, with feelings of estrangement, resentment and guilt. (Barrios x la Memoria y Justicia 2013, 161, our translation)

While placed literally on the ground by activists, the *baldosas* are also placed symbolically on the ground of memory and collective identity-building. Before a *baldosa* is conceived and placed, there are challenges and puzzles that need to be addressed so that they can work effectively to mobilize emotions in individuals and communities. Guarini (2012) portrays an uncomfortable telephone conversation between one of the activists, in the presence of several others, with a victim’s neighbor who did not want to cooperate and even threatened to destroy the *baldosa* in question. Thus, we are made witness to political meaning-making work in which objects and subjects are co-constitutive:

Baldosas, above all, are our way of making the *Nunca Más* [“Never Again”] more than an expression of a desire. Each one of the steps that we follow to make them recovers the presence of the *compañeros detenidos-desaparecidos* [“comrades detained-disappeared”] or otherwise murdered by state terrorism. (Barrios x la Memoria y Justicia 2013, 8, our translation)

And similarly, in this summary testimony from activists:

... the pieces of each story (many of them never collected before) witnessed by family members, friends, fellow activists, articulated with data provided by neighbors who

overcame old fears, transformed us ... [And] the outside changed, too. What the city kept hidden began to be seen, thanks to notices on its sidewalks. (*Barrios x la Memoria y Justicia* 2008, 9, our translation)

Simply working for memory and justice is controversial vis-à-vis those who either support dictatorship, past or present, or are politically indifferent, just wanting to move on, or are overtly hostile (*Guarini* 2012). However, the activists themselves are also diverse, even fractious, and have different memories and experiences. Sometimes there are disagreements between the activists and the relatives of the commemorated individual concerning the language used on a *baldosa*. *Guarini* (2012) registers an example where activists concede to politically softened language, changing their formula from “state terrorism” to “irregular forces.”

For activists, the *baldosas* “form a bridge between different generations” (*Barrios x la Memoria y Justicia* 2013, 8, our translation). On some occasions, children and young people are involved in making and placing “their own” *baldosa* for a former student or teacher at an educational institution. The artistic materiality of the process seems appealing, engulfing, and lively. *Guarini* (2012) portrays instruction, conversation, laughter, and nervousness about misplacing a letter or putting a stone in the wrong place. Perhaps the power of the *baldosas* is that, more than working *against* something, they operate as the material axis around which dialogue, creation, and meaning-making converge and revolve in a constructive and transformative way.

According to *Azulay Tapiero and Garzón* (2011), individuals' engagements with the *baldosas* result from personal experiences, as well as from subjective and intersubjective processes of acculturation. In this sense, *baldosas* can be read in different ways, and oftentimes people attribute meanings to them that had not been contemplated by their creators. For example, *Guarini* (2012) shows how an elderly woman understood, from what someone else had told her, that they were “healing stones.” Clearly *baldosas* do not unfailingly transmit a consistent and singular message (*Bettanin and Schenquer* 2015, 64).

*Guarini* (2012) also presents the reactions of men and women who walk over or near *baldosas*. These individuals are then asked to explain what they feel and to reflect on this. Some people nervously say that the *baldosas* mean nothing and quickly walk away. Some say that they do not know what to think. Others explain their emotions and express their opinions, usually about the disappeared and the dictatorship. Those reactions include curiosity, rejection, recognition, and indifference, among others.

The leader of *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* (Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo), Hebe de Bonafini, angrily declared: “Putting a pavestone on the ground with the name of a disappeared, so they piss, shit and spit on them, is terrible. I don't know who had this idea: it is disastrous.”<sup>9</sup> Such a strong reaction testifies to the political work being done by the *baldosas* that troubles subjects very deeply (*figure 3*).

*Baldosas* do not move everyone, nor do they interpellate everyone in the same way, or indeed at all. To activists this reveals that there is more work to do, and that these memory practices are very much needed. Human rights protection is not guaranteed today, nor in future, and even less so is the justice embraced by the *militantes populares* that the *baldosas* try to make present. This political process involves activist efforts at multiple levels, including an often moving ceremony of placement with unscripted, spontaneous storytelling from those attending (*Guarini* 2012).

*Baldosas* thus provoke a politics of affect, not just emotions as individual experiences. As *Audrey Reeves* (2018, 105) explains, emotion and affect can be distinguished conceptually: “Affects include visceral reactions (such as laughter, tears,

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/politica/hebe-poner-una-baldosa-con-el-nombre-de-un-desaparecido-es-nefasto-nid1495574>.



**Figure 3.** Baldosa por la memoria - everyday ordure.

and screams) that we associate in everyday speech with emotions (such as joy, sadness, and fear), but they specifically relate to the corporeal, somatic, embodied, and sensorial dimension of human experience.” Such constellations of meaning-making practices powerfully evoke quite varied notions of politics that include but transcend the struggle for institutional and institutionalizing power. They also encompass the configuration of space that frames social ordering and world ordering, as well as the production of timelines and temporalities (Buck-Morss 2010). As William A. Callahan (2017, 362) argues, when we say “aesthetics” in global politics, and indeed politics *tout court*, we are concerned with ordering practices that raise ethical questions. What kind of ethical connections between past and present, then, do *baldosas* demand of their viewers?

### Humble Heroes and Heroes that Humble

As objects, *baldosas* are small and humble, indeed remarkably “unmagnificent,” and yet they are powerful in their very unpretentiousness and simplicity. Coming from the craft-art of activist groups, they are removed from the martial/military frameworks of many official forms of remembrance (Snyder 1999). They translate into materiality the apparently oxymoronic pairing of strength and vulnerability that marks the lives and deaths of the *militantes populares* vis-à-vis the powerful institutional systems that disappeared them, and that also threatened those around them.

However, in the case of the *baldosas* specifically, the asymmetry between the victims of state terrorism and those who organized, tolerated, and excused their torture and murder is expressed in their metaphorical resemblance to literally anyone. Their democratic and of-the-people condition is not only empowering, but also a mirror to the violability of ordinary individuals and of democracy itself. They merge functionally with the paving slabs already there, just as pedestrians are merged there as functional citizens. As functional citizens, they are always already vulnerable to what animals, machines, and other humans can do to them (Benegas Loyo 2016a, 38). That vulnerability and violability is poignant, not only because—in the case of the murdered and disappeared—the criminal trials and political controversies are still ongoing. But that poignancy also occurs because, somewhat more abstractly, popular projects, whether socialist, communist, or radical Peronist, have been bloodily defeated. In that way, *baldosas* allude to ongoing popular resistance struggles against neoliberalism and authoritarianism. Those humble objects thus

resonate aesthetically and emotionally with popular sovereignty as the foundational principle through which democratic institutions must be legitimated.

The *baldosas* have been contested, not only by those who support the former dictatorship and/or a new one, but also by human rights activists whose preferred symbolism has been that of the disappeared or of disappearance. The figure of the disappeared person implies anonymity, an undetermined status (*ni vivos ni muertos* = “neither alive or dead”), together with a valuable lack of individuation within the struggle for the *treinta mil*, as opposed to the recovery of a specific individual. However, when a victim is named as such on a *baldosa*, that individual is also symbolically resurrected by means of a materialized textual artifact, and is thus experienced phenomenologically as a physical presence. That evocation is controversial because it seems to reference the view that naming the dictatorship’s victims individually is a strategy that limits protest to the number of cases that have been, and could be, recognized and identified (Bettanin and Schenquer 2015, 65).

*Baldosas* thus resist an erasure of “popular militants” by erasing the erasure, by marking an ongoing absence of particular individuals. They re-elaborate and trouble the narratives around the tragedies of torture, murder, and oblivion with their vulnerability and humility. If they remain pristine, which is almost impossible, they speak their message. If they are vandalized, they symptomatize what they are denouncing. If both situations occur—preservation and deterioration, being maintained and being defaced, which is most likely—then they become a mirror to Argentina’s dealings with the past, and thus a window on the present.

The personal, social, and political involvement that *baldosas* produce is unusual and significant, because it involves painful healing, community-building, and self-reflection, particularly with the activist groups and more generally in the *barrios* (Benegas Loyo 2016b, 19). This democratic practice of memory-making goes well “beyond punishment” and also transcends “a politics of recrimination and rancor” (Moreno and Moreno 1999, 689), which typically operates through the “eternal repetition of its pain” and self-referential feelings of *ressentiment* (Brown 1995, 55, 76; Menéndez-Carrión 2015).

Things are signs, as much as signs are things (Bartelson 2006, 48). And the *baldosas* are things that materially signify and hyper-localize memories, which are generally erased or otherwise sanitized by official histories (Acuff 2012). They articulate messianic heroism and mundane equivocation, like the unofficial heroes who were once part of the life of the city.<sup>10</sup> The humble paving stones tell us that the dead—the murdered and disappeared victims of state terrorism—once walked right here, just as we are doing right now. And now in doing that we also know what it feels like to be humbled by an object. And through emotion, we are called to think ethically about the principles of democracy and the practices of states that, whether disingenuously or not, claim this legitimacy.

### Guilt, Complicity, and Trauma

Ongoing practices of commemoration and remembrance are central to political responses to collective trauma (McDonald 2010, 289). Many sites of memory are instrumentalized by hierarchical, nationalistic language (Bell 2006; Lisle 2006; McDonald 2010). Potentially, however, memories of trauma can become a mode of resistance to a communicative practice that actively “forgets the essential vulnerability of flesh in its reification of state, nation and ideology” (Edkins 2006, 100). Trauma is thus a powerful site for producing collective reflection, empathy, even citizenship-identifications, but there is no guarantee that these positive developments, whether political or personal, are going to happen. In fact, trauma can

<sup>10</sup> Whether victims were heroes at all or, if heroes, then all in precisely the same way, is itself controversial; Guarini’s (2012) documentary touches on this point.

extend itself indefinitely through a silenced silence or even become ingrained in the very movements and interventions that are supposed to repair the damage (Brown 1995; Giorgi 1995; Sneh and Cosaka 2000; Kellermann 2001; Edkins 2003; LaCapra 2009; Ravecca 2019).

The *baldosas* attempt an impossible task: to represent the absent to the unaware and to mark an absence of awareness. Or perhaps they want to manifest the presence of complicity and guilt. Thus, in one way or another, they display the unfinished business of coming to terms with a painful past (Poole 2008, 160). Or, as Thomas Olesen (2012, 376) concludes: “The atrocities already committed cannot be undone ... They linger on into the present and future with moral and political questions: What should we have done? Could we have done more? And how do we prevent future injustices?”

These openings and interrogations are interrupting business as usual and reinterpreting an irreparable set of events. Furthermore, they raise questions as to what would have been possible, or what life would have been like, if the named individuals were still alive, present rather than absent. Or indeed how different the world would be if state terrorism had not murdered or disappeared that person, and so many others. But then how was it possible for that to happen, not again, but for the first time?

From the ground up, *baldosas* show that there is an excess that cannot be captured by formalized and institutionalized processes of justice and—more powerfully—that connection, compassion, affirmation, and recognition are needed in the complex task of weaving past, present, and future together in emancipatory and humane political practices (Benjamin 1996). According to Edkins (2006, 110), “what is important about something that we describe as traumatic ... could be not just that something is injured, but that the very possibility of the thing itself, its very separateness as a thing, is threatened. For example, the way in which the body is generally regarded as distinct from its surroundings is called into question.” Our “vulnerability consists in and is comprised of our radical relationality.”

Dealing with trauma can become an opportunity to restore relationality and, thus, for the cultivation of moral imagination (Lederach 2005). By crossing boundaries between different strategies of memorialization, and in surprising us by abruptly but soberly bringing the past back to our faces (as we view our feet), *baldosas* viscerally reenact and attempt to undo trauma in ways oriented to building democratic citizenship and justly accountable institutions.

However, *baldosas* reference not just the trauma of loss and the politics of impunity, but also compound the trauma by referencing the unburied dead, the absence of a body, and grief without closure (Zehfuss 2006; Honig 2013). Each *baldosa* is an open Pandora’s box that threatens normalized frameworks and everyday nonchalance by reminding us of our collective and individual physical and moral precarity. Thus, the *baldosas* instantiate “trauma time,” defined by Edkins (2006, 108) as a “form of time that provides an opening for the political” and is therefore “distinct from the linear, narrative time that suits state or sovereign politics.”

*Baldosas* are a very active metonym and powerful ethical presence. That presence marks and territorializes an agonizing gap in human experience that becomes public, that is, a common moral responsibility versus everyday complicity. Where there was a traumatic absence, so the object says, now there are words, names, written in stone, even written into the pavements of anyone’s everyday. They thus make language into a material meaning-maker (Sneh and Cosaka 2000). As visual markers for traumatic experiences, *baldosas* are materialized melancholia (Brown 1999).

### Conclusion

The international politics of human rights comprises a vast array of performative practices, joining the international to the national to the very local neighborhood,

bringing together any number of individuals, groups, and institutions. Those practices are enabling, because they provide roles that are perhaps too well understood: victim, perpetrator, witness, expert, lawyer, judge, filmmaker, researcher, agency worker, governmental representative, UN rapporteur, facilitator, reconciler, spiritual advisor or go-between, reporter, and activist. Human rights activists are makers of texts, and perhaps also making signs and posters, chanting and shouting, parading or processing, even acting out simulations by dressing up in costumes or lying down in “die-in” demonstrations.

The “aesthetic turn” in IR, as employed here in considering the *baldosas por la memoria* of Buenos Aires, builds on insights developed within the “turns” to popular culture and visual analysis in theoretical and empirical studies. Notably those studies have focused on artistic works as politicizing agents, and on commercial artifacts that do politics by other means, as well as considering tourism and music-making in an international frame (Franklin 2005; Hansen 2011; Lisle 2013; Weldes and Rowley 2015). As we have demonstrated, *baldosas* perform their political meaning-making in ways related to, but different from, the material practices so far considered.

*Baldosas* are a rare example of activist objects, made active by people, of course, but working hard at their job. The neighborhood activists who make and fix *baldosas* in Argentina are performing an unusual material practice suited to the locality and to the ongoing political concerns there. By making materiality “speak,” people empower themselves not just to speak, but to act, and this article has thus charted that democratic practice. The people’s paving stones, then, re-enact the political *aporia* of international struggles for human rights by traumatizing memory—and working generatively *through* trauma—in everyday streetscapes. Crucially, *baldosas* are crafted to hand political agency to those passing over and looking down, by jarring viewers just enough to confront, on the spot, a deathly politics, and then to reflect, more generally, on the politics of death. Their hesitation, even if fleeting, marks a moment when the everyday naturalizations that make life comfortable are ruptured into an ethical encounter with democratic citizenship.

Moreover, the multi-layered and phenomenologically complex semiosis encoded in such a mundane everyday situation, and in such an unremarkable, concretely material normality, should remind us of the intrinsic precarity of disciplinary boundaries and aesthetic hierarchies, and thus the fragility of intelligibility itself, as well as its open-ended possibilities. While this article represents an encounter framed by scholarly reflections on memorialization as a political practice, the methodological approach, and curiosity about meaning-making in the everyday, should be of much wider intellectual interest. The genre-specific and genre-limiting constraints through which academic practices operate and self-identify—whether in political science, sociology, anthropology, geography, cultural studies, aesthetics, history and the like—might occasionally be troubled in similarly moving ways, by taking an odd, offbeat angle of vision, such as looking at what is under one’s feet.

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