

Childhood and the Display of Violence in Contemporary Museum Exhibitions on Argentine State Terrorism

Abstract: This contribution sets out to investigate the inclusion of childhood experiences of state violence in museum narratives displayed in former clandestine detention centres set up by the last Argentine dictatorship (1976–1983) and later reconverted into memorial spaces and museums. In a comparative analysis, we examine three different curatorial approaches to this topic, discussing the strategies deployed to represent these experiences: the permanent exhibition at the ESMA Museum and Site of Memory, the “virtual museum” Proyecto Tesoros [Treasures Project], by Colectivo de hijos (Cdh) [Collective of Children], and a temporary exhibition entitled ¿Aquí hubo niñ@s? [Were There Children Here?] at the former Olimpo. We furthermore discuss a new perspective that has not so far been acknowledged in museological exhibition practice in post-dictatorship Argentina: the affective response by visitors to the representation of children as survivors of the dictatorship.

Keywords: childhood, memorial museums, state terrorism, collective memory, Argentina

Introduction

This article explores how childhood experiences of state violence are reconstructed in museum narratives in former clandestine detention, torture, and extermination

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centres¹ set up by the last Argentine dictatorship (1976–1983). Many of those spaces, particularly in the capital Buenos Aires, have been recovered in recent years and reconverted into sites of memory or memorial museums.

The exhibition of conflicting histories in museums is one of the most effective forms of public commemoration in the struggle to assert a dominant interpretation of the past. However, hegemonic narratives² are not monolithic and can be challenged by marginalized voices that eventually enter into the museological scripts of these spaces. While a broad research field on memory sites and space after the experience of state terrorism in Argentina has established in the last years,³ so far only a few well-founded scholarly analyses of representational strategies in museums have addressed the history of the dictatorship at authentic sites of remembrance, lacking a specific focus on children.⁴ Furthermore, social sciences and the humanities have only recently started to generate knowledge about the fate of minors as victims of state terrorism in Argentina, focusing mainly on disappeared children.⁵ Thus there

1 We use the native terms “centro clandestino de detención, tortura y exterminio” and its acronym CCDTyE in Spanish, alternating it with the shorter form “clandestine detention and torture centre”, CDC in English (“centro clandestino de detención”, CCD) which are broadly accepted within the memory discourse of the Argentine human rights movement.

2 Following Marc Angenot, who considers hegemony as the set of diverse norms and impositions that operate in social discourse to establish the repertoire of acceptable subjects and tolerable approaches to them, we aim to deconstruct the social narratives on disappearance in Argentina, which characterize what happened in different ways, establishing different relationships between militancy and repressive action, and attribute other roles to civil society as a whole. Although Angenot avoids using “hegemonic” as an adjective to qualify the discourses, we have been inspired by his work to refer to “hegemonic narratives” as those that establish the repertoire of speakable aspects of disappearance in each historical moment. Marc Angenot, *El discurso social. Los límites históricos de lo pensable y lo decible*, Buenos Aires 2012, 32.

3 Florencia Larralde Armas/Julietta Lampasona, *El testimonio en el espacio: entre la escena judicial y la narrativa situada del horror. Un análisis de la muestra permanente en el Museo Sitio de Memoria ESMA*, in: *Historia y fuentes literarias: nuevas miradas, Rúbrica contemporánea* 10/20 (2021), 163–181; Susana Kaiser, *Writing and Reading Memories at a Buenos Aires Memorial Site: The Ex-ESMA*, in: *History and Memory, Special Issue: Museums and Monuments: Memorials of Violent Pasts in Urban Spaces* 32/1 (2020), 69–99; Estela Schindel, “Now the Neighbours Lose Their Fear”: Restoring the Social Network around Former Sites of Terror, in: *The International Journal of Transitional Justice* 6 (2012), 467–485. A recent Special Issue edited by González de Oleaga and Meloni on “Topographies of Memory” brings together relevant articles on the contestation of spaces determined by past violence, focusing particularly on Argentine case studies (see contributions by Messina, González de Oleaga, Larralde Armas, Cinto, Meloni, Cattaneo et al., Da Silva Catela, and Colombo), although lacking a specific perspective on childhood experiences, in: *Kamchatka. Revista de análisis cultural* 13 (2019).

4 We are currently preparing a Special Issue on the topic of the agency of children as victims of forms of state repression in Latin America, particularly focusing on topographies of violence: “Infancias, violencia y memorias. La agencia de niños, niñas y adolescentes sobrevivientes del terrorismo de estado,” in: Ulrike Capdepón/Mariana Eva Perez (eds.), *Clepsidra. Revista Interdisciplinaria de Estudios sobre Memoria* (accepted for publication).

5 Fabricio Sanchis Laino, *La apropiación de niños y niñas en el marco del terrorismo de Estado y las luchas por su restitución en Argentina (1975–actualidad)*, in: *Revista Universitaria de Historia Mili-*

is still much research to be done into the representation of surviving children and of the diverse experiences of violence they went through.

In this contribution, we interrogate how children's experiences of dictatorship violence are represented in current exhibitions and how their voices and testimonies are included in museum scripts. The so-called "second generation" led a renewal of the ways of understanding and remembering the past, both through activism and art, supporting the search for justice to the point of becoming an essential protagonist in the trials of crimes against humanity. However, their condition as direct victims remains veiled behind their position as "children of" (with the exception of those who themselves were disappeared) and the exhibitions in the former CCDTyE provide illustrative examples of this. An explanation for this "adult-centric" approach could be that the discussion of children as victims of the dictatorship appears to be too horrific and painful to bear. Another possible reason concerns the centripetal force of disappearance, the main repressive method applied, that absorbs everything around it.⁶

Our central questions are: how is state violence, particularly against children as victims, depicted in museum narratives and how do these narratives interact with visual material and artefacts? How do these memorial spaces account for the visibility and voices of former child victims in the present and reflect their experiences during the dictatorship? How do the adult voices of former child victims influence and challenge the dominant narratives about the last Argentine dictatorship and contribute to changing discourses in the present?

Our first section describes various forms of violence experienced by child victims during the dictatorship and how these are remembered today. The following sections compare three different curatorial approaches: the permanent exhibit at the emblematic ESMA Museum and Site of Memory (2015) illustrates the predominant place given to children who were born in captivity in the Officers' Club of the Navy School of Mechanics and taken away from their mothers to be "appropriated" (as local activists refer to child robbery by families close to the regime). The second exhibition is *Proyecto Tesoros* [Treasures Project] (2013), a "virtual museum"⁷ designed by the *Colectivo de hijos* (Cdh) [Collective of Children], an organization of children of disappeared with many visual artists among its members, which show-

tar 9/19 (2020), 231–259; Sabina Amantze Regueiro, *Apropiación de niños, familias y justicia: Argentina (1976–2012)*, Rosario 2013; Carla Villalta, *Entregas y secuestros: el rol del estado en la apropiación de niños*, Buenos Aires 2012. During the previous decades, this victim group was mainly the subject of studies from the psychology field.

6 Gabriel Gatti, *Surviving Forced Disappearance in Argentina and Uruguay. Identity and Meaning*, New York 2014.

7 <http://conti.derhuman.jus.gov.ar/2013/04/noticias-entrevista-lucila-quieto.shtml> (20 May 2022).

cases a variety of objects, emphasizing their emotional bonds with the life history of these children in relation to their absent parents. Our last case is a temporary exhibition entitled *¿Aquí hubo niños?* (*Were there Children Here?*) installed in 2018 in the former CCDTyE Olimpo [Olympus], which explicitly aims to represent a wide range of violent situations experienced in this place by child survivors. The final section compares and discusses the three different approaches in relation to a new perspective that has not yet been acknowledged in museological and curatorial exhibition practice: the representation and agency of children as victims and survivors of dictatorship violence.

This work is not exclusively based on the curatorial analysis of the above-mentioned exhibits. Our methodological approach also includes repeated visits to both exhibitions as well as *ad hoc* biographical and narrative interviews with child survivors, focusing on their own experiences with state violence during the dictatorship, and with some of the exhibition curators.⁸ We conducted in-depth interviews with the curators of Ex Olimpo, and analysed the documentation of both CCDs' webpages (images, texts, videos) with an eye to curatorial intention and desired response rather than to actual visitor's reception.

One particularity in the Argentine context is that the narratives' form and content in these memorial sites are often heavily influenced by legal discourse. The criminal cases under investigation and the indictments of individuals were organized around the former CDCs. From case files to museum scripts, from testimonies to temporary exhibits: the echoes of legal narratives resonate in those authentic places that once constituted the crime scene and where today civil society actors, artists, and curators, but also survivors and the relatives of victims try to keep alive the memory of what happened. At the same time, these sites promote exchange and debate that may tease out the limits of what can be said in court.

On a conceptual level, in order to analyse how state violence systematically deployed against children during the Argentine dictatorship is displayed in memorial sites, we find Philippe Mesnard's conceptualization useful.⁹ This author developed an analytical framework for the analysis of "an economy of representations", while avoiding the binarism between explanation and emotion, and at the same time identifying the tension between a didactic and an emotional configuration in the curatorial work. With this, Mesnard discusses the narrative strategies in museums

8 Due to the restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, we combined in-person and virtual interviews, and complemented these with interviews available in online archives (Memoria Abierta, Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno, <http://www.exccdolimp.org.ar> (9 March 2023)).

9 Philippe Mesnard, *El tema del pathos en los espacios de los museos y de los monumentos memoriales*, in: Silvana Mandolessi/Maximiliano Alonso (eds.), *Estudios sobre la memoria: Perspectivas actuales*, Villa María 2015, 85–101.

more broadly, problematizing their affective power for memory processes, a fundamental issue that we will tackle in the following by analysing how museological and legal narratives do shape and, at the same time, conflict with each other.

Contextualization: state violence against children in Argentina, a history of (in)visibilities

During the state terrorism in Argentina, thousands of children of political activists met the same fate as their parents. Just like adults, infants and teenagers were persecuted, forced underground and into exile, deprived of their liberty when their parents or caregivers were abducted, or were else abandoned in empty homes, on public streets, or with neighbours who sometimes stole them. Some remained themselves “disappeared” in the clandestine centres, subjected to inhumane living conditions and torture. Hundreds were born in captivity, separated from their families and handed over to perpetrators to be brought up; many were charged and placed in institutions, even when their families were looking for them. Many suffered sexual abuse in the CDCs, in the homes of those who stole them, or in juvenile institutions. Some children and teenagers were murdered and identified, while others remain missing to this day.

Of these many forms of violence against children, the only one confronted already during the dictatorship as a public issue, thanks to the protests by *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* [Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo], has been the procedure known as “appropriation”. This was the systematic abduction of babies born in the secret detention centres or, in a few cases, present when their parents were kidnapped. There were about five hundred of these disappeared “grandchildren”, of whom 132 have so far been identified. Other repressive measures designed for and implemented against children have remained off the public agenda and are still only partially acknowledged and not widely known. Under the undifferentiated heading “children”, little attention has been paid to where and how those youngsters, who were not specifically “appropriated”, were placed and how their identities were constructed.

In the research field of memory studies, the use of concepts such as “second generation” and “postmemory”,¹⁰ drawn from Holocaust studies, contributed to homogenize dissimilar situations and served to efface the direct impact of this terrorism on the children themselves.

In accordance with the campaign promises of the triumphant candidate in 1983, Raúl Alfonsín, the restoration of democracy brought with it the creation of a truth

10 Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, in: *Poetics Today* 29/1 (2008), 103–128.

commission¹¹ and the promotion of the prosecution of those responsible for human rights violations. But military pressures were intense and the exemplary Trial of the Military Junta (1985)¹² was followed by laws and presidential pardons¹³ that limited the scope of these accountability processes and closed the possibility of bringing perpetrators to justice, making the struggle against impunity the unifying goal of human rights organizations during the 1990s.

In 1995 H.I.J.O.S. (Hijos por Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio, Children for Identity and Justice against Oblivion and Silence) was founded. As the name indicates, they were socially perceived and recognized not as child survivors nor direct victims, but as *children-of* (disappeared, mainly), and they assumed this denomination as their own. This movement revitalized the human rights scene, bringing new strategies and discourses, but always linked to demands about their absent parents. Their own identities and experience as minors confronted with state terrorism remained marginal concerns and were finally relinquished when the group opened up to activists who had not been directly affected by the repression.

Under the presidencies of Néstor Kirchner (2003–2007) and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2015), the demands of *Memoria, Verdad y Justicia* (Memory, Truth, and Justice) with regard to the enforced disappearances, which had long been officially ignored, were at last taken into account and largely translated into public policies. Impunity laws and pardons were overturned both in Congress and by the Supreme Court and legal processes that had been interrupted at different stages were re-opened, while new lawsuits were filed in addition. Alongside the reopening of the trials for crimes against humanity, these public memory policies prompted the so-called recovery of former sites of confinement, torture, and extermination for use as memorial museums and spaces for the promotion of human rights. This policy of recovering former detention centres (most of them military units or buildings, but in some cases also ordinary houses owned by civilians interwoven with the urban structure of the neighbourhood) entailed expropriation and relocation

11 The Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas [National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons] (CONADEP) was created in December 1983. In 1984 the CONADEP published its final report, entitled *Nunca más* (Never Again), which became one of the greatest bestsellers in Argentine history. It continues to be reprinted to this day.

12 The dictatorship had established the Military Juntas as the supreme body of executive power. The Juntas consisted of one representative from each of the armed forces (Army, Navy, Air Force) and were presided by the representative of the Army, who performed the function of president of the nation. Between 1976 and 1983 there were four government juntas. Only members of the first three were brought before civilian courts in 1985. They received disparate sentences ranging from acquittals to life imprisonment.

13 In 1986, “Ley de Punto Final” [Full Stop Law]; in 1987, “Ley de Obediencia Debida” [Law of Due Obedience]; in 1989 and 1990, Carlos Menem’s presidential pardons.

processes, the creation of laws and administrative structures at national and provincial level, the designation of authorities, the allocation of budgets, the preservation and/or improvement of real estate, and the design and installation of permanent exhibitions, which is our topic here. Memory began to be institutionalized and to a large extent this happened *in* these authentic memorial sites. However, there was no consensus within the human rights movement about what to do with these places, nor can it be claimed that the conversion of former CCDTyE to memory sites responded at that time to a major public demand (as was the case with the trials), with few exceptions such as ESMA and *Olimpo*.

During that period, due to the deliberate activism of Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, the issue of disappeared children – who are adults today – became more visible, in the hope that publicizing these stories might mobilize doubts and encourage victims to question their identity by asking themselves whether they had been abducted. The “recovered grandchildren” were regularly present at government ceremonies, alongside the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo. At the same time, H.I.J.O.S. was brought into the management of the new memory sites, and some of its activists, as well as the “grandchildren”, were invited by the Kirchner administration to take up positions in government or to stand for election. None of this, however, resulted in a greater awareness of the various repressive measures applied to children.

The artistic productions of those children, today adults, in permanent expansion in the fields of film, literature, photography, performing arts, music, and plastic arts, have been addressed by cultural and memory studies following Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory”. However, while these children are certainly a second generation in relation to their parents’, they were contemporaries of the events and suffered various forms of violence at first hand. To borrow another notion from the field of Holocaust studies, the situation of these children fits more accurately what Susan Rubin Suleiman defined as “generation 1.5” of Holocaust survivors:

“I mean child survivors of the Holocaust, too young to have had an adult understanding of what was happening to them, but old enough to have *been there* [...]. Unlike the second generation, whose most common shared experience is that of belatedness [...] the 1.5 generation’s shared experience is that of premature bewilderment and helplessness.”¹⁴

This author also distinguishes between children “too young to remember”; children “old enough to remember but too young to understand”; and children “old enough to under-

¹⁴ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *The 1.5 Generation: Thinking About Child Survivors and the Holocaust*, in: *American Imago* 59/3 (2002), 277–295, 277, highlighted in the original.

stand but too young to be responsible”¹⁵ We find these categories applicable for the Argentine context, and will therefore focus on the children of victims of political persecution, who because of their young age were unable to make decisions for themselves or to take responsibility for them, leaving adolescents aside, as Suleiman proposes.

In the following we shall focus on two sites, that we compare to a virtual exhibition, and their respective museological narratives. The ESMA (Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada, Navy School of Mechanics), was one of the biggest CCDTyE. Located in Buenos Aires, it operated during the entire dictatorship and subsequently became the headquarters for the official memory project during the years of Kirchnerism. The so-called *Olimpo* was run by the police between August 1978 and January 1979. This facility had been built at the beginning of the twentieth century as a tramway terminal, and after the end of the dictatorship the police kept on using it as an official car inspection station. Its re-signification as a memorial site began with a campaign by neighbour associations and intensified during the wave of popular assemblies in the socio-economic and political crisis of 2001-2002.¹⁶

Whereas the ESMA Museum and Site of Memory is managed by a board with representatives of the state and human rights organizations, the Ex *Olimpo* is run by a *Mesa de Trabajo y Consenso* (Consensus based Round Table), a working group tasked with building consensus among the local groups who had ensured the recovery of the site. The first, as its name suggests, is a memorial museum and has applied to be listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage site; the second has always resisted being conceived as or called a “museum”.¹⁷ These two memory sites also foster different types of relationship with their urban environment.¹⁸ Whereas the research

15 Ibid., 283.

16 Saskia Van Druenen, *Struggling with the Past. The Human Rights Movement and the Politics of Memory in Post-dictatorship Argentina* (1983–2006), Amsterdam 2017, 144–145; María Eugenia Mendizábal et al., *El afuera de un centro clandestino de detención: las memorias de los vecinos del “Olimpo”*, in: Anne Huffschmid/Valeria Durán (eds.), *Topografías conflictivas. Memorias, espacios y ciudades en disputa*, Buenos Aires 2012, 305–318.

17 On this point, Luciana Messina quotes a report by the *Mesa de Trabajo y Consenso* published in 2009: “The broad consensus not to see this site as a museum was a point of departure. The ‘Museum’ idea was (and is) at odds with the driving force that motivates those who make up this *Mesa*, which is rooted in understanding this site as a reference not only for the past, but also for the present. Which amounts to saying that the Memory we are building reaches out to the present, re-situates us in the current moment, criss-crossed by the conflictuality of today’s struggles. The activities undertaken by this *Mesa de Trabajo y Consenso* are guided by the vector that unites the past with the present, the commemorative with the combative, the recovery of the past from a position within today and with the seeds of hope for what may become.” Luciana Messina, *Políticas de la memoria y construcción de memoria social. Acontecimientos, actores y marcas de lugar. El caso del ex centro clandestino de detención “Olimpo”*, doctoral thesis, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, University of Buenos Aires 2010, 180.

18 The Ex *Olimpo* is located in the more peripheral and popular Floresta neighbourhood. Due to the community based engagement at the site, the communal activities go beyond the scope of memory activism. The ESMA memorial museum is based on a huge complex located in the upper and upper-middle class neighbourhood of Núñez.

team at Ex *Olimpo* put together the exhibition “Were There Children Here?” and continued the project under the same name, at ESMA attention remains focused solely on the stolen babies born on the site. We think it would be useful, therefore, to observe and consider these approaches from a comparative perspective, and to contrast them in turn with an online museum initiative, the *Proyecto Tesoros*, created by the *Colectivo de hijos* (Cdh, Collective of Children), a group of “orphans produced by the genocide”, as they called themselves.¹⁹

Memorial museums are usually created to remember community experiences of violence, such as war, dictatorship, and genocide. Of the three Argentine case studies presented here, the design and structure of the Site of Memory at ESMA corresponds most closely to this concept. The foundations for these places are their links with the past, where commemoration is established in order to heal the present as a form of symbolic reparation. In this sense, they offer an ethical intervention in the defence of human rights. Arrellano Cruz defines memorial museums as

“non-profit educational institutions that reconstruct the memories of the violence and human rights violations of the recent past and present them in a visual, creative and documentary form. They have a future-oriented educational function and justify their existence from the Never again-imperative.”²⁰

Memorial museums implement an explicit obligation to remember the past in order to prevent violence in the future. They reinforce a culture of “Never Again” that was first established as a constitutive part of Holocaust memory as a consequence of those tremendous atrocities of genocide, and later extended to serve as the title of the 1984 Argentine truth commission report *Nunca más* (CONADEP). According to museologist Paul Williams,²¹ a defining feature of these museums is their focus on the victims as a form of commemoration, acknowledgement, and reparation, since memorial museums, unlike other history museums, support the process of seeking historical justice.²²

19 Laura Rosso, Lo que se hereda. Página/12, Suplemento Las 12, 24 May 2013.

20 Fabiola Arellano Cruz, Politische Gewalt ausstellen. Nationale Erinnerungsmuseen in Chile und Peru, Bielefeld 2018, 64.

21 Paul Williams, Memorial Museums. The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities, New York 2007.

22 Amy Sodaro, Exhibiting Atrocity. Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence, New Brunswick 2019.

Reports and evidence: children in the permanent exhibition at the ESMA Memorial Museum

During the 1976–1983 dictatorship in Argentina, the country was divided for repressive purposes into operational areas under the responsibility of the armed forces. The Navy played a prominent role in the city of Buenos Aires and the northern zone of the province of the same name. Inside the ESMA, along with the regular operation of the educational institutions, a clandestine detention centre was set up in the *Casino de Oficiales* [Officers' Club], where an estimated number of five thousands detained-disappeared were held. Apart from the scale of extermination, ESMA stands out for two other particularities. It was the headquarters of the political project of Navy leader Emilio Massera, for which a group of detained-disappeared were selected to participate in what perpetrators called “recovery process” and forced into slave labour. The vast majority of these prisoners only pretended to cooperate as long as they remained under the control of the marines. Their testimonies are to this day the greatest source of evidence about what happened in that CCDTyE. The Officers' Club also served as a “clandestine maternity” (as human rights organizations put it), a system where pregnant women who had been abducted were kept alive until they gave birth under inhumane conditions and killed afterwards, while their babies were distributed to families loyal to the regime.

ESMA became a symbol of impunity during the 1990s, when it was still run by the military: There were official plans to demolish it and erect a monument to national unity in its place (an initiative blocked in the courts by human rights groups). In 2004, President Néstor Kirchner handed over the site to the city of Buenos Aires with a view to turning it into the most important memorial site of the dictatorship. From that point onwards, it became the epicentre of the official memory project. While the Officers' Club was preserved with the aim of creating a memorial museum, the rest of the buildings on the site were allocated to public offices (such as the Human Rights Secretary and the Ministry of Education's television channels) and diverse human rights organizations, all of them supportive of the ruling Kirchner government. Although guided tours began very soon, the museum's permanent exhibition in the Officers' Club, as it can be visited today, was opened in 2015. Until the pandemic, visitors could take guided and self-guided tours. Once a month, “La Visita de las Cinco” (The Five O' Clock Visit) took place, a guided tour with special guests, such as victims, artists, and experts. Photos, videos, and chronicles of these visits were uploaded to the museum website and its social media channels: thus the museum's narrative began to host different, even discrepant, voices.

The crimes committed at ESMA and at other CDCs associated with the Navy have been the subject of various court proceedings in recent years.²³ As Lampasona and Larralde Armas highlight, the testimonial discourse produced in these judicial contexts is fundamental in the museographic narrative.²⁴ At the same time, given the role that the building of ESMA's Officer's Club itself plays as material evidence, the design of the memorial museum was supposed to preserve the materiality of the clandestine centre. The permanent exhibition opened in 2015 is circumscribed to those spaces in which detained-disappeared persons were held: the basement (where torture took place); the attic and its sections called "*Capucha*" (hood, where the prisoners were confined), "*Pañol*" (store room, used to store the goods stolen from the detained people's homes), and "*Pecera*" (fish tank, where those chosen were obliged to carry out forced labour). On the upper floor, the space around the water tank, "*Capuchita*" (little hood), handed over to other repressive forces. In these parts of the building, the empty space "would be reconfigured in a space covered and coated by the testimonies, using various media: posters, panels, audiovisual projections"²⁵. The signage with explanatory texts is displayed on removable transparent acrylic panels, the audiovisual pieces are projected directly onto the walls, and on the third floor visitors walk on raised wooden walkways to avoid stepping on the original floor. Lampasona and Larralde Armas demonstrate in their analysis of the permanent exhibition how testimonies of survivors are anchored in the physical space about which they testify. As the authors put it, the testimonial voices that featured prominently in the museographic construction help construct a "choral voice"²⁶, creating an effect of closure that is both spatial and narrative. This overabundance of testimonies reveals the central place given to the experience of the survivors. While Mesnard ascribes this tendency to the pathos-based configuration,²⁷ the "immersive logic" of those stories, delivered in the context of trials for crimes against humanity, removes its subjective dimension. That is why, despite the fact that the museum is covered in an almost literal sense by testimonies, it is the explanatory logic that predominates in the ESMA Museum.

23 The first trial never came to judgment as the only defendant was found dead in his cell, poisoned by cyanide, the circumstances were never explained. The second, known as ESMA II, ended in 2011. ESMA III was the biggest trial in Argentine history, with 789 victims, more than 800 witnesses, and 54 defendants; the court reached its verdict in 2017. ESMA IV was adjourned for six months during preventive, compulsory lockdown, after which it resumed via Zoom until April 2021, when judgment was pronounced. A fifth case heard in 2021 centred on the sexual abuse of detained women. Proceedings against "appropriators" were never discontinued at any time, and here we must include the one named for the "Systematic Plan", which resulted in a judgment in 2012 after sixteen years devoted to analysing the ESMA cases among others, and sentencing some of those responsible.

24 Larralde Armas/Lampasona, *El testimonio en el espacio*, (2021).

25 *Ibid.*, 168.

26 *Ibid.*, 173.

27 Mesnard, *El tema del pathos*, 2015, 91.



Figure 1: “Small Pregnant Women’s Room”, photo by the ESMA Museum and Site of Memory.

What happens to this narrative, particularly in the case of child victims? The permanent exhibit offers exhaustive documentation of the presence of pregnant detained-disappeared women and their babies in the CCDTyE. Two “Pregnant Women’s Rooms” in the permanent exhibition are dedicated to these victims. In the biggest one, a brief account of each case is presented in an intended neutral language, but also provides information on the political militancy of the detainees. In addition, they indicate who of the children were identified. In the smaller room, there is a second intervention, artistic rather than informative in character, which lends resolute visibility to this group of child victims by inscribing the question “How is it possible that kids were born here?” in big white letters, brightly lit, on the original granite floor.

As a panel in the other room reveals, this question was extracted from the testimony of Lila Pastoriza, abducted to ESMA between 1977 and 1978:

“I asked D’Imperio [a Navy officer] how it was possible that kids could be born here, in this place where they tortured people, and he told me: ‘Look, the kids are innocent. It isn’t their fault that their parents are terrorists. That’s why we give the kids to families who will raise them differently away from the world of terrorism.’”

While the voice of a different survivor – Sara Solarz de Osatinsky, who attended most of the childbirths in the CCDTyE – can be heard directly in a recording, Lila

Pastoriza's question to one of the perpetrators is redirected here to the visitor. Does this shift of the target audience in this new context help us decode the meaning of the installation? Is the idea that visitors should question their own responsibility or that of society as a whole for what happened under the dictatorship, in keeping with the "Never Again" paradigm that memorial museums seek to establish? Or is it enough for the curators to have visitors be stunned by incredulity in the face of such barbarism?

Whatever the case, each of the "Pregnant Women' Rooms", as the museum calls them, echoing the lexicology of survivor testimonies ("*piezas de las embarazadas*"), seems to respond to different "economies of representation". Following Mesnard's analytic framework, the larger room offers an example of the immersive logic, which subsumes a tendency within the other, around the case of Elizabeth Patricia Marcuzzo and her baby Sebastián Rosenfeld Marcuzzo. Printed on acrylic panels, there is a reproduction of the letter that Patricia wrote to her mother when the boy was taken from her to be delivered to her family (an exceptional event, as babies were systematically stolen). Visitors are also provided with a transcription of the letter and a fragment of her sister's courtroom testimony, which "certifies" the truthfulness of the rest of the materials. Also reproduced in the same visual language is a photograph showing a handkerchief embroidered by Patricia and kept by a survivor, where we find lyrics by Joan Manuel Serrat's song *De Parto* (Due Date). These elements allow us to come closer to the experience of this young detained-disappeared woman, to try reading between the lines of the letter that her captors were bound to read, to imagine her need to embellish the birth of her child in this of all places. Like the photos in the museums and memorial monuments analysed by Mesnard, the letter and the handkerchief as artefacts, whose originals are not on display, are confined to an "illustrative function [...]. In this case, the anxiety contained by the image is dominated by and subject to what, in Foucauldian terms, we would call an order of discourse".²⁸ If we consider the two Pregnant Women's Rooms as a totality, an emotional pole seems to have been reserved for the small room, while in the large one, even in its original design, the elements of greatest emotional impact within a rational logic that explains and exposes the systematicity of the abduction of the babies born there are subordinated. On a second level of immersive logic, both rooms, with their configuration more inclined towards pathos – although not so much as to invalidate the predominant didactic tendency – are inserted into the larger narrative of the museum in general, characterized, as we have stated, by the almost exclusive use of testimonies considered as evidence in court.

28 Mesnard, El tema del *pathos*, 2015, 88.



Figure 2: Visitor stares at the photograph of the doll in the “Store Room”, photo by the ESMA Museum and Site of Memory.

Apart from this particular group of child victims, the museum script refers at best tangentially to the presence of young boys and girls. Mention is made in the basement of the fact that women gave birth there, but no statistics are provided, or is there any additional information about the people concerned. In another section of the building, the residence occupied by the director of ESMA, a screen projects the testimony given by Andrea Krichmar before the Trial of the Juntas in 1985. Here she recounts that when she was eleven years old, her friend Berenice, the daughter of ESMA’s director Rubén Chamorro, invited her to play in the Officers’ Club and that they saw a woman in a hood and chains being taken from a vehicle. The testimony does not focus on Krichmar’s own experience as a girl but on what she may or may not have been witnessing. Finally, the section called “Pañol” (store room) offers a glimpse of another type of state violence against children that we are interested in exploring further, as it is a specific form of affectation that has not received attention so far.

Of the five panels that make up this part of the museographic script, a diptych shows a photograph of a rag doll with the caption:

“Doll

María Elsa Garreiro Martínez, ‘La Gallega’, sewed three dolls like this one while she was a forced labourer in the ‘store room’. She gave one to Norma Cristina Cozzi, a survivor of this clandestine centre.”

The other side of the diptych displays fragments from statements made in court by Norma and by Laura Villaflor Garreiro,²⁹ which have been drawn from the ESMA II records. “On this visit, my Mom brought us these little dolls from ESMA, I have one and my sister has one. We found out later, from survivor testimonies, that she made them in the ‘store room’”, says Laura, described in the epigraph as “daughter”. The fragment from Norma’s testimony completes the story:

“[S]he made three little dolls with three pieces of cloth, one of which I am going to show. This doll was a present that I took to my daughter, who was a year old, and it was made by La Gallega, we have kept it until today [...]”

What visits does Laura refer to? Under what circumstances could these detained-disappeared women have given dolls to their daughters? In the collective book *Ese infierno* (That Hell), the authors, five women survivors, devote a chapter to what they call “an excursion into the outside world”. They explain:

“ESMA had a system of family visits for prisoners selected for work. The repressors brought them back to the outside world for a few hours and allowed them to have contact with their loved ones, at first under armed guard, later apparently on their own. Before leaving ESMA for the first time, it was clear to all the detainees that [...] escape during a visit could mean the murder of the other prisoners and savage retaliation against the family of the fugitive.”³⁰

From the doll made of clothes stolen from the disappeared that is reproduced and photographed, the museum offers the child’s perspective of these “family visits” and we wonder: what happened to those girls, who after being violently separated from their mothers, saw them come back from hell but only for a few hours, only to disappear again? In his witness statement, given before the Trial of the Juntas, Aníbal Clemente Villaflor, described as follows the scene: “At the first meeting, the two women [Garreiro and Josefina Villaflor] met with their respective daughters and all they did was to laugh ‘as if they were drunk or scared’; they were not in a normal state and

29 Laura, her sister Elsa Eva Villaflor Garreiro and her cousin Celeste Hazan Villaflor were victims of the ESMA Task Force when their parents were abducted on consecutive days, but whereas Laura and Elsa were abandoned in the street and then taken to family members by neighbours, Celeste was driven to the clandestine centre, where she spent a day before being returned to her grandparents. Although Celeste’s case was described by her grandparents at the Trial of the Juntas, and even though she herself was a plaintiff in the ESMA II trial, she was not classified as a victim in the proceedings. Her case finally appeared among the judgments in Trials III and IV. Nevertheless, she herself no longer appeared as a plaintiff and nor was she formally notified (personal communication with Celeste Hazan Villaflor, 2 September 2021). No member of the Navy was ever charged for abandoning her cousins Laura and Elsa in the street after abducting their parents.

30 Munú Actis et. al., *Ese infierno. Conversaciones de cinco mujeres sobrevivientes de la ESMA*, Buenos Aires 2001, 220.

kept looking at their companion [a member of the ESMA Task Force].³¹ But the girl's perspective is missing in the museum script, as if the photograph (and story) of the doll(s) were there only for the purpose of illustrating the space. The explanatory, detached, thread holds sway over the emotional elements in the script.

A virtual museum of "treasures": emotional dimensions of objects left by the disappeared

The reference to the store room in the ESMA exhibit has nothing to do with what Laura Villaflor Garreiro experienced herself or with her first-hand memories. By contrast, the memories of Laura emerge more freely in *Proyecto Tesoros* (Treasures Project), an artistic project created and curated by *Colectivo de hijos* (Cdh, Collective of Children), the group to which Laura and her cousin Celeste Hazan Villaflor belonged. It was conceived mainly as a "virtual museum" and included:

- an online exhibition of photographs of objects belonging to their detained-disappeared parents,
- a collection of short videos in which members of the Cdh presented and commented on the objects, scenes that were interspersed with the same photographs, now animated,
- an exhibition of original objects and large-format photographs.

María Toninetti, a professional restorator and artist who was a member of the collective, explains:

"The idea for Proyecto Tesoros arose because some of the children had items that were deteriorating [...]. When we began giving form to recording the objects, we realized that there was not much point to it without recording our accounts of these items too. We did not want to focus on the owners of the objects, but on our own history. We wanted to recount how the object came to us, whether we had always been with it or whether a comrade or a family member had given it to us, or whether we had to go and get it."³²

This emphasis placed on the objects can be understood when we bear in mind that the abduction raids, without exception, included the pillaging of people's homes, so much so that in many cases the victims who were disappeared seem to have vanished without leaving any traces behind them. These artefacts, salvaged and conserved mostly by the children or relatives of whom they belonged, acquire a synecdochic

31 Anibal Clemente Villaflor passed away but his testimony was incorporated into the ESMA trials.

32 Alejandro Rebossio, *Una mirada al dolor de la dictadura argentina*, El País, 7 May 2013.



Figure 3: *Proyecto Tesoros*: Laura Villaflor's doll, photo by the *Colectivo de hijos* (Cdh).

function as proxies for their one-time owners. This remedy fits with what Mesnard calls “logics of compensation for absence,” which overlay the economy of the bodies present, merging it “with the absence of the (oppressed) subjects of history”.³³ *Proyecto Tesoros* took on the restoration and conservation of documentary objects, recording the process in photographs and videos, collecting the stories of the objects and the relationship each son or daughter had with them, and finally setting up a “virtual museum” where anyone interested would be able to consult these materials.³⁴

Its online launch in 2013 was complemented by the inauguration of an exhibition in the Historical and Cultural Complex Manzana de las Luces, a building in Buenos Aires from colonial times. On display there were photographs of random objects that did not seem to go together, such as a stained glass bottle, baby clothes, or a cup of dice, individual, in big, colour formats, with an aesthetic akin to advertisements; meanwhile, a showcase made of old wood held other objects, the originals, also disparate, such as a tallit, a brass sign from a legal office, construction manuals, a shirt, a collar, a tea service, and the doll that Laura Villaflor Garrerió was given by her mother when she was brought home for a “family visit”. Parallel to this, a dozen short films were made and uploaded to the Cdh YouTube channel.³⁵ One of these was about Laura’s doll and another about a photographic camera belonging to Celeste’s mother that a fellow prisoner retrieved from ESMA.

The video with the doll in particular, especially by contrast to the other doll from the same series displayed in the ESMA Site of Memory, illustrates the feelings

33 Mesnard, *El tema del pathos*, 2015, 89.

34 Its realization was facilitated by a grant from the Fondo Nacional de las Artes (National Endowment for the Arts) and support from the Instituto Espacio para la Memoria (Space for Memory Institute).

35 <https://www.youtube.com/user/Hijoscolectivo> (1 July 2022).

and emotions associated with these very personal items from the lives of the disappeared. Emilia Perassi observes that the objects making up *Proyecto Tesoros* aim to

“construct a shared autobiography of the breakdown, of the parents, sons and daughters, whose bonds materialize in the object left behind, in this vestige that absorbs and condenses the emotional energy of the dead and the living who are present in these shards of matter now sacred.”³⁶

In the case of the Villaflor cousins, the objects they chose have another distinctive feature in common: they all came out of ESMA, and they connect the daughters with their mothers in a shared history that references the clandestine centre.

In the video for *Proyecto Tesoros*,³⁷ the doll is a toy, a doll on Laura’s lap, who looks at it, hugs it, smiles at it, and interacts with it as she tells her story. Her video testimony has a home-made feel, interspersed with the carefully photographed studies of the doll. Thanks to frame-by-frame animation, the doll is seen sitting with legs and arms crossed, ready for bed, dancing, and even mischievously displaying her underwear; an accordion plays a cheerful tune to accompany this unburdened tone. The history of the object allows Laura to trace a compact lifeline, not that of her mother, but of herself: the “visit” by her detained-disappeared mother, who gives her the doll; the years when the dolls are hidden while the sisters grew up separately with different grandparents, Laura in Argentina and Elsa in Uruguay; the discovery of the dolls, which prompts the conversation with her cousin Celeste about the disappearance of their parents; the dispatch of Elsa’s doll to Uruguay, sealing the reunion between the now adult sisters. The object and the emotion that Laura invests in it reveal concrete ways in which state terrorism affected the girls of the Villaflor family. The visitor to the physical or virtual exhibition “is confronted with the actual experience of the event as a synthesis that is hard to comprehend”³⁸, given that *Proyecto Tesoros* visualizes situations for which new categories are not yet available.

Childhood narratives, disappearance, and the display of violence at Ex Olimpo: the temporary exhibition *¿Aquí hubo niñ@s?*

The current *Espacio para la Memoria y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos Ex Olimpo* (Memorial Space for the Promotion of Human Rights Ex Olimpo), the

36 Emilia Perrassi, *Objetos-Testigo. Fracturas y reconstrucciones del retrato identitario*, in: Kamchatka. Revista de análisis cultural 16 (2020), 261–289.

37 Colectivo de hijos – Proyecto Tesoros – Laura Villaflor Garreiro, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhYINdEdh9g> (1 July 2022).

38 Mesnard, *El tema del pathos*, 2015, 89.

second memorial space that concerns us, functioned between August 1978 and January 1979, located in the Floresta neighbourhood of the city of Buenos Aires. Initially, victims came from other clandestine centres in the Federal Capital and the Province of Buenos Aires, mainly *Club Atlético* and *Banco*. Together they formed a repressive circuit known today as “ABO” (*Atlético-Banco-Olimpo*). Around 500 adults and 80 children are known from documentary records to have passed through the last of these camps.

After the dictatorship, the police garage as part of a larger complex, including an administrative building, was initially used as a vehicle inspection point. It was only closed in 2005, at the behest of strong neighbourhood associations and local human rights groups, which also involved survivors. An important difference, therefore, when comparing it with the ESMA memorial museum, is that while the latter represents an institutionalized, official memory, the *Ex Olimpo* carries the imprint of a local memory activism “from below”, geographically more marginalized and, although state funded, with more meagre resources than ESMA.

¿Aquí hubo niñ@s? is an initiative that has been seeking since 2017 to begin to understand the violence perpetrated against children as survivors by recovering their voices. The research team who curated the exhibition set out to open up a hitherto ignored perspective by centring on childhood experiences of the violence of state



Figure 4: Exhibition *¿Aquí hubo niñ@s?* in the *Ex Olimpo*, photo by Mariana Eva Perez.

terrorism. In this sense, their questions connect with and complement a key concern that drives our research: how do the voices of children who are adults today appear in museum exhibits of former clandestine detention and torture centres? How do their memories influence and challenge the established narratives about the dictatorship? To account for this void, the research team for the former *Olimpo* curated an exhibition to explore the “management by the terrorist state over the children whose parents were kidnapped in the ABO circuit”³⁹ and create a space for their memories. The exhibition opened in 2018 in the administrative section of the building, forty years after *Olimpo* began operating as a CCDTyE, with the meaningful title *Were There Children Here?*

The exhibition was curated with scarce resources and inexhaustible creativity. The materials – with a markedly child-like design and aesthetic inspired by vintage style – are arranged in an old, glass-panelled chest of drawers rescued from a haberdashery shop, which visitors are invited to explore. It is “a device that evokes a cabinet of curiosities, displaying an unsystematic collection that seeks to express the diversity of sources and experiences and to ask questions about these childhoods”⁴⁰. The drawers can be opened, and visitors – mostly pupils and students, but also relatives of victims as well as survivors of the dictatorship and the general public – can touch, and freely arrange and combine the materials and objects inside. Recreations of handwritten letters in individually designed envelopes and handmade cards made from original resources give the testimonies and artefacts representing children’s experiences of violence under the dictatorship an authentic and personal feel that invites the visitor to engage with them, using this interactive materiality to represent their voices in the first person. As artist Natalia Rossi, involved in the curation and design of the exhibition explains, an important goal is to adopt a child’s gaze, in order to generate empathy “by bringing back a certain child perspective on to this site, from our part. Our intention is to make these suspended childhoods somehow present, by creating a sensitive setting.”⁴¹

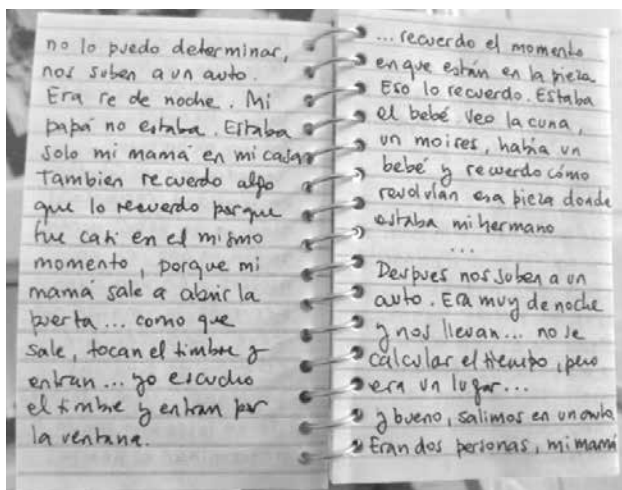
A screen with an endless loop plays a compilation of interviews with former child victims related to the ABO circuit – conducted previously to the exhibition and therefore not exclusively for that purpose – that tell how their childhoods were affected by the violence perpetrated on these CDCs. What is particularly striking in

39 María Eugenia Mendizábal/Cecilia Goldberg, *Metodologías situadas: investigación en Espacios de Memoria*. XIII Jornadas de Sociología. Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires 2019, 5.

40 Presentation by María Eugenia Mendizábal “¿Aquí hubo niñ@s? Proyecto de investigación y muestra” at the international online workshop: *Infancias, violencia y terrorismo de Estado. Voces, miradas, agencia de niñas y niños sobrevivientes* (20 June 2021), <http://calas.lat/noticias/taller-internacional-infancias-violencia-y-terrorismo-de-estado-voces-miradas-agencia-de> (22 February 2022).

41 Personal interview with Natalia Rossi at Ex Olimpo, Floresta, Buenos Aires, 26 April 2022.

Figure 5: ¿Aquí hubo niñ@s? Notebook with an excerpt from the testimony of Juan Martín Cobacho, child survivor of the Olimpo, photo by Mariana Eva Perez.



these biographical narratives are the different modes of violence to which the children were exposed: a recurring situation in the testimonies, recalled in the interviews and presented on screen, is the moment when the parents were abducted in the presence of their children, a highly threatening, potentially traumatic situation of total vulnerability, which sheds a different light on this act of state violence by articulating the child's point-of-view. This shift in curatorial perspective emphasizing and engaging with child experiences is also reflected in the many little notebooks, found in the drawers, which reproduce handwriting testimonies given before various courts during the ABO trials: the car ride to the clandestine centre, a fragmented, distorted perception of the site, and then the next ride, this time towards freedom but without their mothers. This, too, is a recurrent theme for child survivors of the CCDTyE *Olimpo*. While the sequence of abduction – transfer – captivity is well known and became almost commonplace in cultural productions about state terrorism, what is innovative in this approach to narratives of violence is the child's gaze, the emphasis on the emotions, and the present memory of these violent experiences. With each testimony, a curatorial decision was taken to privilege not the facts, but the ways in which they affected the children.

Other forms of violence are depicted from the maternal or paternal angle. A medium-sized greetings card made with an artisanal technique known as “Spanish cardmaking” evokes the generation of disappeared mothers and the handicrafts that women learnt in that generation. When the card is opened, a female narrator inside tells a story of what was euphemistically called “libertad vigilada” (“supervised release” or “liberty under surveillance”), a condition to which both adults and children were often subjected after being released from a CDC. This time the text is not handwritten but printed:

“We experienced a period of surveillance from the time we left on 22 December 1978 to 1983. I call this period a hidden kidnapping because it was a way of being kidnapped in society. We had to live a double life without saying anything to anyone. We were pariahs, we did not want to contaminate anyone with the gaze of the repressors. Out of nowhere we would be put into a car. They threatened me. Sometimes Carlos didn’t show up, I didn’t know where he was, if he came back, if he didn’t. And we said: ‘What are we going to do? We are going to bet on life.’ And we had children.”

The exhibit also contains copies of letters written by mothers who had been abducted and detained on the site, plagued by uncertainties about their children’s fate. One example is the seven-page letter that María Teresa Manzo wrote to her parents in November 1978, telling them how she wanted them to raise her daughter Victoria Winkelmann. Victoria had been brought to *Olimpo* with her and was detained there for three days, but survived:

“Always tell her that mom loves her very much but that she can’t come to see her and that you send her lots of kisses. When she wants to see pictures of me or Flaco [the father] show them to her, but don’t make her anxious until she gets used to you and your rhythm [...]. After about 15 days with you, I ask you to take her to a [...] day care centre, even if it is only for a few hours, so that she can play with other children.”

What is remarkable is that this letter enters the exhibition not as a document in itself, but as an intertext within Victoria’s broader testimony, read by her and punctuated by her comments, in one of the small notebooks, again reinforcing a child’s perspective.

The display also contains excerpts from the testimonies of other child survivors, as well as photos, calendars, candy boxes, and toys, all sensitively arranged to engage the visitor in a dialogue with the children’s narrated experiences by transposing the times, putting visitors in the children’s perspective. Some of these artefacts, which seem to have an evocative function, are originals, while documents of evidentiary and emotive value are reproduced, as we have seen, in various materialities. By choosing this unconventional design and breaking with customary expectations at an authentic site, the curators explicitly seek to arouse curiosity, doubts, questions, and concerns.

One question that needs to be asked is: how does the child-like aesthetics of the materials on display dialogue with the contents that bear witness to repression and violence? Do the pastel colours or the soft covers of the notebooks have a soothing effect on how the displayed violence affects the visitors? Or, on the contrary, do they clash? How is this tension resolved? How does the home-made quality of the materials intervene in this communication that the memorial space wants to establish with

its visitors? Does it attribute a character of authenticity to the artefacts or encourage a more improvised impression? These are relevant questions given the pedagogical function proposed by the memorial space, and even more so as, according to the curators, the exhibition is intended to involve visitors emotionally through empathy, particularly the younger generations, thus creating a performative and potentially transformative experience. While the irresolvable tension between the juxtaposed narratives of violence and child-like aesthetics makes it almost inevitable to dodge the sinister, it is – as Natalia Rossi, the artist who arranged and designed the materials on display, emphasizes – a way of presenting suspended childhoods by creating a “sensitive environment, despite its sinister surroundings, that generally characterizes the CCDTyE.”⁴² It seems to be clear that one of the curatorial intentions is to give these former children back their voice, particularly emphasizing that they were minors at that time and therefore especially vulnerable victims and survivors.

As part of this project, a series of meetings with child survivors of the ABO circuit were held at the former *Olimpo* during 2019. One of the participants was Dafne Casoy⁴³, who commented in an interview with us:

“We have some things in common, but I was more struck by the differences. Differences in how we lived afterwards. From a girl who spent some time living in the street and without going to those extremes, to more subtle things, how much was said at home and how much was not [...]. They were not typical cases, they were not ‘appropriated’ grandchildren. There were some from H.I.J.O.S. that I knew, others who had never gone anywhere and who talked about their own experience.”⁴⁴

After interrupting their activities due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and while awaiting the reopening of the Ex *Olimpo* Memorial Space, the research group *¿Aquí hubo niñ@s?* began to conduct new interviews with child survivors in the second half of 2021, focusing on first-hand experience, and sometimes other former child victims like Dafne are involved.

42 Personal interview with Natalia Rossi, 26 April 2022.

43 Dafne was born and lived in hiding until her parents were abducted by the Club Atlético Task Force; she was nine months old and was left in the lap of her landlord, who was handcuffed to a chair. At the ABO trials, however, only the illegal detention of her mother was indicted as a crime. In 2017, she published her autobiographical novel *Tal vez mañana* [Maybe Tomorrow].

44 Personal interview with Dafne Casoy, 23 February 2021.

Conclusions. Child survivors in memorial spaces: from omission to recognition?

When comparing the two exhibitions, the permanent one at ESMA and the temporary display *¿Aquí hubo niños?*, there are two reflections worth highlighting. First, we can see that these exhibitions were inspired by different approaches. While the interactivity at *Ex Olimpo* appeals to empathy and intimacy fostering an individual experience through the visitor's response to the material, ESMA seems to engage more with didactic, rational, detached learning, triggered by contemplation of the memorial space with the support of explanatory texts. ESMA's institutionalization as a space of memory has entailed a professionalization linked to an increase in the number of visitors, with tourists coming from all over the world – visits that do not necessarily allow for deep interaction with the guides or between visitors themselves.⁴⁵ As we have seen, concrete children's experiences of dictatorship violence are barely represented here, except for the cases of stolen babies born on the site, and the few anecdotes on display lack the perspective of children's agency and the children's own voices.

Secondly, however, the inclusion of the doll in the permanent exhibition and the more profound inquiry into the object and its emotional implications in *Proyecto Tesoros* are a springboard from which it is possible to begin recognizing specific forms of violence and affective impact in childhood – such as the “family visits” by detained-disappeared parents – which, up until now, have not attracted much attention. We observe the scene through the eyes of Laura: the forced detachment and the obligatory replacement of the paternal and maternal figures by others, exacerbated by their strange, fleeting, incomprehensible reappearance soon afterwards. We wonder what short- and long-term affective impacts each of these “family visits” could have had on the girls. If the situation was hard enough for adults to grasp, what could the girls have understood and felt? What agency were they able to perform, how could they respond to this? How do they resignify those episodes and their consequences today, assuming that they do? What is the most appropriate way to reconstruct and represent these stories in museum narratives?

Getting back to Mesnard's analytic categories, regarding the desired affective response of visitors in both memorial spaces described before, it is possible to observe a continuum between a pathos-based and an archive-based approach.⁴⁶ In terms of scale, instead of an either-or logic, the difference in representing child victims of dictatorship violence between the exhibits at the ESMA memorial museum and the *Ex Olimpo* might be a more gradual one.

45 Kaiser, *Writing and Reading Memories*, (2020), 467–485.

46 Georges Molinié, quoted in Mesnard, *El tema del pathos*, 2015, 96.

In the case of the ESMA Museum and Site of Memory, we saw that the narrative at this point is focused on and confined to the children who were victims of a specific form of terrorist violence: the babies born in captivity in this concentration camp and “appropriated” by the families of members of the armed forces or their accomplices. The affective aspect of the direct experience of those babies, now grown men and women, some of them identified, is absent, in that the museum narrative only picks up the testimonies of survivors who were adults at the time. The extraordinary scene witnessed by Andrea Krichmar at the age of eleven, when the daughter of ESMA’s director invited her to spend the day in the Officers’ Club when the dictatorship was in full swing, is not considered from a perspective that reflects the position or agency of the two children involved. But even if their experiences do not feature in all their affective intensity in ESMA’s permanent exhibition, Andrea and some of the “recovered grandchildren” did take part in several editions of the “Five O’clock Visit”. As a result, these voices are in some way starting to be included in the site narrative, which respects their singularity but does not alter their presentation as tangential subplots in the principal narrative.

When the museum script selects a fragment from the testimony of Laura Villafior Garreiro to illustrate what happened in the store room, the permanent exhibition still ignores the emotions of that little girl being “visited” by her mother and her strange “companion” from the ESMA. By contrast, *Proyecto Tesoros* spotlights the affective charge invested in the objects of disappeared parents. In so doing, it fosters the emergence of feelings and emotions as experienced by the first-person narrator, not related by other witnesses who are supposedly more direct or within narrative structures crafted like legal indictments or courtroom testimonies. Unlike her grandfather in his testimony for the court, Laura is not left to relive the horror of this “family visit”, but salvages her mother’s gift as an act of love and asserts it as a gesture of resistance.

As we were able to observe in our close look at the dolls in ESMA and *Proyecto Tesoros*, the same object can be exhibited according to different economies of curatorial representation, geared either to an archive- or a pathos-based response: one facilitates a historical, political understanding of disappearances in Argentina, the other renders visible different affective impacts as they were felt during childhood and as they are remembered and (re)signified today. The latter also applies to the exhibition *¿Aquí hubo niños?*, which aspires not to construct an all-embracing narrative about the repressive management of children on the ABO circuit, but to arouse sensitivity in visitors about the experiences not only of those children but also of the detained-disappeared parents who were concerned about their sons and daughters.

We have noted how the temporary exhibition *¿Aquí hubo niños?* introduced a shift, overcoming the invisibility of certain victim groups and a hierarchy of repre-

sentation that prioritizes the adult *detenido-desaparecido* or the stolen babies, by lending visibility to the existence of the group of former child victims on the ABO camp circuit – and beyond. The testimonies featured by *¿Aquí hubo niñ@s?* attribute a striking agency to child survivors, whereas in the permanent exhibition at ESMA the rare representation of children is governed by their legal status as victims. As Virginia Vecchioli puts it:

“the identification of an individual as a victim is not the automatic result of the application of merely legal and/or technical-administrative criteria, but rather such recognition is part of a wider social process through which different social categories – among them the category of victim of state terrorism – are socially constructed, redefined, and discussed by different agents and groups in order to account for Argentina’s recent political past.”⁴⁷

Memorial museums that privilege the commemoration and perspective of the victim can play a significant role in the constitution of these collective identities, whether they emphasize less recognized situations or reproduce well-established ones. As we observed, the temporary exhibition *¿Aquí hubo niñ@s?* was key to attracting a core group of child survivors of the ABO circuit who then began to organize and perceive themselves as a victim collective, focusing on the agency of children. In late 2021, some of those children, now adults, submitted their first collective judicial application to be recognized as direct victims in the ABO trials.

As demonstrated, our research into these childhood victims and their place in narratives of memorial sites brought to light two situations of which we had previously been unaware in investigating the forms of state violence committed against minors: “family visits” by parents in illegal detention, brought by the repressors, and “liberty under surveillance” together with parents who had been released from the CDC but still remained under military control.

Finally, let us go back to the ESMA Museum and Site of Memory in early 2021: because of the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, visits could only take the form of guided tours. When we reached the end, we asked our guide: “Are there any other traces we can see, other evidence that children passed through ESMA?” Our guide, a woman of about fifty years, spoke first about a drawing on a wall in the section called “Little Hood”, which she believed had been done by children. Then she fell silent. She was thinking. Then she exclaimed: “Me! I am one of the Holy Cross children!” The abduction of twelve relatives of disappeared persons, human rights activists, and French nuns in the Church of the Holy Cross by the ESMA Task Force is probably

47 Virginia Vecchioli, *Las víctimas del terrorismo de Estado y la gestión del pasado reciente en la Argentina*, in: *Papeles del CEIC* 90 (2013), 1–30, 5.

one of the most notorious crimes committed by the Argentine dictatorship. Nevertheless, we had never heard anything about “the children of the Holy Cross”. Then the guide, Roxana Salamone, told us her own story. She, her mother, and her sister were living with Ángela Auad, a very dear friend of her mother known to the children as “auntie”. On 8 December 1977, Ángela took the girls and a cousin of theirs to the church, where activists and relatives were holding a meeting. The children witnessed the abduction.

In late 2021, to mark the anniversary of that day, Roxana published on her Facebook account:

“On 8 December 1977, aged 7 and together with my sister aged 10 and my cousin aged 9, I witnessed the abduction of Ángela Auad, in the gardens next to the Church of Santa Cruz. A few days later, my Mum died of an aneurysm. For me these two events are profoundly connected: my Mum’s contorted face when she came to find us [...]; the doctors who said that the cerebral episode had been triggered by a very powerful shock. [...] So ever since then, on every 8 December, I raise this memory for Ángela and for the other eleven people abducted on that dark day. [...] But a few years ago, not many, you won’t believe it, I realized that this memory that we constructed was a memory of something that had happened to me: a little girl of 7 years old whose world was turned upside-down just after Astiz shouted. (For those who know less about those troubles, Astiz was one of the kidnappers and I saw him in the church doorway telling one of his henchmen not to put us in the dark vehicle that carried Ángela off forever). And not only to me, but also to my sister and my cousin. Kids abandoned during the mixed-up night of an unbearable summer. Childhoods demolished by the threat of a task force. And then I realize that I am commemorating every child who suffered the violent, deranged assault of the state’s genocidal apparatus.”⁴⁸

Roxana was not kidnapped, nor was she a “grandchild” or a “daughter of disappeared”. However, her life was scarred forever by the actions of the ESMA Task Force. She was even orphaned as a consequence of the illegal detentions at the Church of the Holy Cross. She was not taken to the clandestine centre, but she found her own way to enter the site, inhabit it, walk around it, and show it to others through her role as a guide. Her story, like that of so many other children who were ESMA victims, is not told or displayed in the museum. Nevertheless, here is Roxana herself, able to respond to that omission through dialogue with the visitors. It seems like a good starting point. Will the voices of Roxana, Laura, Celeste, and so many others find a place that is less peripheral within the official narrative of the museum? How? The

48 Roxana Salamone, *Postales de una intimidad pública*, 8 December 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10222870575806430&set=a.1226657300067> (highlighted in the original).

Ex *Olimpo* exhibition, in a more marginalized location than the emblematic ESMA, is exploring different strategies of representation, creating empathy through individual experience to interactivity. *Proyecto Tesoros*, on the other hand, has made a methodological discovery: the affective dimension emerges more easily among peers. The new interviews being conducted by the Ex *Olimpo* research team sometimes involve other child survivors who have already been interviewed. In light of what we were able to see from the *Proyecto Tesoros*, we can surmise that this strategy of including peers will permit the emergence of less structured, more sensitive stories.

It will be for future research to explore how debates and conflicts arising from the inclusion and agency of childhood narratives in exhibitions about violent dictatorship can aid understanding about how political struggles around memory unfold across different political junctures, and to observe the strategies being formulated today by former child victims and survivors seeking to establish their own memories and interpretations of the past and to make their own voices heard.

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