



*View of plaques installed by the Comisión del Personal Memoria, Verdad, Justicia at the National Bank of Argentina, Buenos Aires (2012). Photo: Andrea Giunta.*

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## Feeling the Past: Display and the Art of Memory in Latin America

### Abstract

*Memory is a compelling and recurring topic in contemporary art. This article examines the mechanisms through which Latin American exhibitions and artists' urban interventions have addressed the violent and traumatic pasts suffered under decades of dictatorships. The representations of these brutal pasts are activated through images and museographic devices that involve not only the architecture of museums and other sites of memory, but also the choreography and experience of the visitor. I argue that even such formal and abstract structures bear an underlying purpose and politics, which is to produce an emotional contact with the past. By analyzing display sites and artworks dealing with trauma, this article problematizes the relationship between space, memory and history.*

### Keywords

contemporary Latin American art  
memory in art museums and memorials  
urban interventions  
exhibitions and trauma  
activist art

The past haunts the present. It drives a need to recover archives; to activate fragments of a time lived before into a new experience. Memory is one of the most recurrent themes in contemporary art. European cities (particularly Berlin) as well as those of Latin America (especially Buenos Aires) have become huge memorials – cenotaph cities, full of sites, museums, plaques, monuments and urban routes marked to delineate the return of different experiences of violence from the twentieth century: the Holocaust, the disappeared. Given that such cultures of memory stem from traumatic events, how is this history to be remembered? How can the relationship between aesthetics and effectiveness be activated? What should be remembered? How can the art of memory be conceptualized?

1. This image was produced for a postcard project 'The Santiago School'. Four Chilean artists – Juan Davila (who signed as 'Juana' Dávila), Arturo Duclos, Eugenio Dittborn and Gonzalo Diaz – received funding from the Fondo de Desarrollo de la Cultura y las Artes del Ministerio de Educación. The image problematized the constitution of the very state that financed it, and gave rise to an international controversy.

To what extent are these representations performing the past, turning it into a new experience that transforms the original records? In this article I will analyze images and spaces that are programmed to compel an emotional reading of the past, particularly those spaces that convert a history of violence into tangible experience. These experiences seek to get beyond pain and fear and, instead, process traumatic memories through the meditative power of images, displays and architecture. In particular, I will address the visual culture of memory and codes of resistance as they arose in Latin America during the dictatorships marking the second half of the twentieth century. More recent versions of memory-oriented art and exhibitions perpetuate the link to activism, but have gained extra significance through the development of reparation policies. Memory, as I will discuss, involves not so much the ability to bring forward particular facts or interpretations of history, but becomes a means to heighten and change individual consciousness. Through the contemplation of traumatic images and displays, viewers can, in effect, be transformed into citizens capable of opposing past, present and future human rights violations.

Although much research has been conducted into the relationships between art, violence and memory in recent years, this article will focus on two aspects that have not been thoroughly studied. One is the mechanisms that contemporary Latin American art and curating have formulated to revisit the past through deconstructing the foundational discourse of their republics as well as those of repressive dictatorships. The other is by the deployment of formal structures that organize memory in museographic terms, which are generally tied to more abstract formulations of contexts that produce an emotional contact with the past. Both instances provide opportunities to evaluate the extent to which contemporary art, displays and architecture utilize emotion to problematize the relationship between space, memory and history.

## Looking to the Past in Contemporary Latin American Art

Two opposing forms of tension activate the relationship between contemporary art and time: one looks to the future as a force of propulsion that devours the present, projecting it towards what is desired or imagined to be possible, while the other looks to the past, focusing on those aspects that remain unresolved and active in the present. An intense concern for the past – for multiple pasts – permeates Latin American contemporary art. Artists have appropriated the repertoires of images that serve as the foundation for their republics' ideologies, and challenged the myths regarding how states have used and consolidated heroes, in addition to exposing the exclusions and genocides upon which these nations were founded. As an example of this revisioning of the past, Chilean artist Juan Dávila's *El libertador Simón Bolívar* ("Simón Bolívar, the Liberator") (1994) works with an equestrian representation of the hero of independence, Simón Bolívar (1783–1830), who is featured in many different monuments in Latin American cities.<sup>1</sup> In Dávila's version, Bolívar's portrait is *queered* on various levels that subvert the patriarchal canon: the hero is transgendered and dressed in lingerie beneath his epaulettes and cloak; he raises a middle finger in a crass, disrespectful gesture towards the viewer; his skin



Juan Dávila, *El libertador Simón Bolívar* (1994). Photo: © and courtesy of Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art.

is darkened in opposition to the paradigm of white heroes that is the basis of the triumphal account of Latin American nations' formation;<sup>2</sup> and the horse's head and forelegs are distorted in abstract shapes and coloured lines that disturb the realism expected of such an icon. These revisions de-structure the monolithic character of 'the hero' that nations seek to imprint upon their citizens. Everything about the image stirs up a past that has become a frozen fetish in official histories. Such a critique became particularly powerful in the political context of the transition between dictatorship and democracy in the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the image's distribution as a postcard via the postal system brought it into official circuits, including diplomatic routes. The image's agitation did not go unnoticed. The Venezuelan government presented a protest to the Chilean government in regard to what they deemed a disrespectful representation, paid for with government funds destined for cultural promotion and financing (Fondo Nacional de las Artes Visuales). The Chilean Foreign Ministry saw itself obliged to present a formal apology to the Venezuelan,

2. Although the heroes of independence were not necessarily white (Benito Juárez, for example, was from the Zapoteca indigenous group), the stereotypes of the new national states' heroes sought to eradicate indigenous or *mestizo* ('mixed-race') components.
3. Although the transition took place strictly speaking between 1988, when Chileans voted against the continuity of General Pinochet's dictatorship (known as the NO campaign), and the swearing in of President Patricio Aylwin in 1990, two other events can be considered important demarcations: the publication of the Truth and Reconciliation Report in 1992 by the Rattig Commission on human rights violations, and Pinochet's detention in London in 1998, in accordance with orders from Spanish judge Baltasar Garzón. In 1994 the dictatorship's repressive presence was still strongly felt.



4. Though Brazil's dictatorship extended from 1964 to 1985, the most repressive period took place between the late 1960s and early 1970s, involving torture and the disappearance of its citizens.
5. A video of this action can be seen at CADA (1983).

Colombian and Ecuadorian governments (Masiello 2001; Conway 2003; Richard 2004).

Contemporary public art in Latin America also maintains an intense relationship with the immediate past, an era of dictatorships. During the most violent years of Brazil's dictatorship, Cildo Meireles produced an interventional work that exemplified the incisive political and critical force that revising the heroic national imagery can constitute. His installations typically propose emotional reflections upon violence, repression and censorship, but *Tirandentes (totem-monumento ao preso politico)* (1970) took this to an extreme. Tirandentes was the Inconfidência Mineira ('Miner Conspiracy') movement's hero, dedicated to freeing Brazil from Portugal's colonial dominion, and the Brazilian dictatorship (1964–85) often celebrated Tirandentes in its nationalist speeches.<sup>4</sup> Meireles's 'totem-monument to the political prisoner' was carried out on the esplanade of the Palacio de Bellas Artes in the city of Belo Horizonte, where he tied up ten live chickens and doused them with gasoline. The fowl immediately burst into flames. Besides recalling the self-immolation of bonzes in Vietnam, Meireles linked a denunciation of the violence employed by the dictatorship with its demagogic use of national heroes to consolidate its power. Violence here became a working material whereby the treatment of the birds referred to state brutality perpetrated against its own people. This use of ruthlessness sought to move the public viscerally, and to spark a questioning of the dictatorship's cruelty.

In Chile, artists also enacted urban interventions aimed to erode the dictatorship's hold on power. One example was executed by the Colectivo de Arte de Acción ('Action Art Group') (CADA) on the bulwark surrounding the Mapocho River, where cadavers floated ashore during the days immediately following Pinochet's coup d'état of the Unidad Popular government.<sup>5</sup> CADA (1979–85) was an interdisciplinary group formed by sociologist Fernando Balcells, writer Diamela Eltit, poet Raúl Zurita, and visual artists Lotty Rosenfeld and Juan Castillo. They carried out urban interventions seeking to subvert the Chilean dictatorship's repressive power. *No+* (1983) consisted of unrolling a series of paper signs that said 'No+', along with the image of a hand with a revolver. While the police immediately removed the signs, the intervention nevertheless interrupted the rhythms of urban life with a message of resistance.

Besides voicing opposition to state ideologies and their myths, a large number of works sought to destabilize repressive systems by subverted symbols of power. Lotty Rosenfeld's action, *Una milla de cruces sobre el pavimento* ('A Mile of Crosses on the Pavement'), turned traffic markings into plus signs and crosses on the streets of Santiago in 1979, and was later repeated in different spaces linked to power, such as in front of the Palacio de la Moneda (Chile), the White House in Washington, DC (United States), the Plaza de la Revolución in Havana (Cuba), the Berlin Wall (Germany), and the city of Seville (Spain). Intervening with the established order of urban circulation thereby subverted familiar traffic codes, and introduced enigmatic signs that altered normalcy and required deciphering rather than simple obedience.

In Uruguay, artist Nelbia Romero produced an exhibition titled *Sal-si-puedes* (1983) followed by a performance in public space two years later. *Sal-si-puedes* evoked an episode involving the massacre of over 40 Charrúa



Above: Cildo Meireles, Tirandentes (totem-monumento ao preso politico) (1970). Photos: Luiz Alphonsus. Below: Colectivo de Arte de Acción, NO+ (1983), public intervention, Santiago, Chile. Photo: J. Brantmayer.



*Lotty Rosenfeld, Una milla de cruces sobre el pavimento (1979), public intervention, Santiago, Chile. Photo: R. Goldschmied.*

natives in a battle against the independentist army during the process of consolidation of the national state in 1831. In her 1985 urban intervention in Montevideo, Romero connected the performance with the Uruguayan dictatorship (1973–85). The aim of both interventions was to denounce repressive order, that of the independence-seeking state in 1831 as well as that of the dictatorial state in 1973 and 1985. In *Sal-si-puedes*, the artist arranged broken mannequins and a series of cloth pieces to create spaces and transparencies in the museum. The urban performance involved a group of bound women gradually untying their ropes. Carried out in the year of transition between dictatorship and democracy, this performance

referred to the oppression that still made its presence felt. It is worthwhile to point out that under the rule imposed by the Uruguayan dictatorship – whose objective was the categorical elimination of all sense of community and critical thought – simply occupying public space during the time of dictatorship implied danger. Inviting people together, even as spectators of a performance, held subversive meanings and constituted an act of symbolic as well as political resistance.

These and other interventionist projects, despite their activist intentions, were deliberately opaque and ambiguous. They lacked slogans, and any testimonial or documentary information was left to viewers to decipher on their own. While referring to absence, death, disappearances and censorship, they presented topics that were difficult to address directly given the situation of control and repression imposed by dictatorships. Many were shown either in private galleries, protected by the institutional autonomy of the art circuit, or realized as acts of conspiratorial interruption in public spaces. Further, they made use of the encoded language specific to conceptual practice (indirect forms, metaphor, metonymy and detours from traditional art discourse) that made them difficult to interpret by military censors, who were more attentive to the straightforward insubordinations contained in murals, demonstrations and conventional genres of political art.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, certain works (whether visual, literary or cinematographic) created micro-communities, spaces of identification activated on the basis of deciphering non-declaratory content – that which could not be mentioned. As such, some images signified by virtue of what specific, knowledgeable communities read into them. They constituted a precarious method of transgressing the controlling censor's norms and provided a sense of pertinence. In these cases, conceptual art interventions offered the satisfaction of victory in speaking out, in spite of overwhelming repression.

All these interventions produced different moments and spaces of symbolic resistance during the dictatorship. During the post-dictatorship period, however, many art interventions were connected with activist political agendas whose key words were 'justice' and 'truth'. In Argentina, the artistic and cultural scene generated examples that were essential to an understanding of how symbolic interventions related to visibility, artists' groups and human rights organizations. Two distinct phases can be identified in its post-dictatorship era. The initial moment was marked by the emerging public awareness of events of the immediate past, represented by the Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas's ('National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons') (CONADEP) investigation and the military junta being placed on trial.<sup>7</sup> It was at that moment – before CONADEP had published its report – that representations of the disappeared were also formulated for the first time, for example, in urban interventions such as *siluetazo* ('Blast of Silhouettes') (1983), an action carried out just prior to the elections marked the end of the dictatorship. Jointly proposed by three artists (Rodolfo Aguerreberry, Julio Flores and Guillermo Kexel), the action involved protesters tracing a contour of their bodies on paper that would then be affixed to fences, walls and other urban fixtures in the city of Buenos Aires (Longoni and Bruzzone 2008). The blank contours represented the bodies of 30,000 that had disappeared

6. Richard (2009) differentiates between committed art, which demands that artists put themselves at the service of the people, and neo-avant-garde art, which seeks politicization on the basis of formal radicalism and critical experimentalism.
7. CONADEP was created by Argentine President Raúl Alfonsín in 1983 to investigate human rights violations during State Terrorism (1976–83). Its final report, *Nunca Más* ('Never Again') (1984) registered 8,961 forced disappearances and 380 clandestine detention centres.





(the number estimated by human rights organizations), constituting a collective action to recreate the physical space that the disappeared would have occupied.<sup>8</sup>

For the past thirty years, an expanding body of art and museographic displays can be linked to the problem of representing absence and the disappeared. How can one activate the image of someone who is not present, but cannot be proven to be absent either? How can this interstice, this indeterminate state, be portrayed? Such images inherently generate friction with the strategies designed by the democratic state to negotiate the past. In Argentina, this has activated a diverse set of responses: from the trial of the military junta to the 'due obedience' and 'full stop' laws put in place during Raúl Alfonsín's government, to the pardon during Carlos Menem's term, to the repeal of that pardon and the recognition of the state's responsibility with a public apology and the reopening of the justice process during Néstor Kirchner's government (2003–07), a policy maintained under Cristina Kirchner's government (2007–11 and 2011–15). Argentina had yet to resolve how to manage its power and maintain political stability: whether through distancing itself from the past by suggesting that this was the only way to construct the future, or by accepting a search for the truth and bringing those responsible to justice.

Underlying the selection of images and interventions I want to discuss is the idea that the field of visual representations has collaborated in the activation of politics of memory in symbolic terms, above all in relation to the disappeared. In the following sections, I will analyze different forms of representing the past, taking images, exhibitions, museums, parks and sites of memory into consideration. In these works the pivotal issue is based on the questions of what and how to remember.

## Portraits and Plaques: Cities of Memory

Since the 1980s, different forms of representing absence have accumulated; together they constitute a collective investigation into the possibilities and power of images to call forth the presence of representing the disappeared (Giunta 2010). On 25 August 1988, Estela Carlotto, President of the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo,<sup>9</sup> published a photograph of her pregnant daughter Laura in Buenos Aires's *Página/12* newspaper on the tenth anniversary of her assassination. Other Argentine families soon followed suit, and thus instituted a form of popular public intervention called *recordatorios*. Even today, such commemorations appear shuffled throughout different sections of the newspaper. The images, accompanied by texts or poems, present remembrances of individual persons, mixed in with reportage on everyday life. As Celina Van Dembroucke (2010) points out, these announcements intersect the obituary genre of displaying photographs with the format of searching for missing persons. Initially, the photographs employed were pulled from ID cards. Gradually, portraits from family albums were featured, where one could infer the disappeared person's idiosyncratic tastes, relationships, intellectual pursuits and emotional attachments from the details of the photographs. Appearing side by side with other images and texts about current political, criminal, social and sporting events, one realizes that the photos refer to a

8. *Siluetazo* was an action that could be related to a poster made by Polish artist Jerzy Spasky in reference to those murdered at Auschwitz.

9. Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo is a human rights organization created by the grandmothers of children born in captivity. Its mission is to find these children and restore their true identity by putting them in contact with their biological families.

The grandson of Carlotto appeared in August 2014 and Carlotto decided to publish the last recordatorio on 25 August 2014.

10. These organizations include Juventud Trabajadora Peronista, Juventud Peronista, Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores, Partido Comunista and Juventud Universitaria Peronista, among many others.
11. The artists presented a single proposal – a group work. Those who participated were Carlos Alonso (with a disappeared daughter), Nora Aslan, Mireya Baglietto, Remo Biancredi, Diana Doweck, León Ferrari (with a disappeared son), Rosana Fuertes, Carlos Gorriarena, Adolfo Nigro, Luis Felipe Noé, Daniel Ontiveros and Marcia Schwartz.

violent history, and an emotional reaction is produced. The juxtaposition of ordinary and commemorative, public and intimate, absence and survival, thereby establishes a dialogue in the public sphere. In this way, the pages of the newspaper function like an exhibition space where the audience composes both the citizenry at large and the state – the same state that took the ID photos to begin with, the repressive state that made the persons disappear.

Yet, in 1983, during its transition from a dictatorial to a democratic state, Argentina began to investigate human rights violations. Commemorative images have since become activated in relation to texts seeking justice and reparations, merging actions on both the private and social levels. Thirty thousand is the emblematic number of people who have been disappeared in Argentina, but such a number tends to occlude the individual person, with his or her likes and dislikes, family, circle of friends, and complex of emotions. These photographs of the disappeared enable a dialogic relation between the political and the personal. Since 1996, the political organization to which the disappeared or assassinated person belonged has also been added to the memorials, underscoring that they are remembered not only as victims but also as militants.<sup>10</sup>

The memorial photographs aspire to recognition as well as recollection. As Sigmund Freud (1917) postulated, when someone dies, one does not always know the most important part of the person that is lost. In dealing with the disappeared, the body occupies a privileged place. The photographic image both confirms and denies the body's absence – it invokes the notion of temporality, of time passed, along with the idea that a prior order might be hypothetically restored. However, it is not only the body's absence, but the time not lived, that is snatched away definitively. Once submerged in the realm of remembrance, people reside momentarily outside of themselves, swept away by sentiment, and through such sentiment political communities can be articulated and formed. The sensation of an abyss in mourning the disappeared translates into feelings of loss and collective responsibility relevant not only to their families, but to society as well. As Judith Butler discusses, loss contains a transformational meaning, whose effects cannot be foreseen, and which often returns in the manner of waves (2009: 388).

Photographs of the disappeared can be mobilized for concrete political agendas as well. They were activated in just this way in the exhibition *Identidad* ('Identity') (1998), curated jointly by the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo and the Centro Cultural Recoleta in Buenos Aires, a space with a vast and varied visiting public.<sup>11</sup> The concept of the exhibition was centred on the process of recovering the identity of children born in captivity while their mothers underwent torture or were assassinated once their babies were born, and was proposed by a group of artists who collaborated on an installation. Twenty-two years had passed since Argentina's coup d'état. The installation sought to motivate the audience to take part in the search for children born in captivity whose whereabouts remained unknown. It aimed to generate mechanisms of recognition to assist those engaged in this search for their birth parents. Portraits of the disappeared who were parents, selected to be at approximately the same age that their children would have been at the time of the exhibition, were placed beside each



*Identity (1998), installation view at the Centro Cultural Recoleta, Buenos Aires. Photo: courtesy of the author.*

other, at eye level. Mirrors alternated with the portraits in the hope that someone might recognize (or see something of themselves in) the row of faces along the space's four walls. Each viewer was thus positioned to fit in among the plethora of images, which the mirrors multiplied into infinity. Such an installation strategy exaggerated the emotional dimension. One's attention was captured by the endless expansion of the line of portraits and, at the same time, the particularities of each individual face. Restoring identities was the show's political agenda, and during its course many members of the public deposited information (names, photographs) to facilitate the search of children born in captivity. The active power of images was confirmed by their migration from sites of display – from the family album or personal ID card to the public newspaper to the art world exhibition space. This passage between different contexts of presentation sustained a tension that compelled not only recollection but recognition and, perhaps, reconciliation.

Remembrance of wars and genocides is a recurring topic in contemporary Latin American culture and its intense presence permeates the urban fabric, particularly in cities like Buenos Aires. In a number of projects, the names of the disappeared are dispersed throughout the city. In 2006, the *Coordinadora Barrios X la Memoria y Justicia* ('Coordination of Neighbourhoods for Memory and Justice') began a territorial investigation of memory, and collectively installed plaques and tiles around the





*Views of plaques installed by the Coordinadora Barrios X la Memoria y Justicia, San Telmo neighbourhood, Buenos Aires (above) (2014), and the Comisión del Personal Memoria Verdad, Justicia, National Bank of Argentina, Buenos Aires (below) (2014). Photos: Andrea Giunta.*

city that indicated places where the disappeared used to live and where they were captured. In this project, the inscribed names were taken out of the chronological or alphabetical order that other memorials tend to impose. Plaques or tiles were placed around the institutions associated with the person (such as a bank or school), or on the spot where they were abducted. Over the years, some buildings have been surrounded by commemorations and rituals have been established for the production and inauguration of these tiles, thus inserting the project into the fabric of each neighbourhood (Barrios X Memoria y Justicia 2008, 2009). Rather than just focusing on sites where state repression took place (i.e. detention and torture centres), memory becomes decentralized, dispersed and reterritorialized (Tufro and Sanjurjo 2010).

Such a decentralizing strategy explicitly recognized the dictatorship's *power to make disappear*, whereby people who were not linked to armed struggle were sometimes randomly chosen (Calveiro 2004). The stones and plaques can surprise passersby during their urban transit, recalling the place and date of the disappearance of a person, along with a statement that points out whether they were 'popular activists' or 'disappeared detainees' as a way to testify to their political commitment without specifying the organization to which they belonged. The identifying phrase introduces a heroic trait that coexists with their victim status, one that should not be underestimated. For example, thirty paving stones were installed by the Banco de la Nación Argentina's Comisión del Personal Memoria, Verdad, Justicia ('Personal Memory, Truth and Justice Commission') in the sidewalk at the bank's headquarters, adjacent to the Plaza de Mayo, in Buenos Aires, which were later destroyed in the course of a public works project. The act of desecration was denounced by the bank's employees, and the paving stones were eventually replaced by the city with granite ones. This incident illustrates the degree to which memory is tied to community groups (like Barrios X la Memoria y Justicia) who cannot rely on public authorities to safeguard their interests, and must remain vigilant in advocating for human rights in contemporary Argentine society.

At times public commemorations are intentionally vandalized, which underscores the conflictual nature that the unresolved past perpetuates in the here and now. In the Peruvian context, the Campo de Marte, in Lima, features a monument titled *The Eye that Cries* (2007) bearing the names of the dead and disappeared that had been included in the report presented by the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2003). Created by Lika Mutal, a Dutch artist residing in Lima, the monument juxtaposes one central stone (a monolith found in Paracas with a central form that alludes to an eye that water pours from) and fifteen rows of stones. The name of one of the deceased or disappeared is inscribed on each stone (the final report lists 69,280 victims of that violence). An exhibition of photographs titled *Yuyanapaq* (which means 'to remember' in the Quechua language) (2004) was held at the Casa Riva Agüero de Chorrillos in Lima that provided the inspiration for the monument.<sup>12</sup> However, the monument proposes a visitor experience quite different from one looking at documentary images. Set within the Alameda de la Memoria ('Memory Boulevard'), *The Eye that Cries* stands like a minimalist structure that takes

12. The show was also exhibited at the Museo de la Nación, Lima.

on performative aspects due to both its location in a space used by the public to take strolls and its implied invitation to walk the circumference. It is an experience for remembering and sensing the past – a past that most certainly has not yet come to rest. On a recent visit to the site, I was unable to access the monument because it had been closed to the public by perimeter fencing in response to frequent attacks upon it (often involving orange paint, the colour that represents ex-President Fujimori's followers).

The past is not a warehouse of concluded experiences. It persists, is transported into the present by images, names, interventions and structures on the one hand, as well as by acts of censorship, abandonment or vandalism on the other. The artworks and popular practices I have discussed – the alternative contexts for images, sites and memorials – can be considered the new places where memory resides (Nora 1989). These are spaces that infuse today's Latin American urban fabric with the recent memory of violence from the last set of dictatorships. Plaques and monuments slow down the city's vertiginous tempo to remind onlookers of the relationship between a class of citizens – those whose deaths have been impossible to prove – and specific places in the city. The symbolic pattern produced by plaques and other markers that manifest the disappearances trace a network of significance that obliges the city to be read differently. Standardizing the plaques achieves a unified and consistent presence, particularly in Buenos Aires, converting them into familiar urban elements. Once people have read them in various locations, they know what they refer to. Every time one appears, the experience of space is qualitatively shifted. It is no longer merely an area of transit, routine destination or entertainment. Such spaces are marked to call upon conscience and emotion, to keep a vigil over the imperative to remember as a way of inducing collective memory. Pierre Nora points out that memory is not spontaneous, but must be activated, preserved and watched over:

*Lieux de memoire* originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally. [W]ithout commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them away. We buttress our identities upon such bastions, but if what they defended were not threatened, there would be no need to build them. Conversely, if the memories that they enclosed were to be set free they would be useless; if history did not besiege memory, deforming and transforming it, penetrating and petrifying it, there would be no *lieux de memoire*. Indeed, it is this very push and pull that produces *lieux de memoire* – moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet death, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded.

(1989: 12)

If these places were not at risk as zones under threat, creating sites of memory would be unnecessary; and if no tension existed between history and memory, these places would never be produced, nor would they last.

Sites of memory can be constituted in monumental terms (as is the case for the Parque de la Memoria's monument, inscribed with the names of the disappeared) or in fragile, almost imperceptible forms (like plaques installed in the street or remembrance announcements in the pages of a newspaper). Each of these instances consists of calling upon memory; they are places where time stands still and dates, circumstances and names are invoked, as these places coexist within the flow of everyday urban transit, and this is the aspect that gives them the power to evoke unexpected emotions.<sup>13</sup> One could call them bridges that connect those who experienced years of dictatorship first-hand with subsequent generations. Marianne Hirsh (1997) refers to the concept of 'postmemory', which describes the experience of those who have grown up in contact with narratives that preceded their knowledge and even their birth, for they possess a second-generation memory with gaps and missing reference points. In significant ways, the artworks, photographs, memorials, plaques and museums are all addressed to this second-generation memory and seek to activate it in an expanded social and historical context.

13. Gérome Truc (2012) analyzes the topographies of memory from a socio-ethnographical perspective, introducing a critique of Nora based through Halbwach's writings. Regarding the relationship between places of memory and their relationship with the public, Truc presents notions of rectified or obliterated memory.

### **Memory's Museography**

How can museum spaces be converted into sites of memory, and further develop their ascribed tasks of education and civic formation? Museums focused on memory have multiplied throughout the world in recent decades, and especially in Latin America since the late 1990s. Generally speaking, these museums aim to remember experiences of the past through a variety of cognitive strategies that involve the presentation of documents, images and artifacts, as well as through the evocation of emotions. What materials provide visitors with the most salient access to events from the past? Photographs, family trees, letters, objects, chronologies, news clippings, recordings and film footage are typically shown. When addressing violence, however, a sense of ethics necessitates certain limits. First, careful consideration must be applied to what can be shown so as to represent the horror without becoming a reductive illustration or, even worse, appealing to voyeuristic fascination and thereby contributing to further victimization. Second, what is shown must acknowledge competing versions of the past, as well as a clear goal concerning what the museum aims to bring to the public's experience. This would include a demarcation of the beginning and end of the period being narrated, an articulation of who the primary audience will be, along with a divulging of who was responsible for the violent actions and who were the victims.

At the same time, these museums seek not only to inform, but also to move the public, to provoke a state of reflection that will transform consciousness. In this sense, a formal paradigm for art dealing with memory can be identified whereby memory is understood not so much as the capacity to evoke one particular aspect of history, but as a program to influence an individual's conscience in the present. The particular moments of memory that museums point to have changed direction in recent years in relation to the influence of postmodernism and postcolonialism in museography. Collections are increasingly delineated within the sphere of culture. As Jens Anderman and Silkie Simine point out, 'Rather than as



ruins of a lost past, certifying its demise, museum objects have turned into the material hinges of a potential recovery of shared meanings, by means of narrativization and performativity' (2012: 4). Increasingly, museums do not define themselves as solely disciplinary spaces, but as places of memory where the relationship between viewers and the exhibition is mediated by the gaze and intercepted from the standpoint of performance. In this way, what confronts the spectator is not only a historical narrative but also the perception of events that he or she may not have actually witnessed, but that nevertheless can impact their subjectivity. Works of art dealing with memory can be understood in this sense as mechanisms of meditation capable of altering an individual to become more sensitive.

The exhibitionary devices I will discuss are organized on the basis of a formal language that utilizes abstraction, light and diagonals to destabilize conventional forms of viewership and empathy. As Anderman and Simine point out, the global tendency toward memory art in museums has been characterized by the use of modernist abstract design because figurative representations are not as effective in representing horror (2012: 10). Such abstraction, though, is utilized implicitly to construct situations of remembrance and reflection through underlying principles of the museum space and architecture, as well as by its choreographic and narrative elements.

The effectiveness of abstract forms to commemorate and evoke emotion has been a feature of museum architectures focusing on the Holocaust, which can serve as a model for memory-oriented exhibits elsewhere. As Andreas Huyssen stated, 'In the transnational movement of memory discourses, the Holocaust loses its quality as index of the specific historical event and begins to function as metaphor for other traumatic histories and memories' (2003: 14). One example, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, inaugurated in 2005 in the city of Berlin, exemplifies Huyssen's dual function. In this memorial, designed by Peter Eisenman, the proof of the genocide – photos, testimonies, maps and micro-narratives that signify the archive of a single victim or family – are located underground. Above ground are tons of concrete slabs. Walking between the blocks, whose height changes erratically, becomes an unnerving experience. No images refer to concentration camps, no names are written, no dates are recorded. Rather, the memorial concentrates on the bodily sensation of passing through the different-sized blocks and inclines. Even though they are arranged on a grid, there is a sense of surprise, and the palpable sense of the impossibility of definitively understanding the order of a space. Visitors feel instability, discomfort and unease.

This spatial strategy aims to provoke emotional interaction with the spectator through what I call *meditative forms*. The forms typically suspend the factual aspect of history in order to process it as pure emotion. They achieve emotionality by appealing to altered visual perceptions (vanishing points, diagonals, types of illumination) and corporeal sensations (claustrophobic space or, as is the case in the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, space itself that is unstable). These spaces are intended to provide particular experiences, ones that differ from those offered by photos, documents or testimony. Within them each viewer remains practically alone, submerged in silence, without the guide of an explanatory narrative, feeling the effects of insecurity as they move through the space.



*Views of Parque de la Memoria (2010) and the Monumento a las Víctimas del Terrorismo de Estado (2014). Photos: Andrea Giunta.*

14. Diagonals are also present in the route visitors follow at the Jewish Museum Berlin (2001), designed by Daniel Libeskind.

A think of light, for example, may penetrate the darkness and transmit an enhanced emotional presence. Through physically negotiating these forms, a memorable experience is produced. Rather than relating specific events, the enactment of the architecture impacts upon one's consciousness and imprints a message upon the body itself.

Another example of how memory architecture articulates space is the Parque de la Memoria ('Memory Park') in Buenos Aires. Created by the Baudizzone-Lestard-Varas Studio and associated architects Claudio Ferrari and Daniel Becker, its spatial composition is oriented toward transforming the audience during the course of their visit. Although the Monumento a las Víctimas del Terrorismo de Estado ('Monument to the Victims of State Terrorism'), situated within the Parque de la Memoria, bears names in chronological and alphabetical order, they demand to be read in an archival manner, i.e. looking for those whom one might know. Upon finding them, the monument functions as a tombstone or a cenotaph. Yet, the monument also corresponds to a model of meditative architecture. Between the park's entrance and the river, the monument unfolds along a zigzag route. Given that victims' bodies were thrown into the river, it serves the topos of an iconography with historical, contextual and local roots. The meandering organization of space destroys any centralized order based on Renaissance perspective and obliges visitors to engage their own viewpoint through choosing among multiple paths.

Diagonals also have a powerful presence in memorial architectures, especially in the Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos ('Museum of Memory and Human Rights') in Santiago, Chile. The museum was constructed by Brazilian architects from the Estudio América office, based in San Pablo, and was inaugurated in 2010 during President Michelle Bachelet's first term in office. The building supports a membrane that, like a semi-translucent skin, allows one to look out and view the surrounding cityscape. A fine layer of copper (metal that is abundant in Chile) envelops the museum and criss-crosses diagonally over the outer surface. These diagonals can also be perceived from inside, cutting across and occluding one's perception of the city outside.<sup>14</sup> In this way, then, diagonals perform a variety of functions: they force visitors to deviate from a linear account of history, intensify the sense of encounter, defy visual control, and unsettle the very act of walking, all contributing to an experience of the past that is multiple and complex.

The Museo Memoria y Tolerancia ('Memory and Tolerance Museum') in Mexico City offers another compelling example for contemplating the relationship between documentation and meditative forms. The museum's displays include photographs showing the horror of concentration camps in Germany during World War II and even a reconstructed train car, similar to the ones used to transport prisoners. These contrast with a multi-perceptual space evoking a chimney, which is for the most part a one-person box with a bare minimum of daylight. When inside, one hears the word *libertad* ('freedom') whispered. This installation, designated as a 'memorial', operates in the gap between providing information through documentation and transforming visitor's consciousness through emotional experience. Such a strategy aspires to engage new generations with the past; they gain knowledge about history along with personal



*View of the Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos (2012), Santiago, Chile. Photo: Andrea Giunta.*

feelings. It is a mechanism for emotional meditation comparable to that which culminates at the Holocaust section of the Jewish Museum Berlin designed by Daniel Libeskind, a hollow trapezoidal tower of cement, illuminated only by the light that ekes through a slit located above. Visitors remain for a time in this space, meditating in darkness and silence.

Santiago de Chile's Memory and Human Rights Museum also incorporates meditative experiences, such as Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar's *Conscience's Geometry* (2010). This work involves a descent into a subterranean space via 33 ceremonial steps: only ten persons can enter at one time. The door closes behind them and the space remains dark. The only light, coming from 500 silhouette-portraits, gradually increases until becoming fully lit. When it turns off again, visitors' retinas continue to bear its after-effects. The silhouettes combine contours of photographs of the disappeared with those of everyday citizens alive today, erasing the boundary between past and present. By reconfiguring the notion of the victim, the trauma of loss envelops everyone. In this meditative situation, each individual is left to navigate the darkness alone; his or her memory process is confounded through the perceptual changeability and its attendant emotional state.





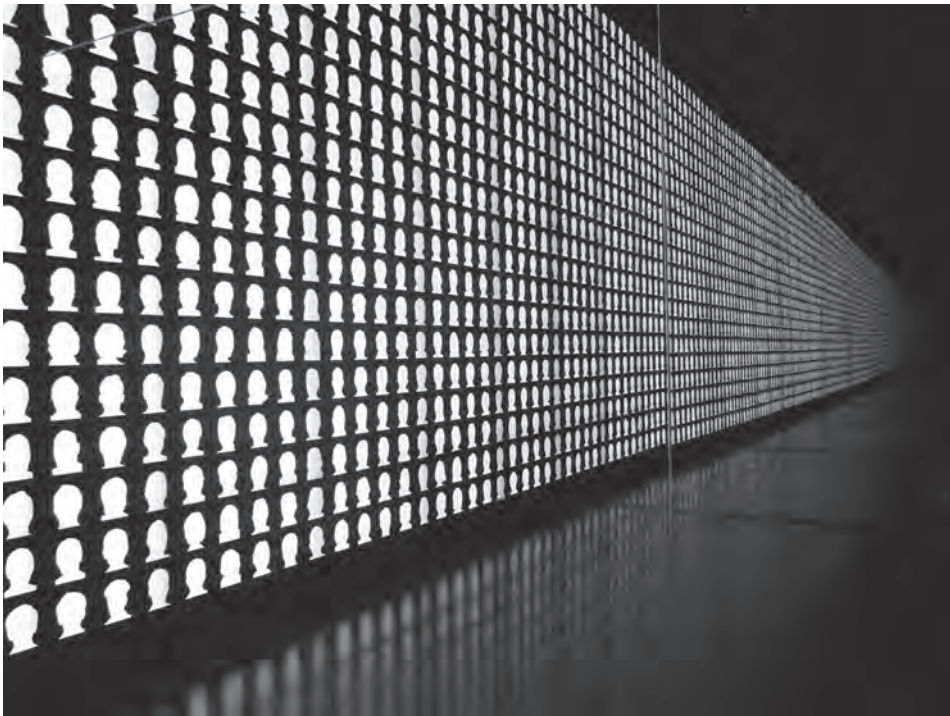
*Views within the Museo Memoria y Tolerancia, Mexico City (above) (2012), and the Jüdisches Museum, Berlin (below) (2012). Photos: Andrea Giunta.*

Museums of memory are perhaps the most effective use of this paradigm of meditative forms; they have shaped the means by which institutions aspire to transform individuals and to raise levels of civic consciousness. Those who were unaware of traumatic historical events become aware. Those who did not feel anything before feel something. Those who never came into direct contact with horrifying acts of the past gain an emotional experience upon which to evaluate and derive their own conclusions.

## **Art Museums and Memory**

When art and museums explore the relationship between remembrance of violence, what is the most effective method? In general, to encourage an active, effective observation of the past requires elements that are extra-aesthetic. Pierre Nora's notion of *lieux de mémoire* is pertinent here, for it appeals to a notion of memory that is transparent, open to discussion, and allowing the possibility of complex narrations. The methods characterizing many of the artworks and museums dedicated to representing the ominous past of the Holocaust or Latin American dictatorships intend to create a history that is multiple and contradictory – instead of unidirectional. While this strategy deliberately introduces areas of ambiguity, the question remains: is this operation trying to stave off a simplistic crystallization of the past, or does it recognize the impossibility of reconciling conflicting narratives? The vandalism perpetrated upon museums and memorials demonstrate that rather than instruments of pacification, sites of memory testify to a violence that may not yet have been calmed and a past that is not yet at ease.

Here one must introduce an additional element. Museums and memorials share an aim to conjure the past emotionally in order to prevent its current presence from becoming too diluted. Dominick LaCapra makes use of the Freudian differentiation between two relations to trauma – mourning ('working through' of traumatic losses) and melancholia ('acting out' that remains fixated upon a traumatic event) – in order to apply them to survivors' and second-hand witnesses' subjectivities. Repetition may well be inevitable for survivors, but in the case of second-hand witnesses, the experience must move from acting out to working through (LaCapra 2001: 90). From this perspective, LaCapra understands that memory can become a means to take a critical distance from the undesirable aspects of the past. It allows the unthinkable to be thought about and worked through from an ethical perspective. Memory museums, as arenas of knowledge and experience that enable ways of elaborating rather than repeating history, offer an invitation to reflect critically on the recent past through enacting its emotional aspects. To move in order to know: this notion is functional to the way in which Marianne Hirsh (1997) refers to the memory of survivors' children as postmemory, in order to bridge the distance between those who lived through the years of dictatorship and witnessed the actual events, and their offspring and society members that follow. This process, posterior to first-hand experience, becomes a vehicle to maintain claims for the disappeared, refresh the demand to see those responsible undergo trial, and sustain the search for children born in captivity.



*Alfredo Jaar, Conscience's Geometry (2010), installation at the Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos, Santiago, Chile. Photos: courtesy of the author.*

The burgeoning construction of places of memory that has occurred over the past twenty years is not unrelated to the redefinition of new democracies (in Latin America, but also in Europe, fundamentally in Germany), specifically in terms of their function in remembering and monumentalizing past events. The states engaging in these policies look to redefine and distance themselves from the repressive regimes that preceded them. Human rights policies are an effective vehicle for this redefinition and distancing process.<sup>15</sup> One aspect of this practice is that history becomes hypertrophied, something Nietzsche (1983) referred to as creative forgetting. Such an option is one that Huyssen (2003) discards as undesirable and unrealistic for times in which the menace of social amnesia cannot be pushed aside. The redefined Latin American democracies have not opted for forgetting; instead, they have intensified remembering and made memory of the past part of their political agendas.

As museums, memory sites and memorials have expanded in number and scope, a specific type of museography has developed, one that permits and generates tension between documents, testimonies, lists of names, diagonal routes and disappearing points of reference, along with the creation of emotional spaces where visitors are encouraged to remain still and self-reflective. In this sense, the memorial architectures that I have discussed here have developed particular devices to go beyond the torrent of information that museum displays normally provide in order to activate a performative aspect that engages past events in such a way that they become one's own experience. Artworks and museum displays dealing with disturbing episodes of national history may be considered to exacerbate the past, but it is through such techniques that traumatic memory can be made both effective and politically transformative.

*Translated by Tamara Stuby*

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15 A significant act proving this distance is the apology offered to the victims of repression by Argentine President Néstor Kirchner on the behalf of the state on 24 March 2004.



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