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The unruly image: memory and transmission in Argentina.

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CHAPTER 5: THE PHOTOGRAPH AS A DOCUMENT

Introduction

The repressive strategy of forced disappearance was, as we have already noted, a known practice in different countries of the Ibero-American sphere, both before and after the Argentine dictatorship of 1976. However, as Pilar Calveiro (*Poder y desaparición*) and Mandolessi and Alonso (*Estudios sobre la memoria*) have pointed out, it was in Argentina where this repressive modality, due to its systematic organization, would reach the degree of an authentic technology of power. It could be said that in this country, then, the very concept of the disappeared detainee would reach the highest degree of condensation.

In this chapter, I will address the first ways in which the Mothers tried to make the fact of disappearance visible. I will see how this need alternated the reporting initiatives both in the public street space and in the legal space. This stage corresponds to the centrality of the ID photo of the missing person. I will try to account for the paths that these images travel (between the state archive and the public exhibition, between the family archive and the political manifestation, between the document and the aesthetic intervention) until they settle into a kind of counter-archive of the nation, governed by other ordering logics than the traditional ones.

The Silhouettes⁸⁴

In addition to the rounds and white handkerchiefs, one of the great artistic acts that accompanied the struggle of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo was the “siluetazo” (silhouette action). This visual resource had already been used during the conflicts in the Argentine provinces of Tucumán and Córdoba in the years before the military coup. It consisted of the use of cardboard silhouettes that cut out the outline of the human figure in natural size. Sometimes the inside of the silhouettes is empty, but generally it is completed with the names and dates of birth and the dates of the kidnapping of the Mothers’ children. It was the human rights organizations who, towards the end of the dictatorship, proposed to the Mothers the serial production of silhouettes to account for the real dimension of the number of missing

⁸⁴ Longoni (“Fotos y siluetas”) challenges the idea maintained by the authors of numerous studies that the silhouettes were consolidated as a visual resource before the photographs. The photographic records of the events of the dictatorship relativize this position. These records show the extended use of the photograph as a leading medium to promote the visibility of the conflict from its beginnings. During 1983 and in subsequent years, the photographic work of Gil, García, etc. show the use of all types of media to display the photos: signs, banners, media on the Mothers’ bodies, posters, etc.

people. It was about giving them a place – occupying a space. An attempt was made to respond to a problem of representation: how much space would silhouettes representing the disappeared take up? The background of this idea is located in the same question that the Polish artist Jerzy Spasky asked himself to represent the numerical dimension of the extermination in Auschwitz.

On that occasion, the silhouettes were classified to show the number of deaths per day. Initially, the Mothers proposed that the silhouettes be empty because the total number of missing persons was not known, nor were all their names available. The first “siluetazo” was carried out in 1983, still during the dictatorship, within the framework of the third March of Resistance. An outdoor workshop was held in which the organizers and protesters made and posted the silhouettes in different public spaces. Somehow a body was returned to the missing. The passers-by and protesters added phrases and messages or made drawings. The response from the public and protesters in general exceeded the expectations of the event organizers. The images, in which the perspective places a participant lying down while being contoured, at first glance appear to show a dead body lying on the street with people crowded around it (figs. 1 and 2). For a moment, the places are exchanged: the living take the place of the dead; the living lend their bodies to the dead who are not there. The isolation of the Mothers has ended. Now it is the people who ask: where are they?



Fig. 1. Guillermo Kexel. *El siluetazo*. 1983, http://www.cvaa.com.ar/02dossiers/accion/3_histo_4.php. Accessed October 18, 2018.



Fig. 2. Eduardo Gil. *Silhouette*. 1983, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, <https://muac.unam.mx/exposicion/el-siluetazo>. Accessed October 18, 2018.

The silhouettes had not been conceived for this 1983 march, but the artists offered them to the Mothers. They imposed their own conditions: the silhouettes would not be displayed horizontally and the figures would be represented empty, because the data on all the disappeared was not available. The silhouettes should also represent children and pregnant women, therefore there would not be a stereotyped outline. According to Eduardo Gruner, the silhouettes are

attempts to represent what has disappeared: i.e. not simply what is ‘absent’ – since, by definition, every representation is of an absent object – but of the intentionally absent, what was made to disappear by some form of material or symbolic violence; in our case, the representation of the bodies disappeared by a systematic policy or a conscious strategy. (qtd. in Longoni, “Fotos y siluetas” 51; translated by Marisela Trevin)⁸⁵

In Longoni's terms, “the logic at play is that of a restitution of the image as a substitution for the absent body” (51; translated by Marisela Trevin).⁸⁶

⁸⁵ “[L]as siluetas son intentos de representación de lo desaparecido: es decir, no simplemente de lo ‘ausente’ – puesto que, por definición, toda representación lo es de un objeto ausente–, sino de lo intencionalmente ausentado, lo hecho desaparecer mediante alguna forma de violencia material o simbólica; para nuestro caso, la representación de los cuerpos desaparecidos por una política sistemática o una estrategia consciente” (51).

⁸⁶ “la lógica en juego es la de una restitución de la imagen como sustitución del cuerpo ausentado” (51).

The refusal of the Mothers to place the silhouettes on the ground shows their resistance to equating disappearance with death. The lying images are a death certificate that halts the battle for signs. The disappeared will not be represented as dead, because for the Mothers this implies an end and disappearance, by definition, does not. The silhouettes would be upright (figs. 3 to 10).

It should be noted that towards the end of the dictatorship, the military drafted self-amnesty laws and declared all of the disappeared dead. The Mothers did not accept this declaration and would continue to demand that they be “returned alive”, as well as demanding the prosecution of the perpetrators. “We want to know where our children are. What have they done with them?” (Archive of the Association of Mothers of Plaza de Mayo). The military maintained a “pact of silence” under which no collaboration was provided for the search for the bodies.



Fig. 3. Siluetazo. <http://revistamutt.com/visuales/el-siluetazo-ponerle-el-cuerpo-a-la-desaparicion/>. Accessed October 18, 2018.



Fig. 4. Guillermo Loíacono. Protests with the display of silhouettes represent the disappeared (“Siluetazo”). October 1983.



Fig. 5. “Silhouettes and Cops”, (two policemen with their backs to the silhouettes, looking away). 2006, Exhibition at Sala PAYS, El Parque de la Memoria-Monumento a las Víctimas del Terrorismo de Estado (Memory Park-Monument to the Victims of State Terrorism) on the 30th anniversary of the 1976 coup.



Fig. 6. Gerardo Dell'Oro. Eighth March of Resistance. December 1988.



Fig. 7. <https://web.archive.org/web/20200410190647/https://www.telam.com.ar/notas/201305/19498-el-siluetazo-a-30-anos-en-el-parque-de-la-memoria.php>. Accessed October 18, 2018.



Fig. 8. Roberto Amigo. *Siluetas blancas entre Madres de Plaza de Mayo*. 1990, Archivos en Uso, <http://www.archivosenuso.org/viewer/475>. Accessed March 26, 2019



Fig. 9. Roberto Amigo. *Madre de Plaza de Mayo junto a una silueta roja*. 1989, Archivos en Uso, <http://archivosenuso.org/viewer/464>. Accessed March 26, 2019.



Fig. 10. <https://journals.openedition.org/agedor/898?lang=en>. Accessed October 18, 2018.

The “siluetazo” had a significant impact among those who produced the event, among those who participated and those who simply walked around the city on subsequent days. The silhouettes, some would say, were “silent screams”, “silent demands”, provoking “surprise” or “discomfort”. The faceless bodies watched. A sort of mirror looked back at the pedestrians. Now, the disappeared were like a contoured community, but contoured by whom? The effect of lying down to lend one’s body to the silhouettes turns an individual act into a collective act: after that experience, it is not the individual who gets back up, but an exposed community, the possibility of political community. This relationship marks the

passage from the aesthetic to the political and vice versa. The Mothers are no longer singular families who lost their children because “they had done something”. Instead, the Mothers are Mothers of the 30,000, and the 30,000 do not belong to the Mothers, but to society as a whole. By virtue of this, “the community is not established as a sum of the I, but as a distribution of the we” (Didi-Huberman, *Pueblos expuestos* 102). Here, the image caused by the silhouettes is “as a sensitive support for our reflection and our political memory: so that the protest, the revolt, the desire for those dead bodies to continue, as long as the image lasts in our memory, continue. they are not entirely, for history, a dead letter or commonplace” (Didi-Huberman, *Pueblos expuestos* 101). The power of representation is multiplied in the “absent” as Gruner says, and it is here where artistic intervention is political intervention.

The silhouettes made human bodies appear in contact with others: “Presence is impossible except as co-presence” (Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* 62). The exhibition of the silhouettes is not only an exhibition of the disappeared; it is a mutual exhibition. Here, the disappeared are not exposed as a spectacle; it will not be possible because the community has been broken. The town is not a unit. The disappeared are spatially exposed to the people, and the people themselves are exposed, but exposed in their brokenness. The public demonstration does not represent the aspiration for popular romantic unity, but rather gives visibility to those who dramatically have no part (Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*).

Photography and Memory Practices

Disappearance precisely entails the avoidance of all forms of imagination or representation regarding the fate of the detained. This has rendered visibility a crucial concern in memory practices in Argentina and has placed photography in a problematic position within these practices.

In summary, the photographs accompanying the victims’ legal data on their identification documents were the initial visual expression of what were not yet memory practices. They symbolized the urgency to fix the image to its referent. One could argue that the Mothers respond to the silence of the state with an image. And they do so using the same administrative means that the state employs to register its citizens: a front-facing or profile picture, a series of cold data that reveal nothing about the personality of the missing person. The aim is to document a legal existence.

Initially, the passport-sized photo, that face stamped on 4-by-4 photographic paper (figs. 11 to 13), was the means to identify the loved one whose fate seemed unknown to all. Documentation sent to various national entities included, alongside the photo, a physical

description of the missing relative. This was the standard procedure in individual inquiries. It was deemed that the mere name of the disappeared relative was insufficient for identification by the authorities (especially considering that political activists often used aliases or war names). The Mothers hoped that their children would be recognized by someone who could provide them with any information about their whereabouts.

As these photos became symbols of a collective endeavour, family members who did not possess such photos utilized pictures taken from the family album but cropped them to the passport photo format. Adapting a photo to resemble a passport photo implies “sharing a symbolic system that ultimately organizes its contemplation and interpretation” (Da Silva Catela, “Revelar el horror” 10; translated by Marisela Trevin)⁸⁷



Fig. 11. ID card photo of Francisca Torres. Archive of Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo.

⁸⁷ “compartir un sistema simbólico que ordena finalmente su contemplación y lectura” (10).



Fig. 12. <https://www.pinterest.es/pin/64950419604684374/>. Accessed March 26, 2019.



Fig. 13. Photograph of grandmother Alicia “Licha” Zubasnabar de De La Cuadra. Founding grandmother and first president of the Grandmothers. Archive of the Association of Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo.

The photos circulated in national and international media. The instances reproduced petitions and improvised dossiers that were photocopied many times using techniques from decades past. This results in the typical photo of the disappeared being generally a rather imprecise face (fig. 14). The French artist Christian Boltanski, in *Chases High School*, created in 1988, selected a set of photographs belonging to the graduation class of Jewish children found in a book about the Jews of Vienna.⁸⁸ Boltanski re-photographed and enlarged the originals until achieving a blurry effect on the faces, which thus acquired a cadaverous appearance. The photographs were installed on pillars of rusted biscuit tins where the light from desk lamps illuminated the ensemble from above, much like the lights in a classic police interrogation room. Although this imprecision of the faces in the identification photos of the disappeared is not deliberate, it is possible to establish a comparison with Boltanski's intervened images. The catalog of his exhibition

includes the original photograph with the following caption: "All we know about them is that they were students at Chases High School in Vienna in 1931." This caption stresses the fact that the remaining picture has no correspondence with present reality: the faces of the children as they appear in the photograph have disappeared. This disappearance is acted out in extreme close-ups. We now see not the realistic illusion of a living subjectivity, as the standard view of photography and of the portrait would have it, but empty, blinded faces. And blinding is a figurative way of objectifying or even killing a person. (van Alphen, *Caught by History* 98–99)

In Boltanski's work, the photographs belong to lives that are presumed to have been suppressed in concentration camps. In the case of the Argentine identification photos, the conditions of the portrait are disturbed by a sinister uncertainty. At this point, both representations of faces diverge. We observe in Boltanski's work that the very photograph seems to reproduce the effect of the concentration camps on the appearance of these faces: "The enlarged images, which transform the faces into skeletal vestiges, remind us of the photographs published after the Second World War had come to an end, of the emaciated survivors of the death camps" (van Alphen, *Caught by History* 99). In the case of the Argentine photos, the faces are frozen moments that at first can tell us nothing about how these people were annihilated. These are not aesthetically intervened photos, but the "natural"

⁸⁸ Work studied by Ernst van Alphen in *Caught by History*.

wear or degradation suffered by these identification photos, subjected to mechanical reproduction and their eventual enlargement and mass production, produces the effect of a gradual derealization, of a progressive loss, never fully completed. Though through different paths, the wear of the images can evoke what van Alphen has termed the “Holocaust Effect”:

It is important to realize that the last two ways in which Boltanski evokes the Holocaust—by reducing them to photographs and lists made at the time as documentation—are not based on reference per se. I call a “Holocaust-effect” by means of a reenactment of principles that in a sense defines the Holocaust—a radical emptying out of subjectivity as a road leading to the wholesale destruction of a people: genocide. (99)



Fig. 14. Photographs of Ana María Lanzillotto and Domingo Menna. Their son's identity was restored on October 3, 2016, at the age of 40. October 3, 1976, Archive of the Association of Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo.

The passport-sized photograph maintains a metonymic relationship with the body of the disappeared. By being publicly displayed, its appearance becomes politicized. These photos exhibit a face, but also its wear, its gradual graphic destruction, which emulates not only the destruction of subjectivity but also the natural process of forgetting. However, their public and political display constitutes a reaffirmation of the will to remember. In Argentina, this collection of displayed photographs interrupted the monotonous continuity of a regime of secrecy and monopoly of signs.

Disarticulated were the political forms of social relations, as the dictatorship promoted forms of socialization based on spectacle and consumption. The dictatorial state is also a producer of fictions, an apparatus of persuasion, an instance that not only inhibits critical images but produces and disseminates its own. The imposed images of concord, peace, health, and unity were complemented by an atmosphere of frivolity that the mass media knew how to design and propagate. Even for those who had been directly exposed to repression and had the fortune to survive, or for the relatives of those who never returned, it was difficult to escape this celebratory and amnesic community. Those who could not share this mandatory optimism were condemned to social isolation or to leading double lives. The writer Mario Benedetti coined the term “insilio” for this latter situation, that is, the idea of an inner exile. An aura of suspicion or immorality hung over these individuals.

It is around the photos of the disappeared loved ones that a semi-clandestine community begins to gather. In these meetings, according to Ludmila Da Silva Catela (“Revelar el horror”), the past is discussed and experiences are exchanged: they are spaces for the reworking of memories. Each relative of the disappeared needed to reclaim for themselves the certainty of events as unforgettable as they were denied. Hence, the analogue photograph, as a trace, as a luminous certification of a body on a photographic plate, became the foundation of a sentimental community organized around a difficult knowledge. Déotte describes this as an “era of disappearance” that demands an “art of disappearance”: an art that needs to cling to photography as evidence of existence (“El arte” 156).

The first struggle of the Mothers was thus an intimate confrontation with themselves, an affirmation. The photograph was exhibited as evidence but was also an amulet wielded against an entire society bent on naturalizing forgetting.

Individual memory is undoubtedly related to a neuronal apparatus, but collective memory grows from an identifiable subject, from a body. It is the material marks preserved over time that contribute to a common memory. The past and the changing narratives that allude to it are preserved in the material environment that surrounds us. Aleida Assmann distinguishes between semantic memory and episodic memory. Semantic memory is the ability to process, learn, and store in the mind the data of the surrounding world. Episodic memory, however, dedicates individually experienced incidents to the exteriorized self. Any verbalized or represented individual memory becomes part of the subjective symbolic system and ceases to be the inalienable and exclusive property of one person. Through language, individual memory is encoded. This allows for its eventual appropriation. Socially encoded memory can be assumed by others or challenged or corrected. No individual memory can

completely dispense with a social and cultural infrastructure. It is this infrastructure, these external signs or social marks, that allow people to preserve memories. The political-cultural action of the Mothers consisted precisely in the constitution of a symbolic space in which individual and untransferable memories could be shared, initially among themselves and later with society.

At the end of the dictatorship, when the Mothers led popular demonstrations, the passport-sized photos were enlarged to be used as banners. (figs. 15 and 16). The faces of the disappeared then appeared in close-up, above the heads of the demonstrators. The banners could be carried by anyone, not just the biological mother of the victim. The image detaches from the body and rises in the air to inhabit public space. It is as if now civil society itself is making a claim for justice.

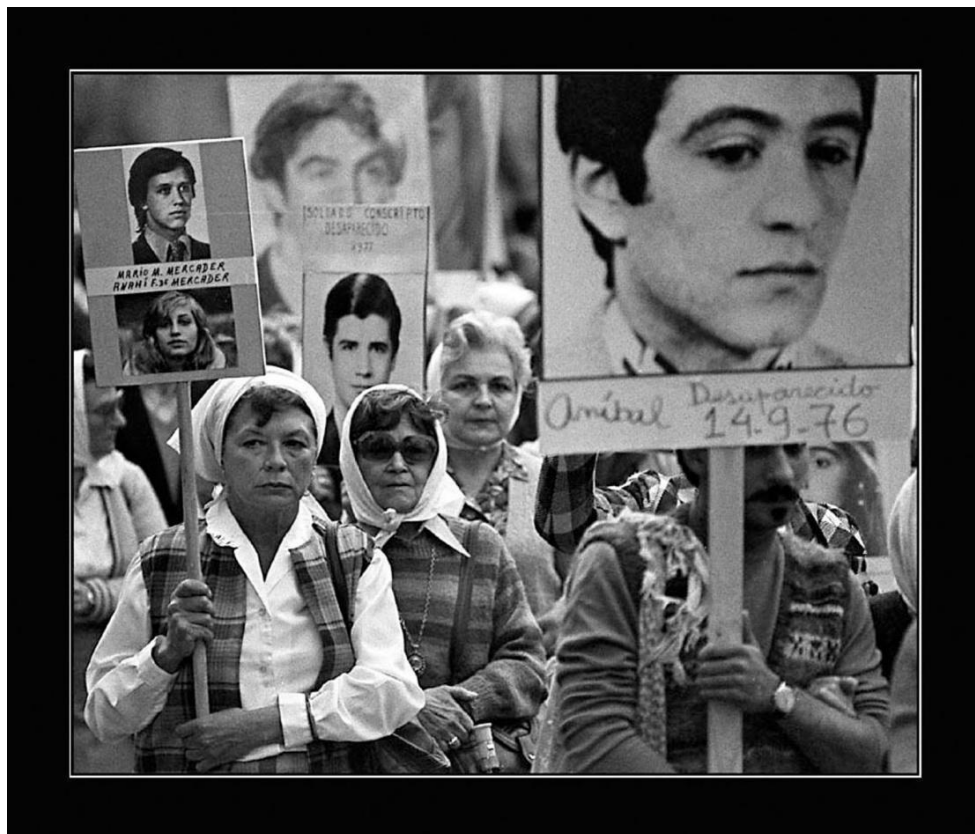


Fig. 15. Archive of the Association of Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo.



Fig. 16. Archive of the Association of Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo.

But photography cannot fail to be at the same time a “falsification” of the referent, since the picture captures and fixes a single moment that is separate from the vital flow of the person being photographed; that is to say, it portrays the referent in an unrepeatable and existentially impossible moment by representing an instant in a living continuum.

The referential function of photography varies according to whether the image is old or recent. In the words of van Alphen, “[e]specially old photographs demonstrate that, over time, the photographic image becomes severed from its referent. It is only in old images that the main function of the medium of photography can be assessed” (*Staging the Archive* 28).

In the case of photographs of missing people, these temporalities coexist in a contradictory way. The photographs were originally taken from a state archive or a family album, but they also belong to the archive of missing people. How old is a photo? How old is a missing person?

When we look at a photograph that tells us about a past time, we can attribute a different meaning to the original. The observer looks at the image from his own horizon of meaning and experience. Images cannot be read beyond their circumstances of production and circulation and cannot be interpreted separately from the acts of their reception. The photos of the victims are intended to represent the disappearance, to make the hidden visible. What led to this way of interpreting them are the diverse circuits of reception and the social,

political and historical dimensions that made these photographs – initially used to record citizens – an affective emblem of disappearance.

Photography can be the material medium of a shared narrative. The photo adds credibility to the common story. The inexpressive aspect that we appreciate in every identity photograph acquires in this context the forcefulness of an interpellation. The visages look back at us. They implicitly ask us to name their bearers, to ask about them.

The Photograph and the Archive

The photographic image, of course, has caused a series of vertigos of perception since its inception. As pointed out by Nelly Richard (*Políticas y estéticas de la memoria*), the effect of presence is technically denied by the dead time that the photographic image inhabits. This is what various authors, from Siegfried Kracauer to Jacques Derrida, will consider the ghostly or spectral character of the photograph; that is to say, the character of being ambiguously placed between what is and what is not, the visible and the invisible, the tangible and the intangible, what appears and what disappears. The photograph was conceived in association with the idea of the certification of the referent, at the service of its classification and identification. It has thus been used by geographical and historical archives, especially colonial archives and in general by mechanisms of state control (van Alphen, *Staging the Archive*). However, the essential ambiguity of the photograph lies in the fact that its indicative power can never be separated from the scenographic disposition by which it is framed or preceded, nor from the significant environment in which it appears, nor from the effects produced by the passage of time between the time when the photograph was taken and the moment of its perception. The photographic image is never a mere document; it also provokes an inevitable vertigo of temporality between what was and what is, between what still is and what is no longer. If we also consider that there is something spectral about every photo, the public exhibition of the faces of people who can no longer be found, or have been removed from the continuum of the living, is inevitably spectral, insofar as such exhibition presents the photos of the people that the state believed could not be part of the group of the living and especially the group of the visible in the new Argentina. The ghostly return of these people who were “removed” from the body of the nation (due to their pathogenic nature, in the language of the dictatorship), and their photographic reappearance in the middle of the most important square in the country inevitably had an extremely disturbing effect for the regime. But for those who remember and demand explanations, these photos are spectres of loved ones whose definitive return is continuously awaited and who are thus always and

indefinitely on a voyage of return that will never be completed. In his publication *Failed Images*, van Alphen highlights the following:

Documents are older than photographs and therefore command more status. The document's archival status is the performance and record of its act. Photographs, in contrast, do not possess the status of an act in that sense; they are considered more passive; reservoir more than record. It is this status of the photograph as passive and as reservoir that posed a problem for the archive, in particular for archival classification and regulation, as the photograph is inherently unstable. It unsettles the grounds of archival classification. In contrast to other kinds of documents, photographs are never just established records of the past; once severed from their referents they can always be read differently. This is how the status of the photograph morphs from record to an archive in and of itself. (226)

This instability of the photographic image, as indicated by van Alphen, has turned the photograph into a double-edged sword for archives, as it creates doubts regarding what the photograph exactly certifies. In this sense, a photograph often says much more about the person who takes it than about its intended referent. The place of the photograph, that is, the series of which it is a part, is as significant as the photographic impression itself when it comes to determining what is perceived in it or the senses it promotes. It is the archive that organizes or stores them, the series of which it is a part and the way in which it is done that allows its archivists to establish a certain order of visibility, consecrate or naturalize "evident" hierarchies, or impose social or sexual stereotypes on reality, turning certain power relations into emanations of nature. More than evidence of reality, the photograph is an effect of truth in a network of power relations. Contemporary photographic art has been nourished by this ambiguity, sabotaging in many ways the pretensions of objectivity in photographic images.

One of the issues that is inevitable in this problem is the relationship between the photograph and the archive, understood in a double sense: as a data bank and as "the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events," in the words of Foucault, that is, as a system of the historical conditions of possibility of statements (*Archaeology of Knowledge* 145). And it is inevitable because the entity considered by the dictatorship to be unclassifiable, that of the "disappeared," the void in the archives of the state, was challenged with a true alternative archive, the Mothers' archive,

which has continued to grow and which promotes another series of statements that have converged ever since with national political life, always acquiring new nuances.

Today, in Argentina, Chile, or Uruguay, a series of ID photos on the street can hardly mean anything other than the series of photos of young people who disappeared during those countries' respective dictatorships. Thus, the classic ID photo that is still identified today with the bureaucracy of any state and is characterized by an impersonal image, the natural context of which are files, institutions, or state archives, has undergone a series of essential changes. In the context of the photos collected by the Mothers, they no longer prove the mere bureaucratic existence of an individual before the law and the nation, but, much more frequently, they evoke a particular fate. And that fate is the fate of the disappeared, that is, of uncertainty and state crime. There is a shared cultural and political background established between the remembrance of the disappeared, their memory, and these ID photos in black and white.

The nationality data next to the photos of the children seems to respond to the denationalization by the military of those they have called subversives. The attached photos and data prove that these people are Argentinian, according to the state's own sources, showing that the national sphere as an extension of the family (an ideal that is promoted by Latin American authoritarian regimes) is a parody, an insubstantial construction, or one whose substance is precisely ruinous. This means that, in part, the photos of the state archive exposed or mounted in the public space, removed from the context of the civil registry, constitute an enactment of that same registry, its black mirror. Thus, what the Mothers inaugurate is a different principle of selection of reality, where the information discarded by the society of the disappearance ends up, generating an immense agglomeration of uncomfortable data. In the ID photo, the individual appears before the state or before the law, separated or isolated from any other characteristic of their daily context. What is characteristic of the ID photo is the fixed and inexpressive look on a white background that turns the registered face into a face with no context or history. In the ID photo, an individual appears before a place of social control and expresses in itself an aspiration of fixation, registration, identification, and immobility. It should be noted that the first photos of this kind were taken as a police strategy and related to criminal files. Their purpose was to detect suspects and their effect, among others, was the criminalization of certain social groups. The ID photo is thus part of a grammar of power that frames, divides, and serializes, while exhibiting on a mass scale and individualizing subjective singularities. But the photo, or at least its public exhibition in the framework of the Mothers' peaceful agitation, is an

outstanding aesthetic intervention. When the perennial and inexpressive look of the disappeared person appears in the midst of a continuum of media images of the present, a short circuit occurs, a violent anachronism that forces us to reconsider everyday life. The emergence of the disappeared person's face thus resulted not only in the aggression of the regime, which saw in it a disturbance of public order, but the hostility of many of the very passers-by, who were extremely disturbed by the spectral return of an undigested and indigestible past. It is the proscribed image where all the ambiguities that are characteristic of the image are exasperated. The Mothers disrupt the apolitical national harmony that the military intend to show and reintroduce the conflict that is inherent to the political, challenging the regime of visibility imposed by the regime, thus initiating a dispute around the representations of the community (Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*).

Regarding the displacements that art has deployed to question these forms of representation, van Alphen (*Staging the Archive*) takes the example of the artist Fiona Tan to analyze the problematic relationship between the archive and photography.⁸⁹ Tan's project consisted of holding the video camera for one full minute over people who were asked to remain motionless in front of the lens. The videographic portrait is so used as a resource to capture the image. In the case of photography, the still image is factual, although it enables multiple readings that question such rigidity. In Tan's experience, these portraits escape fixation. According to Doris von Drathen, "people stare at her. One minute is a long time. As each second passes, the mask of their everyday activities slowly begins to slip and fall away, as if an eggshell were gradually metamorphosing back into a soft membrane. In turn, the faces interrogate the one scrutinising them" (qtd. in van Alphen, *Staging the Archive* 37–38). The faces of the disappeared, cut off from their vital contexts, suffer a similar fate not because of a videographic device, but because of their displacement from the civil registry to the street.

Another example of these displacements in the value assigned to the photograph is the sum of the faces of the disappeared (figs. 17 to 18). The use of flags depicting the sum of the photographic portraits of the disappeared implies the passage from the singular to the serial, and from the individual to the collective. While at the beginning of the Mothers' search the priority was to disseminate the data, the signs of identity of the absent, with the passage of time and the intensification of the Mothers' political role in the struggle against the dictatorship, the photos were gathered together, forming something like banners. There is one

⁸⁹ On Fiona Tan's work see van Alphen, *Staging the Archive* 36–40.

of them that is particularly well-known, which symbolizes the struggle, and which constitutes a portrait of the whole: it is the sum of all available faces arranged side by side (fig. 19).

In this use of the ID photo, the referent, which in a previous phase was the highlighted element, what was shown, what was essential in the photo, is again shifted into the background. A new distance is produced between the photo and its reference that distances these photos from the portrait and brings them closer to allegory.

In this new context, the grouping of the photos once again shows the state's mechanism of identification based on photographic humiliation, serialization, or standardization that objectifies, depersonalizes, disciplines, and subdues. It also shows that the suffering of the detainees is part of the same process of depersonalization. The gazes in the photos in the context of their public appearance become scrutinizing; they are disturbing though elusive gazes. They are faces accompanied by other faces. Substituting the isolated and personal portrait for the series implies a way to deconstruct the humanistic and sentimental concept of the portrait. It implies their entry into a political dimension.

Removed from the archive series of the state and their identity documents, the faces once again lose the appearance of faces bearing a unique biography (which obviously is lost in the series of portraits). This is because they evoke this very serialization and depersonalization, but now as an accusatory duplication that allegorizes the seriality of the crime, its systematic nature, the repeated or reiterated atrocity, and the magnitude of the elimination.



Fig. 17.

<http://www.keywordbasket.com/ZGldGFkdXJhIGFyZ2VudGluYSBkZXNhcgFyZWNPZG9>

[Z/](#). Accessed March 26, 2019.

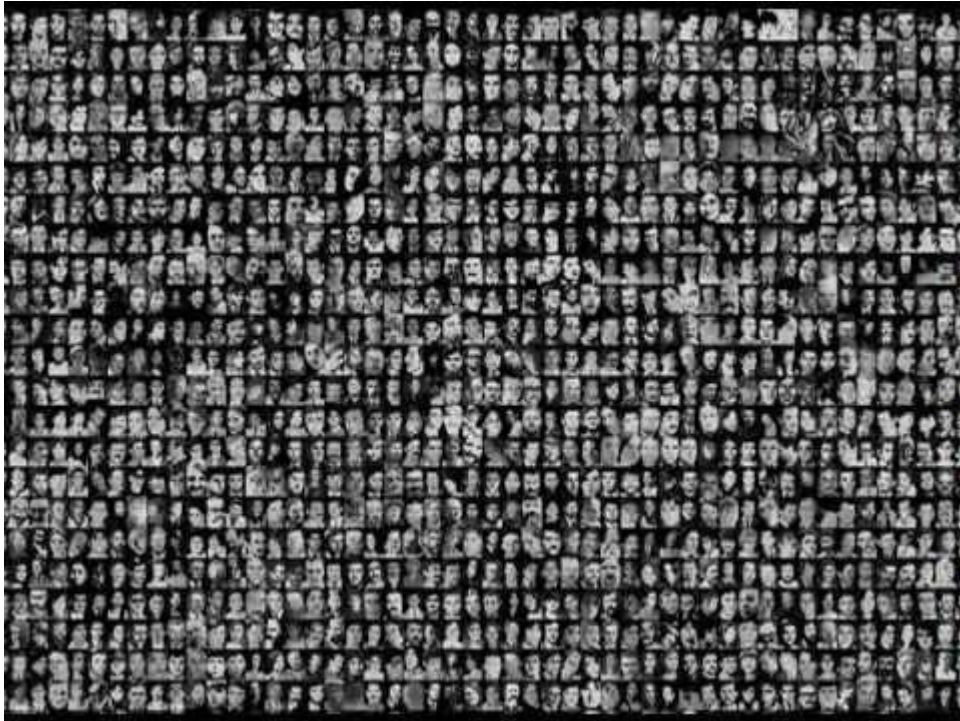


Fig. 18.

<http://www.keywordbasket.com/bG9zIGRlc2FwYXJlY2lkbn3MgZW4gYXJnZW50aW5h/>.

Accessed March 26, 2019.



Fig. 19.

https://lh3.googleusercontent.com/bTf_x3UKERYkGIwoQkLK3yS_4b5z4ZCiBRnqUVhNCzooMchkhKET2rW_o598qrqR8oFkyjw=s116. Accessed March 26, 2019.

The other series, or the other archive used by relatives of the disappeared is that of the family album (figs. 20 to 22). While the ID photo, as indicated by Susan Sontag (*On Photography*) belongs to the state archive and to a form of classification governed by typology and closely linked to the police investigation, the family album photo belongs to a chronological category. It represents the ceremony of shared, private, and family spaces. Once these photos, although individualized and within family relationships, are decoded as photos of the missing, a crossing of temporalities inevitably occurs for the viewer. On the one hand, the meeting of at least two times is typical of photography, but, on the other hand, the viewer cannot help but think that the photo was taken at a time in which its referents felt safe and could not know what was going to happen to them.⁹⁰

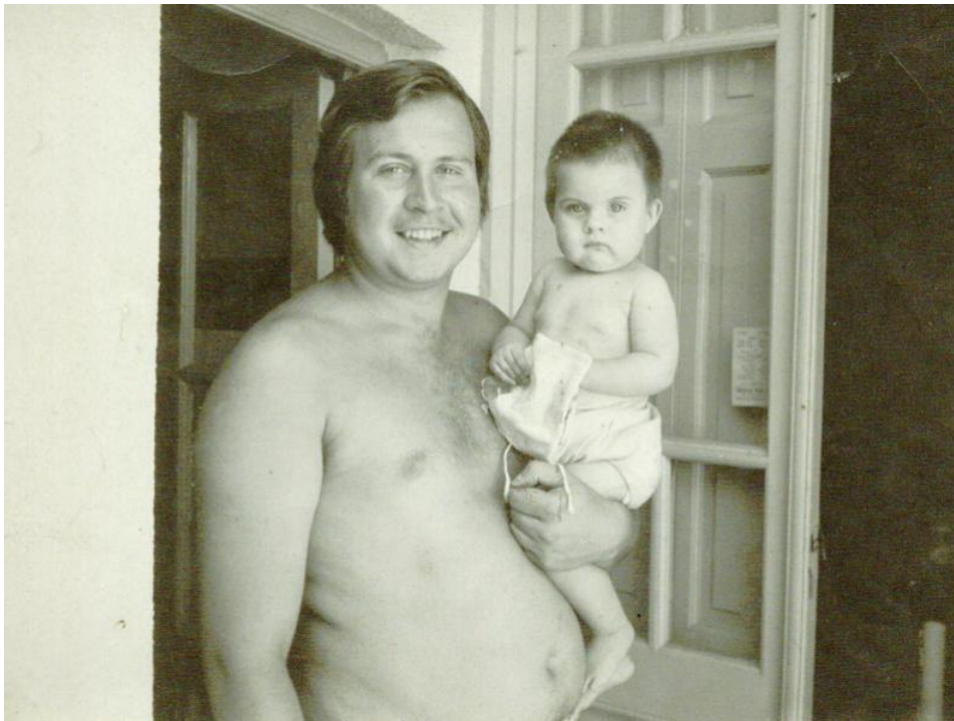


Fig. 20. Ricardo Iwanski with the couple's first daughter, Marta. Archive of the Association of Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo.

⁹⁰ “La tensión latente entre lo despreocupado del rostro en el tiempo pasado de la toma fotográfica que no sabe de la inminencia del drama, y el tiempo presente desde el cual miramos trágicamente la foto de alguien luego convertido en víctima de la historia, compone el desesperado ‘punctum’ que emociona y conmociona esas fotos de álbum de desaparecidos.” (“The latent tension between the lack of concern in the face in the past moment at which the photograph was taken, when the referent is unaware of the imminence of the drama, and the present time from which we tragically contemplate the photograph of someone who subsequently became a victim of history, composes the desperate ‘punctum’ that moves and shocks in those album photos of the disappeared”; Richard qtd. in Longoni, “Fotos y siluetas” 48).



Fig. 21. Portrait of Martinis and Neuhaus at their wedding. Archive of the Association of Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo.



Fig. 22. María Isabel Luque, probably with her son, Marcos. Archive of the Association of Grandmothers of Plaza Mayo.

But family photos are exposed to a certain semiotic erosion, as both Kracauer and Barthes have pointed out (van Alphen, *Staging the Archive*). With the passage of time, these photos cease to be an indication of the person portrayed; they lose the power to evoke the familiar of well-known faces and they acquire other values, another chain of associations. The signs of the time, the fashion of that period, become an obstacle. The photograph of a person becomes a portrait of an era. When subject to other archival contexts, it acquires other meanings and does not contribute to personal memory anymore. As pointed out by Barthes, *History* stands between the face that is sought and the observer of the photograph (64).

Furthermore, the photographs in question are, as indicated above, in place of a void, in the absence of a body and of a photograph illustrating or providing proof of the fate of the disappeared detainee. On these publicly exhibited inexpressive faces and in the absence of referential bodies, different narratives have been built, which have been greatly conditioned by different political phases. I have mentioned the criminalizing military narrative, whose definition of subversive has been previously discussed, a dominant narrative during the dictatorship that casts suspicions of immorality on the entire family of the detainee. This narrative has been historically exemplified by the frequent reaction of many to the news of a disappearance: “*They must have done something*”. On the return of democracy and while the CONADEP (National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons) was conducting its tasks, the narrative that began to circulate was that of “innocent victims” of excessive or unrestrained repression. That is to say, it was a story that stripped the victim of any political will, of any agency and responsibility. During this phase, the family photo, which documents the common lives of ordinary people, could serve to support this version of the story. The officialization of the preamble to the CONADEP report led to the circulation of the so-called “theory of the two demons”. This theory describes the recent past as a military confrontation between two equally demonic sides: the guerrillas and the Armed Forces. This version continues to rely on the military definition of the enemy as a subversive, but it places the military on the side of immorality and violence as well. This version had the advantage of placing the entire population in the position of the innocent victim of that confrontation, as if it had simply suffered through it, without taking sides or taking part in the conflict. Another version that circulated sometime later was that of idealization. The disappeared were all heroes who had given their lives for a better world. In this case, the photo acquires an auratic value, as defined by Walter Benjamin, preventing a fluid or critical relationship with the past. The ID card, or the void of the referent around which the politics of memory develops, allows the self-serving proliferation of versions of the past and characterizations of the absent. The

private practice of memory, on the other hand, invents rituals of evocation that limit this natural dispersion.

As we have seen, in the case of the photo as an instrument of collective denunciation, sometimes a family photo is cut into the shape that a passport photo usually has. As Ludmila da Silva Catela has pointed out, the procedure can be the opposite: the same photo used on the street banner can be transformed into a family photo in the domestic sphere (figs. 23 and 24). In this space, the photograph does not appear with the document numbers, the name, or the date of disappearance. In some cases, the photo is framed. In many others, it occupies a special place in the family home, surrounded by flowers and other objects (fig. 25). The public and private use of the photo are thus differentiated. In the private use of the photograph, which, as discussed above, could be the same photograph that is taken to the demonstrations, it is no longer a matter of insisting on the incorporation of a face into an immense series of faces that share the same fate, but on the violent disruption of a particular fate and the disintegration of a particular family.

The disappeared often do not appear alone, but among friends or relatives, sharing moments of sociability prior to their detention, in a time and with a familiarity in the context of which it would have been very easy to ask them about their thoughts or situation and we will always be intrigued to know to what extent they were aware of what was about to occur. With the passage of time, the need to render tangible the void of the disappearance in the family has led to a series of aesthetic interventions in the family albums which represent it. One of these interventions consists of a current photo that is kind of a duplicate of an old photo in which the disappeared detainee appears in the company of his relatives (figs. 27 and 28). In the current photo, the family is portrayed in the same place where the previous photo was taken and with the same people, now older, distributed in the same way. The first thing that usually draws the viewer's attention in this type of construction (before and after photos) is precisely the change in appearance of the characters, because we tend to experience anxiety over the passage of time. We are faced with the not-always-easy task of recognizing the characters despite the changes in their age and appearance. Therefore, perhaps the first thing we notice is the changes in fashion and the processes of ageing. But the photo that represents the current moment, and that is an imitation of the first, highlights the absence of the missing person, without whom the disposition of the personages in the photo is incomplete. The photo exhibits the domestic consequences of the disappearance: the artificial disruption of a family's life cycle. The separate photos would simply be frozen moments in the lives of certain people and would be subject to the process of semiotic degradation mentioned above.

Together, however, they highlight the void of the disappearance as the most notable consequence of the time lapse between one photo and another.



Fig. 23 (left). Photograph of Estela de Carlotto, president of the Association of Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo. <https://www.elonce.com/secciones/sociedad/378107-walimir-oscar-montoya-companero-de-laura-carlotto-y-padre-de-ignacio-hurban.htm>. Accessed October 19, 2018.



Fig. 24 (right). Estela de Carlotto, president of the Association of Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, publishes the last commemoration of her daughter Laura, after having found her grandson. <https://www.minutouno.com/notas/334182-estela-carlotto-publico-el-ultimo-recordatorio-su-hija-hallar-su-nieto>. Accessed October 19, 2018.



Fig. 25. Photograph of Elsa Sánchez de Oesterheld. She was a member of the Board of Directors until she died in June 2015. Her four daughters and her husband were disappeared. Two of the daughters were pregnant when they disappeared. She died without having the chance to embrace her grandchildren, who must have been born in November 1976 and December 1977–January 1978. *The Washington Post*, Archive of the Association of Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo.

These deliberate voids in the family photos recall the very famous case of altered photos from the Stalinist era in the Soviet Union. In those photos, the leader of the revolution, Leon Trotsky, who appeared in several photographs next to Lenin, was removed from the photos and replaced by a carefully reconstructed empty space. Trotsky's removal from the photos of the revolution was aimed at erasing Lenin's comrade from the history of the revolution, but above all it was the preamble to his physical elimination. In the case of these photographs, the process is the reverse. The elimination of the body occurs first and the photographs represent the consequences of that elimination in the natural environment of the disappeared person. One of the variations is that in which a natural landscape becomes the environment of the disappearance.

The following selection belongs to a series called *Ausencias*, carried out in 2006 by Gustavo Germano, brother of Eduardo Germano, arrested-disappeared in 1976. The series consists of 15 pairs of photos that reflect the before and after the dictatorship in families that resided in the province of Entre Ríos (figs. 26 to 28). The photographs show a landscape identical to a previous one that served as background to a photographed person or group of people. In the new photo, those bodies are not there. We only see the landscape. It is notable that in this case, that which could disperse the attention of the observer, the details of the environment, seen side by side in these photos, allude precisely to the absence itself. The photos have not been altered like those under Stalinism; they are not a montage, but they are an enactment. In these photos, History, which Roland Barthes (64) indicated was an obstacle that stands between the observer and the recovery of the referent, or between the image of memory and the photographic image (van Alphen, *Failed Images*), conspires here to evoke it.⁹¹ The landscape in the current photo, usually to the right of the old photo, would lack any historical significance if it were not linked to the photo on the left. Together they form a series. They historicize the absence. The location of the captions below each photo pair reinforces the absence. In these captions the dates of the photographs (before and after the dictatorship) and the names of the people photographed, in the form of lists located in two

⁹¹ "Photographic Image" and "Memory Image" are concepts studied by Kracauer and introduced by the French philosopher Henri Bergson. In *Failed Images*, van Alphen synthesizes both concepts in the following terms: "Whereas according to common-sense ideas, the two are more or less the same or in continuity with each other, in the sense that photographic images support memory images, according to Kracauer the two are actually opposed. The main stakes or meanings of these different kinds of images are at odds with each other. Whereas the memory image is highly selective and focuses only on what is significant, the photographic image is not at all selective. The memory image retains only what is significant, whereas the photographic image grasps everything that is present in the spatial continuum of a moment. It includes all spatial elements in front of the camera. As a result, a photograph reveals nothing of a subject: 'a person's history is buried as if under a layer of snow'" (230).

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columns (below each photo respectively), are exposed. The combination of the dates and the missing names in the lists refer directly to the vacuum and to the breaking of the family composition.

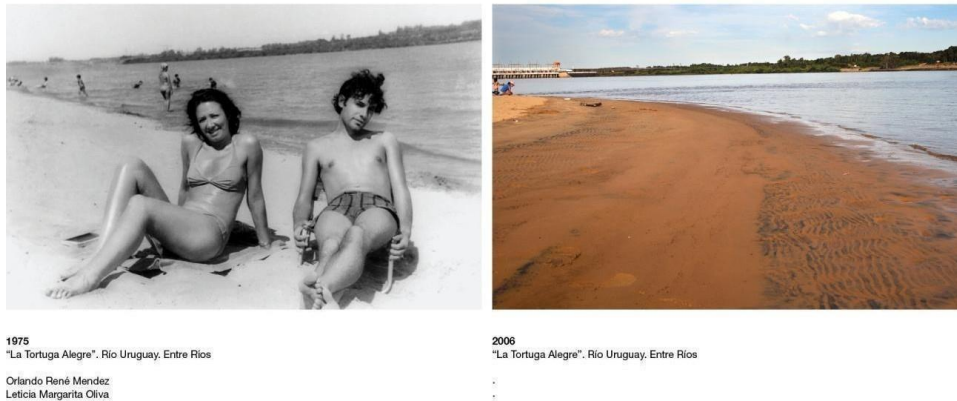


Fig. 26. Gustavo Germano. Images from the series *Ausencias* (*Absences*): detainees-disappeared and murdered of the province of Entre Ríos, 1976–1983. 2006.



Fig. 27. Gustavo Germano. Images from the series *Ausencias* (*Absences*): detainees-disappeared and murdered of the province of Entre Ríos, 1976–1983. 2006.



Fig. 28. Gustavo Germano. Images from the series *Ausencias* (*Absences*): detainees-disappeared and murdered of the province of Entre Ríos, 1976–1983. 2006.

Conclusions

Disappearance occurs when it becomes impossible to connect a proper name, a singularity, and a space where something must have happened. From disappearance, a narrative cannot be extracted, nor can a fable be developed that is classically subjected to space-time conventions that organize a plot. Faced with the absence of a photograph documenting disappearance, the Mothers responded with a flood of images that allude to it. Among the photographic images, the public archive and its rigid taxonomic criteria, and the family archive, governed by a capricious sentimental chronology, the Mothers and the children of the disappeared, their grandchildren, invented a third dimension. This means that the struggle of the Mothers was not only against the current reality of detentions, but also against the natural fate of certain images. The photos of the disappeared needed an alternative archive that visually spoke of the contingency of disappearance, that anchored the images to the contingency. It was like an alternative home that the memorial and political activism of the Mothers was constituting against the inevitable process of semiotic degradation of photographic images.

The work of un-disappearing (because this could be one of the names of the Mothers' task) is undoubtedly an archival work, but the work of a singular archive where what is

recorded does not die, does not settle, since what has disappeared can be replaced, metaphorized, or metonymized, but not archived. Let us remember the words of Rafael Videla: the state can account for the living or the dead, not for the disappeared. The disappeared is an unarchivable category. It is eloquent that when the first democratic government encouraged and made the effort to catalogue the disappeared (the CONADEP report), an important part of the Mothers' movement refused to cooperate and responded that "the disappeared are not archived". By this, they meant that composing a definitive register of the absentees was to declare them dead, to give them a place in the tomb of the archive, to stop the investigation of thousands of cases not yet recorded in the available lists. They saw the CONADEP report as a closure, a way of declaring the beginning of a time of forgetting and reconciliation. Thus, the military institution would be exempt from the requirement to provide the missing data and the state from continuing to seek justice. This paradox deserves deeper consideration.

The archives that the Mothers themselves had been weaving during the darkest years were much more than a reservoir of unanswered grievances; they became an alternative way of reading the past and national reality. Their selection criteria were opposed to those of state archives. What the Mothers' archives recorded were not only the positive facts that identity records need, but also the negatives, which the institutional archive disregards. The Mothers' investigation works on the dimension of the unsaid, on the power of the as-yet unspoken – on that which in these lives, at stake in the vicissitudes of struggle and persecution, goes beyond any biography.

More than a proper archive, the collecting activity of the Mothers would have to be defined as the possibility of an archive that is at the same time linked to the possibility of justice. It gives sensible form to what is normally obscured in the positivity of the record; it stores around the void of disappearance a series of collateral data that allude to it. It is an archive as a reading device. It is this that the Mothers' reserve seems to want to protect – because read from this material, the entire social and political life of the country appears to revolve around disappearance, and disappearance itself as its "epistemological principle". Seen in this way, all normalization and reconciliation of society with itself is revealed as a false closure, a concealment, and ultimately as a renunciation of justice.

This open archive, impossible to close, inhabits a temporality that is no longer proper to either the past or the future, but to a surplus time, or in the terms of Giorgio Agamben, "a time that remains" (*Time that Remains*). As the dimensions of the catastrophe became confirmed, what this alternative archive began to suggest was not so much or not only the

details of indescribable excesses, but the terrifying awareness that they were not excesses. What the Mothers' inheritance achieves in the post-dictatorial era is not to explain disappearance but to understand the entire society from there; to understand the fact of disappearance as its "black box" and exception as the rule.