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The unruly image: memory and transmission in Argentina.

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SUMMARY

This dissertation addresses various visual products that have characterized political and artistic practices related to the memory of the dictatorship in Argentina (1976-1983). These practices create a visual matrix that paradoxically evokes the forced *disappearance* of political prisoners. Building upon these images, this dissertation explores the circumstances and challenges of conveying the past in contemporary Argentina and the formation of a collective memory about the recent past.

The sequences of images that have received public attention or evoked both political and aesthetic resonances can, in my opinion, be organized into three groups or configurations: a first configuration of images is centered on the identity photograph of the disappeared person, originally intended for documentary purposes. The identity photographs are included in files that family members present to official, legal, or human rights organizations to document the disappearance of a family member and to reveal the face and identity of missing sons or daughters. These are the famous images used by the Mothers and Grandmothers in public places, during the first years of the dictatorship. These images underwent changes, both material and subjective. The old reproduction techniques applied to analog photography, the procedure of enlarging the photograph, the multitude of inscription surfaces used, and of course the passage of time, left their mark on the material.

On the other hand, from a purely identity document, the face of the disappeared person transforms into an emblem of the systematic disappearance of people orchestrated by the state. In this context, where certainty about the death of the missing person slowly grew, people began to carry the images as flags in demonstrations against the dictatorship. Many faces were also placed together on a surface of fabric, to represent the massive dimension of the extermination. The image of the disappeared person evolved from an identity document and personal relic to a collective symbol that questioned history and society as a whole.

The first images handled by the Mothers are the origin of several things: firstly, the documentary archive of the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, which I consider an *archive in rebellion* against state archives. Secondly, the birth of an *image space* characterized by particular memory practices. These practices are not only the expression of a need for mourning and commemoration but developed in close relation to social struggle, to an instance of political challenge directed against the state.

The second set of images that generates memories of the dictatorship coincides with the coming of age of the children of political disappearances. A significant number of these young people have founded activist and cultural organizations such as H.I.J.O.S., and in one way or

another, along with other young people who were not necessarily directly affected by the drama of the disappearances, they formed something resembling a second generation of memorial activists in their struggle for truth and justice. This second generation renewed and radicalized the heritage of the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo movement. Many of them carried out unique artistic creations based on images from the archive of the Mothers and Grandmothers or from their own family album. In the hands of *the Children*, the images seem to deviate even further from their referential and documentary function, giving more space to the problematic chronology that the photographic print entails and to the promiscuous and anachronistic character that, according to Didi-Huberman, is inherent to images.

In this way, the artists of H.I.J.O.S. condensed the relationship between image, memory, and politics. More than testimonies of an experience, their works form unique aesthetic constellations, where the process of montage, composition, recycling, and re-composition of inherited visual material seems to point to a profound reconfiguration of the usual forms of memory transmission. These are works that revolve around the "constituent void" that the disappearance of their parents or close family members brought, the bewilderment of identity, the affective dimension of all this, but also presupposed the search for a political meaning of the experience.

The third configuration of images that this dissertation explores is that which appears in the most recent manuals of the *Education and Memory Program* developed by the Argentine Ministry of Education during the Kirchner governments (2003-2015). In this educational, school context, inherent to the transition from social memory to cultural heritage and the stabilization of signs, the images appear in a pacified form, in a marked return to their illustrative, informative, and referential functionality. This shift coincides with the political decline of the Kirchners as an alternative to neoliberal modernization.

In these series of configurations of images arising from the political event of the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, I have seen a particular space or realm, both aesthetic and political. I have associated this space, which consists of creation and resistance, with Walter Benjamin's elusive concept of *Bildraum* as outlined in his famous essay on surrealism. I see in this image space not only the expression of a specific form of mourning and transmission of the past, but also an alternative way to decode history that has epistemological and political consequences.