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Guided Tour: Villa 31. Buenos Aires, Argentina

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Gabrielle Bendiner-Viani

Guided Tour: Villa 31

Buenos Aires, Argentina

Introduction

The following work is based on my three-month experience photographing in Villa 31, an informal or "squatter" settlement of Buenos Aires, Argentina, with Teresita/Peti del Valle and her daughter, Jessica. Located in Capital Federal, Villa 31 is one of the Peronist resettlement camps, or *villas de emergencia*, that has become permanent. It sits along the rail yards of Retiro, a main railway station, and is a five-minute walk from the monumentally elegant park, Plaza San Martin, and the downtown-shopping district.

My work struggles, as do my subjects, to explore the multiplicity of personal truths that exists within the context of urban communities. Simultaneously, this photography represents a trace of my own personal investigation of the world. I think of Ruth Behar's writing on the vulnerable anthropologist, and I consider my photo essays, as she writes about her written ones, to be "an act of personal witness . . . at once the inscription of a self and description of an object" (20). This neighborhood-based work began as an outcropping of a larger subjective photographic documentary project, called *guided tour*, which spans neighborhoods in Buenos Aires, London, and New York City. I ask my subjects to give tours of their neighborhoods, to explain their lives and their spaces to me, and to point me to the images they feel are important in the portrayal of their neighborhood. In these guided tours, I am looking for the personal asserting itself

within the public domain, the making personal of the public world.

Villa 31

In Argentina as a whole, 13.4 million people live below the poverty line. 56% of these people live without sewage systems, 28% near a garbage dump, 23% on a floodplain, 52% without natural gas, and 35% in barrios with dirt roads without drainage (Schurman 4). In the capital city of Buenos Aires, more than 50,000 people live in informal or "squatter" settlements. Seventeen of these exist within the borders of the central "Capital Federal," and these types of settlements are common in the larger surrounding ring called Gran Buenos Aires. In Argentina, these settlements are often called *villas*, relating either to the temporary resettlement camps called *villas de emergencia*, or to the term *villas miserias*. The latter is the name given specifically to squatter settlements in Buenos Aires, and literally means "misery settlements" or towns of poverty or oppression (Hardoy and Satterthwaite 13). The word "*villa*," which usually connotes a place of luxury in English, seems ironic here. Equally ironic is the sense that these districts—parts of a larger society yet excluded from it—can be called "towns" or "*villas*," given the implications of freedom and self-governance that these words usually denote.

The life of Villa 31 is informed by the history of all informal settlements in Argentina and by Argentina's stormy economic and political history. In 1976, rent control was abolished in Buenos Aires, driving thousands of people into informal settlements. Yet between 1977 and 1980, the Military Government of Argentina ran a virulent squatter settlement eradication program, for which displaced tenants received no compensation (Hardoy and Satterthwaite 42). During this time and afterwards, portions of informal settlements, especially those within Capital Federal, were often bulldozed to make way for the construction of highways. Likewise, the government rarely re-housed the tenants displaced from these construction projects. According to my discussions with Peti and other *villa* residents, approximately one quarter of Villa 31 was razed to make way for the unfinished highway that now borders one side of Villa 31. Despite these systematic attempts at *villa*-eradication, *villas* have continued to grow and multiply, spurred by the extensive economic opportunities of the capital, and spreading ever further around the city in Gran Buenos Aires.

I met Peti through a tutoring project that I had become involved with in Villa 31. The project is comprised of non-residents who act as tutors for the *villa's* children, and sometimes, its adults. The mothers of the *barrio* are deeply involved in the project, and indeed with most of the running and organization of the *villa*. There exists a real and long-standing relationship between the residents of the *villa* and the tutors, yet the fact of the tutors' privilege and ability to leave the *villa* must in-

form, to some degree, the relationship between tutor and students. While my work with Villa 31's children can be seen as a low-risk manner for me to access the situation in Villa 31, it led to the formation of a more complex relationship with Peti, a mother and one of the community's most important social/political organizers.

What follows are journal excerpts written during, and just after, my talks with Peti on the visits when we took the accompanying photographs. Even through these personal notes, my relationship with Peti cannot be fully explained, missing, as they are, *her* own notes, which are necessary to see a full relationship between two people. Instead, I use the photography that we made together to evoke and reflect on moments in its construction.

Ruth Behar points us toward Clifford Geertz, who notes that "we lack the language to articulate what takes place when we are in fact at work. There seems to be a genre missing" (Geertz 44; qtd. in Behar 9). In my attempts to analyze and understand both this relationship and the *villa* itself, I have no reference to go back to that is as clear as my photographic record and journal entries of the time; these are pieces from that time when I was "at work." In an effort to create some coherent sense of my experiences working in Villa 31, I need to look at these personal, and admittedly subjective, entities to recall my sense of learning this place. It is only through this combination of personal journal and photography that I can begin to trace the development of my perception of the *villa*, as well as the development of this relationship with Peti. For me as a photographer, it is important to understand those developing relationships as I feel they directly inform the photographs that I was able to make.

* * *

4 de Julio

For me, working at Villa 31 is great—now it's a surface understanding of the place, but a promising beginning. And, yes, while I teach, it certainly is rewarding to have three little girls adoring me and calling my name and asking to come with me and for me to walk them home. And I know they hardly know me, but beginning to make some connection with them is really important, to all of us, though differently. Angelica, coming with me everywhere, putting her head in my lap, all this, well, it's lovely, and I'm terribly happy to give them lots of affection, and attention; it's also so nice for me to have these little kids who are so sweet with me. And it was fun; they're so funny, they couldn't understand my name, I said it oddly for them I guess, but they were so sweet about it. Children are so *parecidos* every-

where—they had that same kind of jumpy energy that reminded me of children I've taught in New York.

But underneath this, while I feel so comfortable with the kids, I can't help but notice the obvious racism at the core of creation of the *villa* settlements. It's so clear that darker people from the provinces, from Bolivia, Paraguay are the people who live in the *villas* while Porteño Capital Federal is white. It makes me feel odd about my own skin color and where I fit into all of this. Here, I look Argentinian, or rather, *Porteño*, and it's funny, because I feel completely outside this social structure, but by looks, I fit right into it.

10 de Julio

I want so much for Peti to trust me. Until now, nothing about the informal settlements of Buenos Aires has made any emotional sense to me. Certainly, I understand, as much as one can, the political and economic factors that create informal settlements all over the world, the factors that create class systems and inequality and poverty. Yet, none of these, as much as I try to see them rationally, can satisfy me emotionally as a reason to my question "why?" This is a dangerous place to stand, I know, erring toward emotion, rather than analysis.

I have come to talk to Peti about this dubious "why," and about what it's like to live here, but this vague and interested line of questioning makes no sense to her. I imagine that she sees me as some oddly quiet foreign journalist, watching her, sitting at her table, and judging her. Her Spanish is fast and different than the other people from Buenos Aires with whom I've grown used to speaking. The TV is on behind her: soap operas in opulent houses, which are ultimately disconcerting to me—these stories seem so out of place here and yet the TV seems to be perpetually on. Peti seems befuddled by me because I refuse to be clear as to exactly what I want from her—I feel like she's used to having direct questions asked, and supplying answers. How can I explain that all I really want is a conversation?

11 de Julio

Yesterday afternoon, Peti and I finally began to smile at each other and I could suddenly see her begin to trust me. I'm not sure why, but perhaps she read my respect for her, perhaps my slowness with her ended up seeming like re-

spect rather than stupidity. Perhaps she realized that I was trying to say that there wasn't any one thing that I wanted from her, that I just liked her. Or wanted to. Wanted her just to chat with me and explain a little to me, such an expert in the face of my own naiveté. In so many ways, I wanted to develop an egalitarian relationship with her, a situation in which we could just talk to each other. I wanted us both to be able to step out of our cultural and economic skins, and so be able to cross some class line and talk to each other without hierarchy or judgement. Not too much to ask.

Peti and I spent the afternoon looking through her family photographs. Photography's familiarity allowed us to come together, to begin talking. As I had asked Peti to guide me through the neighborhood, so she guided me through the stories of her family, as traced through her two haphazard albums of family photographs. She lovingly spoke of her daughter Jessica, rapturously remembering her first communion, exclaiming over the series of five photographs of Jessica in her communion dress. The irony of this lay in the fact that in no picture could one really see Jessica's smiling, proud face. This was an image I could only assume had existed, through the beautiful pictures recalled from a mother's eyes. Every snapshot she had was either significantly out of focus, or was in focus, but Jessica's head had been somewhat cut off. For Peti, these images were rare, valuable. Photography was not something to throw away, and hence every shot was saved. The pictures themselves made no pretence of recording reality exactly as it had looked, but acted only as a vague reminder for her mother, and allowed Peti to describe it all in detail to me, using the photographs as only the barest jumping-off point.

Peti told me how Jessica had had her communion at the Catholic Church in the *barrio*, but then, they had walked through the Retiro railway station and crossed the border between the *villa* and the most highly developed, prosperous area of Buenos Aires. There, one finds Avenida Florida, where all the American tourists go shopping and exclaim on the prosperity, the delights, the first-world-ness of Buenos Aires. There too, is the Sheraton Hotel, where the international businessmen stay, entrenched in their dollarization of Argentina's economy and their consumption of red wine and beef; there too, is the Buenos Aires Marriott, with its perfect impression of American service. In the midst of this is the large and beautiful square, Plaza San Martin, replete with imposing commemorative statues and leafy trees and

grassy lawns, surrounded on three sides by buildings that appear to have been taken from a street in Paris. It was there, a ten minute walk from home, that Peti took Jessica's communion photographs, looking "just like a little bride," as Peti noted, enthused.

3 de Agosto

When I called Peti today, through the crackling of the line I heard her say *si, si, mamita, come by whenever you want*. I thought I'd just be coming back to take some photos of Peti and Jessica. But no. Jessica, Peti and Facundo took us on a walk through the 3 *barrios* that make up Villa 31. Peti talked a lot about the neighborhood—pointing out things—the houses that have newly-built second floors, which just keep building, building, narrowing the *caminos de tierra*, building rooms haphazardly to rent. Only the newly arrived Bolivian and Paraguayan refugees/immigrants rent and live in these little one-rooms. She showed me the port area, with the container ships, where people live in the empty containers. She showed me the old treasury building, just on the edge of Villa 31, where the road becomes paved again. She showed me all of the dirt roads, and eventually we ended up back at her house, where a bird sits in a cage in a fenced-in *patio*, and a neighbor's child was minding Peti's candy store. The last thing Peti tells me as we near the house, is that this land, here by the Retiro train tracks, doesn't belong to anyone.

* * *

Conclusion

At its core, my experience with Peti was a negotiation through picture-making, and it was there that we found some common ground, some common language. Peti saw the connection between my desire to photograph, to make art, to act as a journalist, and her own ability to show off photography. She saw that we could share our distinct ways of making images, to share the kinds of meanings with which both of us have imbued photography. This project exists as an attempt at a communication both verbal and visual, as the evidence of a desire not to report upon *villas* in general, but rather, this *villa*, this woman, for whom I have so much respect. It is an effort to show the very first steps of a beginning talk between New York and Buenos Aires. As I reflect on it now, this project acts as a reminder of what it's like to look and get lost, and ask for directions, to ask for someone else's map.

Notes and Acknowledgements

These photographs were made before Argentina's recent economic crash and political upheaval, and I can only note that the *villas* will surely grow now, and people like Peti will bear the brunt of Argentina's political corruption and economic irresponsibility.

This work is dedicated to both Teresita del Valle and my grandfather Elmer Bendiner, without whom it would not have been possible. A Watson Foundation Fellowship generously funded my work in Argentina.

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Noisy and crowded, the settlement was built on a hillside. The people who lived there were poor and the conditions were very bad. I saw many children who were very sick and the people who lived there were very poor. The work is dedicated to both people and the land. A few times I went to the settlement and I saw many children who were very sick and the people who lived there were very poor. I saw many children who were very sick and the people who lived there were very poor.



camino de tierra, Villa 31

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Peti, Jessica, and Facundo at the autopista



Ruben Niño



Jessica's confirmation picture, taken in Plaza San Martin



Shipping containers, Villa 31



Casa de la Moneda



Peti a casa

Benjamin Chaskal
Times Square Ink:
Marginal Citizenship and Cultural
Culture in the New Times



Peti and Jessica