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## Mnemonic Hauntings: Photography as Art of the Missing

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# Mnemonic Hauntings: Photography as Art of the Missing

Silvia R. Tandeciarz

Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us. — Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003)

The value, I think, of maintaining a distinction between narrative memory and traumatic memory is that it allows us to conceive of a realm of imagery that maps onto the latter. Rather than reducing itself to a form of representation, such imagery serves to register subjective processes that exceed our capacity to “represent” them. A substantive category of memory, but also of image-making, is instituted by this process—a category in which affective experience is not simply referenced, but activated or staged in some sense. Theories of expression are inadequate to the task of understanding this mode of image production insofar as they regard the artwork as the transcription or deposit of a prior mental state. The imagery of traumatic memory deals not simply with a past event, or with the objects of memory, but with the present experience of memory. It therefore calls for a theorization of the dynamic in which the work is both produced and received—a theory, in other words, of affect. — Jill Bennett, “The Aesthetics of Sense-Memory” (2003)

**W**HAT IS IT ABOUT PHOTOGRAPHY THAT HELPS US TO FIX THE PAST? FIX IT, THAT is, potentially in every sense: to freeze it, as in a fixed image, rendering it still; to put it back together, mend what has been broken; to con us, as in mislead, take advantage of, profit from those willing to believe in what has been captured within the frame. By exploring some of the uses of photography in post-dictatorship Argentina, I hope to shed some light on this question, taking as my point of departure Jill Bennett’s observations that the process of making and consuming images serves not only to reference affective experience, but also to activate or stage it. In attempting to theorize the links between trauma and the visual arts, Bennett calls for a theory of affect. Bennett (2003: 29) argues:

As the source of a poetics or an art, then, sense memory operates through the body to produce a kind of “seeing truth” rather than “thinking truth,”

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registering the pain of memory as it is directly experienced, and communicating a level of bodily affect.... It aims to constitute a language of subjective process (specifically of affective and emotional process) to complement history and to work in a dialectical relationship with common memory.

In what follows, I explore the difference between “seeing” and “thinking truth,” posited by Bennett through a close examination of Marcelo Brodsky’s work and its efforts to complement contemporaneous memory narratives in Argentina. If “common memory” in Argentina recognizes the brutality of dictatorship as part of its recent history, official rhetoric also has attempted to close that period by suggesting its containment within the past, as something that is finished and should be forgotten for the sake of stability and future prospects.<sup>1</sup> In this study, I wish to suggest that photography, in a variety of formats, has proved to be extraordinarily effective in resisting this discourse and in forcing an always present negotiation—both affective and aesthetic—of this past and its legacy in contemporary Argentina.

Before pursuing Brodsky’s work, however, it may be useful to take a brief detour to consider some of the ways in which photography in Argentina has represented the trauma of dictatorship since its inception in 1976.<sup>2</sup> As is widely known, the military regime that ruled the country between 1976 and 1983 committed countless human rights abuses in the name of national security. Human rights organizations estimate the total number of victims at 30,000; though many remain unaccounted for today, approximately 9,000 cases of illegal kidnapping, torture, and death were documented in *Nunca Más: Informe de la Comisión Sobre la Desaparición de Personas* (1984). The military junta’s policy of abducting citizens and making them disappear led in 1977 to the earliest and most widely recognizable use of photography to resist repression—that enacted by the Mothers of the Disappeared in their weekly marches circling Buenos Aires’ symbolically central Plaza de Mayo on Thursday afternoons. As Jean Franco (1992: 115) notes in her now classic study of gender and resistance, “the mothers turned the intimidating function of the city under the police state into an alternative public sphere, transforming the Plaza de Mayo into a theater in which the entire population, whether actually present or not, became an audience and a witness to loss.” In Franco’s reading, this spectacle of mourning represents a first instance in which a strategy of resistance—the public demonstration of solidarity and search for information—interrupts the civilizing order of the city to generate awareness and acknowledgment of the Mothers’ plight from even the most casual passers-by. More significantly, perhaps, the photographs the Mothers carry, in addition to their signature white scarves, render their situation intelligible:

The photographs carried by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo became proof of existence. Often taken on family outings, sometimes blurred and badly focused, they silently emphasized the fact that these people

were not monsters but young men and women whose absence had to be accounted for. The military had tried to eliminate them from memory, but their images were turned into a commemoration; the public display was an eloquent reminder of an ethics based on collective memory and continuity (Franco, 1992: 115).

Coverage of their movement most often has stressed their refusal to remain indoors and privately mourn their loss under a state of siege, but I am equally struck by the surprising consistency with which the use of photos, coupled with their silent form of resistance, has been replicated across the globe. Well documented and analyzed by journalists, scholars, and human rights activists, the “model of trauma-driven performance protest” (Taylor, 2003: 170) initiated by the Madres has proved to be extremely exportable. Indeed, as Ariel Dorfman (2003: B7, emphasis added) notes,

We have grown strangely used to them over the last 25 years, those women *with a small photo pinned to their dark dresses*, the extended tribe of those whose loved ones, from Chile to Kurdistan, from Argentina to Ethiopia, from Guatemala to Guinea, have been abducted in the night and never heard of again.... They have become a habitual presence, these faraway women on the television screen asking at least for a body to bury, asking that they be allowed to start mourning their dead.

What is it about the irruption of women in the public sphere and, specifically, their use of photography to turn “their bodies into billboards...[and] conduits of memory” (Taylor, 2003: 170) that makes this method of resistance so poignant, so meaningful, and so transnational, capturing the imaginations of so many?

Ludmila da Silva Catela’s (2001) study of mourning rituals engaged in by relatives of the disappeared in Argentina suggests that photographs play a key role in helping mourners to grieve. She argues that because, by definition, the repressive act of disappearance leaves no body to bury, no definite moment of death, and no tomb, mourners have had to open new spaces and rituals to confront their loss:

The use of photographs to remember an absence re-creates, symbolizes, recuperates a presence that establishes links between life and death, the explicable and inexplicable. Photographs “vivify.” Like a metonymy, they contain part of the referent to totalize a system of meanings. In cemeteries the photo indicates to whom the gravestone corresponds, and iconographically locates the separation between the living and the dead.... These cultural attitudes before death and its images are like those re-created in relation to the missing. The photos of the missing constitute one of the most frequently used forms to remember them. They oppose and complement the category of disappeared in the sense that they return

a notion of personhood, that which in our societies condenses the most essential features: a name and a face (2001: 129).<sup>3</sup>

By attaching a face and a name to the disappeared, these photos imbue them with a corporeality they have been denied; opposing their categorical erasure by the authorities, they reinsert the missing in the spaces from which they have been torn, serving as placeholders until their hoped-for return, or alternatively, as concrete sites where loved ones focus their grief. Da Silva Catela (2001: 131) goes on to describe three sites in which photographs become a principal medium of mourning—the home, the plaza, and the Madres’ bodies—arguing that in these cases, the photograph of the missing person “re-creates a bond broken by disappearance.” As such, on a very personal level, the photos function both metonymically and literally as tombs, recalling the observation that “ever since cameras were invented in 1839, photography has kept company with death” (Sontag, 2003: 24). By situating the dead and creating a material residue that links them to the living, photography becomes an especially potent representational medium for processing grief.

Roland Barthes’ (1981: 76–77) exploration of the particularity of photography as a representational medium further helps to explain the political efficacy of these images and at least one of the reasons that this form of expression has remained so evocative through the years:

Photography’s referent is not the same as the referent of other systems of representation. I call “photographic referent” not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph. Painting can feign reality without having seen it. Discourse combines signs which have referents, of course, but these referents can be and are most often “chimeras.” Contrary to these imitations, in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past. And since this constraint exists only for Photography, we must consider it, by reduction, as the very essence, the *noeme* of Photography. What I intentionalize in a photograph (we are not yet speaking of film) is neither Art nor Communication, it is Reference, which is the founding order of Photography.

Although Barthes’ observation is more or less compelling with regular photography<sup>4</sup>—notwithstanding the falsifications newer technologies make easily available—it is even more so with regard to the kinds of photos displayed by the relatives of the disappeared, most often copies of the ID photo or *foto-carnet* issued by the state as proof of citizenship. It is this photo that normally circulated publicly as a form of irrefutable proof that the individual represented once existed (*the thing has been there*), and that he or she once was recognized by the same state that later, in the name of national security, would attempt his or her erasure. As Barthes (1981:

79) observes: “Hence it would be better to say that Photography’s inimitable feature (its *noeme* [“that-has-been”]) is that someone has seen the referent (even if it is a matter of objects) in *flesh and blood*, or again *in person*. Photography...began, historically, as an art of the Person: of identity, of civil status, of what we might call, in all senses of the term, the body’s *formality*.” The Mothers appealed to this formality by confronting the state with the names and faces of those citizens it disappeared, exposing by association the perversion of all systems of representation bound up in Argentine national identity.

By appealing to this formality, moreover, the Mothers posed the question of complicity between the “eye of power” (James Agee, quoted in Mitchell, 1994: 288) of the disciplinary state, and the eye of the witness gazing upon the image captured by that state’s mechanisms of surveillance. Following the transition to democracy, the *foto-carnet*’s usefulness along these lines, as part of a political and ethical strategy, grew even stronger. Situating its viewer in the place of the taker, it forced the casual witnesses to the crime of disappearance to recognize the power of seeing (as photographer/state functionary/beholder) and to urge them to *look back* (witness). That is, the photos displayed at memorial sites and public demonstrations forced their beholders to assume a position *vis-à-vis* the crimes they traced: to remain silent, passive spectators implied a certain cooptation by the repressive apparatus; to recoil from that form of capture implied staging resistance to the forces that generated it. Thus, long after the formal end of dictatorship, beholders continued to be drawn “into a vortex of collaboration and resistance” (Mitchell, 1994: 300), constantly urged to reconsider and renegotiate their positions with respect to the recent past and its authoritarian imprint.

The importance of the photos’ framing to this dynamic cannot be understated. When reproduced, enlarged, and displayed in public, the photos of the missing not only become legible and aestheticized (Levi Strauss, 2003: 9), they also become effective vehicles for recollection and learning. In context, every photo bears the potential of the *punctum* (Barthes, 1981); one look, one face, one name can “prick” the casual spectator, trigger a memory, open the black hole of history. Re-circulated in strategic ways, reinserted in a new system of meaning, a new social contract, they are transformed. Simultaneously singular and part of a collective, the individuality of each image becomes significant through the sheer numbers accompanying it; displayed together over a period of time, “these images accumulate a charge, so that the monuments begin to operate like batteries: image batteries” (Levi Strauss, 2003: 94). Their strength therefore could be said to reside not in one particular image or the individual loss it traces, but rather in its collective siting/sighting: that is, in the sheer number of disappeared each face evokes—the size of the wound opened by the brutal amputation of the body politic—and in the uncanny locations where they appear. As Levi Strauss (*Ibid.*: 103) reminds us, “it is not possible to make an image of genocide. But it is possible to make images of individuals, and to put words and images and sounds together to say something in

relation to genocide. Without turning a sea of grief into a proscenium, one can still effect the *mise-en-scène*." Photos of the missing publicly displayed and circulated during marches today continue to "prick" their beholders, who like tourists in their own country recognize the existence of a hidden story, of lives hidden from view, of a generation lost. Because "once there is a *punctum*, a blind field is created" (Barthes, 1981: 57), and these images serve as signposts, guiding those hailed to see, in solidarity, what was previously buried within that blind field and to recognize themselves within it:

On March 24, 1999, during the commemoration people divide themselves under the traditional signs identifying each organization, but there are practically no other communicative supports except for the photos. Their faces seem to observe those assisting the ritual. The circle that is covered in the course of one hour is contained by hundreds of images. People stop before the photos, look at them, and then continue marching silently.... The photos do not go unnoticed. They demand respect and reverence. It is not a wall of laments, nor a sanctuary towards which the procession is directed; but those photos provoke a kind of secular cult that reinforces the union between those doing the rounds through a collective action of vigilance over the disappeared, transmitting memory, maintaining them present (da Silva Catela, 2001: 137).

As visitors, marchers, and mourners pass before them, the eyes of the disappeared watch, pay vigil, look back, instruct. They map a blind field, saturate with their presence the cityscape, and bleed through the concrete walls erected by the authoritarian state to keep them at bay.<sup>5</sup> Refusing to disappear, the photos of the missing become, in this new landscape, its haunting; effecting the *mise-en-scène*, they set the stage for a different future.

It is impossible to think about photography in the context of Argentina's last dictatorship outside the parameters established by these documentary captures, first appropriated by the Madres in the Thursday marches they began so long ago. By providing a framework through which to read other efforts to mend the body politic—to suture the absence of a militant generation with their images—the Mothers' use of photos can help us begin to theorize the relationship between ideology and iconology (Mitchell, 1994). Initiatives spawned by their example include their presence at memorials like the Parque de la Memoria in Buenos Aires, where banners bearing images of the disappeared are unfurled at set times or permanently displayed; their use in marches and *escraches* organized by H.I.J.O.S., the children of the disappeared; and the "*cuadros de recordación*" (da Silva Catela, 2001: 140), published daily by relatives of the disappeared to commemorate their absence, creating what Fernando Reati (2004) has called "*el archivo del duelo*."<sup>6</sup> Falling within this frame are even the images displayed as part of the installation, "*Imágenes robadas. Fotos recuperadas. Fotografías de la DIPPBA, 1936–1998*," at



the Art and Memory Museum (La Plata). Consisting of records found in the archive of police intelligence at the Comisión Provincial por la Memoria, the photos have been recovered and transformed into a living memory, a record of militancy, social organizing, and collective projects. No longer part of the machinery of terror, they emerge to bear witness and to pay homage to the vitality and activism of those lost. Like the ID photo that, removed from its ordinary context, calls attention to a state disciplinary project gone awry, images created as part of the apparatus of surveillance become icons signaling its perversity. Rendered in large format and displayed in public for all to see, they document the engagement of individuals and organizations in the struggle for social justice. Even accidental encounters with this scene can encourage its viewers to reflect on the missing, and through them, on the consequences of repression: how the act of capturing the individual through the lens becomes part of a mechanism to establish the parameters of citizenship in a community under siege. More important, the photos serve as a living monument, reinstating the missing into the collectivity and declaring them an integral part of the nation-state. As Susan Sontag (2003: 87) reminds us,

Photographs of the suffering and martyrdom of a people are more than reminders of death, of failure, of victimization. They invoke the miracle of survival. To aim at the perpetuation of memories means, inevitably, that one has undertaken the task of continually renewing, of creating, memories—aided, above all, by the impress of iconic photographs. People want to be able to visit—and refresh—their memories.

By visiting the photos of the disappeared, spectators acknowledge their common history, refresh their own memories, recall collective projects cut short by the coup, and move a step closer to consolidating a more democratic future. These are some of the meanings the Comisión Provincial por la Memoria, the Madres, and the relatives of the disappeared would grant them.<sup>7</sup>



The relation of photography and language is a principal site of struggle for value and power in contemporary representations of reality; it is the place where images and words find and lose their conscience, their aesthetic and ethical identity.—W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (1994)

[Photographs] cannot be more than an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalizations for mass suffering offered by established powers. Who caused what the picture shows? Who is responsible? Is it excusable? Was it inevitable? Is there some state of affairs which we have accepted up to now that ought to be challenged? All this with the understanding that moral indignation, like compassion,

cannot dictate a course of action.—Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003)

If the use of photographs to invoke the Argentine missing remits always to the Mothers' first strategic inscription—a necessary point of reference for creative endeavors that follow in the realm of vision—Marcelo Brodsky's photographic essays and installations can help us to theorize further the role of the visual arts in shaping individual and collective identities in post-dictatorship societies. In the remainder of this article, I analyze Brodsky's groundbreaking photo-essay, *Buena memoria* [Good Memory], built around the reproduction and enlargement of his eighth-grade class photo taken when he was a student at the Colegio Nacional de Buenos Aires. Like the ID photos re-circulated by the Mothers, in this installation Brodsky manipulates a documentary capture of an institutional nature to come to terms with his own personal loss, thereby laying the groundwork for others to engage in similar re/visions of their pasts. In analyzing Brodsky's mnemonic and artistic practice, I am interested in asking what subjective processes it encodes that might exceed the power of narrative forms of representation. In other words, how does *Buena memoria* stage and activate affective experience, and what "seeing truths" does it put forth?

As the writing in the lower right-hand corner of the photograph states, the *Buena memoria* installation was created in 1996 and displayed at the Colegio Nacional de Buenos Aires as part of the school's first commemorative act to honor its disappeared. It consisted of Brodsky's 1967 class photo, which was enlarged six times its original size and marked up by him to indicate the life stories of those pictured, as well as of a photo collage of portraits collected after his return from exile, in which he captured his (willing and able) classmates holding their photo or posing before it in their current environments. These interventions were later expanded in the book presentation by the same name, which includes a number of essays serving to frame Brodsky's work, his reflections on each of his classmates ("*Los compañeros*"), and three additional photo-texts: "Memory Bridge," on the act at the Nacional commemorating its missing; "Martín, my friend," about his best friend, the first of his class to disappear; and "Nando, my brother," about his brother who was killed in the Navy Mechanics School (ESMA). For the sake of clarity, in the remarks that follow I rely primarily on the published version of the altered class photo and its montage at the Colegio Nacional—its first site of dissemination and the one permanently recorded within the frame—to comment on the political, ethical, and aesthetic strategies it inscribes.<sup>8</sup>

The title of the piece, "*Buena memoria*," underscores through the simple act of naming the duality that lies at the core of Brodsky's project. Open to multiple interpretations, at a minimum it suggests a "good" memory in two senses: as in a positive, happy event from the past that is remembered in the present, and as in an accurate one, a memory that is not distorted in the present, but remains faithful to

historical events. Brodsky's title thus plays with the image to which it refers—the intervened class photo—by suggesting it represents a positive memory of a time before violence, while simultaneously highlighting the impossibility of ever accessing it “purely.” What makes this a good memory could be the nostalgia it evokes; but it is more likely Brodsky's determined refusal to engage in a purely nostalgic rendering, as evidenced by the writing that covers the image, defacing it. That is, marred by what came after, disfigured by the repression that followed the instance of capture, the more recent past now intervenes every attempt at recollection, every attempt to access a founding, ordinary moment. The moment of snapping that class photo is thus shown to be irretrievable; forever filtered by the lens of trauma, it invites us to look back while marking an impossible return.



Figure 1. Photograph by Marcelo Brodsky, reprinted with his permission.

As the Mothers did with the ID photos, Brodsky takes an ordinary image associated with one of the disciplinary arms of the state (public school) and transforms it. By violating with language its routine comprehensibility, he calls attention to what was not routine for this generation: if class photos refer us back to the principal pedagogical mission of public schools—the task of educating the citizens of a nation—Brodsky's intervention reminds us of the violence done to those denied the most basic human rights and the recognition of citizenship in a functioning democracy. Meant to record a stage in the process of growing up, a community of learning constituted through shared experiences in the classroom, his class photo signals the interruption of this endeavor and the potential inscribed in the image that was not fulfilled. Thus, he makes the “everyday” speak by underscoring what should be the birthright of every citizen, but was brutally deformed under dictator-

ship—access to education, protection by the state, and the hope of a productive future. In this reading of the photo, the words violate the space of representation, damaging its integrity and thereby speaking the damage done to those pictured. The words, circles, scribbles, and lines inserted in the frame trace the wounds in the body politic that cannot heal, or have yet to heal, or will never heal as a result of the process—*el Proceso*—inflicted upon them. Inserted decades later, they literally “correct” the past, calling attention to the pictured innocence of youth, while making transparent the repressive mechanisms the military junta used to “correct” a whole generation’s idealistic struggle for change. In other words, they edit the life stories of the collective, just as the junta “edited” the body politic by eradicating “subversive elements.” By overwriting the potential inscribed in a class educated for liberation (public school/Colegio Nacional) with the violent re-education imposed by the regime (clandestine detention center/ESMA), they school the viewer, signaling the price paid by this generation as a result of the junta’s efforts to create docile and disciplined social subjects.

In terms of transmitting the material and affective legacy of repression, it is not so much the information contained in Brodsky’s superimposed words and scribbles as the feelings they connote. For some of those pictured, the word “*vive*” [she or he lives] is simply written over their torsos, perhaps to suggest that this is in itself remarkable, or to emphasize that this is, in itself, enough. The faces of others are circled and bear annotations indicating their current professions and/or places of residence. Three students are circled and then crossed out; a single, diagonal slash indicates their deaths, with accompanying annotations specifying how they died. Two of the 32 pictured died as a result of state repression, explicitly noted within the frame by the commentaries: “*A Claudio lo mataron en un enfrentamiento*” [Claudio was killed in armed struggle] and “*Martín fue el primero que se llevaron. No llegó a conocer a su hijo, Pablo, que hoy tiene 20 años. Era mi amigo, el mejor*” [Martín was the first to be taken. He never got to meet his son, Pablo, who today is 20 years old. He was my friend, the best]. Claudio died in armed struggle, but Martín is named as the first of the class’ disappeared, with the additional information of the kinship and emotional ties that were severed as a result of the state’s criminal actions.<sup>9</sup> Finally, many others of those pictured left Argentina—either through self-imposed or political exile—or suffered the loss of loved ones, as the simple legend accompanying Brodsky’s image indicates: “*Yo soy fotógrafo y extraño a Martín*” [I am a photographer and I miss Martin].

Though most of the annotations indicate outcomes, Brodsky’s own caption suggests that those carrying particular weight refer to specific feelings—loss, frustration, pain, denial, and bewilderment: “*Erik se hartó. Vive en Madrid*” [Erik got fed up. He lives in Madrid]; “*Patricia se sobrepuso, pero también le dolió*” [Patricia got over it, but it also hurt her]; “*Silvia no quiere saber nada de todos nosotros. ¿Por qué era?*” [Silvia wants to know nothing about us. I wonder why?] By giving these feelings a name and a face, Brodsky attempts to map the emotional toll of

repression. At the same time, however, he underscores the impossibility of total understanding, highlighting through his rhetorical “¿por qué era?” that which lies beyond the reach of any rational cartography. The “doodles” resembling ancient hieroglyphics that were drawn onto María Teresa’s and Eugenia’s uniforms are a case in point; they signal most eloquently the limits of what can be known or expressed. Signs outside any recognizable alphabet, they resemble graffiti, but fail to transmit a coherent, intelligible message. When asked about these marks, Brodsky stated, “*Las marcas sobre Eugenia y María Teresa representan mi dificultad de comunicarme con ellas, ya que eran ambas personas de poco hablar, y en el caso de MT, lo poco que decía, era totalmente inventado*” [The markings on Eugenia and María Teresa represent my difficulty in communicating with them, since they both said little, and in the case of MT, the little she said was completely invented].<sup>10</sup> Their gender and ethnic attributes add an interesting layer to Brodsky’s gloss. Is the difficulty they pose due to their radical alterity? Is this a form of subconscious “othering” that should trouble us? Is Brodsky consciously trying to underline their difference? We nevertheless can agree that the marks on their uniforms capture the shortcomings of communication and the impossibility of total understanding.<sup>11</sup> For the viewer who has no access to his comments, the marks appear as a problem or a secret code in need of translation. They suggest that, as Doris Sommer (1991) has pointed out regarding all testimonial texts, there are secrets yet to be unraveled, options that remain to be explored, and things we will potentially never know. No representational system can completely contain this collective experience or its affective fallout; the best we can do is to acknowledge what lies beyond rational explanation and the subjective processes that cannot yet be spoken.

What strikes me as most remarkable about this “imagetext” (Mitchell, 1994),<sup>12</sup> then, is the way in which Brodsky’s writing recognizes and strives to re-create affective bonds severed by the repressive apparatus, literally stitching together the sentimental tapestry that once gave meaning to their lives. Though Brodsky’s attempt remains flawed and incomplete, it nevertheless signals his desire literally to suture the dictatorship’s wounds through the combination of words and images. By marking the photo with the fates of those pictured, Brodsky makes their wounds legible — articulating them so as to “fix” them into a collective history — and weaves a counter-narrative to that disseminated by the junta and its supporters, filling in fragments left out of dominant versions of official histories. By rendering intelligible some of the damage done, he begins to reconstruct a partial, collective history of affect modeled on his own experience of loss.

A key element in this process of reconstruction is the site Brodsky selects for *Buena memoria*’s debut.<sup>13</sup> The Colegio Nacional de Buenos Aires clearly represents an institution of power. Founded in 1772, it remains Argentina’s first secondary school, where many of its founding fathers (Mariano Moreno, Manuel Belgrano, and Bernardino Rivadavia) were educated; access to it has always been strictly controlled through the most exacting of entrance examinations. Yet Brodsky plays

down its exclusive pedigree, inflecting his choice with a populist flavor. Rather than focus on the students' relatively privileged backgrounds, or the Colegio's historical role in the training of Argentina's future leaders, he uses its symbolically central site to suggest its representative potential. If, as his marked-up photo suggests, the Nacional was one battleground where the future of Argentina was decided, how many other schools throughout the land suffered the same fate, and how many other students might bear witness to the extraordinarily high costs of state terrorism? Beyond its representative capacity, moreover, the site's strength resides in its ability to bring into relief some of the tensions embedded in the work of recollection. For example, it introduces the question of institutional complicity: What roles did the school's authorities, parents, alumni, and fellow students play in the history captured within the frame? By so doing, it suggests the treachery of power and the banality of evil. Encoding strategic affiliations that safeguarded privilege, it begs the question of what escapes the frame, remaining hidden behind the students' pose. If the Nacional is exemplary, as it insists, what example did it set during the stormy years of dictatorship? Who were the victimizers, the victims, and the bystanders in this drama? As it evokes these concerns, the site interacts with the exhibit, reminding its viewers that this history has a local, as well as national and international, dimension. Brodsky's deliberate choice to return *Buena memoria* to its point of departure thus transforms his act of memory into one of active recollection (Richard, 2004), highlighting his conviction that only by returning to the scene of the crime might these issues begin to be unpacked.<sup>14</sup>

Insisting upon the need for community-based initiatives that provoke reflection in the communities from which they arise, and for a socially meaningful aesthetic that resonates beyond art gallery and museum settings, the lines of inquiry generated by the exhibit reinforce the anti-authoritarianism shaping Brodsky's mnemonic art. Consequent with the Mothers' call to socialize motherhood, Brodsky socializes memory through representation, inscribing within it a call to rebuild community, strengthen solidarity networks, and de-hierarchize culture. Presented as one photo exhibit among many, *Buena memoria* refuses to assume a position of privilege in its commemorative function.<sup>15</sup> Overlaid with a collective history of violence, it suggests that the art of memory is within everyone's reach, a simple matter of drawing from one's own personal archive of images to tell a common story. If class photos "accrete believability over time...triggering certain emotions or states and warding off others" (Levi Strauss, 2003: 74), they can function as powerful talismans in the formation of historical subjects and collectives. Rather than focus on heroes or martyrs, the exhibit directs its viewers to our own class photos, reminding us that, as survivors and witnesses to the genocide of a generation, we all bear the scars of a future truncated by state-sponsored violence. It also insists that everyone pictured—regardless of class, gender, ethnicity, or political orientation—is worthy of recollection. Moreover, as a testament to survival, the photo's presence at the school affirms that despite the dictatorship's will to segregate and privatize, despite

its disciplinary mechanisms, brutality, and legacy of loss, and despite the wounded, the permanently disabled, and the missing, this is a class that has endured and will continue to shape its own future. The networks of solidarity so badly damaged by repression stand a chance of being regenerated through the kind of intervention Brodsky's work represents. It remains up to those pictured, as members of a class and a generation, as well as to us, their witnesses, to visit with the past, to counter the authoritarian gestures that deformed our collective life choices, and to harness the potential captured in this image of youth.

As the inclusion of "Memory Bridge" in the photo essay suggests, the act of transmission, by staging and activating affective experience, completes the creative cycle that began with the marking-up of the class photo:

The pictures remained on exhibit in the school for a few days. The light of the sun at its zenith penetrated the enormous windows of the hall, shone on the faces of the students who stopped to look, and reflected them on the glass that protected the altered photograph. The portraits of those reflections constitute a fundamental part of this project, as they represent the instants of the transmission of experience from one generation to the next (Brodsky, 2000).

As Brodsky clarifies, the testimonies of students who viewed the exhibit highlight its dissemination and now function as an integral part of the work. The photos of their faces reflected on the exhibit's glass, together with some of their transcribed reactions, convey what Bennett (2003: 36) calls "a process of 'seeing feeling,' where feeling is both imagined and regenerated through an encounter with the artwork." If "the art of sense memory does not analyse the process or the symptom; [if] it cannot theorise the links between traumatic memory and ordinary trauma," it *can* register "the affective experience of memory" (*Ibid.*). As the comments of young beholders included in Brodsky's published text make clear, "*esa experiencia fue sentir la historia, sentirse parte y continuación de ella: herederos de vivencias*" [that experience was to feel history, feel a part and continuation of it: heirs of lived experiences] (Claudia, cited in Brodsky, 2000: 57). "The pictures in the exhibit are moving. They express much more than a newspaper story or a commentary. *Memory Bridge* managed to communicate feelings, circumstances, emotions, on a level that would have been hard to achieve without the images, the testimonies of all these generations" (Andrés, [www.zonezero.com](http://www.zonezero.com)). Referring to the life stories of a generation that was literally dismembered, the artwork calls up in its viewers comparable moments in their own life stories. As "heirs," it invites its beholders to feel the loss captured in the act of writing over an old image, in which so many *compañeros* are missing, to recognize the life projects that remain unfinished, and to see their own imbrication in that history. And it directs us to our own class photos, to our own histories and memories, also inevitably marked by the abuses of state terrorism:

*Esas fotos permitieron que me sintiera realmente identificado con los desaparecidos, me vi a mí mismo con mis compañeros y pensé que podría haber estado en ese lugar. Pero, además, se logró algo que jamás había visto; durante el día del acto adultos y chicos compartían y se transmitían sentimientos y conocimientos. Esas fotos lograron muchas otras cosas, durante unos días en el colegio el tema de charla fueron los desaparecidos. Esas simples fotos lograron que por una vez haya memoria (pero de la buena). (Juan, cited in Brodsky, 2000: 58.) [Those photos enabled me to feel really identified with the disappeared; I saw myself with my classmates and thought I could have been there. But also, something I had never seen was achieved; throughout the day of the commemoration, adults and children shared and conveyed to one another feelings and knowledge. Those photos managed many other things, for a few days at the school the sole subject of conversation was the disappeared. Those photos managed that, for once, there was memory (but of the good kind).]*



Figure 2. Photograph by Marcelo Brodsky, reprinted with his permission.

Accompanying the images of students beholding Brodsky's installation, testimonies like this one bear witness to the process of transmission of facts and emotions. Drawing on history lessons devoted to the recent past inside the classroom, the exhibit adds a personal, embodied dimension to the institutional framing of collective memory.<sup>16</sup> Moving beyond the limits of a textbook case, it facilitates intergenerational dialogue and promotes a kind of understanding that can help to catalyze new projects. In conjunction with the other photo collages, Brodsky's installation "[enacts this] process of 'seeing feeling,'" enabling these young students



coming face to face with their own school's living history to empathize with what the imagetext shows and to feel something in response.

As Juan's testimony reveals, in its failure or refusal to name those *many other things* the photos accomplished, the installation also makes clear that there are limits to what language can narrate. It reminds us that in refusing such restraints, the photo exhibit promotes a kind of memory that cannot be activated or *expressed in a newspaper story* (Andrés); it activates memory "*pero de la buena*," a good memory. Good because by encouraging an emotional response in its viewers, it triggers an active process of engagement and appropriation. Good because it demands that its viewers wrestle with its meanings, while enabling their own myriad interpretations. Good to the extent that it is simultaneously personal and representative, communicative and silent, of the past and of the present. Good because it is not arbitrary, but rather framed in such a way that it incites beholders to "*armar relatos*" [construct stories] (Nicolás Casullo, quoted in Bleichmar, 2002: 113) about who these kids were, who they wanted to be, and about the life projects the dictatorship cut short.<sup>17</sup> Good because it pays tribute to the living as well as the dead, to the vitality of a generation that, in spite of everything, lives on. If "photographs are social artifacts in need of interpretation" (Hunter, 1987: 195), Brodsky's exhibit brings this process into focus. Framing realities that no longer exist, his photographs do not tell, they show, and in showing they enable their beholders to arrive at their own conclusions, to formulate their own truths, within a system of meanings crystallized by the legacies of activism and repression. Because memory "*no es entonces simplemente el efecto de una huella, sino un modo de articular esas huellas, de darles sentido*" [is not then simply the effect of a trace, but rather a way of articulating those traces, of making them meaningful] (Bleichmar, 2002: 112). If Brodsky's exhibit promotes a good kind of memory, it does so by serving as an occasion for recollection—fragmented, messy, contradictory, painful, exhilarating, and complex—that mourning that which was lost also helps its beholders to reconnect with the idealism that drove his generation's historical project for change. Herein lies its tremendous success.

## NOTES

In the course of writing this article, I benefited from generous feedback that helped me to deepen and expand my analysis. Among my interlocutors, Sandra Raggio at the Comisión Provincial por la Memoria and Magali Compañ at the College of William and Mary deserve special mention. I am also grateful for the unwavering encouragement of my colleagues in Hispanic Studies and for the College's financial support during the writing of this article.

1. According to Gabriela Cerruti (2001), 1995 marks the breaking point in Argentine public discourse privileging forgetting, a date that coincides with retired Navy Captain Adolfo Scilingo's public confessions regarding his participation in the Death Flights. Brodsky's work thus forms part of the "memory boom" that followed.

2. Common strategies of remembrance involving the use of photography include: their reproduction and display during marches by mothers and relatives of the disappeared, as well as in larger concentrations by these and other political organizations; their reproduction in newspapers as forms of commemoration or requests for information (see da Silva Catela, 2001; Reati, 2004); their exhibition in private spaces; and their collective and representative exhibition at memorial sites (Parque de la Memoria, ESMA, El Atlético, etc.) in the form of banners. In what follows, I emphasize their uses in public spaces and acts of commemoration.

3. All translations of this text from Spanish to English are my own.

4. By regular photography, I refer to all those extra-official practices most commonly consumed: photography as personal record, as social documentary, or as aesthetic pursuit.

5. As Jennifer Schirmer (1994: 186) reminds us, “although state power is delineated by laws, codes, and institutions, it is also articulated spatially by way of its stately buildings; its resplendent plazas; its orderly, grid-like streets; and, most saliently, the strict uniformity of its military garrisons and bases. These ordered spaces and monumental buildings exist, to some extent, so that we may know where the state begins and where it ends.”

6. According to the *Nuevo Diccionario de Lunfardo*, the word *escrache* is a pejorative term referring to the photograph of a disagreeable and ugly person, principally their face (cited by da Silva Catela, 2001: 262). In practice, it refers to the act of “outing” those responsible for the machinery of terror, a strategy developed by the children of the disappeared. Organized as H.I.J.O.S. (Hijas e Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio), it involves tracking down military officers, torturers, and their accomplices and holding large demonstrations in front of their places of residence so as to expose their crimes in a public act of shaming. H.I.J.O.S. has proclaimed that in the absence of justice, there will be *escraches*. In her provocative analysis of “H.I.J.O.S. and the DNA of performance,” Diana Taylor (2003: 161–189) explores additional reworkings of the Madres’ representational strategies, ranging from the use of photography as part of *escraches* to photographic installations like *Memoria gráfica de Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* at the Centro Cultural Recoleta (April 2001) and Julio Pantoja’s *Los Hijos, Tucumán veinte años después* (Tucumán, 1999).

7. The importance of recovering this legacy through photographic images cannot be understated. As Federico Lorenz (2004/2005: 19) notes, the consequences of bombarding the public exclusively with images of victims (instead of their activism) can contribute to a state disciplinary project that transforms those represented into exemplary cases, instructing their viewers in the kinds of punishments encountered by those who dared to challenge the social order.

8. Though the exhibit has appeared in book form at least twice, the most complete textual record I have found corresponds to the text that bears its name, *Buena memoria*, published in Rome in 2000. My analysis of the installation refers primarily to this text. The translations to English from the original Spanish correspond to the versions published as part of the online exhibit at *zonezero.com*. Where no published English translations were available, I have included the original Spanish as it appears in *Buena memoria* (2000), followed by my own English-language translation in brackets.

9. Those responsible for their murders are never explicitly mentioned, a strategic choice that shifts the focus from accusation to mourning and encourages beholders to formulate their own interpretations of this history. Brodsky’s intended meanings are encoded in the framing of the work and its creation as a commemorative piece, but they are never dictated or strong-armed into receptive practices.

10. Personal correspondence with Marcelo Brodsky (March 2, 2005).

11. These are not inconsequential questions, given the language of purification used by the junta to justify their “Process of National Reorganization.” As an individual of Jewish descent, Brodsky is well aware of how suspiciously all non-Christian religions were viewed by the military regime. Ethnicity, gender, and religion were often decisive, not only in identifying “subversive” elements, but also in determining who lived, died, or disappeared. They were categories exploited and integrated into torture mechanisms, and formed part of a racist, classist, and sexist ideology behind the re-schooling of the body politic. Unclear here is the extent to which Brodsky is aware that his treatment of María

Teresa and Eugenia sets them apart and potentially reproduces the kind of exclusionary paradigm that can be used to justify “ethnic cleansing” through othering the belief system he seeks to critique.

12. I borrow this term from W.J.T. Mitchell, who uses it to figure the dialectical process of decoding images that incorporate expressive language, without privileging either verbal or visual repertoires. See, especially, the “Introduction” to *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*.

13. Since appearing at the Colegio, the exhibit has traveled extensively within and beyond Buenos Aires. It has appeared as part of solo, on-line, and collective shows throughout Europe and the Americas and forms part of several collections, both public and private. For a list of Brodsky’s exhibitions between 1984 and 2002, see *Nexo* (Brodsky, 2001: 126–127).

14. Here I activate the distinction between memory and recollection articulated by Nelly Richard in *The Insubordination of Signs*: “The explosion of recollection (fragments, details) bursts memory’s framework and alters those limits defining cultural representations and making them recognizable as a function of a socially composed and accepted repertoire” (2004: 10). Recollection means “exhuming that which covers—veils—that past: *dis-covering*” (*Ibid.*: 19) and entails “a memory-subject capable of formulating constructive and productive ties between past and present, in order to make explode that ‘now-time’ (Benjamin’s *Jetztzeit*) retained and compressed within the historical particles of many discrepant recollections, previously silenced by official memory” (*Ibid.*).

15. Relatives of the 98 disappeared students were invited to participate with photo collages remembering their loved ones. At the time, 98 had been identified, but the number grew to 102, when additional families came forward due to the exhibit to tell their stories (Brodsky, 1997: 48). Brodsky’s class photo, accompanied by his recent photos of his classmates, formed part of this larger grouping. The published version of the exhibit expanded upon Brodsky’s images to incorporate brief reflections on each of those pictured. These third-person commentaries developed in dialogue with his classmates help to contextualize Brodsky’s authorship, adding interpretive layers and structurally helping the work to resist the temptations of authoritarianism.

16. The period of dictatorship is now taught in all public schools, with commemorative ceremonies incorporated, more or less successfully, into the curriculum. In addition to March 24, 1976, it is common to remember the disappeared on September 16, the anniversary of the “night of the pencils,” when six secondary school students were abducted by paramilitary forces.

17. All translations from Spanish to English of Bleichmar’s work are my own.

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