



## The Tenacity of Memory: Art in the Aftermath of Atrocity

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*In this wide-ranging essay, Bernardi explores personal and artistic responses to state violence, particularly state-sponsored civilian murders, torture, and enforced disappearances. She begins by marking the limits of memory in witnessing the past. How do we reconcile what we remember with what we know to be true? How can we find modes of addressing and representing the past that provide a foundation for ethical engagement in the present and the future? Addressing these questions requires a complex understanding of memory as a mode of reclaiming the disappeared, resistance and militancy, the foundation for consciousness building, and, when transmuted into material forms, a means of witnessing.*

*As an artist who draws upon forensic research and works on both individual and collective projects, Bernardi conceptualizes artistic creation as fulfilling multiple roles in witnessing and as an exchange that demands both speech and recognition. An artistic response to atrocity, she writes, is a demonstration that we are listening. In turn, that demonstration, especially when it takes place in community-based art, invites both members and observers into the rituals of commemoration. Such rituals can provide the foundation for rebuilding trust and understanding in communities that have been damaged by state violence.*

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## EMPATHY

A few years ago, I was standing at a bus stop in Buenos Aires, the crowded, cosmopolitan, densely populated capital of Argentina where I was born. A man's intense look upon me, his gaze deep, dark, and tragic, alerted me, although it did not feel like a threat. Rather, it felt like a distant plea. I tried to ignore him, but finally his insistent scrutiny made me turn around and face him directly as a way to challenge him.

He stepped toward me and, with a voice that seemed more a lament than a question, asked me: "Are you Claudia Bernardi's sister?"

His question startled me.

I answered: "No. I *am* Claudia Bernardi."

He looked at me as if seeing a ghost. In a gesture that conjured sadness and relief, he took my hands, briefly contained himself, trying not to cry, and pronounced softly: "Claudia... I thought you had disappeared."

Argentina is a country where if one has not been seen for some time, years, or perhaps decades, one may be assumed “disappeared.”

The man I met at the bus stop had been a student at the National School of Arts, where he and I had studied in the late 1970s. He was one year ahead of me and, indeed, he had not seen me for many years, because I left Argentina in 1979 during the military dictatorship (1976–83). Given the length of my absence, he had assumed over the years that my name had been added to the long list of 30,000 disappeared people, a litany of pain that defines our history.

“My disappearance” had become so tactile to him that when he saw me standing at the bus stop, he could not conclude that his assumption had been wrong. He was looking at a woman he had thought to be a long time dead; the resemblance to the absent one could, then, only be attributed to kinship. The woman standing alive today in this busy city of Buenos Aires could only be “Claudia’s sister.”

We hugged and laughed and cried and promised each other to call and remain in touch from that moment on.

We never did that.

I suspect that is because we cannot change the assumptions of the past so easily or so willingly. We remain hostages of our own memory, even when—perhaps especially when—what precedes us has taken the shape of a continent of sorrow.

As I remember now this episode that caused me incalculable sadness and fresh fear, I realize the magnitude of the damage caused by the military junta in Argentina. This random encounter with a lost friend at a bus stop catapulted the past into the present with the solid fact that “I” could have been one of the disappeared, eroding the distance between “them” and “me,” thinning the frontier between what happened and what could have happened, and showing the tragic absurdity of a methodology of repression.

We have lost “innocence” in Argentina. Learning on purpose or by circumstances of the abuses committed during the military junta, we learn about the organized harm inflicted upon a large proportion of civilians. This awareness, I believe, exceeds the consideration of politics. It becomes—or perhaps, it should become—a consideration of ethics, of a wounded history, and of empathy.

The violations of human rights perpetrated during the military dictatorship against each and every one of the disappeared in Argentina have caused the recognition that we can no longer live in the chosen numbness of

everyday life—not when a system of power, namely the self-imposed military junta, constructed a structure of repression based on torture and degradation. And we are all—each one of us to a certain extent—responsible.

That is the success of state terror.

Argentina is a country wounded by state terror.

The military dictatorship in Argentina produced the death of the country. Argentina committed suicide, risked its future, which indeed has since been tarnished, tainted by the unavoidable repercussions of moral, legal, economic, political, and spiritual corruption.

To modify or annul the past is indeed impossible, for its infinite consequences manage to define the present. When talking about “reconstruction,” we are facing not the rebuilding of a country, but the naked truth that we are collecting the wreckage of a new Argentina fractured by its past, eroded by the power in the wrong hands that, embarrassingly, lasted eight years. Even if not personally related to the victims or to the perpetrators during this darkest period in our recent history, we as a country have to face the fact that we are partakers of this tragedy, simply by having been alive during those years, by having witnessed, even if we did not fully comprehend what we were looking at, the collapse of democracy and the implanting of terror. A prerequisite to initiating the reconstruction of our fractured society is to admit our complacency, if not our complicity.

There is no amendment, no healing to genocide.

Victims of state terror who undergo torture—unimaginable, denigrating treatment whereby one endures demolishing techniques intended to cause the collapse of human dignity—cannot heal, cannot become the person who existed before. It is precarious, even offensive, to expect “healing.” They are amputated of the person they once were.

Their pain becomes our shame.

After a brutal accident, if someone loses a leg, it is not expected that another leg would grow back. The amputated person could walk again, could dance, and could travel the world, but it would always be in the absence of a vital part now remote and abandoned in the past. This truth, painful and monumental, becomes the necessary acceptance upon which to choreograph a future. The damage inflicted by violations of human rights is designed to cause this amputation of the self. Even if the victim survives the tortures of the flesh, they still will have to face unprecedented challenges to live with the memories of the torments. This is true for the victims and it is true for the constituency at large, for we must assume the responsibility that we have witnessed and accepted a system of implanted terror.

## IMPOTENCE

In the United States today, I see the installing of effective and fraudulent systems of repression similar to those designed and placed in action as a methodology by the military dictatorship in Argentina. The wording has changed: “terrorism/terrorist” has replaced “subversion/subversive.” The practice of abuses of civil and human rights is the same. Unlawful new laws are created to justify persecution and prejudice. Perversely, this is advertised as a method of defending democracy. In Buenos Aires, not far from where I live, the main avenue called 9 de Julio intersects with a street that used to be called “Estados Unidos.” In 2003, anonymously but efficiently, with hand-painted letters mimicking the font used by the Argentine municipality on street signs, the public voiced its opposition against the US invasion of Iraq. The street once called Estados Unidos was rechristened “Pueblo de Irak”/“People of Iraq,” an eloquent testimony as to whose side the Argentine people appear to be on. Subsequently, they have asked: How did this invasion happen? Why?

Manufactured, imposed poverty in Central America adds to the devastation produced by recent wars. Hunger and isolation force the exit of millions of migrating people, who see their lives as survival instead of having the right to discern their own futures. This is a new version of violations of human rights. In Argentina, the profound fear inflicted upon a generation that was persecuted, censured, repressed, and terrorized has migrated from the past into the present. The implanting of the “inconceivable” as a matter of everyday life has produced another success for state terror—perhaps the most damaging one, even beyond the annihilation of a large segment of civilians: the sentiment of nihilism, transferred and deposited into the next generation. There is nothing more convenient for the success of state terror than a young generation underestimated in their capability for analysis and criticism: a tame, isolated mass of young people incapable of connecting with their communities and sedated by the feeling of impotence.

This sort of implanted impotence may also be the reason why we still do not know how many civilians are killed daily in Iraq. Do we know that? Do we care? General Tommy Franks, from US Central Command, phrased a sort of excuse: “We don’t do body counts.” I consulted on February 8, 2007 the website of “Iraqi Body Count” to find a minimum of 55,890 and a maximum of 61,605 civilians killed since 2003. According to a

survey conducted by researchers at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, the number of civilians killed in Iraq is 654,965.<sup>1</sup>

The researchers found that the majority of deaths were attributed to violence, which were primarily the result of military actions by Coalition forces. Most of those killed by Coalition forces were women and children.<sup>2</sup>

We are informed of the numbers of dead US soldiers. It is estimated that over 2700 men and women have died since the invasion of Iraq started in March 2003. Each of those deaths is a loss of indescribable proportions. However, a distinction needs to be made when comparing military men and women and civilian casualties. Men and women who enroll in the military do so voluntarily, measuring the benefits and also the risks.

For civilians, the murder of entire families of men, women, elderly, and children; the amputations, the disfigurements, the destruction of their economic means to survive; the poisoning of their water, the collapse of their sustainability... all are accompanied by yet another catastrophe: the surprise that it happened to them. The question of why it happened to them is never answered. They had no choice, no way to predict the carnage, and now, no alternative to the devastation.

In 1992, taking the testimony of survivors of massacres in El Salvador, countless times I sat in a precarious lodging to converse with the people who had miraculously evaded a massacre, or with those whose relatives and friends had perished. They would talk softly, almost apologetically, naming the long lists of dead people in their families. Because the method used by the Salvadoran army was “scorched earth,” meaning that no one and nothing should remain alive after a military operation, the Salvadoran army would kill the people first, then the animals, and lastly they would set fire to the community and the crops. The survivors would identify the exact number of cows, pigs, and chickens, and even how many corn plants had been burned after the massacre.

They would finish their testimony with a question:

*Why has this happened to us?*

<sup>1</sup>Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, “Updated Iraq Survey Affirms Earlier Mortality Estimates,” last modified October 11, 2006 (accessed February 8, 2007), <http://www.jhsph.edu/news/news-releases/2006/turnham-iraq-2006.html>

<sup>2</sup>Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, “Iraqi Civilian Deaths Increase Dramatically after Invasion,” last modified October 28, 2004 (accessed February 8, 2007), <http://www.jhsph.edu/news/news-releases/2004/turnham-iraq.html>

## MEMORY

Memory, personal and collective, becomes militancy in the postwar period. It is a way to reflect upon that which already has managed to change forever our way of interpreting our past and, consequently, our future. It is a way to vindicate people whom we have loved and who are looking at us from the other side of death, leaving us with a painful caress and a question: Why are we still alive?

More than guilt, it is perplexity.

This perplexity screams back to us that "I," too, could have been a disappeared.

The 30,000 disappeared are the success stories of a mandate of annihilation.

The foam of time impregnating the soul.

On a cold afternoon in 1984, I witnessed for the first time an exhumation at the cemetery of Avellaneda, in Buenos Aires. Shortly after the dictatorship had ended and while the country was transiting toward a frail democracy, there was a need to gather proof of violations of human rights perpetrated by the military junta. Mass graves were identified and investigated. My sister Patricia, who was and still is a member of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team, warned me of the spectacle that a mass grave could cause. I saw her descend into an open cavity of the earth. When she emerged, she was bringing two shattered craniums. The fractures were the evidence of how they had died, with a gunshot wound inflicted at a very short distance, execution style. The average age of the two individuals whose craniums she was collecting could have been estimated at around twenty-four years.

That is how old I was when I left Argentina in 1979.

Memory is not a privilege of only a few, but the militancy of many.

The practice of memory as a way to accomplish consciousness which attempts to accept the errors of the past to avoid worse calamities in the future remains one of the most demanding and challenging episodes in the evolution of a culture.

In recent years, buildings that once functioned as clandestine centers of detention and extermination during the military dictatorship in Argentina have been reclaimed by the relatives of the disappeared, by people who survived the imprisonment, by non-governmental human rights agencies, by poets, writers, and artists. The buildings are open to the public as centers of memory. Their open doors welcome a visitation that produces simultaneously empathy and nausea.

In 2002, I visited “el Pozo de Rosario”/“the Hole of Rosario,” which had operated inside the Police Department, *la Jefatura*, centrally located in one of the busiest and most densely populated cities of the Republic. It is estimated that more than 3000 people were taken to this camp, of whom very few survived.

The building occupies the entirety of the block. There are several doors and accesses from the street into the building. Two large iron doors have been identified by the few survivors as the aperture through which trucks full of people, mostly young, would cross the frontier between outside and inside “el Pozo.” Between life and torment.

I had to walk several meters inside the building until I faced the entrance of a particular catacomb, a space opening downward where the blind-folded prisoners were deposited for unpredictable lengths of time. They were tortured regularly, they were mortified at all times, and eventually groups of people were selected to be “transported,” a euphemism that always meant execution.

I walked down the stairs, which were weak as if the weight of many men and women had caused a fragility that was dangerous. The space was uneven. Peculiarly shaped rooms opened to nowhere. There were blind entrances and doors that led to narrow passages. It appeared that the place was staged to produce confusion. I sat in a corner of one of the main rooms, looking around without fully comprehending what it could have been like to be a prisoner there, to hear the daily screams of the tortured inmates, to be the one tortured to the point of agony.

I reclined my back on the wall and I wept.

When I helped myself to stand up, placing my hand on the wall behind me, I noticed a thumbprint exactly in the location where my own thumb, by total coincidence, had landed. The thumbprint was almost unnoticeable until I discovered it, and then it became all that I could look at for a long time. I noticed other handprints, soft, quiet, and elusive. One of those handprints had a scratch next to it, probably done with the indentation of a nail on plaster. I could read the message: “I was here.”

I was here.

I was also here, years after this person unknown to me until now was becoming part of me forever.

My hand over the disintegrating handprint of someone whose tragedy I cannot start imagining or measuring. These places of memory are places of consciousness.

The absent bodies of the disappeared are an immense archive of information preserved from degradation through the collective act of memory. Their unknown bodies have become private and public entities. Documents, photographs, literature, and art narrate the history of the *disappeared*, allowing a sculpted liaison between the vacant generation and us all, standing on this side of the abyss.

Memory is a tool to build consciousness.

We remember the disappeared. They march silently but not unnoticed. They whisper their testimonies to the realm of the living.

Art may be the only apt language for addressing genocide.

Art is a communal tool for listening.

We are listening.

## TRUTH

The first time that I participated in an exhumation was not in Argentina. It was in El Salvador, in a distant hamlet located in the north of Morazan, where there had been a massacre in 1981. Only one survivor provided testimony. Her recounting is filled with details. Rufina Amaya Márquez, the sole survivor of the massacre at El Mozote, saw her community being divided into groups: men, women, younger women, and children. She identified a shallow hill, “Cerro de la Cruz,” where the Atlacatl Battalion took the pubescent girls and young women of El Mozote to rape them, kill them, and, ultimately, burn them. Rufina saw her husband being decapitated and could identify the voices and screams of her own children before they were shot.

No one survived at El Mozote. Only Rufina, under circumstances that are nothing short of a miracle, was left to bring the truth of the inconceivable massacre of a civilian population to us. Over 1000 people perished in the massacre at El Mozote on December 11, 1981. The exhumation took place in 1992 inside a thirty-five-square-meter building known as “The Convent.” The exhumations confirmed the allegation of mass murder against civilians by identifying the presence of human remains of 143 individuals, of whom 136 were children under the age of twelve, with an average age of six.

As part of the investigation and exhumations performed by the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team in the case of the massacre at El Mozote, I created the archeological maps identifying the locations of the human remains, associated objects, and ballistic evidence found.

Until then, I had never exhumed the remains of children. Some of their bones were so frail that they resembled the bones of a small bird. Because of the young age of the victims and their multiple fractures, the remains became a fine powder, a tender sawdust at the moment they were collected from inside the tiny garments where they had been nestled quietly for more than a decade. The trace of existence would evaporate forever, and with it the last presence of this child robbed of life and future.

Memory, consciousness, the truth.

The last victim of genocide is truth.

Killing truth is not a final act.

It transcends history.

Facing truth is an act of responsibility.

The past cannot be modified. Its infinite consequences may, gently, embroider a possible future.

## ART

I am an artist. My art is born from memory and loss.

I design and facilitate art in community projects in locations where there has been an armed conflict and which are transiting into the postwar period.

My art lives in the intersection of art and war.

Four kilometers away from the massacre place at El Mozote, in a small community called Perquin, in 2005, in collaboration and partnership with the community, I created the School of Art and Open Studio of Perquin, serving children, youth, adults, and the elderly. It is a community-based project that uses the strategies of art to rebuild a devastated region where the legacy of the Salvadoran civil war, 1980–92, is being followed by social, institutional, and economic collapse in the postwar period.

The School of Art and Open Studio of Perquin welcomes everyone and all members of the community, regardless of their political or religious affiliation. The curricula and public art projects are debated and designed by the community. The most popular public art interventions have taken the form of murals that narrate, like open history books, the lives and memories of the people of the north of Morazan.

It is not easy to achieve collegiality among people who have been pulled apart by local politics, by the damaging legacies of the war, and by the recent and unprecedented poverty that has been imposed as a result of the erosion of agriculture and the destruction of national industry. While the

Salvadoran currency has been the US dollar since 2001, the everyday reality shows that an average of 450 Salvadorans each day become exiles, resigned to undergo unimaginable personal and legal risks in order to find work in foreign lands, mostly in the United States.<sup>3</sup> The School of Art and Open Studio of Perquin is affected by the poverty and the limitations of the region. We utilize the skills of artmaking to reconstruct and to build the community. It would be imprudent to think that art can remedy tragedies. It would be untrue to suggest that art can amend conflicts; however, art as “a net of gazing eyes” may prove to be a pivotal tool to exercise and to re-establish trust among the survivors.

“Art” and “genocide” belong to fundamentally opposite paradigms. “Genocide” (*geno*, Greek: kind; *cide*, Latin: destruction) is the purposeful and effective praxis of destruction, annihilation in its most successful form. “Art” means generating from nothingness. Art exists through the conviction, praxis, and determination of the maker. Art is a tender caress of remembrance, fatigue, loss, pain, and hope, finding in the proposition of beauty its vindication. Art may not necessarily mean an improvement, but art will assist in the recapitulation of the suffering endured, transformed, and finally rebirthed as a communal proposition.

Endurable peace will never be achieved if the past is not remembered with a sense of communal responsibility that can only occur through the practice of justice. Art adds to the effort in the difficult journey of recovering memory while rebuilding a community like El Mozote, where no one (but one) survived the massacre.

One of the community leaders in El Mozote, Don Florentin, told me:

*Aqui nos han matado la tierra. Les agradecemos a los artistas por ayudarnos a que la tierra viva otra vez.*

Here they have killed the land. We are thankful to the artists for helping make the earth be alive again.

We painted a mural at El Mozote on the church adjacent to the convent where more than 136 children perished in 1981. The community shared dozens of meetings, diplomatic negotiations from which the collegial idea for the theme of the mural emerged. They agreed that the carnage of the

<sup>3</sup>Dorian Merina, “LA’s Busy Immigration Courts Could Swell under Trump,” *Take Two 89.3KPCC*, December 27, 2016 (accessed March 28, 2017), <http://www.scpr.org/programs/take-two/2016/12/27/54010/la-s-busy-immigration-courts-could-swell-under-tru/>

massacre would not be depicted. That was not the message to be preserved in this unique history book. The mural would represent the hamlet of El Mozote as it once was: a prosperous community of civilians who planted and harvested coffee, maguey, and corn. They made drawings of the original church and convent of a community that had lived in harmony as far back as people remembered. They had been poor, as most rural *campesinos* are, but they had not known what devastation meant until they were attacked and killed by the US-trained Atlacatl Battalion.

In El Mozote, there are people who want to remember what happened and many who would rather forget (as if one could). But they all seemed to agree that the names of the massacred children were to be preserved, together with their ages. There were over 400 children identified as victims. The names of these children and their ages, from three days to twelve years, were etched on ceramic tiles that crown the south-wall mural of the church.

On December 9, 2006, during the celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the massacre at El Mozote, each of the children alive today chose a name to recite, to name, and never to forget, to bring from the anonymity of death into the realm of the present.

Most people in Morazan are survivors of massacres or relatives of the victims. They would like to forget, but they know they cannot. They know they must not.

Quique was a combatant during the war. He is small and silent. He lost relatives during the war, including his son, aged eighteen, two months before the Peace Accords were signed. Quique was one of the FMLN<sup>4</sup> combatants identifying FMLN who entered El Mozote to bury “pieces of people” after the massacre. There were halves of bodies decomposing; it was impossible to calculate how many. Children he did not see. The ones he saw were hanging from trees, with slit throats. There were others who had been chopped up. The slaughter was brutal and the collecting of the remaining parts scattered all over the hamlet an indescribable task.

Quique has become a textile artist since the art school opened in 2005.

<sup>4</sup>The Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) is the guerilla organization (now a political party) that opposed the US-backed Salvadoran government during the Salvadoran Civil War.

In a recent conversation, with the caution that he always exercises, he told me: “I once changed the *cuma*<sup>5</sup> for an M16. Now I am changing a rifle for a loom.”

The sadness of the past will never be forgotten. No one can. No one will. No one wants to do that.

There is no amendment for genocide.

Genocide needs to be stopped at all costs.

To count dead civilians in the aftermath of massacres comprises a moral, legal, political, and spiritual catastrophe.

## EPILOGUE

The soul of the world, ephemeral and resilient, is a tender tapestry in which each thread is a voice, a hand, a song, and a memory of someone who has the right to live in dignity. On this fabric, communally, we may deposit the breath of hope.

No one deserves poverty and isolation.

No one should be unassisted when in need.

No one should be a lonely beholder of a tragic memory.

No one should carry sorrows like a wing of stone.

If we are alert enough to detect how to contribute, even in a small way, to remedying someone’s misery and it is in our power to do it, we ought to try.

We simply ought to try.

<sup>5</sup> *Cuma*: a machete used for agriculture in El Salvador.