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A genealogy of affective politics

Visual practices of dissidence in post-dictatorial South America

Introduction

When talking about memorial politics, especially in South America, it is almost impossible to dismiss and consequently not to acknowledge affective politics as the non-institutional origin of memorial politics. In this article I specifically refer to the last military dictatorships in South America during the decades of the 1970's and 1980's. During this period state terrorism was implemented and many people, mostly youngsters, were tortured, murdered and victims of enforced disappearance. The enforced disappearance practice resulted in the birth of the victims' relatives groups, which in time became a social struggle for truth and justice (as they call it). The first term, truth, demands the state to clarify and investigate the circumstances in which the people disappeared. While the second term, justice, refers to the amnesty of the military junta (Colectivo Cultural Entreletras 2006 (* 6)).

Within the genealogy of affective politics exists a continuation or a common thread (if not even a convergence), between guerrilla visual practice and the struggle of the relatives of the disappeared, which also achieves an intense use of visuals. This same convergence becomes what we in the present day know as memorial politics in its complexities, in which the governmental politics of memory and civilian practices are inextricably melted together (especially in case of Argentina, where the Instituto de la Memoria/Ex-ESMA *(1) is one of the most illustrative examples of this kind of politics).

In fact, if we consider the approach and strategies of the main movements for political dissidence opposing the last dictatorial regimes in Uruguay (such as the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional – Tupamaros and 26 de Marzo), Argentina (i.e. ERP-People's Revolutionary Army) and Chile (i.e. MIR –Moviemiento Izquierda Revolucionaria), we might already notice how fundamental the role of affect and some kind of artistic-performative practices were.

The huge alphabetization work carried out in Argentina's poorest suburbs and rural areas as well as in the famous Cárcel del pueblo (the people's jail) in Uruguay are two among various applications of performative pedagogy and "reality-theater" strategies. Thus, we might claim that the latter were used in order to get attention, create a proactive audience that would, at best, become an actor or supporter of political change.

The Uruguayan artist and theorist Luis Camnitzer suggests in his book Didáctica de la liberación (Camnitzer 2009 (* 5)) a brilliant and innovative reading of Tupamaros political practices as artistic activism. Camnitzer highlights the context in which art slips into political activism as well as the incredibly high percentage of artists who took part in the movement and who played a fundamental role in applying (more or less consciously) artistic approaches directly to guerrilla action.

From a historic perspective Tupamaros re-contextualized guerrilla (by definition a rural practice) into an urban context. Because of the geographical condition of the country which is almost completely flat, and more importantly has only one big city, Montevideo, in which more than 60 percent of the population lives, a classical guerrilla would never have worked. So Tupamaros were obliged to adapt a guerrilla

into the urban context of the capital *(2). This implied an almost ontological redefinition of guerrilla itself. According to Camnitzer this redefinition was implemented by the direct juxtaposition of artistic/visual tools and the guerrilla fight (Camnitzer 2009: 25 (* I5)).

Similarly to the Siluetazo movement (or Silhouettes), the Tupamaros performative practice eventually enters into political activism history and not into art history. Ana Longoni and Gustavo Bruzzone analyzed Siluetazo's history and its positioning in political activism history, claiming an acknowledgment of this movement into art history in their book El Siluetazo (Longoni and Bruzzone 2007 (* 8)).

"The realization of silhouettes is the most memorable of the artistic-political practices that lent a potent visuality to the public space of Buenos Aires and many other cities of the country on the demands of the human rights movements in the early 1980s. This consists of a simple design in the form of the outline of a man-sized body on paper, later pasted on the city walls as a way of representing the „presence of an absence of the thousands of prisoners who disappeared during the last military dictatorship." (Longoni 2007 (* 9))

The Siluetazo and Tupamaros practice witness a shift between art and political activism. In the case of Siluetazo the movement can be characterized by a slip of artistic practice into political activism, whereas in the Tupamaros case the opposite movement seems to take place, since political practice shifts into artistic production.

Besides an epistemological question regarding the boundaries of each discipline, this dialectic arises, more importantly, a reflection on the historicization moment which ultimately implies the legitimization of one single practice within a precise field: in this case political history or art history (which generally has a hard time to recognize such practices due to the implicit re-questioning of its own specificities).

Thus, on the one hand we are witnessing an attempt to reflect and legitimize interventionist art as such into the hegemonic narration of art history which is reluctant to acknowledge them (for sure structural difficulties arise also when the mainstream system agrees to legitimize them, most of the time by trying to assimilate them). On the other hand, we also witness the opposite phenomena, trying to decode an artistic value into political activism.

It seems, at least in the post-dictatorial, South American context, that artistic and political tools and methodologies have a strong tendency to intertwine. In addition, this interaction is more likely to entangle under critical political conditions.

This article focuses its analysis on the Argentinean case, which might be considered as the clearest and most illustrative example of affective politics. Therefore I will trace a possible genealogy on the basis of this study case. The main reason behind this choice resides in the fact that nowadays Argentina is the only country that abolished the amnesty law and opened trials (juicios) against the military junta. This achievement was only possible thanks to society's endurance demonstrating during the past decades.

The purpose of this article is to trace (or rather to imagine) a possible genealogy of those different paths to articulate cultural dissidence, in order to make visible where they met and are inextricably bound together.

In the following sections I will further elaborate on the question of affective politics; from the guerrilla movements to the struggle of the relatives of the disappeared and

their specific use of visuals as well as the collaboration with art collectives.

Estética Extendida

The affective bond may already be identified in the strong role that solidarity played in the networks generated during the raise of the clandestine organizations and that affected both the civil population as well as the political exiled communities abroad. This process culminates in the collectivization of motherhood, implemented by Madres y Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo *(3). During the so-called democratic transition period (that starts in 1983) the first Siluetazo action took place (whose most significant antecedent may be found in Tucumán Arde *(4)). The collectivization of motherhood takes a national dimension through this collective artistic action.

This is when the struggle of the relatives of the disappeared became a fight for memory and legal justice and where memorial politics' practice finally achieves counter history writing (* 5). Visual politics could be, especially in a context of permanent repression, deturned to become "critical weapons". Counter history writing practices happened when a collective process (solidarity) starts to articulate its de-identification with the hegemonic narration: the artists as citizens. I will name and include those practices as extended esthetic.

Institutional and governmental memory, as already mentioned, do coexist and melt with non-institutional practices. The latter are mostly time-based, ephemeral or performative and tend to privilege public spaces as context and people's bodies as medium.

Políticas de aparición I

Let's start from the end, or better said, from the hic et nunc.

While writing this article I commuted for a short period to the South of the world, between Argentina, Uruguay and Chile; officially in order to deepen my research for my PhD and my work as an artist.

I was born in Switzerland; my father is an exiled from the Uruguayan dictatorship. The common thread of my family is one of a genealogy of exiles. Exiles have determined our displacement on the planet since at least three generations. This is maybe a possible reason why I am attracted to work with it and deconstruct it. Tracing a genealogy is reassuring; it has to do with legitimacy and continuity. But it also means to step into history's ruptures and acknowledge our own need for a meaningful narration.

My father was born in the exile of his parents. My grandfather was one of the founder members of the communist party in Italy; because of the Mussolini regime he was given political asylum in Uruguay.

Here I am, back (if I may say so) to this very side of the world, looking for more pieces of this human micro-political mosaic.

*I am now writing from Buenos Aires, where Loreto and Federico from the Etcétera group *(6) are kindly hosting me. While having an asado and a beer we chat about affective and memorial politics and practices.*

What does it mean nowadays? Does it still have an up to date meaning? While living here we witnessed police repression in the Parque Centenario. The police completely emptied and blocked the park, by putting up fences during the night.

The Parque Centenario, located in a strategic point in the heart of city, is the symbol of the people's struggle during the crisis of 2001. Almost all the "asambleas barriales" (neighborhood self-organized assembly) were taking place here. Nowadays the park is hosting an organic vegetable garden and self-organized market stalls, just to name a few things that contributed to generate an ecological and alternative economy. On a micro-scale we were able to witness the formation of a neighborhood assembly in front of the park to defend their space despite the hot temperatures and the strong deployment of police.

It becomes clear, hearing people talking and discussing what to do, that they are experienced in self-organization, not only at the level of assembly planning but also in terms of structuring concrete political actions. Police does also have it, of course, and they have exploited the fact that there are summer holidays now, so most students are not here and popular resistance is much more limited then what it normally would be like.

But what is important here is that we witnessed something from close by: the penetration and absorption of affective policies into the social tissue just as if it were a chemical process.

*Etcétera were part of this process-struggle during the Argentinean economical crisis of 2001. The practice of the "escrache" *(7) (kind of a collective and public denunciation of the military that benefits from amnesty. It consists of locating the person and make a public action were he/she lives) can be considered for the purpose of this article as the most significant example in order to analyze the affective bounds between visual practice and political activism.*

Escrached House in Buenos Aires, 1980s

Loreto emphasizes this struggle and how it finally led to the "juicios". He also talks of the renewed continuation of these very practices today, giving the example of artists that are drawing the juicios because it is forbidden to film them. While Federico underlines the conceptual risk of tracing a linear genealogy from Tucumán Arde to the young collectives that were active during the crisis of 2001.

Of course the main risk of tracing a genealogy is falling into a banal linearity. On the contrary, what is interesting here is not only that different generations were active at the same time and collaborating with each other, but also how they started to articulate their own complexities and disagreements and how they fragmented (i.e. Madres de Plaza de Mayo are actually separated in two different associations with very different strategies regarding the construction of a memory as well as different political ambitions). In this sense an affective genealogy is made by several post-

*dictatorial micro-fictions. Therefore, it is not true to affirm that without Tucumán Arde or the Siluetazo, it would have been impossible for the young collectives that arose during the Argentinean crisis of 2001 (such as the GAC or Etcétera or Arde!Arte *(8)) to continue their specific work with this kind of specific socio-political focus and with such public visual strategies. This would definitely be a very deterministic understanding that refuses to acknowledge that affective politics need a different time to sediment into a society and thus into visual practice.*

It is an affective time, in which the present tense is only possible in a violent collision between past and future. This continuous movement produces a violent chronology of back and forth, between recall and oblivion. There are many ways of recalling and many ways of claiming for a sane right of forgetting that articulates a different subjectivity, an empowering one, rather than trying to erase history.

Habeas Corpus vs. Poner el cuerpo

By appearance policy (politicas de apariciòn) here, I refer to the actions of all those movements and artistic and/or activist groups that do use a direct dialectic for overturning the status quo in their visual strategies. The Overturning Dialectic is used as a methodology of denuding the hidden mechanisms and contradictions of the status quo. Denuding happens by contrast and opposition – so for example the siluetazo make the crimes against Humanities of the Videla's military regimes visible. In the majority of the cases it occurs in the form of actions or performance events in the public space. Thus, these actions produce a resistance as they show what should not be shown, shout what must be hushed and remember what must be forgotten. Using one's own body, or better, borrowing one's body, in an operation that resembles a syncretic ritual, the appearance of someone who has been made to disappear is simulated.

The enforced disappearance in Latin America has been developed and tested in order to establish a wild neo-liberal system (e.g. Operation Condor *(9)), on a continent that has always had a strong anti-imperialist tendency advocating for "tercermundista socialism". In enforced disappearance the person (in this case transformed into a "subversive") is deprived of its legal status and placed outside every legal rule. Thus, as explicit consequence, the goal is to erase the person from history.

In order for it to happen, it is essential not only to establish a state of exception, the state of exception has to become the norm itself up until the point that it produces (or opens) the space of the camp, to follow Agamben's argument (Agamben 1995: 188 (* 1)).

During the last military dictatorships in Latin America, the camp has become the common paradigm of society. Designed as an "improvement" of the Nazi camp, the Latin American concentration camp is a continuous, diffused camp. Unlike the Nazi camp, which is located outside of the city, clearly defining a space for "civilization" and a space for "organized brutality", the Latin American camp does not know this geographic frontier. The camp was everywhere. It could be the basement of a sequestered house, a garage or a military school, etc. Also torture methods and instruments are dematerialized: water and electricity are enough, that's why the "picana" *(10) becomes the most widespread method of torture in Latin America.

Also when it comes to get rid of the bodies, they do not need to build a gas chamber, they simply exploit nature itself. The prisoners' bodies are made to disappear in the Atacama desert (in the case of Chile), or great military aircrafts would throw them in the depths of the river. And little by little nature will erase

every trace of those bodies. In short, the camp is dematerialized and fragmented. There is no evidence of a crime or of a victim. At least this is how disappearance was conceived as a technique. Of course, the history of the last military dictatorships in Latin America is extremely complex and articulated, mainly because it develops in the frame of the Condor Plan. What interests me and circumscribes this short article, is to look at disappearance from a bio-political perspective. At this point Agamben is of great help.

In the last section of his book, Agamben explains the evolution from the ancient conception of freedom, which is mainly focused on the figure of the subject, to the modern one, which instead focuses on the Homo Liber or citizen; until the current one, which is characterized by the transition from homo (or citizen) to pure corpus. He writes: "[…] the fact that the legal form of habeas corpus has been given such importance in law, might probably be a coincidence, but from that moment on it becomes inseparable from the history of Western democracy, which in so doing […] placed at the center of his struggle with absolutism, not bios – the qualified life of the citizen – but zoé bare life in its anonymity […]." (Agamben 1995: 137 (* 1))

During the last military dictatorships, the habeas corpus *(11) was the most common procedure in order to try to get the beloved disappeared back. The families of the disappeared were invited to submit demand of habeas corpus. Obviously, the vast majority was without any outcome. It is probably due to the tension created by the insistence on the bodily presence-absence that the families are so aware of the bio-political claim represented by the demand of the return of the disappeared bodies.

Some of the most famous slogans recited indeed "Aparición con vida", "Con vida los llevaron, con vida los queremos!" Another common practice is to say the names of the disappeared aloud and at the end of each name shouting in chorus "Presente!". The policy of affect (and appearance) began precisely by literally giving body to the protest. In order to gain visibility, a group of brave women, the Madres, desperately looking for their children, who seemed to have been swallowed up in the depths of the earth, gathered regularly every Thursday next to the city's main monument (it was the year 1977 in time of full repression). Some of the mothers were kidnapped and disappeared in their turn, but every Thursday there were more and more women circling around the square. As long as the dictatorship began to lose the support of the U.S. and slowly began to decline. In 1983, about 30,000 people were disappeared in Argentina. The Madres decided to occupy Plaza de Mayo for a whole day. It was the first Resistance March. But a strategy was needed to be able to withstand for so long. Three artists responded with a simple proposal: A Siluetazo action. They meant to draw all 30,000 silhouettes in the square, in order to recreate the presence of all people disappeared during the dictatorship. The idea was to show how much space they would have all occupied. In order to achieve this goal, the ones who still had a physical body lent it to the Disappeared. The action was very successful, during the whole day a great number of people came to draw the silhouettes of their beloved ones, tracing the borrowed body of those who were lying on a sheet of paper, and then, simply exchanging roles. Once the silhouette was ready, it was glued upright somewhere in the square. This incredible action went on for more than 24 hours. Powerless, the army could not suppress an artistic action for which no one had ever prepared them.

Military during the Siluetazo, Buenos Aires, 1983.

Initially, disappeared relatives were claiming for “Aparición con vida.” Over time it has become obvious that it was an impossible request. But precisely for this we still claim it. And by “we” I mean all people who are in solidarity with families with a missing person, all people who are fighting for legal justice and all the ones that have actively followed and took position in affective politics since the end of the dictatorships: families, exiled people or just committed citizens – including myself and my relatives’ struggle.

Through the practice of affective memory, the disappeared are embodied in us every time we all answer “Presentes!” The practice of affective memory is resistance against a Thanato-power, against an extreme neo-liberalism that reduced us to our zoé, to a homo sacer that can be killed but not sacrificed. Policies of affective memory through art gives them a body as well as a symbolic dimension, it does rescue those lives that indeed have been sacrificed. Art takes back the auratic dimension, rescuing that part of history and its people from the anonymity to which they were confined. Dusting off forbidden ideas and imaginaries for which many people have been brutally murdered and a piece of history has been declared illegal.

Políticas de aparición II: a conclusion or so …

To conclude, precise genealogy is still not traceable, over time, however, we can follow this “will of disappearing” and its counter-struggle in a sort of “desire for incarnation and appearance” through many generations. This desire for incarnation takes almost always ephemeral forms and we can say that, at least in this part of the world, this specific form of resistance goes hand in hand with art, probably because they meet at some point of their path, just in the moment in which bio-politics and state of exception became the rule. A common thread runs from Tucumán Arde to the Siluetazo and to the dissident political groups, which themselves do have direct affinity with the relatives’ struggle for memory and social justice. Those apparently heterogeneous movements and groups built the ground of affective politics by creating new political and aesthetic tools: they just came to it through different paths.

Let’s take a step back to the point where we questioned the meaning of affective politics today and whether it does still make sense and how… When I first wondered about this matter I was in Buenos Aires.

*Right now, I am in an artist residency at Proyecto La Estrella located in a poor area of the so-called “Cono urbano Bonearense” (approximately two hours from the city center). Local artist and professor Marcos Luczcow who was part of the GAC *(12) collective, is now hosting and implementing the Proyecto La Estrella *(13).*

Is it possible that this residency, here with Marcos, who came from the GAC experience, is a coincidence? Or maybe this is the red line of affective politics or its incarnation under new forms? I asked Marcos this question.. He simply answered: "Do you think it makes sense to wonder about such a question in such a place and in this project?"

It is quite surprising that by just putting things into context, it makes them less universal, but articulates a meaningful territory, both conceptually and physically.

Two images of La Estrella project, Mariano Acosta, Buenos Aires province, February 2013

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//Zur Person

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//Fussnoten

*1 ESMA's (NavyMechanicSchool) history from detention camp to human right headquarter and museum, online: http://www.memoriaabierta.org.ar/eng/camino_al_museo3.php.

*2 According to Camnitzer this redefinition of the guerrilla practice passes through art performativity (Camnitzer 2009: 79–83).

*3 Grandmothers association; online: http://www.abuelas.org.ar/english/history.htm ; Mothers associations, online: http://www.madres.org/navegar/nav.php and Mothers funding line, online: http://www.madresfundadoras.org.ar/pagina/whoweare/85.

*4 "Tucumán Arde" is the name of a project by an artist collective in Argentina which started in 1968. The artists conceived art as an effective instrument for social change, and through the Tucuman Arde project they sought to bring the distressed social conditions of the Tucuman province to the attention of a large public. The project was conceived of as an intervention in mass communication, a circuit of counter information against the official one of the dictatorship (Alberro and Stimson 1999).

*5 Actually, nowadays it would probably be more correct to talk about post-dictatorial fiction(s) rather than politics of memory as Idelber Avelar (1999) suggests.

*6 Grupo Etcetera, online: http://grupoetcetera.wordpress.com/about/

*7 Instead of the ritualistic protest and mourning of the Madres, H.I.J.O.S organize carnivalesque escrache or acts of public shaming. The word escrache is etymologically related to scracè= expectorar, meaning roughly "to expose". (...) Because H.I.J.O.S entered the public arena more than a decade after the fall of military, they can afford to be more confrontational in their use of technique and public space.(...) Still their tactics serve to identify individuals responsible for gross crime against humanity. The performatic interruption, no matter how unwelcome, does not threaten their life. Like the Madres and Abuelas, H.I.J.O.S claim institutional justice, not private vengeance. (Taylor 2003:p.180-183)

The H.I.J.O.S (sons and daughters of disappeared people) association, online:http://www.hijos-capital.org.ar/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=21

** 8* *Arde!Arte group, online: http://www.ardearte.com.ar/*

** 9* *An author that extensively wrote about this subject is Stella Calloni (2006) which is strongly recommend in order to further deepen investigation on the Condor Plan. For more general information please consult: Explanation of the Condor Operation and the United States: A Network of Southern Cone Assassination and American Avoidance 2005, online: http://www.oocities.org/thadoc78/Operation_Condor.htm and Deep politics forum community, online: https://deeppoliticsforum.com/forums/showthread.php?963-Operation-Condor.*

** 10* *The picana (was) an electrified prod used on sensitive body parts such as genitals and temples (...) The Picana symbolized their (the torturers) eroticized violence and power. Just as weapons in every culture have symbolized masculinity, the picana crystallized the phallocentricity of the torture ritual. (Caro Hollander 2010: p.115)*

** 11* *The writ of habeas corpus is an order written by a judge, demanding that a prisoner be brought to the court so that the judge can decide whether the person is being lawfully imprisoned. (Margulies 2006: p.7)*

** 12* *http://grupodeartecallejero.blogspot.com/*

** 13* *http://www.proyectolaestrella.com.ar/*