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Contested Urban Spaces Monuments, Traces, and Decentered Memories

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The Mass Grave and the Memorial. Notes from Mexico on Memory Work as Contestation of Contemporary Terror

Anne Huffschmid

OPENING

Imagine a land plagued by human remains in various shapes and sizes. Some have been located and salvaged by exhumation; others still lie underground, latent exhumations, as skeletons or fragments, some even liquefied or burnt to ashes. Imagine that there has been no natural disaster, but that human agency has sought deliberately to sever these bodies from their personhood. It does not require a work of fiction or the memory of a past event to imagine this scenario. This is Mexico today, or at least a part of it. In a landscape like this, what meaning or function might memory have if we think of it as agency? Can it reverse the impact of such dehumanization? Is it feasible or desirable to transform a mass grave into a memorial?

I will approach these questions from two angles that have guided my research over the last fifteen years. The first emerged from my

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investigation of processes of public memory related to violence and political repression of the so-called recent past and their articulation in present space, a long-term project linking Argentina and Mexico, inserted within the urban fabric of their capital cities.¹ The second entailed me entering the forensic field with a broad study of processes and agencies in response to forced disappearances in Latin America, with a particular focus on Mexico today and the new forensic agencies of those affected.² I shall explore tensions and intersections between these two realms, not only in their spatial and temporal logic but also in the way they generate meaning, based on my recent audiovisual research that I called “landscapes in transition.”³

On the one hand, I conceive the secret graves and other killing fields as sites where the necropolitics of the so-called recent past and present reveals its efficacy. They lend spatial and material form to the appalling uncertainty, deliberately fostered, that envelops bodies stripped of their identity within a limbo or a void (Aguirre 2016: 84), whose counterpart is the necrotheatrical exhibit of destructed bodies (Diéguez 2016: 134). On the other hand, I conceive these sites as contested spaces that harbor potential for an agency of resistance. As I have argued elsewhere (Huffschmid 2015b), we can understand forensic intervention and reconstruction as *constitutive* agency in the face of an ontological crime such as a forced disappearance. It offers, potentially at least, to reconnect names without bodies (those who are being sought) to bodies without names (those who have been found), to reconstitute their personhood, and to restore these rehumanized bodies to the social world (Somigliana 2012: 33).

I propose, therefore, to see *forensic* work, performed by scientists but also by affected families—as it is in Mexico, where groups of searching

¹This research, carried out between 2005 and 2013, led to a number of publications, including the monograph Huffschmid (2015a); for a summary in English see Huffschmid (2018).

²This research began in 2013 and ended in 2020, with audiovisual outcomes such as the documentary *Persistencia* (2019) and the web documentary *Forensic Landscapes* (2020) as well as the short documentary *Dato sensible* (2020). For written publications, see in Spanish Huffschmid (2015b, 2019b), in German Huffschmid (2019a), and in English Huffschmid (2020).

³This exploration was facilitated by a fellowship from November 2019 to June 2020, together with Alfonso Díaz Tovar, granted by the *Center for Advanced Latin American Studies (CALAS)*, based at its headquarters in Guadalajara, Mexico. A preliminary version was written in Spanish for the edited book *Memoria y memoriales en México*, coordinated by Alexandra Délano Alonso, Alicia de los Ríos, María del Vecchi, and Benjamin Niens (Colegio de México, 2021).

relatives have taken much of this labor into their own hands—in terms of *reconstruction*. *Memorial* work interests me as *signification*, as agency seeking to wrest social meaning from atrocity and to insert it in the terrain of what can be said and processed. Mario Rufer argues, concerning the “political work that memory performs on time,” that we should not understand it primarily “as the work of remembering but as the work of *connecting*” (Rufer 2019: 94; my emphasis). How does the emblematic space of forensics, the mass grave—which implies forensic activities such as searching, exhuming, identifying, and reconstructing—relate to the construction of memorial sites and markers that seek to commemorate and signify violence? And how can we speak of massacre, torture, or disappearance that occurs in geographical proximity to our urban everyday—for instance, in suburban settings—and yet seems to take place in a parallel universe, disrupting everyday scenarios constituted by “floating indifference” (Joseph 2002: 29)?

MEXICAN TERROR FIELDS AND MEMORY AGENCIES

Unlike its South and Central American neighbors in the twentieth century, postrevolutionary Mexico’s political landscapes have been characterized by the formal continuity of a democratically elected government and the absence of formally acknowledged armed conflict. Nevertheless, from the late 1960s, the Mexican state applied selective but systematic repression, including forced disappearances, in order to defeat political and armed insurgencies within Mexican territory. This systematic state violence was kept widely invisible to the international eye by the political performance of the Mexican government as antagonist to the military regimes of South and Central America. As a result, it has never been fully recognized in recent Mexican history.⁴ Although there have been isolated initiatives to commemorate state violence, no transitional justice process was ever initiated. The impunity of state crimes remained intact and institutionalized, which is regarded as one of the enabling factors for the current violence crisis.

More than 250,000 people have been killed or massacred, more than 80,000 have disappeared according to the latest statistics from early 2021, and more than 35,000 unidentified bodies, or parts of them, lie in forensic

⁴ See Rangel Lozano and Sánchez Serrano (2015), who correctly characterize Mexico’s counterinsurgency strategies in the 1960s and 1970s as “state terrorism”, departing from the usual but misleading semantic label “dirty war”.

institutions. These numbers speak of a contemporary state of terror much less legible than the political repression or counterinsurgency policies in Mexico or elsewhere in Latin America. Organized crime and illegal economies play their part alongside fragments of a partially corrupt state apparatus. The current crisis is usually framed by the notion of a “war on drugs,” but this clearly oversimplifies the situation. Criminal economies go far beyond trafficking in illegal drugs, and they differ significantly from war scenarios, where the warring parties and front lines are clearly defined. They have roots in the militarization, from 2007 onward, of official action to combat the drug cartels, sparking in turn an unprecedented militarization of these competing cartels, the brutalization of territorial competition, and the diversification of forces committing violence. Moreover, a great deal of terror know-how was transferred from former counterinsurgency strategies, namely terror techniques such as torture and disappearance, military equipment, weaponry, and even manpower, as former generals, soldiers, and police officers enrolled massively in organized crime. Nowadays, the notion of state crime in Mexico no longer refers to a centralized logic of political repression but rather to a fragmented state apparatus, with some segments unwilling or inefficient, while others foster open ties with organized crime based on corruption in every form.

The diversification in criminal agencies and motives entailed a significant shift in the profile of the victims. In Mexico, the overwhelming majority of victims are not killed or abducted because of their political, social, or professional activities (as activists, insurgents, or journalists), but because of their territorial or economic “availability” and vulnerability: for crossing a certain territory, for hanging out in certain areas, for doing business in certain precarious locations. The events associated worldwide with the name “Ayotzinapa”, the attack on unarmed college students by local police officers in September 2014 and the forced disappearance of 43 of them in Southern Mexico, brought the entanglements between local authorities and organized crime to the public realm.⁵

As for memorial agencies, the challenge consists then how to *make sense* of such widespread but opaque violence, which differs from the well-studied patterns of political and military violence in Latin American dictatorships or civil war settings during the 1970s and 1980s. How can extreme violence be *commemorated* when it is not confined to the recent or remote

⁵ For a detailed reconstruction and contextualization of these events, see the platform created by the research agency Forensic Architecture: <http://www.plataforma-ayotzinapa.org/>.

past, but keeps on happening in the present, as it does in contemporary Mexico, shaped by mass killings, disappearances, and deeply rooted impunity.

Despite of the obvious difficulties to do so, it is worth taking note of the fact that many of the families of massacred or disappeared people actually express a fervent desire to carry out some kind of memorial work. The volume *Memoria prematura*, edited by Alfonso Ovalle and Díaz Tovar (2019), gather valuable account of recent memorializations. It lists a group of memorial manifestations around mass killings and disappearances in the last decade, grouping them into “markers,” “monuments,” and “anti-monuments.” Whereas *marcas* are placed at the crime scene, usually outside the urban centers, the other two categories delineate a field for debate about the meaning of a memorial in public and urban life; the authors present as *monumentos* six state-managed projects while they propose to coin as *antimonumentos* a group of self-organized, temporary, and shifting installations created by affected families.

We will return to the notion of “marker” in the next section and to that of *antimonumento* in the third. For now, I would like to state the fragility of these (and other) self-organized memorials, which we might characterize also as vernacular. Their precarious nature, I argue, is symptomatic of the way Mexican society addresses the violence. The “affectedness” is only shared among those who have been affected directly, whose pain has not been socialized and has not elicited even a minimum institutional response. To them has fallen then not only the searching and the reconstructing of scattered remains, but also the impossible task of signifying the atrocities, by carrying out some kind of precarious memory work.

MEMORIAL MARKERS AT SITES OF EXTERMINATION

To explore the connection between extreme violence and memory work in contemporary Mexico, our focus must extend beyond the urban realm, the customary setting for memory sites, toward a variety of spatial typologies, ranging from suburbs to deserts, that have become crime scenes during the last decade. Our project “Landscapes in Transition”⁶ investigated

⁶The title of this project carried out during the mentioned CALAS fellowship refers to diverse notions of *transition*: One, the fact that these landscapes are being transformed into what I conceive of as “forensic landscapes”, first by extermination and then by the activities of those affected; two, we wanted to situate these landscapes within political or post-conflict scenarios of “transition” from a state of war or uncontrolled violence to the “pacification” promised by the new Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador when he took office



Fig. 14.1 Memorial Lagos de Moreno (video-still short documentary “Dato sensible”, ©Huffschmid and Diaz Tovar)

three spaces, diverse geographies that have in common a dual condition as sites of extermination and exhumation. This section takes a closer look at some of the memorial agencies at work there.

The little farmhouse lies on the edge of a highway, a few kilometers from the picturesque old town of Lagos de Moreno (see Fig. 14.1). The building is dilapidated inside with crumbling walls and broken windows; in the courtyard, ruinous walls and dried-out shrubs and trees are being overrun by new vegetation. The wall facing the road displays a colorful mural with five painted faces and a small metal plaque evoking “memory that resists” alongside a list of names. On the sign displaying the original name, *La Ley del Monte* (The Law of the Mountain), the segment “del Monte” has been blotted out and replaced by “de la verdad” (“of truth”).

in late 2018. Furthermore, these areas had been previously explored by the two of us, in separate projects, in relation to the forensic and memorial agencies of families and others; this familiarity facilitated the inclusion of new methods such as drone photography and sound recording. The resulting narratives, the essay booklet *Paisajes en Transición* and the short documentary *Dato Sensible* (Sensitive data), focus on textures, patterns, and spatial contexts, seeking to combine a sensorial approach with an analytical perspective. The booklet is accessible online: <http://www.calas.lat/publicaciones/libros-y-revistas/paisajes-en-transicion>; the international trailer of *Dato sensible*: <https://vimeo.com/512637526>.

The history of this former grocery store, used as a security base by one of the micro-cartels in the area, was reconstructed after the abduction of a group of youngsters in July 2013. The authorities, under pressure from intense family mobilization and with unusual speed, managed to detain a group of suspects, who confessed to the crime and also revealed the spot where the youngsters had been tortured, murdered, and then, according to their murderers, dissolved in acid. Some fragments were identified by DNA tests, others were not. This terrifying fact—that the bodies had been *dissolved* here—makes this site a de facto cemetery. Teresa Hernández⁷, the mother of one of the victims, describes it thus:

This is my son's grave because all of him remains here. And as I couldn't bury him, I couldn't do what people normally do, I see this as his grave. My son is here, his remains, what was left of him.

Different layers and functions are superimposed here in one place: it is the scene of a crime that has been at least partially reconstructed; it remains the repository for unidentified remains; it acquired the role of a cemetery for those who were identified, and it was turned by the families into a memorial marker.

Let us look at that process more closely. Although the families soon learned, because of a leak, what had happened there, they were not allowed onto the site for a long time on the grounds of judicial restrictions. Not until 2015 could they enter the premises and discover not only its state of abandon but also the negligence of the authorities, who had not registered all the clues and evidence present. This was the starting point for a memorial recovery process, initiated by a group of anthropologists called Reco,⁸ resulting in August 2017 in a series of activities: they began with a “sowing for life” and a collective piece *bordado* (embroidery) that transferred the trauma temporarily into the town center,⁹ followed by a memorial pilgrimage on the supposed route of the abducted youngsters, and finally by the intervention on the façade, which consisted of a mural depicting the faces of those who had been murdered and a renaming, the mentioned rewriting of the sign over the entrance. It is interesting to note that this renaming is not to be seen as a mere deletion, but as a deliberate

⁷This verbatim quote and others from people involved have been extracted from recorded conversations during a stay in Lagos de Moreno from December 6 to 8, 2019.

⁸Reco specializes in commemorations with victims of violence in Mexico (Díaz Tovar and Ovalle 2018: 233).

⁹For an analysis of this particular memorial practice, see Olalde (2016).

overwriting, a resemantization in defiance of the supposed *narco*-meaning of the original name. In a more indirect manner, the painted faces may also be read as contestation, challenging the literality of extermination and disappearance and the necro-power that claims to convert human life into nothingness. We might say that *restoring the face* is one of the primary functions of memory processes and spaces in general, just as *reconstructing the name* is one of the objectives of forensic action.

Although the families assure to be happy that the mural has not been vandalized and has been widely “respected” so far, their memorial shares its relative powerlessness with that of other sites and markers. There still is a general lack of research into the impact of any kind of memorials on social imaginaries. But it sure can be stated for this specific case, that the indignation felt by the affected families was not echoed on a mass scale in Lagos de Moreno and that their mobilizations did not arouse major public empathy. “People don’t respond, that’s how it is,” An elder man, Felipe, recalled at one of our meetings. Another activist, Rosa, endorsed this: “The town did not support us.” And at times, she adds, a people’s own families do not either: “In my house they tell me you only talk about the dead.”

At another point in the Mexican geography, the Gulf Coast, the mass grave at Colinas de Santa Fe is located a 15-minute drive from the port of Veracruz, a few minutes away from a suburban neighborhood. Here a



Fig. 14.2 Aerial image of the excavation site in Colinas de Santa Fe, Veracruz (video-still short documentary “Dato sensible”, ©Huffschmid and Diaz Tovar)

group of mothers, banded together in a collective called *Solecito*, managed to locate, after three years of self-organized excavation work, about 300 bodies buried illegally, with the aid of a search brigade that they organized and financed themselves. Without dwelling here on the dynamics of this extraordinary forensic empowerment, which I have treated extensively elsewhere,¹⁰ I shall just focus on the potential for memorial action at this site (see Fig. 14.2).

When the work finished in August 2019, a modest commemorative plaque was made by the members of the brigade. Interestingly, it carried no official logo but only an inscription that read: “In memory of all those who lay in darkness and now, with God’s bounty, are returning to the light. The *Solecito* Collective is grateful to the institutions who supported this great miracle,” a reference to the Office of the Attorney-General and the Science Division of the Federal Police.

On first sight this grateful tone may seem surprising in view of the pronounced institutional passivity that was confined to “safeguarding” the work of the brigade, as we were able to observe on numerous field visits, and also in keeping with what we had been told by groups of families in other parts of Mexico. Upon closer scrutiny, the inscription permits other readings, for it recognizes the “support” of those who, as representatives of the state, had a clear obligation not to “support” but to take charge of this clandestine graveyard. And there is subtle irony to designating such an utterly worldly process, based on self-organized forensic, physical, and financial efforts, as a “miracle.” Moreover, it is revealing that the plaque speaks on behalf of the collective, confirming its decisive engagement with the site and therefore the mother’s responsibility for the site.

Today, the plaque has disappeared, too. A few days after it was placed there by the brigade it was torn down by unknown hands. Only a few cellphone photos testify that it was ever there at all. “Incredible, but it vanished as if by magic,” we were told by Don Gonzalo, a member of the brigade.¹¹ “Perhaps someone didn’t want it, didn’t like it, maybe the owner. Maybe he was thinking that if he wanted to sell the property in future it might cause problems.” While Gonzalo attributed the aggression to monetary calculation, Tere Jiménez from the *Solecito* collective took it

¹⁰ I followed up this process, together with Jan-Holger Hennies, between April 2017 and January 2019, leading to the audiovisual narratives and essays mentioned in footnote 2.

¹¹ Colinas de Santa Fe, Veracruz, August 15, 2020.

as a communicational purpose: “By taking it down they were implicitly telling us: the impunity continues, don’t go on, don’t do this.”¹²

I suggest reading the disappearance of the plaque as an indicator for the difficulty of practicing memory, as a kind of commemorative closure, in a terrain that is quite literally contested: between those who search and excavate buried corpses and those who keep burying them secretly, due to all the enabling structures. Jiménez is fully aware of the contestedness of the terrain and of the underlying messages they receive:

If we wanted to honor them in some way with this plaque and they did this to us, obviously we are not going to put any other plaque there or anything else. How do you think we would dare? What for? What will we gain? We will come back to the same “don’t look for it”, “don’t push it.”

On this same site there is another marker, also there to record the crime but operating in a different way. It is a little *nopal* (prickly pear) that was planted a few years ago by one member of the collective, Celia Garcia, on the exact spot where they found the first body that they were able to identify and restore to a family. Celia recalls:¹³

I saw a little cactus, and I said, “this cactus is going to grow with time” and it will mark the place where the son of my friend Griselda lay. It was very moving, because I was thinking of my son too, and felt as if it was my son, and this left a sign, a marker that here someone had lain who was very much loved by a mother, who could have been me, but it was my friend.

It is a marker which goes without any discursivity, intended to mark - in a totally material sense-, one of the few certainties that could be snatched from this land of uncertainties, and at the same time recalls a bond of empathy: unerasable, but unreadable in its intimacy, decipherable only by those involved.

¹² Conversation with members of Solecito during our encounter in Veracruz, from March 13 to 15, 2020

¹³ In a WhatsApp chat on September 9, 2020.

MEMORY AS AESTHETIC IRRUPTION

Memory work might be interrogated as an interactive setting. Where do the memorial markers emerge from and whom are they addressing, that is, from which place or position do they speak and who are they trying to speak to?

In the memorial at Lagos de Moreno, the inscription derives from an initiative taken by those affected and addresses, primarily a small community of people in a similar situation or with some kind of affinity: mostly relatives, some friends, or activists wishing to express solidarity, who come to the place to celebrate some anniversary or another commemorative reunion. In Veracruz too, in the clandestine graveyard at Colinas de Santa Fe, both the commemorative plaque and the *nopal* sown at the site of the first successful excavation were placed there by people directly affected; they serve as reminders of the huge efforts they undertook, on their own behalf and for the few that might recognize themselves in the mirror of those efforts.

Hypothetically, both markers might transcend the relative inaccessibility of the physical spaces by circulating as images on digital networks. Nevertheless, I argue – as elaborated, in earlier work¹⁴–, that without an accessible spatial anchor that can lend material shape to this experience and enable visitors a get into physical contact, any site will remain as an echo without resonance in the social space and imaginary. The markers *materialize* the effort to resist erasure and in so doing they do defy the dehumanizing message of the disappearance itself. But, as stated above, they do not reach beyond the affected community.

Undoubtedly, there is an obvious need for spaces and sites where the experience of those who suffered the violence directly can be articulated and socially heard. But the “victim’s voice” cannot be taken as the only or absolute foundation of such spaces.¹⁵ First, because it is essential to recognize the situated nature of the victim’s statement, its subjectivity, but also its vulnerability and fragility. And second, because some crimes leave no

¹⁴The need to (spatialize) memories of the terror in order to have a social as well as legal impact was one of the findings of my research into urban topographies of memory in Latin America (Huffschnid 2015a: 181).

¹⁵On the complexity of the site of testimony, whose outcomes will always depend on a readiness to listen, see Jelin (2002: 79-98). The point, of course, is not to play down its veracity, but to recognize the importance of the unsayable, be it a “traumatic hole” (ibid. 96) or a self-protective silence.

testimony: massacres with no surviving witnesses, bodies found that had not been sought, victims not sought or claimed by any family.

So it is, I argue, about facilitating and broadening processes of social interaction and imagination. At this point I would like to bring in the potential of artistic intervention. If we see art as a “practice of problematization,” as Suely Rolnik suggests (Rolnik 2001: 6), a “practice of direct intervention” that seeks to “transform the world,” we must ask *where* exactly this artistic act seeks to “intervene” and *what or whom* it is trying to “change” there. Primarily the victims by helping them to “heal” or work through, and thus survive the experience? Or is it more about those (of us) who keep on living apparently untouched, shielded by some degree of amnesia?

It is always useful to keep in mind that what we tend to call memory “by no way precludes forgetting,” as Todorov puts it in his famous writings on the “abuses of memory” (Todorov 2000 [1995]: 15). Jelin (2002) also teaches us to be skeptical about the usual binary or antithesis of remembering versus forgetting, pointing out that any dictatorship will establish and install its own memorial “stories” in the public sphere (Jelin 2002: 41/42). From this angle, negationism—denying the systematic nature of a criminal state but also of contemporary violence—is not the same thing as oblivion: it is in itself a narrative. From that perspective, in the current crisis of Mexican violence, memorial projects do not so much confront the forgetting and the silence, as is often claimed. Instead, the powerful and highly efficient narrative of *no pasa nada* (“there’s nothing going on”) or *por algo será* (“there must be a reason”), the usual excuse for criminalizing victims, just replaces the figure of *subversivo*—as in social imaginaries during dictatorships—with that of *criminal*. The atrocities themselves are not suppressed, for that would be difficult under a non-dictatorial regime. Rather, they are somehow relegated to a parallel universe, by stigmatizing the victims or by trivializing the violence. So this narrative tends to normalize, dilute and fragment the social impact of the unbearable, converting it into some kind of dense and impenetrable opacity, in an attempt to naturalize our social coexistence with terror, to accept the unacceptable.

Breaking out of the opacity, the paralyzing denseness, calls for memorial work, in my opinion, that does not seek to heal or comfort, but to confront and deconstruct these narratives. That is where I propose to locate the *political* potential of art, that I understand primarily as an *aesthetic* agency, that is, different from and beyond a pedagogical purpose or

representational mediation or ethical immediacy, according to the typology described by Jacques Rancière¹⁶ (2010: 53–84) for the usual attributes assigned to art in political contexts. Instead, the “aesthetic efficacy” that Rancière (ibid. 58) highlights addresses the “coordinates of the sensible” (ibid. 66), facilitating detachment, discontinuity and an experience of dissent, as a “conflict between different sensory regimes” (ibid. 61), than Rancière finds crucial for the potential of artistic or aesthetical intervention in the political field. Its ability to produce “disruptions in the sensory fabric of perception” (ibid. 66) may lead to a reshaping of templates of perception and therefore enabling *other* ways of seeing and perceiving. This, says Rancière, means dispensing with the usual assumption of continuity between intention and effect. “Critical art is art that knows its political impact depends on aesthetic distance. It knows that its effect cannot be ensured, and that something always remains unsayable” (ibid. 84).

Understanding memorial art as a labor of deconstruction was the principal achievement of what James E. Young (1992) coined “counter-monuments.” This artistic movement originated in Germany in response to the paradoxical task of “commemorating” a genocide germinated not outside or on the margins of the nation, but within its very entrails: “How does a state incorporate its crimes against others in its national memorial landscape?” (Young 1992: 270). From the 1980s, a new generation of artists—“ethically certain of their duty to remember, but aesthetically skeptical of the assumptions underpinning traditional memorial forms” (Young 1992: 271)—began subverting memorial conventions and routines in public life.

One protagonist of that movement, the artist Horst Hoheisel, developed the particular aesthetic of counter-monuments as inverted or negative monuments. The best-known example was his provocative suggestion, submitted in 1995 in a competition to design a memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe, that the Brandenburg Gate should be ground to dust and scattered to create a “horizontal sculpture” that people could walk around. Not unexpectedly, the jury rejected this proposal. Other memorial provocations by Hoheisel were, however, implemented. His pioneering piece, in his birthplace Kassel, was the replica of a fountain in the form of an obelisk originally donated by a Jewish entrepreneur and later destroyed by the

¹⁶The cited quotes from Rancière (2010) stem from a Spanish edition that the author worked with and has translated, for the purpose of this article, into English.

Nazis. Hoheisel had the obelisk faithfully reproduced, but he inverted it: the “negative” of the sculpture was sunk to a depth of 12 meters, creating a hole instead of a monument, inviting passers-by to look down into what Young describes as “ghostly reminder of the original, now-absent monument” (Young 1992: 292).¹⁷

Another example of a counter-monument strategy that appeals to social imaginaries in public life was created by Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock in Berlin in the early 1990s. “Places of Remembrance”¹⁸ consists of 80 signs spread around a neighborhood where many Jewish families lived before the Nazis took power. On one side there is a colorful pictogram: a bench, a syringe, a football. On the other, a legal paragraph extracted from the Nuremberg Race Laws declaring that these residents are no longer allowed to sit on the bench or visit the doctor or take part in organized sports. The installation exhibits the mechanics that gradually stripped Jewish citizens of their civil rights by means of seemingly harmless codes such as bylaws or childlike drawings. This is efficiently transposed into a present-day urban setting without any mediation or explanation. The signs catch the passer-by unawares; they disconcert and elicit some form of indignation, triggering questions that I consider productively uncomfortable: How could people once accept such blatantly bizarre, absurd laws? And how would people like ourselves react when confronted by regulations of this kind in contemporary life?

The counter-monument operates as a political aesthetic strategy that challenges rather than reproduces the visual iconography and rhetoric commonly associated with public memory. It seeks by means of an aesthetic provocation to disrupt social anesthesia and to activate a cognitive as well as an affective process. And it does not do so in the more customary manner of a rhetoric of denunciation that tends to shift the blame to some *other* (the state, some abstract entity), but tries to destabilize our protective mechanisms, which allow us to carry on externalizing violence as if it belonged to some other time or place.

That is why the counter-monument is so decisively different from what in Mexico has been known, in recent years, as the *anti monumento*, usually identified by a “memory from below” (Díaz Tovar and Ovalle 2018: 11). Its prototype was erected by human rights activists on a busy boulevard

¹⁷ Interestingly, Hoheisel has taken part in memorial debates and processes in Latin America for almost two decades; see the brochure Hoheisel (2019).

¹⁸ See: <http://www.stih-schnock.de/remembrance.html>.

intersection in Mexico City in April 2015, a few months after those 43 students were disappeared from the rural Ayotzinapa college. It consists of a three-meter-high number—the 43—painted in red with a +sign. More recently, in March 2019, feminist activists placed a purple female icon, with the classical clenched fist and an inscription indicting femicide, right in front of the Palace of Fine Arts.

Undoubtedly, these sculptural installations succeed to irrupt into public life as a certain counter point to the flows to everyday life. Still, they do not seek to subvert or disrupt the usual templates associated with commemoration, or the iconography of traditional formats, be it the statue or the plaque. Instead, they reproduce these formats, but instilling them with different content, and work efficiently as a site of *denunciation*, without aiming to generate an aesthetic experience of dissent or disassociation by “shifting the boundaries that configure the consensual field of the given,” (Rancière 2010: 78). Even an abstract figure such as the oversized red number, prevents passers-by from feeling any further aesthetical or semi-otic discomfort, yet its inscription—the historical slogan “alive they took them, alive we want them back”—confirms and consolidates an unequivocal message. To be sure: It is not my purpose here to question the legitimacy or efficacy of these markers installed to disrupt the urban everyday. I simply state that they do not operate primarily by aesthetic means and therefore do not contribute to subverting our imaginary commonplaces and conventions regarding contemporary terror.

TRACE, NOT METAPHOR: MATERIALITY AND IMAGINATION

There is a widespread belief that metaphor is a powerful force in memorial work. In this last section I would like to destabilize this idea by engaging with the notion of trace, that I conceive—from a forensic perspective—as an intersection between material remains and imaginary work. I begin with what I consider to be the crucial difference between two narrative strategies: the literal and the material. Literal reproduction of terror may, of course, be justified if we think, for example, of the images of piled up bodies that were circulated when the concentration camps were liberated in 1945. The images are unbearable, impossible to look at for long or to “digest.” But in this case, behind this double visual agency—filming those bodies and circulating that footage—there was a conscient purpose to produce a visual shock: displaying the dehumanization in all its literality in the public eye, at that specific historical juncture, meant making it tangible

and extracting it from the realm of “desimagination” (Didi-Huberman 2007: 36). This specific visual maneuver did not seek to generate empathy for the victims, in the first place, but to confront a society that, for twelve long years, had agreed to *look away*.

In a setting such as Mexico today, given the showcasing of terror as spectacle and the necropolitics of disappearance, memorial or artistic agencies that operate such literality, in ethical as well as political terms, are highly problematic in my view. Reproducing the imagery generated by a dehumanizing agency implies collaborating in what we might read as *visual necropolitics*, the staging of dehumanizing power.

Very different from the literal reproduction and echoing of deliberate performances of terror is a strategy founded on *materiality*, that of bodies, of landscapes, and of people inhabiting these landscapes. My own audiovisual work, which has explored both extermination zones and the agencies that defy dehumanization (see my documentary *Persistence* and the web documentary *Forensic Landscapes*), might be conceived as a strategy of *audiovisual materialization*. By that, I do not mean to promote the fetishizing of “things” or objects, but more to avoid generalizing metaphors that tend to erase, and also trivialize, the specificity of things. Instead “materialization” refers to the focusing on the traces, material and immaterial, and textures of what actually happens in a certain place at a certain time.¹⁹

Returning to our initial question about how to do memory in the face of annihilation, I will first refer to two noteworthy artistic interventions, one in Mexico and one in Argentina, before concluding with a note on traces of extermination and their relation to memorial imagination.

The works I wanted to bring in here are different in almost every respect: one is permanent, the other ephemeral; one refers to a past event, the other to the present day; one is situated in what is sometimes referred to as an enormous graveyard, the Rio de la Plata, the other took place in urban space. But they have something in common, and that is an attempt at what we might call an *aesthetic of specificity*.

The sculpture “Reconstruction of the Portrait of Pablo Míguez”,²⁰ made by the artist Claudia Fontes for the *Parque de la Memoria* in Buenos

¹⁹I offer some insights and ideas on the process of constructing such a narrative in Huffschnid 2019a and Huffschnid 2019b.

²⁰See: <https://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/laciudad/noticias/parque-de-la-memoria-detalles-de-la-unica-obra-que-esta-en-las-aguas-del-rio-de-la>.

Aires, seems to stand on the surface of the water, near the coastline of the Rio de la Plata. The silvery silhouette, which is of course anchored to the ground, was modeled on the size of a teenager aged 14 who was disappeared by the last military junta in 1976. The statue appears as a phantom-like figure emerging from the waters, into which thousands of bodies were tossed from planes during the so-called “death flights.” But this is no ghost or phantom: it is a reference to a specific person who had a body and a name. Moreover, the figure does not wear an expression of happiness or serenity, like in the photographs of the disappeared that mothers and other relatives circulate in public space and that produce an involuntary effect of “frozen in time.” Instead, this specific boy will not show us his face at all, but turns his back on us as he looks out to the open sea.

In November 2011, the artist Laura Valencia performed *Cuenda* [“Tie”]²¹ on an inner city avenue in Mexico City. The artistic action involved wrapping a dozen statues, all representing “famous men” from Mexican history, in thick black rope, virtually *disappearing* them. Each of these wrapped figures was dedicated to a person who had been recently disappeared, whose name was indicated on strips of paper attached on site; to this end, the artist collaborated with the affected families. For two days, the memorial performance, including the somehow disconcerting wrapping up process, achieved an effective irruption in urban everyday life, prompting many small-scale conversations between passers-by and participants. One of the most intriguing details, in my perception, was that the amount of rope used depended on the estimated size and weight of the person referenced. In other words, these statues transformed into shapes were not a simple metaphor. Each one evoked a specific physical materiality, forcing us to imagine the person who had disappeared as a body, dead or alive, wounded or suffering, but human and tangible.

To return to the killing fields with which this essay began, I would suggest that the very materiality of the sites of extermination resists their conversion into a commemoration setting. Not only because of the permanence of the crime that lies beneath them, unresolved and unpunished, but for two more specific reasons. One is that these are mass graves under reconstruction, with a clear priority for forensic procedures, and where the only legitimate memorial marker seem to be the ones installed by the people actually working the site, that is, the affected families. The other reason

²¹ Online video: <https://lauravalencialozada.com/Video-CUENDA>.

is that these sites are inevitably contaminated with remains, shattered bones, and even ashes.

Zuzanna Dziuban (2017) has suggested that when human ashes take no part in any burial rite, but are just scattered—as they were across the German death camps—it is the scattering itself that disconcerts. This diffuse character that oscillates between biological substance and some kind of personhood, quite unlike bones in their extreme “thingness” or “formlessness” (ibid. 269), complicates the evocation of a human figure or person. At the same time, quoting the archaeologist Bjørnar Olsen, Dziuban proposes that ashes might be seen as a *resilient* human presence. Olsen described ashes as a form of “dust” whose uncontrolled spread subverts the totalizing purpose of annihilation. This *not-going-away-ness* can be read, says Dziuban (2017: 283), as a kind of material resistance to disappearance.

This idea—and image—of a substance that *will not leave us in peace*, that can seep through cracks and pollute everything, even the air we breathe, is certainly disconcerting. It comes close to what Young meant when he states, referring to the power of a counter-monument, that “it forces the memorial to disperse – not gather – memory” (Young 1992: 294). This horizontal spreading, transcending the verticality of time, resists fixation. And it brings me back to the minuscule fragments gathered up by the groups searching in the desert wastes of Northern Mexico. Both materialize the *not-going-away-ness* of dehumanization and, more than any memorial marker, transform these settings into permanent contact zones²² with what happened. With no explicit memorial agency to mediate, but depending on the agencies that bring them to our field of vision, they function—and potentially speak to us—as an indelible trace: *the human remains*.

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²² In its original context (Marie Louise Pratt) the term “contact zone” designates a post/colonial territory of cultural clash, overlappings and transculturalization; it has been adapted to the memorial context by Sternfeld (2011) and also Assmann (1999: 137).

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