

A RESPONSE TO
TRANSFORMING TERROR
Remembering the Soul of the World

“The Tenacity of Memory / La Tenacidad de la Memoria”

By Claudia Bernardi

“To modify the past is not only to modify a single account: it is to annul its consequences, that tend to be infinite”

“Modificar el pasado no es modificar un solo hecho: es anular sus consecuencias, que tienden a ser infinitas”

“The Other Death”, El Aleph, Jorge Luis Borges

I. *Empathy*

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 as a threat. It felt as a distant plea. I tried to ignore him. His insistent scrutiny made me turn around and face him directly as a way to challenge him.

He stepped towards 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 someone has not being seen for some time, years, or perhaps decades, one is assumed *“disappeared”*.

The man I met at the bus stop was a student at the National School of Arts where he and I studied in the late 70's. He was one year ahead of me and, indeed, he stopped seeing me because I left Argentina in 1979 during the military dictatorship, 1976-1983. Given the absence and the time of absence he had assumed over the years that my name had been added to the long list of 30,000 names of 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 that he had thought long time dead; the resemblance to the absent one could only be attributed to kinship. Thus, the standing woman alive today in this busy city of Buenos Aires could only be "her 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 we cannot change the assumptions of the past so easily or so willingly. We remain hostages of our own memory, even when what precedes us has taken the shape of a continent of sorrow.

As I remember now this episode causing me an incalculable sadness and a 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 "I", 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, by election or by circumstances, of the abuses committed during the military junta, we learn about the organized harm inflicted to 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 transformed and wounded history and of empathy.

The violations of human rights perpetrated during the military dictatorship to each and all the disappeared in Argentina caused the recognition that we can no longer live in the candor or in the chosen numbness of everyday life. A system of power, namely the self-imposed military junta, constructed a structure of repression based on torture and degradation.

And we are, to certain extend, 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 risking its future, which has been since tinted by the unavoidable repercussion 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 power in the wrong hands that, embarrassingly, lasted 8 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 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. The only way in which I see a possible establishment for a project towards 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 or genocide who undergo torture, unimaginable denigrating treatment enduring 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 will always be in absence of a vital part now remote and abandoned in the past. This rotund truth, painful and monumental, becomes the necessary acceptance on which to build the new mapping to choreograph a future.

The damage inflicted by violations of human rights is designed to cause this amputation of the self. Even in the case that the victim may survive the tortures of the flesh, 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 and take responsibility that we have witnessed and accepted by conformity a system of implanted terror.

II. *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 slightly “terrorism/ terrorist” has replaced “subversion/ subversive”. The practice of abuses of civil rights is the same. Unlawful new laws are created to justify persecution and prejudice. Perversely, this is advertised to defend democracy. The accumulated lies that intended to justify the invasion of Iraq with its non-existent weapons of mass destruction is causing that the world regards the United States as a country led by arrogant, unintelligent politicians who lack any talent in international diplomacy.

In Buenos Aires, not far from where I live, the main avenue called 9 de Julio, intersects 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 re christened “Pueblo de Irak” / “People of Iraq”. An eloquent testimony on whose side the Argentine people appear to be on. Subsequently, they ask how? Why this invasion happened?

Manufactured imposed poverty in Central America adds to the devastation produced by recent wars. Hunger and isolation forces the exiting of millions of migrating people who see their life as survival instead of having the right to discern about their own future. 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, indeed, terrorized migrated from the past into the present. The implanting of the “inconceivable” as a matter of every day life produced another success of state terror and, perhaps, the most damaging one, even beyond the annihilation of a large segment of civilians. It is 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 of analysis and criticism: a tame, isolated mass of young people incapable to access their communion, and sedated by the sentiment of impotence.

The implanted impotence may be the reason for which we still do not know how many civilians are killed daily in Iraq? Do we know that? Do we care?

General Tommy Franks, 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 John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, the number of civilians killed in Iraq is 654,965.

“...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.”

We are informed of the numbers of the dead US soldiers. It is estimated that over 2,700 men and women died since the invasion to Iraq started in March of 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 is accompanied by yet another catastrophe: the surprise that it did happen to them. The question of “why” did it happen 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 testimony to survivors of massacres in El Salvador, countless times I sat in a precarious lodging to converse with the people who had miraculously evade a massacre or to 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 plants of corn had been burned after the massacre.

They would finish their testimony with a question:

“Why this happened to us”?

III. *Memory*

Memory, personal and collective, becomes militancy in the postwar period. It is a way to reflect upon which already has managed to change forever our way to

interpret our past and, consequently, our future. It is a way to vindicate people who we have loved and who are looking at us from the other side of death, leaving us with a painful caress on our lips 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 of a mandate of annihilation.

The foam of time impregnating the soul.

In a cold afternoon of 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 towards a frail democracy there was the 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 to an open cavity of the earth. When she emerged, she was bringing two shattered craniums. The fractures were the evidences of how they had died, with a gunshot wound inflicted at very short distance, execution stile. The average age of the two individuals whose craniums she was collecting could have been estimated (plus/ minus) 24 years of age.

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 of culture.

In recent years, buildings that once functioned as clandestine centers of detention during the military dictatorship in Argentina have been reclaimed by the relatives of the disappeared, by people who survived the imprisonment, by human rights Non Governmental 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 the "Pozo de Rosario"/ "The Hole of Rosario" that 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 3,000 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 downwards where the blind folded prisoners were deposited for unpredictable length of time. They were tortured regularly, they were mortified at all times and eventually, groups of people were selected to be “transported”, euphemism that always meant, execution.

I walked down the stairs that 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 what 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, provably 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 myself for ever.

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 a private and public entity. Documents, photographs, literature and art narrate the history of the *disappeared* allowing a sculpted liaison between the vacant generation and we all, standing from 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 to address genocide.
Art is a communal tool for listening.

We are listening.

IV. *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 recount is filled with details. Rufina Amaya Márquez, the sole survivor of the massacre at El Mozote, saw her community being divided in 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 from a miracle, was left to bring the truth of an inconceivable massacre of civilian population to us. Over 1,000 people perished in the massacre at El Mozote on December 11 of 1981. The exhumation took place in 1992 inside a 35 square meters 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 12, with an average age of 6 years old.

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 location of the found human remains, associated objects and ballistic evidence.

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 presence of this child robbed from life and future.

Memory, consciousness, the truth.
 The last victim of genocide is truth.
 Killing truth is not a last time 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.

V. Art

*“Una red de miradas
 mantiene unido al mundo
 no lo deja caerse...”*

*“A net of gazing eyes
 keeps the world united
 it does not allow it to fall...”*

“Poesía Vertical/ Vertical Poetry”, Roberto Juarroz.

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 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 re build a torn apart region where the legacy of the Salvadoran civil war, 1980-1992, 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 their political or religious affiliation. The curricula and public art projects are debated upon and designed by the community. The most popular public art interventions have taken the form of murals that narrate, as open history books, the life 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 legacy of the war and by the recent and unprecedented poverty that has been imposed as result of the erosion of agriculture and the destruction of national industry. While the Salvadoran

currency is the US dollar since 2001, the every day reality shows that an average of 450 Salvadorans become exiles resigned to undergo unimaginable personal and legal risks in order to find work in foreign lands, mostly in the US.

The School of Art and Open Studio of Perquin is affected by the poverty and the limitation of the region. We intend and, so far we have succeeded, in utilizing the skills of artmaking to build and reconstruct community liaisons. It would be imprudent to think that art can remedy tragedies. It would be untrue to suggest that art can amend conflicts, but art as “*a net of gazing eyes*” may prove to be a pivotal tool to exercise and re establish trust.

“Art” and “Genocide” belong to fundamental opposite paradigms. Genocide (*geno*, Greek : origin; *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, fatigues, losses, pain and hope, finding in the proposition of beauty its vindication. Art may not mean, necessarily, an improvement but art will assist in the recapitulation of the suffering endured, transformed and 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 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 us 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 it emerged the collegial idea for the theme of the mural. They agreed that the carnage of the 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 drawing of the original church and convent of a community that had lived in harmony as far 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 the victim children and their ages, starting at three days old until twelve years of age, were etched on ceramic tiles that crown the south wall mural of the church.

On December 9, 2006, during the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the massacre at El Mozote the children alive today chose a name to recite, to name and never 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 can. They know they mustn't.

Quique was a combatant during the war. He is small and silent. He lost relatives during the war including his son, age 18, two months before the Peace Accords were signed. Quique was one of the FMLN combatants who entered El Mozote to bury "pieces of people", 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 chopped. 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.

In a recent conversation, with caution as he always exercises, he told me:

"I once changed the "cuma" for an M16. Now I am changing a rifle for a loom."

(* **"cuma"**: machete used for agriculture in El Salvador)

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 cost.

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

VI. *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 as a wing of stone.

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

We simply ought to try.

Claudia Bernardi
Buenos Aires, February 2007.

