

# HMC



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# Heritage, Memory and Conflict Journal (HMC)

## Scope

The **Journal of Heritage, Memory and Conflict (HMC)** is an international, peer-reviewed, diamond open access Journal that critically analyses the tangible and intangible remnants, traces and spaces of the past in the present, as well as the remaking of pasts into heritage and memory, including processes of appropriations and restitutions, significations and musealization and mediatization. This interdisciplinary journal addresses the dynamics of memory and forgetting, as well as the politics of trauma, mourning and reconciliation, identity, nationalism and ethnicity, heritage preservation and restoration, material culture, conservation and management, conflict archaeology, dark tourism, diaspora and post-colonial memory, terrascapes, migration, borders, and the mediated re-enactments of conflicted pasts.

## Aim

The Journal of Heritage, Memory and Conflict (HMC) covers the fields of memory studies, cultural studies, museum studies, arts and media and performative studies, postcolonial studies, ethnology, Holocaust and genocide studies, conflict and identity studies, archaeology, material culture and landscapes, conservation and restoration, cultural, public and oral history, critical and digital heritage studies. The journal will offer a publishing opportunity for early stage and senior academic researchers in the interdisciplinary fields of Heritage, Memory, Conflict in and beyond Europe. By crossing academic, artistic and professional boundaries, the journal aims to offer an interdisciplinary space for the rich scholarship in these fields, and to contribute to a better understanding of the extent to which memory sites and discourses operate as vehicles at local, national and transnational levels.

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## Spaces of memory<sup>1</sup>

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In the last decade, museums, memorials and monuments have become the battlefield for competing and conflicting visions of the past and the hegemonic or counter memories of the so-called “difficult heritage” or “traumatic heritage”. Far from being mere spaces of musealization that freeze and fix dominant narratives of the past, spaces of memory are increasingly turning into sites of negotiations and reconfigurations of meaning in which social and political identities are debated, strengthened, or weakened in reference to the traumatic experiences of the past which they “represent”. Yet, what does it mean to spatially represent a (traumatic) memory, and what is a space of memory?

In expanding and, simultaneously, problematizing Pierre Nora’s (Nora 1996) category of *lieu de mémoire*, the way we think of spaces of memory aims at an in-depth examination of the peculiar yet specific ways of re-thinking the nexus between space and memory: how do we elaborate, activate, and make visible spaces for memory? This question points to the dynamic construction that underlines the production and connection of spatiality and memory, as well as to the coexistence of a plurality of meanings and experiences that characterize spaces of memory. Hence, when we refer to spaces of memory we think of both actual and material places and sites of commemoration and memorialization, as well as sets of more immaterial semiotic constructions, representing spaces that elaborate and interrogate the (traumatic) past through ritual practices, documentaries, and artistic performance. Spaces of memory thus include museums, former deten-

tion centers and camps, monuments, and memorials, some of which are indexically linked to past traumas<sup>2</sup>. This is so because those spaces of memory stand in the very place where violence and extermination occurred, and any intervention or artistic practice which investigates the multiple versions and their articulations that we can produce of the past, as well as the multiple ways of forming, interpreting, and experiencing the presence of the past when the latter assumes a spatial and relational dimension.

As Neyla Graciela Pardo Abril aptly writes in her article, “Art and Memory: Magdalenas por el Cauca”, both the spatiality and rationality of spaces of memory is represented in the understanding of spaces of memory as:

[...] series of existential relations that guarantee dialogues and interactions related not only to strategies for context transformation, but also those ways of representation of violent events that define the condition of “victim”. *In spaces of memory meanings of location, territory, areas of influence, ethical and political responsibilities, power relationships, and resistance exercises are recovered.* In spaces of memory, the knowledge linked to traumatic events is appropriated and socialized.” (Pardo Abril, this issue, our italics).

All the articles in this issue delve into the multi-layered dimension of the nexus between spaces, spatiality, memories, and traumas that consist of, and, at the same

1 This open access special journal issue is generously funded by the EU research project, H2020-MSCA-RISE-2017 “SPEME- Questioning Traumatic Heritage: Spaces of Memory in Europe, Argentina, Colombia” (H2020 project number 778044). This publication is one of the deliverables of SPEME’s dedicated research on spaces of memory and traumatic heritages and their transformations.

2 We refer here to the linguistic category of ‘indexicality’ as reformulated by Patrizia Violi in her book *Landscapes of Memory* (Violi 2017) to express the direct link that exists between certain spaces and the signs that have been devised to build it. Violi investigates in particular the case in which a monument, or a memorial, is located exactly at the place where a massacre or a traumatic event took place, thus expressing a direct link with that place, increasing its significance as a “trauma site”. In linguistics, “indexical” is used to mean an expression whose interpretation depends on the context and varies as the contexts varies.

time, put into a productive tension. A more concrete, literal, and stricter acceptance of a “space of memory”, as explained by Alejandra Naftal and Lars Ebert in the two opening articles of this issue, is that of space as the product of signifying practices, as a discursive and textual device through which the concept of ‘memory’ is worked through neither as an abstract nor fixed and codified system of knowledge.

As Ihab Saloul argues in his book, *Catastrophe and Exile in the Modern Palestinian Imagination: Telling Memories*, “memory is a volatile concept. The work of memory in all its forms, from historical essays to personal reminiscences, legal testimonies, and imaginative recreations, is not only slippery but also inherently contradictory. On the one hand, memory posits a past reality that is recalled outside the person’s subjectivity. Yet, on the other hand, memory requires a narrator who is equipped with conventional cultural filters of generational distance, age and gender, class, and political affiliations, on whose authority the truth of the past can be revealed. Memories are narrated by someone in the present but nonetheless we still use them as authoritative sources of historical knowledge. Moreover, memories are always mediated, even in the flashes of so-called involuntary memory. They are complex constructions in which our present experience (individual and collective) conjoins with images that are collected by the mind from all manner of sources, including from our inner worlds. Furthermore, we are constantly confronted with images of the past, whether we actively observe them or not. Memory moves from the world of smell, sensations, habits, and images to the outer world via cultural forms such as myths, folktales, and popular narratives in the ways that we talk about traditions, national consciousness, and identities. The work of memory, then, must address itself not only to questions of what happened but also to how we know things, whose voices we hear, and where silences persist”. (Saloul 2012: 4–6) Through the semiotic and cultural lens that we adopt here, memory is envisaged as an active force field of competing discourses within which individual and collective acts of remembrance are constantly re-negotiated, re-elaborated and recounted in often conflictual and contested narratives. It is a conception of memory not as an irrevocably deposited and defined notion but as an active and transformative force that reshapes the past as much as the future, as it interrogates the present, its politics and the subject positions that constitute forms and communities of remembrance and memory transmission. A multidimensional and multi-layered memory is, for that matter, what animates the trans-disciplinary broadening field of Heritage and Memory Studies, whose most cited and recognized authors are, not by chance, constantly referred to by the authors of this special issue.<sup>3</sup>

The shared assumption of this special issue as well as of the SPEME project research, is that for memory to be active and to have a transformative impact it must not be “musealized” and frozen in given and unquestioned forms of representation and communication. Instead, memory with its various forms of spatialization, exhibition and transmission, must reach out to new kinds of social actors, and must develop new forms of interaction with the political, social, and cultural contexts within which it is negotiated and promote innovative forms of expression. Here we come to another nexus that helps us to further problematize the category of spaces of memory as a set of dynamic processes of meaning construction and re-configuration, especially when exploring the impact of artistic practices within a memory site as a way of building a space of memory. Nowadays, spaces of memory do not certainly entertain an accidental relationship with different forms of trauma and artistic expressions. Rather they become sites of temporary exhibitions, theatrical and artistic performances, and, in some more radical cases, spaces of memory are themselves turned into works of art, making the boundaries between memorial commemoration and aesthetic experience ever more blurred. While many sites consecrated to the conservation and transmission of memory resort to art, contemporary artists seem to constantly re-elaborate and aesthetically transform several of the topics linked to (traumatic) memory. The works of Christian Boltanski and of other artists such as Doris Salcedo, Regina José Galindo, Ana Mendieta, Anna Maria Maiolino and Teresa Margolles, are but few seminal examples in this context.

Moreover, the resort to artistic expressions in memorial spaces and contexts is an attempt to answer one of the main and all-encompassing questions regarding these spaces: What do we make of places that oftentimes have been the stage of mass violence, of suffering and deaths; of places that bear the burden of collective lacerations, civil wars and conflicts between communities and actors belonging to the same country and the same culture? This question is debated in several articles in this issue in which artistic practices provide a possible alternative to the paralyzing opposition between an obsessive repetition of the traumatic event and an oblivion aimed at erasing all its traces, offering a way to think through, evoke or represent “what happened” in a symbolic form. A trauma is indeed not only the wounding of bodies and flesh; it is, first and foremost, the breaking of symbolic connections, the impossibility to integrate and balance cognitive, emotional, and symbolic elements of our experiences. Within this frame, artistic practices and expressions may gain an imaginative function able to reconstruct the lost connections, and to suggest new images and alternative thinking paradigms to reduce the

3 Obviously, it is impossible to summarize here the main categories and theories of the interdisciplinary field of heritage and memory studies, animated by a series of reflections that are partly shared and partly debated. See, for example, the work of authors such as Maurice Halbwachs, Aleida and Jan Assmann, Tzevan Todorov, Marianne Hirsch, Michael Rothberg, Georges Didi-Huberman, Ann Rigney and many others.



“hermeneutic gaps” that separate the past from the ways we have access to it in the present. The many thoughts and reflections advanced by the authors of this issue revolve around the premises discussed so far, as in the first two essays which are written by two professionals who work in museums and archives and who take us *inside* two emblematic spaces of Memory in Argentina (Naftal) and in the Netherlands (Ebert), while the third essay (Leoni and Borsari) immediately forces us to face all the contemporary challenges posed by what we could call the “enterprise” of memory making and cultural heritage in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as an endeavor defined by the constant tension between remembering and forgetting, gripped between an excess of memory and an excess of oblivion, whereby what is needed is often either to reactivate “dormant memories” or unmemorable, indescribable, ones. What is also at stake is how to retrace intentionally erased traces as was the case with Holocaust memories in Europe, and with the tragedy of the desaparecidos in Argentina (see also Tornay et al in this issue) or, else, with traces that have withered away due to the passing of time and the death of direct witnesses, while many other memories are celebrated with redundancy.

In addition, the authors in this issue do not limit themselves to a mere architectonical or urbanistic description of the logic and the narratives at play in a space of memory and the many signs it displays and exhibits. Instead, the authors also discuss the practices developed and envisaged around and within a place that is thus turned into a meaningful space; often time bottom-up practices following the paradigm of an active and transformative memory as discussed above.

Some practices are also the outcomes of a programmed artistic research project, as the one analyzed in the articles of Pardo Abril's and Lizel Tornay et al. Others are the result of bottom-up movements of political resistance and activism, as in the case of the Hungarian monuments investigated by Reka Deim, where the direct intervention on a site of memory aims at contesting and challenging the government's official version of the recent national past. As such, several causes for reflections emerge, starting from the already mentioned role of art as an *ethical role* that appeals to artistic practices which do not take for granted what is true and appropriate, or what is wrong and inappropriate, but rather take a stand to re-establish a direct involvement and an intimate contact with the social, political and cultural dimension of any politics of memory and its spaces as spaces of trans-generational and trans-cultural transmission and convergences. Thus, the role of direct, physical experience as it gets *embodied in memory* practices and the spaces they transform, defies the idea of spaces of memory as a form of the archive neither as a stack of documents nor as a series of already established and closed narratives or as a fixed set of unchangeable symbols. On the contrary, memory becomes what is lived and experienced through a subject who is and, at the same time has, a body; a subject who is both a product of sensa-

tion and feelings and a member of a community thought of as a space of belonging, of constant negotiations, conflicts, and acknowledgments. To focus on experience means also to look at all these dimensions, to reflect upon a memory that is embodied in and through the very relationship between spaces and beings that produce, cross, and transform them. At stake here are also *memory affects and emotions*, such as nostalgia, or indignation and resentment when it comes to traumatic pasts, but also hope as a “structure of feeling” intended to question how one can remember without having hope for the future. Finally, what is repeatedly underlined in the essays in this issue is the topic of *memory and intergenerational transmission*. In this context, Marianne Hirsch's well-known concept of ‘postmemory’ (Hirsch 2012) is put under scrutiny not so much for its lack of relevance, but because, at times, it proves to be too encompassing and generalized. As such, the reader will not find theories of postmemory in this issue but rather concrete and actual examples of inter-generational transmission of diverse traumatic pasts such as the Argentinian “dirty war” and state terrorism; the European Holocaust in the Netherlands and Italy, as well as the armed conflict that has been lacerating Colombia for more than fifty years. Therefore, the questions we must ask are: how do we attract new and young generations to spaces of memory? How do we talk about and recount a (traumatic) past to subjects who are neither familiar with this past nor lived or experienced it? How do we develop alternative forms of knowledge that can trigger new ways of thinking around the often-overused slogan, “nunca mas” (never again), as a deeply felt commitment through narratives and images that unpack and balance discussions of concepts such as ‘guilt’, ‘complicity’, ‘responsibility’ and the ‘victim-perpetrator’ dualities and paradigms? How do we make something visible that has become invisible, of which no more traces are left?

It would be overly ambitious to claim that this special issue offers definitive answers to all these questions. Rather, the issue aims at re-formulating these questions, thus adding clarity and, at the same time, raising doubts on the many implications that surround the intertwining of space, memory, and artistic practices by giving concrete examples of how memory works, and of how spaces of memory may trigger relevant processes of identification, socialization, working through and possible forms of reconciliation. As we have attempted to argue, it is not only appropriate, but also necessary, to find new ways of thinking about the transmission of knowledge of the past to new generations, and to overcome the silences, the repressions, and the embarrassments that the traumas of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have produced. Furthermore, it is urgent to reflect on *active and participatory* processes of memorialization and heritagization to bring back to the center of any discussion on memory building the importance of enhancing the sense of *response and responsibility* of both individuals and local, national, and transnational communities with respect to both “what happened” in the past, and to what *will* happen.

What follows is a short itinerary among the articles that compose this special issue. Alejandra Naftal's article presents us with a concrete and exemplary case of a site of memory located in Buenos Aires – the *ESMA-Space for Memory and for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights* where in 2015 the *ESMA Museum and Site of Memory* which Naftal directs was inaugurated. In this space of memory, the former *Casino de los Oficiales* which is now turned into a museum, during the Argentine military dictatorship thousands of people were tortured, imprisoned and from there “prepared” for the flights of death in which prisoners were thrown out from planes to drown in the sea. Naftal recounts the many steps and the heated debates that preceded the opening of the museum, which is a space that represents concrete legal evidence of the crimes that have been perpetrated by the military Junta, and asks how should the former detention centers be treated? Most importantly, how do we conserve the traces and how do we exhibit them? And when facing traumatic events encompassing the torture and disappearance of hundreds of people, how do we turn this site of suffering, horror, and tragedy into a space for memory transmission and the preservation of testimonies for future generations? These questions haunt every attempt to “musealize” a trauma site, starting from how to differentiate acts and practices of documentation and preservation from the audience interpretative, and sometimes very diverse, reactions. In her article, Naftal engages with these debates and discusses how to conceptualize effective and respectful modes of representation of a recent traumatic experience that is still part of the living memory of a large part of Argentine society.

The article by Lars Ebert deals with another concrete case of a space of memory, that is of Herengracht 401 (H401) located in Amsterdam, the former house of a hermetic community of artists and scholars that was funded during the years of the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands (1940–1945) and that was offered as a hiding place for a small community of Jews, some of whom managed to survive. Ebert follows the evolution and transformation of a place that witnessed different traumas and argues that artistic research and practices continue to play an equally, yet different, and surely not confined and hermetic role, today. This is so because the space of H401 has become an archive engaging with artists who, during their periods of residence and thanks to their sensitivity and experience, try to fill the “hermeneutic gap” that still separates the present from the past that is constantly re-invented and fictionalized without losing its power and its force, yet departing from any pre-conceived ideas of truth and authenticity.

In its two distinct yet dialogic parts, Giovanni Leoni and Andrea Borsari's article starts with a critique of memory tools and aids, and the paradoxes produced by the excesses of memorialization on one hand, and of the tendency towards oblivion, on the other. Leoni and Borsari explore new forms of remembrance that mix the

experiential dimension and the urban public sphere, and hence, open up new pathways for the reactivation of dormant memories, counter-monumental strategies and uncoded amnesic traces. Moreover, by highlighting how the experience of political and racial deportation during World War II drastically changed the idea of memorial architecture, the article elaborates on the specificity of architecture as an art craft that not only represents but also builds places which do not only recount experiences but rather *generate* them. The article thus proposes to develop a new conception of “concentratory” architecture, along with its constructing or deconstructing potentialities that can rethink the relationship between the architectural work and the existing surroundings, and to bring the body and experience back to the center of the project.

Pardo Abril's article starts from a broader conception of spaces of memory whereby audiovisual representations of memory can become spaces of remembering and healing. The author analyzes a video production that is closely linked to a physical space, namely the Cauca River, where various hideous crimes were perpetrated between 1986 and 1994, within the framework of the yet-to-be-resolved armed conflict in Colombia. The video not only reproduces, but also participates in what became a ritual of memory on the river, thanks to the organization of an exhibition and procession that mobilized many of the people who struggled and suffered in that place. Through a discursive analysis of the audio-visual restitution of this performance of, and on, memory, the article explores the narratives, the semantic nuclei and the deep underlining values marking the difficult re-elaboration of the memory of this very recent, and for some still ongoing, trauma.

The article by Lizel Tornay et al focuses on the transmission of memory to the new and young generations. Choosing not to resort to the concept of ‘post-memory’, the article focuses on two heritage sites linked to the traumatic memory of the dictatorship (‘the Park for Memory and Human Rights’ and the “El Olimpo” memory site, a former Clandestine Detention Center) by looking at two artistic projects hosted by these two spaces and designed specifically for a young audience prompted to creatively “interpret” and represent them. Thanks to these two examples, the article reflects on how the recourse to an artistic reworking (be it with posters and drawings or with the use of poetry) produced by some of the youngest visitors of the Park of Memory and the “El Olimpo” may, on the one hand, keep the traumatic memory alive by highlighting lived and concrete aspects of these places, and, on the other, how it can stimulate further and broader reflections that go beyond the single traumatic event of the state terrorism, opening up to a more general discourse on the ongoing local and global violation of human rights.

Finally, Reka Deim's article examines the top-down dialectic of Hungarian national memory politics, taking into consideration, on one hand, the national poli-

cies that either impose, rewrite, or celebrate a certain vision of homeland history and public memory, and on the other hand, the practices of civil resistance to national memory expressed through forms of grassroots activism. The memory on which Deim reflects is that of Hungary during its periods of transition from the country's independence to its membership of the Soviet bloc, to the gaining of national autonomy from communism and the so-called "Third Republic" (1989-present), up to the establishment of Victor Urban's national-conservative government which many people consider either as authoritarian or as a government with 'undemocratic' features. According to Deim, the coexistence of several contrasting memories, expressed in symbolic monuments and museums that have triggered numerous demonstrations and bottom-up practices of resistance and opposition around them, has not always had effective and productive results. Moreover, the so-called "multidirectional memories" (Rothberg 2009) don't always have a positive outcome but rather often fail to build a collective and shared awareness. For Deim, multidirectional memories have an element of paradoxicality because while they manage to render different visions of the past explicit, they nevertheless increase conflict and internal turmoil that may even solicit the drive to silence them.

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# Constant consensus building: art and conflict in the ESMA museum and site of memory

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## Abstract

This article describes the history, development and social role of the ESMA Museum and Site of Memory, which is located on the grounds of the former clandestine centre for detention, torture and extermination, in the intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories of the Argentinian dictatorship. The project is characterised by the cumulative effort of artistic expression, public debate, conflict and tension. Through the presentation of different artistic installations and plays, the article explains the focal function of art practices in spaces of memory that are strongly linked to a traumatic past, as well as how undertaking these practices can lead to the establishment of consensus.

## Key Words

ESMA Museum and Site of Memory, State Terror and Human Rights Violations, Performing Arts and Conflict, Victimhood and Public Debate

## Introduction

Between 1976 and 1983, Argentina endured a violent civic-military dictatorship that implemented state terrorism. According to current estimations, the military regime was responsible for more than 600 illegal detention sites across Argentina, 30000 disappeared detainees and thousands of political prisoners and people forced into exile. It also systematically stole children who were born to imprisoned women.

ESMA (Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada) is located on a 17-hectare area in the city of Buenos Aires. It was a teaching institution for officers and NCOs of the Argentine Navy. During the dictatorship, the place operated as one of the most notorious concentration camps in the country. At ESMA, nearly 5000 men and women were detained and disappeared. Many of them were political and social activists, members of revolutionary organisations, workers, professionals, artists, entire families and members of the clergy. The list of crimes committed at ESMA is long, amongst them are kidnapping, torture and homicide.

The buildings where the clandestine centre operated is a design typical of the architecture from this area from the 1930s. It has three floors in the shape of a comb, sitting on a total area of 5,500 m<sup>2</sup>. Each area had a specific function during the years of repression. There were sections where torture, confinement and slave labour took place. However, the compound also comprised sections where repression agents operated, officers' bedrooms and a weekend house for the director and his family.

At the end of the dictatorship in 1983, the Argentine Navy surrendered ESMA to the newly-democratic state. The buildings were gutted of furnishings and left in a condition of total abandonment. Survivors' testimonies are the prevailing source of evidence to make sense of what took place at ESMA.

How should such former detention centres be treated now? This question has been asked time and again throughout post-dictatorship democracy. Responses have varied according to changing historical context and the collective construction of memories in the present that have worked to continually reframe it. Today, the ESMA Museum and Site of Memory serves a dual purpose. One

the one hand, it provides material evidence in the ongoing trials for human rights violations committed here. On the other hand, ESMA's current cause and strategy have initiated a transformation of this site of horror and tragedy, into a space for memory transmission and the preservation of testimonies for future generations.

## The creative process

In 2012, a multi-disciplinary team of professionals was formed to begin transforming ESMA into a Museum and Site of Memory. The new team's expertise comprised of museologists, architects, artists, researchers, journalists, designers, audio-visual specialists, computer scientists, poets and writers. In the preceding two years, the team had produced around two-hundred versions of the site's design and content. These proposals were presented to diverse sections of society, including victims and their families and friends. From this early stage on, ESMA's principle of interpreting and including diverse perspectives of the past guided all our efforts.

Public discourse about the treatment of sites connected with torture and abuse by the military junta has been varied and often contentious. At present, many sites have been established as spaces for memory, while at the same time, they are associated with traumatic violence and loss by their neighbouring communities and society as a whole. The discourse on what position such spaces should occupy is particularly shaped by the engagement between academics and museal specialists and those directly impacted by violence. Some have called for the demolition of clandestine prisons and torture centres, while others have regarded these spaces as spaces of mourning and emphasised their material emptiness.

The ESMA was established through dialogic engagement with all viewpoints on these questions. The result is the product of long-term facilitation of exchange of thoughts. While discussion has been a paramount element to the achievement of consensus, the ESMA was also made through close examination of a broad range of national and international archives, including documentation of legal cases, academic texts, news articles, literary and artistic works. Above all else, the testimonies of survivors have been central to the site's creation.

The ESMA Museum and Site of Memory was conceived for different audiences. The space needed to provide appropriate communication about this period for those visitors who were alive during the dictatorship and later generations. We also needed to provide resources that would meet the needs of local visitors, visitors from other parts of the country, as well as from abroad. The difficulty then, was to challenge this broad range of perspectives to actively engage in the painful and traumatic events that took place here. Our cause is summarised as the creation of a space in which 'those who are comfortable feel uncomfortable and those uncomfortable feel comfortable'. Our central purpose is to challenge those

visitors who might have previously been indifferent and complacent. Our intention is that such visitors will engage anew in the past and also to become aware of the continuing need to remember this past in the present.

It was important that the museum's exhibitions and use of language were appropriate and do not resort to 'low blows' – melancholic or overt messaging that might distract or put off visitors. Language chosen for interpretation and information is consistently respectful and sober. We include distinct perspectives of events throughout to provide visitors with different viewpoints. It is our belief, for instance, that providing only details of traumatic events prevents any mechanism of identification and reproach – disabling reflection and meaningful action.

We have had to remain conscious of the fact that the past we share with visitors is very recent. Many relatives of the disappeared are alive, as well as survivors of violence that took place here. For this reason, the Museum is also a place of repair and reflection to living victims. Moreover however, the building in which we work continues to provide material evidence for ongoing legal processes against perpetrators of the violence that took place here. For this reason, it is vitally important that nothing about the building be altered or modified. This seeming limitation was added to by the fact that we had received a building that was completely emptied. The empty building and the stories of what happened there told by survivors formed our main message to the public.

What are the arguments against preserving a clandestine centre of imprisonment and torture? This question was a driving force in the process leading to the Museum's creation. Reconstruction of events, for instance, was a key ethical debate in our presentations to stakeholders. At the end of a presentation of the project for human rights organisation Madres de Plaza de Mayo, for instance, I recall that one member told us: "I want the people who visit the site to suffer the same as my son suffered. Let them feel the pain, the cold, the torture". Her words were followed by an intense silence amongst the group gathered to hear our presentation. While such a visitor experience would be unethical, we understood through such statements the expectation resting on the project to provide insight and defend this contentious past for survivors and victims' families.

For this reason, we reconstructed events through the testimonies of survivors as a foundation to interpreting these spaces. It was our conviction that we provide as many testimonies as possible for the same object or space, in order that visitors can piece together a whole picture of events from subjective viewpoints.

## The museum

As it was a Museum, we understood that we represented in the social imaginary a place of truth and an authorised voice. It was, therefore, essential that we distinguished between historical documents and interpretations of the present.



**Figure 1.** Museum façade. (ESMA Museum and Site of Memory).

The Museum consists of two museal devices in order to distinguish between historical fact and interpretation:

1. *Traditional Historiographic Interventions:* Panels featuring graphic prints, photos, documentary images, journalistic sources and testimonies. These devices provide historic information about different subjects from the military dictatorship.
2. *Contemporary Experiential Interventions:* Used in order to appeal to an affective reception amongst visitors. Methods included here work to stimulate curiosity and engagement about violent events and their symbolic import. These interventions, based on contemporary museographic devices, are made up of mapping, holograms, lighting, sounds and temperatures. Their objective is to transmit and approximate “the experience” in this place, both in the most aberrant aspects of the repressive dynamics and in the resistance of the people detained there.

Despite our working with these two categories of project design, there were still moments of tension and challenge in the process of reaching agreements over what the final site would represent. These challenges arose frequently from the highly personal nature of exhibition materials and the ongoing trauma of violence experienced by victim’s relatives. Particularly problematic in some instances was the exhibition of photographs of victims

that have also been used in public demonstrations and legal processes. For instance, a mother of a victim requested that a photograph of her daughter be removed from the Museum, because she did not want her daughter to be figuratively in the space where she was tortured and murdered. We respected this wish and it led to our thinking about how best to exhibit such photographs while respecting the views of family members of victims.

We designed a glass panel that would be printed with the photographs of victims, that is graphically dotted in order to trace but obscure their facial features and reveal them from certain angles. Displayed towards the entrance to the building, the panel generates a sense of scale of the number of victims. Secondly, the viewer is able to see the faces of victims from afar, but is unable to make out their features when while walking towards the panel.

On another occasion, the grandmother of a victim told us: “Art, art!!! It’s the best way to transmit this horrible experience to young people.” (Hebbe de Bonafini, Presidenta de la Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo; August 2013; La Plata; Argentina). Bonafini’s phrase guided us in the Museum’s creative process. One of the first rooms visitors go through is the old entertainment hall for Navy officers. We do not have any testimonies from prisoners about this place. As it is a spot that has a lighter symbolic weight, we decided to use it to introduce visitors to the story they will go through both rationally and emotionally. We set up a screening of a film about the military dic-





**Figure 2.** Museum façade. Detail. (ESMA Museum and Site of Memory).



**Figure 3.** Context room. (ESMA Museum and Site of Memory).

tatorship that features archive footage providing context about the politics, economics and culture that led to the coup of 24 March 1976, the resistance to the dictatorship and the fight of human rights organisations and other sectors of society in the search for memory, truth and justice. The film reflects the way in which we curators wanted to use artistic interpretations in the Museum. We use art as a communicative and transmissive tool.

The third floor was the area of captivity, torture and slave labour. Along with the basement, these areas were the most complex places in the building due to their spatiality and their high historical and symbolic value. The visitor enters this section through the main staircase and through a narrow hallway.

Along the third floor, we installed a wooden walkway that serves several purposes. It preserves the original





**Figure 4.** Context room. (ESMA Museum and Site of Memory).

floor, it guides the visitor and it hides the technical installations since we could not carry out any alterations to the building. The walkway guides the visitor closer and further away from the exhibits to evoke changing emotions. We decided to make the walkway out of wood, which is a warm, soft element. It helps the visitor get closer to the experience, but we also wanted to provide room for reflection and distance. Therefore, just as we did not rebuild a concentration camp, we were not going to build anything aesthetically unappealing. We employed beauty as an ethical and aesthetic concept that would contribute to our goal of transmitting a legacy and a memory.

The “El Dorado” room originally was a ceremonial hall. During the military regime, the Intelligence Centre was established here. Here, kidnappings were planned, the information obtained from prisoners in torture sessions was analysed and decisions about their life and death were made. This is where the files containing the information of each of the detainees and their political organisations were kept. The dictatorship’s propaganda campaigns were also developed here.

The El Dorado room is the last room the visitor enters and we developed an audio-visual intervention about ongoing trials of perpetrators. They are portrayed in photographs taken from military files of the dictatorship, which were then replaced by photos of them in court. These pictures are leaning on the floor. This is an allegory of the action carried out on 24 March 2004, the anniversary of the 1976 coup d’état, a date Argentina established as a na-

tional day of remembrance. On this day, President Néstor Kirchner took down the picture of the repressor Videla from the wall of the Military College.

## Art at ESMA

Five years after it opened, the ESMA Museum and Site of Memory has established itself as a place of active participation. To this day, it has received more than 400,000 visitors from diverse backgrounds. They include high school students, university students, tourists, officials, politicians and representatives from other countries.

Initially, the curators had a different vision considering the role of artistic expression in the exhibition. However, we adapted our ideas accordingly to achieve consensus. This happened with the basement of the building, which is perhaps the place with the greatest symbolic load, since it was the area where brutal torture was inflicted and also the last place the detainees saw before the “transfers”, a euphemism used to describe the ultimate fate of the prisoners. In that basement, prisoners selected for death flights were lined up, stripped naked and given an injection of pentothal to numb them. They were then loaded on to trucks and taken to military airports. There, they were moved into aeroplanes and finally thrown alive into the sea.

In this dark place, we intended to put a large installation that would take up almost all the space, a rock, suspended from the ceiling, opposed to another rock suspended on the





**Figure 5.** Third floor, Capucha. (ESMA Museum and Site of Memory).



**Figure 6.** Third floor, Capucha (ESMA Museum and Site of Memory).





Figure 7. “Dorado” room. (ESMA Museum and Site of Memory).

floor. Between them, we wanted to place a rainfall of water that came out from 30,000 pores and project the only photos we have of this place during the dictatorship taken by a former detainee. However, we were not able to reach consensus about this installation as it was unacceptable to several survivors and victim families. This exemplifies that the tensions between artistic languages and the vision of the victims can be contradictory and ambivalent. Therefore, we say that the Museum is an ongoing project. This is fruitful for the connection between the educational and emotional realms that are present in the stories we wish to tell.

I want to comment on some concrete experiences of artistic articulation, where these tensions were strong. One of the proposals of the project was to apply our focus on consensus to explore new channels and languages to help engage audiences and transmit what happened. This resulted in heated and fruitful exchanges between academics, the Museum and the artists. We treated various questions, such as what was at stake for each stakeholder? When and how should they intervene? How should we combine the artistic, academic and institutional visions on curating?

## Performing arts

We were curious to find out whether we could integrate the performing arts and innovative curatorial practices to create a dialogue with art galleries and other sites of

memory to come up with new questions. In recent years, ESMA developed diverse projects to explore languages that help broaden the audiences beyond the communities around the direct victims. In the month of November 2019, the Museum featured the Memory and Performance Art series.

ESMA hosted a performance for the first time, namely Araceli Arreche's *The Voices of the River*. It was performed by a collaboration of graduates of the Metropolitan School of Dramatic Arts (EMAD) and the University of San Martín (UNSAM). The play describes some of the darkest aspects of Argentina's history through a fictional encounter in the depths of the Río de la Plata between Leopoldo Lugones, Roberto Arlt and the French nun and death flight victim Alice Domon. *The Voices of the River* seeks to challenge viewers to re-think through art how the past continues to resonate in our present. Director Martín Paglione wrote to the Museum director's office in his proposal for the play how he intends to combine the locality of ESMA with the content of the play by integrating a tour through the Museum's spaces. Based on this proposal, we worked together for two months during which the Museum specified its requirements of not altering any area of the exhibition and maintaining an atmosphere of respect and lightness.

We aim to use the space, based on its history and its connection with the play. We will begin by welcoming the public at the reception with some opening words. We





Figure 8. Voices of the River (ESMA Museum and Site of Memory).

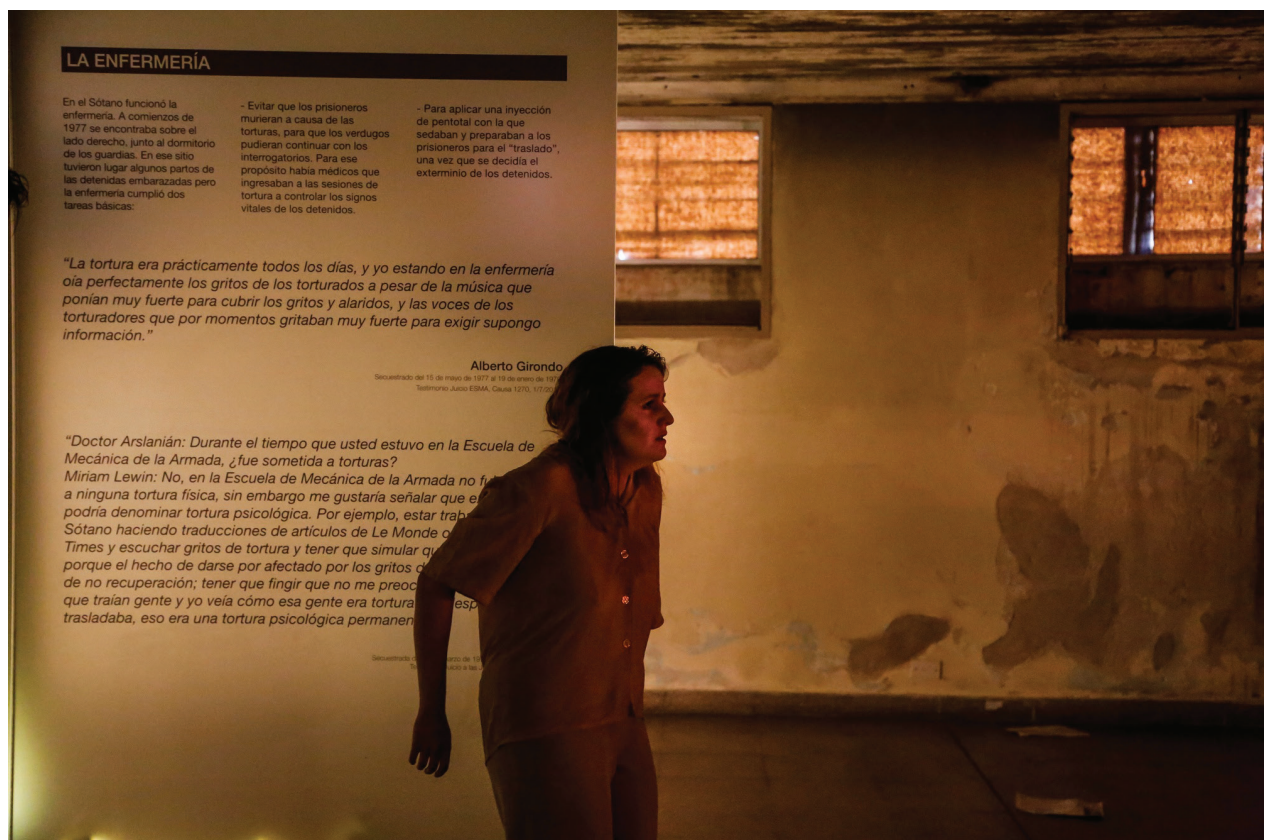


Figure 9. Voices of the River (ESMA Museum and Site of Memory).





**Figure 10.** The Impossible Scene (ESMA Museum and Site of Memory).

will move towards the historical context, where the public will settle on the seats and the floor to watch the full screening. Once the video is over, the first act of the play begins. Then we will move on to the ESMA History sector, where the tour continues and we will proceed to the basement. There will be another section of the play. We will immediately go up to the golden room, where the rest of the play is performed (Martín Paglione, November 2019; Buenos Aires, Argentina).

In that same month, two other plays were performed at ESMA. *The Impossible Scene* was performed by Polish visual artist and theatre director Wojtek Ziemilski in collaboration with Argentine playwright Ruben Szuchmacher, during the artist's stay at the ESMA Museum and Site of Memory as part of the research project *Staging Difficult Pasts* of the University of London. The performance examines how theatres and museums influence the public memory of difficult pasts through situating them in narrated scenes. This was an international exchange programme between artists, curators and cultural institutions from Poland, Lithuania, Spain, Argentina and the UK. The second performance was the play *Adjournment. A Guide for Audiences of Crimes Against Humanity*, by writer Félix Bruzzone Y and French-Argentine attorney, actress and writer Mónica Zwaig. This play tells the story of an unexpected romance in the context of legal trials for crimes against humanity.

The first performance took place at the “Admiral’s House” room, an area that functioned as a weekend family retreat for the head of the clandestine centre. Ziemilski’s play raised questions about the perpetrators. Do they cry? Do they regret it? Can they cry? Question about the soldiers’ minds that made up the armed forces were difficult to accommodate in the Museum. Their voices have mostly been eliminated from the public sphere and many are currently in prison. However, the institution they were part of has never issued an institutional apology for their crimes and their voices are still inaudible in places like the Museum. Here, their representation is limited to their role in the repression and the crimes they committed. The artists were trying to find another way to access their stories through making them human. Ziemilski stated during the premiere:

It seemed to me that there was something crucial in the idea of being able to imagine something that is an Other. What is there? A human Other who does not correspond to the idea of being human we have. That is why I wanted to represent what exists on the other side to open something else. It was easy for me to do this while I was away, but when I got here, the story had its weight, its difficulties. When I started working, it became heavier, more difficult. Each step, each day, each decision became more difficult. I tried to establish a certain contact with the public, an empathy. Being here, in this space, I did not find another way to approach the subject. Afraid of you,



**Figure 11.** Voices of the River (ESMA Museum and Site of Memory).



**Figure 12.** Voices of the River (ESMA Museum and Site of Memory).





**Figure 13.** Adjournment (ESMA Museum and Site of Memory).



**Figure 14.** Adjournment (ESMA Museum and Site of Memory).

of your thoughts and feelings. (November 2019, Buenos Aires, Argentina)

Ziemilski spent three weeks in Argentina and he spent a year studying the local characteristics of state terrorism. He asked questions and thought of different proposals for the play. Should he name the perpetrators or not? Who were they, anyway. Actor Rubén Schumajer recalled that it is a subject that is very close to him. The son of a Polish immigrant, his cousins were killed in World War II concentration camps and he has relatives who disappeared at ESMA. He said: "I usually refuse to represent these themes. It is the first time I have done it, but having done this play, having to play a perpetrator who tries to cry at the hand of Wojtek (Ziemilski) was a very important experience that I am grateful for." (Noviembre 2019, Buenos Aires, Argentina)

The second performance, *Adjournment*, took place at the Golden Room, home of the ESMA Task Force's intelligence headquarters, which today features an audio-visual installation that describes the Argentine path to justice, from 1983 to this day. The play is a testimony to a real meeting between Felix and Mónica, two people who speak different languages and yet agreed on the fact that it is possible to talk about trials for crimes against humanity without biting one's lips or crying. *Adjournment* proposes a tour through the delirious, incomprehensible and absurd areas which the judicial body imprints on the darkest events of recent history.

Monica Zwaig said about the experience of doing the play in what used to be one of the most notorious concentration camps: "There was laughter, and I felt strange about hearing so many laughs here. But I think I kind of liked it." (November 2019) Félix Bruzzone added: "We had an expectation of starting very low, not just because we were doing it in this place, but because the audience came from another tour, already charged, but curiously enough, they quickly responded to our play. I was very surprised that it happened here. It seems good to me that we were able to carry out the work this way and that this space can welcome this type of pieces." (November 2019)

## Conclusion

To what extent do art performances allow us to develop new ways of transmitting stories? We have been asking such questions ever since the first scenes were staged at ESMA and also posed them publicly. We are going to evaluate together with the project researchers, the various sectors associated with the search for consensus as we always do to find out whether this is effective or good or something that enables us to continue thinking and exploring new languages to re-think about what happened, facing the need to re-evaluate ourselves to be – and to become – better. Through these activities we managed to engage audiences who had never been near the Museum, mostly artists and drama students.

A few days after these events, some very intense debates took place amongst the members of the Museum's Advisory Board, which is made up of representatives from human rights organisations and victims. One of the most important opinions again questioned the scope of what should be done in the Museum. These were mostly issues related to artistic manifestations, some of them were almost turning the site into a sacred temple whose only objective was to remember and pay tribute to the disappeared detainees of ESMA. This debate continues because memory is a collective construction of the present that is in a constantly dynamic state.

To be able to participate in Project SPEME and share academic and professional experiences with our colleagues from Amsterdam, Bogotá, Bologna and Buenos Aires is an important contribution to the Museum and to these debates. This article has provided a professional perspective on the challenges the ESMA Museum and Site of Memory faced in representing Argentina's recent history. Through extensive debates with artists, relatives of victims and the public, ESMA strove to establish consensus about how the past should be represented here. The interior of the museum itself, but also performances organised here and artistic installations are geared towards unsettling accepted truths about the military dictatorship and stimulate reconciliation.



# Trauma and allegory: truthfulness in fact and fiction. Making a private archive productive

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## Abstract

Herengracht 401 (H401), until 2019 known as *Castrum Peregrini*, represents the complex and intriguing history of a hermetic community of artists and scholars in Amsterdam which was formed in the years of the Nazi occupation of The Netherlands, 1940–1945. This article attempts to take stock on what we have learned in these ten years about the history of the place, as an indicator of memory politics. It also reflects on the hermeneutic gap of what we cannot know of H401's history as we lack experiential knowledge of eyewitnesses. As the author argues below, the site of H401 shows how the 'hermeneutic gap' can offer a chance to make an archive, such as in the case of 'the house on Herengracht 401', productive and meaningful through the artistic practice of research.

## Key Words

Herengracht 401 (H401), Second World War, archive, hermeneutic gap, art-based research

## Introduction

Herengracht 401 (H401), until 2019 known as *Castrum Peregrini*, represents the complex and intriguing history of a hermetic community of artists and scholars in Amsterdam which was formed in the years of the Nazi occupation of The Netherlands, 1940–1945. Managed by a private foundation, the house was transformed into a cultural centre in the past ten years. H401's activities use the historic fabric of the house on Herengracht 401 as an archive for an interdisciplinary and thematically driven programme wherein the relationship between memory and art plays a central role. Kathy Carbone reminds us of the nature and role of the archive after the archival turn and argues that, although historically embedded, the archive is 'not about the past but about the future of the past and is a vital source for inquiry as well as a subject of inquiry that can inspire new ways of envisioning and living in the world.' (Carbone 2020). It is exactly in this sense

that H401 focuses on their historic fabric as a source to think about the societies we live in today and how these can become more inclusive. It is with this ambition that H401 engages in (artistic-) research projects locally and internationally, as well as networks concerning actual debates around spaces of memory, traumatic heritage, conflict and the politics of the past in the present.<sup>1</sup> This article attempts to take stock on what we have learned in these ten years about the history of the place, as an indicator of memory politics. It also reflects on the hermeneutic gap of what we cannot know of H401's history as we lack experiential knowledge of eyewitnesses. As we will argue below, the site of H401 shows how the 'hermeneutic gap' can offer a chance to make an archive, such as in the case of 'the house on Herengracht 401', productive and meaningful through the artistic practice of research.

The history of Herengracht 401 can be divided into different periods during and after WWII. During the war, the danger from the outside world and the sheer survival

<sup>1</sup> On Fanaticism FIT (EU Grundtvig funded, 2009–2011), TimeCase – Culture is Memory in Action (EU Multilateral project, 20012–2014), European Academy of Participation (EU Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership 20015–2017), Heritage Contact Zone (EU Creative Europe, 2018–2020), SPEME – Spaces of memory (EU Horizon 2020, 2018–2022)



**Figure 1.** The Building Herengracht 401.

was a constituting feature of the group. After the war, the group needed internalisation of the group-defining forces that used to come from the outside to stay together as an alternative community. The war-time trauma was sublimated with a cult to maintain the feeling of togetherness and belonging only to bring back the pain much later in another shape and form.<sup>2</sup> With critical distance in time and space, some eyewitnesses were able to identify their pain as trauma. The complexity of the history in which it is rooted is so dense, that distance in time and culture makes it difficult to understand and empathetically connect with this history in a straightforward, unmediated way.

The concept of the allegory helps to reflect on the possibilities and limitations of artistic interventions and research to create such access to a past that otherwise stays locked by simplified images of trauma or heroism. Some examples of

artistic interrogation of the H401 archive showcase the potential of creative work with historical objects that enables fiction as a point of identification for a broad audience. The focus on ‘form’ (material artistic expression) complements the focus on content (conceptual artistic expression), theory and truth, which is the prevailing paradigm in the contemporary art world and its moral consensus (Pfaller 2020).

The artists and their work presented here do not lean on a preconceived truth or theory and, instead, value material, fiction and the unknown. Their works reveal a relevance of heritage and memory that would otherwise stay out of reach for the audience. They suggest that art and creative research can be free of any purpose, such as healing of trauma or showing truth. Their transformative power unfolds by having no other goal than creating meaning through their own artistic methods. Through this research practice, the artist builds an autonomous relationship to the historic fabric. These artworks, like any good fiction, create moments of identification and empathy for the viewer. They encourage the viewer to adopt a truthful view of history by applying the lens of their own life experience. My personal situation can fuel a unique and critical bond with history by questioning my own thinking and thereby developing a critical perspective on my own position. The role of arts here could be called ‘ethical’, supporting the viewers to question their own ability to take responsibility for their views and actions, as opposed to a prefabricated moralistic answer to the problems of today. Whereas contemporary conceptual art can sometimes fall prey to a moralistic and predetermined reading of the past, the artists presented here put a focus on form (as opposed to concept) and object (as opposed to theory) as ingredients for an open-ended research process to connect with an incomprehensible past. The ‘auto-fiction’ they produce, the stories that reflect their own history or world view, encourage the viewer to form their own views in a similarly autonomous and empathetic way, as a critical self-investigation.

## What we seem to know

### (Auto-)biographical-, anthropological- and justice driven history writing

In the autumn of 1999, I entered Herengracht 401 in Amsterdam for the first time. The labyrinth of rooms full of objects and stories fascinated me as it fascinates everyone

<sup>2</sup> Traumatic experiences of the group hidden at Herengracht 401 in Amsterdam could be described under various viewpoints. Persecution had forced two Jewish young men underground, F.W. Buri and C.V. Bock. Both have published memories in which they give accounts of raids, hunger, illness, loss of beloved ones (cf. Claus Victor Bock, *Untergetaucht unter Freunden*. Amsterdam 1985). In addition, the ones who organised the hiding, Wolfgang Frommel and Gisèle van Waterschoot van der Gracht had both engaged in a love affair with Buri, which almost broken the groups bond. The traumatic impact of this for all involved was described by Buri himself in: *Ich gab Dir die Fackel im Sprunge*, Berlin 2009 and by Gisèle in letters to friends quoted in Annet Mooij, *Het Eeuw van Gisèle*, Amsterdam 2018. Central aspects of the group-defining cult were ritual poetry readings and more generally reading out loud during communal meals, commemorative get-togethers, publishing memory books and the journal *Castrum Peregrini*; pedagogical friendships formed a particular aspect that has been described by Frank Ligtvoet (Vrij Nederland 2017) as toxic, by others as existentially positive experiences. Buri notes that Frommel did not want to miss the war-time community: “Wenn es nach Wolfgang Wesen und Vorstellung gegangen wäre, hätte alles so bleiben können, wie es war” (cf. Wolfgang Frommel, Friedrich W. Buri, *Briefwechsel 1933–1984*, ed. Stephan Bischoff, Göttingen 2017, p.39).



**Figure 2.** Gisèle in her studio on the top floor. 1960s.

who enters the building. Back then, the centre of this hidden universe was undoubtedly the painter Gisèle (1912–2013), who loved to show visitors around and tell stories of a world of friendship and art. The way Gisèle looked at things was full of wonder and she could spark a sense of amazement of the beauty of small things. I learned that Gisèle and two other old men living in the house at that time, Manuel Goldschmidt and Claus Bock, were connected by their joint experience of war, persecution and survival on one floor of the house during the Nazi occupation of The Netherlands. The central figure in their stories from the past was the parlour scholar Wolfgang Frommel (1902–1986), whom they adored.

The stories of Frommel and Gisèle were somehow glorious. Although they also told stories of hunger, police raids and loss in war and concentration camps, they always ended in the wondrous survival through reading or writing poetry and, if the real story had not ended well, then at least that loss was not in vain. The memory of someone who had not survived, such as Vincent Weyand (1921–1945), who died in the concentration camp Buchenwald, was celebrated like that of a saint. Trauma seemingly did not exist. The horrors of the past were, instead, sublimated in rituals of commemoration (e.g. poetry readings) and by awarding meaning to suffering and death (e.g. memory books). Similar to ancient Greek tragedies, there was no space for trauma, only for tragedy, pain and glory, gods and heroes, poetry and friendship. The post-war generation of friends around Frommel and Gisèle also internalised these stories that functioned as a

founding and binding mythology of their own community, as an alternative form of belonging in a post-war society of petty-bourgeois values, but also later, as an alternative to the alternatives that came forth from the student movement.

When the last Jewish hider from the war, Claus Bock, died in 2008, the literary magazine that was published by the survivors under the name *Castrum Peregrini* since 1951, ceased to exist. Its director since 1999, Michael Defuster, had formulated the mission of turning the hermetic and anachronistic activities of a community that had dissolved (with the exception of a few individuals and Gisèle who had survived them all) into outward orientated activities that would make a relevant contribution to contemporary society. This did not go without a struggle against the remains of the old circle that perceived opening up as betrayal.<sup>3</sup> However, with patience and persistence and the building up of a new network of individuals and institutional collaborators, Defuster managed the change, which I witnessed as a colleague and friend.

The first public interdisciplinary thematic year programme took shape in 2009. The programme of exhibitions, symposia, publications, theatre etc. tried to shed light on themes like fanaticism, freedom, friendship and cultural memory. The activities reflected upon the themes on a meta level so as to allow for discussions of broad relevance. The heroic history of the house provided narrative anchors towards topical issues. Its interiors, presented as a carefully curated archive of deceased heroes, provided conversation pieces from which to approach social problems of today.

The main source of narratives were the few witnesses still alive or texts that had been published by the community in their magazine *Castrum Peregrini*. Therefore, we felt the growing need for a critically distanced history-writing and, in 2011, took the initiative to have a biography written of Gisèle's life. We found Annet Mooij, who, in 2012, started to scrutinise the existing archives (Gisèle's own archive is vast) and interview eye-witnesses. The biography was finally published in September 2018 (Mooij 2018). The long and intensive research period had a cathartic side effect. It served as a framework for the post-war generation in which they reflected on their own experiences. Those ranged from a gay history perspective (Keilson-Lauritz 2013), to a first critically distanced albeit empathic ego-document (Haverkorn 2013), the editing of source material (Bischoff 2017), to accounts of sexual abuse (Ligtvoet 2017). The biography of Mooij incorporated these accounts into the life story of Gisèle. The one-dimensional, heroic story, as it was told from within the Herengracht community before, had now grown into a multivocal complex of stories that ranged from heroic to traumatic.<sup>4</sup> We started to realise that the

<sup>3</sup> This struggle came with disputes, intrigues and schisms, but also, amongst others, a lawsuit of many years between the foundation *Castrum Peregrini* and the legal heir of Wolfgang Frommel, former director Manuel Goldschmidt and his legal heirs, the Wolf van Cassel Stichting about the archive that had been taken from the foundations premises as a reaction to the new direction.

<sup>4</sup> The shocking accounts of sexual abuse triggered the constitution of an independent investigation commissioned by *Castrum Peregrini* and chaired by retired judge Frans Bauduin. It resulted in an extensive report published at <http://h401.org/wp-content/uploads/CASTRUMONDERZOEK.pdf>



materiality of the house as an archive represented the ambiguity of heroes, perpetrators and victims next to one another, sometimes even in personal union.<sup>5</sup> This newly-discovered polyphony or even cacophony seemed to represent a *condition humaine* in all its consequences. It provided for a radically new and challenging frame for the cultural activities of H401.<sup>6</sup>

## What we long to know: bridging the hermeneutic gap

### Making the past relevant for today through creativity and fiction

The thematic approach of the H401 activities in the last ten years was distinctly interdisciplinary with a central role for artistic work rooted in the house as an archive. However, as this archive was staged and curated by its late inhabitants, to access the original meaning behind it, a certain knowledge of their lives and their times, a certain experience or a method of deconstruction was necessary.

Walter Benjamin wrote in *On the Concept of History* (Benjamin 1980): “Because the image of the past is lost in each new moment that does not recognize its presence as one of its own concerns.” In theology, this problem is addressed within the field of ‘hermeneutics’, a process of working out the meaning and significance of historic texts. In terms of the Bible, ‘hermeneutics’ usually refers to the way we read and ‘apply’ the biblical message to our modern situation, how we take an ancient text and hear what it is saying to us, here and now.

The ‘hermeneutical gap’ in a heritage situation refers to everything that separates us from understanding the meaning of a heritage object. Amongst the original users, authors or readers ‘there and then’ and us ‘here and now’, a gap has opened up that prevents us from understanding it like ‘there and then’ and also from applying it ‘here and now’. Unless we have the right set of ‘hermeneutical principles’ or scientific methods, we may find this gap rather difficult to bridge. We need to piece a puzzle of endless amounts of information to experience the world as it was back then. Unintentionally, Gisèle had touched upon hermeneutics when she noted in her diary:

“We all carry the Castrum story in us. It has settled in the corners of memory, taken various shapes that we bring to the surface from time to time, from this we can piece a puzzle. And then it will gain a face and others will look at it as one does at a portrait. But everyone will see something else” (Pigaht 2016).

Additionally, in the spirit of Benjamin, we could fail to see anything meaningful at all, other than an abstraction or an illusion as the understanding of an object from back then is fundamentally different today in the context of the world we live in. In addition to the time factor, there is, of course, also the gap between cultural realms. We may understand a bit of the problem with the simple image of a glass of water. In The Netherlands, its significance is fundamentally different than in the Sahara. The need for hermeneutics will be even more important in a combination of time and space distance.

Methodological foundations for hermeneutics of the arts have been provided by, amongst others, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960) and Ernst Gombrich (1960). According to Gadamer, the understanding of an artwork depends on temporality, which also applies to human knowledge and experience. Gombrich similarly elaborates what is commonly expressed with ‘the eye of the beholder’, that only through our own life context and knowledge we can develop an understanding of what is in front of us. Contemporary art theory quite rightly claims to have overcome this binary model of truth and illusion, in the concept of artistic research as a ‘laboratory without a protocol’ (Slager 2015). The question, according to Slager (2015), is whether the artist as a researcher today can be a spectator of history, with his or her laboratories being archives, bridging the hermeneutic gap with artistic tools.

“Science is certainty, research is uncertainty. Science is supposed to be cold, straight and detached, research is warm, involving and risky. Science puts an end to the vagaries of human disputes, research fuels controversies by more controversies. Science produces objectivity by escaping as much as possible from the shackles of ideology, passions and emotions, research feeds on all those as so many handles to render familiar new objects of enquiry” (Latour 1998).

5 Gilad Hirschberger reminds us that “for members of perpetrator groups, collective trauma represents an identity threat (Branscombe et al. 1999), as it creates tension between the desire to view the group in a positive light (Tajfel and Turner 1979) and the acknowledgment of severe moral transgressions in its past. The inability to reconcile the character of the group in the present with its character in the past may motivate group members, primarily high identifiers, to perceive an historical discontinuity of the group that serves to distance present group members from past offenders (Roth et al. 2017). Sometimes, this discontinuity is reflected in the motivation to close the door on history and never look back (Imhoff et al. 2017). One of the 10 recommendations of the report of the Comission Bauduin was to clear the historic war-time apartment from the traces of Frommel so as to make a clear cut with the past. This would nevertheless have been exactly what Gilad describes as ‘closing the door on history’. On the contrary, we felt our responsibility to keep the door open and also make the negative aspects of the past part of our conversations today in order to hold the tension between positive and negative aspects of the past. As a personal note, I would add that growing up in Germany has made me aware that identification with the perpetrators – without any direct personal responsibility for the atrocities of the Nazis – brings a responsibility to remember as part of the ‘never again’ that formed our value system. I believe the same is valid for sites of memory, such as H401.

6 Please refer to Lars Ebert, <https://www.roots-routes.org/the-moralistic-turn-working-through-trauma-in-a-climate-of-outrage-the-case-study-of-castrum-peregrini-by-lars-ebert/>

To which Sarat Maharaj (2004) adds by describing the specificities of artistic research as “spasmic, interdisciplinary probes, haphazard cognitive investigations, dissipating interaction and imaginary archiving.” “That form of research cannot be channelled through rigid academic-scientific guidelines dealing with generalisation, duplication and quantification, since it engages in the unique, the qualitative, the particular and the local” (Slager 2015).

The ‘how’, or the method of the researching artist engaging in memory fabrics and archives, remains a matter of concern as the viewer demands accountability. Christopher Frayling (1997) notes that “artistic research does not begin with a predetermined set of questions or assumptions, but arises from the particular situations or contexts being investigated.” I would still argue that the awareness of a hermeneutic gap of our situation and ideological point of departure is often lacking, especially in the moral consensus of the contemporary art world. Looking at heritage with any kind of ideological or dogmatic perspective can be limiting, such as the one we see in the majority of, for instance, Documenta visitors. Art often is a self-directed appreciation of theory or cultural critique to confirm one’s own truth (Pfaller 2020). Their references (Butler, Deleuze etc.) underpin the politically correct message. As part of that system and a Documenta visitor myself, I do not write this without self-critique and the acknowledgement of the need for autonomous ethical thinking, instead of a moral compass that we seem to find in theory-based art. In its bold presence, one may easily overlook the investigative power of its counterpart, namely material-based art and fiction to bridge the hermeneutic gap. As an alternative concept to truth- and theory-based practices, artistic research that takes material, form and fiction seriously can offer truthfulness in creativity, if this creative research is truthful in the sense of being radical in its open-endedness and autonomy.

## The allegorical impulse

### Examples of the researching artist in the archive of H401

These developments of the last years have fuelled the impression, mainly in rich capitalist societies, that art is mainly about revealing often morally superior truth. Philosophers, such as Badiou, Derrida and Feyerabend, have characterised art as a practice of truth. However, art is also a practice of appearance, of fiction, deception and lie (Demeester 2018). Fiction is the centre of our human being. Without fiction, we cannot broaden our thinking

nor handle the complexity of our world. To put it in the famous words of Picasso: “We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realise truth” (Picasso 1923). Contemporary art practice often seems to forget that the one field fundamentally occupied by art is that of the appearance, the sparkle and that, without that sparkle, there is no truth (Pfaller 2020). The case studies of artistic works below support the thesis of Robert Pfaller (2020) that the material work of art (notwithstanding its conceptual backbones) is the only instrument of artists that makes it possible to discover something that they did not know or did not intend at the outset of the process of creative enquiry (Pfaller 2020). Cultural Studies and other fields of theory, as a point of departure for artistic research, on the other hand, hold the risk to produce art which merely illustrates what the artist and the viewer knew before they saw the artwork. It, therefore, broadens the hermeneutic gap.

When turning to fiction, material and form as an attempt to bridge the hermeneutic gap, the figure of the allegory comes to mind. The term, from Latin *allegoria*, is rooted in the Greek *ἀλληγορία*, composed of *ἄλλος*, ‘other’ and *ἀγορεύω* ‘to speak in the assembly, the *ἀγορά*’. It means speaking through others, letting others speak, putting the meaning-making outside of oneself. In the ancient world, it was a literary figure and a method of interpretation to bridge the hermeneutic gap. Allegorical reading would reveal a meaning of historic texts for a yet-to-come future. Arnisa Zeqo (2019) reminds us of the allegorical impulse embodied in certain practices of artists that problematise the activity of reference. In the hand of those artists, images become something ‘other’. Allegorist artists do not restore an original meaning; on the contrary, they make evident that there never was one. Meaning is added or altered in hindsight. This can be read in analogy to trauma following Ihab Saloul’s conceptualisation of the term as not the painful, horrific or stressful event as such that automatically turns into a traumatic experience. Only, a posteriori, a trauma develops due to the lack of meaning and the feeling of useless suffering or unexpected, unfair and ungrounded loss.<sup>7</sup>

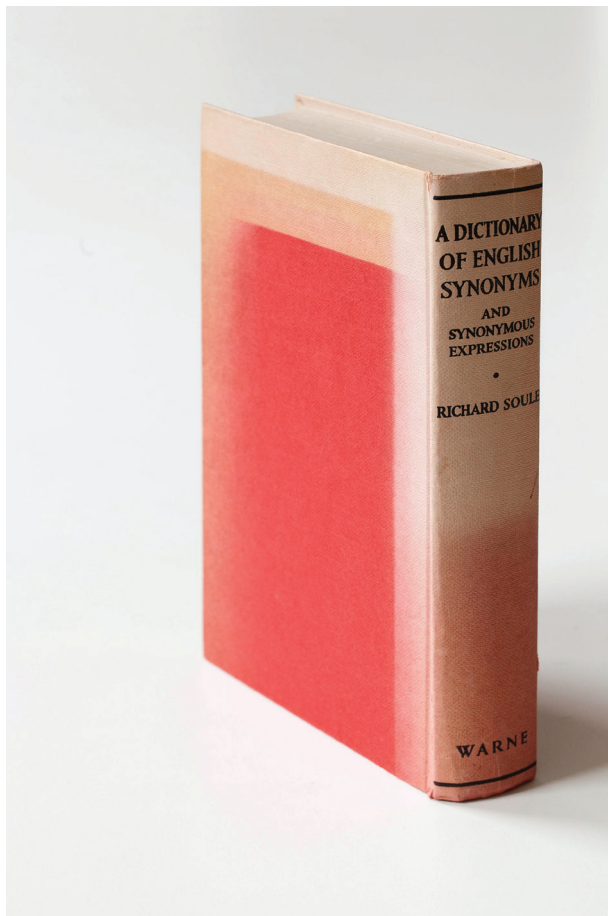
The following artists have worked for a shorter or a longer period at H401 and have used its stories and its materiality as an archive. They made it productive through their artistic use of allegories or ‘research’ in the meaning described above to create a moment of truthfulness in which we can identify aspects of our own biography, our own longing, our own doubts and the urge to connect with the past as a compass for navigating our own lives.

<sup>7</sup> The Viennese psychiatrist and Auschwitz survivor Viktor Frankl wrote in *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1959): “[...] any attempt to restore a man’s inner strength in the camp had first to succeed in showing him some future goal. Nietzsche’s words, “He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how,” could be the guiding motto for all psychotherapeutic and psychohygienic efforts [...] Whenever there was an opportunity for it, one had to give them a why—an aim—for their lives, in order to strengthen them to bear the terrible how [...]”. More commonly, trauma is seen to be caused by an event that breaks through our protective psychological shield, it overwhelms us and our ability to process its impression. See Ihab Saloul (2012, 30–35).



## Amie Dicke

Amie Dicke's participation in the first exhibition at H401 (then still *Castrum Peregrini*), AURA, curated by Michiel van Iersel, marked the beginning of a six-year long artistic engagement with the stories and the material heritage at Herengracht 401. Dicke was fascinated by what disappeared through material decay, by that which is hidden in plain sight in interiors and archives or that which reveals itself through being erased by her own hands. Dicke herself used the term the 'unmade', which integrates two interconnected opposites and can be understood with the image of a palimpsest: by adding a layer, another one disappears, by erasing a layer an unexpected one appears (Dicke 2011).



**Figure 3.** Amie Dicke from the series *Important Souv'nirs*, 2016.

Her first work for the AURA exhibition was the site-specific *Claustrophobic*. The exhibition marked a *rite de passage* from the 'old' and inward-looking *Castrum Peregrini*, mainly publishing a magazine, to the newly-defined cultural activities that were directed towards the world. Van Iersel had asked a group of artists to reflect on what it means to transform a place into something new and whether the aura that was felt there would pertain

when 're-produced', with a reference to Walter Benjamin.<sup>8</sup> Dicke was fascinated by the apartment in which, in 2008, Claus Victor Bock had died. The last Jewish survivor from the war-time period of *Castrum Peregrini* had come to live at Herengracht 401 again after retiring. Before the apartment was about to be dismantled, Dicke set out to cast a death mask over the interior before it disappeared and applied a layer of agricultural plastic over the furniture, covering and wrapping everything in the room. Only then was the apartment emptied and left a transparent plastic shape of what was no longer there, reflecting the essence or aura of a place, an 'unmade' space.

Later, Dicke investigated the former hiding apartment, which is until today largely unchanged from what it was during the years of occupation. With a reference to *The Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard, she set out to realise a site-specific work with golden emergency blankets (Bachelard 1958). The last inhabitant of the apartment was Manuel Goldschmidt, the life-time companion of Frommel. Dicke started to wrap furniture, books and objects so as to save them, just like victims of an accident are saved by emergency blankets from the destructive influences of weather or environment. She soon undid this wrapping exercise as the 'poetics' of the space had helped her understand the actual possibility for her creative intervention, the cracks and the in-between spaces of the historic interior. There was no need for drawing attention to any kind of emergency or the decay, the threatening loss of matter. Instead, the overlooked little slots between carpet and wall, the cracks in the furniture and plaster of the ceiling, the worm holes in a table, those were the overlooked parts of the interior, maybe the ones that held the genuine being and uniqueness of the space. Dicke meticulously and with utter care filled those mostly tiny spaces with gold foil. Upon entering the apartment, nothing was visible. However, just like eyes have to adjust to darkness, they had to adjust to this subtle grid of golden fault lines that defined the space anew and showed the substance matter of overlooked absence.

In a third stage of Dicke's engagement with the house, she turned to the apartment and the studio of Gisèle. Supported by the Mondrian Fund, she worked there for a year. Like an archaeologist, she documented details of the interiors that revealed original colours, when, for instance, frames were removed from their place at the wall. Dust functioned like the colour of a silk print, revealing the artwork when the screen is taken off the paper. She collected images from the archive, by having them photographed in the same way she did with the material structures of the furniture, the curtains, tapestry, upholstery, books and the endless numbers of *objects trouvée*. Through this act of archiving archival material and rearranging it in her artwork, Dicke follows the above sketched allegorical impulse and turned these images into something 'other', exactly not to restore an original meaning, but from her

<sup>8</sup> In his essay *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, first published in Paris 1936, Walter Benjamin argues that an artwork loses its aura once reproduced.

artistic perspective, to create meaning in hindsight. It is exactly in this act that fiction bridges the hermeneutic gap.

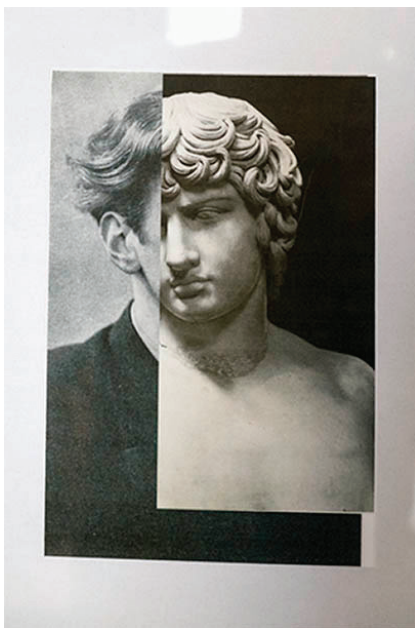
Another focus of this work is on the little notes that Gisèle had used more often as she grew older in order to compensate for the loss of her own memory and for labeling all kinds of objects, such as an empty video tape with the words “nothing to see here”. It is exactly where we commonly assume that nothing is to be seen that Dicke makes us see. She established a photographic account on a website and ultimately made a final selection for an art book, arranging her finds like an archiver, but using an ordering system that only reveals itself by engaging in its flow of images. Henk Slager writes about this approach:

“Against the Foucauldian perspective where a clear connection is made between an archiving rhetoric and the dispositive of power, artistic archiving adds the perspective of desirolology: thinking in terms of new orders of affective associations, of fluid taxonomies and, above all, a thinking in terms of intellectual and artistic pleasure linked to derange the symbolic order” (Slager 2015).

In this dynamic, Dicke’s work could be seen as an ‘archivist of trauma’ like an ancient muse bringing forgetfulness by visualising the erasure of memory and, thereby, creating access to something that would have otherwise not been visible, namely new possibilities and meaning.

## Ronit Porat

Ronit Porat engaged with the historic matter of the house on a longer term as well. First, during a residency in which she created new work for the H401 exhibition “*In Search*



**Figure 4.** Ronit Porat from the series *In Search For Lost Time*, 2014.

*of Lost Time*”, curated by Ronit Eden in 2014 and later as a one-year resident of the Transhistorical Coalition. Porat is a photographer by training and a tireless autobiographer or rather an ‘auto-fiction-ist’. Porat grew up in a kibbutz in the north of Israel, did her military service and studied photography. She represents in all her being and work the ambiguities that come with such a background, combining deep affection for her home country with the critical reflection on its violence and exclusion, suffering herself from the isolation so many of her peers feel. Her upbringing in a kibbutz, including small traumatic anecdotes like an accident to her brother, returns in her work. More broadly, Porat is interested in biographies and histories that constitute collective identities. With her own radically independent life, she frees herself from those collectives that have deeply formed her and for which she still feels an empathic bond. In her work, she digs into archives, brings histories and biographies to the fore, but always inserts her own presence into them and, thereby, breaks the emptiness of the photographic documentation with counter images, creating collages that air an absurdist or surreal quality. Porat’s work responds to Benjamin’s problem of the ‘aura of an artwork in times of technical reproduction’ by inserting the aura from her own genuine story, her own worries, sorrows, pains, joys and her own fantasy in the aura-less material of archival material whose truthfulness is unreachable, cut off by the hermeneutic gap.

During her residency at H401, she dug deeply into the histories of the hidden war-time community and into the books of Frommel and photographs from the archive, as if to free some of the biographies from the corset of the heroic narrative that Frommel and his circle assigned to them posthumously. Derrida, in his book *Archive Fever*, showed that archives represent an intrinsic link between narrative and power. The word archive comes from *Arkheion*, the seat of the rulers in ancient Athens and it is this residence of the powerful where also documents were stored (Derrida 1995). This archive preserved the stories of the winners and made these stories a historical reality or scientific truth. Where Herengracht 401, as an archive, preserved the truth of Frommel and his disciples Porat intuitively focused, amongst others, on Liselotte von Gandersheim, who drowned in the North Sea just after the war had ended and Vincent Weyand, who died in Buchenwald. She liberated them from the corset of a hero by taking their tragic, their vulnerability and their human smallness seriously. The collages that she produced were put into a spatial arrangement with one another in combination with objects from the archive, text-fragments from Frommel’s library and some handwritten reflections of Porat that connected them to her own life-experience (Porat 2014). In her artistic approach, Porat achieves a twofold effect: by bringing to the surface the unacknowledged and, so far, hidden stories, Porat shows us the core of an archive and, therefore, any form of history writing which Hal Foster (2004) describes as “found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private”. Porat does this by putting them in another context, juxtaposing

them with her own biography and, therefore, highlighting their otherness. At the same time, through this allegorical use of historic material, Porat offers the viewer an access through her own life story which she tells first hand. The gap between then and now is narrowed through our encounter with Porat herself.

## Renée Turner

The Rotterdam based artist, teacher and researcher, Renée Turner, has developed a collaborative practice since her time in the cross-disciplinary art collective Geuzen. In her work at H401, she combines various visual forms of research with online writing to explore female identity, narratives of the archive, media ecologies and spaces of co-learning. The Warp and Weft of Memory maps the wardrobe of Gisèle d'Ailly van Waterschoot van der Gracht, as the most intimate remains of her as a person, that which was literally closest to her very being, her skin and body (Turner 2017). Fashion is treated as the medium, which situated Gisèle in the world. Turner developed a digital archive of Gisèle's wardrobe as a means to reflect on her life, work and various histories. She bridges the hermeneutic gap by setting up an alternative archive.

The web-based archive has various entry points. Turner's own notes offer a very personal view on the artist's encounter with a person she meets only through her closet

(Turner 2017). The 'Semantic Tapestry' offers an archive of photographs sorted in interrelated taxonomies that provide an order and, at the same time, a possibility to get lost and wander around. In the 'Epistolary Section', Turner provides access to two of her own correspondences with a writer and a scholar, as well as a letter to the late Gisèle.

Turner's own twofold background provides for a unique artistic profile, the practical impulse of putting things in order stemming from her own roots in the DIY movement. Her academic grounding in a theoretic discourse makes her seek references of critical reflection and, therefore, participation in a broader discourse. The latter translates in her pedagogic endeavours of creating spaces of dialogues for students, artists and scholars. A main tool for her research of Gisèle's wardrobe, consequently, were conversations with students in situ. Those who knew Gisèle would testify that she was driven by an intense urge for order. She explained this through her childhood experience of helping her uncle in the family archive. Throughout her life, she meticulously archived everything her life produced. Turner's work can be read as a poetic and yet, scholarly attempt to pay tribute to this life endeavour. Yet, the methodological rigour of Turner's approach is motivated by artistic experiment, establishing connections with her 'Semantic Tapestry' and associative connections in her 'Notes', both creating rhizomatic assemblages bringing together also the seemingly unrelated. Turner's view that "An archivist's work inevitably ends without a sense of closure" may have been true also for Gisèle's work and it may even be true for us trying to understand her life. We are left without a sense of closure. However, this open-endedness is the strength of the poetic aspect of artistic research work. Turner's fictional letter to Gisèle ends with the following sentence.

"You left a tag on a pair of pants which read: 'These pants are good, but too short.' They were listed in one of your 'To repair' inventories. Just to let you know, I took them home, let the hem out by a centimetre and a half and then returned them to your closet. Judging by the length of the rest of your trousers, I think they would now fit" (Turner 2017).

This shows, maybe in the most concrete way, how artistic research practices can bring an uncomprehensible past closer to our living reality. Turner literally follows up the conversation, the to-do lists and the urges for order of the deceased historic person. Her material research object, Gisèle's wardrobe turns into an allegory to trigger thoughts from the historic material into the intellectual setting of Turner's work.

## Conclusions

The one-dimensional, heroic story of *Castrum Peregrini* was an illusion. Its historic protagonists had consciously or subconsciously sublimated trauma in self-fabricated



**Figure 5.** Renée Turner at work for *The Warp And Weft of Memory*.



meaning and a cultic fundament of togetherness and belonging. The traces of their lives have led to a staged or curated archive that is more an artwork in itself than an objective source of history. As with ancient texts, a hermeneutic gap prevents us from deriving meaning from it today in an unmediated way.

We saw that artistic research may offer a mode of access, a mediation that allows us to unravel relevance and meaning for a contemporary audience. We looked at two modes of practice, based artistic research, the theory- and content-driven practice that results in concepts and the material- and form-driven practice that results in fiction. The latter holds the potential to bridge the hermeneutic gap, the distance between the viewer and the historic object that makes its understanding so difficult and may otherwise require complex scholarly approaches to fully comprehend. Memory work and more generally history, is a contested field of meaning making for today's societies at large and institutions like H401, in particular. Fiction-based art and form-based art that investigate historic objects and narratives build bridges to an unexpected dimension of history and offer a potential for identification, not so much through a theory-based truth, but rather by building a moment of truthfulness. Instead of creating any kind of security of belonging that archives structured by power seem to provide, the approach of fiction and the unstable matter of artistic enquiry offers a moment in which we can relate to something otherwise incomprehensible like trauma or to anything 'other' as such. Ideally, the artworks enable us to recognise the otherness in ourselves.

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# Hypermnesia and Amnesia: Remembering (with) the Body and Post-Conflict Memorials and Architectures<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The article consists of two parts. The first part (§§ 1–2) investigates the indiscriminate and absolute remembering and forgetting of everything, hypermnesia and amnesia as the extreme terms that research has used and uses for the different phenomena of memory, both in individuals and in social and political forms. In the face of these shifts it is thus indispensable to re-establish a critique of the paradoxical effects of memory aids and, at the same time, to seek new forms of remembrance that by mixing an experiential dimension and public sphere refocus the attention on the connection between latency, tension and experiential triggers of involuntary memory and on the ability to break through the fictions of collective memory. On this basis, the second part of the article (§§ 3–4) analyses how the experience of political and racial deportation during World War II drastically changed the idea of memorial architecture. More specifically, the analysis deals with a kind of memorial device that must represent and memorialise persons whose bodies have been deliberately cancelled. The aim is to present and analyse the artistic and architectonic efforts to refer to those forgotten bodies, on the one hand, and on the other hand to point out how for these new kind of memorials the body of the visitor is asked to participate, both physically and emotionally, in this somehow paradoxical search for lost bodies, offering oneself as a substitute.

## Key Words

Body, experience, memorial aids, memorial architecture, remembering and forgetting.

## Introduction: The insurmountable tension between remembering and forgetting

The indiscriminate and absolute remembering and forgetting of everything, hypermnesia and amnesia, are the extreme terms that research has used and uses for the different phenomena of remembrance, both in individuals and in social and political forms. With its shifts and oscillations, the tension between remembering and forgetting within these extremes has marked the research in this field of study, as well as the policies that interact with it. Indeed, a recent trend has been to consider the results of neuroscientific studies on the functioning of individual

memory and the role of forgetting for its physiology as an invitation to sever the internal link between ethics and memory. Faced with these shifts it becomes essential to explore the different possibilities of reintroducing an experiential and bodily dimension into the public memorial sphere by focusing attention on the connection between latency, tension and experiential triggers that stimulate all senses. It is a matter of seeing how to reactivate the forms of involuntary remembering, even reawakening dormant memories, and tearing down the fictions of collective remembrance. Thus proposing to keep alive the tension between what is worthy of being remembered and the unforgettable and developing it as a living phenomenon.

Summing up the epochal turning point in the public policies and practices of memory produced with the end

<sup>1</sup> The first part (§§ 1–2) is by Andrea Borsari, the second part (§§ 3–4) is by Giovanni Leoni.



of the Cold War and with the bustling start of the renewed processes of globalisation, in his agile *Libro della memoria e della speranza* [*Book of Memory and Hope*] Remo Bodei questioned the relationship between historical remembrance, forgetting and collective identity (Bodei 1995). In fact, in this context the philosopher focused on the character of unresolved and continuous tension between contrasting elements that defines the core of the problem in which the “contradictory and divided will” of “remembering beyond all disruptions” and the “forgetting of a lost past” are opposed, interpreting this tension as “tension incessantly reproduced between continuity and discontinuity”. Faced with the risk of favouring “the role of forgetting” due to the excess of self-defence against the extremists of memory, an imbalance towards the side of forgetting must be avoided. Though memory, while never safe, “will struggle tenaciously to not always be defeated”. In fact, factors that contribute to the changing and forgetting of the past include the loss of “institutional support” and “social frameworks of remembrance” that reinforced it, the presence of an “infinitely pliable past that does not pass”, the choice that is made with respect to it “based on a present where it never intermingles in its entirety”, the investment that is not only “cognitive” but also “emotional” that is incessantly required, its constant characteristic of “controversial and contentious ground” and, no less significant, its characteristic of “place of paradoxical alliances between remembering and forgetting”. Hence the need to adopt a posture that mixes the “logic of forgetting” and the “logic of remembering”, giving rise to a “conflicting complicity between remembering and forgetting” that works by virtue of the schema *nec tecum nec sine te* (neither with you nor without you). As much as they are in perennial conflict, “forgetting is as indispensable to remembering as remembering is to forgetting” (Bodei 1995).

In recent years, however, there has been a trend to consider the results of neuroscientific studies on the functioning of individual memory – equivocating the different layers of discourse – as an invitation to sever the internal link between ethics and remembrance, starting from the assumption related to memory according to which remembering and forgetting are human faculties, neither good nor bad. For example, in her 2016 book on the forms of forgetting, Aleida Assmann exhorts studies on remembrance to focus on forgetting and its forms (Assmann 2016). Her considerations are based on the question posed by Jan Philipp Reemtsma: “Remembering is an obligation, the semantics of remembrance are imperative. But what is positive about remembering? Remembering and forgetting are human faculties, neither good nor bad, because they both help deal with life” (Reemtsma 2010). Such a position is read as an explicit correction to the central meaning assumed by the culture of remembering in Germany, in parallel with the conviction that the historical weight of the holocaust cannot be eliminated by forgetting about it. Hence a point of view develops that reveals itself as being problematic in ambiguously

promoting constructive and therapeutic forgetting with respect to a traumatic past and in the failure to distinguish between the selective character of individual remembering and forgetting as a means to compose divided societies. The recognition of the seven ways to forget leads to the emergence of a “paradigm shift that has to do with a global ethic”. However, this shift confirms “the oldest self-description of human memory, valid both for individuals and for societies and cultures”. That is, most memory is lost, and remembering is always limited “because it refers to the experience of an individual or group” (Assmann 2016). This resembles more a sort of immutable law of memory than an authorisation to make its processes available to any manipulation of cultural practices of forgetting or to identify constructivist criteria for the art of forgetting.

Faced with such a scenario, for a position that intends to maintain the conflicting tension between remembering and forgetting in changed circumstances without reducing itself to “the ecology of forgetting” (Cimatti 2020), it seems necessary to question and stimulate the strategies of remembering that work on latency and experiential triggering – starting from contact but which engage all senses – of the involuntary memory that incorporates the past into the present and of the “unforgettable” that “always newly disrupts the fictions of collective memory” (Agamben 2005). The close link between the immemorial and the unforgettable is shown – as Agamben himself made clear in his “idea of the immemorial” – in involuntary memory. In it, memory, “which gives us back the forgotten thing, is itself each time forgotten and this forgetfulness is its light”: “It is not what we have lived and then forgotten that now returns imperfectly to consciousness, but rather, at that point, we access what never was, forgetfulness as the home of consciousness. [...] The immemorial, which plunges from memory to memory without ever coming to memory itself, is properly unforgettable” (Agamben 2020).

Some possible directions for this research include three perspectives that diverge from the unilateral results of excessive remembering, the hypermnnesia that crowds memories and, by hardening them, makes them indiscernible, and of excessive forgetting, the amnesia that reacts to an excess of voluntary remembering but ends up confusing the physiological processing of forgetting with the questioning of immovable history underpinned by the ethical link with memory. The three examples given below as a first draft are those of providing spatial experience through the building of places having a strategy of reawakening “dormant memories”, the conflicting relationship between monuments as aids to memory and counter-monuments as attempts to escape the paradoxical erasure of memory induced by the former, and finally of the recovery of a perspective derived from Georges Perec’s infra-ordinary to experience crucial places of remembrance where time and human destruction have left nothing but pale traces of the horror that took place in them, as in the exemplary case of Auschwitz Birkenau.

### Three strategies: dormant memories, experiential monuments and gaze at ground level

In his work of self-fiction focused on the search for his lost youth in Paris and the elaboration of an “art of memory with which he has evoked the most ungraspable human destinies and uncovered the life-world of the occupation”, as stated in the reason for his Nobel Prize for Literature (Le Monde 2014), the French writer Patrick Modiano showed how “the topography of a city becomes your whole life called to mind”: “The city – as it happens Paris, the city of my birth – is linked to my very first childhood impressions, and these impressions were so strong that I have been constantly exploring the ‘mysteries of Paris’ ever since. When I was about nine or ten, it came about that I was out walking alone, and even though I was scared of getting lost, I went further and further into neighbourhoods I was unfamiliar with on the right bank of the Seine. That was in daylight, which reassured me. At the start of adolescence I worked hard to overcome my fear and venture out at night even further afield by Métro. That is how you get to know about the city, and I was following the example of most of the novelists I admired and for which, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the city – call it Paris, London, Saint Petersburg or Stockholm – was the backdrop and one of the main themes of their books” (Modiano 2014). Correcting his consecration as the “Proust of our time”, Modiano clarified: “Today, I get the sense that memory is much less sure of itself, and that the search for lost time collides with a ‘mass of forgetting that obscures everything’”, clarifying that, lacking the ability to recreate the past in its smallest details, he intends more modestly “to make a few faded words visible again, like lost icebergs adrift on the surface of the ocean” (Modiano 2014). The method according to which he implements his own specific version of the Proustian procedure of recovering involuntary memory is that of recovering “souvenirs dormants” through the present experience of Parisian topography that produces a hybrid between past and present, reactivating its potential for the future, as is clear from his subsequent exemplary novel *Sleep of Memory* whose title refers precisely to “dormant memories” (Modiano 2017). In it, the city is “littered with ghosts, as numerous as metro stations and all the dots that light up when you press the buttons on the electric route map”, feeling a nostalgia for the impossibility of “reliv[ing] something we’d already experienced, in the same time, the same place, and the same circumstances, but liv[ing] it much better than the first time, without the mistakes, hitches, and idle moments”. So his personal *lesser* version of time would proceed through an attempt to organise his memories, putting them together like largely isolated puzzle pieces, thanks to which, “as we fumble through these efforts, certain names light up intermittently, like signals that might lead to a hidden path”. The narrator thus tries to get to the bottom of the list of places and names, feeling like “an

amnesiac, trying to break through a layer of ice and forgetfulness”. To the point of evoking the dissolution of the self in the figure – derived from Blanqui’s *Eternity by the Stars* – of the multiplication of lookalikes and the possible pluralisation of memories: “Thousands and thousands of doubles of yourself follow the thousands of paths that you didn’t take at various crossroads in your life, because you thought there was but a single one” (Modiano 2017).

In the discussion on the opportunity and purpose of memorial monuments such as buildings and physical objects, the consideration of the paradoxical nature of the monument has assumed an increasingly important role, like all mnemonic aids (*hypomnemata*) – since Plato’s *Phaedrus* – starting with writing: when we take note of something, we can afford to forget it because the device takes on the responsibility of remembering it for us. The monument “suffers from the same disease: created to remind us, it ends up making us forget, being both a machine of remembrance and forgetting”, or as Robert Musil recalls: “The remarkable thing about monuments is that one does not notice them. There is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument” (Pinotti 2014). The commemorative monument belongs to the broader class of external reminders, for which each memory relegated to an external device assigned the task of preserving it is exposed to the risk of being forgotten, since this same act of assignment concurrently implies the dispensation, the exoneration from remembering personally, and therefore an implicit authorisation to forget. If this is the structural link that is established between voluntary monuments and memory, in recent decades a broad strategy has been employed to ensure that memorials avoid the fate of being immediately transformed into devices of forgetting, to the contrary becoming capable of preserving and handing down memories. Among the ways to overcome this perverse effect of remembering, Pinotti himself has identified some countermonumental strategies such as: highlighting the absence and emptiness in place of what has been destroyed (the Twin Towers, the Buddha of Bamyán); insisting on verticality but denying it meaning and mirroring it underground (Jochen and Esther Shalev-Gerz: *Harburger Mahnmahl gegen Faschismus*); subtract from the vision to combat opacity due to habit, so that I notice something only when its presence, although in principle visible, is denied to me (Christo and Jean Claude, *wrapping* or *packaging*); change from noble, resilient materials (stone, marble, metal) to lighter materials or non-materials like air and light (Shiro Takahashi, inflatable Buddha; Hiro Yamagata, laser images); apparently mimic a traditional monument, but depriving it of meaning, including through abstraction (the stelae of Richard Serra, the intransitive monuments of Cattelan) (Pinotti 2014). Other cases could be added to this type, such as miniaturisation (the small bronze chairs in front of the places of welcome, where the young Jews had been saved, planned for the design competition for the Villa Emma Memorial in Nonantola) or the joint presence of the separate elements of the information centre and the

stelae in the *Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas* by Peter Eisenmann: “In the memorial these two heterogeneous dimensions of remembrance are topographically differentiated. Above ground the absolutely illegible stelae, below them an information centre reserved for reading. The immaterial threshold that separates these two forms of memory is the true place of the memorial. Keeping them separate is so important because otherwise the guilty conscience, which wants nothing more than to forget, would cover that which must remain unforgettable with a flood of memories” (Agamben 2005).

What emerges is a more determined propensity to emphasise the fleeting, transient and ephemeral character of the act and the memorial object that turns into an increasingly specific experience, not a pre-ordained experience but an action that depends on the involvement and active intervention of those who carry it out, well exemplified by the motto of the work of the Gerz spouses on “producing a monument together” (*ein Denkmal zum Mitmachen*): “Because nothing in the long term can withstand injustice in our place” (Harburger Mahnmahl 1994). And the reflection of Georges Didi-Huberman on the possibility of experiencing the central place of the Shoah, the Auschwitz Birkenau camp, speaks precisely to an experiential conception focused on the involvement of the body (Didi-Huberman 2011, 2013). These are physical places where unspeakable things happened, but where at the same time there is (almost) nothing left to recall these events. Faced with the progressive inability to feel due to overexposure, the possibility of restoring a sense of these places, retracing the path of “places despite everything”, is implemented through the choice to lower the gaze to the ground, to suspend the ideas received and to reconstruct circumscribed, partial images capable of commemorating the defeats of history and reactivating the image of what has been in the present, with a reference first only alluded to and then explicit in the infra-ordinary elaborated by Georges Perec, in the tension between metropolitan places of experience and the detection of body postures in the daily life of the camps: “We believe we know what is terrible.... But we understand nothing. We don’t understand the unendingness of hunger. Emptiness. Absence. The body eating itself away. The word ‘nothing’. We don’t know the camps” (Perec 1992). One must always start again from the: “experience at ground level, what you might call back-ground noise. It’s experience grasped at the level of the setting in which your body moves, the gestures it makes, all the ordinariness connected with [...] the exploring of your space” (Perec 1999).

By its nature the field of architecture would seem to be immune to the issues raised so far. Indeed, the nature of the architectural work seems to be the neutral scene of the described equilibria – and tensions – between remembering and forgetting because of a physical presence that remains and, one could say, watches over the community that produced it. More precisely, it could be said that the “neither good nor bad” human faculties of

remembering and forgetting, as “they both help deal with life”, always save architecture – which is the scenery of life – until a voluntary act of change or physical demolition intervenes. An act that generates nothing more than a new architecture in a continuous cycle. Thus architecture, broadly understood as the organisation of the space built by humanity, contains or rather testifies to a total memory since it is the concrete outcome of every productive act of life. But the areas of investigation mentioned above – “souvenirs dormants”, countermonumental strategies and Perec’s infra-ordinary perspective – nevertheless lead us to the heart of a crisis of the ongoing role of architecture as a witness of the productive acts of a community, including conflict and violence. The crisis consists in having to reflect on the existence of places – physical or mental – that are completely foreign to the community dimension that would inevitably seem to constitute the foundation of architecture. Places that are radically and desperately unique and solitary even though they are close to a community, places that are unrepresentable even though they are composed of matter and bodies, places whose density appears infinite because every slightest act of forgetting can renew that indescribable “offence” of the “demolition of a man”, as Primo Levi described the experience of being held in a concentration camp.

## Representing the anonymous

The experience of political and racial deportation during the Second World War generated a break in the conception of memorial architecture, a paradigm shift that became immediately evident in the post-war recovery. This highlights an element of discontinuity that would have significant consequences on the entire architectural culture of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The fracture stems from the totally new tasks which memorial architecture was called to perform. First, the task of remembering an act of violence, obviously for the benefit of the victims. This task excludes an entire field of memorial architecture, i.e. commemoration, remembering in a solemn and celebratory form. In fact, here what is being remembered is a loss, but in this case not in the form that memorial architecture typically takes in funeral monuments, aimed at preserving the memory of the life of those who are no longer alive. Indeed, funeral architecture represents a loss but seeks to draw on positive content and can take affirmative tones. The new task, on the other hand, consisted in having to convey the memory of the loss itself, a loss that unites millions of individuals having very different destinies in an identical and shared experience, whose singular personality was erased from life by means of a deliberate project of annihilation. The result is a memorial commitment having a dual paradox.

On the one hand it is necessary to recall an experience of anonymity, of loss of individuality, not the collective experience that the concentration system created, but the



enormous sum total of singular yet identical coincident experiences of loss, the concurrent loss of personality and sense of every possible community. Because while historical accounts have been able to fix and pass on the collective experience of deportation, by disciplinary statute they are not in the position to recall the profound – common but singular – nature of annihilation, of “an extreme and monstrous attempt to decide between the human and the inhuman, which has ended up dragging the very possibility of the distinction to its ruin”, as stated in a consolidated interpretative formula (Agamben 2004, p. 22).

On the other hand we have the second paradox, that the memorial regards the final outcome of a deliberate, violent human action whose purpose was to erase any physical trace of the victim. It is therefore the remembering of a void, the only material trace of which are the physical structures built by the perpetrators to carry out the annihilation. Traces that are increasingly evanescent over time due to natural physical decay, but also due to the fading, or what today we must refer to as the extinguishing, of the direct memory of witnesses who alone can “translate” the sense of the places of Deportation – totally determined by the perpetrators – into the language and meanings of those who were their victims.

This memorial task, as paradoxical as it is necessary, has been taken on by literary and artistic languages, but the position of architecture in this regard is specific since architecture not only represents but builds – or reconstructs or destroys – places and does not simply depict or recount experiences but rather allows or generates them. This is evidently not the specific fact of post-war memorial architecture, the element of discontinuity to which reference was made. Architecture as a whole has a dual nature, a dual term of comparison if we refer to the creative processes that guide it: on the one hand the formal conception that manifests itself in representation, on the other hand the material construction that progressively transforms the representation into a physical presence, entrusting the structure to its own unpredictable destiny determined by the passage of time, by circumstance and by active human presence. The breaking point which post-war memorial architecture underscores derives from the different development that the two components – the representation and construction of a place – assume in the face of the memorial task described above.

On the representation front, architecture fully shares its efforts and its difficulties with the other forms of representation and expression – painting, sculpture, writing – that in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century must deal with the “unmemorable”, to use a definition that the aforementioned Agamben has also used in relation to architecture (Agamben 2005). Indeed it can be said that the subject inaugurates a new season of close collaboration between architecture and the arts, characterised by a retreat of architecture with respect to the other forms of expression incorporated within the project with an unprecedented centrality. This is especially true for writing, to which architecture immediately attributes a dual role: on the one

hand an instrument for the necessary direct presence of witness accounts, on the other the need for naming as a memorial practice of restoring a brutally stolen identity to the victims. Both forms are ubiquitous, from the “tombstones” that name the victims in the *Monument to the Martyrs of the Fosse Ardeatine* (competition of January 1944), to the slabs with quotations from the Beatitudes and the tombstones with the names of the deportees added in an update of the project in the *Monument to the Fallen in Concentration Camps in Germany* by BBPR (Milan, 1945), from the writings taken from the *Letters of those in the Resistance condemned to death* and from the Hall of Names in the *Museum-Monument to Political and Racial Deportees* (BBPR, Carpi, 1963) (Leoni 2021), to the centrality of writing in the development process of the *Jewish Museum* in Berlin (1989) by Daniel Libeskind and the reappearance of the concept in almost all the works in this field. On other fronts, for example the relationship between architecture and sculpture, the disciplinary boundary even tends to disappear, creating a shared form. Consider the whole area of the anti-monument, from the stelae of Jochen Gerz in Hamburg (1986) to the “stumbling stones” of Gunter Demnig, a long-lasting project started in 1992 and still ongoing, just to name a few examples. (Young 1993, 1994, 2000).

With regard to the architectural task and remaining on the representation front, there are basically three strategies for dealing with the paradoxical task of an all-negative memory. The first is an attempt to draw on the tradition of symbolism, both by proposing architectural figures and – this is certainly more interesting – trying to find a form of architectural representation of the impossibility of using symbolic images. The architectural history of this visible impossibility of drawing on the symbol, on the full, positive figure, begins again with the great “tombstone” of the Ardeatine, a real gap in the rich figurative and panoramic narrative of that project, and – after having characterised much of the production on the subject – certainly achieves its expressive and effective acme in the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* (Berlin 1998) by Peter Eisenman.

The second path attempted by architecture consists in setting nature aside before the discipline, which is affirmative, to bring back to the centre of the project, and often limiting it to, an interpretative action of the place. This creates a dialogue with the existing that is always implicit in the act of building a new presence, the final objective of each architectural project, and which, on a case-by-case basis, even beyond the specific topic under discussion and not limited to the historical moment we are dealing with, can become central to a project, typically in restoration projects, but not only. For the memorial architectures dedicated to political and racial deportations during the Second World War, the novel element consists in the duty of this interpretative study of a physical and material nature conducted using architecture to deal with a structure that, as noted above, was totally built by the perpetrator, and which must therefore be opposed in its



Figure 1. Museo Monumento Carpi.

anonymous nature, having being used primarily for organisational and productive purposes, and which therefore does not manifestly embody the “discourse”, the self-representation of the extermination programme, a programme that counts invisibility among its objectives. The space of the perpetrator, simultaneously evident and banal, must be forced, deconstructed and investigated using the tools of architectural design with the aim of conveying and preserving the experience of the victim, free of traces and sedimentation. With an additional difficulty that derives from the inescapable outcome of every architectural project, if that is what it is, namely the appearance of a new presence that, while understood as instrumental to the emergence of the evanescent physical testimony of the victims’ past in the place, risks burying them even more deeply under the stratification of evidence and interpretations. While for explicitly symbolic projects the risk – or the field of study – consisted in the not saying and therefore the not understanding of what was stated, here the risk reappears in relation to the reliability and comprehensibility of the “text”. In this regard all initiatives to conserve transit, prison and extermination camps

deserve an analysis. But it must be emphasised that the interpretative and interrogative nature of the project in some way required by the *lieu de mémoire* in the strict sense also innervates projects that do not interpret the memorial place but rather build it. This method is fixed in poetic and masterful form in the aforementioned project of the *Museum-Monument* in Carpi, a work that as is known was designed by a direct witness of the Deportation, but almost invariably reappears in every architecture on the subject, from the central role attributed to the interpretation of the surrounding city in the aforementioned Berlin projects of Libeskind and Eisenman to very recent projects in which the monumental dimension is expressed in an interrogative form such as the *Memorial of the Shoah* in Bologna (SET Architects, 2016) or the *UK Holocaust Memorial & Learning Centre* (Adjaye Associates and Ron Arad, London, 2021). The disruptive effect of a conception of monumental architecture understood in an interrogative form – somehow a paradox, it has been said – could then be followed throughout the architectural production of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, even non-memorial, marking a profound change in sensitivity.



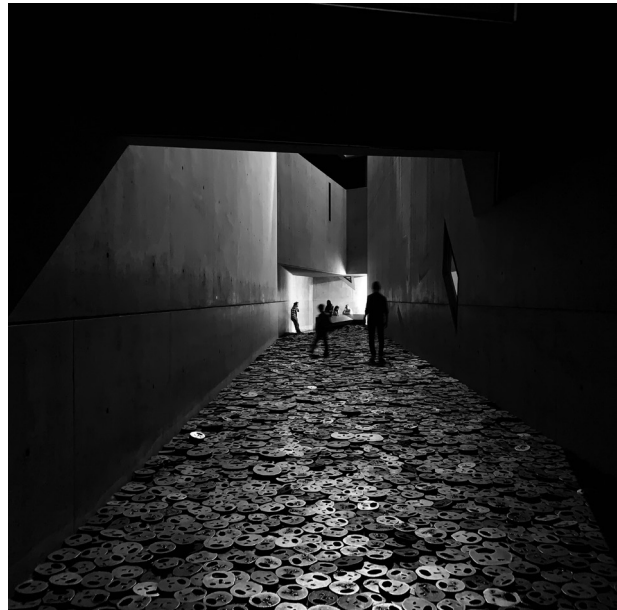


**Figure 2.** N. Aprile, C. Calcaprina, A. Cardelli, M. Fiorentino, G. Perugini (architecture); Mi Basadella, F. Coccia (sculptures), Fosse Ardeatine Mausoleum, Roma, 1944–1951.

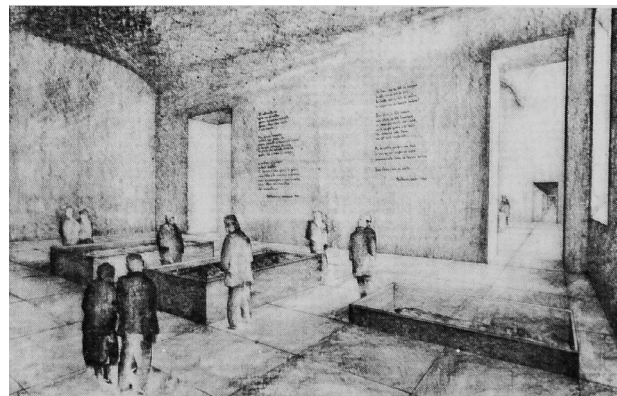


**Figure 3.** R. Boico, San Sabba Rice Mill National Monument and Museum, Trieste, 1975.

The third path undertaken, while still remaining on the representation front, consists of returning the work of architecture to the pure role of a service space for historical documentary narration or for other forms of narration. Therefore, not the representation of the renunciation of



**Figure 4.** D. Libeskind, The Jewish Museum, Berlin, 1989–2001.



**Figure 5.** BBPR, Museum-Monument to Political and Racial Deportees in Carpi, drawing submitted for the competition, 1963.

the symbol, not the attempt to find an architectural form to express the unmemorable component and not even the confinement of the architectural language to the role of commenting on the existing, but rather the decision to exempt architecture from any task of representation of memory by offering itself as a neutral medium for other representations or narratives entrusted to other disciplines. An exemplary work in this sense, unfortunately never built after a troubled design process, is the headquarters for the *Topography of Terror* foundation in Berlin (1993) by Peter Zumthor. Thus we close the circle of the possibilities that architecture has to represent the experience of Deportation, because the renunciation of architecture in service of other expressive forms is the reason for the renewed relationship with the arts and writing mentioned above and that characterises the field throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Of course the three strategies described here are almost never purely expressed in the individual works, and in the





**Figure 6.** BBPR, Museum-Monument to Political and Racial Deportees, Carpi, 1963–73.

development of the architecture itself symbol, interpretation and act of service mix and often conflict, making the history of most memorial architecture dedicated to Deportation particularly tormented. This happens not only because of the obvious political sensitivity of the area, but also because they are projects that directly deal with a fracture created in the discipline also and above all following the experience they recall, a fracture that the dominant historiography in the field of architecture has mostly neglected in favour of a narrative on the continuity and revision of the Modern Movement, but that in fact radically redefines the tasks of architecture in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Making visitor's body available to the victims

It is in the space of this fracture that a specific opportunity of architecture manifests itself, an opportunity linked to its second purpose: not the representation of a form but the construction of an inhabited place. Much more space would be required to precisely exam how in all the works of architecture, in all the spatial devices of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century dedicated to triggering or supporting memorial processes related to Deportation the subject of crossing, of the movement

of visitors within space plays a central role. The consideration that BBPR appends to the end of the project report for the competition of the Museum-Monument in Carpi, after having illustrated the complex and innovative memorial device conceived by an architect-witness, as mentioned above, applies to all: “Spectators will practically breathe in the symbolic representation of the events as they travel the winding path of the Castle” (Fossoli Foundation Archive). Here mention must be made of a very broad topic for architecture, namely the definitive crisis of the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century concept of functionalism: for post-war architecture there was no longer any possibility of directing its efforts towards human types, to develop solutions that were standardised or even based on community identities. It is no coincidence that some of the earliest and most enlightened reflections on the crisis of the functionalist model are the considerations on the Anonymous published in *Domus* magazine by Ernesto N. Rogers during the years that the racial laws were first passed in Italy (Leoni 2017). Architecture is aimed at single persons, all different, to whom it cannot offer a single solution but rather only suggest opportunities for their own individual, singular, non-replicable interpretation of the place. The impact on representation of the desire to control space by geometric means is enormous, with important consequences for the history of architectural languages, but this is not the place to address this topic. But equally important is the opportunity to develop a new conception of architecture that on the one hand establishes an open relationship between the work and the existing surroundings, and on the other brings the body and experience back to the centre of the project. There is no doubt that this new need to set aside early 20<sup>th</sup>-century modernist architecture – different in form but in structural continuity with the long cycle of classical styles – in favour of a radically different, interpretative and non-affirmative discipline that understands form as the final outcome and not as a map for the building and development process is decisively driven or even triggered by the paradoxical task described above of interpreting and building places of memorial dialogue with the mass – yet anti-community and totally singular – experience of Deportation. The path through the Ardeatine caves, the view of the naked “wreckage” in the cases of the Museum-Monument in Carpi, meandering among the stelae in the aforementioned projects of Eisenman and Libeskind, walking through the petrified faces, all the same (metal masks, in reality) in the Jewish Museum, the work of the latter and infinite other examples that could be taken from other works show how the subject matter, in its request to deal with annihilated and erased bodies, induces this substitution, requiring visitors to make their own bodies available to the victims and their right to convey and share the violence of the event, a violence that was not healed by the ascertainment of responsibility, which

remains over time as an annihilation of humanity and as a threat of a possible repetition of such annihilation.

## Conclusion

Both the recognition of the problems linked to the definition of the relationship between remembering and forgetting in the international debate of the last thirty years and the balance of the challenge and disruption that the experience of political and racial deportation during the Second World War imposed on memorial architecture converge in highlighting the experiential and corporeal dimension of the relationship with the constructions of individual and collective memory. In fact, on the one hand the central point of the tension between remembering and forgetting is claimed as a dynamism of continuity and discontinuity in contrast with the attempt to equivocate the results of neuroscience in favour of a naturalistic neutralisation of the ethical instance of remembrance derived from the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And this acquisition leads to the possibility of a criticism of memory aids that opens up to experiencing new pathways for the reactivation of dormant memories, countermonumental strategies and uncoded mnemonic traces. On the other hand, then, the loss of individuality caused by the experience of the concentration camps and the paradoxical memory of a vacuum that derives from it find a counterpart in the various attempts examined to produce architectures of the unmemorable through multiple strategies that insist on the impossibility of using symbolic images, on putting an interpretation of the places in context at the centre of the project or on bringing the architectural work back to the function of space for the deployment of historical or documentary narration. Criticism of functionalism, openness to anonymity and reassessment of the relationship with the existing surroundings thus converge in putting the body and experience back at the centre of the project. And they converge towards a living experience of what is worthy of being remembered that can only occur through the ability of bodies in action to reactivate latency, tension and experiential triggers that stimulate all senses.

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# Art and memory: Magdalenas<sup>1</sup> por el Cauca<sup>2</sup>

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## Abstract

Adopting an interdisciplinary framework of Memory Studies and Art and employing semiotics with a multimodal and multimedia character, it is explored how social groups in Colombia memorialise the violence of the internal armed conflict. The reflection associates the victims' experiences with those expressions of commemoration and remembrance that are narratives embodied in visual and scenic art. It is explored how a semiotic landscape of memory is created through a performative artistic proposal. In this landscape, not only cultural frames can be determined, but also the semiotic-discursive resources that give meaning to the relationship between art and memory. The aim is to characterise the performance known as *Magdalenas por el Cauca* (2008) which was recorded audiovisually in several spaces on the internet. It means that, in addition to the ephemeral *mise-en-scène*, there are records of the performative and communicative work. In this article, we analyse the video *X PEREGRINACION TRUJILLO y MAGDALENAS POR EL CAUCA* (2010), one of the records that perpetuates *Magdalenas por el Cauca*. This reparation act is an audiovisual narrative with ethical and political character and produced collectively by relatives of victims, witnesses, artists and other interlocutors, which interpret and assign new meanings to the performance.

## Key Words

Colombian armed conflict, *Magdalenas por el Cauca*, multimodal and multimedia semiotics, X pilgrimage Trujillo

## Introduction

Latin American societies and particularly Colombia have suffered several periods of systematic violence perpetrated by different types of actors. As a response to the victimising events, collective processes of symbolic reparation have emerged within the communities. One of the main purposes of those processes is the social construction of new meanings as traumatic experiences that “fracture those spatial and symbolic referents used by the communities to organise normal life activities” (Martínez Quintero 2013: p. 40).

Meaning-making processes allow the building of new forms of individual collective organisation and an exploration of updated forms of being and inhabiting the world. It is not only about recovering a version of the past; it is also about looking at its effects in the present and future. “X PEREGRINACIÓN TRUJILLO y MAGDALENAS POR EL CAUCA” (2010) is not only a video, but a work of symbolic reparation that aims to make the past understandable and to help to clarify specific events. This clarification encourages a potential healing process for survivors and victims' relatives in their role as active social subjects.

<sup>1</sup> Magdalena refers to the woman who lamented for Jesus Christ, who died after the crucifixion. ‘Cries more than a Magdalene’ is a popular phrase in Colombia and the term has been appropriated to symbolize the suffering of women in grieving for their relatives.

<sup>2</sup> Grupo Colombiano de Análisis del Discurso Mediático through ONALME (National Observatory of Memory Processes) cooperates with the network SPEME (Spaces of Memory) on collective memory and memorialisation processes. SPEME – *Questioning Traumatic Heritage: Spaces of Memory in Europe, Argentina, Colombia* has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme and develops a joint programme between universities and technical institutions from Europe and Latin America (Project ID: 778044).

Colombia has suffered under an internal armed conflict that has left 9,165,126 victims (Unidad de Víctimas 2021, RNI retrieved 31 July 2021) due to crimes such as homicide and enforced disappearance, both with a balance of 1,253,597 victims (Unidad de Víctimas 2021, RNI retrieved 31 July 2020). In this social framework, it is our aim to explore the political potentialities of participatory and collaborative forms of artistic practices, in which memorialisation processes are committed to create, distribute, and socialise collective memories of mass violence in the period after the signing of the historic 2016 peace agreement in the Colombian post-conflict. It is necessary to mention that, despite the agreement, the internal armed conflict is not yet over, a condition that is pivotal in its memorialisations as it deepens processes of revictimisation.

The memorialisation, analysed in this paper, corresponds to the victims in the Municipalities of Trujillo, Tuluá and Riofrío, located in the northwest of the Antioquia Department<sup>3</sup>, between 1986 and 1994, a case that was followed up and interpreted by the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (National Center for Historical Memory) (2008). According to the information from relatives and humanitarian organisations, 342 victims of homicide, torture and enforced disappearance were registered as the outcome of a joint action on drug traffickers from the north of the Valle Department led by Diego Montoya and Henry Loaiza, paramilitary groups, and the Colombian Military Forces (Revista Semana 2008). The operation was part of a series of joint operations against the guerrillas in this area and in search of territorial control. Trujillo's inhabitants had to witness and suffer selective murders, tortures, forced displacements and enforced disappearances. Additionally, practices such as "social cleansing", assassination of key witnesses, were also carried out so that the crimes would remain in impunity. After these heinous crimes, the bodies were opened, filled with cement, and thrown into the Cauca River so they would not float. The river became a mass grave where the remains of the civilian population were hidden.

"Magdalenas por el Cauca" is a visual and artistic narrative that gives a concrete expression to the necessity of remembering the victims of Trujillo's massacre. In Colombia, the construction of collective memory through art has made it possible to create spaces that interrelate the artistic and political dimensions. This process fosters the appropriation of a civil culture by the citizens as new forms of knowledge are built. In the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Colombian artists have sought to represent violence through different formats and technical media: "installation, video, performance, drawing, interventions in public space, community art etc." (Ramos Delgado and Aldana Bautista 2016: p. 47).

Participatory art has been one of the most relevant art modalities. In this practice, artists elaborate a conceptual

proposal which is executed and, in this case, critically reviewed by survivors, their families, witnesses and a team of artists committed to memory building in Trujillo. This way of producing art focuses on the set of human relationships in their social contexts, rather than on producing meanings as something exclusive or private: the interlocution, the dialogism and the possibility of recovery and dignifying of the "other", are some characteristics of this relational form of interaction (about the interaction ritual, c.f. Bal 2010). Thus, the act of co-creation appears: the author's role is subordinated, and the artistic practice acquires more relevance, making more explicit its purpose of social transformation. As the exhibition pieces are elaborated through collaborative work, they fulfil the requirement of participation and, at the same time, manage conditions of symbolic reparation (Lleras et al. 2019).

The artists Gabriel Posada and Yorlady Ruiz conceived and gave material shape to the work of art for the very first-time in 2008. The exhibition is a combination of a performance and some paintings on rafts where the artist depicted faces of the mothers whose sons and daughters disappeared or were murdered and whose remains are still in the river. This is a "site of memory" where the victims' relatives perform remembrance rituals. In 2010, a pilgrimage along the Cauca River, together with an exhibition, brought about the whole artistic experience. "X Peregrinación Trujillo y Magdalenas por el Cauca" (Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5EshU1M\\_CQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5EshU1M_CQ)) shows how a sociocultural and political phenomenon gets the dimension of persistence over time and is part of a process of massive visualisation in culture. The video, object of our analysis, makes possible to deduce schemes, to identify codes and to recover meanings and social interactions as it is an action motivated and structured through collective interest. It is also an action orientated towards and coordinated with "others" who act as actors or participants and establish relationships with each other that involve not only people, but also objects.

## Collective memories, co-creative art and symbolic reparation

Social groups and victims of the armed conflict and of historical violence, in general, find spaces of memory in artistic expressions. Spaces of memory are understood as series of existential relations that guarantee dialogues and interactions related, not only to strategies for context transformation, but also those ways of representation of violent events that define the condition of "victim". In spaces of memory, meanings of location, territory, areas of influence, ethical and political responsibilities, power relationships and resistance exercises, *inter alia*, are re-

3 A Department is a territorial and administrative division in Colombia.

covered. In spaces of memory, the knowledge, linked to traumatic events, is appropriated and socialised. Thus, these events are updated for the purpose of identifying and imaging ways of social co-existence. Spaces of memory are semiotic and discursive expressions that shape diverse ways of understanding social existence since they build and give sense to the semiotic devices. All works of art, ethically and politically focused on the dignity and visibility of victims, are considered actions of symbolic reparation (Moffett 2015). It can be conceptualised as the set of governmental and socio-cultural policies and actions aimed to guarantee the victim's dignity, eliminating all forms of re-victimisation. In addition, if survivors, witnesses and supportive communities are called to participate in the artistic production, the result is necessarily a co-creation or a participatory work of art.

Participatory or collective artistic expressions are practices that formulate spectra of co-creation in which co-authorship is legitimised on the aesthetic and political conceptualisation of the narrative (Osorio Bermeo 2018). This double condition grants the work of art the potential to become the support and the negotiating process for symbolic reparation. The reparation is integral and comprises two aspects: material and symbolic. Reparations are mechanisms through which governments open spaces for the victims to express suffering, to guarantee their individual and collective acknowledgement and to promote their dignification. In these spaces, processes aimed to fulfil the moral and legal obligation to provide material and symbolic reparations are associated with processes that guarantee the necessary socio-economic conditions for the victims and their communities to have a dignified life (Naidu 2004). Symbolic reparation, according to the Victims and Land Restitution Law, “includes the display of works or acts of public scope or repercussion aimed at the construction and recovery of historical memory, the recognition of the dignity of the victims and the reconstruction of the social fabric” (Law 1448 of 2011).

Art has the power to creatively represent painful experiences as, through its narrative, it enhances dialogical and restorative collective memories. Art encourages citizen action and seeks for more horizontal political exercises that could promote a transformation of a social context. In collective memory, all remembrances from the past are interwoven and shape a common knowledge in a social group. However, this conceptualisation, originating in the work of Maurice Halbwachs (1992), does not make clear the connection with the political “doing” and “acting” of societies. Collective memory has a political function linked to the narrative that is expressed, silenced or forgotten (Jelin 2020). In the post-agreement phase in Colombia (2016), the rewriting of memory's narratives have also meant that the government, elite and power groups have used the tensions over the memory of the internal armed conflict to deny or distort what happened in the conflict. This has encouraged the

return to old and new versions of the violence. These are useful to current socio-economic and political interests which are linked to the mechanism of neoliberal policies that are unaware of a sense of community identity, of the collective organisations and of the multicultural and multi-ethnic character of the country, constitutionally established in 1991.

The resulting socio-cultural consequences imply forms of revictimisation of those who are marginalised for not falling within the ethnic, cultural and socio-political standards of the nation, even when they are functionally and factually members of society. In this process of discrimination, a hierarchy of victims is created and actors, who, in many cases, are perceived by communities of victims as perpetrators, are imposed as heroes. Collective memory becomes a source for the construction of identities as it enhances dignity and self-respect of victimised individuals and communities.

The audiovisual narrative recovers a collective effort to represent the unrepresentable of the violence of the Colombian armed conflict. Thus, the video becomes a symbolic and material connection that enables a transition from conflict, pain and death into ways of explaining, understanding and interpreting the traumatic experience as it recovers the aesthetics of the victim and updates that of the perpetrators. From this perspective, the short documentary interweaves sound and visual elements making visible diverse voices in the construction of a narrative, articulated to the socio-political and cultural death of those defenceless people, whose acts of resistance transit the Cauca River. The relationship between the individuals and the objects is part of the staging's iconology. The victims' clothing embodies not only a sense of absence but, specifically, recovers the sense of the need for justice for a specific criminal act. In this case, the crime is, in the typology of the armed conflict, “enforced disappearance”.

In the national shift that Colombia is experiencing still in 2021, a visual and artistic work, such as “X Peregrinación Trujillo y Magdalena por el Cauca”, uses a creative strategy that updates itself to question the absence of policies and governmental efforts for memory building. In the framework of the post-peace-agreement phase and with a still ongoing armed conflict, the memory actions have not been capable of responding to the challenges of the integral reparation process. Society responds by structuring a process stemming from the survivors, the collectivities, the supportive society, the victimised groups and the artists. The interests and attitudes of the political and economic elite, along with the absence of international cooperation for a permanent cessation of human rights violations in the country, are undermining those ways to comprehend and explain the social fabric's disintegration caused by violence. This situation also subverts processes through which communities confront and resist injustices and humiliations, framed in a conflict that has been strengthened in the last three years.



## The Cauca river: a site of memory and an art space for mediatisation and communicative interaction

In this article, we propose to characterise the mediated artistic proposal “Magdalenas por el Cauca” using the mediation process recorded in the video “X Peregrinación Trujillo y Magdalenas por el Cauca” that was collectivised on YouTube in its first media update. When representing this work of art, a communicative process and an interaction with multiple, diverse and virtual interlocutors take place; collective memory invokes unpredictable dialogues.

“Magdalenas por el Cauca” was performed in two phases: in the first, photographic records of sections of the river and contiguous areas were made. At this stage, an exhibition of these photos was displayed and the audience was asked to tell a story or express their reaction. In the second phase, female members of AFAVIT<sup>4</sup> painted the faces of victims’ mothers holding portraits of the disappeared victims on large pieces of fabric. Later, the artist placed these fabrics on rafts that were set adrift in the Cauca River simulating the victims’ dead bodies that were carried along by the force of the river’s current. The rafts followed one another as if they were in a procession. In some of them, additional symbolic elements and images, such as a woman holding a cross, were also placed or the representation of La Llorona, a Colombian mythical character who endlessly suffers her children’s disappearance (Osorio Bermeo 2018).

In the work of art, iconic and metaphoric elements are clearly marked. One of them is the intertextual reference to Magdalena, a biblical character who lamented for Jesus Christ and, in a culture influenced by Christian beliefs, it refers to a woman who has lost her loved ones. The video on YouTube not only recovers the symbolic value of “Magdalenas por el Cauca”, but also testifies through its narrative to the necessity to reveal the landscape of horror and death into which the river was transformed. An iconological reading of the rafts evokes the bodies of the disappeared and their mothers. The river is conceptualised as a site of memory, a space of interaction and rituals that create metaphorically a sense of funerals that could not take place and transform to that of a cemetery. Life and death are a journey. A blue cross embodies the co-existence with religious beliefs in which pain must be humbly endured, beliefs that are also serving a right-wing political position and which are addressed symbolically through the blue colour, which stands for the Colombian Conservative Party. The alliance between the Church and the Conservative Government in power favoured political violence in the country, especially in regions, such as Valle del Cauca (CNMH 2008).

“Magdalenas por el Cauca” commemorates all those people who were victims of homicide and enforced

disappearance, dignifying survivors, victims’ families and especially the mothers. Considering that the exhibition and procession is a symbolic act of visitation, the video “X Peregrinación Trujillo” (2010) recontextualises the rituality and performance of the population that also follows actively and visually the crafts’ path, praying for the disappeared. The performative act embodies the co-creative art which involves not only its creator, but also who takes part in the pilgrimage. The exhibition-procession develops from the installation and the performance as artworks, to the ritual and commemoration as acts of memory. These two dimensions generate a semantisation of the river as they manage signification processes that include meaning-making beyond death and tragedy (Perdomo 2015).

The exhibition/procession moves away from canons of patrimonialisation as it falls within the scope of “ephemeral” art and includes twenty community acts (the last one held on 7 November 2020 (CELAM 2020), in which the work is recreated in a co-authored act. It is a process of memorialisation that formulates/shapes the collective memory of a collection of communities and which expresses their will to make it visible in the whole country and socialise it with their interlocutors on the internet. Even when the exhibition-procession is materially preserved in time, it also displays its permanence in social cognition. What is remembered, silenced or forgotten is embodied in the experience of those individuals who participate in the ritual, the workshops and other events that the work of art fosters. Art becomes a medium for catharsis, a source for healing and for relief of the pain caused by the perpetrators as it builds a space to symbolically recover and bid farewell to the bodies of the disappeared. The landscape is intervened by the community as an expression of the religiosity and resistance of the communities. To recover the river as a form of purification, the collective artistic intervention is transformed into a public testimonial narrative. The testimonial narrative is a discursive unit that creates visibility for the victims of the Colombian internal armed conflict, dialogically creating a space on the public stage to be inserted from the life experience in the memorialisation processes.

Through “Magdalenas por el Cauca” and the performance “X Peregrinación Trujillo”, it is possible to infer the potential of collective artistic practices to build spaces for interaction, in which those collective and individual memories of a painful past, caused by the violence in the internal armed conflict, are invoked and made visible. Memorialisation processes activate a political potential and encourage new artistic expressions of supportive co-creation embedded in collaborative practices. These processes become forms of production, design and socialisation of collective memories. In this case, survivors, victims’ relatives, witnesses and trauma inheritors, in general, are active participants who recover their presences and experiences. Their memories are interwoven with

4 Association of victims’ relatives of Trujillo.

those of the individuals who were more directly involved, with the memories mediated by the community and memories indirectly built, despite the proximity to the victim. Thus, the video “X Peregrinación Trujillo” (2010) updates “Magdalenas por el Cauca” as a work of art: the video manages mediated memories and fosters collectivities able to appropriate and keep the memories alive, despite State policies that tend to deny or obscure them. José Obdulio Gaviria, former advisor to the government of Álvaro Uribe Vélez, expressed: “Denying the conflict is a position based on facts” (*El Espectador* (Debate 10) 2019). In this tension, it is certain that the conflict happened, not only based on factual evidence, but also on institutionalised discourses, in which this is evident:

During the peace negotiations between the government of Juan Manuel Santos and the FARC, the Comisión Histórica del Conflicto Armado y sus Víctimas<sup>5</sup> (CHCV) was created to examine the causes, development and effects of the armed confrontation in Colombia. As a result, twelve essays and two reports were written by intellectuals with a clear plurality of approaches and explanations about the war that the country has suffered (Garzón Vallejo and Agudelo 2019).

The video gives concrete shape and perpetuates the construction of a collective knowledge that is integrated into social cognition, enabling emotional dialogue as a basic understanding and an ethical view of the violent past. The video also allows the appropriation of an aesthetic capable of sustaining its commitment to individual memories which become collective as that knowledge is managed, formulated and reflected in a dialogic process; the past is creatively built by using and giving shape to this kind of knowledge (Rigney 2016). It is precisely in social cognition where collective memory is structured and has meaning, insofar as it is organised in the cultural and axiological background of a community.

In the video, a set of static images in large format, moving images of a religious and festive ritual, songs of resistance, declarations, denouncements and life declarations are articulated. A multiplicity of social actors are involved: witnesses, survivors, leaders, community members as solidarity agents, civil and religious authorities, organised children and rafters, amongst other actors. There are multiple discursive genres: testimonies, political speeches including elegies and resignification of objects, such as clothing items, flowers and the rafts that, while passing, allow us to visualise what surrounds the river with the objects and people that pass through the waters; this is how the semiotic landscape is constructed. The semiotic landscape is conceptualised as a dynamic communicative interaction that materialises an artistic expression with multiple and diverse knowledge, which

is amplified and updated in the act of remembering; and produced and interpreted from its sign character.

The relationship between memory, creation and imagination defines forms of knowledge that are spatially and temporally located and enhances other narratives from new interlocutors which recover violent events of the internal conflict. This is what Levy and Sznaider (2002) called “unlimited cultural memories”: these are sources of knowledge which produce perceptual experience, articulate emotions and make “others” visible: their traumas, concerns, expectations and hopes. This cognitive process connects through representation in the present, the past and the future. The video records intangible expressions, individual and collective memories in which the dialogue that structures the process of memorialisation is formulated. The aim is to construct civic responsibility as it is anchored to the art co-produced by the victimised communities. Paterson (2017) points out that it is only through participation that members of a community are empowered, not only to imagine a change in solidarity, but to manage it in the search for the desired society. This way of proceeding empowers those who seek through social action for a transformation of a violated and vulnerable society.

## Reading the mediated semiotic landscape

Addressing media expressions implies to recover its design, production and interpretation process in interaction. This requires tools of transdisciplinary nature through which the study of a discourse involving diverse interwoven signs is formulated. Verbal language, non-verbal sounds, static and mobile images, colour and technological support media are used to make them function in the process of memory building and to create proper conditions to formulate strategies to achieve peace. Through the multimodal and multimedia study of a video, the semiotic modes, the appropriated resources for the construction of meanings (materialised in cultural frames) and discursive representations are investigated.

Following the approaches of Kress (2010) and Van Leeuwen (1999), Multimodal and Multimedial Critical Discourse Studies (MMCDS) are defined as a transdisciplinary and critical-reflective position that addresses discursive units, as characterised by materialising in different sign systems (modes), the relationship that goes from cognition to the social reality represented; and, for distributing and socialising the discursive units through technological sources. In this perspective, the processes of signification come from the inter-sign relationships that are typified in the discourse and from the material and technological devices that are available in the culture.

<sup>5</sup> The Historical Commission of the armed conflict and its victims (CHCV) was responsible of studying and investigating the phenomenon of violence in Colombia, as well as determining responsibilities of those who participated or had any sort of involvement in it.

The characteristic media and multimodal expressions of contemporary media activity – come to life in signs – are not external phenomena to the social subject that uses them. Consequently, approaching them involves the individual who is defined by the conditioning of his social-communicative reality (Norris 2016). It is postulated that action and interaction bind social actions, memory processes and history, defining the identities of the actors (Norris 2016). The understanding and the explanation of a mediated act involves, at least, the meaning's producer and the mediator; it addresses the tension that goes from the one who produces the meaning to the way in which the media transforms the signification, especially when it is staged on a platform like YouTube. Given the characteristics of the selected corpus, Rheindorf's (2019) proposal is adopted to reveal the differences handled between the social actors involved in the act of communication, the objects used and the symbolic world they build and inhabit. This implies selecting fields of social action and specific discourses situated to carry out a transversal analysis of the discourse.

The YouTube video "X Peregrinación Trujillo (2010)" is analysed to describe forms of interaction, to recognise and explain the relationships generated between the semiotic modes involved, to establish representations that are created in the socio-cultural frameworks and to give an account of the relationships amongst co-creative art, memory, symbolic reparation and collective social action. The video is a short documentary that supports the collective artistic action and functions as an index of the institutional and governmental support received. A short documentary can be characterised as short-time audiovisual work which expresses a representation about a type of reality from the perspective of those who document it. The main strategy is related to the type of video-assembly which gets a concrete shape through the articulation of semiotic resources producing a space and a temporality different from that of the represented events, in this case, the exhibition and pilgrimage. The short documentary becomes a narrative that goes far beyond the socio-discursive practices represented, managing a new type of memorialisation, whose purpose is not only to contextualise the artistic work "Magdalenas por el Cauca", but also emotions as the visual complements the auditory elements (Martínez and Salway 2005).

Methodologically, the video is analysed from a mixed perspective since its segments are decoded sequentially and additively. Schemes are developed, theoretical assumptions are made and interactions are delimited; at the same time, meanings attributable to actions and actors are recovered, as well as their motivations and interests. In addition, relationships between the participants and the artifacts that have a meaning in social interaction are established. Natural settings as places for interaction are

also recovered, as well as categories, such as density and permanence.

"Density" is understood as the set of qualitative values that come from the observation of the interaction through which the characteristics of individuals and artifacts are perceived in the video. The category "permanence" facilitates the recovery of the space/time sense that the medium guarantees and makes accessible the interactions, so they update and go through a process of re-semantisation channelled via the interlocutors. Within the framework of *permanence*, the characteristics of the communicative situation, the role of artifacts and accessories, the spatial organisation, the semiotics modes and the general atmosphere, represented in its place of production and interpretation, are verified (Knoblauch et al. 2014).

Representations are analysed in two dimensions: the appropriation of their symbolic meaning and the permanent re-semantisation. Epistemologically, it is assumed that semiotics go through all possible explanations to characterise all the semiotic modes involved. Consequently, the video is an integral system of signs, that is, it has a multimodal character and is socially distributed through technological resources (YouTube in this case) which also make it multimedial. The possible meanings and senses come from the design elements of the environment and their production, as well as from the density and permanence of the audiovisual data of the video, being recovered as a discourse and a narrative.

## Reshaping the semiotic landscape of memories

The forms of interaction include the objects, from which the relationship with the actors is established and the relationship with the environment is formulated. In the interval between 0:00 and 0:11 seconds, the first ritual of religious nature comes out, including a location where a prayer is attuned, the image of a crucified Christ and an altar with flowers and a candle in the foreground. Without transitions, a ritual of resistance appears, marked by a procession accompanied by chanting the song written by Mercedes Sosa, "I ask only of God". There is an intertext between the song's title and nuclear issues related to the *X Pilgrimage's* topic: religious beliefs, resistance and denunciation against war. The resistance ritual appears in the interval between 0:12–0:18 seconds and lets us recognise the stanza: "I ask only of God/ that I am not unmoved by injustice/ that I am not slapped on the other cheek/ after resigning myself to injury by a claw/"<sup>6</sup>.

Between the seconds 00:30 and 00:40, another intertext links religious beliefs with the seeking for resistance: the verse written by Juan Antonio Espinoza<sup>7</sup>: "You cannot

6 Original text in Spanish: "Solo le pido a Dios/ Que lo injusto no me sea indiferente/ Que no me abofeteen la otra mejilla/Después que una garra me arañe esta suerte/".

7 Original text in Spanish: "No se puede sepultar la luz" / "Y si no, las piedras gritarán - la invencible causa de los pobres /".



bury the light” / “If you do, the stones will scream – the invincible cause of the poor”. These lines are related to the biblical quote in Luke 19:40 which tells about the impossibility of silence as testimony, despite the attempts of silencing it. The singing is performed, while the image displays in a high angle shot the scene when people walk to the river highlighting two verbal indexical markers that guide the interlocutor in space and time: “Riofrío, Valle del Cauca” and the MOVICE<sup>8</sup> billboard. In 1993, the Third Brigade of the Colombian armed forces entered the Municipality of Riofrío and pretended to combat guerrilla forces, when actually they were fighting civilians. Thirteen people were killed and several more were injured and were later presented as wounded in combat and as ELN militants. This crime against humanity has gone unpunished as the Supreme Court of Justice declared null the legal process against the perpetrators (CNMH 2008).

From second 00:40 to second 00:46, a large-format pictorial image is displayed, focusing on Carmen Londoño’s face. She is considered one of the *Magdalenas* since one of her children, revealed in an inset at the bottom right, was killed in the Trujillo Massacre. The pictorial image by Gabriel Posada is based on a photograph taken by Jesús Abad Colorado for the report “Trujillo, una gota de esperanza en un mar de impunidad”<sup>9</sup> (*Magdalenas por el Cauca*, undated). This section of the video is accompanied by the verse “Ay, Magdalena, ay, Magdalena”, part of the song “Alma de caminante” by Martha Elena Hoyos. These lines work as a link to introduce the segment 00:47–00:59 seconds where a religious authority, ‘Padre Antonis’ – Episcopal Church, exhorts transposition of the meaning of death into that of life by saying: “After meeting her master, Mary Magdalene set out to announce life. You and I will set out to announce life”<sup>10</sup>. The discourse carries political content since its purpose is to formulate and build models of behaviour to establish a social body. A relationship between what is proclaimed and the characteristic ritualisation of the preaching is elaborated. Between minutes 01:00 and 01:12, there is a declaration accompanied by a kinesic gesture, characteristic of the Catholic-Christian rites, using the hand facing the river: “We declare restoration of life in this place”<sup>11</sup>. In the liturgy, the preaching/declaration has a performative character: it is considered that the restoration is executed on the symbolic and material level.

Symbology acquires meaning in the framework of the exhibition/procession as an act of remembrance. The performativity and rituality of the people who visually accompany the rafts’ route performing post-mortem reparation acts, enables *Magdalenas por el Cauca* to acquire

signification. This artistic and mediated project provides the sociocultural conditions to build an active collective memory. The victims and survivors find a space to affirm their identity and socialise their common history of exclusion. The video becomes the support for co-creation of memory through art, as it connects and creates dialogues with virtual audiences transforming collective knowledge. These transfigurations provide new horizons to collectivise memories.

From 1:14 minute onwards, the life or festivity ritual materialises the restoration. The participants in the pilgrimage start dancing, there is an instrumental sound that results from the performing of the Brass Quintet of the *Instituto de Cultura de Pereira*. The presence of sister Maritze Trigos stands out amongst other actors as, from her role of a religious authority, she acts as companion, in horizontal relationship and as an active member of the Asociación Familiares Víctimas de Trujillo<sup>12</sup> (AFAVIT). The nun, although dressed as a civilian, legitimises the ritual by authority. Between minutes 1:42–1:47, in a wide shot, one of the rafts is displayed which is later on driven away by the current of the river. This moving image serves as an anticipation, prolepsis, of what is going to happen.

At 2:04 minutes, a *fade to black* is displayed, signalling the closure of the ritual of life or festivity and a more artistic and political ritual is introduced in which individuals with different degrees of authorities appear. Their presence is relevant because they are representatives of the victims, their relatives and the supportive civil society. María Isabel Espinoza, a writer born in Pereira who lives in the region, intervenes in the video – which is deduced from what is deictically indicated in the video (“Cartago – Valle”). The artist, called “the poet of the death” (Perdomo 2015), stands on a platform where pictorial images of portraits in white and black of some of the disappeared victims are placed, together with a pictorial image/portrait of one of the *Magdalenas* in large format and full colour and a cross that connects the *mise-en-scène* with the “Fundación Guagua”. This is a social organisation committed to the defence of human rights which focuses on victims of the State in issues, such as forced disappearance, extrajudicial executions and crimes attributed to State forces or officials committed in the context of the armed conflict (URL: <https://fundaguagua12.wixsite.com/fundacionguagua/sobre-nosotros>).

The intervention is characterised by the voice of the artist who narrates the events seen from the outside, but with a subjectivity legitimised by being an artist/witness of the dead bodies floating down the river. This scene implies an emotional event for the victims, survivors, rela-

8 MOVICE is a national movement that brings together groups of organisations that represent the victims of State crimes committed in the context of the internal armed conflict.

9 Trujillo, a drop of hope in a sea of impunity.

10 Original text in Spanish: “María Magdalena, después de encontrarse con su maestro, salió a anunciar la vida. Ustedes y yo, saldremos a anunciar la vida”.

11 Original text in Spanish: “Declaramos restaurada la vida en este lugar”.

12 Association of relatives of victims of Trujillo (AFAVIT).

tives and community members. Evidentiality is produced through first-person modalisation and a phenomenon of hyperbaton, an inversion that gives the narrative a more poetic direction: “dissolved bones” and “grieving black vultures”<sup>13</sup>. The reading is accompanied by an inset where images of the exhibition/pilgrimage held in 2008 can be seen, these, by substitution, representing the bodies of the victims floating down the river without specific direction. This is how a memory process is updated:

Funerals in the Cauca River had become daily bread. The river waters became a casket coach carrying them without a destination. I say this because some of the corpses could not be recovered for identifying them or to bury their dissolved bones. Many remain in the stomach of fishes and of grieving black vultures (María Isabel Espinosa 2010).

The reiterated audiovisual resource of *fade to black* creates a temporal leap and brings into focus the label “Grupo infantil AFAVIT”<sup>14</sup>. Immediately, a girl appears speaking on behalf of a gathering of children and youths. In her words: “This group is called Jimmy García Peña in honour of a boy who was killed at the age of 18 months. He was killed in Naranjal”. The presence of the group is an indexical marker of children and young people as victims of the massacre and creates a sense of activism and resistance of those who, because of their birth, did not witness the massacre. The mnemonic resource in the children’s intervention is anaphoric: “we are seeds, we are memory, we are life, we demand justice”. In Western societies, children are symbols of hope. The verbal and graphic expressions transmit a process of socialisation, anchored in the construction of identity and desirable social transformations.

The next transition marker is a wide shot of the river in which an object on a raft is focused, covered in a white material and partially hidden behind the vegetation. Simultaneously, in *voice off*, a man who produces a remembrance act is heard. Eduardo Carreño (minute 3:08–3:58), member of the *Colectivo de Abogados José Alvear*<sup>15</sup>, who has followed the case unofficially, addresses the people around the stage. The visual context is composed by black and white photographs of the disappeared victims, the crosses – three of them different from the cross placed at the centre – and, in the first third, at the right corner, there also appears an artistic image in large format of Evangelina López, mother of one of the disappeared who symbolically embodies every mother of the disappeared youths or children. In his speech, Carreño expresses his condition as a social subject and his point of view about the memory process in which he is immersed:

Recalling today 20 years of [the disappearance of] Tiberio, of Alba Isabel and of their companions,

the victims whose mortal remains were thrown in the Cauca River [...] We believe that this case is symbolic on the national and international level, that is, what has been built for the victims. [...] In 1995, former President Samper publicly assumed responsibility for these crimes. We cannot forget them. We must reiteratively provide support to the victims [...], all the victims of State crime regardless of the region or sector they belong to. Neither forgiveness, nor forgetfulness! Punishment to the murderers! (Eduardo Carreño 2010).

In this speech, various temporalities are presented. The first is 1990, the year in which the priest Tiberio Fernández, his niece Alba Isabel Giraldo and other companions were assassinated. Members of the Colombian security forces used torture and sexual violence before they murdered them. The second is 1995, when Samper recognised the State’s responsibility for these crimes. “Magdalenas por el Cauca”, performed on 17 April 2010, evokes the anniversary of the murder of Tiberio, Alba Isabel and 25 other persons, artistically represented in “La Ofelia de Trujillo”.

In minute 4:02, the *fade to black* displays the motto “Magdalenas por el Cauca”, initiating the spiritual and memorialisation ritual. The rafts navigate down the river with images and artistic representations alluding to the victims and allegorical to the topic of the Magdalenas. At minute 4:04, an inset in a wide shot shows two rafts being driven; the use of a zoom effect magnifies the shot and brings the image closer to the observer. When the inset is enlarged, it is possible to observe that the rafts are driven by young men and that the closest raft in the shot is the one of Ofelia Trujillo. The implied intertext is the work of art “Ofelia” by the painter John Everett Millais in which the female character of the same name commits suicide and her body appears floating with flowers in a stream. The resource of intertextuality is expressed by iconological markers (the woman floating in the stream and the flowers), through which the senses of the violent death are recovered. To represent Ofelia, an image of Alba Isabel Giraldo’s face was chosen (Perdomo 2015). From minute 4:25 onwards, there is a close-up that allows the observation of the elements accompanying the sculpture, amongst them being an image on the chest of Father Tiberio Fernández, flowers and the faces of 25 of the disappeared, which collectively make up Ofelia’s dress.

At minute 5:16, one of the Magdalenas emerges; it is an artistic image in a large format with a blue and grey-scale background, it is a proposal to represent Rosalba Lozano, whose brother Agustín disappeared and the grief which killed her mother. The grey colour and the woman’s facial expression set a sense of sadness. In minute 5:46, the poet Omar Ortiz intervenes by reading a sto-

13 Original text in Spanish: “Desechos huesos” and “dolientes chulos”.

14 AFAVIT children’s group.

15 José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers’ Association.

ry written in the first person producing a metonymy in which the character of the story represents the victims of the Massacre.

I had my newly polished black shoes on, I looked like a handsome man, (said) my mother during the goodbye kiss ritual. In line, they took my photo for the job application, but quickly they pushed me into a car, they pressed two shotguns to my head and I ended up in a pigsty where they asked me about strangers. No sir! I said and they beat me. Yes sir! I said and they beat me anyway. They did everything as if he had no humanity, no bones, no blood, no soul. I no longer have a blue suit, or an orange tie, nor can I hug Margarita. Now I am a faded photo that my mother carries around in squares and parades (Omar Ortiz 2010).

The poet's reading is accompanied by zooms to the Magdalena with the face of Rosa Elena Montoya, with a black background, creating the sense of death. The woman's circumspect character, complemented by other symbolic elements, such as the presence of a rounded black object placed on her forehead, allows us to infer that a bullet went through her head, leaving the semiotic mark of the act of violence and its remains as she loses part of her corporality, to be placed in the upper left corner. The artistic image of Rosa Elena, made by Gabriel Posada, is a re-semiotisation of the photograph made by Jesús Abad Colorado; the semiotic transformation involves the grey colour of the woman's hair and the face in the photograph of her murdered son, on the chest.

The *travelling* accompanies the raft of a woman who is indexically identified as Consuelo Valencia (minute 6:34). The pink background of Magdalena produces a contrast with the rest of the image. The presence of colour shows the character of Magdalena who is a survivor of the crimes committed against her immediate family. Her two missing sons are presented in a grey-scale, connecting iconology with the region's own sociocultural assessments. The marked shapes of the face, especially the facial folds, are indexical marks of the traces of time.

In minute 7:18, the Magdalena does not represent a person, but is made "in memory of all the women who were raped and murdered". This work of art was made by Orlando Naranjo, president of AFAVIT and relative of a victim. Some of the significant features of the woman represented are colours: black, grey; the red that connotes the blood product of violence; and blue which is culturally related to tears. The raft moves away slowly and this movement is associated with a visual-temporal resource

that not only marks the end of the ritual, but also the distancing of the victims carried away by the river.

Death gives way to life through the symbolic act of accompanying missing lives. Simultaneously, a woman is heard in the background: "They will be rivers of joy for having overcome the horror of death. Rifles are the eyes of war. While some look at the dead, we dream of life" (Maritze Trigos 2010). The statement and the simile emphasise the transformation of the meanings associated with the river. The rafts are followed by the musical accompaniment of an acoustic guitar whose instrumental tones, soft and slow melody and rhythm give a feeling of tranquillity. At minute 8:08, the *fade in black* marks the end of "Magdalenas por el Cauca" and begins the credits that are accompanied by photographs of the *X Pilgrimage*. The video closing, as a unit, is made up of two types of visual resources: Ofelia in 30 different angles and planes, the artistic images of the Magdalenas; and the visual-graphic resources of a fixed image, in which, on the one hand, members of the community are recovered and represented and who actively participate in the pilgrimage as rafters; and, on the other hand, different moments of the resistance rituals of the population, which include a girl victim who makes a tribute with flowers, are shown.

The representation of the exhibition/pilgrimage implies recognising the articulation that occurs between the iconic elements and the central meaning, transposing the meaning of death to that of life. These elements become icons due to the stabilisation of their socio-cultural sense. The conjunction of permanence and density is produced by its social diffusion and media reproduction. In Kohn's (2018) perspective, repetition transforms icons into memory units which are easily recognised by society.

The iconological relationship is formulated within the framework of religious rituals that can be approached in the video through the flowers and the cross. The flowers create an indexical relationship with life and death. Culturally, flowers are a semiotic resource that carries the sense of tribute and respect and gives a theme to the inescapable condition of existence. The cross activates the Judeo-Christian sense of Calvary, the innocent victim and the search for the act of justice.

Within the framework of the festive ritual, whose centre is the sense of resistance, the iconology includes the image of the bridge, which updates one of the social movements for the victims and integrates two meanings: on the one hand, the transition from one situation to another, emulating an armed conflict and the peace process. On the other hand, the transition of life and death, which come together in the river's presence as a route. The rafts became the leitmotif as they recover the victim's presence and generate an intertextual relationship with the Greek myth of Charon's boat: the natural and forced passage between life and death is rebuilt. The T-shirts, worn by those attending the exhibition/pilgrimage, constitute an index of the inescapable act of resistance to which the socio-cultural community of the region is committed in search of guaranteeing reparation and non-repetition.

**Table 1.** Visual-graphic memory: rituals.

Religious ritual	Festivity ritual	Artistic-political ritual	Spiritual and memorialisation ritual
(0:00–1:13)	(1:14–2:03)	(2:04–4:01)	(4:02–8:00)
Fig. 1a	Fig. 1b	Fig. 1c	Fig. 1d

Source images: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5EshU1M\\_CQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5EshU1M_CQ)





**Figure 1.** A. Religious ritual – 1:08; B. Festivity ritual – 1:31; C. Artistic-political ritual – 2:50; D. Spiritual and memorialisation ritual – 7:21.

## Conclusion

The icons work as traces of the presences/absences, collectively intervened in an act of dialogic co-creation, which is permanently reinterpreted and signified to permeate the memories with the collective meaning formulated in the Trujillo community. Iconology becomes the axis of the process of co-creation and interaction that is renewed, periodically, in the exhibition-pilgrimage, reformulating collective memory indefinitely. The analysis of the semiotic and mediatised landscape of memory in Trujillo allows us to unravel its socio-political and cultural implications, within the context of the Post-agreement (2016). The multimodal and multimedia memorialisation initiatives constitute fundamental acts of collective resistance against the persistence of violence and human rights violations. In the process of semiotic-discursive characterisation of the video “X PEREGRINACION TRUJILLO y MAGDALENAS POR EL CAUCA” (2010), the artistic image of the victims was recovered, resignifying the meaning of existence in the rituals. Sign systems and the semiotic resources involved have a role in transforming the meaning of death and war into that of life and peace. Iconology and metaphors articulate the different sign systems, structuring the visual-verbal unit at the service of the visual-graphic. There is a verbal

reinforcement that contextualises the beings and objects involved in the rituals and creates reference points for multiple interpretations.

The analytical perspective of the rituals, through which the representations of collective and individual memories are constructed, designed and updated, allowed the recovery of macro-micro-narratives to decipher forms of commemoration that articulate models of the past and (with hegemonic constructions of power) the transformations that update the present and project the future. Latin America requires that, from the studies of language, we explore the connections amongst practices of memorialisation and the symbolic ways of remembering the past as a guarantee for comprehensive reparation and non-repetition of violence, with its continuities and ruptures.

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# Memory, art and intergenerational transmission. Artistic practices with young people in memory sites in Argentina

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## Abstract

This text analyzes recent experiences with young people from Middle Schools of the city of Buenos Aires (Argentina) in Memory Sites of this city. Our inquiry is interested in the intergenerational transmission referring to the traumatic past around the last military dictatorship established in Argentina between 1976 and 1983. With this interest, two experiences designed through artistic languages are analyzed: the Posters Project from the Memory Park and the use of poetry in the guided visits to the Memory Site at "El Olimpo", former Clandestine Detention Center for Torture and Extermination, both spaces of the city of Buenos Aires.

## Key Words

Intergenerational transmission, memory Sites, narratives, traumatic legacy, young memories

## Introduction

Memory sites in Argentina refer to events that took place during the period of State terrorism that was in force in the country between 1975 and 1983<sup>1</sup>. In all cases, these sites, whether former clandestine detention centers or memorial sites, are related to that tragic period when an extermination mechanism was set in motion, a scheme based on its clandestine character, on the kidnapping of people, whose location and, eventually, whose murdered bodies were hidden, thus depriving them of proper burials, and on the systematic appropriation of children. This is about the horror that challenged the human condition by harming its ontological status.

"Such an outburst of experience [...] breaks the link with the thinkable [...] since horror surpasses the limits of language and a manifestation of the world as the annulment of the sense" (González 2005: 72). Horror is pierced by the ineffable; it cannot be explained, to the extent that the very

foundations of meaning of all narratives have been affected. "The victims of enforced disappearances are, literally, dead people without a burial site, and this state of uncertainty, of lack of ritualization, of suspension, produces a vacuum which is impossible to fulfill" (Violi 2020: 17).

The specific characteristics of the politicization that shapes the historical and cultural fabric in this territory enabled the construction of a broad human rights movement that, in the last thirty years, has even surpassed the organizations of family members and survivors, expressing themselves through diverse groups in the civil society. Faced with the impossibility of performing the usual funeral rites, they developed diverse practices to cope with the loss and the mourning process, thus becoming the foundation for the processing of such difficult past times.

At the same time, the important presence of the psychoanalytic movement in Argentine culture since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Plotkin 2003) has provided a generous contribution to local cultural and political debates

<sup>1</sup> In February 1975, the constitutional government entrusted the Armed Forces (FF AA) with the mission of "annihilating any subversive activities". On 24<sup>th</sup> March, 1976, the Armed Forces took over the National Government through a military coup and established a dictatorship which lasted until 10<sup>th</sup> December, 1983.

(Besse 2019). The incorporation of psychoanalysis as an interpretative tool, its circulation through magazines with a wide target readership and the configuration of a professional field<sup>2</sup> generated widespread acceptance in various sectors of Argentinian culture. This phenomenon accounts for the possibilities of underlying prevalence, in spite of the repressive policies implemented by the dictatorship. During the 70s and the 80s, there was a significant circulation of reflections among Mental Health professionals (psychologists, psychoanalysts, psychiatrists), whether exiled or remaining in the country. They waged a fundamental semantic battle in order to place the consequences of such rupture of the bonds of the thinkable within the framework of a traumatic situation generated by State terrorism (Lastra 2019).

The CELS, Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (Center for Legal and Social Studies), one of the main organisms advocated to the human rights defense during those years, claims that

“Since 1982, the CELS Mental Health Team has been working with people who have been victims of the State terrorism violence of the 70’s and 80’s decades [...]. The extreme trauma has been definitely characterized by the horror imposed [...]. The psychic trauma that these people suffer is the outcome of the impact that a social catastrophe has on the subjectivity. Theirs are paradigmatic testimonies of how a tragic collective history intertwines with each person’s individual story” (CELS 1996).<sup>3</sup>

This conceptual displacement – from the individual approach towards its consideration in the frame of a traumatic social situation – evidences an intense investigative work and exchange aimed at facing the challenge of understanding the effects of the experienced violence during the State terrorism beyond individual situations.

Considering the mediation of meanings that culture produces on the local reality, those contributions from the psychoanalysis field, in a dialogue with the work developed by the Human Rights associations – not only the Mental Health team from Madres de Plaza de Mayo (Mothers of Plaza de Mayo Square), but also the Mental Health team from the aforementioned CELS, among others –, enabled, since the last years of the dictatorship, the attention, consideration and treatment of the extreme violence experienced by wide sectors of the population in the framework of a social situation understood as traumatic and managed as such, beyond the particular subjectivities (Tornay et al 2021). In this fabric, the construction of narratives of inter-generational memory and transmission are nourished and spread, in many cases boosted by ever-lasting searches for amplifying and delving into the elaboration of the traumatic situation.

All these specificities of recent Argentine history outlined a particular journey, recognized worldwide for its power and expanse in the elaboration of the horror. By focusing on the memory sites as constructions of this powerful journey, we are aiming at reflecting upon their narratives and the possibilities of transmission to the generations that have not had a direct experience of those years.

As Régine Robin points out,

“What most museums or memorials lack in terms of “homogenizing” narrative is the shadows, an unspeakable part that is not disguised [...] What obstructs communication in those official buildings is the excess of images and explanations, the illusion of a possible contact with the reality of that past [...] These museums give information to us, but perhaps do not transmit anything” (Robin 2014: 140).

Faced with this problem, different memory sites have proposed various strategies and initiatives that invite critical reflection on the recent past from sensitive registers. Can art at the sites of memory contribute to the elaboration of critical memories that facilitate the approach of new generations to these traumatic pasts? With the intention of encouraging dialogue within the framework of the arduous processing of such difficult social situations, in this article we will approach work experiences from and through different artistic expressions in two memory sites of the city of Buenos Aires: the Posters Project from Parque de la Memoria –Monumento a las Víctimas del Terrorismo de Estado (Memory Park – Monument to the Victims of State Terrorism) and the use of poetry in the guided visits to the Memory Site at “El Olimpo”, former Clandestine Detention Center for Torture and Extermination.

In studies on the elaboration of memory by generations who did not undergo the traumatic situations, the concept of “postmemory” has become widespread. This term was coined by Marianne Hirsch (2012). However, this concept refers specifically to the universe of victims of the Shoah and, strictly, in family contexts (Violi 2020). Then, it was used by other authors in a rather vague and inaccurate manner. On its most ample definition the concept of “postmemory”, matches in fact with that of “memory”, on its working approach, thus leading to a merging of both concepts. For this reason, we will not talk about “postmemory” in this work, but rather about a process of memory elaboration and intergenerational transmission.

As Patrizia Violi states:

“Transmission is then resolved in a chain of progressive enunciations which are written in layers, the new ones on top of the previous ones. This is exactly what takes place in postmemory: successive generations reclaim the memories of their fathers and mothers;

2 In 1942, the Argentinian Psychoanalytical Association was created, the first association member of the International Psychoanalytical Association (IPA) within the Spanish speaking world.

3 Unless otherwise indicated, all verbatim citations are originally in Spanish and were translated into English by the article’s translator.



**Figure 1.** Memory Park – Monument to Victims of State Terrorism, Buenos Aires City, Argentina. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

they reinterpret them, transform them and retranslate them in other ways. The discursivity of the postmemory is a transformative one, and, in many instances, as was the case in Latin America, a strongly creative and innovative one” (Violi 2020: 23).

Thus, we do not consider intergenerational transmission as a linear unidirectional transference of an unmodified object (knowledge and memories of the past) of adults towards the youngsters, but we understand that there exists a dialogue where there is elaboration and translation by the new generations, according to their contexts, interests and questions of the present. As we will see, these aspects are evidenced in the two experiences analyzed.

## Posters project: young people as producers of memories

The Memory Park is a space of remembrance located in the north of the city of Buenos Aires, on the riverbanks of the Río de la Plata river and estuary, the final destination of many victims of enforced disappearances, who were thrown into the river by their kidnappers in the so-called “death flights” (Verbitsky 1995). Its creation was promoted during the 1990s by human rights organizations, relatives of victims and survivors of State terrorism themselves. The Legislature of the city of Buenos Aires passed its creation in 1998, it was officially inaugurated in 2001 and it has been definitively open to the public since 2007.

This memorial site was created during the administration of former President Carlos Menem (1989–1999), which was characterized by policies of “forgetting” State terrorism crimes (Lvovich and Bisquert 2008). In this unfavorable context, it became the first governmental place to encourage awareness of such a traumatic past, and it occurred several years before many former Clandestine Detention Centers were recovered and transformed into commemorative buildings, when the time was auspicious to develop memory policies.

It is a public area of 14 hectares, with free access, which includes the Monument to the Victims of State Terrorism (Fig. 1)<sup>4</sup>, a group of sculptures commemorating State terrorism in Argentina and a hall for temporary exhibitions called PAYS Hall (this acronym in Spanish means: Present Now and Forever). As Patrizia Violi and Cristina Demaria (2017) indicated, even though the place represents certain official or specific meanings, it adds multiple senses depending on the diversity of practices and visitors, since it is a memory site, a mourning place for relatives and a means to explaining Argentina’s recent history, but it is also a park, a recreational spot where many people simply go for a walk or to enjoy the river view.

In this memory site, art is entrusted with a crucial role, not only in its design but also in its narrative and pedagogical proposals. These are in charge of the Education Department and consist mainly of guided visits and workshops for students of different levels. One of the activities carried out in this area since 2012 is the project “Afiches – Pensar el presente haciendo memoria” (“Posters Project- Thinking the Present by Recalling the Past”), a proposal that invites high

<sup>4</sup> The monument is a wall with the names of those who disappeared and were then murdered by state violence and semi-official armed organizations from 1969 to 1983. While most of the victims are from the last dictatorship (1976–1983), the choice of the period is the result of serious discussions within the Pro-Monument Commission and intends to show State terrorism as a broader historical process that preceded the last military coup (Vecchioli 2001).



school students (13 to 18 year-olds) to reflect critically on different problems related to human rights today. The final product is the creation of a poster or other graphic artwork. Some of the topics that have been discussed are genocide, gender violence, migrant rights, youth, institutional violence, gender and identity, and indigenous peoples.

In each new edition, the project offers activities in several stages. First, after the announcement by the Park, the staff of the site meets with the teachers who register their students for the project. In this meeting, they work on the main guidelines to be considered, based on written material and activities proposed by the education team, who also seeks advice and articulation with governmental and non-governmental institutions engaged in the suggested topic for that particular edition.

After working on the topics with their teachers, the students of all the schools go to the Memory Park for a guided tour and a group workshop. The visit, although shorter than a regular one, aims to give young people a better understanding of the institution that organizes the activity, a basic knowledge of State terrorism and the reasons why the park promotes this type of project. As the members of the education area point out, young people enjoy this visit very much, since for most of them it is “quite a plan” since, after the educational class, they continue on their own with recreational activities. It is also a unique opportunity for them to go round the place and get acquainted with the topic, and this can create an interest to visit other memory sites (Interview with Rapp, Toytoyndjian and Vázquez Lareu, 2020). As for the workshop, the organizers of the project state that “the idea is for the students to get involved, even physically, to work in groups to encourage debate, the exchange of ideas and questions” (Eliano et al. 2019: 3).

Finally, students turn their ideas into posters and/or comics, with the guidance of their teachers and the members of the Park’s education team, who visit the schools for a follow-up. These productions are created in groups and the intention is that the students should be able to summarize their opinions on the topics using different artistic techniques. Then the posters are digitalized to be exhibited in the Park (and sometimes, in the PAYS Hall itself) for several months. In two opportunities, these productions travelled to other cultural sites in Argentina.

In this review, we will focus on the 2018 edition, which proposed as a topic “Gender and Identities under Construction. Rethinking the norms and ways of being”. This topic proved to be a very appealing one, due to the growth of the feminist movement in Argentina, but especially due to the discussion on the legalization of abortion

that took place that year in the National Congress. Although the project was rejected, the campaign in its favor generated a very strong process of mobilization among the youth. As a result, this Posters’ edition reached a record number of participants (21 schools).

The proposal for this edition was to work on three axes: gender roles, identity in the school and discrimination. The workbook prepared by the Park’s education team included the main guidelines regarding gender studies and the existing approaches of the feminist and LGBTIQ+ movements, such as the difference between sex, gender and sexuality, and the notion of gender identity. It also analyzed the forms of discrimination suffered by people who do not fit within binary heteronormativity. In addition, in its introduction, it sought to link the topics proposed with the memories of State terrorism in the Park’s narrative frame. Thus, on the one hand, it highlighted the fight for acknowledgment of the Right to Identity brought by the organizations that sought to return to their real families those children who were appropriated during the last military dictatorship<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, it emphasized the repressive actions suffered by the LGBTIQ+ collective during those years<sup>6</sup>. Finally, it proposed a series of activities with advertisements and journalistic reports for students to analyze and discuss gender stereotypes and different forms of discrimination. The aim was for them to develop a critical position on these issues based on debate and discussion by means of group work and role-playing exercises.

There were many different final productions, both technically and conceptually. Of the whole set, two posters stand out for their artistic value and for the process of research and reflection they expressed. The first one (Fig. 2) was done by a group of students from a state school in Laferrere, a popular neighborhood in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area. In a vanishing line, there is a path with the colors of the Diversity Flag, surrounded by fire, which seems to be guiding a group of people with green and orange handkerchiefs (faceless people, perhaps without a defined gender) to the National Congress. The building is surrounded by butterflies and fists high up in the air. Above, the words of the Argentinean LGBTIQ+ activist Lohana Berkins are quoted: “In a world of capitalist worms, you need to have some courage to be a butterfly”. The poster cannot but be interpreted in relation to the discussion of the legalization of abortion that was taking place at that time in the Argentine Congress. The green handkerchief is the symbol of the movement in favor of the legalization, while the orange handkerchief represents a demand for the separation of the Church from the State,

5 As part of the State terrorism regime, about 500 children, sons and daughters of those disappeared detainees, were appropriated by members of the suppressive forces. This practice consisted of the robbery and falsification of the identity of those children who were kidnapped together with their parents, and of those who were born during their mothers’ illegal detention. Since 1977, Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo (Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo Square) and other organizations have been working to find these children (now adults) to restore to them their true identities. On this topic, see Villalta (2012) and Laino Sanchis (2020).

6 For an overview of violence against LGBTIQ+ movement, see Insausti (2015).



**Figure 2.** Poster by students from Secondary School N° 8 Juan Carlos Bruera (from Gregorio de Laferrere, Buenos Aires Province). Source: Memory Park Website.

in a country where the Catholic Church is one of the fiercest opponents of that legalization project<sup>7</sup>. However, the path with the diversity colors entering the Congress seems to give an account of a wider horizon of expectations, where the feminist perspective and the LGBTIQ+ movement enter the seat of one of the powers of the State to modify from the roots up a patriarchal society, while burning everything down with their powerful steps.

The second poster (Fig. 3) was designed by a group of students from a private Catholic school in the city of Buenos Aires. In this composition with different elements, Botticelli's Venus stands out, intervened with the Diversity Flag that covers her eyes. This canonical image of female beauty offers a contrast with the different body types (fat, skinny, with hairs and also with different genitalia) that can be seen in the background. In this poster, again we see the Congress of the Nation, the fire, the fists high up in the air, and the reference to different slogans of feminist movements and women's movements: "Not One Woman Less" (in relation to femicides), "It will fall" (in reference to patriarchy) and "No more transvesticides". It is interesting to point out that this poster was made

by students of a private Catholic school. Even when the students were allowed to participate, and park workers were able to carry out their activities without any control, the possibility of some kind of tension at the school was likely to appear. However, the legitimate and independent voice of an external actor, the Park, in this case, allowed the teacher to go deep into matters that she could probably have not been able to develop as freely in a regular class (something similar might have happened to those teachers who, not having taken an active part in the Posters Project, still took their students to visit the Park).

### Poetry at "El Olimpo"<sup>8</sup>: a sensitive approach to the experiences of the victims of illegal and enforced disappearances

"El Olimpo" was one of the Clandestine Detention Centers for Torture and Extermination (CCDTyE, the acronym in Spanish) that operated in the city of Buenos Aires during the last military dictatorship. It is believed that in its five months' operation, between 16<sup>th</sup> August, 1978

<sup>7</sup> In Argentina, this separation is rather ambiguous, since the Catholic Church receives funding from the State in preferential terms.

<sup>8</sup> Translator's Note: "The Olympus" in English.



**Figure 3.** Poster by students from María Ana Mogas School (in Mataderos, Buenos Aires City). Source: Memory Park Website.

and the end of January, 1979, 500 people were kidnapped there, of whom about 100 would survive (Messina 2010). In 1979, due to a visit to Argentina by the OAS's Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the site was dismantled by the oppressors; most of those who had been kidnapped were executed on the "death flights" (Verbitsky 1995) and a few others were resettled in other clandestine centers. From that moment on, the place was passed effectively to the Federal Police as a Vehicle Verification Center.

Since the 1990s, several social groups began to make visible the human rights violations committed at this site, and denounced the presence of the Security Forces. This process was started by groups of organized neighbors, survivors, relatives of disappeared detainees, political militants and members of human rights organizations. After years of struggle, during which these groups introduced bills and organized acts, festivals, assemblies and demonstrations in the whereabouts of the site, in October 2004, former President Nestor Kirchner and former Governor of Buenos Aires City Aníbal Ibarra, signed an agreement, establishing the eviction of the Police and the "recovery"<sup>9</sup> of the place for the remembrance and promotion of human rights (Guglielmucci et al. 2008). After several controversies, the individuals and organizations that took part in this process decided that the site should be co-managed by a Working and Consensus Commission, also known as "Mesa"<sup>10</sup>, and the State. In addition, they created the "Programa para la Recuperación de la memoria histórica del ex CCDTyE Olimpo" ("Program

for the Recovery of the Historical Memory of 'El Olimpo'"), where research projects, guided tours and other participative and cultural activities are carried out.

Among the different activities offered at "El Olimpo", the ones that are most in demand are the guided tours for students from secondary schools and from social and political organizations. Although no two visits are identical – since they vary according to when they are carried out, who coordinates them and the groups to which they are addressed – there are basic agreements among the workers of the site regarding the story to be transmitted. These include the importance of overcoming the "literal memory" (Todorov 2000), the one that only brings back the repressive practices and the horrors experienced at the detention centers; the need to explain the conditions that made State terrorism possible and which of them still remain; and also the commitment to turn the site into a place where life is also honored, a place to remember those who were seen there and to honor, not only their political and ideological values, but also their careers as militants and members of political parties (Working and Consensus Commission of "El Olimpo" 2011).

Broadly speaking, the visits are divided into three moments: an introduction, which aims to contextualize "El Olimpo" – explaining the role it played within the repressive machinery and how it became a memory site – a tour to "El Pozo"<sup>11</sup> (Fig. 4) and a final stage of the visit at the exhibition named "Eso que no pudieron destruir: Historias de Vida de detenidos-desaparecidos vistos en el ex CCDTyE 'Olimpo'". ("What They Could Not Destroy: Life Stories

<sup>9</sup> The term "recovery" seeks to evidence the process of resistance as well as the involvement of different social participants in the management of the sites.

<sup>10</sup> (Translator's Note: "Table" in English). A place for debates and management in which, by means of agreements, decisions are made regarding the site. At present, it is formed by survivors of such space, human rights organizations and different political, cultural and local groups.

<sup>11</sup> In the jargon of the repressive practices, the sector where the repressors held the abducted captive was called "El Pozo" (the hole). There were small cells, without natural light or ventilation. After the dismantling of "El Olimpo" in 1979, the police made changes to hide their crimes: they demolished walls and cells, covered windows, covered the floors with other materials, among other structural modifications. Today, vestiges still persist, which allows us to reconstruct, together with the testimonies of the survivors, the events that took place there.





**Figure 4.** Sector of cells, former clandestine detention center “El Olimpo”. Source: Paganini (2020).

of Victims of Enforced Disappearances Seen in this Former Clandestine Detention Center, ‘El Olimpo’”).<sup>12</sup>

In the lines that follow, we will analyze a selection of fragments of poems that the site guides use on the tours for the young. We decided to pay special attention to them because of their ability to narrate true detention experiences of the victims of enforced disappearances and the imprint they leave on visitors. As site workers claim, over the years, the poems became a key element to accompany young people on the journey through “El Pozo”, because they allow visitors to move from the universal to the particular, to move them without causing anguish, generating empathy between the detainees and the visitors, and collaborating in the communication of their experiences in a resilient manner (Mendizábal et al. 2017).

The poems used in the visits are part of the book *Eso no está muerto, no me lo mataron* (*This Is Not Dead, They Haven’t Killed It Off*) (1986), written and edited for the first time in exile by the survivor Roberto Ramírez, also known as “Viejo Guillermo” (Old Guillermo).<sup>13</sup> In the book, the author recovers some chunks of everyday life during his experience in the different clandestine centers where he was held hostage. Thus, the poems constitute,

on the one hand, a contribution to the knowledge of what happened in the clandestine centers during the last dictatorship, and, on the other hand, it is a way to pay tribute to his fellow victims of enforced disappearances.

**We** take a chance towards **your** cell/ to see the miracle/ caused by the agreement/ between nature and your willpower: / a green sprout with two small leaves. / **We** see it as a tribute/ To your newborn baby boy/ – they let you make a phone call – , / Like a song to life, / Like a song to the fight (Ramírez 1986: s/n).

Upon analyzing these verses, and this can be appreciated in this fragment, we notice, in general, that the poet builds a “poetic voice”, which then unfolds. It fluctuates between the first person singular, as the subject who retrieves and shares some splinters of his own personal experience in the detention centers, and a first person plural which represents the acts of resistance carried out by their fellow victims of enforced disappearances.

Likewise, in the titles of the poems, we can notice the need to retrieve and retain the names of the fellow disappeared detainees.<sup>14</sup> *Elías-Horacio, Mariano, Inés, Pequi,*

<sup>12</sup> The exhibition evokes the detainees seen at “El Olimpo” through the reconstruction of their biographies in folders/albums made by their loved ones. Each album gathers, in the form of a collage, different photos, documents, letters, anecdotes, etc., that account for the different aspects of their lives, such as their militancy, their interests and their affective networks.

<sup>13</sup> Roberto Ramírez, militant of the Marxist left, kidnapped and held in different clandestine centers. He was released in 1979 and exiled in Sweden, where he wrote and edited the poems.

<sup>14</sup> It is interesting to point out that the guide uses the term “fellow”, and in the present tense, to talk about the disappeared detainees. We believe this can be explained by the political and ideological proximity, and to honor their memory, to build a bridge between the party members of the past

*Mori, Willy, Matías, Darío* and *Guarincho* are the protagonists of stories and life experiences that did not die. In fact, the “poetic voice” sometimes addresses them, it builds a “poetic you” that still prevails: that of the victims of enforced disappearances, who are made eternal with the written word.

In each poem, in turn, an effort to retell everything can be noticed, the intent for each story to condense everything that can be said about that person, that scene, that place. Through the use of inverted commas, the poet strives, on the one hand, to reproduce as faithfully as possible all the facts, to recover every word and gesture of the fellow disappeared detainees who are no longer with them. On the other hand, he tries to strengthen the polyphonic nature of the text, so that readers notice that these verses belong not only to him, but are also part of a larger group.

“...almost all of us sitting on the floor/ in a vigil/ that lasts for several hours, /and a hand/ softly touches my head/ to lift me up, /in passing, so as not to be seen. /I can tell who you are: /Pequi! /In months we will know/ The recently fallen/ Of your human greatness, / Of your militant integrity...” (Ramírez 1986: s/n).

As with these verses, the anecdotes that the poems carry with them not only provide information and paint a picture of everyday life in the detention centers,<sup>15</sup> they also allow for a close-up on how the detainees managed to endure those situations: what they felt, what they thought, what they feared; but also, what they were willing to risk in order to help the others. All the poems begin with a description of some characteristics of the repressive system in general, and the everyday life in the CCDTyE, specifically. For instance, they tell us how the food was distributed, how the repressors tortured them, and how the transfers were made to another clandestine center, or to the final destination. However, the poems describe all this from a different perspective to that of the testimonies by the survivors before the justice system, where no room is usually left to express emotion, subjectivity and resistance (Mendizábal et al. 2017).

Although the poems shed light on the horror endured in the clandestine centers, we can also gain insight into the acts of resistance, care and support among the fellow detainees and the emotional bonds that were born there, as we can see from the fragments quoted here. Most of the actions retrieved in the poems are dangerous for them, since they amount to a direct challenge to their repressors:

“...there are 8 loaves of bread and 14 of us./ We will eat half/ and the other half, when hunger/ strikes./ How to store them,/ who to trust?/ It’s unanimous/ -almost instinctive, a reflex-/ Elías and Horacio/ will be the guardians./ It’s time,/ we break bread amongst

us/ not a crumb is missing,/ I imagine in everybody’s eyes/ a sparkle of triumph” (Ramírez 1986: s/n).

Thus, the poems allow for a more complex profile of the detainees, and not just as mere victims, and they recover their agency in the context of this repressive apparatus. If we take into account that one of the main objectives of the dictatorship was to erase identity and destroy any collective form of organization, these minor acts of resistance have a much deeper sense, politically speaking.

During the visits, the guides invite the young students to read these poems out loud in different “stations” of the route through “El Pozo”. In general, this is done in the places that are more difficult to recreate, due to building transformations carried out by repressors. The same was done in the spaces where the interrogations were carried out, or where the cells used to be. Thus, the poems are a vehicle for the transmission of traumatic experiences, such as imprisonment or torture, but avoiding the paralysis, the distancing, and even a masochistic pleasure in new generations. Every shared verse reinstates gestures of humanity, and allows for flashes of light and life, in a past imbued by death and darkness.

“...I knew only pieces of you/ underneath the cloth<sup>16</sup>/ and we never exchanged/ but half a word, / almost carelessly/ by the door to the cell/ you take a chance and leave/ a whisper hanging: / Guillermo, careful with.../ I understood then/ that it was possible./ That behind the cloths/ the eyes survived,/ that in the muffled mouths/ words kept on fermenting...” (Ramírez 1986: s/n).

The moments of reading the poems aloud are interesting, since they allow for the democratization of the word during the visit; they open up new ways of listening to the experiences of the subjects of the past and they enable the young to imagine them, and to make them their own. In a sense, this shared reading can be seen through the lens of a *performance*, since it brings about a special intonation given by the reader, a specific body language and it takes place in a specific setting. All these elements turn this into a unique moment for all the participants, just as memory presents itself: unstable, changing, an ongoing construction (Tornay et al 2021).

To sum up, the poems allow for a sensitive approach to the experiences of the disappeared detainees, and they offer a different way of looking at them. In the words of Belén, one of the eighteen-year-olds who took part in the visits:

To me, it is a new way of looking at it. Because, just imagine... in a poem with so much feeling, so much emotion, it is... I cannot express it... it is like telling a story from feelings. It’s the details that let

and those of the present.

15 Inside “El Pozo” (The Hole), there was an area where those kidnapped remained isolated, but there were other spaces where people who had been detained much longer could move and meet with others, under the watchful eye of the repressors.

16 Blindfolds or bags which covered the eyes of those kidnapped, and stopped them from seeing anything.

us step into their shoes, so that we can feel empathy for the person who was, at that time, enduring all this (Interview to Belén 2017).

## Final thoughts

As we have seen, the Posters Project at the Memory Park depicts two of the main challenges that memorial sites should face over traumatic events in Argentina and other places around the world. The first challenge is how to attract and talk to the new generations. In different national contexts, there is a great interest in promoting the dialogue with those young people who have not experienced the traumatic events that are remembered in those sites. The second challenge, related to the previous one, has to do with the possibilities of connecting the past they discuss with the problems in the present day. In Todorov's terms, as we said before, it is a matter of transcending the "literal memory" of the events that are recalled in order to construct an "exemplary memory" so that "the past becomes the principle of action for the present" (Todorov 2000: 31).

Regarding the first aspect, this project encourages students not to be mere spectators or receivers of the Park's message, but to take an active role. Thus, students become the producers of meaning, which is reflected in their artistic creations. And what is more, sometimes students take up the proposals to express their own concerns and interests referred to existing problems. The two posters analyzed, for example, show the fight for the legalization of abortion, which was not one of the specific topics in the workbook, but it was undoubtedly one of the most important concerns for the young that year. The Park recognizes this active and creative position of the students by exhibiting their posters in the PAyS Hall.

In the Posters Project, the memories of State terrorism and its victims are dealt with as part of a plan of activities and topics, but they are not necessarily developed by the students in their productions. However, the project seeks to generate new relationships, to draw lines of change and continuities between that past and the present. As workers point out, one of the main purposes of the Park is to promote human rights (Interview with Rapp, Toytoyndjian and Vázquez Lareu Rapp et al. 2020). In this sense, the reflection over human rights violations nowadays lets students recover the critical spirit of those young people of a similar age to them who, in the Seventies, were chased (murdered, disappeared or imprisoned) for standing up for their rights. Students concerned with their present issues can experience the closeness between those fights and their own pursuits. Simultaneously, it enables the dialogue with the tradition of activism by human rights organizations that promoted the creation of this memory site. Thus, the Posters Project helps young people to look beyond the commemorative aspect of the Park, by reflecting on the current problems they are worried about. It seeks to encourage the development of an active society capable of empathizing, from this critical reflection on the present, with the trau-

matic past caused by State terrorism. As the workers of the place point out, the intention is to "give students the possibility of perceiving the memorial site as a place where they can express themselves, where they can bring their own worries up for discussion to keep the ultimate purpose of the site always updated" (Eliano et al. 2019: 3).

In relation to the practices regarding the second aspect, the reading of the poems that are intertwined with the material footprints during the visits to "El Olimpo", the new generations might find here a new approach to the situation of the young people detained in this clandestine center. This is especially relevant if we consider the scarcity of images available in Argentina to represent illegal detention centers (Raggio 2009).

In this way, the poetic language triggers questions, appealing to people's sensitivity, about the experiences of these kidnapped individuals that had not been thought of until then. The images created by the poems truly move young people and prompt them to imagine their own reaction in a similar scenario. In so doing, they build a bond with those who are no longer there, and come to understand their intentions and motivations, even in a context of extreme vulnerability, while living in a clandestine detention center.

In short, poetic language can reach insightful places that cannot often be conquered through history. In order to learn, it is not always necessary to "see", but to "believe" (Raggio 2007), the experience needs to be believable. Literature, and, in this case, the poems by "Viejo Guillermo", allow us to elaborate reality and put it into perspective. By providing a singular description of the past and making it "believable", the poems operate as a powerful vector of remembrance (Rousso 2012).

It is important to consider the heterogeneity of the visitors' groups in both spaces. The production of reactions over the recent past has been profuse and diverse in Argentina: literary, theater and film works, performances, political activism in public spaces. However, their reception depends upon multiple factors which involve the members of the new generations. In the cases analyzed, there are groups of secondary school students who have had different approaches to the construction of memory from the years of the Argentinian dictatorship, depending on the family, social, cultural and political backgrounds they have experienced. As we have seen, their teachers and the workers, project managers and guides of the memory sites have worked with them based on different proposals, and each student will have elaborated their reflections.

What must be highlighted in both cases is the effort, by those involved in the management of the memory sites, to reflect on the elaboration of memories as a dialogic process, with frameworks which allow the young to become personally involved, and which enables them to reclaim, translate and re-elaborate that past, based on their interests in the present.

"A work of art inspires the individual volition to see, in those who are helpless, their own odds" (Alemán 2003).



The practices in both spaces, through a sensitive language, evidence a fruitful process that could direct our inquiries towards a wider, deeper dialogue with diverse sectors of the new generations in the process of elaboration of the memory.

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# Entanglements of art and memory activism in Hungary's illiberal democracy

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## Abstract

This paper explores how art contributes to the articulation of memories that counter the official historical narrative of Hungary's self-proclaimed political and ideological system, illiberal democracy. Amid deepening polarization between Europe's post-colonialist and post-socialist countries, the Hungarian government promotes a Christian conservative national identity against the "liberal" values of Western Europe. Systematic appropriation of historical traumas is at the core of such efforts, which largely manifests in removing, erecting and reinstating memorials, as well as in the re-signification of trauma sites. Insufficient civic involvement in re-writing histories generates new ways of resistance, which I demonstrate through the case study of a protest-performance organized by the Living Memorial activist group as a response to the government's decision to displace the memorial of Imre Nagy in 2018. I seek to understand the dynamics between top-down memory politics, civil resistance and art within the conceptual apparatus of the "memory activism nexus" (Rigney 2018, 2020) and "multidirectional memories" (Rothberg 2009). I argue that artistic memory activism has limited potential to transform the dynamics of memory in a context where a national conservative political force has gradually taken control over historical narratives, triggering inevitably polarizing responses in the society. Although profoundly embedded in local histories, the case-study may offer new ways of negotiating traumatic heritages through the entanglement of art and memory activism.

## Key Words

Hungary, illiberal democracy, illiberal memory politics, memory activism, multidirectional memory

## Introduction

In the aftermath of oppressive regimes and armed conflicts, societies face an enormous task to seek justice, evaluate their histories and work toward a future where such painful episodes can be avoided. Pierre Nora describes this sort of post-totalitarian transformation as "ideological decolonization," a process of re-evaluating the past, "which has helped reunite these liberated peoples with traditional, long-term memories confiscated, destroyed or manipulated by those regimes: this is the case with Russia and many countries in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, Latin America and Africa" (Nora 2002: 5). Underlying the ideological decolonization of societies around the world the main driving force to rewrite fabricated histories that had served the interests of totalitarian establishments

is "collective memory" (Halbwachs 1992 [1925]; Assmann 1995 and 2008) in the sense that it is "a matter of communication and social interaction" (Assmann 2008: 109). Commemoration of suppressed histories is critical to propagate agendas of accountability and transitional justice, therefore the duties of democratization and peace building are inextricably bound up with memorialization in such circumstances. Across numerous countries around the world, a growing number of museums and memorials are devoted to telling painful histories with the intention to build more cohesive and self-reflexive societies (Sodaro 2018; David 2020), which are often informed by the activities of various activist groups that struggle for a just re-evaluation of the past.

Memory activism – the propagation of alternative histories and counter-memories via political commemora-

tions, demonstrations and other forms of civil initiatives – has predominantly been conceptualized in the frame of conflict studies, with regard to post-war and post-dictatorship societies that face daunting memories of war, genocide, repression, and conflicting interpretations of the past. Research in this respect has largely been focusing on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Gutman 2017), the Yugoslav wars (Fridman 2015) and the aftermath of Latin American military dictatorships (Allier-Montañó and Crenzel 2015; Andermann 2015; Jelin 2003; Villalón 2017), and besides traumatic events, the memory of nonviolent struggles has also been explored (Katriel and Reading 2015). In many Latin American countries that recently underwent post-dictatorship transformations, there is a strong sense of ethical obligation to propagate the imperative of “nunca más!” (never again!) through distinct forms of memorialization. Addressing the crimes of the military dictatorship of 1976–1983 in Argentina or the ongoing internal armed conflict of Colombia is based on a shared will among academics, museum professionals and civil society to promote discourses dominated by survivor testimonies, as well as produce evidence and identify perpetrators. Characteristically, art plays an important role in the expression and visualization of such traumatic heritages in public programs and in the creation of spaces of reflection, such as the Parque de la Memoria in Buenos Aires, a park to commemorate the victims of state terror through a memorial accompanied by statues of invited artists, including Claudia Fontes, Denis Oppenheim and William Tucker.

Although societies in East-Central Europe have also experienced oppressive regimes before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, their ideological decolonization and memorialization processes have been different from the Latin American examples in many regards. One of the major obstacles post-socialist countries are facing is that memories of multiple violent pasts – WWI, WWII, the Holocaust and crimes committed under the communist regime – had been suppressed or “absent” due to the lack of communicative frames (Van Vree 2013) for a long time, and their re-assessment has only been possible since the fall of the Berlin Wall. After four decades of totalitarian control, first-hand testimonies and memories are not easily accessible, and the fact that many victims, witnesses and perpetrators have meanwhile died further complicates seeking truth and justice. Like other East-Central European societies facing “too much memory, too many pasts” (Judt 1992: 99), Hungary has

numerous untold and conflicted stories that re-emerge simultaneously in the aftermath of the communist era and remain contested and overlapping to this day.<sup>1</sup> Following the regime change of 1989, the memorialization of Trianon (the redrawing of Hungary’s borders after WWI), the Holocaust and the 1956 Revolution has been dominating the Hungarian discourse on traumatic heritage, and since the illiberal turn of 2010 – when the Christian conservative FIDESZ-KDNP government took office – the history of deportations to forced labour camps in the Soviet Union has also been increasingly present on the level of public commemoration.<sup>2</sup> The main problem with the (indeed) urgent processing of these histories is that research is increasingly being carried out in line with the government’s victimizing and anti-communist agenda, which overlooks Hungary’s complicity in these turbulent histories by focusing on victims and portraying the country as a victim to external powers. Such a perspective reinforces what Tony Judt calls “comparative victimhood” (Judt 2005: 826–830), an unproductive contest for recognition between the victims of the Nazi and the Soviet occupations. The politics of recognition, according to Máté Zombory, reaffirms the emergence of “societies of trauma” – a product of ongoing transformation of politics across Europe and beyond since the seventies – where memory politics overtakes class-based political representation, and the political representatives of various victim “status groups” compete with each other in the name of victims, which tends to renew conflicts rather than bringing reconciliation (Zombory 2019). In post-totalitarian societies like Hungary, where the memory of the communist regime and Western Europe serve as the main reference points determining political identities to this day, the rising right-wing populism framed as “illiberalism” significantly reinforces the politics of recognition, disabling the resolution of conflicts between different victim status groups and political identities.

The memory politics of the illiberal state foregrounded the importance of memory activism both historically and in the present. There is a growing interest in the history of the democratic transformations in the late eighties, when nonviolent demonstrations comprised the backbone of civil opposition to the Soviet oppression across East-Central Europe (Pfaff and Guobin 2001; Palonen 2008). In the case of Hungary, the “politics of symbols” (K. Horváth 2008: 249), especially political commemorations, were the main means to oppose the Soviet dominance in the late eighties. The Hungarian democratic opposition,

1 For instance, the consequences of the Trianon Treaty, the persecution and extermination of Jewish and Roma people, the Nazi occupation and the violence of the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party, the siege of Budapest, sexual violence during the wars and the Soviet occupation, post-war forced displacement of the Hungarian-German population, deportations to the Gulag and retaliations after the anti-Soviet uprising of 1956.

2 The government established the Gulag Memorial Committee (Gulág Emlékbizottság) in 2015, responsible for creating publications, educational projects, conferences, films, oral history archives as well as for supporting commemorations, memorials and plaques throughout the country. A major memorial site was created at the Ferencváros Railway Station, including the Malenki Robot Memorial and a permanent exhibition inside a former bunker – as a side project of the Hungarian National Museum – entitled “The Circles of Hell. Malenki Robot – Forced Labor in the Soviet Union.” In 2018, Viktor Orbán inaugurated a black granite obelisk, the Memorial of the Victims of the Soviet Occupation in Budapest.



which served as the basis of all the dominant democratic parties to emerge after 1989,<sup>3</sup> organized demonstrations on highly symbolic dates, including the anniversaries of the 1848 anti-Habsburg uprising (15<sup>th</sup> March 15) and the 1956 anti-Soviet uprising (23<sup>rd</sup> October), which generated considerable civil engagement. By means of expressing their disagreement with the falsification of history regarding the two major fights of independence, the protesters publicly opposed the Soviet political and ideological system in the frame of political commemorations. Above all, the most significant commemorative event was the public rehabilitation of the executed Prime Minister Imre Nagy and his fellow martyrs, which symbolically marked the Hungarian regime change (Benzinger 2000; Harms 2017; K. Horváth 2008; Rév 2005). The framing of these events and the evaluation of the traumatic heritage of the Nazi and Soviet occupations are at the center of the illiberal memory politics as well as recent memory activism.

Besides specific historical experiences and memorialization processes, art has also developed unique characteristics in post-socialist contexts, and it continues to support a novel kind of memory activism within the illiberal state. As far as the current Hungarian state of affairs is concerned, Andrea Pető's analysis on the emerging illiberal democratic system is revealing. According to Pető, the "illiberal polypore state" is a successful form of governance that benefits from globalized (neo)liberal democracy and, at the same time, contributes to its decay (Pető 2017b: 19). While the illiberal polypore state appropriates liberal democratic institutions and funding channels, it builds an ideology to present itself as an alternative to liberal democracy, which counters the power of the "liberal elites" by emphasizing national sovereignty, Christian culture and traditional values. Besides supporting pro-government NGOs instead of progressive NGOs framed as foreign and dangerous to sovereignty, "[t]he illiberal counter discourse to the liberal human rights paradigm is nationalist familialism, accentuating the rights and interests of families over those of minorities and individuals" (Pető 2017b: 20). The interpretation of history from such a perspective is crucial to framing the illiberal ideology, therefore the government has gradually taken control over historical narratives by means of funding cultural and research institutions, museums and memorials. As a consequence, the function of political art is undergoing considerable transformation to counter the measures and narratives of the government (András 2013; Nagy 2015; Human Platform 2020). Unlike the artistic interventions that contribute to narrating and nuancing the past in a number of memorial museums in post-conflict societies, such as ESMA Memory Site Museum (Buenos Aires) and Museo de Memoria de Colombia (online, planned in Bogotá), which combine professional approaches with human rights activism, in Hungary it is the memorial museums that are targeted by



**Figure 1.** Imre Nagy Memorial in Martyrs' Square before its removal (Photo: Wikimedia.org/adirricor).

activists – both directly and indirectly – for showcasing a state-controlled, unidirectional historical narrative. For instance, Budapest's well-known "trauma site museum" (Violi 2012), the House of Terror Museum and the yet-to-be-opened House of Fates Holocaust museum represent the same problematic approach to history as the one that currently characterizes the government's memory politics. In this situation, the articulation of alternative memories by creative and artistic means takes place largely outside the state-sponsored institutions, and political art tends to serve as an aid of demonstrations to formulate and visualize counter-histories in opposition to the official narrative.

Insufficient civil involvement in the transformation of public spaces and memorials since 2010 has generated a specific type of activism evolving around memorials and museums, organized predominantly by the Living Memorial, a group of activists, artists and academics that has initiated demonstrations and discussions on a regular basis since 2014 to protest the government's memory politics. The context and objectives of these demonstrations are best understood through the conceptual apparatus of what Ann Rigney calls "memory-activism nexus":

"This means examining the interplay between memory activism (how actors struggle to produce cultural memory and to steer future remembrance, as described

3 The democratic opposition included: the Hungarian Democratic Forum (Magyar Demokrata Párt, MDF), the Alliance of Free Democrats (Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége, SzDSz) and FIDESZ – Alliance of Young Democrats (FIDESZ – Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége).

in Gutman 2017), the memory of activism (how earlier struggles for a better world are culturally recollected, as described in Katriel and Reading 2015), and memory in activism (how the cultural memory of earlier struggles informs new movements in the present, as set out in Eyerman 2016).” (Rigney 2018: 372)

Building on these conceptual distinctions, I look into the creative methods applied by the Living Memorial to produce counter-narratives as a form of *memory activism* and, in order to explore *memory in activism*, I analyze the visual and cultural references the group’s 2018 protest against the displacement of Imre Nagy’s memorial applies to articulate their demands. The case-study also concerns the cultural memory of key historical events in Hungary: the anti-Soviet uprising of 1956 and the regime change of 1989. Besides shedding light on the ongoing contestation of the memory of these events in the current illiberal political system, the analysis raises further issues that challenge dominant Western European discourses on memory from an East-Central European angle. Although profoundly embedded in the local context, the case-study may offer new ways of negotiating the past through non-violent memory activism with the tools of visual arts.

## The Imre Nagy Memorial and the contested legacy of the 1956 revolution

The Hungarian government’s decision in 2018 to remove the Imre Nagy Memorial (Fig. 1) from the Martyrs’ Square located next to the Parliament building in the center of Budapest instantly sparked a wave of social resistance. Critics and protesters not only resented the authoritative decision that excluded professional and civic participation from the decision-making process related to the historically charged public space and trauma site, but also objected to the historical perspective the removal represents. Imre Nagy, the Prime Minister of the 1956 Revolution, occupies a central role in Hungarian collective memory as a symbol of the short-lived national unity both in the 1956 uprising and in 1989. The nationwide uprising was the first major disruption in the region to op-

pose Soviet-imposed policies after the communist takeover of the late forties, which shocked the public across the world and prompted many thinkers from Hannah Arendt and Jean-Paul Sartre, to Gabriel García Márquez, to rethink their views on the Soviet model of socialism (Arendt 1958; Sartre 1968; García Márquez 2003a; 2003b; 1983).<sup>4</sup> The 1956 uprising, however, remains one of the most contested events of the country’s history due to the long suppression of its memory, its interconnectedness with the regime change, and because it has been subject of appropriation by various political parties, which transformed 1956 into “a source of extreme political polarization that fractured Hungarians’ understanding of the 1989 transition” (Seleny 2014: 37). The recent, unexpected removal of the Imre Nagy Memorial indicates yet another radical shift in the memory of both historical events.

The systematic suppression of the memory of 1956 during the Kádár era (1956–1988) has largely contributed to its contestation (György 2000; Harms 2017, Pető 2017a). The uprising began as a workers’ and student protest – inspired by the June uprising of Polish workers in Poznan – and after toppling the Stalin Monument and occupying the Hungarian Radio building to broadcast their demands, the protesters gathered in front of the Parliament on the morning of 25<sup>th</sup> October 1956 to call for a new, democratically elected government. This day went down in history as “bloody Thursday” because the State Security Police (Államvédelmi Hatóság, ÁVH) shot into the peaceful crowd, killing dozens of people. The insurgences sparked disorder and violence, and self-organized militias began fighting in the capital’s streets against Soviet troops and the ÁVH. The government collapsed and a new interim government of Imre Nagy was formed that pledged to re-establish multi-party system, free elections and to withdraw from the Warsaw Pact, a military treaty set up against the NATO between the Soviet Union and seven of its satellite states. The uprising was quickly crushed due to the Soviet military intervention on 4<sup>th</sup> November, and a new government formed. Imre Nagy was found guilty of treason in a secret trial to be executed in 1958 and he was buried in an unmarked grave alongside other fellow victims. In the aftermath of the short-lived revolution, the new Soviet-backed government of János

4 Hannah Arendt added the chapter “Epilogue: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution” to the second edition of *Origins of Totalitarianism*. Subsequent editions did not include this chapter but it was published separately in *The Journal of Politics* (Arendt 1958). Jean-Paul Sartre’s view of the Soviet Union considerably changed after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Although he wrote in positive tone about the Soviet Union following his 1954 visit, he condemned the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 and, consequently, broke with the French Communist Party. When Gabriel García Márquez visited the Soviet bloc as a young journalist in 1957 in search of the everyday reality of the socialist utopia, the situation in Hungary left the most sinister impression on him. He recounted his journey in a series of eleven articles, which appeared as “90 Days Behind the Iron Curtain (De viaje por los países socialistas)” in 1959. The journey through East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Ukraine, Poland, Russia and Hungary affected García Márquez’ political ideas “quite decisively,” (García Márquez 1983) as he grew critical about the Soviet model of Socialism. He depicts a depressing image of the Hungarian capital, which he finds heavily damaged due to the WWII bombings and the anti-Soviet revolution of 1956, and observes that a system of surveillance keeps everybody in fear. Recalling the strict itinerary and the continuous presence of “interpreters” who actually spoke only in Hungarian, he concludes about his hosts that “they did all they could to stop us forming any concrete impression of the situation.” (García Márquez 2003a) According to García Márquez, his was the first delegation of foreigners that was allowed in the country following the crushing of the 1956 uprising and János Kádár’s takeover only ten months prior to their visit. Although García Márquez clearly sympathized with Kádár and excused him by claiming that “circumstances are pushing him backwards,” he condemned the execution of Imre Nagy as a politically motivated murder in 1958 (García Márquez 2003b).

Kádár did everything to suppress the memory of the uprising, banned any sort of public commemoration and framed the event as a disgraceful “counterrevolution.” In Andrea Pető’s words, “Forgetting, omission, and amnesia were successful tools for depoliticizing Hungarian society after 1956.” (Pető 2017a: 44) Thus, the working through of the trauma of 1956 was rendered impossible for decades.

The 1956 Revolution not only became the foundational narrative of the new, post-Soviet democracy as the flagship historical event to counter the Communist Party’s historical narrative but it also provided the revolutionary moment of the regime change through the public rehabilitation of its victims. The Hungarian regime change was not a revolution *per se* – like, for instance, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia was more so – but a process of negotiations between the Communist Party and the democratic opposition. Furthermore, a number of scholars consider the regime changes of the former Eastern Bloc as an “unfinished revolution” (Mark 2010) due to its grave compromises, including support of “unwanted forms of western political and economic colonization” (Mark et al. 2015: 463) and the failure to execute transitional justice, especially in Hungary (Kiss 2006; Stan 2009; Stan and Nedelsky 2015; Ungváry 2017). Accordingly, the Hungarian negotiations – also known as Round Table Talks – carried out in meeting rooms far from the public eye did not provide a remarkable event that could be singled out in collective memory. In sync with the smooth political transformation, the re-signification of public spaces and memorials was also negotiated, and it did not crystallize into a singular event. The renaming of public spaces and the removal of communist era monuments were peacefully carried out in the early nineties – many of the monuments were transferred to the Statue Park Museum at the outskirts of Budapest – and symbols of the new democratic system gradually took their places (Boros 1997; Póty 2003; Kovács 2005/2006; Palonen 2008). Once commemoration of the 1956 uprising was possible, numerous memorials popped up across the country, and Imre Nagy came to be honored as a national martyr. Nagy’s main memorial inaugurated on the occasion of the Revolution’s 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary on a distinguished location in front of the Parliament was not merely a compensation for decades of forced amnesia but predominantly a symbol of democracy and freedom affirmed by his public funeral in 1989. For the act of the reburial ceremony legitimized a completely new reading of the 1956 Revolution and, more generally, of the whole Kádár era, and it made the regime change into a visible and experienceable iconic event that stuck in the public imagination as a turning point in history.

Given Imre Nagy’s outstanding symbolic role, the removal plan of his memorial came as a surprise, even though the physical and ideological reconstruction of the

site around the Parliament started already in 2011, in the frame of the Imre Steindl Program. The memory of 1956 has been playing an important role in FIDESZ’s memory politics since the party’s foundation in the late 1980’s, for instance, many of the demonstrations organized by the democratic opposition – including the young FIDESZ – aiming to bring down the communist regime revolved around the commemoration of 1956. At the public rehabilitation of Imre Nagy the young Viktor Orbán famously demanded that Soviet troops leave the country and honored the late Prime Minister of the uprising for standing up against the dictatorship. The speech also underlined the connection between the regime change and the memory of the lost revolution by claiming that 1989 eventually fulfilled the objectives of 1956. Although Orbán’s 16<sup>th</sup> June speech was preceded by the public proclamation of the democratic opposition’s 12 points containing the same imperatives on 15<sup>th</sup> March in Liberty Square, another crucial demonstration in the transformation process, the reburial ceremony performed in the Heroes’ Square in front of over 100.000–200.000 people and broadcasted nationwide has become a far more influential event in collective memory. Thus, the speech has become a key reference point in the legacy of 1989, and it returns in the 2018 demonstration, as well. For reasons just indicated, the Imre Nagy Memorial in the Martyrs’ Square facing the Parliament represented complex histories in its original spacial context, recalling the momentous national unity through the memories of 1956 and 1989. The removal of Nagy’s most important memorial, therefore, raises a number of questions regarding the appropriation of historical narratives and the memorial’s site-specificity.

## Art and memory in activism

When the decision about the memorial’s displacement and transfer to the Jászai Mari Square was made public, signs appeared on it instantly with inscriptions, such as “Fascism is being built here” and “Did you know? Imre Nagy is a hero” reflecting the format that referenced the anti-immigration and anti-Brussels “Did you know” campaign of FIDESZ. Alongside the first emotionally and politically charged reactions, activists formed a group called Imre Nagy Stays! (Nagy Imre marad!) and issued a petition against the memorial’s removal and the appropriation of history.<sup>5</sup> The signatories condemned the memory politics of FIDESZ, which manifests – among other forms – in the Imre Steindl Program that aims at reinstating the pre-WWII image of the area around the Parliament to eliminate remnants of the communist past. The petition highlights that despite the controversial position of Imre Nagy as a member of the Communist Party who sided with the anti-Soviet revolution, he gave his life for his country and deserves national recognition in the

5 “Tiltakozunk a Nagy Imre-szobor eltávolítása és a magyar történelem kisajátítása ellen!” 28 August 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/szabadahang/posts/256644234984839>





**Figure 2.** The rehabilitation of Imre Nagy and other martyrs in Heroes' Square, 16<sup>th</sup> June 1989 (Photo: Fortepan/tm).

site where Hungary's most important historical figures are memorialized. Additionally, the new location of the statue next to the former building of the ÁVH – which was complicit in crushing the uprising – insults the communist revolutionaries and abuses the memory of 1956, according to the petition.<sup>6</sup>

In line with the petition's arguments, the Living Memorial's demonstration on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2018 addressed Imre Nagy's symbolic role in collective memory, in a format that combined the elements of protests, a public discussion on site and an artistic performance – a protest-performance or political performance, as one of the organizers, András Rényi defined it (Csillag 2018). In the first part of the event, invited guests<sup>7</sup> discussed Imre Nagy's legacy in the light of the regime change, and the transformation of FIDESZ from an underground liberal democratic student activist movement to a national conservative party (Fig. 3).<sup>8</sup> The second part included a performance, in which men dressed in black painted the water underneath Nagy's bronze figure black, and placed a coffin over the water (Fig. 4). Then the men spread out a banner behind the memorial to invoke the staged setting of the reburial ceremony of 1989 (Fig. 2), while the young Viktor Orbán's above mentioned speech was played backwards, evoking an uncanny atmosphere (Fig. 5). After the performance, three discussants representing three different generations – a young politician,

a former member and co-founder of FIDESZ, and a participant in the 1956 uprising – expressed their strong opposition against the government's authoritative memory politics and politically motivated falsification of history. The event ended with the national anthem, which was also played backwards.

Besides expressing their disagreement with the oversimplifying and exclusory victim narrative propagated by the government, the Living Memorial's event enabled the articulation of silenced memories of 1956 and 1989 by making the memorial's embeddedness in the country's revolutionary heritage visible. While memorials are evident and efficient media to visually represent and "remediate" (Erll and Rigney 2009) complex histories, such potential of demonstrations is often overlooked. Ann Rigney underlines the power of protests as a form of cultural remediation that make the past re-imaginable, observing that protests are remembered largely due to their potential to generate a simplistic narrative about the "good struggle" versus suffering or the perpetration of violence by the police, like in the case of the Black Lives Matter movement (Rigney 2020). Characteristically, continues Rigney, a moment or a figure is singled out by the protesters, through which a moral imperative is formulated, and the event is fitted into a scheme that enables cultural remediation in the form of a meaningful and recognizable story, often by directly referencing previous demonstrations with different goals. In sync with the general dynamics of demonstrations, the 1989 rehabilitation of Imre Nagy not only legitimized the new political system but also enabled the remediation of the "story" of the regime change in the form of an emotionally and visually remarkable event, as I have demonstrated above. Similarly, the 2018 protest-performance aimed at remediating the "story" and imagery of the reburial ceremony and, in so doing, it visualized a counter-narrative to protest the illiberal memory politics. While several elements of both nonviolent protests of 1989 and 2018 fit into Rigney's conceptualisation, it is nonetheless difficult to embed them into a global or at least European revolutionary heritage centred on the French Revolution and the protests of 1968 in many regards. This is partly due to the considerable differences between the Eastern and

6 The ÁVH brutally carried out purges after the communist takeover of 1948 until Stalin's death and Imre Nagy's first appointment as Prime Minister in 1953, and is complicit in the crushing of the uprising. The building served as the headquarters of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party between 1956 and 1989. Between 1971 and 1991, a statue of Marx and Engels stood in front of the former ÁVH building, which is now on display in Budapest's Statue Park.

7 Discussants included Katalin Jánosi, artist and Imre Nagy's granddaughter; Anna Donáth, politician, MEP and granddaughter of politician Ferenc Donáth, who was sub-prime accused in the Imre Nagy trial; László Eörsi, historian at the 1956 Institute; János Rainer M., historian and head of the 1956 Institute; István Hegedűs, sociologist and former member and founding member of FIDESZ, member of Hungarian Europe Society; Rudolf Ungváry, participant in the 1956 uprising and founding member of the Historical Justice Committee (Történelmi Igazságtétel Bizottság).

8 FIDESZ (Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége, meaning Alliance of Young Democrats) was initially a party of young liberal democrats founded in 1988 to oppose the ruling communist regime. It got into the National Assembly in 1990 and its ideology gradually shifted from liberal centrist to a more conservative civic centrist position by 1993, when Viktor Orbán was elected as chairman of the party. In 1995 FIDESZ changed its name to FIDESZ – Hungarian Civic Party, while still in opposition. During their first governmental term (1998–2002), FIDESZ joined the European People's Party, terminating its membership with the Liberal International. In the following years spent in opposition, their position strengthened both in the national arena and in the European Parliament, and FIDESZ won an outright majority at the 2010 elections with a national conservative agenda.



**Figure 3.** Still from the video documentation of the protest-performance, 2018 (Video: Ádám Csillag).

Western European historical experiences, and the lack of framing of post-socialist histories within the dominant (Western) European memory discourse. Regarding the 2018 protest, its fixed format and mixed genre (organized discussion, artistic performance, speeches) contribute to its complexity making it a unique example of memory activism, not to mention the fact that the performance mobilizes a very specific (and artistic) set of references that might not be easily decoded by the general, let alone the international public.

The choice of the performance's designers provides a meaningful starting point for those who are familiar with the history of Hungary, as it underlines not only the mnemonic but also the visual and conceptual continuity of the 1989 funeral within the performance. One of the designers was the architect László Rajk, previously an active member of the democratic opposition and responsible for the concept of the reburial ceremony in 1989. It is also important to note that Rajk has suffered the consequences of the communist regime's misdeeds because his father, Minister of Interior and Minister of Foreign Affairs between 1946 and 1949, was executed by the Stalinist Rákosi government in 1949 following a show trial based on fabricated charges, and his public reburial was an important demonstration against the injustices of the regime on 6<sup>th</sup> October 1956, shortly before the outbreak of the uprising. The other designer was the sculptor György Jovánovics, who also played a key role

in the memorialization of the regime change as the designer of the Memorial to the Victims of the 1956 Revolution (1992), located in the cemetery where Imre Nagy and other victims were buried. The abstract design of Jovánovics's "counter-monument" (Young 1992) embodies complex meanings, including a direct visual reference to the reburial ceremony. The sculptor explained in an interview that the white sarcophagus on top of his structure represents the staged funeral in Heroes' Square in order to preserve the memory of the ephemeral "stage-like art-piece" in stone (Mihancsik 1994a). Beyond the participation of these two persons – the third participant, Dávid Adamkó, artist and sound designer, represents a younger generation – that situates the protest-performance within the revolutionary heritage of 1956 and 1989, the visual elements, specifically, the coffin and the stage design of the public funeral play a crucial role in the remediation of memories. These powerful symbols have the potential to compress complex meanings and references since they are inscribed in collective memory as images directly associated with the regime change – often as "prosthetic memory" (Landsberg 2004) for those who did not have the chance to directly experience the event.<sup>9</sup>

The coffin, a common element of demonstrations worldwide, may be seen as a gesture towards a more general protest-culture but it has specific connotations in this context. It recalls the six coffins displayed in front of the Kunsthalle Budapest in 1989, containing the remains of

<sup>9</sup> Although Alison Landsberg's concept was developed in the context of the United States' history, the potential of the media to make a historical event experiential for those who did not live it through is also notable in this regard. The frequent circulation of the images of Imre Nagy's public funeral has largely contributed to them marking the regime change for those who had not been present as well as for younger generations.





**Figure 4.** Still from the video documentation of the protest-performance, 2018 (Video: Ádám Csillag).



**Figure 5.** Still from the video documentation of the protest-performance, 2018 (Video: Ádám Csillag).



five martyrs, and an empty coffin placed over the others for the unnamed martyrs of 1956. This element summons the personal traumas of 1956 that engendered collective grief over the loss of lives and the retaliations, which were publicly relieved for the first time in 1989. The coffin carries the core message of the protest-performance, according to which it is the three decades of democracy to be mourned this time, as the inscription on the coffin suggests: “Third Republic, lived 29 years.” The statement proposes that the removal of the memorial marks such a radical shift as the regime change did when it turned the communist one-party system into the democratic Third Republic of Hungary. The action thus indicates the end of a social and political reality interrupted by the government’s illiberal ideology and politics, and it reflects the worries of the political opposition about FIDESZ’s authoritative tendencies. The re-enactment of the reburial ceremony in combination with the uncanny recording of Orbán’s 1989 speech implicates his dissonant role in the legacy of the regime change, especially due to the memorial’s removal from the Parliament area, which disrupts the legacy of the 1956 Revolution by erasing its meanings gained in 1989.

The banner depicting the stage design of the reburial ceremony set as the memorial’s background as part of the performance signifies the momentous consensus and national unity the funeral represented regardless of the political pluralism of the times. The architects László Rajk and Gábor Bachmann entrusted to design and conceptualize the ceremony by the Historical Justice Committee (Történelmi Igazságtétel Bizottság) understood that they had to reflect on both the funerary and the revolutionary character of the event. For practical ends, they had to take into account the role of the media as the event would be broadcasted live, for the first time in case of an anti-communist demonstration. They chose the Heroes’ Square, in front of the Millenary Monument and the Kunsthalle as location because the square could fit a large crowd, and they decided to cover the whole length of the Kunsthalle’s façade in white, which served as a reflective board for the cameras (Mihancsik 1994b). The tympanum and columns were covered in black, the color of mourning, and the stage was set as a rusty iron structure with a fire on the left side, a pulpit on the right, and the coffins in between. Over the pulpit a white flag was stretched with a hole in it, referring to the symbol of the 1956 Revolution: the flag with a hole in the place of the communist coat of arms. The unusual post-modern structure invited free associations according to the designers’ intentions, and beyond the commemoration of martyrs, its visual language served to express both closure and hope. According to Rigney, hope, a “structure of feeling” (Williams 1970: 128–135; quoted in Rigney 2018: 370) is essential in activism, because it not only “informs civic action and motivates the struggle for a better life” but also “helps to *reframe* historical violence as a *struggle for a cause* rather than as a matter of victimisation; as a matter of civic engagement rather than of paranoia” (Rigney 2018: 370–371). Since the commemoration of the martyrs in

1989 provided a firm framework of victimization, the emphasis on the element of hope was crucial at the dawn of the new, democratic era.

The hope and optimism regarding a pluralist, democratic dialogue based on civic engagement rather than paranoia amid the construction of the multi-party system echoes on a bitter tone in the protest-performance, and it becomes completely eradicated by the memorial that replaces Imre Nagy’s statue. As far as visual symbolism is concerned, the funeral’s creative stage design invoked the classic avant-garde art implying that the leftist political tradition (from which avant-garde art emerged) does not equal with the false ideology of the communist era but remains an important point of identification for many Hungarian citizens. Such emphasis on pluralism *and* national unity stands in sharp contrast with the current government’s reading of history that divides society based on the empty signifiers of “right” and “left” by means of anti-communist, anti-liberal and anti-Brussels propaganda. The removal of the Imre Nagy Memorial clearly indicates a shift in the official narrative in line with such efforts towards the anti-communist interpretation of 1956 and 1989, where the significance of the political left is gradually undermined, and the memory of the reform communist Prime Minister becomes incompatible. This shift is further enhanced by the reinstatement of a highly debated memorial in the place of the Imre Nagy Memorial. Shortly after the statue’s removal, the National Martyrs’ Memorial (aka. Red Terror Memorial) was reconstructed in its place, based on a Horthy era structure that had stood there between 1934 and 1945, depicting the allegorical female figure of Hungary and a male figure defeating the monster of communism referring to the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1918–1919 (Fig. 6). The reinstated memorial attests to two problematic implications of FIDESZ’s memory politics. First, it reaffirms nostalgia for the controversial Horthy administration (1920–1944), a Christian conservative regime complicit in anti-Jewish legislation, as well as in the persecution of the Jewish population under the Nazi occupation. Second, it reinforces anti-communism by commemorating the victims of the Soviet Republic of 1918–1919, contributing to the populist narrative that depicts Hungarian history as an imagined fight between “good” (Christian, national conservatism) and “evil” (external domination by communists or liberals), successfully used in Orbán’s populist rhetoric. The re-signification of the Martyrs’ Square confirms that the revolutionary tradition of 1956 and 1989 is overwritten by a distilled version of history, where the oversimplified notion of anti-communism suppresses the actual pluralism of memories and (political) identities.

Due to the removal of the Imre Nagy Memorial, the re-organized Parliament area (Kossuth Square and Martyrs’ Square) represents exclusively the traumas regarding the memory of 1956, therefore, the uprising’s interconnectedness with the regime change’s optimistic message is completely ignored within this symbolic space and trauma site. Memorials in this location have special significance not only because it is the “main square of the nation” but



**Figure 6.** Memorial of the National Martyrs 1918–1919 in Martyrs' Square, 2019 (Photos: author).

also because it is the site of the “bloody Thursday massacre,” perhaps the most tragic event of the 1956 Revolution. Kossuth Square does not accommodate any visual evidence to the traumatic event other than the buildings that have since been renovated but the link between the past is visualized by the memorials commemorating the massacre. The subtle memorial dedicated to the victims of the “bloody Thursday” on 25<sup>th</sup> October 1956 represents symbolic bullets in bronze on the wall of the former Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development on the corner of Martyrs' Square, designed in 2001 by sculptor József Kampf and architect Ferenc Callmeyer, who himself was one of the survivors of the massacre. Since 2010, two more spectacular memorials were added to the square: a memorial pond with the inscription “Persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed (2 Cor 4:9) In Memoriam October 25, 1956” („Üldöztetünk, de el nem hagyatunk; tiportatunk, de el nem veszünk; 2 Kor 4:9 In Memoriam 1956. október 25.”) and an underground memorial center, including a memorial and a permanent exhibition showcasing over sixty massacres across the country.<sup>10</sup> While the memorials to the massacre are legitimate due to the site's past, the removal of the Imre Nagy Memorial signifies the withdrawal of the narrative about the fulfilment of the Revolution's objectives in 1989 – an aspect emphasized by the young Viktor Orbán in 1989, paradoxically. The Living Memorial articulated this ab-

sence with the re-signification of the site in the form of a requiem for the diversity of memories and identities, and it reminded its audience of the indissoluble entanglement of 1956 and 1989. At this point, the question might be raised whether such a creative form of memory activism that propagates memory pluralism is able to bring more understanding and solidarity within a deeply polarized society.

## Memory Activism and Multidirectional Memories

In his influential book *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (2009) and subsequent article “From Gaza to Warsaw: Mapping Multidirectional Memory” (2011), Michael Rothberg offers a conceptual frame to understand the simultaneous upsurge of various memory traditions beyond the logic of the zero-sum game of competing victimhood as a productive process because “the result of memory conflict is not less memory, but more” (Rothberg 2011: 523). Rothberg argues that “public memory is *structurally multidirectional* – that is, always marked by transcultural borrowing, exchange, and adaptation,” and, accordingly, “collective memories of seemingly distinct histories – such as

10 In memoriam 25<sup>th</sup> October 1956. Memorial and exhibition. See: <http://inmemoriam1956.hu/>





**Figure 7.** The German Occupation Memorial and objects placed in the frame of the Living Memorial, 2019 (Photo: author).

those of slavery, the Holocaust, and colonialism – are not so easily separable from one another” (Rothberg 2011: 524). Post-socialist societies have been experiencing a vast wave of competing victimhood since 1989, which did not only concern local memory discourses but also challenged the dominant (Western) European paradigm. The different experiences of WWII and its aftermath between countries of the former Eastern Bloc and Western Europe accumulated in heated debates in the European Union, such as the one around the Prague Declaration (2008) and the subsequent EU resolution (2009) that equally recognized the victims of Communism, Nazism and fascism as victims of human rights violations committed by totalitarian regimes, which led to ongoing conflicts between the memory of the Holocaust (especially regarding its singularity) and other traumatic heritages within Europe. The notion of “multidirectional memory” aspires to overcome such competition to enable difficult but necessary discussions in this regard; however, the post-socialist region remains underrepresented in Rothberg’s investigation. Looking at the Hungarian discourse through the lens of Rothberg’s concept, which assumes that more memory generates more understanding and facilitates solidarity between victim groups may add intriguing insights into the dynamics of memory from an Eastern European perspective.

Discord between various interpretations of the past has been exacerbated by FIDESZ’s memory politics since 2010 but conflicts of that sort are more deeply rooted in the Hungarian society. Prior to the illiberal turn, the case of the House of Terror Museum (2002) provided an early example of conflicting historical narratives with regard to the representation of the Nazi and the communist regimes. The conflict has never been resolved but while the museum’s widely criticized victimizing narrative represented FIDESZ’s unidirectional approach to history, it also triggered a wave of intense debate, that is, a sort of productive multidirectionality. It was, in fact, the museum’s failure to produce a nuanced historical perspective that generated a wide range of discussions from the theorization of “comparative victimhood” (Judt 2005: 826–830, see also: Benazzo 2017; Turai 2009; Zombory 2019) to the critique of memorial museums (Creet 2013; Sodaro 2018), which greatly enriched our understanding of memory. While debates around the House of Terror Museum have been limited to professional and academic circles in this case, the open-air exhibition the museum organized on the occasion of the 1956 uprising’s fiftieth anniversary in 2016 activated not only professional but also civil responses. The Living Memorial installed a guerrilla exhibition to complement the museum’s installation with two further tableaux displaying political figures and groups



underrepresented or left out of the official narrative, including Imre Nagy and other reform communist politicians, portraits of workers and texts about the communist Petőfi Circle that participated in the 1956 uprising. The list of suppressed elements indicates that it is largely histories related to the political left that are invisible in the museum's narrative, which is in line with the meanings attributed to the removal of the Imre Nagy Memorial.

Conflict generated by an exclusory unidirectional narrative is often the very trigger of the emergence of multidirectional memories, as the Living Memorial's first action demonstrated (Munteán 2019). To commemorate the victims of WWII in the Holocaust memorial year, the government decided to erect the Memorial for Victims of the German Occupation (2014) in Liberty Square, the symbolism of which denied Hungary's responsibility in the Holocaust. The memorial represents Hungary as the allegorical figure of Archangel Gabriel holding the state symbol in his hands, with Germany above him in the form of the imperial eagle attacking Hungary – which in fact is erroneously not even the Nazi symbol, according to István Rév's observation (2018). As a response to the planned memorial that depicts Hungary as an innocent victim of the Nazi Germany, the Living Memorial organized a flash mob and invited people to place personal objects around the intended memorial. By means of the ongoing and ever-changing, ephemeral memorial consisting of objects, photographs, texts and other memorabilia, the activist group managed to transform the site into a memorial in its own right to counter the values of the planned state memorial (Fig. 7). The demonstrators addressed issues including the memorial's denial of Hungary's complicity in the Holocaust through its problematic symbolism (Erőss 2016; Kovács and Mindler-Steiner 2015; Kovács 2017; Rév 2018; Ungváry 2014) – a problem that has already been raised regarding the House of Terror Museum (Blutinger 2010; Sodaro 2018; Turai 2009). Alongside the counter-monument – not in the sense that it adopts “anti-monumental strategies, counter to traditional monument principles” but as a memorial “designed to counter a specific existing monument and the values it represents” (Stevens et. al. 2012: 951) – the Living Memorial community has been organizing *in situ* public discussions to share memories the official narrative fails to represent, opening up discursive space to frame personal and collective recollections of the past. The juxtaposition of the two memorials reveals a conflicting dynamics of uni- and multidirectional memories, which László Munteán sums up as follows: “Paradoxically, the governmental will that carried out the construction of the memorial to the occupation without public consent did not simply enact its own interpretation of the past at the cost of others but, inadvertently, it also initiated an ongoing movement of counter-memory that would have remained dormant had it not been awakened by indignation” (Munteán 2019: 80).

The subsequent demonstration of the Living Memorial against the removal of the Imre Nagy Memorial reaffirms

the paradoxical dynamics of multidirectional memories, while it extends the discussion on different histories. In that case, the governmental will to remove a memorial generated public discussions on the memory of the regime change and the traumatic heritage of the communist era, which might have remained limited to professional debates otherwise. This echoes Rothberg's argument on productive multidirectionality that understands memory “as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative.” (Rothberg 2009: 3). The clash between different versions of history also activated personal recollections of the past alongside professional discussions, which underlines that memory is essentially a social practice and cannot be overwritten by top-down memory politics (Erőss 2018). The persistent memory activism of the Living Memorial thus highlights that conflicting memories triggered by top-down interventions in the public space may generate urgent public debates that would remain hidden or underexplored otherwise.

The activism of the Living Memorial, however, not only sheds light on the inherent paradox of multidirectional memories but also demonstrates that multidirectionality alone fails to create a form of “differentiated solidarity” (Rothberg 2011) in the context of the Hungarian illiberal system. Discussions enabled by the protests have undoubtedly contributed to a better understanding of diverse memories and of the experiences of various victim groups, but they did not necessarily facilitate more understanding between the groups of society represented by the Living Memorial and the ones that identify with the official version of history. On the one hand, the demonstrations activated discourses on historical traumas and silenced memories by visually articulating counter-memories and -histories. On the other hand, despite the Living Memorial's indisputable merit in making distinct pasts imaginable and present in the public sphere, their activities could not escape reproducing conflict between official narratives and counter-narratives, and between (political) identities devoted to either side. In the light of the case studies, Rothberg's proposition about the positive impact of multidirectionality applies as far as cross-referencing, exchange and stimulation is concerned between various memory traditions, but the emergence of multidirectional memories alone cannot reinforce more solidarity in the overall society within the Hungarian context.

## Conclusion

The nonviolent political demonstrations I analyzed concern different stages of memory in different historical and political contexts, including the democratic transformation and illiberal democracy, yet they both play a critical role in the articulation and visualization of memories with artistic tools. The public rehabilitation of Imre Nagy, including its monumental stage design, not only highlighted the element of hope in the context of mourn-

ing a national trauma but also contributed to making the revolutionary moment of the regime change imaginable and transmittable. When the protest-performance recreated the funeral's design three decades later, it reflected the loss of hope in terms of the possibility of dialogue between memories and identities, indicating a disruption in the working through of traumas and painful histories within the illiberal system. At the same time, the action brought silenced memories back into the public sphere, and for a short while it re-signified the area around the Parliament – the trauma site of the 1956 Revolution – which has since been completed as the *par excellence* representative space of the official historical narrative. The case studies demonstrated that memory activism has the potential to create both physical and discursive spaces of memory that are able to transform the discourse on traumatic heritage, and they confirmed the role of art in making the past re-imaginable from diverse perspectives. However, while the 1989 public funeral is widely remembered as a moment of national unity, the potential of the protest-performance to promote memory pluralism remains limited to a relatively small group of society and it does not necessarily facilitate more solidarity between various political identities.

The complexity and specificity of the Hungarian examples of memory activism shed light on the difficulties of embedding Eastern European traumatic heritages in the dominant European memory discourse. Besides the considerable differences between Eastern and Western experiences and memorialization practices of historical traumas of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the focus of Western (and Anglo-Saxon) art and academia has been placed on the memory of the Holocaust, slavery and crimes committed by colonial powers, therefore the conceptual and visual framework of memorialization has also been developed based on these contexts. Simultaneously, post-socialist societies continue to have discussions on their own traumatic histories, which make use of dominant theorizations of memory and trauma, yet they often necessitate distinct perspectives and novel conceptual apparatuses that are able to reflect on local experiences of multiple victim groups. The negotiation of the past by means of museums, memorials and memory activism continues to diversify the understanding of history in Hungary, yet it does not move beyond the politics of recognition that reproduces conflict rather than bringing reconciliation.

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