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**2011**

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**“Remembering Remains: The Texture of Memory in Post-Proceso Argentina”**

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**“Remembering Remains: The Texture of Memory in Post-Proceso Argentina”**

**by**

**Gregory Brian Whitworth, B.A.**

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**“Remembering Remains: The Texture of Memory in Post-Proceso Argentina”**

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**The University of Texas at Austin, 2011**

**Supervisor: Henry Dietz**

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This thesis is a photographic essay that examines the work of memory in Argentina related to the dictatorship of 1976 and its aftermath. In it, I examine various sites of memory that can be broadly defined as archival, performative and pedagogic and attempt to relate these sites to the scene of contemporary memory.

An estimated 30,000 people were disappeared during “El Proceso” from 1976-1983 and these absent visages continue to haunt the nation. Officials from the outgoing regime remained protected from prosecution for 20 years after the formation of the constitutional government. Over time and without access to juridical redress, Argentine human rights groups have resorted to assorted means to recuperate the memories of the disappeared and the excesses of the regime.

Groups like Las Madres de Plaza Mayor, HIJOS, and Grupo Etcetera developed performative practices – from the sanguine march to the carnivalesque protest. Neighborhood associations attempted to mark and recuperate former clandestine detention centers as public

sites. Student activists mark sites with elaborate murals narrating the cityscape's connection to its political ghosts. Municipal and provincial organizations emerged to catalogue, film, record, archive and listen.

Lastly, with the election of center-left president Nestor Kirchner (2003-2007) and his commitment to this memory work, along with his support of the legal prosecution of former regime officials, there emerged more monumental projects such as the creation the Parque de la Memoria and the memory museum at the largest detention and torture center in Argentina during the dictatorship, ESMA.

This study enters into these sites of memory and attempts to narrate their affect and grammar in relation to the politics of memory that Argentines continue to struggle with to this day.

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## PROLOGUE

When I first arrived in Buenos Aires, I admittedly knew more about the history of the dictatorship from 1976-1983, “El Proceso”, than about the scene of contemporary memory. What I brought with me were these archival datum, punctuated with images of disappeared silhouettes circulating in the public sphere. It was this affective politics of the photo, of the stuccoed silhouette in the alleyway, of the white scarf of the Madres de Plaza Mayor, which drew me to the scene of memory and away from the archive. Of course, what I imagined and what I found were disparate indeed. I thought that the landscape of memory about the Proceso would be much like our Vietnam, largely forgotten, with high school students struggling to place the name on a map of SE Asia, like Argentine youth might struggle to place a face to the name of their own dictator, Videla. What I found were both latent emotions coupled with now stereotyped/entrenched scenes of memory coupled with puzzling material remains. The latent emotions hit me hard and unexpectedly while the material remains entered me like a slow creep.

Having barely recovered from my in-country vertigo since my arrival in Buenos Aires (Baires) after some 2 weeks, I was quickly disinclined to the idea that “El Proceso” was largely forgotten. I was standing in a line waiting to withdraw money from an ATM, when I felt someone over my left shoulder, hovering a little too closely. I could tell that this middle-aged woman wanted to say something. She asked me if the other ATM was working and I told her that it was broken. She then asked me where I was from and what I was doing here in Baires. I told her that I was from the U.S. here working on a project about the dictatorship. She began conversing with me in English once it was apparent that it was better than my Spanish and said:

“Oh so your working on a project about the dictatorship. I have a lot to tell you about that period if you are interested.” Astonished at her candor, I asked her to go on.

She proceeded to tell me an amazing story- to a complete stranger, right there in the bank line, in front of a half-dozen other people, as if we were the only people in existence. She told me that her father had been in the air force during that time, and that he was one of the pilots who flew planes over the Mar de Plata that threw detainees into the river. She had lived with this in silence for much of her life, unable to speak of such things since she was in a military family. At that point she was transported into that grief and began to sob. She said that she had struggled since that time with unrelenting guilt about what her father had done. She confided that he had died recently and that she was now ready to speak about her experiences.

I hugged her, not knowing what else to do, slightly stunned at her public breakdown, and mumbled something inadequate like “it wasn’t your fault.” I told her I would love to talk with her at some later time if she was interested. She responded that she would be happy to meet with me but it had to be outside of her home because she did not want her kids to know anything about this family secret. She bid me farewell with by telling me one still has to be careful when talking of such things in Argentina as the military won’t hesitate to kill you, even now. Puzzled I said goodbye.



**Photo 1: Garaje Olimpo, mural**

So, I had come to Argentina to study material remains, thinking of those “sites” , in retrospect, as passive indicators of a discourse of reconciliation about a past largely forgotten. Quickly disabused of this notion as a result of this conversation, even in view of her exceptional circumstances, I understood that traumatic memories circulated, ever present, and that the material remains I wanted to study must play a more active role in staging the politics of memory than I had imagined. What follows is a personal and photographic essay that examines the materialization and circulation of memories about the legacy and significance of the dictatorship (1976-1983) after the democratic transition, focusing on the last 12 years. I examine “sites of memory” in the largest sense of that phrase - thinking about those as loci of or stages for memory discourses or performances - but focus on analyzing material sites such as museums, parks, memorials, detention centers, graffiti, murals and markers and relating them to memory politics.

## **PREFACE: The Post-Proceso Context: 1980's and 1990's**

The transition from dictatorships to democratic regimes of governance is never easy and its rhythms differ from country to country. What they have in common however is the presence of an “official discourse” that emerges initially to narrate the period in conciliatory ways. These discourses emerge at very fragile times in the redefinition of the polity as the transition always occurs within the yoke of the former dictatorship. The military and their allied social and political forces are still potent players in the articulation of the transition and social and political actors must act pragmatically to enact reforms that push forward, all the while looking back. In Argentina the discourse that emerged was called the theory of “two devils”. In this story of state terror, the right and the left were engaged in an ideological battle in which both sides committed shortsighted atrocities and both should be blamed for their excesses. This theory was circulated in the public sphere by the military government on the eve of their abdication and was bolstered with their own self-amnesty when democratic elections were decreed. When Alfonsín was elected the first post-dictatorship president, he pushed forward on his pledge to try the generals of the coup in 1985 after the publication of **Nunca Mas** (1984), the study by the government-appointed truth commission examining the period that documented at least 9000k disappeared and more than 300 clandestine detention centers (CCD). Following the “dos demonios” discourse, his prosecutorial pledge was also directed at the leading guerilla leaders (still alive) who were also to be tried.

As military prosecutions of other leading figures proceeded after the 1985 trial and after the approval of a reform to the military code however, the military stepped forward to voice its disapproval. There were a number of military rebellions between 1986 and 1989 that forced the Alfonsín government to reverse its policy of prosecuting military and police figures. The

passage of the “Ley de Punto Final” (Full Stop Law) in 1986 and the “Ley de Obedencia Debida” (Due Obedience Law) in 1987 effectively stopped further prosecutions. The influence of the military was still too threatening and powerful. Carlos Menem followed Alfonsín in 1989 and issued two presidential pardons to further assuage the military. These pardons completed the process began in 1986 of shielding the military from prosecution for state crimes by freeing all military convicted of crimes or pending trial (including some guerilla leaders). So, the “two demons” discourse of state terror prevailed at the boot heel of military threat.

The 1980’s and 1990’s then has been called the era of impunity as the military and police institutions guilty of widespread terror were immune to prosecution. The narrative about the period that prevailed and populated the public sphere then was one of oblivion, two guilty sides did horrible things and it is time to move forward. Any discussion of the crimes of state terror was completely evacuated from the public sphere, at least from national politics and certainly the juridical sphere. However, the ghosts of dead pasts always remain and indeed return to weigh down new eras. In the mid-1990s, new social and political groups emerged to agitate for justice and a new political narrative about the period that would not only transform juridical facts but also the political imaginary of the country.



## **Chapter One: Guarded Remains**

From about 1995 to 2003, the unleavened political and juridical discourses that were evacuated from the public sphere were supplanted by an affective politics that populated it instead with an affective topography that mapped terror, guilt and victimhood. Neighborhood, youth and HR groups began to agitate for the recuperation or dedication of sites to encode a new narrative about state terror outside of the political and juridical spheres evacuated by the state and inaccessible to victims, their families and their advocates. One of the first sites was the former CCD known then as Club Atletico.

### **Club Atletico**

It is a site that was located in downtown Baires, in a barrio called St. Telmo. It operated from about 1976 -1977 until it was demolished in 1978 for the construction of a principle highway during the dictatorship. Until 1995, the site was unmarked, buried under the detritus of the freeway, abutting the entrance ramp. Neighborhood and cultural groups organized around a demand to commemorate the site officially and even to excavate it as those still in the neighborhood remembered what it had been. Without municipal or federal support they undertook projects to mark the site themselves. These efforts did not go without resistance as the predominant discourse of “forgetting” that was prevalent attributed “remembering” as the attribution of guilt:

In July 1996, close to 500 people participated in a gathering that included the construction of a paper mache structure of a tree and a public reminder with the faces of the victims of repression. On that first occasion, a firebomb placed at night destroyed the

tree and the memorial. On the second *Jornada de la memoria* in August 1997, a plaque remembering the disappeared was set up, the names of the repressors were engraved, and during the commemoration a monument, a totem, was collectively constructed on one of the pillars of the highway. During the following night, the plaque was destroyed, the totem was torn down and the engraved names of the repressors were covered with paint.<sup>1</sup>

It wasn't until 1999 that local groups successfully pressured the city of Baires to commit resources to marking the site in some way and site excavation only began 4 years later in 2002.



**Photo 2: Excavation at Club Atlético, Memoria Abierta**

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Jelin and Susan Kaufman, "Layers of memories: 20 years after in Argentina," in **The Politics of War memory and Commemoration**, ed. T.G. Ashplant, G. Dawson, and M. Roper (London: Routledge, 2000) 97-98.





**Photo 5: Excavation at Club Atlético, Memoria Abierta**

The recuperation of the site was the result of almost 10 years of community activism. The precious artifacts found during the dig, revived ruined lives while the dour urban setting, fronting rush-hour oblivion, has now been rearticulated into an affective topography. The old commemorative markings that were etched into the site, and re-etched after their destruction in the late 90's, have now been replaced with more permanent markings and the site is now an official site of memory adopted by the municipality. The new artwork which adorns the site evinces a haunted but triumphant past: human figures seared into the sides of girders; faces staring back at the viewer from pillars; ghostly corpses erupting through the earth towards the sky; and the outline of a huge human silhouette on the berm. These forms emerge from the earth, steel, cement, undulating through decayed forgotten remains and call to the passerby to stop and take in the haunting images, which, while they give one pause in their enunciation of death and

despair, clearly are emergent figures reclaiming their right to speak to those secondary witnesses who contemplate them.



Photo 6: Club Atlético, totem by Grupo Totem

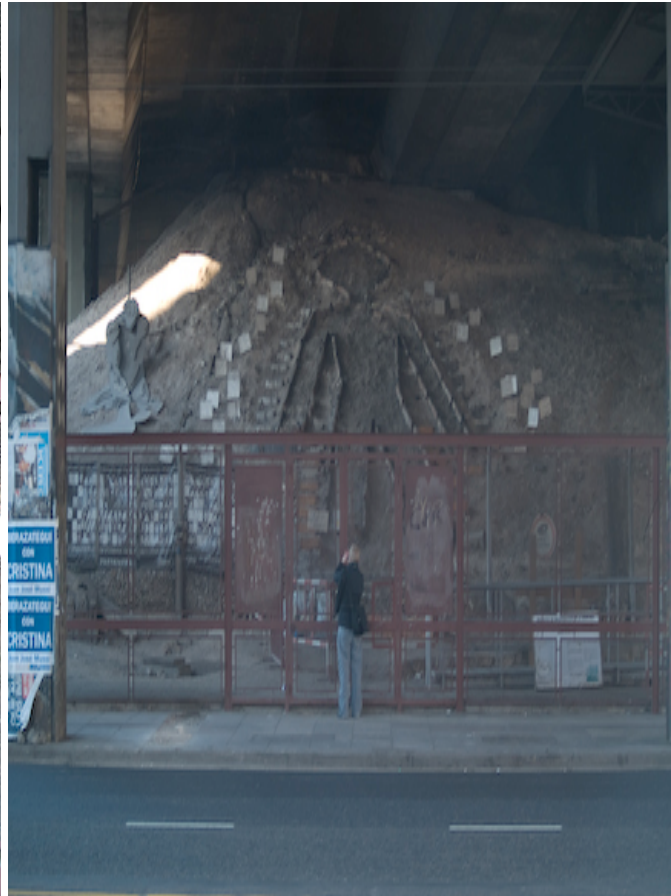


Photo 7: Club Atlético, figure on the berm

The site was completed in October 2007, when the side opposite of the excavation was turned into a memory park of sorts, as much as one can be created under a freeway overpass. This is a site to be occupied, to view and contemplate the excavation site, which is walled in by protective fences and inaccessible except to walk by on the sidewalk. It has gentle sloping walkways, staircases and benches which welcome one into the space. “Justicia, Verdad , Memoria” is etched into the walkway and the entrance is framed with a wall indicating the site

is dedicated to “companeros detenidos desaparecidos presents ahora siempre”. The area neighborhood association still commemorates the memory of those who passed through the CCD with a candlelight vigil that has gone on since their first attempts to reclaim it.



**Photo 8: Club Atlético, plaza**

As with all the recuperative site projects and memory parks that I looked at in Baires, there are a number of incongruent grammars that narrate the site. The excavation site itself looks like a secure compound, surrounded by ten foot high fences. The park opposite the site is constructed of monolithic slabs of cement block, a recapitulation of the dour urban landscape around it. There are no lights to speak of and my friend was told that this was no place to be at night and to be sure to hide her equipment. In view of the difficulties of constructing a monument and memory park under an overpass, this is not really troubling. What interests me is the cobbled together feel of the site, the overpowering presence of the materials used, the relative

lack of integration of the elements as a place to pause and take things in. I think all these elements reflect the politics of the site: the initial lack of municipal support; the community struggle to recuperate it; the defacements that occurred; the many years of delay that forestalled the planning and articulation of the site. The site itself is an allegory narrating the difficulties of articulating a new narrative that ensconces memory in the public sphere. It marks the beginning of these struggles, moving across its architecture from a struggle with oblivion to remembrance. It is the material sign, in its fits and starts, of a local struggle that eventually helped to rearticulate a national political imaginary. The struggle continues in different forms, though the community was victorious, memory waxes and wanes. I talked to a couple of homeless kids living in cardboard shacks in the midst of refuse piles while taking photos. They asked me what I was doing and I told them that I was taking pictures for a project. They asked what was so interesting about this place and I told them about the CCD that operated during the dictatorship. They had no knowledge of the dictatorship or the site.

*Hauntology: Recrudescence*



**Photo 9: Razed Villa, 1977. Caras y Caretas.**



**Photo 10: Club Atlético, overpass**



**Photo 11: Club Atlético, overpass**

Photo of a villa miseria, a slum, being razed in Baires, '77. (*Caras y Cartas: Noche de la Dictadura*). Many slums were razed as a way to target and control radicalized workers but also to beautify and modernize the city. The freeway that runs above the ruins of Club Atlético also ran over a former (different) villa miseria. The bottom 2 photos show a couple of homeless kids who lived around the Atlético ruins and professed no understanding of the site's history as a former CCD or its current status as memory site.



## Garage Olimpo

The site made famous to the public by the riveting and harrowing 1999 film *Garage Olimpo*, which detailed the detention and torture of a group of student activists and close friends, but its former status as a CCD was no mystery to the inhabitants of Barrio Floresta. As with Club Atletico, community groups had agitated for the recuperation of the site for many years. The site itself was “marked “ by the municipality around the same time excavation began at Club Atletico by closing the business that was operating there, fencing in the entrances and posting a sign indicating its status as a form CCD. Recuperating the site more extensively, however, seems a long way off or unlikely owing to its austere warehouse shell in the middle of the business district. Though, as we have seen, the inconvenient location of a CCD – eg Club Atletico’s location under a freeway overpass – has not forestalled more elaborate efforts at recovery.



Photo 12: Garaje Olimpo, mural wall



Photo 13: Garaje Olimpo, entrance

The principle community intervention at the site itself is a series of extensive murals outlining the principle wall of the building that faces the street and pedestrian traffic. The murals narrate a brief history of state terror Argentina about which Olimpo was emblematic. There is an image the fearsome Ford Falcon, with its black-tinted windows, the vehicle used by security forces to kidnap people off the streets. There is an image of military transports tossing victims into the Mar de Plata and images of detainees, some pregnant, with arms raised upward in defiance, reminiscent of the corpses erupting from the earth at the Atletico dig. There is the presence of the corrupt priest, bootjack police and armed military figures, CCDs imaged as nondescript houses, and anti-Americanisms.



Photo 14: Garaje Olimpo, mural

These murals were painted in 2007 and represent a culmination of community activism through which the site has been appropriated for community use despite the apparent delays in recuperating the building itself by the municipality, a project approved in 2003. In lieu of a site made for passive secondary witnessing, the community has organized an extensive year-round schedule of activities and events at the site or about the site. These include workshops, exhibitions, human rights charlas, commemorations, and lectures. These events are publicized through the internet-based community news magazine, *La Floresta*. An extensive summary of these events can be found at [http://www.la-floresta.com.ar/noticias\\_del\\_olimpo.htm](http://www.la-floresta.com.ar/noticias_del_olimpo.htm).

The most recent project to occupy the site itself in some permanent way, involved the efforts to create a public library. The library would house books on human rights themes and contain an extensive collection of books that were banned during the dictatorship, <http://www.la-floresta.com.ar/2007/julio/12.htm>. In 2008, the community launched a separate website for Garage Olimpo, [www.memoria-olimpo.com.ar](http://www.memoria-olimpo.com.ar). Similar community initiatives have been undertaken for a second CCD in the community, Automotores Orletti. This site is still in operation as an automotive garage and the community has been urging the municipality to designate it as a memory site to be appropriated and recuperated as with Olimpo.

What we see represented in this site is the same kind of community-centered activism to recuperate and revivify dead pasts, belated or scarcely acknowledged by the municipality. In contrast to Club Atletico, Garaje Olimpo has been transformed into a kind of community repertoire for activating and cultivating memory through performance and pedagogy. It is an active site despite its barren and empty frame and guarded gates. It represents another way a community can navigate the conflicts inherent to memory projects. Club Atletico marks another avenue to the navigation through the memory terrain. The Barrio San Telmo community was

eventual successful in working with the municipality to articulate a site designed both by local art troupes and the city. In the face of blatant opposition to marking the site, and intransigent delays of some 5 years by the city, the community emerged with a space of reflection. Their struggle is part of the narrative of the site, the incongruent visual grammar it evinces is yet a part of their triumph. They too have their own local internet-based newspaper and various groups in charge of memory projects for the barrio.

All of the neighborhoods in Baries are also linked together by a municipal office that funds the placement of community plaques on neighborhood sidewalks in order to mark or commemorate some memory site. The level of commitment and organization of local neighborhood groups is quite extraordinary. The influence that they wield now is the result of more than a decade of organizing and their memory politics are the principle reason the municipality has now become central to there recuperative projects. These groups have catalyzed the municipality into a more active public role in revivifying neighborhood memory projects.

*Hauntology : The Falcon*



Photo 15: Ford Falcon



Photo 16: Ford Falcon, Garaje Olimpo



Photo 17: Ford Falcon



Photo 18: Ford Falcon

In talking about the iconography of the military dictatorship, my young liberal-minded Spanish tutor confided that one image haunts him, the iconic Ford Falcon, used by security forces to disappear activists: *“Every time I see one of those cars with their tinted windows, slowly pulling up to an intersection, I get goose bumps, pause and walk in the other direction.”*

## **Parque de la Memoria**

The Parque de la Memoria is Argentina's national monument to commemorate the deprivations of state terror during the dictatorship. As planned and approved in 1998 by the Baires legislature, it was to consist of a sculpture park of 14 sculptures; a large three-walled monumental walkway with 30000 plaques aligning them signifying the disappeared; memorials to those killed/injured in the 1994 bombing of the AMIA building, a Jewish political and cultural organization; and an educational center. The sculptures were selected from among 600 entries from national and international artists. The Plaza de Aceso was to house the sculpture park which one entered into first. From there one would move into the monumental walkway, walking into the space via gently sloping walkways up and over its apex to descend towards the shores of the Mar de Plata.

The site itself is somewhat isolated from the central business district of Baires but its location was largely symbolic. It is a site that opens up to the Mar de Plata, the river in which hundreds of drugged or dead detainees were thrown from military cargo planes. The University of Buenos Aires (UBA) essentially abuts the site with twin towers of the Social and Natural Science faculties framing the horizon. The faculty and students of UBA were decimated during the dictatorship so panoramic view of the campus is quite fitting for the placement of a memory park. Inside the Social Science college, a banner encases the rafters surrounding the open-design central square in the buildings center and overlooks the communal student space.

Like the CCDs analyzed before, the site itself from its design to its realization, is a metaphor for the politics of memory in Argentina. It commemorates while it signifies both rupture, of the old official discourse of "dos demonios", and transition, articulating new discourses for recuperating

national trauma. It is a bit shocking when you approach and enter into the site. It resembles a military compound, surrounded with imposing barbed-wire fences, industrial- metal ground lamps, cement walkways overgrown with weeds, and tall prison-like street lamps jutting out of the perimeter. An armed guard patrolled the site during my first visit. It was hard for me to imagine the aesthetic that was envisioned for the site and I could only presuppose that it was still a work in progress but it was more than that. As with the CCDS, the politics of the site, of the community, of the nation, seemed essential to understanding this incongruent visual grammar. The site had been planned and under construction for 10 years and still wasn't complete. The project was approved in 1998 and inaugurated in 1999 while the first three sculptures were not installed until 2004 and the terror monument only opened at the end of 2007.<sup>2</sup>



**Photo 19: Parque de la Memoria, entrance**



**Photo 20 : Parque de la Memoria, entrance**

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<sup>2</sup> For a similar analysis see, Silvia Tandeciarz, "Citizens of Memory: Refiguring the Past in Postdictatorship Argentina," **Modern Language Association** 122.1 (2007): 151-169



**Photo 21: Parque de la Memoria**



**Photo 22: Parque de la Memoria**

Many elements are still incomplete, with 11 sculptures still to be installed, the education center unfinished and the walkway winding along the shores of the Mar de Plata in shambles.

When I first visited the site only the sculpture park was open and the gritty industrial park feel coupled with the incoherent narrative of the abstract and sparsely placed monuments was visceral. It was a bit disorienting, as there wasn't a clear way to navigate the site and one wonders what a tourist might think: abstract expressionism or trauma narrative? During my second visit the terror memorial wall has been opened and it presented another set of incongruencies. The two parks seemed of different eras, one dragging on the symbolization of the other: industrial abstraction meets contemplative simplicity. Despite these bare contrasts, it is hard to criticize a memory park after all. The work of memory, as we have seen is agonistic, constituted by the same elements that prevented the narration of traumatic memory, with its commemorative and guilt-attributing moves, from emerging into the public sphere in the first



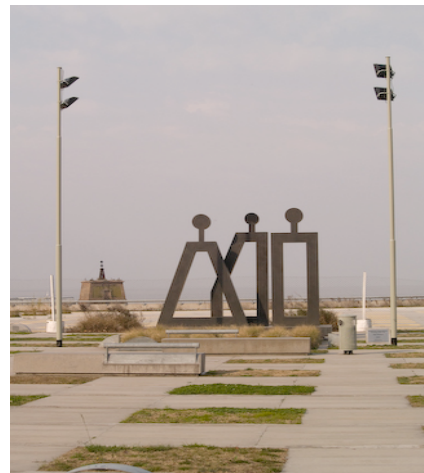
place. I think that it is more productive to see the park as a running story that mirrors the nation's place in the articulation of memory discourses, many of which work, and have worked, at the grass-roots level of the family, of the neighborhood, for 30 years. It also represents the achievement that local and HR groups have worked towards for so long, the politicalization of memory, and the graft of this agonistic onto national politics. After seeing memory work evacuated from the public, political and juridical spheres for decades, this memory work was not part of a national political dialogue in which these groups were now central.



**Photo 23: Parque, sculpture**



**Photo 24: Parque, sculpture**



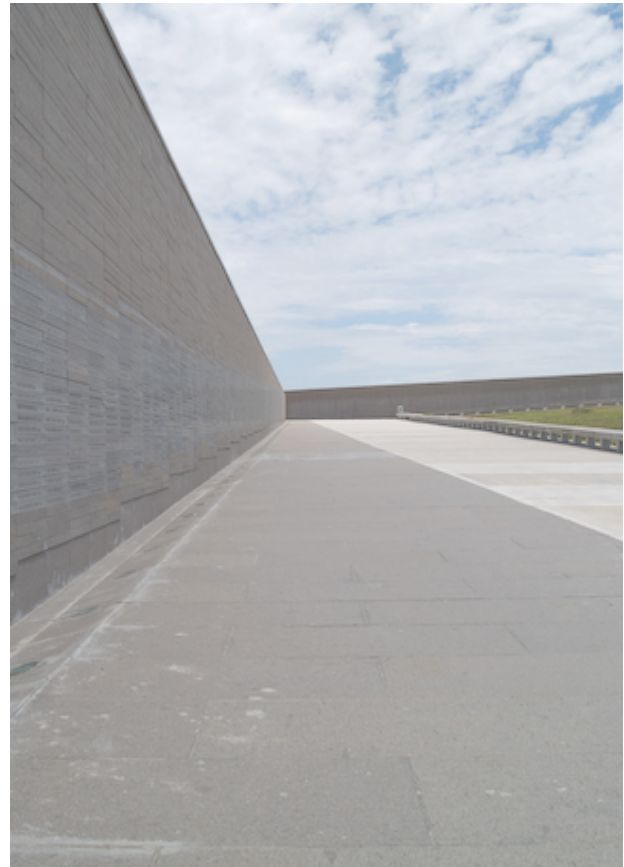
**Photo 25: Parque, sculpture**

The grammar and intent of the terror monument is much clearer, less haphazard. The three walled installation is fronted by a garden populated with a pond trees and polished rocks. An enormous marble slab enters into the river of polished rocks, one end embedded in them, the other jutting into the air. One walks through or around this to enter into the sloping walkways

framed by the enormous granite walls, stuccoed with 30,000 plaques of the disappeared arranged by date. Moving through the Z-shaped walkway, one goes over a crest and spills out towards the Mar de Plata down a gently sloping walkway. At the river, an enormous beltway is being constructed undulating around the shoreline. It will be possible then to see back into the site, towards UBA and the cityscape, from the river, moving around the outside of the site, moving into the plaza from the opposite, perhaps less disorienting direction, into what will become one day an elaborate sculpture park.



**Photo 26: walkway**



**Photo 27: naming wall**



Parque de la Memoria: Photo 28



Parque de la Memoria: Photo 29



Parque de la Memoria: Photo 30



Parque de la Memoria: Photo 31

I guess the effectiveness of any memory site can be gauged by how it is used by the public. After the affectively charged inaugural events, with the presence of president Kirchner and Las Madres de Plaza Mayo, what will become of the site, triumphant in many respects, despite the dissonant grammar. When I made my trip there, I noticed indeed how out of the way it seemed. Despite the symbolic significance of the site location, resonant with so many elements of the struggle against the dictatorship, people must visit the site for it to be effective.

An Argentine friend in her early thirties who visited the site with me said that she didn't think that it was that out of the way. However, the two times that I visited the site, there were no more than 3 or 4 people there. While touring the site, she mentioned that she had never heard of the park, though living outside of the country for 5 years, and some of her friends hadn't either. When she told them where she was going and what the site was their response was, perhaps, tell-tale of its future significance: they asked her why would she want to go there?

## **Chapter Two: The Repertoire**

Due to the lack of juridical punishment of anyone in the former dictatorship until the coronation of the left-center President Nestor Kirchner in 2003, a former Montonero (urban guerilla group), himself imprisoned during the dictatorship, memory work forced itself into the public sphere via the performative. Las Madres de Plaza Mayo were a group that emerged during the dictatorship to demand accountability for their missing children. They continue to march around the plaza each Thursday at 4pm right in front of La Casa Rosada (the presidential residence) demanding justice for their disappeared children. Las Madres served as a model for a new generation of protest/performance groups that emerged during the 1990's. The Menem years (1989-1999) saw the emergence of performance protest groups like Grupo Escombros and Grupo Etcetera in addition to H.I.J.O.S, a group representing children whose parents were disappeared. These groups created public spectacles designed to bring the past back into the present so that the continued pursuit of Los Genocidios would continue to be doggedly pursued and recalled. Finally, this kind of repertoire continues to inform the juridical sphere as massive protests continue to be mobilized during ongoing court cases and the continued threat to or disappearance of witnesses.

### **Las Madres de Plaza Mayo**

In August of 1977 a group of mothers looking for their missing children found themselves together in the Plaza de Mayo. Word spread, numbers grew and before long they were getting the attention of the press, the regime and international human rights groups. Unable to ignore them, the regime referred to them as Las Locas, crazy women, and when ignoring them

and dismissing them failed, intimidation ensued. They were deterred even after some of them had been dragged away in police cars, beaten or charged by mounted police. At that time they didn't have a name, but in 1979 they constituted themselves as Las Madres de Plaza Mayo, and they formed a large network of sister groups headquartered in the capitals of the all of the Argentine provinces. They haunted the regime and continue to do so.<sup>3</sup> Even for those who may not recognize their name, their white kerchiefs are iconic as are the pictures of their missing children pinned to their blouses:

What the Mothers of the Disappeared do is to collectively harness this magical power of the lost souls of purgatory and relocate memory in the contested public sphere, away from the fear-numbing and crazy-making fastness of the individual mind where paramilitary death squads and the State machinery of concealment would fix it. In so courageously naming the names and holding the photographic image of the dead and disappeared, the mothers create the specific image necessary to reverse public and State memory.<sup>4</sup>



**Photo 32: Madres de Plaza Mayo. Memoria Abierta**

<sup>3</sup> Bouvard, Marguerite, **Revolutionizing Motherhood** (DE: Scholarly Resources, 1993) 2, 94.

<sup>4</sup> Taussig, Michael, **The Nervous System** (NY: Routledge, 1992) 28.

These actual photos of the missing were then again redeployed as absent figures, in silhouette form, pasted to walls all around the country, and blazoned on placards at any protest, walking billboards charged with memories, collapsing dichotomies – flash – haunting power. The charged symbol of the silhouette, the absent figure, remains a powerful image 30 years later.



Photo 33: Las Madres. Memoria Abierta



Photo 34: Las Madres. Memoria Abierta.



Photo 35: silhouettes. Memoria Abierta



Photo 36: Las Madres. Memoria Abierta

As of 2007, Las Madres have become a national institution. They inaugurate sites like the Parque de la Memoria and ESMA, they lead protest marches for many social causes. They have opened a “Free University” that is housed in the same building as their bookstore and coffee shop, located about 20 minutes from the Plaza de Mayo. They have their own website, a national radio program and produce/publish their own videos, books, broadsheets, and newspapers. The section of Las Madres led by Hebe Bonafini has publicly stated that it will no longer participate in the weekly marches around the Plaza de Mayo as of 2008; they have emerged victorious from their struggle against oblivion and impunity.

### **In the Street**

One of the new memory groups that emerged during the Menem years was *HIJOS*. (*Hijos e Hijas por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio*). This group represents the children of the disappeared and, like Las Madres, has chapters throughout the provinces. Their supporters, of course, represent a generation of youth committed to bringing an end to the impunity of former regime officials and they do so by taking to the streets. Their most famous instrument is the “Escrache” (which is slang for exposure), an act of public, carnivalesque shaming. I had high hopes of being able to attend and photograph one of these well-planned events so a friend and I tried to talk to some of those involved with the *HIJOS* radio program on *FM 88.7 La Tribu* but we arrived on the wrong day. Instead, I turned to the activist journalist website *Indymedia* to try to ferret out an outing, and while there was a lot of chatter there about future outings, I was not able to locate one before I left.



The HIJOS catchphrases are these: “Juicio y Castigo” (Justice and Punishment) and “Si no hay justicia, hay escrache” (If there is no justice, there will be escraches). Both Las Madres and HIJOS operationalize the play of absence/presence; Las Madres attempt to instantiate the missing/dead while HIJOS attempt to instantiate the present/absent. If, in a society of systemic impunity, former officials can’t be tried for crimes against humanity, then one way to mete out justice is to point them out in public, where they live and where they work, so as to mark the public as co-present as it were, if not culpable by default. Here is a lengthy description of a typical event by Diana Taylor:

HIJOS organizes carnivalesque protests that lead participants directly to a perpetrator’s home or office...Escraches are highly theatrical and well organized. Theatrical because the accusation works only if people take notice: Giant puppets, military pigs-on-wheels, and at times huge placards of photo IDs of the disappeared...All along the route, vans with loudspeakers remind the community of the crimes committed in that vicinity. Well-organized because HIJOS prepares the community for the acción: for a month or more before the escrache, they canvas the neighborhoods...showing photographs of them...They plaster the accused’s photo in the shops, restaurants, streets, and neighborhood walls....With the help of activist artists such as Grupo Arte Callajero, they post street signs ...to mark the distance to the perpetrator’s home (and) paint the repressor’s name and crimes in yellow paint on the sidewalk in front of the building...Protestors provide an alternate map of Argentina’s socio-historical space: “You are here”...<sup>5</sup>

HIJOS almost always perform escraches along with performance art groups that emerged during the ‘90s as well. Groups like Grupo Escombros, Grupo Arte Callajero, and Grupo Etcetera, would often design the props for each action. These groups also worked independently and made/erected/performed their works all over the country, from sculptures to protests. Unable to see an escrache in person, I was able to photograph a retrospective of one such group, Grupo Etcetera, at La Casa Cultural de Recoleta in downtown Buenos Aires.

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<sup>5</sup> Taylor, Diana, “ ‘You are Here’: The DNA of Performance,” *The Drama Review* 46, 1 (T173), Spring 2002: 151.

Grupo Etcetera Exhibit, Centro Cultural Recoleta, 2007



Photo 37: Escrache



Photo 38: Escrache route



Photo 39: Genocidio



Photo 40: Juico y Castigo

## The Trials

With the annulment of the Due Obedience and Final Stop laws and the retraction of any immunity for former regime officials in 2003 – upheld by the supreme court in 2005 – memory work in the juridical sphere began (anew). Those military figures still alive, still in hiding, are now being retried or placed under house arrest. There are hundreds of pending cases that will be backlogged for years to come. On the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the coup in March 2006, then, justice was finally being done.

Despite the accomplishments, the years 2006 and 2007 also ushered in haunting performances of terror's past. In 2006, Julio Lopez testified in what was only the second trial of former police/military officials to be started after the annulment of the impunity laws. On September 19 2006, shortly after his testimony that led to the conviction of former police commissioner Miguel Etchecolatz, Julio Lopez was disappeared. I attended the 1<sup>st</sup> anniversary march marking his fate in September 2007.

It was a massive affair, with thousands of people marching to the Plaza de Mayo late in the afternoon. There were scores of groups allied behind all number of banners representing student, labor and rights organizations. The cacophony of drums was deafening. I wasn't exactly sure what the route was or when the march would get started; moving the throng of people to the Plaza would take hours and shut down the city. By the time the massive crowd made it to the plaza it was dark. There were hours of long speeches, live music, and poetry readings that stretched into the night. To date, Jorge Julio Lopez is still disappeared.



Photo 41: Jorge Julio Lopez March, 9/18/07



Photo 42: Jorge Julio Lopez March, 9/18/07

In December of 2007, Hector Febres, a former ESMA official, was being tried for crimes committed while appointed there. These were the first trials of former ESMA officials. On December 15 he was found poisoned to death in his cell. These chilling events recall past horrors and impunity however it appears that Argentina has disarticulated the old narrative of “dos demonios” from the political imagination of the country and seeded it with one less prone to closure and impunity. It does give one pause however that such blatant acts could still occur and I now fully understood what the women in the bank line had told me when she claimed that one must be careful when speaking out against the military; they’ll kill you even now.



Photo 43: Lopez flyer

### Chapter Three: The Provincial - La Plata

My deep and specific interest in thinking about post-memory in Argentina was largely due to a reading of Diana Taylor's provocative book, "Disappearing Acts."<sup>6</sup> Her focus on the performative power of the image to unravel the discursive "looks and glances" of an authoritarian regime largely determined my interest in exploring the visual during my own research. My trip to La Plata was no different.

La Plata is a large city within the province of Buenos Aires, about 30 minutes outside the capital. In my case it was about an hour-long trip on a train, which seemed much longer in the cold steely confines of the car that I was in, shivering all the while from the bitterly cold breeze coming through the open windows.

As with most large Argentine cities during the 1970s, especially those with one or more large universities, student and labor activism was widespread as were the regime's crackdown on all of its manifestations. In Argentina, high school students were also prominently involved in these movements. All students were possible enemies of the state and the repressive state apparatus came down particularly hard on La Plata's children.

My desire to explore memory sites in La Plata was filmic in origin. One of the most widely seen films in Argentina about the "dirty war" was "*La Noche de los Lapices*" (*The Night of the Pencils*, 1986). The film narrates the stories of six high school student activists who were disappeared by the regime, with a seventh the lone survivor, Pablo Díaz. The six were kidnapped

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<sup>6</sup>Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War,"*

during in the middle of the night, sequestered, tortured in one of the many clandestine camps in the city, murdered, and disappeared. The film itself was based on the book of the same name in which Díaz gives his testimony.



Photo 44: Movie Poster, *La Noche de los Lapices* (common domain)

As a hub of repression during that time, La Plata also emerged as center of memory work. *La Comisión Provincial por la Memoria* emerged as one of the many influential municipal organizations that worked to re-narrate the past by collecting archival evidence and developing an oral history archive. It was there that I went to ask that staff for some advice about memory sites of note.

Through our discussion, I learned that I had just missed a large civic protest surrounding the ongoing trial of Christian Von Wernich, which was taking place in La Plata and was being televised nationally. Von Wernich's trial was one of the most publicized of those trials of former regime officials that had gotten under way only a few years prior, once their immunity had been formally stripped.

He was a former police chaplain who was present during torture sessions and who also informed on activists through their religious confessions. Von Wernich would later be convicted of 7 murders and implicated in scores of kidnappings and cases of torture.<sup>7</sup> Not too far from Commission's office we came upon an elaborate mural in his likeness with the captions,:

“CURA VON WERICH: ¿DONDE ESTA LAS HIJA DE ELENA Y HECTOR?” and  
“VON WERICH GENOCIDA.”

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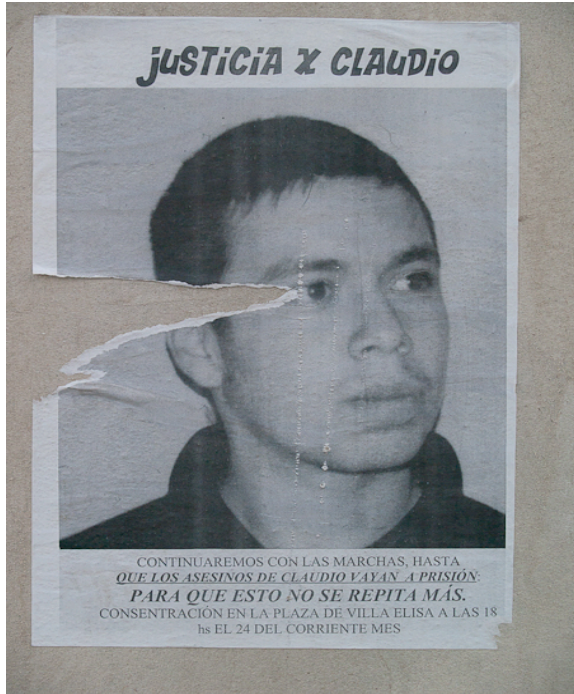
<sup>7</sup> “Argentina's disappeared: Father Christian, the priest who did the devil's work,” *The Independent*, 10/11/07.





**Photo 45: Von Wernich mural, La Plata**

Before making my way to the commemorative site devoted to the events of “*La Noche de los Lapices*”, I wanted to find a few more sites that were suggested to me in addition to just wondering around. The works/acts of memory here were of a different type than the monumental works that were common in the capital. What abounded were works on a smaller scale but also the ubiquitous political posters and murals that are commonplace everywhere in Argentina. The political posters were always an entreaty against forgetting and the demand for justice with each announcing a protest date.



La Plata Political Posters: Photo 46



La Plata Political Posters: Photo 47



La Plata Political Posters: Photo 48



La Plata Political Posters: Photo 49

La Plata's memory work was, in general, smaller scale, more personal, and quite often, tucked away into courtyards, parks, landscaping, and the inner recesses of buildings. The sculpture works seem commissioned and speak to La Platenses with a knowing glance. They are in a sense, counter-memorials, or counter-monuments, and while one might suggest that money is a factor, and it always is, this work is unmistakably local, almost private/personal. The people who live here know where to find these works; outsiders must be told about these places/spaces. One could argue that La Plata's political positioning on the periphery of the Capital is reflected in their memory work which is most certainly not monumental, and, it would seem, La Plata's memory work, appearing in the nooks and crannies of the city center as they do, are deliberately *not* projects of the state, not subjects to state power. Not to memorialize in that way is a refusal to cast their memory work in terms of state power, the refusal to inhabit the same terms of a discourse that led to the terrible excesses of the past. The incoherent grammar of Buenos Aires' state projects are absent here, rather, these works/spaces are *familiar*.

On the side of a nondescript municipal building one finds a haunting silhouette, the shadow of a man, and on him scripted a melancholy poem. This work was commissioned by the famous Argentine protest-art collective *Grupo Escombros*. And completely hidden in the corner of the courtyard of an administrative building is an astonishing holographic montage of suffering. The works that one is likely to encounter in La Plata are pessimistic about the human condition; you'll find no state triumphalism here. It is, if nothing else, plaintive.



Photo 50: sculpture, Group Escombra

Photo 51: sculpture, Grupo Escombra



Photo 52: mural/montage

Photo 53: mural/montage

The commemorative pieces located in front of the former high school that the kids from “Los Lapices” attended is, to continue a theme, simple, plaintive, small, personal. A remembrance.



Photo 54: Former high school



Photo 55: Homenaje



Photo 56: Sculpture/Mural

*Hauntology: Return of the Repressed*



**Photo 57: Destitute Falkland War vets**



**Photo 58: Destitute Falkland War vets** pleading for recognition in La Plata's central square. The disastrous 1982 war proved the undoing of the dictatorship. Though victims themselves as teen conscripts, the shameful defeat has left them guilty by association and now a subaltern voice in the new memory landscape.

## Chapter Four: The Pedagogic - ESMA

The years of 2006 and 2007 could be seen as a final triumph for the memory entrepreneurs (Jelin). In 2006, the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the coup was ushered in by a president who privileged memory work and justice over against impunity in the public sphere. The grafting of local victim, justice and truth advocacy so long in the making with a national political agenda resulting in project to instantiate a pedagogical and topographical transformation of memory about the dictatorship.

In 2007, the ultimate symbol of the military institutions from the dictatorship, *Escuela de Mecanica de la Armada*, ESMA, was scheduled to reopen as a memory museum. During the dictatorship it was both a military campus as well as the principle site of torture and disappearance in all of Argentina. At one point, President Carlos Menem (1989-99) proposed the destruction of the site, replaced by a monument that generated vigorous protests and marches. In 2004, President Nestor Kirchner and the legislature authorized the recuperation of the site as a memory park, and ordered all military personnel evacuated by early 2007. This turn of events resulted in the resignation of four generals but the military no longer had any footing in the memory wars. By the end of 2007, ESMA was opened (sort of) for pedagogical tours explaining its dark history to the public.

When I made my first trip to the ESMA, it was closed during the renovation of the site into a public museum and education center. The site itself is enormous, about the size of a small college campus, fronting a long, wide thoroughfare, Ave. del Libertador. A large front gate frames the enormous front entrance, with its monumental pillared entryway.





Photo 59: ESMA, main entrance

The site itself was run down, with stucco peeling off of façades, slightly unkempt landscaping, and broken out windows throughout. The guard shack that appeared to be situated to check in non-military was unattended. The only sign that the site would become a museum was a banner that flew in the entrance and a plaque posted near a walkway inside.



**Photo 60: ESMA exterior**



Photo 61: exterior



Photo 62: exterior



Photo 63: exterior



Photo 64: exterior

However the most striking thing that any visitor will first take in are the harrowing sculptured silhouettes grafted to the long fence in front of the main complex. These silhouettes are the siren call of memory in Argentina. These figures are the absent presence that haunted the military regime during its institutionalization, as well as the post-regime, free from juridical castigation. They are the symbolization of the photos of the missing, pinned to the blouses of *Las Madres de Plaza Mayo*, as they made their weekly rounds in front of the *Casa Rosada* (presidential residence) protesting the regime, demanding the reappearance of their missing children:

*¡APARICON CON VIDA!*



Photos 65: Silhouettes, Los Desaparecidos



Photo 66: Silhouettes, Los Desaparecidos

## The Tour

Despite the pomp and circumstance of the inauguration of the site in December 2006, it wasn't exactly clear when the site would be finished or opened to the public. With only a week left until I departed in January 2008, I was still eager to tour the site but unable to find any info on the city's website about it. By chance, a staff member from the *Museo de la Ciudad* told me via email that tours were in fact being conducted but that one had to request a spot via email, an email that hadn't been published anywhere that I was aware of. As far as I knew this mechanism wasn't public knowledge at all, and as late as 2010 this was still the only way to gain access to the facility.

Whatever the case, I signed up an Argentine friend and myself for the last minute tour. All of the people on the tour spoke or understood Spanish, so I gathered that there weren't any tourists in the group, mainly Argentines. My Argentine friend didn't actually know too much about the history of the site. In fact, she later confided that she often passed this facility by on her way to school not 10 years ago and never really paid any attention to it. The fantastic website/resource for the Argentine NGO *Memoria Abierta*, whose oral and photographic archives I did some research at for a couple of weeks, offer up this description of the basic layout of the main building, and its use as a torture and detention facility:

It is a three-story building. The detained were kept on the third floor, the basement, and in a large attic. There were also other dependencies, such as “el Pañol”, a place used as a deposit space for the items taken during the looting of the homes of the disappeared persons; “La Pecera” (The Fishtank), where small offices, the library and the archive operated; The “Capucha” or “Capuchita” (The Hood, or The Little Hood) were places used for torture and to house some of the detained. In 1984 the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (Conadep) carried out an inspection of the location. Thanks to the testimony of some survivors, these spaces were identified and recognized and the sinister use of the territory, through which passed around 5,000 people that remain disappeared to this day, was proven. The report *Nunca Más* says: “The ESMA was not only a clandestine detention center where torture was inflicted, it also functioned as the operative axis of a complex organization that even possibly intended to hide the crimes that it committed with the extermination of the victims.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> [http://www.memoriaabierta.org.ar/eng/camino\\_al\\_museo3.php](http://www.memoriaabierta.org.ar/eng/camino_al_museo3.php). Accessed 8/15/11.

The tour itself was centered around these key elements of the interior. We circled around the main building front to back, then down into a dark basement, then into the administrative center of the building, and then finally, upstairs, passing through various hallways into a darkened attic of sorts and then again into another one, smaller, higher up, with a little more light. Already familiar with the history of the site, I left the group at times as I wandered around taking pictures.



Tour: Photo 67



Tour: Photo 68



Tour: Photo 69



Tour: Photo 70

After spending a lot of time in the basement, I lost myself in the upper reaches of the building, waiting for people to come and go as I angled for a good atmospheric shot, through a shard of broken glass here, framing a ray of light through a dust encrusted window there. Unlike downstairs, where the entrance, basement and center were buttressed by narrative placards, upstairs was a maze, a deserted series of decrepit offices connected by lanolinum slick floors, spilling out into unexpected and dimly lit rooms. There was nothing to see really, only something to feel, shadows and shapes, and grit and concrete and steel, lightness and weight, and looks and glances.



**Photo 71: ESMA, exterior**



**Photo 72: ESMA, basement**

Having broke a way from the tour, I felt, well, I felt like that time in Germany when I got lost in some torch-lit tunnels beneath a former concentration camp, last one out, being there. Looking now at the photos that I took, they have a filmic quality, shots for a movie production, of a film I might make or might have seen. They haunt, as I am haunted, recrudescient irruptions that prick

historical consciousness, interrupting the flow of idle events with moments of recognition: the punctum. In these shadowy stills are the material silhouettes of the dead made manifest:

For the researcher of essences, what significance should we make of the punctuating photograph? The *punctum* is what haunts. It is the detail, the little but heavily freighted thing that sparks the moment of arresting animation that enlivens the world of ghosts.<sup>9</sup>



ESMA Attic: Photo 73



ESMA Attic: Photo 74

As with many of the memory sites in the federal capital, the site is marked by the fractious nature of its birth. Talk of ESMA as a memory site of some sort had gone on since the Menem presidency. During that period, the future of the site was entirely in question as Menem and the Navy preferred that it be razed and adamantly refused plans to recuperate it as a museum. The fight moved into the courts and the right to decide the future of the site was eventually

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<sup>9</sup> Gordon, Avery, **Ghostly Matters** (University of MN Press, 1997) 108.



awarded to the federal district of Buenos Aires. Ten years later, the site is now a museum, albeit, unfinished, deteriorated, with only placards, a diorama, and staff animating the links to empty, dimly lit rooms.

Like the *Parque de la Memoria*, the grammar of the site is uncertain of itself just yet. At the moment of my tour, it could have been an artifact from the set of *Brazil* with its monumental, run down architecture, or it could have been a mausoleum. Or a shipwreck. At the time of my tour, the phenomenology of the site feels like Absence. Maybe this is part of the intended pedagogy of the site, with its spare, unadorned and shadowy interiors. It felt like a mausoleum.



**Photo 75: ESMA, upper attic**

In addition, the access to the site only makes it quasi-public, which runs counter to the whole idea of any pedagogic function it is meant to have. As of 2010, tours of the site still must be

scheduled in advance by email. So, the narrative of the site is still in process even while the politics of the site have finally been surmounted.

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