

“Implicated Spaces”¹

Investigative journalist and activist Rodolfo Walsh was assassinated two days after he finished “Open Letter to the Military Junta.” It was the day after the first anniversary of the Argentine military coup in March of 1976. His murder reminds us that writing and thinking critically are privileges we should never take for granted.

The censorship of the press, the persecution of intellectuals, a recent police raid on my house, the murder of dear friends, and the loss of my daughter who died fighting you— these are some of the facts which have forced me into this form of clandestine expression, after having spoken openly as a writer and journalist for almost thirty years... These are the thoughts I wish to share with the Junta members on this first anniversary of your ill-fated government. Without hope of being listened to and certainty of being hunted down, I remain true to the commitment I took up long ago, to bear witness in difficult times.

In just 15 minutes, it would be impossible to do proper historical justice to Argentina’s Dirty War, its inspiring human rights movement and nuanced visual politics. So today, I will tell you a little about Walsh, who is just one of the 30,000 disappeared. I will present my embodied research as I discuss critical sites implicated in his murder and disappearance and his reappearance in public art, memorials and the ongoing demand for justice. These sites and artworks illustrate an intertwining of vision and movement that foreground corporeal presence in our encounter with corporeal absence. This encounter forces us to recognize that it is a form of political privilege to know the status and location of the bodies we love.

¹ This paper in its current form is presented as a script for a power point presentation; thus it does not include any footnotes. The italicized sections are the performative moments during which Otálvaro-Hormillosa steps away from the podium. “Implicated Spaces” was first presented at California College of the Arts in April of 2012 as part of the Visual and Critical Studies Graduate Symposium in San Francisco. The presentation culls from Otálvaro-Hormillosa’s master’s thesis “Embodying Spaces: Memory and Resistance in the Aftermath of Argentina’s Dirty War (1976-1983).” To view one of the articles on which the presentation is based, please visit <http://cca-viscrit.com/about/thesis-symposium/2012-2/gigi-otalvaro-hormillosa/> which includes footnotes.



30,000 so-called “subversives” were disappeared by the junta during their eight-year process of “national reorganization” in the midst of communist paranoia, i.e., fear of another Cuba, reason for which the U.S. supported the Dirty War. No one was exempt. The disappeared included babies, teenagers, pregnant women, artists, lawyers, teachers, nuns, priests, scientists—people from all sectors whom the military deemed fit for their perverse methodology of repression and ideological cleansing.



In April of 1977, shortly after Walsh’s murder, mothers of the disappeared began to organize their weekly marches. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo emerged, wearing portraits of their disappeared loved ones as they marched, demanding truth and justice; when they began to demonstrate with other human rights organizations, the portraits were blown up on placards—a visual strategy that resonates to this day—as in the first Walsh piece I will discuss. So what happened to Walsh?



While in Buenos Aires last November, I got off at the Entre Rios Train Station at the intersection where he was shot; this intersection is an implicated site akin to Andrea Dooley’s implicated

geographies. These sites are intertwined with past violence, because they provided the staging area to kill.



During an intervention on the National Day of the Journalist last June, Grupo de Arte Callejero (Street Art Group) plastered a large portrait of Walsh on the stairs to the train platform. Since the mid-90s, this artist collective has employed embodied interventions by implicating sites of terror such as former torture centers and homes of military murderers.



Documentation on the left reveals the scale of the portrait in relation to our bodies. Though the installation was no longer there (as pictured on the right), I imagined the experience of this transformed site.



And so I ask you to visualize your body ascending these steps. As you climb the stairs, your feet land in front of his chin, then his lips, followed by his nose, eyes, eyebrows and finally his forehead. With each step, your body meets another part of his face, until it disappears. Your body encourages you to contemplate his face, and its disappearance. But as you ascend, others descend and do not see the portrait. Once they are on the platform,



they see signs renaming the station after Walsh. Once you are at street level, you are faced with the implicated site of his murder. Some may not have been aware of this, but perhaps once they arrived under or over ground, their curiosity was piqued by these images and signs. Like a performance, as in Peggy Phelan's ontology of performance, Walsh's fragmented face disappeared into their memory and unconscious. Thus the implicative and performative functions of the installation become clear. Though the portrait in Argentina is rooted in the Mothers' legacy of visual and performative politics, when placed at this site, this performativity becomes contemplative as it engages both vision and movement.

According to witnesses, Walsh's body was then taken to ESMA



the former Naval Academy and most notorious of the 360 clandestine torture centers, at which three of the founding Mothers were detained and tortured. In a gesture of psychological torture, Walsh's murderers displayed his body to his detained comrades at ESMA. In his letter, Walsh discusses these torture centers.

5,000 disappeared, 10,000 prisoners, 4,000 dead, tens of thousands uprooted—these are the raw statistics of terror. With prisons overflowing, you have created virtual concentration camps...where no lawyer, journalist or international observer ever sets foot.



This is a detail of ESMA—an implicated micro site. During a tour of the space, our guide stopped in front of this watch tower to which a heavy chain was once attached to a pole on the other side of the road. This indentation was caused by the chain. It is deep due to the numerous times that the chain was dropped on the ground. Each time a vehicle arrived with detainees, alive or dead as in Walsh's case, the weight of terror dug the chain deeper into the concrete, repeatedly wounding this site. Later on during the tour, I encounter another implicated micro-site—this time inside the Officer's Casino, the exterior of which is picture here.



We couldn't take photos inside due to the ongoing trials. As we ascended the steps, our tour guide pointed out visible indentations, presumably from chains attached to the detainees' ankles. There were numerous scars along the stairs. These implicated micro-sites were subtle, but perceptible to other senses beyond vision. This building doubled as a torture chamber and clandestine maternity ward. Babies were given light and detainees, blindfolded for extended periods of time, were deprived of light. Taking one sense away and heightening the others, the torturers exploited an embodied perception by manipulating the senses for gruesome purposes. They left visible and palpable traces in these implicated micro-sites.

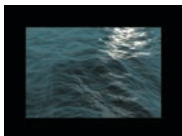
After Walsh's body was displayed at ESMA, it was never seen again. Like many of the 30,000 disappeared, he remains disappeared. So how were they killed and where did their bodies go? This question has been the subject of the work of extraordinary custodians of memory—the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team.



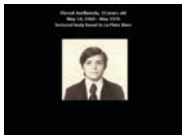
Their aim is to identify and return remains of the disappeared to their loved ones, to determine causes of death, and to provide evidence in court proceedings, thus shedding light on human rights violations. In Buenos Aires, I met one of the founding members, Patricia Bernardi. She spoke to me about one cause of death suggested by Grupo de Arte Callejero. Their Signs of Memory are installed at Memory Park, located off the shore of La Plata River.



This one references the weekly death flights, during which thousands of heavily sedated bodies were dropped into the River. While at the Team's office, Patricia showed me the evidence and explained how they identify causes of death. Certain fractures indicate those resulting from the impact of a body hitting the surface of water when dropped out of a plane and into the River.

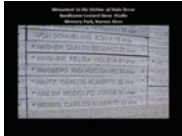


About thirty out of the estimated 4,000 victims turned up along the shore, including the three founding Mothers whose remains the Team identified in 2005. The others disappeared.



Discussing the case of Floreal Avellaneda whose body was found in the River (pause) with hands and feet tied, and signs of severe torture, Walsh doubly implicates the River and ESMA. He

suggests that ESMA is one of the torture centers from which bodies were transported before meeting their fate in the River. Was Walsh dumped into the River?



I ask myself this question, while I'm at the River—at Memory Park. I encounter him again in a sea of names engraved in the Patagonian porphyry from which the Monument to the Victims of State Terror is constructed. It is comprised of 30,000 alabaster plaques displaying names of the disappeared.



I am astounded before the Monument, as my gaze lands on the ages next to the names. 18, 29, 24, 30, 32, 23, 25, 57, 20 “embarazada.” Embarazada (pregnant). The names of the pregnant women are distinctly engraved like so and their ages range from fourteen to forty-one. Fourteen to forty-one. I think of the numbers I encountered that morning as I moved through a labyrinth of boxes at the Forensic Team’s office. Rooms filled with boxes of remains, with no names, only numbers, waiting to be identified. Do these names correspond to the boxes that wait? My breath is fragmented.



The architectural design of the Monument’s four walls creates a fragmented, zigzag path that directs the body. Though the walls are the same height, the increasing and decreasing elevation of the ground creates an optical-spatial illusion. The journey is simultaneously one of ascent and descent that continually shifts the viewer’s sense of space.



At this final wall on which Walsh's name appears—the Monument soars above the viewer as you can see from its scale in relation to the human body. It opens out to its vanishing point—implicating the River into which thousands disappeared. This final wall extends and intertwines the viewer's breath, gaze and movement of descent.

This intertwining of vision and movement is a function of the embodied art practices I have discussed today.



The mourning of the fragmentation and disappearance of bodies is implicit in these practices that profoundly engage us in the presence of our own bodies. Walsh's face appeared at an implicated train station in which bodies ascended and descended. His name reappears in volcanic stone in the breathtaking Monument at Memory Park. The Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team works toward matching the Monument's names with the remains in their custody.



Loved ones of the disappeared continue to carry photos at demonstrations. This custodial memory of fragmented bodies has sustained the constitution and expansion of a collective body of resistance as in the marches for truth and justice inaugurated by the Mothers thirty-five years ago.



Of this search for truth and justice at the height of the dictatorship, Walsh wrote:



In thousands of cases of disappearance, legal recourses were not pursued either because people understood the futility of the gesture or because they couldn't find a lawyer who would dare to present such cases after the fifty or sixty who had done so, were disappeared in turn. This is how you have stripped torture of all time limits.

After thirty five years, things have changed. We can slowly begin to see the fruits of the persistence and synergism of the Mothers and other artist activist groups.



Last October, some of the most notorious military torturers responsible for crimes against humanity at ESMA were sentenced to life in prison. Some of these cases involved the murder of Walsh and the three founding Mothers. The day after the trial, artist and activist Claudia Bernardi poignantly recalled:



With every sentence, they pronounced the names of the men and women they attempted to disappear. They returned with dignity without recovering their lives, but nevertheless seizing the condition of absence. There they were, present and resounding, we looked at each other in the mirror of perplexity. We applauded and we cried. We embraced in this moment of tridimensional time.