The participant, the witness, the artist

Imágenes de la Ausencia

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One rainy Saturday in May 2013 saw the opening in the *Parque de la Memoria* (Memory Park) in Buenos Aires of the exhibition "*El Siluetazo desde la mirada de Eduardo Gil*," (Eduardo Gil's Perspective on the Silhouette Movement) in which most of the photos assembled in this book could be seen in large format. Among the many who came on that autumnal afternoon, a small group was particularly noticeable. It was made up of several Mothers and Relatives, who appeared to be rooted to the spot very close to one particular photo, going over it and brushing it with their fingers, chatting animatedly among themselves or to whoever came near. Thanks to the size of the enlargement, they were able to make out the faces of those who were marching in a large demonstration, at the front of which was a long banner signed and carried by the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo demanding the appearance "with life" of the detained-disappeared. Behind them, many of the marchers were holding aloft photographic placards with the faces of women, men, children and babies.

That particular picture had managed to capture the forcefulness of the crowd as it made a massive stand in the streets against dictatorial terror. But for these people at the exhibition, and for those of us who could hear them, it was also a collection of very particular stories: they started locating and naming different people, saying who they were, when they'd met, how much they'd changed over the years. Each face recognised was the cue for a detailed story, a memory, an association, a joke ("I can't see you there. Where had you got to that day?"). That corner of the exhibition room seemed to have been transformed into a warm get-together of friends extended to all those who were present in the photo, marching against the dictatorship more than three decades ago. The photo became the threshold to an imaginary time that was neither past nor present, but an unexpected facet in the memory, emerging as an exercise for a variety of voices.

Placards

Among those who were recognised (or better still, rediscovered?) in the photo was Santiago Mellibovsky, who died in 2009, and it was he and his wife, Matilde Saidler de Mellibovsky (parents of Graciela, an economist disappeared in 1976, active militants in the CELS, the Jewish Movement for Human Rights and the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo – Founding Line), who were the driving force behind the first photographic archive of the disappeared at the end of 1982, and the beginning of 1983. Photos had been used since the beginning of the dictatorship: even before the Mothers started wearing the headscarf that would come to identify them, they were already holding up high, hanging around their necks or pinning to their clothes the photos of their children taken from the family album or from their identity document. The Mellibovskys had the wonderful idea of bringing them together and making them a powerful visual resource available for collective use. In their small amateur photographic studio they undertook and funded the titanic task of bringing together the available photographs of the disappeared, copying them and enlarging them to a good size (70 x 50 cms. approx.), and then mounting them on thick cardboard attached to a wooden "T". Besides the face of a disappeared person, the placards generally bore the name and date of the kidnapping, and at times some other information about the person's profession or occupation. In some cases, family references also appeared, like "mother of two children." Other placards included only photos, without any other information. On a very few occasions, the placards consisted of a collage of several photos: the two parents and their children, all of them disappeared. These placards coexisted in time with others (of a similar size and form) that only bore text: a name, a date, and a large question mark.

As can be seen in many photos in this series, taken by Eduardo Gil in successive marches in 1982 and 1983, the simple resource of the placards was both powerful in impact and very effective, and from then on they were seen in human rights demonstrations over and over again. The initiative of the Mellibovskys marks a crucial instance, a strong connection between personal use and public effect: the photos leave the intimate (family) circle to become a visual device available for the crowd. The both forceful and moving presence of the absent was raised high, to a height from which many more could feel questioned and "observed". There are two important questions contained here, one of a practical nature (the existence or the creation of a more or less centralised archive of photos of the disappeared among the human rights organisations), and another that involves defining a visual policy (the incisive awareness of the impact that those faces marching among the crowd, or above it, would have among the witnesses).

The placards convert the photos into a collective resource, while their production and their presence go beyond the circle of immediate family of each one of the victims represented. In that regard, they interact with the position promoted by Hebe de Bonafini in pursuit of socialising motherhood: "We're the mothers of thirty thousand. (…) When we went to the Plaza we used to exchange the placards of our children. (…) We'd carry them in a van, and then each mother would grab one, any one."[1] Nevertheless, in one of the photos of Eduardo Gil certain resistance to diluting each very personal story, the bond of affection that links the disappeared with the person carrying the photo, is clear: during a rest in the march, in the middle of the street, a delicate family portrait of three members is composed. A Mother accompanied by a girl (her granddaughter? her niece?) lovingly gathered around the placard of a disappeared person[2], are sadly looking at the camera. For the observer it is evident that the one being carried is not a placard chosen at random, but that of some much loved and deeply missed person, with a name and a history in common with those who are demanding his appearance. What is true is that mothers, family members or friends used to have to search among hundreds of placards for the one with the photo of their loved one, but if they failed to find it they carried any other during the demonstration. Persons close to a disappeared person tell of the strange sensation and the emotion it caused them to come across the photo of their loved one being carried aloft by an unknown person.

Those bonds of affection come into play again with very moving intensity when the daughter of another disappeared person from Zárate visited the Eduardo Gil exhibition a few months ago and came across the photo of Beba and Julio. She sent an e-mail telling of her find to Julio's daughter, who was born in 1976 and has lived in Catamarca since her father's disappearance. Gretel Galeano wrote: "Years have passed but I'm still repeatedly going over and trying to build the jigsaw puzzle of my life. (…) For march number 36 I was in Buenos Aires, but I decided to go to Zárate to visit the tomb of my grandmother, and also to see the corner where my father was picked up. I visited different organisations in search of information, I knocked on doors, went to the Grandmothers' library in search of photos of my grandmother on one of the marches... but found nothing. (…) When I finally saw my grandmother and my father on that placard my heart simply missed a beat. I have nothing, just five or six photos and a couple of letters that survived the pain and the dictatorship. That photo means everything to me."[3]

The use of photos as visual resources in the human rights marches is a form of insisting that those who disappeared, whose existence was denied by the genocidal régime, were subjects that had a biography prior to being kidnapped, a name, a face, an identity, in addition to a family that was searching for them and demanding their appearance. The photos are of evidentiary value and constitute a certainty, "a tiny proof of existence in the face of growing uncertainty."[4] They form part of the documentary remains of what happened, they bear witness to "the visual certainty of an objectified past, (…) the objective sign of an

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[1] Interview with Hebe de Bonafini by Graciela Di Marco and Alejandra Brener in: Natalie Lebon and Elizabeth Maier, *De lo privado a lo público. 30 años de la lucha ciudadana de las mujeres en América Latina*, UNIFEM, LASA, Siglo XXI, 2006.

[2] It is Julio Eduardo Galeano, aged 27, a militant in *Vanguardia Comunista* who disappeared in Zárate on 12 August 1977. It is his mother, Celina Amalia Álvarez Macías de Galeano, better known as Beba Galeano, who is holding the placard.

[3] Personal letter from Gretel Galeano to the author, 14 August 2013.

[4] Jean Louis Déotte, "El arte en la época de la desaparición," in: Nelly Richard (ed.), *Políticas y estéticas de la memoria,* Santiago de Chile, Cuarto Propio, 2006, p. 156.

existence effectively verified by a technical register."[5] To paraphrase the well-known proposition of Roland Barthes, these photos affirm that *this happened*, *this event occurred, this person existed*. They manage to provide the disappeared with visual representations in scenarios that combine everything, from intimate and private use within the home, in connection with the rituals with which each family recalls its relatives and absent members, to their mass installation in the public space. In this passage, by moving away "from their private rituality to become an active instrument of public protest,"[6] the photos of the faces of the disappeared become an unmistakable collective sign. They represent all those who disappeared, while each one of them is also like a footprint of one single life.

Silhouettes

The photo that aroused so much concentrated attention in the *Parque de la Memoria* was taken during the 3rd Resistance March to be convened by the Mothers, on 21 September 1983, students' day, with the country still in the grip of the dictatorship. The march closed the activities of the day and, thanks to its sheer size and scope, is known as *El Siluetazo* (The Silhouette Movement). It was the initiative of three visual artists (Rodolfo Aguerreberry, Julio Flores and Guillermo Kexel) and it was funded by the Mothers, the Grandmothers, other human rights bodies and political militants. From then on the making of silhouettes became another forceful public and insistent visual resource to represent the disappeared.

The creation of the silhouettes consisted in simply tracing on sheets of paper the empty form of a life-size body. These were then pasted onto the walls of the city as a way of representing "the presence of an absence," that of the thousands of people detained-disappeared during the last military dictatorship. The *Siluetazo* marks one of those exceptional moments in history at which an artistic initiative coincides with the demands being made by different social movements, and is given form by the sheer force of a crowd. It involved the participation by hundreds of demonstrators who painted and *offered their bodies* to sketch the silhouettes, before pasting them up on walls, monuments and trees, despite the threat of police action.

So, the silhouettes are another visual device that gives representation back to what has been denied, hidden, disappeared. Eduardo Grüner thinks of the silhouettes as "attempts to represent the *disappeared*: that is, not simply the 'absent,' since, by definition, *any* representation is of an absent object, but of the intentionally *absented,* made to disappear by forms of material or symbolic violence; in our case, the representation of the *bodies* disappeared by a systematic policy or a conscious strategy."[7] The logic at play is, he concludes, that of a *restitution* of the image as *substitution* of the absented body.

The Plaza de Mayo became an improvised and gigantic workshop producing silhouettes until gone midnight. Eduardo Gil records each of the stages and techniques involved in the creation process: the active participation of young people and even children during the day; the process of pasting up the silhouettes around the square; the use of the paint roller, the freehand drawings and the templates used to give a uniform image. He also records the procedure as being the most moving and ritualistic: the demonstrators used their own bodies as the mould by lying down on the paper so that their outline could be drawn. The silhouette thus became the representation of two absent bodies, that of the person who lent their body for the outline and, by transference, the body of a *desaparecido*, and so it helped reconstruct "the broken bonds of solidarity in a symbolic act of a strong emotional nature."[8] The action of offering their bodies carries an ambiguity: occupying the place of the absent person means accepting that any of those present

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[5] Nelly Richard, "Imagen-recuerdo y borraduras," in: Nelly Richard (ed.), *Políticas y estéticas de la memoria,* Santiago de Chile, Cuarto Propio, 2006, p. 165.

[6] Nelly Richard, op. cit., p. 168.

[7] Eduardo Grüner, "La invisibilidad estratégica, o la redención política de los vivos. Violencia política y representación estética en el Siglo de las Desapariciones," in: Ana Longoni & Gustavo Bruzzone, *El Siluetazo*, Buenos Aires, Adriana Hidalgo, 2008.

[8] Roberto Amigo Cerisola, "Aparición con vida: las siluetas de detenidos-desaparecidos," in *Arte y violencia*, Mexico, UNAM, 1995, p. 275. Included in: Longoni & Bruzzone, op. cit. See also the article "La Plaza de Mayo, Plaza de las Madres. Estética y lucha de clases en el espacio urbano". In AA.VV. *Ciudad/Campo en las artes en Argentina y Latinoamérica***,** Buenos Aires, CAIA, 1991. pp. 89-99.

could have taken the place of the disappeared person and faced their uncertain and sinister fate, and at the same time, it means giving it form, giving it back a presence, a corporeal nature, however ephemeral. The status of a subject. The body of the demonstrator in place of the disappeared person as a living support for the preparation of the silhouette allows it to be seen as "a footprint that breathes."[9] "In each silhouette a disappeared person would return to life," says Nora de Cortiñas.

The initial intention of the artists behind the *Siluetazo* spoke not of "art" but of "creating a *graphic event* that would shock with its physical size and its unusual nature, and would help revive the attention of the press." Leaving the pasted silhouettes in place after the demonstration would give them a public presence "for as long as the dictatorship could take to make them disappear again." The initiative was accepted and reformulated by the Mothers and materialised by the march, which rapidly appropriated the whole process and transformed it into something tangible. "At the outset, the project considered personalising each of the silhouettes, with details of dress, physical features, sex and age, even using the techniques of collage, colour and portrait."[10] The idea was to make a silhouette for each of the disappeared; however, the Mothers recognised the problem that the available lists of victims of the repression were very incomplete (they still are), so the group decided that the silhouettes should all be identical and without any form of inscription.

It was the Grandmothers who requested that children and pregnant women should also be represented. So Kexel placed a cushion on his belly and allowed his profile to be traced. His daughter served as the mould for the children's silhouette. The babies were drawn freehand.

The collective production process transformed into something tangible any attempt at uniformity. Aguerreberry remembered the spontaneous and massive participation of the demonstrators, which very soon made the artists "dispensable": "I reckon that just half an hour after [our arrival] we could have left the Plaza because we weren't needed at all."[11] Despite the decision that the silhouettes should have no identifying marks, people spontaneously wrote the name of their disappeared loved one and the date of their disappearance, or covered them with slogans. Specific demands emerged to differentiate or individualise, give a precise identity, a particular feature (noses, mouths, eyes), a condition. Demands that among the crowd of silhouettes *my* silhouette, that of my father, mother or child, that of my disappeared friend or brother should be there. A boy went up to someone doing the outlines and said: "Do my dad." "And what's your dad like"?' They give him a beard and a moustache.[12]

The *Siluetazo* implied *appropriation*[13] or *occupation* of the centrally located – and central in the web of political, economic, symbolic power of the city and the country - Plaza de Mayo and the area around it. Amigo evaluates this event in terms of "taking the square," not only politically, but also "aesthetically."[14] An offensive in appropriating urban space. In the middle of the hostile and repressive city, a (temporal) space of collective creation was liberated and can be thought of as a redefinition of both artistic and political practice.

Certainly the best known of the photos brought together in the series, "*Siluetas y canas*" (Silhouettes and Cops) is an exceptional composition that offers an understanding of how the task of documenting the event in such great detail combined in the work displayed by Eduardo Gil with the intention of capturing the decisive moment, in the style of Cartier-Bresson. Constructing a forceful metaphor, behind the advertising posters covered by the line of silhouettes there emerges the repetition of a single word: POWER. The almost mirror-like symmetry of the gesture of the two armed policemen "watching" the silhouettes, just as they once kidnapped and disappeared those who were being represented. The names on the silhouettes, all surnames that begin with the letter "a", provide the clue to the procedure of naming the silhouettes from an alphabetical list of the detained-disappeared denounced until that moment.

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[9] Gustavo Buntinx, "Desapariciones forzadas/ resurrecciones míticas," in: VVAA, *Arte y Poder*, Buenos Aires, CAIA, 1993, pp. 236-255.

[10] Carlos López Iglesias, interview with the action group, in: Longoni & Bruzzone, *El Siluetazo*, op. cit.

[11] Hernán Ameijeiras, "A diez años del Siluetazo," in *La Maga,* Buenos Aires, 31 March 1993.

[12] Victoria Azurduy, "Haceme a mi papá," in *Crisis*, Buenos Aires, 1984.

[13] Bedoya and Emei use this term in "Madres de Plaza de Mayo: Un espacio alternativo para los artistas plásticos," in: Longoni & Bruzzone, op. cit.

[14] Amigo, op. cit., p. 265.

It was precisely because of that photo that I arrived at Eduardo Gil's studio in around 2006,[15] while we were preparing the edition of the volume *El Siluetazo*. Awaiting me was the surprise appearance of several rolls of unknown photos of protests taken during the last period of the dictatorship, when Eduardo Gil was still a sociology student and was taking his first steps as a photographer, recording the marches that he attended not so much as a graphic reporter but as a participant. When we met, he generously opened his archive, found negatives not yet copied and made this little treasure known.

These photos by Eduardo Gil reveal the simultaneity with which the placards of photos and the silhouettes became visual resources of the human rights movement and helped give the disappeared an inescapable public presence in the crucial period of the end of the dictatorship. If both resources have different emphases (one strengthens the bonds of affection between the person photographed and the one marching with the photo, the other proposes to put itself in the place; one recalls the biography prior to the kidnapping, the other insists on the vacuum left by the absence), at the same time both approach each other and intertwine. Holding the photos aloft as a response to anonymity and the denial imposed by State terrorism is an impulse similar to that which spontaneously took the protestors to provide the silhouettes with particular features and a name on that day in September 1983: because although they were demanding the appearance of the thirty thousand and the fight for justice is a shared cause, the pain of the relatives and friends has concrete faces, names and histories.

Eduardo Gil reveals himself as that young photographer who, in his first shots, combines three inseparable dimensions: that of the participant who is a committed party on the march and chooses the risk of the street by accompanying the anti-dictatorship confrontation; that of the witness, the one who documents and gives proof of the events; and that of the artist, the one who manages to catch the fleeting but decisive moment, which is both unique and unrepeatable, in the details, situations, gestures and discoveries that his eye catches, even in the crowd shots, and which manage to take us back to the intensity of that time and to its continuity in the present: Which is what happened suddenly and so brightly one grey afternoon in a corner of the *Parque de la Memoria*.

[15] I refer to the collective volume *El Siluetazo* (Buenos Aires, Adriana Hidalgo editor, 2008) mentioned above, the cover of which is illustrated with that particular picture, which was practically the only photo in the collection to have been made known until that time.