History demonstrates that your revolutionary struggle lives on in the millions of beings who struggle for a world of justice and solidarity. You are the fire that sustains happiness and hope. — Página 72 obituary in homage to the disappeared, November 24, 2011
Today is November 24, 2011. It is Thanksgiving Day in the United States, but I am in Buenos Aires at the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team’s office. One of the head custodians and founding members, Patricia Bernardi, takes me downstairs, where the evidence is housed. We enter a room in which there are two skeletons resting on two tables. The room is connected to another room in which other custodians are working. Patricia closes the door. Now it is just her and me. And the two skeletons. My body begins to adjust. My senses are jolted, awakening me to operate on another level of consciousness. She casually lays down her keys alongside one of the skeletons and proceeds to explain how they go about identifying the cause of death. There is a large fracture at the base of the skull. She picks it up and tells me that this person was shot at close range. The teeth are vivid, still a bright white that imprints itself on my memory. This is a body, violated. This is corporeality in another form. This is what we may become one day. Despite the heaviness I feel at this moment, I am relieved to know that people like Patricia are caring for these bodies.
THE EXTRAORDINARY CUSTODIANS OF MEMORY AT THE Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team contribute to the advancement of human rights around the globe. Their eyes witness and their hands preserve traces of massacres beyond imagination. They are experts in corporeality, in another form. Their work began shortly after Argentina’s Guerra Sucia (Dirty War) and the long arduous process of attempting to identify the remains of a fraction of the thirty thousand disappeared continues to this day.²

Bodies Persisting in Space

SINCE THE DIRTY WAR (1976–1983), ARGENTINE ARTISTS AND activists have called for justice through embodied interventions in public space. These interventions take many forms, including the recuperation of former sites of torture, the creation of monuments and public art projects, and marches of resistance and remembrance. By offering their bodies at demonstrations, employing recurring visual strategies such as portraits of the disappeared, or directly engaging the bodies of others in public, artists and activists have intertwined corporeality and the politics of space. The persistent connection between bodies and space over the last thirty-five years has enabled a resistant visual politics of the disappeared to thrive both in contemporary art and in the ongoing demand for justice. This essay addresses this resistant visual politics as it is manifested in a particular remarkable monumental space.

The following pages offer a phenomenological account of the Monument to the Victims of State Terror and a nearby sculpture by Nicolás Guagnini, both located within Memory Park in Buenos Aires. While visual politics are critical to the struggle for human rights in Argentina, these works engage bodies in space in a way that exceeds visuality. They demand a multisensory engagement that pushes us to contemplate the meaning of our own corporeality and that of others. They force us to recognize that it is a form of political privilege to know the status and location of the bodies we love.

In March of 1976, the military took over all branches of the Argentine government and announced their plan for a “national reorganization” that would be enacted through a perverse methodology of repression and ideological cleansing. The military junta used the threat of communism as an excuse to begin eight years of state-sponsored terrorism.³ The Dirty War was one of various byproducts of the Cold War that took place in Latin America around the same time. It involved the forced disappearance, murder, rape, and torture of thirty thousand so-called “subversives” who threatened the military’s National Security Doctrine based on conservative and Christian values.⁴ In an atmosphere of terror, loved ones of the disappeared began their searches by approaching government agencies, to no avail.

In April of 1977, the first fourteen members of Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, organized by Azucena Villaflor, had their first gathering. Thus began a series of weekly Thursday marches that continue to this day. By moving out of the private sphere and into public space to demand the return of lost relatives, they risked their lives and brought attention to a situation afflicting many Argentine families.⁵ In October of that same year, twelve members of the Mothers established the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo in recognition of the fact that their daughters had been pregnant at the time they disappeared. While detained in clandestine centers of detention and torture, the daughters gave birth to children who were given away to military families.⁶

The Grandmothers and the Mothers played a significant role in initiating the Argentine human rights movement that has evolved over the last thirty-five years. As the founding members have aged,
another generation has taken up their model of hope, persistence, and endurance through groups such as the HIJOS (Hijos Por la Identidad y la Justicia Contra El Olvido y el Silencio; Children for Identity and Justice against Oblivion and Silence), an activist group made up of sons and daughters of the disappeared.

Patricia tells me how rewarding it is to work with families once they have identified the remains: they are so grateful to have their disappeared loved ones returned. Patricia picks up a femur and shows me the small, hollow square they have carved into the bone to collect a DNA sample. She explains that certain types of fractures indicate other causes of death, including the force of impact when a body hit the surface of the water after being dropped into La Plata River. She mentions that about thirty bodies out of the estimated four thousand that were dropped from the sky during weekly death flights turned up along the shore. The others disappeared deep into the ocean, never to be found again. I find out during my visit that the number of families who have provided DNA samples is relatively low compared to the number of disappeared. I am somewhat shocked by this, but then I ask myself: would I want to know if my lover, brother, or sister was shot in the head from three feet away, or if they were drugged and dropped out of a plane, bones shattering at the moment of impact? Or would I opt for amnesia, denial, or complacency without justice? I do not know.

MEMORY PARK IS LOCATED OFF THE SHORE OF LA PLATA RIVER, an implicated river into which thousands of heavily sedated bodies were dropped, disappearing forever. Thus it is an implicated geography, defined by Andrea Dooley as a site that is intertwined with past violence because it provided the staging area to kill. Memory Park is especially charged due to its proximity to ESMA (Escuela Superior de la Mecánica de la Armada), the former Naval Academy and most notorious of the 360 clandestine centers of torture at which many of those dropped into the River were detained. Visitors to Memory Park are reminded of the death flights and of the Park’s proximity to ESMA by Carteles de Memoria (Signs of Memory), an artwork by Grupo de Arte Callejero (GAC) commissioned by the Park in 2009. These fifty-three memory signs offer a visual timeline of critical events and phenomena surrounding the Dirty War, including U.S. involvement in Latin America via its training of some of the military junta’s top officials in the notorious School of the Americas (fig. 1). Since the mid-1990s, GAC and HIJOS have collaborated to organize escraches, a type of public demonstration or performance protest with the sole purpose of implicating sites of terror. During these embodied interventions in urban space, participants would graffitithe homes of unpunished military repressors and former sites of detention and torture. Their objective was to make the community aware of the murderers at large in their own neighborhoods and places of work. Oftentimes, they employed signs such as those installed at Memory Park to identify these implicated sites. These performative acts of public shaming significantly altered the urban spaces of Buenos Aires. Collective bodies incriminated these spaces as implicated in state sponsored terrorism and forced the city itself to
testify to the brutalization of its inhabitants. Through their embodied occupation of implicated sites, artists and activists restored the city’s potential as a collaborator in the battle for justice. By reinstalling remnants of these earlier performance protests—such as those represented in the Signs of Memory at Memory Park—GAC demonstrates the interconnectivity of bodies, geographies, and cities, and explores the capacity of such relationships to effect change.

Perhaps the Mothers and Grandmothers recognized this capacity when they inaugurated the movement of corporeal interventions kept alive today by groups like GAC and HIJOS. But in the case of the Mothers and Grandmothers, their collaborators were images of the disappeared faces of their loved ones, creating what art historian Ana Longoni describes as a “prolific genealogy for the public use of photography in the struggle for the human rights movement against the official denial of the killings.”11 In “Photographs and Silhouettes: Visual Politics in Argentina,” Longoni discusses the origins of photography as a tool for resistance among the Mothers. The Mothers and Grandmothers emerged, wearing small posters of photographs around their necks, and marched around the Plaza to demand truth and justice. Once they began demonstrating with other human rights organizations, the photographs were blown up on large placards that they carried during their marches. Longoni argues that at different moments, photography in Argentina has served various political functions: the creation of solidarity among those who demonstrated in public spaces in the midst of fear and terror; the centralization of a photographic archive; and the definition of a visual politics in which the awareness of these faces, marching among or above the demonstrators, had an impact on others who were watching (fig. 2).12

The resounding impact of these faces remains evident to this day. Whether at small scale events such as the baldosa (tile) installations...
where loved ones hold photographic placards, or at larger events such as the National Day of Remembrance for Truth and Justice or the Annual March of Resistance, at which a long banner of portraits is carried through downtown Buenos Aires to the Presidential Palace, these faces persist in space, emotionally moving the bodies who carry them and those who witness them. I am one such witness. I was moved by a face that appeared, disappeared, and reappeared as I approached the Guagnini sculpture at Memory Park.

**Giving Thanks**

Through I am in Argentina for the Thanksgiving holiday, I still give thanks, albeit for my own reasons. It is appropriate to do the work I will do today in homage to the disappeared on this holy day of amnesia during which people in the United States celebrate a day that conceals an act of genocide we know all too well. Or not well enough. We would rather not think of it, so we eat cranberries instead. I forego the cranberries this year. Perhaps I will have chimichurri. Today will be full of giving thanks, to many times, spaces, and bodies.

After a walk along the River during which we pass GAC’s visual timeline, we arrive at the first of the four walls that make up the Monument to the Victims of State Terror designed by the Baudizzone-Lestard-Varas Studio. It is much taller than I had anticipated, but this perception is fleeting, as I will soon find out (fig. 3). As we walk along this wall, the ground ascends and the height of the wall appears to diminish. But in reality it is just our movement through space that changes, as we tread the unstable, gradually rising ground. The Monument is made of Patagonian porphyry and includes the names of approximately nine thousand of the disappeared, engraved on...
We leave the brightly lit room where the two skeletons rest and make our way to another room. The lights are not on. There are many boxes in this room, most of them labeled with names. They hold remains that have been identified. Other boxes are labeled only with numbers. They are waiting to be identified. We make our way to another dark room. More boxes, no names, only numbers. We then walk down a short hallway, to yet another dark room, holding many more boxes that only have numbers. I am in a labyrinth, of bodies. Boxes and boxes and boxes, waiting to be identified, waiting for a proper burial. Corporeality in a box.

Do the names engraved on the alabaster plaques correspond to the numbers on the boxes that wait? 26, 24, 27, 19, 33, 26, 29, 20, 30, 22, 54, 40, 25, 23. The names and numbers make me feel heavy, like the Patagonian porphyry wall to my left (fig. 4). My breath is fragmented by the teens, twenties, and thirties—lives abruptly cut short. I am breathing unevenly and remind myself to extend my breath, deeply and slowly.

When I reach the end of the first wall, the Monument no longer towers over me. I now stand above it as the second wall confronts me. It is entirely devoted to 1976. I spend most of my time at this wall, in this year, which brought me to this planet, this body, this project and this place. The Monument guides me. It directs my body to make a sharp right. I am now standing on elevated earth. From this location, the second wall is to my left, its vanishing point cutting into the edge of the third wall partially visible ahead of me (fig. 5). The slope continues to ascend, and the second wall appears to diminish as did the first, but not as severely. The River is beyond the third wall. No one is at the Monument but me. Just me, the walls, the names, and the River. The sounds of the River and wind are audible. I am grateful for the clear skies that surround me, the blissful blue in which I find solace. I turn to face the second wall. I am in 1976. In the vortex of the Monument and the names it enshrines. Adriana Alicia Ángel, 22 años, embarazada; Ramona Benitez, 18 años, embarazada; Ricardo Bermejo García, 23 años, embarazada; Isabel Angela Carlucci, 24 años, embarazada; Gabriela Carri Quiriborde, 19 años, embarazada; Monica...
Figure 4—Names and ages engraved on the alabaster plaques at the Monument, 2011.
Photo by Heather Carducci

Figure 5—Baudizzone, Lestard, Varas Studio, second and third walls of El Monumento a las Víctimas del Terrorismo de Estado (The Monument to the Victims of State Terror), 2007. Patagonian porphyry. First section: 305.4 feet; second section: 138.9 feet; third section: 142.4 feet; fourth section: 241.14 feet. Memory Park, Buenos Aires, 2011. Photo by Heather Carducci
In my solitude, I can let go. I can be one with my grief. And yet the surface next to the second wall of the Monument is flatter and helps to ground me. I look closely at the spaces separating the plaques. There appears to be a reflective surface behind them that provides yet another contemplative space among those already evoked by the River and this Monument of names and numbers.

After leaving 1976 to approach the third wall of the Monument, I come to a halt. This wall is taken up entirely by 1977. Once again, the Monument guides my body, instructing me to take a sharp left so that the names flow toward me from the right. From above, this third wall appears to join the V constructed by the first two walls, transforming it into a Z (fig. 6). The slope continues to ascend slightly as I reach the end of this third wall. I then approach the fourth and final wall of the Monument’s oblique path, and it asks me to shift my body once again. Though the zigzag design that the architects envisioned as a symbol of the “wound inflicted by violence” can best be seen from above, it is felt in the body, at ground level.

Where this final wall begins, its height is not much greater than mine. As I look ahead, the slope of the ground descends with a gradient as steep as that of the ascension along the first wall. At the top of the incline, La Plata is in full view (fig. 7). The Monument directs my attention to this river. She is its vanishing point. She is the point at which many of the people whose names appear on these walls vanished. I am reminded of this as I move toward the Guagnini sculpture to my right, questioning if the person whose image appears is one of the thirty thousand who vanished into her waters (fig. 8).
30,000 by Nicolás Guagnini is a site specific sculpture made of twenty-five steel columns. The portrait of the artist’s father that was used by his grandmother during demonstrations is painted on the columns and becomes visible in its totality when the participant’s body is located at a specific point in space. As I encounter this piece installed directly in front of the River, my perception of it engages not only my vision but also my corporeality. Depending on where I am, the portrait continues to transform. At one point, I see the entire portrait; from a different point, I can only see fragments of Guagnini’s father’s face. From behind, multiple faces appear, and from yet another point only the white of the steel columns is visible. My gaze is led to the River, and a space for memory and contemplation emerges. The portrait thus vanishes as I move toward this implicated river. Like a performance, the image disappears into my memory and unconscious. Thus the implicative and performative functions of the portrait become clear. Though the portrait in Argentina is rooted in the Mothers’ legacy of visual and performative politics, when placed before the River this performativity becomes contemplative. I experience its power during my ritualistic encounter of this space that holds both presence and absence.

As I pull myself away from the Guagnini sculpture, I return to the last wall of the Monument. It includes names of the disappeared from 1977 to 1983; in later years, they begin to diminish in number, yet their impact is just as great. Mariana Elena Garaza, 17 años, embarazada; Monica Elizabeth Garcia, 14 años, embarazada; Maria Adelia Garin, 29 años, embarazada; Eva De Jesus Gomez, 38 años, embarazada; Maria Isabel Jimenez, 41 años, embarazada. I come across names of disappeared people about whom I have heard firsthand, such as Rodolfo Walsh, the disappeared activist and investigative journalist whose dead body was displayed to
his comrades at ESMA. Earlier this week, I was at the Entre Ríos Train Station, at the same intersection where he was assassinated, two days after he finished his famous “Open Letter to the Military Junta” in March of 1977. During the National Day of the Journalist in Argentina in June 2007, GAC implicated this site in Walsh’s murder by plastering a large portrait of him on the stairs to the train platform and renaming the station “Estación Rodolfo Walsh” in homage to him. And here he is again, represented in another form, engraved in Patagonian porphyry as part of this monumental space.

As I reflect back on the Monument’s skewed path, it becomes clear that it was designed to engage the body. When I began, the first wall towered over me, and the names were sparse. At the Monument’s direction, I moved through its zigzag structure. My sense of physicality was transformed by the shifts in its scale as I moved through it. During this movement, I became enveloped by the walls as the names and numbers increased, surrounding me at every side and from every angle. I was on a journey in this sea of names and numbers, becoming more and more puzzled by this encounter of presence and absence. The path is oblique, interrupted by voids between each wall, creating spaces for memory in which the body participates. The journey is simultaneously one of ascent and descent. When I reached the end of the final wall, my spatial sense shifted once again. At the bottom of the incline, the height of this last wall soared above me while its length extended to its vanishing point—the River. This movement caused my breath and gaze to become intertwined as I walked toward this vanishing point.

The Monument is a structure that lives. Its architecture is sensuous. Appealing to the “architectonics of the human body,” it employs its design to maximize the body’s perceptual capacities. The Monument invited me on a journey with open arms and encouraged me
to constantly shift my gaze, perception, and sense of spatiality and corporeality. As I contemplated my own fleshy body before this Monument, I was reminded of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “flesh” as the space existing between our bodies and everything we perceive.²¹ In my acute presence in this “flesh” between my body, the walls, the names, and the River, I became hyperaware of my breath and the air that joined me to the bodies surrounding me. I pondered, and continue to ponder, the unsolved puzzle of corporeality and the implications of the disappearance of corporeality. Corporeality in boxes, corporeality engraved in volcanic stone, corporeality transformed, existing in the air that we breathe. The breath is flesh is life! It is what connects us to everything.

Today is Thanksgiving and I am grateful for the air of Buenos Aires. The air here is palpable, sensuous, and audible. It feels good. So I take it in with the fullest capacity of my lungs, my heart, and my soul. Today is Thanksgiving. I am so very grateful for today’s encounters, for my breath and for the air that sustains us. And sustains hope.

Bodies that Endure

The Monument and the Guagnini sculpture at Memory Park encourage the participant to remember the disappeared by way of an engagement of the body in its movement through space. These experiences of the Park challenge the primacy of vision as the sense through which we understand art about the disappeared. It is an effective perceptual strategy, since the majority of the disappeared remain disappeared, their fates mysterious. Though the sculpture and the Monument are works of visual art, they demonstrate that to contemplate the disappeared and to create or experience artwork about them, our memory demands an engagement with other senses—perhaps inarticulable senses beyond the five that are traditionally attributed to us. These artworks urge us to contemplate our own corporeality and sensory vital functions, such as the breath. The breath connects us to the disappeared—as it did in my acute presence in the "flesh"—to mourn the loss of their corporeality and their breath.

The experience of mourning implicit in these monumental works is informed by the visual politics of the disappeared, on which the Mothers and Grandmothers have had a significant impact.²² These art practices in contemporary Buenos Aires continue to evolve and demonstrate the power of collaboration between Argentina’s art and activist communities. Thus the politics of space and the visual politics of the dead converge to produce a “sensory politics” of embodied memory.²³ The Mothers and Grandmothers demonstrated that to remember is to resist and to resist is to remember. They passed on this resistant memory to future generations of artists and activists, risking their own bodies by inserting themselves—or representations of their disappeared loved ones—in public space. Without such acts of memory and resistance, recuperated former torture centers—many of which function now as memory sites—would still exist as military and government buildings, police stations, schools, garages, and old bus terminals. Were it not for the work of the Mothers and Grandmothers over the last thirty-five years, some of the recently reopened trials pertaining to these sites would not have ended in triumph for the families of the disappeared.²⁴

The politics of space continue to unfold as more and more perpetrators connected to these implicated sites are tried for their crimes. Justice has come in response to ongoing practices of resistance and memorialization that directly engage bodies in space. Families and loved ones repopulate the city with images of the disappeared on
memorial placards and banners. Artists and activists display these images in public installations. Names of the disappeared reappear in volcanic stone in the breathtaking Monument at Memory Park. Extraordinary custodians of memory like the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team work toward matching these names with the remains in their custody. Hence, the disappeared are never forgotten and always present: “They return with dignity . . . seizing the condition of absence.”93 Their bodies endure in space, transforming corporeal and ethereal forms in art and activism and offering a model of resistance that is at once contemplative and hopeful.

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Notes
1 Obituary of Hector Hugo Malnati and Mirta Coutoune, Página 12, November 24, 2011. Malnati and Coutoune (who was approximately four months pregnant) were disappeared on November 24, 1977. Every day, Página 12, one of Argentina’s major newspapers, publishes obituaries of those who disappeared in years past on the date of publication.
2 The Dirty War was a period of state-sponsored terrorism that lasted from 1976 until 1983.
4 This phenomenon is not unique to Argentina. The Dirty War was led by one of various right-wing dictatorships in the Southern Cone (which includes Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay) established under the clandestine program known as Operation Condor, a campaign of political repression and terror whose primary aim was to eradicate socialist and communist influences. Among the many scholars that have discussed the U.S. government’s direct support for such programs, Noam Chomsky has explicitly connected Operation Condor to repressive U.S. policies in other parts of Latin America. See Noam Chomsky, foreword to American’s Other War: Terrorizing Colombia by Doug Stokes (New York: Zed Books, 2003) viii–xviii.
5 In December of that same year, twelve of the Mothers and their supporters were kidnapped at a planning meeting at the Church of Santa Cruz. Survivors from ESMA, the former Naval Academy that functioned as the most notorious clandestine center of torture and detention, testified to witnessing the brutal torture of these women, including one of the group’s founding members, Villaflor. See Rita Arditti, Searching for Life (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 35–36. In 2005, Villaflor’s remains, along with those of two other founding members, were identified by the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team. See The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo—Founding Line, accessed December 9, 2011, http://www.madresfundadoras.org.ar/pagina/quienessomos/13.
6 The chapters “The Grandmothers Organize” and “Finding the Children” in Arditti’s book Searching for Life provide a thorough account of the appropriation of children as well as the responses and tactics developed by the Grandmothers in collaboration with scientists specialized in DNA matching. See note 3 above.
7 As stated on their website, the Team’s aim is to “recover and identify remains, return them to families and provide evidence in court proceedings. Through this work, we seek to shed light on human rights violations, contributing to the search for truth, justice, reparation and prevention of violations.” Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team, “About Us,” accessed February 25, 2012, http://eaaf.typepad.com/about_us/.
9 I have briefly summarized GAC’s description of the School of the Americas below the image. Each memory sign is accompanied by smaller signage that explicates the phenomena visually represented. For more information on the School of the Americas, which is now called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, see Hidden in Plain Sight, a feature-length documentary that looks at the nature of U.S. policy in Latin America through the prism of the Institute. This controversial school has trained military personnel and top ranking officials all over Latin America, not just in Argentina, since 1946. See John Smihu (2005; United States: Seventh Art Releasing, 2005), DVD.
10 See Diana Taylor, “HIJOS and the DNA of Performance,” The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas (Durham: Duke University

21 Ibid.

22 During the tour, I learned that the decision to include the designation for pregnant women was informed by the Grandmothers, who are part of Memory Park’s advisory consortium of human rights organizations.

23 The notion of “sensory politics” emerged from a conversation with Dr. Julian Carter. My reading of embodied interventions in public space has been greatly enriched by his insightful comments.

24 On October 26, 2011, a historic event occurred. Eighteen of the most notorious military torturers responsible for crimes against humanity at ESMA were given sentences ranging from eighteen years to life in prison. One of the men sentenced to life was Alfredo Astiz, a former Naval Commander from ESMA who infiltrated the initial meetings of the Mothers, posing as the brother of a disappeared. Some of the cases that carry the most symbolic significance include those involving the murder of Rodolfo Walsh, as well as the disappearance and murder of Aracena Villafañ and the other Mothers who were kidnapped that same day in 1977. On the importance of human rights organizations assuring these convictions, see CELS, “First conviction for crimes against humanity committed at ESMA,” accessed on October 29, 2011, http://www.cels.org.ar/comunicacion/?info=detalleDoc&ids=4&lang=es&ss=46&idc=1445 and Ente Público Espacio Para la Memoria y para la Promoción y Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, Justicia en Acción: Sentencia para 18 Represores de la ESMA, 26 de Octubre del 2011, Comodoro Py 2002 (Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2011).

25 In “Tiempo Tridimensional,” an unpublished essay written the day after the ESMA trial in October of 2011, artist Claudia Bernardi recalls “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 embraced in this moment of tridimensional time.”