

Buenos Aires

When she showed me her photograph,
she said,
this is my daughter,
she still hasn't come home
She hasn't come home in ten years.
But this is her photograph.
Isn't it true that she's very pretty?
She's a philosophy student
and here she is when she was
fourteen years old
and she had her first communion
starched and sacred.
This is my daughter
she's so pretty
I talk to her every day
she no longer comes home late, and this is why I reproach her
much less
but I love her so much
this is my daughter
every night I say goodbye to her
I kiss her
and it's hard for me not to cry
even though I know that she will not come
home late
because as you know, she has not come
home for years
I love this photo very much
I look at it every day
it seems that only yesterday
she was a little feathered angel in my arms
and here she looks like a young lady,
a philosophy student
but, isn't it true that she's so pretty,
that she has an angel's face
that it almost seems as if she were alive?

LAWRENCE WESCHLER

ON THE ART OF THE DISAPPEARED

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DISCUSSED: TK

That from the Chilean poet Marjorie Agosin, in a poem titled “Buenos Aires.” As I write, the citizens of Buenos Aires are marking the thirtieth anniversary of the launch of Argentina’s devastating Dirty War, which would presently come to see the disappearance of more than thirty thousand of the country’s citizens—the term *disappearance* being both a euphemism and as such an evasion (for these people didn’t just disappear, they were disappeared, they were made to disappear) and also a cannily accurate description of their fate as seen from the point of view of their surviving friends and relatives: suddenly, horrifically, unac-



countably (and this last was key), these dear people had just vanished without a trace and were no more. (The thirtieth anniversary of the launch of such campaigns of repression elsewhere in Latin America—Guatemala, Brazil, Uruguay, Chile, and so forth—is already several years past.)

It was a diabolically effective tactic. If, as has sometimes been noted, repression is the effort by the Forces That Be to take people who had started behaving like subjects (instead of the abject objects into which role history had theretofore long relegated them), to take such people and turn them back into good little mute and neutered objects once again, one could hardly have come

up with a better one. For the regime was able simultaneously to eliminate some of its most vividly effective opponents, to discombobulate the wider opposition as such (sending friends, relatives, and coworkers who might otherwise be working to overthrow the regime into ever more desperate and futile and isolating efforts at search and rescue), to demoralize the wider society through the whiff of terror such disconcerting tactics evinced—and all the while was able to deny that it had been doing anything of the sort. These people, after all, had just “disappeared”—how was the regime supposed to know what had happened to them?

As the years passed and one by one the regimes encountered other sorts of difficulties (military defeat, financial debacle, institutional disarray) and began ever so gingerly exiting the scene, they invariably took care to lavish amnesties upon themselves, further shielding their officers from prosecution for any of the depredations they in any case steadfastly denied ever having been party to. And by and large, with certain exceptions, such retrospective amnesties held, and kept on holding, till the point where the statute of limitations kicked in, further shielding any wrongdoers.

A sort of civic normalcy began to take hold, albeit a peculiarly riddled one. For as the great Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert had once parsed things, in his poem “Mr. Cogito on the Need for Precision,”

and yet in these matters
accuracy is essential

we must not be wrong
even by a single one

we are despite everything
the guardians of our brothers

ignorance about those who have
disappeared

undermines the reality of the
world

And a democracy could be many things—could countenance all sorts of special arrangements to secure the cooperation of its various contending interests—but at the very least it would seem that it needed to be grounded in reality, a reality continuously undercut by any willed (albeit enforced) ignorance (or amnesiac amnesty) as to the fate of those disappeared.

And yet here is where things began to get interesting, where the tactic of disappearing people doubled back on some of its progenitors. For legally speaking, while torture and mayhem and maybe even manslaughter and murder could be subject to a retrospective amnesty or a statute of limitations, disappearance was different. Disappearance was an ongoing crime: its victims were still disappeared and hence as subject to legal recourse today, long after that amnesty, as they ever had been. Or so one judiciary after another began to hazard. And at long last accountability of a sort began to seem possible...

Still, this legal sort of accountability—this systematic holding of malefactors

to account in a court of law—only addressed a part of the putrefying legacy of the era of disappearances (and even that fitfully and sporadically at best). The culture of these countries as a whole had also been undermined and laid waste to by those campaigns, and in this sense it was going to be up to others besides lawyers and judges to begin the labor of reclamation: up to artists and playwrights and novelists and filmmakers.

And they have clearly been doing so. Such at any rate is the pressing news that comes barreling forth from a show, originally organized at the North Dakota Museum of Art, of all places, currently touring the world, that surveys some of the most powerful and unsettling efforts by Latin American artists to come to terms with the toxic legacy of those terrible years—the show from which I have drawn some of the instances that follow.

Before turning to specific instances, though, I would just call attention to certain abiding themes that recur from one artist and country to another. The power, for starters, of brute facticity (of this bicycle, that x-rayed jaw) in the labor of reclamation. And likewise the force of names—specific names, carefully compiled and respectfully nested. And likewise, and somehow especially evocatively, the power of faces.

In a luminous little essay on “The Face,” Jean-Paul Sartre once noted how the face “creates its own time within universal time.... Against [that] stagnant background,



Argentinean artist Nicolas Guagnini (b. 1966) calls his array of mysteriously black-streaked vertical white vinyl posts 30,000, an obvious allusion to the 30,000 citizens the Argentinean military arranged to be made to disappear following their 1976 coup, a number which included his own father, a journalist kidnapped the following year, never to be seen again, except now, in occasional glimpses, as the spectator circumnavigates the son's array, and suddenly, the father's face snaps into startling focus.

the time of living bodies stands out because it is oriented.... In the midst of these stalactites hanging in the present, the face, alert and

inquisitive, is always ahead of the look I direct toward it.... A bit of the future has now entered the room: a mist of futurity surrounds

the face: its future." The face, Sartre goes on to insist, "is not merely the upper part of the body.... It is corporeal yet different from belly or

thigh: what it has in addition is its voracity; it is pierced with greedy holes.” The greediest, the most ravenous of those holes, of course, being the eyes. For “now the two spheres are turning in their orbits: now the eyes are becoming a look.” Sartre goes on to conclude how “if we call transcendence the ability of the mind to pass beyond itself and all other things as well, to escape from itself that it may lose itself elsewhere; then to be a visible transcendence is the meaning of a face.”

But look at what is going on here. For time and again in this show (as with the photo in Marjorie Agosin’s poem), we are being confronted with a squandered and truncated gaze, a forward-looking, future-tending gaze that has nevertheless been interrupted, cut short, cruelly severed. We, of course, here and now (for the time being, as it were), are forced to embody the future toward which that gaze was directed, but it becomes up to us to reach out, to gaze back, to fulfill and redeem that haunted gaze.

The redemption involved, however, is of a complicated sort. In the immediate wake of the Second World War, in an essay titled “*La guerre a eu lieu*” (translated as “The War Has Taken Place,” though the title might more accurately and tellingly have been rendered “The



Columbian Juan Michel Echeveria (b. 1947), a writer before he became an artist, manages to channel the whole wretched agony of his country through a wall of achingly observed close-up photographs of a single mannequin, that of a child, trashed and abandoned to the elements outside an old textile factory in Bogotá.

War Has Had a Place”), the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty noted how:

we have learned history, and we claim that it must not be forgotten. But are we here not the dupes of our emotions? If ten years hence, we reread these pages and so many others, what will we think of them? We do not want this year of 1945 to become just another year among many. A man

who has lost his son or a woman he loved does not want to live beyond that loss. He leaves the house in the state it was in. The familiar objects upon the table, the clothes in the closet mark an empty place in the world.... The day will come, however, when the meaning of these books will change: once... they were wearable, and now they are out of style and shabby. To keep them any longer would not be to make the dead person live on; quite the opposite, they date his death all the more cruelly.

And I’m likewise reminded of a luminous parable of W. S. Merwin’s, his prose poem “Unchopping a Tree,” which begins, ever so self-evidently, “Start with the leaves,”—continuing—“the small twigs, and the nests that have been shaken, ripped or broken off by the fall; these must be gathered and attached once again to their respective places.” And it goes on like that (“It is not arduous work, unless major limbs have been smashed or mutilated.... It goes without saying that if the tree was hollow in whole or in part, and contained old nests of birds or mammal or insect... the contents will have to be repaired where necessary, and reassembled, insofar as possible, in their original order, including the shells of nuts already opened”). And so forth for paragraph after



In 1988, the veteran Uruguayan master Antonio Frasconi (b. 1919) perpetrated his own series of eighteen woodcuts around the theme of his own country's disappeared, perhaps the most remarkable of them being this one here, in which the abject march of doomed prisoners is momentarily undercut by the piercingly lucid and defiant gaze of just one prisoner who still manages to raise his head ever so slightly so as to be able to take it all in.



Brazilian master Cildo Mereiles (b. 1948) dealt with the mounting siege of terror, mass arrests and ironclad censorship afflicting his country in real time, as it was happening, in 1970, by commandeering empty Coke bottles, and before returning them for deposit, stenciling them with white ink mottoes, invisible until the bottles had been refilled with sweet brown soda at the factory and sent back into (now subversive) recirculation.

hallucinogenic paragraph: every single leaf is reattached, every single branch; tackle and scaffolding are hauled in so as to facilitate the final reattachment of the reconstituted bore to its stump, at which point the tackle and scaffolding

start getting pulled away:

Finally the moment arrives when the last sustaining piece is removed and the tree stands again on its own. It is as though its weight for a moment stood on

your heart. You listen for a thud of settlement, a warning creak deep in the intricate joinery. You cannot believe it will hold. How like something dreamed it is, standing there all by itself. How long will it stand there now? The



One of the Argentinean military's most fiendish refinements was to kidnap pregnant couples, torture and kill the husband, keep the woman alive until she gave birth, at which point she too was murdered, and the infant given over to infertile military couples for adoption. In 1998, the Grandmothers of the Disappeared in Buenos Aires—noting how such children, still oblivious of their origins, would now be approaching the same age their parents were at the time of their disappearance—contacted a collective of Buenos Aires artists named Identidad (Identity) to see if they could contrive some sort of intervention. The collective generated a maze of photographs, with images of each kidnapped couple ranged to either side of a mirror, such that visitors would be forced to acknowledge their own complicity in the country's tragedy, and certain specific visitors might be given to acknowledge something more compelling still.

first breeze that touches its dead
leaves all seems to flow into your
mouth. You are afraid the motion
of the clouds will be enough to
push it over. What more can you
do? What more can you do?

But there is nothing more
you can do.

Others are waiting.

Everything is going to have
to be put back.

Everything put back indeed.
But surely the leaves in
question are dead and will never
again not be dead, the clothes in
the closet out of style and shabby,
the angel's face in Agosin's poem



Columbian (b.1951) Oscar Muñoz can't seem to get over the evanescence of even the most urgent memories. In one set of pieces consisting of circular mirrors arrayed along a wall at eye level, the visage of a disappeared victim only comes swimming into view by way of the exhaled breath of the peering viewer, and just as quickly commences to fade away. In another piece, across a series of plasma-screen projections, a brush-wielding hand emerges from the side and quickly proceeds to sketch out the face of yet another disappeared: it takes a few minutes before the mesmerized viewer comes to realize that the grey surface is in fact hot pavement, the portraying medium mere water, and already this face, too, is disappearing (yet again!), just as the hand emerges from the side of a neighboring screen, repeating the whole Sisyphean project all over again with yet another soon-to-disappear face.

just that, and only seemingly alive.

The challenge in these societies is to find a way of reclaiming the dead and honoring their presence in a manner that nonetheless still

allows room for, indeed creates room for, the living. It is a challenge that, time and again, artists in Latin America have been appearing to meet and master. ★

“The Disappeared” will be on view at the Museo del Barrio in New York City from February 22 through June 17, 2007. A catalog, from which this material is drawn, is available.