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Silhouettes of the Disappeared: Memory, Justice and Human Rights in Post-Authoritarian Argentina

Abstract

A review of:

El Siluetazo. Compiled and edited by Ana Longoni and Gustavo Bruzzone. Buenos Aires: Adriana Hidalgo Editora, 2008. 514 pp.

Keywords

Argentina, Artistic practices, Disappeared, Memory, Political participation, Social movements

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Silhouettes of the Disappeared: Memory, Justice and Human Rights in Post-Authoritarian Argentina*

By Vincent Druliolle

El Siluetazo. Compiled and edited by Ana Longoni and Gustavo Bruzzone. Buenos Aires: Adriana Hidalgo Editora, 2008. 514 pp.

Soon after taking office in 2003, Argentine President Néstor Kirchner announced that the Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada (Navy School of Mechanics, or ESMA) in Buenos Aires, one of the most infamous torture centers of the last military dictatorship, the so-called “Proceso de Reorganización Nacional” (National Reorganization Process, 1976-1983), would be transformed into a museum of memory. On the occasion of the twenty-eighth anniversary of the military takeover, March 24, 2004, President Kirchner led a highly symbolic public event during which he and a range of social actors entered the premises of the ESMA where thousands of Argentines were taken clandestinely under the dictatorship and most of whom have since then been missing, thereby marking the re-appropriation of the past by the state and Argentine society. He was accompanied by the Commander of the Army, the representatives of the city of Buenos Aires, major human rights organizations, and associations of the relatives of the victims of the repression. In his speech, President Kirchner apologized to Argentine society for the failure to pursue justice and for preserving the memory of the last dictatorship. After signing the documents devolving ESMA to the city of Buenos Aires, the event culminated in the removal of the portrait of General Jorge Rafael Videla, the architect of the military takeover and first leader of the Junta, and of Reynaldo Bignone, its last leader, from the walls of the *Colegio Militar* by the President. Some days before this event, which may already be called a defining moment in Argentine history, human-sized silhouetted representations of the disappeared had been placed on the bars of the entrance of ESMA by the relatives of the disappeared, human rights organizations, and some artists as well as invited guests. The silhouettes have remained there since then. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the disappeared had returned to Argentine society, no longer as invisible traces haunting daily life, but as acknowledged absences. They have found a place and a role as the guardians of memory and as a source of the ethical commitment to the defense of human rights in post-authoritarian Argentina.

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It is not surprising that the disappeared returned to ESMA through this artistic medium. Such human-sized silhouettes have been used by the human rights movement and the organizations of the relatives of the disappeared since the last days of the authoritarian period, when they invaded the streets of Buenos Aires, an important event known as the *Siluetazo*. Nevertheless, most references to the *Siluetazo* in the academic literature are very brief (Chaffee 1993: 111-2; Taylor 1997: 195-200), and the exhibit receives scant attention in an edited volume on art and politics in new democracies, that includes various chapters on Argentina (Bilbija et al. 2005). *El Siluetazo* (hereafter referred to as *ES* in the citations), compiled and edited by Ana Longoni and Gustavo Bruzzone, was published in Argentina in 2008 is an exhaustive and particularly stimulating study of this unique artistic practice which offers an original perspective on the history of the struggle for memory, justice and human rights in Argentina.

Most of the documents, press articles, pictures, testimonies and papers compiled in the book were reprinted or published over the last decade in *Ramona*, an Argentine review of visual arts. The strength of the book comes from the wealth and importance of the documents gathered, but also from the axis around which the discussion is organized. The book is divided into three main sections: (I) “Documents and Testimonies”; (II) “Readings of the *Siluetazo*”; and (III) “The Legacy of the *Siluetazo*.” This review essay follows the structure of the volume. It discusses each of these themes before drawing out wider implications. The first section introduces the main ideas, actors and implementation of the *Siluetazo* as well as its larger set of meanings. The following two sections concentrate on the analyses of the *Siluetazo*, more precisely the ways in which it has been interpreted and subsequently re-appropriated. The conclusion endeavors to suggest some lessons for the diffusion and promotion of human rights.



Anonymous silhouettes on the bars of the entrance of ESMA. Photo by the author.

The Origins of the *Siluetazo*: Outlining Memory

The first part of the book compiles a series of documents, testimonies and pictures about the origins of the *Siluetazo*, more precisely its creators and the actors involved in its implementation. Some date back to its birth in 1983 and include press articles about the event, while others are retrospective accounts—the more recent documents are from 2003 and 2005. While there are numerous repetitions, the editors claim that due to the number of texts and differences of interpretation, the book is “polyphonic,” a *collage* in progress, multiple and conflictual like memory itself (Longoni and Bruzzone in *ES*: 8-12). However, a few more recent testimonies are either redundant or do not add anything new to the original documents.

The *Siluetazo* began as a project of three Argentine visual artists, Rodolfo Aguerreberry, Julio Flores and Guillermo Kexel at the end of 1983 while Argentina was still formally under military dictatorship. The general idea that introduces the artists’ proposal is to organize the creation of 30,000 faceless human figures by a whole range of social actors in order to represent what has remained only an estimated scale of the repression under the last Argentine military dictatorship (73-81 and Flores in *ES*: 83-107). The original proposal (Aguerreberry, Flores and Kexel in *ES*: 63-6) sets out the objectives of the project: (1) the return of the disappeared; (2) to give the emerging movement of protest against the collapsing dictatorship a new form of expression and a way of lasting in time; (3) to create a “graphic design which might strike the state through its physical scale and formal development, and its unusual way of renewing media attention” (63); (4) to mobilize the population. The proposal further explains that each participant should have a duplicated image of herself, so that those absent should be present through them (64). Julio Flores explains that “to give the absent an image, we had at least to exhibit the body which isn’t there or the space occupied by this body or all the bodies. [...] The images had to be different but similar, because all had suffered the same experience but they were not an anonymous mass” (in *ES*: 91). Then the human-sized silhouetted images should be placed on walls, trees, or around monuments in order to create a “striking” visual impact. The proposal also deals with the technical and logistical issues involved. Kexel argues that they were aware that the implementation of the project, of which popular participation was an essential part, required the mobilization of a wide range of people and resources (in *ES*: 109). It was clear for the designers that they had to receive the support of the emerging human rights movement, and therefore they submitted their project to the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, the organization founded during the dictatorship by mothers of the disappeared to demand the truth about them, and has remained at the forefront of the struggle for memory, justice and human rights in Argentina.

The Madres quickly replied to the artists and invited them to implement their project in December 1983 during the third Marcha de la Resistencia (March of Resistance), an event that continues to take place annually during which the human rights movement, and a wide range of other social actors, demonstrates for the promotion and protection of human rights. What is interesting however is the modification that the Madres made in Aguerreberry, Flores and Kexel’s initial project: In addition to their refusal to associate the silhouettes with any partisan slogan or banner, two things in particular should be noted. First, the Madres rejected the suggestion that the duplicated images be put on the floor (64). As Julio Flores explains, this would have amounted to an acknowledgment of the death of the disappeared since the very act of drawing the outline of a body

on the floor is what the police do after murder (in ES: 96). This was unthinkable at the time for both personal and political reasons, and is still rejected by some organizations today, which has created divisions within the human rights movement.¹ Second, the Madres did not want the participants to write any name or date or put a picture on the silhouetted images. Each image had to represent all the disappeared, not single individuals (Kexel in ES: 110-1).

On the day of the Marcha de la Resistencia, people's participation in the project surpassed the artists' expectations. Thousands of people served as models to create thousands of silhouettes to represent disappeared. Because the silhouetted posters could be made out of very basic materials (newsprint, paper rolls, paint, paintbrushes, spray cans, paint rollers, pencils), the streets and squares of Buenos Aires were spontaneously transformed into a giant collective, open-air workshop. Interestingly, people ignored the Madres' instructions and wrote the name of their disappeared relatives on the silhouettes. Subsequently, the instruction would be abandoned altogether. According to Santiago García Navarro, such "disobedience" originated from the concern that endless repetition of these empty "image-traces" would seem hardly more meaningful than a statistic (in ES: 335-6). Writing names and dates was a way for the relatives to give the silhouettes flesh, thereby contributing to a form of mourning even though most relatives did not want to acknowledge the death of those who were disappeared. In Liprandi's words, the *Siluetazo* served as both "denunciation" and "reparation" (in ES: 376). Kexel also recounts that the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo—another organization created by a group of relatives (mainly grandmothers) of the disappeared and that specifically seeks to identify the children of the disappeared born in captivity and "adopted" by members of the dictatorship—pointed out that there were no silhouettes of pregnant women and babies (in ES: 111). Thus, Aguerreberry described how he used a pillow in order to draw the silhouettes of a pregnant woman, while Kexel's three-year-old daughter served as a model for the silhouettes of children. Babies were drawn free hand.

As people left the Marcha de la Resistencia, the posters were pasted up on the walls of the city. When routine life resumed the following day, Longoni and Bruzzone explain, the "the press reported that pedestrians expressed their uneasiness and surprise at feeling stared at and interpellated by these faceless figures," a visual impact which they call the "mute cry" of the silhouettes (in ES: 30). The silhouettes seemed to pull down the "wall of silence" and undermine the "we didn't know" repeated by society as a consequence of the terror instilled by the disappearances (31). The absence represented by the silhouettes had become a "gaze" directed at contemporary society (Fernández in ES: 406). In the following days, the police were given the order by the authorities to prevent people from pasting up such silhouettes on the walls. The emblematic picture on the *Siluetazo*, the lower picture on the front cover of the book, shows how this ironically strengthened, or even "authenticated," the meaning of these images: by protecting the walls on which they were pasted, the police seemed to, or were forced to, acknowledge they had made the "subversives" disappear but were still protecting their crimes and keeping a secret that was no longer hidden.

For Buntinx (in ES: 261) and other commentators (e.g., Amigo in ES: 222), the *Siluetazo* was not the artistic representation of the demand "*aparición con vida*" which is often translated as "bring them [the disappeared] back alive," but rather its very fulfillment. The anonymous silhouettes were a way

¹ Soon after the return of democracy, the Madres split over the issues of whether to accept symbolic and financial measures of reparation and whether they should search for and exhume the bodies of the disappeared (Bosco 2004).

of making present that which is absent, which for Ricoeur (2000) is the impossible task of memory. Thus, the outlines of the silhouettes as they were drawn by Argentineans were also the outlines of the struggle for memory, a political struggle which would be equated with the demand for truth and justice.

In line with what was intended, the *Siluetazo* turned out to have a much greater impact than a traditional demonstration or protest march. The very term is the word *silueta* with the Spanish suffix “-azo” which conveys the augmentation and intensity of the object to which the suffix is attached. García Navarro (in *ES*: 339) adds that in Argentina the suffix is traditionally used for revolutionary moments and major episodes of social protest—for example, “*El Cordobazo*” or, more recently, “*el cacerolazo*.”² Nevertheless, García Navarro uses a different suffix and refers to the “*Siluetada*” in order to capture an aspect specific to this event and practice:³

an excess, something which had not been considered and that it was impossible to reduce to the mere expression of a demand. As an expressive system, [the Siluetazo] does not explain, represent, symbolize, or synthesize anything but is, at the same time, emerging out of, and co-producer of a new time, of a new situation. (337)

In sum, the silhouettes have been regularly re-appropriated, either as such or as a source of inspiration, sometimes by other actors and for other struggles. But before turning to this issue, and in order to better understand these re-appropriations in the first place, one has to focus on the meanings given to the *Siluetazo* and its “excess” by the actors and participants themselves as well as various commentators.

Making Sense of the Power of the *Siluetazo*

The second part of the book is devoted to various “readings” and interpretations of the *Siluetazo* that complement those in the first part. One central concern of the volume is the extent to which the *Siluetazo* can, or should be seen as art. Liprandi goes as far as to argue that this is one of the central questions it raises, and he endeavors to locate the *Siluetazo* in the history of art in general and in the Latin American context in particular (in *ES*: 365-400). Clearly, from the beginning the focus was on the political intervention, and Aguerreberry, Flores and Kexel were primarily interested in the process of silhouette-making and the visual impact. Nevertheless, after a brief overview of the debate, Longoni and Bruzzone conclude that the *Siluetazo* questions art’s modern condition as separate from daily life and incapable of exercising any transforming effect on our existence (in *ES*:

² “*El Cordobazo*” was a general strike and popular uprising that took place in Córdoba in May 1969 during the military dictatorship of General Juan Carlos Onganía. “*El cacerolazo*” is a form of popular protest which consists in people making noise by banging pans (“*cacerola*” in Spanish) and other utensils. It is historically associated with the spontaneous middle-class protest against the government’s policies during the financial crisis that hit Argentina in 2001, after which it became an organized phenomenon. It has since then been re-appropriated by a range of actors for a variety of socio-economic struggles. In this case, the suffix “-azo” also denotes the act of hitting or striking, or the fusion of the literal and figurative meanings.

³ The relevance of the distinction made by García Navarro and reflected in the different suffixes is discussed by Longoni and Bruzzone (in *ES*: 15) who claim that it is primarily a matter of emphasis, or that both neologisms are not opposed interpretations of the event and practice.

43). This essay will instead concentrate on the other main question which runs through these contributions, namely how to make sense of the power of the *Siluetazo* and of the influence it has had.

It has been emphasized that the success of the *Siluetazo* is largely explained by the massive participation of the population that took charge of its production. Flores argues that the simplicity of the techniques and material necessary for the creation of the silhouettes was chosen to mobilize the people who usually do not take part in demonstrations or get involved in politics (in ES: 101). Moreover, a dossier on the *Siluetazo* edited by Laura Mango and Jorge Warley published in the Argentine review *La Bizca* in 1985 and reproduced in El Siluetazo (149-86), emphasizes that the aesthetic language of the silhouettes was so powerful because it was “elementary” and thus associated with the “concrete demands of daily life” (185). Buntinx refers to an “effective socialization of the means of artistic production” through which the people appropriated both the creative practice and the struggle for justice (in ES: 278).

A Spanish expression is used by Aguerreberry, Flores and Kexel to explain this dimension of participation, namely “*poner el cuerpo*” (Longoni and Bruzzone in ES: 32). Literally it means “laying one’s body,” while its usual, figurative sense, indicates an active commitment or the idea of standing up. In other words, the idea of “*poner el cuerpo*” is fundamental to make sense of the dimension of identification. The silhouettes are “an empty space that had to be filled in” (Mango and Warley in ES: 149), and Buntinx (in ES: 260) argues that insofar as one has to use one’s body to represent the disappeared, the very practice of drawing the silhouettes is a way for the living to identify with the disappeared, and the dead, and fill in the void of their absence with life. Yet this also means facing up to one’s own image (Fernández in ES: 406). Some silhouette-shaped mirrors in front of the ESMA seek to create this experience of one’s split subjectivity and identification. Summarizing this idea of “*poner el cuerpo*” as a “relation of substitution/restitution,” Santiago García Navarro claims



that one had to turn one's body into a technology of memory and producer of justice (in ES: 351).

As cultural critic Roberto Amigo argues in one of the most interesting contributions in the book (in ES: 203-52), this immense open-air workshop “generated a space of freedom [which] outlined what democracy should foster” (219) and be like. The practice was political not only in the fact that it was a denunciation of the dictatorship and its crimes, but also because it produced “a solidarity which reconstructs the bonds between contemporary activists and the previous generation” that the dictatorship annihilated, as well as between a range of social actors in the new democracy (213). Importantly, Carlos López Iglesias underlines that the collective democratic subject instituted itself through this denunciation of the crimes of dictatorship (in ES: 316). Flores argues that one of the prior questions was indeed the question of the subject that is claimed to demand memory and justice, or of the political actor that should be understood to have suffered the repression of the dictatorship and to remember in the present (in ES: 91). For the artists, the “we” should not be limited to the relatives of the disappeared but include society as a whole.

Some of these ideas are echoed by Buntinx (in ES: 253-84) in another major analysis inspired by Walter Benjamin. Noting the ambiguous “forensic” connotations of drawing the outlines of dead bodies on the floor inherent to the *Siluetazo*, Buntinx argues that it is a “politico-messianic experience in which resurrection and insurrection are intertwined” (259-60). He foregrounds the power of the *Siluetazo* not so much in the pictures themselves as in the activities which institutes it and gives it its “aura”. For Buntinx, these activities reverse the metaphor the silhouettes stand for: “the void is filled through the life-infused action of those who (d)enounce as the same time as they fill it in” (261). This institutes a new form of power, “ephemeral but vivifying” (278). It is interesting to note that Aguerreberry, Flores and Kexel (in ES: 78; Flores in ES: 93, 105) have always refused to exhibit the silhouettes in a museum or art gallery, for they would lose their original meaning and turn them, their “aura” and memory itself into inanimate objects. The place of the silhouettes is thus in the streets of Buenos Aires where they were able to spread and leave their marks. In turn, this created a powerful visual impact, as Aguerreberry, Flores and Kexel had hoped. Amigo refers to a politically-driven “aesthetic transformation of reality” (in ES: 212-3) and of “the impact of the image through the transformation of public space” (220). From a distance, the sheer number of identical silhouettes created a “horizon” but, upon approach, one is able to read the personal details added by people and understand the repression under the dictatorship as a series of concrete histories as one passed by through this scenographic space (221). Summarizing some of these points in explicitly Marxist terms, Bedoya claims that the *Siluetazo*:

unites artistic praxis with the political praxis of the masses; shares the means of artistic production with the people, and pulls it out of the passivity to which the spectator is condemned, transforming it into a collective producer of art; [...] it has a profound impact on public opinion whose consciousness is raised. (in ES: 158)

The essays in El Siluetazo offer stimulating analyses of the event, which at the same challenge the criteria generally used to assess and explain the appeal and success of forms of protest and social movements, criteria that ignore the meaning it has for the participants—the focus in the academic literature being on measurable outcomes at the level of the state. The book also suggests that one important aspect of the power and success of the *Siluetazo* has to do with the ways in which it has inspired subsequent struggles. I now turn to these re-appropriations in post-authoritarian Argentina to which the final part of the book is devoted.

The Re-Appropriations of the Silhouettes

The third general issue discussed in the book is the subsequent uses of the silhouettes, and the source of inspiration the *Siluetazo* has been for a range of social actors in Argentina. This issue is the most ambitious and stimulating, and constitutes nothing less than a new and insightful account of the history of Argentina since the transition to democracy.

Though the third and final parts are directly devoted to this issue, most of the texts throughout the book also refer to “the legacy” of the *Siluetazo*. They explain that after the third *Marcha de la Resistencia*, the silhouettes blossomed in Buenos Aires and across Argentina, while they also became graphic icons in the press. The practice itself was reinvented as it has been used again in different contexts and in other demonstrations. The individualization of the silhouettes has already been mentioned. In addition, because the police removed them from the walls, they were increasingly painted on the floor. After the first *Siluetazo*, the silhouettes were usually made prior to the demonstrations out of a wider range of materials and were not used on such a large scale. For some marches, the silhouettes were carried by the participants. Marching alongside the disappeared, they all stood up for memory and justice. As the introduction about the ESMA shows, they have remained powerful symbols to date in a country in which the demand for memory and justice are only starting to be fulfilled.

What is more interesting, however, is how the *Siluetazo* proved to be an inexhaustible source of inspiration for the organizations of the relatives of the disappeared and the nascent human rights movement. Several texts refer to other events and demonstrations that sought to combine the political and aesthetic dimensions as successfully as the *Siluetazo* had—see the short chronology (in *ES*: 151-2) and the articles by Amigo (in *ES*: 225-39), López Iglesias (in *ES*: 326-31) and Schindel (in *ES*: 411-25). Some of these events include the international campaign “*Dele una mano a los desaparecidos*” (“join hands with the disappeared”) in 1984-5, which was also inspired by the actions of the Asociación Internacional de Defensa de los Artistas Víctimas de la Desaparición en el Mundo (Association for the Defense of the Artists Victims of Repression around the World, AIDA). The outlines of the hands of the participants in the demonstration were drawn on sheets of paper and were then joined together along a string. On that day, ninety thousand hands formed a one-mile long chain of solidarity uniting the Plaza de Mayo and the Congress. It is estimated that around one million hands were made and joined in eighty-six countries, thereby affirming the willingness and necessity to participate in the struggle for memory and justice (in Mango and Warley in *ES*: 170-5). The “*Marcha de las máscaras blancas*” (“march of the white masks”) in 1985 was also influenced by the *Siluetazo*. The participants wore anonymous white masks to represent the disappeared and to protest against silence and impunity. In both cases, as with the *Siluetazo*, anonymous body parts served as the bond with the disappeared, the way of bringing them back to life and demanding justice, while their sheer quantity reflected not only the scale of disappearance, but also its denunciation and the solidarities that were reconstructed (Longoni and Bruzzone in *ES*: 51; Schindel in *ES*: 414). Finally, the *Siluetazo* also inspired the forth *Marcha de la Resistencia* in 1984, whose main demand was the rejection of amnesty (Bedoya in Mango and Warley in *ES*: 166-9). On this occasion, new posters were produced. Two pictures were side by side, separated by the word “*genocidas*” (those guilty of genocide). One was a picture of Videla whose face was deleted. The other picture represented a side-

view of a person with an aggressive face and who, the cap suggests, could be a member of either the police or the armed forces, in short a pawn in the repressive apparatus. The poster thus places on an equal footing all the actors of the “dirty war.” This time anonymity did not represent disappearance but the anonymity of ordinary people turned executioners and accomplices, anticipating what would soon be infamously known as “due obedience.” Before and during the march, thousands of posters were pasted on the walls of Buenos Aires and people drew the rough sketches of the faces of some “*genocidas*” and added their name at the bottom, involving themselves in the demand for justice.

It is nevertheless often said that the influence of the *Siluetazo* is most visible in a new form of protest developed in the mid-1990s by a new organization that joined the human rights movement in Argentina. In 1995, former navy officer Adolfo Scilingo acknowledged that the military drugged prisoners and dumped them into the Río de la Plata from helicopters after they had been tortured (Verbitsky 2005). This confession by one of the central actors triggered more revelations, controversies, and reactions. At the same time, the generation of the children of the disappeared was reaching adulthood. In the heated context generated by Scilingo’s confession, they engaged in the struggle against impunity and the demand for justice, and contributed to rejuvenating it. In particular, some children of the disappeared created, in 1996, the organization H.I.J.O.S.—*Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio*, Children for Identity and Justice and against Forgetting and Silence—the acronym means “children.” H.I.J.O.S. renewed not so much the demand for justice as its form and the practices through which it is expressed, namely the *escrache*, to which it is often reduced (Kaiser 2002). To put it briefly, this form of protest consists in tracking down the members of the last military dictatorship who have been protected by amnesty laws and have never been judged in order to denounce their presence in the routines of everyday life. Then H.I.J.O.S. organizes a carnivalesque demonstration, the *escrache*, which culminates in the marking of the *genocida*’s home with symbolic blood stains. By inviting the neighborhood and the wider population to participate in this practice of naming and shaming, the idea is to involve society in the implementation of the punishment that the state failed to pronounce. H.I.J.O.S. also gives great importance to the signalization of the presence of a “*genocida*.” They have worked with a group of artists called Grupo de Arte Callejero (“Street Art Group”). They have used some symbols of daily life and used these codes to highlight what it conceals. For example, they have designed traffic signs inspired by the traditional warning iconography to signal that a murderer lives in the neighborhood. In this way, both the reality of impunity and the demand for justice are reinserted through conventional codes and symbols in the routine of daily life.⁴ As several contributors note (Schindel in *ES*: 416-8; Meirás in *ES*: 460-1), the emphasis on the participation of the population and on visual aspects makes the *escrache* a direct heir to the *Siluetazo*.

This is why José Luis Meirás (in *ES*: 455-77) refers to “*transf(b)erencias*,” a term which combines the Spanish words for transfer of property or capital, and heritage or heredity, thereby echoing Taylor (2003: 161-89) who refers to the “DNA of performance.” But the re-appropriations of the silhouettes were not limited to the relatives of the disappeared. Already early in the 1980s the silhouettes “invaded” artistic works, but above all a whole range of demonstrations and forms of social protest (Flores in *ES*: 104). The silhouettes were, in particular, re-appropriated in the early

⁴ A sample of the Grupo de Arte Callejero’s work can be seen at: <http://gacgrupo.ar.tripod.com/>

1990s against the neo-liberal macroeconomic policies of President Carlos Menem (1989-1999). For the twelfth Marcha de la Resistencia in 1992, there was a project to use them as representations of the groups of individuals most affected by these policies (women, students, workers, and pensioners, among others.) though the rain on that day prevented its implementation. The point is that, as Amigo asserts, over time “the silhouettes [detached] themselves from the representation of the genocide to identify contemporary struggles against an economic model, promoting the disappeared as a model of and for political activism” (in ES: 238). The silhouettes, he goes on, are “our symbolic strategic reserves against the consolidation of a democracy based on impunity and social inequality” (239).

Beyond the silhouettes themselves, Meirás (in ES: 462-3) notes that a whole range of social movements used forms whose political and aesthetic characteristics were explicitly indebted to the *Siluetazo*; for example, during strikes or by movements against police crime, against the growing number of kidnappings, for better labor conditions, or to demand justice after the fire of the nightclub República Cromañón that killed 194 people on New Year’s Eve in 2004. The Grupo de Arte Callejero (in ES: 427-33) explicitly acknowledges this debt for some of its own practices, and so do several groups such as Argentina Arde!⁵ which have been active since the financial crisis of 2001 (in ES: Meirás: 463-78). Bruzzone and Longoni conclude their introduction to the book with the following words:

the silhouettes ensure as a common, recognizable resource, as a shared code to denounce the existence of the 30,000 disappeared, but also as a trace which is resignified through the denunciation of the new victims of impunity, the persistence of repression, the new forms of disappearance throughout the last three decades. (in ES: 58)

Schindel (in ES: 422-3) argues that the attempt to recreate a *Siluetazo* in front of the ESMA at the end of 2004, as discussed in the introduction of this essay, somewhat failed owing to its lack of spontaneity, as if its reproduction further exhausted a force linked to the unique and effervescent context of its emergence. However, it may be argued that the force and legacy of the *Siluetazo* should be gauged by the range of actors and causes that re-appropriate its visual language and find a form of expression through it, or by the range of demands that the silhouettes have metaphorized.

By underlining the explicit re-appropriations and continuities between the *Siluetazo* and a range of subsequent forms and practices of protest, El Siluetazo offers an insightful history of the human rights movement and its political agenda in Argentina that complements the historical and social scientific studies on the topic. It is in this sense that Longoni and Bruzzone’s book is a major contribution to the existing literature on post-authoritarian Argentina. But the central role of the *Siluetazo* in these developments also suggests broader human rights implications.

Conclusion: The Diffusion and Promotion of Human Rights

The best summary of the importance of the *Siluetazo* and its legacy is probably Schindel’s. She contends that:

⁵ See the organization’s website at: <http://www.argentinaarde.org.ar/>.

actions based on interaction and participation, ways of inscribing memory in the city that do not seek to freeze it but instead provoke it in daily life, are maybe the Argentine way to answer the contemporary question about the form of giving expression to painful memories in the skin of the city. (in ES: 422)

Making sense of the *Siluetazo* as performance and in line with several texts in the book, the general point is that memory is a set of practices; memory is performed, rather than deposited in various objects or a lowest-common denominator of knowledge in the cognitive sense of the term. In other words, memory is the practice itself while, as with the much-discussed “counter-monuments” (Young 2000: 90-151), individuals themselves are the thinking and acting memorials.

In addition to enriching our understanding of the individual and political dimensions of memory and remembering, the *Siluetazo* suggests broader human rights implications concerning their transnational diffusion and promotion. Longoni and Bruzzone explain that Aguerreberry, Flores and Kexel drew their inspiration from the work of a Polish artist, Jerzy Skapski, which was reproduced in the October 1978 issue of *El Correo de la Unesco* (in ES: 27). The work is a poster with twenty-four rows of minute silhouettes of women, men and children. The caption explains that they represent the 2,370 people that died in Auschwitz every day and that insofar as it operated during 1,688 days, as many copies of the poster were printed in order to represent the four million people who died in Auschwitz. What Aguerreberry, Flores and Kexel learned from this work is the idea of representing visually and in space the overwhelming scale of the repression. Another influence is the actions of the Asociación Internacional de Defensa de los Artistas Víctimas de la Desaparición en el Mundo (AIDA) in Europe which were reported back to Argentina by the exile community (Amigo in ES: 208-9). In 1981, AIDA organized a march in Paris in support of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo. For this occasion, they made a banner on which were painted three black busts with a faceless white figure. The following year in Switzerland, the participants in a silent march were dressed in black and wore white faceless masks and posters with the personal details of the disappeared around their neck (subsequently, similar marches were organized in Argentina, including the “*Marcha de las máscaras blancas*” discussed earlier). In addition, a banner represented small silhouettes standing for the disappeared. Amigo argues that these activities were themselves clearly indebted to the pacifist and anti-nuclear movement (in ES: 209).

This shows the transnational and artistic origins of the campaign for human rights in Argentina. It is important to stress it. The voluminous literature on transnationalism and human rights focuses on norms, and it may be valuable to analyze how such artistic work may be intertwined with the promotion and diffusion of human rights norms. This is suggested by the inspirational example of the Polish artist and his work on the Holocaust which has become a global trope for human rights. As Huysen argues, in Argentina and elsewhere, “Holocaust discourse functions like an international prism that helps focus the local discourse about the *desaparecidos* in both its legal and commemorative aspects” (2003: 98). Moreover, these same transnational and artistic factors have been crucial for the vitality of the struggle for memory and human rights in Argentina and the country’s high profile in this regard. The *Siluetazo* inspired the campaign “*Dele una mano a los desaparecidos*” discussed earlier which organized across more than eighty countries. It also sparked the imagination beyond Argentina in Latin America where the silhouettes have often been used to denounce human rights violations (López Iglesias in ES: 328).

Finally, the *Siluetazo* and its history since the end of the last Argentine military dictatorship show that the human rights literature and, perhaps, the human rights community itself should acknowledge the decisive role of art and performance in the advancement of human rights. The lesson of the *Siluetazo* may be seen in the context of Stanley Cohen's (1995) important claim about the work of human rights organizations more than a decade ago, namely that "There is a paradox in the heart of the human rights movement: we believe that if people "only knew" what was happening they would do something, but we have learnt that just letting them know is not enough" (iv). Art and performance are, at their core, about freedom and unbridled expression. Moreover, they are potent vehicles for communication, for the emotional mobilization of normative values, for transporting people to, and creating, better worlds. They may, the *Siluetazo* suggests, capture for the population the horror of violations of human rights, promote their defense and the willingness to take charge of the defense of human rights, better than any set of statistics, legal report or any other official publication traditionally produced by the human rights community.

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