

## ***El Siluetazo* (The Silhouette): On the Border between Art and Politics**

ANA LONGONI



The realisation of silhouettes is the most memorable of the artistic-political practices that lent a potent visuality to the public space of Buenos Aires and many other cities of the country on the demands of the human rights movements in the early 1980s. This consists of a simple design in the form of the outline of a man-sized body on paper, later pasted on the city walls as a way of representing the “presence of an absence” of the thousands of prisoners who disappeared during the last military dictatorship.

Between 1976 and 1983, state terrorism imposed in Argentina the figure of the *desaparecido* (disappeared) as its most repressive and ominous systematic modality, a systematic technology of the instituted power with its institutional correlative – the concentration and extermination camps. About 340 camps in the entire country were reported

(a majority of them functioning clandestinely in the centre of the cities in police or army buildings), which 20-30,000 illegally detained people passed through, and who for the most part ended up being killed without any trace. "Disappearance is not a euphemism but a political allusion: a person who at a specific moment [that of his kidnapping in the street, in his own house or at his workplace] disappears, fades away in such a way that there remains not a trace of his life nor of his death. There is no body of the victim nor of the crime"<sup>1</sup>.

The high point and at the same time the decisive turnabout of a long history of the fragility of democratic institutionality, weakened by continuous eruptions of military power, the repressive strategy of the last dictatorship managed to take apart and defeat the revolutionary political projects, based on the annihilation of a generation of opponents (not only militants of various groups that led armed struggle but also thousands of worker representatives, student activists, their families and friends). But the effectiveness of their action resulted in the dispersion of what in her clear analysis Pilar Calveiro (herself a survivor of the concentration camp) calls the "concentrationist and disappearist" power. The imprecise limits of the camps disseminated terror in society and paralysed any understanding of what had occurred.

The concentration camp, by its physical proximity, by the fact of being in the midst of society 'from the other side of the wall', can only exist in the midst of a society that chooses not to see, through its own impotence: a 'disappeared' society, as stunned as the kidnapped themselves.<sup>2</sup>

The 'outside' of the concentration camp is a concentrationary city that runs a permanent danger of turning into a concentration camp in the strictest sense of the word: *all* citizens are potential missing people, and like them, invite erasure.

"Bodies without matter" is what Calveiro calls the missing people who were kidnapped, tortured and killed in the concentration camps.<sup>3</sup> The missing is neither alive nor dead and his existence is denied by the state that causes the disappearance. "It is a body – and not a corpse that is no longer a body – reduced to a biological life, medium of a neutralised subject (not singularised, not ethical, not political)"<sup>4</sup>.

If "the terror [...] disbanded barbarically the representations that mediate between life and death"<sup>5</sup>, the silhouettes articulate a visual mechanism that returns the representation to the unrepresentable, the hopeless, the concealed, the missing.

Eduardo Grüner thinks of the silhouettes as "attempts at representing the missing: that is to say not just the 'absent' – given that by definition the *entire* representation is of an absent object – but that of the intentionally *absented*, those who were made to disappear through some form of material or symbolic violence; in our case, the representation of *bodies* missing due to a systematic polity or a conscious strategy"<sup>6</sup>. The logic in play is, he concludes, that of the *restitution* of the image as a *substitution* of an absented body.

With the production of the silhouettes, Santiago García Navarro postulates, the self is restored to the body – although it may be another self, because the project actually dealt

with a self that was much broader, more cohesioned and multiple at the same time: that of the multitude congregated for the Third Resistance March called for by the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, an organisation of the mothers of the missing persons.

Although certain previous antecedents do exist, the start of this practice of silhouettes can be traced to 21 September 1983, Students' Day, yet still within the times of dictatorship during which – due to the importance and enormity that the practice gained – it is known as *Siluetazo* (Silhouette). The procedure was an initiative of three visual artists (Rodolfo Aguereberry, Julio Flores and Guillermo Kexel) and its realisation received the support of the Mothers, the Grandmothers (who continue to look for hundreds of appropriated grandchildren, many of whom were born in captivity), other human rights organisations and political militants. And from thereon the making of the silhouettes became a forceful 'public' visual resource whose use expanded spontaneously.

The *Siluetazo* signals one of those exceptional moments in history in which an artistic initiative coincides with a demand of the social movements, and gains form by the impulse of the masses. It involved the participation, in an improvised and immense open-air workshop that lasted well past midnight, of hundreds of demonstrators who painted and *put their bodies* for the sketching of the silhouettes and later pasted these on walls, monuments and trees, despite the threat of police action.

In the middle of a hostile and repressive city, a (temporary) space was liberated due to a collective creation that can be thought of as a redefinition of artistic and political practice.

In this essay I will examine an entire account of the *Siluetazo* that is made up of a mosaic of interpretations, many times in conflict with the 'artistic' condition of this practice and the powers attributed to this image in the construction of the collective memory of genocide in Argentina.

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In the beginning of 1982 a private foundation (Esso Foundation) convenes an Exhibition of Objects and Experiences that is later suspended due to the Falklands War, the conflict between Argentina and Great Britain for the control of two islands in the South Atlantic. The three artists mentioned earlier – who were involved in the workshop – decide to participate in this with a work that alludes to the disappearance of people from their quantitative dimensions, the physical space that would be occupied by all those bodies violently snatched from our midst. They say, "The original intention was to produce a collective work of large dimensions [...] The first objective was to generate visualisation (the dimensioning) of the physical space that 30,000 detained-missing persons would occupy".

The trigger for this idea was a work by the Polish artist Jerzy Skapski, reproduced in the UNESCO magazine *The Post* in October 1978. It was a poster of 24 four rows of tiny silhouettes of women, men and children, followed by a text: "In Auschwitz everyday 2370 people died, the exact number that is reproduced here. The Auschwitz concentration camp lasted 1688 days and that is the exact number of prints taken of this poster. In all, about a quarter of a million human beings perished in the camp".

Thirty thousand missing: in this range the quantities no longer speak of people, of concrete lives. To visualise the quantity – overwhelming – of victims and to represent them one by one: that is Skapski's method the Argentine artists take up, to be made man-sized. They project variants of this initial idea: to print silhouettes on a large cloth makes it impossible for the work to be incorporated in the exhibition hall, and it is therefore displayed in its surroundings, enveloping them; or better still, to make a paper labyrinth on whose internal walls the 30,000 figures could be pasted.

They realised that to make these numbers of silhouettes required about 20 groups to work and about 300 helpers who would make about 100 silhouettes each. What made the group accept its non-viability was the dimension (it would take up about 60,000 square metres), the impossibility of taking charge of such a mammoth task and the cost of producing and putting it up.

On the suggestion of an old militant, they decided to approach the Mothers with their idea, three days before the march that had for the last three years been capturing the Plaza for 24 hours. They decided that it would be the demonstrators who would concretise the idea. This transition is crucial to the process I am talking about. They pass from a proposal that although political – and also dangerous in the time of dictatorship – would restrict its circulation and its impact, to the artistic ambit to generate a social event within ever increasing anti-dictatorial mobilisation. The artists' initial proposal does not speak of "art" but of "creating a graphic act that would strike out by its physical magnitude and the rarity



of its achievements and would renew the attention of the press". To leave the silhouettes pasted on the walls once the mobilisation had dispersed would give them a public presence "for as long as it takes for the dictatorship to make them disappear once again".

The initial idea was accepted and reformulated by the Mothers, and put into effect by the gathering that swiftly adapted the process and transformed it into an act. "In the beginning the project had thought of personalising each silhouette with details of clothing, physical characteristics, sex and age by making use of the techniques of collage, colour and portraits"<sup>7</sup>. It was planned that a silhouette each of every missing person would be made. The Mothers pointed out the difficulties, as the available lists of the victims of repression were incomplete (they continue to be so); and thus the group decided that all the silhouettes would be identical and without any inscriptions.

The artists took with them to the Plaza "innumerable rolls of wood paper, all kinds of paints and aerosols, paint brushes and rollers" and some 1500 prepared silhouettes. They also took stencils to generate a uniform image. And from there, the Plaza turned into an improvised and gigantic workshop for the production of silhouettes till past midnight. It was the Grandmothers who pointed out that children and pregnant women should also be represented. Kexel tied a pillow to his stomach and his body profile was sketched for the silhouette. His daughter served as a model for the silhouette of a child. Babies were drawn freehand.

The process of collective production changed whatever intention there was of uniformity. Aguerreberry remembered the spontaneous and massive participation of the demonstrators that very soon made the artists "dispensable". One of them recalls, "I think within half an hour of reaching there we could have left the Plaza because we were not needed for anything"<sup>8</sup>. Despite their decision that the silhouettes would not have any identification marks, the people spontaneously wrote the names of their 'missing' and the date on which they had disappeared, or covered them with slogans. Concrete demands came up to differentiate or individualise, to give a precise identity, personal features (noses, mouths, eyes), or a condition. That amongst the multitude of silhouettes, this is my father's silhouette, my mother's, or my child's, or that of my missing friend. A child comes up to somebody sketching a silhouette and says, "Draw my papa, please". "And what does your papa look like?" He is given a beard, moustache.<sup>9</sup> "Figures of couples, of mothers and children, a group of factory workers are drawn [...] the many 'sketchers' go on representing what is asked of them in a process of collective construction"<sup>10</sup>.

A demonstrator overawed by what is being created returns to the march with red paper hearts that he pastes onto the silhouettes around the Plaza.

Apart from the stencils the demonstrators used their own bodies as models. "As the paper rolls were laid out on the grass or the pavements, some youngsters lay down on the paper and the others drew their body shape with pencils, that were then painted"<sup>11</sup>. In this way the silhouette changes into a mark of the absent body, he who lent his body for sketching the outline and – by transfer – the body of a missing person, thereby reconstructing the "broken lines of solidarity in an act symbolic of a strong emotivity"<sup>12</sup>. The

action of 'putting' the body carries with it an ambiguity: to occupy the space of an absentee is to accept that anyone of those present could have been in the place of the disappeared and had the same sinister run of bad luck. At the same time it means to give it a life, return its corporeal nature – and a life – even though ephemeral. The body of the demonstrator in place of the missing person as a live support in the making of the silhouette helps in accepting it as a “a print that breathes”<sup>13</sup>. In every silhouette a missing person came alive, testifies Nora Cortiñas, a Mother.

The first *Siluetazo* implied *appropriation*<sup>14</sup> or *occupation* of the centric – and central in the scheme for political and economic power, symbolic of the city or the country – Plaza de Mayo and its surroundings.<sup>15</sup> Amigo evaluates this event in terms of the “capture of the Plaza”, not only politically but also an “aesthetic capture”<sup>16</sup>. An offensive in the appropriation of the urban space.

In the following months two new *Siluetazos* take place in Obelisco, another crucial point in the city, linked not as much to political power as to youth mobilisation in the festive months of the beginning of democracy.

The *Siluetazo* produced a notable impact not only on those involved in its production but also because of the effect caused by its silent screams from the walls of the centric buildings the following morning. The press pointed out that pedestrians were discomforted or amazed by the look given to them by these faceless figures. One journalist wrote that the silhouettes “seemed to point from the walls at those responsible for their disappearance and silently demand justice. Through a visual play, for the first time family, friends, people who were reacting and those who were missing seemed to be together”<sup>17</sup>.

The silhouettes were demonstrating what public opinion ignored or chose to ignore, breaking the pact of silence put into force in society during the dictatorship regarding the effects of repression and its source; and that can be summarised in a self-justifying commonsense expression: “We did not know”.

The silhouettes are usually understood as a visual rendering of the slogan “Apparition with Life”, raised by the Mothers since 1980 (a slogan oft repeated in the demonstrations would be, “Alive they were taken, alive we want them”). This was a response to the rumours and conjectures circulating that the repressive state apparatus kept the detainees alive in clandestine camps. This minimal hope that some of the missing persons were alive began to fade away with the passage of time, the discovery of mass graves and the testimonies of the very few survivors about the cruel methods of extermination. Pilar Calveiro reflects on the social difficulty of processing the frightening truth that the survivors enunciated. They did not speak of the missing persons but of the dead, of bodies systematically demolished.<sup>18</sup> Even then the slogan, “Apparition with Life” continued to be central in the Mothers’ discourse for a long time, appealing not to the immediate policy but more to an ethical dimension, or maybe also to redeem its invocation.

On this point there are various interpretations of the silhouettes. Robert Amigo points out that the silhouettes “made the absence of the bodies present in a scenic representation

of state terror”, while Buntinx thinks that they ratify the hope of “life” that the Mothers have. “Not a mere artistic illustration of a slogan but its lively fulfillment”, he affirms. Proposing an inverse reading, Grüner opines that in the silhouettes there is something that “startles those who gaze at them: they reproduce the habitual resource of the police which draws with chalk the outline of a cadaver retrieved from a crime scene”. This could be read as “a *political* gesture that wrenches from the enemy – called the ‘order force’ – its method of investigation, generating contiguity, as if to say, ‘It was you’”. But it also deals with an “*unconscious* gesture that admits, at times contradictory to its own discourse that prefers to continue speaking of the ‘disappeared’, that these silhouettes represent *cadavers*. Therefore the intention (conscious or otherwise) of *representing* the disappearance is carried out as *promoting* the death of the material body”.

To completely avoid the temptation of associating the silhouettes with death, apart from this contiguity with the police procedure the Mothers removed from the artists’ project the possibility of pasting the silhouettes on the ground (which was one of the options) and made it clear to the participants the necessity of having the silhouettes standing up straight, never



lying down. As a result, the demonstrators themselves went around pasting them on the buildings adjacent to the Plaza, respectful of the condition that the silhouettes were to have according to the Mothers. Despite these preventions, the reading that Grüner suggests in the late 1990s had already been prefigured in the Third Resistance March, in the counterpoint between the white erect silhouettes and another silhouette inscribed on the pavement that explicitly confronts the slogan "Apparition with Life" with another slogan that says "The Whole Truth". In between thousands of silhouettes on the walls, their makers (members of CAPATACO/Group of Common Tariff Participative Art, a Trotskyist group linked to the socialist movement) sketch a different silhouette on the ground in the exact place where a death had taken place: that of Dalmiro Flores, a worker assassinated on 16 December 1982 by paramilitary forces during a protest march at the Plaza de Mayo.

The silhouette on the ground alludes to, and now undoubtedly, the police procedure by which a place is marked where a person has been knocked down and before the body is removed. Therefore a specific victim of repression is chosen whose sad end is known for sure. In contrast with the other silhouettes this one induces "an immediate association: all the missing persons are dead, like Dalmiro Flores".

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What aspects of the *Siluetazo* am I referring to when I say that it redefines artistic practice? Although it may have been transitory, for its dynamics of collective and participative creation the *Siluetazo* implied the effective socialisation of the means of production and artistic circulation in the sense in which the protestor is incorporated as a producer. The visual action "is an act by everyone and belongs to everyone"<sup>19</sup>. The proposal clearly states that there is no need for "special drawing knowledge"<sup>20</sup>. This radical participative practice manifests itself in the socialisation of an idea or concept, forms and artistic techniques that are simple but forceful in the repetition of an image and in the act of creating it.

For Buntinx, the effective socialisation of the means of artistic production that the *Siluetazo* implies is "a radical liquidation of the modern category of art as a pure-object-of-contemplation, separated-from-life-agency, and also the recuperation for art of a magico-religious dimension that modernity had deprived it of"<sup>21</sup>, reinstating to the image its popular character and its magical and prodigious value. He is not the only author who proposes a reading of the silhouettes in terms of restoration of aura. Grüner points out that "the idea of an objective form that contains a void that *looks at us* is linked, (at least *can be* linked) to the concept of popular or auratic art given by Benjamin, to the point that for the Jewish-German philosopher this is defined by "the expectation that what one looks at also looks back and that creates an aura"<sup>22</sup>. Buntinx takes more risk in the same line of interpretation, "The capture of the Plaza certainly has a political and aesthetic dimension but at the same time also *ritual*, in the most loaded and anthropological sense of the term. It does not only deal with generating an awareness about genocide but also of *reverting* it: to recover for a new life loved ones felled on the phantasgoric borders of death [...] A messianic-political

experience where resurrection and insurrection mix with each other [...] It is a matter of making art an acting force in a concrete reality. But also a magical gesture in this direction. To oppose the renewed political power of the empire, an unsuspected mythical power: the ritual pact with the dead"<sup>23</sup>.

If it were so, if the *Siluetazo* reactivated the ritualistic dimension attributed to the image (as with cave paintings and religious icons), is it legitimate to place the *Siluetazo* within the autonomous sphere that modernity calls "art"?

Arnigo thinks that the demonstrators who make the silhouettes – except the small nucleus of artists who initiated the project – aesthetically transform reality within a political objective without having "any artistic conscience behind their action, giving precedence to protest and a political fight". In order to avoid speaking of "actions of art", he proposes to define the *Siluetazo* and other initiatives of similar nature as "aesthetic actions of political praxis".

Artist Leon Ferrari insists on the same with similar arguments: "The *Siluetazo* was a culminating work, formidable not only politically but also aesthetically. The number of elements that went into play: an idea proposed by artists, carried out by the masses *without any artistic intention*. It's not as if we got together for a performance, no. We were not representing anything. It was a production of what everybody felt, whose material was inside the people. *It did not matter if it was art or not*"<sup>24</sup>.

Maybe the debate could be redirected not so much in terms of defining whether the *Siluetazo* was understood in its times as an artistic act or not, but in thinking how a vanguardist project of reintegrating art and life is carried out, how the "artistic" resources and procedures used acquire here an unheard-of social dimension. It does not deal with aestheticising the political praxis nor introducing in art a political theme or intention"<sup>25</sup>. The *Siluetazo* dilutes the artistic specificity by socialising the production, by looking for a distinct insertion in the restricted artistic circuits, by repositioning its scopes in "the intention of resetting a *social territoriality*"<sup>26</sup>.

Therefore, the *Siluetazo* can be thought of as being inscribed on the border space between art and politics. It is an artists' initiative that is articulated by a social movement in the fight for radical re-appropriation of public space captured by the dictatorship. It is a collective action whose development dilutes its "artistic" origin (as far as to forget it), in so much as the resources that the group of artists puts at the disposal of the masses is appropriate and meaningful. Its distance or slip from preconceived forms to what should be committed political art is evident, and thus enters into a confrontation with the realist representation tradition of the extreme left. On the other hand it shows a link with the artistic production of the centre that does not renege on contemporary international trends. It does not adapt to this baggage peaceably, but – in any case – it expropriates it and subverts it. It manages a participation of hundreds of anonymous collaborators (artistic or otherwise) in its creation and dispersion; and rearticulates popular art and culture not in terms of a thematic reference or in the aestheticisation of a specific material but, above all, in the installation of its productions in the streets and mass communication circuits.

In its conscious lack of definition of the “artistic” condition of this practice, the *Siluetazo* brings us face to face with the spillover of the autonomous condition of art, a radical redefinition of the modern category of art as a practice as separate from daily life and incapable of exercising any type of transforming effect on our existence. Perhaps this question will be the most significant and disquieting dimension of its legacy.

Translated from the Spanish by Maneesha Taneja

## Notes

1. Pilar Calveiro. *Poder y Desaparición* [Power and Disappearance] (Colihue, 1998, Buenos Aires), p. 26.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Santiago García Navarro. “Como el Fuego que se Desparrama por un Tanque de Nafta [Like a Fire That Spreads over a Petrol Tank]”. In A. Longoni and G. Bruzzone, *El Siluetazo* (Adriana Hidalgo, Buenos Aires, forthcoming).
5. “Las Maquinarias de la Memoria en la Argentina [The Machinery of Memory in Argentina]”. In *Pensamiento de los Confines*, No. 9-10, p. 31 (2001).
6. Eduardo Grüner. “La Invisibilidad Estratégica, o la Redención Política de los Vivos: Violencia Política y Representación Estética en el Siglo de las Desapariciones [The Strategic Invisibility or the Political Rendition of the Alive: Political Violence and Aesthetic Representation in the Century of the Disappeared]”. In Longoni and Bruzzone, op. cit. A revised and expanded version of these reflections can be found in Eduardo Grüner, “El Sitio de la Mirada: Secretos de la Imagen y Silencios del Arte [The Place of the Look: Secrets of the Image and Silences of Art]”, in *Norma* (2001).
7. Carlos López Iglesias. “Entrevista al Grupo Realizador [Interview with the Organising Group]”. In Longoni and Bruzzone, op. cit.
8. Hernán Ameijeiras. “A Diez Años del Siluetazo [Ten Years of the *Siluetazo*]”. In *La Maga*, 31 March 1993.
9. Victoria Azurduy. “Haceme a Mi Papá [Draw My Papá]”. In *Crisis* (1984).
10. Carlo López Iglesias, op. cit.
11. Aguerreberry, rodolfo, Julio Flores and Guillermo Kexel. “Siluetas”. In Longoni and Bruzzone, op. cit.
12. Roberto Amigo Cerisola. “Aparición con Vida: Las Siluetas de Detenidos-Desaparecidos [Apparition with Life: The Silhouettes of the Detained-Disappeared]”. In *Arte y Violencia* [Art and Violence], (UNAM, 1995, México), p. 275. Also see his article “La Plaza de Mayo, Plaza de las Madres: Estética y Lucha de Clases en el Espacio Urbano [The May Plaza, the Mothers’ Plaza: Aesthetics and Class Conflict in the Urban Space]”. In AA.VV., *Ciudad/Campo en las Artes en Argentina y Latinoamérica* (CAIA, 1991, Buenos Aires), pp. 89-99.
13. Gustavo Buntinx. “Desapariciones Forzadas/Resurrecciones Míticas [Forced Disappearances/Mythical Resurrections]”. In AA.VV., *Arte y Poder* [Art and Power] (CAIA, 1993, Buenos Aires), pp. 236-55.

14. This term is applied by Bedoya and Emei, in "Madres de Plaza de Mayo: Un Espacio Alternativo para los Artistas Plásticos [Mothers of the May Plaza: An Alternative Space for the Plastic Artists]", in Longoni and Bruzzone, op. cit.
15. The Plaza de Mayo occupies a central space of power in the urban imagery of Buenos Aires. Surrounded by crucial buildings of political and economic importance (la Casa Rosada, the Cathedral, el Cabildo), it was here that the rebellion against Spanish domination was declared in 1810. Today the offices of the national government, the city government, various ministries, the National Bank (and head offices of various other banks) are located here. Connected to the Plaza Congreso (where the National Congress is situated) by the Avenida de Mayo (May Street), this path is the chosen one for the majority of protests, gatherings and demonstrations.
16. Roberto Amigo Cerisola, op. cit., p. 265.
17. *Paz y Justicia*, Buenos Aires, September 1983.
18. Pilar Calveiro, op. cit.
19. Bedoya and Emei, op. cit.
20. "Propuesta de Aguerreberry, Kexel y Flores a las Madres [Aguerreberry, Kexel and Flores' Proposal to the Mothers]". In Longoni and Bruzzone, op. cit.
21. Gustavo Buntinx, op. cit.
22. Eduardo Grüner, op. cit.
23. Ibid.
24. León Ferrari. Interview with the author, Buenos Aires, 24 May 2005.
25. Roberto Amigo Cerisola, op. cit.
26. Juan Carlos Marín proposes this concept in *Los Hechos Armados* [The Armed Acts] (Ediciones PICASO/La Rosa Blindada, 2003, Buenos Aires).