

A Site of Struggle, A Site of Conflicting Pedagogical Proposals: The Debates Over Suitable Commemorative Form and Content for ESMA

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On the 24th of March 2004, then President Néstor Kirchner declared that the infamous *Navy School Mechanics* complex in Buenos Aires – known by its Spanish acronym ESMA – was to become a Museum of Memory. As the military was asked to hand over its tenancy of ESMA to the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, a public debate ensued regarding what memorial mandate could properly delimit a site where an estimated 5,000 people were detained, tortured, and disappeared during the military's "dirty war." There is broad agreement that ESMA will become a pedagogical space of some kind, "where the issue is about creating," as Horacio González puts it, "an experiential site with a pedagogical and reflective characteristic" (2005, p. 75). However, the proposals seeking to specify and concretize the broad pedagogical desires invested with this site are varied and often at odds with each other (Melendo, 2006, pp. 90-91). The *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*, spearheaded by Estela Carlotto, proposed the construction of a museum

whose contents were to be explicitly dedicated to remembering and honouring the disappeared. Others like the *Movimiento Ecuménico por los Derechos Humanos* and the *Liga Argentina por los Derechos Humanos* put forth that ESMA should be reconstructed exactly as it appeared during the repression when it was functioning as a clandestine torture centre. Hebe de Bonafini, the president of the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, rejected rendering ESMA into a “museum” or some fossilized replica, and proposed instead that ESMA should become a functioning art school. The school would include, according to Bonafini, a site dedicated to learning about the “ideals of the 1970s” and the accomplishments and aspirations for social justice of the disappeared.

Throughout the years ESMA was cited often enough – most notably in the *Nunca Más* Truth Commission Report, the monumental 1985 Trial of the Military, and the eerie wave of confessions given by perpetrators in the mid 90s – that it became entrenched in the public imagination, attesting to the worst memories of the “dirty war.” It is no surprise then that ESMA is vested with a particular memorial charge, which is fraught with complex and often contesting attempts to give representational content to the past victimization. The opening of ESMA as a memorial possibility thus mobilized a series of affective responses that exposed the contradictions and differences that inherently riddle the work of learning and remembering from a difficult past. In this paper, I focus on one of the more disputed issues in the discussion regarding the pedagogical mandate of ESMA. Namely, I engage the debate of whether to include artworks, installations, and an art gallery within ESMA. While some worry that placing artistic works or a gallery space would distract from, or worse, further spectacularize the horrors associated with this site, others have varyingly made the point that art has an important role to play in the pedagogical project of ESMA. Working with some of the arguments offered by artists and critics – such as Marcelo Brodsky, Lila Pastoriza, and others – I will consider how the placing and arrangement

of art within ESMA can forge a particular *pedagogical act of memory*, rendering collective meaning to the difficult and highly-charged memories that arise around this site.

Before proceeding to the above noted part of the paper it is necessary to trace the complex legacy of ESMA in the post-dictatorship period. While the government of Néstor Kirchner officially recognized and designated ESMA as site for learning about Argentina's difficult past, state policy in the post-dictatorship period has often been hostile to the various demands to officially recognize the horrors that took place at ESMA. We need to appreciate then the historical context that helps to forge and sustain the significance of legislating ESMA into such a charged memorial site.

The Legacy of ESMA: The Struggle for Memory and Justice

Andreas Huyssen notes that debates regarding what to do with commemorative sites of trauma in Argentina have been "tightly linked to claims against military officials in courts and in the public sphere... As such, the debates... became part of a complex local history of cover-up and amnesty, public protest and continuing legal struggle" (2000, pp. 25-28; also see 2003, p. 99). We thus need to situate the legacy of ESMA with the ongoing struggle in Argentina to bring military violators before the courts. While Kirchner's government (2003-2007) was certainly sympathetic to a human-rights agenda, his decision regarding ESMA was a response to, and gained currency from, a sustained public demand for memory and justice that preceded his administration.

With the turn to democracy in Argentina (1983), a legal process was set in motion in order to publicly account for the dictatorship's repressive strategy of disappearances. Although responsibility for the disappearances was spread widely throughout the ranks, the 1985 Trial of the Military was intended, by the government of Raúl Alfonsín, as an

exemplary educative trial limited to the most senior level of the military. However, public resolve for more trials grew as it was seen to be an effective means of marking and gaining answers to the fate of those disappeared, answers which the military was not willing to divulge voluntarily. Faced with an increasing number of trials against a military that was once again closing ranks and publicly making gestures to derail the turn to democracy, Alfonsín legislated a series of amnesty laws that sought to contain further prosecutions. In 1990, in the name of reconciliation, the convictions and precedent established by the Trial of the Military were further eroded and overturned through a set of pardons issued by Alfonsín's successor Carlos Menem.

In Argentina the demand for justice has thus included a rejection of both the politics of reconciliation and the amnesty laws sheltering the military from prosecutions for violations committed during the "dirty war." It is important to note that this demand for justice has been inexorably linked to the broad and diverse work of establishing and transmitting public memory by recovering temporal and spatial registers associated with the past trauma. Various rights groups have thus petitioned the state, as it were, to overturn the pardons and amnesty laws by uncovering clandestine detention centres and by staging demonstrations coinciding with specific commemorative dates (CELS, 2000; Lorenz, 2002; Huyssen, 2003, pp. 97-99).

An important turning point in the efforts to forge memory and justice in Argentina occurred during the 20th anniversary of the coup d'état – on the 24th of March 1996. In the months leading up to the 20th anniversary it was noted that, "new social actors began to participate in the commemorative activities leading up to the date, with a multiplication of small acts and initiatives, some individually conducted while others were sponsored by public institutions" (Lorenz, 2002, p. 82). From this point onward a broad and sustained effort to plan the political-cultural activities for the 20th anniversary took shape. The momentum and

identification with the commemorative event was enhanced as it garnered widespread symbolic significance, surpassing previous activities for publicly marking this date. The unprecedented number of organizations that came together to plan their participation with the day of commemoration resulted in a force that was varied and consistent enough to sustain a powerful demand for overturning the amnesty laws and for expressing a general dissatisfaction with the current government of Carlos Menem.

The varied commemorative events were a means of expressing and channelling the general sense of frustration coming to the fore during this period. "Links were [thus] established between the anniversary and current unsolved judicial cases, cases where collective action and demands are out in the open" (Jelin and Kaufman, 1998, *n.pag.*). Wrongs that were previously isolated from each other converged and were given public expression and significance through demands for justice. Moreover, arising from the 1996 commemorative event, "the scope of denunciations of human rights violations broadened, to include the rights of sexual and ethnic minorities, as well as economic rights – the unemployed, the homeless" (Jelin, 2003, p. 59). As those wronged by prior and present abuses registered their antagonism, the state was forced to orient itself in relation to this emergence of an undeniable accumulation of unsettled claims that readily articulated the bankruptcy of the state's terms for conciliation.

Fearing that the increasing public demand for justice would bring social conflict and division, then-President Menem aggressively promoted reconciliation. Menem's attempt to mobilize a seamless discourse for forging national reconciliation produced some absurd and revealing moments. One of the most telling was his proposal for what to do with ESMA. The haunting presence of the ESMA complex amid life in Buenos Aires gave rise to anxieties about how to deal with the property, how to live with this unsettled and unsettling presence that riddled

claims to national unity. In a type of public exorcism that sought to also quell the momentum to overturn the amnesty laws, Menem proposed to demolish the ESMA and replace it with a monument to national reconciliation. Literally, in the overturned burial grounds of the disappeared the sense of a redeemed “we” would be monumentalized: early in 1998 Menem decreed that “the site would be turned into a park, which, he said, would be a monument to national unity” (BBC World Service, 1998, *n.pag.*).

The proposal, however, misapprehended the public mood and the prevailing force linking the preservation of commemorative sites with the work of human rights. Given the danger of using the same grounds of a past atrocity in order to justify the terms of the present, an urgent mobilization unfolded to prevent the state from undertaking the demolition project. Eventually Menem’s decree was annulled through a lawsuit launched by rights groups who proposed that the ESMA should be left standing as a reminder of the crimes committed by the dictatorship. Judge Osvaldo Guglielmino issued a ruling that immediately halted the demolition and the translocation of office files from ESMA to a new location outside the city of Buenos Aires. His ruling noted that the families of the disappeared had valid reasons to keep the ESMA from being demolished. It consequently ordered the preservation of the main edifice and all its property as a means of safeguarding any potential evidence remaining therein that could provide information as to the fate and whereabouts of the victims’ remains. The ruling conferred that there was a collective obligation to preserve the site so as to ensure the right to investigate and to mourn the unsettled past.

Interestingly the ESMA incident unleashed a surge in public projects that attempted to commemorate the disappeared. The “presidential delegation” type of rule that Menem tended to wield, which often justified itself by claiming to be an objective and more efficient force for shaping unity amidst social disparity, was exposed as a divisive strategy.

The public expression of dissatisfaction that gathered social significance through the demand for justice thus progressively encouraged multiple and competing interpretations among legislators as to the effectiveness of the strategy of reconciliation. Consequently legislators began to act in a far more complex manner with regard to the unsettled past. A notable example was the legislation introduced in 1998 (around the same time as the ESMA fiasco) to construct a memory park – *El Parque de la Memoria* – on the banks of the Río de La Plata in Buenos Aires. The debates concerning the construction of this commemorative site went beyond the terms of reconciliation, dialogue or atonement that had previously accompanied state-initiated attempts to monumentalize the traumatic past. Eventually through a complicated and drawn out process Federal courts – beginning in 2001 with Judge Gabriel Cavallo – began declaring that the amnesty laws were unconstitutional, effectively opening the way for other courts to hear charges brought against the military for violations committed during the dictatorship.

Given the struggle for memory and justice thus described we can appreciate the significance of Kirchner’s decision to designate ESMA into the *Espacio para la Memoria* – a memorial pedagogical site. Tracking the contest between state and non-state groups to recover temporal and spatial markers associated with the past atrocities provides us, also, with an understanding of why debates over the pedagogical objectives of ESMA are so highly charged. The historical context thus gestures us to keep in mind how debates over what to do with this site invariably tap into an ongoing struggle to define the normative terrain in post-dictatorship Argentina.

The ESMA Pedagogical Debate: Guarding the Historical Referent

While ESMA’s official designation as the *Espacio para la Memoria* stands as a physical refutation of the politics of “reconciliation,” of the

pardons and amnesty laws that until recently were in place, those vested with ESMA's future found themselves in the grip of a complex and perhaps interminable debate regarding the pedagogical mandate of this site. How to tell the story of ESMA? What narratives, what artefacts, what relations between objects could ever do justice to the known and unknown stories of violence engraved within this site? What to remember? What to forget? How to draw links that point to the present and to the future? As Estela Schindel (2005) wrote at the time, "How to make use of those cursed buildings? ...The proponents, who saw their dream fulfilled when President Kirchner turned the grounds over for the construction of a Museum of Never Again, now face the difficulty of reaching a consensus with what to tell in its interior" (p. 267; see also Schindel, 2006). The difficulty involves bringing forth the disruptive force of the past in the present so that a political community can ask after, "who are we" and "who will we become if we pursue this course of action" (Pitkin, 1972, p. 205). This then is a normative debate that is about the collective future as much, if perhaps not more than, the criminal past. Deciding what to tell inside and through ESMA inevitably involves, as Lila Pastoriza recognizes, an intra and inter-generational endeavour of facing the past and moving towards a different future (2005, p. 253).

One of the central questions in the debate regarding the pedagogical mandate of ESMA is whether art has any role to play here at all. Those concerned with promoting a more straightforward human rights education question the role of art. What role can be entrusted to art when it is primarily intended to deliver an aesthetic experience, an experience valued for its own sake rather than for social utility? Art's concern with nuance, tensions, and interruption renders it suspect for educating and enlisting succeeding generations in the ethos of a human rights culture, or for suitably commemorating past victims. Some others worry about the appropriateness of art in such a place, claiming that ESMA "speaks

for itself,” and only minimal descriptive documentary information is appropriate.

One of the expressed concerns is that placing artistic works or a gallery space within the premises would alter and corrupt the actuality and historical authenticity of this site. For instance the *Asociación de Ex Detenidos Desaparecidos* are opposed to any adaptation or introduction of objects into the premises for any purposes other than to reconstruct and attest to how ESMA functioned as a detention, torture, and extermination centre. There are groups who propose preserving the details of only the most notorious places of torture and detention – like the Casino de Oficiales – while allowing other buildings within ESMA to be used and restructured for different purposes. However, the group of *Ex Detenidos Desaparecidos* put forward that the whole 17 hectares of the ESMA complex “should have no other use or function except as a material witness to genocide” (in Brodsky, 2005, pp. 215-216).

Echoing similar sentiments as the *Ex Detenidos Desaparecidos*, there are those who while questioning the role of art or the construction of an art gallery favour reconstructing an exact replica of how the detention centre operated. Groups like the *Movimiento Ecuménico por los Derechos Humanos* and the *Liga Argentina por los Derechos Humanos* put forth a pedagogical agenda that attempts to simultaneously recall the crimes committed within ESMA and promote human rights in the present by staging an exact, mimetic reconstruction of the day-to-day existence of the camp (Melendo, 2006, p. 90). Still for others the concern is with showing the brute facts and attending the testimonial details that fill this site. According to Alejandro Kaufman (2005), no special emphasis or artefacts are required at ESMA: “only a strict adherence to the testimonies and the proofs... its mission is not to understand or teach history, nor violence, but to show that and only that which took place here” (p. 249).

However, Pastoriza worries that confronting the testimonies and actual spaces of murder without mediation – through the “pedagogy of

consternation" – can turn out to be overwhelming (2005, p. 92). While certainly facing the testimonies and spaces attesting to the atrocities helps convey what happened, a naked encounter with horror risks stupefying and paralyzing visitors to this site. Horror is all that is left for the person facing a mimetic reconstruction of this place. Pastoriza wonders if the authoritarian logic that forecloses engagement and participation is not reproduced in such a limited space of interpretation and consternation. She writes, "are not authoritarian practices reproduced if the museum limits itself to 'showing' what happened without providing opportunities for visitors to participate and engage different discourses?" (2005, p. 92). Her question here echoes Jacques Derrida's concern with the risks of assuming the past to be wholly given and transparent. According to Derrida (1994) our ability to receive the past is not truly possible without our present ability to work through, interpret and engage with its multiple and interminable meanings. For "if the readability of a legacy were given, natural, transparent, univocal," writes Derrida, "if it did not call for and at the same time defy interpretation, we would never have anything to inherit from it" (p. 16).

In another gesture of fidelity to the historical referent there are those who propose, in a rather enigmatic manner, that ESMA should remain mostly empty, with minimal objects, and very few educational props or artifice, in order to allow the site to "speak for itself" and to so offer its indisputable yet un-representable evidence. Eduardo Molinari for his part points out that ESMA, "requires nothingness, which should not be confused with oblivion" (in Brodsky, 2005, p. 213). Rather than mere forgetfulness, Molinari mobilizes an aesthetic of "nothingness" that would evoke the impossible re-presentation of absence, which is an attempt to encircle the notorious and disturbing instances that exceed our understanding. The prevailing concern with the trope of "emptiness" and with clearing the way, as it were, so that ESMA can "speak for itself" is aptly conveyed in a conversation between the Argentine cultural critic

Beatriz Sarlo and the German memorial artist Horst Hoheisel, in the magazine *Punto de Vista*. Speaking about how to appropriately place and integrate historical information within sites of trauma, Hoheisel tells of his disappointing visit to ESMA where, according to him, there was already too much interference from the provisional objects and props conveying testimonies and information associated with this site. Hoheisel tells us that,

These spaces where torture and murder took place are symbolically loaded and sufficiently evocative. The historical explanations need to be almost invisible. (...) Likewise there is no need for sculptures or art objects here. While someone like Marcelo Brodsky... wants to add art in these spaces, my sense is that these spaces are sufficient in themselves. As one visits the Casino one senses the limits of what art could possibly add to this space (2005, p. 22).

Between *Filling* and *Emptying* ESMA: The potential of Art

The Argentine artist-photographer Marcelo Brodsky (2005), whose own brother Fernando was at ESMA and remains one of the disappeared, notes that it is appropriate, as many have done, to ask whether art fits in this space marked by its bloody history. The debates that surrounded the limits of representation in relation to the Holocaust, the “historian’s debate” in Germany resound here too. Emptiness has a certain quality that provokes a form of attentiveness to this traumatic site that is personal and meditative. As Pastoriza admits, “emptiness can invite one to imagine and to ponder spurring curiosity, engagement, and interpretation” (2005, p. 90). Emptiness can also help to foster a type of *negative witnessing* that may account for both the un-representable gaps that remain in people’s lives, and, importantly, point to our own

epistemological gaps. Such gaps are significant to acknowledge lest we too easily settle the disruptive force of this site.

However, Brodsky makes the point that in the precarious institutional environment of Argentina, “emptiness is not project enough” (2005, p. 207), for it leaves the building vulnerable to future unknowns –to changes of mind and alternative social agendas that might be imposed on what are still politically volatile commitments. Noga Tarnopolsky captures the fragility and uncertainty that accompanies the ESMA project when she writes,

Nothing here is quite what it seems. This is a country of anti-memory, a country that consumes its own archivists. So despite what clearly appears to be the best of intentions, it remains entirely unclear what exactly a museum at ESMA will provide for Argentineans. What will be held there? (in Williams 2007, p. 70).

The possibility of putting the memorial task aside and severing this difficult engagement with past and future is ever more threatening, since the recent election of Mauricio Macri (on 24th June 2007) as head of the government of the city of Buenos Aires. Presently, there is a worry that Macri appears indifferent and may come to stall or eventually foreclose ongoing memorial projects such as those taking place in and around ESMA.

Clearly buildings do not “speak for themselves” or maintain their own political-cultural relevance, they require artifice and purposely placed objects to bring humans together to draw significance and forge a commitment to a desired future. For Brodsky, visual art does have a role to play in the pedagogic project that ESMA should be. Visual art, in a particular non-didactic form, has the ability to offer objects and open an interpretative space where evocative interminable questions around representation and relations to the past can emerge, rather than merely *presenting* the horrors that happened there. Such an approach is needed,

Brodsky and others propose, because it guards the significance of ESMA and gives it a better chance for a future: “No one will want to repeatedly return to hell” (2005, p. 207).

In an email correspondence between various artists grappling with the potential role of art in ESMA, published in the Argentine art journal *Ramona*, Nicolás Guagnini (2004) relates his difficult visit to a Nazi concentration camp in Mauthausen, Austria (pp. 57-58). He expressed that the visit was necessary but extremely arduous, and that he did not want to ever again visit Mauthausen or other Nazi camps since the overwhelming horror encountered there was sufficiently exemplary. Guagnini notes that the memorial space being proposed for ESMA has a chance to undertake a different pedagogical trajectory than the one employed at Mauthausen (2004, p. 57). According to Guagnini, certain parts of the premises – like the Casino de Oficiales (where torture was mainly carried out) – should be preserved through a museum-like treatment of the space. However, the Casino should not be the only or main way of bringing people to or through ESMA, since the information of death and torture here would overwhelm everything and eventually exhaust our interest to return. The possibility of thoughtfully arranging art objects, study, and cultural exhibitions, according to Guagnini, will mark this place as a trans-generational passageway and with possibility –hence guarding ESMA’s future (2004, p. 58). This gestures us, “neither towards a traditional model of the museum nor towards the morbid reconstruction of extermination camps” but towards *arranging* a multifaceted site for ongoing interpretation and communication (Brodsky, 2005, p. 44).

The point is that humans need sites that can invite and support complex mediation: objects, things, interpretative networks, and intricate structures that allow people to come together to appreciate the *work of inheritance* and the *still unsettled claims for justice*. Otherwise without thoughtful arrangement and mediation – through a literal replica or

statistical abstraction of the horror – we risk draining the world of significance and collapsing into a gnawing indifference. Rather than merely presenting the factual horrors of the past (which risks exhausting our interest) the very nuance of art, which necessarily asks us to take our time, opens a different sense of temporality, a different consideration of our time that has the ability to sustain a future relation with these issues.

So, certainly, the concern by varying rights groups to recover and preserve ESMA from the “politics of reconciliation” (a politics that threatens to demolish the specificity of this site) is an important undertaking. But there is also the worry, as expressed by those noting the significance of art within ESMA, that amid this recovery operation we might threaten the very futurity of this site when we assume that the building “can simply speak for itself.” Similarly, when we render ESMA primarily as a site for conveying raw testimonial and historical information – supposedly without artifice – we risk obviating the troubling complexity of the past event into the swamp of horrible facts or, as Pastoriza puts it, into a paralyzing “moral didactics” (2005, p. 91). By privileging a pedagogical strategy that either *empties* the building or *fills* the building with supposedly *transparent and horrific facts* we make ESMA susceptible to either the *future whims of politics* (since, emptiness is not project enough), or to a *numbing disinterest* with the event (since, no one wants to return repeatedly to hell).

The pressing peril facing ESMA resides then in the way in which the pedagogical proposal to *empty* or *fill* the ESMA respectively forecloses the present *public memorial potential* afforded by this site. To prioritize either a site of emptiness or a site filled with transparent facts disregards how the placing and relating of objects and the use of artifice within ESMA can forge collective scenes of orientation toward the past and future. What is at issue then is to recognize how ESMA potentially offers a site where publics can gather around the traces and objects of a forlorn past through *memorial artistic arrangements* that may allow individuals

and publics to be powerfully affected and so apprehend how the past faces and still calls out to the present.

While Brodsky (2005) and others who fall on this side of the debate are loath to specifically prescribe what type of art should go into ESMA, the suggestion is that there is something about the very nuanced associations and interruptive potential evoked by art that opens us to the work of sustaining *interpretation*, which is so necessary for allowing the past to teach us and face us *as* the past – *as* something *different* than the present. Since visual art is opposed, in Brodsky's opinion, to a straightforward encounter with information, the arrangement of artworks within ESMA can evoke a mode of attentiveness and memorial interpretative practice substantially different from the presentation of historic facts. Through the passage that art opens, the hope is that ESMA can become a complex and living space for reflection, learning, and dialogue that is not easily exhausted or rendered obsolete by passing political trends. The hope is also that this site can foster a *constellation* between the past and present, preserving and animating the particular relevance of the past across time. This would be a place for re-showing and re-inserting the past into an elsewhere, allowing new configurations to emerge so that we may see *a unique event* instead of a continuous flow of equivalent events that disappear into the wreckage of yet another historical catastrophe.

It is not surprising that those who make a case for the potential of art within ESMA are fond of citing Walter Benjamin (see Pastoriza, 2005, p. 87). Within the proposals for art there is an implicit appreciation for Benjamin's theses on history (1969), which aim to cultivate the capacity of transmitting the past as a necessary concern for us in the present (see also Simon, 2005). Against the reduction of the past into positivist historicism, which pretends "to grasp the past as it really was" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 255), Benjamin puts forward an art of historical attentiveness that endeavours to rescue from oblivion that which

threatens to disappear. The work of “rescuing” the past, or breathing political life back into it, does not proceed by grasping for some “pure” or “transparent” reconstruction of what actually was, rather the historical attentiveness that Benjamin speaks of appropriates the past as a “flash” or as an “image” – that emerges through a constellation – in order to blast open the continuum of history: to interrupt the continuum of unsettled injustices (1969, pp. 261-262 & p. 263).

For Benjamin, as well as for Brodsky, Pastoriza, and Guagnini, there is a dire concern to forge a complex living relation – a constellation, not consternation – with the remnants of an oppressed past that is decaying, leaving, and revealing itself in the traces and ruins of its passing. Rather than mimetically presenting the past or depositing raw direct accounts of the horror (supposedly without arrangement) within a site like ESMA, the art of forging a constellation involves the historical work of decomposing the sequence of the past and re-composing it into a living interpretative relation with the present. Thus, it is through the art of arrangement (and not through the direct presentation or negative encirclement of horror) that a constellation takes shape, illuminating a dialectical relationship between the past and present where different *tenses* confront rather than overwhelm each other. The proposal – in a Benjaminian tone – aspires to draw and arrange artistic works and objects within ESMA in order to reframe and expand what can be perceived in the present, evoking a “flash” or “image” that makes a different and ongoing relation to the past and future thinkable and imaginable.

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