Reviving the Memories of the Disappeared, Exhibition curated by Laurel Reuter, North Dakota Museum of Art, Grand Forks; SITE Santa Fe, New Mexico; October 13, 2007–January 20, 2008.

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SITE Santa Fe's exhibition, *Los Desaparecidos,* resembles a funerary monument. Installation pieces, photographs, and videos become like tombstones that memorialize the thousands of intellectuals and resistance workers who "disappeared" during the dictatorial regimes in Latin America of the 1970s. Gallery visitors encounter works by more than 15 Latin American artists from countries, such as Argentina, Chile, Columbia, Uruguay, Venezuela, Brazil, and Guatemala. Although the underlying theme of the exhibit may make it seem morbid, it is undeniably inspiring. The artists who are represented have produced works of art that reflect their attempts at coming to terms with the political disappearances of thousands of individuals and with the corruption evinced by their governments in the past. The title, *Los Desaparecidos* refers to those people who were abducted, tortured, and/or killed, in some cases, forcibly exiled by state terrorists. While all of these artists seek justice by exposing the widespread disappearance of people in their home countries, some artists are particularly effective in capturing the despair and devastation caused by tyrannical regimes during the last century.

The untitled installation by artist, Arturo Duclos dramatically conveys how a murderous regime ravaged the country of Chile (Figure 1). Duclos constructed an 11 x 17' Chilean flag entirely of human femur bones, which he placed end to end to form an outline of the image. The reference to his nation's flag is bleak and clearly speaks to the fact that Chile was a dictatorial state, one whose citizens were persecuted, tortured, and put to death during Pinochet's administration in the 1970s. Yet, while this skeletal flag

produces an unforgettable image, it achieves its effect at some risk. Although the human bones were donated to the artist by various hospitals, Duclos' installation may potentially offend some viewers. Since this piece is meant to memorialize the victims of torture and murder in his country by using actual remains, it might also be read as de-sacralizing the human body through the grotesque display of human remains. Simultaneously, however, the carefully constructed display reframes the bones in a manner that recalls the importance of relics in Catholic belief and ritual. This alternate reading counters the perception of de-sacralization by symbolically rendering them as sacred.

Figure 1. Installation view of *Los Desaparecidos*; Arturo Duclos (Chile), "Untitled" (2005); 66 human femurs and screws; 11.5 x 16.9 ft. Courtesy of SITE Santa Fe.

The artwork of Argentine artist Fernando Traverso, like that of the Chilean Duclos, also provides viewers with an unusual memorial piece (Figure 2). This work is titled, "Urban Intervention in the City of Rosario," and consists of a collage of photographs, which depict a series of bicycle silhouettes that Traverso spray-painted onto various walls and street corners in Rosario, Argentina. His eerie silhouettes draw attention to the absence of those who disappeared because his spray-painted bikes are abandoned and unoccupied by

their cyclists. Traverso explains that, “you knew someone had been taken away if you found his abandoned bicycle.”[i] Since bicycles can also be symbols of innocence and childhood, Traverso’s silhouettes remind us that the warped Argentine government also abducted innocent children during the violent years of 1976-1983, otherwise known as the Dirty War. The photo-collage, however, loses some of the immediate impact of the original, site-specific, spray-painted bicycles via the mediation of the photograph. If Traverso had spray-painted a bicycle silhouette directly onto SITE Santa Fe’s walls, local gallery-goers might have experienced a more visceral sense of loss and abandonment.

Figure 2. Fernando Traverso (Argentina), “Urban Intervention in the City of Rosario” (2001); Photograph. Courtesy of SITE Santa Fe.

Argentine artist, Marcelo Brodsky also created a memorial out of a childhood object: his eighth-grade class portrait. In “The Companions,” Brodsky asked his classmates at a reunion to write directly on his class portrait about their current lives and whereabouts (Figure 3). Responding to the absence of many of his classmates, Brodsky then circled the faces of students in the photograph who were forced into exile during the Dirty War. He also crossed out the faces of students who have since disappeared or been killed.

Brodsky’s artwork makes a powerful statement that emphasizes how an unbelievable number of people, nearly 30,000, disappeared during the Dirty War in Argentina. His installation compels viewers to think about how their own class portraits might look in comparison.

Figure 3. Marcelo Brodsky (Argentina), “The Companions” (1996); large photographic intervention; 46 x 69 in. Courtesy of SITE Santa Fe.

Instead of focusing on the political victims of disappearance, Iván Navarro’s “Criminal Ladder” is a commentary about those individuals who actually committed the acts of torture and abduction in Chile (Figure 4). In his installation, Navarro presents an escape ladder, which hangs from the ceiling to the floor and has the names of Chilean criminals emblazoned on each of its wire rungs. Out of all the criminals who are highlighted on the rungs of this ladder, only a few have served time in prison. Navarro recorded these sentences in an accompanying binder to demonstrate, both, how incredibly lenient those punishments have been and how comfortable some of the prisoners are in their luxurious reformatories, which include such amenities as television and internet access. Navarro

implies that the criminals represented on the escape ladder have metaphorically escaped their punishment. By pairing the escape ladder with a lawyer's briefcase, Navarro's installation is a stinging critique of how the Chilean legal system still has not brought justice to those who were victimized during the Pinochet regime.

Figure 4. Iván Navarro (Chile), "Criminal Ladder" (2005); fluorescent light bulbs, electric conduit, metal fixtures; 1.5 x 3 x 30-38 ft. Courtesy of SITE Santa Fe.

In his installation piece, "Project for a Memorial," Colombian artist, Oscar Muñoz projects a series of video images that show an artist's hand in the act of painting portraits of people who were killed by violence in 1970s Colombia (Figure 5). As the artist's hand re-traces these portraits on a sidewalk, the faces dissolve within moments as the paintings evaporate under the hot sun. Since their fleeting faces can never be entirely seen, Muñoz highlights how we will never have the ability to fully know the people who have been abducted. Although the memories of the victims' faces are ephemeral, the underlying message of *Los Desaparecidos* suggests that remembering their struggles will help prevent future disappearances.

Figure 5. Oscar Muñoz (Colombia), "Project for a Memorial" (2005); installation of 5 synchronized videos; 15 in. screens. Courtesy of SITE Santa Fe.

Like the artists featured in *Los Desaparecidos*, the Mothers of *Plaza De Mayo* in Argentina are trying to recover the identities of those who are missing (Figure 6). SITE Santa Fe includes a video on this Argentine organization, which was started by mothers of abducted children. Today, the Mothers of *Plaza De Mayo* is made up of human rights activists who help unite children who were missing with their families. Though this organization is integral in aiding the disappeared, SITE Santa Fe's video on the Mothers of *Plaza de Mayo* is tucked away in a gallery corner where it is easily overlooked. Nevertheless, this video is important to the exhibition because it provides insight into how people today are coping with the aftermath of the political disappearances of their family members and friends.

Figure 6. *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*. Courtesy of Peter and Jackie Main.

Lawrence Weschler, who wrote about the disappearances in *The New Yorker*, believes that Latin American societies are continuing to find ways of "reclaiming the disappeared and honoring their presence in a manner that still allows room for, and indeed *creates* room for the living."[ii] Perhaps the artwork of *Los Desaparecidos* is accomplishing the same goal by honoring the dead and helping people come to terms with the legacy of these tumultuous years. Whether it is with human femur bones or with a paintbrush, these artists honor the missing and the dead by remembering them, as they try to reconcile their countries' bloody pasts. Ultimately, *Los Desaparecidos* is an important exhibition to see and experience because, as it suggests, remembering the injustices of the past can change the way we act in the present and future. More importantly, the exhibit also reminds us to be active and to be critically engaged with our political system in order to prevent such atrocities from ever reoccurring.

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[i] Fernando Traverso, "Fernando Traverso" in *Los Desaparecidos* Grand Forks: North Dakota Museum of Art (2006), 58.
[ii] Lawrence Weschler, "Preface" in *Los Desaparecidos* Grand Forks: North Dakota Museum of Art (2006), 11.