

Helen Zout's *Desapariciones*: Shooting Death

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La lente de Helen Zout es implacable. Como fue la vida en la desaparición. Una sociedad argentina que hace desaparecer o permite desaparecer. No hay ninguna demagogia en las imágenes. Es así. Sin poesía, sin sueños. Blanco y negro. Todo el terror de los rostros ya sin esperanzas.

- Osvaldo Bayer, "*Recorrido por la muerte argentina.*"

(Helen Zout's lens is unforgiving. This is how life was during the disappearances. This was society in Argentina, making people disappear, or merely allowing it to happen. There is no demagoguery in her images. This is just the way it was. No poetry, no dreams. Black and white. Naked terror in faces finally bereft of all hope.)

One of the historic uses of photography has been the documentation of death, beginning with yellow journalism's publication of so-called "crime scenes" and including photography as an instrument of photographic and forensic investigation: in addition to the bibliography of professional

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autopsy photography, one can recall the significant work of Weegee (pseudonym Arthur Fellig), who often made it to New York crime scenes with his camera ahead of the police and published iconic collections of images of death and mayhem. Also of importance has been the use of photography, from its earliest beginnings, in medical research. John Harley Warner and James M. Edmonson's *Dissection: Photographs of a Rite of Passage in American Medicine* is a candid-camera tour of anatomical medicine in practice—almost 150 photographs of the process of dissection in the second half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, when there was still the pervasive belief that cadavers belonged to medicine and not to living heirs. This, in turn, is the principle that unifies the core collection of the Museo Forense de la Morgue Judicial de Buenos Aires, established in the mid-1920s as the first of its kind in Latin America (of special note is the display, in formaldehyde, of “penes tatuados del hampa” [tattooed penises of the underworld]).

Helen Zout (born in 1957 in Carcarañá, in the Argentine province of Santa Fe) has used her photography as a contemporary intervention in the forensics of death, with specific reference to the disappeared persons of the so-called Dirty War against subversion that was waged by the neofascist military dictatorship that assumed power in Argentina in March 1976, with disappearances arguably lasting through the period of tyranny up to the return to democracy in 1983, and even, perhaps, beyond. While there is considerable dispute over documented numbers, the process of capture, detention, interrogation, and liquidation of individuals accused, directly or indirectly, of subversion has left many unresolved issues in Argentine society, one of which is the recovery of remains through the location of disposal sites and forensic analysis. DNA testing has been extensively utilized, along with other previously established methods, and the Argentine case has been one of the testing laboratories for forensic anthropology. Official photography—that is, the record of judicial agencies and scientific support components—is an integral part of a process that remains far from any sort of social or legal closure. The work of other photographers from the realms of documentary journalism, archival efforts, and art therefore supplements the central forensic undertaking. As such, where the latter must necessarily be circumscribed by precisely defined conventions of evidence and accountability, supplemental work such as I have described may move along a continuum in which the highly affective components of the construction of images, of which photography is unquestionably among the most compelling, can exercise strategies and degrees of rhetoric that would be inadmissible in what we defend as the office of professional photography.

Zout, whose work is situated within the enormous body of Argentine photography, photography by women in Argentina, and photography as a medium of the culture of redemocratization since 1983 in Argentina, has received support for her photography from the John Simon Guggenheim

Foundation (2002). Her images, which have been widely exhibited in Argentina and abroad, focus on social questions and mental health issues, with special emphasis on immigrants and children; in the latter case, she has been particularly concerned with children affected by AIDS.

Desapariciones (2009), her first published dossier, is a collection of photographs related to inquiries into the disappearance of persons during neofascist tyranny in Argentina; they portray both the remains of victims of the repression and the sites of their extermination and burial. The images of *Desapariciones* have served as the basis for several exhibitions of Zout's work, most recently a solo show in the Fotogalería of the Teatro Municipal General San Martín in Buenos Aires (March 2011), a venue created by Sara Facio, the dean of Argentine photography, and one of the most prominent public spaces for the exhibition of photographic work in the country.



Skull with bullet hole, judicial morgue, La Plata

Zout's work enters into a dialogue with that of a large array of Argentine photographers who have concerned themselves, in accord with an unwavering sociohistorical commitment, with an inquiry into the consequences of tyranny. These photographers, whose work I examine in detail in my *Urban Photography in Argentina: Nine Artists of the Post-Dictatorship Era*, deal with a daily dynamic that continues, in one way or another, to be affected by that tyranny. Thus, Zout's documentary photography is related to the work of such important names as Adriana Lestido, Eduardo Gil, Marcelo Brodsky, Gabriel Valansi, Marcos López, and Gabriel Díaz, all of whom have pushed the limits of photography to pose, in a particularly eloquent and effective manner, current Argentine sociohistorical questions. This essay will examine the discursive rhetoric of

Zout's photographic images in their attempt to interpret the parameters of state terrorism against social subjects during the neofascist tyranny.



Exhumation and identification of bones, judicial morgue, La Plata.

The manner in which Zout's material underscores its supplemental relationship to official forensic photography is evident from the very first image in *Desapariciones*. Indeed, one is immediately struck by a fundamental ambiguity as to whether the photograph is the sort of spontaneous photographic opportunity attributed to photojournalism or whether it is a deliberately contrived, staged tableau that signifies through highly charged insinuation and allusion rather than through a transparent semiotics of representation. It is fruitful to compare this composition—which portrays an individual and elements of autopsy that leap out of the frame toward the viewer—with what might be a spontaneous shot of an individual engaged in conducting an autopsy, oblivious to the camera that happens to catch him deeply engrossed in his work. The historian Osvaldo Bayer, in his commentary on the photographs, insists that Zout's intent here is to capture the face of the “uniform monster-torturer” (57), and there is ample reason to agree with him. Although Bayer does not engage in any gender-inflected commentary, there is the clear relationship between the

woman's camera and the masculine gaze of the subject, whom we can agree to call "the doctor." His is a hulking, commanding presence, with his bald head (which some might see as a fetish icon of authority) and his piercing eyes behind severely authoritarian glasses. He grips the autopsy table in a gesture of dominant control, and his privilege is emphasized by his medical smock and protective gloves. His figure marks the division between the upper and lower planes of the photograph. The upper plane is that of the sophisticated instrument of illumination that enables "the doctor" to proceed with full visual command of the object of his study. Although the protruding handle of the lamp is a necessary component of its maneuverability, one can be excused for seeing, if not its phallic allusiveness, its similarity to the barrel of a gun or a death ray aimed squarely at the victim or at the victim's remains.

The lower plane of the image contains one of the many skeletal remains found in the mass grave sites of the disappeared, often in the fragmented state evidenced in this photograph. (The fragmented skull shown here contrasts with a later image in which a skull is held in the hands of "the doctor" to reveal the sort of death-dealing perforation that would have been produced by a bullet.) However, what is most notable about this image, particularly as the introit to Zout's dossier, is a fundamental ambiguity surrounding the way in which there is a major interchangeability at work here. On the one hand, we have the image, staged or somehow recovered, of a medical professional engaged in the torture and deconstruction of a human body: I mean specifically to evoke here Elaine Scarry's crucial observation that torture produces a de-structuring of mind and body. At the same time, there is an overlap between the Dr. Mengele impersonation of Zout's image and the work of the forensic investigator, whose task is to somehow "undo" the deconstruction of torture and murder so as to recover the original identity of the individual—or part of the individual—under examination. The forensic agent in this latter image, like his lethal prefiguration, holds the "universe" of a human being in his hands, and Zout's photographs are marked as much by the practice of disappearance as by the restoration of appearance.

It might be appropriate to allude here to some of the received intellectual opinions regarding photography and the way in which it is inevitably linked to death. Roland Barthes, for example, links photography to a profound melancholy, as a medium that always records that which has been—that is, that which is now dead and gone, especially with reference to lived human lives. Photography, for Barthes, is always aorist, never durative. Concomitantly, Susan Sontag, always so preoccupied with the bad faith of bourgeois art, saw photography as legitimating the viewing of the suffering of others, who are so far removed from the process of photography so as to render irrelevant any imperative of authenticity, in favor of the greater importance of the sanitized impact: Zout's doctor may be staring the viewer

down, either as the torturer himself or, alternatively, as the accusing face of a forensic specialist angered by the grim task he is called upon to perform (in fact, Zout's own identification for this image states that it is from the La Plata Judicial Morgue). But in either case, he is contained by the frame of the photograph, restrained from ever actually being able to interact with the viewer, who in a blink can dismiss this image and the whole exhibition.

In other images, however, Zout works against the feigned immediacy of reality that renders photography—at least in the photojournalistic tradition—so problematic. Although a trope of ambiguous prefiguration underlies the two images I have discussed to this point, there is a series of other images in which a presumed “incompetence” or “incompleteness” of the photographic act underscores the stepping away from, and thus a supplemental stance toward, documentary photographic work.

In the case of the photograph of Nilda Eloy, identified as a survivor of the Arana clandestine prison camp in La Plata (the capital of Buenos Aires Province), three compositional elements coalesce to create a disturbing image that defies conventional photographic portraiture. Conventional photographic portraiture is, nevertheless, suggested in the dominant element of the image, Eloy's stunningly beautiful face and the impressive sweep of her hair. Her features are bold and assured, her gaze is steady and commanding, and her mouth is relaxed yet firm: here is a commanding presence, one of feminine authority derived, we can be assured, from her imprisonment and probable torture because of her sociopolitical activism. As a bust, Eloy's image demands a place of privilege in any pantheon of noble survivors of tyranny. And if Zout had chosen to make her image one that included just Eloy's face and shoulders, it would be a conventional, if impressive, example of photographic portraiture.



Nilda Eloy, a survivor of the centro clandestino Arana.

What disrupts the convention, however, is the inclusion, in the lower two-thirds of the photograph, of Eloy's body and the distribution of her hair. It is not that there is something "wrong" or even "unaesthetic" about the inclusion of Eloy's lumpy, matronly body, accentuated by some sort of colorless, shapeless shift, but rather the way in which it interacts starkly with the beauty of her face. Now, I don't mean to imply, in a rank sexist fashion, that a lumpy, matronly body is not beautiful, only that it is not part of conventional photographic portraiture of the twentieth century. The contrast between the two principles—a convention of beautiful or noble faces versus the accurate rendition of real female bodies—is what makes this photograph distinctive, moving it from the realm of interesting human faces to that of dramatically lived-in bodies. This semantic positioning is underscored by the third element, Eloy's hair. Although her hair is distributed as a lush framing to her stunning facial features, as our gaze moves down to her anti-beauty principle body, it trails off in disarray. On the right side of the image, the hair is full but disorderly when contrasted with the apparently well-brushed roots that frame Eloy's face. On the left side, the hair is partially combed back over the right shoulder, but, upon close examination, like the filaments of a spider's web, it laces over the woman's body and down to her waist.

This suggestion of an additional body covering that results from the comparative disorder of her hair is disturbing because it recalls the disordering and disruption of the body as part of the process of disappearance undertaken by the apparatus of repression. While Eloy is a survivor of that process rather than inert remains on the forensic examining table, Zout's image nevertheless captures the way in which she has been an object of that process, from which she will never fully recover: her body will never be "fully composed" again, an ideal composition such as what conventional photographic portraiture would propose to offer.

Another form of corporal disruption is found in the image of Adelina Alaye, the mother of Carlos Esteban Alaye, who was disappeared in 1977. In this case, the most immediate object of bodily destruction is Carlos Esteban, who we can suppose experienced the full arc of the process, from detention to murder and disposal in an unmarked mass grave. As has often been pointed out, the direct victim of repression is not the only one profoundly affected by it. There is a theatrics of disappearance, as partly captured by Zout in the image of a child's drawing of an assault on a woman during a home invasion by members of a so-called *Grupo de Tareas*. Similar assaults are recounted in Luis Puenzo's film *La historia oficial* or directly portrayed in Marco Bechis's *Garage Olimpo*. Both the theatrics and the consequences of disappearance are translative, in the sense that they spread out from the direct victim to family, friends, neighbors, bystanders, few of whom can remain untouched by the violence of the act of detention, ultimately knowing to one degree or another what the arc of the process put in motion will be. It goes without saying that the mothers of the disappeared are among the most immediately affected, which is why the Madres as various action groups and as a comprehensive icon have played such an eloquent role in the Argentine imaginary relating to the recent history of tyranny. In this case, Zout's decision to portray Alaye in a blurry fashion functions as an X-ray, so to speak, of her own bodily disruption in the face of her son's disappearance.



Adelina Alaye, mother of Carlos Esteban Alaye, disappeared in 1977

Historically, photography is grounded in the promise of reproductive fidelity and clarity. Emerging against the backdrop of movements in painting such as impressionism and expressionism, photography proffered what painting had realized it could not do: capture reality in perfectly proportional terms. That photography cannot, after all, do any such thing constitutes part of later theorizing about the nature of the art, but an integral element of the origins of photography is the attempt to achieve the highest precision of image possible, and thus any photography museum will include the apparatuses of literal restraint that were necessary to immobilize the body to prevent blurring. Zout's photograph—and here again I wish to underscore the principle of supplement that characterizes her work—deliberately introduces blurring as a technique for transmitting the disruption brought by the shock of the son's disappearance.

Zout makes use of the technique of image blurring in various other photographs representing the sites of clandestine detention centers and mass graves. The principle of supplement is particularly evident in these photographs because they can be contrasted with standard examples of photojournalism, which would have as their goal to capture the exact detail of the landscape and the survivors and forensic investigators combing it, the former for signs of recognition, the latter for usable evidence. Such details

are lost—repressed—by Zout’s camera in a dual process that captures both the psychological disruption of such sites for those who experience them and the questionable possibility of extracting an unmediated truth about a historical event from them. By contrast to attempts by survivors (as well as agents of repression who have turned state’s witnesses) to describe what these sites looked like when in operation (e.g., “I remember the *parrilla* was over there . . .”), Zout’s images trenchantly underscore the impossibility of rendering exact details: the process of corporal disappearance leaves as its lasting trace the disappearance of precise historical realities.



The search for bones and remains of the disappeared

Several of the photographs constitute something like a suite dealing with the disappearance of prisoners, especially those who were drugged and then dumped into the waters of the Río de la Plata to drown. Many of their bodies eventually floated ashore, the tides carrying them to the *balneario* (beach club) area of the Costanera Norte near the Ciudad Universitaria. (This area was subsequently developed as the Parque de la Memoria, which is dedicated to the disappeared and features a wall with the names of those—some ten thousand in number—whose disappearance was categorically determined. The park features monumental artwork and documentary displays.) The suite of five photographs depict, in order: the interior of one of the planes used for the so-called flights of death to dump the bodies (a detail featured in the aforementioned Bechis film); one of the sites along the Río de la Plata where at least one body was found in 1976; an archival photo from the Dirección de Inteligencia de la Policía de la Provincia de Buenos Aires (Police Intelligence Agency of Buenos Aires Province) showing what one assumes to be a hooded police agent, pointing a gun; the (water-

damaged?) photo from the dossier of one of the agents of repression; the burned-out frame of a Ford Falcon, the vehicle of choice for the agents of repression, in which two identified bodies were found.

The photograph of the interior of the plane that flew flights of death is especially eloquent. It is photographed as though it were a tunnel of terror in an amusement park, making use of Zout's trademark stylistic device of the blurred image, with the Barthesian *punctum* (central organizing point) of the photograph being the black passageway that may serve as access either to the cockpit or to the back of the plane from which the drugged bodies of the prisoners were dumped (stripped, in the vulturous practice of the guards, of all clothes and personal effects of value).



The interior of a plane used in the “flights of death”, Moron Aeronautics Museum. Morón.

The viewer casts her eyes over the arched interior of the plane, inventorying its details in the manner of any prisoner who might have been at least semiconscious and to a degree aware of her surroundings: the blurring of the image in this case also specifically correlates with the drugged state in which a partially conscious prisoner might have been able to perceive her surroundings. As one can see, the interior of the plane is nothing more than a flying coffin. While there are some benches, the majority of the prisoners would have been scattered around the floor, most likely (especially recalling the images in *Garage Olimpo*) heaped on top of each other for the short flight from the detention center to the middle of the river. The dilapidated condition of the interior of the aircraft adds to the quality of oppressive claustrophobia the viewer might experience, and it takes little imagination to imagine that the visual aspect of the interior would

have been matched by the inevitable consequences of transporting drugged, semiconscious bodies in likely poor physical condition from torture and lack of medical care. At least there would be the lingering smell of unwashed and untreated bodies, accompanied by bodily fluids (sweat, urine, feces, vomit) prompted by the drugs administered to render them semiconscious and perhaps by the movement of the aircraft. Although the photograph displays a space empty of human presence, the viewer's effort to supplement that vacancy with human presence cannot be anything but profoundly unpleasant in terms of the prisoners and any accompanying merciless military personnel.

Zout's work, then, implies a particular ethics of photographic inscription. Although there is the implicit proposition that photojournalism and other forms of photography driven by criteria of transparent realism are of limited value, what is directly manifest in the visual protocols of *Desapariciones* is that photography cannot bring about the reappearance of what history has destroyed. There can be no entertaining juxtaposition between "before" and "after" images, whether for individual social subjects or for lived sites—concentration centers, torture chambers, burial grounds, transport vessels, watery graves. As a consequence, the goal of photographic production must legitimate itself on some other grounds of signification. These grounds are most interestingly pursued by Zout in those images in which the emotional repercussions of tyranny are seen through an imaging of the deconstruction of feelings and consciousness in the process of experiencing tyranny personally. By choosing not to use the camera as an instrument of forensic research but rather as an affective supplement to that research, Zout intervenes in the still ongoing discussion in Argentina over disappeared persons with a uniquely eloquent photographic language. While it cannot reconstruct that which has been lost, it can undertake to piece together the contexts and the actors of the process of human devastation. Zout's photography is a language that speaks to what continues to be a profoundly dislocated Argentine society, one that is still struggling to refocus itself, so to speak, despite all the government commissions, cultural practice, and sociopolitical and legal discourse. In this regard, I would close with Zout's image of Cristina Gioglio, a survivor of the Arana detention center, wandering, as Bayer points out in his commentary (57), in a graveyard of consumerism—the daily life of capitalism that is what Argentines have been left with by their history. That landfill now occupies what was once a site of torture and death.



Cristina Gioglio, survivor of the centro clandestino Arana. La Plata.

Yet one of the remarkable features of contemporary Argentine social history, in contrast to other countries in the Southern Cone that experienced similar tyranny, has been the way in which an ongoing discussion about the past of human devastation has been sustained. The record of consciousness of human rights violations and, concomitantly, the remedy of a viable public human rights discourse remain strong in Argentina, and the publication of *Desapariciones* is yet another entry in the bibliography of cultural production that continues to accompany that public discourse.

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