

**INVESTIGATING AND COMBATING TORTURE:
EXPLORATION OF A NEW HUMAN RIGHTS PARADIGM**

**THE HUMAN RIGHTS PROGRAM
CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL LAW**

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

ART AGAINST BRUTALITY

By Claudia Bernardi

It was the Fall of 1989. I was listening to the testimony of a Salvadoran woman who had just arrived as a political refugee to a shelter in Oakland, California.

She said: *"A todo se acostumbra uno, menos a no recordar"* *"One can get accustomed to anything, except not to remember"*. These words had a profound effect on me for they became the structure of a philosophical and aesthetic development both as an artist and as a Human Rights activist.

"F", the woman who spoke to me about the refusal to forget, is from Chalatenango, one of the northern states of El Salvador where the war was fought bitterly for the twelve years length of the Salvadoran Civil War. "F" escaped from El Salvador, like many thousands of Salvadoran did, with the hope of finding safety. Her story is a successful one since she managed to leave the war zone and to arrive to California with her husband and four children. At the time they left, the oldest daughter was 8 years old. The youngest, only 5 months old. Because they had been in hiding for long periods of time, the children had been instructed not to speak. "D", the third daughter who was four years old when I first met "F"'s family, remained silent for three years after arriving to the United States.

Each refugee carries a story of loss and hope. A journey of sorrow and one of determination. I left Argentina in the midst of the Military Dictatorship which ruled the country from 1976 to 1983. I am part of a generation that has suffered the violence of institutionalized methods of repression. None of us have remained undamaged. Argentines in exile and the ones who never left shared the paradox of remembering the "disappeared" *"desaparecido"* with the lucidity of time never passed. We remember them through their absence more than through their presence. Memory becomes both, a resistance and a poetic methodology of existence.

As a visual artist, I have identify that the very essence of my work relays upon memory. It is, perhaps, a nostalgic attempt to remain in contact to that which conforms who I am. At the same time, memory and the depiction of one's own passage have the important roll of connecting a personal history to an organic tissue of culture. There is no orphanage in art. Artists are the ones who can frequently interpret and reflect through an act of poetic beauty the concerns and

even the demands of a large majority. Art and the artists become the voice of the voiceless.

This certainty prompted me to design and create an art group and collective directed to the community of political refugees and survivors of torture from Latin America living in the Bay Area. Funding was available for this project through the California Arts Council, The East Bay Community Foundation, Arts International, The Alameda Arts Council, The Berkeley Arts Commission and Kala Institute. I had the conviction that through art making the exploration of issues related to immigration, exile, torture and trauma would surface. I did not intend to create a setting for art therapy since I am both ignorant and unprepared to undertake such a task. My approach was that of an artist who finds in art a source of personal transformation and a vital tool to give testimony. I was also hoping that in the format of working as a collective a sense of community through the arts would be established.

Although I was not ignorant of the reasons of why political refugees arrived to California, I was indeed unprepared to meet a community of hundreds of people coming from El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua. Their priorities were urgent: to get political asylum, to get financial assistance, health and psychological counseling, to become acquaintance with a new country, language and set of expectations. I wonder at times if the creation of an art class would not be regarded as superfluous.

Fortunately, one of the first participants of our art group helped me to reaffirm the validity of such a project. He said:

" Memory is what we use in order to forget. But, we can't. Memory stays. All this, happened to us"

"La memoria es lo que usamos para olvidarnos. Pero no podemos. La memoria aquí se queda. Todo esto nos ha pasado"

The main objectives of this art project have been:

- 1- The creation of prints and works on paper.
- 2- The works would reflect and explore the personal histories of the participants.
- 3- The participants would work communally in a setting of professional guidance towards the creation of their work.
- 4- The work would be created with the expectation of being exhibited nationally and internationally.
- 5- The artist would accompany the exhibitions in order to give first hand testimony of what their art was about.

This project which today has ten years of existence managed to meet all our initial expectations. The participants of this art group chose a name that summarizes the reason for this art project to exist: TAMOANCHAN is a Nahuatl voice which means "The Land Where The Gods Left Us The Corn". It is a name that addresses the participants roots and the regarding of their personal histories as the gift left to them to envision a new future. Although none of the participants were artists before joining this art project, most of them have become artists

respected and welcome in the Bay Area's art world and in exhibitions nationally and internationally.

Firstly, the participants were mostly men, reflecting the most traditional structure of war diaspora. Few years later, the participants were men and women who had started their own families in this country. Today, a new art group exists called: Taller del Sur/ The Southern Studio. The participants of this new young group are the children of the initial artists who are working in collaboration with their parents creating art as a way to preserve the memories of the parents' homelands.

Their work is extraordinary. I use this adjective with caution for I do not mean to say only that their work is stupendous. Their work is, indeed, "out of the ordinary". Their art does not comply with fashions or aesthetic currents. The reason for their art to exist is visceral and urgent. Their art departs from a personal history that becomes a collective experience through the power of poetry and the instinct of empathy. The artists seldom talk about what they remember preferring to share a solidarity within their silence. They recognize a palpable comfort in making images with pursue of survival.

One of the participants, J.D.P., a lawyer and Human Rights activist from El Salvador, a torture victim and a political refugee, once tried to define for me the repercussions of having been a victim of political violence:

" We (the victims) see the world and our life through a glass that is sharp and broken. We can look through but we will never be able to put the whole picture of what happened to us together again. We have been amputated. If we were to have only one leg every one would understand that we cannot dance again. Well... we can dance, but another leg will not grow!

Our soul is the same. We are damaged beyond recovery. But, we can still attempt to make a new picture of this new stage. This is what art is for me."

This revelation had a profound influence in understanding my own artwork. With the signing of the Peace Accords in 1992 ending a twelve years Civil War in El Salvador a new development of international law determined the creation of the United Nations Commission of Truth that would investigate violations of human rights perpetrated during the war. One of those investigations focused on a massacre that had taken place at the hamlet of El Mozote in the state of Morazán, in 1981. The investigation departed from the testimony of the only survivor of this massacre, Rufina Amaya Márquez. The Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team was nominated to perform the exhumation at El Mozote.

The A.F.A.T. asked me to be the artist creator of the anthropological maps that would serve as evidence as part of the final report. I accepted and joined the A.F.A.T. in El Salvador. The exhumation started in early October of 1992. Technically, the whole hamlet was the "place of crime". The Judge, pertinent in this case, Dr. Federico Portillo Campos, determined that Site #1, the first location to be exhumed, would be a small building known as "The Convent House" ("El Convento") which was adjacent to the church.

I was not unfamiliar with exhumations. I had been aware and informed about violations of human rights in Argentina and in the rest of the continent. I had worked closely to the artists of TAMOANCHAN, some of who were survivors of massacres themselves. I was not ignorant of issues concerning refugees and diasporas. However, nothing prepared me to what I confronted at El Mozote.

In that small building, The Convent, the human remains of 143 victims were found, 136 of them were children. All younger than twelve, with an average age of 6 years. The allegation of mass murder against civilian population was confirmed.

In searching through the accumulated earth of the original building small fragments of bone would appear reconstructing a history of horror. Most of the human remains were so small that they hardly looked human. They were frail and fractured bones of children. They looked like the missing anatomy of an angel. There was an inconceivable tragedy attached to the brutality of finding the intact rib cage of an infant in a tiny garment. What I saw at El Mozote left a permanent imprint. A tattoo of the soul.

It is not possible to enter a mass grave without experiencing a profound transformation. It is not only the physical contact with death, it is the awareness that this massive death could have been prevented.

Images recovered from the grave merged into my own art with easiness. Fragments of clothing, tiny objects of children, bones trapped in the gentleness of a sleeve. All what I saw at El Mozote became a new iconography that I have resisted until now to call it "my imagery". The images are part of the communal recollection of everyone related to El Mozote. I regard the art created upon El Mozote as a documentary. Within hundreds of layers of pure pigment images both familiar and inconceivable are scratched from early strata of colors narrating what I saw, what I feel damaged by, what must not happen again.

Since 1993, the artists of TAMOANCHAN and I have organized exhibitions addressing through art our recent history. We trust art to say what words seem unable to translate. Within the metaphoric discourse of images and colors we hope to make available not "the testimony of a political refugee, survivor of torture/ survivor of massacre" but, to make public both the vulnerability and the strength caused by the effect of the sorrows that which stained our lives.

The artists of TAMOANCHAN recognize a spiritual amputation. Parallel to that, they claim a ferocious desire to live transformed into an urgency of creativity. Art becomes the ultimate subversive act: *art against brutality*.

In the words of a beloved poet from Argentina, Juan Gelman, who is himself a political refugee and the father of a disappeared son, daughter in law and unborn grandchild, poetry and art exist within "Unthinkable Tenderness". This effort of gentleness beyond the actuality of hell must not be regarded as romanticism. Creativity is, in fact, a subversive act. Artists, poets, writers and thinkers are

firstly persecuted by governments, which attempt to control people with unlawful laws. The spirit of artists will always remain uncompromising. Freedom is the seed of creation. Any attempt to mitigate that freedom will damage not only the artists but the whole society and the cultural structure of history.

It is through poems, literature, music, the visual arts, performing arts that history is shaped, narrated and retained. That which has afflicted sorrowfully a generation is presented in an art form as a testimony, as an offer and as a remainder. It may be art that pains us, art which carries a humanness beyond frontiers. This art will be understood even when words would be spoken in unfamiliar languages.

The art of TAMOANCHAN has traveled as far as Hiroshima and has been exhibited together with the words and testimonies of remarkable refugees , among them, His Holiness, The Dalai Lama. "From Hiroshima to the World, Art and Photography Exhibition" was presented in August of 1995 and was organized by the Hiroshima Joshin-in Volunteer (HJV) with the help and collaboration of Hiroshima International Relations Organization, Hiroshima Peace Culture Foundation, The Chugoku Shimbun, World Friendship Center, Asia-Africa Environment Protection Center, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Marcus Weight and Claudia Bernardi.

Every art piece created, every art exhibition presented is a social event which attempts to reach through the power of poetry and empathy realities that may be unbridgeable otherwise. The roll of art in society expands from the creation of the artifact, *fact of art*, to the reception of the artwork within the community creating a new paradigm to further comprehend the human condition. The cultural power of art cannot be negated. The importance of creativity must not be underestimated in the process of reconstruction. To understand the spiritual discourse, which gives birth to all art forms may constitute a new parameter to imagine a more compassionate future rooted in the persistence of hope.

Claudia Bernardi
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