

# Dossier | The Political Image: Art and Disappearance

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## The Political Image: Art and Disappearance

By Adolfo Vera

The starting point for any examination of disappearance must be a reconsideration of contemporary political theory. Disappearance, in our era, has created an upheaval in the very fabric of temporality, if one considers this temporality from the point of view of a modern “philosophy of history.” The teleological linearity of events, a continuity of processes—or at least the superposed layers of knowledge-power—constitutes “our” experience of historical beings: a genealogy and archaeology of knowledge. Disappearance, an event that can go so far as to cancel any event, has a radically disruptive effect upon “our” experience. It is the ultimate “anti-event,” the disaster event. (1) One might say, with Jean-Louis Déotte, that what finally manages to “interrupt history” isn’t a “Messiah” or communism, but, under the aegis of Catastrophe, the fact that a police tactic used from the time of the Nazis right up to the military regimes of Argentina and Chile, and including the French in Algeria, (2) can manage to make a woman, man, or child cleanly disappear, vanish, without leaving a trace. The disappeared come back only as ghosts, to haunt our “social peace,” to demonstrate the very impossibility of community. What happened? Where did the event die? Political thinking must then shift toward ghosts, develop into a “political philosophy of the ghost,” the central intent of any political thought concerning what might today be a “post-catastrophe” community.

I shall begin by setting down what I will call a “political image.” A political image (not all images are political) is an image that takes into account the political process that annihilates meaning, what Déotte and others call the catastrophe, (3) that is, the radical crisis of meaning subsequent to the horror experienced by thousands of victims of totalitarian regimes from Auschwitz to the present. Since Auschwitz, any notion of political community can only be articulated, understood, or postulated around this central issue: the disaster of meaning, the very core of politics as an exercise (that is always paradoxical and based on misunderstanding, according to Rancière) of a community’s being-together, due to the collapse of the possibility of writing history. Images that are not born from this issue are not “political images.” They may be advertising, scientific or mental images but in no case are they political images. This type of image, arising from rather specific determinants, is one definition of the political fact of “us” (this “us,” says Lyotard, must always be in quotes, due to the crisis in conventional means of inscribing existence, i.e., history, narrative, technique) (4) that was specifically developed, worked on, and created in contemporary art. As we know, the clearest effect of Adorno’s famous sentence about the impossibility of art after Auschwitz was precisely that art subsequently functioned solely on what I, following Blanchot, would call disaster. From this perspective, the political philosophy of ghosts can

only be a philosophy of art “after the era of disappearance.”

It isn't a coincidence that photography became the most significant “artform” after Auschwitz. Photography—the art of the trace—developed most intensely when the fundamental political problem was precisely an “absence of traces.” After Auschwitz, we find ourselves in the presence of a myth written in the first century of our era: Pliny the Elder's story of Dibutade seems charged with political connotations. For friends and relatives of the disappeared, whether in Argentina or in Chile, photography and its essential qualities— anachronistic temporality, technical reproducibility, the processing of its images as an Index —are an attempt to enable the experience of the that-has-been, of showing and demonstrating to the broken community, with each new execution of the ritual, that its children, spouses, parents had a face, a body, a name—in a word, had left a trace. It was a matter then of returning, with each iteration, to the Dibutade ritual, of tracing on a support (wall, paper) the inscription of a body in order to remember it, to know it had existed, that it had lived. Just as Dibutade had asked her lover to hold still as she marked his contour on the wall—the line and trace of memory—in order to set an image of his presence against the reality of his disappearance, so too have kith and kin of the disappeared tried to inscribe, in paradoxical gestures laden with impossibilities, the “reality” of the disappeared. In the famous siluetazo of the early 1980s, for instance, thousands of Argentinians traced anonymous silhouettes on hundreds of walls in the city to protest the dictatorship. This ritual was transformed into something almost epic—“almost,” because the epic no longer has currency in a broken community deprived of any clear destination by the conjunction of terror and rampant capitalism—, standing before the power of disappearance to show and to demonstrate that these people had existed.

We must therefore identify the political moment, in the sense that we have defined the political image, of theories on photography that have emphasized the indicial nature of the photographic image. One may especially recall the work of Rosalind Krauss, Philippe Dubois, and Roland Barthes.

The philosophical question itself goes further still. What is the relationship between trace, event, and inscription (and thus inscription surface)? May we consider disappearance as an event? Would it not rather be (as I suggested earlier) an anti-event, the event that cancels any possibility of an event, since it annuls the possibility of inscribing a trace on a surface by cancelling the trace and the surface (the body and the imprint of the body)? Properly speaking, are the friends' and relatives' efforts, the ritual practices (dances, singing, masquerades), not gestures and political actions meant to conjure the event—the disappearance and the life before the disappearance—, to inscribe it onto new surfaces, like monuments, rituals in the streets, institutions (Fundación Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, Asociación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos)?

At the same time, disappearance may be understood as the interruption of the social processes of individuation, as a radical crisis of that which enables the formation of “community.” In such a moment, we must reconsider Gilbert Simondon’s notion of psychosocial individuation. (5) His theory allows us to see how the fact of disappearance will utterly crush what one may consider the nuclear process in the constitution of a community and an individuality (knowing that an individuality cannot constitute itself without involvement of the community and vice-versa). Every community, says Simondon, is constituted from a process of social “meta-stability,” i.e., of constant crisis in the subjects’ social identification with the institutions, laws, and norms that sustain shared existence. Metastability suggests that sociability is generated through crisis rather than through stability. Disappearance, however, destroys this metastability, since it destroys the very possibility of an individual’s recognition among others as a member of a community. In this “time of disappearance,” our societies must live with ghosts, that is, to use the words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, with the dead who are not “fully dead,” who come inexorably back toward us—the “intolerable” dead. (6) Simondon himself insisted on the fact that, facing the dead, the process of individuation doesn’t stop, since the dead continue with us, not only with the funerary rites, but also from all that may be considered part of the social process of recollection. Yet, following Simondon, one may conclude that a crucial anthropological characteristic—the individuation relationship between the community of the living and the “community” of the dead—will be interrupted by disappearance. It will disrupt the very process of psychosocial individuation. Disappearance therefore leaves the subject in a pre-individual moment, which Simondon says is the moment of pure affectivity. In societies that develop under regimes whose political strategies of terror include the systematic practice of disappearance there arises what Déotte called “social disindividuation,” that is, the experience of a psychosocial affectivity rooted in anxiety and terror.

[Translated from the French by Ron Ross]

#### NOTES

1. See Maurice Blanchot, *L’écriture du désastre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980).
2. See Jean-Louis Déotte, Alain Brossat, *L’époque de la disparition. Esthétique et politique* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2000).
3. See Jean-Louis Déotte, *Oubliez! Les ruines, L’Europe, le Musée* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1994).
4. See Jean-François Lyotard, *L’inhumain. Causeries sur le temps* (Paris: Galilée, 1988).
5. See Gilbert Simondon, *L’individuation psychique et collective* (Paris: Aubier, 1989).
6. See Nicolas Abraham, Maria Torok, *Le verbier de l’homme aux loups* (Paris: Flammarion, 2007); *L’écorce et le noyau* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006).