Feeling Photography

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THE KINDERHEIM PHOTOS

I look for my childhood self in two tattered school photographs from the early years of my family’s refuge in La Paz, Bolivia, and I see a somber-looking boy in the midst of a group of unsmiling children and adults.

The two photos (figures 10.1 and 10.2) have my father’s captions on the back, written in German—“Schule [school] Miraflores 1944” and “Poldi 5 Jahre [five years old], Kindergarten.” Both were taken outdoors, most probably on the same day, in a stone-paved yard in front of a weather-beaten, discolored, whitewashed adobe wall with a scattering of houses and the cloud-heavy Altiplano mountain plateau visible in the background. The building where we lived in an apartment overlooking the school is on the immediate right. The photo depicting a larger assemblage (figure 10.2) shows all the day students and teachers in the Kinderheim—the Children’s Home sponsored for Jewish refugee children in La Paz by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in New York; the other photo (figure 10.1) shows only my kindergarten class, our teachers and their aides, as well as some two dozen preschool infants who attended the institution during their parents’ working hours.
Nowadays I recognize only one other child in the photos, the light blond Yoram Warmuth, who would later become one of my best friends in La Paz, standing next to me, and Ilse Herz, the young teacher’s assistant (second from the left in figure 10.1) whom I met again almost fifty years later in Ardsley, New York, and interviewed for my book, Hotel Bolivia. I can no longer recall the name of the teacher wearing sunglasses nor of the stern-looking woman on the far left of the kindergarten picture (figure 10.1). But I do recall that my mother later revealed to me that the stern one was the teacher who told my parents that I was a difficult child, perhaps even a slow one, because I was unresponsive to the routines and indifferent to the rules that the Kinderheim’s adults tried to establish for us.

The majority of us in the kindergarten class—as well as our teachers—are wearing white apron-coats, the requisite uniform in Bolivian schools at the time. Unlike those of more elite institutions, our uniforms bear no identifying school insignia proudly displaying the school’s name and motto. While they served to protect our clothing underneath, their primary purpose, no doubt, is to mask differences among us: the slightly better-off children and those from more impoverished homes are equalized behind the apron-coats and their depersonalizing whiteness.

But what is most striking about my school images is the fact that hardly a person in them is smiling. Almost everyone looks solemn, serious, largely cheerless and unhappy. This, by the early 1940s, had nothing to do with photographic technology—with slow film or slow shutter speeds that in earlier decades had made it easier to take photos of serious faces than of those with harder-to-hold-still-and-sustain natural smiles. Nor was it reflective of an older, more formal portrait convention that encouraged dignified expressiveness over a seemingly grinning frivolity. The cheerlessness in my two photos may well have mirrored the general bleak atmosphere of the Kinderheim—a joyless institution in my memory, whose staff seemed much more concerned with establishing order and maintaining discipline among us children than with our instruction or imaginative potential. And it most definitely reflected the general gloom and uncertainty pervading the times—the ongoing world war and the repeatedly traumatic confirmations of the horrors that would later be named the Holocaust.

The fact, of course, was that all of us in these photos were either recent refugees or (like me) children of recent refugees born in the land that had granted our parents a haven. All the teachers, their assistants, even the older children in the group had emigrated from Europe only a few years earlier and had directly or indirectly experienced Nazi intimidation and persecution in the homelands from which they were displaced. On a daily basis, news about the war and the fate of relatives and loved ones left behind made its way to Bolivia and fueled our parents’ conversations and apprehensions. There was certainly no way that their tears and sorrows could be hidden from us: in our family, it was during the months that we lived in the Miralroles apartment above the Kinderheim that we received confirmation of the killing of my father’s half-sister, Gisi, her husband, Leopold, and their youngest daughter, Rosi, after their transport from Vienna to Riga. The gloom in which we children were enveloped pierced even so conventional an image as our school photographs.

**WHY SCHOOL PHOTOS?**

The Bolivian Kinderheim photographs mark a particular moment of transition for the children, their parents, and the place where they were taken. But despite the traumatic and traumatizing circumstances impinging on everyone depicted within them, they do conform in every sense with school photographs snapped elsewhere, even in happier times. They reveal specific memorial capacities yet also underscore qualities characterizing this genre of photography more generally. Loss, childhood vulnerability, the social integrationist effects of schooling, the process of creating group identities—all these are reflected within them.

Taken by commercial photographers with seemingly few if any artistic aspirations and little desire to deviate from formulaic representations, school photographs everywhere share many of the same features. A group of students, standing or sitting on benches or by their desks (or standing outdoors, in rows, near the school building, as in Leo’s) all face forward and look at the photographer. The photographer and the camera setup are instrumental in arranging the assemblage. The arrangement is often focused around a centrally positioned teacher (or teachers)—authority figures whose inclusion marks a difference between school photos and other institutional group images. The teacher’s presence, like the photographer’s, serves as a disciplining force, enjoining the children to assume postures and gazes that demonstrate their acquiescence to a group identity imposed through their membership in a specific school grade or class. In this regard, of course, the larger national matrix in which a school—and, by extension, every school class—is embedded plays a key ideological role. Accredited by the municipality and/or the state, schools are the institutions that teach children to read and write, and that provide them with elements of a national literary and scientific culture and, especially, of its versions of history.

254 Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer
They are also the sites that instruct students in rules of acceptable behavior and morality, tutor them in civic responsibility, and instill respect for authority and the established economic order. In addition, they reflect pedagogies of social life, imparting useful lessons about differences in gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and religion. They may also reveal trajectories of failure and success, blockage and advancement, as well as factors shaping these in given communities. While aided in this task of ideological inculcation by other institutions—by the family, the law, the media, and the arts—schools are primary agencies in shaping and reinforcing values, outlooks, beliefs, and myths that constitute citizenship in the society where they are located. Even small, externally funded schools like the Kinderheim in La Paz conform to this general ideological function.¹

In this regard, class photos, like school report cards and diplomas, can be considered as a form of certification available to all persons depicted within them—a confirmation of grade level, grade ascendency, and of participation in a trajectory of socialization defining citizenship and national belonging. Each image is both a form and an instrument—visual evidence—of a commonality among the children in a class, of a standardization often reinforced and highlighted by the mandated wearing of school uniforms, by dress and hair codes, and by other means of minimizing or erasing differences. Leo’s kindergarten photos attest to this: in them, the children, together with their refugee teachers (native German speakers required by Bolivian state authorities to provide instruction in Spanish), are collectively blended and incorporated into a unit. Differences among them—in sociability, creativity, and intelligence, and between compliant boys and girls and “difficult ones”—are rendered invisible by the photographers’ conventions. At the same time, however, these differences can become discernible to those who are a part of the school community.

Where school photos are taken they may, for some children, be the only available photographic record of their childhood, showing an institutionally constructed identity, rather than a personal or familial one. But in Bolivia and, no doubt, in many other places, this form of photographic certification of social or national integration was—and certainly still is—not universally available. Rural schools with largely Indian populations—a significant number of impoverished Bolivian schools, in other words—most probably did not have the resources and equipment to photograph their students in the 1940s. When children from such impoverished areas were photographed individually or in their classrooms in subsequent decades, the photographing agencies might well have been nongovernmental organizations using such images as a form of advertisement, to generate donations from abroad, and thereby mobilizing the discursive vocabularies of humanitarian organizations rather than official state-sponsored forms of image making.²

The group sameness and the uniformity of pose desired in class photos—features consciously shaped during the photograph’s preliminary setup—tend to impede but not altogether eliminate the possibilities of subversion by individuals in the class. Subjects may try to fool around before or even while the photos are being taken, but the school images that tend to survive are, for the most part, the ones that record the most uniform, smiling or deadpan, look on all the faces. School photographs thus do more than certify a step in the trajectory of ideological incorporation. They also instantiate the institutional process that interpellates the individual into a group identity. And as such, the instrument that creates them—the camera with which they are taken—both documents and participates in the process of socialization that integrates children into the dominant worldview.

Unlike portraits, which, in Hans Georg Gadamer’s terms, produce an “increase of being,” a “surplus” that consolidates the uniqueness of the individual subject that is being depicted, class photos tend to negate that uniqueness and, in that sense, become “antiportraits” structured by the school’s institutional gaze.³ Indeed, their sameness and ubiquity would seem to make school photos largely unremarkable. How then can we explain their pervasiveness in family albums, their common display on memorial websites and at reunions, their frequent reproduction in communal histories and in memoirs, and their appeal to numerous artists who reframe them in new images and installations?

On the one hand, of course, because they depict individuals in group settings, school photos serve as evidence of belonging that can become a powerful confirmation in shifting political circumstances, or in situations of war, persecution, or genocide. Class photos thus not only become potent media for anyone wishing to memorialize and mourn a world of yesterday but also effective mnemonic aids helping to identify particular living classmates—as well as age-mates who have disappeared (or have been violently removed) from our midst. In spite of their conventionality, they also provide some contextual information about the school, the historical moment, and the cultural values of the time when they were taken. As archival documents that carry incontrovertible evidence of past existence and previous acceptance, they assert “we were here” and “we were here in this grouping.” They
can thus become powerful emotive as well as political vehicles combating forgetting, the erasure of violence, and the exclusion or eradication of some members from the group.

Like all photographs, moreover, class photos have the capacity of recording and inscribing contradictions that the conventionality and uniformity of poses, middle-distance camera angles, and institutional sanctions would seem to exclude. As Leo’s reading of his Bolivia school images shows, every group image, assembling a number of diverse individuals, inscribes a greater range of meanings than the photographer would have intended to record or the situation of the image would have accommodated. These meanings and effects may be individual or collective but, in either case, they exceed the narrow institutional frames of the image and the act of interpellation that school photos are intended to perform. It is in the retrospective act of revisiting, visually, scenes from the past more generally, and from childhood in particular, that such failures of interpellation and of uniformity emerge most clearly. School pictures are evidentiary archives of recognition, to be sure, but they are also archives of attachment—to the past, to a former self, to a sense of belonging—and they are archives of resistance and detachment at the same time. They are both representational, official records, and antirepresentational, resonant documents that can transmit affect over space and time.

If we thus read class photos as a subset of the more encompassing genre of group portraits—paintings and photographs of guilds, army units, clubs, unions, and youth groups, for example—we can speculate more generally on the resonances they might evoke. Doing this, we might see them in the terms introduced by the art historian Aby Warburg, who, in his “Mnemosyne-Atlas,” mapped a large set of “pre-established expressive forms” that carry and transmit affect across time, constituting a transgenerational memorial repertoire in visual form. If class photos fall into such a category of expressive forms, then their “emotional life” (to use Jill Bennett’s term) would be transmissible. By recalling the subordination of individuality to group membership and incorporation into a social and civic assemblage, they convey both the desire to belong to the group and the resistance against the overtly or indiscernibly coercive submergence of the individual within a class collective. This tension between individuality and transindividual anonymity, between assimilation to the group, on the one hand, and subversion and resistance, on the other, is characteristic of the emotional life of class photos.

Since class photos, like all photos, moreover, freeze a moment in time, they also serve to measure change over time, and to recall past incidents, when they are viewed and reviewed years, perhaps decades, later. In Jeff Wall’s terms, their temporality is both “liquid,” immersed, as he says, in the “incalculable,” and “dry,” as a result of the optical photographic apparatus associated with modern vision and its evidentiary power. Connected to the complexities and vulnerabilities of childhood and youth, they keep developing, as it were, activating and reactivating memory and affect in shifting present circumstances.

Inspired, perhaps, by these qualities, artists as diverse as Carrie Mae Weems (U.S., The Hampton Project), Lorie Novak (U.S., Past Lives), Marjane Satrapi (Iran, Persepolis), Marlene Dumas (South Africa, The Teacher [sub al]), Tomoko Sawada (Japan, School Days), Ruud van Empel (Netherlands, Generation I), Sandra Ramos (Cuba, Islas), Mirta Kupferminc (Argentina, Noche de los lápices), Christian Boltanski (France, Lycée Chazes), and Marcelo Brodsky (Argentina, Buena Memoria) have turned to class photos as bases for important artworks and memorial installations in the late 1980s, 1990s, and over the course of this past decade. For them, class photos from their own or from found archives have constituted documents that can be reframed so as to bring out the contradictions they contain and thus to mine their complex affective and memorial possibilities.

We want to focus here on Christian Boltanski and Marcelo Brodsky, two artists who, though working in very different geographic, political, and historical contexts, and employing class photos in radically different registers, mobilize the emotional life of these images as well as their evidentiary power as core memorial, ethical, and aesthetic media. Read comparatively and contrapuntally, their work exposes the fragility of memory in the aftermath of historical trauma and challenges the very ideology of national incorporation and citizenship that school pictures are meant to project and, unofficially and almost imperceptibly, to confirm.

**SCHOOL PHOTOS AS ARCHIVES OF LOSS: CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI**

Notably, Christian Boltanski, one of France’s best-known artists of the post–World War II generation, has used class and group photos from found archives in a number of his memorial installations to forge an influential aesthetic of memory and mourning (see plate 9). Although his found images originated in very different places—in Jewish schools in Vienna, Berlin, and Paris in the 1930s, and in a French school in Dijon in the 1970s—the installations in which Boltanski has employed them are quite similar. They all consist of individual faces cropped out of the group photos and rephoto-
graphed and enlarged by him to a point where they have lost their resolution. Boltanski then sets these face enlargements, now blurred of their specificity, into new groupings on walls, or he mounts them on biscuit boxes, or reprints them on white sheets, and he illuminates each one of them (sometimes quite aggressively) using simple incandescent light bulbs with conspicuously exposed electrical cords. The evocation of interrogation lamps and the fear they provoke is hard to miss.

Diverse sites have hosted these impressive installations: galleries, museums, churches, chapels, even train stations—spaces for works that Boltanski suggestively titled *Archives, Monuments, Reconstitutions, Lessons of Darkness, Reserves, Reliques, Autels* (Altars). Two of them he named more explicitly *Le Lycée Chasses* and *Les Enfants de Dijon*. Despite these evocative memorial labels, however, none of his school-photo installations seem, in fact, to evoke memory and loss within any specific historical context. His lit-up faces, enlarged, blurred, and indistinct, have had their indexical connection severed from the original school image from which they were cropped. They have become phantasmic—memory icons—that trigger an affective response within us, the viewers. Nothing, for example, distinguishes the blurry images derived by the artist from school photos of Jewish students in Vienna or Berlin in the increasingly life-threatening 1930s from those created from images of schoolchildren in Dijon in the 1970s. As Boltanski himself has stated, his art is not “about” but “after” the Holocaust. And, in that aftermath, certain artistic tropes evoke and provoke the affect of melancholy in a virtually free-floating, iconic, rather than referential, manner.

In using class photos, Boltanski both acknowledges and reveals the collective anonymity inherent in the genre—the absorption of the individual into the group—and he underscores that anonymity by embedding the images within an elegiac structure. But by disaggregating the group images, he also separates the children from each other, marking the dissolution of the group in catastrophic times, and recalling the division and isolation that times of extremity can impose on group members who are forcibly separated from each other.

Class photos, Boltanski has said, are inherently “so sad.” We look at one of them and we know: someone has failed, someone has not lived up to her promise, someone has died. Through the more specific labels “Vienna,” “Berlin,” “Purim” (a Jewish festival of deliverance in which children wear costumes and masks), and the dates, “1930s,” this inherent sadness may then be grounded and compounded by our historical knowledge of events yet to come. But, while the particular aesthetic elements of the installations may evoke the fate that Jewish children suffered during the Holocaust, the artist has not granted his subjects an individual story. Ghostlike projections, they haunt the archival photographs from which they were cropped, as well as us, who can no longer look at these images innocently. Indeed, even if, in fact, some of the children in the school photos used by Boltanski survived the war and genocide, he has figured them as dead, or as marked by a death they were not supposed to evade.

Ernst van Alphen has criticized Boltanski’s representational strategies for producing what he terms a “Holocaust effect” that dangerously repeats, to the point of reenactment, some of the Nazi strategies of persecution and torture. He cites the resonant use of lights, cords, boxes, and other gestures of dehumanizing classification. In contrast to this assessment, however, one can read Boltanski’s strategies not as forms of reenactment, but as modes of protest and exposure, provoking not merely an elegiac sense of loss or fear induced by the lights and cords, but a form of political anger and outrage. Indeed, such a reading endows his memorial installations with a poignant irony. For in using children’s faces abstracted from the very particular context of class photographs, the artist levels powerful accusations against regimes that would expose children to persecution rather than protection—states that would, on the one hand, appear to incorporate children into nationality and citizenship through schooling and ideological inculcation, but that, on the other hand, would target a group among them (unspecified but, by implication, Jewish) for deportation and murder. The use of class photos, moreover, also permits Boltanski to suggest how in some situations the institutions associated with the Jewish community were used as effective agents of the state’s lethal intent. By labeling his installations and implicitly identifying his sources as class photos in Jewish schools in Vienna, Berlin, and Paris during a decade of increasingly vicious Nazi anti-Semitism, Boltanski suggests that the school itself provides the evidence of Jewish identity that would have made it difficult for any child in the photo to hide or to pass.

*Lycée Chasses*, the first of Boltanski’s installations based on class photos and part of his series *Lessons of Darkness*, clearly reveals the complex ways in which the artist utilizes archives in his work (see plate 9). Boltanski found the *Lycée Chasses* photo in the 1984 volume *Die Mazesinsel*, edited by the Austrian Jewish filmmaker Ruth Beckermann, an illustrated history of Vienna’s largely Jewish Second District from 1918 to 1938 (figure 10.3). Un-
conventionally, the young people in this photo are anything but conformist or anonymous. Leo Glückselig, the student in the center of the top row (who donated the image to Beckermann), acts out a humorous scenario, but several other boys also display irreverence. Meanwhile, their teacher remains serious and almost dour in the middle of the front row. This image, with its eye-catching antics, certainly contrasts with the many class photos where individuality and difference have been suppressed for the sake of uniformity and group identity. Yet, in selecting this photo for his installations, Boltanski seems to acknowledge and even contest the limits of his own strategies of anonymity and generalization, gesturing toward another aspect of class photographs—their potential function as stimulants for the reclamation of individual identities and stories from a collectivized mass. Even the overly enlarged and blurred faces in his Lycée Chazes installation do, in fact, distinguish themselves by their different facial expressions. Irony, humor, mockery—these are some of the strategies of individualization that persist even in the most phantasmic aesthetic projections. And, by including these differences, Boltanski takes his images out of the anonymously elegiac. The smiling and ironic gestures and expressions on these young faces provide a point of entry, an affective trigger for the viewer who, in the aftermath of genocidal destruction, can return to a "before" to recognize a human particularity in them that defies erasure.

SCHOOL PHOTOS AS ARCHIVES OF ATTACHMENT:
MARCELO BROSĐSKY

These strategies, and the range of affective responses they elicit—mourning and melancholy, anger and outrage, nostalgia and protectiveness of children—emerge even more clearly when we compare Christian Boltanski’s memorial installations to those of the Argentinian artist Marcelo Brodsky. When we turn to Brodsky’s uses of class photos, we are precisely struck by the very different memorial registers in which he and Boltanski participate, and by the different ways in which they invoke or contest the tension between anonymity and individuality inherent in the genre of class pictures. Although nearly contemporaneous, and although they both use images of a time “before” to mark catastrophic loss caused by war and persecution, the memorial works of these artists follow quite divergent chronologies. Boltanski’s work is, as he has insisted, defined by its temporal belatedness in relation to the Holocaust: his is an inherited memory. Brodsky, on the other hand, began working on the period known as the “Dirty War” in Argentina almost immediately upon his return from exile in Barcelona in the late 1980s, just a few years after the end of the military dictatorship that had lasted from 1976 to 1983, and during which his brother and many of his contemporaries were tortured, murdered, or relegated to the realm of the desaparecidos. One wonders if it took such a significantly shorter time to produce this work precisely because of the touchstone that Holocaust memory had already set, and the process of mourning—artistic, ethical, psychological—it had already explored. It is tempting to jump to this conclusion, but we would caution against doing so too rapidly.

When Latin American artists like Brodsky cite European memorial tropes that evolved in the aftermath of the Holocaust, they may certainly wish to relate the trauma and memory of recent dictatorships to the aftereffects of the genocide in European memory and memorialization. But they also desire to mark the very different temporal, psychic, and political legacies of their own, local, situation. It is significant, for example, that Brodsky asked Andres Huyssen, known for his eloquent writing on the cultural and artistic memory of Nazism and World War II, to write the introduction to his artist’s book, Nexo. Describing his encounter with Brodsky’s installation Buena Memoria during his first visit to Argentina in the late 1990s, Huyssen claims,
Brodsky’s work spoke to me immediately since I was able to connect it to my own earlier writings on German culture after Auschwitz and the Third Reich as well as to an earlier global discourse about historical memory. I was struck by the fact that Holocaust discourse seemed to cast its shadow over the debates over the desaparecidos in Latin America. . . . [Through] the productive inscription of certain tropes, images and moral evaluations . . . [the] Holocaust . . . has functioned like an international prism that energizes the local discourses about [the Dirty War].

For some viewers, no doubt, the exhibition Huyssen saw at the Recoleta Cultural Center in Buenos Aires would have been reminiscent of the work of Christian Boltanski and others. But it would be a mistake to see Brodsky’s aesthetic choices as merely European inspired or influenced. In using portraits of individuals and groups in his memorial work, Brodsky is also responding to the monumental photographic iconography defining local memorial practices pioneered by the protest actions of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo (the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo) in Buenos Aires and their use of their disappeared children’s photographs.

Notably, the mothers of the disappeared began to use official identification (ID) photos—required of all citizens in Argentina—as evidence of their children’s existence and as a demand for their reappearance. Magnified copies of ID photos kept by families became instruments of proof—a way both to bring to visual attention the military government’s acts of abduction during the Dirty War, and to impede systematic efforts by its agents to erase the records and images of its victims and to deny their very existence. But, in excess of their institutional conventionality, the ID photos also became, in these circumstances, archives of attachment and loss. In their weekly protests (which are still ongoing), the Madres made it a practice to circle around the Plaza de Mayo, a focal site of Argentine political life, with large blown-up copies of ID photos of their missing children strapped to their bodies. In so doing, as Diana Taylor has indicated, the mothers’ very bodies are turned into “billboards” and “conduits of memory” that simultaneously identify the missing person and refuse to allow her or him to be forgotten.

From their earliest display in this manner, and throughout the continuation of the weekly demonstrations to this very day, the identification photographs of the disappeared have also been activated in a number of other ways in different memorial contexts. They have been carried in demonstra-

tions as memorial “placeholders” for the desaparecidos by the u-110s, the organization of the children of the disappeared—both by children born before their parents’ abductions and raised by grandparents or other relatives, or those born in prisons or concentration camps. And they have been used artistically as instruments of detection and recognition. The photography exhibit Memoria Gfrica de las Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo (Pictorial Memory of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo), for example, which was held in Buenos Aires in 2001 and in New York in 2007 (as part of a larger exhibition called The Disappeared), included a collaborative installation, Identity, consisting of 224 blown-up ID photos of young couples that were expecting a baby when they were captured by the military. Installed along the walls of the gallery space, the horizontal lineup of these images was interrupted by 132 mirrors whose function it was to invite and provoke visitors of a certain age who suspect that they might be adopted children of disappeared parents. Could a given individual depicted in the installation be their lost mother or father? Looking in the mirror: is there a physical resemblance? Comparing features, visitors could thus become part of a “genealogical tree” set up within the installation. In this respect, as Taylor observed, ID photos, serving as evidentiary media for the discovery of possible kinship, functionally complement DNA tests that many young Argentines have attempted to use to determine their origins. Both "work to reappear those who have been erased from history itself."

Similarly, Marcelo Brodsky employs photographs in his work less for purposes of identification and possible familial resemblance than to mediate and elicit affective responses on the part of his viewers that can be put to political use. His best-known installation, Buena Memoria, originates in a class picture. Yet unlike Boltanski’s displays, the basis for this work is not a found school photograph, personally unrelated to the artist. Instead, he features the photo of the first-year students, sixth division, of the Colegio Nacional Buenos Aires, the artist’s own class picture (Figure 10.4).

This class photograph, in its original iteration, is quite conventional. The depicted children are lined up in four rows facing forward and smiling; some are looking off to the side. One girl in the front row holds up a sign with the school’s name, the class, and the year, 1967. There is a great deal of individual variation in dress and expression—no school uniforms, no standardization of appearance—and, although the setting is institutional, the mood of the picture is, within the confines of the genre, quite informal.

In the installation, the picture is intact but blown up to huge proportions (Brodsky labels it a "gigantograph"). Unlike in Boltanski’s works, the class
remains together, and the individual children’s features are not distorted. But each of the children’s bodies is inscribed with a brief text written on the photo that connects the past to the present. Some faces are circled and others are circled and crossed out. The text is simple, abbreviated: “Silvia is very tall as always. She is a physical therapist”; “Carlos is a graphic designer”; “Claudio was killed fighting the military in December 1975.”

In the gallery and museum installations of Buena Memoria, and in the catalogs that were published in conjunction with them, Brodsky placed individual portraits of the class members, now adults, next to or holding the original class photo (figure 10.5). Accompanying these individual photos are longer labels describing the classmates’ adult lives as well as images cropped from the 1967 class picture. This multilayered installation emphasizes both the passage of time and the continuity between past and present for those who survived in Buenos Aires or returned there in the aftermath of the Dirty War. The particular stories of these survivors, and their adult images juxtaposed with their faces as schoolchildren, underscore the poignant loss of those who disappeared. Eliciting the affect of loss and mourning, they align spectators, in Jill Bennett’s words, “with the subjective position of those who grieve.”

It is clear here, of course, that in building his installation around photos of identifiable individuals, Brodsky is inserting himself into the line of commemoration and protest particular to Argentina’s Dirty War. He acknowledges and cites the role of photographs in the Madres’, Abuelas’, and Hijos’ protest actions. But, in basing his artwork on a school picture, he also introduces a new and somewhat different form of continuity and commemoration. Like the 1D pictures that have dominated the Argentine memorial landscape, school photos that have been widely disseminated among students and their extended families provide a form of evidence that is uniquely immune to destruction by state-supported perpetrators. The classmates who were disappeared continue to live in their age-mates’ memories, and their class photos serve as forms of certification of their continued presence and as reminders of a life that was violently interrupted. For the Madres, Abuelas, and Hijos, memory is genealogical, part of a ver-
tical, familial chain of transmission, but in Brodsky’s installation it becomes part of a communal, generational, and affiliative web of mourning and resistance. In Buena Memoria the violent mark of erasure on the skinlike surface of the photographic print recalls the violence of selecting individuals out of the social body with the intention of annihilating them and their memory. The lines etched into the surface of the print transmit that violence, puncturing us as viewers. But they transmit defiance and the determination to call public attention to the murder of their classmates as well. As in the weekly demonstrations in which the Madres carry images of disappeared daughters and sons strapped to their bodies, the classmates in Brodsky’s installation also become embodied signifiers of loss. The gesture in which they grasp their class photo, literally holding their living and disappeared classmates’ memory in their arms and close to their body, touching the photo and permitting it to touch them, elicits multisensory modes of apprehension. It transforms that photo into a powerful memorial document. Their touch elicits a haptic and emotive look from the installation’s spectators, who, in Jill Bennett’s words, are thus moved to “bear witness to losses and to confront the reality of political murder.”21 It is that move from personal grief to the political that transforms mourning into anger, defiance, and resistance.

In its first installation in 1996, Buena Memoria was addressed to a very specific audience, the then-current students of the Colegio Nacional Buenos Aires, where the original class photo was taken. Titled Puente de la memoria (Memory Bridge), it was situated in the hallways of the Colegio as part of a ceremony to commemorate the disappeared students of the school. When it was installed, Brodsky took photos of current students reflected in the glass that framed the large class photo as they looked at the faces behind it. And he questioned many of them about their responses to the work. “I think when one sees a picture of any of the kids, one cannot deny that it might be one of one’s own classmates,” Andrés, one of the current students, commented to the artist. Another, Frederico, noted, “When I saw the picture of those students posing for their picture, I immediately identified with them.”22

In provoking such an identificatory haptic look—a look not elicited by Boltanski with his phantasmic installations—Brodsky’s artwork reflects the ongoing, continuing presence of the Dirty War and its victims in contemporary Argentina. Even to this day, the Madres are walking, the crimes have not been resolved, the perpetrators have not been brought to justice. To be sure, any memorial installation attempting to do justice to this urgency in

Argentina would have to address how the past lives on in the present in a virtually unbroken, continuous memorial chain. It would have to establish the presence of those who were disappeared without record—their ongoing existence within their family and their community—in order to undo their willful and violent erasure.

The 1967 class photo has certainly permitted Brodsky to reanimate the disappeared in “liquid time.” With it, he has kept the dead in vision and maintained the space they have left in the lives of those who survived them. But beyond the group photo, in an additional move toward this political and memorial intent, Brodsky has also drawn on other documents, such as the photo of his best school friend, Martín Bercovich, kidnapped on May 13, 1976, and “still missing.” In the installation, Brodsky features a torn page from his own lined school notebook with its binder holes on the right. A blurred photo featuring a boy in a checkered shirt, holding a camera, is pasted onto the page. Next to the image, we read in a slanted child’s handwriting, “Martín takes a picture of me with his Kodak Fiesta that is just like mine. Chascomús [lagoon] in the background.” Sadly missing from this installation, however, is the adult picture of Martín. “Martín was the best friend I have ever had,” Brodsky writes. “I still dream of him often, and it has been twenty years since they [the military] took him.” By including a snapshot by Martín, one in which he points the camera at Brodsky as a boy, the artist shows Martín as a subject and creator of images, not just as the object of institutional representation. The snapshot, the handwriting, the torn-out notebook page, all embody, animate, and contextualize this image and, with it, Martín’s memory. This personal picture and the child’s handwriting next to it reveal the institutional gaze that still stubbornly clings to school pictures, even when they are reframed and reanimated, and even if they are used in divergent historical and aesthetic contexts.

Brodsky’s and Boltanski’s installations do indeed respond to the distinct needs of the memorial cultures in which they are embedded. Brodsky’s are inserted into a local aesthetic, profoundly referential and realistic, and Boltanski’s into an elegiac, postmodern, and transnational one. Although both artists mobilize the powerful emotional life and the historical and memorial capacities of class photos, they do so in the service of different affective encounters: one identificatory and haptic, the other more distant and haunting.

But, ultimately, we would argue, both use school pictures as vehicles
of political anger and resistance. What happens, they seem to ask, after individuals and groups have been displaced, excluded, killed off by others within the same nation-state and its institutions? In such an aftermath, it is sometimes in the interest of state authorities and of citizens (especially, perhaps, in the interest of ex-perpetrators and their descendants) to try to prevent the past from surfacing to disturb normalcy and reconciliation. Using school pictures—the very objects originally intended to certify belonging and socialization—Boltanski and Brodsky interrupt this move toward oblivion. They disturb the present. And in so doing they trouble and impede the eradication of a troubling past.23

NOTES

1. Leo Spitzer, Hotel Bolivia: The Culture of Memory in a Refuge from Nazism (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000).
2. See Christina Kotchemidova, “Why We Say ‘Cheese’: Producing the Smile in Snap- shot Photography,” Critical Studies in Media Communication 22.1 (2005): 2–25. She argues that Kodak played a key role in shaping cultural habits around photography in the early twentieth century when the technology was becoming widely popular. The idea of consumer happiness, as reflected in smiling visages, was reproduced time and again in advertisements for Kodak and more generally.
3. For the classic formulation of the concept of ideological interpellation and the role of “Ideological State Apparatuses” (the educational institutions, the family, the law, the media, and the arts) in constituting individuals as subjects within the state, see Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” in Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 143–182. For the institutional role of photography and its specific uses in the rationalization of labor in the United States in the last decades of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Elspeth H. Brown, The Corporate Eye: Photography and the Rationalization of American Commercial Culture (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), especially 1–64. Class or school photos were taken early in the history of photography, with some of the oldest surviving daguerreotype examples depicting classes at Princeton University in the 1840s. Class photos as evidence of cultural transformation in the direction of a dominant “Caucasian standard of civilization” were especially made at educational establishments intended for the “civilization” of Native Americans (e.g., Carlisle Indian School, Tulalip Indian School), African Americans (e.g., the Hampton Institute), and various colonial schools in West Africa (e.g., Fourah Bay College and New Town West School, Freetown, Sierra Leone). The photos from the American Indian schools are especially interesting in this respect because many of them were made at two different points in time: when the Native American children were first brought to the school, generally with long hair and wearing their native costumes, and sometime afterward, in school uniforms and with hair cut short and parted.


4. For a number of years we contributed regularly to an NGO in Bolivia to “sponsor” an impoverished boy living in a remote village on the altiplano, near Lake Titicaca. In return we received letters, allegedly written by “our child,” providing us with an update on his life. Each letter also contained a photograph of the child and, occasionally, of him in his class.


10. Personal communication by the artist, New York, October 2009.

11. Brett Ashley Kaplan tells the story of the adult survivor Leo Glückglen, who recognized himself in one of Boltanski’s installations but was shocked to find himself figured as dead. Boltanski is said to have been moved and surprised when Glückglen later contacted him. See Brett Ashley Kaplan, Unwanted Beauty: Aesthetic Pleasure in Holocaust Representation (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 133.


16. The term “placeholder” for these memorial photographic icons is Taylor’s. See Taylor, The Archive and the Repertoire, 161–189, esp. 187.
17. The New York exhibit was held at El Museo del Barrio, February 23–June 17, 2007.
23. Quoted in Brodsky, Buena memoria.
23. For invaluable suggestions on earlier drafts of this essay, we would like to thank Laura Weixel, Elspeth Brown, and Thy Phu, as well as audiences at the “Feeling Photography” conference at University of Toronto, Oldenburg University, Dartmouth College, and the members of the Engendering Archives working group at the Center for the Study of Social Difference at Columbia University. A brief reflection on school photos, Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, “About Class Photos,” appeared in the “About Images” series, Nomadikon, http://www.nomadikon.net/ContentItem.aspx?CI=28.

11 Photographing Objects as Queer Archival Practice
ANN CVETKOVICH

In her 2008 exhibition titled An Archive of Feelings, Tammy Rae Carland endows ordinary objects from domestic life with archival significance by photographing them. Many of the images contain only a single object: a copy of Robin Morgan’s Sisterhood Is Powerful so well thumbed that the binding has broken and the pages are held together by a rubber band (plate 10); a red-and-white checked mug bearing the word “Art”; a playhouse made of pink paper; a pair of heart-shaped chocolate boxes (titled Imperfect Lovers); a thrift-store coin bank with black leather trim and a suggestively queer “Hers and Hers” inscription; a box of love letters tied with a yellow yarn ribbon. The boldly colored objects pop out so vividly against the white background that they seem almost three-dimensional, an effect bolstered by the fact that they are depicted at their actual sizes. The relative invisibility of the frames (which are also white) further contributes to the sense of a magical apparition. The series includes not only photographs of individual objects, but larger images that combine items to create collections: cassette mix tapes with hand-drawn covers; dedication pages torn from books that acknowledge lesbian lovers; items that Carland took from her mother’s house after she died. Although suggestive of collage, the photographed ob-