

S i l v i a A . M a l a g r i n o



T E S T I M O N Y:

I n s c r i p t i o n s i n t h e W a r Z o n e



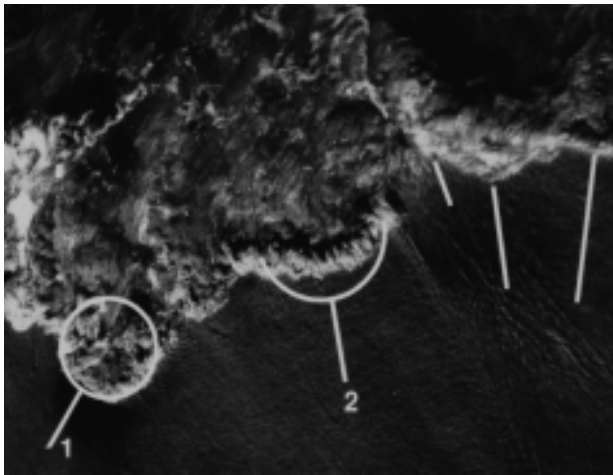
The South/Missing, 1993
Gelatin silverprint, detail from triptych; each panel, 60" x 40"

Developments in the fields of postcolonial and poststructuralist theories in recent years have transformed understandings of the relationships among culture, history, and representation. No longer understood as the transparent documentation of an authentic past, history making can now be seen as a selective process of preservation and omission, in which absences and gaps "speak" as loudly as that which is included. Historians and theorists such as Michel Foucault and Trinh T. Minh-ha have shown that any claim to "truth" or reality is always politically and ideologically motivated, whether consciously or not. Yet truths and histories, however ideologically shaped, have profound, and often devastating, material repercussions. Writing about the relationship between war and representation, Elaine Scarry has noted that there are three "arenas of damage in war, three arenas of alteration: first, embodied persons; second, the material culture or self-extension of persons; third, immaterial culture, aspects of national consciousness, political belief, and self-definition . . . In war, the first and second forms of damage are the means for determining which of the two sides will undergo the third form of damage."¹

Questions about the complex relationships among constructions of the body, material culture, and political ideology pervade Silvia Malagrino's installation "Inscriptions in the War Zone." Combining photographs and text to suggest the heft and solidity of absence, particularly the absent human body, Malagrino's images return again and again to elusive traces and fragments: a fingerprint, a bloodstain, the imprint of a face on cloth. Through her attentive framing of these remnants, Malagrino movingly asserts the body's central location --and dislocation -- in the deployment of political and territorial violence. Words, like photographic images, are shown also to be vestiges. In one triptych, "Pulsing Under the Surface," words are heaped together, like so many bodies in a mass grave, mangled almost beyond recognition. Fragments reveal, in one panel, terms for inflicting bodily pain, in another, the names of body fluids and toxic chemicals, and in another, a jumbled catalogue of personal possessions -- shoes, letters, eyeglasses -- the remains of bodies at once vulnerable and resistant..

The "war zone" of Malagrino's title is both literal and metaphorical, individual and collective. In part, it refers to the history of Argentina, where Malagrino was born and from which she emigrated in 1978. In the period of Argentina's "Dirty War," between 1971 and 1983 almost 9000 people were "disappeared" through state-sponsored terrorism. In "The South," Malagrino draws upon this specific historical context by depicting the tattered photographs posted by Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo as a testament to their abducted loved ones. Yet, at the same time that Malagrino's work refers to specific traumas, it also evokes correspondences among the histories and technologies of other wars. In their emphasis on the accumulation of vestiges of persecuted bodies, these images also summon, for instance, Nazi concentration camps or Cambodian killing fields.

¹ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 113-114.



From: *Inscriptions*, 1993
Gelatin silverprints, detail from installation; 24 panels, each panel 8" x 10"

In "The Hunt," Malagrino juxtaposes different "found" representations -- text, twentieth-century photographs, and an ancient carving -- which, when combined, produce a narrative not only about a history of violence, but also about the urge to represent it and the difficulties and dangers of doing so. Always self-reflective, Malagrino asks how photography and the photographer are implicated in the violence of this "hunt." Through her work, she also asks to what extent she and her medium might play a part in resisting this history.

Malagrino's photographs are never simply referential or documentary, but rather pose fundamental questions about the nature of evidence and documentary photography, about who controls what is seen and what is known. Much of the work collected in "Inscriptions in the War Zone" explores the genre of forensic photography, particularly how this apparently scientific (as opposed to "artistic") use of photography is constructed. These works ask the viewer: What is real? What are the purposes of "official" forensic photography? What makes us believe or deny an image and the story it tells? Why do we trust one image and not the other?

By exploring the conventions of forensic photography, Malagrino re-appropriates the official visual discourses of the state and its authority to document history and "truth." In doing so, she attempts to resist the layers upon layers of erasure upon which that official history has depended. Her work exposes the visual technologies of the state as not simply gathering information "for the record," but instead actively producing evidence for its own construction of history. The installation demonstrates how the seemingly transparent evidence collected by such means is itself a highly mediated and complex representational genre. Appropriating the cool investigatory tone of "crime scene" photographs, Malagrino marks the spaces once occupied by now-lost bodies. The "facts" presented may or may not be fictional. If the official record has historically refused to produce "facts" and evidence of its own crimes (for instance, of the disappeared), then Malagrino is

in part doing just that, creating evidence, and therefore memory, on behalf of the absent bodies. Although she foregrounds questions of absence and loss, Malagrino refuses a stance of nostalgia. She offers her viewer not the comfort of reclaiming and restoring these lost bodies, an impossible task, but rather the attempt to record and claim their absences. Her work encourages the active and questioning presence of the viewer, who brings her or his own personal and collective histories to the installation. One aerial "crime scene" indirectly refers to the Argentinean military's practice of dumping bodies of the disappeared into the ocean. While at first glance this photograph seems to present a precise, scientifically annotated map of the scene, significantly Malagrino provides no actual reference points. This spot of ocean could be anywhere. Further, it is impossible to locate a specific point on the surface of the ocean, whose areas can only be mapped and measured at its depths. In its ambiguity, this image movingly suggests and documents other histories of loss: African slaves who perished in the treacherous middle passage or ocean-borne refugees attempting to flee wars in Vietnam or Liberia. Whether or not this image marks the exact place where bodies were disposed or drowned is beside the point. Insisting on the productive uses of memory for political intervention, Malagrino's work urges us to recognize the permanence of those losses and the importance of creating, even fabricating, evidence in order to remember them.

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Purdue University, 1996

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Front Cover: Untitled, 20" x 20" Inkjet color print, 1996

Back Cover: Video still, 33 sec. digital animation in a loop, 1996

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