

Series Editor: (Volumes 1–37): Peter J. Ucko  
 Academic Series Editors (Volume 38 onwards): Martin Hall and Julian Thomas  
 Executive Series Editor (Volume 38 onwards): Peter Stone

1. *What is an Animal?* T. Ingold (ed.)
2. *The Walking Lander: Patterns of domestication, pastoralism and predation*, J. Clutton-Brock, M.J. Rowlands and C. Tilley (eds)
3. *Dominion and Resistance*, D. Miller, M.J. Rowlands and C. Tilley (eds)
4. *State and Society: The emergence and development of social hierarchy and political centralization*, J. Gledhill, B. Bender and M.T. Larsen (eds)
5. *Who Needs the Past? Indigenous values and archaeology*, R. Layton (ed.)
6. *The Meaning of Things: Material culture and symbolic expression*, I. Hodder (ed.)
7. *Animals into Art*, H. Morphy (ed.)
8. *Conflict in the Archaeology of Living Traditions*, R. Layton (ed.)
9. *Archaeological Heritage Management in the Modern World*, H.F. Cleere (ed.)
10. *Archaeological Approaches to Cultural Identity*, S.J. Shennan (ed.)
11. *Centre and Periphery: Comparative studies in archaeology*, T.C. Champion (ed.)
12. *The Politics of the Past*, P. Gathercole and D. Lowenthal (eds)
13. *Foraging and Farming: The evolution of plant exploitation*, D.R. Harris and G.C. Hillman (eds)
14. *What's New? A closer look at the process of innovation*, S.E. van der Leeuw and R. Torrence (eds)
15. *Hunters of the Recent Past*, L.B. Davis and B.O.K. Reeves (eds)
16. *Signifying Animals: Human meaning in the natural world*, R.G. Willis (ed.)
17. *The Excluded Past: Archaeology in education*, P.G. Stone and R. MacKenzie (eds)
18. *From the Baltic to the Black Sea: Studies in medieval archaeology*, D. Austin and L. Alcock (eds)
19. *The Origins of Human Behaviour*, R.A. Foley (ed.)
20. *The Archaeology of Africa: Food, metals and towns*, T. Shaw, P. Sinclair, B. Andah and A. Okpoko (eds)
21. *Archaeology and the Information Age: A global perspective*, P. Reilly and S. Rabitz (eds)
22. *Tropical Archaeobotany: Applications and developments*, J.G. Hather (ed.)
23. *Sacred Sites, Sacred Places*, D.L. Carmichael, J. Hubert, B. Reeves and A. Schanche (eds)
24. *Social Construction of the Past: Representation as power*, G.C. Bond and A. Gilliam (eds)
25. *The Presented Past: Heritage, museums and*
26. *Time, Process and Structural Transformation in Archaeology*, S.E. van der Leeuw and J. McGlade (eds)
27. *Archaeology and Language I: Theoretical and methodological orientations*, R. Blench and M. Spriggs (eds)
28. *Early Human Behaviour in the Global Context*, M. Petraglia and R. Korisettar (eds)
29. *Archaeology and Language II: Archaeological data and linguistic hypotheses*, R. Blench and M. Spriggs (eds)
30. *Archaeology and Anthropology of Landscape: Shaping your landscape*, P.J. Ucko and R. Layton (eds)
31. *The Prehistory of Food: Appetites for Change*, C. Gosden and J.G. Hather (eds)
32. *Historical Archaeology: Back from the edge*, P.P.A. Funari, M. Hall and S. Jones (eds)
33. *Cultural Resource Management in Contemporary Society: Perspectives on managing and presenting the past*, F.P. MacManamon and A. Haron (eds)
34. *Archaeology and Language III: Artefacts, languages and texts*, R. Blench and M. Spriggs (eds)
35. *Archaeology and Language IV: Language change and cultural transformation*, R. Blench and M. Spriggs (eds)
36. *The Constructed Past: Experimental archaeology, education and the public*, P.G. Stone and P. Planel (eds)
37. *Time and Archaeology*, T. Murray (ed.)
38. *The Archaeology of Difference: Negotiating cross-cultural engagements in Oceania*, R. Torrence and A. Clarke (eds)
39. *The Archaeology of Drylands: Living at the margin*, G. Barker and D. Gilbertson (eds)
40. *Madness, Disability and Social Exclusion: The archaeology and anthropology of 'difference'*, J. Hubert (ed.)
41. *Destruction and Conservation of Cultural Property*, R.L. Layton, P.G. Stone and J. Thomas (eds)
42. *Illicit Antiquities: The theft of culture and the extinction of archaeology*, N. Brodie and K. Walker Tubbs (eds)
43. *The Dead and their Possessions: Repatriation in principle, policy and practice*, C. Ffowke, J. Hubert and P. Turnbull (eds)
44. *Material Culture: The archaeology of twentieth-century conflict*, J. Schofield, W.C. Johnson and C.M. Beck (eds)

# MATÉRIEL CULTURE

The archaeology of  
 twentieth-century conflict

Edited by

John Schofield, William Gray Johnson  
 and Colleen M. Beck



London and New York

for the identification and the proper burial of their loved ones. Much local lore warns against relinquishing any body parts, no matter how superficial, to anyone, and some individuals did refuse. Six of the twelve families involved in this portion of the project appreciated the need.

- 4 There were two women and two men in this grave. As discussed later in the text, this grave may have been a collapsed *huzon* – a man-made cave – that served as a guerrilla hideout. The association with insurgents may explain why this was the grave that was not tended.
- 5 The UN contingent left in charge of security was Russian. Because Russia was considered an ally of Serbians, this arrangement made us a little uneasy, but nothing came of our fears. Ultimately, the 24-hour guard, which was supposed to be a short-term solution, was posted for four years (see Stover 1997; Stover and Peres 1998).
- 6 This is only generally true. A number of sites in Guatemala have yielded over 200 individuals (EAFG 1996; Stover and Ryan 2000). Still, the fact that most of the remains in Guatemala are skeletonized streamlines handling, transport and analysis.
- 7 Site security was sometimes a problem (Stover and Peres 1998: 141, 148). Thus, during one excavation, forensic investigators slept on site for several weeks.

## REFERENCES

- Bintliff, J. (1991) *The Annals School and Archaeology*, New York: New York University Press.
- Botes, T.C., Snow, C.C. and Stover E. (1995) Forensic DNA testing on skeletal remains from mass graves: a pilot project in Guatemala, *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 40(3): 349–55.
- Chippindale, C. (2000) Archaeology's proper place, *Archaeology* 53(2): 67–8.
- Connor, M. and Scott, D.D. (eds) (2001) Archaeologists as forensic investigators: defining the role, *Historical Archaeology* 35(1).
- EAFG (Equipo de Antropología Forense de Guatemala; now FAFG) (1996) *Anuario* No. 3: 1994–1995, Guatemala City: EAFG.
- Edsall, J.T. (1975) *Scientific Freedom and Responsibility: Report of the Committee on Scientific Freedom and Responsibility*, Washington DC: American Association for the Advancement of Science.
- Jones, S. (2000) *Of Centaurs and Doves: Guatemala's Peace Process*, Boulder CO: Westview.
- Joyce, C. and Stover, E. (1991) *Witnesses from the Grave: The Stories Bones Tell*, New York: Ballantine Books.
- Lowenthal, D. (2000) Archaeology's perilous pleasures, *Archaeology* 53(2): 62–6.
- PHR (Physicians for Human Rights) (1996) *Medicine Under Siege in the Former Yugoslavia, 1991–1995*, Boston: Physicians for Human Rights.
- Silber, L. and Little, A. (1996) *The Death of Yugoslavia*, New York: Penguin.
- Simon, J. (1987) *Guatemala: Eternal Spring, Eternal Tyranny*, New York: W.W. Norton.
- Stover, E. (1997) The grave at Vukovar, *Smithsonian* 27(12): 40–52.
- Stover, E. and McCleskey K. (1981) *Human Rights and Scientific Cooperation: Problems and Opportunities in the Americas*, Washington DC: American Association for the Advancement of Science.
- Stover, E. and Peres, G. (1998) *The Graves: Srebrenica and Vukovar*, New York: Scalo.
- Stover, E. and Ryan, M. (2001) Breaking bread with the dead, *Historical Archaeology* 35(1): 1–27.
- Tuller, H. (2002) Dirty secrets: blood protein and VFA analysis of soil from excavation of grave sites in the former Yugoslavia. Unpublished Master's thesis, Dept. of Geography and Anthropology, Louisiana State University.
- Wiseman, J. (2000) Archaeology and history: addressing some delusions about our discipline, *Archaeology* 53(3): 6–9.

# 11 Violent spaces: conflict over the reappearance of Argentina's disappeared

ZOË CROSSLAND

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years debates over the politics of archaeology and ownership of 'the past' have received substantial attention in the archaeological literature. The role of forensic archaeology in present-day conflicts has however been neglected, perhaps because of the difficulties of writing about such an emotionally charged subject. Public interest in forensic techniques may be gauged by the prominence of reports in the popular media, especially during the 1990s, concerning the excavation of mass graves. The potential prurience of these reports has perhaps also contributed to mainstream archaeology avoiding the topic. However, the increasing worldwide use of forensic excavation to assess and attest to human rights violations highlights the importance of these archaeological techniques. I am not myself a forensic archaeologist, and I have no personal experience of forensic excavation techniques. My interest in this topic was stimulated by a visit, which I made in 1992, to the forensic excavations in Avellaneda cemetery, Argentina, where I was introduced to the work of the Argentinian Forensic Anthropology Team. This study demonstrates the importance of forensic archaeology to interpretive archaeologies, arguing that far from being a marginal element of archaeology, forensic archaeology engages with epistemological and ontological issues that are relevant to the discipline as a whole.

The focus of this study is the reaction to the work carried out in Argentina by the Argentinian Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF). The EAAF was responsible for excavating the unmarked graves of people who were 'disappeared' during the military dictatorship of 1976–83. Much of their work was used as evidence in the trials of the military juntas that took place in the mid-1980s. While the majority of the exhumations that they carried out in Argentina took place during the late 1980s and early 1990s, after the restoration of democratic government, their work retains a high profile due to the widely publicized search for the children of disappeared women, who were born while their mothers were detained by the military. Additionally, the recent indictment of Chilean ex-president Pinochet has brought the issue of disappearances in the Southern Cone of the Americas back under international scrutiny.

Presented herein is a partial 'archaeography' of the excavations at the Avellaneda cemetery on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. I have chosen the neologism archaeography as I feel that this accurately describes the emphasis of the study on both the writing and practice of archaeology in this particular context.<sup>1</sup> Accounts of forensic anthropology usually focus on their role as providers of evidence, and the relationship of forensic anthropology to police work (Snow *et al.* 1989; Crossland 2000). However, this chapter is not a methodological study or critique. Rather, I explore the embodied aspects of the excavations; the ways in which they are incorporated into technologies of control and resistance in the context of the aftermath of the repression. I contextualize the excavations as situated practices that are part of different, often conflicting, discourses involving the disappeared. The study draws upon the inter-disciplinary common ground between archaeology, history and ethnology, and hence the term archaeography also plays on the similarities and differences between historiography and ethnography. Although all archaeography provides a partial (in all senses) narrative, this account in particular is a partial archaeography, as it is based only on newspaper reports, articles, interviews and secondary literature. This textual analysis focuses on the spatiality of the forensic excavations, as the starting point for a larger and more detailed archaeography, that will incorporate interviews and archival documentation.

### HISTORICAL NOTES

The spatial readings made of the excavations were framed within the differing responses to the restoration of democratic rule in Argentina in 1983. In order to contextualize these readings, it is necessary to first provide a sketch of the violent history that lay behind the excavations. The military coup in 1976 was not unusual in terms of Argentina's history. The country had an unstable political history as, over the course of the twentieth century, recurrent military coups unseated various elected governments. In the years leading up to the 1976 coup, the economic and political situation deteriorated, as the government came under increasing pressure from both left and right, made manifest in the often violent social and political demonstrations which took place with increasing frequency. The weak government led by Isabel Perón (General Juan Perón's widow) passed a series of decrees calling on the army to put an end to the actions of 'subversive elements' in Argentina, and in March 1976 the armed forces formed a junta which took over the government of the country. Once in power the junta's actions echoed those of Perón after he took power in 1946. Freedom of speech was immediately restricted as they placed radio and television stations under state control (Simpson and Bennett 1985: 231–7). The judiciary was restructured to put more control in the hands of the military through replacing members of the Supreme Court and the attorney general. The legislature was effectively disbanded; Congress was dismissed and provincial parliaments closed. Institutions and associations perceived as a threat were also closed down or banned; these included universities, trade unions and political parties (Argentine National Commission on the Disappeared

(CONADEP) 1986: xi–vi). Although disappearances had begun under the Perón government, the largest number of disappearances took place in the first year of military government, and they were to continue throughout the entire period of military rule (CONADEP 1986: 10, 404).

People were usually abducted by small paramilitary or parapolice groups, who acted anonymously, and of whom the police and military could, and did, deny all knowledge. These actions were implemented in the name of a 'war' waged against subversion. This terminology of war was intended to legitimize the violent activities of the state, framing the actions as a necessity and therefore not an abuse of human rights. General Videla, often portrayed as one of the more moderate elements of the junta, (for example in Harvey 1980; see also Salama 1992: 33) defined a terrorist in a now infamous statement:

A terrorist is not only the person who carries a gun or plants bombs; he is also the person who spreads ideas contrary to Western and Christian civilisation. (*The Times*, 4 January 1978, cited in CONADEP 1986: xiii)

As this illustrates, the definition of 'terrorism' was sufficiently nebulous that anyone could be accused. In the name of suppressing subversion, between 9000 and 30 000 individuals were abducted by clandestine commando units, under the tacit direction of the ruling juntas (Brysk 1994; CONADEP 1984). The primary targets were people who belonged to organizations, professions and religions seen as 'subversive'. These included students, trade union members, politicians, journalists, psychiatrists, Catholics, Jews and Protestants; anyone who was perceived as a threat to the values of the ruling junta (see illustration of 'the tree of subversion' in Simpson and Bennett 1985: 226, 263). However abductions were not restricted to people from these categories, as described by the Argentine National Commission on the Disappeared (CONADEP). Thousands of people were abducted simply because they were 'relatives, friends, or names included in the address book of someone considered subversive' (CONADEP 1986: 448). For the majority of those abducted there was no pretence of due process; no chance was provided for the disappeared to answer charges made against them. However, this basic violation of human rights pales beside the widespread torture and murder that were also part of the state project of disappearance.

As the junta had control of much of the news media, it was difficult for people to publicize the disappearances. Journalists were often wary of publishing material that could be construed as 'subversive', making them vulnerable to attack. However at the end of April 1977, a small group of mothers of disappeared people organized a protest in the Plaza de Mayo in the centre of Buenos Aires. This was the beginning of a powerful protest movement built by the mothers of the disappeared that would have international influence and prominence. Various commentators have noted that the emphasis on their motherhood by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo had the effect of undermining the junta's framing of the repression.

Indeed the cultural importance of motherhood itself in Latin America has been

the source of academic interest (Stevens 1973), and has been explored in relation to women's protest movements in South America (Malin 1994; Jelin 1990). As part of its creation of a 'war', the junta stressed the protection of 'Christian' values. One of the core values that they sought to protect was the importance of the nuclear family; yet their violent breaking apart of families, sons and daughters from parents and grandparents undermined this claim. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo exploited these inconsistencies. By demonstrating by their presence that the military was destroying families, the Mothers not only attempted to change the way in which disappearances were framed, but also created a slightly protected space for themselves in that, according to the junta, mothers were essential to the reproduction of the 'ideal' Argentina. The emphasis on their motherhood allowed them to defy the ban on public meetings in order to demonstrate. However, they were not invulnerable to attack. In 1978, twelve of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo were abducted, one of whom, Azuzena Villaflor de Vicenti never reappeared. (For a more detailed history of the Mothers organization, see Agosin 1990; Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo 1995; Bousquet 1982; Fisher 1989.)

The military finally relinquished control of the government in 1983, pushed by the pressure of human rights groups, foreign governments and the state of the national economy, as the country's foreign debt escalated and salaries dropped, leading to strikes and mass demonstrations. Concurrently, the Malvinas (Falklands) conflict both led to, and provided an excuse for, a more visible decrease in support for the ruling junta. Following the collapse of the junta, there was a widespread call for investigations into the crimes committed by the state. The newly elected democratic government set up a commission, known as CONADEP, which would research the human rights abuses that took place during the years of military government. CONADEP was accused by some human rights groups of having no real power, as it had no authority to impound the records kept at many police stations and army and navy barracks which would have provided evidence of human rights violations. There was indeed a whole bureaucracy behind the disappearances; however, this greater part of this mass of documentation has never come to light, having been destroyed in the last months of military rule (CONADEP 1984: 263-72; Salama 1992: 36-9; Simpson and Bennett 1985: 90-1). Eventually, enough evidence was compiled that those responsible could be brought to trial.

The democratically elected government of President Alfonsín was in a politically delicate position when the investigations began. The threat of a military coup was a real possibility for the new administration. This contributed to the pressure placed on Alfonsín that led his government to enact the 1986 'full stop' legislation that put a time limit on bringing prosecutions of those not yet on trial. This movement towards leniency intensified during the late 1980s as the stability of the new government was threatened by military insurrection, such as the rebellion which erupted in April 1987 as the result of the refusal of General Guillermo Barreiro to answer charges of human rights abuses. The subsequent president, Carlos Menem, implemented a more wide-reaching series of pardons, culminating in 1990, when the last few officers remaining in prison were pardoned. As a result of the pardoning of military officers many still saw a need for protest and activism to bring those

responsible to justice. Just as during the period of military rule, the most vocal criticism came from the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (see accounts in Fisher 1989: 27-59).

In 1983-4, as part of judicial enquiries into the human rights abuses of the juntas, excavations of mass graves were ordered by the courts. These early exhumations were carried out without archaeological or forensic consultation, leading to the destruction of the graves, and providing neither secure evidence nor skilled consultants who could identify the remains and provide evidence in court. In order to excavate the graves more sensitively, North American forensic experts were invited to Argentina by CONADEP, and subsequently the Argentinian Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF) was established (Joyce and Stover 1991; Verbitsky 1993: 9). The forensic excavations not only provided evidence in the trials of the junta, but also focused on identifying individuals in order to return their remains to their relatives for a proper burial. However, after the team was established, Alfonsín began the enactment of the 'full stop' legislation which brought an end to the trials of those responsible for the disappearances. This meant that over time the focus of the team's work shifted as their results were no longer used to bring prosecutions of the military. Instead, the personal and emotional significance of the excavations came to dominate public understanding of their work, as they provided grieving relatives with the remains of their loved ones. The significance of this shift for the ways in which the disappeared were and are understood is explored below.

### MAINTAINING ABSENCES

Perhaps surprisingly, there has been substantial opposition to the exhumation of the disappeared by many of their mothers and relatives. This opposition has sometimes been dismissed as the extremist rantings of '*las locas*' (the madwomen), a name originally given to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo by the junta (Bousquet 1983). As Agosin notes (1987: 433), the ascription of insanity to women who are seen as a threat is a tactic that has been employed in many contexts to disempower women who are seen as 'out of place' or as acting inappropriately. In their appropriation of the traditionally male spheres of public spaces and political discourse, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo transgressed on both counts against the hyper-conservative values held by the juntas. The Mothers have consistently chosen public spaces as the arena for their demonstrations and criticisms of both the military regime and the subsequent democratic governments.

The Mothers never claimed to have been the only ones or the first to fight against the dictatorship, but we do claim to have been the first to have done it publicly.

(from an open letter from Epelbaum, for the Mothers, to Dr Raúl Alfonsín, quoted in Agosin 1990: 85)

The choice of the Plaza de Mayo provides a good illustration of their co-option of public spaces for their protests (Torre 1996; Fisher 1989: 88–108). The Plaza has had a central role in Argentinian national history. Located in the political, financial and symbolic centre of Buenos Aires, this is where independence was declared in 1810; it is also where key government buildings are located, including the presidential palace. The choice to march in the middle of the week on a Thursday afternoon was also strategically selected to maximize their visibility. The public, open nature of the demonstrations, was used as a deliberate counterpoint to the secret activities of the state. In this way the Mothers made their private grief public and revealed and subverted the clandestine nature of the disappearances.

Our battle was legitimate; that of the military was something hidden, monstrous, and illegal.

(Epelbaum, quoted in Agosin 1990: 34)

Another form of protest developed by the Mothers was the placing of newspaper advertisements that criticized the regime. In this too they chose a public arena for contestation that contrasted directly with the military's clandestine operations. The Mothers' protests were given additional impact through the choice of these most public spaces for demonstration, as they challenged social expectations of where and how women, and especially mothers, should act. Through creating their protests in public space, their conspicuous presence made visible the absences of their children.

One of the slogans frequently used by the Mothers, and often quoted as evidence of their 'irrational demands' is '*aparición con vida*', meaning 'appearance alive'. This slogan is not a literal demand for the return of disappeared people who are still being held illegally; rather, it is a call for accountability.

*Aparición con vida* means that although the majority of them are dead, no-one has taken responsibility for their deaths, because no-one has said who killed them.

(Carmen de Guede, quoted by Fisher 1989: 128)

This position has contributed to the continuing use of the description of the Mothers as *las locas*. Graciela de Jeger, another of the Mothers, elaborated the thinking behind the slogan.

We knew it was very unlikely that our children were alive. At first we were hopeful, but now we can see it's impossible. But we don't want to assume responsibility for the deaths ourselves. We want them to say who killed them. This is why we speak of our children in the present tense. *Aparición con vida* is the most controversial of our slogans because a lot of people support us, but say *aparición con vida*, no. You're mad.

(quoted in Fisher 1989: 128)

The forensic excavations and identification of the disappeared run directly counter to this position, documenting the reappearance of human remains rather than of living individuals. This has led to conflict between human rights groups. Some groups, particularly the *Asociación de Madres de Plaza de Mayo* (Bonafini-Cerrutti line) and the *Asociación de Ex Detenidos-Desaparecidos*, directly oppose the forensic work of the EAAF (*Asociación de Ex Detenidos-Desaparecidos* 1988; *Asociación de Madres de Plaza de Mayo* 1989; Verbitsky 1989). Others, including the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Families of the Disappeared and Political Detainees are supportive of the exhumations (Verbitsky 1989; *Familiares de Desaparecidos y Detenidos por Razones Políticas* 1990), as is the group known as the Founders of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Other relatives and mothers who are not formally aligned with any particular interest group tend to be supportive of the excavations (Verbitsky 1993). Argentina is unusual within Latin America in having a large and vocal proportion of human rights organizations opposing the forensic recovery of disappeared human remains (Verbitsky 1989: 9).

Bonafini and her followers ... didn't want exhumations. 'We the mothers of the disappeared will not be converted into mothers of the dead,' Bonafini once declared, ignoring mounting evidence that the disappeared had indeed been executed.

(Joyce and Stover 1991: 254)

The common disparagement of this position fails to grasp that it is part of a coherent political strategy calling for admission of wrongdoing by those responsible. Berta Schubertoff, whose son was identified by the EAAF, spoke well of the excavations, but she explained how she saw other Mothers' perception of them.

[They] do not accept the exhumations because they say that their sons are still living through their ideas and they will continue their struggle and will be found alive. They do not accept their surrender in a bag of bones.

(Kisilevski 1990: 9, my translation)

This refusal to acknowledge the bodies of the disappeared therefore derives from separate and related political positions, held in particular by the Association of Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, headed by Bonafini. They insist on public judicial accountability by those responsible; until then, they insist on remembering their disappeared relatives as they were in life rather than in death. Related to this position they believe that both the CONADEP inquiry and the excavations focused overly on identifying and describing the victims of the repression, rather than eliciting admissions of guilt from the perpetrators.

We already know that thousands of *desaparecidos* were secretly murdered and buried. The exhumations don't tell us anything we don't already know ...

(Jeger, quoted in Fisher 1989: 128)

As a direct response to the lack of information and the misinformation and rumours spread about the disappeared during the years of the repression, many Mothers have refused to acknowledge any attempts to account for the disappeared. The opposition by the Association of Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo to the excavations is therefore part of this effort to keep their children disappeared and in this way maintain their public visibility, until full accountability has been obtained. This strategy has been discussed by various commentators (Schirmer 1993; Malin 1994), and the Chilean writer Ariel Dorfman has also explored the sentiments behind the strategy in a poem called *Last Will and Testament*, which begins:

When they tell you  
I'm not a prisoner  
don't believe them.  
They'll have to admit it  
some day ...

The poem moves on to outline the misinformation and lies offered to the families of the disappeared. These ranged from claiming that their relatives had not been seized, but had moved abroad, to showing them signed confessions, demonstrating the guilt of those who had been taken from them. The poem persistently returns to the refrain 'don't believe them', responding with this even to assertions that appear to be self-evidently true. The poem delineates the difficult personal experiences that led to some relatives publicly refusing to trust any information that was received from or through organizations associated with the state. Dorfman finishes the poem:

And finally ...  
when they ask you  
to identify the body ...  
when they tell you  
that I am  
completely absolutely definitely  
dead  
don't believe them,  
don't believe them ...

(Dorfman 1997)

In the absence of any sure knowledge about what had happened to their relatives, the strategy of seizing the absences created by the juntas was a novel and creative way of changing the terms of the discourse about the disappearances. In order to claim the spaces left by the disappeared, the Mothers filled the spaces with embodied public representations of the disappeared as they remembered them in life. During their demonstrations in the Plaza de Mayo, which still take place, the Mothers carry photographs of their children and wear white headscarves

embroidered with their names. Probably the most well-known and literal example of this claiming of the spaces left by their children is the painting of ghostly silhouettes around Buenos Aires, marked with the names and dates of people's disappearances. These first appeared in 1983 at the end of military rule, and have become a popular motif for protest since then. The silhouettes reflect the ruptures left by people's disappearances in the lives of their friends and families. In 1979 the Mothers sent a letter to the UN, the US government and Pope John Paul II in which they described the pain of disappearance.

The families began to relate to the absent people as 'fantasmas' ... the kidnapped lacked identity, no one knew whether they were alive or dead ... [Absence is] a pain without object. It is a vacuum, total loss, the dead without body and without grave ...<sup>2</sup>

(quoted in Salama 1992: 43, my translation)

The absences created by the seizure of people from networks of social and family relationships, were therefore used by the Mothers as a mnemonic device to remind the country that these people had been clandestinely kidnapped and that those responsible had not yet been brought to justice. The reclamation and politicization by Mothers in Argentina of the absences left by their disappeared children ascribes new meanings to the empty spaces left by a disappearance. In this way the Mothers have modified the original violent significance that resided in this absence, a meaning primarily created by those who forced this condition upon the disappeared; 'contrary to the final assurance of death, the very absence of bodies has created a *presence* for ongoing life' (Schirmer 1993). However the use of this particular strategy is not accepted by all mothers and relatives of the disappeared, as some relatives prefer to remember their loved ones in ways which do not focus on the continuing absences of the disappeared. Others attempt to retain the uncertainty of disappearance, even after receiving physical remains.

Really, the Mothers were right not to want the bodies, because in spite of the fact I had my son's grave exhumed, I don't know it's my son. I think it's my son, but I don't know who killed him. All I know for sure is that my son isn't here.

(Elisa de Landin, quoted in Fisher 1989: 130)

The public recreation of the absences of the disappeared has contributed to the disappeared often being described as 'fantasmas'.<sup>3</sup> Even the official CONADEP report referred to the quality of being disappeared as a 'sinister ghostly category' (CONADEP 1984: 3). Dario Olimo, one of the archaeologists involved with the excavations wrote that the disappeared are 'like ghosts, neither alive nor dead' (personal communication 1994). The limbo-like condition of the disappeared is also reflected, recreated and contested through the space of the excavations.

## THE SPACE OF EXCAVATION

One of the major sites of excavation of the disappeared is at the Avellaneda cemetery on the outskirts of Buenos Aires (Salama 1992: 251–74). Sector 134, the area where the unmarked mass graves were located, stands in marked contrast to the rest of the cemetery. When I visited in 1992, I was struck by the profound contrast between the main part of the cemetery and the area where the disappeared were buried. The cemetery itself was well kept and colourful, with carefully mown grassy avenues separating the ordered rows of graves. It contained the usual architecture of death; gravestones marked with names and dates, flowers and photographs of the people buried there. The graves of the disappeared, however, were delimited by a walled-off area, closed by a sheet metal gate. Inside the area was overgrown with coarse grass. The only architecture present was a dilapidated, low concrete building, previously used as a morgue, then abandoned, and later used by the forensic team to complete their analyses (Joyce and Stover 1991: 284). In contrast to the rest of the cemetery, no explicit symbolism had been inscribed in Sector 134. There were no tombstones providing names for the graves. Indeed there was none of the conventional architecture of death in this apparently 'empty' zone.

The ghostlike state of the disappeared is created by, in part, their lack of temporal incorporation into the world of the dead by passing through funerary ritual (Crossland 2000: 153–5). Equally the space of Avellaneda reinforced their lack of spatial incorporation into the 'proper' place for the dead. Instead, reflecting this ghostlike status, they resided in a circumscribed zone that was walled off from both the living and the dead. It was within this ambiguous 'empty' space that the excavations took place. Exploring the conflicting readings of the excavations in Sector 134 exposes the intersections between the institutionalized authority of the military, the police and law courts and the agency of the individuals and interest groups involved. The various interpretations of the excavations are constrained and created by the larger socio-political contexts, in the placing and interaction of the graves within societal networks of control and authority over the memories and bodies of the disappeared. However, they are also informed by the localized configuration of the space of excavation, which frames the interpretations within the details of the spatial relationships between architectural elements and people's interactions with them. During the excavations of the disappeared, the individual biographies of many individuals, both living and dead, came together in Sector 134, to create alternative and conflicting readings of the sector as a place. These differently embodied understandings of this space, in some people's eyes, meant that the excavations reproduced the structures of institutionalized power that created the 'empty' sector in the first place. However, in others' eyes, the excavations challenged the very same violent institutions and the individuals who created and maintained them. As the 'empty' space of Sector 134 was excavated, so the human remains and the embodied practices of excavation were simultaneously incorporated, both into the creation and regeneration of institutional authority, and the challenging of the institutionalized practices which led to disappeared people being buried there.

Even after the military relinquished formal governmental power in Argentina, disappearances continued. Some families received telephone calls from disappeared relatives during the period of transition to democratic government in 1984, yet these people never reappeared. The security services still operated with some autonomy after Alfonsín's government was elected (Fisher 1989: 127–8). This meant that to participate in the excavations was a dangerous activity for the anthropologists. One of the members of the team described this.

I knew that ... after the first exhumation I'd just be marked. ... It was 1984, democracy was beginning here, and everybody was talking about a new military coup. I was worried that I could be on ... the next list.

(Doretto, quoted in Joyce and Stover 1991: 295)

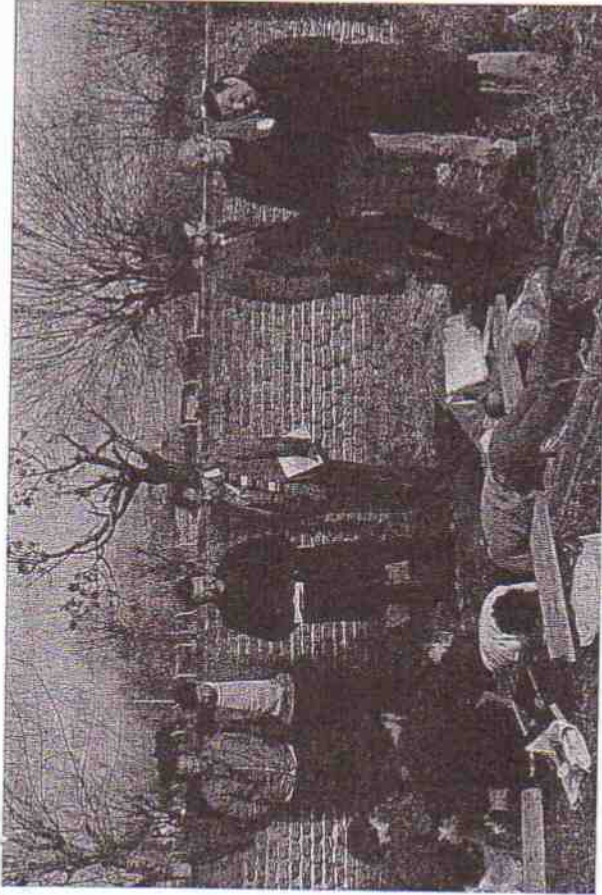
There were similar fears in Chile after Pinochet's government was replaced by a democratic government:

The legacy of a dictatorship is sinister, profound, leaving permanent scars. There still exists in the minds of young parents the fear that military power might revive in our country. There still exists the fear that during the night there will be a knock on the door to take us away because we are innocent youths with political beliefs and values. The Chilean dictatorship never tolerated political dialogue nor dissident ideas. It did not allow the young to make history and this legacy has scarred us.

(Agosin 1993: 407–8)

The courage it took to participate in the excavations at this early date led some commentators and relatives to compare the commitment of the EAAF with the idealism and courage of the disappeared (Verbitsky 1993: 9). There is a common association between the young and idealism which is often emphasized by the Mothers when talking of their disappeared children. Renee Epelbaum, spokesperson for the 'Linea Fundadora' of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo noted that 'It is normal to be idealistic when you are young. If you're not, then you're already old' (Malin 1994: 195). However, the connections made between the disappeared, the anthropologists and youthful idealism also recognize that the anthropologists' work could be seen as a threat by the military and police, most of whom were still in the positions they held under the military dictatorships.

The excavations, in addition to providing evidence for the law courts, took a great deal of their symbolic force from the physical uncovering of the bodies, revealing the secret activities surrounding the disappearance and deaths of those buried there. This again made the crimes of the juntas visible and contributed to maintaining public consciousness and memories of the years of the repression, one of the key demands of the Mothers organisations. 'The collective memory says, and will continue to say: do not forget, do not forgive' (Epelbaum, Founders of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo 1992 newspaper advertisement, cited in



**Figure 11.1** Excavations at *Avellaneda* cemetery, Buenos Aires. According to the account in the *Independent* magazine, from which this is taken, the men standing against the wall are police. Standing in the centre of the group of men on the right is Clyde Snow, a North American forensic anthropologist who was instrumental in establishing the EAAF

Source: Mimi Doretto

Malin 1994: 213). The excavations provided a different, but ultimately incompatible, way in which to accomplish what the Association of Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo also hoped to accomplish, the revelation of clandestine activity and the uncovering of what was meant to be left hidden. However, some of the impact of the excavations was absorbed by the space in which they took place. The very location of the excavations in Sector 134 of Avellaneda meant that they took place in the place originally created by the military for disposing of the disappeared. The excavations, although designed to challenge the military regime were played out in an arena created by those responsible. The enclosed space that held the mass graves continues to be segregated from the rest of the cemetery. This means that it was not experienced as a public space by the excavators and the relatives of the disappeared, and as such it is less available to being visibly appropriated for political protest as with the Plaza de Mayo. Additionally the private nature of the pain and death of the people buried there also contributes to a more personal and private reading of the space. This context of excavation therefore also collided with the choice of the Mothers of high-visibility public places for protest, and led in part to accusations by the Association of Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo that the focus of the excavations lay too much on those buried there rather than on those responsible for the deaths.

This was reinforced by the presence of representatives of the police at the excavations. Fig. 11.1, originally published in the *Independent's* magazine, shows the first excavations in the San Isidro suburb of Buenos Aires. The forensic anthropologists are surrounded by observers. The men standing against the wall are described as police. The anthropologists were frequently watched by policemen while they worked and this created a threatening presence for some of them, marking the excavations as a dangerous place. Patricia Bernardi, one of the anthropologists, recounted the following:

The police are always there and I remember a day when one of them turned to a police doctor at one grave site and said 'if we had done it right ten years ago, these people wouldn't be here now'.

(Michaud 1987: 20)

Whether these particular men were involved with the disappearances cannot be established. However, the involvement of the police in the disappearances has been documented and the police therefore constituted a threatening presence, especially in the early days of the exhumations (Fisher 1989: 18–19). One of the cemetery workers at Avellaneda described helping the police bury the bodies: 'The police would call us over in the mornings after the trucks had come in with the bodies ... The soldiers told us to begin digging holes ...' (Joyce and Stover 1991: 292). The surveillance by the police of the excavations may be interpreted as marking the area as one that is and has been under their control and as such affected the ways in which the anthropologists and relatives of the dead experienced the physical space. An account that describes this interaction relates the reactions of people present after finding the probable remains of a seventeen-year-old *desaparecido*.

... the cluster of relatives ... take the bad news in silence ... There is a pause in the work. A couple of bullets have been found, one lying in the tangle of ribs, another lodged deep in the right hip joint. The two plain clothes policemen take an interest for the first time. They gather around the bullets, conversing knowledgeablely to each other without emotions. Mimi Doretto is aware of their scrutiny: 'It is often like that. The police know about the bullets, most of them know all about the disappeared.'

(Unsworth 1989: 36)

Even the spatial configuration of people's bodies may be interpreted as replaying the inequalities of institutionalized authority and knowledge of the place of excavation. In Fig. 11.1, the positioning of the anthropologists, kneeling or lying down, physically in the grave and close to the disappeared, could be seen to contrast with their observation by the nameless men, who stand and look down upon them, apparently overseeing the excavations. The gendering of the work also echoes that of the disappeared and the paramilitary groups, as the majority of the abductions were carried out by men, and those taken were young and both male and female.

This association again echoes the parallels made between the anthropologists and the disappeared by some families of disappeared people.

The surveillance of the excavations by the police and others played into the concerns of some human rights groups, especially the Association of Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Asociación de Ex Detenidos-Desaparecidos. A major criticism made of the CONADEP investigation was that, although the victims of the repression were known, the murderers were still anonymous (Asociación de Ex Detenidos-Desaparecidos 1988). Indeed during the trials there was a sense that the junta still held control, in that to some of the Mothers it appeared that much of the trial was framed in terms set by the military. One of the Mothers, Carmen de Guede recalled that during the trials, the victims of the repression were described as terrorists or subversives, without supporting evidence. Those on trial were given the dignity of their military titles and allowed to be present in full uniform for their sentencing. The Mothers, in contrast, were constrained in what they wore in that they were not allowed to wear their characteristic white scarves that represent their children and symbolize their collective search for 'truth and justice' (quoted in Fisher 1989: 141).

The excavated bodies of the disappeared also contributed to this perception of control by those responsible. As they were excavated, the identity and memory of the individual could become overshadowed by the manner of their death. The bullets and injuries inflicted on these bodies are two of the most salient characteristics of the remains. The details of the person's life recede before the violent manner of their death. Even aspects of their own bodily history, their dental records, the mark left on the skeleton by pregnancy and childbirth, childhood broken bones, could be appropriated as courtroom evidence. These details were used to identify disappeared individuals to provide evidence to bring the military to trial. However, since the convictions from these trials were later quashed, many Mothers saw the use of the remains of the disappeared in the trials as in the service of forgetting the past and moving on to a new unified future for Argentina (see the advertisement placed by the Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo in *Página 12* for example [December 1989]). This, taken in addition to the symbolic investment that the Bonafini-Cerrutti line of Mothers have made in finding their children alive or not at all, marks the excavations for them as a place that is created by, watched and controlled by the state apparatus responsible for the disappearances. As a result the anthropological team has come under direct attack by these Mothers for appearing, in their eyes, to collaborate with those responsible for the disappearances. At one of the earliest excavations at Isidro Cassanova Cemetery, some of the Association of Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo surrounded the exhumations and refused to let anybody get close, throwing stones at anyone who attempted (account by María Julia Bihurriet, quoted in Joyce and Stover 1991: 258-9). Some human rights groups felt that the focus on the victims while the guilty were free, and in many cases still in positions of power, was a diversionary tactic, to take the pressure off Alfonsín's and then Menem's governments from the still strong armed forces.

While the Founders Line of Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and other human rights

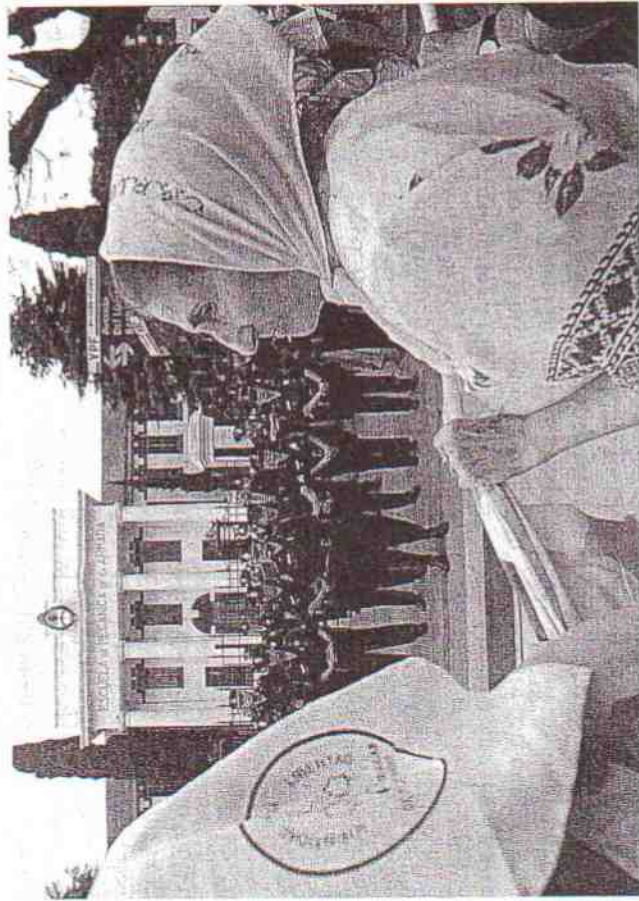


Figure 11.2 Protests outside the Naval Mechanics School

Source: Reuters

groups, such as the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, support and accept the work of the excavations, the Association of Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo sees the reappearance and sanctioned reburial of bodies as sapping the power from their protests. Although many see the exhumations as enabling them to come to terms with their loss through mourning and reburial, this cannot be reconciled with the views of the Association of Mothers. At the core of the Association's strategy is a demand that the charged and threatening spaces created by the disappearances should be kept as such, and should in this way be turned against those responsible. The maintenance of Sector 134 (and other burial sites) as such a threatening and dangerous space is consistent with this strategy. For these mothers, the emptying of the area, and its gradual reincorporation back into the landscape of the cemetery rids the place of its ghosts and takes away its power as a place which may haunt those responsible, and remind people that those who should answer for their violent actions still walk free.

Another instance of this friction can be seen in the recent conflict over the proposed destruction of the Naval Mechanics School where many people were detained and tortured (Fig. 11.2). Ex-president Menem suggested that the building be razed and replaced with an 'open green space and monument to national unity' (*New York Times* 1998: 15). This has led again to a clash between differing ideas of what the collective response to the years of the repression ought to be. Certainly the Association of Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo would reject any possibility of national unity while those responsible for contributing to the fragmentation of the

nation through kidnap, torture and murder are still at liberty. One Mother responded to Menem's suggestion by shouting 'let us inside to claim what is left of our loved ones'. This statement then is not a literal expectation of finding remains, but rather a symbolic claiming of hidden space. The claims made on this concealed space attempt to counter the perceived attempts of the military, and the democratic government, to convert this violent hidden space into a neutral place, no longer haunted by the uneasy ghosts of the disappeared.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Brian Boyd, Adam Smith and Javier Morillo-Alicea for helpful comments on earlier versions of this chapter; also to Penny Dransart for suggestions with translations, and Stephen Michaud for helping with references. A related presentation was given at WAC4 in January 1999; my thanks also to Paul Lane for inviting me to participate in the Subordinate Societies, Local Archaeologies session. Thank you to Ariel Dorfman for permission to reproduce part of his poem, *Last Will and Testament*, and to the EAAF, especially Mimi Doretti, for giving me permission to use her photograph reproduced as Fig. 11.1, and helping me track down the original copy. Finally, I'd like to acknowledge the help and support of Colleen Beck and Polly Osborn, who gave me much assistance in putting the chapter together in its final form.

#### NOTES

- 1 Many thanks to the members of the 'Space and Place' seminar, run by Adam Smith at the University of Michigan, for coming up with the term.
- 2 'Los familiares pasan a relacionarse con los ausentes que se convierten en "fantasmas" ... Se debe enfrentar la ausencia, que no es un duelo común, de por sí doloroso. Es un "duelo sin objeto". Es el vacío, la pérdida total, la muerte sin cuerpo y sin entierro ...'
- 3 According to Velázquez 1967, even the word *fantasma* has an ambiguous quality in Spanish. The masculine form translates as phantom or 'image of some object which remains impressed on the mind', while the feminine form translates into ghost or spirit. In present-day usage the masculine form is more current. It has broadened out to mean ghost/phantom/appearance or vision/illusion (Simon and Schuster 1997) and also has the additional meaning of *amenaza* which may be translated as a (threatening) spectre (Concise Oxford Dictionary 1996).

#### REFERENCES

- Agosin, M. (1987) 'A visit to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo', *Human Rights Quarterly* 9(3): 426–35.
- Agosin, M. (1990) *Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Línea Fundadora): The Story of Renee Epelbaum, 1976–1985*, translated by Janice Malloy, Trenton NJ: Red Sea Press.
- Agosin M. (1993) 'Democracy for a ghost nation', translated by P.M. Vega, *Human Rights Quarterly* 15(2): 406–9.
- Amnesty International (1987) *Argentina: The Military Junta and Human Rights: Report of the Trial of the Former Junta Members, 1985*, London: Amnesty International.
- Asociación de Ex Detenidos-Desaparecidos (1988) 'Víctimas identificados, pero asesinos anónimos', advertisement, *Página 12*, March: 13, Buenos Aires.
- Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo (1989) 'Luchamos por la vida, no los traicionamos,' advertisement, *Página 12*, 22 December: 6, Buenos Aires.
- Bousquet, J.-P. (1982) *Les Folles de la Place de Mai*, Paris: Stock 2.
- Brysk, A. (1994) The politics of measurement: the contested count in the disappeared in Argentina, *Human Rights Quarterly* 16(4): 676–92.
- CONADEP (1986) *Nunca más (Never Again). A Report by Argentina's National Commission on Disappeared People*, London: Faber and Faber.
- Concise Oxford Spanish Dictionary* (1996) New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Crossland, Z. (2000) Buried lives: forensic archaeology and the disappeared in Argentina, *Archaeological Dialogues* 35: 146–59.
- Dorfman, A. (1997) *Wretched and Last Waltz in Santiago*, London: Sceptre.
- Familiares de desaparecidos y detenidos por razones políticas (1990) 'No los traicionamos luchamos por la vida', advertisement, *Página 12*, 10 January: 6, Buenos Aires.
- Fisher, J. (1989) *Mothers of the Disappeared*, London: Zed Books.
- Harvey, R. (1980) Poor little rich boy. Argentina: a survey. *The Economist*, 26 January: 3–26, London.
- Jelin, E. (1990) *Women and Social Change in Latin America*, London: Zed Books.
- Joyce, C. and Stover, E. (1991) *Witnesses from the Grave: The Stories Bones Tell*, Boston: Little, Brown.
- Kisilevski, M. (1990) Testimonio de una lucha contra el olvido y la impunidad, *Nueva Sion*, 19 January: 9, Buenos Aires.
- Malin, A. (1994) Mothers who won't disappear, *Human Rights Quarterly* 16(1): 187–213.
- Michaud, S.G. (1987) Identifying Argentina's disappeared, *New York Times* (Sunday colour supplement) 27 December: 18–21, New York.
- New York Times* (1998) 18 January: 15, New York.
- Salama, M.C. (1992) *Tumbas Anónimas*, Buenos Aires.
- Schirmer, J. (1993) 'Those who die for life cannot be called dead', in Agosin, M. (ed.) *Surviving Beyond Fear*, Fredonia NY: White Pine Press, pp. 31–57.
- Simon and Schuster's International Spanish Dictionary* (1997) 2nd edn.
- Simpson, J. and Bennett, J. (1985) *The Disappeared: Voices from a Secret War*, London: Robson Books.
- Snow, C.C., Stover, E. and Hannibal, K. (1989) Scientists as detectives. Investigating human rights, *Technology Review* 92(2): 43–51, Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Stevens, E.P. (1973) 'Marianismo: the other face of Machismo', in Pescatello, A. (ed.) *Female and Male in Latin America*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Torre, S. (1996) 'Claiming the public space: the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo', in Agrest, D., Conway, P. and Weisman, L. (eds) *The Sex of Architecture*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, pp. 241–250.
- Unsworth, T. (1989) The body hunters, *The Independent Magazine*, 30 September: 32–6, London.
- Velázquez de la Cadena, M. (1967) *New Revised Veldquez Spanish and English Dictionary*, Chicago: Follett.
- Verbitsky, H. (1993) Identificación de una mujer, *Página 12*, 10 January: 8–9, Buenos Aires.