

# How to Remember the Present? Permanent Exhibition at the Museum of Memory, Montevideo, Uruguay

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*Centro Cultural y Museo de la Memoria - MUME (Museum of Memory), Montevideo, Uruguay. <https://mume.montevideo.gub.uy/>. Permanent exhibition.*

Balancing the need to inform and engender an emotional response, the Museum of Memory of Montevideo (MUME) establishes its message and captures the attention of visitors even before they enter the building. Inaugurated in December 2007 as a collaboration between Montevideo's Municipality and several human rights associations, MUME's permanent collection aims to explain the context of the civilian-military dictatorship that took place in Uruguay from 1973 to 1985. Like other dictatorships in South America at the time, these 12 years were marked by authoritarianism and violence, and included the disappearance of 197 people and the imprisonment and torture of 9,000 others.

The five galleries comprising the permanent collection exhibit art and quotidian objects, text, and video to build a thematic discourse that includes the establishment of the dictatorship, the popular resistance, exile, imprisonment, and disappearance. The exhibition emphasizes the multiplicity of experiences during that time and how the dictatorship's repercussions extend to the present time, affecting the lives of thousands of Uruguayans. The museum articulates a compelling and nuanced narrative aiming not only to educate but to provoke current audiences while honoring the memory of those who lived this chapter of the country's history, yet to be closed.

Museums of Memory are framed within the concept of "memory politics", which refers to how the recent past (and present) are thought about, legitimized, and embodied in the context of human rights violations by the state.<sup>1</sup> In Latin American countries, Museums of Memory have been created as a response to the silence in governmental politics in the post-dictatorship and transition period. The first *Museo de la Memoria* [Museum of Memory] in Latin

America was founded in 1998 in Rosario, Argentina. More were created in the following decades, including the *Museo Casa de la Memoria in Medellín*, Colombia (2006), the *Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos* in Santiago de Chile, Chile (2007), and the *Museo Sitio de la Memoria* in Buenos Aires, Argentina (2015) among others. These museums share a political discourse focused on “giving voice to victims of state terrorism” and demanding truth and justice.<sup>2</sup>

The Museum of Memory in Montevideo is no exception, highlighting its mission to “create a space to promote human rights and the memory of the fight for freedom, democracy, and social justice.”<sup>3</sup> This is explicit both in its writings and in its brochures, website, and social media, as well as in the objects and narrative used in the exhibition space.<sup>4</sup>

Placed next to the main entry door, a life-sized bronze sculpture meets the visitors. Rubens Fernández Tudurí’s *Torturados* [Tortured] from 1986–2011, depicts two naked figures leaning in opposite directions and tied together with rope on their wrists and ankles. Their heads are covered with bags, increasing the tension and claustrophobic feeling of the scene. The sculpture represents the over 9000 people who were imprisoned and tortured during Uruguay’s dictatorship, serving to announce the tone of the museum’s rationale: it is their story that is being told.<sup>5</sup>

Five separate exhibition galleries organized by theme act as connected chapters of life in Uruguay from the 1960s to the present. While aiming to explain at length the complexity of the subject matter, the abundance of objects and extensive wall text in the exhibit clutter the overarching narrative.<sup>6</sup> This is particularly the case in the first gallery, where floor-to-ceiling enlarged photographs, pedestals with newspaper cuttings and various objects, an art installation and TV, and even the remnants of a bicycle, all compete for the attention of the visitor. Aptly called “La instauración de la dictadura” [The establishment of the dictatorship], this gallery introduces the museum and explains the establishment of the dictatorship. It argues, however, that the dictatorship did not begin on June 27, 1973, but rather that it was a long process of escalating violence that the museum traces to 1968 and even earlier.<sup>7</sup> This gallery not only includes mentions of the violence caused by the military but also of that instigated by the leftist guerrilla group *Movimiento de Liberación Nacional-Tupamaros* (MLN-Tupamaros). This includes, for example, the execution of four people linked with a paramilitary ultra-right-wing group after the group had kidnapped and killed members of the MLN-Tupamaros. The explicit presence of these well-documented facts helps create a more nuanced narrative that enriches and opens debates about causality and correlation.

Likewise, a photograph by Spanish-Uruguayan photographer Aurelio González summarizes the central message of the first gallery. *Tanques militares rodeando el Palacio Legislativo el día del golpe de Estado. 27 de junio de 1973* [Military tanks surrounding the Legislative Palace on the day of the coup d’état. June 27, 1973] sharply depicts a military tank in front of the Uruguayan Legislative Palace on the day of the coup d’état. The slanted angle suggests the

immediacy of the snapshot and the urgency of the scene, which opposes the ease of a man in the foreground walking his dog. The uneasiness of the composition and the calm of the man highlights the variety of reactions to the coup d'état. In doing so, the photograph invites the audience to consider and talk about the experiences of that day in their lives, their families', and their neighbors', ultimately acknowledging the multiplicity of possible memories and reactions surrounding this event.

Similarly, personal responses to the objects displayed are prompted in the next gallery, "La resistencia popular," [The popular resistance] fittingly placed opposite to the first gallery. An installation of a group of battered pans and pots hanging from the ceiling at different heights triggers a memory for those who lived through the dictatorship (or the more recent economic crisis in 2001) and heard the *cacerolazos*. Common in South America, *cacerolazos* or *caceroleadas* is a form of popular protest that consists of banging metal household tools and utensils to make noise. In the context of the dictatorship, where public collective demonstrations were extremely dangerous, this was one way to express anger and discomfort without being seen, therefore remaining safer.

The popular resistance to state control and censorship was carried out with different strategies, for example with the use of metaphors and double meaning in theatre, music, and literature. An opening of the wooden flooring on one side of the room allows the audience to peak through a glass panel and see boxes containing books, magazines, and other documents. This places the visitor in the shoes of many who had to hide their belongings under the floor or buried in the backyard to avoid being connected with a leftist ideology, even if the books were not even closely connected with politics.

Immediately after and connected with "popular resistance" are the galleries dedicated to imprisonment and exile ("Cárceles" and "El exilio"), physically signaling that these were the two destinations for those who openly opposed the regime. The area for "El exilio" [The exile] is placed in opposition to the entrance to the gallery, locating it in the literal periphery of the building and alluding to the physical distance of those who had to escape the country. The visitors are drawn to the area via a silent projection of an impactful documentary featuring the activist work done by exiled Uruguayans, and an audio of heartbeats that engulfs both spaces.

Unlike other regimes in the region, the Uruguayan dictatorship was characterized by long imprisonment. For example, former Uruguayan president José Mujica, who was a key member of MLN-Tupamaros, was imprisoned for over 14 years.<sup>8</sup> "Cárceles" [Prisons] confronts the audience's preconceived ideas of what it meant to be imprisoned in Uruguay during the dictatorship. It is a surprise for most of the visitors to find embroidered handkerchiefs, jewelry, and small sculptures made by prisoners while held against their will. MUME also exhibits a selection of the abundant correspondence between the teacher Diadaskó Pérez and his young daughters, which includes colorful drawings of roses, clowns, and scenes of birthday parties. Far from diminishing the traumatic experiences of imprisonment and torture, this gallery

shows the complexities of their reality and challenges the audience. As in previous galleries, the variety of objects reinforces the multiplicity of memories, even if, as Andrew C. Rajca states, the narrative “articulates a counter-history of the dictatorship and its effects from the perspective of the militant Left.”<sup>9</sup>

Four prisoners’ uniforms hang from the ceiling at the entrance of the next and final gallery, “Los desaparecidos” [The disappeared]. Of the almost 9000 people incarcerated during the dictatorship in Uruguay, 197 are considered “disappeared.”<sup>10</sup> In the context of military dictatorships, “disappeared” is understood as a different category than “missing”, given its use as a tool of terror performed by the state.<sup>11</sup> The prisoner’s uniforms act as focal point but also physically block the path of the visitor, who is at the same time drawn in and forced to walk through them, finally encountering a collection of cardboard posters with the faces of 197 people hanging from the walls and ceiling. Each poster has a wooden pole that signals its use during protests and marches. Although lightweight, the display draws the visitor into an immersive experience which emphasizes the distress felt by the families of the people depicted. This final gallery is the smallest room, and houses posters by an activist group led by family members of imprisoned and disappeared people as well as an enlarged photograph of a dug-up grave on the floor. The latter subtly alludes to the discovery of human remains and to the incarceration of former president Juan María Bordaberry as well as some of the high-ranking military involved in the crimes.<sup>12</sup> A series of short interviews with survivors highlight the work done by the museum and repeats the slogan of these activist groups: *Nunca más* (never again).

The exhibition ends unresolved and open-ended, just as the lives of the families and friends of those who disappeared. However, it fails to mention crucial events that occurred as part of the transition and post-dictatorial period. This absence could be partially due to an understanding that most visitors are local and aware of the most recent events. These include the release of political prisoners, the activist work done by the families of the disappeared, the campaigns in 1989 and 2009 to annul the law granting impunity for the crimes committed by the state, and the establishment of the “Peace Commission” in 2000. Some of these important events were originally part of the permanent exhibition, but at the time of the visit, that space was used for an upcoming temporary exhibition.<sup>13</sup>

MUME’s permanent exhibition surpasses the exclusive archival display and shies away from oversimplified narratives. Instead, it serves as a testament to the enduring power of memory in shaping identity and advocating for justice. Just like the yearly massive “Marcha del Silencio” (March of Silence) every May 20<sup>th</sup>, the museum uses a memory politics rhetoric that works to clearly and successfully underline the open wound that the dictatorship has left.<sup>14</sup> Understanding that memory is a powerful identity tool, the museum opportunely reminds viewers that the dictatorship is not over: not until the truth is found out about what happened to those victims of state violence, not until justice is made.

# Notes

- 1 Robin Rodd, “Dossier Introduction: Museums, Art, and the Politics of Memory in Latin America,” *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research* 27, no. 2 (May 4, 2021): 191–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13260219.2021.1994694>.
- 2 Rodd. 192
- 3 “Centro Cultural Museo de La Memoria | Museo de La Memoria,” accessed November 11, 2022, <https://mume.montevideo.gub.uy/museo/centro-cultural-museo-de-la-memoria>.
- 4 “Centro Cultural Museo de La Memoria | Museo de La Memoria.”
- 5 Eugenia Allier-Montaña and Camilo Vicente Ovalle, “As an Unhealed Wound’: Memory and Justice in Post-Dictatorship Uruguay,” in *The Struggle for Memory in Latin America: Recent History and Political Violence*, ed. Eugenia Allier-Montaña and Emilio Crenzel, Memory Politics and Transitional Justice (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2015), 35–52, [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137527349\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137527349_3). 36
- 6 Kathleen Franz, “History Unbounded: A Relaunch of the Public History Review Section,” ed. Brian Horrigan and Kathleen Franz, *The Journal of American History* 105, no. 1 (2018): 121–25.
- 7 “Centro Cultural Museo de La Memoria | Museo de La Memoria.”
- 8 Interview. “Pepe Mujica narra su encuentro con un torturador,” *CNN* (blog), accessed November 11, 2022, <https://cnnspanol.cnn.com/video/torturador-encuentro-jose-pepe-mujica-uruguay-jose-manuel-rodriguez-cami-lo-cnne/>.
- 9 Andrew C. Rajca, *Dissensual Subjects: Memory, Human Rights, and Postdictatorship in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018), <https://nupress.northwestern.edu/9780810136366/dissensual-subjects>. 105
- 10 “Desaparecidos,” Madres y Familiares de Uruguayos Detenidos Desaparecidos, May 18, 2015, <https://desaparecidos.org.uy/desaparecidos/>.
- 11 “What Would You Do If State Authorities Made Your Loved One Disappear?,” Amnesty International, accessed November 11, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/enforced-disappearances/>.

- 12 Rajca, *Dissensual Subjects: Memory, Human Rights, and Postdictatorship in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay*. 43
- 13 The original layout can be found at the museum's website, "Centro Cultural Museo de La Memoria | Museo de La Memoria." Accessed November 11, 2022. <https://mume.montevideo.gub.uy/museo/centro-cultural-museo-de-la-memoria>.
- 14 Allier-Montaño and Ovalle, "As an Unhealed Wound."