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Photographing the absence: how to portray the emptiness created after disappearance in Mexico?

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ABSTRACT

The work of Martell and Gómez Lucini underscores the importance of remembering those who have been lost, advocating for the right of the disappeared to be searched for, cared for, and recognized. Their photographs and projects transcend documentation; they are acts of remembrance and resistance, demanding justice and attention to the systemic violence of the disappearances in Mexico and the impunity surrounding them.

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How can the absence of a person who is a victim of disappearance be represented? Along this piece, I am addressing this question throughout the work of Mexico-based photographers Mayra Martell (b. 1984) and Zahara Gómez Luchini (b. 1983), the author of the recipe book *Recetario para la Memoria* (Gomez Lucini, 2020; Rea & Lucini, 2021), created in collaboration with the *buscadoras* (women searching for the disappeared). In a context where extreme violence and disappearances have become deeply normalized, hence tolerated, these two artists serve as a counter-narrative, shedding light on the often-overlooked aspects of intimacy, emotion and domestic life in the face of a severe human rights crisis.

These artists evoke a profound sense of social memory and collective mourning by portraying the personal and cherished belongings and places of those who have disappeared. Each object photographed is not just an item; it is imbued with emotional significance, offering a poignant critique of the crisis while connecting deeply with themes of care work and the everyday lives of families impacted by violence. Their work invites us to re-evaluate the spaces we often regard as ordinary – homes, domestic life and family relationships – revealing how love, hope and the essence of daily existence persist even amid conflict.

Representing emptiness has been a question for canonical modern and contemporary artists. Often, when discussing these subjects, art historians analyse *4'33"*, a piece created by US-American composer John Cage in which the score instructed performers not to play their instruments for four minutes and thirty-three seconds. Sound and rest: The absence

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of sound creates music. This piece invites the spectator to become a participant in this uncomfortable silence (Roberts, 2013).¹ Yet, far from conversations about abstraction and void in art, in other contexts, the question of absence has different implications compared to avant-garde US-American artists. How does one represent absence not as an emptiness of elements – the lack of a world to be portrayed, as Cage – but as the absence of someone from their world? How can the absence of sound – their voice, the noise created by their movements of their body – provoked by the disappearance be shown to the world?

Mayra Martell's and Zahara Gómez Lucini's oeuvre shows another kind of uncomfortable silence. Martell's photographs are about the rooms belonging to disappeared women, addressing disappearance and femicide² in Ciudad Juárez during the 1990s and 2000s. Furthermore, the similarity between the photographer and the subject is striking: she is a woman who begins her work in her twenties, an age similar to that of the other female victims and is also a native of Ciudad Juárez. On the other hand, Gómez Lucini's pictures show a recent crisis of disappearance (starting in 2006 with the so-called "War on Drugs" of President Felipe Calderón) in Central and Northern Mexico.³ Through this text, I will be looking for representation in terms of the adjacent, not the absent, addressing what remains after someone is missing. There is a particular intimacy that is created between the observer (us) and the missing person, even though we do not know them and, most probably, never will.

How to represent absence?

In Mexico, there are more than 100,000 estimated missing persons (Zerega, 2024) and the authorities have been unable to rescue them, punish those responsible and prevent more disappearances.⁴ Just between 2020 and 2022, 1,134 clandestine graves with 2,314 bodies and 2,242 human remains were exhumed (de Derechos Humanos, 2025). This situation has forced the families of the disappeared to organize themselves into collectives to carry out searches. They are known as *buscadoras* or *madres buscadoras*, women who dedicate themselves to searching – in Spanish, the suffix *-as* refers to women, *madres* refers to mothers – as most of the members are female.⁵ Families search for their loved ones alive, as victims have the right to be searched for alive – as opposed to dead – and the first hours after a disappearance are crucial.

However, due to a lack of action on the part of the authorities, *buscadoras* have no option but to search in clandestine pits, which has forced them to learn forensic science (Flores, 2023), develop search techniques and create ways for funding: buying special gear such as hiking boots, helmets and equipment such as digging tools. Besides, they put themselves at risk of being victims of threats or even disappearance and murder for their activism (Nuño & Martínez, 2025).

Disappearance leaves a specific type of emptiness, a raw void far away, deeper than a white canvas on the wall or the silence of an orchestra: the absence of a person who exists physically somewhere, either alive or dead, and exists emotionally in the lives of their loved ones: a void attached to profound affective connections. In this context, absence is not represented as a blank space as canonical modern artists did; it is portrayed as a counterpoint: in contrast to the elements that remain. The objects and favourite recipes appear as if they were waiting for the missing person to recover them. They are

a hint of their existence elsewhere, preserving the memory and representing the space occupied by the presences that are no longer there. Activists, victims' collectives, and artists create art pieces to express their pain, denounce injustices, and call out the victims by name, remembering them.

Recetario para la Memoria (recipe book for Memory): carework and affect for keeping their memory alive

The *Recetario para la Memoria* is a photographic and literary project created by Gómez Lucini with the families of victims of disappearance. It is sold in bookshops, and half of the profits are donated to the *buscadoras* collectives. By compiling the favourite dishes of missing individuals, their memories are preserved through food. Offering the public an opportunity to engage in an intimate moment – a shared sensory and emotional experience. The act of cooking and eating becomes an aesthetic encounter – engaging sight, smell, taste and memory – while fostering affective resonance as emotions are exchanged in a reciprocal dynamic.

Emotional experiences are not merely transmitted between individuals; rather, they emerge from the interaction itself. The act of eating serves as a bond, enabling individuals to attune to one another's emotional states, thereby creating a shared affective experience, even among strangers. Through photographs and recipes, it facilitates a dynamic in which the observer and the person who cooks are both *moved by* and *active participants in* the social relationship. This establishes an a co-created experience, demonstrating how affective responses arise from interaction rather than pre-existing emotions (Mühlhoff, 2015). Therefore, the book mediates a tripartite social interaction: between the missing person, the individual showing how to make the recipe and the reader who may also prepare the dish. In this way, a bond is formed: an affective resonance among all three parties, or more. The dynamic of 'moving and being moved' within this relationship illustrates how emotional experiences are not static but emerge through engagement, where interaction itself generates feeling rather than merely conveying it.

Feeding, or being fed, is something we all have in common. We eat to stay alive, but we also find pleasure and comfort in food (Figure 1), shaping our most intimate memories from an early age. In an interview that my team and I conducted in 2020 with a seeker from Guanajuato, she told us that one thing that connected her to her disappeared brother was the smell of bacon and fried eggs – a luxury in the context in which they grew up: 'My brother was very fond of bacon and eggs. We were very poor as children; we never had enough bacon at home. When he came to visit me, we would have that for breakfast' (Reencontrarte En La Vida, 2020). Drawing from this idea, *Recetario para la Memoria* invites empathy through affection: we all have a favourite dish that reminds us of moments when we feel happiness or protection.

There are currently two editions of the cookbook: one made with *buscadoras* in Sinaloa (2020) (Northwestern Mexico) and another made with *buscadoras* in Guanajuato (2023) (Central Mexico) and are the product of collaborative work, one of the participants is renowned journalist and author Daniela Rea (b. 1982), who has specialized in covering the human rights crisis in Mexico. In her text, through her participatory listening, she recovers testimonies and the emotional implications of the search and the wait. In a relationship of trust, she enters each household together with the photographer and carries out her



Figure 1. Recipe of 'pizadillas' for Roberto.

journalistic work. Rea explains that the act of preparing the meal helps the families to keep hope and continue the search: 'knowing that there is someone who honours them, who waits for them with a table set, a fire lit'. Their stories are 'not just about an absence but about love. An aching love, a desperate love, a consumed love. But finally love'. In her work, she takes into account the feelings of the families to keep the memory of the direct victims of disappearance and the secondary victims: their relatives (Rea & Lucini, 2021, pp. 53–59).

Gómez Lucini's photographs show us the intimate spaces where the care work, the reproductive work, of the families is carried out: they are not professional kitchens, they are simple tables, modest stoves, wood cookers and inexpensive plastic tablecloths, very common in working-class Mexican households. Overall, the recipes are made with simple ingredients, 'comfort food'. All of the above reinforce the everyday feeling of common domestic spaces that lack something: the table is set and someone is missing. Regarding the composition, the protagonists are the dishes illuminated by natural light. The cook is rarely represented, sometimes only her hands as a way of protecting her identity as *buscadoras*, who is also at risk (Mercado, 2024).

In the words of Gómez Lucini: 'I hope that through these photographs of something as simple as a meal, those who have not lost a loved one can consider the grief of others' (La Plaza de Cultura y Artes, 2023). The idea of grief becomes hard to describe, as *Buscadoras* states, they are searching for their missing ones alive. The *buscadoras* grieve for the lost but not for the dead: How can someone grieve someone that we do not know is alive or not?

There is a strong connection between care work and the *Recetario para la Memoria*. As feminist economists explain,⁶ reproductive work sustains the productive system. If human beings are alive, it is because someone has taken care of our bodies and minds, in some

capacity, since we were born. Care work provides us with the most basic subsistence needs: cleaning, cooking, feeding, caring for children, caring for the sick, etc., and in patriarchal societies, as happens in Mexico, women are the ones who take care of most of this work. Hence, the *buscadoras* also do particular care work: not just by cooking, but by heeding the memory and the importance of the search for their loved ones, which is a way of keeping them alive. Thus, by remembering the missing ones, women do particular care work in this necropolitical regime – borrowing from Mbembe (Mbembe, 2003, pp. 11–40) – where resistance to oblivion and indifference is, as the rest of care work, gendered.

Mayra Martell: intimate spaces of absent women

In her series, *The Act of Missing* (2005–2020), Martell portrays the rooms and objects of missing women and girls in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Northwestern Mexico. The feminist anthropologist Rita Segato has approached the crime and disappearance of women in Juárez, suggesting that these violent acts are expressive messages from a male ‘author’ exerting control over the female body. In this border city, characterized by the proliferation of *maquilas*,⁷ a context of de-statization and neoliberalism marked by stark inequality unfolds. Amidst this reality, a parallel state has emerged, established by armed corporations that wield absolute territorial dominion and operate in an extremely systematic and organized manner. This phenomenon represents a provincial totalitarianism where the female body becomes a symbol of territorial domination; its annihilation not only reflects this power but also feeds and sustains the existence of that terrifying dominion.⁸

Photography, particularly photojournalism, is loaded with political content: it has a pivotal place in representing protests, disasters, wars and human rights crises by showing through the media people surviving attacks or dead bodies as a result of them. As it happens with other art expressions, with pieces such as Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937), photography also creates a place in collective memory around an event and allows us to preserve evidence and archive it, becoming primary sources for historical research. Undoubtedly, photographs are created by someone who decides what to portray. As art critic John Berger (1926–2017) states, photographs ‘bear witness to a human choice being exercised’ (Berger, 2013). Thus, a photograph is a result of the photographer’s decision of which particular event or this particular object is to be seen.

Yet, the decision to portray the space left by someone who has disappeared entails other difficulties, among which the ethical complexities of photographing people whose lives are induced into precarity – borrowing from Butler.⁹ There are no corpses covered by veils as a result of a military attack, nor families trying to cross a dangerous sea, nor kids facing starvation waiting in line for food. In the photographs of Martell, it is precisely the ‘non-event’ that is represented, or it is perhaps the absence of the actual event that is represented. Similar to Cage’s composition, these pieces make the spectator a participant in attending to the silence. There are no new events to be portrayed, time stopped: Frozen rooms as if they were a time capsule, objects that have not been moved since the girl or woman was abducted, with folded clothes, a framed portrait on a bedside table, some religious images and a teddy bear. As a result, an event is indeed shown without being explicit: it is the disappearance as an event that is portrayed, it is, in the words of Berger, not shown because it is actually ‘contained within it.’ (Berger, 2013, pp. 291–294).

Martell began documenting the spaces and personal belongings of missing women in 2005 after seeing the reports of disappearances on the streets of Central Ciudad Juárez. The first case she documented was a woman of her age at the time. Similarly to Gómez Lucini and Rea, she gained access to the rooms thanks to the mothers who opened the doors of their homes: 'They showed me pictures, clothes and, on some occasions, I could smell the smell in some garment. I had never seen so much pain in a person, explains the photographer, who placed herself in spaces that were familiar to her: 'Visiting their rooms reminded me of myself a few years ago' (Martell, 2019).

A photograph of a spot in the room of a missing young woman shows a small piece of paper stuck to a mirror with tape on it (Figure 2). In this broken mirror, another person (probably the photographer) is reflected, taking the place of the absent young woman. The paper shows us her handwriting and a list of pending goals that remain suspended. Her tasks will not be fulfilled: 'Short and long-term goals: -Start swimming lessons -Work hard to pay the school registration fee. -Raise money for the Cervantino.¹⁰ -To do the wardrobe -Paint the house in September -Buy dining room chairs -Buy shoes -Read Plato - Speak and be nice to people. Martell places us as spectators in the same spot as the young

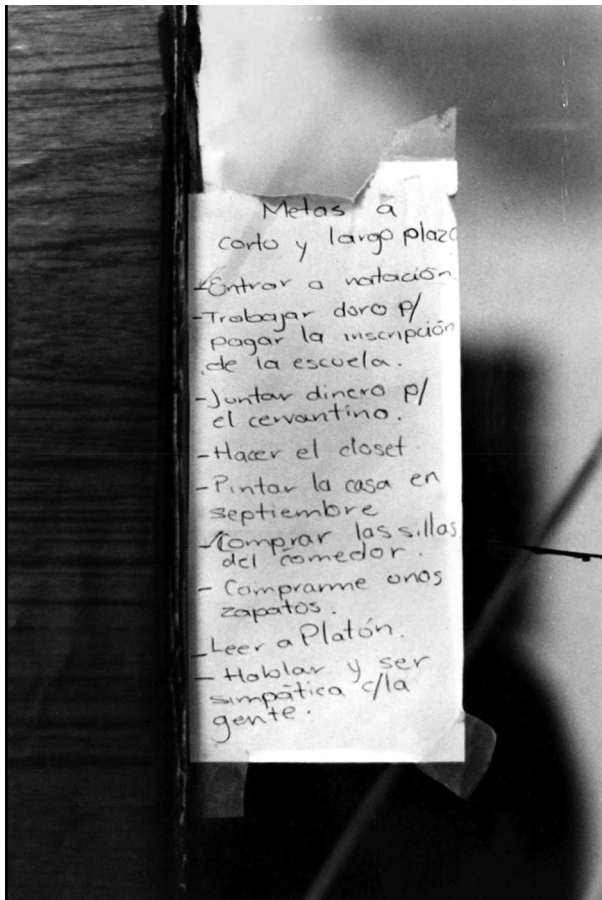


Figure 2. Mayra Martell. *Metas de Erika Carrillo, desaparecida en el 2000 (goals of Erika Carrillo, disappeared in 2000).*



Figure 3. Mayra Martell. *Diana Noraly Piaga Reyna, 16 años. Desapareció el 27 de febrero del 2009; trabajaba en una maquila en el turno de la mañana. (Diana Noraly Piaga Reyna, 16 years old. Disappeared on 27 February 2009; she worked in a maquila in the morning shift. Photo of the wall of her room).*

woman's room, in a very intimate scenario, in front of the object that reflected, no longer, the image of the young woman every morning.

In this second photograph (Figure 3), the composition is quite simple, yet, when understanding the context, it becomes a very complex image. It is a partially painted wall with a rustic finish, on it there are three stickers placed by a teenager, who was still a child, yet had an adult life working in the *maquila*. They are two Disney princesses: The Little Mermaid and Snow White. Two hegemonic figures that form part of the media narrative that dictates the gender mandate are the idealized family made up of a beautiful princess and a prince charming. The photograph speaks to us of the progression of age; it is no longer about a teenager. How old is this woman now? How do absent people mature? It makes us think about the coming of age of a girl who may not exist anymore. The stickers, ephemeral materials that stick and peel off, are still on the wall: they are what remains after the absence; they stopped being ephemeral.

Conclusions

Although the work of Martell and the *Recetario para la Memoria* depict different historical moments and geographical contexts (Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, in the 2000s and Sinaloa and Guanajuato in recent years) and even though the *Recetario* has a collective authorship, both projects demonstrate the absence of a government presenting solutions to prevent disappearances, find the missing, and punish perpetrators.

The phenomenon of disappearance also needs to be examined from a gender perspective. While the more recent disappearances in Sinaloa and Guanajuato are not always gendered, as in Juárez, most of the recipes honouring the disappeared are made by

women. Furthermore, most of the *buscadoras* are women and most of the disappeared are men. In both cases – in Ciudad Juárez and Guanajuato and Sinaloa – the missing bodies are subjected to precarity following their kidnapping, probably as forced labour for organized crime and human trafficking. All their families face constant impunity for the perpetrators, re-victimization and lack of solutions from the government in their search for the missing.

Both Gómez Lucini and Martell demonstrate the necessity for families to create their narratives about their loved ones and to preserve their memories. In their work, photography serves those who have vanished by representing the spatial vacuum left by their absence, showing that their loved ones are waiting for them and that they are cared for. The objects portrayed are vessels imbued with an affective charge, preserving the memory and longing connected to the missing through even the smell of the objects or their favourite dishes.

Both artists highlight the urgent need to denounce the crisis of disappearance. They appeal to social memory through affection, revealing the intimacy, possessions and daily life of those who have disappeared. Each object, brimming with emotional significance, functions as a poignant vehicle for raising awareness about the crisis and highlighting the multifaceted dimensions of disappearance, which may resonate in other contexts of conflict around the world.

Moreover, their oeuvre underscores the role of women as caregivers in keeping the memory of disappeared relatives alive: recognizing their right to be remembered, searched for, and cared for – because their lives matter. Through their corpus, Gómez Lucini and Martell not only draw attention to the urgent issue of disappearances or femicide in Mexico but also connect with similar struggles in other regions affected by conflict and loss.

In sum, the work of Lucini and Martell not only restores the humanity of the victims by giving them visibility, history, and identity through the testimonies of their loved ones – who preserve their memory – demonstrating how the reclamation of memory is an act of care. Furthermore, their work compels society to confront systemic violence and impunity perpetrated by oppressive regimes. By breaking the silence and demanding justice, their images serve as a powerful call to action, urging viewers to reflect, remember, and resist. Through this lens, photography becomes more than documentation; it transforms into an act of remembrance, resistance and reclamation of dignity.

Notes

1. Additionally, Robert Rauschenberg is known for his series of blank canvases, which were made in 1951 as an art statement. Rauschenberg's canvas eradicates image, mark and colour, furthermore removing painterly gestures of any kind, hence eliminating the artist's hand and as a consequence the concept of individual authorship.
2. Despite court rulings, the international pressure and activist resistance, femicide still raising in México, yet the number of femicides occurring is actually not clear, although it is known that there is a high rate of murders of women, it is not known exactly how many of these murders are gender-related (Vela & Atuesta, 2020). Furthermore, in a recent piece, Fonseca and Zaramella discuss the creation of the Campo Algodonero memorial in Ciudad Juárez, which was mandated by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR) following a 2009 ruling regarding the femicides of three young women in 2001 and highlighted systemic gender-

based violence, state neglect and impunity, as reaffirmed by international treaties like the American Convention on Human Rights and the Belém do Pará Convention. The court's decision marked a shift in Mexico towards viewing violence against women as a gendered issue requiring specific acknowledgement and reparative measures. The discussion extends into ongoing public and artistic responses, such as the Pink Crosses movement, which employs aesthetic practices – like temporary crosses inscribed with victims' names – to actively engage the public, challenge official narratives, and oppose efforts to forget or move past violence. These acts of memorialization reinterpret traditional monuments, emphasizing participation and social transformation over permanence, and highlight how visual and performative art intersect with justice and gendered memory in the public realm (Fonseca & Zaramella, 2023).

3. From 2006 to July 2022, 40% of the missing persons are still unaccounted for; 56% of the persons were found alive and 4% of the persons were found dead. In total, between 2006 and 2022, 86,438 missing and unaccounted for persons were registered, of which 76% are men and 24% are women. Data Cívica, 'Datos para encontrar a quienes nos faltan' (Data Cívica, 2022).
4. As Siman and Hone demonstrate, in the Mexican context, the unprecedented and escalating number of disappearances constitutes a critical dimension of the country's human rights crisis. Although many disappearances in Mexico are not formally classified as 'enforced disappearances' under international legal standards – due to stringent evidentiary requirements – the lack of effective investigations, the frequent involvement of illicit actors, and the resulting obfuscation of accountability produce consequences for families and society at large that are functionally equivalent to cases of state-perpetrated disappearances. Moreover, the systematic methods employed by perpetrators further align these incidents with patterns typically associated with state-driven enforced disappearances (Siman & Hone, 2024, pp. 4–7).
5. Muehlmann documents the testimonies of women engaged in the search for their disappeared loved ones, drawing from the phrase 'Call the Mothers, Not the Police', a refrain when someone goes missing, underscoring the state's failure to provide security, the author shows the institutional neglect and how families – particularly mothers – have mobilized at the grassroots level to demand answers and justice. *Buscadoras* frequently confront systemic government corruption and incompetence, assuming roles traditionally reserved for authorities: searching for the missing, investigating disappearances, or even negotiating with in kidnapping and extortion cases. By centring the voices of these women, Muehlmann illustrates how the security crisis is transforming ordinary people into de facto forensic detectives and even intermediaries in negotiations. Shaylih Muehlmann, *Call the Mothers Searching for Mexico's Disappeared in the War on Drugs* (California: California University Press, 2024).
6. Isabella Bakker, 'Social Reproduction and the Constitution of a Gendered Political Economy', *New Political Economy* 12, núm. 4 (diciembre de 2007).
7. A *maquila* or *maquiladora* is a foreign-owned assemble factory that uses cheap labour in Mexico that exports products. Quite common in Mexican border cities.
8. Rita Laura Segato, *La escritura en el cuerpo de las mujeres asesinadas en Ciudad Juárez* (Segato, 2013). Furthermore, Julia Estela Monárrez also addresses the issue of femicide and sexual violence in Ciudad Juárez between 1993 and 2004, using an exhaustive investigation that combines journalistic, judicial and non-governmental organization sources. She emphasizes the sexual and systematic connotation of the murders and coins the concept of 'systemic sexual femicide' to explain the atrocious forms of sexual violence that violate the bodies of the victims, linking them to a social, political, cultural and economic structure that favours it. Pointing out that different institutions are responsible for fragmenting and exercising a structural violence, sustained by hegemonic masculinity that manifests itself in the complicity and social silence that permits these crimes. The violence is not only physical but also symbolic, where male sexuality is linked to domination, power and the violation of the female body, reinforcing gender and social class inequalities and emphasizes that male sexuality, objectified and genitalised, is seen as a tool for control, domination

and the expression of power. Similar to Rita Segato's work, the author reflects on how victims' bodies become symbols of waste and social control, in a context where impunity and indifference allow violence to continue to be perpetuated (Fragoso & Estela, 2009).

9. Following Judith Butler, precarity as a politically induced condition that distinguishes those lives to be preserved from those whose lives are disposable. All human life is per se precarious because we are all vulnerable to the possibility of injury or destruction. Nevertheless, precarity is distributed differentially between populations. There is an unequal exposure through the radically unequal distribution of wealth. Precarity is the particular vulnerability imposed on the poor, the disenfranchised endangered by natural disasters and war (Butler, 2010).
10. Cultural Festival held every year in Guanajuato, México.

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Author contributions

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