



Chlorophyll printing technique in Presence, by Rafael del Río: art, memory and resistance against forced disappearance in Mexico

La clorotipia en Presencias, de Rafael del Río: arte, memoria y resistencia frente a la desaparición forzada en México

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Abstract

This article examines the essential role of contemporary art as a vehicle of symbolic resistance and collective memory in the face of forced disappearance in Mexico. It is argued that memory is a social construct in which art operates as a powerful device of visibilization, mourning, and denunciation against structural impunity. Drawing on the aesthetic proposal of Deleuze and Guattari, the concepts of percepts, affects, and blocks of sensations are explored. Study subjects reflected on their own perceptions, which led them to rethink the notions of fragility and the ephemeral that the disappearance of persons entails, using chlorotypy as a support of signification, on the basis of the project *Presence* by photographer Rafael del Río. Chlorophyll printing (the technique of photographic printing on green leaves) functions as a powerful visual metaphor for the fragility of life and the threat of forgetting. These creations transform absence into an active *presence*, stimulating empathy and processes of symbolic healing. In this way, contemporary art reaffirms itself as an ethical and political agent that resists oblivion and demands justice through affects and collective bonds.

keywords: Chlorophyll printing technique, contemporary art, forced disappearance, collective memory, visual arts.

Resumen

Este artículo examina el papel esencial del arte contemporáneo como vehículo de resistencia simbólica y memoria colectiva frente a la desaparición forzada en México. Se argumenta que la memoria es un constructo social donde el arte opera como un poderoso dispositivo de visibilización, duelo y denuncia ante la impunidad estructural. A partir de la propuesta estética de Deleuze y Guattari, se exploraron los conceptos de: perceptos, afectos y bloques de sensaciones. Sujetos de estudio reflexionaron sobre sus propias percepciones; lo cual los llevó a repensar los conceptos de la fragilidad y lo efímero que conlleva la desaparición de personas, utilizando la clorotipia como soporte de significación, a partir del proyecto *Presencias*, del fotógrafo Rafael del Río. La técnica de la clorotipia (impresión fotográfica sobre hojas verdes) funciona como una potente metáfora visual de la fragilidad de la vida y la amenaza del olvido. Estas creaciones transforman la ausencia en una presencia activa, estimulando la empatía y los procesos de sanación simbólica. Así, el arte contemporáneo se reafirma como un agente ético y político que resiste a la desmemoria y exige justicia, a través de los afectos y los vínculos colectivos.

Palabras clave: Clorotipia, arte contemporáneo, desaparición forzada, memoria colectiva, artes visuales

◆ Introduction

Forced disappearances in Mexico unfortunately occur every day. In our country, according to Casavantes (2016, p. 21), "in Mexico – even without an official dictatorship – in the sixties and seventies, hundreds disappeared during the so-called 'Dirty War'." This indicates that the problem is long-standing. It should be noted that, today, not only people connected to the political or social sphere disappear, but the phenomenon extends to all sectors of the population.

According to Rosen and Zepeda Martínez (2015, p. 158), "the spiral of violence in Mexico that characterized the period of Felipe Calderón's government derives mainly from the brutal struggles between drug-trafficking cartels for control of the production and trafficking routes of drugs." It was during that six-year term, with the so-called "war on drug trafficking," that the problem of forced disappearances began to surge considerably across Mexican territory. In addition, it is worth emphasizing the criminalization that the authorities themselves exercise over the victims. According to Mastrogiovanni (2017, p. 37): "The institutions themselves bear great responsibility in this dynamic of criminalization [...] because they do not dedicate the time, the effort, or the necessary structures to solve cases of disappearance." In response to this incipient action by government authorities, search groups have formed, made up of women and men who are family members of the disappeared, to confront the problem. These groups can be found throughout Mexican territory – groups that resist and struggle so that official narratives do not impose their "historical truth."

At present, the figures are alarming. According to Red Lupa (2024) – a digital platform for monitoring and overseeing the general law on the forced disappearance of persons and disappearance committed by private parties – in its May 2024 report, in Mexico the disappearance of persons persists and is repeated in every state. The disappearance of persons in the country is widespread and systematic. After a year in which the figure of 100,000 cases of disappeared persons was reached, the number rose by 7.3% in 2023 and continued to climb in 2024 by 6.3%. To date, reports of cases of disappeared persons continue to increase.

In the face of this terrible panorama, the search groups that have emerged from organized civil society have become a hope for thousands of families. It is within this dark situation that art actively intervenes in

order to contribute, through its many languages, so that such events do not fall into oblivion. The particular case of *Presence* by Rafael del Río invites reflection on this serious problem and consideration of chlo-rotypy as a support of signification. It is a support that, by virtue of its physical characteristics, symbolically carries the theme this study seeks to address, and it shapes how that message reaches the viewer and provides the elements with which to reflect on the difficulty of forced disappearance. To this end, the aesthetic proposal of Deleuze and Guattari has been used to investigate how 50 study subjects received the work. This has made it possible to clarify and demonstrate the relevance of the artist's decisions when choosing the support of signification for his work, in this particular case, chlorotypy.

❖ **Conceptual framework:
the construction of
historical memory in
contemporary art**

In order to reflect on the problem of forced disappearances in Mexico, it becomes essential to rethink the topic in relation to concepts such as historical memory, individual and collective memory, and the representation of trauma. These will help us to envision a broader and more concrete picture of the social implications such a problem entails, and how artists ultimately problematize them and turn them into creative material for their proposals.

History is a critical reconstruction of the past. It can be argued that historical memory is written by a few characters who, from their own perspective on the events, give an account of the relevant happenings of a society. This evidently has a major impact on how events are recounted and on the medium of information through which they circulate. We must not forget that we live in an era in which we have access to vast amounts of information very quickly (and in many cases directly), as has never before been experienced. This shapes our historical memory. On this matter, Darío Betancourt (2004, p. 126) explains that "historical memory presupposes the reconstruction of the data provided by the present of social life and projected onto a reinvented past," which invites us to rethink memory as a living phenomenon in constant change. We adapt to these events, although in many cases we do not perceive it in a fully conscious way.

Memory, however, is not only a personal phenomenon; it depends on the social groups to which one belongs from an early age and throughout one's existence – that is, it is continually being reconfigured. Individual memory, although some recollections may seem strictly personal, is influenced by all the social relationships one establishes. Thus, our way of interpreting experience comes from prior collective frameworks.

Adding to the above, we are never completely alone, since, paraphrasing Maurice Halbwachs (Halbwachs and Díaz, 1995), even when we remember something in solitude, we evoke perspectives that have been transmitted to us by various groups (family, friends, school, society, etc.). In

this regard, Betancourt (2004, p. 126) tells us that collective memory "is what magically reconstructs the past, and whose recollections refer to the experience that a community or group can pass on to an individual or to groups of individuals" that is, memory is not a strictly individual phenomenon but is reconstructed through interaction with others. In the case at hand, with the family members of disappeared persons.

The representation of trauma is made manifest through the accounts and experiences of violence (of any kind) on the part of those who once suffered or who continue to suffer it. Their resistance keeps that trauma alive in society. The recovery of those voices is what allows collective memory to remain alive and to "affect," in some way, the artists, prompting them to try to "put themselves in the shoes" of those who live through such violence. These concepts (trauma and collective memory) are correlated, and in the case of forced disappearances they are fundamental to sustaining collective memory in the desperate reality Mexico is going through.

Hence, in scenarios marked by systematic violence and forced disappearance, as is the case in Mexico, art has emerged as a fundamental means for constructing historical memory and demanding truth and justice. Unlike official discourses – which often deny, minimize, or distort the facts – artistic practices make it possible to articulate alternative narratives that bring visibility to what has been and continues to be silenced. In this context, Halbwachs (Halbwachs and Díaz, 1995) holds that individual memory is always formed and maintained within the framework of social groups, which implies that artistic production (in any of its manifestations), especially collective production, can act as an act of resistance against the forgetting sought by the centers of power.

Along these same lines, the French philosopher Didi-Huberman (2004, p. 31) affirms that "to show an image is not only to make visible, but also to summon a memory," underscoring how art is not limited to representing but activates processes of mourning and symbolic reparation. If we understand an image as everything that takes place before our eyes, the representation of the unrepresentable (such as forced disappearance) finds in art a language that does not seek to close or erase the wound, but rather to open a space of recognition and truth that contributes to resistance against forgetting. Below, some examples of artists who have worked from the standpoint of historical and collective memory are presented.

Memory is not a passive reflection of the past; rather, as Jelin (2002, p. 25) warns, it is "a situated social construction, traversed by disputes and tensions." From this perspective, the work of artists such as Teresa Margolles transforms objects, traces, and personal accounts into devices of active memory, calling on both society and political institutions through art. Margolles's work represents one of the most forceful proposals in contemporary Mexican art on the subject of disappearance, violence, and memory. Trained as a forensic specialist, she has developed a body of

work that starts from the physical traces of death in order to construct a silent yet profoundly disturbing social critique. Through the use of materials imbued with real traces (such as water used to wash corpses, the clothing of victims, or fragments of walls where a murder took place), her work activates what Didi-Huberman (2004, p. 49) calls an "image that burns with reality", that is, an image that does not represent but rather carries the *presence* of the event itself. This strategy does not seek to spectacularize pain but to transmit it ethically and politically.

This Mexican artist confronts the viewer with what society has tried to deny: the materiality of loss. In pieces such as *What else could we talk about?* (2009), presented in the Mexican pavilion at the Venice Biennale (see figure 1), she used bloodstained cloths washed with bodily fluids to allude to the absent bodies.

Figure 1
What else could we talk about?



Note: Margolles, 2020.

In this regard, Diéguez (2016, p. 67) notes that "the way in which violence has penetrated aesthetic and artistic representations has transformed our behaviors and visualities in real space." In this sense, the Mexican artist Mónica Mayer, in Antivilo and Bello (2021, p. 169), states: "art is a means of making us understand the experiences of others, and so to take them on or avoid them [...] it allows us to know the 'other' or to see our experience reflected." That is why insisting on the idea that the artist cannot dissociate from what is happening around them, cannot become dehumanized or indifferent in the face of these disastrous events that occur day after day.

On the other hand, one of the events that shook public opinion in Mexico and around the world was the case that took place on the night of September 26, 2014, in the municipality of Iguala, in Guerrero, with the 43 students from the Raúl Isidro Burgos Rural Normal School of Ayotzinapa who disappeared. Following this, the Chinese-born artist Ai Weiwei held the exhibition *Restoring Memories* in 2019, at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MUAC) of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in Mexico City (see figure 2). According to the museum's website, the artist used a documentary film and a series of portraits made with Lego pieces, with the participation of students from the Schools of Architecture, Industrial Design, Arts, and Design of UNAM.

Figure 2
Restoring Memories

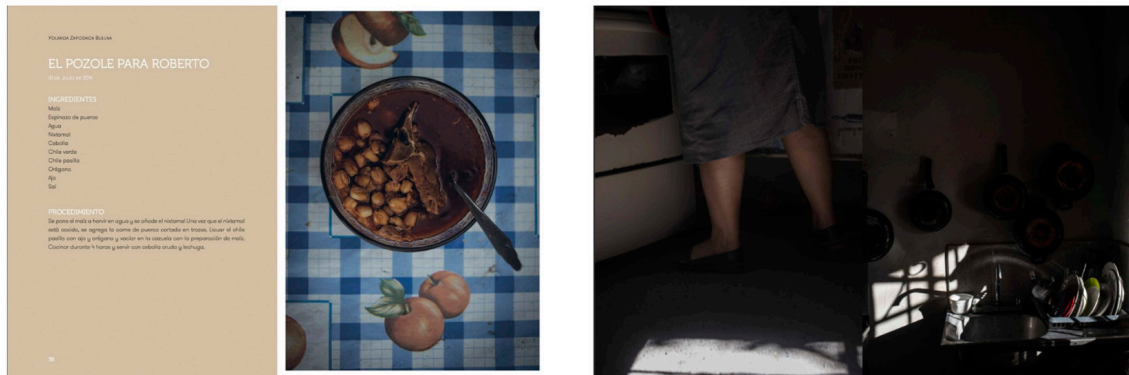


Nota: Coolhuntermx, 2019.

With this work, the artist appeals to the construction of memory by using Lego pieces in its creation, with the metaphor of that invisible bond that links us to our ancestors and obliges us to a duty toward the generations to come. It is important to emphasize that the artist involved students in the making of the piece, since it establishes a direct connection with the unfortunate events that befell the young people of Ayotzinapa.

Along the same lines, the artist Zahara Gómez Lucini of Argentine descent, born in Madrid, raised in Paris, but settled in Mexico – investigates social themes through photography, as her website *Recipe book for memory* (2020) (see figure 3). There she describes it as a gastronomic, photographic, and social project in which in collaboration with the *Rastreadoras del Fuerte* in Los Mochis, Sinaloa, Mexico she gathers in a book the recipes of the group of mothers and family members along with the favorite dishes of their disappeared loved ones, whom they have been searching for since 2014.

Figure 3
Rastreadoras del fuerte



Note. Recipe book for memory, 2020.

It is a project that links, through the photographic image, the affects and memory carried by food, and as Zahara states on her website (2020, p. 1): "The Recipe Book for Memory is a tribute to those who are no longer here and to those of us who still resist forgetting. It is a book to learn new recipes, to turn the individual into the collective, to nourish our memory and to feed ourselves with resistance." It should be noted that 50% of the proceeds generated by the cost of this book are donated to the Rastreadoras del Fuerte, so that they may continue searching for their loved ones. All of these stories, told through the recipe book, narrate how the territory has been transformed, since places that were once for leisure have now become clandestine pits filled with bodies.

In the western part of the country, particularly in the city of Guadalajara, the artist Julieta Casavantes staged the theatrical production *Absences* in 2016 (see figure 4). It was a theatrical performance that used the mask as a primary element that is, the dialogue between the actors was nonexistent, and the entire dramatic weight rested on their corporality. Audio recordings were used that the director obtained through her work with mothers and family members searching for their disappeared loved ones.

Figure 4
Absences



Note: Photograph by Orlando Torres Canela.

This allowed Casavantes to create an intimate space of reflection, claim, and demand for justice, in which the body – the one that is absent and is being sought by family members – is made present by being named, so that it does not fall into oblivion. This is reinforced by the fact that, at the end of each performance, family members of the disappeared gave their testimony, and a dialogue with the audience emerged.

With these references, we can observe that the supports and materials for signifying the works are diverse and depend on the discipline the artist practices. In these projects, a very important aspect can be identified: collaborative work. As Diéguez (2016, p. 82) notes: "to narrate, to recount, to make visible are perhaps necessary actions in order to recognize and signal the vulnerability of life and the prevailing place of trauma and pain in these times." It is not a matter of expressions in which the artist navigates and resolves the artistic piece alone and in private, but rather involves other people in its making – in this case, the people who are experiencing the issue firsthand. As we have noted, the issue of forced disappearances in Mexico is extremely alarming, and in this case, art is an effective way to activate historical memory by creating community and empathy. Artists serve as links between the victims of forced disappearance and the general population, helping to ensure that the issue does not fall into oblivion, indifference, normalization, or apathy. Thus, in line with Jelin (2002, p. 48), these works act as "memory markers," generating spaces of symbolic dispute in which the absence of the disappeared becomes *presence* – not only material and aesthetic, but political and resistant.

As we have already pointed out, in the production of this kind of proposal that addresses such a complex situation as forced disappearances, the artist becomes involved in a participatory way. Within the emotional

and conceptual production process of the work, the choice of the support of signification becomes a fundamental element. Vielma Cabruja et al. (2023, p. 317) note that "the affective potential (of the various supports of representation) is intrinsically linked to its technique of dissemination and the devices of visualization." Under this premise, the artist seeks to establish a relationship of material and symbolic correspondence with the gravity of the topic, in order to subsequently convey it to the viewer.

Thus, the work of art, understood from the perspective of Deleuze and Guattari and analyzed by Gómez Cabal (2006), is fundamentally constituted by percepts and affects. This composition endows the piece with an intrinsic vitality, since, as Gómez Cabal (2006, p. 110) puts it, "a painting is a becoming of percepts and affects like life itself." Becoming should be understood as a constant coming-into-being, a continuous transformation of forces and intensities.

In the context of the problem of disappearance, this concept resonates as a latent possibility, referring to the hope and the process of searching to find the absent person. The percept is the component that is captured through the senses. Gómez Cabal (2006, p. 111) states that the percept "comes from perception; we perceive with the senses." It is crucial to understand that a percept is not a singular object but a multiplicity of forces. A single percept, such as a face, is composed of multiple percepts (eyes, nose, etc.) and, in turn, forms part of the larger percept that is the work of art as a whole.

The affect is the force or intensity that drives perception. Gómez Cabal (2006, p. 112) affirms that "we perceive because we have been affected. An affect is becoming," and goes beyond subjective experience. The affect is a dynamic force that modifies the power of existence of a percept. Upon perceiving (percept) the represented face of the disappeared person, the subjects are inevitably affected by that image. This encounter with the pictorial representation, which carries a life story and an absence, provokes a variation in the percept's power to exist, transforming it and charging it with meaning. The interaction of these forces (percept and affect) within the work and with the viewer constitutes a sensation, and their combination forms a block of sensations (Gómez Cabal, 2006). Thus, one can grasp the complex relationship that the viewer establishes when encountering an artistic piece, and even more so when dealing with such a delicate subject in which, unfortunately, anyone can be directly or indirectly affected.

Having said that, the technique that interests us for the purposes of this study is chlorotypy. It is a contact printing photographic procedure that uses chlorophyll (extracted from natural green leaves) as a light sensitive emulsion. Unlike traditional photographic processes based on silver salts or digital ones, chlorotypy does not require industrial chemicals and develops through photosynthesis. This organic condition implies that

the image, once printed, will continue a process of natural oxidation and decomposition, which makes it an ephemeral support by definition. As Larrea Solórzano (2023, p. 138) notes: "it is an alternative photographic process that is used to create images through the natural process of decomposition of chlorophyll in plants." To exemplify its use, the work of Yago de Orbe is presented a photographer born in Spain who currently resides in Ecuador. The artist is committed to the social and environmental causes of Latin America, and one of his main demands is to protect the life of the rainforest and stop its alteration (see figure 5).

Figure 5
Quechua Woman



Note. Alternative Photography, 2020.

According to the website of Alternative Photography, his work is inspired by the indigenous Amazonian cosmovision and also by the origins of photography, allowing nature to express itself: plants reveal their inner power in images that, metaphorically, become a mirror in which we can see our own organic essence reflected; a mirror that questions us about our relationship with nature. To this end, the photographer turns mainly to portraiture.

After this conceptual and referential overview, we now turn to the project that is the focus of this study.

◆ **Presence, a project by
Rafael del Río**

The project *Presence*, by the Jalisco-born photographer Rafael del Río, fits fully within the perspective of historical memory a phenomenon that is neither static nor individual, but a social construction mediated by affective bonds, shared accounts, and the collective frameworks that make it possible to reconstruct the past from the present (Betancourt, 2004; Halbwachs and Díaz, 1995). In this sense, art does not only reflect social reality; it reinterprets it, resignifies it, and, above all, makes it visible from the realm of the sensible. For this reason, we are interested in reflecting on how the artist's decision regarding the materials of signification of the work is interpreted by viewers.

Presented in 2021 at the Jorge Martínez Gallery of the School of Arts of the University of Guadalajara, *Presence* (see figure 6) is born of the artist's prolonged experience as a press photographer, linked for more than two decades to the documentation of structural violence in Mexico. From his direct contact with family members of disappeared persons and from his coverage of marches and protests, Del Río constructs a collective visual testimony that (beyond its documentary value) functions as a device of active memory.

Figure 6
Presence



Note: Serrano, 2021a.

According to information from Iván Serrano for *Newspaper UdeG* (2021b, para. 4): "The exhibition is made up of various sections: photographs of disappeared persons from different parts of the country printed on natural leaves and with sunlight, as well as an installation in the form of a tree composed of 144 black-and-white portraits"; in addition, video material is presented featuring interviews with family members of the disappeared. Likewise, as the author states in an interview for Serrano (2021b, para. 5), "there is also an installation with clothing of absent persons that was provided by their family members as a way of honoring their memory; a series of images of their empty bedrooms; and photographs of the field search work of collectives from various cities of the

country." It is important to highlight the diversification of media that the photographer used: on the one hand, photography as the fundamental basis of his artistic practice, and on the other, installation and video.

The proposal is materialized through a diversity of languages: portraits printed on natural leaves through the technique of chlorotypy, installations with clothing and objects of absent persons, video testimonies, images of empty bedrooms and of the fieldwork of search collectives. This articulation of supports reinforces what Jelin (2002, p. 48) calls "memory markers": symbolic elements that not only evoke absence but reaffirm a political and affective *presence* in the social space.

We are interested in inquiring further into his proposal and into his personal motivations for creating the project *Presence*. Rafael del Río worked for the past 20 years as a press photographer; in the last 10 years he covered, in particular, the issue of extreme violence and the crisis of dehumanization in the country, which is most gravely synthesized in forced disappearance.

From being present at the constant marches and from interviewing family members of the disappeared, the photographer felt the need to create a testimonial that would give an account of the serious situation these people are going through, in order to encourage collective memory regarding the issue and the social relevance of these events for the country, since disappearances continue to overwhelm the authorities, who are unable to provide an effective response.

This work makes it possible to give greater visibility to the phenomenon and to raise awareness in the face of this terrible situation, seeking empathy with the pain of the other. As Susan Sontag mentions in her text *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2004), one should not assume a "we" when the topic is the gaze upon the pain of others.

By printing the portraits of disappeared persons on natural leaves, Del Río introduces a symbolic dimension that engages directly with the fragility of life and the impermanence of memory. Chlorophyll, as the organic basis of the image, inevitably degrades over time, causing the face to slowly disappear from the surface. This choice is not accidental: it represents, in a painful but poetic way, the possibility of forgetting, but also the urgency of remembering. Rafael del Río incorporates the technique of chlorotypy in *Presence*, where the natural leaves are a symbol of life. The hope of the family members of disappeared persons is to find their loved one alive. Therefore, the photograph of the search printed on a leaf becomes a symbol of hope.

The technique of chlorotypy is linked to the theme of the disappeared. That representation of life, that life cycle, will, with the passage of time, eventually cause the same impression on the leaf to fade away. There is a fragile and ephemeral condition at once, since, on one hand, the resulting

printed leaf is quite thin and can easily break if not handled with care, while on the other hand, because it is a natural emulsion (chlorophyll), with subsequent exposure to light and following its natural cycle, the leaf continues its oxidation process until the image disappears. The series of portraits printed on leaves with this technique is joined by another installation that builds the figure of a tree composed of more than 144 portraits of disappeared persons (see figure 7) whom the photographer captured at marches and in personal interviews with the family members of the disappeared.

Figure 7
Tree, from the project Presence



Note: Rafael del Río, courtesy of the author.

As Betancourt (2004) puts it well, historical memory is a reconstruction projected from the present onto a past that is constantly being reinvented; chlorotypy, therefore, not only represents the past but warns of its possible erasure. We live in a time of very complex insecurity. In this regard, Diéguez (2016, p. 219) reflects: "art sometimes has that strange power to sniff out the state of the times and make it strangely visible, disturbing us with images that are clearly uncomfortable." This need on the photographer's part to create a testimonial in order to encourage collective memory, as he himself states, was key to displaying that reality.

In this regard, the Mexican journalist Marcela Turati (2021, pp. 10–11) – a specialist in the investigation of human rights violations – is in charge of writing the introductory text to the exhibition catalogue of the project *Presence* by Rafael del Río, and she undertakes "this approach which dares to look intimately, with respect, [...] at the searches, the

journeys, and the protests across the various geographies of pain." As Turati notes, it is a scenario of pain, despair, and the agony of finding the loved one who is absent but in the *presence* of those who search for them and remember them. In addition, the project highlights the collaborative character of committed artistic practices. As stated in the theoretical framework, memory is not constructed in solitude. Del Río works directly with family members, who contribute not only images, but also accounts, spaces, objects, and, above all, their time and trust. This participatory dimension is fundamental, since it turns art into a place of encounter, of symbolic reparation, and of ethical visibilization.

Photography, and in the particular case at hand in this study, the chlorotypy print, neither seeks nor has among its functions to present solutions to the serious problem of forced disappearances. In line with Rancière (2014), the political and social function of art does not lie in transmitting a direct message, but in reconfiguring what he calls the distribution of the sensible. That is, art makes visible what the dominant social order has rendered invisible (bodies, stories, injustices) and, in doing so, creates a disruption in what is considered normal or acceptable. Following Rancière (2014), aesthetic experience is not inert: when it confronts the viewer with this new configuration of the sensible, as is the case with the project *Presence*, art acquires the power to resignify the experience one has of the world and the awareness of exclusions and dynamics of power – in this case, in relation to the issue of forced disappearances. In this sense, according to Capasso (2018, p. 230): "the political in art does not lie in providing the exploited and marginalized with a representational apparatus that does symbolic justice to their disadvantaged condition, but in introducing between the work and the viewer [...] the paradox of the unanticipated." That is, that the work produces something not planned by the artist. That such an observer becomes active because they need to reinterpret the work with their own intelligence and, in this way, reorganize the sensible.

Therefore, *Presence* embodies many of the principles discussed in the theoretical framework: art as a tool for activating collective memory; the representation of trauma as a form of resistance; and the importance of social bonds for sustaining remembrance, the relationship between the artist and the work, the precepts and the affects. Far from closing the wound, this work keeps it open not as a sign of hopelessness, but as an act of symbolic justice in the face of a State that still fails to respond effectively.

Methodological design based on the aesthetic proposal of Deleuze and Guattari: a case study of Presence

For the experiment, we sought participating subjects who would reflect on the relevance of the theme to the support of signification. To this end, the project was presented to 50 people of different ages in two sessions, each lasting approximately 45 minutes, in which they answered three open-ended questions. The above was based on an aesthetic

premise that addresses the relationship existing between creator, work, and viewer.

In this regard, we have drawn on the aesthetic proposal that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari establish in their text *What Is Philosophy?* (1993): percept, affect, and the resulting block of sensations. For these authors, "the work of art is a block of sensations, that is, a compound of percepts and affects" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1993, p. 164). Now, in order to clarify what these components of percept and affect refer to, according to Gómez Cabal (2006, p. 109): "they are the elements that provide the fundamental basis for art from the position of the artist or the viewer; [...] the simple act of being in the position of looking at a painting, of painting a picture, or of writing about a work of art, will cause them to emerge." However, for Deleuze and Guattari (1993), these forces (since they do not consider them to be elements) are represented in the plane of composition (forms, colors, size) and in the characteristics of the support, as well as in the techniques used by the artist. The image we perceive is not a reflection of an object or a scene, but exists in the very medium that composes it. In this sense, sensation does not refer to a thing in the external world but to the affect or percept that arises from the very material with which the work is created.

Development of the experiment

To carry out the experiment, 50 people of different ages were considered, including professors and students who were summoned to two sessions, on October 4 and 7, 2024, at the Arts Headquarters of the University Center for Art, Architecture, and Design of the University of Guadalajara (see figure 8).

Figure 8
Study Subjects



Note: Authors' own elaboration.

Each session lasted approximately 45 minutes. First, participants were briefly explained what the technique of chlorotypy consists of and what its particularities are as a printing support. Then, on a screen, they were shown the chlorotypy pieces from the project *Presence* by Rafael del Río, and at the same time an excerpt from the introduction that journalist Marcela Turati wrote for the exhibition catalogue was read to them.

Subsequently, they were physically presented with a framed piece from the work *Presence* so that they could view it individually—that is, the piece was passed around so that each and every participant could observe it in their hands. Afterward, each person was given a sheet with the following spaces to fill in: age and gender, in addition to three open-ended questions: What do you consider the contribution of the support (chlorotypy) to be in relation to the theme of the disappeared? What visual impact does the piece generate for you, both physically and projected on the screen? Based on your conception of the fragile and the ephemeral, what do you consider to be the link the photographer establishes between the theme and the support (chlorotypy)?

As mentioned earlier, 50 people participated in the call. Their ages ranged from 22 to 55 years; of these, 52% were female, 42% male, and 6% answered "other." This is consistent with the population of the University Center, where it is evident that the majority are women. This datum is relevant, since search collectives are mainly composed of mothers, and the ages of disappeared persons also fall within that range. Since the works are artistic pieces, the following morphological parameters of the image were considered, and are listed in Table 1, in which form, color, and texture were of particular importance.

Tabla 1
Parámetros de análisis empleados en la obra Presencias de Rafael del Río

Parameter	Specific Analysis in <i>Presence</i>	Connection with Percept and Affect (Deleuze and Guattari)
Form	The portrait as absence: The principal form is the portrait or human figure, often blurred, veiled, or incomplete, inscribed on the organic silhouette of the natural leaf. In this case, the photographer used elegant leaves. The composition emphasizes the fragility of memory.	Percept: The figure that emerges from the chlorophyll constitutes the block of sensation of the absent being. The imperfect and incomplete form of the portrait communicates a percept of what is missing (the disappeared person).
Color	Dichromatic range of loss: a fundamental contrast between intense green (chlorophyll, the remnant of life) and yellow/bleached tones (photo-bleaching by the sun, the registration of the image). Color is a record of the action of time.	Affect: The pale tones and high contrast generate an affect of melancholy, vulnerability, and pain. The unstable color (which will degrade) intensifies the affect of the ephemeral nature of memory and time.

Texture	Organic and tangible: The texture is defined by the prominent veins and the irregular surface of the leaf. These organic imperfections (wrinkles, veins, breakages) overlap and integrate with the printed portrait.	Percept/affect: The natural texture anchors memory to the earth and to the bodily, creating a raw, unpolished percept of the tragedy. The irregular texture adds an affect of the living and the sensible, dignifying the search.
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Note. Authors' own elaboration.

For the open-ended questions answered by the study subjects, we are interested in reflecting on the aesthetic proposal of Deleuze and Guattari—that is, in establishing that link between the creator, the work, and the viewer, on the basis of the support of signification, and how these percepts and affects lead to an emotional impact. The results are presented below.

◆ Interpretation of the results

From emotion to reflection

Rafael del Río puts forward a proposal that reflects on a topic of great relevance in present-day Mexican society: the forced disappearance of persons. His professional career as a photographer has allowed him to be close to the family members of disappeared persons and to learn first-hand of their concerns. As Vielma Cabruja et al. (2023, p. 318) state: "the photographer not only interprets and enunciates, but is also an emotional and emotionally affected subject in the complex process of producing the image"; thus, in the project *Presence*, the author narrates first-hand what these people are experiencing.

Throughout this complex emotional process of production, the photographer needs to decide on the support of signification, since, citing Vielma Cabruja et al. (2023, p. 317) again, "according to the modes of dissemination and the devices into which it is integrated, photography possesses an affective potential," and in this case, the technique of printing in chlorotypy was one of the photographer's decisions, with the aim not only of showing the images of disappeared persons but of creating a relationship between the theme and the way of signifying it that is, that the materiality of the work would express and account for the issue and would also be emotionally affective. In this sense, the study subjects had the opportunity to learn about the context of the work through the text by journalist Marcela Turati, to observe the chlorotypy pieces digitally, and to hold one of the works in their own hands.

The open-ended questions answered by the study subjects lead us to reflect on the aesthetic proposal of Deleuze and Guattari that is, on establishing that link between the creator, the work, and the viewer, on the basis of the support of signification, and how these percepts and affects lead to an emotional impact.

Material support (chlorotypy) and its thematic link to the forced disappearance of persons

From this perspective, the choice of the plant-based support is not solely a technical decision but a profoundly symbolic one (see figure 9).

Figure 9
Chlorotypes from the project Presence



Note: Rafael del Río, courtesy of the author.

Leaves, as living and fragile matter, operate here as a metaphor for human life threatened by the systematic violence of forced disappearance. Each impression slowly degrades, just as the memory of those who have been torn from their environment does. This ephemeral dimension refers directly to the vulnerability of memory: if it is not cared for, if it is not constantly reactivated, it disappears.

In the case of chlorotypy, in response to the first question: What do you consider the contribution of the support to be in relation to the theme of the disappeared? The responses invite us to reflect that the support of signification has a soft texture, and that its shape is not rectangular like the conventional supports of photography. Furthermore, as a consequence of the technique, it is very fragile (similar to a dry leaf; the study subjects could see that the leaf was already broken in some of its parts) and ephemeral, since over time it will inevitably disappear.

Gómez Cabal (2006, p. 110) exemplifies this in an artistic work, mentioning that: "the life of a hand is the affect that it contains, and in a painting, the hand we see is percept, and the affect is the life that the hand-percept expresses", and Gómez Cabal (2006, p. 110) also notes: "a painting is a becoming of percepts and affects like life itself". Becoming should be understood as a coming-into-being, a latent possibility, in this sense, the possibility of finding the disappeared person.

That said, the percept, as Gómez Cabal (2006, p. 111) mentions, "comes from perception; we perceive with the senses." In our case, the study subjects perceived with their eyes the face of a disappeared person, since it is represented through a set of eyes, nose, mouth, hair, ears, skin. What they saw was not a face, but the percept of the face on the support of a natural leaf, through the technique of chlorotypy. As Gómez Cabal (2006, p. 111) again indicates: "A percept, therefore, identifies a face, a hand, a body, a work of art, but it is not one percept; rather, it is multiple percepts that compose a great percept, the work of art, that is, the percept of the work of art." Thus, we can conclude that our study subjects perceived in the chlorotypy print a series of percepts through their senses, principally through sight.

In response to the question: "What visual impact does the piece generate for you, both physically and projected on the screen?", the following reflection emerges. As regards affect, Gómez Cabal (2006, p. 112) states that "we perceive because we have been affected. An affect is a becoming"; affect goes beyond the subject, toward becoming, and that is why it is modified. Relatedly, Gómez Cabal (2006, p. 112) notes: "Affect is not an object; it is also a force, an intensity, in this sense, as a force, it affects the percept. What an affect does to a percept is modify the power of existence of a percept." That is, the subjects, after perceiving (percept) the face of the disappeared person, were affected by such a representation. This is where one comes face to face with the life story of each one of them. All of this contributes to what Deleuze and Guattari define as a block of sensations.

Chlorotypy can be analyzed through the Deleuze-Guattari concept of the work of art as a "block of sensations" – that is, as a compound of percepts (elements perceived sensorially) and affects (emotional or affective experiences produced by perception). This concept can be applied to chlorotypy in the following way:

Speaking of percepts, chlorotypy – as a photographic technique based on the transfer of an image onto a surface of the leaf of a plant or tree using a specific developing process (UV rays from the sun) gives rise to a concrete visual image that can be appreciated through the senses, especially sight. These images, owing to their peculiar tonality and texture, in addition to the "imperfect" shape of the leaf (sometimes incomplete) that tends to mix with the textures of the image itself (in this case the portrait, the skin of the person), offer a visual percept that is unique, different from other photographic forms. The resulting images usually have an atmosphere of softness or aging, generating their own sensory field.

The texture and shadows present in chlorotypy can evoke sensations of the tangible and the ephemeral something that can be perceived at the physical level (the quality of the printed image) but that also generates a more abstract experience of what is represented in the photograph.

At an affective level, chlorotypy produces a series of emotional resonances due to its unique appearance. The sepia-like tones (which depend on the choice of leaf), the softness of the image, and the process that involves the manipulation (sun-exposure time) of the medium generate a sense of nostalgia or of suspended temporality, which can trigger an affective response in the viewer.

The relationship between time and photography in this kind of technique implies a long, elaborate process and may also be associated with an affective experience of slowness, of reverence for the historical and the artistic. Thus, the viewer can feel an emotional connection with the past, with an image that has been arrested in time, often related to memory or to what has been lost.

In sum, chlorotypy, as a work of art, functions as a "block of sensations" in which percepts (the visual, the material) and affects (the emotional, the evocative) are intertwined. The photographic image, created by a physico-chemical process (photosynthesis) that generates a particular texture, offers an experience that is both sensory and emotional, in which the observer not only perceives an image but is also affected by the atmosphere created by the technique itself. In this way, as Gómez Cabal (2006, p. 112) puts it: "Percepts and affects constitute a sensation; blocks of percepts and affects constitute blocks of sensations." The gesture of printing the portraits of disappeared persons on plant leaves invites us to think about the fragility of bodies and about the need to sustain the *presence* of those who have been taken from us. As discussed in the theoretical framework, historical memory is not a fixed archive but a living and socially situated reconstruction (Jelin, 2002). In this case, the support becomes an active part of the discourse: in addition to containing the image, it transforms it into an experience of mourning, time, and fading.

Furthermore, this material choice allows for an intimate approach to the viewer. Unlike traditional or large-format prints, the leaves, by their scale and texture, invite a close and almost tactile observation. This kind of sensory bond reinforces the emotional connection with the topic, activating what Didi-Huberman (2004) calls "the image that summons a memory", the image that does not represent an event but reactivates it in the present.

The visible wear of the chlorotypes (their fading color, their breaking edges, their progressive disappearance) also alludes to the emotional and symbolic deterioration that families undergo in the absence of justice (see figure 10).

Figure 10

Physical chlorotypy from the project Presence



Note: Rafael del Río, courtesy of the author.

The incomplete images reflect the wound left by prolonged absence, and the fragility of the material becomes a mirror of the state of defenselessness in which those who search for their loved ones find themselves. Chlorotypy, in this sense, is not only an expressive medium but also a form of poetic, political, and ethical denunciation and resistance.

Finally, each leaf with a face is part of a larger whole, as if collective memory grew from individual fragments. The leaves, a symbol of life, are reconfigured here as an organic archive of the absent. Thus, the work documents pain and also transforms it into a device of living, sensitive, and communal memory.

Link between the support and the theme: fragility and the ephemeral

In line with their particular conception of the fragile and the ephemeral, these are the reflections that led the viewers to consider what the link is that the photographer establishes between the theme and the support of signification. The photographer manages to find, in the process and the support, the ideal language to convey the gradual way in which life deteriorates and/or is erased (see figure 11).

Figure 11
Chlorotypy from the project Presence



Note: Rafael del Río, courtesy of the author.

The memory that links them is life and the eternal, but, at the same time, it is the temporality the work can take on due to the technique the photographer has used; in this sense, the conservation of the leaf is important, as a reminder so that these events remain present in the memory of citizens. The fragility of the support and of the way the image is obtained, as well as its brief and surprising appearance and disappearance, are present both in life and in the technique used to manifest how brief and perishable life is. Thus, the work bears an inevitable trace, in the conceptual, the aesthetic, and even the immense and raw reality that surrounds us. It makes us link the leaf to societies, since they are fragile, while at the same time relating it to human thought, since no matter how hard we try to keep an image alive in our minds, with time it loses its color, its brightness, and begins to become blurred and dim.

As human beings, we are fragile and ephemeral; today we may be here, and tomorrow our existence may disappear in a sigh. Just as exposure hours once etched faces onto a leaf, one day those faces will disappear. Everything is fragile: the leaf, ourselves, the image, life. The pieces of the project, like the leaves themselves and the cases of the disappeared, are tied to time, and on many occasions are forgotten, just as the leaves on which their faces may slowly fade away. The analogy is reinforced by the fact that this is a problem that has continued to grow and to which adequate follow-up has not been provided: in the same way that ultraviolet rays gradually degrade the image to the point of forgetting that the person existed, society in many cases forgets to be in solidarity with those who have suffered such a regrettable loss.

The artistic work is also linked to the suffering of the family members of the disappeared person: the despair of not knowing where to search, knowing that time is precious and that, with that very passage of time, their case would become one more among the thousands that exist throughout the country. Following the same logic, the support has the property of being thin, and therefore of breaking easily. Moreover, the action of the sun also wears the leaf down somewhat, so that, as time passes, that portrait gradually fades.

Link between the support and historical memory

Historical memory is built not only in official archives or in institutional discourses, but also (and perhaps more profoundly and forcefully) in the cultural and artistic expressions that emerge from the lived experience of pain and resistance what we have called part of collective memory. As has been pointed out, "memory is not a passive reflection of the past," but a situated, contested construction in constant reformulation (Jelin, 2002, p. 25). In this sense, contemporary art has consolidated itself as a means of symbolic dispute and the production of meaning that makes it possible to question hegemonic narratives and to recover silenced voices.

Artistic practices that address forced disappearance in Mexico, such as *Presence* (2021) by Rafael del Río, *Recipe book for memory* (2020) by Zahara Gómez Lucini, or the theatrical production *Absences* (2016) by Julieta Casavantes, and the others described, operate as acts of active memory. These works document the trauma and create spaces for its collective elaboration, making the absent visible and dignifying those who have been stripped of their name and their history. As Didi-Huberman (2004, p. 31) affirms, "to show an image is not only to make visible, but also to summon a memory," which underscores the ethical and empathic value that the manifestations of art have as a form of resistance. The artists, in the cases presented, do not seek to close the mourning, but to open it; they do not aim to offer a definitive truth, but to detonate a critical and affective reflection that engages the viewer to rethink their role in the face of this social problem. In the project *Presence*, for example, the fragility of chlorotypy on natural leaves becomes a metaphor for the ephemeral nature of life and the constant risk of forgetting. The printed image, as already noted, will eventually disappear, which turns the work into a warning about the urgency of remembering and not forgetting of resisting the onslaught of those who would prefer that this issue not remain in citizens memory.

These pieces also stand out for their collaborative dimension. They are not individual exercises, but processes of shared creation with family members, collectives, and communities, which reinforces their ethical, empathic, and political character. This collaboration transforms art into a device of collective agency, in which the representation of trauma becomes not only a counter-narrative but also a tool of symbolic healing. The participation of contemporary art in historical memory also entails

risks and tensions. The aestheticization of pain or institutional cooptation can neutralize the critical potential of these works. For that reason, as Diéguez (2016, p. 219) warns, art has the power to "disturb us with images that are clearly uncomfortable," but also the responsibility to sustain that discomfort as a form of ethical interpellation.

◆ Conclusions

The forced disappearance of persons in Mexico constitutes one of the most atrocious expressions of structural violence and State decomposition. In the face of the omission and complicity of the authorities, civil society (especially the collectives of family members) has undertaken a sustained struggle for memory, truth, and justice. In this complex panorama, contemporary art has emerged as a sensitive, ethical, and political tool that not only denounces absences but activates processes of collective memory and resistance.

As has been demonstrated, the experiment has allowed us to reflect on the complex dynamic established between the creator, the work, and the viewer. From the aesthetic proposal of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, we have considered the percepts and affects contained in the portraits printed using the technique of chlorotypy, in the work *Presence* by Rafael del Río.

By applying the concepts of percepts and affects from Deleuzian thought, we have come to understand how each work generates a multiplicity of sensations in the viewer, which are not limited to a simple passive reception but instead activate diverse interpretations and emotional responses. This has led us to determine the relevance of the support of signification that will sustain the artist's discourse and that will lead the viewer to feel that emotional approach to the work. In the case at hand, that of chlorotypy, due to its specific characteristics: the organic nature of the natural leaves, taking into account that each leaf is unique and comes with particular physical features (texture, shape, size, color); as well as the ephemeral character of the print, since, with continued exposure to light, it will gradually disappear; and the fragility of the final result, which resembles a dry leaf, so that its handling must be careful to prevent it from breaking.

It has also been made evident that art, far from being a decorative object or an individualistic expression, becomes a space of symbolic construction that calls upon the viewer and mobilizes affects. The proposal analyzed, *Presence* by Rafael del Río, and the other references presented here, exemplify an artistic practice that is committed to social pain, that bets on making visible what is invisible, on resignifying the everyday, and on accompanying those who search for their loved ones.

These practices show that art can and must engage with social urgencies. By working with testimonies, objects, landscapes, bodies, or images,

contemporary artists build bridges between personal experience and collective memory, between intimate mourning and public denunciation. In this way, art positions itself as an act of resistance against forgetting and as a possibility for healing (if only symbolically) the wounds opened by violence. Finally, art does not replace justice, but it can be one of its most profound forms of evocation. In a country where silence has been State policy, art offers a crack through which memory, empathy, and dignity may seep through. To remember, through art, is also to insist that no disappearance is or should ever be normalized. 📍

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Among his lines of research are alternative photographic processes. In 2024 he presented his first photobook *Coliseo*, under the editorial seal Kahl Editions. His work is part of the PICS platform of the Centro de la Imagen. In 2024 he participated in the exhibition "Codificar, Almacenar y Recuperar, fotografía contemporánea en Jalisco," within the framework of Fotoseptiembre, at the Centro de la Imagen in Mexico City. He was selected for the exhibition "Corporeidades," at the IX EOS Photography Festival 2025, held in Paraguay. He is currently pursuing the Ibero-American Doctorate in Aesthetic Theories at the Universidad de Guanajuato.

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