

The Challenges of “Recuperating” Historical Memory: The Archive as Personal and Academic Source

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My grandfather’s refusal to discuss his role in the Spanish Civil War – he fought on the side of Republic - spurred me to try to find personal and art historical answers to questions that led me to attempt to empathize with, or at least understand, the motives of people I will never know except through their traces in visual materials produced during this period, and their fleeting presence in archives. This journey, which at first was academic, became personal as I visited archives where I sought answers that form the basis for the book I am currently writing *Visual Culture, Exhibitions and the Politics of Memory during the Spanish Civil War*, and was able to locate fragmentary information about my family. This process made me all too aware of the limits of attempting to recover historical events and motivations, and to keep at the forefront the need to contextualize archival documents and visual evidence.

Even today, archival information that would help survivors and their families seek justice is not available, in addition to the thousands murdered, jailed, persecuted, and sent into exile, countless remain disappeared or buried in mass graves. The December 2007 *Ley de la Recuperacion de la Memoria Histórica* seeks to encourage greater access to government, private and Church repositories that would shed light on these crimes against humanity. A few months ago, I contacted an archive seeking information about the concentration camp or jail where my grandfather and other relatives may have been incarcerated at the end of the war. An archivist answered that they would need to know the names of the sites where a person was held in order to facilitate this information. This type of bureaucratic circular reasoning, a Kafkaesque and absurd situation when

observed from afar, demonstrates the need for this law, that unfortunately does not enforce cooperation, but rather encourages it.

In the late 1990s, I saw Susan Meiselas' [Kurdistan project](#) (1991- present). I learned that because the Kurds have been the victims of genocide, as they moved from place to place, keeping visual evidence and material traces of their culture and their families' histories could expose them to physical danger. When I saw the work again at [ICP](#) this fall, I realized that the impact of this work for me was not just one of empathy for the Kurds. Rather, it responded to an inarticulate and suppressed realization that I lack any traces of my relatives' lives from the period when they fought to defend the Spanish Republic. This too, could have exposed them to danger.

Only I began to examine objects brought home by veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigades housed at the Tamiment Labor Archive at New York University, part of an interdisciplinary workshop *Visual Culture and Historical Evidence: The Case of the Abraham Lincoln Brigades*, and spoke with Haidy Geismar about the ways in which material culture is understood, did this come into sharp relief. The veterans too, brought home objects as they fled the war torn Republic, items that once they returned home could expose them to political persecution here in the United States. The traces of the ways in which the soldiers in their daily lives used visual materials such as posters, calendars and pamphlets, gave the contents of this archive particular poignancy. An example is calendars and albums commemorating Republican heroes in the defense of Barcelona from General Francisco Franco's right wing military uprising, or depicting daily life, all illustrated by the artist known as "Sim" (José Luis Rey Vila). I had seen copies in pristine condition in Barcelona, but here, they were marked by traces of their owners. I saw ripped and cut out pages from the calendar, saved and carefully brought home by veterans, and one page in particular, with a handwritten note: "It's like the church in Belchite, Spain." The veteran who found SIM's images compelling enough to tear them out of a calendar to safe keeping, inscribed the image as if it was a

photograph, a testimony, or perhaps an aid to memory. Belchite was one of the longest and bloodiest battles in the Spanish Civil War, and the parallel the veteran makes between the ruined church in Barcelona and the one in Belchite (Franco preserved the town as a macabre site of memory, constructing a new town nearby) points to his movements during the war.

Here were the elusive traces of “viewer reception” sought by many an art historian. What were the ways in which viewers understood these objects, today often decontextualized and clinically preserved in archives? In my work, I avoid such seemingly unanswerable questions. The readers, viewers, and owners of such objects, like my grandfather, are dead and their testimonies, lost. Instead, I focus on tracking the ways in which such visual propaganda circulated across media, and the efforts made by their producers to convey particular messages through the promotion and reinforcement of slogans in posters, postcards, illustrations and cartoons in magazines and newspapers, in speeches, press articles, and songs. I found administrative documents that also shed light on the strategies such producers – poster makers collectives’, political parties, unions, and political commissars – employed to attempt to persuade through these compelling and pervasive images. I did so based on a belief in the power of images, and the ALBA objects are testament to the importance of Sim’s images for some of their viewers, Americans that heroically fought to defend the Spanish Republic.