

Case Study: Marina Zerbarini's *Tejido de memoria* (Memory Weave), 2003

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<http://www.fact.co.uk/whats-on/current/cities-in-dialogue-memory-weave.aspx>

This case study looks at how digital artworks engage with issues of human rights, taking the work of Marina Zerbarini as an example. It aims to offer food for thought for museums and other institutions as to how new art forms can engage visitors in human rights issues in new and interactive ways.

Marina Zerbarini is an Argentinian digital artist who has been researching art/technology crossovers since the mid-90s. She is one of Argentina's longest-standing digital artists.

In 2003, Marina created her interactive online work, *Memory Weave*. In 2014, *Memory Weave* was showcased at Liverpool's FACT (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology) as part Professor Claire Taylor's (University of Liverpool) AHRC-funded Latin(o) American Digital Art project. *Memory Weave*, as its name suggests, is a richly-layered piece containing video files, still photographs, montages, texts, graphs, and user input, which all combine to stimulate active participation on the part of the viewer.

Memory Weave Marina's most political artwork to date, and she declares in the blurb to her work that the key themes of this work are 'human rights, poverty, social inequality, and memory'. More specifically, the artwork dialogues explicitly with the Madres de Plaza de Mayo (Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo), an association of mothers whose children were disappeared during Argentina's military dictatorship, 1976 – 1983. One of the objectives of the Mothers is to bring to light the human rights abuses of the military regime, and this comes through in the artwork.

The multi-layered combination of video files, photographs, texts, montages, and sound files means that the viewer/audience does not approach the artwork a linear way. Instead, the viewer/audience has to take up an active role, activating files as s/he navigates the work, and constructing a narrative as s/he does so – in a similar way to that which memory functions, as words, sounds and images interconnect, or interweave.

One way the artwork makes us think about memory and human rights is through its use of images. For example, the main page has the same black-and-white image repeated several times in a mosaic format: a photograph of the interior of a building, with bare walls, concrete columns and high windows. The architecture, and the grey-scale, grainy quality of the image, recall images of the clandestine detention centres that were established during the Argentine dictatorship and which were responsible for the disappearance, torture, and murder of an estimated 30,000 people.



Also, there are several named links, and other un-named links, hidden in the visuals. These connect to the main content of the work, and weave in a critical commentary on past and present Buenos Aires. Within these links, textual, visual, aural, statistical references to Buenos Aires and the Mother of the Plaza de Mayo appear, along with numerous statistics about contemporary poverty and inequality in Buenos Aires. In including such sources, Marina encourages the user/viewer of *Memory Weave* to consider human rights from two points of view: first, in light of Argentina's history of military dictatorship and second, from a contemporary perspective which encourages reflection on inequality in twenty-first century Buenos Aires.

The other sources and links within the work also encourage us to think about human rights issues. Video files, for example, open up short films, some of which are artistic or fictional works, and others which are extracts of interviews with a founding member of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. As we view these files, we learn more about the motivations of the Mothers, and the human rights abuses they protested against.

The sequences of still photographs and video files are supported by a further, un-named section of the work in which eighteen individual documents – some text, some graphic, and some photographic – provide supplementary information about the dictatorship, the Mothers and contemporary inequality in Argentina. By clicking on an icon on a chessboard, different documents are loaded, covering topics such as infant mortality, maternal mortality rates, poverty and unemployment in Buenos Aires; texts about the dictatorship and contemporary issues such as poverty and malnutrition in Argentina; and two photographic images. Again, because the viewer/audience activates each file, they construct a narrative as they go through the work.

In addition to all of this, *Memory Weave* engages the audience through the work's conscious effort to incorporate user comments. In the 'Communication' section, the user can submit a comment, poem, or even a report on human rights. This makes *Memory Weave* a 'work in progress', which is always being updated with thoughts on civil rights and justice.

I asked Marina for some closing comments on this artwork, and its relationship to human rights, and this is what she had to say:

"There is a close relationship between interaction, human rights, and memory. It took me a long time to understand and to relate to what happened around me in my country: the pieces fell into place one by one, and each piece activated another memory. After so many years of repression – not just of human rights, but also of individual thought, and of societal thought – your feelings are blocked, and only start re-appearing bit by bit. Each one of the themes of my work emerged spontaneously, when you're distracted, over time, and bit by bit.

One day, you put everything together and it all comes rushing out: *Memory Weave* ended up threaded with unexpected feelings and unanticipated logic. The way in which interactive archives appear in the work are like memory: somewhat surprising, because you click on something and you don't know what you're going to find, but it's inevitable that you find something."



Image: Marina Zerbarini

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