

**The Presentness of Central America**  
**Photography and Memory in Group Material's 1984 *Timeline***  
by  
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[SLIDE] With the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero on March 24, 1980, civil unrest that had been escalating in El Salvador since at least the 1930s, plunged the country into a full scale civil war between the newly formed leftist revolutionary organization, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front or FMLN, and Salvadoran government and right-wing paramilitary forces. For most U.S. citizens, however, [SLIDE] it was not until the discovery and exhumation of the bodies of four raped and murdered U.S. churchwomen in early December 1980 that the atrocities being committed in El Salvador became actualized. As one Senate Republican staffer who dealt with Central American issues explained, "Human Rights abuses in [El Salvador] took on more concrete meaning for people when the women were killed. It brought the killings home in a different way than gross statistics. These were Americans, not nameless, faceless campesinos and urban dwellers. It was very hard not to be very deeply affected by that."<sup>1</sup>

[SLIDE] Many Americans learned about the killings of the four American churchwomen through news stories that circulated in the mainstream print media. Most of these articles included explicit photographs of the exhumed bodies. The editors at *Newsweek*, for instance, published three color photographs, to accompany their story about the murders. Two of the photographs, one of which appeared on the table of contents page, pictured the process of exhuming the bodies from a shallow grave. The third, almost half a page in size, depicted three American nuns kneeling in prayer over the slain bodies of their co-workers. In this photograph as well as the smaller one that appears on the same page, the women's bodies have been, largely out of respect, partially obscured with leafy branches. While these coverings serve to slightly

diminish the graphic nature of these atrocities, in both images, spectators who stand in the background visibly holding cloths over their faces so as to deter what one assumes is the stench emitted by the decaying bodies attest to the impossibility of actually doing so. Moreover, the directed gazes of these and many of the other bystanders, including the three American nuns, as well as the titled camera angle from which Sipa/Black Star photographer Chris Laffaille [Laffaille] framed the brutalized bodies in the immediate foreground of the picture, all serve to visually implicate *Newsweek* readers as witnesses to these killings.

Even more than form and content, however, widespread engagement with these atrocities in the United States was facilitated by the social and political contexts in which these images circulated. Prior to the brutal deaths of the four churchwomen, most Americans did not know or much less care about El Salvador. [SLIDE] After seeing images such as the ones disseminated in *Newsweek* that depicted these half naked bodies being exhumed from their shallow grave, many Americans, especially the U.S. religious community, began to actively protest against U.S. Central American policy. The murders also ignited a flurry of angry letters, phone calls, and telegrams to congressional offices demanding not only that justice be sought but, more critically, that U.S. aid to El Salvador be stopped immediately. President Jimmy Carter, who had tried to make human rights a cornerstone of his foreign policy, also felt the political gravity of the atrocities committed against these American churchwomen. On December 5, three days after the murders, the Carter administration suspended all economic and military aid to El Salvador “pending,” as an article in the *New York Times* explained, “the clarification of the role of Salvadorian security forces in the killing of the three American nuns and a lay missionary.”

This suspension of aid by the Carter administration, however, was short-lived. When the FMLN along with the Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR) began a “final offensive” against

the armed forces of the Salvadoran government in early January 1980, Carter, in his last days before leaving office, approved \$5 million in “lethal” military aid, including automatic rifles and combat helicopters, to help the Salvadoran armed forces fight off what the State Department called “Marxist terrorism supported covertly with arms, ammunition, training and political and military advice by Cuba and other Communist nations.”<sup>2</sup> This new aid was in addition to the \$5 million in “nonlethal” military aid that the Carter administration had already resumed after a “Presidential fact-finding mission” concluded that the Salvadoran military had no connection to the deaths of the four American churchwomen. This pronouncement, however, would turn out to be untrue. The Carter administration, in fact, knew that little progress had been made in the investigation into these slayings; yet, because they feared that, with the assistance of arms from Nicaragua and Cuba, the FDR/FMLN would be able to overthrow the Salvadoran government as leftist revolutionaries had recently done in Nicaragua, they chose to justify the resumption of U.S. aid to El Salvador with a fiction about progress being made in the case of the murders of the American churchwomen. Such misrepresentations and especially their justification through a Cold War rhetoric would only intensify after Ronald Reagan took office and his incoming officials tried to transfer at least some responsibility for the murders from the Salvadoran military to the women themselves. Newly appointed delegate to United Nations Ambassador, Jeane Kirkpatrick, for instance, called the women leftists political activists. While Secretary of State Alexander Haig contended that the women might have been shot at for running a roadblock.<sup>3</sup>

In evoking these accusations, the incoming Reagan administration sought to restrain, if not, outright deter public indignation and by extension solidarity with the Salvadoran guerrilla forces that had been gaining momentum across the United States as a result of the brutalities of

these murders. [SLIDE] It was within this context that Group Material, a collective of young artists working in New York City, conceived of their multi-media installation *Timeline: The Chronicle of US Intervention in Central and Latin America*, on view at the P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in Queens, NY, between January and March of 1984. [SLIDE] Produced as part of a network of exhibitions, performances, and other events known as “Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America,” *Timeline* was designed not only to educate its audience about the history of U.S. military interventions in Central and Latin America but, more critically, to shift how U.S. cultural memory around this history had been and could be deployed. A photograph of the slain U.S. churchwomen played a crucial role in this solidarity raising effort.

[SLIDE] *Timeline* filled four walls at P.S. 1 with a disparate group of objects that ranged from cultural artifacts and documentary materials to contemporary and historical works of art. Included among these items were propaganda from the leftist revolutions in Nicaragua and El Salvador, including a FSLN banner and a FMLN scarf, [SLIDE] commodities—bananas, coffee grinds, tobacco leaves, cotton, and copper—that directly referenced imperialist interests in the region, [SLIDE] as well as newspaper clippings and press photographs, including several recent and particularly gruesome images from El Salvador taken by Associated Press photographer Bolivar Arellano [Bol-liv-ar Ari-ya-no] and Magnum photographer Susan Meiselas. [SLIDE] Interspersed alongside these cultural artifacts were works of art made by around 40 contemporary artists, including Richard Prince and Barbara Kruger, among others, as well as by such historical figures such as Tina Modotti [Mo-dotti] and John Heartfield. [SLIDE] In addition, in the center of the room, Group Material installed a large red sculptural navigational buoy that artists Barbara Westermann, William Allen, and Ann Messner had recently made for use in a march against U.S. intervention in Central America in Washington, DC.

[SLIDE] Group Material displayed all of these objects in a collage-like array with relatively little explanatory material save for their placement above or below a three inch red painted timeline that extended horizontally across all four walls of the room. [SLIDE] Spanning the years 1823 to 1984, the dates marked off in black on the timeline correlated approximately to a chronology of U.S. interventions in Central and South America as well as the Caribbean that had been prepared by members of the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador and mounted on the installation's entry wall. Yet, "Those seeking exact correspondences between dates and display items," as Thomas Lawson notes in his review of *Timeline* in *Artforum*, "would have been disappointed for the evidence was put to a different use."<sup>4</sup> Here Lawson refers to the fact that, though many of the works in the exhibition were produced in the 1970s and 1980s, their placement along the red painted timeline did not correspond chronologically with these time periods.

[SLIDE] A photograph by Susan Meiselas of the slain bodies of the four American churchwomen was one exception. What accounts for its synchronous placement on the red painted timeline, just after "1980," the year that the murders took place in El Salvador? In the brochure that accompanied the installation, Group Material explains that they had included these "current media documents...to lend factual support to the exhibition as a whole."<sup>5</sup> Rather than "factuality," I would argue that the "presentness" of Meiselas's photograph was of greater importance. In using the term "presentness," I draw on Mieke Bal's discussion of cultural memory, which she defines "as an activity occurring in the present, in which the past is continuously modified and redescribed even as it continues to shape the future."<sup>6</sup> Here Bal theorizes that cultural memorization is not a static document of the past, rather it actively, even performatively, concerns the "here and now." It is precisely the ways in which the display of

Meiselas's photograph of the slain American churchwomen in *Timeline* activates such a "presentness" of memory, so that "the past is 'adopted' as part of the present"<sup>7</sup> that renders it so critical to the exhibition and especially its effort to "modify and redescribe" U.S. cultural memory around the conflicts in Central and Latin America.

As a practice, photojournalism is not something that is usually associated with cultural memory. Communication scholar Barbie Zelizer [Zel-i-zer] has attributed this indifference in part to "the popular assumption" that photojournalism is "driven more by its emphasis on the here-and-now than on the there-and-then," and that its practitioners therefore tend to "distinguish themselves from those dealing with the past by aspiring to a sense of newsworthiness that draws on proximity, topicality and novelty."<sup>8</sup> The display of Meiselas's photograph of the slain American churchwomen within *Timeline* at first seems to emphasize many of these "here-and-now" qualities. Not only does its chronological display along the red painted timeline underscore its "topicality," but the familiarity and proximity of its subject matter would have made the photograph exceedingly "newsworthy" for viewers. At the same time, since viewers were looking at this photograph in early 1984 when *Timeline* was on view at P.S. 1, a little more than three years after the murders had taken place, cultural memory around the atrocities depicted in the photograph belonged as much to "here-and-now" as to the "there-and-then." In other words, the "presentness" of the photograph was not something that was over and done and thereby relegated to the past. Instead, cultural memorization around these slayings was still being reconstructed and re-presented. This point was something well understood by the Reagan administration who used the ongoing investigations into the murders of the four American churchwomen as leverage in their dogged effort to certify to Congress that the Salvadoran government was in compliance with the human rights conditions stipulated for the renewal of

U.S. military aid. Anyone who questioned the validity of this progress was opportunely labeled by the Reagan administration as abetting the communists.<sup>9</sup>

For Group Material, this redescription of U.S. cultural memory around the murders of the American churchwomen by the Reagan administration was highly problematic, especially since human rights organizations both within and outside of El Salvador continued to ascribe these and the majority of other noncombatant murders as being instigated by the Salvadoran government. To challenge these accounts, Group Material harnessed the “presentness” of Meiselas’s photograph to different ends. [SLIDE] The visual framing of the murders by Meiselas was especially open to such modification. This is because even though the subject of the image is the murder of the four American churchwomen, those who look at these brutalized bodies, including the Salvadorans who exhume them from their shallow grave as well as the numerous photographers and television crew members who document these atrocities are given as much visual prominence as the women themselves. In the upper right side of the composition, for instance, stand three individuals and their recording devices. [SLIDE] Though visually similar to the three American nuns who kneel in prayer over the slain bodies of their co-workers in Chris Laffaille’s [La-Faie’s] widely circulated *Newsweek* photograph, these individuals, whose heads have been abruptly cut off by the top of the frame, serve a different function. Rather than engage viewers emotionally with these atrocities, they, in addition to the numerous other photographers, including Meiselas, who are rendered visible through the prominent interplay of their shadows on the ground, call attention to the act, even the spectacle, of looking at the dead.

How might this act of looking be directed toward more radical ends that, as Group Material member Mundy McLaughlin had previously written, “can give people a new perception of the world”?<sup>10</sup> The display of the objects within *Timeline* provided one such strategy. [SLIDE]

In juxtaposing Meiselas's photograph of the slain American churchwomen next to another photograph that she had taken of two Salvadoran women grieving at a mass held for the murdered American nuns in the Chalatenango Church where the U.S. women had worked, Group Material attempts to redescribe and modify cultural memory around the killings depicted in the photograph from one that emphasized American exceptionalism to instead focus on the dynamics of inter-American exchange. Such a re-contextualization was critical not only in terms of the Reagan administration's efforts to co-opt these atrocities for their cold war agenda, but also because these slayings, along with the subsequent murders of two U.S. labor advisors in El Salvador in early January 1981, were the only cases to be investigated "in a period," as Marvin E. Frankel, Chairman for the Lawyers Committee for International Human Rights notes, "when perhaps 30,000 civilians including the country's Archbishop have been murdered, many by the government's armed forces."<sup>11</sup> In this statement, Frankel calls attention to the fact that even though the U.S. and Salvadoran governments continued to impede investigations into these murders, they had still garnered far more visibility than the thousands of Salvadorans who had also been killed during this same time period. How the public notoriety, even spectacle, of these murders might be shifted away from furthering U.S. economic and geopolitical interests in El Salvador to bringing about solidarity with the Salvadorans who remained invisible to most Americans was a central question.

One of the ways that Group Material attempted to deal with this issue was by redescribing the past upon which the "presentness" of Meiselas's photograph of the slain American churchwomen depends so that a new space of memorization might be activated in the future. In her writings about photography and memory, Barbie Zelizer notes that "images function in memory precisely through contingency, when meaning settles not at the image's



original point of display but over time in new contexts that are always altered, sometimes playful, and often contradictory.”<sup>12</sup> Here Zelizer argues that unlike in the print media where the meanings of news images are often anchored through the textual descriptions that accompany them or in terms of the larger political environment in which they were initially made, when photographs move through time and space, the singularity and seemingly finality of such meanings begins to shift. In the case of Meiselas’s photograph of the murdered American churchwomen, then, the meaning of this image is no longer tethered exclusively to the event that it depicts much less to the U.S. Central American policies of Ronald Reagan to which it was leveraged. Within the spatial and temporal organization of *Timeline*, the “presentness” of this news image instead begins to alter as it is seen and re-seen in terms of the contextual framework that unfolds around it, including the other images of the dead on display in the exhibition.

[SLIDE] Among these images is Bolivar Arellano’s photograph of the mangled bodies of recently killed Salvadoran guerrillas piled haphazardly onto the flatbed of a military truck. Taken in March 1982, while Arellano was working for the Associated Press, the photograph references recent events in El Salvador, specifically fighting in an impoverished suburb outside of San Salvador, between military forces and rebel insurgents that resulted in these killings as well as the horrific dragging of three guerrilla rebels through the streets behind a pickup truck. Rather than reference this fighting directly or make a commentary about the scant coverage that it received within the U.S. print media, within *Timeline*, Arellano’s photograph is placed just to the right of “1932,” the year of the Salvadoran peasant massacre or “la matanza” [ma-tan-za]—in which between 10,000 and 30,000 civilians (mostly indigenous people) were killed by the Salvadoran military—that is listed as part of the chronology found on the exhibition’s entry wall.

The asynchronic placement of this news image may at first appear contradictory. In displaying Arellano's 1982 photograph in terms of a massacre from 1932 that is not even depicted in the image itself, both sets of killings appear to be denigrated. Such an understanding, however, assumes that the value of Arellano's news photograph lies in its "here-and-now" qualities. That is not the case. The asynchronous placement of Arellano's photograph along the red painted timeline serves to redescribe the "presentness" of this news image in terms of the larger history of inequity and subjugation that existed within El Salvador and that was closely intertwined with U.S. interventions within that region. [SLIDE] As the timeline mounted on the exhibition's entrance wall noted, the year "1932" was not just the date of the 1932 peasant massacre, it was also when five U.S. and British/Canadian warships were sent to El Salvador out of fear that the "revolt was being backed by Moscow."<sup>13</sup> Given that in 1984 the Reagan administration was also trying to justify U.S. intervention in El Salvador through its own Cold War agenda, such a realignment between the "here-and-now" and "there-and-then" in Arellano's photograph would have been critical not only for initiating solidarity with victims of the U.S.-backed repression in El Salvador but also for shifting the very past upon which the cultural memory around Meiselas's photograph of the slain American churchwomen equally depended. [SLIDE] Together these press photographs documenting atrocities in the Salvadoran civil war, then, were not just objective historical documents that belonged to the past; instead, on the walls of *Timeline*, they became dynamic, affective objects, whose mobility and mutability could empower viewers to think differently about the present and, by extension, the future of inter-American relations.

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<sup>1</sup> (Crisis p. 62 f. 23)

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Lawson, *Artforum*

<sup>5</sup> Group Material.

<sup>6</sup> Bal.

<sup>7</sup> Bal.

<sup>8</sup> Zelizer, *Memory Studies*, 80.

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<sup>10</sup> Mundy McLaughlin

<sup>11</sup> 2.

<sup>12</sup> Zelizer, "The Voice of the Visual," 161-162.

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