POLITICS OF (UN)DOCUMENT

Immigrants and Photographic Devices in Seba Kurtis's Postdocumentary Photography

Agustín Berti and Andrea Torrano
Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Argentina

This essay discusses the experimental forms of visual representation in the work of the Argentinean photographer Seba Kurtis. His work portrays several migrations from the southern to northern hemispheres using "flawed" devices and other heterodox resources that extend the limits of the concepts of record and representation, and their relation with technology. The technical device and security device, seen from a biopolitical perspective, intertwine in Kurtis' photographic works, producing what we define as "flawed experience" and "people without identity", which constitute the illegal immigrant condition. Photography becomes a form of resistance and a necessarily veiled memory of a diaspora marked by its growing illegalization, in opposition to the record and control of state devices.

biopolitics

device

experimental photography

immigration

Kurtis, Seba

post-documentary

resistance

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

interventions, 2014
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2014.886158

Introduction

In his final courses and conferences, Michel Foucault analyses the progressive growth of the state as observed since the nineteenth century. Foucault discusses the issue of the state from a perspective he calls "governmentality", that is, the set of actions that the state, institutions and specific knowledge exert over the people who inhabit a territory, who are regarded as *population*, a biological group subject of calculus and statistics. In *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault indicates how modern states look for security, that is, the conservation of population. Government administration is the political form that has population as its objective, the form that uses economic knowledge as an instrument and that controls society through the security device. This device is characterized by the determination of security sites, probabilistic and statistical calculus, normalization, and the correlation between security techniques and the population (Foucault 2007, 25). However, in the development of these problems Foucault introduced conceptual changes. The notion of the anatomo-politics of the human body, the exertion of power over an individual body, was replaced by the biopolitics of the population. The first is a technology of disciplinarian power on the human body so as to increase its usefulness and its meekness, its integration into economic control systems. The second is a technology of power which implies a series of regulatory controls on biological processes: birth, mortality, health and lifespan (Foucault 1978, 139). Finally, governance defines the way in which the actions and conduct of individuals are addressed.[1]

The security device, typical of the society of control,[2] enables the regulation, sorting and arrangement of the population. In addition to improving the living conditions of the population, it is capable of exclusion, violence, and even death. In this sense, Butler states that "this power functions differentially, to target and manage certain populations, to derealize the humanity of subjects who might potentially belong to a community bound by commonly recognized laws" (2006, 68). The security device works by differentially administrating life. This means that over the population continuum there are separations between valuable and worthless lives, between liveable lives with lamentable deaths and inhuman lives that do not deserve to be grieved.[3]

Today, some of those who build on Foucault's work consider government as not so much exerted on individual bodies – anatomopolitics – or the totality of the population – biopolitics – as on so-called "risk groups", on social collective subjects (De Giorgi 2000; O'Malley 2004). The category of "group", as a collection of individuals who share some common features and to whom an identity is assigned, becomes the object and objective of power. Risk groups are those considered a threat to the population that the

1 After the third lesson of the seminar "Security, Territory, Population", Foucault abandons references to biopolitics and replaces them with governance.

2 Deleuze (1992) points out the passage from "disciplinarian society" to "society of control" produced by the generalized crisis of confinement spaces.

3 Butler (1993; 2006; 2009) proposes these concepts when discussing biopolitics.

government wants to secure. These groups include the unemployed, drug addicts, criminals and, especially, immigrants (De Giorgi 2000, 100).

Agamben (2004) denounces the legal–political (i.e. biopolitical) condition of the citizens of allegedly democratic states who must be subject, on a "regular" basis, to control devices. Control is exerted through the use of electronic devices (from cell phones to retina recognition). The extension of technologies and devices originally intended for the "dangerous classes" to all citizens demonstrates that the state, which should be the very space of political life, has turned the citizen into a suspect *par excellence*. This "gradual animalization of man", pointed out by Foucault, is what Agamben (1998) named "bare life". The concept refers to the zone of indistinction between a life both protected and acknowledged by a given legal–political order (*bios*) and mere biological life (*zoé*). Bare life is a life for which acknowledgement as such and legal protection are suspended. Therefore, it is reduced to a pure biological life which is exposed to extra-normative violence (Agamben 1998).

Immigration thus becomes a central issue for governmentality. In the last few decades the immigration policies of liberal states have been characterized by a restrictive tendency, dominated by the limitation of immigrant rights and liberties, especially in the case of illegal immigrants, and by a hardening of border controls and vigilance. The government of these risk groups – also called "risk government" (Rose 2007) – administrates the crossing of borders to the countries of destination, differentiating between desirable and undesirable immigrants. This produces stratification between immigrants who are already citizens of the destination country, regular immigrants and irregular immigrants. Immigration policies thus implement government technologies that enable an increase in border controls, the restriction of access, the creation of detention centres and so on.

These measures have had divergent effects: they have succeeded in limiting and stemming immigration flows (especially irregular flows) to wealthier societies, but they have not been able to intervene directly into the source of migration itself. However, simultaneously, the increase in control measures has produced an increase in forms of clandestine immigration, with a series of side effects: the creation of differentiated spaces regarding liberty of movement, "entrance" discrimination, an increase in the risks associated with migration itself, and a greater threat of death at border crossings (Cossarini 2011, 10).

Conceptualizing immigration as a risk to the population is manifested in the media and in government policies by means of a newly minted term to designate irregular immigrants: "crimmigrant" (Stumpf 2006). This concept assumes a convergence between irregular immigration and criminality. The criminalization of irregular immigration allows the imposition of severe migration laws and differential sanctions for the crime, depending

on the immigrant. The mere presence of an undesired immigrant turns him or her into a risk for society; the immigrant *becomes* a crime (De Giorgi 2000, 63).

The work of Argentinean photographer Seba Kurtis offers a significant and appealing example to discuss the impact of recording and representation technologies on migration. His work depicts the experience of illegal migrants before the control devices; that is, migration in increasingly biopolitically controlled borders and its effect on human lives. His own experience as an illegal immigrant in Europe plays a major role in this regard, strengthening the ethical and political appeal of his work. Kurtis has exhibited his work in photographic festivals and galleries in Europe, North America and Australia,[4] and regularly contributes images and texts about photography and migration-related issues in photography magazines[5], but he has not exhibited in Argentina, where he remains largely unknown. His work has circulated widely in spaces legitimated by the art world, and the arrangement of his work on his minimalistic and non-explicit Internet page offers a political and aesthetic statement on his work and on his subject. His webpage is thus a peculiar curatorial space that breaks the oft-closed borders of the art world and opens up to the larger political debates on the matter.

Of course, he is not the only photographer working on migration. His approach could be compared to other POC project members, for instance.[6] And his experimental and artistic procedures could also be compared with those of Gustavo Germano's work on the Argentinean disappeared *Ausencias* (www.gustavogermano.com).[7] However, what sets him apart are his interventions at different stages of production of photographic images (exposure, storage, copying and collection) and the way this appeals to the various technological traditions of image production.

The philosophical concepts discussed above provide a theoretical framework to analyse the poetics and politics of Kurtis's *oeuvre*, an extensive series of photographs with a complex intertwinement of topic and the actual material form of the image-representation of migration. Such an analysis will discuss the intimate relation between the redefinition of borders, the impact of registration and information technologies, and its implications for the definition of the human condition of illegal migrants. Agamben (2004) pointed out that migration biopolicies are, ultimately, a test ground for politics aimed at all citizens. Against the alleged neutrality of technology, current and classic discussions on the subject (Feenberg 1991; Simondon 1989; Stiegler 1998) point out that technological development is what allows for the existence of culture, rather than being its product. Thus, a specific technology cannot be considered neutral. On the contrary, it forms part of the very foundations of what can and cannot be perceived and therefore what can be thought, ethically and politically.

4 Some of Kurtis's group and solo exhibitions include the Noorderlicht Photofestival in Groningen, Host Gallery in London, Kiosk Gallery in Manchester, SiFest in Italy and the New York Photo Festival in 2009; the Tricycle and Idea Generation galleries in London, Galleria Contemporaneo in Venice, the Milan Fotosintesi Festival and ArtVerona VII and Lumen Gallery in Budapest in 2011; the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, the Houston Center of Photography, F/STOP 2012, the Fifth Festival for Photography in Leipzig, Format Contemporary Gallery in Milan and the Fotografia Europea Italy in 2012.

5 Kurtis's work has been published in the *British Journal of Photography*, *Foto 8*, *Foam Magazine*, *Visura Magazine*, *Little White Lies*, *The Sunday Times* and *Wire*, among others. His photographs have been included in the books *Basics Creative Photography 02* by Maria Short and *Hijacked Vol. 3: UK–Australia Contemporary Photography*. His first photo-book

Seba Kurtis: A Case of Postdocumentary Photography

The digitization of images (and imaging) implies a series of political challenges resulting from the increased power of record and control that patterning bestows on governments and companies. In this context, the production of images that dispute and subvert the devices of record and control offers an excellent opportunity to think about the limits of visual representation and to take a political stance *before* and *within* technical reproduction devices. This implies considering the necessary relation established between technological and control devices, and the possibility of a counter-representation of, and within, the recording technologies. Agamben's fears have already been realized in contemporary European and American migration control policies.[8] In the case of Kurtis, we will discuss how he represents the experience of migrants in relation to control devices by evidencing the technical devices themselves and, in doing so, how he undermines the clichés of documentary photography.

To discuss the forms of visual representation that challenge the established ideas of photography as record and document (related to the indexical character of reality attributed to photographic images and the ubiquity of these records of reality through the security devices exacerbated by file digitization), it is necessary to pay attention to heterodox technical procedures. Such procedures blur the distinction (typical of, but not exclusive to, art criticism and aesthetics) between work of art and storage, or content and container. Heterodox procedures can also put into question well-established ideas of photographic referentiality due to the necessary bond with the physical world and the reflection of light. Furthermore, they may also undermine naive aestheticizing ideas implied by the epic or touching images typical of documentary photography, frequently associated with social and political activism. Aestheticized images are based on the indexical qualities that documentary poetics attribute to photographic images.

The representation of migration is a field of dispute, both political and aesthetic, and it demands a critique of registration technologies and the aestheticized documentary image in order to produce representations that transcend the limits of the state and aesthetic regime. In Kurtis's work, the ethical, political, aesthetic, technical and thematic aspects of images intertwine. The immediate effect of such intertwinement is a reauratization of the photographic print that implies a politicization of the practice of photography, opposed to the aestheticization that usually contradicts the political intentionality of documentary photographers. Kurtis's photographic work updates some of the main topics of Walter Benjamin's essays on the work of art and on experience, therefore providing a unique opportunity to rethink some of these dilemmas in relation to immigration and the security devices mentioned above. The label "postdocumentary" has been used by Kurtis

by Here Press published in 2011, is *Drowned*. He is also a regular lecturer in European and Australian art schools and holds a Masters in Fine Arts by the London College Communication.

6 Kurtis is a member of the POC Project (Piece of Cake Project Network for contemporary images), created in Rouen in 2002 at the initiative of French photographer Charles Fréger. For more information, see www.pocproject.com.

7 Kurtis has also produced images related to the Argentine military dictatorship, uploaded to his personal website in 2013. The series is called "76–83" and comprises a collage of photographs and recently released US government files on the period.

8 This has been very eloquently displayed, for instance, by Sylvain George's 2010 experimental documentary *Qu'ils reposent en révolte (des figures de guerres)*. One of the film's most powerful images shows clandestine migrants erasing their fingerprints with red-hot screws and

himself, following British photographer Paul Graham. It alludes to the blurring of boundaries between the art and photographic worlds, along with the decay of what was specific to photography – its indexical relation to the physical world – due to digital cameras and other experimental procedures. It can also refer to the depreciation of images in their ever-increasing flow in contemporary societies.[9]

In order to understand the implications of Kurtis's images we must analyse the intertwinement of topic, form and technique in the photographic projects exposed in his webpage.[10] His recurring topic is the constant diaspora from underdeveloped to developed countries. The photographer himself lived for five years as a clandestine immigrant and worker in Europe, after the Argentine economic meltdown in 2001, first to aid his family and then to help them cross over to England with him.[11] Thus, a strong personal and subjective dimension explicitly pervades Kurtis's projects. He focuses on his own family history, refers to the trajectories of friends and acquaintances, depicts places where he worked, and introduces the situations that conditioned the final form of his different projects.

Kurtis's use of analogue machines, which are radically different to digitally produced images, is almost an anachronistic practice in itself. Furthermore, he uses a rare large-format camera (4 x 5 ins) that he subjects to several unorthodox procedures (such as the partial fogging or destroying of negatives). This is the basis of his personal poetics by means of which he establishes a correspondence between form and content – or between the photographed and the physical storage surfaces of the photographic representation – and which the artist calls "vandalization". By means of this vandalization, Kurtis avoids the Romantic logic inherent to the poetics of retro that seek beauty in obsolescence. Under the label of *Immigration Files*, Kurtis groups the projects more explicitly related to the topic.

"700 miles" portrays Latin American migration on the Mexico–US border. To produce this series, Kurtis printed images from damaged negatives whose boxes had been opened before being developed. By solarizing the negatives, he introduced the randomness of physical phenomena and generated a peculiar luminous aura in the resulting images. Due to the necessity of longer exposure times, Kurtis's 4 x 5 portraits involve still models posing and looking straight into the camera, thus dispelling the illusion of documentary photography as a reflex of reality, which snapshots of suffering people in situations of great strain (and usually looking downwards) generate. Kurtis has stated that he made use of these technical means in order to portray those who suffer the fragility of the immigrant experience in a heroic way, as opposed to the miserabilism frequent in politically oriented documentary images (Coventry University 2012). The procedure also establishes an analogy between the subjects of portraits caught in the hazards of solarizing and the actual experience of subjects deprived of citizenship, as "bare lives"

razors while disguising this act of mutilation within the form of a ritual in order to limit the biopolitical control applied by migration record files (Kuehner 2011).

9 For a broader discussion on the idea of postdocumentary, see Graham (2010).

10 See www.sebakurtis.com. Kurtis's website is frequently updated and its layout reorganized. In this essay we focus on his photographic work up until 2011. Since then, he has added other series and regrouped some of his previous work. For instance, "8 years", which is discussed here, is currently offline.

11 In 2001 Argentina's economic meltdown unleashed the most important economic, social and political crises since the return of democracy in 1983. On 19 December President De La Rua decreed a "state of siege" that led to riots throughout the country and a police repression that caused nineteen deaths in two days. On 20 December the resignation of the president resulted in the biggest crisis in political

representation in Argentine history. For a broader discussion of these events, see Mazzeo and Fundación de Investigaciones Sociales y Políticas 2004). Because of the crisis, tens of thousands of Argentineans migrated to the Northern Hemisphere.

under the exposure of the desert sun on the Arizona border. On the other hand, exposure of the negatives also points to the exposure (both physical and legal–political) endured by those who cross borders. Theirs are lives exposed to violence, lives that strive to "survive", in the biological sense. Agamben, radicalizing Foucauldian thought, suggests that what specifically defines biopolitics is "no longer either *to make die or to make live*, but *to make survive*. The decisive activity of biopower in our time consists in the production not of life or death, but rather of a mutable and virtually infinite survival" (Agamben 1999, 155).

"A few days more" pictures waiting Egyptian immigrants on the coast of North Africa and the increasing travel hazards due to the lengthier journey across the Mediterranean caused by Italian closed-border policies. In this case, the vandalizing process does not affect all the negatives of the series. Kurtis chose instead to open the camera's chamber while taking some specific shots. Instead of solarizing all the material, the project includes some partially or almost completely fogged images along with copies of undamaged negatives. Paradoxically, undamaged images are mainly depictions of damaged objects (for instance, a weather-worn parasol where the immigrants wait for their ship). This series of photographs presents a non-homogeneous corpus in which the abstract image of an almost complete fogging coexists with disturbing erasure of the face of a portrait due to a partial solarization or the depiction of damaged objects in unvandalized images. The coexistence of images of ontologically diverse orders challenges the indexical value of the photographic device and, at the same time, creates images with a clear and strong political appeal precisely by making indexicality hesitate before the growing abstraction caused by the solarization. Since the substrate of such abstraction is a solarized shot, it is in fact an inaccessible indexicality, which therefore goes in the opposite direction of the conceptual realism of the digital images.[12] In fact, conceptual realism allows the implementation of migration policies and, ultimately, effective governmentality; that is, the structuring of "the possible field of action of others" (Foucault and Dreyfus 1982), which in this case refers to undesired migrants who are kept apart from the governed population. The interplay between damage and no damage, both of the negatives and the portrayed objects, suggests the existence of different regimes for the technical devices. The state administration of migrants determines, through the "correct use" of technical devices, which lives are valuable and which are not, which bodies matter and which do not. On the contrary, the solarized face of a waiting migrant standing in front of an iconic Western soft-drink poster is an eloquent example of the hesitation of indexicality and of the blurring of photographic identification to represent irregular migration.

"Drowned" presents the arrival of African rafters to the Canary Islands. Although *Immigration Files* has six different sections, this is the last part of a

12 What is less evident is the fact that digital images dilute the referent and the indexicality that remained in photochemical images. When electronic devices codify a series of sensorial inputs and translate it into an image, this image loses its purely deictic nature, frees itself from the referent, and becomes language, code.

triptych along with "700 miles" and "A few more days." The vandalization procedure for this project is extreme. The photographed topics are not the immigrants themselves but the shores that those who survive the sea journey will reach. After taking these pictures, Kurtis took the radical decision to drown the negatives in the same sea where the rafters drown. The result is a series composed by the copies of damaged negatives that survived the sea. Also, a short video shows, without any explanation, the 4 x 5 negative boxes floating in the sea. In "Drowned" the images share the same fate as the immigrants exposed to the swings of fortune imposed by water, salt and sun, intertwining form and subject and defying the logics of visual representation that standardize the products of technical reproduction devices. Kurtis represents the violence to which migrant life is exposed, a bare life for which acknowledgement as such – as well as legal protection – is suspended, and is therefore cast into a survival on its own. The effects of seawater on the negatives mirror the precariousness and the abandonment of a life deprived of all qualities.

The last two sections of *Immigration Files*, "8 years" and "Undocument", are of a different nature. In the first, instead of vandalizing the negatives, Kurtis subverts the logics of the state that guide the visual representation in bureaucratic institutions by photographing several documents and letters. In the next section, he presents a collage that works as his artistic and political manifesto. With both procedures, he represents the will of government power to control life through the record of images and documents. "8 years" is a curatorial selection. Surprisingly, the object of the selection is not a photographic corpus but a series of red-tape documents, certificates, stampings, and notes in Spanish, Greek and Italian to show the time Kurtis lived as an illegal immigrant until he obtained his legal resident status.

The images display his own family genealogies according to the state records of the countries in which his family has lived for several generations. What dismantles the state representational logics is a brief text that brings sense to this series of apparently meaningless images:

> When times were hard, my grandparents left Europe for Argentina. When times became hard in Argentina I left for Europe.
>
> I took 8 years to overcome the lengthy bureaucratic bullshit, mind games and loopholes to get my legal right to stay in Europe. (Kurtis 2012a)

The last section, "Undocument",[13] consists of a single photograph, torn and marked with pencil. The picture shows a friend of Kurtis who was deported, and it is clipped to a crumpled piece of paper with some machine-typed text, set in unjustified alignment. This art piece works as a manifesto that summarizes Kurtis's artistic and political positioning:

13 Besides the obvious sense of "undocumented" as "without legal papers," the title calls for multiple interpretations. "Undocument" might be read as a noun (a "no document") or as a verb ("do not document"), but also in the sense of "unregister"; or even, from Latin language phonetics, as "one document", suggesting a unique document, or "a document" of those without documents.

> The first time that I faced deportation was when the police raided the construction site where I was working. Three Moroccan friends, two Colombians and myself hid in a big water tower. One of them, "e1 Loco", panicked thinking it wasn't a good spot so he hid a few metres away from us. They got him. After three days in prison they gave him half an hour to say goodbye to his six months old baby. After this experience I woke up every day concerned that if didn't [sic] pick a good place to hide next time the police showed up my life in Europe and everything I had would be terminated. The constant fear and uncertainty of daily life eventually subdues your personality and paranoia sets in. Everything revolves around getting your papers and the perceived freedom that it brings. You can't make plans, want possessions or build anything solid as your life here may not exist tomorrow, you lose everything if they throw you out. Vandalising the sheets of film is a reaction to the constant chaos experienced over five years of living as an illegal immigrant. (Kurtis 2012b)[14]

The precariousness of the experience of illegal immigrants is present not only as the topic of the manifesto and the image, but also in the exposition of the fragile materiality of the work of art. It is an experimental intervention in the programmes of the devices, in full awareness of the mechanisms' work, aimed at showing the fragile nature of the products of such devices (both the photographic print and the typed text) and doing so in a direction unforeseen by technical design. Furthermore, such intervention also challenges the representations of immigrants produced by modern state security and control devices. If the modern state is a device itself, then deportation is a function in the state's programme, a function that regulates the status of residency (that cannot assimilate undocumented subjects – that cannot "govern" them) and is executed by police agents, just as photographers execute the camera's programme.[15] Kurtis's manifesto bestows upon "el Loco" a grievable life, in an attempt to "re-realize" what, as Butler has suggested, the security devices "derealize". Kurtis builds his poetics on the assumption of the task of restoring that which is deprived of immigrant subjects when they are represented as bare life. Being illegal is, in a way, being on the threshold of the inside/outside of the apparatus of the state, in a created situation that cannot be properly defined as legal (since illegality implies not being ruled by the immigration laws – because immigration law contemplates sanctions for the illegal). It is, in fact, an area of uncertainty.

Shoe Box displays a selection of family pictures deteriorated by the passing of time; nevertheless, migration and globalization still underlie this series. A shoe box containing these photographs is the last family heirloom that survived the evictions and migrations that the Kurtis family underwent due to the two great Argentine economic crises of the last quarter of a century. The box was stored in the house of Kurtis's grandparents, which, in turn, suffered a flood. *Shoe Box* is a curation of these family pictures that have

14 This non-native English speaker in "Undocument" creates an intended estrangement effect. The alienness and helplessness that migrants experience is present in the attempt to translate the experience into a foreign language, as well as in the exposure of the fragile materiality of the art piece.

15 For a broader discussion on "Undocument" as a manifesto and the intervention on the apparatuses, see Berti (2010). Flusser's (2000) concept of "apparatus" introduces a provocative insight on ignorance of the internal functioning of technical apparatuses and the internal logics of governments and multinational companies. The black box of the photographic camera works as a metaphor to explain the logics of postindustrial societies ruled by information and the ignorance of operators about what occurs inside apparatuses. Flusser has steadily become a necessary reference in discussions of the relations between aesthetics and technology.

undergone the decay of time and water, but also of the back of the pictures, in which the emulsion of other images has left a trace. Time and crises have converted technically reproducible devices into unique objects. The negatives have been lost and digital scanning cannot preserve their tactile material uniqueness, their peculiar textures that indicate the passing of time and the flooding.

Through the material decay of the pictures history is inscribed in the storage, the photographic paper, generating a paradoxical, cult-valuable, auratic object which has been produced with an automated device. The artistic procedure here lies in the curatorial process of the family pictures. In the topics of the images one can trace a family history common to any Argentine (and by extension to any South American) middle-class family: the parents' wedding, family holidays, Holy Communion, the first family car, childhood images, the local team's victory celebration. In *Suspended Conversation*, a long study on family albums as a form of narration, Langford identifies a "snapshot aesthetic" that draws on the authority of such images in modern art:

> In a snapshot economy, artlessness equals candour equals truth; in practice, the scale and reproducibility of machine-processed prints encourages multiplicity, repetition, juxtaposition, erasure – methods that refer to the amateur and the amateur album, and keep family values alive within the avant-garde. (Langford 2001, 31)

Langford states that family albums (and, we may add, family pictures boxes) are a specific historical and cultural product, "one way of preserving the structures of oral traditions for new uses in the present" (2001, 21).

Although the images refer to the past, the marks of decay banish the temptation of the nostalgic gaze, and provide a radical "new use" for an otherwise indistinct and serialized collection of images. Compared to the aestheticization of the past which sustains the poetics of "retro", *Shoe Box* images are torn apart from the past. The poetics of "retro" could be defined as the specific fetishism for the objects of the recent past, loosely related to the personal experience of time that obliterates the historical inscription (and conflicts) of products and technical devices. "Retro" finds delight in the ideal image of an inexistent, better past. As Batchen has pointed out, "the stimulation of nostalgia is a major industry, the past has become a profitable commodity" (2004, 14). Kurtis's pictures, with its marks of decay, go in the opposite direction, inscribing the objects in a specific past, that of the Argentinean middle class and the subsequent economic crisis it underwent, replacing the aetheticization of retro with a disturbing political and artistic statement.

The curatorial process goes beyond mere retro by making visible the condition of the photographic print as a physical storage surface for the image. The images of the backs of the prints, where parts of other pictures have stuck, introduce the object "photographic print" as significance and not merely a signifier for the image. On the backs there are texts that tell of the industrial origin of the papers ("HECHO EN BUENOS AIRES POR KODAK") but also the traces of a now-lost craftsmanship related to family owned shops ("Fotoestudio Víctor" rubber-stamped on industrial papers).

The procedure inscribes the mechanically reproducible copy in a familiar dimension by a referral to remembrance, not only by the topic of the images but also by the summoning of the textures of different papers, of old logos by the rescue of developing as a trade craft. The gesture of photographing the back of the family pictures historically inscribes objects that would otherwise be still moments of the past (the front of the photographic prints), family memoirs saved from time through a technical recording device. Being stained with other images allows an inscription which is absent in the case of intact prints whose back would not be topicalized (nor topicalizable) because they would not be significant surfaces themselves. Describing representational conflicts regarding the images of the "disappeared", Nelly Richard (2000, 166–165) states that in South American countries photographs have a dual inscription: ID pictures represent a subject ruled by a law that individualizes him/her. This isolates his/her identity and inserts it in the typology necessary for disciplinarian societies, the public archive. Family album pictures belong in a different series that links the subject to a chronology, that of the family. Furthermore, Richard warns us of the implications of digital preservation of such images, because "the photographic portraits of victims appear before [us] at the same level of technical equivalence … 'translated' to the same standard language of computational graphics. That computational graphics works, for us, with the executively accomplice language of economic and marketing modernity" (2000, 170). The backs of Kurtis's shoe box pictures avoid such standardization and the aetheticization it entails. The ruined images of *Shoe Box* are the reverse of the meaningless red tape of "8 years"; the family picture is the opposite of the migration files. The backs are that which an album conceals, its roots hidden in a materiality marked out by paper brands and local photo-shop rubber stamps.

Immigrants, Experience, Devices

To represent the immigrant's condition of precariousness, Kurtis intentionally avoids what typically stands for "touching images" – people, most

usually ethnically or socially characterized (according to well-intentioned Western prejudice), in a difficult context, frequently looking downwards. He portrays people looking straight into the camera, in neutral moments rather than tragic situations; or, in a complementary direction, he chooses to shoot places instead of people, and bureaucratic documents where the text has no value other than that of a pure image; he photographs photographic prints, thus revealing their inscription in history and using them to represent the experience of losing a homeland. His choices do not end there: by intervening into technical processes, he introduces precariousness into the act of photographing itself; by taking advantage of the vicissitudes of the material existence of prints he inscribes their still moments back into the flow of historical time. Using cameras with broken chambers that let in the light, taking single shots with large formats that require longer exposure times, or the extreme situation of literally drowning the negatives in the same waters that immigrants drown in are ways of blurring the boundaries of the artistic form and its topic of representation.

The innovation and disturbing power of Kurtis's photographs reside in the intervention into the technical device and their products, in the alteration of the recording process, and in the introduction of uncertainty precisely where technology seeks to provide certainty, but also in the subversion of the logics of art curatorship, which define the work of art. The reintroduction of uncontrolled nature into standardization (intrinsic to the technical device's functioning) allows Kurtis to unveil the fragility of visual memory as much as the precarious integrity of those thrown into the inclemency of the sea (or the weather in a more general perspective) by state policies. The illegal immigration that Kurtis represents through vandalized technical devices is a kind of immigration characterized as a "risk" or, more accurately, "potentially risky." The application of government technologies of prevention and prediction is based on this assumption of potential risk (O'Malley 2004). The arbitrariness of the security device is evident because it identifies specific groups as "crimmigrants". The security device does not act on the effective deviation but on the possibility of one; that is, on a technical prediction.

In artistic works like Kurtis's the representation of bare life implies a politicization that unfolds a possibility of breaking the aetheticization of life and politics foreseen by Benjamin in mechanical reproduction technologies (Benjamin and Arendt 1968, 242). Kurtis's different projects complement each other: *Shoe Box* indicates in the photographic print what *Immigration Files* unveils in the act of photographing. The print that the passing of time makes unique, associated to the swings of fortune of family history, gains an aura in the Benjaminean sense of the term. However, instead of mere "cult value", the pictures have regained aura that has its roots in the experience of loss and privation of subjects that clung to those stained, torn and blurred

pieces of memory, whose negatives (that is, the possibility of their technical reproduction) were lost long ago. Batchen notes that the hybrid nature of photography, its relation to other material objects opposed to the ideal of a reproducibility detached from worldly existence, has haunted this invention since its early days: "Hybrid objects constitute a sceptical commentary on the capacity of photography itself to provide a compelling memorial experience" (2004, 48). Furthermore, such "artefacts" are actually what make mechanically produced images produce a meaningful experience: "They suggest something creative must be done to a photograph, some addition has to be made to its form, if it is to function as an effective memory object" (2004, 48).

Kurtis's artistic procedures imply the conscious subversion of the standardization installed by the technical recording and registering devices (and upon which government technologies base their legitimacy and possibility of application), opposed to the more amateur (and intuitive) nineteenth- and early twentieth-century collage and framing procedures described by Batchen.[16] Uncertainty, be it in the process of capturing light or in the material existence of family pictures, is an allegory of the fragile memory of immigrants and provides these images with an unusual renewed aura. Benjamin closed "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility" with a warning and a calling for art to regain its political dimension: humankind's "self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art" (Benjamin and Arendt 1968, 242). The poetics of Seba Kurtis may provide an answer to such a calling:

> And I think the aesthetic came along with my romantic notion of being a photographer, along with a bit of rebellion about the manipulation of the medium or documentary photography or whatever you want to call it … [W]e are in a really exciting time for photography, concerned photography doesn't have to just show people begging or dying in black and white, people have started to understand that photography is moving on … like Paul Graham said this year: "We are clearly in a Post Documentary photographic world now." (della Bella 2010)

The immigrant gaze unfolds the possibility of a differential representation that registry devices cannot standardize. Vandalization used as a subversion of the standard device is indeed a choice to politicize photography.

Foucault (1980) inscribes the concept of "device" in a political register that sets the basis for the characterization of the operation of power. In the interview "Michel Foucault's Game – or Trick, or Ploy", he points out that the meaning and the methodological function of the term "device" determine

16 Batchen (2004, 94–7) argues that the detachment produced by photography is indeed a "commoditization" which ultimately leads to a memory disorder.

a heterogeneous set that includes discourses, institutions, architectonic installations, etc. The device has a strategic dominant position whose function is to constitute subjects by inscribing their bodies in a form of being. This is possible through a series of practices, knowledge and institutions that manage, govern and give useful sense to the behaviours, gestures and thoughts of individuals. Agamben (2009) located the Foucauldian conception of devices in a broader context. For Agamben, a device is anything that has the capacity to capture, orient, intercept, model, control and secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions and discourses of living beings. In this way, subjects are the result of the relation between the devices and living beings. There is no subjectivization process that does not link an identity and, at the same time, a bondage to a power. Devices not only subjectivate but also produce desubjectivation; that is, the processes by which the production of a subject implies the denial of a subject.

However, it is incorrect to say that devices "capture" individuals in their network; they produce subjects that remain subject to specific effects of power/knowledge (García Fanlo 2011, 3). Therefore, it is possible to resist devices since, as Foucault points out, "there is no relationship of power without the means of escape or possible flight. Every power relationship implies, at least *in potentia*, a strategy of struggle" (Foucault and Dreyfus 1982, 225). Power and resistance are mutually implied.

Kurtis's work is in itself resistant: the politicization of photography consists of a resistance to technical and social devices through the subversion of the standard positions that they generate, through the unfolding of unforeseen and unforeseeable positions. Moreover, resistance grows in the represented subjects themselves. Kurtis provides a visual representation for the emergence of forms of resistance in which life affirms its power, its capability of creation, production and subjectivization. We interpret this as a resistance to devices on two different levels. On one hand, a resistance to the photographic device, that involves not only the correct use of the camera but also the documentary as a genre; on the other, a resistance to the security device, to the government technologies that have as object and objective the control of the life of risk groups. Both *Immigration files* and *Shoe Box* provide images of resistance that do not allow the photographic device to generate documents that can be used to feed the security device. Kurtis's images are the representation of a resistance that is itself resistant by becoming inassimilable to the security device. With this statement, we wish to acknowledge that with postdocumentary photography, Kurtis achieves the representation of the resistance carried out by illegal immigrants. Such a resistance implies the crossing of borders, the daily experience of illegality, the alliances between "undocumented" people and, at the same time, a form of representation that resists the technical standardization of the photographic device, be it analogue or digital. Kurtis does not produce a mere

photographic record – not even when using official documents. On the contrary, he intervenes on the technical device and its products – his vandalization – and subverts the logics of governmentality by generating an anti-documentary meaning in official documents.

The representation of immigrants built by the images and texts of Seba Kurtis, backed on his own life experience, introduces a view that sheds light into the irresolvable tensions undergone by undocumented immigrants and the impossibility of a standardized or harmonic resolution. In *Infancy and History* Agamben notes, "for just as modern man has been deprived of his biography, his experience has likewise been expropriated" (1993, 13). The Italian philosopher radicalizes Benjamin's statement form 1933 on the "poverty of experience" after the First World War, since after the Second World War it would be impossible to avoid talking about the "destruction of experience." Agamben calls attention to the fact that "we know that the destruction of experience no longer necessitates a catastrophe, and the humdrum daily life in any city will suffice. For modern man's average day contains virtually nothing that can still be translated into experience" (1993, 13). Modern man in his daily life goes through a gust of events without being able to turn any of them into experience.

In spite of the contemporary death of experience stressed by Agamben, we believe there are other forms of experience, as in the case of illegal immigrants during their moments of peril. We refer to this as *flawed experience*, since the subjects cannot fully achieve inscription in tradition and yet the events have an intensity that deeply affects their lives without turning into an inassimilable shock. Since immigrants are subjects located on the threshold of inclusion and exclusion, even life in the city does not allow them a way into it. The immigrants' experience is the experience of permanent fragility, of permanent dispossession, of permanent survival.

Kurtis achieves a representation of the fragility of life as an illegal immigrant, of a life determined by uncertainties and deprivation. Undocumented immigrants are deprived of their civil rights; the only future they foresee if the security device detects them is temporary imprisonment and subsequent deportation. Immigrants "without papers" suffer a special violence that allows, through law, the establishment of who is a person and who is not. Agamben defines "identity without the person" as the result of the transformations worked on identity produced by policing technologies: "For the first time in the history of humanity, identity was no longer a function of the social 'persona' and its recognition by others but rather a function of biological data, which could bear no relation to it" (2011, 50). A separation between identity and person occurs, and the identity acquires more importance than the person. We consider that undocumented immigrants implicate a phenomenon of an opposite sign. An immigrant "without

papers" is what we define as a *person with no identity*, a person that socially recognizes him or herself in their immigrant condition, in the experience of fragility, but who lacks any legal and police recognition other than their illegality.

In a similar venue, Roberto Esposito defines "person device" as the real effects caused by "the assumed, continuously recurring separation between person as an artificial entity and the human as natural being, whom the status of person may or may not befit" (2012, 9). Man is considered as the product of an excision from biological body and a rational or moral part; person is a plus added to the biological fact. Esposito observes that there is a withdrawal of the person, resulting in man, as a biological entity, becoming a reality without value, pure *zoé*. Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is based on the notion of person, nowadays most of the human population is exposed to misery, hunger, marginalization and death. According to Esposito (2009), this antinomy is born of the separation and exclusion implicit in the notion of person itself.

While Agamben points out the separation of identity and person, Esposito notices the excision at the base of the "person device", between the man and the person itself. Both agree that biopolitical devices, especially during the twentieth century, centre in the biological life of man and its related identity. Lives are valued as registerable biological data, from which they are acknowledged by the law. Ultimately, this enables a differential administration for desired and undesired migrants.

The opposition between the citizen's "identity without a person" and the immigrant's *person without identity* is rendered into images in "8 years" and "Undocument". In the first, Kurtis himself embodies the antinomy, in the different bureaucratic documents and papers that represent the eight-year limbo in which he lived as an illegal immigrant until obtaining his residency. The transition between one condition and the other is possible only through the legal device and the bureaucratic mechanisms it implies. "Undocument", on the other hand, portrays a "person without identity" from the immigrant perspective. The intervened picture of a deported friend represents fear and uncertainty, the loss of the precarious achievements caused by deportation. A deportation caused by the lack of an "identity without person."

Conclusion

Before the naive idea of globalization as an extension of the benefits of liberal democracies to the rest of the world, Kurtis's images render evident

the precariousness that globalization propitiates. Illegal immigrants cannot "make experience" in the midst of precariousness (and yet, paradoxically, illegality becomes one of the few places left to experience anything in a world progressively more administrated through social devices).

In his vandalization and curatorial practices, the photographer offers a form of visual representation that implies a resistance to two ways of standardization that cause the exclusion and persecution of immigrants: that of security devices and that of technical register devices. The resources of turning persons visible through fogged pictures, through the personal history that underlies the identity without person certified by bureaucratic documents, or discovering it clung to the family pictures turned into unique objects, imply groundbreaking forms of resistance to represent the growing illegalization of immigrants in developed countries. Moreover, by doing so, Kurtis challenges the formal aetheticization implicit in documentary photography deemed as "politically engaged".

In the first case, the fogged faces question the idea of identity precisely by challenging the recording device itself, in a resistance to the homogeneous image produced by the "correct" functioning of the device. Undermining the documentary value of the photographic image unfolds the possibility to make experience and to use the technical devices in an unforeseen, non-standard direction to narrate, in the Benjaminean sense of the term, the immigrant's own history, which is otherwise rendered invisible and administrated by government technologies.

In the second case, the curatorial process applied to the document suggests that there is no face to attach to those eight years of uncertainties and illegality. A phase lag emerges between the security device that administers identities and the always-fragile personal experience of the immigrant. In the case of *Shoe Box* the curation denaturalizes the standardized representations of the South American middle classes pointed out by Richard (2000). The series of economic crises burst the bubble of stability and cast off the subjects into precariousness. Kurtis's images, actual (un)documents, suggest that there is a particular "experience" that immigrants exemplify as an extreme case. This is what we define as *flawed experience*, an experience that tradition cannot incorporate since immigrants are not allowed into the city, into society. Nevertheless, the mere possession of a flawed experience allows immigrants to offer an unwilling resistance to the personless identity propitiated by security and registry devices.

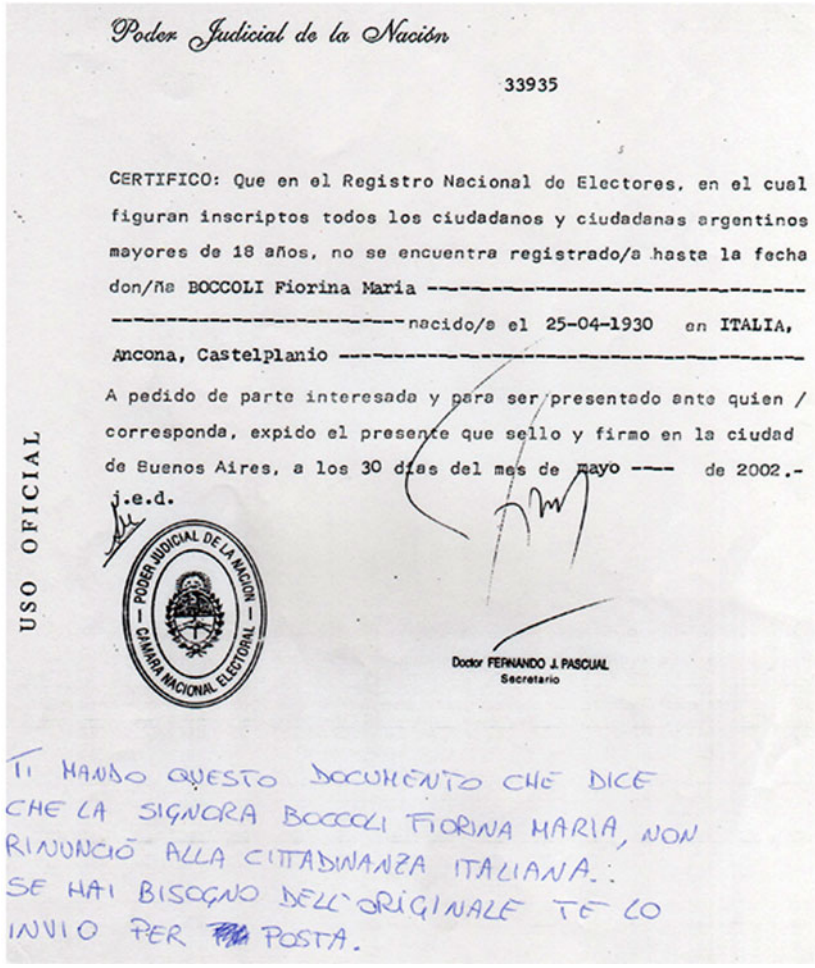
Figure 1 "**Drowned**"

Figure 2 "**Drowned**"

Figure 3 "**A few days more**"

Figure 4 "**A few days more**"

Figure 5 "**A few days more**"



Poder Judicial de la Nación

33935

CERTIFICO: Que en el Registro Nacional de Electores, en el cual figuran inscriptos todos los ciudadanos y ciudadanas argentinos mayores de 18 años, no se encuentra registrado/a hasta la fecha don/ña BOCCOLI Fiorina María ---------- nacido/a el 25-04-1930 en ITALIA, Ancona, Castelplanio ----------

A pedido de parte interesada y para ser presentado ante quien / corresponda, expido el presente que sello y firmo en la ciudad de Buenos Aires, a los 30 días del mes de mayo ---- de 2002.- j.e.d.

PODER JUDICIAL DE LA NACION
CAMARA NACIONAL ELECTORAL

Doctor FERNANDO J. PASCUAL
Secretario

USO OFICIAL

TI MANDO QUESTO DOCUMENTO CHE DICE CHE LA SIGNORA BOCCOLI FIORINA MARIA, NON RINUNCIÒ ALLA CITTADINANZA ITALIANA. SE HAI BISOGNO DELL'ORIGINALE TE LO INVIO PER POSTA.

Figure 6 "**8 years**"

Figure 7 "**Shoe Box – Fronts**"

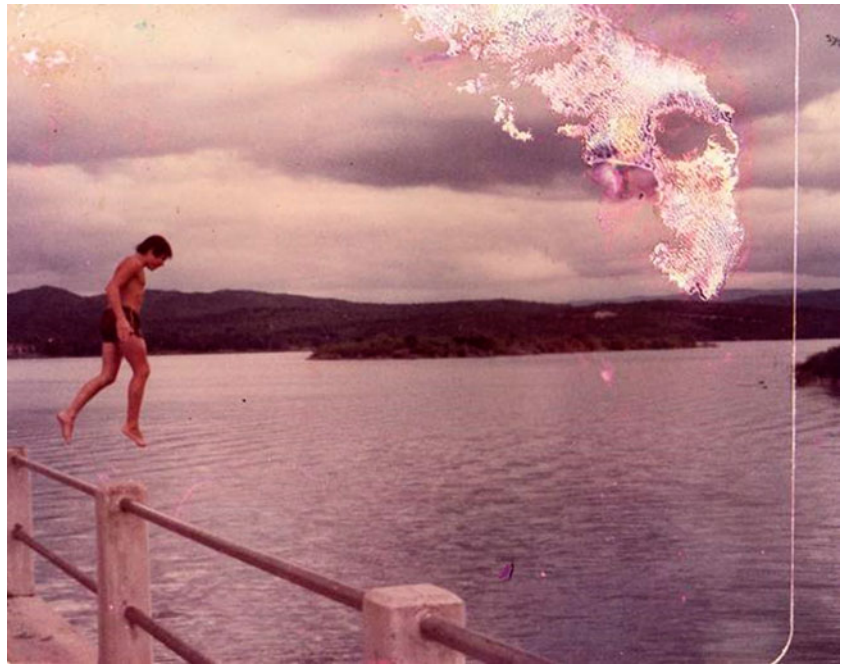


Figure 8 "**Shoe Box – Fronts**"

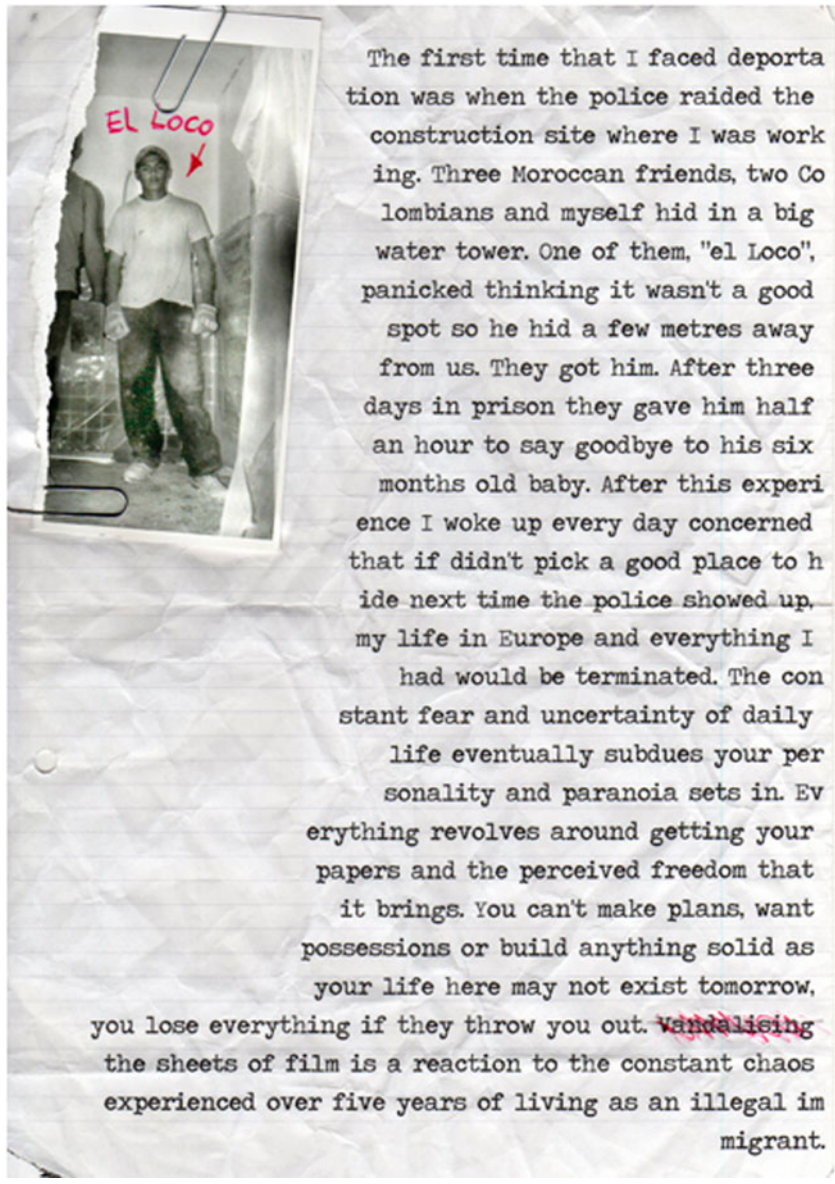


Figure 9 "**Undocument**"

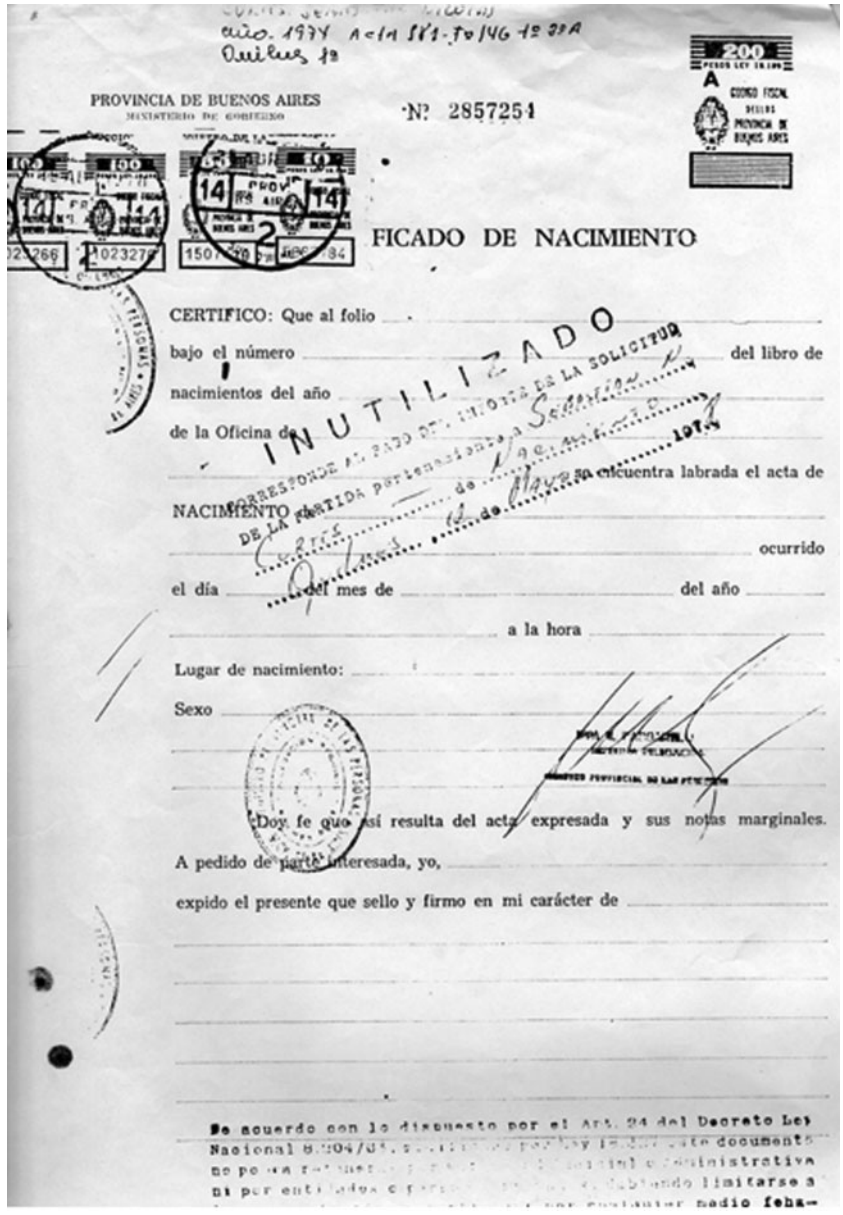


Figure 10 "**Eight years**"

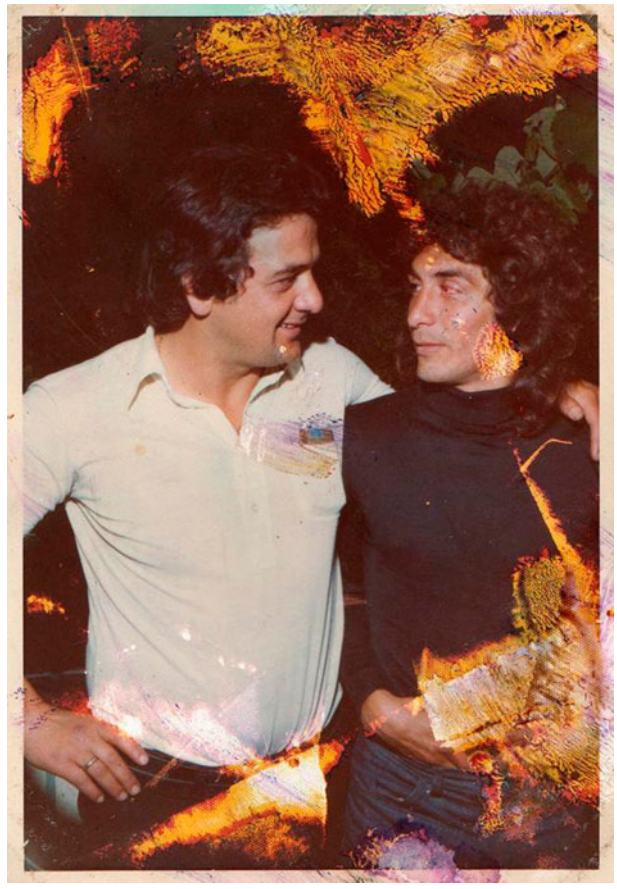


Figure 11 "**Shoe Box – Fronts**"

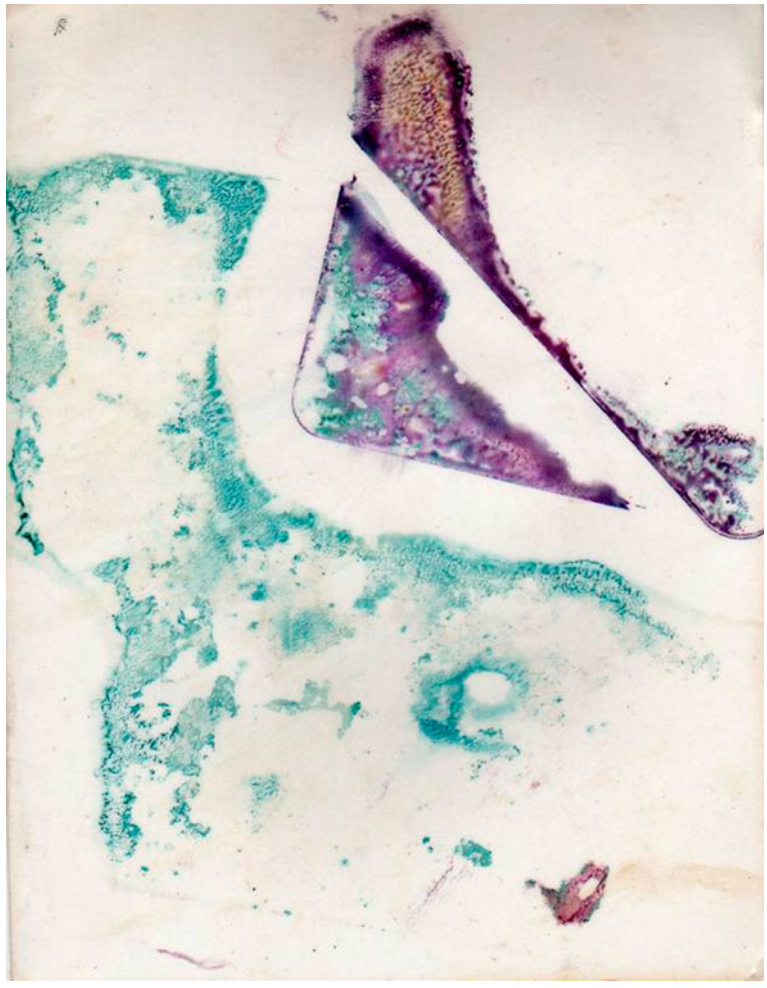


Figure 12 "**Shoe Box – Backs**"

Figure 13 "**Shoe Box – Backs**"

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Seba Kurtis for allowing us to use the images that illustrate this essay. The work has been significantly improved due to detailed comments from anonymous referees. Remaining errors are, of course, our own.

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