

Abolishing Representation: Making Corruption Tangible

By Aura Estrada

The political events that took place during the Nineteenth Century in Mexico—the Independence of Spain in 1810, the American Invasion of 1849, the French invasion of 1862, the constitutional secularization in 1856 of government and society, the battle between Liberals and Conservatives and the final triumph of the former—all contributed to create the tumult and subsequent blood bath of the Revolutionary enterprise of 1910, which lasted approximately 10 years and claimed the lives of over a million Mexicans. In the same year that the Revolution officially burst out, Porfirio Diaz organizes a series of events to commemorate the centennial of our Independence. Amongst the celebratory events was the exhibit in Mexico City of the paintings of a select group of Spanish artists. The purpose of the invitation, which openly excluded the works of Mexican painters was thus twofold. On the one hand, it reaffirmed the still warm emotional, if not actual colonial ties between Mexico and Spain and on the other it was meant to show New World artists the techniques and themes they should, as they actually did, emulate in their own work. To confront the implicit insult hidden in this invitation, the painter Gerardo Murillo, a.k.a. Dr. Atl, organized an exhibition of Mexican paintings at the Royal Academy of San Carlos, the official School of Fine Arts, located in the politic, cultural and economical heart of the nation's capital: downtown Mexico City, where ruined pyramids and crumbling cathedrals have stood together, if uneasily, for more than five hundred years. Like the nation at the beginning of the Twentieth century the Academia underwent a series of repeated brief appointments of directors and directions. It was not

until 1911, bolstered by the Revolutionary upheaval that under the guidance of Gerardo Murillo the Academia embarked on a radical veering away from the accustomed Europeanizing academicism of the previous century promoted by the official cultural apparatus and moved towards an exploration of Mexico's Indian past, folklore culture and the liberal's claimed modernity which Twentieth century was to bring about but never did. As Desmond Rochfort writes, "The movement's emanation from the catharsis of the Mexican revolution [has] resulted in the construction of an entire mythology of revolutionary art."

The quest for identity propelled by the Revolution, which was more of a gigantic revolt, sought, not to repeat the ancient past, but to create a new beginning. In this sense, some of the Murals of Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros, different in technique and subject matter as they are, are foundational. By delving into the archaic they sought to secure the future modernity of the nation. While European vanguards were futuristic and intended to break with the past tradition, the Mexican one was searching to create a local tradition. In her reading of Mexican Muralism, the critic Marta Traba contextualizes the movement in the nationalistic tendencies of the 1920s and 30s which posed "a great debate of the prime obligation to establish a bond between art and society, particularly when the society in question was culturally deficient and lacked access to information that would make clear its role as the protagonists of history."

In his quest for identity, the Murals of Rivera began by exploring the festive in popular culture exposing a naïve conception of utopia. Of the three chief Muralists, Rivera and Siqueiros were the most committed to the construction of the new modern nation through art. This commitment, however, took them to very different places.

Rivera's notion of the new nation relied heavily in the concept of an anonymous mass that animated the soul of society and to whom he wanted to educate and give voice through his murals. For him, this anonymous mass meant the Indian population of the country. Thus, he repeatedly depicted pre-Hispanic societies in how he imagined they would have lived. Rivera's use of folk art and Indian motifs soon earned him the scorn from Conservatives, critics and colleagues alike, like Orozco who accused Rivera of contributing to create a simplistic view of Mexican identity:

Indeed we Mexicans are the first ones to blame for having concocted and nurtured the myth of the ridiculous *charro* and the absurd *china* as symbols of so-called Mexicanism...At the sight of a *charro* or a *china*, at the opening notes of the horrible *jarabe*, one is automatically reminded of the nauseating Mexican stage, and all this, amalgamated becomes "Our own." ¿Whose own? Why pick the most outdated and most ridiculous attributes of a single social class and inflict them on the whole country? p. 66.

Orozco's remark spot on the "picturesqueness" that was synonymous with the movement: Rivera's *indigenismo* was accused in Mexico of exoticism. The construction of a postcolonial identity preoccupied artists and intellectuals alike. Alfonso Reyes, part of the intellectual elite of the time, answers to the question of Mexican identity in literature thus: "in Paris and in all of Europe was reduced to this: over there they only ask to Latin Americans to be 'colorful' and exotic. That branch of literature, in itself mediocre, seduces only the mediocre and our writer, if he really is a writer, runs away from any abuse of the so-called 'local color' and tries instead writing books of universal worth. As far as we are or are expected to be 'colorful', the intellectual relationship with America Latina, will not be very engaging." In Argentina, Jorge Luis Borges will also address this argument by writing in a 1923 essay "The argentinean cult of local color is a recent European cult, one the nationalists should reject for being foreign."

The relationship of today's artists to the question of identity is as complex as it was yesterday. However, the solemnity of the Muralist movement has been, as I have already said, replaced by a sardonic attitude towards the present situation of the nation and the city, The art critic María Guerra explains this change in attitude thus:

The irony derived from these pictures, lives in the humor of the end of the millennium, suspended between the melancholic lament and the death of the meanings of modernity: conscience, truth, sex, capital, power and with all of it, the significance of the body.

La ironía que se desprende de estas fotografías vive en el humor del fin del milenio, suspendida entre el lamento melancólico y la muerte de los significados de la modernidad: la conciencia, la verdad, el sexo, el capital, el poder, y con ello el significado del cuerpo...

The failure of the nationalistic project and the definition of a Mexican identity are expressed in various ways in the works of these artists in which the conglomerate of the charro and the china has been substituted by corrupted policemen and ambiguous portraits of the wealthy.

Although today's young artists do not have a visible revolution to feed their aesthetic needs, they have indeed reacted to a wave of political events that have shaken the nation to its core: the armed movement of the Zapatistas in 1994, the scandal of Carlos Salinas's government and its consequent economic crisis, the assassination of a presidential candidate, the rising statistics of kidnappings, and the demographical explosion of the nation's capital which has turned the city into a megalopolis which lodges approximately 20 million people.

Thus, almost a hundred years later after the Revolution, some of today's young Mexican artists continue, in perverse and subversive ways, to delve into the exploration of Mexican identity in the historical context of poscolonial, posrevolutionary, globalized

Mexico. The means of representation have utterly changed since the first decade of the last Century and the emergence of Muralism. They have, in some cases, even been abolished and replaced by living embodiments of corruption, violence, crime, and social injustice. The buildings utilized by Muralists are now substituted by the use of the streets of the city; the subjects of the art pieces are no longer imaginary, symbolic peasants, but actual people who are either victims or victimizers of society. Thus, while Muralism was revolutionary, Neomexicanism is rebellious. Muralism followed the ideological precepts of the triumphant Institutionalized Revolution (in a deliberate attempt to defy the boycott of significant subject matter heralded by the European modernist vanguards). The works of Okon and Margolles exploit the failures of such a project by attacking the myths created under the banner of progress and justice for all at the beginning of the last century. Their works, though humorous and playful, do threaten, even if momentarily, a tight socio-economical arrangement, disturb the inner workings of the city's violent dynamic by exposing the normally hidden entrails and bodies of anonymous victims, defy tradition by relocating it in incongruous contexts, and twist around the relationship between city, institution and citizen. Thus, their artistic practices move towards an incipient form of cultural agency by exposing the malfunctioning of the political and even the cultural apparatus.

In one of his video-installations, Yoshua Okon bribes three policemen and asks them to perform different sketches in front of the camera. The first policeman is asked to reenact his routine when arresting someone. He accepts the offer after the artist bribes him for 200 hundred pesos, roughly the equivalent of 20 dollars. The sketch records the use of verbal intimidation that is often used to scare the detainee to force him or her into

paying a 'mordida'. What becomes interesting is the escalating use of vulgar language as the policeman gets more irritated in front of the camera; first he mildly asks the artist to leave him alone and stop taping him, he then proceeds to blame rich people for the corrupted state of things, then he addresses the artist's blond hair and takes it as a signal of economical status and insults him in account of it. Finally, he becomes physically aggressive. On the second sketch of this piece, Okon again bribes a policeman for 20 dollars and asks him to do something with his nightstick for the camera. This is what he does—the results are appallingly sexual but also humorous [slide # 2]. The third policeman is bribed into dancing, which he does diligently. Okon's practice of bribery that has been a common illegal transaction between citizen and judicial system for quite a while takes a turn for the ironic. In such a corrupted state policemen can be bribed even into making art. By bribing these three policemen, the purported caretakers of the law, Okon is not only exhibiting the corrupt condition of Mexican law enforcers, he is also taking part in the making of such a lawless state.

At last year's Miami/Basel art fair, Okon again appropriated "real life" into art. In a clever turn on Joseph Beuys canonical post-modern 1974 performance piece "Coyote" - - in which Beuys shared a cage with a live coyote – Okon, in Miami, shared a cage with a real Mexico City "coyote" -- that is a man who wealthy people can hire to complete bureaucratic tasks, such as standing in long lines and taking forms to various government offices. However in their Miami cage Okon's coyote-man was made to live like a caged animal, drinking water from a bowl on the floor and so on, an unsettling commentary on his de-humanized Mexico City profession.

Okon is not the only artist to employ government bodies to construct a rather politicized aesthetics, the work of Teresa Margolles has done so in a most daring manner. As a forensic technician in Mexico City's morgue, Margolles took advantage of her position to create disturbing pieces that, even if involuntarily, reveal the dark side of Okon's experiment with bribing. In one of her most remarkable works, Margolles dissected one of these anonymous dead in an odd exchange: Margolles agreed to pay for the man's funeral, since the family of the victim (probably of drug dealing) did not have the money to do it, if they allowed her to take a piece from his body, his tongue. This tongue has traveled from Mexican museums to galleries and museums abroad. According to Margolles, "the social and economic circumstances of a society are sharply discernible in the corpses filling the morgues of the megalopolis every day: victims of drug addiction and violence as well as large numbers of anonymous dead."

From two very different stand points, Okon and Margolles point to the perverted functioning of the system's basis thus proposing a standpoint towards a potential cultural agency. Finally, I would like to present one of Okon's latest pieces: *Muerte subita* or *Sudden Death*. The picture mocks the tight socio-economical construct of Mexican society by photographing an "Indian healer, Tomasa, at a tennis court in a gated community on Oaxaca. With her humour, Tomasa gives her own version of this game she has never played."

Thus, as much as the techniques of these artists differ from those utilized by the so-called Mexican School, certain elements protrude to suggest a sort of kinship, strong, even if repelled by today's artists who insist on looking elsewhere to found their tradition. This kinship suggests a penchant in both movements to explore the ways in

which cultural practices might “challenge the traditional” customs of the Mexican political and socio-economical machinery.

Their defiance of the system, however, is not without its perils: It feigns an exposure of a crumbling rule sustained by a complicated complicity with it. The use of the city and the crowd to defy or to expose the corrupt political apparatus presupposes a reciprocal relationship of utility: they use the apparatus as much as the apparatus uses them to maintain the order of an apparent chaos. Like in the 1950s, when Siqueiros was appointed to carry out several murals whose topics were still revolutionary so that the government “could continue to direct Mexico down the road mapped out by the demands of international capital, while at the same time appearing to preserve and develop the country’s valued radical cultural credentials.” Or else, why has the cultural apparatus been so open to an artistic gesture that repeatedly exposes it as failed and corrupt? To omit this reading of the question one would have to believe in the good faith of the cultural apparatus that has already been exposed by the representation of them in the works of these artists as corrupt and subject to bribery, insofar as the cultural apparatus is a branch of the political one, as it happens to be in Mexico.

Thus, even when these artists have abandoned the overt political visual critique of Siqueiros or Orozco and have instead raised the flag of the modernist vanguards and their desire of an anti-art, an art autonomous and free from commitments with official discourses, the particular circumstances of their city and their nation turns the vanguardist dream into an involuntary political satire. Despite of the complex relationship between the work of Okon and Margolles and the political apparatus, their art is not innocent of

that dilemma. The dilemma itself turns their works into an incipient instance of agency, cultural, or even political. Their art is one whose laughter's sharp bite spares no one.

The painter, the true painter for whom we are looking, will be he who can snatch its epic quality from the life of today and can make us see and understand, with brush or with pencil, how great and poetic we are in our cravats and our patent-leather boots.

The *flâneur par excellence* sees no tragedy in the ordinariness, the un-holiness of the modern world—here portrayed by the image of cravats and patent-leather boots. He believes, the true modern poet must lose its halo of holiness and “walk around incognito” through the new boulevards of Haussman's Paris. Once stripped of its religious dimension, art struggles to find its proper subject matter and its purpose in a modern secular society. Some years later, in a two- page essay, Stephane Mallarme will write: “L'homme peut être démocratique, l'artiste se dédouble et doit rester aristocratique.” Mallarmé thus claims for a re-sanctification of the arts. In this same essay he equates the aura of mystery that envelops religion to the aura of mystery that envelops works of art. For him, art is an autonomous object independent of the world where it exists. Baudelaire's notion of art ran in the opposite direction. In his poems the poet is a pedestrian, a floating walker who experiences the new arrangement of the urban space. The frantic street, with all its dangers, becomes a “primal modern scene” from Baudelaire on. Baudelaire's and Mallarme's two opposite notions of art and artist anticipate, even quietly detonate, later aesthetic debates about art's autonomy and purpose. For Mallarmé,

the proper aim of the artist is to create an art that is enlightening, sacred, and sublime. For Baudelaire, like Wilde, even Picasso and Duchamp, there is no art that is “proper.” Art is a purpose in itself and it should always be provoking, rebellious and revolutionary.

European and American vanguards of the first two decades of the Twentieth century respond in various ways to the meaning and the object of art’s rebellion and revolution. For Duchamp, it will mean the rebellion and ultimate destruction of the previous means of artistic production and the abandonment of the easel as a metaphor of the abandonment of the old concept of high art and beauty. Mexican muralists, Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, embrace this dictum but modify it to serve Mexico’s particular historical circumstances in an attempt to create and legitimize a national, public art that glorified the nation’s indigenous and mestizo past, destroyed the old myth of “Order and progress” that had become the positivist ideological *motto* and sediment of Porfirio Diaz’s nation, and replaced it with the new revolutionary notion of an egalitarian, democratic cultural and political apparatus.

In the 1920’s the Murals of Rivera signal the new aesthetic disposition which gathered its symbols from three ideological spaces: the Mexican Revolution of 1910, Indian pictorial themes and techniques (the mural at first and the frescoe latter), and the social responsibility of the artist to educate the people about Mexico’s glorious past. In contrast, the tendency of many contemporary Mexican artists is the attempt, through the use of novel techniques but who also avoid the easel, to break with the myths created almost a century ago. When artists such as Yoshua Okon, Miguel Calderón, Teresa Margolles, Jonathan Hernandez, among others, recur to human bodies and corpses or commit criminal acts to construct their works of art they seem not that far away, however

subversively, from Baudelaire's *flanneurism*—only, they usually carry a camera on the shoulder, and not a brush nor a pencil, and their purpose is not to “walk incognito” amidst the body of a shapeless and anonymous crowd but to expose it as a powerful force of society.

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Many of these artists actively utilize the same social, health, and political institutions they attack in moral and political grounds to construct their works of art. This strategy of social exhibition echoes the public art of Rivera, Siqueiros and Orozco who sought to expose in their murals the political and moral evils that inflicted their society-- their results, however, are almost opposite. While the work of some of today’s artists is non-representational, active, playful, morally ambiguous and interested in the “critique (or satire) of the state-controlled national narratives” (Cuahutémoc Medina, “Semefo”, p.320), the latter exhibits “a sharp division between good and evil”, is excessively “indulgent in melodrama” (Marta Traba, *Mexican Muralism*, p.), and fond of grand, exaggerating historical narratives.

By exposing the malfunctions of a failed national modernity (such as unemployment, bribery, corruption of political and health institutions, bureaucracy), the videos and installations of these artists turn them into instances of cultural agency or social activism. In some cases, however, their artistic practices depend upon an open complicity—even bribery—with the same institutions they attack. Thus, their relationship to institutions is different only in purpose to that of the Muralists who openly and repeatedly collaborated with the government’s institutions for the purpose of helping to construct the new race inspired in the indigenous and mestizo traditions, while today’s artists take advantage of this association in an attempt to break it. Muralism wanted to create the myths that would consolidate the nation’s future, the work of Okon, Margolles,

Alys, looks for ways to destroy these myths; the myths of the anonymous mass, the existence of a cosmic race, and the triumph of the national project.

Hausmann's Paris found an enthusiastic echo in late Nineteenth Century Francophile Mexico. Porfirio Díaz, then ruling, ordered the rearrangement of wide boulevards in downtown Mexico to emulate the architecture of Nineteenth century Paris, paragon of the modern city. The most famous of these boulevards, or Avenidas in Spanish, is Paseo de la Reforma, an avenue that has been, and still is, metaphorically, a valuable barometer of the city's history. Built in 1846, its first name was Paseo del Emperador, referring to Maximiliano's Second Empire and it was built to connect the National Palace with the Chapultepec Palace where Maximiliano and Carlota would live. The anachronistic Empire project fell almost immediately as it rose with the triumph of the Liberals in 1861. But it was not until 1872 that it changed its name to Paseo de la Reforma to celebrate the triumph of the Republic, under the liberal government of Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada who ordered the construction of some of today's most emblematic city symbols such as the Monument to Colón, which replaced a statue of Carlos V, the statue of Cuauhtémoc, the Aztec martyr-hero, and the Angel of Independence inaugurated in 1910. These statues were erected to embellish the city with monuments that proclaimed the country's new political disposition. In 1899, under Porfirio Diaz, the Avenida was again subject to a series of changes to imitate the French boulevards, which were in turn the display of the new modern France Republic.

It is this Europeanizing of the city's streets and politics that Rivera and Siqueiros oppose in their Murals where they openly celebrate the Mexican heritage from early Mesoamérica through the Revolution. Following Marta Traba's reading of Mexican

Muralism, the moving forces behind the movement were, first, “the Mexican Revolution and the current discovery of the spirit, the inherent worth, and the deep-rooted culture of the Mexican people, all of which had been obscured by the Europeanizing tendencies of the long period of Porfirio Diaz presidency,” and second “the new tendencies abroad in the Old World.” By the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the diffuse technique of the Impressionists had yielded to the fragmented, mathematical, and cinematic Cubism of Picasso and Braque and later on to the Dada and Surrealist movements of Jean Arp, Marx Ernst, and Marcel Duchamp. Mexican Muralism could not sympathize with the irreverent nihilism and anti-dogmatism of Tristan Tzara. Rivera and Siqueiros, like other artists and intellectuals in Latin America, were searching to create and legitimize a glorious, mythical past in order to consolidate a truly autochthonous future. Soon after his return from Europe, where he had embarked in a brief cubist mode, to Mexico City Rivera abandons the easel to join fellow artists in the creation of a public art whose roots they naively, but necessarily, traced back to Pre-Hispanic cultures.

Rivera’s use of folk or popular art and Indian motifs soon earned him the scorn of Conservatives and critics and the alienation from former friends and colleagues, like Orozco and Siqueiros who accused him of creating not an autochthonous but an exotic art.

Indeed we Mexicans are the first ones to blame for having concocted and nurtured the myth of the ridiculous charro and the absurd china as symbols of so-called Mexicanism...At the sight of a charro or a china, at the opening notes of the horrible jarabe, one is automatically reminded of the nauseating MEXican stage, and all this, amalgamated becomes “Our own.” ¿Whose own? Why pick the most

outdated and most ridiculous attributes of a single social class and inflict them on the whole country? (Jean Charlot, p. 66)