

Dear all,

Thank you so much for taking the time to read this early draft of what I hope to turn into the fifth chapter of my dissertation. My dissertation analyzes the ways in which the political role of artists and cultural institutions in Mexico have changed in the wake of a series of political and socio-economic transformations commonly referred to as the country's "twin" neoliberal and democratic transition. This chapter is a direct continuation of the previous one, in which I analyze the way the state directly commissioned and deployed art during the official bicentennial commemorations of Independence and the centennial commemorations of Revolution in 2010. In this chapter, my goal is to contrast these official commemorations with the way members of the artistic community itself engaged critically in the commemorative events and, by extension, with the state.

I am testing many of the arguments here, as well as the structure of the chapter, and I am looking forward to any suggestions, including the use of theory to sustain my arguments.

To situate this chapter, I am pasting below a one-paragraph contextual introduction from the previous chapter:

2010 was one of the most violent years in Mexico's recent history. The drug war launched by president Felipe Calderón a few years earlier was linked to over fifteen thousand homicides, and the visual and media landscape was saturated with gruesome images of the drug war's casualties. That same year, Mexico commemorated two hundred years of independence and one hundred years of revolution. But despite the spectacular (and expensive) attempts to make the state's power highly visible, the celebrations were marked by public indifference, resistance, and even outright hostility, and fell far from being an innocent expression of collective festivity. President Calderón and his coterie accused the press of helping to perpetuate and intensify the violence by propagating the drug-traffickers' messages and pleaded both the media and ordinary citizens to "limit" coverage of the violence and to "speak well of Mexico" (*hablar bien de México*). This plea came at a moment in which tourism (an industry that regularly contributes 10% of the country's GDP and provides millions of jobs) began to drop, presumably as a result of the bad press linked to the drug war. But the problem, according to Calderón and his cabinet, was not the drug war itself and its resultant body count, but rather the way these were distortedly being represented by the media. "People mistakenly believe," argued the president, "that we are still in crisis and that there is no solution to our security-related problems." The way to "fix" these distorted perceptions was to increase the budget for social communication and publicity. The state spent enormous sums of money to advertise Mexico's virtues to both foreigners and its own citizens. In 2010, the state's publicity budget increased by 40%.

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Chapter 5

The social life of political art:

The production of critique during Mexico's national commemorations

If one happened to be flying into or out of El Paso, Texas in 2007 and looked out of the window, one could read the word “Sumisión” (the Spanish word for Submission) written in gigantic letters at the base of the iconic Black Christ Mountain and just across a highway from a sprawling slum. The slum is called Anapra, and is located just a few miles west of Ciudad Juárez and a few miles south of the Mexican-US border just beneath Fort Bliss, the US army’s second-largest installation post. In 1974, the Anapra valley was occupied by a handful of poor families and has since become home to workers at the *maquiladora* factories that have sprouted in Juárez since the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and to those stranded migrants who fail to make it to the other side of the border and become stuck, often joining the *maquiladora* workforce. The inhabitants of the area (which is dubbed “the dormitory of the *maquiladoras*”) have struggled, with little success, to obtain the most basic public services such as electricity, drinking water and paved roads. Anapra continues to be blighted by poverty, exploitation and frustration, and also by recurring environmental and health disasters. For lack of other means of disposal, trash is burned in the open and incidences of respiratory disease – and also birth defects – are the highest in the region. Juárez also has a grim reputation as one of Mexico’s capitals for feminicides, and Anapra has become one the sites where the thousands of bodies of brutally murdered women have been dumped.¹

¹ There have been multiple cases of blood poisoning caused by the lead production and toxic waste has been found all of which are attributed to the ASARCO foundry (American Smelting and Refining Company, created by Meyer Guggenheim).

After spending several months in Ciudad Juárez, Spanish artist Santiago Sierra chose Anapra as the site where he would produce his piece *Sumisión*. He hired a group of local laborers to carve fifteen-meter-long letters spelling out the word and to line each one with concrete. But the piece consisted not simply of tattooing the word itself onto the deserted valley. The idea was to fill each concrete-covered ditch with fuel and to set the word on fire on December 1st 2006, which marked the first day of Felipe Calderón's presidential term. Members of the local art community, as well as activists, journalists, and students were invited to witness the event, which would also be streamed on Sierra's webpage. Mariana David, the curator of the project, recalls that the piece was discussed at a press conference and at different public gatherings months prior to the date of its planned culmination. These conversations and discussions, she maintains, helped to generate anticipation to see the word burn. Both the artist and the curator have argued that *Sumisión* (formerly titled *Word of Fire*) would work at the level of symbolic language: "Why choose a word like 'submission' rather than one like 'bravery'?" asks David, "Because we were going to burn it! (...) Fire has always had a redemptive element, and one of rebirth too. By burning the word submission what we were trying to say was precisely that we were not submissive!"²

But in spite of the excitement and suspense that had built up around the event, the local government intervened and prohibited the crew from setting the word on fire.³ The official reason given by the authorities was that the piece would exceed the limit of allowed carbon emissions. That the curator and her crew had spent months acquiring all the necessary permits to guarantee that the piece would comply with all security and environmental provisos did not seem to matter, nor did the fact that public burnings of fuel and waste were a permanent facet of Anapra's landscape. David had the local state environmental committee conduct a study that showed that burning the word for half an hour, which is how long the event

² Interview with Mariana David. December 4th, 2014. David also noted the parallels between Sierra's piece and the old traditions of burning the Judas and the Fallas Valencianas.

³ The act of burning the word was interrupted twice, first in December 2006 and then again in March 2007.

was going to last, would emit the same amount of carbon as two buses running for about ten miles each.⁴ But the measures taken to comply with the stipulated rules were ignored by the authorities, who kept threatening to deploy the police to impede the burning and to fine David millions of pesos if the piece went ahead. The threats were effective and the burn never took place.⁵ “Submission cannot be burned away,” Sierra joked, “because the authorities will not allow it.”⁶ Instead of being disintegrated by the fire, the word remained in place for over five months, visible to those driving on the adjacent highway or flying over the area.

The first time I came across *Sumisión* was in the archives of the public, state-owned Carrillo Gil Contemporary Art Museum (MACG), located in the upscale neighborhood of San Ángel in the southern part of Mexico City. *Sumisión* had been part of a larger site-specific art project, *Proyecto Juárez*, that took place in Ciudad Juárez in 2006-2007. And while the final stage of *Sumisión* had been interrupted by the local authorities in Juárez, what survived of the piece – a set of black-and-white photographs of Anapran laborers digging the word into the ground, as well as an hour-long video of the surrounding area taken from an airplane⁷ – was displayed three years later at the MACG as part of an exhibition tied to Mexico’s 2010 bicentennial commemorations of Independence and the centennial commemorations of the Revolution. That a project about Ciudad Juárez (and one, that as I quickly learned, explicitly addressed topics about the violence in the city) was used as part of Mexico’s commemorative events, was particularly surprising, especially given president Calderón’s plea to “speak well of Mexico,” which given Ciudad Juárez’s all-around ghastly reputation, basically entailed not to speak about it at all.

⁴ Villela Mascaró, Pilar. (2008) “Not in my name: reality and ethics in the work of Santiago Sierra” in *Santiago Sierra. 7 trabajos/7 works*. Lisson Gallery: London, p.17.

⁵ Mariana David. Interview December 4th, 2014.

⁶ “La sumisión no arde porque las autoridades lo impiden” (Interviewed by Edgar Hernández for *El Excelsior*, March 2007)

⁷ The photographs and video can be accessed here: http://www.santiago-sierra.com/200704_1024.php The video shows the carved word and the surrounding area, but “the majority of the images are characterized by oblique, even delirious points of view that scramble our sense of direction and make abstract what was once recognizable, thereby sacrificing much of the work’s own evidentiary value.” Baum, Kelly. (2015) “On Santiago Sierra, *Sumisión* (*Submission, formerly Word of Fire*) (2006-7)” in Scott, Emily and Swenson, Kristen (eds.) *Critical Landscapes. Art, Space, Politics*. University of California Press: Oakland, California, p.143.

Sumisión, like other artworks from *Proyecto Juárez* and from other exhibitions selected by members of the art community for the commemorations, stood in glaring contrast to the official, spectacular art commissioned formally by the state to mark the occasion. While the official works of art were more celebratory in nature in an attempt to distract the population from the rising violence (see Chapter 4), the artworks commissioned by the artistic community openly condemned the state for the violence, inequality, corruption, and other pressing political problems facing the country. *Sumisión* is, in this sense, exemplary of the type of art that the artistic community selected for the commemorative exhibitions, but also of the type of “political art”⁸ that has been produced and the ways it is circulating in Mexico in the 21st century. While *Sumisión* is this chapter’s main object of analysis, I will bring up other works as well as a way to make several points.

First, I will show how the artistic community in Mexico, despite continuing to work for state-owned institutions, is in fact distancing itself from the state and finding ways to use resources from the private sector to turn ostensibly state-run spaces into bastions of critique against a state deemed to be responsible for many of the country’s problems. Second, I show that despite the politically subversive content of much of the art that is being produced, artists themselves (unlike previous generations) draw a line between art and activism. Artists’ political role, I argue, is becoming one of social critique much more so than of social mobilization. This transformation partly helps explain why the type of censorship of art has also changed. Not only is art rarely censored anymore, but when it is, the reasons given for doing so are rarely related to the content of the art itself. I end the chapter with a brief reflection on the meaning of “political art.” In the conclusion I make explicit something that I hope to have shown implicitly throughout the chapter: scholars need to be much more attentive to the “social lives” of artworks – namely the immediate conditions and ideological aspects of their production, circulation and exhibition – when

⁸ I will have more to say about this term at the end of the chapter.

engaging in its interpretation. In order to avoid taking for granted formal generic categories like “political art” and exclusively projecting our own tastes when deciding what is and is not “political,” we need to think about our methodological choices and take seriously those that allow us to study the immediate context of the artworks.

Exhibiting the Commemorations

To mark the bicentennial commemorations of Independence and the centennial commemorations of Revolution, the state spent nearly 230 million dollars on commemorative objects and events, including countless art exhibitions. Every state-owned art museum in Mexico City included in its 2010 repertoire at the very least one event, exhibition, or publication that explicitly broached the subject of the commemorations. And yet there was no unity of message in these events and certainly no communal patriotic exaltation. Most noticeable, virtually all the contemporary art exhibitions that were organized for the occasion did not seek to honor the nation in any celebratory way. Instead, the commemorations were used as an opportunity to address topics of violence and to echo the widespread discontent against the state for the country’s precarious socioeconomic and political situation.⁹ These exhibits also criticized – with different degrees of explicitness – the official celebrations themselves and accused the authorities of spending scarce resources on banal, short-lived spectacles that deliberately avoided addressing the most pressing political issues currently troubling the country.¹⁰

⁹ Some of these critical exhibitions included: “crisiss... Latin America: Art and Confrontation: 1910-2010” at the National Palace of Fine Arts; “Spectographies: Memories and History” at the University Museum of Contemporary Art, MUAC; “Revolución Es” at the Laboratorio de Arte Alameda; “Residual/Artistic Interventions in the City” a series of site-specific projects organized by the UNAM in collaboration with the Goethe Institute, with an exhibition at the MUCA; “Flour and Epazote” at the X Teresa Arte Actual; “Micro-histories, Macro-worlds: A place out of history” at the Tamayo Museum; “Project Juárez” and “Violent Times” at the Carrillo Gil Contemporary Art Museum; and “Dreams of a Nation: One Year Later 2011” at the National Museum of Art, MUNAL (this exhibition was a critical reflection of the commemorations and took place a year after the event).

¹⁰ Some exhibitions, including “Specographies...,” explicitly questioned the idea of a linear historical progress. Others tried to demystify the idea of the autonomy of the nation by presenting works from across Latin America, rather than simply Mexico (e.g. “crisiss...” at the Palace of Fine Arts). There were other exhibits that, instead, focused on very specific problems and even tried to propose specific solutions. For “Residual...,” Mexican and German artists produced socially-engaged artworks with the

Another significant commonality between these exhibitions was that they focused more closely on the event of the Revolution rather than on the Independence. This also stood in stark contrast to the official commemorations, which prioritized the Independence. One of the main reasons why president Felipe Calderón and his party (the National Action Party (PAN)) had prioritized the Independence over the Revolution, was because the Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI) was seen as the heir to the ideals of the Revolution, and the PAN, therefore, tried to minimize the memory of this episode. But although the artistic community prioritized the subject of the Revolution, the way in which this event was represented and commemorated could not be more different from the precepts of revolutionary nationalism that had prevailed throughout the PRI's rule. For instance, not only did the exhibitions rarely mention the relationship between nationality and race,¹¹ but there was also no attempt to define the meaning of "Mexico" or to link the idea of the nation to any kind of unifying symbol (other than, perhaps, violence and death). Indeed, the artworks that were on display were very different from the murals that had been produced on the walls of all kinds of state buildings half a century earlier, in which linear, future-oriented stories about a common national project were visually narrated. But they were also very different from the art produced by the critical and politically-engaged art collectives known as *Los Grupos*, which flourished in the 70s and 80s. Many of the members of these collectives were avowed Marxists and used their art as a way to communicate political ideas and organize people to protest against the regime and unite with social and guerrilla movements across Latin America. *Los Grupos* rarely exhibited their work in museums and opted, instead, to work on the streets of Mexico City, further blurring the line between art and activism.

intention of creating environmental awareness regarding waste generation and created a recycling center, a composting plant, and a food stand with alternative biodegradable packaging as ways to handle residues.

¹¹ Those that did include work that addressed this relationship did so as a way of criticizing it and noting how tying the idea of a Mexican nation to race had fostered racism against the indigenous population. The exhibit that most explicitly broached this topic was "Dreams of a Nation..." curated by José Luis Barrios.

While the artistic community used the 2010 commemorations to criticize the country's current situation, they were not romanticizing or calling for a return to the past. Moreover, according to claims made in the catalogues, brochures, and interviews of the organizers of these exhibits, their intention was often to question the idea of linear development and historical progress and to show that it all could have been otherwise. But what this "otherwise" might look like was difficult to discern. The current problems that the country was experiencing seemed so imminent and terrifying that perhaps there had been no time to imagine the future.

Moreover, these exhibitions all took place in public, state-owned museums that fall under the umbrella of either the National Institute of Fine Arts (INBA) or the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM).¹² Despite working for state-sponsored institutions, many of the art directors and curators that organized these shows refused to participate in the official commemorative ceremonies and events, including the mass spectacles and other festivities organized for the occasion described in the previous chapter. Their ability to disambiguate these different forums helps to complicate the notion of "state public art" in the singular and problematizes the image of a uniform and monolithic state. In other words, most of the professionals responsible for these provocative exhibits and art projects were themselves government employees whose salary is paid with tax-payers' money. And while the unprecedented influx of private money that museums have begun to receive through trusteeships and sponsorships (see Chapters 2 and 3) helps explain why these state-owned museums were able to put on these critical shows, ultimately these spaces continue to be state spaces.¹³

¹² Including those museums managed by the National Institute of Fine Arts (Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes; Museo Nacional de Arquitectura; Ex Teresa Arte Actual; Galeria Jose Maria Velasco; Laboratorio Arte Alameda; Museo Casa Estudio Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo; Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil; Museo de Arte Moderno; Museo Mural Diego Rivera; Museo Nacional de Arte; Museo Nacional de la Estampa; Museo Nacional de San Carlos; Museo Tamayo Arte; Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros; Salón de la Plástica Mexicana) and those managed by the National Autonomous University in Mexico (UNAM), including the MUCA Roma, the MUAC, the Chopo Museum, Museo Experimental El Eco, and the Centro Cultural Universitario Tlatelolco.

¹³ Despite being state institutions, a series of factors had opened up the possibility for members of the artistic community to take control over the organization and planning of these institutions. The commemorative events and exhibitions held in these spaces evidenced just how much autonomy museum directors and curators had from the federal state.

Proyecto Juárez

In 2005, Mariana David – a young curator from Mexico City who, after finishing her B.A. in Art History at the Universidad Iberoamericana, had moved to the southern states of Mexico to do research on community museums (*museos comunitarios*) – received a grant from the National Foundation of the Arts and Culture (FONCA¹⁴) that allowed her to travel north to Ciudad Juárez with the intention of curating an art project that could help to make evident some of the hierarchies and oppressive power structures of the city. At the time, Juárez had not yet acquired the title of being the most violent city in Mexico and the world – titles that it held between 2008-2011 and 2008-2010, respectively¹⁵ – but it already had a reputation for its prevalent vice, violence, and impunity. It was particularly infamous for the appalling labor conditions nurtured by the sweatshop industry (*maquiladoras*), the Juárez Cartel (which was the most important drug-trafficking organization in the 1990s), and the wave of feminicides that has been taking place in the city since the mid-1990s.¹⁶

The violence in Juárez was what instigated the project in the first place. While David hoped that art could help to generate greater collective consciousness and perhaps even trigger some kind of pressure on the Mexican state to address the city's precarious situation,¹⁷ her point was never to portray Ciudad Juárez as an outlier. On the contrary, the goal of Proyecto Juárez was to stress the parallels between this city and other places around the world which have also suffered from rampant capitalism and the perils of trade liberalization. She wanted both to challenge pre-existing views of the city and, simultaneously, to inform those who knew nothing about the violence in Juárez. “We wanted to make some noise,” David explained,

¹⁴ The FONCA is the closest equivalent to the National Endowment for the Arts in the United States.

¹⁵ Ortega, José. “Violencia: Logros y Pendientes” in *Seguridad, justicia y paz*. Consejo ciudadano para la seguridad pública y justicia penal A.C. (January 27, 2016): <http://www.seguridadjusticiaypaz.org.mx/temas-de-interes/seguridad/1357-violencia-logros-y-pendientes>

¹⁶ Hundreds of young, poor women living (many of them working at the maquiladoras) have been murdered. (see Gonzalez Rodriguez, Sergio. (2006) *Huesos en el Desierto*. Barcelona: Anagrama, 3rd ed.).

¹⁷ Roundtable 1. David. Disc 2, min.4

but also to “avoid portraying Juárez as if it was the seed of all evil.”¹⁸ The goal was to foster empathy with the local residents, the *juarences*, by showing how the city “is part of everyone, that everything is connected.”¹⁹ As such, rather than simply portray the murders and crimes in spectacular ways – much like the tabloids were doing (see Chapter 4) – the idea was to contextualize the violence by tracing its links to broader socioeconomic and political causes.²⁰ It was also an opportunity to show other attributes of Juárez, a city with a long cultural history that was seldom highlighted by the press.²¹

David decided that the best way to achieve this was to create a project that would consist of a series of public *in-situ* artworks that spoke about the city and its inhabitants. *In-situ* (or site-specific) art is a type of art created to exist in a specific place. The artist takes the location into account while planning and creating the artwork, which usually requires that she reside there for a determinate amount of time in an attempt to understand the context and produce a piece that is not a full-blown alien imposition on the space and its inhabitants. David lived in Ciudad Juárez for about two years. She rented a house during that period and shared it with the artists who participated in the project and who trickled in and out of Juárez for periods that ranged from a couple of weeks to over three months.²² During their time there, artists met with local activists, scholars, students and other artists from the city. They visited the city’s landmarks, maquiladoras,

¹⁸ “Nos interesaba hablar fuerte y claro, llamar la atención. También desarrollar un proyecto internacional desde Ciudad Juárez y sacar nuevas imágenes de ese contexto.” (David, Mariana (2010) Brochure Proyecto Juárez, p.7-8)

¹⁹ “No se trata de ver a Ciudad Juárez como la semilla del mal sino entender que es parte de todos, todo está conectado. Buscamos colocar a CJ en el mapa del arte y decir que desde ahí se puede crear.” Mariana David, quoted in “Se puede hacer arte en Juárez” *Excelsior*, 8 de octubre 2010, p.8.

²⁰ The use of violent images, often of naked, brutally beaten women, without any kind context that might accompany these texts, made it seem as though the murder had been an isolated crime of passion, divorced from any structural cause. Reproducing images of naked women, moreover, is also a way to instantiate a male gaze. García-del Moral, Paulina (2011) “Representation as a Technology of Violence: On the Representation of the Murders and Disappearances of Aboriginal Women in Canada and Women in Ciudad Juárez” in *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, Vol.36, No.72

²¹ The famous comedian Tin Tan was from Juárez and the whiskey distilleries were established there during the prohibition drew many celebrities (Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, Al Capone) to the city and gave it a certain charm. The election of Ronald Reagan changed the story of Juárez, but the history of the city is much longer.

²² The house was open not only to the thirteen artists that were involved in the project, but also to other artists who went to Juárez to do all kinds of artistic projects, including Mireya Salare who developed her project *Las Muertes Chiquitas* during her stay at the house. Other projects that were developed there included Artemio and Antonio de la Rosa’s script for the movie *Me quedo contigo*. The space became an intimate setting that brought people together to engage in creative production. (David, Interview)

cabarets, hospitals, universities and archives. Many of them also spent time talking to the city's residents and attended talks about the sociopolitical and economic situation of the region.²³

David invited thirteen male artists and one art collective (*Democracia*) to create individual artistic pieces that specifically spoke to and about the city.²⁴ By exclusively summoning male artists David wanted to show how patriarchy and masculinity (the latter conceived both as “a biological condition” and “a cultural trait”²⁵) taint every system of power; in her view, women are just one more group within the milieu of vulnerable social groups.²⁶ While she selected the artists, she then gave them the freedom to produce whatever artwork they wanted. As one can imagine, the works produced are all very different, which makes the task of generalizing the project a difficult one. Some works were much more conceptual than others, and also more humorous and cynical; some paid more attention to the message, others focused on the form. But what they all had in common was that, in some way or another, they all addressed topics of violence.

Artemio and Yoshua Okón were perhaps the two most famous Mexican artists who participated in the project. Both of them were born in the 1970s and participated actively in Mexico City's “alternative” artistic scene in the 1990s.²⁷ For Proyecto Juárez, Okón created a video-installation which he called *Canned Laughter*, which like most of his work is a piece of dark-humor. During his time in Juárez, Okón founded a fake company, “Bergson” (named after the philosopher Henri Bergson), which was supposed to produce, pack, and export the laughter that is used by television sitcoms in the United States. He then hired several local workers from different *maquiladoras* to laugh in unison and recorded them. He also commissioned the creation of hundreds of cans with the logo of his fictitious company. On display at the MACG in 2010, his

²³ Brochure Proyecto Juárez, (2010) pp.5-8.

²⁴ The artists that participated were Artemio (Mexico), Carlos Amoraes (Mexico), Gustavo Artigas (Mexico), Paco Cao (Spain), Jota Castro (Spain), Democracia (Ciudad Juárez), Iván Edeza (Mexico), Antonio de la Rosa (Spain), Enrique Ježik (Argentina), Ramón Mateos (), Yoshua Okón (Mexico), Santiago Sierra (Spain) and Artur Zmijewski (Poland).

²⁵ Brochure Project Juárez (2010)

²⁶ Brochure Proyecto Juárez (2010) p.14

²⁷ For the story of these spaces please refer back to Chapter 2.

piece included the video of the workers laughing together and samples of the coats that had been worn by the workers and the cans that purportedly contained the laughter. Artemio is also known for creating comical works, but his piece for Proyecto Juárez was much grimmer. It was a very simple piece, a pile of earth from Ciudad Juárez that weighed the same amount as the weight of the bodies of women that had so far been murdered in the city. When this piece was exhibited a few years later at the MACG, it weighed 23 tons and was titled *Portrait of 450 Murdered Women in Ciudad Juarez*.

Perhaps the most famous foreign artist, besides Sierra, who participated in the project was Artur Zmijewski from Poland. His contribution to the project was a video installation (“Yolanda 2007/ Danuta 2006/ Ursula 2007”) that consisted of twenty-four-hour clips of the lives of three immigrant women living in Ciudad Juárez, and in cities in Italy, Germany, and Poland. Mexican artist Antonio de la Rosa also presented a piece that spoke about violence against women. Awkwardly titled “2 Tetas y 1 Fracaso” (“2 Tits and 1 Failure”), the piece was a performance which consisted of the artist getting breast implants and keeping them for five years as a way “to put himself in the place of women, and carry with him those portentous temptations.”²⁸ For the MACG exhibit, a series of photographs of de la Rosa wearing the implants were displayed, together with silicon residues of breast implants. Another piece was a set of digital black-and-white prints by Argentinian artist Enrique Jezik. Titled “Six cubic meters of organic material,” the photographs show remains and debris from a slaughter-house in Ciudad Juárez.

The figure of the *in-situ* artist is a polarizing one.²⁹ Some critics highlight the genuine collaboration that can arise between artists who do site-specific projects and members of marginalized communities. Participating in these art projects can help people from different communities learn different tools and

²⁸ Schmelz, Itala. “Política cultural y arte político en el México actual” Lecture delivered for the conference *Entre la teoría y la práctica: reconsiderando el arte latinoamericano en el siglo XXI*. Museo de Arte de Lima (MALI). Lima. November 2, 2011 (2011).

²⁹ For insightful analyses of socially-engaged, site-specific art that talk about its pros and cons, see: Bishop, Claire (2012) *Artificial Hells*. London and New York: Verso; Kester, Grant. (2011) *The one and the many: contemporary collaborative art in a global context*. Duke University Press: Durham and London; and Kwon, Miwon (1997). “One place after another: notes on site specificity,” *October*. Vol. 80 (Spring): 85-110. As will probably become clear at the end of this chapter, I believe that rather than judging the notion of *in-situ* art as being *a priori* good or bad, we can only judge very specific examples.

skillsets from each other and can also help them question some of their assumptions about the world in ways that can trigger much needed change. Other scholars are somewhat more skeptical. They often stress the power imbalance that is always present in the relationships that develop around these projects and the often patronizing attitude of the artist who comes and goes as he pleases, unaware of the actual consequences his presence and projects might cause the members of the community. They claim that it is often only the artist who actually benefits from the interaction (with fame and money) and is summoned by institutions across the world to visit different locations, “often working on more than one site-specific project at a time, globe-trotting as tourists, adventurers, pseudo-ethnographers.”³⁰ The artist, moreover, can always pack her bags and leave, an option that is rarely available for locals.³¹

One of the original goals of site-specific art back in the late 1970s was not only to challenge the idea that art can have a fixed trans-historical and universal meaning, but also to contest the commodification of art itself.³² Rarely are the artists that engage in site-specific projects concerned with the aesthetic aspects of their work (i.e. with the question of whether or not the work is aesthetically pleasing and beautiful), and it is not uncommon for many of these projects to take place in locations that are off the beaten art-world path. But despite these intentions and efforts, site-specific art has also fallen prey to marketization and commodification. While *in-situ* work was originally meant simply to survive as long as the project itself was taking place, now it is the documentation of these projects that becomes a coveted commodity, bought and sold by art institutions and collectors around the world. It is not unusual, therefore, for the documentation of a site-specific work to be present from its very conception. The project itself is often “designed with an eye to how it must be photogenically adjusted for its own documentation – and the work becomes merely

³⁰ Foster, Hal. (1996) “The artist as ethnographer?” *The Return of the Real*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, p.304. Hal Foster convincingly criticized this ethnographic shift in the arts for a number of reasons including the common practice of locating the notion of the site somewhere else, in “the field of the other,” of “the postcolonial subaltern,” as if there was no politics to engage with in the artist’s most immediate context.

³¹ David and all the artists left Juárez a few months before the violence spiked, and the situation became even more precarious than it already was. This was not a possibility for most *juarences*.

³² Crimp, Douglas. (1993) *On the Museum’s Ruins*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, p.17.

the process that leads to documentation.”³³ Accordingly, the public for many of these works is no longer the local population of the sites where these are produced, but rather members of the global art world who are able to learn about these projects through exhibitions, catalogues, and web-pages. Indeed one could argue that the artworks produced for Proyecto Juárez, including Sierra’s *Sumisión*, were in large part created not primarily for *juarences*, but rather with the global art world in mind.³⁴

There were several reasons why David deliberately invited artists who already had a presence in the global art world. First, having art world celebrities participating in the project facilitated the process of finding resources.³⁵ That a young curator like David was able to summon a group of world-renowned artists in the first place was in large part a result of the timing of the project. The mid-2000s was a moment in which Mexican contemporary art was particularly coveted in the global art market and Mexico was becoming one of the preferred destinations for art world celebrities.³⁶ Proyecto Juárez was financially supported by private agencies such as the Patronato de Arte Contemporáneo (PAC) and also the Spanish Embassy in Mexico and the Spanish Agency of International Cooperation. But a very important part of the budget came directly from the galleries that represented some of these artists. Investing on site-specific projects is an astute financial decision for galleries because even when these projects do not directly yield a profit, they help to boost an artist’s reputation and will eventually increase the price of her work. Galleries participate in a wide range of activities and events that are not evidently, directly, or immediately of a commercial nature but that are, nonetheless, necessary to position the artist in the market. That *Proyecto*

³³ Mosquera, Gerardo. (2012) “Introduction.” in *Crisiss...América Latina, arte y confrontación*. Conaculta: México, p.28

³⁴ According to David herself, the only piece that was produced for the people of Juárez because only they could understand the message, was an installation by Iván Edeza that included images of the city’s buildings (including cinemas, theaters, cabarets, canteens and bars), which were part of the city’s collective memory and its historical legacy and which were being demolished and replaced by new buildings that had no connection to the city’s history or the local population. (David, Interview)

³⁵ David created the non-governmental organization Palacio Negro A.C. so that she could receive donations in exchange for tax deductions.

³⁶ I talk about the political and economic reasons why this became the case in Chapter 2. A central antecedent event to Proyecto Juarez was *inSite*, the biennial of site-specific art in Tijuana and San Diego. *inSite* was one of the first projects in Mexico that operated under a bi-national public-private partnership. For an incisive analysis of this biennial, see Yúdice, George. (2002) *The Expediency of Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Juárez eventually became the topic for one of the shows for the 2010 commemorations reveals the central role that galleries play in molding a national commemorative event.

But David also summoned well-known artists because she anticipated that whatever the artists produced for the project would eventually circulate in biennials, art fairs, and exhibitions around the world, which would help spread the word about Juárez (and perhaps also about herself).³⁷ But while alluding to the “outside” world was a big contributing factor, in the process these artists would also work closely with the Juárez population. Not only would they learn from them about their city but they could, in return, share their know-how about the artistic field with local artists. Given the lack of galleries and funding sources in the city, Proyecto Juárez could help bring in resources that would be used to fund projects produced by the local community. This was the intention, but this part of the project was one of the aspects that fell short. In retrospect, David laments that most of the local projects that were conceived by the local community – including videos, a radio station, web-pages, workshops, etc. – did not in fact materialize.³⁸ In this sense, Project Juárez embodied many of the criticism that are often voiced against *in-situ* projects: it was more successful in promoting a type of art that was tailored for a European public and often had very little to say to the local community on which these projects were based. And while the intentions of the project might indeed have been laudable – to introduce “a new face of Juárez” to different publics – in the end, the violence of the city was perhaps too overwhelming and one could argue that most of the artworks could be interpreted as simply reproducing many of the “horror stories” that were already circulating in the press.

Ni sumisos, ni activistas, sino todo lo contrario

When Project Juárez was first launched, Santiago Sierra was already one of the most controversial figures in the contemporary art world. He had become famous for his installations that consist of people – usually

³⁷ Brochure, Proyecto Juárez, p.5

³⁸ David, Interview.

illegal immigrants, prostitutes, and junkies – performing useless and humiliating tasks for pay, including crouching inside cardboard boxes, holding up blocks of wood or concrete, dying their hair blond, getting a black line tattooed on their back, or masturbating.³⁹ Sierra never reveals the name or story of the people that he hires, and usually pays them no more than the local minimum wage. Given that these performances take place inside museums and galleries, they become one of the few occasions in which people living at the margins of society get to interact in the same enclosed spaces with members of the intellectual and economic elite. The voyeuristic presence of the elite is part and parcel of Sierra’s pieces. Indeed, the artist has argued on several occasions that a central component of his work is the fact that it will be sold in the art market and will yield him very high profits.⁴⁰ Sierra is also open about the fact that he has never “worked” a day in his life – “I have no calluses. I don’t know how to do things”⁴¹ – and yet makes a lot of money from his art.

One could interpret Sierra’s work as a representation (or a replica) of the labor process under the capitalist system. In one of his videos, for instance, he shows a homeless man from Madrid repeating the following phrase “My participation in this project can generate a 72-thousand-dollar profit, and I am charging five pounds.” Some critics interpret his art as one that reveals the alienation, inequality, and forms of exploitation inherent in the way work is organized in our societies, increasingly favoring the use of outsourcing and subcontracting. They claim that Sierra is coming from a position of empathy with marginal classes and that far from fostering a “voyeurism of humiliation,” his work is able to reveal

³⁹ In most cases, the people he hires perform whatever he tells them to, but there is one case in which workers walk away. At the Deitch gallery in New York, he hired several workers to hold heavy beams while spectators watched them. At some point, the workers thought it was beneath their dignity to be there as props in an artwork and walked off the job (Jackson, Shannon. (2011) *Social Works: Performing Arts, Supporting Publics*. Oxford: Routledge, p.71).

⁴⁰ “In the art world you always work for the powers that be: banks, governments and so on. Who else can pay for an exhibition in a museum? You have to be conscious that we all work for a machine. Even if we’re waiters we feed the machine of capital.” “Santiago Sierra by Teresa Margolles: An Interview” in *Bomb Magazine*, No. 86, (Winter 2004): <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2606/santiago-sierra>

⁴¹ SOURCE

the art system's ability to confer an aura of legitimacy to purely criminal gestures. (...) The obscenity of Sierra's acts lies in making visible what artistic modesty tries to conceal. (...) The critical result of these actions is to destroy culture's appearance of autonomy. (...) The artist demonstrates his condition of white-collar proletarian: an intellectual mediator who in exchange for certain privileges –mainly, being allowed to take part in the profits generated by the art sales system –introduces ideas and projects that lead to the generation of profits.⁴²

Whether he is revealing something that is hidden or whether he is saying something that everybody already knows is perhaps a different question altogether, and one that can only be addressed by paying attention to the particular contexts in which his work is exhibited. But given that he neither advocates for a more just distribution of wealth, nor for an improvement of working conditions, nor does he propose new modes of sociability or solidarity – he himself maintains that “there is nothing humanitarian or charitable about my work”⁴³ – Sierra is often accused of being a cynic and a hypocrite.⁴⁴ He himself seems ambivalent about the ethics of his own work. While at times Sierra describes his art as a mirror image of capitalism, namely an “act of torture,” at others he justifies it by arguing that having a man sit on a chair inside a box for four hours is less cruel than having him stand on his feet for eight hours (like most of the guards of any museums or the workers of any factory are forced to do).⁴⁵

But what never changes is Sierra's refusal to take up the stance of political activism. He is the first one to concede that his work does nothing to change the precarious circumstances in which most people live:

If I thought about how to give real visibility to these people, I wouldn't have chosen the art world as a platform to do it, but rather a determined political activism—but I don't trust that either. Let's say that I do things because I think they should be included in the art world, but I don't have grandiose dreams that I'll actually achieve anyone's redemption, because that's absurd. When you

⁴² Medina, Cuauhtémoc. “Mutual Abuse” in *Installation Views P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center*, P.S.1. MOMA: New York, p.46. Art critic Pilar Vilella argues that one of the most discomforting aspects of Sierra's work is precisely that the culpable agent – “who is to blame?” – is hard to locate. If we blame Sierra because he put the workers there, then we should also condemn those businessmen who engage in much more violent forms of exploitation every time they produce a commodity and also ourselves, the consumers, for purchasing those products and incentivizing these exploitative conditions. (Vilella, Pilar Vilella Mascaró, Pilar. (2008) “Not in my name: reality and ethics in the work of Santiago Sierra” in *Santiago Sierra. 7 trabajos/7 works*. Lisson Gallery: London, p.33).

⁴³ SOURCE

⁴⁴ Juan Albarran. (2013) “Beyond an ethics of labor: geometry, commodity, and value in the oeuvre of Santiago Sierra” in *Santiago Sierra: Sculpture, Photography, and Film*. Kinshalle Tubingen, Deichtorhallen Hamburg. Sammlung Fackeber, Snoeck, p.39.

⁴⁵ SOURCES

sell a photograph for \$11,000 you can't possibly redeem anyone except yourself. (...) A banker who buys one of my pieces is like a newspaper that accepts letters to the editor. Self-criticism makes you feel morally superior, and I give high society and high culture the mechanisms to unload their morality and their guilt.⁴⁶

But while Sierra is certainly one of the most skeptic artists of his generations when it comes to defending the potential for art to change the world, he is no outlier in his call to distinguish art from activism.

Many contemporary artists also draw a line between art and activism. For instance, Yoshua Okón, the artist who created *Canned Laughter*, maintains that art, unlike activism, does not have *a priori* answers to political problems. While art can help to raise questions and voice critiques, and while it might help change people who interact with it – “art can help us to distance ourselves from preconceived ideas so that we can look again”⁴⁷ – there is no way of knowing how it will do so. Artists should try to get people to think critically, Okón told me, but to achieve this, the last thing artists should be doing is pushing a specific agenda, because this will trump critical thinking.⁴⁸

The curator of *Proyecto Juárez* Mariana David is also wary of confusing art with activism, but like Okón, she also argues that “there are times when art can function as a bridge to exchange and offer other perspectives from those generated by the media and the official channels. If art is able to confront, generate a debate, make evident, shed light on what is hidden, that means that it was useful.”⁴⁹ Ruth Estévez, the head curator at the MACG during the time the exhibit of *Proyecto Juárez* took place, also distinguished “artistic operations” from “political strategies and social protest.” She argued that art incites a very different type of reflection from activism and used the example of Project Juárez to maintain that art, “rather than

⁴⁶ “Santiago Sierra by Teresa Margolles: An Interview” in *Bomb Magazine*, No. 86, (Winter 2004):

<http://bombmagazine.org/article/2606/santiago-sierra>

⁴⁷ “El arte not busca agendas específicas ni pretende alcanzar ninguna meta. Sin embargo ... el arte puede ser una gran herramienta para la reflexión, para poner atención a lo que generalmente ignoramos o damos por hecho. Puede ayudarnos a tomar distancia en relación a ideas preconcebidas para así volver a mirar. (...) A diferencia del activism en el que se busca una respuesta *a priori*, un lugar al que se intente dirigir a los demás, el arte está más interesado en plantear preguntas sin importar las conclusiones” (Okón, *Proyecto Juárez Brochure*, p.11).

⁴⁸ Yoshua Okón. Interview. May 4, 2014.

⁴⁹ “A pesar de que pueda funcionar como puente de intercambio y ofrecer otras perspectivas ante las generadas por los medios de comunicación y las vías oficiales. Si el arte logra confrontar, generar un debate, evidenciar o arrojar luz sobre lo que se oculta, eso significa que sirvió de algo.” (David, *Proyecto Juárez Brochure*, 2010)

transferring discourses of political-ideological activism, uses languages that works as an alchemical process, so as to intensify certain details of a situation that either have not been pointed out before or that have been sequestered by a mediatized political discourse.”⁵⁰

But while for many of these artists and curators disambiguating art from activism might seem straightforward, these two practices can not only feed from each other but they can also blend into one another. For instance, one could present a clear political message and push for a specific political platform (i.e. what Okón defines as activism) and by doing so encourage people to distance themselves from preconceived ideas and see the world with new eyes (i.e. what Okón defines as the political role of art). Indeed many of the attributes of aesthetic experience are hard to disambiguate from certain forms of activism, including the attempt to disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions about the world or habitual forms of thought, as well as the possibility of making people aware of their ability to generate new normative values and of their inevitable inter-dependence with others. As art theorist Grant Kester argues, “Artistic practice certainly carries its own specific methods, protocols and capacities, generated through its extremely complex history, but it also shares points of productive coincidence with other practices.”⁵¹ One of these other practices is activism.

I raise this point here not to make the argument that art and activism are one and the same thing, but rather to show that contemporary artists are increasingly invested in making this distinction. This was not always the case. Many artists working in Mexico throughout the twentieth century, and particularly those whose work was explicitly political (including many muralists and members of *Los Grupos* and the *Taller de Gráfica Popular*) did not care to distinguish their artistic practice from their activism. Previous

⁵⁰ “Estos proyectos, en lugar de transferir discursos de activismo político-ideológico, utilizan lenguajes que sirven como proceso alquímico para intensificar ciertos detalles de la situación que no han sido recogido hasa entonces, o que bien se encuentran secuestrados por un discurso político mediático (...) trata de reconciliar de una manera artística, efectivamnete, también demuestra los propios límites de la acción que en esa reconciliación pueda existir. Sin embargo, es necesario establecer puentes o elaborar intentos, para que, por lo menos, exista un campo para la reflexión.” (Ruth Estevez, Proyecto Juárez Brochure, p.6.)

⁵¹ Kester, Grant. “On the relationship between theory and practice in socially engage art” in *Fertile Ground* (July 29, 2015): <http://www.abladeofgrass.org/fertile-ground/between-theory-and-practice/>

generations of artists saw their work as a tool for political and social education, change, and mobilization, and would explicitly use it to convey specific messages.⁵² Today artists (including those whose work is being collected and becoming Mexico's national patrimony and the country's diplomatic calling card) are much more modest about the transformative potential of art and of the political changes that it can achieve. Not only do they avoid conveying any straightforward message, but rarely can one find work that seeks to mobilize masses of people. That their work is centered around critique is perhaps not coincidental.

One could interpret this move as a decrease in "radicality." As Pierre Rosanvallon has astutely observed, to be a "radical" citizen today no longer requires one to look forward "to *un grand soir*, a 'great night' of revolutionary upheaval," but rather to point "a finger of blame every day; it is to twist a knife in each of society's wounds."⁵³ While Rosanvallon is referring to citizens living in countries with long histories of liberal democratic institutions, his description seems to fit Mexican contemporary artists who are increasingly prone to critique perhaps more so than to imagine the world anew. But I wonder if making this distinction is actually helpful when it comes to artistic works and practices. After all, drawing a stark distinction between works of art that are "radically disruptive," "moderately critical," or "naively ameliorative" is not something that can be done easily, as there are many forms of art and activism that "always move through moments of *both* provisional consensus or solidarity-formation *and* conflict and disruption."⁵⁴

The contemporary artistic community continues to create art that tries to have political effects and continues to use art as a tool for political education, but the type of art it creates and the ways it tries to use it for political ends are very different from the past; so too are the pedagogical tools that are employed in

⁵² Of course, when it comes to art these messages can be interpreted in different ways.

⁵³ Rosanvallon also argues that the fact that citizens are increasingly adopting the figure of censors and watchdogs is not necessarily a signal of "depoliticization," but rather a shift away from a politics of ideas and into a politics of distrust. See: Rosanvallon, Pierre. (2008) *Counter-democracy*. Harvard University Press: Massachusetts, pp.181 and 255.

⁵⁴ Kester, Grant. "On the relationship between theory and practice in socially engage art" in *Fertile Ground* (July 29, 2015): <http://www.abladeofgrass.org/fertile-ground/between-theory-and-practice/>

museums and cultural spaces. Under the PRI regime, for instance, many of the artworks that were exhibited in state cultural institutions were accompanied by explicit interpretive explanations. In Mexico, artistic and cultural institutions have always been indexed to national education initiatives and fall under the umbrella of the Department of Education.⁵⁵ As many scholars have shown, throughout the 20th century, specific didactic and exhibition techniques were devised to accompany the art that was being produced. Artworks did not simply appear in a vacuum, but were strategically located in certain buildings, and accompanied by “text panels, didactic displays, and exhibitionary strategies that (...) render specific interpretations of their meaning readily accessible to large numbers of foreign and domestic visitors.”⁵⁶

Today – as I showed in Chapter 3 – the curatorial and education departments of many contemporary art museums often work separately from one another. Many curators are skeptical of creating exhibitions that are too didactic, fearing that by helping the viewer interpret the meanings of the work, they will in fact be doing them a disservice – by elucidating certain meanings of the work they will, to borrow Okón’s words, “trump critical thinking.” For example, instead of explanatory texts that might over-determine a specific reading of an image, we increasingly find other ways of communicating messages that are, in theory, less hierarchical in nature, namely the organization of roundtables, seminars, and workshops in which the public that attends these events can participate more actively and through the process of deliberation presumably reach their own conclusions about the art that is exhibited.⁵⁷

Virtually all the exhibitions organized for the commemorations were accompanied by some kind of forum for discussion.⁵⁸ The Project Juárez exhibition at the Carillo Gil Museum in 2010 was accompanied by three two-hour-long roundtables. Some of the guest speakers for these forums were activists and artists

⁵⁵ It was not until 2015, that the first Department of Culture was created by President Enrique Peña Nieto.

⁵⁶ Coffey, Mary. (2012) *How a revolutionary art became official culture*. Duke University Press: Durham, p.22.

⁵⁷ For a closer examination on this topic please refer back to Chapter 3.

⁵⁸ To give just one example, the MUAC organized the symposium “Phantom, Fetish, and Phantasmagoria,” a three-day event that took place at the end of October 2010, which was free and open to the public and had quite a remarkable lineup of speakers including Enrique Dussel, Néstor García Canclini, David Theo Goldberg, Brian Holmes, Claudio Lomnitz, Achille Mbembe, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

from Ciudad Juárez, as well as scholars from different areas (including a few sociologists and political scientists), and also artists and other representatives of the art world. The roundtables –which were recorded and can be consulted in the museum’s archives – were fairly well attended, particularly given that they took place in the middle of the week, at regular work hours. There were about two dozen per roundtable. I identified a few well known members of the Mexican art community, but for the most part the attendees were ordinary citizens.

The discussions addressed all kinds of topics related to socioeconomic and political issues concerning Ciudad Juárez, but also issues that were directly linked to the relationship between violence and artistic representation in relation to the project and to the exhibition themselves. The roundtables allowed the participants to discuss some of the artworks in more depth, while at the same time avoid a top-down explanation of what the artwork might mean. Given that the exhibition was taking place in 2010, the artworks and project were discussed in light of current events, at a moment when the violence in the city had escalated tremendously. The guests and the public openly discussed the ethical and moral issues behind organizing a project like *Proyecto Juárez* and also its subsequent exhibition. They debated the implications of using art to trigger social change and also of bringing foreigners to talk about a context that they barely knew, especially one that was particularly violent. The titles of the roundtables are indicative of the discussions: “Artistic projects in spaces of social and political conflict: pertinence and opportunism;” “Ciudad Juárez: A Lab of our Present Times;” and “Juárez Resists.”

Given that many *juarences* were invited to participate in the panels, they were able to contest many of the myths that have been created around the city. Many of them challenged the view that people from Juárez are politically passive and are, therefore, responsible for the escalating violence in their city. They provided many examples of local organizations and different communities around the city working together to fight crime. In making this point, they were also showing how foreigners (be it artists or social workers) who often come to the Juárez with the intention of helping the local residents by creating projects out of

scratch, can actually accomplish much more by collaborating with efforts already underway. They were able, therefore, to criticize the framework of Proyecto Juárez itself.

Indeed, the public who attended these roundtables participated by asking questions and making comments in ways that made these forums seem to be truly plural and lively public spheres. Strong criticisms against the state, private corporations, and specific individuals and families from Ciudad Juárez, were voiced. The conversations were never dominated by a single individual and people seemed eager to speak their minds, even as they did not always agree with one another. This became most evident during the panel attended by the members of the band *Funky Bless* and the activist Ivonne Ramírez. The musicians and the activists had diametrically different views about the victims of the war in Juárez. Much to the surprise of some people in the public, the musicians supported the position of the state and argued that the victims of violence were members of gangs and cartels. Ramírez contested this view and maintained that many innocent civilians who were not involved with drug cartels were also being murdered and displaced. Despite these disagreements, all the participants coincided that the way in which foreigners and Mexicans from other parts of the country talked about the city was not only offensive, but also incorrect. It was the roundtables, perhaps more so than the artworks themselves, which more successfully questioned the way that Ciudad Juárez had been reproduced in the media and existing a different face of the city and its inhabitants.⁵⁹

Censorship, Freedom, and Indifference

At the end of 2007, Mariana David and the artists who were still in Ciudad Juárez as part of *Proyecto Juárez* left the city in a hurry (as a result of a series of unfortunate events, including the fact that David's van was

⁵⁹ Perhaps an interesting addendum to the exhibition would have been to include the videos of these roundtables to the show so that people who did not attend would at least be exposed to these debates and criticisms.

stolen) without being able to give the project any kind of closure.⁶⁰ Three years later, as the country was getting ready to celebrate one of the most important national commemorations in decades, David decided to resurrect the project by organizing an exhibition about it. She approached Itala Schmelz, a philosopher and cultural critic, who at the time was director of the Carrillo Gil Contemporary Art Museum (MAGC). Schmelz not only acceded to have the MACG house an exhibit about *Proyecto Juárez*, but decided to link the exhibit to the national celebrations. Like other cultural workers, Schmelz wanted to make sure that the museum became a site of contestation of the official commemorations; she was well aware that museums “would be one of the few spaces with the freedom to support projects that deviated from the patriotic condescending spirit that would surely characterize the commemorative projects in more ‘official’ spaces.”⁶¹ But while David helped Schmelz secure the funding for the exhibition – much of which came from the private sector – actually making the show happen proved to be much harder than either of them expected.

The INBA (the National Institute of Fine Arts) is required by law to authorize all the exhibitions and events that take place in state museums. The directors of these spaces submit a brief description of the shows and activities and wait for the approval of the federal authorities. At first, *Proyecto Juárez* flew under the censors’ radar and was approved with no restrictions. There is no way of knowing why exactly the exhibition passed the first round of inspections unquestioned. The most prevalent rumor has it that whoever was in charge of reviewing the exhibit linked the word Juárez in its title with Benito Juárez (one of Mexico’s most cherished national heroes) rather than with Ciudad Juárez, thinking it would be a historical and patriotic project.⁶² As the opening of the show loomed, however, INBA officials realized that the subject matter of the exhibit was not Benito, but rather Ciudad Juárez. It was then that, according to Schmelz, the authorities “showed caution and disconcert.”⁶³

⁶⁰ David, Interview.

⁶¹ Schmelz (2011).

⁶² Ibidem.

⁶³ Ibidem.

But both Schmelz and David refused to give in and fought against the cancellation of the exhibit. In the end they managed to convince the authorities not to interrupt the show, but had to compromise by agreeing to open it ahead of time (so it did not formally coincide with the launch of the official commemorations) and also by decreasing advertising for the exhibition. It is very difficult to measure the effects of such compromise and to know if more publicity would have actually bolstered the attendance to the exhibition, which amounted to approximately 3,620 people during the three months that it remained opened.⁶⁴ What we do know is that the rushed opening did have an effect on the roundtables that were organized as parallel activities to the exhibition, given that several guest speakers that were invited were not able to attend.⁶⁵ Even so these roundtables were, in many ways, the most successful aspect of the exhibition.

On the other hand, however, while the exhibition of *Proyecto Juárez* was mostly funded by the private sector and by foreign government agencies, one could easily fall under the impression that the Mexican state had supported the project all along. For instance, the cover of the exhibition's brochure that was given out to visitors at the MACG included the official logo for the commemorations. Additionally, on the first page of the booklet one can find the celebration's slogan "México 2010: 200 years of proudly being Mexicans" which was linked to the "official" celebrations and reproduced in all kinds of places and objects, ranging from billboards and buses, to books and magazines and worked as propaganda not only for the commemorations but for the state itself. The last page of the brochure comprised all the logos of the entities that had helped to fund the exhibition. The logos of the state institutions CONACULTA and INBA were

⁶⁴ After the exhibition closed in Mexico City, it travelled to Madrid where it was shown at the cultural center *El Matadero*. Over 30,000 people saw it in the Spanish venue. That more than ten times the people saw the exhibit in Spain than in Mexico also helps to confirm David's presumption that the artworks and their documentation would be seen by more people across the world than by a local or national public.

⁶⁵ The hip-hop group *Funky Bless* from Ciudad Juárez was meant to open the series of discussions with a concert and instead had to perform at the end of the event, when many of the attendees had already left. In spite of these changes, the roundtables were well by many accounts quite successful.

printed in a larger size and above the private institutions, including those who had supported the project much more vigorously than the government.⁶⁶

What is particularly noteworthy about the story of *Proyecto Juárez*, and of Sierra's piece in particular, is that it went from being censored by the local authorities of Ciudad Juárez, to almost being censored by the federal state authorities, to finally being appropriated by the federal state authorities as if they had commissioned and supported it all along. In other words, the state took credit for the work done by an increasingly professionalized artistic community (who has become ever more savvy at finding resources to fund the production and exhibition of artworks in state-owned space) and of the funds provided by the private sector. Even more paradoxically, the state now comes to benefit from the work of the artistic community even when the latter openly condemns the state. And it is precisely because the content of the works is condemning of the state, that it seems as though the latter is open and supportive of such criticism.

The paradox of this situation is that it is the funds that come from the private sector that end up undergirding the false image of a state that continues to fund the arts and supports freedom of expression, including exhibitions that are critical of the state itself. The MACG is owned by the state, which is responsible for paying its electricity and maintenance bills and the salaries of most of its employees, including Schmelz herself. But the money that the MACG receives from the state is not enough to cover the costs of all the shows and events that are planned. Indeed, the museum does not even receive the money that it collects from entrance fees and from the bookstore, which it has to give to the INBA which then redistributes in whatever ways it pleases. Funding from the private sector, therefore, has become indispensable for state museums to finance many of their exhibitions. Indeed, a central part of Schmelz's job

⁶⁶ The latter included the following: Fundación Bancomer BBVA, Fundación Jumex, Asociación de Amigos del MACG, Asociación Cultural Exterior de España, Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional and the Spanish Embassy in Mexico

is to seek out funding from the private sector, even as the state can claim to be the principal supporter of any show she puts on, including ones that it intended to censor.

There is, of course, no way for the public to know that Schmelz and David had to fight tooth and nail in order to make the show happen or about the relationship between private capital and state support (or lack thereof). It is also unlikely that most of the people who came across the exhibition were aware that Sierra's piece had been censored by the local state authorities in Juárez, as there is nothing in the photographs or videos that reveals that the word was meant to burn or what the meaning of this burning would have been. One can look at the photographs and video and assume that the piece consisted simply of the carved word on the ground. When the piece is presented, it is usually accompanied by a brief explanation that includes a description of Anapra. The only sign of censorship is in the title, as the piece is usually presented as "Submission (Formerly Word of Fire)," which might prompt the viewers to question why the title of the piece is no longer "Word on Fire," but leaving them with no clear answer.

That an artwork can be censored at the local government level and then be promoted at the federal level not only evidences the disjunctions between different levels of government and the ambivalent meaning of the state itself, but also opens up a host of questions about the meaning of censorship in Mexico's newly-democratic regime. One could argue that it was precisely the artistic failure of *Sumisión*, namely the fact that the work of art was never consummated, that made it more successful in more ways than one. The cancellation certainly helped to bolster Sierra's reputation as an *enfant terrible* of the art world, as an artist who is capable of making people in power uncomfortable to the point of censorship, a rare attribute these days and one that helps to raise the price of artworks.⁶⁷ Paradoxically, the interruption of the work meant that more people were able to see Sierra's land-art piece, which was meant to be consumed by the fire, but instead remained *in situ* for almost half a year. But also, as it often happens when

⁶⁷ In one of the most famous instances of this, Robert Mapplethorpe's prints that were censored increased in price from \$10,000 to \$100,000 dollars (Adut, Ari. *On Scandal*. Cambridge University Press: New York: 2008: 286).

it comes to acts of art censorship, the piece itself received more press than it would have otherwise. Its censorship was reported by major newspapers in Mexico and around the world and was avidly reviewed and commented on by the global art community. But despite all this, no major scandal came out of these condemnations: no federal state agency or private corporation, not even those entities that had helped to finance the piece, including the Spanish Embassy in Mexico, pursued the case in an attempt, for instance, to try punish those responsible for the cancellation. Nor did anyone try to recreate the piece.⁶⁸ Perhaps the diplomatic and economic costs and risks of intervening (“free trade”) were too high compared to the possible rewards of defending freedom of expression and creation and seeing the piece realized through to its end. Sierra, for his part, denounced the censorship but also basked in the attention and profit he had gained from it, stating ambiguously and contradictorily that “I don’t talk about censorship, because I think that when you launch a work it functions in many ways, and one of those is that society blocks it.”⁶⁹

But what is also worth pointing out is that the interruption of the original piece was not explicitly based on its status as art. A discussion about what should or should not be represented never took place. There was no debate of the sort that took place during the roundtables at the MACG, or, for instance, about whether a Spanish artist should critique aspects of Mexico he knew little about or whether the violence of Juarez should be aestheticized. This represents yet another historical disjuncture. While artists in Mexico were never subject to draconian censorship by the state (in the way they were, for instance, in other parts of Latin America or the Soviet Union), they were nonetheless often censored and punished explicitly for the content of their work.

⁶⁸ The project and particularly Sierra’s piece was covered by press from around the world including Artnet, several Spanish newspapers (particularly *El Mundo*), several German newspapers (Laitenamerika), and also local newspapers and sources from Ciudad Juárez.

⁶⁹ “Santiago Sierra by Teresa Margolles: An Interview” in *Bomb Magazine*, No. 86, (Winter 2004): <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2606/santiago-sierra>

To take one of the most famous examples of this, the iconic muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, was arrested in 1960 for depicting a rail worker's strike on a mural he painted for the National Association of Actors (ANDA). The mural was a deliberate protest against the state's anti-organized-protest legislation, and caused the desired offense.⁷⁰ It was promptly effaced and Siqueiros was sent to the Lecumberri prison for four years. And yet, having received state support for his work prior to his imprisonment, Siqueiros quickly returned to painting murals in public, state-owned spaces. This example shows, on the one hand, just how profoundly ambiguous and schizophrenic the relationship was between artists and the Mexican state. On the other, it speaks to the relatively transparent nature of the PRI regime's practices of censorship. The state was clear that Siqueiros was imprisoned and his mural destroyed because of its political, anti-state content, and after he had been punished, he was welcomed back and financially supported. Other artists who were more vociferously critical of the state, like Melecio Galván, were killed, while others, like members of *Los Grupos*, lived in fear of being followed, intimidated, or imprisoned.

The nature and practice of censorship seems to have changed quite profoundly. The idea that a contemporary artist would be sent to jail or killed because of his work is almost impossible to imagine. While Sierra's work – among others – was almost certainly censored for its content,⁷¹ the censorship itself was not framed as such. The claim in Juárez that it would have caused excessive carbon emissions is absurd, but also makes the case seem to be a cut-and-dry bureaucratic intervention. Meanwhile, in Mexico City, the state approached Schmelz privately and implied that the work did not comply with Calderon's call to "speak well of Mexico." There was no public censure or criticism of the artwork itself. Rather, the case was again framed as a technicality in the context of the commemoration where, Schmelz recalled, "Apparently there

⁷⁰ He described the work as a protest against Article 145 of the Constitution, which maintained that any act of "social dissolution" would be considered an offense to the state. (Coffey, Mary. (2012) *How a revolutionary art became official culture*. Duke University Press: Durham, p.120).

⁷¹ According to David, the main reason why the piece was cancelled was because the governor of Juárez was going to inaugurate a big plaza elsewhere in Juárez and didn't want any other event to become the main news.

were specific policies according to how governmental institutions (including the museums, of course) could talk about the topic of Ciudad Juárez: basically, not talk about it.”⁷²

Censorship in neoliberal times, argues curator Ania Szremksi, is used by the state to create the illusion that it is neither retrenching nor shying away from its responsibilities to the public. Based on acts of art censorship she studies in Poland, Russia and Egypt, Szremksi argues that censorship is carried out under the banner of morality and explicitly and publicly targets the content of artworks. Doing so enables the state to suggest that there “are values we have always believed in and will continue to believe in. In the midst of the extremely rapid change characterizing the neoliberal experience, the state’s assertion that it needs to protect us from something corruptive gives the impression of permanence and stability.”⁷³

In contrast to this claim, in Mexico we find that an increasingly neoliberal state does not – as it did historically – invoke moral or political reasons for censorship. Instead, it seems to trumpet its broad embrace of freedom of expression as the *sine qua non* of the newly-democratic Mexican state, at least publicly. Censorship of art in Mexico is indeed rare, but when it happens, as in Sierra’s case, it is justified by the invocation of technicalities (or not publicly discussed at all). In this case, as in those discussed by Szremksi, the promise of freedom of expression became an illusory one. But unlike the cases discussed by Szremksi, the censorship of Sierra’s piece was handled in such a way as to avoid any outright debate about freedom of expression or morality. In this respect, Sierra’s piece was no outlier. Even Schmelz, who confronted the INBA authorities, has acknowledged that for the most part, when the interruption of an artwork takes place “this is not because the message of the artwork is particularly efficient, but rather, because ... we are not complying with the adequate bureaucratic structures.”⁷⁴

⁷² Schmelz, 2011.

⁷³ Szremksi, Ania. “[Art and Morality under Neoliberalism: Reflections on "Blasphemous" Art from the East—A Tale in Three Parts](http://www.art21.org/texts/the-culture-wars-redux/essay-art-and-morality-under-neoliberalism-reflections-on-blasphemous-a)” *Art 21*. (November 1, 2011) (<http://www.art21.org/texts/the-culture-wars-redux/essay-art-and-morality-under-neoliberalism-reflections-on-blasphemous-a>)

⁷⁴ Schmelz, 2011.

But while the new forms of censorship further the “reinforcement of the vertical structures of command and the punishment for disobedience,”⁷⁵ they are much rarer than the artistic community claims they are. The topic of censorship is one that comes up frequently when one studies the relationship between politics and art. Over the course of my fieldwork, I talked to a lot of people from the art world about censorship, and while most of them referred to it as if it was a frequent issue, when I pushed them to mention concrete acts of censorship they often found it very hard to think of any. Indeed what often seemed to be the case was a certain anticipation of censorship, almost a desire that it would take place, perhaps signaling that the art they were creating and exhibiting mattered because, like Sierra’s piece, it had the power to provoke. Both the visibility and the price of a censored work goes up immediately as a result of censorship, as will the entire oeuvre of an artist whose work has at some point been censored. In a world in which freedom (or the illusion of freedom) is valued more than almost everything else, being censored, and particularly in an overt way becomes a coveted prize. But in Mexico this is increasingly rare.

Certainly there have been cases in the last few decades in which censorship happens – perhaps these are the exceptions that confirm the rule – and rumors circulate about how specific works that are exhibited in museums are innocuously taken down earlier than planned because they are uncomfortable to certain powerful people.⁷⁶ There are other cases in which the state simply withholds funding for projects that it had officially promise to sponsor. This was rumored to be the case with the Mexican Pavilion at the Venice Biennial in 2009 in which artist Teresa Margolles was chosen to represent the country but the state pulled her funding when they discovered that her work would be a critique of the country’s ongoing drug war. Again, this retraction was never made public and, exactly as had happened at the Carillo Gil Museum, the

⁷⁵ Ibidem.

⁷⁶ A piece by artist Eric Beltrán that showed the continuity between different PRI leaders from the very early stages to the time of Peña Nieto was exhibited at the Tamayo Museum in the fall of 2014 and taken down a few weeks before the date originally announced and with no explanation as to why this had been the case. While members of the art world claimed that it had been a form of censorship, the museum director, Carmen Cuenca, denied this fact, arguing that it had been a bureaucratic error of having over-programmed different exhibits (Interview Carmen Cuenca, September 30, 2014).

catalogues for the show, which had already been printed, bore the logos of CONACULTA and Mexico's Department of Foreign Affairs even as the exhibit ended up being funded by the private sector.⁷⁷

For the most part, however, censorship has become a bogeyman. For instance, the curator of the collection of another contemporary art museum told me how her curatorial department had decided to acquire and exhibit a piece that quite explicitly mocked both national symbols and heteronormative values. She expected that state officials would feel offended by the piece and that she would be forced to remove it from the exhibition. Accordingly, she made sure that the museum's head curator and the director would support her in case any other authority asked for the removal of the piece. The three of them agreed that if they were indeed forced to omit the piece from the exhibit, they would resign from their posts as a sign of protest. But much to their surprise, this did not happen. Not only did no one protest, no one even raised an eyebrow; it was as if the piece had gone completely unnoticed.

This "freedom" (or "indifference"), moreover, has not only come from the side of the government, but also from the private sector, who has increasingly taken on the role of cultural sponsor. An example is the work of photographer Diego Berruecos, whose pieces were included in two of the exhibitions that became part of the commemorations.⁷⁸ One of Berruecos' main projects is titled "PRI: Genealogy of a Party" and consists of different series of photographs that seek to capture the power of the PRI party and its decadence. These series include photographs of monuments of *priista* leaders that plague the country, as well as of ghost towns that were once ruled by the PRI and are now downtrodden vestiges of unfulfilled promises. Berruecos also spends time in the archive, rescuing and reproducing old photographs of politicians during political rallies that demonstrate how little the mannerisms and gestures of political leaders have changed over time. In 2010, Berruecos won one of the coveted fellowships awarded by the

⁷⁷ Among the works Margolles prepared for the biennial, were pieces of cloth that had allegedly been soaked in the blood of people that had been murdered as a result of the drug war, which she used to wash the floors and windows of the pavilion.

⁷⁸ "Spectographies..." at the MUAC and "Violent Times" at the MACG.

public-private program “Programa Bancomer / MACG de Arte Actual” which, as its title indicates, brings together funds and resources from the Bancomer Bank and the Mexican state via the MACG (for an analysis of this program see Chapter 2).

During his time as a fellow of the program, Berruecos created a mural composed of all the obituaries that were published in the newspapers of Mónica Pretelini, the wife of the then-governor of the Estado de México, Enrique Peña Nieto.⁷⁹ When Pretelini died, in 2007, Peña Nieto was one of the main contenders for the PRI candidacy (in 2012 he won the presidency, marking the return of the PRI to power), which helps explain the vast number of obituaries, many of them paid for by powerful individuals and corporations (in Mexico it is possible to buy/sponsor obituary space in the newspapers, meaning that obituaries for politically important people are often accompanied by the names of CEOs or politicians and the logos of corporations and government agencies).⁸⁰ This evidences not simply the alliance between the rich and the powerful, but also speaks to the fact that the PRI had never really lost its political power.⁸¹ Several members of the artistic community who had worked closely with Berruecos during his fellowship had anticipated some kind of censorship to take place when he finally exhibited his work. The president of Bancomer Bank attended the opening of the exhibition where Berruecos’ mural was first revealed, and some of the cultural workers involved in the Programa Bancomer feared that he would find the piece offensive given that he was one of the people who had paid for an obituary. But against all expectations, the president of the bank stopped in front of Berruecos’ piece, laughed, and move on.⁸²

In 2010, at the MACG, Sierra’s piece, too, was displayed without incident and, while it generated some critical discussion during the roundtables, for the most part it went unnoticed. Indeed, Schmelz might

⁷⁹ Pretelini died of natural causes on January 11, 2007, but rumors circulated about Enrique Peña Nieto’s complicity in his wife’s death.

⁸⁰ To see Berruecos’ mural of obituaries go here: <http://diegoberruecos.com/?p=1394>

⁸¹ Vargas, Itzel. “Diego Berruecos.” (2007) *Catálogo Arte Actual Bancomer-MACG*, México, p.59.

⁸² Schmelz, 2011.

be right when she worries that state authorities have become increasingly “immune to the ideological effects of art.”

Conclusion

Scholars of art and those few scholars of politics who study art often write about artworks as if these were isolated artifacts that in and of themselves have political effects. These interpretations tend to define artworks as political (or not) without exploring their logics and conditions of production, circulation and reception. These interpretations rely on the scholar’s (somewhat) subjective and generally reified reading on the content of the artwork itself. Chantal Mouffe, for instance, defines “critical art” – using Santiago Sierra as one of her examples – as “art that foments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate. It is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony.” In her view, critical artistic practices can “disrupt the smooth image that corporate capitalism is trying to spread, bringing to the fore its repressive character.” Artworks, she concludes, “have a necessary relation to politics because they either contribute to the reproduction of the common sense that secures a given hegemony or to its challenging.” However, by not studying the contexts of artworks’ contextually-specific circulation and reception, Mouffe misses the way the same artwork can simultaneously contest and reproduce different forms of common sense and political-economic orders. Without paying attention to what I refer to as the social life of the artwork,⁸³ claims like Mouffe’s are so broad that they are both unverifiable and uncontestable. Moreover, they open the door for cultural producers who do care about the political effects of artworks to trust that an artwork in and of itself will do all the political work, at the expense of the apparatuses of exhibition, promotion, and dissemination.

⁸³ I borrow this term from Arjun Appadurai who writes about the “social life of things.”

As this chapter has tried to show, artworks or artistic practices can contest certain forms of common sense while advancing another. In this chapter I have showed how Sierra's piece provoked political discomfort and censorship, thereby generating some degree of critical discussion, only then to be re-appropriated by both the Mexican state and corporate sponsors, thereby bolstering Sierra's reputation in the global art market and in many senses declawing his critique. In this case, critique and commodification go hand-in-hand, with differing effects in different stages of the artwork's circulation. There is nothing intrinsically "critical" or "non-critical" about it, and even as its content does "make visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate," its circulation itself traces circuits and gains prestige from structures made possible by and upholding the dominant consensus itself. It is an ambiguity that Sierra himself not only seems aware of, but actively takes advantage of.

Understanding what is political about political art or critical about critical art requires not simply defining the perceived effects of its content, but studying what Appadurai terms (in relation to "things" more broadly) its "social life"⁸⁴ and what Kopytoff dubs its "cultural biography"⁸⁵ to understand the conditions under which an artwork is created and has given effects. Scholars who study cultural production tend to agree that "careful ethnographic research avoids oversimplified generalizations about the meanings of these forms and reveals the contradictions and complexities with which people experience them."⁸⁶ A piece by Santiago Sierra will provoke very different types of people, it might also be simply a commodity that will make him very rich, and will simultaneously be exhibited in a state museum and become part of a country's national memory. The same work of art might look very different at different times and for different people. It might be much more politically provocative under certain circumstances, just like it might become more or less coveted in the market. It can be used to the attack the Mexican state, but then

⁸⁴ Appadurai, Arjun (ed.) (1986) *The Social Life of Things*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 3-63.

⁸⁵ Kopytoff, Igor (1986) "The cultural biography of things" in Appadurai, A. *The social life of things*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 64-91.

⁸⁶ Mahon, Maureen. (2000) "The visible evidence of cultural producers" in *Annual Review of Anthropology*. No.29, p.481.

repurposed to commemorate “the nation.” Interpreting the object itself in a vacuum is not only not useful but also impossible, given that we are interpreting the piece from a specific location, bringing to it our own presuppositions about the world, and making *a priori* judgments about its political effects without actually studying those effects. Doing so in the case of works by someone like Santiago Sierra, as this chapter has shown, is impossible.

Studying these politics, moreover, provides valuable insight into politics themselves, rather than simply the politics provoked by a given artwork. Tracing Sierra’s work through its circulation and reception shows how Mexico’s post-transitional state reproduces certain authoritarian behaviors but in a new guise significantly shaped as much by discourses of social liberalism and freedom of expression as by the challenge posed to it by the power of large-scale capital in contesting its hold on dominant cultural narratives. It shows that the state’s influence on cultural production and shaping of national narratives is based in large part on its ongoing control over the infrastructure of exhibition spaces, but no longer on its direct control (political and financial) over the artistic community itself or over a more -or-less accepted, unitary national imaginary.