Preserving Memory

Llamas, Nerea A.

Published by Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials

Llamas, Nerea A.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/100443.
Art collectives in the service of social justice have a long history in Mexico. As early as 1938, established and emerging artists formed a prolific collective, the Taller de Gráfica Popular (Popular Graphic Arts Workshop; TGP), which took on issues like workers’ rights, land reform, and public education. More recently, a collective effort grouped sixty-four Mexican graphic artists with social justice organizations to illuminate the ongoing murderous brutality against women along the Mexican border. \(^1\) The artists involved in this exhibition, aptly named *Las Muertas de Juárez Demandan Justicia* (The Women of Juárez Demand Justice), decorated the Mexico City subway with provocative posters aimed at creating a “collective shout” against prosecutorial inaction. \(^2\) The federal prosecutor responded by opening investigations on confirmed femicides. Nevertheless, violence against women continues and so does the call to arms via art collectives.

A contemporary grouping of young Oaxacan artists called the Asamblea de Artistas Revolucionarios de Oaxaca (Assembly of Revolutionary Oaxacan Artists; ASARO) also expresses its solidarity with female victims of border violence. While ASARO focuses on Oaxacan issues, several among its prints and stencils memorialize the women of Juárez. Against the backdrop of a general overview of ASARO and its work, this paper posits that librarians and archivists can help advance and preserve access to human rights activism like ASARO’s by capturing its digital output alongside its printed work. The University of New Mexico Libraries has digitized and captured each of these formats in collections that are accessible online in the New Mexico Digital Collection (http://econtent.unm.edu/) and the Diseño Gráfico Collection (http://www.archive-it.org/).

**Background**

ASARO emerged as an appendage of protests originating from the April 2006 National Teachers’ Union strike in Oaxaca. Teachers’ strikes are commonplace throughout Mexico during the summer months. Local unions typically stage sit-ins to raise public awareness of continued needs for pay
increases and basic educational funding. In most cases, involved parties reach some compromise before the start of the school year. In 2006, then Oaxacan governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz—identified by taggers as URO—refused to entertain local teachers’ demands, because cooperating with teachers contradicted his 2004 gubernatorial campaign slogan *Ni marchas, ni plantones* (no marches and no sit-ins).

To show their dissatisfaction, teachers came from throughout the state, descended upon Oaxaca City, and established camp on the main plaza. On June 14, Ruiz Ortiz responded with force, sending police dressed in riot uniforms and supplied with bullets and tear gas into the crowd. The conflict escalated as teachers regrouped and reoccupied the plaza. In a recent exhibit essay, Michael Graham de la Rosa notes that fed up protesters eventually occupied fifty city blocks in the center of Oaxaca. The government responded by sending in helicopters to fire tear gas. By that point, Oaxaca residents, already dissatisfied with Ruiz Ortiz’s 2004 election, which they perceived as fraudulent, set their sights on ousting him. After June 14, his removal became their sole demand, overriding their original requests for increased pay and supplies.

The people of Oaxaca responded to the June 14 raid with renewed solidarity. ASARO artist Yescka recalls: “The next morning, there was a march and the people were able to take over the Zócalo again. From that day on, many people started to show solidarity with the teachers.” Continued displays of solidarity along these lines resulted in the formation of an umbrella organization called Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (Popular People’s Assembly of Oaxaca; APPO), which incorporated ASARO. Government action against protests angered and inspired broad involvement from indigenous organizations, women’s groups, rural activists, religious activists, students, human rights organizations, and artists. These groups ultimately joined the teachers against Governor Ruiz Ortíz, igniting a “deeper social rebellion” which consumed Oaxaca from July through November.

The ASARO print *Skull Helicopter*, a simple and effective triangular composition, depicts the raid of June 14. The print features generic *calaveras* (skeletons) representing a mother, father, and child standing on the wrought iron balcony of their home. A menacing calavera helicopter hovers overhead. This image depicts the raid on protesters as an attack on families, expected by parents but not children. While the frightened parents look up, the child remains oblivious and grasps his soccer ball. The skeletons in this print harken back to the work of the famous turn-of-the-century Mexican cartoonist and satirist José Guadalupe Posada, ultimately placing this piece within an identifiable tradition of Mexican graphics. However, the scene reflects more poignantly on local Oaxacan conditions. Beyond its obvious reference to the raid, the tree in the foreground may also represent conflict between the governor and Oaxacan families. Early in his governorship, Ruiz Ortíz proposed to repave the main square and cut down huge and well-established laurel trees.
Infuriated citizens, lacking any trust in Ruiz Ortiz, created a committee to prevent these efforts and to protest the lack of public consultation.

Several ASARO prints tell the stories of this uprising. One such example, *La marcha de las cacerolas* (The March of Pots and Pans), memorializes the August 1, 2006, event in which women, modeling themselves on the Argentine *cacerolas* of 2001, took to the streets with pots and pans. Women from all walks of life, including housewives, school girls, and indigenous women, met in the late morning and marched towards the plaza. By the time they reached Channel 9, the state-owned television station, which marketed itself as the “Channel of the Oaxacan people,” the march had grown to between two and five thousand participants depending on sources. When the director of the station refused to grant the women an hour-long broadcast, approximately 350 protesters seized control of the station. That evening they broadcasted live on television and on two radio stations, one of which they renamed Radio Cacerola. Until the government destroyed transmission control equipment twenty days later, the women broadcasted from these stations, showing videos of Oaxacan uprisings and past social movements in Mexico and abroad.

*La marcha de las cacerolas*, a combination of text and image, shows a group of calavera women marching with a banner that reads: “Nuestros muertos seran vengados, como APPO” (Our Dead Will Be Avenged, Like APPO). The women wear traditional Oaxacan dress—*huipiles* and embroidered blouses with wraparound skirts secured at the waist by a sash. This clothing idealizes the prominence of indigenous women in the movement. Likewise, calaveras are not generic; they have individualized features and fashions, sporting different accessories and styles to express the diversity of indigenous Oaxacan peoples. Children accompany some of the women in the print. They march in the moonlight; their path illuminated by a torch. Some women carry pots, machetes, spoons, while others hold calla lilies, the iconographic indigenous Mexican flower.

Given the success of defense groups like the *cacerolas*, APPO gained enough authority in the summer of 2006 to declare itself the legitimate governing body of the State of Oaxaca. The people, in effect, enacted their right to form a parallel government of the people. APPO mobilized the people of the state to organize additional defense groups and to enable popular assembly as well as communication through Radio Universidad. They articulated an entire social movement. Protesters reoccupied media outlets, built barricades in the streets, and generally wrested control in hopes of prompting the governor to resign or encouraging federal authorities to remove him. This calculated series of events ended in even more extensive and severe repression in late October as President Vicente Fox sent federal police into Oaxaca to “reestablish order.” Together with police, military officers demolished APPO barricades, stages, platforms, and radio stations. This intervention effectively silenced overt demonstrations and communicated clearly to the residents that
the federal government supported the policies of Governor Ruiz Ortiz. Much to the chagrin of protesters, Ruiz Ortiz completed his term.

**Artistic Resistance**

During the uprising, state and commercial media, especially newspapers and local radio stations, were hostile to protesters. In order to have their voices heard, artists challenged the state media by clandestinely painting and printing their resistance on city walls. Street art flourished, reflecting the “society’s need to create a visual language that connected with every person who walked down the street.”

> “New stencils, woodblock prints, and spray painted messages appeared each morning. Art collectives such as ASARO formed. These artists used their creativity and imagination to visually represent the marginalized, exploited and oppressed, as well as to promote anti-capitalist counter-culture in Oaxaca.”

ASARO artists used iconographic images to express reverence for Mexican printmaking, while also reinforcing collective memory around popular imagery like the resilient face of Emiliano Zapata. Their ingenious interventions with these images often recast new messages—as in the case of a Zapata stencil, with a gas mask, or a print depicting his sombrero filled with skulls above a crowd of faces, perhaps emblematic of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation; EZLN). Reminiscent of Mexico’s revolutionary spirit, these pieces extended nationalist revolutionary iconography into the twenty-first century. The Zapata print labeled *XX-XXI* suggests as much, while the stencil retooled Zapata’s image, as representative of the people, masked to protect against the Mexican authorities, gassing out rebellion. Playing with these well-recognized iconographic images, artists inspired new questions, leading to different and sometimes troubling conclusions about the collective memory.

ASARO’s use of iconographic images to create confusion and anger as well as laughter and approval underscores its commitment to collective works and to diverse representations. Much like its umbrella organization APPO, ASARO incorporates multiple individual movements within a larger communal context, something southern Mexicans call *comunalidad* (communality).

The collective’s tag “ASARO” draws on the expertise of several artists including Beta, César, Guillermo Pacheco, Ikne, Irving Herrera, Ita, Mario Guzmán, Melo, Rigoberto Martínez, Selo, and Aler. These artists pride themselves on their varying political belief systems and also inclusiveness.

Yescka, one of the more visible ASARO artists, recounts in an interview that Mario, currently the curator of the Oaxaca Graphic Arts Institute (IAGO), brought together “young art students and street artists.” He recalls that the collective’s first collaboration involved protesters giving artists spray paint and stencils to make signs. The spectacle of arming young people with cans of paint and marching them into barricaded areas reflects ASARO’s commitment
to “intervene” physically with their presence and conceptually with their graffiti. These appropriately named “interventions” require a community of painters and printmakers committed to rasquache, a term that describes repurposing the materials at one’s disposal. This Mexican tradition is suggestive itself of resistance to poverty. Yescka remembers that differences in ideology enhance the group and enable it to succeed across organizations: “Seguramente si no hubiéramos participado en el movimiento social y hubiéramos seguido trabajando de forma individual, no seríamos lo que somos ahora. Tratamos de integrar a más gente y plantear un arte social, que en Oaxaca se había perdido desde hace mucho tiempo.” (Surely if we had not participated in the social movement and we continued to work individually, we would not be what we are now. We tried to integrate more people and to raise a social art, which in Oaxaca had been lost long ago.)

ASARO’s interventions are like puzzles. They pull together multiple pieces in a singular statement. Despite the collective challenge of these works, they also celebrate diversity and the importance of individual imaginations. Armed with spray paint, participants in ASARO’s interventions shake things up, so to speak, by incorporating biting commentaries on consumerism, state-sanctioned violence, and social injustice into already posted advertisements. In one illustrative example, a piece of a multiblock mural in Mexico City represents a truck route, likely suggestive of NAFTA, as the road to “Revolution” with stops at “consciousness,” “creativity,” “freedom,” and “community.” These interventions challenge authorities to rethink the messages they project.

For many Oaxacans, graffiti has become “political protest speech and a way of achieving social justice through community organization.” However, Oaxaca’s residents voiced considerable ambivalence about the graffiti surrounding them. On one hand, messages were well-taken, and on the other they defaced the beloved city. Some may have seen graffiti or street art as inconsequential, while others argued against its artistic value. During the uprising, most believed that it was violently disruptive. Oaxacan protesters, who were denied their rights to assemble in public or to speak through traditional media outlets, may well suggest that graffiti is the honorable work of scribes “passing written word to people against rebellion.” Not unlike the graphic images that lost Posada his first job at El Jicote, ASARO’s pervasive imagery shocked people and inspired difficult discussions.

In a recent blog post, Mexican graphic artist Arnulfo Aquino, a participant in Las Muertas de Juárez Demandan Justicia, lauds ASARO for taking political graphic expression from center to periphery “explosively and powerfully” in the “first rebellion of the century.” Aquino suggests that ASARO occupies the revolutionary spotlight in contemporary Mexico as a result of its effective stencil and street art collaborations. ASARO’s publicity has not come in newspapers and magazines—though there have been a few stories that
are well cited within asar-oaxaca.blogspot.com—but rather through blogs and social networking walls.\textsuperscript{24}

**ASARO and Women’s Rights**

Community is at the center of ASARO’s philosophy. As artists working for human rights, ASARO creates potent and communicative images. As such, ASARO’s prints and stencils are necessarily striking and often reminiscent of the violence they seek to expose and ultimately stop. For this reason, it comes as no surprise that men and women in Oaxaca would express their solidarity with *Las Muertas de Juárez*. As Lynn Stephen demonstrates, Oaxacan women have long migrated to other parts of Mexico and the United States, confirming their position as targets not only of physical violence on the border, but also of systematic discrimination within Mexican social and political systems.\textsuperscript{25}

An ASARO stencil entitled *OAX-AO616* hammers home to Oaxaca the extensive reach of atrocities committed against women. It serves as a disturbing reminder of a furtive campaign against poor, displaced Mexican, and often indigenous, females. It is no secret that pervasive poverty, human rights violations, and government corruption have plagued Oaxaca for more than a century. This piece of graffiti depicts a facial view of a woman’s head balanced precariously, as if removed from her body and placed disjointedly on her separated shoulder, where the viewer’s gaze veers right to reveal stitches running from chin to chest. The depersonalized label “OAX-AO616” identifies this face with a possible origination point in Oaxaca and a number reflecting the 615 unnamed victims before her.\textsuperscript{26} The stencil comments poignantly on a chilling reality that all Mexicans own: too many women are lost, victims not only to physical violence and murderous campaigns, but also to complicit inaction that results in their disappearance from the record of injustice. Much like the woman depicted, this image can be easily erased in an official gesture to remove from the public record the unsightly reality of the violence it represents. It is the very essence of ephemeral. This ASARO stencil, documented only in photographs disseminated on blogs and social networking walls, reaffirms the piece’s transient nature. “Raising a social art,” a goal Yescka articulates boldly, requires the accumulation of such images.\textsuperscript{27} Preservation of these pieces transforms reminders into evidence. If people remember this chilling image, they may be more likely to engage.

Some of ASARO’s prints, easier to find in traditional library and archive settings, relay the same call to memory and arms. *Ni una muerta más en la ciudad frontera* shares its title with lyrics from *Sueños rotos* (Broken Dreams) by the Mexican hip-hop sensation and social activist Boca Floja. These pieces address a young Mexican woman’s perilous migration. One print balances the face of a woman being strangled with a Pietà holding the naked body of a murdered woman along a fence with three crosses. This image represents and memorializes the murdered and symbolically martyred women of Juárez. These prints champion the human rights collective *Las Muertas de Juárez*: 
Ni Una Muerta Más (The Dead Women of Juárez, Not Another Death), which has spread its message internationally with help from willing artists.\textsuperscript{28}

The Pietà is one of several iconographic images that appear in ASARO’s work on human rights abuses against women. This image, symbolic of Mary’s lament in the immediate wake of Christ’s death, engages a discussion of lost innocence. Other symbolic images such as descansos (roadside memorials) along the migratory path north commonly appear in these ASARO memorials to the women of Juárez. These crosses act as physical and visual triggers for remembering and for illustrating the omnipresence of death. Several ASARO prints, such as No a la violencia. Ni una más (No to the Violence. Not One More), Women Mourning Next to a Corpse with Candles, and Two Nudes Surrounded by Crosses and Barbed Wire, reflect the catastrophe of loss with the inclusion of descansos.\textsuperscript{29} Each of these prints also reveals bodies lying bare, either as corpses or as nudes. These symbols remind us of female vulnerability, especially within the harsh physical environment, where violence against women has risen to epidemic proportions and bones decorate the horizon.

One of ASARO’s most potent prints offers visual reference to the vulnerable nude female and textual reference to her corpse. At the left foreground of this print, a nude reclining female body, legs spread at the edge of a river, empties her vaginal fluid into the water source running past. Her torso, breasts, and chin rise out of the river into the background where they become the hilly border. To the right words tell her tragic story: “Mi cuerpo ha desaparecido se lo han comido los huesos temblando y mis carnes deambulando. Yo solo pienso en esperanza en el castigo del ser malvado y en el porvenir del bien amado” (My body has disappeared, they have eaten its trembling bones and my wandering flesh. I only think of hope and of the imprisonment of the evil being and of the future of the beloved).\textsuperscript{30} The symbolic woman in this print, an integral part of the border landscape, suggests that unnamed propagators of violence against women cannibalize the female body as well as their landscape. This violent act prohibits the dead from resting in peace until the evil is captured and the beloved freed from the tyranny this landscape evokes. This print conjures the iconographic Mexican female image of Coatlicue, the Aztec goddess known for her skirt of serpents and necklace of hearts, hands, and skulls. Many suggest that Coatlicue’s image recollects the earth mother as both the giver and taker of life, a catalyst for a natural cycle in which life begets death and vice versa. This dualistic image is often presented as the mother of the Mexican people. Coatlicue captures her children in the underworld and regurgitates them back to life. Her likeness appears in ASARO stencils as a symbol of indigenous permanency and resistance.\textsuperscript{31}

\textbf{ASARO in Libraries}

ASARO carries the Mexican revolutionary torch forward through blog publishing and social action via the Internet. As a result, their blog and social networking posts are essential artifacts of this contemporary movement. As
librarians committed to access, we believe it is important to incorporate work from collectives like ASARO into the academic space, not only by citing or describing their ephemeral pieces in print, but also by using technological resources to ensure that their born-digital production is preserved and sustained within libraries. Just as scholars today examine the work of the TGP, scholars decades from now must encounter the artistic interventions of collectives like ASARO. Collecting and making images available publicly helps to increase awareness of injustices by offering evidence in a visual and digitally accessible format.

A perusal of the ASARO blog (http://asar-oaxaca.blogspot.com) reveals some striking similarities with newspaper publications like La Patria Ilustrada and the Gaceta Callejera, where Posada published, printed, and circulated his graphic production. Much like these sources, the ASARO blog offers dedicated pages with print and image as well as “ads” or links directing readers to other sources. ASARO’s blog is professionally organized and informative to facilitate broad access and discoverability. It links users to historical and biographical information, advertisements, and selections of ASARO’s street and print graphics as well as its paintings. This blog also runs reprints of stories on ASARO and reports from the press while providing open access to ASARO publications and videos. To date, ASARO’s blog is without question the best source of information on the collective. It is an essential element within its body of work.

While ASARO may be center stage in twenty-first-century Mexican graphic arts, academic library and archive projects aimed at archiving born-digital artifacts of their work linger in the peripheries. We digitize physical artifacts like those described above and typically overlook equally important digitally born production. Just as ASARO marches into barricades and incorporates the voices of marginalized peoples, it uses social networking walls like Facebook, Myspace, and blogs as digital canvases. Libraries have the capacity to save this kind of work through crawls and captures aimed at preserving pieces of digitally born production.

In November 2010, the University Libraries at the University of New Mexico (UNM) ran the Diseño Gráfico test pilot in Archive-It (http://wayback.archive-it.org). The experiment periodically captured and archived snapshots of Spanish language, principally Mexican, blogs related to graphic arts. Initially, we cast our net too broadly and collected disjointed titles, which lacked any specific subject cohesion or provenance, making the collection under-discoverable. In our next phase, the plan is to create an event-based collection, drawing from ASARO interventions and affiliated blog commentary. Broad recognition of ASARO’s work on other web pages necessitates a collection comprised of multiple URLs referencing its revolutionary work.
Conclusion

Not unlike the journalists, printmakers, and muralists before them who reflected Mexican history in public and underground spaces, the ASARO collective uses the most current technology to enhance its work as well as extend the reach of its message. Savvy digitally focused archival projects designed to save the work of Mexican graphic arts collectives must emerge in order to retain for posterity the creativity and voices of politically and socially active artists’ collectives in contemporary Mexico. In addition to incorporating important printed art into digitized collections, librarians and archivists can preserve access to digital activism by developing selection techniques for the most ephemeral of the materials, the stencils and graffiti that publicly taunt authorities. The digital format is an ideal artifact of subaltern expression, described in postcolonial theory as the manifestations of marginalized peoples’ expressions of self and power. In the 1990s, Latin Americanist scholars began to debate in earnest the potential for applying subaltern studies as a method for recasting the historical record to include the stories of the disenfranchised. Through its artwork, ASARO fills a gap in the official Mexican record, illustrating the Oaxacan peoples’ version of the summer of 2006 and on human rights abuses against women along the border.

NOTES

5. John Gibler, Mexico Unconquered: Chronicles of Power and Revolt, with a foreword by Gloria Muñoz Ramírez (San Francisco: City Lights, 2009), 143.


21. Ibid., 64.

22. Ibid., 23.


24. Ibid.


27. Yescka quoted in Frisari, “Arte y movimiento.”


