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The 20th Century Muralism in Mexico

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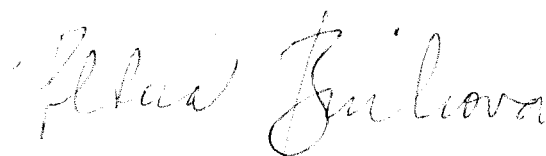
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Prohlašuji, že jsem disertační práci vykonala samostatně s využitím uvedených pramenů a literatury.

V Praze dne 25.ledna 2006

Petra Binková

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Petra Binková".

Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again
and expecting different results.

Albert Einstein

To J.M., R.S. and V.V.

...because of all of you, I do feel sane.

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INTRODUCTION

The visual history of Latin America in general and in Mexico in particular have been marked by the struggle over images, whether they are licit or illicit, proper or improper, orthodox or heterodox, acknowledged or not. It is in fact impossible to overlook political, religious, economic and cultural intensity that circulates around the images, especially when their authors' central reference became a visual articulation to the nation's aspirations, history, and dreams. Mexican Mural Movement is one of the foremost examples of such an approach. All its principal protagonists have produced a rich corpus of mural and oil paintings that express Mexico's historic struggles and triumphs. The relationship between politics, history and aesthetics, in fact, has been a major concern throughout Mexican 20th century art - as critique, protest or affirmation. Moreover, this relationship is not only manifested in the kind of realism deployed by the Mexican muralists but in diverse forms and styles, which to a large extent underlined the complex relationship between rupture and tradition and possibly tensions between modernism and social realism.

Following the ideological heritage of the mural renaissance, many artists engaged in visual dialog with the masses and communicated their messages through the

synthesis of Marxism¹, Catholic Christianity, pre-Columbian tradition, search for national origins and the fusion of universalized nationalist elements. Some of these characteristics resemble social realist art of former 'socialist block', particularly the assumption of a national culture which is transcendent and non-temporal. However, such an attempt to reach the appropriate stylistic means often resulted in conservatism and traditionalism of form. Yet, it can be understood that in Mexico, such a myth had to be produced in order to overcome traumatic historical ruptures such as

¹ It is important to realize the specificity of Marxism as found across Latin American continent, both politically and socially. Until the 1960s Marxism played only a marginal role in Latin American politics. Before the development of import-export industrialization, the working class was small. Communist parties had been founded in the latter half of the 1920s but they remained insignificant until the late 1940s. Moreover, the Cold-War anti-communism of the USA was reflected in Latin America by exclusion of communists from government and from political life in some countries. It was however the success of Cuban Revolution in 1959 which transformed the prospects of Marxism in Latin America. After Fidel Castro declared himself Marxist in 1961, an entire generation of Latin American socialists looked to Havana rather than to Moscow for revolutionary inspiration. The revolution having taken place in agrarian country and without the aid of the Soviet Union, renewed interest in Marxist theory and played a significant part in the rise of an intellectual 'New Left' in Latin America, as well as in Europe and the USA.

In social terms, the intention to create the new 'integral' culture at the beginning of the 20th century, Marxism provided the guidelines for social transformation thank to the most creative Marxist thinker the Peruvian *mestizo* José Carlos Mariátegui, a leading *indigenista* and author of an important Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana., Ediciones Era, 1928. For him, the Indian heritage was the source of cultural authenticity and look for cultural wholeness through regeneration of the indigenous communities and the revitalization of Indian tradition.

revolution. Consequently, mural painting in Mexico, which follows the post-revolutionary period and which finds various conceptual and more often ideological parallels in contemporary murals is characteristic of visualizing revolutionary ideology in public spaces.

Mural art, of course, has a long and complicated history in Mexico. Mural painting was a pre-Columbian practice as it is still evident in many Aztec and Maya archeological sites throughout the country. But there is virtually no continuity in the historical developments of muralism from the ancient past until the present time.² The story of Mexican muralism since the

² According to Tatiana Falcón, a coordinator at the *Laboratorio Diagnóstico de Obras del Arte* of the *Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* in UNAM, the tradition of mural painting had already been abandoned prior to the Conquest. It is believed that the very precise and complex technique used for creating pre-Columbian murals was forgotten during the colonial period. This technique was specific in its use of colors, the manner of applying paint over naturally made plaster, and in the way lime was prepared. Pigments were made from minerals, or extracted from vegetables and plants available in the immediate surroundings. Nowadays, lime is used by indigenous communities almost exclusively for building projects and the colors used (acrylic etc.) for painting murals are produced commercially. Furthermore, the ancient civilizations used colors on the outside facades of their buildings, temples and palaces mainly for decorative and/or symbolic purposes, and their iconography was based on predominantly abstract and geometric motifs. Despite the few known interior murals of a figurative nature, it would be very difficult to find the actual contextual line connecting these murals to the pragmatically expressive painted stories as found in contemporary Mexico. For Mexico, as for many other societies worldwide with a high rate of illiteracy, various oral and visual forms of expression have been the dominant means of communication. Nonetheless, contemporary Mexican murals do not appear to be a spontaneous expressive form, which would serve such a purpose.

Conquest has been a politicized one, tracing institutional ruptures, political conflicts and shifting cultural practices over past five hundred years. With the Conquest, indigenous artists were forced into service of the colonial authorities and trained to paint church murals in the visual language of Catholicism.³ This tradition somehow continued throughout the 17-th century but was soon to be replaced by the technique of decorative applying of layered colors. During the 19th century mural took on a more popular form, frequently appearing in *pulquerías* and *cantinas*.⁴ The very first modern mural in Mexico was nonetheless painted in 1910, still several months before the Revolution, by Mexican artist Dr. Atl (Gerardo Murillo), depicting scenes of female nudes. He also formed so-called *Centro Artístico* (Artistic Centre), the aim of which was to find walls of public buildings on which to paint murals. Atl's influence on the development of Mexican muralism was derived from his radical political standpoints as well as from his position as mentor, teacher and later the Director of the Academy of San Carlos.⁵

³ In some Mexican churches and cloisters, it is possible to see the 16-th century wall paintings made by the Indians. In terms of art technique, design and color, these works are great examples of visual syncretism, but they are far from the traditional mural painting before the Conquest.

⁴ Author's interview with Tatiana Falcón, August 13, 2003, Mexico City.

⁵ Orozco, Siqueiros and other soon-to-become important figures of Mexican muralism were at that time students there. See; Charlot, Jean:

The more familiar modern profile for muralism was established in Mexico in the aftermath of the military phase of the Mexican Revolution (1910-20). The artistic accomplishments of Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Jose Clemente Orozco, as well as many others, participated from 1920s through 1940s in a radical shift in Mexican politics to include representation of the working class, *campesinos* and indigenous population in national identity and official policies.

Mexican muralism during the post-revolutionary period marks the point of departure for this text. However, in order to understand the true character of Mexican mural art of the 20th century, I find essential to research not only involvements of the artists themselves and their impact on own works, but also the creative and intellectual discourse of their colleagues or later followers. Moreover, the task of documenting and analyzing the current state of Mexican muralism cannot remove the mural image from the context of its production. Mural production after the Mexican School has been entangled in widening conflicts between the state and evolving social forces. As I will try to present through the text, this conflict is partly visible in the contradiction between the mural image presented via official politics and muralism in a form of a cultural practice of visual representation existing in its unofficial form.

Mexican Mural Renaissance, Hacker Books, New York, 1962.

There are numerous publications, both in Spanish and English, covering the history of Mexican Mural Movement, the Mexican School and/or the turbulent life stories of the *tres grandes*.⁶ One of the key publications which gave a direct impulse for post-revolutionary muralism to emerge is undoubtedly José Vasconcelos' La raza cósmica (1925)⁷. In this influential essay, Vasconcelos designated the goal of history to be the fusion of all peoples and cultures. Using the Greeks as a model, he believed that the mixing of races almost always proved beneficial. For him, the most crucial aspect in cases of genetic fusion was the spiritual element, giving the Indian a necessary role in the development of Mexico. While Vasconcelos's ideas have been condemned as simply a theory to uplift people with a deeply ingrained sense of inferiority, I believe that his theories presented in this essay are much more important because Vasconcelos reinterpreted these ideologies which were being actively used to oppress the Mexicans in a

⁶ The following publications are used in this text as the very basic reference guideline through the field of Mexican Mural Movement: Brenner, Anita: Idols Behind Altars, Payson and Clarke, New York, 1929; Cardoza y Aragón, Luis: Mexico, Active Painting, Ediciones Era, México, 1961; Charlot, Jean: Mexican Mural Renaissance, Hacker Books, New York, 1962; Rochfort, Desmond: Mexican Muralists, Laurence King, London, 1993; Reed, Alma: The Mexican Muralists, Crown Publishers, New York, 1960; Rodríguez, Antonio: A History of Mexican Mural Painting, Thames and Hudson, London, 1969; La Pintura Mural de la Revolución Mexicana, Fondo Editorial de la Plástica Mexicana, México, 1975.

⁷ Vasconcelos, José: La raza cósmica, Espasa-Calpe, México, 1994.

manner that would glorify them instead. Instead of rejecting these ideologies, which would be the natural tendency of a Mexican Nationalist, Vasconcelos was able to participate within the realm of accepted Western philosophy by applying the mechanics of evolution in a way that would gain credibility in intellectual circles and proposed a new interpretation that benefited the people who were at the mercy of European intellectuals.

Another highly significant study used in this text is Leonard Folgarait's So Far from Heaven: David Alfaro Siqueiros' The March of Humanity and Mexican Revolutionary Politics (1987)⁸. This critical micro-study of David Alfaro Siqueiros's late mural-relief housed in the Polyforum Cultural Siqueiros in Mexico City, *La marcha de la humanidad* (*The March of Humanity*, 1966-1971) earned him a considerable respect among his colleagues. It represents a sound reaction by a first-class art historian to the currently fashionable histories of many self-styled theorists who implausibly seem to say, "That is all well and good in practice, but how does it work in theory?" Yet, the success of So Far from Heaven comes from the liveliness and qualifications with which he deploys a series of theoretical traditions to organize his impressive research and

⁸ Folgarait, Leonard: So Far From Heaven: David Alfaro Siqueiros' The March of Humanity and Mexican Revolutionary Politics, Cambridge University Press, London, 1987.

analysis. He plays off different theoretical trends against each other, rather than assuming that any intellectual tradition is adequate to all historical problems or that every theoretical framework harbors empirical blind spots that make them all useless.

One of the most important written sources of information for the post-Mexican School muralism in Mexico is undoubtedly book by Bruce Campbell entitled Mexican Murals in Times of Crisis (2003)⁹. It traces the ongoing critical contributions of mural arts to public life in Mexico to show how post-revolutionary murals have been overshadowed both by Mexican School and by exclusionary nature of official public arts. By documenting a wide range of mural practices Bruce Campbell evaluates the ways in which practical and aesthetic components of revolutionary Mexican muralism have been appropriated within context of Mexico's ongoing economic and political crisis. Combining ethnography, political science and sociology with art history, Campbell traces the emergence of modern Mexican mural art as a composite of aesthetic, discursive and performative elements through which collective interests and identities are shaped. He focuses on mural activists engaged combatively with the state to show that mural

⁹ Campbell, Bruce: Mexican Murals in Times of Crisis, The University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 2003.

production that is neither connected to the elite art world nor supported by the government has made significant contributions to Mexican culture.

When dealing with the main objectives of this text, I am going to employ all of the relevant outcomes (i.e. factual information and data, related visual and written material, personal accounts and analysis of particular events, and descriptions of particular locations) of my fieldwork and academic research completed in libraries and various institutions in Mexico and Europe.¹⁰ In the course of gathering, analyzing, and presenting this material, I have benefited immensely from the help offered from numerous individuals and

¹⁰ The following is the list of institutions from which I benefited the most while researching the topic in Mexico:

Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, México D.F.

Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana - Xochimilco, México D.F.

Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS), México D.F.

Centro de Estudios Tepiteños, México D.F.

Biblioteca de las Artes, Centro Nacional de las Artes, México D.F.

Biblioteca de México, Centro Nacional de las Artes, México D.F.

El Centro Nacional de Investigación, Documentación e Información de Artes Plásticas (CENIDIAP), México D.F.

Los Servicios Educativos Integrados al Estado de México (SEIEM), Toluca, estado de México

La Biblioteca Nacional de México, México D.F.

David Alfaro Siqueiros Public Hall, México D.F.

Museo Nacional de Antropología, México D.F.

El Palacio de Bellas Artes, México D.F.

Polyforum Siqueiros, México D.F.

Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros, México D.F.

Museo Mural Diego Rivera, México D.F.

Museo Nacional de Arte, México D.F.

organizations without which many parts of this my project could not have been completed successfully. I sincerely believe that I have not misused their support and trust, while acknowledging any mistakes and misinterpretations to be my own.

CHAPTER I
MEXICAN MURAL RENAISSANCE AND AN APEX OF THE
MEXICAN SCHOOL

In 20-th century Mexico, murals as examples of visual expression in public spaces have been to a large extent mirroring an intensive social engagement of its protagonists. Each change inside particular fragments of Mexican society and/or its overall social structure therefore stimulates an artist to act as the creator of public consciousness in the given conditions. This was the case in Mexico after the Revolution of 1910-1917. The revolutionary outcome was a profound process of social and political transformation. Alan Knight offers the following summary of the situation in Mexico after 1920 through the 1930s and 1940s:

“It is true that Mexico’s economy had not been revolutionized by the Revolution....In contrast, Mexico’s social and political life was dramatically changed by the Revolution, albeit in an often unplanned and unforeseen manner. The armed mobilization of 1910-20 gave way to new forms of institutional mobilization: peasants, leagues, trade unions and mass political parties, left and right, great and small. The result was not a decorous politics, such as Francisco Madero had advocated in 1910; but neither was it a

closed, personalist autocracy system of the kind Díaz had maintained to the end ...Although state control over civil society thus increased, the state built by the leaders of Sonora (1920-34) was not an authoritarian leviathan...Organized workers and peasants often elected to ally with the state, but they usually did so conditionally and tactically, and there were many examples of popular dissidence....What is more, by the 1920s, the demands and rhetoric of popular movements displayed a new radicalism, a new self confidence....Equally, the peasantry displayed a different temper compared with pre-revolutionary days.”¹¹

In line with the Article Three of the 1917 Constitution, “a remarkable document, more radical than any other constitution in the world at that time”¹², the newly elected president Alvaro Obregón (1920-24) and his government decided to pursue substantial changes of educational policy. This contributed to an ideological basis that would be useful for revitalizing state legitimacy as well as for cultural mediation of that current social situation. The main embodiment of such policy was the

¹¹ Knight, Alan: “The Rise and Fall of Cardenismo, c.1930-1946” in Bethell, Leslie (ed.): Mexico Since Independence, Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp.241-242.

¹² Hall, Linda B.: Álvaro Obregón: Power and Revolution in Mexico 1911-1920, Texas A & M University Press, 1981, p.181.

founding of *Secretaría de Educación Pública* (SEP) in 1921, led during the first four years by Obregón's appointee José Vasconcelos. SEP combined massive popular education efforts with an ambitious construction program and literacy campaign, the nature of which can be characterized by Vasconcelos' appeal to the Spanish Conquest of the Americas as a model for social and cultural transformation, valuing especially the work of the missionaries as a civilizing force.¹³ Accordingly, he claimed that to educate is to redeem. Understandably, as Leonard Folgarait concludes, the social re-enfranchisement of the popular masses in post-revolutionary Mexico was to be achieved through a moderation of their 'uneducated' political and economic criticism of the class-based nature of the system.¹⁴ Paradoxically, Vasconcelos wished to end poverty yet maintain the class hierarchy, to revalue the indigenous traditions yet assimilate indigenous people into *mestizaje*¹⁵ with a predominantly Hispanic accentuation.

¹³ See selection of writings of Vasconcelos in Ripoll, Carols (ed.): Conciencia intelectual de América: Antología de ensayo hispanoamericano, Eliseo Torres & Sons, New York, 1966, pp.319-408.

¹⁴ Folgarait, Leonard: Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico 1920-1949, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p.20.

¹⁵ *Mestizaje* is the idea that Mexico comprises of racially hybrid post-colonial population. Its citizens are neither European nor Indian, they are Mexican. Mexican nationalism has historically posed Mexican as *mestizo* identity, adversarial to the identity 'Indian'. As a result of such policy, the majority of the Mexican population, albeit partially or

The formal constitution of Vasconcelan discourse becomes more apparent from the following passage of his well-known piece of writing La raza cósmica:

“In order to express all of these ideas which today I manage to expound in rapid synthesis, several years ago, when they were as yet undefined, I arranged to give them symbolic expression in Mexico’s new Palace of Public Education. Without sufficient elements to do exactly what I hoped, I was forced to conform to a Spanish Renaissance construction around two patios, with archways and walkways that give something of the impression of a wing. On the wall sections of the four corners of the anterior patio I ordered produced allegories of Spain, Mexico, Greece and India, the four specific civilizations that have most contributed to the formation of Latin America. Immediately thereafter, beneath these four allegories were to be raised four great stone statues to the four great contemporary races: White, Red, Black and Yellow, in order to indicate that America is home to them all, and needs them all. Finally, in the centre was to be erected a monument that in some form would symbolize the law of the three

wholly of Indian descent, does not identify itself as ‘indigenous’. ‘Mexican’ is the state ideology and it is the mass consciousness while the indigenous population in Mexico has remained ‘invisible’ in Mexican political discourse for many years. See: Identidad y mestizaje, UAM, México, 1996.

states: the material, the intellectual and the aesthetic."¹⁶

The above described populist thrust of Vasconcelos' program forms a useful framework for sketching the Mexican mural 'revolution', since it was this philosophical idealist who proclaimed that outdoor public art was a visual medium highly accessible to the public, thus it could play an important role in a government's conception on how to restring a nationhood shaken by civil war.

As a result, SEP commissioned Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and others¹⁷ to paint a series of murals on public buildings (universities, courts, museums, hospitals, government offices etc.). Their works validated pre-Conquest indigenous culture, revolutionary symbolism and introduced a new visual language that represented social and national themes, religious motifs and a

¹⁶ Vasconcelos, 1994, pp.52-53 (translated by Bruce Campbell)

¹⁷ There is a number of left-wing artists-muralist who were co-authors of the initial chapter of the Mexican mural movement and thus deserve to be mentioned, such as Ramón Alva de la Canal, Jean Charlot, Amado de la Cueva, Gabriel Fernández Ledesama, Ernesto García Cabral, Emilio, García Cahero, Xavier Guerrero, Fernando Leal, Carlos Mérida, Roberto Montenegro, Juan O'Gorman, Pablo O'Higgins, Máximo Pacheco and Fermín Revueltas. With few exceptions, their public frescoes did not lead to landmark artworks. Hence, inside the framework of this study, I am going to concentrate on the main characteristics of the muralism of the first half of the 20-th century, for which the artistic achievements of the Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros provide an eloquent reference. For more information on the remaining artists, see Stein, Philip: Murales en México, Editur, S.A., México, 1984.

pro-Hispanic worldview. The first direct reference by the Mexican muralist to one of the most significant results of the Spanish colonialism in Mexico, i.e. *mestizaje*, was Orozco's 1926 fresco¹⁸ in the National Preparatory School called *Cortés y Malinche* (Cortés and Malinche, fig.01).¹⁹ By this portrayal, Orozco succeeded in communicating the unequal nature of this male/female European/Indo-American relationship without denying the dignity of the victim. It symbolizes "synthesis, subjugation and the ambivalence of her position in the story of the nation's history of colonial intervention."²⁰

Moreover, the three main protagonists of mural painting soundly denounced European art and instead celebrated Mexican heritage from early Mesoamerica through the Revolution. In other words, their works reflected the government's nationalistic sentiments that gave rise to an

¹⁸ To what I am referring throughout this text as "fresco" is in fact the *fresco secco*, or lime-painting. During the process of its creation, the plastered surface of a wall is soaked with slaked lime and lime-resistant pigments are applied swiftly before the plaster sets. See: Ward, James: Fresco Painting: Its Art & Technique, Hollowbrook Pub., 1979.

¹⁹ Malintzin Tenepal was an Aztec noble woman. The Spanish baptized Malintzin (or Malinche) and gave her a Christian name, Marina. Doña Marina served Hernando Cortés as lover, translator, and strategic advisor. She aided him in the conquest of the Aztec empire which consequently mobilized Spain's colonization of the New World.

²⁰ Rochfort, Desmond: Mexican Muralists, Laurence King, London, 1993, p.46.

artistic movement, which eventually became referred to as Mexican Mural Renaissance.²¹ It also highlights the role of the State as prominent patron. In this role the State had a decisive say in shaping the ultimate ideological values of the public paintings in order that the audience be absorbed by the unified institutional demands of more conservative patrons, rather than by the diverse political or artistic intentions of their authors (particularly in case of Siqueiros' Communist partisanship and Rivera's growing Marxist affiliation²²). The overall history of the Mexican Murals Renaissance, including individual contributions of the *tres grandes* (the great three), has been a fairly known and widely popularized issue. My intention, however, is not to provide another synopsis of the official Mexican muralism of the first half of the 20-th century, but rather to point to some of its equivocal layers so as to distinguish it from more recent developments of mural production in Mexico.

First, there had been something genuinely operative about the Mexican Mural Renaissance, which was subsequently

²¹ This term was coined by French born muralist living in Mexico Jean Charlot to apply the first phase of Mexican muralism of the 20-th century. The period active involvement of Orozco, Siqueiros and Rivera and their colleagues is also known and will be additionally used throughout the text as the Mexican Mural Movement and the Mexican School.

²² Rivera's position in politics was inconsistent. He considered himself a natural communist but he had many arguments with the Mexican communist party, which motivated him to leave the party in 1925, only to join again a year later.

appropriated by the governing elite. In fact, the Mexican government was instrumental in supporting a form of modern painting, which was nationalistically oriented but, at the same time, served as a powerful impetus for modern political intervention. The iconography of these murals thus became a formula that helped to create the post-revolutionary Mexican state by re-defining popular stereotypes, establishing the myth of the regime and by articulating visually the notion of *mexicanidad*²³. In other words, the murals painted between the 1920s and 1950's created the iconography of the peasant revolution²⁴ – the revolution from below, agrarian reform and the notion of free secular education for all. Indeed, such an iconography may appear rather unrealistic. Nonetheless, it is efficient when it comes to articulating issues, such as the relationship between leaders (both spiritual and technocratic)

²³ *Argentinidad, mexicanidad, peruanidad* etc. refer to the 1900s quest of Latin American intellectuals for their own national essence. By 1920 this quest led to the (re)discovery of popular traditions and ethnic experience which started to be considered as criterion of cultural authenticity. Particularly in Mexico, it strengthened cultural nationalism which heralded economic nationalism of the 1930s and subsequent development regulated by state.

²⁴For example, Diego Rivera himself depicted Emiliano Zapata, one of the legendary rebel leaders of 'peasant' Mexican Revolution, over forty times in frescoes, oils, and prints. One of the most memorable works is his concluding panel at the Palacio Cortés in Cuernavaca from 1929, where Hugo Brehme's photograph of 1915 was used as a model. For more information on Rivera's portraits of Zapata, see: Híjar, Alberto: "Los Zapatos de Diego Rivera" in Los Zapatos de Diego Rivera, México and Cuernavaca, 1984.

and masses or a historical (dis)continuity of different stages of the revolutionary engagement.

Muralists, in fact, instituted a virtual deification rite through their art, by rendering the most cherished values of a society permeated with sensitivity and its quest for identity, thus ultimately consolidating the idea of a Nation. In this sense, it is possible to claim that the legacy of the Mexican Revolution was constructed as a national project, while muralism helped the post-revolutionary Mexican state to be perceived as an extension of this national project.²⁵ This is clearly expressed, for example, in Rivera's fresco *Distribution of Arms* in the Ministry of Education in Mexico City in which the celebration of International Worker's Day occupies the space of the traditional catholic feast (fig.02). Here the revolutionary iconography is accompanied and projected into the mirage of the October revolution in Russia. Thus, the Mexican revolutionary regime is shown as the first possible stage, which is to be appropriated in the future by a worker, soldier or peasant. Such a visual space was immediately accepted into a 'national iconography', regardless of its Marxist intention.²⁶ As a result, both the

²⁵ Author's interview with Cuauhtémoc Medina, Mexico City, August 2003.

²⁶For more information about political and ideological radicalism of the Rivera, Siqueiros, and Orozco, see: Rodríguez, Antonio: A History of Mexican Mural Painting, Thames and Hudson, London, 1969, p.198.

government and the opposition could share the same iconography and media. The same murals could be interpreted in nationalist terms, as an orthodox Stalinist argument or even as an occultist vision. This monolithic view of the role of the state patronage (and all political directives) in relation to murals has been expressed in rather harsh terms by Octavio Paz:

“Those works that call themselves revolutionary and that, in the cases of Rivera and Siqueiros, give proof of a simplistic and Manichean Marxism, were commissioned, sponsored, and paid for by a government that had never been Marxist and that had ceased to be revolutionary. The government allowed artists to paint on the walls of government buildings a pseudo-Marxist version of the history of Mexico, in black and white, because such painting helped to give it the look of being progressive-minded and revolutionary.”²⁷

No matter what the subject matter was, these murals kept the revolutionary myth alive and flexible enough to help celebrate the post-revolutionary establishment.

Furthermore, the muralist, recognizing the value of the past and its potential to serve the present, reintroduced the

²⁷ Paz, Octavio: “Re/Visions: Mural Painting”, Essays on Mexican Art, Harcourt Brace & Company, New York, San Diego and London, 1993, p.132.

Renaissance fresco, in combination with the representational space of the mural, and formal elements of European high modernism (i.e. Rivera's cubism, Orozco's expressionism, Siqueiros' futurism). Technological innovations and experimental techniques enabled them to expand the placement, and thus the audience. In this respect, it is possible to claim that the muralists were the agents who revitalized and inserted art in public spaces in the modern era, particularly in the context of Latin American continent²⁸. Indeed, it was Siqueiros who criticized past aesthetic movements, which had advocated art that was exclusively at the service of the wealthy and the aristocracy. He accordingly called for the formation of a "movement in favor of public art, that gave birth for the first time in several centuries to a new social artist to correspondent to the new ways of functional social production in the arts."²⁹ A newly formed early modern public space was then to be perceived as a space which immediately surrounds the state organization, as a space of social engagement, political

²⁸ It is not within the scope of this study to fully explore the issue of modernism. Hence, the recent theoretical discussions surrounding modernism led to a redefinition of the term as such, which subsequently enabled an inclusion of Mexican Mural Renaissance inside its frame. See: Craven, David: "The Latin American Origins of Alternative Modernism", *Third Text*, no.36, 1996, pp.29-44.

²⁹ Siqueiros, David Alfaro: "No hay más ruta que la nuestra. Importancia nacional e internacional de la pintura mexicana moderna. El primer brote de reforma profunda en las artes plásticas del mundo contemporáneo", 2nd edition, México, 1978.

demonstration, negotiation and administration with(in) the state system. In short, there was an attempt to insert the public space into the national iconography and vice versa. However, it failed to address the importance of the process through which the public space evaporates in order for public sphere to grow.³⁰

It is important to understand the Mexican Mural Movement as an artistic practice. This practice embodied a certain ideological and theoretical discourse and an articulated critique of the structure of modernist art, artistic autonomy, the relationship between aesthetics and uselessness, and of individuality and an artist in practice. This was clearly pronounced in the *Manifesto of the Union of Mexican Workers, Technicians, Painters and Sculptors* which was drawn up by Siqueiros in 1922. It was published in 1924 in the seventh issue of the union newspaper *El Machete* and included the signatures from the large majority of the mural artists:

“...our primary aesthetic aim is to propagate works of art which will help destroy all traces of bourgeois individualism. We reject so-called Salon painting and all the ultra-intellectual salon art of the aristocracy and exalt the manifestation of monumental art because they are useful....

³⁰ Author's interview with Cuauhtémoc Medina, Mexico City, August 2003.

We believe that while our society is in a transitional stage between the destruction of an order and the introduction of a new order, the creators of beauty must turn their work into clear ideological propaganda for the people, and make art, which at present is mere individualist masturbation, something of beauty, education, and purpose for everyone.”³¹

The retro-prophetic critique of the manifesto as a whole, in fact, tries to restore a certain set of pre-modern values in terms of location of artistic practice while, at the same time, it tries to propose the function of art beyond an individual (production, consumption etc.) Likewise, through an extensive visual and written artistic production, the muralists created the theoretical body to substantiate not only official muralism in Mexico, but also official public art in the context of Mexican society as well as in general.

Hence, mural painters, particularly Rivera and Siqueiros, presented themselves as spokesmen of the masses. As critiques of modern aesthetics and its relationship with personal

³¹ For full version in English, see: Ades, 1989, p.323-324. See also: Siqueiros, David Alfaro: *Art and Revolution*, Lawrence and Wishart, London 1975, pp.24-25. For original version in Spanish, see: “Manifiesto del Sindicato de Obreros Técnicos, Pintores y Escultores”, *Cuadernos del Taller Gráfica Monumental*, Vol. 1, UAM-Xochimilco, México, 1986, pp.4-5.

taste,³² they positioned themselves into a symmetrical position with politicians who speak in the name of the citizens, which inevitably led to the hegemony over expressing the universality of Mexican people (particularly workers).³³ Such an implicit position of an artist and, in fact, what is perceived as an effective instrument for public negotiating with politicians, and participating in the processes of (re)forming particular political bodies, is undoubtedly a unique phenomenon in the history of 20-th century art. Not since this time has an artist in Mexico or elsewhere in Latin America achieved such official status for bridging the gap between an individual and the masses, to function as a leviathan, to mediate while providing a mythical connection to the past. Accordingly, the significance as well as idiosyncrasy of the Mexican Mural Movement in the context of public space/sphere reaches beyond the basic structure of how public art operates.

What is equally as important about the social dynamics of the murals during the first half of the 20-th century is the fact

³² Each muralist wielded his own visual vocabulary for social change. Their interpretations tended to be vastly contradictory, according to their individual ideological preference: “Rivera's indigenous, equalitarian garden of Eden; Orozco's ordeals by fire as social purification rituals; Siqueiros' thunderous marches toward progress.” See Reyes Palma, Francisco: “Mythical Structures in Perceptions of the 20-th Century Mexican Art”, *Curare*, no.10, 1995, section revistas.

³³ Author's interviews with Renato González Mello, Mexico City, August 2003.

that their authors visually reinterpreted the essence of the Mexican Revolution in such a way that both the state and the opposition could share the same iconography. First, as is apparent in Orozco's frescoes in the National Preparatory School from 1926, were an essence of betrayed hero and an iconography of martyrdom.³⁴ These works demonstrate a certain historical pessimism and apocalyptic thrust. According to Antonio Rodríguez, Orozco did not glorify the revolution but he was sincere in saying that great social phenomena needed no glorification. "If Orozco did not extol the Revolution, he nevertheless fulfilled himself through it. How could we understand the Orozco of *El trinchera*, *Los soldados*, and *Adiós* without the Revolution?"³⁵ In another part of his book A History of Mexican Mural Painting, Rodríguez offers a compelling description of the above-mentioned Orozco's fresco *La trinchera* (The Trench):

"In *The Trench* there are no stirring hymns to drive heroes towards enemy bayonets, no waving standards to enthuse the timid. Here everything is dignified like death or like fire which, having consumed and purified, resolves in ashes...two men have fallen, one is his back, the other with

³⁴ Author's interviews with Renato González Mello, Mexico City, August 2003.

³⁵ Rodríguez, 1967, pp.191-192.

hands crossed in front of him, a third kneeling, hides his face in his hands: a rifle lying diagonally, cutting space like a spent bullet....No lyric passion, no lamentation. There is no enthusiasm, nor is there despair."³⁶

Second, the tragic essence of the Mexican Revolution was extended by the need of the state as well as the opposition to respond in such a way that all that was lost or unaccomplished was to be justified in the future. In this respect, the Mexican Revolution became a juncture for the social and spiritual revolution, which was left unfinished. Moreover, the post-revolutionary governing elite incorporated this idea of an 'unfinished revolution' into its past, present and future representation. What was not yet achieved (i.e. an unfinished revolution) became a point which legitimized the state.³⁷ The visual discourse of muralism endorsed the state authority through representation of the struggle, which was by no means claiming the present time to be the fulfillment of the dream but rather the opposite.

In general, from the 1920s until the end of the 1940s it is possible to claim that the Mexican murals were fulfilling the

³⁶ Ibid.: p.189.

³⁷ Author's interview with Cuauhtémoc Medina, Mexico City, August 2003.

function of defining territory, a certain political space, while presenting a monumental narrative portrait of national origins, history and identity. Their authors - each one according to his personal, social ideological and artistic beliefs - were delivering to the public a compelling discourse, presented as a presumable truth. Thus, the function of the mural was rather allegorical, not instrumental, and its value was primarily argumentative. It was meant to uphold the 'right' set of information or transmit the vision of the future. This became problematic during the following decade. During this time, there were considerable changes in the national as well as international political and economic situation, which introduced a rapid growth of media propaganda. This new predicament was clearly in conflict with the visionary prospects for social transformation that emerged in the most radiant murals of the previous decades. In short, the late 1940s witnessed a shift in the exclusive position of official muralism.³⁸

³⁸ The existing mode of public art production became contradictory with the expanding middle class and its nationalist tendencies, and with the state's efforts to construct a domestic market for cultural consumption. Later works by Rivera, Siqueiros and to some extent by Orozco (until his death in 1949) were becoming targets of public debates regarding their aesthetic value and representation of specific ideas or events. Such was the case, for example, of Rivera's unjustifiably afloat murals depicting pre-Columbian cultures that were painted from 1945 to 1951 in the patio of the National Palace. Other examples include his fresco originally located in the Hotel del Prado, entitled *A Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park* (1947-48), and his murals for the National Fine Arts Institute (*The Nightmare of War and the Dream of Peace*,

CHAPTER II
THE MEXICAN SCHOOL AFTER 1950:
FACING THE RUPTURE

After 1946, beginning with the presidency of Miguel Alemán (1946-52), increased foreign investment into Mexican resulted in a significant, but very uneven and costly economic expansion. Agrarian reform was neglected, a more equitable distribution of wealth and power was never realized, and the demands of labor organizations were as brutally suppressed as they had been during the late 1920s and the early 1930s. Throughout much of the post-war era, Mexico became entangled in the demands of this expanding foreign capital that was being used for nationalist expansionism. At the same time, the country's political autonomy was held within the dominant constraints of post-war, East-West political conflict and the resulting regional demands placed on it by the powerful neighboring United States.³⁹

State patronage of the arts followed the logic of import substitution, providing support for domestic cultural production

1952), and Teatro de los Insurgentes (*History of the Theater in Mexico*, 1953).

³⁹ Keen, Benjamin and Wasserman, Mark: *A Short History of Latin America*, Rutgers University, 1984, pp.285-290.

and consumption. With the beginning of the Cold War, the government initialized an expansion of the domestic cultural production to compensate for the declining U.S. market for social realist works of Mexican muralists. In 1947 the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (National Institute of Fine Arts, INBA) was established and in 1940, the national art infrastructure was further enhanced by the creation of the Salón de la Plástica Mexicana, a state funded gallery for the visual arts.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, Mexico - particularly Mexico City - became a recognized intellectual centre in which left-wing dissidents from other Latin American countries could find necessary tolerance and support.⁴¹ Desmond Rochfort summarizes the overall position of Mexican arts and culture created by the Cold War as the following:

“The era of the Cold War created a
cultural and economic environment which

⁴⁰ Reyes Palma, Francisco: “50 años de artes plásticas y política en México (1934-84): I”, *Plural*, México, May 1988, p.42.

⁴¹ Apart from granting political asylum to Trotsky (from 1937 up until his assassination by Soviet agents in 1940), Mexico also provided space to known intellectuals of the Americas who were looking for a refuge from the right-wing repression in their own countries between the 1950s and 1990s. Among these individuals one can encounter the following names: the US experimentalist composer and a member Communist Party Conlon Nacarrow, Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Gabriel García Márquez, Adolfo Gilly, Nestor García Canclini, Ernesto Cardenal and other members of the Sandinista leadership, and cadres of the FDR from El Salvador. See: Craven, David: Art and Revolution in Latin America 1910-1990, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2002, p.71-72.

affected and influenced the work of all three painters in ways that were unpredictable and in many senses contradictory. The increasing influence of the United States on Mexican society in the years of McCarthyism had a particularly pressing impact on Mexican culture. The radical social rhetoric of the country's post-revolutionary art became increasingly less tolerated by the Mexican cultural establishment, a fact that helped to create the fertile ground on which the commercialized consumer culture of the United States could take root in Mexico. The enormous economic influence and power of the United States in the post-war period also provided the context for what has been called the third stage of Mexican revolution, that of 'consolidation'. During this period Mexican society was no longer exclusively defined by its traditional agrarian categories, but by others that were increasingly industrial, technologically advanced and modern."⁴²

In spite of the above-described situation, the Mexican government continued to commission mural art for public housing projects, hospitals, public works projects, and newly constructed public buildings such as the National University

⁴² Rochfort, 1997, p.161. See also: Cosío Villegas, Daniel: A Compact History of Mexico, El Colegio de México, 1975, ch.6.

projects (1950-52). The increased patronage of middle-class sectors, and a strengthened national bourgeoisie, in fact facilitated a relative privatization of mural production for theatres, banks, hotels etc.⁴³ Moreover, the Mexican state began to perceive the *tres grandes* as creators of the work that was regarded as part of the National Historical and Artistic Patrimony⁴⁴. Consequently, during the post-war period, Orozco, Rivera and Siqueiros gradually became institutionalized. In particular, Rivera's visual discourse (until his death in 1957) epitomized this newly acquired national significance. He more or less canonized the visual narratives of the construction of the Mexican nation-state through his selection of materials and colors, his demonstrated modulation of the modernist style and Mexican nationalism, and his ability to integrate the mural works to the constructed environment (fig.03)

This development deeply affected the attitudes of younger radical artists who were disagreeing with what they perceived as the creed of cultural nationalism. This resulted in first expression of famous *ruptura* signaled in 1959 by the painter José Luis Cuevas and his iconoclastic denunciation of

⁴³ Reyes Palma, 1988, p.42.

⁴⁴ Protected mural works included those of Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco (legally inscribed as of 1959), Dr. Atl (1964). David Alfaro Siqueiros' oeuvre was included in 1980.

the Mexican mural art's hegemony as "nopal curtain". He argued for the need to move away from introspective nationalist dogmas and to open up Mexican art to a much broader set of international influences.⁴⁵ Correspondingly, the muralist José Chávez Morado and other founding members of the *Taller de Integración Plástica* (Visual Arts Integration Workshop) aimed to "recover the sense of monumentality, expressivity and public function of the production of visual art."⁴⁶ What followed was a gradual abandonment of the nationalistic values of an art within popular reach. This had been a crucial element of mural painting during the second and third decades of the 20-th century and partially of the 1940s. The state artists continued producing a variety of public artworks with different national themes and concerns but, in general, there was a clear move away from the prescribed canon of revolutionary muralism, i.e. national symbolism, popular imagery and internationalist Marxist iconography, towards a more subjective international style.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Cuevas, José Luis: "The Cactus and the Curtain: An Open Letter on Conformity of Mexican Art", *EverGreen Review*, no.7, 1959.

⁴⁶Quoted in Reyes Palma, 1988, p.42

⁴⁷ However unexpected it may appear, this shift would also include a steady progress towards popular realism and against dominant mural aesthetics as demonstrated by the Taller de Gráfica Popular (People's Graphics Workshop, TGP). Unlike the mural movement, according to Louís Cardoza y Aragón, the TGP "maintained greater independence from the State, from tourism, from the national buyer" and thus

The inevitable changes in the official public discourse of Mexico delineated the emergence of a new official space for mural practice. President Adolfo López Mateos (1958-1964) announced a shift towards the left but, in reality, his social economic and repressive labor policies did not differ significantly from those of his predecessors. He re-launched the program of land reform but most of the redistributed land was of poor quality. In 1959, he broke a general railway strike and had its leaders arrested and jailed for years. When Siqueiros denounced his repressive policies, López Mateos had him charged with the crime of "social dissolution" and sent to prison for four years.⁴⁸ The president also began promoting an uncompromising strategy of national and international cultural diffusion. The strategy intended "the broadening of a museological platform that culminated in the inauguration of a network of new and old museums, clearly oriented toward the promotion of tourism and the international image of the country."⁴⁹ Finally, the collapse of official public space of mural

performed an anti-imperialist function for which muralism had failed. See: Cardoza y Aragón, Luís: Pintura Mexicana contemporánea, Imprenta Universaria, México, 1953, p.28. For more information on the topic, see a remarkable essay about TGP by Dawn Ades in Art in Latin America, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1989, pp.181-193.

⁴⁸ Keen and Wasserman, 1984, p.286.

⁴⁹ Reyes Palma, Francisco: "50 años de artes plásticas y política en México (1934-84): II", *Plural*, June 1988, p.26.

practice was concluded with the end of a strategic symbiosis between the populist nationalism of the Mexican state and the popular frontism of *the Partido Comunista Mexicano*⁵⁰ (the Mexican Communist Party), which was during its existence consistently promoting a public discourse on muralism. The dissolution of this strategic symbiosis generated clear results. After 1958, official mural production experienced a considerable decline.⁵¹ This was reinforced through evolving artistic practices having to establish other institutional links instead of relying on their traditional links with the Mexican state. Correspondingly, the government administration had to launch alternative affiliations with the private sector that changed the nature of its patronage of the arts. The resulting impact on the official Mexican public art form is well demonstrated in the

⁵⁰ Having been founded in 1919, it was the oldest Communist Party in Latin America which was nevertheless rarely a significant force in the intellectual or political life of the nation, except for the few years during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas. Between 1940-50, Mexican Communist Party declined from thirty thousand members to three thousand. By the 1960s, the party's abstract commitment to the revolution was undoubtedly connected to the support of the Soviet Union, similarly as in case of other Soviet-backed parties in Latin America. See: Castañeda, Jorge: Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left After the Cold War, Alfred A. Kopf, New York, 1993, pp.24-25.

⁵¹ According to Shifra Goldman, of the 1286 official murals created between 1905 and 1969, only 14 were painted in 1969. See: Goldman, Shifra: Pintura mexicana conemporánea en tiempos de cambio, Insituto Politécnico Nacional, México, 1989, pp.29-30.

ultimate mural work produced by one of the *tres grandes*, Siqueiros' *La Marcha de la Humanidad en la Tierra y hacia el cosmos* (The March of Humanity on Earth and Toward the Cosmos, 1966-71). This spectacular project is probably the last mural to achieve the degree of public visibility previously enjoyed by works of the main protagonists of the Mexican Mural Movement.

It was indeed David Alfaro Siqueiros who, after the death of Orozco and Rivera, assumed the main role as a muralist in Mexico. On the international level, he was, at certain points, competing with Rufino Tamayo for the same level of recognition. Siqueiros was the adventurer of the constitutionalist revolution, the prophet of technology and the fall of capitalism, a devoted leader of the mining proletariat, and a Stalinist agent and virtual assassin of Trotsky. He was also capable of being deeply moved before the canvas, with the rhetoric of a baroque, sentimental spirit.⁵² His most important contribution to wall painting was to make direct use of the mural's public nature to emphasize its social function. Whereas Rivera used architecture as a frame and Orozco treated it as a foil, Siqueiros employed it as combination of both style and message. If art was for the people, then it must involve them in

⁵² Author's interview with Renato González Mello, Mexico City, January 2003.

its imagery, physically and psychologically, as well as visually. From the very beginning of his involvement in muralism, Siqueiros' mural design was characterized by a desire for maximal visual impact.⁵³ He was also a pioneer in researching new materials and new techniques for outdoor mural production. Siqueiros was the first to use industrial synthetic paints, an electric projector to transfer images onto the wall, and a spray gun with stencils. He extended his inventiveness even further when in many works he used, apart from traditional grounds, different materials, such as cement and Masonite. Consequently, his primary concern was the social accessibility and political purity of his art.⁵⁴

The culmination of Siqueiros' efforts can be seen in his above-mentioned accomplishment *March of Humanity*

⁵³ For that purpose he developed a method, from which people would see his work, by means of photography and film. It became known as polyangular perspective. Walls, floors, ceilings, stairways, and columns, every possible free space was covered by Siqueiros with murals and *escultopinturas* (sculptural paintings) in order to envelope the viewer into an integrated painted environment.

⁵⁴ See: Tibol, Rachel: David Alfaro Siqueiros: Un mexicano y su obra, Empresas Editoriales, México, 1969. For more details on Siqueiros political views and concept of revolutionary art, see his book Art and Revolution, his individual writings "Three Appeals for Modern Direction (1921), "Appeal to the Proletariat (1924), and collectively written text "Manifesto of the Union of the Mexican Workers, Technicians, Painters and Sculptors" (1924), all published in Ades, 1989, pp.322-326.

(fig.04).⁵⁵ Siqueiros constructed the space by means of his artistic principles; therefore, the architecture and the painted design form a complete unity. There is no distinction between the paintings and the exterior or interior structure they cover. Consisting of *escultopintura*, the mural combines the painted image and relief sculpture to cover the surface of almost 4,500 square meters. The brutal and over-life size designs give the sloping surfaces of the exterior a disturbingly vertiginous character.⁵⁶ In their essence, the interior narrative of human striving and progress, as well as the more allegorical images of the twelve exterior panels, seem to assert primarily the monumentality of the artist himself within the context of Mexican cultural and political life.

The most conspicuous aspect of *The March of Humanity* is the utopian nature of its message, both formally and politically. Siqueiros was preoccupied with the creation of this work, at the time the largest mural in the world, and subsequently failed to symbolically articulate a nationalistic aspect to the public through the mural's visual discourse. He was unable to baptize

⁵⁵ Originally privately commissioned for a hotel complex in Cuernavaca in the state of Morelos, the project was modified and transformed into the Polyforum Siqueiros at the Hotel de México in the Mexican capital.

⁵⁶ See: Folgarait, Leonard: So Far From Heaven: David Alfaro Siqueiros' The March of Humanity and Mexican Revolutionary Politics, Cambridge University Press, London, 1987.

“an existing institutional space with the symbolic presence of the nation in the form of the mural – i.e. where the mural is a ritual element consecrating a government building or public works.”⁵⁷ Instead he positions the mural as a kind of autonomous architecture and social space, rather than as a secondary semiotic additive or aesthetic adornment.

The ideological containment of this utopian proposal of an alternative public space is nevertheless evident in the nearly total subordination of content over form, as well as in the analogous subordination of its formal composition to the spatial contradictions between the project's aspirations toward autonomy from official public space and its allocation to a private sector. Whereas Rivera had maneuvered privately controlled space into the public discussion of content, provoking instead, and almost exclusively, remarks on its monumentality. Siqueiros's construction of a public context for his mural relied heavily on its formal novelty, in a sense constructing the mural's public significance without public interlocutors. Unlike Rivera's engagement of public discourse through a semiotic provocation, Siqueiros's polyforum project represents instead an effort to elevate the mural to the level of second-order sign, mural as

⁵⁷ Campbell, Bruce: Mexican Murals in Times of Crisis, The University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 2003, p.69.

myth in Roland Barthes's sense, of discourse that aspires to a cancellation of indexical speech.⁵⁸

The mural's formal and political utopianism (identical qualities in this work) could not find public resonance mainly with a technocratic modernizationsit discourse shared by Mexican state and private investors alike. In fact, the mural's "legible" content was first approved by Suárez y Suárez⁵⁹, minimizing the possibility for publicly significant scandal and no doubt also determining in part the work's transhistorical and almost apolitical depiction of, in Siqueiros's words, "the triumph of democracy, symbolized...by three fundamental elements: science and technology, industrialization, and man expressed

⁵⁸ See Barthes, Roland: Mythologies, The Noonday Press, New York, 1990, pp.105-159.

⁵⁹ A wealthy Mexican capitalist who financed the project. He had fantasized about constructing an enormous cut diamond sustained by four columns. Their partnership resulted eventually in the polyforum's architectural form and location as a cultural "gemstone" adorning a large-scale urban development scheme titled "México 2000". Proposing to be "a self-sufficient area, a showcase for our city and our country, and an attractive and efficient answer as to how large-scale tourism can best be handled in a modern city, "México 2000" was to comprise an architectural ensemble boasting an international hotel, a convention centre, a commercial hub, recreation areas, a cabaret, and a heliport, in addition to the Cultural Polyforum, a forum for public events, the arts, and culture. See: Pamphlet distributed by the Siqueiros Cultural Polyforum. The Hotel de México, with which Polyforum was first conceived, has been replaced by an international trade centre.

as the knowledgeable application of these factors to the benefit of humanity."⁶⁰

Moreover, the mural did not provoke any extensive public discussion about the content, receiving instead immense attention concerning its monumentality. It is also possible to perceive the mural's exceptional emphasis on form over content, as motivated by the author's personal comment about the emptiness of the democratic promise given by the Mexican government. Leonard Folgarait went as far as to suggest that the mural could be read as a parody of the PRI ideology.⁶¹ In

⁶⁰ Letter, dated September 12, 1970, from Siqueiros and the project's head architect, Guillermo Rossell de la Lama, to Manuel Suárez y Suárez, seeking approval for final changes to the internal portion of the project.

⁶¹ *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (Institutional Revolutionary Party) is a unique political party which largely monopolized Mexico's political life from its founding by former president Plutarco Elías Calles in 1929 until the mid-1990s. Effectively, all important figures in Mexican national and local politics belonged to the party. Originally called *Partido Revolucionario Nacional* (National Revolutionary Party) the party was renamed Partido de la Revolución Mexicana (the Mexican Revolutionary Party) in 1938 and took its current name in 1946. Throughout most of the 20-th century, the PRI held complete power through a combination of coercion, cooption and corruption. Until the late sixties, the PRI and its predecessors gave references to popular organizations and, though no so successfully, they tried to integrate the middle class organizations into the ruling party. Since the late 1970s, the PRI corporatist structure has weakened, the PRI has remind remarkably resilient. Moreover, the party system has undergone a series of substantial changes, which partly contributed to the democratic legitimacy of the government. In the 2000 presidential election, PRI's candidate Francisco Labastida Ochoa was defeated by Vicente Fox Quesada of the right wing opposition *Partido de Acción Nacional* (National Action Party, PAN). His term in office marked the end of 71 years of uninterrupted rule by the PRI. However, the *Priistas* retained control of numerous state and

fact, Folgarait managed to disentangle the knotty politics surrounding Siqueiros's last great project in a study, that reveals much about his compromises with the PRI.⁶²

Siqueiros's own public pronouncements about the mural, however, reinforced the works' abstracted historical narrative by stressing the mural work's contributions to the technical development of Mexican muralism. He even went so far as to claim that the polyforum raised Mexican muralism to its highest technical stage to date, thus departing definitively from the Mexican School's earlier conceptions of the public and establishing the mural itself (posited as technological development) as a protagonist of national history. A parodic visage for the mural surfaced most persuasively only after the PRI's neoliberal turn, inaugurated in 1982 with the presidency of Miguel de la Madrid and a deep economic recession from which Mexico has yet to find exit.

The multilayered story of 20-th century Mexican muralism by no means loses its dynamic character either by Siqueiros's completion of the above-discussed mural, or by his death in

local governments. On the whole, the political history of Mexico of the last century is largely a history of the constitution of one power and one national party, by means of series of political moves and institutional reforms which implied the penetration, neutralizing and near suppression of the local power. See also: Lajous, Alejandra: EL PRI y sus antepasados, Martín Casillas Editores, 1982.

⁶² Folgarait, 1987.

January 1974. It nonetheless marked the definite decline of muralism as the prominent public art form of the official regime in Mexico. Bruce Campbell summarizes the situation as follows:

“As the technocratic-and private-sector-oriented principles of neoliberalism became dominant in the Mexican public sphere, the public propositional profile of Mexican muralism faded to the vanishing point. No longer situated as a history-making aesthetic form of public discourse (à la Vasconcelos), nor a consciousness-raising medium of social struggle (in the context of a revolutionary nationalist project), nor even a form of domestic industry (as with Alemán), in practical terms the mural instead became, in effect, a budgetary problem.”⁶³

In conclusion, the success of the Mexican Mural Movement created an ideological structure, which convinced many people around the world that that it had introduced an alternative formalism as an opposite of the *Ecole de Paris*. That is to say, a new vision of a truly politically advanced form of art had been introduced. Consequently, muralism, as presented by the Mexican School, has become an exemplary representation of public political art in the West. This has been further accompanied by the re-transmission of an idea that one can

⁶³ Campbell, 2003, p.70.

make revolution by painting, through simple reproduction of symbolic elements and revolutionary discourses in a canonized manner. When deciding to accept the artworks of the Mexican School as a creative point of departure, one has to realize that “there is nothing like vernacular cubism, popular abstraction, peasant suprematism”.⁶⁴ The muralism of the *tres grandes* was nonetheless very effective in transforming itself into a pervasive aesthetic in which it is possible to find various types of social (class-based) and structural relationships. There are various forms of muralism, including popular early muralism, state sponsored muralism, and revolutionary muralism, along with rather conservative modes of expression.

As a result, general expectations about Mexico are to a certain degree framed by images painted by Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros, who managed to convince the rest of the world about the authenticity of their visual statements. Since these images traveled quickly through the media, they, in fact, substituted the generally accepted visual revolutionary register. Hence, it is possible to claim that one of the global effects of the Mexican Mural Movement is that it created an icon of the Mexican Revolution that eventually “goes as far as to define the

⁶⁴ Author’s interview with Cuauhtémoc Medina, Mexico City, August 2003.

image of Speedy González”.⁶⁵ The murals, particularly those of Rivera, predefined every expectation regarding the Revolution as such, including the involvement of the peasants, and the role of revolutionary leaders, etc.:

“Speedy does not sport the elegant *charro* outfits sported by the revolutionary leader, but is always outfitted in the fashion of the worst of stereotypes, the indigenous peasant: an untucked cotton shirt and *pantalones*, and a large straw *sombrero*. If they are not barefoot, Speedy and his famished mice that accompany him wear Mexican sandals called *huaraches*, also typical of the peasants....The operating element in this commercial representation of Zapata was the stereotype of the revolutionary leader as presented by Diego Rivera who, in his depictions of Zapata for his 1930s Cuernavaca murals, transformed him from *hacienda* corporal into a

⁶⁵ Author’s interview with Cuauhtémoc Medina, Mexico City, August 2003.

The use of the cartoon character Speedy González in this text is not intended as art criticism of the murals. Rather it is an attempt at shedding light on a social sensibility that is as common as it is ill-defined and is called by Medina “González Global Culture”. It has little to do with common traits that can be traced to specific works as it consists of a spirit whose manifestations are so diverse they could actually be considered antagonistic. In essence, it is to suggest that stereotyped images of ‘the Mexican’ were derived from a form of paranoia dating back to the early twentieth century. It was found in an Indian-peasant uprising in the heartland of the Americas. The cultural stereotypes of the Mexican as a degraded peasant-rancher would not work if it did not exercise repression and sublimation of an effective historical subject.

dispossessed indigenous leader....The similarity between the image of Speedy González and Rivera's Zapata...cannot be a coincidence. We see, then, that in the stereotype of Speedy González, the global television viewer is consuming a pop *derivative* of mural painting iconography. Its ability to charm involves the displacement, compression and transformation of a story of political and visual radicalism. ⁶⁶

Every aspiration to cultural, international or regional hegemony is in fact based on mythical structures derived from the indispensable establishment of one or several other structures, which must be either subjugated or decontextualized. In this sense, the story of the Mexican School is indeed exemplary. By constantly commemorating the degradation of the power structure and the exaltation of the subordinate elements, the Mexican myth of national public art encountered its transnational destiny through progression. This progression transforms what is revolutionary into something commercial, that which is mediatic into something ethnic, that which is popular into avant-garde, and that which is subcultural into something global, and every other possible permutation.

⁶⁶ Medina, Cuauhtémoc: "Refinamiento por corrupción: Hacia el Speedy disfrute de la Cultura Global González" in Hertz, Betti-Sue (ed.): Axis Mexico, San Diego Museum of Art, San Diego, 2002, p.138.

Finally, it is possible to reason that the history of Mexican School mural practice suggests the development of the modern mural form in Mexico as an aesthetic-political modality of public discourse, a practical composite of public propositions and visual aesthetics positioned as a constituent of the official public sphere. The three formal components of official Mexican muralism, as this cultural form is consolidated in the mural production of the Mexican School, became: direct participation in official publicity and discourse (1), reciprocal integration of the visual discourse of the mural to an array of communicative practices participant in defining official publicity (including a variety of scriptural genres, but also public speech, debate, and provocative public "event") (2), and the development and public thematizing of a social-realist aesthetic (albeit multiform in character) as the visual register for the public sense of the mural work and as unquestioned limits for public dispute over the representational space of the mural image.

CHAPTER III
MEXICAN MURALISM AFTER THE MEXICAN SCHOOL
(1970s-1980s)

As indicated earlier, by the 1960s, the Mexican School had lost much of its earlier public prominence. From the very beginning, the Mexican Mural Movement both shaped and was shaped by an official public arena structured around a one-party corporate political system. Since the early 1960s, government institutions and the ruling PRI have been steadily losing legitimacy. This was partly because the Mexican governing elite started deserting most of its earlier values while focusing on modernization at all costs. As the 1968 massacre of the student protesters in Tlatelolco demonstrated, these costs could indeed include brutal repression of the members of Mexican middle classes.⁶⁷ The student movement⁶⁸ in 1968 marked the

⁶⁷ Tlatelolco massacre represents the unique moment in Mexican modern history, when the state power officially ordered to kill members of Mexican middle class. In other cases, the victims of the state repression were largely peasants, workers and indigenous

“beginning of the creation and development of a series of social movements in Mexico, both in the rural areas and in the cities”.⁶⁹ These independent and semi-independent movements struggled to organize themselves collectively, outside the politics of the state administrative system, while continuously challenging the PRI hegemony over public power and discourse. In this context, the official muralism of the Mexican School has become rather contradictory.

The subsequent development of Mexican muralism has thus become entangled in an expanding conflict between the government and evolving social forces. This has been partly visible in the contradiction between the mural image presented through official politics and muralism as “a cultural practice of visual representation participant in its unofficial forms in the

population; yet, the victims in 1968 were those who expected to be beneficiaries of the modernization process, i.e. middle class sectors. See: Knight, Alan: “Historical Continuities in Social Movements” in Foweraker, Joe and Craig, Ann L. (eds.): Popular Movements and Political Change in Mexico, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, Colorado, 1990, p.100.

⁶⁸ The movement initiated with very limited demands: the destitution of some state officials, freedom for the students put in jail, punishment for corrupt officers. However, the repressive measures taken by the state against the students and the apparent strength acquired by the movement created the soil for a radicalization which was seen by president Gustavo Díaz Ordaz as a potential threat for the stability of the city, especially in the context of the 1968 Olympic Games which were hosted by Mexico.

⁶⁹ Reygadas, Rafael: “En la dura batalla por la democracia”, *Cuadernos de Educación Popular*, no.8, Centro de Estudios Ecuménicos, México, November 1991, p.33.

construction of counterpublic images.”⁷⁰ The most contemporary examples of mural art have been produced at a local and popular level, in a political context of severe disappointment with those official public institutions with which the artists belonging to the Mexican School had established a tight relationship. As a result, the emerging murals practices have been highlighting the gap between official representation and contemporary social and cultural experience. This gap is articulated through oppositional interests, collective projects and identities. In this sense, post-Mexican School muralism “affords a window not only into advancing cultural identities, but also onto the construction of oppositional public spheres.”⁷¹

A possible point of departure of the main advances of the post-Mexican school muralism can be seen through the 1968 student riots in Mexico City. That conflict also profoundly transformed the attitudes of Mexican artists. The students of the art schools and the UNAM (*Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*) began to make art within and about *el movimiento estudiantil*. Their objective was to distribute information in rapid and effective ways. To express their political beliefs they used banners, *mantas* (painted fabric), mail art, mimeographic prints,

⁷⁰ Campbell, 2003, p.18.

⁷¹ Ibid. p.89.

spectacular demonstrations incorporating avant-garde theater, and, above all, murals⁷². During that period, the Mexican capital boiled with public art activities which had a decisive impact on the forms of artistic expression during the 1970s, including a gradual exile of this artistic expression from official public space.⁷³

Perhaps the most significant artistic phenomenon of that decade was the creation of *los grupos* - independent associations of artists working with different media but aspiring to similar goals. Photographers, performers, book artists, poets, sculptors, muralists, installation artists and filmmakers gathered under the premise of collective/interdisciplinary work to explore socio-cultural issues. The most influential groups were *Proceso Pentagono*, *Suma*, *Peyote* y *La Compañía*, *Mira*,

⁷² Unfortunately, as in case of Mario Facón's murals painted during an armed student takeover of a section of the UNAM campus, all the portraits of Che Guevara, Emiliano Zapata and Genaro Vásquez (guerrilla leader from the state of Guerrero) were destroyed during the following days when authorities regained control over the space. See: Híjar, Alberto: "El muralismo vive", *El Gallo Ilustrado*, August 1994, pp.10-11.

⁷³ Apart from classical wall painting which is the main focus of this text, the change was also apparent in more transitory counterparts to murals, such as *mantas*. Stylistically, many of the *mantas* used prior to Tlatelolco massacre bore a resemblance to the church standard. Through the 1970s and 1980s, the use of *manta* gained force and more conscious aesthetic and political consideration. See: Campbell, 2003, p. 148-163.

No-Grupo, and *Tepito Arte-Acá*.⁷⁴ For these groups, the artwork serves as a tool to provide the spectator with the means to react and interact. Unofficial community muralism played an important role in these efforts to articulate a cultural space, particularly when the working-class *barrios*⁷⁵ in Mexico City became the sites of conflict over efforts to modernize or reconstruct urban housing.

Moreover, the permanent, fixed-site mural opens view onto the public propositions produced in opposition to – and often “offstage” or behind – the screen of official public discourse. Many of such murals are literary irreplaceable in the spaces of collective experience delimiting the *barrio* or peripheral urban regions. In other contexts, the spatial deployment and formal resolution of local muralism accents elements of the built environment instead, filling a specific site or kind of site with public significance by drawing into view its history and social utility. The latter form of unofficial muralism combines the ethnographic value of “the rescue or retrieval of popular” with a revaluation of specific sites in the urban built environment.

⁷⁴ See: Goldman, Shifra: “Elite Artists and Popular Audience: Can They Mix? The Mexican Front of Cultural Workers”, *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, no. 4, 1985, pp. 192-207.

⁷⁵ A *barrio* is a collection of neighborhoods. It is more in the tradition of the French *quartier*, in which the common traits defining the place and distinguishing it from others come from the inside, not from the officially frontiers.

An illustrative example can be found in conflicts over Tepito, a historic barrio located near the National Palace, consisting of seventy-two blocks occupied by more than one hundred thousand inhabitants.⁷⁶ In 1973 the muralists founded the above-mentioned Arte Acá cultural movement, one of the longest existing artist organizations in Mexico City. Significantly, this happened one year before the formation of the *Asociación de Inquilinos de la Colonia Morelos-Tepito* (The Morelos-Tepito Neighborhood Tenant's Association, AICMT).⁷⁷ Arte Acá formed an effective cultural extension of this local movement against Plan Tepito, the urban development project announced by the owner of the buildings in Tepito in collaboration with *Instituto Nacional de Vivienda* (National

⁷⁶ The barrio of Tepito is located very close to the same ground as an ancient Aztec community called Tepiton. However ancient its roots, Tepito survives today both within and underneath the official economy. On the surface, the work of many of its residents makes Tepito the second largest producer of shoes in Mexico. Underground, Tepito's residents make their living by smuggling and bootlegging. The community's enormous open-air market is known throughout Mexico City as a source of *fayuka*, cheap foreign goods smuggled in to avoid high tariffs. Their organization and mechanisms of exchange are informal, i.e. there are no written rules, no official hierarchy, as people speak of the "informal authorities" rather than leaders. Author's interview with Alfonso Hernandez, the director of Centro de Estudios Tepiteños and the barrio archivist, Mexico City, September 2003.

⁷⁷ Rosales Ayala, Héctor (ed.): *Tepito: ¿barrio vivo?*, UNAM, México, 1991, p.61. For the overview of an early history of Arte Acá, see: Rosales Ayala: *Tepito Arte Acá: Ensayo de interpretación de un práctica cultural en el barrio más chido de la ciudad de México*, UNAM, México, 1988.

Institute of Housing). From its very beginning, the plan intended to replace the barrio's traditional *vecindades*⁷⁸ with luxurious condominiums, achieved through elimination of 'frozen' rents and the removal of low-income tenants to transitional housing on the outskirts of the city.⁷⁹ The Arte Acá artists understood the fear of losing the *vecindad*, an essential component of the barrio's identity, which dates back to the Spanish Conquest.⁸⁰ The leading activist/artist/muralist, Daniel Manrique, adopted the mural practice to a level suitable for the multiple-use space and its aesthetics of everyday life, in order to reveal the significance of the location as such. He also elaborated in the infamous *caló* (slang) of Tepiteño popular culture an entire materialist discourse on the origins in labor of

⁷⁸ Multiple family dwellings constructed around a central enclosed patio which are not defined by the mere vicinity of the houses but by the kind of conviviality existing among the neighbors who happen to live there.

⁷⁹ One of the most important results of Tepito's approach to development has been its ability not only to defend its community integrity but also to elaborate its own autonomous plans for self-development. Drawing on the technical help of some young architects and urban planners from the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, they elaborated their own community development plan, submitted it in an international competition sponsored by UNESCO, and won. The resulting publicity and legitimacy made it impossible for the government to move in and evict them. See Esteva Gustavo: "The inner-city community in Mexico City prefers to manage its own affairs, without interference from the forces of "development"', *Reclaiming Politics*, Fall-Winter 1991, p.38.

⁸⁰ For the early history of Tepito, see: Aréchiga Córdoba, Ernesto: Tepito: del antiguo barrio de indios al arrabal, Sábado Distrito Federal, México, 2003.

popular art and culture, and the importance of the *vecindad* as the basis for an integrated and autonomous popular culture.

“This is “*vivienda*” in its broadest significance. More precisely, I mean “*vivienda*” in *vecindad*, which means the integration of the following spaces: house-patio-street; home-workshop-family life; patio-workshop-communitarian conviviality; street-workshop-commerce-communitarian conviviality in a popular workers’ neighborhood.”⁸¹

One of his latest mural cycles from 1999 entitled *Tepito siempre e pasado, Tepito siempre presente* (Tepito Always in the Past, Tepito Always in the Present) vindicates his earlier mural intensions in the *barrio*, many of which were severely damaged during the 1995 earthquake. Painted inside the main administrative building in Tepito, the individual scenes clearly substantiate the relationship between the artist and the community⁸² as well as serving as an example of Manrique’s practical cancellation of the revolutionary tradition of the Mexican School.

⁸¹ Manrique, Daniel: “*Vivienda - Arte y Cultura*”, *Cuadernos del Formento de la Vivienda II*, Departamento del Distrito Federal, México D.F. 1996.

⁸² According to the writing on it, the author dedicated his work to all *Tepiteños* (citizens of Tepito) as well as to “anybody who would come to see it.”

Throughout the entire mural cycle Manrique celebrates the basic facets of communal life, including the reproduction of productive skills (carpentry, shoe making, plumbing, various forms of street reselling etc., figs.05-06) for the local autonomous economic development and collective leisure time (home activities, dancing, drinking, playing football, figs.07-08). An aesthetic break with the Mexican School is particularly apparent in the case of the central mural (figs.09-10), which visually and spatially questions the institutionalized social structure. This is pronounced through the internal pyramidal architectural space, which reflects on the spatial dimensions of the social hierarchy, as well as through the conscious displacement of the narrative executed in the dramatic social realism of the Mexican School. The juxtaposition of narrative and spatial discourse thus serves as a visual composition, highlighting the denunciation of official revolutionary ideology and hierarchy, in favor of the horizontal relations of an everyday exchange within the community. The significance of these everyday forms is established with figurative arrangements that are distinctly architectural. The marked spatiality of the human figures and the weight of the figures in the space bring forward the verticality of the pyramid, consisting of an unofficial public space inside a self-organized community. The architectonics of Manrique's mural cycle is based on the integral relationship

between the everyday personal space, space of communitarian social life and that of the development of autonomous productive capacity. The author himself articulated his spatial preoccupation three years as: "All Mexicans should know with absolute clarity that the Mexican nation is our home and Mexico is our habitat. Let's not forget that our first home is our body, and that 'vivienda' is an extension of our body"⁸³

Furthermore, more than a decade earlier in 1982, Manrique co-authored another set of murals in Tepito, which typify an additional rupture from the revolutionary tradition of the Mexican School. As part of an international exchange between the barrio of Tepito and a working class neighborhood in Paris, he painted the murals in collaboration with a French arts collective *Populart* in the enclosed patio of the Centro de Estudios Tepiteños. This self-organized autonomous centre has been functioning as a community cultural, social and educational base despite been established contrary to the will of government authorities.⁸⁴ Although the murals are among those seriously damaged during the 1985 earthquake, it is still possible to 'read' what was left of its visual narrative. A

⁸³ Manrique, Daniel: "Vivienda-Arte y Cultura", *Cuadernos de Formento de la Vivienda II*, México, 1996, (pages not numbered).

⁸⁴ Conversation with Alfonso Hernandez, the director of Centro de Estudios Tepiteños and barrio archivist, Tepito, México, September 2003.

possible starting point is the depiction of an assembly line, whose conveyor belt forms the spinal column of a brontosaurus skeleton delivering automobiles down the line. The attention of observers seems to be deliberately drawn to the image of a human figure presumably clawing its way out of the inertia of industrial mechanization, through an explosion of blood and corn⁸⁵ (figs.11-13). The dramatic narrative is not resolved, but strangely concluded, by the image of the Christian crosses of the Conquest. They are depicted as deadly swords, poised ready to penetrate through the hearts of the conquered ones, who lie wounded on the ground (fig.14). The positioning of the murals within the local autonomous and unofficial communal center can be understood as a conceptual step forward, out of the established mural practice of the Mexican School, which dealt predominantly with official public buildings and official public works.

These types of unofficial mural works became more common towards the end of 1970s and the beginning of 1980s, when the independent urban and social movements in Mexico intensified their demands for affordable housing, while developing a more highly politicized profile. Identification with

⁸⁵ This interpretation was suggested to me by one of the staff members of the *Centro de Estudios Tepiteño*. The same interpretation is also offered by Bruce Campbell in his book Mexican Murals in Times of Crisis.

these urban housing organizations would automatically indicate political independence from the PRI, therefore, the creation of explicit symbolism within a residential space started to become a political need. However, wall paintings have rarely been part of an official agenda of such organizations, since they rather prefer “immediately consumable cultural productions such as rock concerts, dances, and the like.”⁸⁶ Despite this tendency, various informal initiatives, cultural groups, individual artists and neighborhoods have produced an extensive body of visual symbolism in line with the needs and demands of particular local environments. Unofficial mural production has been exceptionally intensive in Mexico City. Many community artists were influenced by the accomplishments of Arte Acá and developed their own muralism within the framework of neighborhood engagements. These street murals display themes selected by community residents.

The earthquake in 1985 gave new impetus to autonomous participation and mobilisation. The aftermath of the disaster exposed the inability of the state and the military to assist the frightened population. Several organizations such as the Coordinating Committee of the Earthquake Movements and the *Asamblea de Barrios* (Assembly of Neighbourhoods) pressured the state to respond to the earthquake victims. The state’s

⁸⁶ Cambell, 2003, p. 90.

inability to address the needs of the population, together with a decreasing popularity of the President Miguel de la Madrid (1982-86), initiated a series of demonstrations of dissent. These demonstrations, such as *marchas* (protest marches), *plantones* (sittings) and cultural events which stood as a symbolic appropriation of actual public spaces by organized sectors of the civil society.⁸⁷ Consequently, the emerging unofficial muralism, responding to community concerns both spatially and thematically, was utilized by tenants, squatters, and neighbourhood organizations as a means of marking occupied space and improving a public profile for the group's presence.⁸⁸ In this context, the actual public space ceased to be a place and instead, became a situation, through which the notion of mural production entered the realm of cultural intervention, positioning itself within the flexible boundaries of postmodernism.

As the critic Fredric Jameson points out, postmodernism has many variants; some that are progressive and others that are not.⁸⁹ Yet, it is in line with the debates of postmodernist criticism that the public art has been constantly redefined.

⁸⁷ Jaime Tamayo, "Neoliberalism Encounters Neocardenism" in Foweraker and Craig (eds.), 1990, p.126-128.

⁸⁸ Campbell, 2003, p.96.

⁸⁹ Jameson, Fredric: "The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodernist Debate," *Critical Inquiry*, January 1985, pp. 53-65.

Accordingly, the main features that link the discussed unofficial muralism in Mexico City to a postmodernist critique are: it functions as one of the basic mediums employed according to the requirements of the cultural intervention; it is commonly carried out in a collaborative manner and sometimes even anonymously; its content may be changed or compounded by other artists, while their meaning depends on the active participation of a politicized audience.

Felipe Ehrenberg's⁹⁰ project of the reconstruction of Mexico City after the 1985 earthquake can be used to illustrate such a postmodernist approach. His cultural intervention took the form of entering the disaster area of Tepito in Mexico City immediately after the earthquake. Ehrenberg took some artists, friends, and his own family into Tepito in order to organize brigades to comfort survivors, who had been left without homes, electricity and social services, and to distribute food and clothing. Volunteers who made up the brigades included psychologists, musicians, teachers, actors, university students,

⁹⁰ Ehrenberg is a Mexican artist/activist who, in the early 1960s, worked as an apprentice with Mexican school muralist José Chávez Morado and who considers himself a general practitioner of art. Community involvement in art is a vital aspect for him. In the late 1970's, along with several other artists, Ehrenberg formed a group called *Grupo Proceso Pentagono*, the aim of which was to oppose the official gallery system. Together, they painted hundreds of murals throughout Mexico, using traditional and contemporary mediums. His decision to participate in *la reconstrucción* was inspired by the work of his brother, who went to Nicaragua during the revolution as a cameraman and joined the southern guerrilla front.

classical painters as well as muralists.⁹¹ These kinds of social and cultural activities are based on the premise that public art, including unofficial mural painting, is structurally determined by, and linked with, processes taking place in society as a whole. Significantly, this trend has recently become symptomatic of the neo-liberal economic policy for increasing investment in services and of outsourcing production to low-wage countries such as Mexico. As a result, many analogous artistic practices can be additionally interpreted as a criticism of neo-liberalism.

Within this context, a “notorious” dispute between art critic Alberto Híjar and Felipe Ehrenberg which happened in 1984 may seem a bit symptomatic while providing in outline the official public situation of mural practice for the historical present. Ehrenberg established an arts and communication workshop called *Haltos20rnos/Talleres de Comunicación (H2O)*, which undertook an impressive project of mural production throughout Mexico, working with five-day production schedule that integrated teams of local participants into every aspect of determining site, design, and image transfer. H2O began as a series of mimeograph-based workshops on developing a popular press, a model that met with such success that it was adapted for the Nicaraguan context by

⁹¹ Author’s interview with Felipe Ehrenberg, Mexico City, September 1997.

militants of the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*. After instituting comparable workshops centered on mural production, H2O is calculated to have had produced more than a thousand murals throughout Mexico.⁹² Ehrenberg's participation in an interview conducted for Mexican television in August 1984 became a point of departure for a critical essay by Híjar, published in the weekly cultural supplement of *El Día*, wherein the art critic attempted to "delineate camps within the so called Mexican School and, of course, within Mexican muralism."⁹³

Rating the work of H2O as poor contrast to the community murals movement articulating Chicano⁹⁴ political and cultural

⁹² Author's interview with Felipe Ehrenberg, Mexico City, September 1997.

⁹³ Híjar, Alberto: "El muralismo vive", 1984, p.10.

⁹⁴The term Chicano refers to the Mexican Americans, the oldest and largest Latin American population in the USA. They are found largely in the Southwest and Midwest of the United States, but scattered population exists throughout the country.

The Mexican School made the strongest impact on the visual language of its northern neighbor in the case of Chicano⁹⁴ muralism, which emerged at the same time as the official mural production in Mexico began to decline. The roots of Chicano art lay in their 1960's political movement *El Movimiento*, an alliance of disfranchised farmers, workers and students. The Chicanos' experience of colonial conquest and annexation, continued internal colonialism, dispossession, migration and forced relocation created various strategies of survival and transformation, including a so-called 'cultural reclamation'. Its core consists of reclaiming and establishing links to a real and imagined history that "encompassed the topographies of the annexed Southwest and Mexico through a nationalist project of identity." The *barrio* mural movement is perhaps the most powerful legacy of the Chicano art movement nationwide,

resistance in the United States, Híjar denounced Ehrenberg's group as "neutrality at the service of the State." For him, the H2O workshops represented not Mexican muralism but the imported U.S. model of the WPA⁹⁵ murals of the late 1930s. "Is this Mexican muralism?" asked Híjar. "Is this the Mexican School?" The fact that those two questions received the same negative answer suggests that they were hinted together by nationalist commitments governed in turn by formal hegemony of the Mexican School. In the balance of the essay, Híjar turned to a delineation of what he perceived as two basic tendencies within Mexican muralism: institutional muralism and

with its collective attitudes and working methods associated with this art form. Its authors draw from the legacy of *tres grandes*, i.e. from Mexican national heritage. See: Zamudio-Taylor, Victor: "Chicano Art", in Sullivan, Edward J. (ed.): Latin American Art in the Twentieth Century, Phaidon Press Ltd., London, 1996, p.317.

Probably the most widely viewed and discussed Chicano mural work is Judy Baca's *Great Wall Mural Project*, the largest of its kind in the world at the time, which she began in the Tujunga wash drainage channel of the San Fernando Valley in 1976. For more information on Judith Francisca Baca and her art projects, see: <http://judybaca.com>

⁹⁵ Works Progress Administration

The visually constructed mythology of revolutionary art, as it appeared on the walls of Mexican public buildings, first became a point of reference in the United States during its difficult period of the 1930s Depression. When the Roosevelt administration implemented a policy of state-funded projects to ease the hardship, supporters of the Federal Art Project of Works Progress Administration regarded Mexican muralism as a model for a new democratic, radical art. The ability of the Mexican muralists to visualize the critique of capitalism in its crisis, and to be one of the few to articulate an explicit critique of fascism during the 1930s, further reveals why many artists in the United States found inspiration in the mythology of these artworks. See: Biddle, George: An American Artist's Story, Little Brown, Boston, 1939.

an oppositional muralism integrated to communities of struggle. Critically surveying recent murals by José Reyes Meza and Fanny Rabel in the Public Registry of Property building in Mexico City, he concluded that the institutional legacy of the Mexican School "has to be surpassed, transforming the mechanisms of circulation and of diffusion." The transformation of the Mexican School legacy will come, he suggested, by a movement beyond its "individualist" mode of production and fetishization of the work of art. The institutional and "utopian" mode of mural production will be supplemented by a more "scientific," collective mode of production.⁹⁶

Responding to Híjar, Ehrenberg not only accepted the charge that H2O did not represent a continuation of the Mexican School, he also embraced it. Despite Híjar's insistence on the Mexican School as elemental to Mexican muralism, Ehrenberg's public defense of H2O temporarily silenced any declaration with regard to Mexican School aesthetics. "If indeed our work knows the postulates of the Mexican School, at no time has it pretended to follow them or change them."⁹⁷ H2O, he asserted, simply provided "provided services", including training in muralism, offered with the funding and administrative support of the SEP and State

⁹⁶ Híjar, Alberto: "El muralismo vive", 1984, p.10-11.

⁹⁷ Ehrenberg, Felipe: "El muralismo vive, sí, aún a pesar de los teóricos", *El Gallo Ilustrado*, August 19, 1984, p.9.

Workers Social Services Institute (ISSSTE). Notably, despite the popular orientation and democratic commitments of the projects evident in this choice of local venues – workers' housing, hospital, and cultural centers – its broader representation for the national public sphere was expressed solely in administrative terms. Both in the earlier televised interview and in the printed reply to Híjar.

The Híjar-Ehrenberg dispute touched the field of relations between mural discourse and the state power. In the points of contact and conflict in their positions, one perceives the features of the post Mexican School situation of muralism and a shared contestation of the limits of the official public space. An apparent gap between mural aesthetics and official public argument is confronted with distinct efforts at repositioning muralism as a constituent of the Mexican public sphere. On one hand, H2O's effort to construct a democratic mural publicity from the ground up demands distancing from official discourse, including aesthetic discourse of the Mexican School. On the other, the "scientific" supersession of the Mexican School muralism proposed by Híjar grounds itself not in the embrace of a different aesthetics but in a collective mode of production integrated to social movement moving away from and against official public discourse.

H2O's communitarian model of mural publicity was collective to the same degree as Híjar's scientific socialist model, but the discursive conditions for their official public engagements were in conflict in accord with their relation to the national visual language of Mexican School aesthetics. Stepping back from the immediate object of the dispute Híjar and Ehrenberg (i.e. mural form), one can also see evidence of a broader struggle over the limits and legitimacy of the official public sphere. That is, public meaning more generally is what is most fundamentally at stake. Here a different image begins to take shape, not of mural form specifically, but of the instability of its public contexts. One might say that that the other side of the official visibility of Mexican muralism is an equally official invisibility to which dispute over its public meaning is consigned. The official image of Mexican muralism is therefore faces sharp relief by encountering attempts to enter public space with a mural aesthetics with oppositional public discourse.

CHAPTER IV
MEXICAN MURALISM AFTER THE MEXICAN SCHOOL
(1990s)

In Mexico, neo-liberal concerns have become increasingly pronounced since the very beginning of the 1990s. The massive social mobilizations supporting the centre-left *Frente Democrático Nacional* (National Democratic Front, FDN) during the presidential campaign of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas⁹⁸ in 1988 proved that some units of civil society were prepared to ally with political parties for the sake of expressing their disagreement with the economic austerity, brought by the economic crisis and by the shift towards neo-liberal economic policies.⁹⁹ In the following years, support for the major left-wing opposition party, *Partido de la Revolución Democrática*¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Cárdenas lost to the PRI candidate Carlos Salinas de Gortari. According to the official count, he won a mere 50.4 percent of the vote. The opposition parties contended that Salinas' total share of the vote would have been even lower had the PRI not resorted to fraud.

⁹⁹ Foweraker and Craig (eds.), 1990, p.22.

¹⁰⁰ In 1988, the National Democratic Front was created around the presidential candidature of Cuauthémoc Cárdenas. This coalition grouped several small leftist parties and the Revolutionary Institutional Party's radical liberal wing. In 1989, on the basis of this alliance, the PRD was created. Ostensibly, there are two dominating PRD factions — the original left-wing activists who were in severe opposition to the PRI, and the disenfranchised PRI leftists who had been ostracized and denied access to power circles until they were encouraged to leave. There is a natural distrust between the two blocs, and although no group has a clear party supremacy, the

(Party of the Democratic Revolution, PRD), declined mainly because the internal organization failed to institutionalise and differentiate between its members. On the other hand, the formation of numerous non-governmental organisations (NGO's) and independent groups multiplied.

In this context, the partial triumph of some organizations to pursue their demands signalled a strengthening of civil society. However, public spaces were not occupied only by urban collectives. Groups of peasants, workers or citizens who dissented from electoral came from all over the country to demonstrate their opposition. While in 1991 more than 200 demonstrations took place in the city, by 1996 the number multiplied and included 2040 marches which, independently of the number of participants, blocked the central streets and roads of the capital city, which created double pressures for the state - to respond to the demonstrators' demands and to provide solution for the problems within Mexico City. Moreover, the multiplicity of demonstrations in the capital was interpreted by its inhabitants as a sign of the government's inability to maintain order.¹⁰¹

politically skilled ex-PRI members have managed to gain more public support and seize various electoral posts, while the radicals are more active in policy matters.

¹⁰¹ Magaña, Manuel and Morales, Julio: "Ya Basta; 2 040 marchas en el año en el D.F.", *Excélsior*, December 07, 1996.

During the past fourteen years, several popular movements and entities in Mexico advanced their demands to be able to fully exercise their rights as citizens through different means of demonstrating dissent. The ideological tendencies and organizational goals of independent groups, such as the *Unión Popular Nuevo Tenochtitlán* (New Tenochtitlán Popular Union), *Frente Popular Francisco Villa* (Francisco Villa Popular Front, FPFV) and the *Unión Popular Revolucionario Emiliano Zapata* (Emiliano Zapata Revolutionary Popular Front, UPREZ) identified strategically with elements of national cultural patrimony and history that had been deemphasized in official discourse, usually involving the situation of the mural's physical and social context (the housing unit, the barrio, the street) within a collective struggle. The political conditions of possibility for the mural and its surrounding were thematized in the visual interior of the mural.

In order to grasp with the beginnings of the counter-government activist tendencies of many local muralists, it is important to know the context from which this activism emerged. During the 1990s, Mexican artists in general started to abandon the traditional aesthetic modesty towards the social and cultural contradictions that surrounded them. In fact, they turned their original expressive and lyrical concerns into tools of political investigation. Such a radicalization of artistic practice

was, in part, the result of the social and political crisis that authoritarian modernisation and economic integration produced in Mexico in 1994-95. Cuauhtémoc Medina briefly, but eloquently, describes its consequences for the Mexican artists:

While Mexico's landing into the global economy and its agitated "transition to democracy" was dominated by the clash between global market forces and the resistance movements of the Indian societies, the widening of social differences between new tycoons and impoverished masses, and the cultural contradictions deriving from the crumbling nationalist/modernising ideology of the post-revolutionary regime, contemporary artists intervened more resolutely into the imagery of the country's crisis....[and] by the turn of the century, those same local political interventions, infused with a conceptual dexterity but retaining an amateurish basis, had gained global currency in terms of keeping a poetical and political tensions within post-conceptual practice."¹⁰²

Having provided support for greater visibility of marginalized groups and issues led to the unearthing of repressed histories and initiated the re(dis)covery of invisible

¹⁰² Medina, Cuauhtémoc: "Zones of Tolerance: Teresa Margolles, SEMEFO and Beyond", *Parachute*, no.104, 4-th trimester, 2001, pp. 44-45.

places so far ignored by the dominant culture. In addition, this radicalization further intensified the focusing on unofficial mural production after the mid-1990s. Yet, inasmuch as the socio-economic order has been thriving on the artificial production and mass consumption of difference (for the sake of difference), the various forms of cultural interventions in urban public places also served another purpose. This purpose could be interpreted as a means to extract the social and historical dimensions out of places to serve the thematic drive of an artist, satisfy institutional demographic profiles, or fulfill the fiscal needs of a city. In fact, this has been the case of official mural production. After the inscription of the Mexican School into the national cultural patrimony, "muralism had ended up as a political institution or as a habit of high government functionaries: every new public and state building had to have its mural, just like it had running water and sewage system."¹⁰³

An interesting symbiosis is the legacy of the institutional mode of art production, revolutionary symbolism of Mexican School and collective unofficial muralism of the dissent. This symbiosis can be found if the work of the Mexican painter-muralist Gustavo Chávez Pavón¹⁰⁴, a founder and leading

¹⁰³ Acha, Juan: Las culturas estéticas de América Latina, UNAM, México, 1994, p.162.

¹⁰⁴ Apart from an intensive involvement inside the frame of La Gárgola, this self-taught artist is known as an activist, cultural

member of an artistic group La Gárgola. Since the beginning of the group's existence in 1993, Gustavo Chávez has realized many public art projects for various independent organizations and state institutions throughout the country, as well as abroad.¹⁰⁵ Chávez's official artistic engagement includes a mural entitled *En defensa de Educación Pública* (In Defense of Public Education), painted for the Secondary School of Technology in Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, Estado de México, during 1998-1999. His latest mural project, entitled *El Derecho a la Educación Pública* (The Right for Public Education), is realized inside the building of *Los Servicios Educativos Integrados al Estado de México* (SEIEM) in Toluca.¹⁰⁶ In both cases, the author tried to draw people's attention to the issue of public education in Mexico and to provoke discussion concerning the nature of the Article Three of the Mexican

promoter and graphic collaborator with the Mexican leftist daily newspaper *La Jornada*.

¹⁰⁵ Murals executed by La Gárgola can be found in Mexico (in the states of Chihuahua, Chiapas, Guerrero, México, Estado de México, Michoacán, Oaxaca, Sinaloa and Veracruz), Denmark, Italy, Spain and Sweden. Inside Europe, Chávez is mainly known for his murals in the Zapatista autonomous zone in Chiapas, where they were noticed by international observers, participants of various meetings and members of NGOs operating in the region.

¹⁰⁶ The series of murals was inaugurated on June 3, 2004. See; Vargas, Angel: "Con Gustavo Chávez, el muralismo retorna a la educación pública", *La Jornada*, June 3, 2004, cultural supplement.

Constitution, that guarantees the right for public education to all the citizens.

The mural *En defensa de Educación Pública* (fig.15) is composed as an open book of the country's history, adorned with a skull rack and two heads of feathered serpent at its sides.¹⁰⁷ Its narrative focuses on the depiction of a ferocious fight between an eagle and serpent, which stand as allusive symbols of the fight between the classes. According to Gustavo Chávez: "The eagle represents democracy and justice, while the serpent stands for exploitation and corruption. These traditional Mexican symbols were reinterpreted and reused in order to reflect upon the actual situation of the country."¹⁰⁸ According to further explanation by the author, the rural teacher on the right side is reading Article Three of the Constitution to the farmers, while on the extreme right, the figure of Prometheus is not chained to the mountain but to the steel arms of a machine protected by canons. The suffering expressed through this mythical hero induces the idea that the purpose of knowledge exists to liberate people, not to enslave

¹⁰⁷ Chávez dedicated this wall painting to late Otto Campbell, a muralist and the former professor at the Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez.

¹⁰⁸ Author's interview with Gustavo Chávez, Mexico City, February 2003.

them.¹⁰⁹ In the very centre of the mural, there is a human palm holding an atom, with the nucleus consisting of an image of a heart, reminding the viewer that “studying is the force which moves us forward, thus, it should be done with love.”¹¹⁰ As in many other wall paintings authored by Gustavo Chávez, the visual and spatial juxtaposition of the concept of *mexicanidad*, standing against modernization at all costs, is very pronounced.

Chávez's contribution to the ongoing mural project *El Derecho a la Educación Pública*¹¹¹ in SEIEM reveals similar political, social and artistic affiliations (figs.16-18). The painted walls inside the building reflect the idea of a very didactic and perhaps too literal approach towards the general theme of the

¹⁰⁹ In this context, Prometheus has a noticeably different connotation than in Belkin's mural entitled *Prometheus: Zapata and Sandino* in the National Palace in Managua.

¹¹⁰ Author's interview with Gustavo Chávez, Mexico City, February 2003.

¹¹¹ This project is a part of a long-term state scheme of creating mural in educative institutions named *Los murales en la Educación* (Murals in the education). During my visit of Toluca in March 2003, I documented the process of painting the mural as well as interviewed Gustavo Chávez, his collaborator and member of La Gárgola Pepé Talas Dominguez, and Hector Animas Vargas, the director of the *Educación Secundaria y Servicios de Apoyo* inside SEIEM. During these interviews, I learnt that the main objectives of the overall idea of connecting murals with education are to “promote muralism as a form of cultural expression which allows to create the feeling of identity within the frame of education, to amplify respect for cultural values, and to contribute to the formation of culture as such.” In the same building, there is also a mural by Dr. Roberto Chávez Sahagún, which was one of the first accomplishments of the *Los murales en la Educación*.

project. Ranging from ancient indigenous symbolism and elements of nature to very transparent motives of publicly accessible knowledge, the mural cycle still reveals subtle details of Chávez's own artistic vision, his personal beliefs about Mexican society, the indigenous population and problems in general, which have a universal validity. There is no doubt about his ability to understand the importance of a visual experience and a possibility to educate through different types of media, including different art forms. His enthusiasm however does not cross the boundary of strictly self-explanatory and 'notoriously' recognized images and symbols. On the whole, his message is to appreciate every single small step in recognizing all of the different forms of learning and absorbing knowledge, and to respect the author's creative 'fight' for general access to basic education in Mexico.

Overall, Chávez's 'educational' murals strongly evoke the monumental epic character of the Mexican Mural Renaissance. As the artist himself admits: "My work is a continuation of the Mexican School muralism, of Rivera and Siqueiros' work. It is not about mere copying, but also about recovering their values related to their struggle and criticism of the oppressive system. We are getting stronger while looking for the aesthetic elements which would help us to identify with the actual situation of the country and which would help as to

reach a more just society.”¹¹² Regarding Rivera’s inheritance, for instance, Chávez’s image of the rural teacher included in both of the above-discussed murals, bears a striking resemblance to Rivera’s fresco *La maestra rural*¹¹³ from 1923 (The Rural Teacher, fig.19). It is not however simply reproduced as a visual tradition. Because of its context, in which the previous aesthetic form becomes absorbed and politically implicated, “the revolutionary realism of the Mexican School, like other elements of *patrimonio cultural*, takes on newly contentious meaning in its appropriations for the present.”¹¹⁴ The second face of Chávez’s muralism, the one which is not connected to official commissions by state institutions and which expresses more radically his affiliation with dissent, is mainly connected to the Zapatista uprising in the Mexican state of Chiapas¹¹⁵. In the urban environment

¹¹² Author’s interview with Gustavo Chávez, Mexico City, February 2003.

¹¹³ Located in the *Secretaría de educación pública*, this wall painting is an exceptional embodiment of the distinctive radicalism of the educational program in Mexico during the 1920’s and 1930s.

¹¹⁴ Campbell, 2003, p.101.

¹¹⁵ On the January 1, 1994, the same day as the North American Free Trade Agreement came into force, peasants from the southernmost Mexican state of state of Chiapas declared war against the Mexican government. They occupied four towns and six villages and kidnapped the state governor. What followed can be qualified the worst period of political violence in Mexico since the 1960s. After the open war which lasted for ten days, a difficult process of political negotiation was initiated. ¹¹⁵ At the moment of writing this text, the movement

(particularly that of Mexico City), the portraits of Emiliano Zapata, Subcomandante Marcos, Ernesto Che Guevara, masked faces of anonymous rebels, and other common features of neo-Zapatista orthodox revolutionary visual narrative announce the radicalization of negative portrayal of the official power and the growing efforts to visualize the fights over urban spatial positions. Most of such murals can be found mainly in neighborhoods with a strong relationship to the PRD.

The frequency of Zapata's appearance as a sign of oppositionality predates the 1994 Chiapas uprising, appearing with increasing frequency in mural form since the 1960s. However, a kind of intertextuality bridging different sites of struggle and oppositional public space begins to characterize images of Zapata and Zapatismo after the sound initial appearance of the *Ejercito Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (Zapatista Army of National Liberation, EZLN)¹¹⁶ in strikes

continues to be largely confined to its original areas of influence in Chiapas. Increasingly isolated in 'self-governing' enclaves, the rebels periodically protest against various government development projects, all of which they view as intrusions. Their outreach to other Indian groups is still limited by disputes over land, politics and the Zapatistas' intolerance of disagreement.

¹¹⁶ According to the EZLN, the Zapatista insurgents, with their charismatic leader, ideologue and spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos, derived their name and their political inspiration from Emiliano Zapata.¹¹⁶ The discourse behind the original demands of the EZLN, expressed in the "Declaration of War", is derived from traditional revolutionary goals - an immediate rejection of political authorities, defeat of the army and establishing a transitional government in charge of electing new authorities on the basis of

against official public power and authority in San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas in January 1994. Gustavo Chávez twinning of the face of the original Zapata with that of his latter-day interpretation in the faceless EZLN *comandante* links the revolutionary national past to the insurrectionary present. Executed for the *Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana – Azcapotzalco* (Union of Workers of the Autonomous Metropolitan University at Atzapotzalco, SITUAM) during a 1995 strike, the mural was produced with paints and wall space made available by union militants' takeover of a privately owned warehouse adjacent to the Atzapotzalco campus.¹¹⁷ The masked faces of latter-day

democratic procedures - interpreted in class rather than racial or cultural terms. The EZLN discourse was then redefined during the first week of fighting and began to focus on the indigenous or Indian aspects of the rebellion, including a wide range of demands, such as land allocation, housing, food, work, health, education, independence, liberty, justice and peace. For more information see: See: Molina, Iván: "Las demandas totales del EZLN", in El pensamiento del EZLN, Plaza y Valdés, México, 2000, pp.40-45 and "Declaration of War", ¡Zapatistas! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution, Autonomedia, New York, 1994, pp.49-51 or "First Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle (EZLN's Declaration of War)" on the following web page:

<http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/mexico/ezln/ezlnwa.html>

Originally published in *El Despertador Mexicano*, December 31, 1993. "The Mexican Awakener" is the newspaper of the EZLN, issued on January 1, 1994, in conjunction with the uprising. It was the first document released by the Zapatistas, containing Declaration of War, an editorial, and the Revolutionary Laws.

¹¹⁷ Author's interview with Gustavo Chávez, Mexico City, February 2003.

Zapatistas insert the radicalized, negative image of official power into urban environment, accenting more traditional treatments of Zapata with public exposure of the official cancellation of the revolutionary leader's political legacy.

The masked figure¹¹⁸ of *comandante*, whose eyes can be interpreted as a visual indication of a critical public consciousness from behind the anonymity enforced by official strategies of surveillance and control, emerged after January 1994 as a mark of common cause between disparate sites and motives of conflict, despite the military containment of armed

¹¹⁸ Concerning the significance of the ski mask as a fundamental trademark of the Zapatistas' image, overall, there has been no consensus amongst the scholars regarding this phenomenon. The reasoning that Zapatistas use their balaclavas to mask their identity in order not to get identified, imprisoned or killed appears to be most rational. However, there are also other aspects to be considered, such as the long Indian tradition of masks as well as present concerns of the indigenous population in Chiapas.

Inside the Zapatista's rebel territory in Chiapas, the ski mask serves as a unifying agent for all actively involved indigenous participants, who come from several ethnic Maya subgroups, thus, speak different languages and/or engage in different specific social and cultural practices. (See: Shelton, Alan: "Masks", *The Dictionary of Art*, vol.21, Grove, New York, 1996, p.250.) Consequently, the masked Indians no longer see themselves explicitly as Tzotzils, Tzeltals, etc. Their amorphous identity allows them to form a unified force, a force that is strong enough to remove a different kind of mask, that of the oppressed and marginalized Subcomandante Marcos reflected on this aspect in several interviews and one of his letters entitled "The Sup Will Take off His Mask if Mexico Takes off Its Mask". See: Subcomandante Marcos: "The Sup Will Take off His Mask if Mexico takes off Its Mask" in *Shadows of Tender Fury*, 1995, pp.83-86.

Moreover, various masks also from identity, therefore, the masked faces and anonymous eyes of the Zapatistas staring out of the murals become carriers of a message which says: "*Todos somos Marcos.*" (We are all Marcos.).

Zapatismo in Chiapas. The significant, though subtle, shift in the visibility of the Zapatista movement coincides with the EZLN's strategy of organizing national conferences on issues of public interest such as indigenous rights or social justice.

However, as demonstrated on the above-mentioned works of several artists, considerably more intriguing are those murals that "fuse the recognizably national forms of Mexican School with local politics of space that embroils official institutions with putatively apolitical social actors."¹¹⁹ A broadly defined social realism, encompassing both the technically simple work of the untrained and the more skilled techniques of the educated artist, characterizes much of unofficial muralism. This inheritance from the Mexican School is not simply reproduced as a visual tradition. Rather, because of the context in which aesthetic form is politically implicated, the revolutionary realism of the Mexican School, like other elements of cultural patrimony, takes on newly contentious meaning in its appropriation for the present.

Although many mural works of the 1990s make only indirect claims on or challenges against the official public sphere, they are nonetheless both aesthetically and politically intense, articulating themselves visually with cultural discourses that mobilize illusions of 'deep Mexican' national identity against

¹¹⁹ Campbell, 2003, p.101.

an official discourse of modernization. The visual juxtaposition of a discourse of *mexicanidad* as against modernization at all costs and policy of officialdom is often explicit. Moreover, it is important to note that the critical task of locating post Mexican School murals within the frame of public space (or spaces) is complicated by the question of form on two fronts. First, there is a problem of defining the object. With regards to artistic expression, the question of form traditionally evokes a set of aesthetic concerns which are related to conventions and codes of representation, corresponding states of reception and the experiential autonomy of work of art. Apprehension of aesthetic form draws attention to the artwork as a space within which the syntax of artistic representation suspends a tension between tradition and change. In these formal terms, the mural becomes one of the institutionally circumscribed spaces wherein aesthetic forms find their history and, in turn, art historical criticism engages cultural exchange.

Second, the problem of form arises as a matter of historical context, as a component of the politics of representation with which the mural form is engaged in Mexico in its revolutionary nationalist origins. A view onto the political specificity of recent muralism is affected by the politics inherited through the revolutionary era and its articulations of mural production. In other words, mural production depends to

significant degree on the mural's "classical" official form. Thus, the main facets of mural art under this perspective are arranged as emblems of specific programmatic discourses such as indigenism, Marxism etc. The fact that revolutionary nationalist muralism was promoted by a revolutionary nationalist state is, of course, understandable. But the public situation of mural art is therein implicitly explained as a function of the conventions of nationalist discourse. In effect, exclusive interpretation of the "content" of official murals (especially when it coincides with previously established official determinations of their content) inclined towards a highly stylized image of both muralism and its public context.

Strangely enough, formalist and contextualist approaches are equally problematic in relation to the mural form. The reasons can be seen in what Norman Bryson identifies as an underlying schema that implicitly organizes the question of form from both perspectives. Their common ground is, according to Bryson, "the postulation of an interval between text and context," a radical separation of the object of criticism (text) from its environment, where context is definitively exempted from criticism.¹²⁰ "From one point of view...this cut is precisely the operation that establishes the aesthetic as a

¹²⁰ Bryson, Norman: "Art in Context", The Point of Theory – Practices of Cultural Analysis, 1994, p.73.

specific order of discourse. From another point of view, the cut is that which creates a discourse if art historical explanation."¹²¹

Such separation of text and context is especially problematic in case of public art, since, as the term implies, the text in question is formally bound to its context. Once separated in the paradigmatic way described by Bryson. 'art' and 'public' cannot be put together without limiting blocking something of the public form in the ordering of art historical interpretation. Consequently, the work of art is removed from the scene of its own engagement in order to be positioned within the work of art historical discourse.

One consequence of this is a transformation of the work (labor activity) accomplished by the art from in question. Concerning mural, the transformation (i.e. alteration of its form) takes place under supervision of a perspective that overlooks the spatial dimensions of the work of art. The determination of form then leads to the overrunning of the space of the mural work with elements which have nothing to do with mural practice. Furthermore, formal analysis of the mural is charged with the responsibility of reconstructing the artistic form. But cultural criticism does not need to search for political significance 'outside' the space of muralism. Muralism is – primarily due to public character of its spatial orientation –

¹²¹ Ibid, p. 73.

inevitably a political practice. In fact, far from requiring a simple refusal of formalist art historical interpretation, the mural form suggests the need for deepening and consolidating of formal approach. Importantly, muralism confronts cultural criticism with the political necessity of a formalist interpretation or “the hermeneutic reconstruction of a cultural form rendered abstract, ideal, or “affirmative” only by dint of a previous disintegration insisted upon the illusory totality of the official public sphere.”¹²² Only in this way can one begin to distinguish the alternative public propositions which are invisible and placeless by official public works.

¹²² Campbell, 2003, p. 206.

CHAPTER V

MEXICAN MURALISM AFTER THE MEXICAN SCHOOL: THE MOST RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

1. EXTRAMUROS

In order to conclude the overall assessment of muralism in the 20-th century Mexico, I am going advance towards the main visual outcomes of the symposium *Without Borders – alternatives in community art and communication*,¹²³ organized by the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana at Xochimilco campus in Mexico City (UAM-X) in March 2003. The symposium included round table discussions, workshops and other activities, as well as two exhibitions inside the university venue called *extraMUROS* (extra walls) and *Murales en el Patio Rojo* (Murals in the Red Patio). According to the organizers, Sergio Valdez, Víctor Ortega and Javier Martínez, the following stands as the principal objective of the whole project:

“The university environment exceeds the limits of its official walls, therefore, university and society should foster each other and

¹²³ *SIN FRONTERAS– alternativas en arte y la comunicación comunitarios*, UAM-X, Mexico City, March 5-7, 2003. The symposium was aimed to “expand community art and communication beyond their natural or artificial borders, geographical or historical limitations as well as to explore the relationship between art and communication in concrete public or communal environment in order to grasp with their further possibilities.” Quoted from the official program of the symposium.

establish creative and transformative relationship. The exhibitions reflect this relationship as well as share the concept of intervention in diverse public spaces within and outside the university. In both cases it is clear that there are many other walls to challenge besides those surrounding the university space.”¹²⁴

Exhibition *Los murales en el Patio Rojo* consisted of the process of creating five murals in the Red Patio inside UAM-X, the iconography of which was subsequently interpreted by their authors. The murals were executed by a Mexican artist Marela Zacarías, La Gárgola (led by Gustavo Chávez), Congrejo Collective, students of UAM-X taking part in the Community Mural Workshop, and the children of Damary Purgas U.H. Kindergarten. All the works represent a novel form of ‘transient mural’ which found its significance in the monumental aesthetics. Described by Sergio Valdez as “mural with an expiration date”¹²⁵, the half mural and half *manta* stands as a monumental image on cloth designed and deployed according

¹²⁴ Author’s interview with the organizers of the exhibitions, Mexico City, March 2003.

Moreover, it is important to realize that since the late 1960s, student mobilizations in Mexico have taken lead in improvising mass communication techniques (including murals, banners and graffiti) in order to counter official propaganda as well as to maintain an active area of critical public discourse.

¹²⁵ Author’s interview with Sergio Valdez, Mexico City, March 2003.

to the perspectives of particular artist(s) and for tactical necessities, for particular audience in several particular locations. As a mobile medium, it is distinguished by its use to enhance the public awareness of issues and events that would have otherwise been excluded from visibility in the official public sphere. In this context, public representation requires mobility as much as expression.

Regarding its relationship to a more traditional mural practice, the transient mural often consists of an exclusively visual discourse specifically developed for its combined mobility and monumentality. Such is the case of Marela Zacarías's mural entitled *Otro mundo posible* (Other world is possible), an outcome of the Xochimilco project. Zacarías¹²⁶ is a member of the youngest generation of artists and activists in Mexico that seeks to reinvigorate their country's revolutionary past and

¹²⁶ Like many of her artistic forbearers in Mexico, Marela Zacarías explores social issues by painting. After almost six years of living in the USA, where she studied mural art at Kenyon College at Gambier, Ohio and participated in various public and community art projects, she returned to Mexico to live in the capital city, and to paint murals and oil paintings. Before participating in Xochimilco symposium, she has been an assistant artist for *Metamorfosis*, a mural executed by organization *Mural Comunitario* in San Miguel Ajusco and sponsored by the Tlalpan district. Some of her murals and political banners have been published in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *U.S.A. Today*, *D.C. Free Press*, *Excelsior*, *La Jornada*, *Ovaciones*, *Novedades*, and *The Economist* magazine.

Author's interview with Marela Zacarías, Mexico City, March 2003.

carry it into the future.¹²⁷ From her mural in the Red Patio, one can derive the key determinants of collective opposition, an opposition strongly felt by many left-oriented Mexican artists, as well as international artists of her generation. On the front plane appears a colorful cluster of young people with banners demonstrating against the war in Iraq, declared by the USA shortly before the mural's execution (fig.20). The figure of the US president George W. Bush, whose face is morphed with the one of Adolf Hitler, navigates the strings of a puppet recognizably representing the Mexican president Vicente Fox (fig.21). With grey colored background images of US soldiers, combatants in gas masks, a large gas pipe, and heavy army machinery, the author further justifies her anti-war campaign theme. By including the portraits, names or signatures of students of UAM who assisted her during the process of painting her iconography, Zacarías attempted to emphasize the visibility of local experience and territorial boundaries over abstract narratives of national or, in this case, international issues. In its essence, *Otro mundo posible* summarizes Marela's artistic credo:

"All my paintings make a social statement.
Each statement is based on my written and
visual research and it interprets something

¹²⁷ In fact, the artist officially claims her art and ideology to be partly influenced by the *tres grandes*.

happening to humanity. I focus on human beings because we need to understand our self-destructive nature as a human race. The people in my paintings are screaming for help, they ask for compassion and solidarity.”¹²⁸

Moreover, Marela Zacarías represents one of the few Mexican female muralists, the number of which decreases as one moves down the social hierarchy. It has to be admitted, however, that while the Mexican School¹²⁹ rarely centered its visual narratives on female historical actors, many of those who perceive themselves as reviving the legacy of the *tres grandes* place great emphasis on the social, political and historical agency of the women.¹³⁰ As a female artist and the author of the female portraits flanked by their actual names inside her

¹²⁸ See: <http://www.marela.org>

¹²⁹ To expand upon this issue, see, for example Elena Poniatowska's book *Querido Diego, Te abraza Quiela* (Ediciones Era, México, 1978), in which clearly implies a gendered absence as central to the Mexican School's public discourse since it does not include the experience of the private sphere to which women are historically consigned.

Few exceptions can be found in the works of Diego Rivera, such as his 1928 fresco in the Secretaría de Educación Pública *Distribución de armas* (The distribution of arms), which includes portraits of Modotti and Kahlo. On the whole, most of the female characters in the works of *tres grandes* are assigned the role symbolic representations of national revolutionary visual discourse, not active protagonists of social change.

¹³⁰ Among others, for example, Arnold Belkin, Gustavo Chávez or José Hernández Delgadillo.

mural, Zacarias stands as a pronounced reference about the increased political participation and recognition of social power gained by women through their activist roles in the formation of the urban movements in Mexico. With regards to this, Bruce Campbell further concludes, that “unofficial muralism participates in development of the unofficial public spheres organizing against official public authority by raising the profile of women to the status of constructors of public meaning and space and agents of historical and social transformation.”¹³¹ Hence, it is important to recognize female artists such as Marela Zacarías, as creators of alternative representation inside the culture, for they subvert the binary oppositions by which they had been defined. This however does not change the fact that, on the whole, the public image of women in Mexico continues to create tension. This tension exists not only between official public discourse and unofficial muralism, but also in relation to other artistic practices referring to “the unthinkable” which is “completely part of culture; but it is completely excluded by dominant culture.”¹³²

Furthermore, as murals continue to appear as sites of contention, one has to admit that numerous recently painted

¹³¹ Campbell, 2003, p.95.

¹³² Butler, Judith: Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity (Thinking Gender), Routledge, 1989, p.89.

walls in Mexico suffered were destroyed. In fact, politically motivated censorship and various forms of maltreatment became a common experience for many mural artists.¹³³ The destruction of murals by the authorities has often been explained as “incidental to a change in administration, a bureaucratic accident, or an alteration in the physical environment of government office, rather than as a result of ideological difference.”¹³⁴ Fortunately, the artists do not necessarily remain silent. In 1996, following destruction of several ‘controversial’ murals on the Supreme Court building painted by the artistic group *Resistencia Eléctrica*, Felipe Ehrenberg made a straightforward statement for the reporters: “What they [the official authorities] paint over in black signifies what they always do when they insist ‘nothing had happened here’: in Huasteca, ‘nothing had happened here’; Chiapas, ‘nothing happened here.’ They are always able to paint something over it so it looks like there is nothing there.”¹³⁵

¹³³ For example, during one of our conversations, Gustavo Chávez calmly admitted that, in the course of his unofficial activities, he has been frequently threatened by the state authorities, which on one occasion led to his short imprisonment.

¹³⁴ Campbell, 2003, p.35.

¹³⁵ Aranda Jesús: ‘Durante dos horas, la SCJN fue el mural de la inconformidad’, *La Jornada*, February 12, 1996, p.7.

I am using Bruce Campbell’s translation into English, which is included in his book Mexican Murals in Times of Crisis, p.164.

2. TANIPERLA

Another tactic, i.e. not staying 'silent' to the destruction of murals, appeared five years earlier in the same location of the above-mentioned symposium. The mural, created by local students in *Patio Rojo* in 1998 is almost an exact copy of the mural entitled *Vida y sueños de la Cañada Perla* (Life and Dreams in the Perla Canyon), also known as *The Taniperla Mural* which was destroyed shortly after its creation in the pro-Zapatista Tzeltal settlement of Taniperla, Chiapas, in 1998. It was painted for Sergio Valdez Ruvalcaba, a professor at the Department of Education and Communication at UAM-X and co-organizers of the symposium, to commemorate his imprisonment connected to the creation of the original mural. No matter how over-idealized or even utopian its narrative appears (figs.22-24), it is important to highlight the importance of this mural as an outcome of the public act of resurrecting the message carried by the destroyed mural in its original form. This act offers a possible strategy against any form of unreasonable vandalism committed on publicly accessible artworks. Similarly to this case, any destroyed visual message can be thus recreated and even further amplified so as to

become an epitome of counter mobilization of the suppressed cultural form.¹³⁶

3. TANIPERLA, LA CAÑADA DE PERLA, CHIAPAS

The Perla canyon is a remote location inside the Lacandón jungle, named after the Perla river which runs through it and continues for some eighty kilometers in the northeast direction to eventually join the Jataté river. This geographical area is sustained by a rich variety of resources found in the territory marked off by the two mountain ranges forming the boundary of the canyon. The annual rain precipitation of three thousand millimeters is an indicative factor to characterize climatic conditions in this subtropical humid region. Apart from the unique variety of fauna and flora, the Perla canyon was regarded as important for having one of the richest ecosystems in the world. The local ecosystem, however, has been gradually deteriorating because of the maltreatment, mainly by the state interest groups operating within the region.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ As an act of solidarity, the Taniperla mural has been subsequently recreated in several other locations in Mexico as well as in Argentina, Brazil, USA, Canada, Spain, Italy and Germany.

¹³⁷ Howard, Philip and Homer-Dixon, Thomas: "Environmental Scarcity and Violent Conflict: The Case of Chiapas, Mexico", Occasional Paper, American Association for the Advancement of Science, Washington D.C., and University of Toronto, January 1996.

During the 1940s, the canyon became a new home for a small population of indigenous immigrants whose collective dream was to own their individual piece of land. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, small settlements in the mountains and larger settlements along the river began to appear. Among those which have survived until today are Censo, Taniperla, Perla de Acapulco, Zapotal, San Caralampio, San José, and Calvario. There are approximately fifteen thousand people living in this large mountain corridor. Life in the Perla canyon has always been extremely harsh, particularly for numerous groups of *Tzeltales* employed in cattle raising *fincas* or farms.¹³⁸

One of the indigenous settlements in the Perla canyon, the Tzeltal *ejido* of Taniperla, became known internationally for the events surrounding the creation and prompt destruction of a mural painting entitled *Vida y sueños de la Cañada Perla* (Life and Dreams in the Perla Canyon, fig.25). The origins of the idea of painting a mural can be traced back to the beginning of February 1998. Professor Sergio Valdes Ruvalcaba¹³⁹, better known as 'Checo' Valdez, and his colleagues visited the indigenous community of Taniperla to conduct research as a

¹³⁸ See: Viqueira, Juan Pedro and Ruz, Mario Humberto (eds.): Chiapas: Los rumbos de otra historia, UNAM and Universidad de Guadalajara, 1995.

¹³⁹ As a researcher and a professor at the Department of Education and Communication at Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana – Unidad Xochimilco and Sergio Valdes Ruvalcaba specializes in the use of graphic art for comparative research and education.

part of larger academic project called “Tzeltal Education, Knowledge, and Community Values” led by Dr. Antonio Paoli. Professor Valdes lived in the community, and his activity was limited to organizing cooperative graphic workshops, which enabled the community to express, via graphics, the aesthetic values of *Las Cañadas* inhabitants. In principle, he managed to establish a close relationship based on trust and respect with the local people. This was the reason why the authorities from several communities approached him to announce their interest in “making a great painting with themes and topics which are important for the inhabitants of Las Cañadas.” He replied that that he would be able “to explain this to people, to learn more about their dreams, to help them decide but, at the end, nobody paints the same”.¹⁴⁰ Still, excited about their proposal, he returned to Mexico City to make the necessary preparations to conduct such project. In the third week of March 1998, he returned to the Perla canyon.

After initial planning and explanations, men and women from twelve communities arrived at Taniperla to participate in the creation of the mural on the front wall of the Municipality House. Under Valdez’s coordination, they divided into several groups with different concepts and working dynamics, and

¹⁴⁰ Author’s interview with Sergio Valdes Ruvalcaba,, Mexico City, February 2003 and Antonio Paoli, Mexico City, February, 2003

proceeded to concentrate on the subjects of peace, harmony, unity and happiness. There was no wish to include scenes of war and death: "Each of us would like to paint only those topics which he/she likes," they told to Checo Valdez.¹⁴¹ After a long and engaged discussion, each group agreed on how to visually approach particular themes, such as 'water is life', 'cooperative for the unity', "assembly for deciding", 'Zapatistas are guarding us', Zapata as a hero', 'coffee plantation for earning', 'the word of women', 'radio to communicate', and 'leaders and their word'. After fifteen days of painting, the mural was finished on April 10, 1998. It was meant to accompany the inauguration of the autonomous municipality of Ricardo Flores Magón and to commemorate the death of Emiliano Zapata.

The following day, Checo Valdez and eight other people were arrested during a raid by military and police officers to dismantle the newly established autonomous municipal government. They were accused of theft, pillory and rebellion. The last accusation has two preconditions according to the state Penal Code: possession of firearms, and the commission of violent acts neither of which have been substantiated. Professor Valdez faced a possible nine-year sentence if convicted. After spending some time in Cerro Hueco, the main

¹⁴¹ Author's interview with Sergio Valdes Ruvalcaba, Mexico City, February 2003.

state prison in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, he was eventually released. This incident however caused an outrage among many intellectuals and human rights activists in Mexico and abroad:

“The arrest of Professor Sergio Valdes Ruvalcaba in the Taniperla community on April 11th, is a wake up call to those of us who are presently working in indigenous communities, whether as researchers, in development, health or education. At this juncture, even paralysis and silence do not guarantee personal safety. The mere act of living in a zone of conflict at this time, which is the situation for the inhabitants of over half of the state of Chiapas, makes us "suspects," "presumed guilty," or just "plain guilty." Such was the case of Professor Valdes Ruvalcaba.”¹⁴²

According to Sergio Valdes, the mural is meant to represent an allegory of the “harmonious life of the indigenous people of Chiapas” after they “took arms to gain control over their own lives.”¹⁴³ However, when closely observing its iconography, it is possible to deduce that the mural, executed in

¹⁴² Hernández Castillo, Aida: “Threats and Discord in the Chiapas Investigation”, <http://isla.igc.org/Features/Chiapas/chiapas2.html>
See also: “American Association for the Advancement of Science: Human Rights Action Network”, http://shr.aaas.org/aaashran/alert.php?a_id=111

¹⁴³ Author’s interview with Sergio Valdes Ruvalcaba, Mexico City, February 2003.

a traditional 'primitivist' manner, represents an over-idealized ideas and concepts about everyday life of indigenous communities in the region. The narrative offers a story of happy families and their households, an egalitarian redistribution of goods, communal collecting of crops, all in the middle of a utopian vision of an ideal ecosystem, displaying all of the different types of colorful fruit, green meadows, jaguars, deer, and horses. The blue river streams – allegedly designated as a metaphor of life – are peacefully running through the valley, reflecting the luminous color of the sky above adorned with birds, stars, diamonds, butterflies, and with the smiling sun and moon at both corners of the mural. As discussed in different parts of this text, all of these images have to some degree a symbolic value for the Chiapas indigenous communities. In this particular case, they can also be interpreted as a pictorial topographical designation for the region. This is even more obvious when the viewer studies the central background image, where one can find three mountain ranges, which designate the three canyons. Close to the sun, there is an indication of another hill, painted in blue color to mark its distance, which suggest the presence of another canyon and underlines the overall fragmentation of the space into a succession of horizons.

It can be logically assumed that this unusually long mural image is meant to be read from the male-oriented right-hand corner to the female symbolism on the extreme left; from the dawn towards a night sky guarded by the moon¹⁴⁴ placed above the head of Mother Earth represented as a large female figure.¹⁴⁵ As I am going to demonstrate, it nonetheless creates no difficulties to reverse the direction and interpret the mural in a traditional manner of left-to-right 'reading' direction of a visual narrative. With her serene posture, Mother Earth visually interconnects the blossoming fertile land in the lower part with the lively night firmament. In fact, it is her waist, which presents the dividing point between these two sections, neither of which offers any sign of their authors' attempt to engage with perspective. Some of the colorful stars on the night sky form a discreet halo around her head, which further strengthens a symbolic importance of the Mother Earth, elevating the wish for land ownership to the level of religious faith, as a crucial

¹⁴⁴ Among the Classic Maya, a young beautiful female was the moon goddess, and she frequently sits on the crescent of the Maya glyph for moon, nearing a rabbit in her arms. The modern Maya believe that the female moon was dimmed after a squabble with her husband the sun, and that she may have lost an eye in the quarrel. For more information concerning the concept of duality in the thoughts of the Maya, see: Carrasco, David: Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmovision and Ceremonial Centers, Harper San Fransisco, 1990.

¹⁴⁵ The idea that the large figure of woman at the left-hand corner represents the Mother Earth was suggested to me by a person who witnessed the mural's short existence and who wished his identity to remain undisclosed.

unifying element among members of particular community or particular region inside Chiapas.¹⁴⁶

The two round gray hills, representing nutritious bosoms, spatially extend symbolic references to the land, fertility, life and female aspects of the indigenous system of beliefs, which were have constantly been inserted into the neo-Zapatistas' revolutionary tenets. The grey bosoms rest on two white baldachin-like clouds, the soft texture of which gives an allusion of a nest, safely accommodating the future treasure. The remaining space on the left-hand section of the mural is filled with symbolic traits common to this type of visual and iconographical approach to primitive painting: an indigenous *campesino* working in the corn field (an unequivocal reference to the most important plant of indigenous Mexico), a modest house with laminated roof (the temple or church), and the people gathered around the fire inside the building (religious unity).¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ For the inherent importance of communally owned and its historical, social, ethnological, economic, and ecological implications for everyday life of indigenous communities in Chiapas, see: Simon, Joel: Endangered Mexico: An Environment on the Edge, LAB, London, 1998; La tierra en Chiapas, viejos problemas nuevos, Plaza y Valdéz, México, 1999; and Collier George: Fields of Tzotzil: The Ecological Bases of Tradition in Highland Chiapas, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1975.

¹⁴⁷ For a concise overview of particular symbolic references and their relevance for the Maya regions, see: Miller, Mary Elen and Taube Karl: The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya, Thames and Hudson, London, 1993.

This left-hand side of the mural also includes some subtle details which. One of them is a group of women in colorful dresses that form a circle through which the visions of diversity and harmony become intertwined, at last. The authors' intention to engage the viewer in an unconditional idealization of all possible aspects of communal life is further amplified by a dove, a universal symbol of peace, flying over the field of blossoming flowers. The tranquil overtones in the lower part of the mural depict everyday life of the Las Cañadas inhabitants – a woman washing her clothes in the river, children and their mothers bathing close together, a father and son carrying firewood on their backs, or people talking inside their home - can be again inserted into a prophetic visual discourse of the Zapatista ideology. What brings me to this assertion is a small house in the middle of these familiar activities: a building belonging to so-called *Campamento Civil por la Paz* (Civil Camp for Peace) which can be found in many Zapatista communities. These camps are designed to house human rights observers, who are conventionally recruited from national or international groups supportive of the Zapatista movement.

The right-hand side of the mural, forming the announced male-focused thematic counterpart to the predominantly female and maternal symbolism of its left edge, begins with the dawn

and an announcement of a new day. In ancient Mesoamerica, the solar god tends to be a youthful male, consistent with the vigor and power of the rising sun. The first dawning marks the beginning of everyday reality, in which the gods are represented by a supernatural time of dream and living gods are re-enacted in the apparent movements of the starry sky.¹⁴⁸

In the Maya region, the sun was also identified with the most powerful creature of the forest, the jaguar, painted at the bottom of the mountain range close to the sun.¹⁴⁹ Perhaps because the Maya and the jaguar shared the dominion over the tropical rain forest, the Maya had more jaguar deities and deities with jaguar associations than any other Mesoamerican people, which indeed justified its presence in the Taniperla mural, as well as in

¹⁴⁸ See, for example: Tedlock, Denis: Popol Vuh, The Mayas Book of the Dawn and Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings, Touchstone, New York, 1996.

¹⁴⁹ Jaguar gods were present in every major Mesoamerican civilization, but jaguars were also important shamanic creatures, and in states of ritual transformation, humans changed themselves into jaguars. The Maya hieroglyph that is read *uay*, meaning animal companion of *Tonal* (a spirit-familiar or soul) is itself an *ahau* glyph half-covered with jaguar pelt. For example, according to Sahagún, Aztec “conjurers went about carrying its hide – the hide of its forehead and of its chest, and its tail, its nose, and its claws, and its heart, and its fangs, and its snout. It is said that they went about their tasks with them – that with them they did daring deeds, that because of them they were feared.” See: Sahagún, Bernardino de: The Florentine Codex: A General History of the Things of New Spain, Book 11, University of Utah Press, 1982 and Marínez, José Luis: El “Códice florentino” y la “Historia general” de Sahagún, Archivo General de la Nación, México, 1989.

other pictorial achievements inside the Zapatistas autonomous region.

Other scenes depicted in the right-hand section include the male circle of harmony and diversity, boys playing basketball, coffee beans being put out to dry, men working on electrical connections for the village, repairing roads, and performing other public works needed in the community. On the front plane of the lower part of this section, one can immediately notice children entering a community school. As in the case of other public buildings throughout the Zapatista autonomous zone, particularly schools, one can read on the school's front wall "*Soldados, drogas y putas ¡no! Maíz, frijol y paz ¡sí!*" (Soldiers, drugs and whores – no! Corn, beans and peace – yes!) It refers to one of the basic rules officially introduced by the EZLN into all Zapatista communities immediately after the beginning of their resistance: no members of the Mexican army are welcome in the territory, unconditional prohibition for selling, consumption or possession of any drugs and alcohol, plus a strict ban on any form of prostitution.

At the extreme upper right-hand corner, on the top of the hill above the village, an attentive eye can identify a small antenna belonging to radio transmitter, a visual counterpart to the San Andrés Accords' proposal "that the corresponding national agencies should prepare a new communications law to

allow indigenous peoples to acquire, operate, and administer their own communications media".¹⁵⁰ The antenna is literally surrounded by the Zapatista combatants spread across a large part of a mountainous horizon. They are engaged in singing the Zapatista anthem, the opening lines of which include a direct reference to their role of being the guardians of indigenous people's homes, while observing their undisturbed life from the surrounding mountains.¹⁵¹

The narrative also focuses on the entrance door to the Municipality House in the middle of the building front. As a symbol of Taniperla¹⁵², the reed painted on the door has a

¹⁵⁰ "*Medios de comunicación*. A fin de propiciar un diálogo intercultural desde el nivel comunitario hasta el nacional, que permita una nueva y positiva relación entre los pueblos indígenas y entre éstos y el resto de la sociedad, es indispensable dotar a estos pueblos de sus propios medios de comunicación, los cuales son también instrumentos claves para el desarrollo de sus culturas. Por tanto, se propondrá a las instancias nacionales respectivas, la elaboración de una nueva ley de comunicación que permita a los pueblos indígenas adquirir, operar y administrar sus propios medios de comunicación."

"Documento 2: Propuestas Conjuntas que el Gobierno Federal y el EZLN se Comprometen a Enviar a las Instancias de Debate y Decisión Nacional, Correspondientes al Punto 1.4 de las Reglas de Procedimiento",

http://www.ezln.org/san_andres/documento_2.htm

¹⁵¹ "Ya se mira el horizonte
combatiente zapatista
el cambio marcará
a los que vienen atrás"

For the whole Zapatista anthem, see:

<http://es.geocities.com/somohermanos/himnozapatista.html>

¹⁵² Taniperla literally means the Tzeltal word for "reed" ("tani") joined with the name of the Perla river.

legitimate right to preside over the entire mural image. Within the context of mural's iconography, the door represents a symbolic entrance into the world of peace, while indicating the geographical location from where the realm of peace would be reached: Taniperla, Chiapas, Mexico. Above the door, one can read the Tzeltal sign "*Sna yu'n ateletic yu'un comonaletic*", meaning "The House of Community Authorities". From each side, the two Mexican popular heroes and one of the principal revolutionary inspirers of the Zapatista resistance supervise the entrance. Richardo Flores Magón, on the left-hand edge of the door, is planting the seeds of knowledge across the canyons. The act of sawing is depicted by the dropping letters of the "*libertad*" (liberty) word from his left palm. On a horse on the opposite side is Emiliano Zapata wearing a red scarf with his popular slogan, which was added to the Mexican Constitution, written on it: "*la tierra es de quien la trabaja*" ("land for those who work it")¹⁵³. This central scene is finalized with images of a man and woman walking towards the entrance to the Municipality House. The man approaching from the left is reading unspecified documents, while the women on the other side is, according the Tzeltal author of this image, "not only

¹⁵³ See: Womack, 1968 and Carpizo, Jorge: La Constitución mexicana de 1917, Editorial Porrúa, México, 1998.

carrying *pozol*¹⁵⁴ inside her bag, but also some contracts to discuss with the authorities.¹⁵⁵

Within the context of other Zapatista murals in Chiapas, this work probably offers the strongest pictorial representation of one of the basic structural principles of Mesoamerican religious thought, which is the use of paired oppositions as recognition of the essential interdependence of opposites. Apart from the male and female principles, common oppositional pairings include life and death, sky and earth, zenith and nadir, day and night, sun and moon, and fire and water. As in this case, it can readily be seen that such a series of pairings could easily be linked to a larger group of oppositions. Thus, one side could entail the male, life, sky, zenith, day, sun and fire, whereas the other would be the female, death, earth, nadir, night, moon, and water. As demonstrated in the Taniperla and other murals in Chiapas, such larger structural oppositions are evident in both pre-

¹⁵⁴ This traditional drink of the Mayan peoples of Central America and Mexico is made from fermented corn. *Pozol* has both high nutritional value and outstanding medicinal properties, and is traditionally used by Mayan communities for treating giardia and other intestinal infections. For all these qualities, the indigenous communities are carefully protecting their collective knowledge about its preparation. See: López Juan: Mexicanismos en el Diccionario de la lengua española, Instituto Cultural Cabañas y Secretaría General, Unidad Editorial, Gobierno del Estado de Jalisco, México, 1988.

¹⁵⁵ Author's conversation with a person who witnessed the mural's short existence and who wished his identity to remain undisclosed, San Cristóbal de la Casa, Chiapas, September 1997.

Conquest period and contemporary Mesoamerican religious systems.

Another strong feature is the Taniperla mural's primitivist nature, which, as explained earlier in the text, is one of the common features of many Zapatista wall paintings. However, unlike other comparable examples, the entire work is a product of local indigenous inhabitants, thus, it cannot be regarded as an imitation of primitivist styles and narratives which are dominant over numerous other art and craft products throughout the region. In fact, the Taniperla mural embodies most of what has been so distinctive about the indigenous visual art production of the past decades, including the vibrant color range, interwoven relationship of people with nature suggesting regional self-sufficiency (in a traditional respect for nature combined with a modern mastery of contemporary resources which interconnect the villages but leave the ecosystem unharmed) and multi-signifying link between the visual narrative and geographic references to particular locations. Since 1994, this content would have been inherently baptized by a conventionalized depiction of the EZLN as the primary source of all changes within the region during the past ten years. There is no attempt to evaluate the nature of these changes other than through uncritical, over-celebrative and over-idealized interpretations. Indeed the mural is called *Life*

and *Dreams in the Perla Canyon*, thus, it is more valuable not only to look for critical references to reality, but also to (re)claim the authors' right to their dreams and accept them without reservation.

4. MURALS VS. GRAFFITI

In conclusion, it is clear that the main protagonists of the post Mexican School muralism have been aware of the powerful tradition of their well-known predecessors. Through the diverse pictorial outcomes they have succeeded to forge their own artistic philosophies and styles, drawing on contemporary influences and events. Yet, the story of Mexican contemporary muralism could not be complete without at least a brief consideration of its relationship towards so called graffiti art¹⁵⁶. According to Bruce Campbell, "it is Mexican graffiti, publicly framed as scandal rather than art, that has been the most officially visible form of unofficial murals practice."¹⁵⁷ It would be rather problematic and for the sake of this text largely

¹⁵⁶ The word *graffito* (plural *graffiti*) is used for any casual writing, rude drawing, or marking on the walls of buildings, as distinguished from a deliberate writing known as an inscription. The word comes from the Greek term *graphein* (to write). Twentieth-century preoccupation with the accidental and other manifestations of the unconscious has stimulated an interest in this form of self-expression. Large, elaborate, and multicolored graffiti created with spray paint on building walls and subway cars first achieved a notorious prominence in New York City during the late 1960s.

¹⁵⁷ Campbell, 2002, p.22.

unproductive to dispute this statement. What should be nonetheless acknowledged is the fact that the invention of the spray-can stimulated a level of raw execution and mode of expression that, since the early 1980s, facilitated an urban subculture of writing on the walls, in effect demonstrating graffiti. This act has taken on an additional form and meaning in Mexico, particularly in Mexico City. Although graffiti art is certainly not a Mexican invention, its appropriation by urban youth, undisputedly aware of the prestigious status of the Mexican School muralism, produces pictorial variations relevant within the context of Mexico, through employing significantly image-oriented forms of mass cultural production and a visual language of local spatial politics.¹⁵⁸ Using their ability to challenge stereotypes of contemporary Mexican society or to pinpoint otherwise overlooked issues, the Mexican *grafiteros* constantly tackle the fixed historical perception of the Mexican School and its legacy, which still ignores the widespread graffiti practice and excludes it from mural art. Consequently, “in addition to the transgressive territorial sensibilities characteristic of graffiti art in general, Mexican graffiti art is distinguished

¹⁵⁸ There is also clearly pronounced formal tendency to make graffiti more “Mexican” as their authors prefer to use for example, aerosol technique instead of spray nozzles so common among US graffiti artists. Moreover, Mexican *grafiteros* often refuse to use standardized English expressions to come closer to exclusively Spanish-speaking recipients.

above all by a heightened awareness of the exclusionary ideological mechanisms defending the boundaries around the nation's cultural monuments."¹⁵⁹

Despite the fact that more orthodox graffiti artists, such as Pedro Van Leger, insist that their work is an evolution of 20th century Mexican muralism, the generation of 'traditional' muralists such as Felipe Ehrenberg and Daniel Manrique find little connection not only with this novel form of spray-can muralism, but also with the Mexican School mural production as such. Daniel Manrique summarized such resentment in the following statement: "I do not respect work of Siqueiros, Orozco or Rivera. I understand Rivera was an excellent painter, but he did not create anything. He was an excellent learner, but he didn't leave anything new behind," adding that he cannot take graffiti seriously either although he believes that "even good graffiti artists may have good technique, but their work lacks content."¹⁶⁰ The ideological and aesthetic division between mural and graffiti artists prevails. Until now, it has rarely crossed the boundaries of discursive and/or polemic argumentation. In the case of the youngest generation of Mexican artists-muralists, who perceive the 'revolutionary

¹⁵⁹ Campbell, Bruce, 2003, p.122.

¹⁶⁰ Quoted in:

http://www.kinetictravel.net/feature_articles/art_city/SFmex_Graf_Art.html

burden' of the *tres grandes* as a more distant part of their history than their older colleagues, such polemics loses its proclaimed coherence.

In contemporary Mexico, as well as elsewhere in the world, art gradually ceases to be perceived as a cluster of highly specialized divided categories, fixed techniques, defined modes of expression and forms of presentation. What matters more is the ability of its creators to engage whatever medium they chose, to challenge the superimposed image of reality within the world that people create, maintaining personal (private or public) connections through works of art, and reaching the fringe of mutually shared experience. As I am trying to reveal, throughout the 20-th century, mural painting in Mexico has gradually taken a more 'unofficial' and more personally engaged direction, although public space and involvement of the community during the process of artistic creation remain crucial. The visual flow of images are newly interwoven again and again in order to extend and broaden visual, mental and physical space allowing for possibilities of an alternative public narrative, in which various modes of perception can be interlocked with an everyday reality of today's Mexico.

CONCLUSION

As I was trying to suggest in this text, the cultural value of mural production is political in the sense that it responds to interests and motives of the social world and intends to transform the space which it occupies. When doing so, such visual works orient itself toward the construction of its own public. The mural process that aspires to create mural art must therefore be multiple and combined. A similar thought has been pointed out by Bruce Campbell his book Mexican Murals in Times of Crisis:

[Mural practice must be] making its commitments and negotiating compromises within the balance of social forces; attempting to fix in some manner the social context in which it takes place; hailing a more or less broad sector of the social milieu; and seeking out some meaningful figure with an eye toward symbolic consensus, or "no man's land" capable of negotiating through perspectival conflicts over the space of the work."¹⁶¹

Only by attention to the practical components of muralism does it become possible to recognize a contextual variety of mural work. In fact, these are nothing more than distinct modes of

¹⁶¹ Campbell, 2003, p.205.

formal compromise between the production of the mural image and its public. An alternative delineation of contemporary muralism is thus at the same time a delineation of practical accomplishments distinguished by gaining the ground of particular spaces – concrete or social. Basic components of the mural work include, at least, the location of the mural within the varied context of mural production, the aesthetics through which the work defines itself formally, its distinct techniques and materials, and the types of public discourse that are mobilized around and through the production of its image.

The mural form can be located as a point of contact between a visual aesthetic dimension, a discrete social space or site (in both architectural and social sense), and a general field of public discourse. The public sense opened by mural practice in Mexico has in this respect a close affinity to what Henri Lefebvre identifies as “monumental space”. The visual, special and public fields are coordinated by the mural form’s transposition of “ordinary” and “extraordinary” meaning in the construction of consensus that “overcomes conflicts, at least momentarily, even though it does not resolve them.”¹⁶² Like monumental space, the mural work tries to enable “a continual back-and-forth between the private speech of ordinary conversations and public speech of discourses, lectures,

¹⁶² Lefebvre, Henri: The Production of Space, Blackwell, London, 1993, p. 224.

sermons, rallying cries, and all theatrical forms of utterance."¹⁶³ However, as proved by Mexican muralism after the Mexican School, the mural form can only fulfill such a task when both its presence and its content come to make public sense. Without such coordination the image quite literally is 'out of place'.

The product of mural work is not the image alone, but also its perception by immediate public. The immediate public finds its image in the mural while, at the same time, the mural image encounters its meaningful public form in coalescence of immediate public. Of course, the mural form is likely to fade or decompose faster than its visual image. The specificity of the form can also be, and often is, ignored, suppressed or refused by public discourse that search a relationship with mural image but aims to free itself from public that gave impetus for creation of the mural image. What this means for art historical interpretation, however, is not that form becomes unreasonably fleeting and therefore too complicated to apprehend. Rather, the encounter with the image takes on greater critical urgency. Once it acknowledged the historical and political contingencies imposed on the mural form, formal criticism cannot afford to yield its critical ground by ignoring the procedures of transformation while the image is being created.

¹⁶³ Ibid., p.224.

Despite the current trends of contemporary muralism as discussed in this text, the intellectual, journalistic and historiographical consensus in Mexico is that Mexican muralism has passed over to the great historical beyond brought into sight by museological retrospectives and academic seminars. Here one encounters the public discourse which is articulated over and above a popular and semi-autonomous muralism that has gained strength since the end of Mexican School. The official public visibility that is able to emerge from underneath the layers of elite public discourse is selective, concentrated mainly on the successors of the *tres grandes*, or in the novel and fleeting effects of current mural production. That is to say that the visibility of unofficial muralism is discursively diminished in such a way that what emerges into official public light is little more than a weak, nostalgic populism or a spectacular 'effectiveness' divorced from any real or possible public other than of the 'expert'.

Access to the mass media and to the prestigious cultural circuits is a decisive factor in determining the aesthetic and public value of a mural. In addition to conflicts between official and unofficial sectors of cultural production, this has meant increasing divergence within the field of unofficial mural production, i.e. between local, popular muralism on one hand and those types of muralism oriented toward the prestige and

visibility afforded by mass mediation on the other. What is therefore important in mural production, “a cultural form that now has its own historical and social roots just as much in the popular sectors as in the institutional worlds of the state and the Church”, is the relative power and visibility allowed to distinct claims on public authority.¹⁶⁴

Murals continue to appear as site of conflicts in Mexico. In 2000, a student activist at the National University was imprisoned on charges of, among other things, destruction of the “artistic patrimony of the nation” because students protesting against raising tuition fees and privatization of university services edited a famous Siqueiros mural at UNAM.¹⁶⁵ Siqueiros’ mural entitled *The Right to Culture* (1952-56) included a list of revolutionary dates in the history of Mexico, culminating in the promise of another in “19??.” Activists altered the question marks to read “1999”, thus marking the largest student strike in national history as revolutionary. Meanwhile, ongoing conflict between Zapatista insurgents and official Mexico has generated both popular mural production and officially directed mural destruction in numerous indigenous communities in Chiapas.

¹⁶⁴ Campbell, 2003, p.186.

¹⁶⁵ Bellinghausen, Herman: “Historia fugaz de un mural perenne”, *La Jornada*, November 7, 2001, p.50.

In these cases of post-Mexican School era, one can see the cultural politics of neoliberalism at work on the received materials of the nation's cultural patrimony. The materials of national identity are being worked over, realigned, and modified to the needs of capital. At the same time, the state tries to adjust the given national cultural dimension of its legitimacy (i.e. the revolutionary nationalist tradition) to its role as guarantor of ongoing trans-nationalization from above. Popular appropriations and counter-official mobilizations of the cultural form are confronted and disciplined accordingly. Consequently, the public circumstances of mural work may no longer be national in any simple sense, although one must immediately add that they never have been. Future mural documentation and criticism should undoubtedly include the public conditions and accomplishments represented by mural form. Tracing multilayered dimensions of mural production is a necessity for grasping the public circumstances and genesis of the mural image and for coming to terms with the broader struggle over collective meaning and interest with which the murals work is imbricated. For art historical interpretations this task turns out to be an equally necessary exercise in critical self-discovery as well as regarding the public consequences, political implications and even relevance of cultural criticism in the era of 'globalization' everyone is struggling to define.

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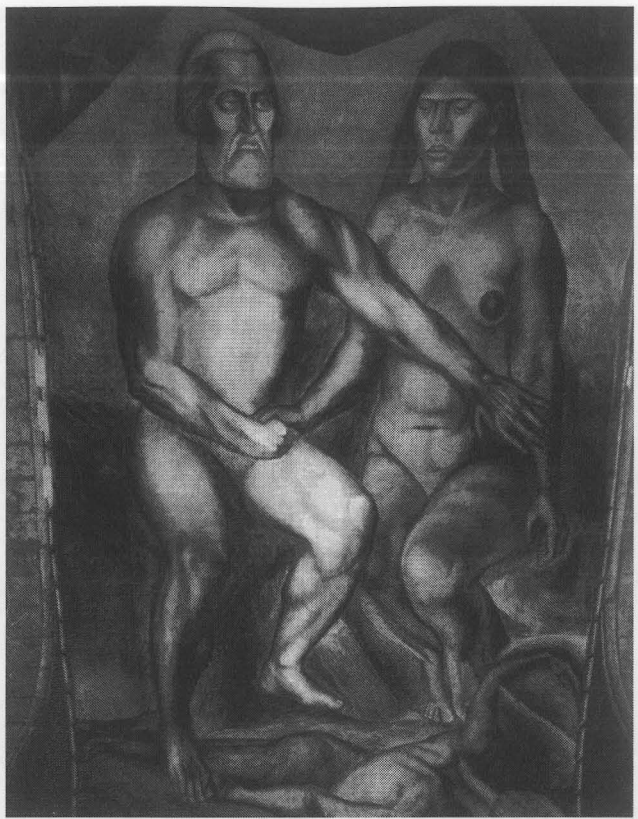


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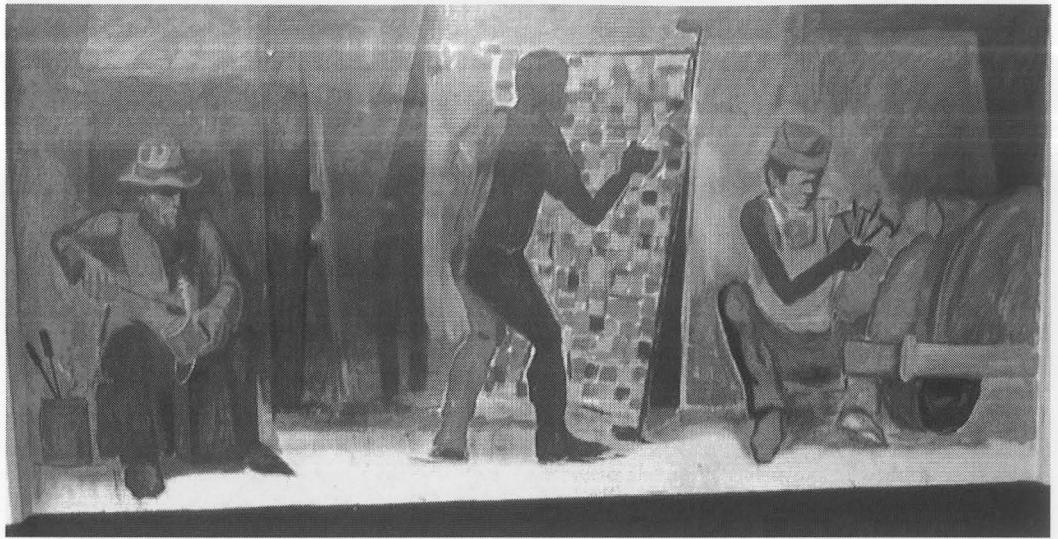


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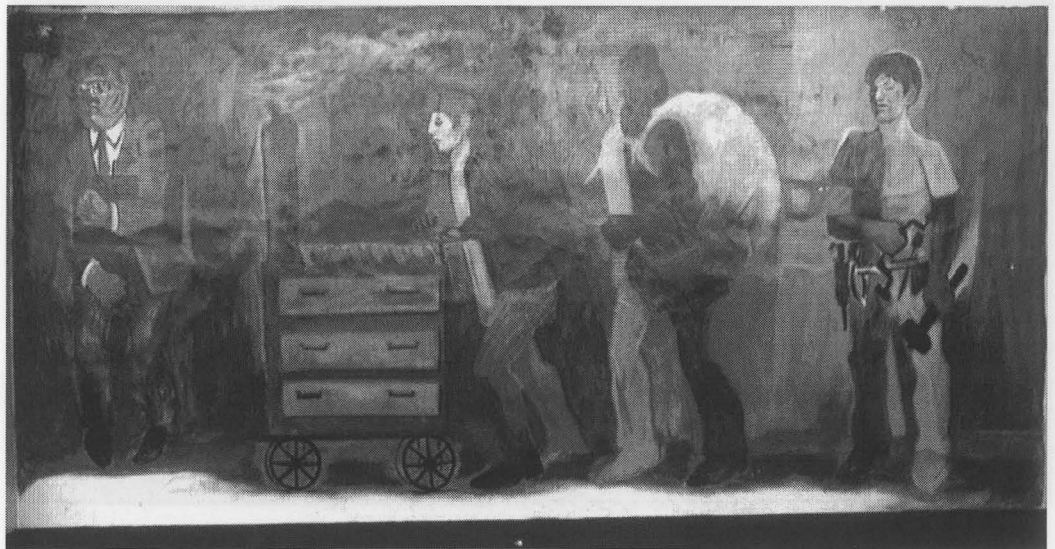


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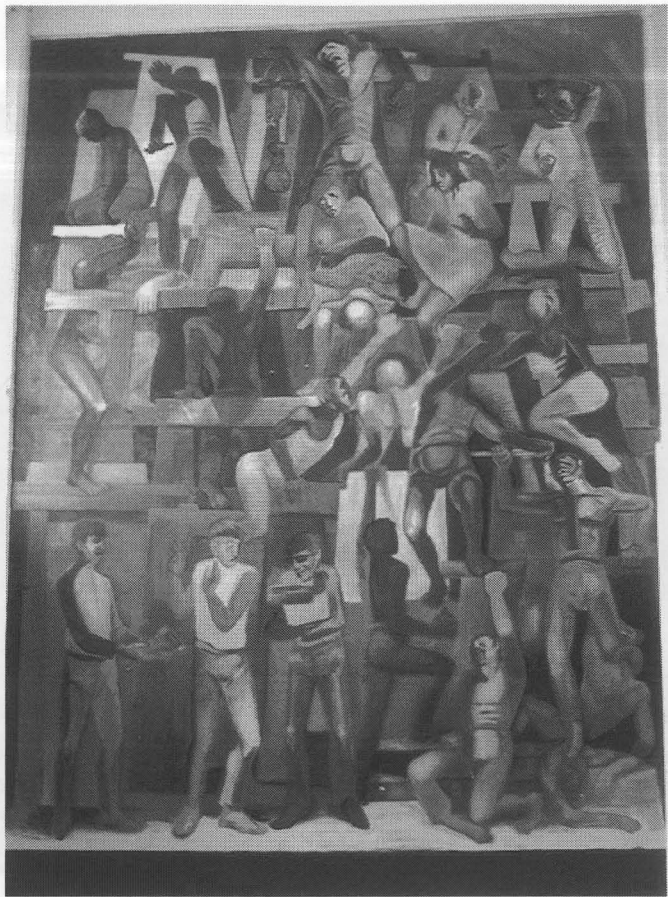


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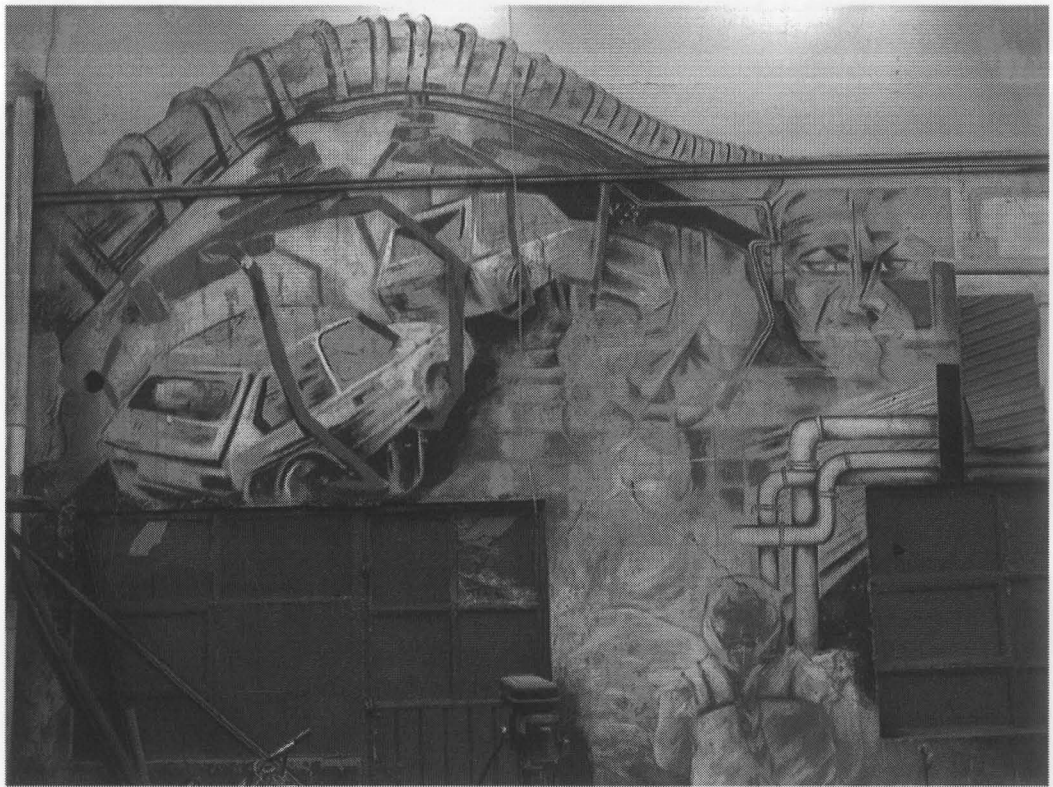


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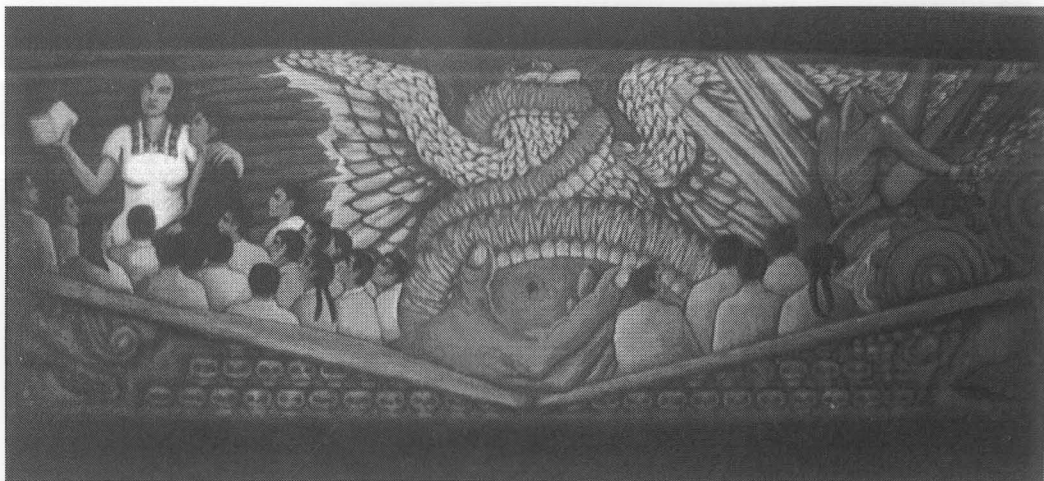


Fig.15 Gustavo Chávez: *In Defense of Public Education* (1998-99, acrylic, Secondary School of Technology, Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, Estado de México). Photo: Gustavo Chávez

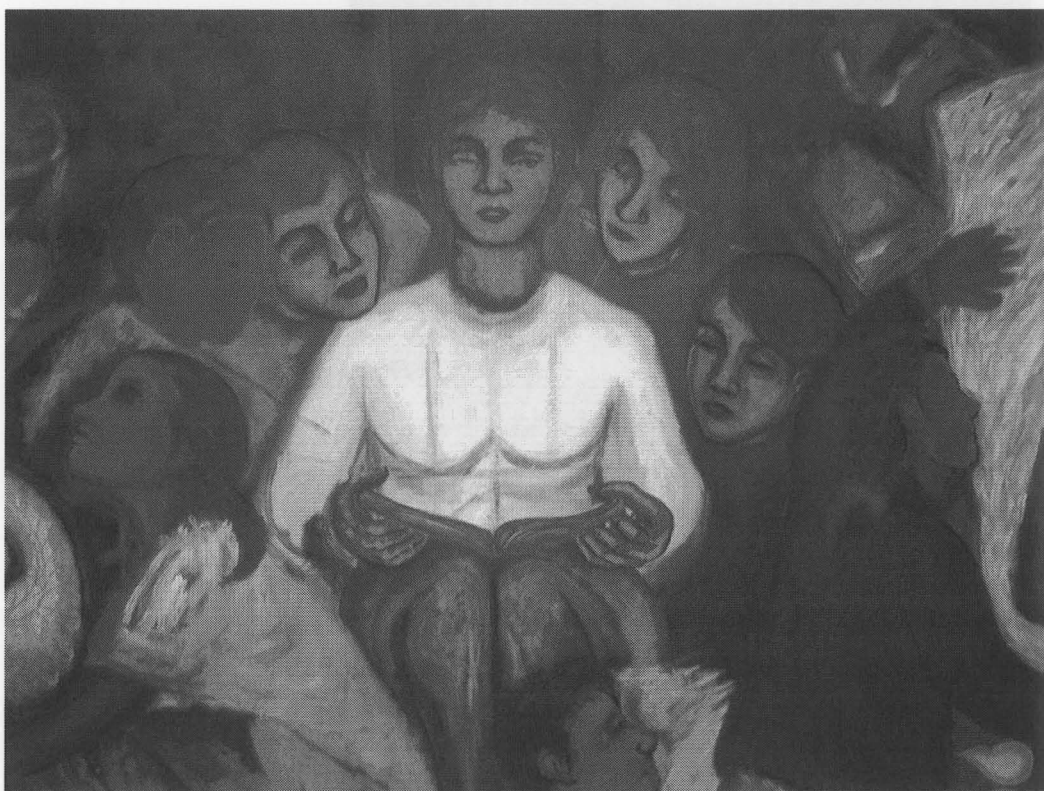


Fig.16 Gustavo Chávez: from the series *The Right for Public Education* – detail (2002-2003, acrylic, stairway, SEIEM, Toluca, Estado de México). Photo: Petra Binková © Petra Binkova 2003

Fig.16 Gustavo Chávez: from series *The Right for Public Education* – detail (2002-2003, acrylic, stairway, SEIEM, Toluca, Estado de México). Photo: Petra Binková © Petra Binkova 2003

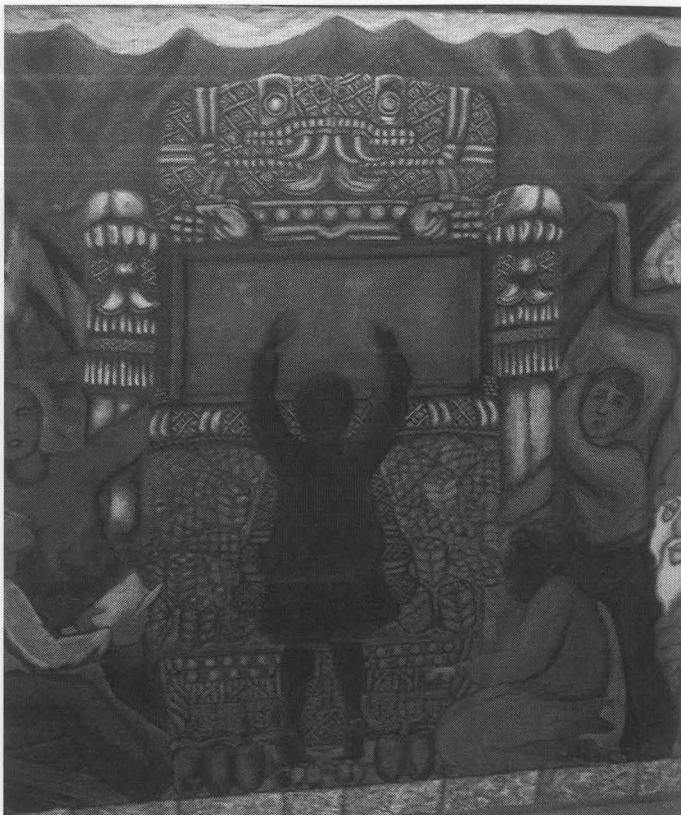


Fig.17 Gustavo Chávez: from the series *The Right for Public Education* – detail (2002-2003, acrylic, stairway, SEIEM, Toluca, Estado de México). Photo: Petra Binková © Petra Binkova 2003

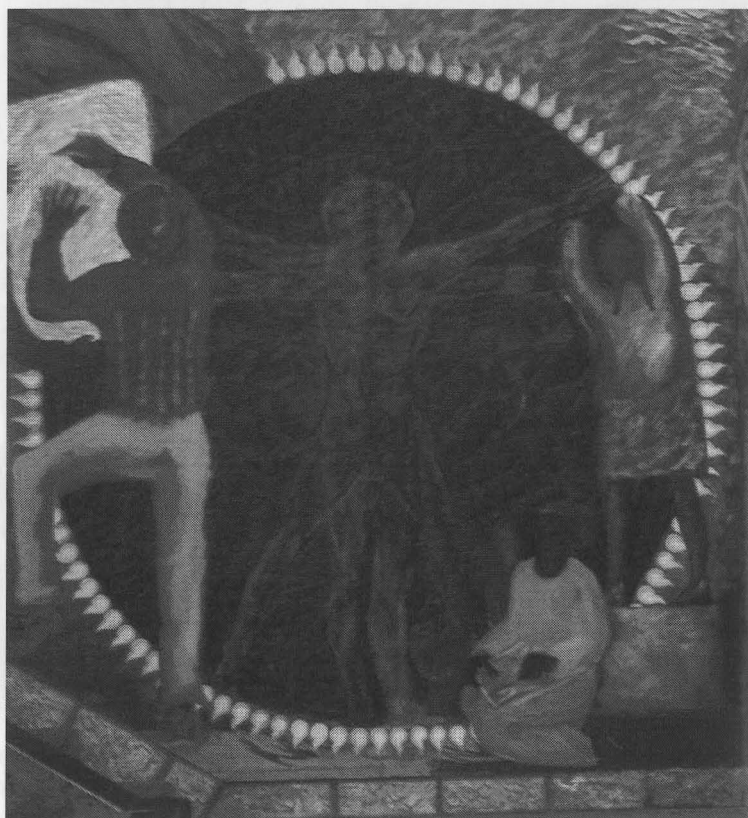


Fig.20 Mirala Zacarias: Mexico City). Photo: Petra Binková

Fig.18 Gustavo Chávez: from series *The Right for Public Education* – detail (2002-2003, acrylic, stairway, SEIEM, Toluca, Estado de México). Photo: Petra Binková © Petra Binkova 2003

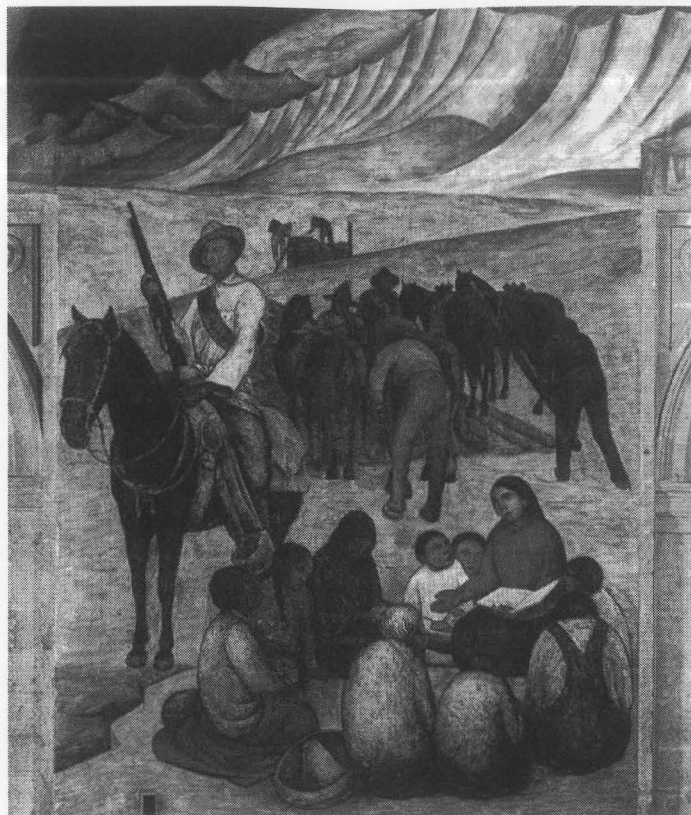


Fig.19 Diego Rivera: *The Rural Teacher* (1923, fresco, south wall, Court of Labor, Ministry of Education, Mexico City). © Bob Schalwijk



Fig.20 Marela Zacarías: *Other world is possible* - detail (2003, Red Patio, UAM-Xochimilco, Mexico City). Photo: Petra Binková © Petra Binkova 2003

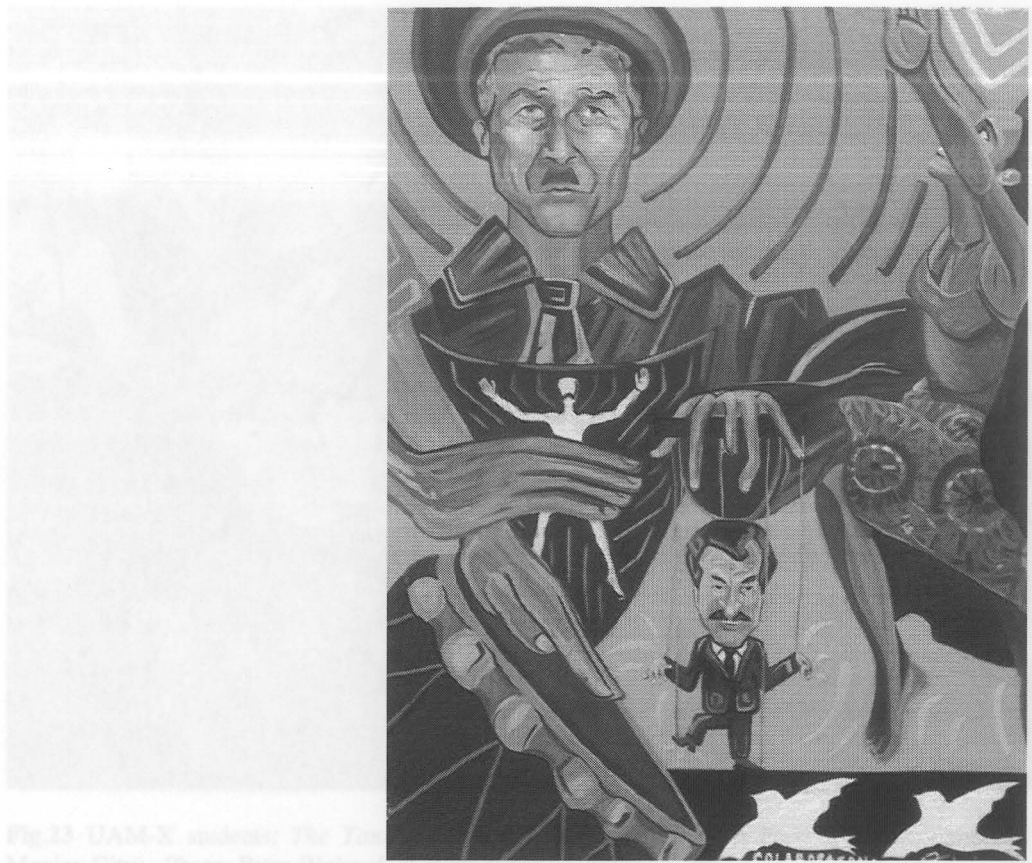


Fig.23 UAM-X students: *The Taniperla Mural* (1998, Red Patio, UAM-Xochimilco, Mexico City). Photo: Petra Binková

Fig.21 Marela Zacarías: *Other world is possible* - detail (2003, Red Patio, UAM-Xochimilco, Mexico City). Photo: Petra Binková © Petra Binkova 2003



Fig.22 UAM-X students: *The Taniperla Mural* (1998, Red Patio, UAM-Xochimilco, Mexico City). Photo: Petra Binková © Petra Binkova 2003

Fig.24 UAM-X students: *The Taniperla Mural* - detail (1998, Red Patio, UAM-Xochimilco, Mexico City). Photo: Petra Binková © Petra Binkova 2003



Fig.23 UAM-X students: *The Taniperla Mural* - detail (1998, Red Patio, UAM-Xochimilco, Mexico City). Photo: Petra Binková © Petra Binkova 2003



Fig.24 UAM-X students: *The Taniperla Mural* - detail (1998, Red Patio, UAM-Xochimilco, Mexico City). Photo: Petra Binková © Petra Binkova 2003



Fig.23 Inhabitants of the indigenous communities in the Perla canyon: *Life and Dreams in the Perla Canyon* (1998, acrylic, the municipality house, front wall, Taniperla, Chiapas).