



Art, memory, and disappearance in contemporary Mexico: A conversation with Alfredo López Casanova

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Art, memory, and disappearance in contemporary Mexico: A conversation with Alfredo López Casanova

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journals.sagepub.com/home/vio**Alfredo López Casanova**

Mexico

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Verónica Vallejo FloresMondes américains (UMR 8168), France; Centre d'histoire du XIX^e siècle (EA 3550), France**Abstract**

In his work, the Mexican sculptor Alfredo López Casanova pushes the boundaries of both art and politics. For *Violence: An international journal*, he takes a look back at his personal and collective trajectory, from his early and “natural” political and social commitment in his neighborhood to the tragic reality of contemporary Mexico. He reflects on several of his previous individual works, such as the bronze sculpture *Fray Antonio Alcalde*, and collective projects he is a part of, such as “Huellas de la Memoria” (Footprints of Memory). For the latter initiative, the intimate recollections of the families of disappeared persons are engraved on the soles of shoes, powerfully illustrating how the construction of memory goes hand in hand with calls for justice and truth.

Keywords

art, commitment, disappearances, justice, memory, sculpture

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In his work, the Mexican sculptor Alfredo López Casanova pushes the boundaries of both art and politics. For *Violence: An international journal*, he takes a look back at his personal and collective trajectory, from his early and “natural” political and social commitment in his neighborhood to the tragic reality of contemporary Mexico. He starts off by addressing his career as a sculptor creating busts of historical figures, his fondness of geometry and painting, the commissions he has secured and the competitions he has won, but also the ethical and political decisions that have led him to reject certain works. He then moves on to tell us about the collective project “Huellas de la Memoria” (Footprints of Memory), in which the intimate recollections of the families of disappeared persons are engraved on the soles of shoes, and in which the construction of memory goes hand in hand with calls for justice and truth. Finally, he gives us a new insight into *Fray Antonio Alcalde*, a bronze sculpture that “inhabits time” by virtue of the—initially hidden—messages inscribed on it regarding the contemporary humanitarian crisis. Throughout the conversation, Alfredo shares his reflections on the artist’s relationship with society, the state and its institutions, the media, and the art world. The interview also sketches a critique of official memory when it is created with no consensus and with no justice, and it also points out the role of art when it is turned into a “weapon of denunciation” and a gesture of situated and living memory. This conversation took place on 19 August 2020, with Alfredo López Casanova (A) in Mexico City, and Sabrina Melenotte (S) and Verónica Vallejo Flores (V) in Paris.

S: Let’s begin with your trajectory. Can you tell us how you embarked upon your artistic career, and how your political and social commitment emerged?

A: I was born in Guadalajara [Mexico], but we’re all a product of migration in one way or another, because my family is from a place in Zacatecas [a Mexican state further north and west]. There’s no tradition of art or artists in my family, although I do have a brother who had two keen interests: culture (artistic) and political activism. In that regard, he is an immediate reference. So, from a very early age the keynote was political activism. I had been involved in political movements since secondary school—not just me, but almost everyone in the area where we lived, one of the neighborhoods in the south of Guadalajara where the popular urban movement sprang up, alongside political organizations such as the ACNR,¹ but also the Comunidades Eclesiales de Base (basic ecclesial communities), which were set up in the neighborhood with the clergy who settled down in working-class neighborhoods after the Second Vatican Council.² I was just starting to draw at the time, and they asked me to do little drawings for the mimeograph, to accompany the flyers, bulletins, and announcements produced by the neighborhood’s organizations.

I nurtured a number of artistic interests, and I began to frequent the Jardín del Arte [literally, the art garden] in the Agua Azul:³ there were plastic arts

workshops there on Sundays, and you could go and pay a voluntary fee. That's how I started. I was studying and working at the same time. I was a factory worker for almost ten years; I had all sorts of jobs before I got into the University of Guadalajara's School of Plastic Arts. The school, which is a faculty now, had a technical emphasis, and you could go there after secondary school for very technical training, with a strong focus on workshops. It was a five-year course, and it was very academically rigorous, because it was two hours of painting, two hours of sculpture, and two hours of drawing per day, all week long. In the third year you decided which discipline you would go for. I opted for sculpture. In the third year I began working with professional sculptors in the morning, and in the afternoon I would study at the school. I think my generation was one of the last to have very rigorous teachers, who had trained at the Academy of San Carlos.⁴ I was taught by two of Clemente Orozco's⁵ assistants, so you can imagine how demanding they were.

I finished my studies in 1990, and there wasn't any of the current trends of artists transforming into activists, in a kind of conversion that sees them begin to address current issues. That wasn't the case for me. In other words, I believe it's quite normal for me to be involved right now in what I'm involved in, because really I've never stopped being involved since my teens. My political commitment and involvement were quite a normal thing in the environment I lived in. In general, this is the space-time I would see myself in.

- S: Why did you choose to be a sculptor?
- A: I never knew why I chose to be a sculptor. When I started at the school I wanted to be a painter, but I took a different path in the end.
- S: We've seen that you've done sculptures of many icons of revolutionary history or figures related to the issue of the disappeared, such as Che Guevara or the Argentinian poet Juan Gelman. Why did you choose these figures? What contribution does sculpture make in comparison to other arts?
- A: Some projects come to me, and others are personal projects that arise through various circumstances. So I've done figurative sculptures, which I've created after winning tenders, but I've also done other works that have nothing to do with that. I made some geometric sculptures, which are the ones I love doing most. There's a very fine sculpture at the Jalisco State Human Rights Commission, *Estela por la Paz* [Stele for Peace], which is a white figure (picture 1). I made another, *Ave* (picture 2), which won the Juan Soriano Prize; it's a winged, abstract piece. Some other pieces are circumstantial. The sculpture of Rockdrigo González (picture 3), a musician who revolutionized Mexican rock and was killed in the 1985 earthquake, came about as a suggestion from some urban musicians when I arrived in Mexico City.



Pictures 1 and 2. *Estela por la Paz*, Guadalajara, 2000 (left) and *Ave*, Guadalajara, 2013 (right). Courtesy of the artist.



Picture 3. *Rockdrigo González*, Mexico City, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

The sculpture emerged from a campaign to collect keys and other items made of bronze.⁶ Given my previous experiences, I was interested in it as a challenge, as a possibility that people would organize themselves in relation to a proposal and do something together. *The Estela contra el Olvido* [Stele against Oblivion], which is a portrayal of the tragic explosion of April 22, and a fierce criticism of corruption,⁷ was also the result of a lengthy two-year campaign to gather resources, keys, and metal. Strictly speaking, I didn't charge a fee for it.

The bust you mention, of Juan Gelman, a first-class poet, is actually a sculpture from a tender I won at the Guadalajara International Book Fair. I did the fair's busts for nine years: from Sergio Pitól to Fernando del Paso, as well as Carlos Monsiváis, Juan García Ponce, and Rubem Fonseca, among others.

So, if you look back at what I've done, I'm not an activist sculptor. I'm a very diverse sculptor. Not all my work is political. I don't mind being pigeonholed as a sculptor who creates political works—I don't care about that. But I don't consider myself an "activist" or an activist artist, because that's not the case. My work is much more extensive, as the geometric pieces show. I also paint and do engravings. I do what I feel comfortable with at the time. When I'm commissioned to do a bust, a sculpture, which is very tiring, and I have a certain financial cushion and some time, then I find it relaxing to paint. But I don't paint figures; I paint patches, geometry. As for the engravings, lots of them were requests: for political prisoners, protection of water, land, etc. But not all the engravings are political. I must have another thirty or forty more playful engravings, such as games, compositions, animals. I have fun because I work with different techniques: sculpture, painting, engraving, photography. It might seem like these are different people. Geometry is totally unrelated to the sculpture of Genaro Vázquez (picture 4) or Gilberto Bosques (picture 5).⁸ And painting is totally different to engraving. Engravings certainly have a lot to do with my involvement nowadays, especially with associations of the families of the disappeared.



Pictures 4 and 5. Genaro Vázquez, San Luis de Acatlán, Guerrero, 2019 (left) and Gilberto Bosques, Mexico City, 2018 (right). Courtesy of the artist.

I was enthralled by the potential of sculpture to honor someone like don Gilberto or Rockdrigo González. I have also been lucky enough to choose the figures I sculpt, with all the risks this entails, as these almost invariably involve campaigns or an extremely tricky search for resources [financial resources]. So, to answer the question, some figures came to me; I didn't seek them out, and fortunately I liked them. But I must also say that I've refused to do certain works. For instance, one day they contacted me to ask if I would do a bust of Salinas.⁹ I owed four or five months' rent and I had no work; I was just doing craftwork. You have to take an ethical stance against things, and so I said, "I won't do it. I'm not going to do it." I don't do that kind of figure in a serious way. The state says to me, "do me a Fox"¹⁰ or "do me a Calderón"¹¹—okay, I'll do them, but maybe as a caricature to mock them, to satirize them, like the grandiose caricatures of Hernández,¹² for example. On another occasion they asked if I would take part in a closed three-person tender to build a monument for the army, and I said, "no, no, no." It was a lot of money, about four million pesos, tax-free, to be paid when the job was done. I said, "I'm not going there." By that stage I was already working with the relatives of the disappeared, and I said, "I can't do that. It's not my kind of thing. I would never do that."

V: In one interview you said you led a kind of double life, as a professional sculptor and as a person who has been socially committed since his teens. How do you reconcile those two sides? You've already partially answered the question by telling us how you've refused to do certain works, but have there been any occasions when it was more difficult to reconcile these two lives, or keep them separate?

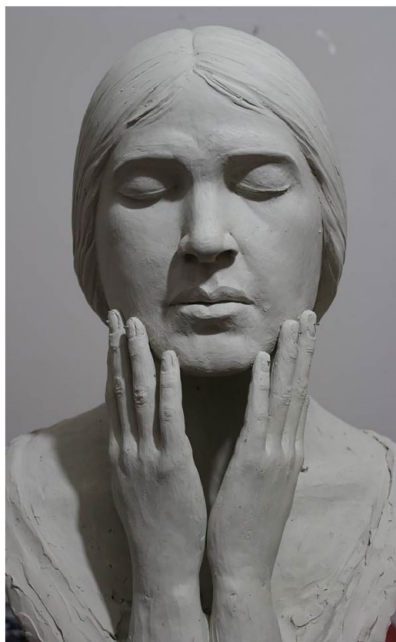
A: In the past it was easier for me to maintain that balance because the situation in the country was more peaceful. I'm talking about the period before 2006.¹³ I was in Guadalajara, and I was an activist with the Zapatista Front of National Liberation.¹⁴ I had my cultural life on the one hand and my political activism on the other. That's the way it was then. I wish it were still like that, but, as the country has deteriorated, I have increasingly spent more time on the streets with organizations. Before, I wasn't often asked to do a logo for a relatives' group or an engraving for calls to events. Let's say that the idea of "a committed artist" is more visible at the moment. I've become more visible as the sculptor who's deeply involved in the issue of forced disappearances, with the families, a sculptor who does engravings. And I'm delighted to do them; it's very difficult for me to refuse. I find it so hard to say no, especially to the families.

But I have to balance out the economic part somehow, because you have to pay rent, and you have to live. The situation is certainly complicated, especially at the moment, with the pandemic. It's getting more complicated for just about

everyone, but it's two or three times more complicated again for the cultural community, and for the workers who've lost so many jobs in Mexico. But look, I've lived in uncertainty for almost thirty years—I'm a professional at living like that, in the throes of crises. I'm not complaining though, because even though I've had twenty-something years of uncertainty, you still feel quite privileged, unlike a worker, for example, or people who in these COVID times aren't able to stop selling, because they live hand-to-mouth, on the street. The situation is difficult for just about everyone. I look for ways to balance things out; I always have ways to keep my head above water, with odd jobs here and there. And as I do that, I always try not to give up too much of my time; I resolved to live and work for myself, so that I can move my schedule around and be where I want to be, in certain circumstances, marching alongside people and organizations.

- S: You talk about ethics, and I liked what you said about how you impose limits on yourself, but at some point I imagine you have to take money from a government that you also condemn, along with other people in the collectives. Even if you try to strike a balance, there are times of tension, friction, aren't there? How do you handle that? How has it affected your individual work? Because you can't always keep things separate, even if you try to.
- A: These dilemmas and situations clearly exist, and they are the price you have to pay. I think I may be or I am a very inconvenient person for some people in the government. I accept that I've been vetoed by the Jalisco government.¹⁵ I know it, and I've been told this by my informants close to the state government. I don't care, and really what's important is to find a balance at all times amid all the tension. I have only two options: this search for a balance, or the total radicalization of my stance toward the state, saying, "I won't have anything to do with the state as a sculptor." The latter option would be rather unfeasible for me, because either the state buys your sculptures or they are bought by business people or the wealthy.

And I'm not a famous sculptor; I'm not a sculptor who sells. In other words, by way of a self-criticism, I neglected a strategy, that of selling privately. I was never in the places where business and work are generated and flow, where you hook into the art world. I haven't held my exhibitions at galleries or sold at them—first because I didn't want to, and second because my first experience was very disappointing, because the galleries charged us a 50 percent commission on each piece sold. In that respect I lie outside the logic of the market. In other words, all my public works have been connected to the state, through tenders I've won, apart from the busts of Tina Modotti (picture 6), Francisco Villa, and Emiliano Zapata (picture 7), which I made when Pablo Moctezuma Barragán, a very honest and transparent politician, was mayor of Azcapotzalco.



Pictures 6 and 7. Tina Modotti (left) and Emiliano Zapata (right), city hall of Azcapotzalco, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

My situation as a sculptor is certainly rather complicated. I would have to find a kind of self-management formula, which, in real life, in the city, doesn't work. Having a go at community self-management is more viable in rural areas, but not in the city—the city is more complicated. I think that, provided that a certain ethical and political position is maintained in relation to specific issues, I don't have a problem with having a relationship, not with the entire state, not with certain figures, but a kind of equilibrium with the state, because government projects are paid for by our taxes.

S: Recently there's been a lot of talk that it isn't possible to separate the artist's life from his work, but now I have a slightly better understanding of why you also feel the need to draw a line between both sides as much as possible.

A: I prefer that. My professional life is in another place that people don't even know about, because I really didn't want to combine the two aspects. Perhaps I'll be remembered more as the activist sculptor.

S: It's the most visible part for the time being, isn't it? With the Footprints of Memory project, for example.

A: Yes.

- S: Is Footprints of Memory connected to the turning point in Mexico fourteen years ago? What I mean is, did the “war on drugs” and the wave of violence it unleashed lead you to increase your political and social commitment through the Footprints of Memory project?
- A: Footprints of Memory, which is a collective project, not a personal one, arose out of circumstances and as a surprise (picture 8). It came about from walking alongside people. It might have happened, or it might not have happened, but I would have been there anyway, lending my support in any way I could. In other words, it was completely natural for me to meet with the relatives after 2006, when Calderón’s war began, because I was already in contact with the families in the Eureka collective¹⁶ in the 1980s, for example. This links in with what I was talking about earlier, the life of the activist, the militant, or whatever we want to call it—the committed person who has had a relationship with organizations for some time.



Picture 8. Footprints of Memory, Berlin, 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

It would seem now that there are many more of us, but it’s almost always the same people, as we get to know each other and develop relationships along the way. And even though the violence got worse after 2006, I think it is more visible now thanks to the media, the Internet, social networks, and the fact that everybody has a camera. Some violent episodes from the past were condemned to oblivion. For example, Guadalupe Pérez, of H.I.J.O.S.,¹⁷ has tirelessly condemned the massacre of around twenty peasants in Pantepec, Puebla, in the 1980s. I hadn’t heard of this massacre, and I only found out about it through him. It also surprises me that only a very small circle of people are still condemning the massacre of Rubén Jaramillo, his family, and his four children in Morelos in 1962. In other words, the new generations don’t know what happened. And there are many more such massacres. I think the new reality has imposed itself as an image, with today’s immediacy of things; that helps a lot.

- S: So, coming back to that idea, to what extent can art make it possible to write a forgotten history? I don’t know if this is one of your goals in certain works.

Because I think Footprints of Memory also largely has that objective: to give shape, to give identity, to the forgotten in that contemporary history.

- A: Footprints of Memory is a metaphor for the search that is being carried out with the relatives. In other words, what began as a spark, an intuition on a march one May 10,¹⁸ started to take shape with the second pair of shoes, which arrived along with a letter from a mother in Coahuila. That letter, which contained the words “walk” and “search,” was what led to the general creation of the project. Then the few groups we initially had contact with began to tie us in to events in the 1970s and in subsequent years. What I mean is that, although at the outset most of the relatives who gave us their shoes were looking for loved ones who had been disappeared during Calderón’s war on drugs, between 2006 and 2012, the relationships we built brought us into contact with relatives who asked, “can we engrave shoes from the 1970s?” and “can we engrave shoes from Latin America?” And so now we have engraved shoes from Tunisia, Africa, and the Western Sahara.

As time went by, it was decided that green would be the color of the disappeared, representing the hope of finding them alive; red would be for the women who were murdered while searching for them; black denotes mourning, for those who have been found in secret pits or have been identified; and there’s also a message of hope with orange, for those rescued from secret jails. Thanks to the hard work of the collectives and the families tirelessly working for their loved ones to be produced alive, we can’t rule out the idea that many of the disappeared from the present era will appear, and then they’ll be orange. We have to keep hoping for this.

- S: But does that mean that Footprints of Memory is more of a memory strategy, or would you also call it art? And what kind of art? Community art, collective art, a collective memory? How would you define the Footprints of Memory project?

- A: It’s more the Footprints of Memory collective that defines it. We believe it is a strategy of visibilization, denunciation, and collective construction of memory built with the relatives. If considering it a work of art or an artistic installation helps spread the message of denunciation farther afield, we don’t care how it’s categorized. We give the media free rein to decide what they want to call it. It used to bother me that Footprints of Memory was interpreted as the project of a sculptor, and that therefore it was a work of art. During the very first interviews, before the first exhibition, and even in interviews after that, we insisted, “no, Footprints of Memory is a visibility strategy. It is not a work of art.” I think I resisted all of that because even I was unwilling to acknowledge the power of art when it is wielded as a weapon of denunciation.

However, I think people attach a lot of importance to the person just because he’s an “artist” and has created public works, has won prizes, and has a career behind him. I’ve thought to myself, “what if that piece had been started by

someone else, not necessarily an artist? How would people have seen it then? Would they have given it the same level of importance?" So I think that up to a point it's unfair to the things created by people from relatives' groups, which I believe are impressive. For example, a group of mothers made a blanket with sections composed of the embroidered handkerchiefs of each of their children. I saw the work and they explained to me, "if we cover ourselves with this blanket with all our disappeared children, either we'll feel their warmth, or we'll give them our warmth." And they were also sending a message: they wanted the authorities to cover themselves with the blanket and feel the pain that the disappearances caused these families, as well as their responsibility for it. What I mean is that the families also have that power to build objects and conceptualize them. And I said, "it's an impressive work of art." If it had been done by a seemingly committed "artist" it would be considered a wonderful piece and it would be in the best galleries in the world—but that's not the case. So I think this was what was really bothering me: that the media gave the work value because it had been created by an "artist," and not because it was a collaborative project between the families and a collective.

I think art has much to contribute, but it has to be very careful in how it does it. There are a lot of people in the art world who approach the relatives [of the disappeared] with very little tact. They come, they get what they want, and they never come back. You can't do it like that; you shouldn't approach them like an artist who's there to take what he needs from the families in order to make a big noise with something in the Reina Sofía or the Louvre. You have to approach them much more delicately, with a great deal of respect, above all, with a great deal of respect for the organizational processes, for the location, for the cultural environment. Not many make sure to take back the product they've created. A while back a very important book was doing the rounds—*Cómo trabajar con el pueblo* [How to Work with People],¹⁹ by the theologian Clodovis Boff, a book we worked on extensively in the 1990s. It's very useful, and it gives some pointers on how you should approach the organizational processes of relatives, peasants, workers, etc.

You might say that I have a feel for this after so many years of being involved in different processes, and I know how to approach them, how to be with them. I wasn't interested in approaching the relatives in order to create a work of art. That's very clear. I wasn't interested in that. For us, Footprints is a strategy of visibilization; it is the construction of an object to denounce forced disappearance; it is a collective construction, along with the relatives, to raise awareness of it so that it is not forgotten. It's a memorial, but it's a particular memorial, because it doesn't single out an event in the past, but rather it's a memorial under permanent construction, amid the circumstances, in the present. It has three axes: memory, truth, and justice. This is important to us. It's our horizon. It's a memory that denounces, that builds, and that demands justice.

- S: Talking of memorials, Footprints appears to me to establish a very clear break with the official memory of recent events, which is almost nonexistent in Mexico. For example, Calderón's Memorial to the Victims of Violence was, we might say, a memorial with no memory, because it was so anonymous, with no names, no respect for the victims' families, who were not consulted at all. This kind of memorial fosters impunity and oblivion. Does Footprints of Memory act in some way as a counterweight to that official memory?
- A: There's a permanent battle between the memory of the state and our fight for memory. The term you used, "a memorial with no memory," is the title of a very interesting article by Carolina Robledo on the story of how the Calderón memorial came about. It's really a betrayal of the dialogs of the Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad, led by Javier Sicilia.²⁰ The initiative for a memorial sprang from that movement, and Calderón's betrayal and stupidity was to locate it next to the Campo Marte, which is a place with strong links to the army, but also Marte [Mars] is the god of war. So, however you look at it, it was a betrayal. The Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad distanced itself from it, and the project was only endorsed by Mr. Martí and Ms. Wallace.²¹ From my point of view—and this is a personal opinion—it can't be called a memorial, because a memorial means listing the facts and naming the people. It's nothing more than some big lumps of metal and a few intellectual phrases—not that the phrases are too bad, but nobody is singled out, nothing is said, nothing is denounced.

That memorial is a total failure. And it is disturbing for a memorial not to have led to a consensus among the groups of victims. Consensus is key; that's the ideal: the broadest possible consensus among the families. Why do I say this? Because if there is consensus the memorial comes to life, if there is consensus there is approval, and if there is consensus there is a future, in the sense of the construction of a memory for those yet to come. A memorial is to be lived in, a meeting place, a place for reflection. Why did the families not attend when the Cotton Field Memorial was inaugurated?²² Why did the state make that mistake? More reflection is needed in this respect to learn from failed experiences and to not repeat them. If they're going to do something, it shouldn't end up like an empty shell, a white elephant.

There's been a huge lag in the memory discussion in Mexico, since the massacre of 1968,²³ since the 1970s and the 1980s. We're seeing all of these massacres, disappearances, and feminicides, and there's no justice. First, because there's no will to fix things; these events are still happening, these situations are still being repeated. We are saying it very clearly: the state cannot build memory because what the state has to do [first] is ensure that justice is done. As long as justice is not done, the state cannot build memory. So, our construction of memory in the Footprints of Memory is quite singular, because it is a memory that "acts on a number of levels": it denounces, demands *justice*, seeks the *truth*, and, along the way, it builds *memory*. We proceed with these three axes in mind, which were

well established by our partner organizations in Argentina, who had quite a head-start on us in this discussion, and in the construction of certain consensuses. For example, it is very interesting that Argentina reached a stage of social maturity as a country in order to build, at a certain point, a state memory policy—that is, the state confirms that there are buildings where torture took place, and it is the state itself that puts up the plaque to commemorate it; there’s a state policy to vindicate all of that. But the most important thing of all is for this vindication to be accompanied by trials of the torturers and the perpetrators—in other words, that memory and justice should meet and walk hand in hand. The people are seeing high-ranking perpetrators and torturers sent to prison. Here, none of the perpetrators have been locked up, and Echeverría is still sitting around at home.²⁴

- S: Yes, but you agree that this is because the violence is simultaneous to this memory work that is being carried out primarily from below. In Argentina, Chile, or Colombia there was a longer interval between the violence and the process of “transitional justice” or “restorative justice.” In Mexico, this is all more mixed up, and the violence is still ongoing.
- A: The violence is still ongoing, but violence has been going on here for as long as in Argentina. The first death flights, in fact, were carried out here.²⁵ There’s a big difference: here, we didn’t have a dictatorship, but state violence as a pattern of behavior is a combination of impunity and corruption, especially impunity. Since the perpetrators of the 1968 massacre went unpunished, no precedent was set to ensure that this did not happen again. And then many more massacres followed. Some of the perpetrators eventually died, and they died with total impunity. Others are still alive; they’ve been identified, and yet they’re not in prison.
- V: Going back to what you said about the state not being able to build memory because it’s not allowing justice to be done, what, then, do you think of what they have done with the basement of the old Federal Security Directorate? It operated as a secret prison and torture center in the 1960s and 1970s, and now it is being presented by the Mexican government as a memorial site, even though no trials were held, and no punishments were meted out.
- A: There’s a risk there, and there’s also been a fraternal discussion with colleagues who backed the project in some way. Many of them were imprisoned there, in fact. They were guerrillas who were tortured either there or in other sites used by the Directorate. I try to respect, see, and understand their point of view. They feel that it was a vindication of their story, demonstrating that they were neither terrorists nor criminals; they were guerrillas who had been denied the path of political participation and who had no choice other than the political-military option. In that sense, they are right. The risk I see is in the signals that are being sent to the population. It worries me that the message is that this is a memorial for events set entirely in the past, but that isn’t the case.

What is at stake in memory work is a call for justice over extremely serious events that should not be repeated. We should reflect on how to pressure the state to work more on the culture of justice. I'm shocked by the culture of peace in the Mexican context. I'm shocked because I feel it's a lie, a falsehood. If no work is done on the culture of justice, if all injustices are left unsettled, there will be no basis to ensure that these events are not repeated. We cannot talk of peace if people are still disappearing. Why, when the government was ordered by the ruling of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights to vindicate Rosendo Radilla,²⁶ did it do so only partially? I mean, what did the state do? It took the easiest option: it put up a plaque in Atoyac, but the family didn't attend the inauguration. Why didn't they go? Because a number of commitments weren't fulfilled by the state.

The ruling of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights established that the main priority was to find Rosendo Radilla, and then to put up a plaque. The state put up the plaque, but they didn't observe the ruling, because they didn't determine the whereabouts of Rosendo Radilla. In other words, the state only partially complied, but it conveyed the message that the plaque drew the whole affair to a close, because it had complied with some of the requirements of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. If we want to ensure that there is no repetition, the first thing that must be done is to jail the perpetrators, and then memory will be accompanied by justice and truth. That is why we are asking questions and saying that the state, for the time being, cannot build memory, because what it has to do first is ensure that justice is done.

- V: The phrase "Memory, truth, and justice," those three axes you have referred to, was inscribed on one of your recent sculptures, that of Fray Antonio Alcalde in the center of Guadalajara, the city where you were born. I think this piece clearly combines your side as a sculptor and your side as a committed citizen. What prompted you to inscribe and conceal a number of messages for the disappeared in one of your public works?
- A: I won a commission to do one of the six sculptures for the Rotonda de los Jaliscienses Ilustres.²⁷ I chose to do a sculpture of Fray Antonio, but I wasn't the only one. In fact, when I went to the interview, after the commission had been announced, I saw at least six sketches of Fray Antonio Alcalde.²⁸ While I was doing the sculpture, in a realistic style, observing classical and academic criteria, the Jalisco Attorney General's Office issued its conclusions on the disappearance of the three young film students,²⁹ declaring that the kids had been burned, burned to ashes. This was the Jalisco version of historical truth,³⁰ because they did not compile any expert evidence or any genetic proof that this was what had happened to them. That's a fact. This still hasn't been verified, so much so that the case was referred to the Attorney General of Mexico. So there was a specific set of circumstances here: a sculptor working on a professional task gets a reality check. I feel rage, impotence. And, faced with this reality, I have two options: either I let it go and get on with my work, or I take an ethical

decision to speak out against the disappearances in Jalisco. I took the second option. You might say that the political activist won the day and decided to do so with a daring, careful strategy. I wondered, “what will I do? What can I do?” and then I said, “what if we do a sculpture of Fray Antonio Alcalde that puts him in the context of what is happening right now in Guadalajara, in a specific era?” It’s as if you were giving the sculpture a specific temporality, like when you make a time capsule. So, yes, it’s a key sculpture, combining the professional sculptor and the man who’s thrown his lot in with the families of the disappeared.

- V: Can you talk to us about the four messages you concealed? Why did you choose those messages? Did something move you to put them on a certain part of the sculpture?
- A: There are two main messages and two lateral messages. “No son tres, somos todxs³¹” [They’re not just three, they’re all of us] is the phrase dedicated to the kids, their lives, their hopes, their tastes, their eagerness to live their lives, etc. (picture 9). This phrase had to be seen. It had to be the most visible. And that was why I put it on the book that the effigy holds in its hands. The other phrase is the same basic demand since the 1970s: “Vivos se los llevaron, vivos los queremos” [They took them alive, we want them back alive]. This is an unconditional demand.



Picture 9. Fray Antonio Alcalde, Guadalajara, 2018. Photo credit: Verónica Vallejo Flores.

It is absurd that they should take someone away and make them disappear. It defies all logic in Europe; it defies all logic in Cuba, for example, where they don’t understand what’s going on in Mexico; it even defies all logic in some Latin American countries, with all their past history. Argentina would not tolerate a disappearance now. I remember the huge demonstration for Santiago:

a single disappearance mobilized an entire country.³² Here, there's a massacre, or five or ten people disappear, and very few people do anything. So those two phrases were key.

I also put the exact number or the best approximation of the number of disappeared at the time I was casting the sculpture: "Jalisco, 6503 desaparecidos" [Jalisco, 6,503 disappeared]. So it's a denunciation, and it's a time capsule. If we look at the number of disappeared then and now (around 9,000), this is a clear wake-up call for the government, because little or nothing is being done. The other phrase is "Memoria, verdad y justicia" [Memory, truth, and justice], the three words that may be used to sum up the story we are immersed in, the demand we are making, and the need for two things: firstly, no repetitions, and secondly, the need to raise awareness among future generations.

I maintain that I am not in breach of contract. This is quite interesting, because what I used was the empty spaces in the sculpture: the base and the space on the book. The contract stipulated: "an effigy of Fray Antonio Alcalde must be made with the following characteristics: iconographic resemblance in accordance with features as they appear in paintings; a posture of humility and religious mysticism." The sculpture meets those criteria. I decided not to attend the inauguration ceremony, not because I had concealed the phrases, but because I had been told there would be a demonstration at the time of the inauguration, in connection with public works that had caused structural damage to some houses in the historic center of Guadalajara. So I decided not to endorse the inauguration by being there.

Subsequently, out of respect for the families of the disappeared students, I contacted them. We talked the day before the first anniversary of their disappearance. We met by the sculpture, and I explained it to them and said, "you decide whether we reveal them, or whether they'll be revealed with the passage of time." They asked me for a few hours to think about it, and the next day at eight in the morning they sent me a message: "Yes, we're happy to go forward with it, and we'd like to thank you for doing it." The disappearances affected me as a person, and they should affect everyone, but I also think it's important to talk to the families. There are certain things you can decide for yourself without asking anyone's permission, but there are others that have to be discussed, and there has to be an invitation, and the families have to be asked for permission.

It all went well and we achieved our objective, which was to provoke, to cause a stir. And we did want to cause a stir, because we feel it's important to move others, to challenge them, to put a question to the population. I also fought for the location of the sculpture: Avenida Fray Antonio Alcalde, the main avenue in the city. And there were some furious reactions, and even threats that I would be arrested. They were so angry that they started an initiative to remove the phrases in bronze. The sculpture is so enraging because it is bronze, and bronze conveys a sensation that no other material can:

a sensation of permanence, that it will be there for life. The script I read on the day of the revealing will be lost as time goes by, but what will not be lost is what is there forever. The blow I struck the state with will last. In other words, as time goes by, the sculpture will say, “at that moment, this happened.” It is a sculpture that inhabits time, even though it is of a figure from two hundred years ago. It inhabits time, it contextualizes the moment, and it will say who was in charge at that time in Jalisco, who was governing the state.

What was also very important was acknowledgment from the families, and also from the priest in charge of the canonization of Fray Antonio Alcalde, who said, “what the sculptor did is fine. It does not affect the figure of Fray Antonio Alcalde, and, what’s more, Fray Antonio Alcalde would be on the side of the families of the disappeared.” That’s very true. He reminds me so much of Samuel Ruiz,³³ but also of Raúl Vera,³⁴ and Raúl Vera is a Dominican, as was Fray Antonio Alcalde. In his day, Fray Antonio Alcalde responded to the emergencies of the time; in times of famine he set up refectories for the people, for example. If the disappearances were the emergency, and he were living in this age, I have no doubt he would respond to them.

- V: On the day the messages were revealed, you read a text you had written yourself to the media covering the event: “Fray Antonio Alcalde or the cry of the statue.” What’s behind that title?
- A: I feel it is absurd that even a bronze sculpture has to decry what is going on in the country. It is totally absurd that, in the middle of a space-time of humanitarian crisis, of war, a sculptor has to go so far as to create things that people have to read and understand, because the people aren’t crying out, they aren’t saying anything. Even though the sculpture doesn’t physically speak, it’s telling you about it. In that sense it’s a heartrending cry.
- V: After you had revealed the hidden messages, you gave an interview to a Guadalajara newspaper in which, while trying to contextualize the action you had taken, you drew a parallel with other actions taken by other visual artists in other times and places. You specifically referred to *Guernica*. Why did you make that comparison?
- A: I didn’t mean that *Fray Antonio Alcalde* is a grandiose piece, because it isn’t. What I was referring to was the defense of creative freedom. In other words, they give you the commission, but what you can’t negotiate under any circumstances is the freedom of how you do it. When Picasso was questioned on his painting by a general, he said, “and also, I didn’t do this [the war]; you did.” By drawing that parallel, I was modestly using the same defense he used, by saying, “hey, you commissioned this work, and the work has been done in iconic, aesthetic terms. The rest is about personal freedom, and I’m the one who gets to decide that.”

If you’re in a position to suggest things, even if they’re illegal, hidden, or whatever, you have two options: either you back down, or you defend and argue what you’ve done. In my case, the strategy to defend the piece involved registering it for copyright. That was a key course of action. I know there was

serious debate within the immediate circle of the governor of Jalisco, and they almost decided to remove the sculpture and sue me, but they backed down when I made a public announcement that it had been copyrighted, because that entailed legal consequences for them. They were also stopped by the media impact. The event even became a brief national trending topic on Twitter.

V: A moment ago, when you were talking about Footprints of Memory, you were saying it was a strategy of visibilization and also a memorial under permanent construction. What really is the sculpture of Fray Antonio Alcalde with its hidden messages? Do you essentially consider it an act of denunciation and of protest, or could it also at some point become a future memory? Is it, or could it be, a memory support too?

A: That's a very interesting question. It has a lot to do with the passage of time, with the process of maturity of a civil society. The action may go down in history as a scandal, a wake-up call, which is how I interpret it. It is a wake-up call for the authorities, but also for the population. It is a strategy, an act of great rage, I admit, but it could not be any other way. I've been wondering when we'll hit rock-bottom, and in fact we're no longer surprised when burial pit after burial pit is discovered. If we hit rock-bottom, we have to start processing all of this. Nothing at all is being processed. If we were processing what is going on, we'd be saying "enough is enough." And the "enough is enough" stage hasn't yet arrived.

The Fray Antonio Alcalde sculpture may remain in place as a fact, as an event that is consigned to oblivion by another tragedy, and then another, and then another. As Rosario Ibarra de Piedra³⁵ said in the 1970s: "It is our fault as a society because we are unable to stop this, because if the state does not stop the violence, we have to stop it ourselves." And today we have the mothers of the disappeared. The May 10 march is so difficult. What goes on at the march? We march alongside the families, no more than two thousand of us. If there were one person for each of the disappeared on that march, there'd be seventy thousand people; and if there were two from each family, there'd be one hundred and forty thousand. But we don't do that, we don't march. So this means that our acts have been merely testimonial. They are token gestures, tiny objections saying, "watch out, this is what's going on here." I would like the Fray Antonio Alcalde sculpture to be seen as a wake-up call for an era, about what happened. And hopefully, over time, what we did will help raise awareness to put an end to the violence. Otherwise, I'm afraid I have to tell you that this gesture will be consigned to oblivion, as so many other things have been.

V: If we consider the Fray Antonio Alcalde sculpture as an action that brought together the artist and the activist, what distinguishes the sculpture from other protest actions or projects you've been involved in? And also, what distinguishes it from other Mexican interventions that have been carried out in the public space to raise awareness of forced disappearances? I'm thinking, for

example, of the Glorieta de las y los Desaparecidos [Roundabout of the Disappeared] in Guadalajara and the Plaza de los Desaparecidos [Square of the Disappeared] in Monterrey, the anti-monuments in Mexico City, or the plaques to commemorate the disappeared and murder victims placed at the foot of the *Estela de Luz* [Stele of Light], also in Mexico City.

- A: I believe the Fray Antonio Alcalde sculpture has a certain level of rage and daring that bears a great resemblance to other interventions we used to carry out, more or less clandestinely, at the Rotonda de Jaliscienses Ilustres, every October 1, the day before the anniversary of the massacre of October 2, 1968, when we threw red paint over the sculpture of the murderous general, Marcelino García Barragán.³⁶ The difference is that the daring lies in leaving the action permanently in bronze, because when you stain it, then it's forgotten about, because they come along and remove the paint. There is, you might say, a qualitative leap. But as an action, it is very similar: against the authorities, without asking for permission, taking them by surprise. With respect to the other question, I believe that *Fray Antonio Alcalde*, as a memory action, indeed forms part of the work of our small circle of people who are dedicated to memory and take actions. What I mean is that *Fray Antonio Alcalde* belongs to the need to build memory in the country, in the context of all the foundational memory actions, such as the Plaza de los Desaparecidos in Monterrey or the Glorieta de las y los Desaparecidos in Guadalajara. These actions are foundational because they founded a historical territorial benchmark. The challenge will be the fragility of time, as in the fragility of memory as time goes by. But *Fray Antonio Alcalde*, even though it was an act of rage by a sculptor, cannot be understood without considering all those memory sites.
- S: Earlier you said that memory or testimonial acts must come from civil society, and you also involved the mothers in the sculpture of Fray Antonio Alcalde, in the revealing of the hidden messages. The same is true of Footprints of Memory, because the mothers participate in the process. I think that, in addition to efforts with regard to justice, memory, and writing history, there is also a more significant process for the families: relief, a kind of grief in the act itself. It reminds me of the Bordados por la Paz initiative, where families embroider the names and stories of their disappeared loved ones, thereby creating a space that is at once political and intimate, to allow them to express their grief. Was this also one of the intentions behind revealing the messages?
- A: I should say that I don't like the word grief, because it makes me think of the conclusion of an event. Grief in Mexican culture is to be found in mourning, and this is the grief of death. I can't talk about grief in relation to disappearances; I don't know how the families work through it. I think that the issue here is rather collective participation. Footprints of Memory couldn't have been conceived without the participation of the families, their letters, their shoes, and their presence at the exhibitions, because every exhibition has a space for reflection, especially for students, because we want to reach out in particular to young people. The experience of Footprints of Memory and the one-off experience

with *Fray Antonio Alcalde* are closely linked to the organizational processes I had previously been involved with.

I've already said that *Estela contra el Olvido* (picture 10) was a genuine citizen participation campaign to create the sculpture. Even though it bears no relation to these issues, the creation of the sculpture of Rockdrigo González was also a truly collective experience. I believe what's important is my experience of community work since the 1980s and 1990s. It's about building, reaching the conclusion that certain actions are community processes, be they cultural processes, political processes, or memory processes. My intuition for working with people is very present; I learned certain methodological tools, and I worked extensively with working-class neighborhoods, with organized neighborhoods. There's a way of approaching people, a way of building, a way of inviting others to build processes collectively. And this means that on some collective or community projects, such as *Footprints of Memory*, the story of someone who has worked with organizational processes carries more weight. This is certainly a distinguishing feature, because a lot of us plastic artists shut ourselves up in our rooms and work on our sculptures and our paintings, and we don't build relationships with people.



Picture 10. *Estela contra el Olvido*, Guadalajara, 2004. Courtesy of the artist.

I think that artists who inhabit and live in their time have to wake up to the situation. You're living in the world, but you're living in a region of the world that's undergoing a huge tragedy, a manmade humanitarian crisis, which has no comparison, bar the tragedy of the Revolution, in terms of loss of human life. And I still don't know what's going on in the country, or how we've reached over seventy thousand disappeared, according to the official figures. We don't even count the dead anymore. It's got out of hand. But it's very strange, because if you say "it's got out of hand," you're relieving the state of its responsibility, when really it's the state that is guilty. I'm amazed by the inability of the people to react to events, and, as I said before, it's not the government that can stop the war; it's the civil population.

So, because the situation is so urgent, I believe that the cultural community ought to take more decisive action, *en masse*. I'm talking about musicians, painters, dancers, playwrights, actors, etc. Many of them have started to do things, very important things—videos, performances—but in my opinion the cultural community is not addressing the issue, or not the entire community at any rate. If I were a famous sculptor, which I'm not, but if I were, I don't know if I would have been affected by this reality. I've asked myself this question many times. In other words, if my story had been different, if I hadn't had that experience in south Guadalajara, the context of the 1970s and 1980s, I think I would have been a geometric sculptor, more concerned with recovering public spaces through urban sculpture. But I have been confronted with the country's violence since the 1980s, so I have been in constant contact with state violence. An entire context and atmosphere has shaped my personal behavior within a territorial space, a space-time that is gradually changing, and the activist in me continues to respond to what is going on in the country, as I did in the wake of the uprising by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation.

Each of us responds according to our life story, and there are also events that represent a rupture, a conversion, or a transformation for certain people. There was a definite response by some people in the cultural community who were affected by the country's reality and crisis after 2006, due to the electoral fraud of that year, Calderón's violence, or a specific act of violence that was particularly close to home—a disappearance or a murder—which made it so much more personal, leading them to see the world differently. I think it's terrible that something has to happen close to home for you to react and say, "ah, this happens to a lot of people, so we have to organize." I don't think it has to be that way. I believe the cultural community has the ability to build artifacts, objects, works of art, whatever they can make, things that help us see the country differently, that counteract the idyllic world television offers us. That is the role I believe the artist ought to play.

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Notes

1. Asociación Cívica Nacional Revolucionaria, a rural guerrilla group founded in 1968 in the state of Guerrero. The group disbanded in 1972 following the death of its leader, Genaro Vázquez Rojas. There was a resurgence in the 1980s in certain parts of the country, albeit no longer as an armed movement, but rather as a mainstream political organization.
2. Following Vatican Council II, the Latin American Episcopal Council held the Medellín Conference in 1968 where the bishops emphasized the structural roots of poverty. From this interweaving between religion and social movements, basic ecclesial communities were born to lay the foundations of a renewed Christianity known as "liberation theology."
3. El Agua Azul is a park in the city of Guadalajara, south of the old town.
4. The Academy of San Carlos is a prestigious engraving school established in Mexico City.
5. José Clemente Orozco is, alongside Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, one of Mexico's great early 20th-century muralists.
6. "A key for Rockdrigo" ("Una llave para Rockdrigo") was the name of the campaign launched by the sculptor and the different people and organizations involved in the sculpture project, with the aim of getting people to donate keys, taps, nuts, and so on, which would be melted down to obtain the bronze needed to make the sculpture.
7. On 22 April 1992, a series of explosions rocked the city of Guadalajara, caused by a build-up of gasoline in the sewage system. The catastrophe, which killed more than 200 people and left almost 100 unaccounted for, revealed the corruption of government authorities at a number of levels.
8. Gilberto Bosques Saldivar was the Mexican consul in France during the Second World War. He saved the lives of tens of thousands of Jews and Spanish Republican exiles by issuing them with visas to emigrate to Mexico and avoid deportation.
9. Carlos Salinas de Gortari, president of Mexico from 1988 to 1994, accused of electoral fraud. He put in place a strongly neoliberal policy that led to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). On the day the agreement came into force, 1 January 1994, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, made up of thousands of indigenous people, emerged from clandestinity and took up arms to demonstrate their firm opposition to neoliberalism.
10. Vicente Fox Quesada, president of Mexico from 2000 to 2006.
11. Felipe Calderón Hinojosa, president of Mexico from 2006 to 2012.
12. José Hernández is a Mexican political caricaturist. He works for several left-wing newspapers and won the National Journalism Prize in 2000.
13. It was during Felipe Calderón Hinojosa's 6-year term that the so-called "war on drugs" was introduced, unleashing a wave of violence the like of which had not been seen since the Mexican Revolution.

14. The FZLN, founded in 1997 and dissolved in 2005, was a political and social organization primarily composed of intellectuals and artists who sympathized with the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in the wake of the 1994 uprising.
15. He is referring to the controversy that arose following the installation of his sculpture of Fray Antonio Alcalde in the center of Guadalajara, Jalisco, which he discusses in more detail toward the end of the interview.
16. The ¡Eureka! Committee, created in the late 1970s, was one of Mexico's first organizations of mothers and relatives of the disappeared.
17. H.I.J.O.S. México is a sister organization of H.I.J.O.S., which was set up in Argentina in 1995. The Mexican organization is composed of the children of disappeared persons, exiles, murder victims, and political prisoners from Mexico and Latin America.
18. Since 2009, a march has been organized in Mexico City every 10 May (Mothers' Day in Mexico), led by the mothers of the disappeared.
19. *Cómo trabajar con el pueblo: Metodología del trabajo popular* was published in 1986 in Bogotá by the Indo-American Press Service. It was translated in English a few years later, in 1988, under the title *How to Work with People* by Claretian Publications (Quezon City, Philippines).
20. The Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad emerged in 2011 following the murder of seven people, including the son of the poet Javier Sicilia. The movement served to raise awareness on the national and international level of the large number of murders and disappearances that the "war on drugs" was causing. It was a major catalyst for the organization of victims' relatives, since it fostered the creation of local committees and more extensive networks.
21. Alejandro Martí, president and founder of the association México SOS, and Isabel Miranda de Wallace, president and founder of the association Alto al Secuestro. These are two of the three victims' organizations that backed the project and were involved in the inauguration of the memorial. Both organizations have close links to the business world and to the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN, a right-wing party). See Carolina Robledo Silvestre (2015) *Un memorial sin memoria: Exclusión y autoritarismo en el México actual*. *Alter/nativas* 5. Available at: <https://alternativas.osu.edu/es/issues/autumn-5-2015/essays/robledo.html#endnote10>.
22. A memorial built in 2010 in the state of Chihuahua, in the wake of a ruling by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, which held the Mexican state responsible for the disappearance and death of three women whose bodies were found in 2001 on a cotton field in Ciudad Juárez.
23. The massacre of 2 October 1968, or the Tlatelolco massacre, was the name given to the bloody repression of a student demonstration in Mexico City. The exact number of deaths is still unknown, but it has been estimated that there were at least 400 victims.
24. Luis Echeverría Álvarez, president of Mexico from 1970 to 1976. He was one of the main political leaders involved in the so-called "dirty war," a period of brutal repression of political dissidents (members of guerrilla groups or of peasant or student organizations) from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s.
25. A practice of extermination that consisted in throwing people into the sea from an airplane.
26. Social leader who disappeared in 1974 in Atoyac de Álvarez, Guerrero, after he had been illegally detained at a military checkpoint of the Secretariat of National Defense (SEDENA). His case was taken to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, which held the state responsible for his disappearance during the "dirty war."
27. A monument in the old town of Guadalajara, commemorating the major figures in the history of Jalisco.

28. Former bishop of Guadalajara (1771–1792), considered to be one of the city's great benefactors.
29. Students who were disappeared on 19 March 2018, outside the city of Guadalajara.
30. In Mexico, "historical truth" is the term used for the official version that, with no actual proof, the federal government attempted to impose in 2015 in the case of the 43 students from the Rural Teachers' College in Ayotzinapa, who were forcibly disappeared on 26 September 2014, in Iguala, Guerrero.
31. The letter *x* is used in Spanish to write in gender-neutral terms as an alternative to adjectives and nouns ending in *-o/-a*.
32. Santiago Andrés Maldonado, an Argentinian activist who was forcibly disappeared on 1 August 2017.
33. Bishop of Chiapas from 1959 to 1999. He was known for his support of organized indigenous communities.
34. Bishop of Saltillo from 1999 to 2020. He is known for the support he has given to the families of the disappeared.
35. One of the most emblematic figures of the ¡Eureka! Committee. Her son, Jesús Piedra, was disappeared in 1974.
36. Mexican general and politician who was in charge of the Secretariat of National Defense at the time of the 1968 massacre.

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Alfredo López Casanova is a Mexican sculptor from the city of Guadalajara. He studied at the University of Guadalajara's School of Plastic Arts and has won several sculpture awards and commissions. He is the creator of more than 20 public works, both figurative and geometric, in a number of cities, including Guadalajara, Mexico City, and Havana (Cuba). Alfredo López Casanova is also well known for his long-standing political and social commitment to several causes. In recent years he has been particularly involved with the relatives of the disappeared, especially through his participation in the Footprints of Memory collective, which carries out the important work of denunciation, awareness-raising, and memory for the disappeared in Mexico and other parts of the world.

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