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# Embodying Absence: Remembering Mexico's Missing Persons through Art

Sabrina Melenotte

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# The Global Politics of Artistic Engagement

*Beyond the Arab Uprisings*

*Edited by*

Pénélope Larzillière



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# Contents

List of Illustrations VII  
Notes on Contributors IX

Introduction: Repertoires of Engagement in Motion 1  
*Pénélope Larzillière*

## PART 1

### *Moving Repertoires of Engagement*

- 1 Creating a Syrian Culture in Exile: The Reconfigurations of Engagement 35  
*Franck Mermier*
- 2 The “Metamorphoses of the Political” in the Contemporary Art of Palestinian Post-Oslo Generation 63  
*Marion Slitine*
- 3 Transnationalizing the Repertoires of Action: A Comparative View of African Rappers’ Engagements in Motion 98  
*Alice Aterianus-Owanga*
- 4 Digital Artivism in Movement: The 2019 Lebanese Uprising’s Art on Instagram 122  
*Rayane al-Rammal*

## PART 2

### *Artistic Visibilities and Political Circulations, in Diaspora*

- 5 Presence and International Journeys of Engaged West Saharan Singers 153  
*Sébastien Boulay*
- 6 Young Documentary Theatre on Syrian Stages: An Aesthetic of Circulation, Exile, and Engagement 181  
*Simon Dubois*

- 7 Anatolian Musicians in Europe: Creation, Political Engagement,  
Transformation 210  
*Pinar Selek*

**PART 3**

***Contest and Critique, in a Globalizing World***

- 8 Palestinian Art Talk: A Local Lexicon for Global Art Production 233  
*Kirsten Scheid*
- 9 Fictions of the Contemporary: The Shifting Spaces of the  
Marrakech Biennale 266  
*Sarah Dornhof*
- 10 Focus on the Bahraini Art Scene: Centralization Processes and  
Social Engagement 290  
*Shyam Iskander*
- 11 Embodying Absence: Remembering Mexico's Missing Persons  
through Art 311  
*Sabrina Melenotte*
- Index 341

## Embodying Absence: Remembering Mexico's Missing Persons through Art

*Sabrina Melenotte*

Recently, there have been discussions in several parts of the world over the legitimacy of removing statues and rewriting the history and memories of past violence. Events in Mexico have raised the same question in a quite different manner. The statue of Christopher Columbus in Mexico City was removed from the main avenue, Paseo de la Reforma, 'for cleaning' by the government two days before 12 October 2020, the date on which the discovery of the Americas is commemorated and on which considerable protests often take place. On the same date in 1992, the statue of the conquistador Diego de Mazariegos was toppled by indigenous organizations in Chiapas (which were later involved in the 1 January 1994 Zapatista uprising), brandishing signs that condemned five hundred years of the death and destruction of the indigenous peoples, and the theft of their lands. But on the latter occasion, local authorities sparked a heated debate by proposing to replace the statue of the conquistador with one by Pedro Reyes of an indigenous woman, Tlali, reduced to a modern face, inspired by the pre-Columbian Olmec heads. Many historians and anthropologists have noted the ineptitude of asking a man, Metis moreover, to represent an indigenous woman in order to overcome colonial heritage, without consulting those primarily concerned, namely indigenous peoples and women.

Other events have been running in parallel to the removal of statues. Many 'anti-monuments' sprung up in public areas of Mexico City the last years, calling for justice. On 22 August 2020, one of these was erected in front of the US Embassy in tribute to the seventy-two migrants who were murdered on that date in 2010 in the state of Tamaulipas. Another was erected on 25 November 2020 opposite the Palace of Fine Arts in the heart of the city, this time in tribute to the victims of feminicide.<sup>1</sup> Following these protest actions, the mayor of Mexico City, Claudia Scheinbaum, reconsidered her decision to install the first figure, and

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1 Feminicide describes the political dimension of women and girls who are murdered simply for being female. Mexico has one of the highest rates of feminicide in the world: according to a recent UN report on the subject (United Nations, 2020), 63,324 women are presumed to have been murdered between 1985 and 2019.

consulted associations, artists, and historians before finally choosing another one, called “The Young Amajac”, a young woman of the pre-Columbian Huastec elite from Veracruz who is associated with the goddess of fertility. Meanwhile, the empty pedestal of Columbus is actually occupied by a wooden sculpture, 2 metres high, called in a press release “Antimonumenta. We want to be alive” (Antimonumenta. Vivas nos queremos). This portrays a woman painted purple, the colour of feminism, and with her fist raised, on the roundabout that has been renamed “Kiosk of Women Who Struggle” (Glorieta de las Mujeres que Luchan).

These apparently unrelated events raise many questions: first, they bear witness to a moment when crucial issues related to memorials were reactivated; second, they show the (more or less) intimate link between art, memory, and public space, and question the role and the legitimate place of artistic and social expressions that serve as monuments; third, they place the subject of the mass dead and disappeared in contemporary Mexico alongside the struggles of indigenous peoples and women. Thus, the construction of a memorial field around contemporary violence must be analysed over the long term, but also in a present where social actors are repositioning themselves in the public space and the political arena.

This issue is particularly acute given the country’s transition to democracy thirty years ago and the wave of extreme violence the entire country is currently suffering, unprecedented since the 1910–1920 Mexican Revolution. Prior to 2007, violence was sporadic and only affected specific sectors of the population, but since that date, President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa’s war on drugs has led paradoxically to a sharp rise in the number of homicides and disappearances, which are now occurring across the whole country. Since 2006, the war has resulted in an estimated total of 350,000 dead and 105,000 missing, prompting increased interest in how to remember and commemorate these individuals. Alongside this contemporary issue, the long-lasting historical and memorial concerns have been reactivated around the recognition of indigenous peoples, women, and missing persons.

This chapter offers a critical reflection on artistic engagement, focusing on the memory of dead and missing persons in Mexico within the larger story of victims of entrenched violence and the state’s denial of responsibility. It focuses in particular on the art form of monuments (Jelin and Langland, 2003; Hite, 2013), aiming to reflect on what Preda (2010), and Huyssen (2003) (whom Preda quotes) call ‘memory art’ and on the role that politically engaged art and artists play in fashioning public memory. Official art is often the first point of reference when constructing and interpreting a nation’s past (Preda, 2010), but as in many countries that have undergone a major political transition, a

number of artistic initiatives in Mexico have arisen from civil society as a way of giving voice to citizen memory and as an attempt to make up for the lack of legitimacy in official initiatives. They become cries for justice that transcend traditional approaches to memory, with the works themselves embodying protest and taking on a powerful political dimension.

This invitation to contrast official memory art in Mexico with protest memory art is particularly important in a context of widespread violence, since the representation of violence presents an immediate paradox: it portrays events whose contours are difficult to define since they are so deeply rooted in daily life that they have become commonplace and invisible. The images of atrocities that have invaded the imaginary of Mexicans in recent years often verge on the obscenely bloody, raising questions about the way in which violence is spoken about, represented, and made visible. Can representing the unrepresentable (Didi-Huberman, 2003) help to overcome it? Does approaching memory from an aesthetic and political perspective, or art from the point of view of memory and politics, help to fill the void that is created by the loss of meaning that death and mass disappearances bring about? Can it also counterbalance the horrific images that have haunted Mexicans' imaginations? What role can protest art play in proposing alternatives to images of atrocities, on the one hand, and to state silence, on the other?

Mexico's situation defies any simplistic answers, as the country is not in a post-conflict state or undergoing a process of transitional justice, both of which relate to a past that is over. First, political violence has a long history in Mexico, and does not begin with the so-called war against drug trafficking in 2006. We think for instance of the repression of students in Tlatelolco in 1968, or the massacre of Acteal in the Highlands of Chiapas in 1997, which killed indigenous Tsotsils, mostly women and children (Melenotte, 2014). Second, the contemporary simultaneity of extreme and widespread violence and its first commemorations raises urgent questions about how to produce a narrative of a present and a very recent past that are both violent and painful. It is paradoxical, to say the least, for Mexicans to suffer continuing high-intensity violence while producing a national narrative that holds out the promise of a cessation of violent acts and an underlying capacity for reconciliation. Third, the ongoing violence creates divisions and polarizations between the state and society, and more so between victims and perpetrators. This prompts questions about the extent to which official art projects that endorse national narratives, especially in monument form, exacerbate rather than reduce these tensions by setting categories literally in stone. The official art and memories produced by Latin American dictatorships, and authoritarian regimes more generally, have been problematic, whether they praise controversial historical figures – as was

the case with Franco in Spain – or cover up dark episodes, especially those that implicate the state, consolidate the winners' view of events, and subsequently lead to events being forgotten rather than to remembrance, reparations, or the cessation of violence. In addition to the political issue of government responsibility for violent acts that it may choose to record or silence, a further obstacle lies in the status conferred on victims and the political and artistic choices of whether or not to bring their voices into the public arena.

By cross-referencing ethnographic observations and analysing artworks that memorialize the missing and dead in Mexico City, the aim of this chapter is to highlight the different ways in which artists play a role in the city and appropriate public space in order to produce memory in an 'alternative' manner. Unlike institutional memory policies, artistic expressions emerging from civil society offer a particularly fertile alternative and collective memory art that redefines protest art and gives a new role to artists, who are engaged in a political and ethical approach that is close to the victims yet resonates in wider society. The chapter contains a selective analysis of some official and unofficial artworks in Mexico City, showing how each one 'makes memory' and creates memory art with very different purposes and engagement within the city. I begin by looking at how institutions have dealt with the memory of ongoing violence in Mexico, with analyses of the Memorial to the Victims of Violence in Mexico (*Memorial a las Víctimas de la Violencia en México*) (2012), the Absence Monument (*Monumento a la Ausencia*) (2018), and the recreation of the Day of the Dead (2018) as a heritage event. I then focus on two artistic and political experiences that challenge the traditional frameworks of the 'memorial form' and politically engaged art: two anti-monuments, the +43 (2015) and the +72 (2020), which sprang up on Mexico City's Paseo de la Reforma. Lastly, there is an analysis of the collective living memory project *Footprints of Memory* (*Huellas de la memoria*). Here, I draw on an interview conducted with the sculptor Alfredo López Casanova during the summer of 2020.

## 1 The Memorial to the Victims of Violence in Mexico

When acts of violence have occurred, memory plays an important role in creating opportunities for social reconciliation and healing, catharsis, and even mourning for victims' families. However, numerous studies on memory policies and commemorations in the context of armed conflict or after mass violence have highlighted the difficulty of composing a common narrative of a past that will inevitably be controversial (Nora, 1986; Halbwachs, 1997; Ricoeur, 2000; IPEV, 2018). Collective memory is an arena for political disputes in which



power relations and divisions are embedded in multiple narratives and places. Moreover, post-dictatorship memory policies often include policies of transitional truth and justice, and are to do with the ways in which society interprets and appropriates the past in order to shape its future (De Brito et al., 2001, cited by Preda, 2010). Lastly, Reinhart Koselleck (1998) has demonstrated how war memorials provide a foundation for the identity of survivors, obeying the injunction to commemorate the dead and preserve traces in a material form as monuments or memorials that periodically update a society's relationship with its past and its loss. In Mexico City, the Monument to the Revolution (started in 1910 but not completed until 1938), the monument in Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Tlatelolco commemorating the student repression of 1968, and, recently, the Memorial to the Victims of Violence in Mexico record dark episodes in Mexican history in monument form. I will focus on this last example of a monument erected to serve institutional memory. It supposedly focuses on contemporary violence, but has been widely contested because of its lack of a deep connection within the city and the architects' lack of engagement with the social and political processes in progress at the time.

In the early years of Mexico's war on drugs, official discourse aimed to make both the dead and missing appear to be suspect, by distinguishing between 'guilty' and 'innocent' victims (Robledo Silvestre, 2015). The murder of the son of the poet Javier Sicilia in 2011 turned this approach on its head, with Sicilia's reputation legitimizing his son's innocence. After a number of years in which Mexican society had been numbed and passive, Sicilia created the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity (Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad, MPJD), bringing thousands of people onto the street to chant slogans that demanded an end to the war and a return to peace. The effect was to remove the stigma attached to the victims and bring the issue of their legal and judicial recognition into the public arena and onto the political agenda. The government responded to the scale of these demonstrations by organizing the Dialogues for Peace in Chapultepec Castle, in the heart of Mexico City, during the summer of 2011. This initiative was not only an opportunity for the government to regain its legitimacy, then in tatters, but also, according to Moloeznik (2013, cited by Robledo Silvestre, 2015), to reassert its policy of military intervention. A few months later, a Victims' Law was passed, which has provided a legal framework for the families of victims to benefit from material compensation programmes. However, this legal recognition has not meant a retreat from the national security-based approach that dominates current policy, and may even have had the perverse effect of justifying continued military intervention in the name of a 'we' that includes those most directly affected. The creation of a victim identity has provided new opportunities for victims in the

public space and for establishing a memory of current events; but it has also opened the door to the legitimization of the government via the bureaucratization of victims and the establishment of an official framework of memory. This has taken place in particular through the construction of the Memorial to the Victims of Violence in Mexico, built at the very end of Felipe Calderón Hinojosa's term in office and inaugurated at the beginning of Enrique Peña Nieto's mandate (Robledo Silvestre, 2015).

Calderón promised to finance this memorial with funds confiscated from drug traffickers, while Sicilia, for his part, launched a proposal for a memorial in which the award process would be open to dialogue and involve public meetings in which victims and their families would participate. The consultation process, initially open to victims, was eventually dropped from the proposal, and the MPJD and other victims' organizations were not included in the project. The work, which had been put out to tender, was carried out by a firm of three architects together with three different victims' organizations that were not connected to the social mobilizations of the previous months but were close to the business community and the National Action Party (Partido de Acción Nacional), which was then in power. The jury chose this work because of its "successful approach of a sequence of symbolic walls that clearly convey the sense of remembrance and emotional renewal that were the essential components sought by the competition" (Provictima, 2012, cited by Robledo Silvestre, 2015).

Comprising seventy 12-metre-high red steel walls erected among trees, the memorial is supposed to represent life and destruction, with the trees and the people who pass through representing living beings and the walls symbolizing memory and absence. The rust on the walls is meant to reflect the scars and marks of the past, while on each wall there are engravings of phrases referring to peace and the involvement of civil society. The memorial aims to present violence as a "giant and never-ending problem" without specific periods or stories. It provides a space that can be appropriated by citizens, who can write or paint on it whatever they wish (Gaeta Springall, 2012, cited by Robledo Silvestre, 2015).

The memorial has been the subject of considerable controversy since its conception, for several reasons, not least for its location: it is built along the Paseo de la Reforma in the heart of Mexico City, on Ministry of Defence land (Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional) next to Campo Marte. As such, the site symbolizes the institution that is responsible for the fight against drug trafficking, an occupation that has caused so much violence and has repeatedly gone unpunished. The cost of the monument, 30 million pesos (around US\$ 1.5 million),



FIGURE 11.1 Memorial to the Victims of Violence in Mexico by Gaeta Springall Architects.  
© SABRINA MELENOTTE, MEXICO CITY, DECEMBER 2021



FIGURE 11.2 Memorial to the Victims of Violence in Mexico, with the names of victims attached by a group of victims' organizations led by Comité 68.  
© SABRINA MELENOTTE, MEXICO CITY, DECEMBER 2021

has also caused outrage. Above all, however, both the MPJD, led by Javier Sicilia, and victims' organizations as a whole, have condemned it because of the absence of any victims' names or information panels, which is most unusual for a memorial. As with the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, which also

provoked considerable controversy owing to the absence of names and the silence imposed,<sup>2</sup> the abstract approach was intended to allow everyone to interpret the monument in their own way. The monument was also designed to be modified, with people able to make it their own by inscribing their words next to the voices of such diverse, not to say “dissonant”, thinkers (Ovalle and Díaz Tovar, 2019) as Anne Frank and Mother Teresa, and Latin American writers such as Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende, and Jaime Sabines.

This official memorial site is proof of the failure of the negotiations between the Calderón government and the victims’ organizations associated with the MPJD. Considering recognition of the status of victims could have resulted in a more prominent political role for the memorial artwork, but this was considered an insult by the MPJD and human rights’ activists in Mexico, and led to debate about an artwork that had been expected to play a more resilient political role. Described as a “memorial without memory” (Robledo Silvestre, 2015) and a “space arousing amnesia and non-memory” (Ovalle and Díaz Tovar, 2019: 91), the work seems to have failed in its objective for those primarily concerned, the victims, because ‘to restore to the absent their human dignity, they must be mourned as everybody’s loss, and incorporated into a collective memory that restores their place in the world’ (Robledo Silvestre, 2015). The Mexican sculptor Alfredo López Casanova, who will be discussed later on in this chapter, considers the monument to be a “failed memorial” (*memorial fallido*) because it was built without the “consensus” of victims’ groups:

In reality, this is a betrayal of the dialogues of the MPJD. Out of these dialogues and Calderón’s stupidity arose the initiative for a memorial, the great betrayal. It is a particular betrayal to have placed it next to the Campo Marte. The Campo Marte is where the army is based, and is named after Mars, the god of war. So however you look at it, there is betrayal. [...] The missed opportunity for memory concerns me greatly and the memorial of the victims is a complete failure in this respect. It is worrying that this type of memorial did not obtain the consensus of the victims.<sup>3</sup>

A. LÓPEZ CASANOVA, interview conducted on 19 August 2020

López Casanova distinguishes here between memorials without consensus and those that have been agreed upon with the victims, but it should be pointed out that the lack of consensus here was not only between the state

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Finkelstein (2000).

<sup>3</sup> Translator’s note: This interview was conducted in Spanish, and the English translation here has been made from the author’s French translation.

and the victims, but also among victims' groups themselves, since although the inauguration of the memorial took place without the involvement of victims' groups close to the MPJD, the three victims' associations close to the party of the president then in power did have input. However, by not detailing the violent events and the names of the victims at any point, this memorial legitimized the federal government rather than recognizing the victims of violence and thereby creating a common narrative for the whole country.

Several subsequent attempts by victims' groups to appropriate the memorial have endowed the work with a renewed political role. In 2013, Comité 68, founded after government repression of more than 400 students in the same year as the Olympic Games in Mexico City, renamed this space the Memorial *of* the Victims of *State* Violence (emphasis added). Some time later, the memorial was appropriated by a group of victims' organizations led by Comité 68, who attached the names of victims of certain massacres (including those of Acteal, Lagos de Moreno, Villas de Salvárcar, Casino Royale, and Creel) on the steel walls (Ovalle and Díaz Tovar, 2019, p. 91), but these were erased after a few months. In 2016, under the government of Enrique Peña Nieto, the MPJD proposed renaming the Stele of Light (Estela de Luz) as the Memorial *of* the Victims of Violence in Mexico and Stele of Peace. These citizens' initiatives sought to hold the government to its obligations, to give new meaning to the monument, and to recover the historical truth by giving a name to each victim, insisting that there would be no "justice without truth, and no peace without justice".<sup>4</sup> Lastly, in 2018, to commemorate the repression of students and citizens in the city's Plaza de las Tres Culturas by Mexican armed forces fifty years earlier, the Victim Care Executive Commission (CEAV) added to the efforts of civil society by installing new walls to replace those that had deteriorated (Ovalle and Díaz Tovar, 2019).

So, controversial though it is, the first memorial to the victims of the war on drugs has opened a debate on the political expression of past and ongoing violence. It has also led to some changes in official artistic expressions of memory and a degree of meaningful reinvestment in them by civil society.

## 2 The Absence Monument

Also in 2018, the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México included the subject of the missing in their official commemoration of the violent events

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4 For more details, see the MPJD's website: <https://mpjd.mx/pronunciamientos/memorial-de-las-victimas-de-la-violencia-en-mexico-y-estela-de-la-paz/> (accessed 12 December 2021).

of 2 October 1968. The Absence Monument (Monumento a la Ausencia) was commissioned to commemorate the victims of the 1968 crackdown on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the 1968 student movement, following a tender process organized by the Tlatelolco University Cultural Centre (CCUT) and the CEAV. The Israeli artist Yael Bartana won an international competition, and worked to create a space that would be dedicated to memory and protest as a form of collective symbolic reparation.

Situated in the CCUT central courtyard, Bartana's piece consists of the footprints of 400 pairs of shoes trodden into an expanse of cement by the victims and survivors of the October 1968 events. The number of pairs of shoes is significant: Bartana opted for what is considered the maximum number of missing persons recorded by the victims' groups and not the minimum version, which sometimes puts the number of dead and missing at only thirty. The artist also invited several victims' representatives to take part, including Comité 68 and the Communist Youth League of Mexico, whom she met at the site. The sets of footsteps recording the violence are set into the concrete, and cross each other, getting mixed up and even overlapping, without going either in a specific direction or a straight line; it is as if the incoherence of the footsteps evokes the panic of the students running to escape police bullets. Although visitors may not wish to do so, they are permitted to walk over this area of footsteps (since there is no barrier preventing them from doing so), and this symbolizes a tracing back over the footsteps of the missing – and over the history of past violence.

The memorial is located less than 500 metres from the public square where the massacre took place on 2 October 1968, and its footprints commemorate one of the most emblematic episodes of state violence in Mexico's modern history. The building next to it is plastered with the slogans "Neither forgive nor forget" and "People, do not abandon us – Unite!". There is also a free exhibition that is based on an impressive piece of archival work called M68 Citizens on the Move. This open-access digital archive brings together more than 100,000 objects from thirty-five archives in universities, public institutions, and civil society. The information panel at the entrance to the exhibition encapsulates the 1968 massacre in the following words:

The massacre of students, workers, and civilian protesters by military and police forces in Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Tlatelolco on 2 October 1968 took place just a few days before the inauguration of the Olympic Games in Mexico City. The people who demonstrated that day were part of a worldwide movement seeking social change, but they became the victims of a brutal, violent, and premeditated attempt to silence their



FIGURES 11.3 AND 11.4 The Absence Monument by Yael Bartana in the Tlatelolco University Cultural Centre's central courtyard.

© SABRINA MELENOTTE, MEXICO CITY, OCTOBER 2018

protest. The massacre and the enforced disappearances and civil oppression that took place on that day and in the years that followed are an atrocious example of a state perpetrating violence against its own citizens. The massacre symbolizes the repression of one of the most basic civil rights: the right to protest.<sup>5</sup>

The facts could not be stated more clearly: there was a “massacre” induced by “a state perpetrating violence [against its own citizens]” including “enforced disappearances” in order to “silence” their protest. The memorial is completely

<sup>5</sup> Translator's note: This translation is from the author's French translation of the original Spanish.

in keeping with a statement made earlier by the CEAV director, Jaime Rochín del Rincón, who called the massacre of the students in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas a “state crime” (*La Jornada*, 25 September 2020). The CCUT has adopted an engaged and proactive position, transmitting a political message at the intersection of art and history; this acknowledges the responsibility of the government in these events and the victims’ desire for justice.

This artistic presentation of the memory of 1968 some fifty years after the events involves a more inclusive and consensual official work of remembrance than the Memorial to the Victims of Violence in Mexico described earlier. This is because victims’ and survivors’ organizations were included in the creative and political process, and the responsibility of the government for the violence was openly acknowledged. Combined with the exhibition, Bartana’s work forms part of an endeavour that is guided by academic and historiographical work and contributes to a deeper understanding of the facts. The abstract artwork outside complements the exhibition inside, with the documents and photographs enabling us to follow the sequence of events in detail. The emphasis, however, is on the effort of institutions rather than on the work of a foreign artist in residence who has embraced a specific position in the country that has welcomed her, but whose own history and work ultimately appear to be secondary, even in descriptions by the press. Instead, the CEAV – the institution responsible for victims of the contemporary conflict in Mexico – boasted about “implementing measures to ensure collective satisfaction” (SurAcapulco, 25 September 2018) in its reconstruction of the memory of the facts, having rooted the artwork within a more integrated process of reparation actions.

### 3 Treating the Death of Migrants as Heritage in Times of War

Another of my ethnographic observations from October 2018 relates to the way in which the Mexico City authorities sought to commemorate death linked to migration as heritage.

Throughout the month of October, before a procession and celebration in the cemeteries on 1 and 2 November, Mexico City’s central square, the Zócalo, is filled with offerings and altars to the dead. Taking place at the heart of the public space, the Day of the Dead involves bringing the dead back to life, with processions by the souls of the dead and food offerings for them. This was initially a syncretic religious festival and popular belief, but the secularization of the country in the nineteenth century resulted in the celebration being placed under the political authority of Mexico City, and thanks to the efforts of the



municipal authorities it is now included on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list.

In 2018, the city authorities decided to dedicate the Day of the Dead and its offerings to migrants who had lost their lives in transit, welcoming them into the so-called city of refuge. Several altars placed in the Zócalo represented migrants with five enormous and stereotypical skeletons, known as *Catrin*s, their clothes revealing their identity: an Asian, a Spanish Republican, a Jew, an indigenous woman with her child, and a young Latin American, each representing a wave of migration in the country's history. The idea was to create an analogy between the migrants and pre-Columbian mythology, where the souls of the deceased have to brave ordeals in their journey to reach Mictlan, the underworld or the kingdom of the dead; and then, once they have overcome the dangers, bide their time before coming back to life. On each altar, these somewhat Eurydicean figures were seen on the move, sometimes braving the harshness of the natural elements – mountains, snow, rain, river, and fog – and sometimes the danger of wild animals, such as the jaguar, or even the dangers posed by other human beings. Their moving bodies reinforced the impression of the ordeal that they had experienced.

The irony, however, was that at this time some 4,000 migrants, soon to grow to as many as 7,000, mainly from Honduras and El Salvador, had chosen to cross the southern border of Mexico in the hope of reaching the United States. They travelled under cover of the Caravan of Mothers of Missing Migrants (*Caravana de Madres de Migrantes Desaparecidos*) so as to benefit from protection on a journey that they would otherwise have had to make alone. Contrary to expectations, it was not President Enrique Peña Nieto, still in office, who took charge of handling these migrants in transit, but rather the president-elect, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, elected in July but not due to be inaugurated until December, thus anticipating the migration policy he would pursue a few months later. This essentially consisted of stationing large numbers of police and military with armoured vehicles on the Mexican side of the US border under pressure from the United States, which threatened to close its borders completely. Three weeks before his mid-term elections, Donald Trump denounced an “attack” by migrants and “criminals”, and sent more than 5,000 soldiers to the border, threatening to send triple that number if the caravan continued north. He also threatened to cut the millions of dollars in aid his government was sending to Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. To avoid a serious diplomatic incident with Mexico's northern neighbour, López Obrador promised to give work visas to all Central American migrants who wanted to stay in the country (BBC News Mundo, 29 October 2018).



FIGURES 11.5–11.8 Several altars placed in the Zócalo for the Day of the Dead in 2018, representing migrants with five enormous and stereotypical skeletons, known as *Catrin*as.

© SABRINA MELENOTTE, MEXICO CITY, OCTOBER 2018

Mexico City's depiction of those who had died and gone missing during migration as art and heritage was confronted with a harsh reality: the thousands of present-day migrants provided a stark contrast with the festive staging of past events. Making migrant journeys a heritage item appeared to depoliticize the

subject rather than to root it in the present, thereby responding to social and political demands relating to contemporary migration. Even though the 'young Latin American' in jeans and a hoodie was supposed to represent contemporary migration, the stereotype was abstract and far removed from reality when set alongside historic migrations and divorced from the political context of ongoing migration.

#### 4 The +43 and +72 Anti-Monuments

In response to artworks that are designed to serve memory but do little to enable victims to come to terms with their pain or with the bloody present, alternative approaches to art, based on collective and community memory, have emerged in recent years. In the face of state denial, survivors and victims' families are rewriting their history with the help of human rights activists and artists who seek to challenge official policies. This art enables them to construct a political identity and a 'we' in order to create the history of a group or community: deprived of its history by the state, they seek to express themselves in their own way, beyond the bounds of official national history. A memory has thus emerged in Mexico that results from citizens' initiatives and uses a political language that denounces impunity and demands justice.

One of the most eloquent contemporary artistic expressions of these demands for justice in the face of contemporary violence is undoubtedly the anti-monument. This term refers to a protest creation process that emerged in the early 1990s, and was coined by James E. Young (1993) – who initially used the term "counter-monument" to refer to works commemorating the Holocaust that had emerged in Germany in the second half of the twentieth century as a reaction against nationalist and authoritarian forms of monument. As a strategy, anti-monuments break with institutional monumentality and the values this conveys, while in a context of widespread and extreme violence, they function as practices of commemoration and resistance to violence; and they are spearheaded by the families of victims and survivors of violence (Ovalle and Díaz Tovar, 2019: 108).

The most well-known and emblematic anti-monument in Mexico referring to 'enforced' disappearances, in other words those carried out with the direct participation of the state, was erected anonymously and pays homage to forty-three students from the Raúl Isidro Burgos Teachers' College (also known as the Ayotzinapa Rural School). On 26 September 2014, following demonstrations against educational reforms and while travelling to Mexico City to take part in the march to commemorate the 2 October 1968 Tlatelolco massacre,

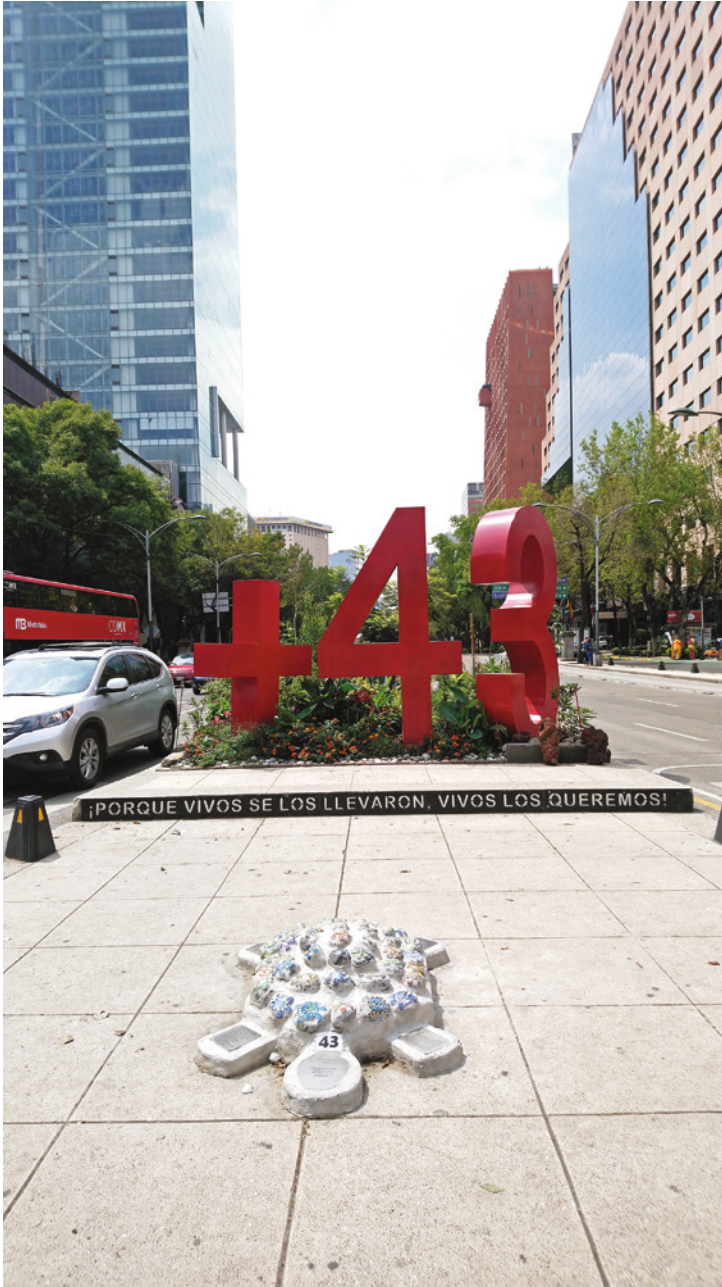


FIGURE 11.9 The most emblematic anti-monument in Mexico referring to 'enforced' disappearances and paying homage to forty-three students from the Raúl Isidro Burgos Teachers' College.  
© SABRINA MELENOTTE, MEXICO CITY, OCTOBER 2018



FIGURE 11.10 The anti-monument in Mexico with protesters.

© SABRINA MELENOTTE, MEXICO CITY, OCTOBER 2018

the students were attacked by a coordinated group of local, state, and federal police forces and soldiers, and disappeared completely in circumstances that are still unclear.

Standing 3 metres tall, the anti-monument comprises a huge number 43 preceded by a + sign, to remind us principally of the forty-three missing students, but instructing us not to forget all those others who have also disappeared in Mexico in 'enforced' or other circumstances. The three components are red, to symbolize the blood of the victims. Running along the base of the anti-monument, the slogan "¡Porque vivos se los llevaron, vivos los queremos!" ("Because they were taken alive, we want them back alive!") is a direct reference to the slogan chanted by the families of those who went missing during the Dirty War of the 1970s.<sup>6</sup> In front of the anti-monument sits a sculpture of the rural school's symbol: a turtle encrusted with forty-three smaller turtles that are decorated with colourful mosaics.

The anti-monument is located at the entrance to the business district on the central reservation of the Paseo de la Reforma in Mexico City. It sits at the

<sup>6</sup> The Dirty War in Mexico began at the end of the 1960s and lasted until the end of the 1970s, taking place at the same time as the dictatorships in South America. Inspired by counter-insurgency approaches employed in Algeria, Vietnam, and Latin America, it broke with traditional wars by employing selective military and political repression of political dissidents through the involvement of paramilitary groups and the systematic use of enforced disappearance and torture. Also described as a low intensity conflict, the Dirty War indiscriminately repressed both combatant and civilian populations.

crossroads with another large avenue that leads directly to the centre, next to the Church of San Judas Tadeo where a monthly pilgrimage of the saint's worshippers takes place, and opposite the Cibeles Fountain and the large yellow sculpture known as the Torre Caballito. This location means the anti-monument is clearly visible in the centre of the city, and it has become a stopping point for demonstrations and in particular the monthly marches of the parents of the forty-three students and other students from Ayotzinapa Rural School, who always end their march in the middle of the avenue here with speeches that mix social protest with commemoration and demands for justice. This appropriation of space by the victims and protesters provides evidence of the break with the Memorial to the Victims of Violence in Mexico, which has never received society's backing.

On 22 August 2020, another anti-monument sprang up, this time in front of the US Embassy. It was placed there by the families of the seventy-two migrants who were massacred in August 2010 in San Fernando, Tamaulipas. Here again, the figure refers to the number of people murdered and the '+' to the thousands of others who have disappeared or who have been murdered in Mexico. The collective and anonymous sculpture is situated further down the Paseo de la Reforma than the Memorial to the Victims of Violence in Mexico, and is in the middle of the pavement. Clearly visible to passers-by and businesspeople, it commemorates victims in a completely different manner; it is a counterpoint to the official site.

Videos of the installation of the +72 anti-monument show a number of groups representing victims of disappearances and their relatives, together with human rights activists and charity or church groups. We see the pavement being dug up to install the anti-monument, but at that stage no-one knew if it would be allowed to remain or if it would be removed by the authorities straight away. Against all expectations, it remained in place, to the astonishment of passers-by and the US Embassy guards. The location of the anti-monument, a protest against the massacre of migrants, is symbolic, as it exposes the involvement of the United States in the dark history of the wall and the criminalization of migrants on the northern border. On the day it was set up, the families and activists declared, 'Today we are erecting this anti-monument to cleanse the memory of the 58 men and 14 women murdered in the El Huizachal *ejido* [common land], because they were not criminals, but workers with dreams and plans, with families waiting for them' (Desinformémonos, 22 August 2020).

In Mexico, the very process of erecting an unofficial monument in the heart of a city gives it a transgressive character. It is first and foremost the unexpected and unauthorized intrusion into public space and the spatial and temporal appropriation of the city by citizens that endow the monument with a special meaning, since they hold up a mirror to the official memories that are

represented further up the avenue. In contrast to the official memorial, the +43 anti-monument breaks with the idea of memory as an object and a work of art and promotes a relational, symbolic, and contingent approach to the political emergency. In the same way, and in contrast to the depoliticized journey taken by the migrant *Catrin*as staged in the *Zócalo* for the Day of the Dead festivities, the +72 anti-monument makes it clear that the dangers faced by these seventy-two migrants are attributable to repressive policies that criminalized them, referring directly to the responsibility of the United States for the construction of the wall, and indirectly to that of Mexico in its role as an outsourcer in the violence perpetrated against the migrants, who were executed and then abandoned to the elements.

As such, the anti-monument challenges the very notion of memory set in stone. The material of the anti-monument is not the bronze or marble of official memorials; it is not intended to last, because it is designed to be removed on the day the state brings justice to all the dead and missing. The anti-monuments are characterized by their ephemeral nature and go beyond the idea of perpetuating memory. They “seek to alter the perception that a fact is irrevocable” (Infoactivismo, 30 October 2017) by becoming the focus of ongoing protests and demands for justice and part of social practices; this is what endows them with legitimacy.

## 5 Footprints of Memory

Our last example of alternative memory art breaks with the kind of monument art that imposes an official message that is made up of the winners' memories and history (and its omissions). In addition to memorials or anti-monuments, more fragile and precarious objects, such as shoes and etchings, have been used in recent years. This is exactly what the Footprints of Memory (*Huellas de la memoria*) project, aimed at denouncing enforced disappearances, has done.

In 2017, a partnership between an international charity focused on enforced disappearances, the *Collectif Paris-Ayotzinapa*, and an arts venue in Paris, *DOC!*, resulted in an exhibition entitled *Footprints of Memory*, with the involvement of the sculptor Alfredo López Casanova and María de Jesús Tlatempa, the mother of one of Ayotzinapa's forty-three missing students. It was on this occasion that I got to know Alfredo personally and discovered the group project. We stayed in touch and met again during the summer of 2020 for a group interview on the relationships between the arts, memory, and the missing in Mexico (López Casanova, Melenotte, and Vallejo Flores, 2021). Several extracts from our discussion are included here to prompt reflection on this project, which involved the families of missing persons. Drawing on the memory of

those searching for them, this is one of the most innovative artistic and political approaches to thinking about how to honour and commemorate the dead and missing in Mexico.

In his retrospective account of this project, Alfredo refers to an initial “intuition”, or “spark on the road” that was ignited during a march that took place on 10 May 2013, Mother’s Day in Mexico: Letty Hidalgo, a mother looking for her son Roy Rivera, who had gone missing in Monterrey, told Alfredo about the hundreds of kilometres she had travelled looking for her son and her decision to choose sturdy, comfortable shoes rather than pretty ones. He asked her for a pair of her shoes, and began to consider the distances that families were walking in their search for the missing and the wear and tear on the many types of shoes they wore. This led him to ask others to send him their shoes:

work boots, cowboy boots, trainers, sandals, court shoes, pumps, flip-flops, and all say a lot about who they belong to. The shoes arrived with a personal message written on a piece of paper which the group then etches onto the sole. The soles are now a “register of names, ages, and places, marked by their demand to know, where are [the missing]?”<sup>7</sup>

RIVERA GARCÍA, 2016

For the travelling exhibition, Alfredo went to Paris with dozens of shoes that had been sent in by families of the missing. These were gathered together, logged, and distributed by members of the group. As detailed in the extract, the personal messages etched onto the soles of the worn-out shoes were written by the families and intended for their absent loved one; they tell the stories of the missing and of those who are looking for them, giving substance to absence and memory.

The initial idea was fleshed out with the arrival of the second pair of shoes that came with a letter from a mother from Coahuila that included the words ‘walk’ and ‘look for’. This inspired the way the project would then develop.<sup>8</sup>

A. LÓPEZ CASANOVA, interview conducted on 19 August 2020

7 Translator’s note: The English translation of this quotation has been produced from a combination of the author’s Spanish to French translation and the English subtitles from the *Footprints of Memory* video.

8 Translator’s note: All extracts from this point are taken from the interview with Alfredo. They were translated from Spanish to French by the author, and then from French to English as part of the translation of this chapter.





FIGURE 11.11 Exhibition Footprints of Memory.

© PHOTOGRAPHIC FUND OF FOOTPRINTS OF MEMORY, PARIS, 2017

A classic motif in projects on the subject of disappearance, the shoe embodies the idea of walking, the search for a loved one, the refusal to do nothing and just sit around waiting. Each shoe has a life: it gets worn down into the shape of the foot that wears it, and is marked by the path of the seeker and by the passage of time. These shoes tell stories and bear the memories of hidden suffering that institutions do not represent. With a personal and intimate message etched onto them, they will not be worn down further; they are now works of art that are exhibited and circulated, not as sacred, untouchable physical relics, but as part of a narrative that conveys a message of love and a public outcry, bearing witness to the memory of the missing and those searching for them.

The symbolism of the etched shoes is reinforced by the choice of colours used to print the message on paper:

Green is for the hope of finding [the missing] alive; red for the women murdered when searching for [the missing]; black for the grief of those who have been identified in unmarked mass graves; and orange for the message of hope for those who have been found and set free from the secret prisons.

A. LÓPEZ CASANOVA, interview conducted on 19 August 2020

This political project on alternative memory has grown rapidly, and now encompasses a wider geographical area and a longer period of time, thanks to the solidarity of its contributors and its Facebook page. There are now more than 200 shoes in the collection, some of which come from other countries, enabling the project to cover disappearances not only in Mexico, but also in Central America and Argentina. Following Alfredo's visit to Europe, there are even shoes from North and sub-Saharan Africa. The temporal boundaries have also been extended, and the project now includes disappearances from the Dirty War era of the 1970s right up to today's war on drugs.

Our initial relationships were with groups connected to events that took place well after the 1970s. That is to say, at the beginning, most of the families who gave us their shoes were linked to the period of the Calderón war, from 2006 to around 2012, but these relationships meant that we then met families who asked, "And can we etch [messages for the disappeared] from the 1970s?" We said, "yes, of course", and then they asked, "and can we etch [messages for the disappeared] from other countries in Latin America?" Since then, we have also etched [messages for the disappeared] from Tunisia, other countries in Africa, and the Western Sahara.

A. LÓPEZ CASANOVA, interview conducted on 19 August 2020

An interesting analogy can thus be drawn between the symbolism of the shoes and walking, on the one hand, and the circulation of artistic and memorial elements across the world, on the other. Together they constitute a transnational repertoire of protest and memory art that embodies demands for justice.

Other artistic initiatives by citizens should be mentioned here, such as that undertaken by the pioneering mothers of the group *Bordamos por la Paz* (We Embroider for Peace), whose aim is to restore the individual and collective memory of people who have disappeared or been murdered in recent years. With hundreds of embroiderers and dozens of families joining the cause, this and the *Footprints of Memory* project have been exhibited in several parts of the world. By making private messages public and giving details of the victims' lives, they make a political statement, since naming and relating the individual stories of the missing and the dead gives dignity to those who are all too often reduced to anonymous numbers. As an alternative to fixed or monolithic memorials or anti-monuments, these two projects are itinerant and not necessarily just displayed in the centre of Mexico City. The result is different each time and depends on the context in which the exhibitions are mounted.

In 2017, Alfredo López Casanova used long threads to hang the etched shoes from the ceiling of the exhibition space in Paris, while portraits of the mothers



FIGURES 11.12–11.14  
Exhibition Footprints of Memory.  
© PHOTOGRAPHIC  
FUND OF FOOTPRINTS  
OF MEMORY, BERLIN/  
HEIDELBERG  
(GERMANY) AND ROME  
(ITALY), 2017

and those of their missing children were placed on the surrounding walls, enveloping both the shoes of the missing and the visitors. This group project benefited from Alfredo's experience. A man in his fifties, his lengthy career exceeds the scope of this chapter (López Casanova, Melenotte, and Vallejo Flores, 2021). He defines himself as a migrant because his family moved from the state of Zacatecas to the city of Guadalajara. Of the many sculptures of his that can be seen in various cities, one in Guadalajara has left a particular mark on the city. This recent sculpture of the Dominican friar Antonio Alcalde, erected in 2019, was unveiled in the presence of the mothers of the missing, and included four 'hidden' messages commemorating them, together with a text the artist called "the cry of the statue" (Vallejo Flores, 2021). He presents these deeply political works as 'living' memories, but does not like the label of 'engaged artist', and still less that of 'activist', not because the political label detracts from the artistic nature of his work, but because he prefers to distance himself from more fashionable movements and to draw attention to his work's deep roots in the local community. In the 1970s, he had an early and organic relationship – 'natural' in his words – with the struggles for basic public services and a decent standard of living in his neighbourhood in the south of Guadalajara. As a teenager, he contributed drawings to the working-class urban movement that was highly active at the time in the city. The movement sought to mobilize the working classes in Guadalajara and in rural areas, and brought together grassroots church communities led by Jesuits inspired by the Second Vatican Council and political organizations that had emerged from former guerrilla groups, such as the Asociación Cívica Nacional Revolucionaria (National Revolutionary Civic Association). Alfredo continued working as a manual labourer while studying at the city's Fine Arts School, where he met the teachers of some of the greatest mural painters, such as Clemente Orozco. Today, he says his connection with the mothers of the disappeared is also very 'natural':

Footprints of Memory is a metaphor for the search [for the missing] and was put together with the families. [...] The relationship with the families flows naturally. It's not recent, not from the Calderón war, but grew out of my contact with the families of the Eureka Collective in the 1980s, for example. [...] I have had a relationship with those organizations since the 1980s. Today, it seems that there are many more of us, but it's almost always the same people: we get to know each other and along the way the relationships become more fluid, and so it was only natural that I would come across these families in 2006 and thereafter.

A. LÓPEZ CASANOVA, interview conducted on 19 August 2020

There are two strands to Alfredo's career: first, there is the individual sculptor who is trying to make a living from his work and apply for official commissions and competitions, producing solo projects in different styles that range from geometrical painting to the busts of famous Latin American figures that are dotted around Mexico City and Guadalajara. Second, there is the politically engaged man who gives his unpaid, anonymous support to social movements he considers just. Alfredo is proud of the fact that he has never been part of the "small art world", as he calls it, nor has he done much to increase his personal fame or earn more money by playing the gallery game and attending exhibition openings. This ambivalent relationship with the state and the art market makes him an artist who "juggles", as he puts it, to find a "balance" between his involvement as an activist and his artistic success, which, depending on the periods and contexts, may be in harmony, with one feeding off the other, as in the Footprints of Memory project, but may also be discordant. "Not all my work is political", he points out, while acknowledging that he is best recognized today as a "sculptor who is highly committed to the subject of enforced disappearances".

Alfredo is conscious that his name as a sculptor has contributed to the "visibility strategy" of the collective project, which he laments but instantly deconstructs in a way that leads him to detach himself from his own experience – to the extent that he talks about himself in the third person:

What bothers me most is that the media gave more value to the work because it was created by an "artist", and gave less weight to the fact that it was a collaborative project involving an activist group and the families. And this is where the image of the militant, the activist, intersects with the audacity and experience of the sculptor who has some skill in etching, and is able to do so. So the artist asks for a few shoes, he's skilled at etching them, and for the media, the sculptor's story is suddenly more important than the activist's initiative.

A. LÓPEZ CASANOVA, interview conducted on 19 August 2020

These two aspects of his nature often crop up in his discourse, and, in his words at least, help him to distance himself from the image of the politically engaged artist, an image he rejects. By separating art from politics, Alfredo takes as read that the former, art, has a tendency to glorify the individual, while activism tends to obliterate the individual, the artist. He prefers to move in and out of these two non-permeable universes, to preserve freer spaces for creation in which he can take refuge, such as geometry and painting, which fascinate and relax him, and spaces in which his ethical and political positions predominate;

this also helps to avoid complications with the authorities. It is therefore not surprising that he refuses to speak of *Footprints of Memory* as his own or as a work of art, and makes it a point of honour to speak about it in the first person plural:

At the beginning, I was annoyed that *Footprints of Memory* was interpreted as a project initiated by a sculptor and that, therefore, it must be a work of art. From the very first interviews, before the first exhibition, and even in those that followed, we insisted that “no, *Footprints of Memory* is a visibility strategy; it’s not a work of art”. I think I resisted the idea because I was unaware of the power of art or I did not want to recognize it as such when it is used as a weapon of protest. Yet in fact it does give it a new dimension.

A. LÓPEZ CASANOVA, interview conducted on 19 August 2020

Rather than deciding whether *Footprints of Memory* is a work of art or not, he draws a distinction between works of art that are created purely for aesthetic purposes, and those that have a different aim, that of rendering a memory visible in order to condemn a situation experienced collectively by the families of the missing:

There is both a dispute over and a discussion around memory, because the state has realized the potential of the subject that it hadn’t grasped beforehand: there has been a long delay in the discussion about memory in Mexico since the massacres of ’68 and the 1970s and 1980s. There have been more and more massacres, disappearances, and feminicides, and there is no justice. First of all, because there is no will to find a solution; these things are ongoing, they just happen again and again. And we state this very clearly: the state is in no position to offer remembrance because what is demanded of the state is that it does justice, that is to say, that as long as justice is not done, there can be no memory provided by state. Therefore, our construction of memory in *Footprints of Memory* is very specific, because it plays out in several fields: it is a denunciation, which demands justice and seeks truth, and by so doing, also constructs memory.

A. LÓPEZ CASANOVA, interview conducted on 19 August 2020

The victims participating in the project aspire to memory and justice, principally criminal justice, but also social and restorative justice. And justice involves naming things:

Footprints of Memory is both a denunciation strategy and, by working with the families, it is also about the collective construction of memory. It is a memorial, but it is a very specific type of memorial, because it is not a memorial that records a fact from the past, but rather it is a memory in ongoing construction, in the midst of events, in the present day, and whose three main components are memory, truth, and justice. For us this is very important. It is our horizon. It is a memory that denounces, builds, and demands justice.

A. LÓPEZ CASANOVA, interview conducted on 19 August 2020

Thus, while institutional memory policy aims, at best, at the past not being repeated, alternative memories are rather a process and a performance, and send us forward to a future time and place through the process of public and shared recognition of suffering, which then becomes a driving force for social transformation. This atypical approach to space and time allows a society deeply marked by violence not only to recognize and identify itself, but also to project itself towards a new horizon in which there is new hope. As the message on the shoes provided by the family of Jebrey Castaño Montoya, who went missing in 2002 aged thirty-four, reads, “Hope is never lost and you become a dreamer, you imagine that at any moment he could return. This hope is eternal and at times you don’t want to know what happened, you only want to keep the beautiful and unforgettable memories” (Rivera García, 2016). This projection is also the reason why, quite unlike the Memorial to the Victims of Violence in Mexico, which has never been ‘inhabited’ by the population, the families of the missing and the wider public are invested in memorials that are rooted in ritualized social and daily practices, which endow them with a certain political dimension.

## 6 Conclusion

Memory is never unique (Halbwachs, 1997): it is constantly being constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed. In this sense, it is always ‘open’ and is redefined by the changing groups of which society is composed (Erll, 2010; Jelin, 2012). Art plays a fundamental role in the construction of the memory of a violent past or present, not because it is capable of putting an end to violence, but because it can oppose the ‘culture of silence’ so often associated with collective violence (Gómez-Barris, 2009). By comparing and contrasting a number of artworks related to memory, we have seen how official initiatives differ from alternative approaches, and how the former prolong the silences and impunity

they are associated with. In the face of official memory, other initiatives by civil society have burst into the field in order to ensure the missing are not forgotten. The construction of alternative memory covers a broad spectrum of artistic practices and expressions that are beyond the scope of this chapter, but which all share the dimension of being collective and driven by protest, invested in by both family and society. These practices lead us to reflect on the way in which emotion and the intimate take on a political dimension and people turn to protest art to demand truth and justice.

The Memorial to the Victims of Violence in Mexico, monolithic and nameless, is considered by the majority of the victims to be 'without memory', as it presents continuing violence as a timeless and decontextualized abstraction. Similarly, the 2018 migrant-themed Day of the Dead festivities treated migrants as heritage objects, depoliticizing them by cutting them off from their context and social reality, live issues in Mexico at the time. These official memorials tend to depoliticize the artistic treatment of victims and contingent reality. Conversely, anti-monuments, the Footprints of Memory project, and other projects that have emerged from Mexican civil society root individual accounts of violence in a situated collective memory and a particular geographical and historical context. By endowing memorial art with an eminently political force, these alternative collective expressions constitute a veritable repertoire of collective, globalized protest.

The spatial reappropriations of memory by the MPJD and the groups associated with today's victims and those of 1968 are redefining ways of dealing with a traumatic past and redrawing the contours of artistic engagement when it is backed by protest: artists and victim support groups are keen not to use collective projects to serve their personal fame. The deliberate merging of their individuality as artists in the anonymity of the collective is, however, counterbalanced by the fact that this same individuality ultimately serves the collective project, by using the artists' know-how and professional skills to reinforce the visibility strategy of the collective project.

Lastly, alternative artistic approaches not only cover a diversity of artistic practices, but also have a social function that turns them into a living memory that acts as a cry for justice. The anti-monuments that are springing up in Mexico City and the travelling Footprints of Memory collective project are socially and symbolically charged by the victims, giving them a voice and resonating far outside Mexico. Protest memory art carried out this way is contingent; it speaks to us of both the traumatic past and the present in a specific context of ongoing violence, while allowing us to look towards the future in a way not offered by institutional memory, and to identify with the fate of the families of the missing both in Mexico and further afield.



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