

Aesthetic Imagination in the Face of Chaos

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In bello parvis momentis magni casus intercedunt.

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The earthquake of '85 destroyed Tepito. It was September 19th, and that afternoon at about three o'clock, my kids, their friends and I loaded three cars with clothes, medicine and bottled water. Bewildered by the piles of debris we had to dodge, we shakily parked on the corner of González Ortega and Cerrada Días de León, where I ended up staying the night. And the next night and the next... That first night, under a light drizzle, I founded the crisis relief organization that later became the Centro de Enlace Díaz de León/Tepito Indómito (Díaz de León Center of Liaisons /Savage Tepito). Just a few days later, we set up three tents, which we turned into our administrative base, a shelter for victims, and a staging ground to distribute provisions, donations and offer first aid relief. Waves of victims aimlessly walked the intransitable streets. Some hurried to their jobs, others to aid survivors in the downtown area of Tlatelolco. Confused, the people of Tepito wandered around, looking lost, turning over debris to better yank free a piece of furniture, clothes, documents, a family photo. The power had gone out. The phones weren't working. There was no water and sodas were worth gold. There was no way to mix the baby formula, to make rice, to make soup... There was no way to shower! And the smell of the dead! A terrible stench of carrion wrapped around us for weeks... We faced an unforeseen future. Precarious. Chaos swept over us. Chaos swept over the entire country. And so we started to mourn.

The morning of Monday the 23rd, I woke before dawn. Volunteers had to be organized to distribute food and blankets, arrange expired medicine and redirect any claims to the appropriate government office. Our neighbours, now homeless, crowded in front of our tents. The sun was rising when, in the distance, we heard a sweet, delicate sound. The sound of a violin. Everyone stopped their work and chatter, kids let go of their mothers' hands, and everyone craned their necks to try to see this mysterious violin, which was quickly coming our way. And then, a very tall and thin man with a black goatee and eyes half closed came in through the gate before us,

playing his violin. One of Bach's fugues, maybe? No one moved during that brief eternity that lasted the whole of the violinist's stroll through our neighbourhood. And then he left, taking his gentle toast over to the heart of Tepito.

At its peak, Tepito Indómito was able to organize close to 60 volunteers who served as liaisons between the victims and the city government. A celebration was certainly called for. And so a month later, the volunteers and I decided to put together an enormous party. We called up every band and sonidero musician who played in the slums, bars and clubs within a two-mile radius. We held the party at the bar, *Botellita de Jeréz*. And in mid October our volunteer group invited neighbours to work on a collective offering for the victims of the earthquake: a huge table, some 30 meters long by 4 meters wide, full of fruit, flowers, gifts, pictures and confetti. It was beautiful!

The lack of water in our area lasted 54 shaky days, days in which everything changed. Relations between societal forces changed, hierarchies of power changed, even my hair colour changed. My hair turned grey as I rearranged the pieces of my 42-year-old heart. Every week, I came and went from my hometown, Xico, to Mexico City. I travelled a few times to give talks in other parts of the country and abroad. And I began to submerge myself in the every day life of Mexico City's downtown. One day I realized that the Capital's artistic sphere, which was becoming more and more disparate from my immediate reality, had started to suffocate me. It was strange, even picturesque to my colleagues that I lived in Xico. I could no longer find myself in them. Finally, a decade later, I moved to Portales in the Benito Juárez neighbourhood of Mexico City, but I kept my studio in Xico until 1998.

The few walls that had withstood the earthquake in the devastated area of pre-graffiti Tepito and its surrounding neighbourhoods were covered and recovered by murals whose painters were still unknown by mainstream culture. Flocks of poets and writers founded a series of clubs and associations in Peralvillo, Bondojito, Tepis and Morelos. They published short photocopied or mimeographed texts about life after the earthquake. A multitude of funk dives were established, and rock musicians became a tremendously important escape-valve for an overwhelmed youth. The city's southern neighbourhoods couldn't make sense of this phenomenon. They only got as far as an obsessive yet distanced curiosity for the "Barrio Bravo," or fierce neighbourhood, as Tepito is famously called. In 1998, the Museum of Popular Culture began exhibiting a model layout of Tepito, equipped with tiny streets, food stands, apartments and sea-food restaurants. The museum entrance is as cheap as a metro ticket, and is only a few blocks from Calz in Tlalpan, on the same road that goes to the actual Tepito!

A year later, on October 10th of 1986, I found myself in San Diego. I was newly immersing myself in the art profession again and had accepted to build a large installation that I titled Tropi-Bang! Then, a little before noon, I got a phone call from Pepe Vega, who I'd left in charge of our organization. "Did you see the news? An earthquake, measured 7.5 hit San Salvador! We're already gathering things to send them." "What good are *things*?" I responded. "The best thing we can offer is our own experience, don't you think? Wait for me, I'll be right over..."

With the help of Angeles Campos and Jose Lever, I created Operation Barrio: 16 former Tepito victims, one allopathic and seven homeopathic doctors. We landed in San Salvador on the 14th, with the 70-year-old grandmother, Amelia Loredó, at the head of our group, carrying an enormous chrome-framed portrait of Our Lady Guadalupe. We were surrounded by soldiers as we made our way from the airport to the San Jacinto Barrio. The country—eye of the hurricane in the Central American wars of the time—was falling apart and living under a strict curfew. We brought the huge tent that had served the victims of the Chichonal Volcano eruption, which I turned it into our operational headquarters. We created a handful of teams, each focused on offering a different type of sustainable aid. Immediately after that, we put together a massive cultural arts festival. We stayed there a month. And it was really only after I came back to Mexico and was able to remerge myself in the reconstruction and aftermath of Tepis, that I thought clearly about my experiences with crisis. And that's when I thought to compare the repercussions of the conflict of '68 to the earthquake of '85. Can it be?!

The student conflict, which, as many of you know, has been exhaustively studied and scrutinized, left a rich cultural and artistic legacy. The literature, music and visual arts—as well as some documentaries and Jorge Fons' movie—that were produced throughout the conflict and in the following years, forged direct dialogue with a large slice of society that was able to affect the nation's forthcoming actions. Thanks to these works we achieved rich reflections on the earthquake and its aftermath. But in comparison to '85, the impact of '68 was trivial, especially in southern Mexico whose painful and prolonged tragedy would see its climax only with the Maya uprising of January 1994. With regards to the urban population, it's clear that it was the empowerment that came from the post-earthquake environment that shifted the dialogue during the election of 2000... as well as that of 2006.

I understand that my friend and colleague, Rubén Ortiz, is going to talk about the artistic reproduction of '85. I think it's important to discuss the impact—if there was any—the earthquake of '85 had on our conception of aesthetics. There's a sea of photo-essays and videos, many chronicles, some literature and popular music

and, of course, a roster of sinister jokes (what's a joke, but the very base element of Mexico's imagination?!). But as far as I know, theater and dance kept themselves at the margin of the catastrophe and its aftermath. And save for a very few exceptions, that Rubén will surely enumerate for us, neither film nor visual arts knew how to process the catastrophe. By now, the want to register, interpret and think about chaos and catastrophe has practically disappeared. With one exception.

Somewhere between '64 and '85 sprouted the Movimiento Grupal. These artists overflowed with creativity. Characterized by conceptual and formal experimentation, with a confrontational—sometimes militant—flare, their work reached an eclectic public. But despite the long list of texts it produced, it didn't resonate significantly with the critics of the time. And so it's little talked about in the realm of art history. It's in that time period of profound change, in those three decades wedged between two catastrophes, that visual arts in Mexico—specifically in Mexico City—went from being one of the leading voices in the country's push to change itself (in spite of many), to being merely one more commodity: works of art made for the conspicuous consumption of the new rich, who were the only beneficiaries of the catastrophic neoliberalism that squashed the country after its institutionalization was cemented by the PRI-economics of Salinas and De la Madrid.

Education and social formation determine the ways in which the artist responds to the universe surrounding him, and this is reflected in the content and form of his work, which, in turn, express his ideas. For *Current Art in the Age of Information*, education and social formation are even stronger determinants in the moment the artist *projects himself*. As an example: The country's most important centre in generating artists, the National School of Visual Arts/Academy of San Carlos (ENAP is the acronym in Spanish), which was located in the downtown historic district until 1979. An excellent public transportation system allowed easy access to this ancient factory of artists, for the rich and poor, men and women, Spanish, mestizos, and even the vast number of cultures lumped together as the so-called 'indigenous'. The calamitous Revolution of 1920 and its chaotic aftermath would be incomprehensible to us without the works of art produced by the academy's graduates, who strove to reflect and interpret the fray. In spite of the art movements of the status quo, this niche of artists continuously strove to pay attention to the nation's socio-political on goings. Many of those who later led the Movimiento Grupal, Grupo Suma, as well as many other collectives, first studied at the academy.

Eleven years after '68, UNAM resolved to exile ENAP to Xochimilco, very close to the most privileged area of the city. The school of design went with. It's complicated getting to the southernmost part of Mexico City by public transportation. This move

radically changed the socioeconomic profile of the students, who from then on would need a car to get there. Time, distance and cost alienated students of few resources until ENAP was “purified” enough that it became almost exclusively made up of “creolized” kids from suburban neighbourhoods. Equipped with cars and without the need to work as they study, these kids come from families who generally mistrust art and who push them to pursue a career in design instead. This group suffers from a deficient education that leaves them ignorant of Mexican art history, and leads them to become less and less responsive to the country’s current state-of-affairs. Their blood-life consists of expensive, specialized, English-only magazines. As a last resort, they respond only to the cyber-reality of the Internet. They’re continuously tuned into the international gallery industry, with its private museums, fairs and foundations. They become aware of catastrophic news and chaotic situations through sound-bites, 80% of which are in English and the other 20% offered only through terrible translations: an Iranian woman’s death by stoning, tsunamis in Asia and floods in Germany, the slaughter of seals, the depredation of the Amazon, the cause of the Palestinian (and so many other) conflicts in the Middle and Far East. Al Gore and global warming overshadow events in their immediate environment... Everything of course is laden with attractions—Aichi’s 1st International Triennial (whose theme was *Art and Cities*); Miami Beach’s Art Basel (the international art world’s favourite winter hub); or Taipei’s 7th Biennial (whose theme is to question the infrastructure of the institution of biennials).

Cries for help are confused with cries of fashion, which drive us toward chaos. The cyber-levels of our cyber-tension are exacerbated. How can we prioritize so many emergencies? How do we process them in order to transform them into art? Suffering and compassion are no longer shared; they’re privatized and internalized. Incapable of responding to actual, daily reality, artists explore existential anguishes with English titles. Hermitage makes way to chaos.

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Chaos comes from the Greek (χάος, abertura). It encapsulates confusion and disorder. It’s “the amorphous and indefinite state” that comes before the ordering of the cosmos. The Real Academia Española tells us that the mathematical definition of chaos is, “the apparently erratic and unpredictable behaviour of some dynamic systems, though their mathematical formulation is in principle deterministic.” Meanwhile, Google gives us a pluricultural and multilingual slew of artists who undertake chaos and catastrophes. I browsed the topic in various languages; out of all the names that appeared on my screen, I couldn’t find one single Mexican artist.

Let’s use a magnifying glass to better study Mexico’s current. We’re in the era of so called “actual art,” which Denise Dresser so emphatically and confidently described before Congress just a few months ago. In politics and economics alike, Mexico crumbles at a chaotic pace, it’s social fabric already steeped in catastrophe. We’re harassed by the savage polarization of our middle class whose liberals and conservatives hate each other with resentment little seen before. They sense the precariousness of their immediate future, but are resolved to reject any gesture toward national reconciliation.

Determined by a distribution of wealth that only favours a handful of powerful families, impoverishment first and foremost afflicts our first nations, that is to say our original pueblos, or the *deep* Mexico that Bonfil Batalla describes and Carlos Montemayor studied so closely. Today, violence thrives throughout our entire country while our cities are besieged with poverty and any wealth lies hidden within gated neighbourhoods.

It’s not easy to count the number of victims—most dispossessed and dark skinned—of this bloody war which tears at the social fabric of Mexico, breaking our governments, institutions, economies and religions, our entire culture. But music (and not just the narco-corridos) and film (not just ones with Almada) are years ahead of the rest of culture with their interpretation and mode of thinking (two recent films, *El Infierno* by Luis Estrada and *Machete* by Robert Rodriguez, are an extraordinary pair).

It’s hard, maybe impossible to foresee the effects of this catastrophic conflict when we don’t even know who is poised against whom. Who are “the good” and who “the bad.”? The only thing certain is, as Ramon de Campoamor said, “in this treacherous world, there isn’t truth or lie: everything is according to the prism through which it’s seen.”

When confronting the question, “what becomes of our aesthetic sense when we approach chaos? I can say that the only contemporary Mexican artist of calibre I know, the only one who has kept his gaze locked on the chaos which peels off the catastrophe that he and all of his forefathers have had to bear, is a modest but extraordinary print-maker, painter and active member of his community, who MUAC, over there in the south of the Capital will never invite. Distinguished yet unknown in Mexico, he is becoming more and more recognized in Denmark, France, Indonesia and Germany. I’m talking about Nicolás de Jesús. Is anyone interested in getting to know him? You’ll find your answer by looking him up on the Internet.

My first presentation was done in 1960. Three signs, signals—glyphs?—obsessively recur in my early work: the Egg, the Arrow, and the Jester. Diego Velazquez taught me that we artists are like court jesters. Some confuse jester with clown. Google tells me that the profession “dates back to ancient times. It arose in Rome along with other corrupting customs—love, luxury, indulgence—all of which promised pleasure and resulted in a search of ever more intense physical, moral and intellectual monstrosities: dwarfs, giants, the deformed, etc. The tradition created a constant demand, and it became so big that a market was created in Rome just for this. When the profits were big enough, the Orient began producing its own monsters and dwarfs.”



Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y (1997)

JOHAN GRIMONPREZ

This film is a record about hijacking through a dynamic assembly of fragments and documents taken from different sources, primarily TV shows. Grimonprez analyzes the relationship between the catastrophic events in the collective imagination and their use in the mass media.