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Grassroot Narratives in Oaxaca and Ciudad Juarez

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¡Viva La APPO!

Grassroots art by ASARO and the Oaxaca movement. 2006 - Present

This is the story of ASARO (Assembly of Revolutionary Artists of Oaxaca) It is a story of the people of Oaxaca. It is a story that comes from the streets of Oaxaca City and Indigenous Rural backdrops where intense military occupation only strengthens the People's unification against the corruption and oppression of the Mexican government. It is a story that has seeped through the state controlled mass media. Refusing to be silenced, these images are only one manifestation of the Peoples voice. These along with radio, music, blogs, YouTube videos and MySpace accounts create the cannon in which the Oaxacan peoples express their story and their vision. It is a story of how Oaxaca's peoples united and created their own solutions. For those of us willing to see through the graphic images of violence, we can appreciate the narratives of grassroots triumphs these people have achieved on their long road to sovereignty.

It begins in 1810 when Father Hidalgo proclaimed "Death to bad government" and initiated Mexican independence from Spain. One hundred years later, popular unrest left Dictator Porfirio Diaz packing and the Mexican Revolution began with promises of land and liberty. Today, a century after the Mexican Revolution began, many of Mexico's citizens fail to see those pillars that the revolution promised as nationalist and private sector agendas leave many communities such as those in Oaxaca in neglect or even worse, exploited or under corrupt federal authorities. Twelve years after the Zapatistas took to the capital, a series of oppressive measures would ignite a wildfire within the streets and the popular consciousness of the Oaxacan peoples. ASARO would find its roots within the escalating violence and police presence as the People fought for their autonomy and dignity.

"Many of the children we teach come to school hungry. There are children who live in extreme poverty... We wanted children to have notebooks, pencils, and school supplies because all of that is part of the right to education. If there is a nail sticking out of a chair or if a roof leaks, how can we expect children to learn there?" – Eleuterio, School Teacher an APPO member

In July of 2006 a teachers sit-in, or *plantón*, occupied 50 city blocks around the Zócalo of Oaxaca City. At the same time the various neighborhood organizations were demanding the resignation of the governor. The contested conservative PRI governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz (who had been commonly believed to achieve his position through fraudulent elections) had decided not to negotiate with the teachers: "*ni marchas ni plantones*" or "no marches or sit-ins" became his motto. Rather, on the 14th of July at 4:30 am the teachers and supporters were confronted by police in riot uniforms, bullets, tear gas, and helicopters. Death squads had invaded the imagination of the Oaxacan peoples. The Oaxacan peoples retaliated by bringing the *planton* support in the form of food, aid and supporters.

“The next morning, there was a march and the people were able to take over the Zócalo again. From that day on, many people started to show solidarity with the teachers.” –Yeska, ASARO artist

The Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO) was born. It united both rural indigenous and city peoples. APPO was a collective of various neighborhood associations, universities, teacher, student and workers organizations, and later included Indigenous and rural associations. As marches began with the intention of ousting Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, a need to express became imminent. ASARO was called into being by the APPO, to combat against the misrepresentation of popular mass media and to express the motives of the popular uprising. The ASARO’s delivery began on the walls of Oaxaca City.

“We were painting on the ground with our own blood when the tank started to roll in. I wanted to show the federal police that were on the verge of invading our city. ‘If you want our blood, here it is, you can have it.’ I painted the faces of the people of Oaxaca and the words *Ni una Gota mas de Sangre* – Not another Drop of Blood” – Hugo, ASARO artist

“When we got to the *zócalo*, people gave us more paint to use for murals and to write messages” –Yeska, ASARO artist

The months to follow would illustrate the flourishing of consciousness as the APPO stood up in solidarity against the military occupation, shootings, selective repression, political imprisonment, torture, and rape. The APPO would succeed in peacefully taking over governmental buildings, Hotels and more importantly TV and Radio Stations. On these channels the latest news of the military’s abuses to Oaxaca’s citizens which became a broadcasted call to action. The APPO retaliated by erecting more than 3000 barricades in neighborhoods to better protect themselves.

“People said ‘*compañeros*, let’s prevent these death squads from passing by putting obstacles in their way. Let’s raise barricades.’... You found all kinds of people at the barricades. They’ll even say ‘I didn’t even talk to my neighbor before because I didn’t think I like them, but now that we’re at the barricade together, he’s a *compañero*’” – Leyla, APPO member

“The barricade soon took on a life of its own. You could describe it like a party, a celebration of self-government where we were starting to make emancipation a reality.” –David, Agronomist and Political Prisoner

APPO organized democracy and even its own police force (*topiles*) during their war against the Mexican state. Though many journalists, mothers, brothers, teachers and students were imprisoned and sometimes killed, it only brought them closer. As the media depicted the people of Oaxaca as unruly peasants their cause continued even stronger. Their need to be heard had satisfied a need to organize. ASARO armed with spray paint, printing presses and talent satisfied this need.

“We can’t question anything without being accused of being rebels. For Mexicans, and especially for Oaxacans, our status as citizens only lasts for one day – the day we go out to vote. The next day, if we protest, if we try to express what it is we object to in the system, we are accused of being insurgents, guerrillas and criminals. Our institutions exist only to serve an elite class.” –Pedro, Journalist

ASARO drew from these experiences to deliver images of the streets. Their images create a dialogue between the situation on the streets and in the pueblos and the APPO’s ambitions. Along with Radio and Internet, their works create a discourse of the movement itself. The use of graffiti and printing processes reflect the popular need to be able to distribute far and wide. Where a TV or radio station might be raided by the state, or a journalist shot and silenced, the ephemeral quality of these prints and stencils makes it hard to silence these powerful images. The internet has allowed ASARO to speak to the world through videos, JPEGs, MP3s and blogs. They represent the sovereignty of the Oaxacan people on the ground and in the democratic stage of cyberspace. They tell their story to the people of the world as an example of how humanity can shine through so strongly even when faced with violence, oppression and corruption.

Exhibition curated by Mikey Graham De la Rosa.

Sources:

Diana Dunham & CASA collective. (Ed) *Teaching Rebellion. Stories from the Grassroots Mobilization in Oaxaca*. PM Press 2008.

www.myspace.com/asaroaxaca

www.casacollective.com

ASARO: “Todos somos APPO. Todos somos Cd. Juarez”

Many of the prints made by ASARO do not directly address Oaxaca. Rather many of their efforts have been concentrated on the Mexican American border region and in particular Ciudad Juarez. When APPO was formed, women were included as the other vital half of the organization. Looking to the north, ASARO artists looked at the impacts of military presence on women and the society at large. In show of their solidarity with *Juarense Compañero/as*, they dedicate these prints to them.

Migration to the north has impacted the entire region. The same forces that have oppressed Oaxaca's autonomous development, have forced many of its citizens out of its borders. The state's administration only seems to worsen the economic opportunities for its residents. The creation of neo-liberal economic models for production created dependency instead of autonomy. Desperate families have found themselves in difficult situations. Many opt to go north.

“There are children affected by family problems. Children who've been abandoned, children whose parents have migrated to the U.S. and never returned ... I used to tell the community that they should make an effort to finish middle school, to finish high school. 'But what's the point?' they'd ask me. 'Then you can go to university' I'd tell them. 'But if I go to university, can you help me get a job in the community?' they would ask. 'Well, no,' I conceded, 'there are no jobs in our communities...' Then they would respond,... 'Even if I finish, there are no jobs. I may as well try to make my way to the United States to make a little money'”

–Eleuterio, Oaxacan Teacher, APPO member

Many never make it across. Some try to make it in cities like Nogales, Tijuana and Juarez. In these cities they are confronted by cartel violence and Mexican military occupations. Here, they face oppression by two powers. People go missing. ASARO's prints demand justice. They see the continuity in two opposing ends of the Mexican Republic. Addressing these issues makes the *Frontera* a Mexican patrimony. It situates APPO as only one of the struggles against the Mexican Government and regional violence and calls for nationwide resistance. It is an enormous issue that impacts all Mexicans. It is no wonder why “We are all APPO, We are all Juarez” became a common graffiti tag on Oaxaca's walls.