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Democracy, Cultural Agency and Digital Bits: Saving ASAROs Blog

Suzanne M. Schadl

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Author: Suzanne M. Schadl: Latin American and Latino Collection Curator, University Libraries, University of New Mexico
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Disclaimer: I'm sorry I cannot be in Gainesville to offer this presentation. I appreciate your attention and invite you to contact me with any questions or suggestions at schadl@unm.edu. Please hold me accountable for any unexplained "librarianese."

Presentation Abstract:

This presentation is a call to action which also introduces a developing project to digitally archive the blog production of a contemporary Mexican artists' collective called the Asamblea de Artistas Revolutionarios de Oaxaca/The Assembly of Revolutionary Oaxacan Artists (ASARO).

What is ASARO

ASARO is a contemporary Mexican artist's collective comprised generally of young art students and street artists whose work addresses social and political issues, including immigration, unemployment, education, and civil rights. They work in multiple mediums such as wood and linoleum block prints, large scale graffiti murals, interventionist stencils, and digital media. This group formed in 2006 around contemporaneous teachers' and other anti-government protests in Oaxaca. In solidarity with other protest movements, they present art as a weapon, engaged in social justice.

Their logo depicts their name in lower case print, but the final letter acts as the barrel of a pistol, firing a red star. ASARO sees publically accessible graphic art and spray painted murals as inspiration for social and political action as well as cultural inclusion. Often this collective uses iconographic images to express reverence for Mexican print making, while also reinforcing collective memory around popular imagery. Their ingenuous interventions with these images often recast messages -- as in the case of the Virgin of Guadalupe in a gas mask or Mexican revolutionary hero, Emiliano Zapata as a *punkero*.

Reminiscent of Mexico's revolutionary spirit, these pieces extend nationalist solidarity into the 21st century. The collective's tag "ASARO" draws on the expertise of several artists including, Beta, César, Guillermo Pacheco, Ikne, Irving Herrera, Ita, Mario Guzmán, Melo, Rigoberto Martínez, Selo, and Aler. These artists pride themselves in their varying political belief systems and also on their inclusiveness. Yescka, one of the more visible ASARO artists, recounts in an interview, that Mario -- currently the curator on the Oaxaca Graphic Arts Institute (IAGO), brought together young art students and street artists. He recalls that the collective's first collaboration involved protesters giving artists spray paint and stencils to make signs.

The spectacle of arming young people with cans of paint and marching them into barricaded areas reflects ASARO's commitment to intervene physically and conceptually with their graffiti. These appropriately named "interventions," require a community of painters and print makers committed to r*asquache*, a term that describes repurposing all materials at one's disposal. This Mexican tradition requires collective human resources too. Yescka notes that differences in technique and ideology enhance ASARO and enable it to incorporate other social movements: "Surely if we had not participated in the (broad) social movement (in Oaxaca in 2006) and we continued to work individually, we would not be what we are now. We tried to integrate more people and to raise a social art, which in Oaxaca had been lost long ago." (Graham de la Rosa, 2010)

ASARO's interventions are like puzzles. They pull together multiple pieces into a singular statement. The collective nature of these works celebrates diversity and the importance of individual imaginations. Armed with spray paint, participants in ASARO's interventions expose political corruption and social inequities by incorporating into already posted advertisements, biting commentaries on consumerism, state sanctioned violence and social injustice. In one illustrative example, a -piece of a larger-multi-block mural in Mexico City (re) presents a truck route, likely suggestive of NAFTA, as the road to "Revolution," with stops at "consciousness," "creativity," "freedom" and "community." This intervention challenges authorities to rethink the messages they project.

In a recent blog post, Mexican graphic artist Arnulfo Aquino lauds ASARO for taking political graphic expression from center (Mexico City) to periphery (Oaxaca) "explosively and powerfully" in the "first rebellion of the century" (Aquino, 2010). Aquino suggests that ASARO occupies the revolutionary spotlight in contemporary Mexico as a result of its effective stencil

and street art collaborations. ASARO's publicity has not come from newspapers and magazines,
-however, there are printed stories cited within their blog. The majority of their works, including
moving images of interventions like the one described here appear in digital photographs, videos,
and PDF files on their blog and social networking sites like Facebook.


Archiving Digitally Born Materials

ASARO carries the Mexican revolutionary torch forward into blog publishing. As a
result, their blog and social networking posts are essential artifacts of the movement just as
Posada's broadsides were important to late nineteenth and early twentieth century politics. As a
librarian committed to access, I want to incorporate work like ASARO's into the academic
space, not only by citing or describing their ephemeral pieces in print or in presentations like this
one, but also by using technological resources to ensure that artists' digitally produced works are
preserved and sustained within libraries so that 50 years from now a scholar may find their work,
alongside that of the famous Mexican print maker, José Guadalupe Posada, for example.
Certainly most in this room recognize these Posada *calaveras*, published originally as a small
press broadside and reproduced here as a digitized copy.

The University Libraries (UL) at UNM maintains a national designation as one of the strongest collections on Latin American Art, Art History, Photography and Graphics. Special collections reflect this priority with over 15,000 Latin American posters, 4,500 photographs, and several major holdings of Mexican popular graphics, including multiple formats with over 400 works by Posada and a substantial archive of the *Taller de Gráfica Popular* (Popular Graphics Workshop) or TGP, a Mexican graphic art collective founded in 1937.

One need only visit UNM's Center for Southwest Research (CSWR) and Special Collections, Pictorial webpage to experience the depth of Latin American graphic art at UNM. These collections provide open internet access to surrogates or digital copies of print collections, including, as you can see in this slide, photos from military expeditions against Pancho Villa in 1916 and the print pieces currently in our ASARO collection.
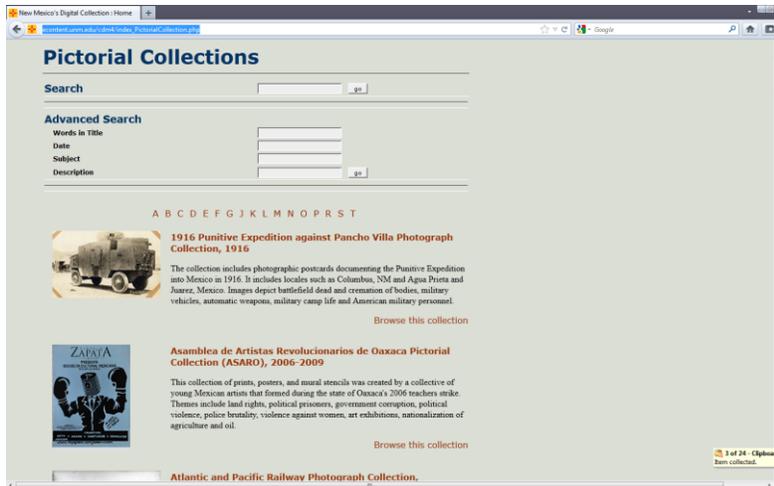
Other notable examples in these digitized pictorial links include the . Fernando Gamboa Collection of Prints by José Guadalupe Posada, 1888-1944, including lithographs, etchings, and engravings collected by Mexican art historian Fernando Gamboa; the Jane Norling and Lenora Davis Poster Collection, 1970-1980, compiling pieces from Cuba, Nicaragua, and Mexico; and the Sam L. Slick Collection of Latin American and Iberian Posters, ca. 1970-2000.

Recent physical acquisitions, including wood block prints by ASARO continue the tradition of collecting, preserving and providing access to physical pictorial works. These digital collections enable us to create surrogates or scanned digital copies (often called digital objects) to facilitate open internet access to these works.

While digitization of physical artifacts like these prints and posters is important for humanities archiving, digital scans of print objects do not address the pressing reality of disappearing web publications and exhibitions. For this reason, we must begin to develop best practices for archival projects designed to save work first published in digital formats. By preserving digitally born bits, librarians and archivists can secure access to contemporary graphic sources. Like Posada did more than century ago, ASARO uses the most current technology to engage social and political commentary. Their blog reveals striking similarities to newspaper

publications where Posada printed and circulated his graphic work. Much like these sources, the ASARO blog at http://asar-oaxaca.blogspot.com offers dedicated pages, with digital rather than print text and image.


The difference is that print pieces like Posada's broadsides have been carefully collected, physically preserved, and made available for posterity, often also as highly accessible digitized copies. Most of you are thinking, "Well material generated on a blog is also accessible to anyone with an internet connection, right?" Yes **but** these pieces generally have a limited shelf life. Blogging programs like BlogSpot and WordPress are not preserved in their original form or stored – like archival digital surrogates -- in multiple servers. Quite the contrary, blogs are typically modifiable and saved only to the extent that the blogging platform on which they are written saves their content in another server.

Even the ASARO blog -- which features an embedded archive, loses unique files like photos, videos, scans and documents that are purged periodically from the platforms such as BlogSpot, Tumblr and YouTube facilitating online publication. In this very real scenario, the unique pieces attached to blogs remain at the mercy of public platforms that modify content in 90 day intervals.

Last year the University Libraries (UL) at UNM ran an archival experiment in the Internet Archive's (www.archive.org) Archive-It service. This project was designed to identify a

means for saving digitally generated content. A free open access digital archive that collects screenshots of websites for its Way Back Machine, the Internet Archive enables researchers to search web addresses and find past versions of web pages. Without a web address, however, the Way Back Machine is useless. Archive-It (http://www.archive-it.org) solves this problem by enabling member institutions to create keyword searchable collections, which can be browsed without knowledge of the web addresses on which they appear.
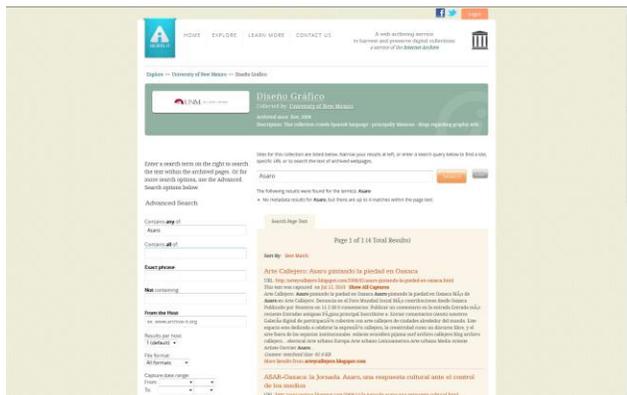
UNM pays $14,000 annually for Archive-it membership, which enables us to build three collections in which the Archive-It service crawls and saves snapshots of webpages, from which we further select unique linked content and describe it for cataloging. One of these collections, Diseño Gráfico (http://archive-it.org/public/collection.html?id=1701) captures and archives quarterly snap shots of Mexican, graphic arts blogs, including, but not limited to ASARO's. This collection contains past snapshots of varied content including comic strips, photo documentaries, graphic advertising sites, and design blogs. As you may note in this slide, the content captured replicates many of the print materials in our special collections, suggesting that Archive-It or some other similar, perhaps less expensive tool, would be a prudent investment for digital archiving.

The broad net we cast originally with Diseño Gráfico was useful for demonstrating the applicability of digitally born –artifacts- with reference to established collection strengths.

However, this experiment did not lead to a particularly strong or recognizable collection. Our initial geographical limitation (Mexico) and subject specific focus on graphic art was a start but it did not go far enough. It lacked clear provenance, meaning it could not be identified with a specific collector or artist. The next step is to use Archive-It or develop an in-house product that periodically crawls, captures and allows us to save blogged and other internet generated materials on ASARO in a collection named for the collective, and identified in our catalog as well as in our archival finding aids as a collection related to the print and surrogate collections in the CSWR and New Mexico Digital Collections.

Conclusion

In addition to incorporating important printed art into digitized collections; librarians and archivists can preserve access to digital content by exploring tools for digital selection of the most ephemeral materials. ASARO may be center stage in 21st century Mexican graphic arts, but academic archival projects aimed at born digital artifacts like their blog linger in the peripheries. We digitize physical artifacts and overlook equally important digitally born pieces. Just as ASARO marches into barricades armed with spray paint, the collective uses social networking walls like Facebook, as digital canvases. Libraries have the capacity to save this kind of work and they should get started quickly before too much gets lost.

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