

# EDITORIAL

## RADICAL IMAGININGS: ART PRACTICES OF/FOR JUSTICE

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Artistic and cultural practices have time and again contributed to struggles for justice: whether by stirring up debate, contesting the hegemony of the visible, or even disputing the meaning and frames of justice itself. Drawing on this, this two-part publication of *Kunstlicht* sets out to look into alternative ways of imagining and pursuing justice through art-related practices. It aims to go beyond the confines of a unanimous understanding of justice in order to delve into its plurality. And it is with this thinking of plurality that we ended up producing not one but two issues on the topic. Central to both is the problem of visibility/invisibility and its relation to the long, continuing legacies of oppression.

Consider, for instance, the present situation in Mexico. A maddening and harrowing sensation is what results from the effort of trying to make sense of the current reality there. Strategically framed as a ‘War on Drugs’ back in 2006,<sup>1</sup> it now seems more accurate to say that the country is dealing with an enterprise of extermination; a war against social reproduction that has claimed the lives of over 250,000 people<sup>2</sup> and has set an estimated 40,000 more in a painful limbo.<sup>3</sup> A “routine of formidable degradation,” as curator Cuauhtémoc Medina refers to it,<sup>4</sup> in which violations of the right to life in their many shapes multiply at an unbearable pace. Daily displays of these horrors circulating via mass media and social networks function, at a societal level, as a means to paralyse. In addition, the profoundly ineffective and corrupt nature of the Mexican judicial system makes the task of realizing the conditions for tackling injustices appear as an impossible one, often eliciting feelings of isolation and powerlessness.

“Yes, things are hard, harder every day,” said the Zapatistas in their 2016 invitation to the Festival *ComArte and ConCiencias for Humanity*. “It is as if the night has become longer. It is as if the day has postponed its stride until no one and nothing is left until the path is empty. It is as if there was no breath left.”<sup>5</sup> However, this is not a manifesto of hopelessness. In the same invitation, the Zapatistas insist on our capacity to imagine that things can indeed be different. The very possibility of realizing other worlds or a ‘bigger house where many worlds fit’ begins there.

This was one of the underlying concerns of *and many images to come*, a gathering held in early 2016 in Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) co-organized by

<sup>1</sup> When declared as such by the then President Felipe Calderón.

<sup>2</sup> See José Córdoba and Juan Montes, “‘It’s a crisis of Civilisation in México.’ 250,000 Dead, 37,400 Missing,” *The Wall Street Journal*, November 14, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> According to journalist and researcher Ernesto Aroche Aguilar, as of October 2018 the National Register for Missing or Disappeared Persons (known in Spanish as RNPED), an institution under the purview of the Ministry of Interior in México, has recorded a total of 33,125 cases of people missing/disappeared in the state jurisdiction and 1,145 in the federal jurisdiction which, altogether, amounts to a total of 35,270. Furthermore, based on data gathered by the non-governmental organization Data Cívica [Civic Data], a total of 1,316 reports have been ‘erased’ from these records which, according to Data Cívica director Mónica Meltis, is likely due to these cases not complying with the “normative framework of the RNPED.” However, the situation is far more complex; as non-governmental organizations such as FUNDEM have stressed, these are only official numbers that account for less than 14% of the catastrophe. Grace Fernández Morán, director of FUNDEM, has explained that many cases are not even reported; in fact, only one out of nine cases is, mainly because the relatives fear for the consequences that may follow given that the state forces are deeply enmeshed in the situation. In her view, the magnitude of the issue amounts to over 300,000 people. See García A., Dennis. “Hay 300 mil desaparecidos, aseguran ONG,” *El Universal*, November 13, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Cuauhtémoc Medina, “A Landslide of Images: A Story that is Not History, 2014-2015,” in: *Teatro Ojo*. En la Noche, Relámpagos, eds. Cuauhtémoc Medina and Helena Chávez (México: MUAC-iae: 2018), 228.

<sup>5</sup> Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, “One House, Other Worlds,” 2016, <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2016/09/14/one-house-other-worlds/>

Medina and researcher Helena Chávez McGregor, along with the collective Teatro Ojo, that brought together activists, artists, journalists, philosophers, and historians.<sup>6</sup> The ‘theatrical performance’ sought to collectively explore the “predicaments of defining the value of culture and art in relation to the worst possible circumstances.”<sup>7</sup> Placing an emphasis on the ‘locus of the image’ and the politics of appearance, the event turned out to be a meaningful attempt to collectively discuss and assess our present moment(s) in order to envision possible modes for political mobilization beyond the thresholds of necropolitics, and to counter the prevailing sense of disorientation.

While México occupies an important place in the issue, we set out with contributions that deal with the relation of artistic practices and justice from different angles. In the first article, Suzannah Henty positions Richard Bell’s *The Dinner Party* (2013) as a radical decolonial intervention that performs an erosion of the idea that under modern nation-states, justice for indigenous peoples is something achievable. In doing so it thus reveals the anxieties of speaking of decolonization in the settler state through exposing the continued longing for White power specifically in Australia.

Delving further into the pervasive effects of the institution of Whiteness Sharon Daniel reflects on the contemporaneity of the institution of slavery in the context of the United States by looking at the carceral complex. She does so by discussing her work *Undoing Time* (2013-ongoing) in which through a variety of gestures and strategies she creates a ‘defacement’ of the emblems of democracy “in an effort to repurpose them as public records of structural and state violence.”<sup>8</sup>

Zachary Formwalt’s play *A Legal Fiction* connects to Daniel’s text by shedding light on the links between capitalism and racism, and the need to question the legal rights discourse. It captures how legal provisions intended to ‘protect’ former slaves got tilted for the benefits of capitalist corporations which used them to argue for companies to be regarded as equal persons under the law.

The conversation with Fred Moten and Stefano Harney follows to set in motion the transition towards México. It brings to the table topics covered in their book *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (2013), in which the authors, drawing on the black radical tradition, conduct a social, political, as well as economic and aesthetic critique and experiment with forms of organizing from below. Conducted on the occasion of the Spanish translation of the book, this interview engages with what it means for it to be read in contemporary Latin America. The conversation discusses the journeys of Moten and Harney’s thought and touches upon issues such as translatability, indigeneity and blackness, fugitivity, and brokenness. As the interview emerged from a study group, we have included it here unaltered, in an effort to retain its conversational tone.

The subsection entitled ‘The Long Night’ acts as a space for thinking through the aforementioned indiscriminate overflow of violence in México. To begin, Sam Law’s introductory text adroitly leads us through some of the specificities of the

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The event took place between January 21 and 22, 2016.

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Cuauhtémoc Medina, “At Night, Lightning,” in: Teatro Ojo. En la Noche, Relámpagos, eds. Cuauhtémoc Medina and Helena Chávez McGregor (México: MUAC-IIE: 2018), 45.

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See page 24 of this issue. Sharon Daniel, “The Blindness Of Whiteness And The Labour Of The Negative,” *Kunstlicht* 40, no. 1-2 (2019): 24

Mexican context by preparing the ground for the Ayotzinapas case in relation to the articles that follow.

Luciano Concheiro San Vicente analyses the case of Santiago Meza López—who was accused of dissolving human bodies with acid—to explore the characteristics of what he conceptualizes as two regimes of violence in Mexico specifically in the context of the so-called ‘War on Drugs.’

Helena Chávez McGregor takes us through the project *What is to come* by Teatro Ojo in order to discuss the notion of appearance. Relying on Jacques Rancière’s theorization of the distribution of the sensible, she considers the political implications and potential of the project’s aesthetic strategies.

In a related vein, Cooperativa Cráter Invertido’s poetic contribution offers a meditation on the faceless of history. Those who, in contradistinction to Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History, try to imagine a future out of what is already present, to look past The Long Night.

Emilie van Heydoorn and Fleur van der Laan’s text moves away from Mexico but retains the focus on the limitations of justice in post-colonial contexts. Centering on Patricia Kaersenhout’s work *Stitches of Power, Stitches of Sorrow*, it emphasizes the problematics of who gets to define violence, and showcases the need for an intersectional approach.

Andrea Ancira and Neil Mauricio Andrade’s text comes as an anchoring postscript. It deals with the consumption of violence and violent images that now plays out in Mexico, by engaging with the opposition between transparency and opacity.

Lastly, as an awakening from the nightmare, we have a memory of an image that violence produces. Yolotl Gómez Alvarado and Adrés Villalobos’ contribution functions as an after-thought that rings and reverberates through The Long Night; as something that lingers and that we carry with us. When our senses shut down from the loss that violence brings, the affective images that art creates might enable us to feel and imagine with others again.

It is in this feeling of finding strength and imaginings through and with each other, that we are happy and grateful for having been able to create this volume as an all-women editorial team. With this issue, we also welcome Cleo Foole and Anna Sejbæk Torp-Pedersen on our editorial board. Finally, we would like to wholeheartedly thank all the authors and artists that contributed herein, as well as Rosa te Velde and Steyn Bergs whose help was crucial in making this a reality.

We dedicate this issue to Samir Flores, a dear comrade and friend whose life was taken in February this year by assassination at the hands of the government; to him, who taught us what it means to make life out of death. This issue is also dedicated to Lili Flores, who despite all continues to fight.

On behalf of the editorial board,  
Aline Hernández