

A Ghost Wanders About Mexico: Tlatelolco 1968-2008

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1. Writing over one's own skin.

On October 28, 1968, José Revueltas, the most significant leftist writer of the Mexican twentieth century, and one of the most active intellectuals to take part in the 1968 student movement, was finally able sit down in a clandestine refuge and try to write about his experience with the repression of the movement. Revueltas had been hiding from the police in different locations of Mexico City just after the massacre of October 2—like the few members of the National Strike Council who had conducted the student movement but had not been arrested the very same day of the killings. The 19th Olympic Games were over, hundreds of students and academics were rotting after being tortured in jail, and the movement was agonizing. Revueltas was finally caught on November 16. A philosophical writer who has frequently been compared to Dostoyevsky and Sartre, Revueltas was uncannily lucid in his attempt to describe the collective feeling of frustration provoked by the government's bloody repression: "Our sight has been forbidden. They prosecute our happiness. They are dead and they kill us. (...) That is why we will live."¹ Such image of a gothic repression, where violence was ultimately a consequence of the resentment against living, set the tone for a chronicle that was left unfinished, which he titled after the famous starting lines of the Communist Manifesto: "A Ghost Wanders about Mexico."

Surrounded with books, reading and writing amidst other fugitives, Revueltas recorded the moment when the news about the Tlatelolco killings started to reach their clandestine refuge. He had been reading Rilke, and a friend caught his hand between the book's pages as a reaction to the news of the massacre. This small gesture, a motion of the flesh and the living, made him realize that he and his comrades had attained a new condition. Each of the participants in the movement was to become a sort of book of affects and

¹ José Revueltas, *México 68: Juventud y Revolución*, prolog. Roberto Escudero, Ed. Andrea Revueltas y Philippe Cheron, México, Ediciones Era, 1978. (Obras Completas: 15), p. 79.

testimonies. This crime, and the history of the student movement, was from now on to be inscribed in the guise of writing on their skin:

A certain melancholy starts to descend on my soul. Federica holds my hand with Rilke in between, whose pages she has closed between her fingers, my own fingers, and our lives. Books, books, books. It is not that Rilke is entwined in our hands (...) We are the books, everyone is writing his or her own self over the skin. Tlatelolco. We will keep on writing it: you, *Hirondelle*, you, Federica, and Ruperto and Carlos and Luis and Mario and *Cronos*. It is a history that will never finish because others will keep on writing it.²

For over forty years, the memory of the 1968 student movement and the killings in the Tlatelolco Square that brutally ended the revolt, have been haunting the political and cultural life of Mexico. At least a few generations of Mexican youth have grown up under the shadow of those events, which have of course taken on a different resonance according to the times and mores of each epoch. There are very few indices of the way in which the narratives of world history gravitate under the spell of imbalances between the self-consciousness of a center and its periphery, so that the story of the Mexican 1968, despite having been by far the bloodiest and most dramatic social rebellion of that year—the last of revolutionary epidemics of modernity—is frequently left forgotten among the myths of the brick and conceptual battles at the Sorbonne in Paris, the invasion of Prague by the Soviet Empire, and the clash between authorities and anti-war demonstrators in Berkeley and Ken University, etc. Even in retrospect, due to the geo-historical racism of the “developed countries,” the West remains attached, with silent complacency, to the crush of the most extraordinary pro-democracy mass movement in the south in the 1960s.³ After all, in the context of the universal confrontation between the Eastern bloc and NATO, the small nuisance of the

² Revueltas, *op. cit.*, p. 81, 83.

³ The exception to the rule is the well researched chapter that Mark Kurlansky devoted to the Mexican 68 in his book *1968: The Year that Rocked the World*, New York, Ballantine Books, 2004, p. 321 ss It is remarkable that even in their extraordinary history of Argentinian guerrilla groups of the 1960s and 1970s, Eduardo Anguita and Martín Caparrós assimilate the causes of the Mexican student movement to the “withdrawal of subsidies to the Universities”: (Eduardo Anguita y Martín Caparros, *La Voluntad. Una historia de la militancia revolucionaria en la Argentina. Tomo 1/1966-1969*, Buenos Aires, booket, 1006, p. 437-438.)

dead, the political prisoners, and the crushing of the illusions of a whole generation, which took place for the sake of the continuity of a semi-dictatorial, post-revolutionary regime that ended up ruling the country for more than 70 years, was a small price to pay for hemispheric security.

In a certain way, the Mexican student movement of 1968 closely resembles the challenge that students posed to the commu-capitalist regime of the Chinese Communist Party of 1989. In a country where the modernizing PRI regime (the acronym for Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party), under a six-year succession of quasi-monarchic presidents, conducted a crony capitalist process of economic development—on the basis of an almost perfect, corporative control of labor unions, peasants, army, and economy—the fact that the middle class students took to the streets in tens and hundreds of thousands in 1968 represented an unthinkable act of defiance. From the standpoint of a regime where the president thought of himself as the veritable father of the nation, the student revolt was an unforgivable sign of disobedience, coming not from the subaltern, exploited masses but on the contrary, in the guise of a Tocquevillian revolutionary challenge: from those who understood social and economic development to be necessary components for the modernization of the moral and political structures of a country.

Ironically, the rebellion itself was to a great extent the product of the stupidity of a state falling into the trap of materializing its own ghosts. With the objective of evacuating the grounds in order to ensure the pacific and orderly realization of the first Olympic Games to ever take place in the third world, on July 26, the Mexican government decided to make a show-down of force on the basis of a minor street brawl between two local high schools on the anniversary of the Cuban Revolution. Pretending that the fight was the tip of the iceberg of a communist plot to disturb the Olympic Games, the government seized the members of the then-small clique of the Mexican Communist Party and brought the army to the streets, as if to demonstrate its willingness to impose order.⁴

⁴ In this sketch of the 1968 events I am using a number of sources, among others classical accounts like Elena Poniatowska's *La Noche de Tlatelolco* (México, Ediciones Era, 1971),

The exercise on preventive repression turned onto its head when the troops stormed several university buildings around the city, and even used a bazooka to demolish the ancient colonial door of the San Ildefonso College Preparatory School. The violation of the status of autonomy of the university moved both the students and the university authorities to protest: the vice-chancellor of the National University, Javier Barros Sierra, led the protest demonstration, breaking the silent rule of obedience to the president. The university ceased all activities under the collective leadership of a National Strike Council, which made a petition document that included several democratic demands: the release of political prisoners, the demotion of the heads of the police, and above all, the demand of public dialogue with the government authorities. This last point had particular importance. On one hand, it implied the utter rejection of the shady style of negotiation and compromise in which the state managed social conflict to—through corruption—incorporate the former opposition into its ranks. On the other, as the leaders of 1968 have openly recognized, the demand for public dialogue became the biggest “objective limitation to sort out the conflict,”⁵ for it became a “straightjacket that would make difficult any negotiation with the authorities.”⁶

Precisely because of the increasing repressive violence, just like in Athens today, the movement grew in a few weeks to become the largest social mobilization in Mexican history. The events of that summer are legendary, but this is not the place to construct a detailed narrative of them. It will suffice to say in August 1968 the student protest grew in strength and discipline despite the siege of the security forces and the wild threats from the president. Notwithstanding that its leadership was at times divided between those who harboured hopes that the protest would eventually lead to a revolutionary process and those who

but also new publications that shed light to many obscure details of the events, like Julio Scherer García and Carlos Monsivais, *Parte de Guerra. Tlatelolco 1968. Documentos del General Marcelino García Barragan. Los hechos y la Historia*, México, Aguilar, 1999, and Gilberto Guevara Niebla, *La Libertad nunca se olvida. Memoria del 68*, México, Ediciones Cal y Arena, 2004, who offers a detail account of the seizure of the Communist Party headquarters in p. 37-41

⁵ Gilberto Guevara Niebla, *1968: Largo camino a la democracia*, México, Cal y Arena, 1968, 33.

⁶ Gilberto Guevara Niebla, *La libertad nunca se olvida*, p. 181.

understood it as a pro-democratic gesture of social disobedience, the movement remained strictly defensive. Given the almost absolute hold that the government had on printed and visual media (journalists were regularly under the payroll of current authorities, and the TV and radio channels were an integral part of the workings of the regime), it was a significant battlefield for students to have a share in the circulation and flow of information.⁷ Beyond the importance of news programs aired by the university radio in the dissemination of the aims of the movement, one of the main channels of information involved the production of graphic art, printed mostly in the workshops of the San Carlos Art Academy. Based partly in the appropriation of imagery and styles from other political genres, such as the Popular Graphics Workshop of the 1930s and the graphic production of the May 1968 French student movement, but also direct quotations from works by modern artists, and above all through an inventive parody of the logos and themes of the Olympic Games⁸, the posters and leaflets produced by the students were marked by the denunciation of the barbaric brutality of the repression and the effacement of the democratic façade of the government. Along with the documentary films produced thanks to a cunning command structure by the students of the Film School, which provided the stock for the many documentaries produced later on, the graphics became the main visual referent of the movement, sometimes accentuating—more eloquently than any written production—its role of a pro-democratic, immanent critique of the nation state⁹. As a whole, their parody values evoked the significance that immanent critique had in the production of resistance culture, especially when facing an adversary that lacked any claim of legitimacy save the recourse to physical force.

⁷ On the variety of media produced by the student movement see: Alvaro Vázquez Mantecón, “Visualizing 1968”, in: Olivier Debrouse (ed.), *La Era de la Discrepancia/Age of Discrepancies*, México, UNAM-Turner, 2007, p. 37-39, and p. 66-71

⁸ For a recent analysis of sources of the Mexican 68 graphics see: George Roque, “Gráfica del 68”, en: Alvaro Vázquez ed., *Memorial del 68*, México, Turner-UNAM, 2007, p. 216-233.

⁹ See: Alvaro Vázquez Mantecón, “Cine. El 68 en el cine mexicano”, in: *Memorial del 68*, p. 192-203.

After the presidential address to the nation of September 1, 1968, the state apparatus opted to disrupt the opposition by means of provocation and criminalization. Between September 18 and 20, the army occupied the campuses of the National University and the Polytechnic Institute, but even then the movement did not abate. The drama reached its climax on the night of October 2, when the army, in combination with undercover security forces of the so-called Olimpia Battalion, encircled a student demonstration in the Tlatelolco dwelling area—the pride of the modern architectonic movement—and violently seized a significant number of the delegates of the National Strike Council. This was far from a surgical counterinsurgency operation, however. A full-fledged combat developed amidst the pre-Columbian ruins in the Three Cultures Square, which was presented by the state-controlled media and the judiciary as if having been provoked by armed communist commandos informed by Cuban and Chinese intelligence clandestinely operating from within the student movement. The international press however, reported that the battle had been an unprovoked mass killing conducted in cold blood, which according to an investigation conducted by *The Guardian* newspaper, left more than 300 civilians dead.¹⁰

It was not until recent years that a veritable explanation emerged to justify the fact that, rather than a standard massacre, in which the army would have shot the civilians in the Three Cultures Square, it got involved in a crossfire combat that lasted several hours and involved the use heavy artillery. The defense minister, General Marcelino García Barragán, left documents that suggest that the Tlatelolco massacre was a weird state crime where members of the presidential guard were deployed to shoot to the soldiers to simulate a student uprising¹¹. It

¹⁰ Octavio Paz quoted this number (and made it popular) in *Posdata*, Mexico, Siglo XXI, 1969, p. 280. It was confirmed by John Rodda in 'The Killer Olympics', *The Guardian*, 18 August 1972; quoted by Sergio Aguayo, *Los archivos de la violencia*, México, Grijalbo, 1998, p. 249. (Available in pdf from <http://www.sergioaguayo.org/biblioteca/1968%20Los%20archivos%20de%20la%20violencia.pdf>)

¹¹ Julio Scherer and Carlos Monsiváis, *op. cit.*, p. 37 ss

may well be that the total number of people killed that night was close to forty¹², but all the regardless, the carnage was a state treason at the highest level, in which the army was shot by clandestine state agents without any warning in order to materialize the narrative of a communist plot. It was, in fact, a rudimentary application of the politics of spectacle: the production of a fictitious conflict that helped the establishment prevent an actual revolutionary process.

As Revueltas predicted, each generation of Mexicans, especially students, have lent their bodies to the ripple effects of '68. Until well into the 1980s, learning about 1968 was a clandestine pedagogy: one made one's way through the account of the events by hearsay, by reading early witnesses' accounts and newspaper compilations, and attending university cinema club sessions that mixed *auteur* films, rock and roll flicks, and the extraordinary documentary produced by the students of the cinema school, Leobardo López's *El Grito* (México, CUEC, 1968, 120 mins.) [The Shout]. The horrified seduction of learning of this state crime amounted, for people like me, to an actual political initiation: one learnt to hate the army, to appreciate the tactics of counter information of the movement, and to become leftist on basis of the pleasure principle of different rebellion modalities descending from 1968.

Writer José Revueltas was right: the killings of October 2 1968 were inscribed on the skins of an endless number of readers and writers. In fact, it is the way in which images become wounds, events get involved in the emotional education of the living, and narratives become a referent of future political attitudes that differentiates it from the detachment of a history whose task, as Nietzsche rightly put it, is to "adapt the past to contemporary triviality."¹³ The workings of politicized memory are in fact a form of *physis*. Despite the mythology of the social rebellion, the competing academic and ideological interpretations of the

¹² The official report by the Special Attorney in 2006 refused to produce a definitive figure on the number of casualties of the Tlatelolco Massacre, and limited itself to list the confirmed deceases and to quote discrepancies in official and journalistic estimates: Fiscalía Especial FEMOSPP, *Informe Histórico presentado a la Sociedad Mexicana* (2006) México, Comité 68 pro Libertades Democráticas, A. C., 2008, p. 164-169.

¹³ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, tr. By R. J. Hollingdale, int. by J. P. Stern Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 90.

movement, the different claims on specific actions and actors, the battle surrounding the inheritance of those struggles, and what Carlos Monsiváis ironically describes as the “basic element of the foundational myth” of a “glimpse amidst shootings of the end of authoritarianism” (“And so democracy began, in the streets, in the markets, in the Three Cultures Square, in the Lecumberri Jail”¹⁴), 1968 became a long-term affect on Mexicans, a ghost that refused to be placated by means of academic knowledge alone.

2. *The tradition of independence.*

Nonetheless, it should be clear that effects and affects, and reflection and consequences do not have the same temporality, nor pose a continuous narrative. One of the main reasons to avoid contributing to national art history narratives is that social catastrophes, like the repression of the 1968 democratic movement, are powerful enough as agents of the production and demolition of subjectivities to leave behind an incredibly detailed mass of rubble, specified strata by strata, discipline by discipline, and work by work, in a manifold of ways. The cultural effects of the '68 crisis in Mexico were monumental: among other things, it brought to an end the relative tolerance that middle class artists and intellectuals enjoyed and put them directly in the line of fire, facing the authoritarian nature of the regime. One could argue that a terrible reality lies behind the fact that the Tlatelolco massacre became the central symbol of genocide of the ancient regime in Mexico: the state could systematically kill and imprison peasants and workers who defied its hegemony throughout the decades, confident that the claims of justice left behind were to remain marginal. Instead, when the children of the enlightened classes were killed, the state was bound to suffer an efficient reprisal sooner or later—the victory that the government obtained with its student massacre was, properly speaking, pyrrhic. This sector, the intellectual class, was able to turn the tables around and make sure that the violent imposition of power became a cultural defeat. The day after the killings, poet Octavio Paz quit his post

¹⁴ Carlos Monsiváis, *El 68. La tradición de la resistencia*, México, Ediciones Era, 2008, p. 30.

as the Mexican ambassador in India and wrote an extraordinary poem describing the ashamed nation as a “lion crouching ready to spring” while “the municipal employees wash the blood from the Plaza of the sacrificed.”¹⁵ It took a few years for Mexican writers, intellectuals, and the imprisoned leaders of the movement to produce a unique body of literature—at times truly avant-gardist, in terms of its leaning towards the circularity of the narrative, the collage, and even the pop nature of the montage of testimonies (among others, Elena Poniatowska’s *La Noche de Tlatelolco* [The Night of Tlatelolco], Carlos Monsiváis’s *Días de guardar* [Contrition days], and Luis González de Alba’s *Los días y los años* [The days and the years])—which was able to expand the anger and commit their readers to the long-term task of bringing to an end the cultural order that had activated the repression. A significant number of films have approached the events both from the unbearably painful exploration of the murderous rage of the society (*Red Dawn* by Jaime Humberto Hermosillo and *Canoa* by Felipe Cazals) and the satiric depiction of the generation gap between the sixty-eighters and their children (*El bulto* by Jaime Retes). In any case, 1968 redefined the concept of the intellectual in Mexico: to be involved in cultural production implied, in one way or another—for a revolutionary Marxist or a liberal critic—that culture was understood as a form of opposition. As Octavio Paz himself was to suffer late in his life, to be an intellectual and to agree with the Mexican state became an onto-ethical impossibility.

Notwithstanding, the contemporary visual arts were in general less able to produce a memory of ’68 than the written word or photography. Without suggesting that ’68 became a visual taboo for contemporary art, the movement and its tragic end seemed hard to approach from a field that, paradoxically, was probably more affected than any other cultural production in terms of its institutional behaviour. More than dealing with the visual consequences of the movement, one first has to consider the extent to which the dynamic of visual production was entirely shaken by ’68.

¹⁵ Octavio Paz, “México: Olimpiada de 1968”, en: *México en la Obra de Octavio Paz. 1. El peregrino en su patria. Historia y política de México*, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987, p. 709.

In fact, 1968 provoked a schism in artistic practice that, to a large extent, lasted until the late 1990s, when, as a result of globalization, contemporary art regained a central role and prestige value in the cultural production of Mexico. The most important effect was a veritable divorce of the emerging contemporary art community from the official institutions of culture. At the very peak of the movement, in the last weeks of August 1968, a significant number of non-official artists that were otherwise destined to be absorbed within a modern circuit of artistic production—the very same artists who had successfully broken with the belated local hegemony of nationalist, pseudo-political, post-mural painting—endorsed the student strike by imposing a ban on the official exhibition that the Olympic cultural committee had devised to present parallel to the games. Painters and sculptors ranging from Manuel Felguéz, Vicente Rojo, Helen Escobedo, and Kazuya Sakai, to the then emerging youngsters like Felipe Ehrenberg and Arnaldo Coen boycotted the Salón Solar [Solar Salon], and created an independent organization titled Salón Independiente [Independent Salon]¹⁶. Many of them joined forces to produce an ephemeral mural on the grounds of the Ciudad Universitaria [University City] during the cultural festivals organized by students. Even after the massacre, the Independent Salon coalesced the post-mural artists into refusing any participation in Mexican official events, and went to organize three exhibitions, in 1968, 1969, and 1970, entirely devoid of official participation. Probably influenced by the arguments of *autogestión* [self-management] by political theorists like Revueltas, the artists assumed that they alone had to be entirely responsible for their public presentation. Although the strictures of their refusal and the lack of a common political project brought the Salon to an end in 1971—provoked by the impossibility of enforcing the self-imposed rule of denying participation in any exhibition or biennial that did not include the whole collective—the Salon had at least two extraordinary consequences. For one thing, it

¹⁶ For a detailed account on the history of the Independent Salon see: Pilar García de Garmenos, “The *Salón Independiente*: A new reading”, in: Debroise ed., *La Era de la Discrepancia*, p. 49-57. However, it is important to state that I diverge from García’s assumption that the Salon was little influenced by the political ideologies of the 68 movement.

inaugurated a period during which the cultural institutions of the country were effectively unwilling to collect, and therefore resistant to incorporate the production of contemporary art into museums, which until well into the year 2000 operated more as temporary exhibition spaces than as mechanisms of cultural memory production. This disregard had an enormous effect on keeping contemporary art marginalized and disempowered in regard to audiences and academia, not to speak of the lack of systematic private collecting. On the other hand, the Salón Independiente and its ephemeral mural became the blueprint of another phantasmal utopia: the pursuit of the modalities of collective action and self-organizing that haunted artists working in many different media during the 1970s and even until the 1990s who were particularly prevalent in the formation of the *Grupos* [Groups] movement of the 1970s, the artist book, mail and experimental art circuits revolving around practitioners and theorists such as Ulises Carrión, and the unflinching radicalism of independent film-makers working in super8 format (the “superocheros”).

With all its weaknesses and merits, the semblance of independence and the polemics of the Mexican contemporary art world are to be understood as a longstanding consequence of 1968. In addition to a number of other social and historical circumstances, including the experience of bitter freedom provoked by the 1985 earthquake, 1968 turned the ambivalent and complex dynamic of contemporary art in that periphery into an experience of self-organization that came to end only with the process of consecration and assimilation provoked by the international success of current Mexican practices.

Having said this, it is not idle to ponder on the specific and sporadic ways in which visual artists tried to address 1968 as an artistic motif. In fact, one of the consequences of the trauma of the massacre was that there were very few instances in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s in which contemporary artists focused on 1968 as a question of visual or conceptual commentary, which strongly underlines the remarkable way in which the politics of memory towards these events were suddenly reactivated on occasion of the 40th anniversary of the movement, that is, in 2008.

3. *The dustbin of history.*

One cannot start to review the memory of 1968 unless one is ready to work through the indexes of social trauma and historical frustration that the brutality of the Mexican state cast over the democratic experience of protest. Above all, the art historian ought to record the ways in which the feelings of loss and nonsense provoked by the Tlatelolco massacre were translated into films, texts, and artworks. As writer Juan García Ponce put it in his key work, *Crónica de la intervención* [Chronicle of an Intervention, 1982], the massacre of Tlatelolco represented, first of all, the imposition of unreality over the possibilities of history:

A massacre transmogrifies any place into a refuse dump. The events which public character ought to allow their objective comparison and permanence fade in the distance faster than any other. Their signature is their own refutation.¹⁷

After the killings, a recurring image in poems, chronicles, and memories is that of garbage: stains of humanity and shots in the doorways and lifts in the building, blood pools being cleaned by Mexico city sweepers over the ancient pyramids, objects left behind by the stampede of the crowd. In the most important early account of the student movement, *La Noche de Tlatelolco* by Elena Poniatowska, appears a particularly poignant news clipping written on October 5 1968 by José Luis Mejías in the *Diario de la Tarde*:

Maybe the most chilling sight was the many bloodstained shoes that were spread out in the square, silent witnesses of the disappearing of their owners.¹⁸

It seems that the earliest and most crude artistic response to the 1968 movement was the exhibition titled *A nivel informativo* [At an informative level] that three very young artists, Víctor Muñoz, and Carlos and José Antonio Fink, created at the Fine Arts Palace in 1974. Departing from the Mexican 1968 and the testimonies of the 1973 coup d'état in Chile, the environments produced by Muñoz and the Fink

¹⁷ Juan García Ponce, *Crónica de la intervención*, Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2001, vol 2, p. 1428, 1982.

¹⁸ Elena Poniatowska, *La noche de Tlatelolco*, 201.

brothers paid tribute to the surrealist assemblage tradition. The artists produced a scene surrounded by barbed wire where trash bags floated above the floor, which was covered by personal objects. They were turning the image of the Three Cultures Square massacre into a landscape traversed by residues, an index of personal loss and historical destitution.

Such early materialist response to '68 was soon to be answered by a radical, allegorical vision of the massacre that was totally alien to the realist leanings of the left. I am referring to the esoteric interpretation Alejandro Jodorowsky introduced in his most ambitious film, *The Holy Mountain* (1973-1974). Earlier than any other fiction or experimental movie, Jodorowsky made reference to the Tlatelolco killings as an omen of the wide social and spiritual crisis of the age, as part of his countercultural mystical reading of the sexual perversion of the modern state and economic power¹⁹.

Indeed, in the early sequences of his film, among references to the crisis of Christianity and the postcolonial experience of the Americas, Jodorowsky stages a modern killing of the innocent. Along the fence of a colonial church, where an army of centurion parade carrying crucified animals, modern soldiers merciless execute gagged and handcuffed youngsters. Although it is translated into a mystic code, the referent is unambiguous: from the hearts of the students being killed, birds rise to the sky as an echo of the iconography of the Olympic Games. The scene is all the more extraordinary for making it makes a parody of the complicity of the world with the massacre in the guise of a group of tourists that consume the killings as part of Mexican exoticism.²⁰

Later on, Jodorowsky comes back to the issue to provide a post-Freudian reading of the psychology of the repressor. As if drawing from the mythological construction of Freud's *Mass Psychology* when reviewing the imaginary world of Axon, the chief of police, Jodorowsky explains the killing of students as part of the construction of authority on the basis of collective castration. Axon recruits his

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²⁰ See: Alejandro Jodorowsky, *Montaña sagrada*, from 6'15" to 7'58"

troops by collecting the testicles of the recruits. In turn, he brings his army to exterminate a rally led by people marching, making the characteristic “V” sign of the student demonstrations. As the director recently argued, the sequence also performs a parody of the special effects of cinema²¹.

How did viewers receive such anti-solemn forms of social representation back in the mid-1970s? It is not hard to imagine that Jodorowsky’s depiction of the Tlatelolco killings faced the indifference or rejection of audiences more akin to classical left-wing modalities of representation. It would be interesting to compare the tactics of *The Holy Mountain* to other sarcastic records of 1960s radicalism, like Godard’s *La Chinoise* or the slapstick depiction of the Black Panther’s ideologies in *One Plus One*. However, there is no doubt that once the modernist aesthetic codes of the left had gone into crisis, shock strategies like these seemed to offer a reading of history that refused any affective neutrality.

4. Failed monumentality

The difficulty of arriving at a successful artistic rapport of 1968 was already visible in the activities of the artistic *grupos* of the 1970s, a number of collectives that explored the possibilities of a reconsideration and reactivation of public art, especially after 1977. Since graphics had been the most important means of visual production of the movement itself, a good deal of these groups’ actions consisted of pursuing new street graphic art with which they hoped to redress the oppressive government control of public media with creative forms of counter-information. Starting in 1977, the MIRA collective (formed by artists such as Melecio Galván, Arnulfo Aquino, Jorge Perezvega and Rebeca Hidalgo) focused on the creation of “*graphic comunicués*,” made of black and white drawings and reproduced as commercial heliographic copies that were temporarily installed on panels and

²¹ See: *Montaña sagrada*, 1:08’50”- 1:10’35”

quickly placed in schools, factories, and squares to disseminate an alternative memory of recent history. The October 2 massacre, along with the repression of June 10, 1971, had a prominent role in their narrative. Considering that several of their members were part of the graphic art brigades that produced the propaganda of the 1968 movement, it's hardly a coincidence that the artists of the MIRA group were responsible for the compilation of the 1968 graphics in book form.

It is also not by chance that there is no—and that there probably should not be any—definitive object of visual representation of the Mexican 1968, in terms of a public monument to commemorate the massacre. The idea of erecting a site of permanent civic significance in relation to the student movement proved an impossibility in the long term, but there was at least one serious attempt of creating one. In 1989, the Comité 68 Pro Libertades Democráticas [’68 Pro Democratic Freedoms Committee], composed by the surviving members of the National Strike Council, created a public contest to design a ’68 monument to be erected in the Three Culture Square. A project by some of the former members of the Proceso Pentagono Group, titled *La Grieta* [The Crack], won the contest, and according to the independence ideal of the left, a public fundraising campaign was started, but it failed to collect the money necessary to build it. I tend to believe that to a great extent, it was a lucky failure. Despite the fact that the project for the monument refused the anachronistic standards of political public sculpture in Mexico, which to this date are the basic nineteenth century model of bronze statues, the monument would have been ultimately naive. *La Grieta* was conceived as a geometric platform that would have created a trench in the shape of a cataclysmic crack, where the viewer was meant to walk and read the names of the people killed during the massacre. Unbeknownst to the artists, this late earthwork was going to be a classical third world *already made*. The idea of the trench was, in essence, identical to the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall* that was erected by Maya Lin in Washington D.C. almost a decade earlier, in 1982. Beyond the historical irony posed by the fact that the Tlatelolco Memorial would have become a peripheral example of Cold War architecture of mourning, the monument was also devised to respond to a sort of principle of archeo-astronomy:

the crack was to be oriented in such a way that it would be traversed by sunlight each year on October 2. But the worst pitfall that was prevented by the lack of public funds was not so much artistic as historical. The dimension of the trench was designed to leave enough subterranean walls to consign hundreds of names of students, children, women, and soldiers allegedly killed in Tlatelolco. The truth of the matter, however, is that when historians and lawyers—working jointly with the '68 Committee and the Special Attorney who was trying to prosecute those responsible of human rights abuses—tried in the early 2000s to enlist the number of the deceased, they were unable to locate more than forty victims. The devilish mathematics of the Tlatelolco massacre, based on the miscalculations provoked by the amount of gunfire used during the operation and the hysteria of the moment, do not in any way diminish the responsibility of the repression. But the fact that only forty names have been confirmed as victims of October 2 would have rendered *La Grieta* poetically faulty.

At the end of the day, the '68 Committee opted to erect a more discrete memorial slab in the square based on one of the graphics of 1968 that, in turn, quotes a famous engraving by George Braque and lists the names of three dozens of confirmed victims. This monument, useful as it is to provide a focus point for the October 2 demonstrations, has little artistic and civic significance. It is, in fact, a testimony to the crisis of the notion of the public monument, both as a modality of contemporary sculpture and as a means to mark and symbolize civic space. This very same failure, however, was to become a major source of reflection and production in the way the question of the memorializing of '68 was activated at the turn of the twenty-first century. In a sense, the failure of monumentality became instrumental in preventing the exorcism of the memory of 1968.

5. Invoking the phantom of democracy.

Isolated as they were, two radically different individual artworks signalled the significance that the memory of 1968 was to assume in the emerging contemporary art field in Mexico. It is not entirely by chance that, as in many other instances, the first move came from an immigrant artist, the Belgian-Mexican ex-architect Francis Alÿs. In 1996, preoccupied with the many works and actions that

take place on the main square of Mexico City—the Zócalo—and using it to examine the political and aesthetic significance of the polis, Francis Alÿs made a video that turned back to 1968 to think about the question of resistance to mass manipulation. *Patriotic Tales* shows the artists leading a flock of sheep to encircle the flag post of the Zócalo to create a sort of symbolic massive flock of animals, suggesting that they were awaiting democratization. The action was an explicit homage to an important event of the Mexican '68. When a group of bureaucrats were brought to the Zócalo on August 28, 1968, supposedly to “restore the dignity” of the Mexican flag that according to the presidency had been offended by the red and black flag of the student strike, they broke the institutionalized silence of the regime by braying like sheep. With historical hindsight, *Patriotic Tales* reactivated the memory of the moment when student movement effectively came close to put the hegemony of the regime in danger, akin to the breaking point in the events of May '68 when the Renault Union joined the general strike called by the students. It is likely that the rebellion of the bureaucrats that day could have been the last drop that confirmed for government the decision of aborting the student movement by means of force.

A similar principle of benjaminian historical reactivation, and the suggestion of '68 as the location of an unfinished social process accompanies a specific print by artist Mariana Botey titled *2 de Octubre de 1968 Responsables* [October 2 1968 the Culprits, 2004]. In November 2001, the newly elected president Vicente Fox announced that the crimes of '68 and the dirty war of the 1970s were to be prosecuted by a specific prosecutor of justice with an unconsciously ironical title—*FEMOSP*: the Special Attorney for Social Movements of the Past. This commission was one of the most spectacular failures of the Fox administration: after six years of investigations, the prescription laws prevented the commission from punishing a single statesman or military for the “genocide” of the opposition. Despite its apparent modesty, Botey’s silkscreen print, published by Nopal Press in Los Angeles, is a witty exercise of appropriation techniques. Botey superimposed two photographs of the cabinet members of the Díaz Ordaz presidency with the flowchart of the Mexican government during the repression.

Produced under the umbrella of Botey’s “invisible college,” the print that conflates the status of a political readymade and a judiciary document performs a form of symbolic punishment based on the very documents that were part of the failed prosecution.

Both Alÿs and Botey’s works signaled a change of strategy when artistic practices began to address 1968 explicitly under the guise of the interpellation of the ghost of unrealized democracy. Once put into this historical perspective—that of an *undead* claim that, in effect, could not be put to rest through an act of justice or a monument—a new field of transactions, in regard to the memory of the movement, could begin to take place. The juncture of that occasion was to be provided by the 40th anniversary of the movement.

6. Under the spell of the forever present.

The energy with which 1968 re-emerged as a significant issue for the production of contemporary art involves the coming together of two tendencies. On the one hand, Mexico as a nation-state effectively entered into a new era of social confrontations and conflicts with the so-called transition to democracy after the earthquake of 1985, the social crisis and indigenous rebellion of 1994, and another period of supposed democratic transition in 2000. Along with it, after 1990, contemporary art in Mexico became fully integrated into the “post-conceptual flight” of global art, which involved an ambiguous tension between contemporary art as a means of self-consciousness of late capitalism and, at the same time, a central social leisure and economic activity. The fact that both processes frequently run against the utopian, leftist hopes of a revolutionary overturn of capitalism and the pursuit of non-commercial modes of agency, just adds a further element to the jigsaw, because despite its financial and social institutionalization, contemporary art has become a sort of symbolic sanctuary for the memory and thinking of social and political radicalism worldwide. It is arguable that any significant experience of current contemporary practices involves the tense dialectic between its market and social prestige functions, and the way in

which its theorizing and social significance depend on the constant referencing to revolutionary traditions and radical culture. It is in great part due to the sanctuary function that art fulfils today, as an unconscious historiography and a time capsule of the agonizing left, that during 2007 and 2008 a veritable re-emergence of 1968 imagery and reflection invaded contemporary art practices in Mexico.

Along with those epistemological conditions, one of the main causes of the Mexican 2008 revivalism was the deed of a specific museological experience. In 2004, the facilities of the former Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tlatelolco Square, which was practically emptied as a result of the 1985 earthquake, was handed over to the National University. Megalomaniac and quasi-fascistic as the building designed by the ultimate official architect of the ancient regime, Pedro Ramirez Vazquez, may be, this real estate transference had a deep significance. On the one hand, it was a melancholic testimony of the unwillingness of the current Mexican government to deal with its own historical inheritance. On the other, the icy grandeur of the Tlatelolco Foreign Affairs Ministry testified to the bygone third worldist Mexican fantasy of acquiring a major role as a non-aligned power in the diplomatic field. As if to forget, more easily, that once upon a time Mexico pretended to have a diplomatic policy based on the cunning refusal to mechanically adhere to USA directives, the Tlatelolco Foreign Affairs Ministry went into the conventional recycling machine of most obsolete architecture in the West: I mean, it was condemned to become a cultural facility. The whole transaction, which made the left-wing city government the official owner of the building, carried only one condition: that the university would build a memorial to the events of 1968.

The team that was put in charge of this task, which included ethnologist Sergio Raúl Arroyo and historian curator Álvaro Vázquez, among others, made a number of remarkable decisions. For one thing, they decided that the memorial to '68 had to operate on the basis of using new media. Closely collaborating with the surviving participants of the movement, they decided to create a multimedia museum that, instead of knitting a narrative based on objects, photographs and texts, was to use video and sound as a means to turn it into a cacophonous concert

of voices. The new 1968 memorial was made on the basis of hundreds of video interviews of leaders, students, politicians, and witnesses that were edited to produce a constant confrontation of conflicting talking heads revising the different episodes of the 1968 epic from a personal standpoint. As a result, the experience of the memorial was more about transmitting emotional moments of agency than cleanly narrated facts. Through video, the memorial activates the condition of the witnesses and actors just as the fleshy books *Revueltas* described: living histories inscribed on living organisms that were traversed by a historical experience. The effectiveness of this historical device is reflected in the thousands of people of all ages who flock into the museum every week. At a time when it has become customary to lament the lack of historical consciousness of generations allegedly reified by the aesthetics of immediacy of the Internet, the sight of hundreds of families listening to the testimonies of a radical student movement is reinvigorating. It is not that contemporary masses are allergic to history, they distrust the mediation of high culture writing and ideological indoctrination; instead, they probably respond better to the seduction of testimonials of political experience. I was the first to be shocked at my reaction to the populism of the memorial: this is a history museum that was able to equally satisfy a leftist snob like me, as well as the fifty year old, cynic taxi driver I spoke to the other day, who could not believe that the testimonies of the aging students had not been censored, and included popular slang, mutual accusations, and four letter words.

At the same time, the museum staff, partly influenced by contemporary art curatorial projects that the university sponsored at the time —Álvaro Vázquez was also one of the curators of the *Age of Discrepancy* show in 2007— started their task with a particular fascination for the way some contemporary artworks had addressed the task of working through the possibilities of social conflict. Under the spell of the politicized nature of contemporary art practices, they assumed that the museum ought to use contemporary art as part of its design. First, they introduced some of the contemporary art works that had addressed the events of 1968 into the memorial's narrative: a reconstruction of Víctor Muñoz's installation of the shoes abandoned by the people who escaped the massacre, and Francis Alÿs's

Patriotic Tales as a turning point of the display. At the same time, they did not refrain themselves from using contemporary art forms in their display strategies: any of their film materials were presented as two or three-channel video installations and used mug shots from the National Archives to create a Boltanksy-like photographic installation in the former safe of the ministry. Finally, in order to underline their commitment to contemporary aesthetic, they hired Cuban-Mexican curator Tayiana Pimentel to select a new work to frame the opening of the new museum. Pimentel could not have been bolder in her choice for this commission when she decided that the right artist for the task was no other than the Spanish-Mexican Santiago Sierra.

Characteristically, Sierra devised a piece that was conceptually, politically, and aesthetically relentless. For seventy-two continuous hours without intermission, from October 22 to 25, 2007, Sierra had actors and volunteers reading post-minimalist cantata titled *1548 State Crimes* out loud in the gelid Juarez multipurpose hall of the old Foreign Affairs Ministry. Day and night, with or without an audience, Sierra had two people reading the list of all the victims of state repression in Mexico from 1968 to the present, which was transmitted in real time on the artist's website. This anti-theatrical tour de force, which paid homage to the tradition of perpetual music performances spanning from Erik Satie to LaMonte Young, was a dutiful application of a statistical aesthetics. Pronouncing only the name, date of death, location, and classification of each case as "killed" or "missing," Sierra convoked the oppressive weight of the history of state violence, establishing an implicit kinship between the systematic repetitiveness of minimalist music and the serial, murderous nature of the nation state. *1548 State Crimes* was certainly an unbearable performance that was somehow better to watch in the absence of any other spectators, say by two or three in the morning, as if the presence of any other viewer invoked a sort of indecency. The work implicitly assumed that to add any figment of aesthetic satisfaction to the recount of human rights abuses would have simply lacked in propriety. Above all, this monumental anti-monument—a dematerialized checklist of a heap of corpses—made a clear

point in suggesting that the killings of 1968 could not be conceived as an isolated moment in the past, but as a generalized feature of the state even today.

The monotonous dryness of Sierra's inaugural piece did not at all discourage the museum from following the same track. It may well be that the alienating effect of the experience of Sierra's experiment, as a sort of *Staatsmusik*, convinced the museum authorities of the rightfulness of the enterprise, to the extent of driving them to promote the fortieth anniversary of '68 as a platform for a number of equally uncompromising and ambitious interventions this last fall.

I would like to comment particularly on four of those actions, inasmuch as they represent the complex negotiation between the toolbox of contemporary art and the challenges involved in addressing the legacy of radicalism. As it will be clear from the beginning, all of the projects relate more to the need to intervene in the space of affective and political questioning created by the ghost of '68 in 2008 than to the history of the student movement in itself. Located in a dialectic of the operation of the past in the present, rather than on the actual investigation of the past or the mourning of the possibilities of a revolution that did not occur, they all suggest a situation that rejects the "what would have happened?"-obsession of what in Spanish we call the "post-preterit" tense. In other words, these actions refused to delve in the myth of '68, deciding instead to work directly with the fabric of the currents of social memory it invokes:

1. *Street déjà vu*. A recently formed contemporary theatre collective that carries the name *Teatro Ojo* (in English, Theater Eye, a possible homage to Tziga Vertov's soviet *Kino Glaz* or "Eye cinema") opted to program a number of discreet theatrical multimedia situations, roughly following the calendar of the main ephemerides of the student movement. The common thread of those interventions consisted in an assault on the casual passer-by in different locations of Mexico City, and his or her involvement with situations that involved a personal dialogue with the memory of '68. The *Teatro Ojo* strategies were manifold: installations with images from photographs, prints, and slogans related to the student movement placed in squares, buses, and the university campus; a performance of '68 songs

with a *mariachi* band in the street; the production of video installations that placed living individuals inside scenes taken from the documentation of the events; billboards that detoured the infamous anti-radical statement of Nicholas Sarkozy's—"forget 1968"—adding a counter-slogan: "But never its style", etc. Those post-Brechtian attempts to instigate a poetics of estrangement in the texture of the fiction we call daily life culminated in a private ceremony in one of the flats in the infamous Chihuahua building—the main stage of the October 2 massacre—where the actors and their audience drank beer, watched videos, and read books aloud in the very same places where dozens of demonstrators took refuge during the shooting. The fact that none of the actions was understood as part of a sequence, but only as a fragmentary experience involving the casual participants, confirmed the intention of exploring modalities of theatre that would sacrifice the stage, but not the Aristotelian unity of place, time and plot that still—probably regressively—structures our expectations of most action art.

2. *Failed restoration.* During the last decade, the Tercerunquinto collective has made a significant number of conceptual interventions based on the paradoxical application of devices drawn from architecture and masonry, in order to produce artworks based on anti-functional architectonic thinking, along with the criticism of cultural and social institutions. On the October 2, 2008, Tercerunquinto offered their anti-architecture in order to symbolise an impossible operation to restore the Foreign Affairs building's original sense. For a week, and with all possible cares, the collective gathered a team of restorers and bricklayers to dismantle five plates that contained the Mexican coat of arms (the eagle and the Aztec snake) on the building's façade in order to materialize the deflating effect of this type of official architecture.

The chiselling evoked the dream that the building's new destiny as the site of the 1968 memorial would convey a change of regime. Just like regal coats of arms or the Nazi swastika, the emblem of a government should be distorted in order to indicate the beginning of a new era. Once the process of destruction was finished, however, the marble emblem was restored to its place of origin without any damage, as if nothing had ever happened. This *Desmantelamiento y*

reinstalación de un símbolo patrio [Dismantling and restitution of a patriotic symbol, 2008] was, in fact, an allegory of a bitter historical process: the motley nature of an interrupted revolution and an unsuccessful transition, the notion of a change that was mere restoration.

3. *Hallucinatory monumentality.* We have already discussed the artistic and historical failure inherent to the existing monument to the victims of 1968. It would seem impossible that the current slab that commemorates the deceased in the Tlatelolco Square could be ever able to activate the social memory of 1968, especially considering the extraordinary decay of the dwelling unit it belongs to. Partly based on the inspiration of the beginning of the visionary *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) by Stanley Kubrick, which depicts the discovery of an uncanny, minimalist sculpture in outer space, artist Ximena Labra devised a strategy to infuse the monument to the victims of Tlatelolco with hallucinatory powers. Using the very same casting techniques with which pre-Columbian or any archaeological artefacts are reproduced for educational and museum purposes, she had the 1993 original monument reproduced in fiberglass in order to have three more life-size replicas. Then, for two months, she had her monuments temporarily erected either along the original monument, in order to have the four together, or installed in other, more symbolically effective public sites: the Zócalo main square, the Fine Arts Palace, the Insurgentes subway station, and the grounds of the *Monumento de la Revolución* [Monument to the Revolution]. This physical migration somehow restored the monument with a novelty value, bringing it to audiences that would probably never visit it in its original site. For if people would never go to the monument, why not bring it to the people?

At the same time, the whole action behaved as a quasi-scientific, counterfactual test of the failure of this genre of sculpture object. Not only did the audiences generally take it for granted that this slab was not supposed to be located in the places where they encountered it or behave towards the copies in the Tlatelolco square with no hesitation on their symbolic validity, but they subjected those copies to the specific spatial and practical conditions that prevailed in their new context. In a word, the moving monuments failed to

significantly transform their surroundings into a space of mourning. Seen in retrospect, the action became a detailed chronicle of the banality of urban art, allowing the artist to document the paradoxical, effective use of monuments in the city, either as new-age political fetishes, street furniture, and even as places of erotic encounter. The refined poetry of Labra's negotiation of fantasy and banality make her work one of the most interesting readings of the behaviour of public art that have been produced in the region.

4. Producing the public.

The work by Mexican-Canadian new media artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer is characterized by its usage of highly complex new media to create situations of conviviality and inter-subjective rapport in public space. His intervention on Tlatelolco Square during September and October 2008 is probably the most significant work this artist has created so far: an effective application of the resources of digital technology, monumental light sculpture, sound intervention, and political activation that somehow summarize the experience of Lozano-Hemmer's whole career. In fact, the work put all of his art's poetics and technology to the service of realizing the most important demand of the 1968 movement: the concept of public dialogue as a critique of the structures that control all media, opinion, and information—the establishment's way of channelling social power.

In the northeast corner of the Three Culture Square, Lozano-Hemmer situated a small stand with a megaphone that could only be heard from a few meters away. For ten nights, the microphone was entirely available for anyone to use—neighbour, activist, passerby or cultural consumer: anybody could simply arrive at the stand, grab the microphone, and make a speech towards an absent crowd. These voices in turn activated a massive visual and audio amplifier: every time somebody spoke to the microphone, a huge beam, similar to the ones used to trace planes during a bomb attack, was turned on, illuminating the top of the old Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and turning the words of the citizen into light. At the same time, the unfiltered statements were recorded and cued in an automatic radio programmer that inserted them, as they were being produced, in a live transmission of the University Radio, one of the main radio stations in Mexico City.

In fact, once the signal was effectively broadcasted, another light installation was activated: three other huge beams illuminated three important sites of Mexico City, conveying the sense that the words uttered in the square were broadcasted all around the country.

From a technical and artistic point of view, *Voz Alta* [Out loud] was a belated realization of a constructivist utopia: the transference of the publicity apparatus to the citizen, and the production of an industrial-age agora. In it, any modern art historian would be able to recognize a certain combination of some of the features of Vladimir Tatlin's Monument to the Third International (1919-1920) and Gustav Klutsis's Radio Announcers (1922). Instead of representing the propaganda machine of the revolution, however, *Voz Alta* effectively allowed the individual to occupy the airwaves with any kind of material: from proposing to a girlfriend to openly calling for an armed revolution (I heard at least two people using the radio for that purpose), or simply to broadcast their personal memories of the student movement or complain about the lack of social responsibility on part of the Tlatelolco neighbours. For a limited period of time, Lozano's work restored the social means of hearing and visibility to the public. Under the spell of the phantom of liberty that 1968 invoked, his work pointed to a renewed social usage of street art, which instead of occupying public space for the sake of visibility—or to make an icon of the artist as a genius—suggested the possibilities of using technology for the purpose of (re)inventing the public.

7. *Forget amnesia.*

Social memory is the outcome of action, which —as Hannah Arendt so cleverly argued—“produces’ stories with or without intention as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things.”²² If 1968 cannot be forgotten it is not only because of its unfulfilled demand of justice; it is because the inheritance of the student movement was a formidable factory of subjectivities. It may well be that, independently of any objective measure of effects, it is in relation to the production of an exemplary experience that social movements are able to instigate emancipation. For as Eduardo Valle, the speaker at the most important rally of '68 said at the end of the

²² Hannah Arendt, *La Condición Humana*, Barcelona, Paidós, 1993, p. 208.

silent demonstration of September 13, even if the repressive forces were to chain and gag every participant in the movement, a “consciousness of action” would remain unscathed as an unforgettable legacy:

“We have experienced freedom in the streets, lived democracy in thousands of assemblies, rallies and demonstrations. When one tastes the sweet side of freedom, it is never forgotten...”²³

All of the artistic transactions we have examined share a common ground: rather than adhering to any normal visual standard, iconographic or rhetoric, of “political art,” they tend to demonstrate politics as a possible destination for slowly developing forms of poetical involvement. Having the privilege of following their development all throughout the last year, they reinforced my personal conviction that rather than subjecting artistic practice to an authoritarian demand of political instrumentality, or the adhesion to any specific programmatic, it is their development as means of production of subjective forms that eventually allows them to become politicized at the encounter of a fluid moment of social activity. The complex set of mediations they involve—the accumulation of culture, the production of cultural venues, the vitality of a public and academic sphere, the availability of economic resources for symbolic activity, in other words, the existence and refinement of cultural institutions—constitute a precondition of the mere possibility of their political activation. Contemporary art turns political only when necessary, but in order to operate as such, it first needs to establish its existence as a complex web of traditions and resourcefulness. Similar to historical events, artworks are significant because they produce, albeit at a different speed, different forms of subjectivities. That this production is not idle is confirmed when they add this internal power to the elaboration of memory of those social events that are in themselves remembered because they effected subjects. Just as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things.

²³ Guevara Niebla, *La libertad nunca se olvida*, p. 257.