

Mictlan's Cyber-Cartography the Search of Mexican Families for Their Loved Ones: A Collaborative Socially-Engaged Art Project

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Abstract

Mexico is living in an extreme humanitarian crisis since 2006, a crisis that has escalated up to an unprecedented situation. Among the different circles of the horror of this contemporary Mictlán—the underworld for the Nahuatl culture—, there is one especially painful: the kidnapping of civilians. With more than 30,000 people 'gone missing', and several independent groups searching for clandestine graves all around the country, the situation is unbearable. This paper addresses the making of a collaborative socially engaged art project that enables a collective of women based in Los Mochis to document their search for their loved ones in rural and urban areas of Mexico.

Keywords

Mexico, cyber-cartography, collaborative, creative-practice, practice-as-research, socially-engaged, human-rights, Mictlán.

I

Since 2006, Mexico is living in an extreme humanitarian crisis. More than 33,482 individuals have been kidnapped (Martínez, 2016), and the dead toll of this *war against drugs*—as it was called by former Mexican President Felipe Calderón—is 234,000 (Hernández Borbolla, 2017) by the end of 2017. The general opinion among civilians is that “local police departments are allied with criminal gangs, and have little incentive to recover the bodies of citizens—the *desaparecidos*—kidnapped for ransom, robbery or revenge and never found again” (Maharaj, 2016). Family members of those abducted, tired of visiting police headquarters, hospitals and clinics, even morgues, and being told to wait for “news” on their cases, started to investigate—a task that should be done by police—and to search for clandestine graves. “We are finding things that authorities never wanted to look for” [...] “We are doing their work, because we want to find our children” (McDonnell, 2016) explained Rosalía Castro, a mother that has been looking for her son Roberto for four years already in the state of Veracruz.

Rosalía Castro is part of the El Solecito

Collective, in Veracruz, a group of women and men that found several mass graves this area of Mexico; but there are other collectives in Jalisco, Coahuila, Tamaulipas,

Nuevo León, Estado de México, Sonora and Sinaloa, just to mention a few states.

These collectives share an impromptu system: they meet several days a week—either in an office, a house, a specific point in the city—, they prepare their expedition, and then they just drive to the places they agreed in a private agenda. They have limited and sometimes scarce tools, like machetes and shovels, but especially, they bring several metal rods—in the shape of a T—that help them to get a better clue in case there is a grave underneath: they push it down and when pulling the rod out, by smelling the very point, they may know if there are any bodies buried there.

II

Journalists are following the activities of these collectives, providing them with more ‘visibility’ that could translate—not always—as a sense of protection. Some of the journalists that work in smaller cities in Mexico live in a state of precariousness, sometimes as freelance—working for different media organizations—, with no support from the editors or owners of the newspapers, with no special training or equipment to go and do their job. *Periodistas de a Pie* is “a network of national and international journalists who are experts in social issues and human rights” (Pastrana, 2017). This network has followed this cause, making media productions to help understand better this humanitarian crisis. With the support of Open Society Foundations, *Periodistas de a Pie* produced the project 'Buscadores. En un país de desaparecidos' which means *Seekers. In a country of disappeared*. The general editor is Daniela Pastrana, project designers are Consuelo Pagaza and Prometeo Lucero, and drawings are made by Rafael Pineda. In this project, Mexican journalists introduce seekers' profiles through short videos. The list of ‘buscadores’ include: Mario Vergara, Silvia Ortiz, Alma Rosa Rojo, María Herrera, Graciela Pérez, Fernando Ocegueda, Guadalupe Contreras, Mirna Nereida Medina, Araceli Rodríguez, Alfonso Moreno, Leticia Hidalgo, and José Díaz Navarro.



Figure 1. Buscadores. © Periodistas de a Pie / Pie de Página.
URL: <http://piedepagina.mx/buscadores/index-.php>.

The project introduces videos of each one of the individuals that are searching for their family members. This is an ongoing project, that is being nurtured by members of Pie de Página collective.

III

Scholars working in public and private universities in Mexico have been studying this phenomenon, and they have presented their research results in conferences and symposia like Colegio de Mexico ‘Violence and Peace Seminar’ coordinated by Sergio Aguayo, or Colegio de Michoacán conference ‘Sovereignities at stake. Insights from citizen security in Latin America.’

There are some scholars that work together in order to provide training to the collective of ‘searchers’ or ‘buscadores,’ that is the case of GIASF, a Group of Research in Social and Forensic Anthropology.



Figure 2. GIASF. © <http://www.giasf.org/asesoriacutea-teacutecnica.html>

One of the workshops they have been providing is ‘Search, localization and registering of contemporary discoveries’ in which “the GIASF has developed a flexible model of technical advice to relatives of disappeared persons and their representatives on the generalities of anthropology and forensic archaeology in the search and identification of

human remains. It is a horizontal learning methodology that focuses on the needs of victims.” (GIASF, 2015).

As stated in their website, “more than 200 family members have attended these workshops in Mexico City, Veracruz, Coahuila, Sinaloa, Baja California and Chihuahua.” (GIASF, 2015).

IV

Journalists help us understand better what is happening, contextualizing the situation, providing information, making visible these groups of citizens in their search. Scholars provide deep data, delivering elements to make sense of the storm the country has fallen. Their subject of study are these citizens. They interview them, film them, record their words, document their activities.

But these individuals, at the end, when journalists and scholars leave, are left by themselves, alone, with the regular tasks of being alive: cleaning dishes, looking for the family children, cooking, cleaning the house.

They rely on social media to share their experiences with other individuals that are going through the same *inferno*.



Figure 3. Las Rastreadoras. © <https://www.facebook.com/Las-Rastreadoras-del-Fuerte-267629457048946/>

They give ‘likes’ to other’s stories, they forward information on missing persons, they write a little word of hope, they circulate videos of their own search and findings, or they look for company by sharing their commitment to their loved ones.

““For years, many of us felt isolated, like we were the only ones going through this,” recalls Diaz, who has been consumed by the search for her son, Luis Guillermo Lagues Diaz, a popular disc jockey and events promoter in Veracruz who was last seen June 28, 2013. “We have since found out there are hundreds, thousands of others going through the same emotions, the same pain. Now, we can share it.”” (McDonnell, 2016).

There is a need to register their day to day, to be part of a wider community, to be seen and to be heard. There is a need

to tell their stories: who their sons or daughters were, what they did for living, their favorite meal, anything that can keep their memories alive and fresh, as a way to survive.



Figure 4. Las Rastreadoras. © <https://www.facebook.com/Las-Rastreadoras-del-Fuerte-267629457048946/>

Even if there is a big chance for this ‘desaparecidos’ to be dead, there is hope: “Te buscaré hasta encontrarte” or “I’ll look for you until I find you”, means that they will be searching until they recover their loved ones, alive or lifeless.

V

The third production of the long-term creative research project *Vis. [un]necessary force* (2014-2020) is a collaborative socially-engaged endeavor that consists on the construction of a tool that will enable Las Rastreadoras—the collective of women based in Los Mochis—to build an online database and map that will mirror their search in the rural and urban areas of Mexico.

Vis. [un]necessary force is a creative research project that explores how civil population survives amongst extreme violence performed by legit and non-legit groups of power in specific areas of Mexico. The project explores the consequences of the violence in the daily life, especially among family members of missing individuals.

V. U[n]f_3 is a multimedia testimonial, which uses geolocation, audio recording—accompanied by photographic and textual elements—that will generate a map of the significant places-landscapes for the relatives of the disappeared. *V. U[n]f_3* is an artwork that would allow for the construction of a map—made of sound, texts and images— of the explorations carried out by Las Rastreadoras in Mexican rural and urban areas.

The collaborative work included participating in their expeditions, understand the way in which the collective works, making a tool that will be user-friendly, design the front of the application with them—from the colors to the fonts—and finally testing the app on-site in order to deliver a useful tool for them to incorporate in their day to day live.



Figure 5 screen shot from *V. U[n]f_3*. Work in progress. © Luz María Sánchez.

The core of *V. U[n]f_3* has three elements. The first one is the design and development of a tool that mimics a social network, but in this case, it is a private one, just for the use of the group Las Rastreadoras. They are able to upload their photos, to record voice notes or ambient sounds, to write a note. All these data go online to a database, and is visible—for the closed group—in a map. The second element, that is designed in collaboration with GIASF, is a tool that has to be used by certain members of Las Rastreadoras, in order to fill the database with reliable data: places where they are looking for their family members, people participating, characteristics of the area in which they are searching, pictures of the terrain before start digging, with protocols before and after the finding of clandestine graves.

But the third element relies on the fact that the artist ‘as producer of knowledge’, the artist ‘as producer of symbolic objects,’ in this case, gives way to each of the women that participate as Rastreadoras, to make their own symbolic objects using this tool. Their photos and sounds and texts, their path, their findings. A private construction. As Harun Farocki stated, I reclaim the “not-me” or “non-moi” “comme condition essentielle” (Didi-Huberman, 2010: 188)—in his work of restitution of images.

Through *V. U[n]f_3* I am looking forward to delivering a useful tool for social scientists to work along with this collective. But more important, I would like to imagine for this tool to be used by Rastreadoras, and little by little, to build a place for mourning and remembering; a tool that may disclose the search and findings of these brave group of women in their journey to Mictlán, in order to bring back their family members from anonymity and silence, and to give them proper burial.

In Mexico, we need to be companions, and go deep into this contemporary Mictlán, and come back, and say what we saw: be the witness and speak the horror.

Acknowledgments

The team collaborating in this project is Romain Ré, Ana Paula Sánchez-Cardona, Tania Reyes, and GIASF: Research Group on Social and Forensic Anthropology, especially Carolina Robledo Silvestre.

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