

ART ACTIVISM IN GUATEMALA

by

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis to my husband, Derek Robertson, whose inspires me with the confidence to make dreams a reality.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
ABSTRACT .....	viii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
II. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	2
II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	6
Demographic Transitions and Democracy .....	11
III. PURPOSE AND METHODS .....	13
VI. FINDINGS .....	14
Manuel Chavajay.....	14
Manuel Tzoc.....	17
Wilson Emilio Gomez Espinoza .....	21
Rosa Chavez.....	23
Mario Santizo .....	28
Regina Jose Galindo.....	31
Erick Boror .....	35
Eny Roland Hernandez.....	39
VII. CONCLUSION.....	45

APPENDIX SECTION .....	51
REFERENCES .....	54

## **ABSTRACT**

Guatemala is a small Central American country with a long history of violence in the 20th century. In 1996 after 36 years of civil war, a peace treaty was signed, bringing an end to ethnic genocide and armed conflict. In the midst of this struggle, there is an emerging community of artists who are advocating for social justice and to sustain indigenous culture through their work. These artists create works that confront topics such as discrimination, violence against women, race, gender, sexuality, power, corruption, and the attempt to erase recent history. This qualitative study uses the lens of existential social thought utilizing semi-standardized, semi-structured interviews with artists who are facilitating social change through their work. Data from interviews was compiled, and a phenomenological reduction was accomplished by clustering reoccurring themes in interviews to uncover unique commonalities. The research shows how artists use, make meanings through, and understand social justice artwork that facilitates social change in Guatemala. The findings highlight the frustrations of Guatemalans who want power relations disrupted and to lift the country out of violence and corruption. To effect change, these artists have demonstrated how art can transcend the cognitive process and reach people on an intimate and emotional level. However, further research is needed to explore how internal and external forces, and powerful Ladino families from Guatemala's colonial past, maintain a hold on power.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Guatemala is a small Central American country with a long history of violence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1996 after 36 years of civil war a peace treaty was signed, bringing an end to ethnic genocide and armed conflict. One would hope that a peace treaty would bring peace, but the violence that was once political has shifted to social violence (Bellino, 2017). Social unrest and crime is the result of severe inequality in Guatemalan life. This has been the result of a corrupt and ineffective government, and the dissolution of traditional social structures due to the economic forces behind globalization (McMichael, 2017). Guatemala grows an abundance of food yet it has one of the highest child malnutrition rates in the world (McMichael, 2017). The people of Guatemala struggle under arduous conditions while trying to establish a democracy built on the foundations of a failed political system. In the midst of this struggle is an emerging community of artists who are advocating for social justice through their work. These artists create works that confront topics such as discrimination, violence against women, race, gender, sexuality, power, corruption, and attempts to erase recent history. The media they use for their works are as varied as the topics.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Art today is "transitioning from an object-oriented culture to a systems-oriented culture. Here change emanates, not from things, but from the way things are done" (Mesch, 2014, p. 9). This transition can be seen in the work of these artists whose artwork transcends the confines of the art gallery. Performance art that challenges power dynamics can be in Guatemala City's Plaza Mayor. This type of activism is decidedly systems oriented with the occupation of public spaces by the artist. The way in which the artist engages the space provides the audience with "a new critical lens for action" (p. 163) in the production and use of space (Thompson, 2015). These artists have come of age in a democracy that has emerged from a violent civil war in a society that has never adjusted to a postcolonial world. They are committed to the task of reimagining possibilities for the future of Guatemala.

Post-revolutionary societies experience a betwixt and between period when people do not identify with the past or with the future (Raunig, 2007). It is in this hybrid space, created in the transition from resistance to liberation, where people will "feel the need to speak...to become the mouthpiece of a new reality in action" (Platt, 2011, p. xvii). These artists, in many different forms, have become the mouthpiece for the call to action in Guatemala. History provided synergy to this artistic social movement with a proliferation of international art biennials beginning in the 1990's. They have participated in the Venice Biennial, the Sydney Biennial, and The Sharjah Biennial to name only a few. Since curators have noticed these artists, their artwork for social justice and inclusion has garnered international attention (Thompson, 2015) and the opportunity

to show work in Spain, Denmark, Peru, Germany, Italy, the United States, Argentina, and many other countries.

The works of these artists are redefining perceptions through public performance that arrests the current concept of space and the use of place. During these moments of arrest the manipulation of power is exposed allowing the observer the opportunity to redefine how perceptions of power relations have been formed. Regina Jose Galindo gives us a prime example in her piece *Pig's Blood*, where she explores the dynamics of power. A bucket of pig's blood is precariously perched, high over Galindo's head. The bucket is connected to a rope that extends to the audience. The audience is invited to participate in the performance as the antagonist, by pulling on the rope, dumping blood onto Galindo's head. The President Donald Trump, of the United States, is expressed as a pig, or the blood in the performance. The blood represents his misogynistic and racist behavior of President Trump. Galindo gives the audience the power to express this behavior by pulling the rope and emptying the bucket of pig's blood onto Galindo's head. Her aim is to have people think about power and what happens with power when combined with opportunity.

The artistic movement and the Mayan movement are entwined in Guatemala, which has simultaneously grown in influence by gaining greater equality for indigenous people (Fischer & Brown, 2001). Mayan communities once adopted bilingualism as a "pragmatic response to political and socioeconomic forces" (Maya cultural activism pg. 166). Language acquisition did not replace Mayan language or culture but assisted the Mayans to adapt and preserve Mayan identity. During the conflict Mayan language was suppressed and the government targeted people who spoke Mayan languages.

Bilingualism gave way to a language shift, where an entire generation of Mayan parents spoke Spanish around, and to their children, replacing the traditional Mayan language (Fischer & Brown, 2001). These artists today are preserving indigenous languages by learning them and assisting future generations of Mayans to acquire and use them. For example, Rosa Chavez publishes in K'iché to give Mayan people indigenous literature written in a modern context. During the conflict indigenous communities were targeted by the military (Billingsley, 2014). Manuel Chavajay recalls being forbidden to speak his traditional language of Tz'utujil, and was to only speak in Spanish. Today, Chavajay helps maintain his indigenous culture by publishing in his first language, Tz'utujil, and preserving traditions and language through the various media of his work.

Guatemala is faltering at the beginning of a civil democracy (Kruijt, 2001). In 1985 the country began the transition from a military government to a democratically elected government, but control and power remained in the hands of the Latino elite (Lopez, 2006). According to Marx, the goals of a revolution are either to take over power and dismantle the government or to take over power and transfer the power of the state to improve society. The transfer of power provides the opportunity to refine and improve the state to reflect the needs of society (Raunig, 2007). While the Guatemalan Peace Accord of 1996 did not transfer powers of the state, it did create a gradual shift within the government. In 2000 Guatemalans elected Alfonso Portillo as President of Guatemala, creating the first Presidency that was not formed by the military or the powerful Ladino elite, who claim to be decedents of the original Spanish colonizers (Kruijt, 2001). In 2007 a social-democratic president, Oscar Berger was elected President, which was seen as part of the democratic revolution in Latin America referred

to as the “Pink Wave” (McMicheal, 2017). The Mayan movement has been working from within by assimilating indigenous people into roles of government (Fischer & Brown, 2001). Gilles Deleuze states that countries experiencing a revolutionary change in society pass through an initial stage and then “move across the middle” (p. 30), and experience a period where all outcomes are possible (Raunig, 2017). It is also during these times that Wagner believed true art is created as a “social product” that is a “faithful mirror image” of the “dominant spirit of the public” (Raunig, 2017, p. 11). It is during these periods that artists feel the need to speak out by producing work from collective suffering that enables momentum behind social movements (Raunig 2017). Guatemala is seeing an exponential number of artists who are producing such work to bring about social change in society (Rosa, 2016).

According to Anatoly Lunacharsky, art is a means of revolution because of its ability to disquiet the masses. “If revolution can give art its soul, then art can give revolution its mouthpiece” (Raunig, 2017, p. 12). Rosa Chavez said that artistic expression can be judged as terrorist action by the government. On Columbus Day 2012, October 20, she participated in a collaborative protest by indigenous people. Following the protest, Chavez received a government notification charging her with illicit associations, cultural damage, and provoking public disturbances. All of these artists are a voice for the marginalized and silenced people of Guatemala, yet only the indigenous artists in this study have received reprimands or threats from the government.

### III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

While a clear and concise theory of how art activism works is the academic ideal, Duncombe posits that there is no method for measuring effectiveness or a clear understand of how art activism works, although there are “patterns of practice and tendencies of thought that can help” (Duncombe, 2016, p.53). He believes that art activism operates in an area between Dialectical Materialism and idealist theory on social change. From a materialist perspective, interaction with the natural world and human institutions prompt people to desire social change. Duncombe says,

...the world changing ideas of priests and prophets are to be explained by looking at the division of labor in society that would allow for a leisure class of priestly intellectuals, and the conditions and relations of production that might prompt a radical reaction by these prophets (2016, p.6).

Idealist theory is based on the premise that people observe what is wrong in society and that social change is needed. In addition, there is an idea of what a better society would look like and how that vision can be achieved. It is the interaction between idealism and materialism where the artist creates work that is inspired by idealism and “the point of intervention” is at “the level of material conditions”. Duncombe succinctly states, “Ideas shape material reality, and cultural shifts can result in structural transformation” (Duncombe, 2016, p. 6).

Throughout history scholars have theorized about the role of art, and the possibilities that art can achieve. In figure one Duncombe provides an explanatory chart of how Western thought postulates the potential of art throughout history:

Table 1. *Historical western thought on the potential of art (p. 22).*

Bible & Quran	Gives humans agency to create and define the world
Plato & Aristotle	Creates an experience (or the illusion of an experience) in which people feel new ideas and perspectives
Bertolt Brecht	Alienates people from their own experiences and environments so they can reflect upon them critically
Walter Benjamin	Facilitates the creativity of others
Augusto Boal	Stages mental, emotional and physical rehearsal for the revolution
Antonio Gramsci	Provides a building block of cultural hegemony, and counter hegemony
Jacques Rancière	Functions as a mirror of society as it is, or an aesthetic sense of what could be
Audre Lorde	Articulates unsayable ideas and communicates new sensibilities
Immanuel Kant & Friedrich Schiller Claire Bishop, Chantal Mouffe, & Boris Groys	Opens up a space for new knowledge Disrupts the status quo order and understandings
Grant Kester	Catalyzes new communities and conversations

In the 21st century, the nature of art has undergone a dramatic transformation. Modern production and consumerism focus on the accumulation of new experiences. The traditional notion of what constitutes an object is no longer confined to a specific thing but includes the processes of how things are done. Like society, art is shifting from an object orientation to a systems orientation and the mechanics behind a process. (Mesch, 2014, p. 9). “Cultural production is increasingly focused on the formation of new spaces and new experiences, rendering the products themselves somewhat

unnecessary” (Thompson, 2015, p. 15). An Apple store is not just a place to buy a product but is a lifestyle destination where we can become educated and imagine new ways of being. Likewise, an Ikea store is not just a place to buy furniture. It is a place designed so that we can imagine the transformation of living space. It is a store where we can imagine and explore new ways of living (Thompson, 2015). According to Bishop,

...the hallmark of artistic orientation towards the social in the 1990s has been a shared set of desires to overturn the traditional relationship between the art object, the artist and the audience. The artist is conceived less as an individual producer of discrete objects than as a collaborator and producer of situations; the work of art as a finite, portable, commodifiable product is reconceived as an ongoing or long-term project with an unclear beginning and end; while the audience, previously conceived as a ‘viewer’ or ‘beholder’ is now repositioned as a co-producer or participant (Bishop 2012, p. 2).

Art is produced through social engagement with the viewer politicized in the process of creating art. This form of art is not found in a gallery and may be difficult to identify, relying on media such as performance or a social event. Thus, artists are removing art from an object oriented, stationary context and are taking art to the people in the form of social engagement. Artists are transitioning from merely offering social critique, which can be passive and operate at a distance from social experience, and are increasingly attempting to change social structures through activism and the creation of new forms of meaning and experience.

To understand how art and activism work together, one should know how they operate independently. Duncombe (2016) states that the goal of activism is to change power relations to bring about a more equitable society. The objective of art is to stimulate or emotionally move someone to perceive something differently. Activism is the “action to generate effect,” and art is the “expression that generates affect” (Duncombe, 2016, p. 117). Artists are the avant-gardes who create art with the intent to spur people to action to facilitate social change (Mesch, 2014). Artists can engage individuals on an affective level that transcends cognitive processes to persuade public opinion. By influencing people’s way of thinking, public sentiment is garnered to pressure changes in systems that lack effectiveness (Duncombe, 2016).

The use of art as activism is a modern phenomenon. In earlier stages art was simply a critique that typically represented the power of the church, the state, or particular individuals (Groys, 2014). Now, art can speak the interests of collectives of people who are otherwise marginalized. Social conscious art previously critiqued social conditions that stemmed from political systems (Groys, 2014). Modern art activism uses art to not only critique, but also to imagine new possibilities and to change the systems that produce social conditions. A result of neoliberalism has been the collapse of the social state that provides a safety net for the disenfranchised (McMicheal, 2017). Art activists replace the role of the social state and NGOs that are unable to fulfill their role. The objective is to aestheticize the political system to render it dysfunctional. Aesthetic defunctionalization reduces politics to its pure form removing what it represents and exposing it as an object for contemplation (Groys, 2014). Simultaneously, aestheticizing the political breaks down differences among people and unites the public. Walter

Benjamin believed that “All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war.” (Raunig, 2007, 9. 17). Ironically, Lunacharsky suggests the opposite, and that aesthetic defunctionalization will bring about a unification of people who peacefully endeavor for a common purpose (Raunig, 2007). In both scenarios, one goal is realized. People put aside their differences while “achieving a uniformity of the masses through the means of art” (Raunig p. 17). Thus, the success of activist art is not in changing systems of production, but in uniting the public so that they create the power necessary to affect systems of production.

Our hopes, dreams, and perceptions are formed by the world in which we live. This world is shaped and controlled by economic, political and social forces that create reality and “the common sense of the world” (Thompson, 2015, p. 61). In the twenty-first century, we have seen the state apparatus in Guatemala create national identities by appropriating folklore and indigenous arts. Manipulating cultural capital to promote a government agenda redefines the understanding of culture, while simultaneously diluting the potentiality of traditional artistic expression in political opposition (Hughes & Déa, 2012). To cut through the "cultural haze," (p. 83) artists must employ new methods of resistance through art (Thompson, 2015). The traditional mediums of art have expanded from sculpture and paint to film, performance, installation, and site-based artistic works. Art has emerged from the gallery and is shown in alternative spaces that emphasize the social process of producing art. Activist art combines the social and aesthetic to lay bare this process as something to be contemplated by the viewer. The viewer is now able to reconfigure the meanings that underlie social processes and can deconstruct the national identity created by the state (Thompson, 2015).

In post-colonial Guatemala, there has been a shift from identifying with nationhood to identifying with commonalities between people. People identify with personal traits in others such as ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. While this individualizes members within society, it promotes solidarity through shared aspects of individual identity. In this way, political engagement has taken on new forms and new understandings with the revolutionary idea of "the personal is political" (Mesch, 2014, p. 6). People can collaborate because of shared commonalities and by coexisting in shared places. Communities are built by harnessing personal identities and by encouraging individuals to contribute as producers of social change (Mesch, 2014). The reimagining of political involvement has provided artists in Guatemala new methods of engaging people through the processes of creating art. Art that takes place in public spaces involves the individual in ways that bring a new awareness to communities that fosters participation from all members of society.

### **Demographic Transitions and Democracy**

Guatemala is in a historically precarious time, which demographic data can help contextualize. According to theory based on population data, Guatemala has characteristics of a society ripe for democracy. After the fall of an autocratic government, population growth helps dissolve the influence that the government once had (Dyson, 2013). An example is the disregard of the government by artists in Guatemala, which exemplifies how government influence has waned since 1996. According to artists in this study, art that the authorities once considered punishable by death is no longer given consideration. The population of Guatemala has grown from 10,646,674 in 1996 to 17,245,346 in 2018 (Central Intelligence Agency, 2016), though

growing, the actual rate of the population growth has decreased each year since at least 1968. As the rate of population growth decreases, the average age increases, creating a more fertile ground for democratic movements (Dyson, 2013). In the past 50 years, population growth has dropped from 3.04% to 1.96% with the average age increasing by 4.4 years. Additionally, the fertility rate in Guatemala has fallen from 6.99 to 3.13 children born per woman (Central Intelligence Agency, 2016). Lower fertility rates allow women more freedoms resulting in greater gender equality and more favorable conditions for democracy (Dyson, 2013). While this does not guarantee a democratic shift in Guatemalan society, it does help create some of the conditions that are amenable to a democratic transition.

### III. PURPOSE AND METHODS

The purpose of the study is to understand how artists use, understand, and make meanings through social justice artwork to facilitate social change in Guatemala. This qualitative study employs the lens of existential social thought, utilizing semi-structured interviews with artists who are facilitating social change through their work. Interviews were analyzed by open coding content to develop concepts in the narratives. These concepts were then grouped into coding frames, or themes, that are identified in the findings.(Groenewald, 2004). The research was conducted through the orientation of critical ethnography with attention on social inequities in Guatemala and how to affect positive change. The interviews where conducted in an active participant orientation with a conscious partiality towards participants in the study. The intent of the research was not to present themes in the narratives but to let the voice of the artist come through in the findings of the study. Ethnographic narratives are used to describe significant findings found across the interviews, and to present each artist in the context of Guatemalan culture (Groenewald 2004).

The research questions are designed to elicit the most information related to the question asked. Most questions are open-ended to encourage answers that are rich in description and context. Creative interviewing was used to provide a climate for collaboration and personal exchanges. If the goal of activist art is for people to create new ways of understanding, it will provide insight to know how these Guatemalan artists make meaning for themselves. As interviews unfolded, follow up questions were used to explore undiscovered themes that were relevant to the study (Berg & Lune, 2012).

## IV. FINDINGS

### **Manuel Chavajay**

Artist Manuel Chavajay has dark brown eyes and hair, typical for people of indigenous Mayan Tz'utujil decent. He has a stoic personality and speaks with a measured maturity that appears greater than his age of 35 years. His studio in the Mayan village of San Pedro La Laguna is perched on the water's edge of Lake Atitlan in the Guatemalan highlands. Chavajay was born and raised as a traditional Mayan in the Tz'utujil village of San Pedro and he was instilled with the deep respect the Mayans have for tradition and the natural world. He studied art in Guatemala City for five years and remained in the city to work for two more years. He became frustrated producing art while working for other people and decided to return to San Pedro to create art of his own. He is drawn to the traditions of his Mayan heritage and feels compelled to maintain his cultural history through his artwork. Chavajay believes that to protect and secure Tz'utujil culture, the Tz'utujil language and the oral stories of the Tz'utujil people, must be preserved.

Chavajay's sculpture of a Mayan water jug in half pottery and half plastic sits on top of a work desk in his studio. Traditionally, the water jug is made of pottery, but the modern variation is made of plastic. The sculpture illustrates the transformation of handmade jugs using traditional materials to industrially produced plastic jugs. Not only is this transformation expressed in the physical form of the jug, but also in the literal language used to describe the water jug. As Chavajay expressed, "when you talk in Tz'utujil language we say the word for plastic in Spanish because it does not exist in

Tz'utujil. We introduce the plastic into the language. The plastic represents the invasion of the Spanish". The form and function remain the same, but the jugs essence has changed. It is this changed, or missing essence that Chavajay wishes to maintain in his culture.

In the series of large paintings titled *Disappeared*, Chavajay depicts a solitary *cayuco*, or traditional canoe, adrift on Lake Atitlan. Below the *cayuco*, we see the painted reflection of the *cayuco*'s occupant; that of a Mayan man in traditional dress or *traje*. However, when one looks in the *cayuco* above the reflection, the reflected person is absent, disappeared, representing the many Mayans who were killed during the conflict. One of those people killed was Chavajay's 14-year-old brother. Chavajay recalls being hidden underneath his bed for hours at a time as a child. His mother was hiding him from the military that patrolled the highland villages seeking out indigenous people to kill. After Chavajay's brother was tortured, the soldiers left his body hanging in a tree near his house. While soldiers no longer patrol the mountainsides, the government intentionally leaves the conflict and genocide out of the education curriculum. They fail to educate new generations of Guatemalan children about the atrocities carried out during the civil war. The hope is that the violence and killing would disappear from people's memories as if it never happened. The government is actively pushing a policy that will result in the eradication of a generation of indigenous people (Billingsley, 2014). Chavajay is an ardent defender of those whose who disappeared and wants to remember them by expressing their presence in his paintings.

Chavajay actively encourages members of his local San Pedro community to think about life with intention. His worry is that the state education system will succeed

in in their discriminatory policies, thus he invited a group of fisherman to participate in a project. By venturing into community participatory performance Chavajay hopes to expose learned thought processes, which serve to oppress indigenous people. The fishermen are lead to some traditional Mayan canoes, or cayucos, floating on the lake and are instructed to tie them together and start rowing. The men do as they are told, but their chaotic rowing accomplishes nothing and Chavajay eventually tells them to stop. He then asks the men why they performed in the way they did. The fishermen looked at each other and began laughing nervously. He told them that without purpose their paddling was ineffective and that "this is the result of the education we have received, we always follow orders, we never use creativity to transcend." The men could have untied the cayucos or could have coordinated their rowing so that they would have an effect. These are the same learned thought processes that cause people to forget a generation of disappeared indigenous Maya. Chavajay wants these men to begin questioning how they think. By participating in performance art, the fishermen are given the opportunity to observe how their thoughts make meaning and to contemplate this process in new and different ways. When asked about the impact the project had on the fisherman, Chavajay said many of the men claimed it was an essential experience in their lives. The men are able to be more observant of life and to use their cultural connection with nature to live with intention. Chavajay says this cultural connection to nature fosters daily communication with the natural lived environment. Through this communication one can express gratitude and experience new ways of knowing. In this same way the Mayans can resist the efforts of the state to eliminate the existence of indigenous Maya by acknowledging and remembering those who disappeared.

## **Manuel Tzoc**

Manuel Tzoc, age 36, lives with his boyfriend in zone one, the gritty colonial urban center of Guatemala City. He was born into a K'iche' Mayan family but was not raised as a traditional Mayan. Although Tzoc identifies as K'iché, he considers himself a hybrid of indigenes and Ladino due to his urban and modern lifestyle. Tzoc spent three years studying language and letters at the Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala and continues to acquire knowledge so he can share it with others. He believes that the constant violence found in Guatemala has numbed people's empathy towards one another resulting in discrimination and social exclusions. Tzoc says "art will make you question yourself. What is your position, your role towards society?" Tzoc wants to encourage people to think critically and question these exclusions, which he believes is fundamental for creating a society that benefits everyone.

After the signing of the peace treaty in Guatemala, Tzoc says people “emerged from behind a dark cloud”. As a member of the post-war generation his life experiences are imbued with oppression and violence. For Tzoc, poetry and creative writing are “part of restoration”, which helps him alleviate pain by transferring it to the printed page. When inspired, it is difficult for Tzoc to resist putting pen to paper as a form of social protest. His work confronts society on issues such as race, sexuality, and gender. Poetry is his way of communicating by “visualizing exclusions that come through my body”. Tzoc says these exclusions can be seen and felt in the heteronormative, patriarchal systems found in many areas of society to include medical, educational and financial services. In order to be your authentic self you must imagine yourself as a completely autonomous person. This is what Tzoc wants to achieve through his writing. Poetry is

his way of communicating with others and to “visualize problems or entertain the heart.” Each of his poems is a “small bomb” in the fight against oppression and injustice, as seen in his poem, “My Heart As a Child” (2006):

I am a transvestite  
leather mini skirt - mesh stockings -  
glass platforms and lights  
that's why I write  
my pink lips  
that's why I write  
my cellophane paper glasses  
that's why I write  
my heart shattered to pieces  
and lonelier than ever  
that's why I write  
floating rubber duck  
in a toilet full of shit  
that's why I write  
gas cylinders exploding  
that's why I write  
inflatable doll purchased at sex-shop  
that's why I write  
plaid picnic table cloth  
bloodstained- virgin whore menstruation-

that's why I write  
with the dirty hands of a homosexual  
homophobic and bourgeois  
that's why I write  
"I'm afraid to write, it's so dangerous"  
Clarice Lispector would say  
and I'm shitting myself in fear.  
and longing  
that's why I write

Tzoc's art is not subtle, and he must constantly fight to defend his work. This fight is the essence of what being an art activist means to Manuel. An artist must be committed to his art on a consistent basis to render it effective. Tzoc states that the "production of my art, my books, have come from the fact of living and surviving from the way I work". For him, the political is decidedly personal. Tzoc views himself from his various identities of Mayan, hybrid, and a homosexual male. It is in this struggle where Manuel feels a strong connection to others and finds happiness. Even though the life of an artist may be sparse, it is through the dichotomy of what he lacks where he can see the "privileges that I have, and that's with what I work." To fight against social exclusions he says that he has to be brave and position himself in a society that wants to make him invisible. Tzoc says that by being fully to who you are is to visualize yourself as a person with rights. "You must be: I am like this, these are my wishes, this is my path, my posture, my way of thinking, my policies...everything is important". He says

that when people question themselves they “create action for society” which results in understand and empathy leading to increased tolerance.

Manuel Tzoc feels a deep connection with his deceased mother’s K’iche’ heritage and strives to be a voice for the indigenous Mayan people. During a performance, he takes off his urban western clothing and stands nude in the Central Plaza of Guatemala City. He then covers his entire body with an indigenous fabric "glove" sewn from the material of his deceased mother's traje. In this public performance, Tzoc expresses the restrictive western gaze given to indigenous people. He says that under our clothing we are all people, each an individual. When an indigenous person wears traje, they become the "other." They lose their personhood and become a subjugated object with limited value. Tzoc also questions the use of public space by staging the performance in Guatemala City's central Plaza: the same plaza where Mayan citizens were executed during the civil war. The indigenous have been subjected to spatial marginalization and social exclusion to keep them oppressed. They have traditionally been excluded from political, economic, physical and social matters, depriving them of autonomy, identity, knowledge, and land. (Romero, Estrada, Marceau, & Rice, 2017). Manuel Tzoc refuses to be persecuted,

The political moment that we are living in Guatemala right now, we shouldn't remain quiet. Speak up, the population and the artistic, cultural and intellectual circuit is fighting injustice, corruption, oppression, exclusion, you get a response from people, people are reacting.

After years of racial discrimination, the indigenous Maya are experiencing regeneration in both culture and political representation (Pallister, 2013).

## **Wilson Emilio Gomez Espinoza**

Wilson Emilio Gomez Espinoza was 16 when he began picking garbage in Guatemala City to earn money. He has spent most of his life without a permanent home, but is currently happy to have a place to live. His job as a garbage picker and experience with poverty cling to his persona, dragging him down both physically and emotionally. Espinoza is a Ladino, and at 40 years of age he retains classically handsome features with shoulder length hair collected in a bun. When asked about his race or cultural background he replies “Mixed. I’m not indigenous, just a normal person.” He completed primary school through 6<sup>th</sup> grade and some high school, but said most kids living in poverty do not finish school. He later enrolled at the city university but said he was unable to continue and “received a piece of paper saying I was just a listener”. He says that his education has been in the streets, reflecting that “I didn’t do it in the proper way, like society dictates, get enrolled in school...it’s like I didn’t do anything”.

On his first day of picking garbage at the age of 16, Espinoza found a volume of *On the Genealogy of Morality* by Friedrich Nietzsche. He felt the book held importance for his life and began reading the book that day. During the following years he memorized large sections of the book that he found poignant. The garbage proved to be a great educator and Espinoza has collected and read over 700 books. One of his goals is to establish a library for children who lack access to books, recalling that books were “something that was denied me.” Espinoza has gone from picking garbage independently to, as he describes, “the privilege of taking out the garbage of the most powerful people in this country”. This is the source of the books he has been able to collect, with many of them new and unread. He feels the bitter irony in the fact that he was denied access to

books when he was young, but as an adult he is plucking books from the garbage of the wealthy.

Espinoza entertains many ideas for conceptual art with objects he finds in the trash. Out of his bag he pulls a ham leg along with other objects deemed worthy to collect. He raises the ham leg,

For example a butcher shop, the disappearance of men and women...but until now I haven't presented anything. I'm clear that I'm presenting things from the garbage, a few people see value, others feel uncomfortable. I just collect things, like a crazy person, that's how it feels.

He believes that if his art did not come from garbage people would not be so indifferent. Espinoza believes that this choice of materials, combined with his social position, is why his work is met with indifference from the art community. Espinoza receives no funding and would like to be recognized equally with other artists who are funded. He feels resentment and says he will develop in a self-taught way. Espinoza would like more recognition as a human, and comments that he is "conditioned by past experiences, I'm always thinking that what I do is not worth anything. I understand I'm getting attention for the work I do, but I can't help it".

Espinoza believes that if someone is given a chance to be artistic as a child they would develop into a more balanced and fair adult. Espinoza wants to see equal access to public spaces, access to libraries, and access to education for those who are interested in acquiring knowledge. "I would have loved the opportunity to work in art back then", he laments, "but now I feel old". Even though he feels defeated, Espinoza has an art opening in the near future. He found a sponsor in the "Fondo de Cultura Económica", a

non-profit publisher who invited him to present in their auditorium. His concept is “Books Under Siege” with the original idea to present in a Guatemalan prison. For his upcoming show he is imagining books locked in a gilded cage, only to be accessed by a privileged few. He will include a section of the performance for books that children can touch, read and interact with. For Espinoza, age and lost opportunity is a recurring theme. The weight of being marginalized and ignored can be seen in his face and posture. He says with a defeated grin, “I think I exclude myself because I feel old. I feel I can’t compete with other people because of that. I don’t have the same energy, not even to drink!”

### **Rosa Chavez**

In a small café in the colonial center of Guatemala City, Rosa Chavez is running late as she sits at a table with an apologetic smile. Her face is open and inviting and projects a calmness that only confidence can provide. Chavez was born to a Kaqchikel mother and a K’iche’ father who met because of their involvement in the resistance. Both of her parents later joined the Guerrilla Army of the Poor, leaving young Chavez with relatives in Guatemala City. At that time, Guatemala City was exploding with Maya refugees from the rural highlands who were escaping violence and displacement (Billingsley, 2014). Chavez was permitted only to speak Spanish and was to dress in the style of a Ladino. She began to question her identity “in a Christian, patriarchal society that separates you from other people.” Her mother returned for her a few years later reuniting her with both her mother and her traditional indigenous culture.

Chavez began the process of what she describes as “the self-restitution of my Maya being.” For many years she was denied the ability to speak in K’iche’ or wear her

traditional traje. To be indigenous was to be economically and social inferior with corporal ramifications, such as imprisonment and death. Chavez describes her experience in the poem “Numbed Into Submission” from her book *Casa Solitaria* (2005):

the lady says that in my village  
we are all shucos (dirty)  
that's why I bathe every day  
my long hair was cut off  
she says because of the lice  
I can't speak Castile well  
and people laugh at me  
my heart  
is sad  
I went to see my cousin yesterday  
the driver didn't want to stop  
and when he was about to stop, he sped up  
hurry up Indian donkey - he said to me  
I fell down and scraped my knee  
the people laughed and laughed  
my heart  
is sad  
my cousin said  
I'll get used to it (5).

Chavez wanted to connect with her indigenous self and began learning K'iche and Kaqchikel. Many of her poems are written in K'iche, since she believes that providing literature for people to read in a modern context will help preserve K'iche language and culture. She has returned to the Maya Cosmo-vision and actively strives to decolonize her intellect and spirituality. Chavez says, "when I find myself with my creator being, when I hear that calling I follow it, and I have to continue cultivating it." She joined the collaborative "La bodeguita del centro" where she met artist Regina Galindo, Anibal Lopez and Marlon Barrios and other writers from the post-war generation. Chavez participated in street interventions, public space performance, and helped write and publish a counterculture zine. Creating art has transformed Chavez's life deeply by causing her to "break paradigms of what it means to be a Mayan woman." The experience of creating art causes Chavez to rethink life and how we produce meaning and truth. She says it "changes the way we see the world; it generates other social openings." She feels a strong personal responsibility to Mayan women and believes that her job as an artist and her "life experience could mean new opportunities for other indigenous women". She continues, "I have an interest in working directly with the community, and to combine my art with activism". Chavez believes art can contribute to personal and social transformation by allowing us to see other possibilities and experience new understanding.

When Chavez is inspired, she can feel the "artistic experience go through my body" which is translated into something specific such as a poem or performance. Chavez is curious to explore themes of women and public spaces, specifically indigenous women, women sharing spaces, water rights for women, and women's land rights. These

are also the themes that are of the most interest to the government. In 2012 Chavez helped organize an indigenous resistance march on Christopher Columbus Day that included poetry readings and a concert in the central plaza. After the event, she received a notice that she was being charged with criminal association, damage to cultural heritage, and for causing a public disturbance. The notice was signed by the government officials and included the signatures from top Guatemalan business leaders. This made Chavez nervous because the government can decide that an artistic expression is a terrorist action. She once belonged to an art activist collective called "caja ludica" and in a period of seven years, three of her colleagues were assassinated. Chavez says "there are many actors that want silent societies," who "feel threatened because people wake up," but "these are strategies to get us afraid. I think there are just different mechanisms of oppression that are present in artistic expressions".

Chavez is keenly aware of systemic oppression and the "racist vision of how an indigenous must be." Being indigenous "has become a constant in my life now. Being an indigenous, it is me, it is beyond my face, being present as a Maya woman. This is not only related to my body or my desires, but also with the way I live". To realize herself as a Maya woman was not an easy process. In an attempt to claim back her colonized identity, Chavez writes about how systemic ideologies of what it means to be an indigenous Maya woman constantly impact her both physically and mentally. In her poem "What Will I Do Without Your Smell, Elena", from her book *Casa Solitaria* (2005), she speaks with a direct and robust voice on sexuality, gender, and desire:

Do not let me Serota  
cabrona pisadita

What am I going to do?  
when I think of your pusa  
and I cannot suck you  
caress you  
or simply see you naked  
let me cling to your belly  
suck your breasts so rich  
Elena console me  
I love you and therefore desire  
Hope it goes wrong  
good shit in life  
so you can return to me  
Elena forgive me  
but tell me  
before  
what will I do without your smell?

At the time Chavez wrote the poem she was working with themes on the physical processes of experiencing emotions. She felt it was important not to censor the human emotions we experience so that people can identify with the poem. She was criticized for writing with her Maya identity in a vulgar manner that is not typical of a Maya woman. However, Chavez says her person, her being is an indigenous woman, so in everything she does, she is an indigenous woman. Chavez emphasizes, "If any identity limits my freedom or autonomy, then we have a problem. Healing is not always nice, there can be

really hard moments in the creative process, but in those profound spiritual moments I don't separate art from spirituality." Chavez says that she is comfortable within her nature, and as someone who follows the Maya Cosmo Vision she is in constant transformation.

### **Mario Santizo**

Mario Santizo was a small child when he moved with his parents from Chimaltenango to Guatemala City. He is a soft-spoken man with European features and a kind gentle face. When asked how he identifies culturally he says, "I don't see myself different from others, so, Guatemalan." Santizo would fit the description of a Ladino, a Guatemalan from European descent with light skin and fine hair (Söchtig et al., 2015). He remained in Guatemala City until he was 14, two years before the signing of the peace accord, and then moved to Quetzaltenango with his father. Santizo's father knew of his love for art and enrolled him in the Rafael Rodríguez Padilla National School of the Plastic Arts where he studied photography and painting. Santizo became fascinated with art when he discovered a Larousse art encyclopedia as a child. He poured over the depictions of cities, landscapes, and images of possibilities of what could be. He reflected upon the society he experienced in Guatemala and the societies expressed on the pages of the art encyclopedia.

Santizo was a child before the signing of the peace treaty and did not have direct exposure to the violence of the civil war. His memories of that time include power failures caused by exploding bombs that were detonated by resistance fighters who were attempting to disrupt the government. Santizo said the violence he must now navigate is social violence aggravated by income, gender, and racial inequality. Street violence is

the norm in Guatemala with domestic violence towards women common because of established gender inequity (Bellino, 2017). He says his first works are a reflection of that violence and “the depression I was feeling at the moment.” Santizo wanted to feel a sense of community where people share and gather together. In order to feel community he produced a work titled 33 in honor of his 33rd birthday. The idea came as he considered Jesus turning 33, which was “the last year in which he could perform miracles.” Santizo wished to perform his own type of miracle to "parody the miracle of Jesus by multiplying bread and fishes to the crowd." He hand pressed 250 images of loaves and fishes out of woodblock prints, one of the oldest artistic techniques for creating serial images. When Santizo organized the event, he distributed bread and fish block prints in an analogy of feeding the crowd. In exchange, those who received the loaves and fishes were asked to exchange their thoughts written down on a piece of paper. As described by Santizo:

There were many drawings that represented the understanding of people that this was a work...not selfish work, it was about sharing and creating a community. So people understand the main purpose, and they wrote about it, about gathering together, creating a community. When you analyze that, you realize that so many thoughts were positive, that even in the reality that we are living in now, people remain positive. Many times what has made me feel okay was to express myself, and see that the work creates empathy with other people. So I realized some of us were thinking the same way, and that makes you feel less lonely.

With time, Santizo began to realize that people understood his art and that others experienced the same thoughts and emotions. He had the epiphany that by helping to create empathy in people, one person at a time, he could indirectly affect his community, which planted the seed for his later work, "Acts of Aggression." Santizo contemplated the fractured society in post-war Guatemala and how these fractures are maintained in the artistic community. He imagined these fractured groups coming together as artist sharing together, united as one, and invited artists to participate in his project where he asked them for a hug. Santizo is resistant to hugs and finds them uncomfortable, questioning the engendered behaviors in something as simple as a hug. As Santizo hugs a fellow artist, the embrace is photographed and later drawn in minute detail by Santizo. He reflects,

It is obvious from the structure of Guatemalan society; woman are more comfortable giving hugs than men, some of them look like they are not real from the men, but from the woman, you can always see that they are really hugging.

Santizo titled his work *Acts of Aggression* because a hug is not only loving, but it can be inherently uncomfortable. When one participant feels a hug lingers too long the connection can bring about insecurities. "There is a thin line between affection and aggression, between giving and taking, between belonging and not, between falling apart and being held together" (Wellen, Santizo website 2017).

Santizo was pleased with the artists' reaction to the project and plans to have the photographs and drawings published with biographies of each artist. He wants the work to be about the artist so that others will discover them and learn of the contemporary

issues in Guatemala. Santizo says his country is a small third world country and that it surprises people to learn that Guatemala has contemporary art. By supporting other artists, he will also gain more exposure for himself. He was invited to the Slovenia biennial by Regina Jose Galindo and expressed his gratitude for the ability to show his work internationally. He commented,

It has a direct effect, her (Galindo) being able to be outside the country, showing her art, especially for the artists that belong to the generation after hers. Also, the biennial of Arte Pais became international, so that also helped that the name of artists can be heard outside the country. It's like many things came together, and that has helped us.

A participant in *Acts of Aggression* told Santizo that there would not be so much violence if there were more art projects like his. For Santizo, it was an emotional moment. His wishes for Guatemalan society are very simple yet so difficult to achieve. He would like to have a good relationship with everyone, leaving behind all differences, “being able to see each other in the street and being able to say hi”.

### **Regina Jose Galindo**

Regina Jose Galindo, age 43, has been writing poetry since she was a child. She recounts "writing a diary when I was young, and then the poems came." The poems are not typical of a pre-teen girl and they deal with the most basic of human experiences, such as violence and love. She says that her earlier poems were visceral and shocked her family because she spoke openly about sexuality. Educated as a secretary, Galindo worked in a creative marketing agency in Guatemala City. She was introduced to

bohemian society and began performing by reading poems at rock concerts. The concerts were clandestine ways to perform, as described by Galindo:

They started from rock movements; it started at the concerts that were related to poetry, people went onstage to read poetry. They didn't know that was performance, they just took the spaces, and that was part of that generation, the post-war generation at the end of the 90's. I read poetry in many places like Casa Bizarra or Zona 1, but you didn't know you were making a performance, you just did it, and that was it.

Galindo said that she enjoyed being in the company of artists and found the energy of performing in front of others captivating. For her, art became the tool for her to express her thoughts and words. She became discouraged with her job, spending time on creative ideas so that other people could make money. In 2005 Galindo won the Golden Lion award, the highest prize at the Venice Biennale (La Biennale di Venezia, 2018). The award opened doors for Galindo by giving her independence and the ability to support herself as an artist.

In the late 1990's Galindo's generation discovered that there would not be peace after war, something she was raised to believe. She says that there was "No state or institutional support, no spaces, no help of any kind, with violence overflowing every day" (Goldman, 2006). Galindo believes that you need to try and have control of your life and she says that it is her right to "go to any place and manifest, they can't tell me what can I say or not say." When she creates a performance, she worries about the design, hoping that it will encourage new thoughts and ideas from her audience. During a performance she is neutral and says that a performance is not good or bad, it just

happens. When she collaborates with people during a performance, she hopes to open people's mind so they can talk about the experience, but reflects, "you cannot control the results, you cannot control the emotions or the reception of people." Galindo states that she fails to understand people with engrained thought patterns who fail to see the ethical implications in the basic problems of Guatemalan society. She believes that those who benefit from established power systems in Guatemala are willing accomplices to injustice in her country. Galindo says "I understand why I cannot sell my work to people with money in Guatemala. We don't think the same way. We can drink wine together, but we cannot discuss my work."

Galindo states that the social and institutional systems in Guatemala work to subjugate and objectify women. The murder rate of women in Guatemala is high, and women are silenced and dismissed in society. It is because of structural and institutional patriarchy combined with cultural machismo that women have no power (Romero et al., 2017). In 1999 Galindo performed *Screaming in the Wind* in Guatemala City. She was suspended over a busy street from the colonial Arco de Correos in the middle of a weekday. She then read poetry without a microphone to demonstrate the futility of women trying to have their voices heard. Her voice and words became lost in the wind. She knew that this performance would get attention, saying she "was a woman on the verge of throwing herself into space, a woman protesting violence, one more crazy person." Galindo was correct and says that people continue to ask her if she is the girl who hung herself from the Arco de Correos.

The life of an artist in Guatemala is grueling with artists struggling to find opportunities. Galindo says that Guatemala has talented artists with a vibrant scene but

that they lack an audience. Galindo frequently travels because of the ability to earn money outside Guatemala as an artist. She says it is a challenge in Guatemala because the people in power manipulate society and can hide the atrocities of the civil war. Guatemalans are ignorant and have no historical memory motivating Galindo to "collaborate in the creation of memory" through her art. Her greatest challenge is her own people, questioning why Guatemalans submit to fear and tolerate abuse without taking action. As Galindo expresses, "I feel impotent, unable to change things, but this has sustained me, and I've watched it grow since I became aware of what was happening" (Goldman, 2006"). She says that young people do not understand that the violence they live in today is a consequence of a civil war. Galindo comments with amazement, "The new generation thinks the war happened 100 years ago". She elaborates by saying Guatemalans do not understand their history. They believe the war was between the resistance and the military when in reality it was the military against the people. This is the reality that Galindo wants to bring to the consciousness of Guatemala but adds that after 20 years, she has grown tired.

Galindo is one of the most well-known living Guatemalan artists and has won recognition at various international biennials. She finds that she needs the experience of traveling as an artist outside of Guatemala because she is "exhausted to be here because I feel like I don't have air." She says she feels like an artist only outside of Guatemala and that in Guatemala she lives like a typical Guatemalan woman. She reflects, "I have this big experience that I really need, I can cross the line from Guatemala. I breath when I travel, I am living as an artist outside." She continues, "Being an autonomous artist, I work by myself, to produce by myself. And when I go outside Guatemala, I feel like a

queen, because I send my ideas and other people work and produce, so it's different". Galindo says that she is intentional about losing patriotism as an artist, feeling it is important to disrupt the nationalist power relationship. She says "I try to make horizontal communication, not vertical, I don't want people to feel bad for me." In her work, it is important that people feel empathy with the problem, not with Galindo. She thinks that people from the United States are difficult to reach because the reflex response is "Poor woman, a lot of things happen in her country." She is shocked at how little Americans know about the actions of the United States and has observed the disconnection between American citizens and the United States Government. Galindo states that the lack of connection has allowed United States citizens the luxury of escaping responsibility. She resents being seen as a woman from a third world country with shortcomings and elaborates:

I would like to be seen on the same level as other countries, the same as other artists from all over the world. As a human being, it doesn't matter from where you came. It doesn't matter how many tools you have. If you have a brain and a heart you can make a good mix. You can have a good life and have your world.

Galindo believes that if she applies herself to her work that she can open doors for Guatemalan artists who follow her. She says that life should not be so tricky and hopes she can help create a society where living the life you want can be a reality.

### **Erick Boror**

San Juan Sacatepequez is a city located in northwest Guatemala and is known for artisans who are highly skilled woodworkers (Valladares, 2011). The city is a hybrid of

urban and rural culture and is home to artist Erick Boror. Boror became interested in art when he was studying architecture at university and noticed how art could increase social capital and provide access to different people. He feels that artists have societal permission to speak with honesty and that his ideas and opinions are valid, worthy of contemplation. Boror says the life of an artist is unconventional and that as an artist he has to make sacrifices. "An artist lives for more important things, like honesty. The life of an artist is a privilege, but also makes the themes you talk about real." He compares an artist to a preacher and says an artist must have a ministry. Like religion, an artist must believe and preach the themes in art. According to Boror:

It's not a job; it's not a hobby, it's an obsession. You have to go out like a preacher and convert people to those causes that move you. It's transforming normal people to get them to see the reality that you see.

Both of Boror's parents are indigenous Kaqchikel, but as a cultural mestizo Boror does not wear traditional clothing. His looks are typical Guatemalan with a boyish charm, full lips, and a subtle indigenous appearance. When discussing cultural identity, Boror describes himself:

Intellectually I'm mestizo. In Guatemala there's a lot of talk about cultural diversity, but my position is that there is not diversity as such, but a cultural emphasis that is concentrated, that has cultural concentrations. We drink the same soda, but in different places and with different tools. We have the same elements but with concentrations according to the place where they live.

Through conversation, it is clear that Boror does not buy into the ideology of Ladinos being a separate race (Söchtig et al., 2015). He is intrigued by democratic spaces and discusses how Guatemala has a large population of mestizo people, living in culturally different locations. He says that it is in these democratic spaces "where we solve our problems." He reflects, "in the market, when indigenous people come from the city or the towns we all socialize. It is democratic, and we are all on the same level". Boror said this perception is a "privilege that only the artist can see. People just live it, but they don't understand it". It is from this place that Boror finds motivation. He says he enjoys capturing the nuances of society and "condensing it and convert it into a piece of art." Similar to the democratic space of the market, Boror says that art allows people to perceive in new ways, making the artist the conscience of society. To generate contemplation, "Themes have to be intense, strong because they are a reflection of society. The themes cannot be shy and must be committed to the people." Boror is committed to the people by working obsessively, believing that he should clear his mind of distractions and focus on his art. For him, "Art is a construction that begins when you're born, and it ends when you die. The life of an artist becomes his masterpiece and is reflected in his work".

Boror works in a variety of media to include painting, drawing, textiles, sculpture, woodworking, and carving. His fellow artists know him as a skilled woodworker, which is apparent in his wood sculpture of a drug trafficker's boots. The boots are a symbol of power and are fashioned in the style of Mexican cowboy boots, and made from exotic leather (Rodriguez, 2017). Boror sculptured the boots smooth like bone with a leather pattern on the surface of the boots. It is difficult to discern what animal the skin is from

because it is the skin of humans. The violence the narco traffickers brought to Guatemala is represented as the skin of killed Guatemalans used to make the traffickers boots. Tendons and veins can be seen on the surface of the boot as if it is fused with the lower portion of a leg. Portions of the boots eerily resemble bone with faint blue and red highlights around the tendons and veins giving it a morbid effect. A drug trafficker's boots are embellished with elaborate designs, and these boots are decorated with a symbol that resembles a vagina, blush red on the interior with wings stretching out from each side. Boror explains that this is the symbol of life and birth from which all are born and represents the invasion of Guatemalan culture by traffickers.

Drug crime that was once prevalent in Columbia has shifted to Guatemala because of a defunct government (Ewing, 2018). Boror states:

Today there's a rise, a success in art, but it's because of the government's ineffectiveness, it's obsolete, it doesn't work. The advantage is the artist does not have to ask for permits or insurance, but it's not because there's liberty, it's because they are ineffective. So, the artist takes advantage of that, to produce with more liberty. The artist has taken the space that the government has not used.

He says that Guatemalans are used to changing governments and have lost faith in the government's ability to perform. As discontent grows among Guatemalans, they are taking control of their own lives. "People have learned to trust what they can do for themselves, and they decide their own future. The people have been gaining in power, not the government". An example Boror gave happened in 2015 when President Otto Pérez Molina was forced from office. He believes that cultural promoters are

responsible for the surge of defiance in Guatemalan society: "The opportunity is that the private sector is supporting the innovative alternative projects." He explains that there is a void of government and that the influence of the church has waned, and this is the space that artists have claimed.

Through his work he wants people to awaken to the idea of achieving personal objectives, goals, and dreams. He continues; "Guatemala is passing through a complicated time, and politically this is a moment that we haven't seen before." He wants "to take advantage of this moment, of what we're living right now." He says Guatemalans are a tolerant and pacifist people who will forgive multiple times. Eventually, Guatemalans can be "suddenly violent. Guatemala has much passion, so it's never half way". It is this passion that Boror wishes to capture in his work. He said people have to identify with the work, and as society, it must be intense and strong yet clear and direct. He notes "An artist recreates and captures not for today but for the future." He knows there is no hope if people are unable to imagine a better life. By seeing a better future, people can resist and demand justice. He believes that the most important artists overcome great obstacles, and reflects, "Art is a difficult career, it does not depend on anyone, and at the end, it's the most humble flower that grows in the most inhospitable swamp."

### **Eny Roland Hernandez**

Eny Roland Hernandez grew up exploring the streets of Guatemala City. He roams around the various zones, or areas, and captures images on an expensive cell phone

camera. The phone is high end with a camera that is heralded as revolutionary. The phone manufacturer covers the expensive of the phone and pays Hernandez to take photographs that the company can use in advertising. Hernandez has found other ingenious ways to earn money, such as producing photography for the Guatemalan department of tourism. He is happy with the needed support but says that it is difficult being an artist in Guatemala. The Guatemalan Ministry of Culture is responsible for governing cultural development and to “promote the Guatemalan identity and the culture of peace” (mcd.gob.gt, 2015). But according to Hernandez the ministry “joined culture and sports together under the Ministry of Culture, and they use all the money for sports. There is no money for culture”. He says that commercial galleries in Guatemala are not interested in representing contemporary artist, focusing instead on folk art or art that is purely aesthetic. Hernandez expresses hope for the arts and says that recently there have been a few experimental galleries and organizations that are interested in contemporary artists, providing opportunities for exposure.

Hernandez studied finance at the University of San Carlos and worked in a bank as an accountant. He disliked his job and decided to take classes in Communication Sciences so he could work in the bank IT department. Through a professor, Hernandez discovered photography and began to experiment with the digital camera on his phone. He started looking for a job as a photographer and found a position with the local newspaper in the cultural section. One of his first assignments was producing portraits of artists for an article on the art scene in Guatemala City. Hernandez was captivated and inspired by the artists and realized that he could make a statement with photography. He was invited to collaborate with a diverse group of artists who produce art on a chosen

theme. The first theme he was involved in was the Virgin of Guadalupe. Growing up, Hernandez attended an all-male Catholic military school and was pleased to have a theme he knew well. He says,

I made a picture of a sensual San Juan Diego, to whom the Virgin appears.

I took a picture of a guy from the market who sells roses. For the Virgin to appear, San Juan Diego must first seduce her. The reaction of the people was positive. It was a catharsis and easy for me to produce this type of photography. I feel comfortable talking about Catholicism; it is something I know well, the weak side of religion.

Hernandez says that in school they do not teach about the civil war and that growing up he knew nothing of the conflict or genocide. Attending a Catholic military school was oppressive, and students learned through discipline, not encouragement. He says that his education was dramatic and he continues to reconcile his experience in adulthood. "They don't need to teach in that way. In the band, they would hit you if you don't play well, many hours under the sun, very militant. When you do this for many days, you change". Military discipline combined with Catholic ideology was an oppressive combination, convincing believers that they are worthless sinners. According to Hernandez, in the Catholic Church, people are taught to celebrate the suffering of Christ, not the resurrection. People lament the suffering of Jesus, and through guilt, they should also suffer. The church ensures its followers are vestiges of guilt and maintain control because of inherent sin. Hernandez says he always felt like a sinner and had to deconstruct the idea of who he is to reconstruct himself with new beliefs. He states "My work has helped me be more secure, about myself, about the things I want to say, and

about the things I want to change in the country." Hernandez comments that he did not choose to be born in Guatemala, but when he returns after traveling, he wants to be in Guatemala. He says that Guatemala has many problems that inspire him as an artist, and now that he is in a position of privilege he wants to use that privilege for the betterment of others.

Hernandez views Catholicism as overtly oppressive in its insistence on suffering in Guatemalan society, and he questions the role of religion in Guatemalan life. Catholic Saints are iconized as those who suffer to replace and provide relief for our suffering. Roland Hernandez wants viewers to question the role of Saints in his series *Dulce Mortification* by showing them in a subversive context. His photograph depicts a hairy St Sebastian as male, arms open, chest and groin exposed for the viewer to soak in. While the form is sensual and seductive, there are bleeding wounds on his torso caused by the arrows held in his outstretched hands. Roland says,

The church uses the suffering of death as an excuse to infuse "the guilt of sinners" as a means of spiritual control and, therefore, social and cultural...culture of death, of celebrating the passion and death of Christ over its resurrection that, in the end, becomes a policy that imposes suffering as a form of morbid joy, which is ritually celebrated every year with different excuses by the convenient and temporarily devout people.

Hernandez finds the commodification of religious practices by the Catholic Church unethical. Catholic processions are a cultural spectacle in Guatemala and attract both international tourist and Guatemalans from across the country (Martin, 2016). Hernandez explains how the Church has monetized the processions by charging participants

exorbitant sums of money guaranteeing that only the privileged can participate. He likens the processions to the scenario of the merchants who Jesus expelled from the temple for using it as commercial business. Hernandez states that if Jesus returned to earth today, he would be enraged with the behavior of the Catholic Church. Guatemalan society does not need to wait for the return of Jesus to feel his rage; they can experience it through the work of Hernandez.

As a gay man, Hernandez feels an obligation to other gay people growing up in Guatemalan society. He reflects, "I think when someone, some young guy like me at the college, they can see my work and feel empathy. They understand that I have passed through the same experience. I am hoping that they will not feel alone." Hernandez has a specific concern for gay people who live in rural areas. He says that the farthest rural people can travel to is Guatemala City and that they:

...won't go to the United States, or France, or South America to live happily. We must in some way, make a change for the people who feel alone here and don't have a way to escape. A lesbian girl in the countryside, they don't speak Spanish, so they are trapped. I want to inspire people who want to question themselves. I know there are people like me who are afraid to criticize religion or to live as a gay person. I want to give something to Guatemalans in some way.

Hernandez uses his recognition to effect change in a variety of ways. He is an organizer with Guatemala Pride, and in 2017 they had over 20,000 people attend. All advertising is done at a grassroots level since no mainstream media outlets or newspapers will cover the event. As a community organizer, he is influencing others and helping effect change.

Hernandez recently met a group of young legal professionals who wanted to advocate for gay marriage. He could see that they needed guidance and introduced them to people who could help further the cause while helping them plan events. Hernandez is also spearheading a safe zone campaign and was designing training manuals for restaurants and business who agree to participate. He believes everyone deserves the fundamental human right to safety.

Hernandez was recently inspired to begin a new project. In the national archives, he discovered headshots of gay people who were captured by the military during the conflict. The crime they were taken for was that of being homosexual. The police photos are small and show the captured person as they were when arrested, which is typically in drag. Hernandez says ‘you can get very connected from such a small picture, it's like the people are watching you.’ Most of the people in the pictures are either dead, or very old, and Hernandez wants to honor them, so they will not be forgotten. He wants to make the exhibition in the style of street art to impact people who do not go to galleries. The art scene in Guatemala City, says Hernandez, is “like a bubble and it’s difficult to go to the real people.” He also believes that the average Guatemalan may not understand contemporary art. When he wants to convey a message, he feels it is necessary to make his work approachable. Hernandez has traveled extensively for work and enjoys the experience and exposure, but laments, "I can go all over the world with my photography, but normal Guatemalan people will not be affected." Hernandez actively shows his work outside the gallery, looking for opportunities to have his art displayed on the streets and in the countryside.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Guatemalan artists in this study are speaking out against oppression and social injustice. This study shows how they are advocating for an end to the violence that is exacerbated by economic inequality, sexual discrimination, racism, misogyny, and corruption. The participants exemplify the political theory that in post-revolutionary society people do not feel connected with the past, or have a vision of the future (Raunig, 2007). According to Bhabha it is during this transitional period where artists feel the need to have their voices heard, and to provide symbolic resources to help their communities make sense of their place in the world (Platt, 2011). The suffering experienced by the people of Guatemala is reflected in the work they produce and is manifested through various forms of media. International Biennials have enabled the artists in this study the ability to travel internationally. When the government fails to represent citizens, artists like Erick Boror feel it is the responsibility of the artist to express the desires and aspirations of the people. He says that the art produced is intended for the future by allowing individuals to imagine new possibilities, echoing the sentiments of Wagner (Raunig, 2007).

Postwar generations are becoming empowered and discovering that they can control their future. Regina Galindo helped derail the presidential candidacy of Efraín Ríos Montt with her performance *Who Can Erase the Footprints*. Erick Boror states that the proof of the people's power became evident in 2015 when President Pérez Molina was ousted from office under the pressure of organized demonstrations. The artists in this study are receiving a great deal of attention and are bringing the struggles of

Guatemalans to an attentive international audience. The misery experienced in Guatemala is being harnessed by these artists and is giving people a voice that cannot be ignored.

To effect change, these artists have demonstrated how art can transcend the cognitive process and reach people on an intimate and emotional level. Nato Thompson (2015) elaborates, claiming that people reconstruct meaning through engaging with and participating in an artist's work enabling them to grasp how power is used to subjugate people. Regina Galindo does this effectively by aestheticizing the political and exposing injustice through art, a concept put forth by Groy (2014). Galindo focuses on performance art where she exposes the process of power relations so that observers can reconsider the implications behind social constructs. In 2003 Galindo was influential in ending the presidential candidacy of Efraín Ríos Montt, the general who ordered genocide during the civil war. Frustrated by Guatemala's historical amnesia, her performance "who will erase these tracks" accelerated a national artistic campaign to expose the atrocities of Mott. It is clear that her art can inspire people to take action against malfeasance, and marginalized persons and communities can creatively reclaim that power.

A theme throughout this study is that Guatemala is in a transitional period with a defunct and unreliable government. Erick Boror says that "Guatemala is passing through a complicated time" and that "politically there is a moment that we haven't seen." about Manuel Tozc believes, that "in the political moment that we are living in Guatemala right now, we shouldn't remain quiet anymore, speak up. You get a response from people, people are reacting." Mesch (2014) states that art connects people through

personal traits causing political engagement to take on new forms. Social cohesion is not a nationalistic endeavor but is based on individual identities such as ethnicity or gender (Mesch, 2014). Manuel Tzoc uses poetry to express his needs in a society that renders him invisible. People identify with his work and begin to question the process of social exclusion. Creating empathy towards others incites people to action based on shared identification (Mesch, 2014). Artist Wilson Espinoza identifies with fellow garbage pickers and those who are excluded from education, housing, and healthcare. Espinoza resents not having access to books growing up and creates pop up libraries for children utilizing the discarded books of the privileged. Espinoza has captured his shared experience with others and has created an awareness that encourages people to participate in the creation and improvement of communities.

The Maya movement has taken hold in Guatemala and is realizing gains for indigenous rights (Fischer & Brown, 2001). While there is no Mayan political party, indigenous people have been elected to congress in an attempt to work from within the government (Lopez, 2006). Indigenous language and culture have been oppressed in Guatemala resulting in an erosion of Maya traditions (Fischer & Brown, 2001). Artists have been active in restoring indigenous traditions as this study confirms. Rosa Chavez and Manuel Chavajay publish poetry in Tz'utujil and K'iché to provide reading material in a modern context to help preserve and promote indigenous languages. Chavajay engages Maya leaders through participatory art projects that highlight the limitations of thought constructs molded by Spanish colonialism. The projects have had success, as participants are enlightened to new ways of thinking that can help mitigate centuries of systematic oppression. Chavez is a community organizer who works with indigenous

women to reclaim their Maya identities through workshops in rural communities. By decolonizing the Mayan intellect, Chavez wants indigenous people to spiritually reconnect with the land. This connection to the natural world is exemplified in recent victories over land rights as Mayan people seek sovereignty of their traditional Mayan territory.

Guatemalan society is precariously evolving with the opportunity of an emerging democratic process. The country adheres to theory by Gilles Deleuze and is in a perpetual state of limbo where any political outcome is possible (Raunig, 2007). Democracies depend on the participation of citizens and the ability to hold meaningful elections (Dyson, 2013). This study shows that the Government has been successful at disconnecting Guatemalans from recent history. If Guatemalans are not privy to the atrocities of the civil war, then fair elections are difficult due to power structures and inequity. As Bellino (2017) explains,

...to actively diss-remember violence, when erasing the past so clearly benefits those who committed atrocities and marginalizes those who were targets of violence and repression.

However, people are beginning to acknowledge the civil war because the government is unable to hide the truth because of the efforts of people like the participants in this study. In an age of international travel, social media, and Internet access it is impossible to conceal the genocide and violence the Guatemalan government perpetrated against its own citizens. Sustainable social and political systems require accountability and transparency. The social justice artists included in this work are helping create transparency and hold accountable the unjust wielding of power.

Democratic nations tend to be industrialized countries that are economically sustainable. Globalization is a threat to Guatemalan democracy due to the resulting inequality in developing nations. Guatemala's ability to act with autonomy is undermined by powerful countries that meddle in Guatemala's political process for financial gain (McMichael, 2017). However, this study highlights the frustration of Guatemalans who want these power relations disrupted and to lift the country out of violence and corruption. As hybridity sweeps the globe, Guatemalans express the hope that developing countries are given the same consideration as ethnocentric industrialized nations. Art activism and demographics alone are not enough to transition a country to a working democracy, but activist artists contribute to the interpretations and meaning making that support a democratic community. In this way the artists studied here provide resources for, and help create, new systems of meaning (Mesch, 2014). Researchers have shown that post-revolution Guatemala has the necessary mechanisms for a democratic transition (Dyson, 2013). It is possible that Guatemalans today will realize a complete transition to a democratic government that represents the needs of its citizens. Art activist and others who advocate for justice in Guatemala are vigilant in the effort to end inequality for the Guatemalan people.

Further research is needed to explore how art operates as an influencer in society by moving from a social critique to a catalyst for positive change. It is likewise crucial to learn how powerful Ladinos, colonialism, and both internal and external forces, maintain a hold of power in Guatemalan government. To deconstruct social hierarchy, it is imperative to understand how the structure operates. It is likewise essential for the international community to acknowledge how developing countries can be manipulated

for profit by elitist developed countries. The United States has been implicit in the overthrow of a popularly elected government and for training a military that was responsible for the killing of up to 200,000 people (Jonas, 1996). The problem of inequity will be difficult to address until developing countries are given autonomy to govern in the best interest of its citizens.

**APPENDIX SECTION**

A. PARTICIPANTS ..... 52

B. RESEARCH QUESTIONS ..... 53

## APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANTS

Eny Roland Hernandez Javier is an artist informant known to the primary investigator. Artists were recruited using the nonprobability sampling strategy of respondent-driven sampling. Purposive sampling was used to select artists who represent the larger population of activist artists (Berg & Lune, 2012). Eight artists were interviewed for the study and include indigenous, Ladino, gay, lesbian, male, female, and fluid gendered, artists.

Participating artists were asked to take part in an open-ended semi-structured interview. The interviews were scheduled at a time convenient for participants. During the interviews, participating artists were asked about their work and how it facilitates and relates to social change. The interviews were audio-recorded with the researcher taking notes.

Participating artists:

Eny Roland Hernandez

Erick Boror

Manuel Chavajay

Manuall Tzoc

Mario Santizo

Regina José GalindoRosa Chavez

Rosa Chavez

## APPENDIX B: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

### **Demographic Profile Questions**

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your race?
4. What is your sexual orientation?
5. What is your level of education?

### **Semi-structured Questions**

1. What is it your experience being an artist in Guatemala City?
2. Describe how you first become involved in art?
3. What is the goal of your work?
4. What effects do you hope your work will have in Guatemalan society?
5. How do you see your work effecting people?
6. Describe the themes that appear in your work.
7. How has your work affect you?
8. Tell me about how the government may perceive your work.
9. Describe how you feel about government reaction to your artwork.
10. Describe how government toleration of art activism has changed in your lifetime.

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