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**Ephemeral Commemorations;
Violence, Monuments, and the Public Sphere in Calderón's Mexico**

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In 2010, Mexico commemorated two hundred years of independence and one hundred years of revolution. That same year, 35,000 deaths were officially associated with the war on the drug trade launched by president Felipe Calderón a few years earlier. 2010 became the most violent year in Mexico's recent history.¹ Not surprisingly, the celebrations fell far from being an innocent expression of collective joy and festivity and, instead, were marked by indifference, resistance, and even outright hostility. People kept asking, "What is there to celebrate?" The state, meanwhile, spent nearly 230 million dollars on the commemorations and created myriad *lieux de memoire*, including art exhibits, monuments, films, and books. Among all these commemorative projects, there is one that deserves particular attention, given that more than any other it *embodied* Mexico's existing structures of feeling.² I am referring to the *Coloso*, a gigantic statue of a man that, according to president Calderón, represented "the Mexicans." In this essay, I will

¹ According to the Department of National Defense, between 2007 and 2010, 656 civilians were killed as a result of this war on drugs. Although the homicide rate has increased throughout the entire country, the increase has not been the same everywhere; 85% of the homicides occurred in 70 municipalities out of a total of 2,435.

² Raymond Williams defines "structures of feeling" as characteristic elements of "impulse, restraint, and tone"; affective elements of consciousness and relationships: "not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity". The term "structures of feeling" describes those structures that mediate between the individual and the social; yet they are not fixed and permanent structures, but rather more ephemeral and transitory ones, social experiences which are still in process—this is what distinguishes them, for instance, from institutions (Williams 2009, 131-2).

provide an analysis of this quite literal body politic in an attempt to show how the goals of certain commemorative events and sites change when such commemorations take place in an environment of violence. In particular, by showing how the *Coloso* inadvertently became an ephemeral monument, I will point to the consequences that such an environment might have on the possible lasting effects of commemorations.

The Mexican government commissioned sculptor Juan Carlos Canfield to build the *Coloso* as part of the commemorative parade that would take place in Mexico City on September 15, 2010. The idea was that the statute would be paraded down *Reforma* avenue and then displayed in the city's main plaza during the ceremony that would follow the parade. Afterwards, the statue would be permanently placed in the newly-constructed Bicentennial Park. Things, however, did not turn out as planned. Given the enormous size and weight of the statue, it had to be cut into pieces for the parade, an act that was reminiscent of the mutilated cadavers whose images had become associated with Calderón's war on drugs. Moreover, the identity of the *Coloso* was unclear and people joked about who he allegedly represented, inciting a discussion in the media that revealed a rising discontent with the regime and with democracy more generally. All this bad press might help explain why the sculpture never made it to its purportedly permanent location at the Park. While it was briefly put back together for the official celebration, as soon as the event was over, it was again dismantled and to this day it remains abandoned in the parking lot of a public building, where it has begun to decay.³

The impermanence of this central figure of the commemorations is in itself telling. Unlike the 1910's centennial commemorations of Independence which were linked to broader economic, urban, and sanitary plans and which consequently led to the

³ "Héroe por un día, SEP arrumba a el Coloso", by José Luis Ruiz, *El Universal*, September 28, 2010.

construction of a series of monuments and buildings that significantly reshaped the layout of the city, many of which continue to exist to this day –for example the *Ángel de la Independencia* (Tenorio 1995; Lomnitz 2001)— the 2010 bicentennial was, with very few exceptions, characterized by impermanent events and sites –one of these exceptions is the much-criticized *Estela de Luz* (dubbed by pundits the Tower of Corruption given that it turned out to be much more expensive than initially planned).

Yet, despite its ephemerality, the *Coloso* was an avidly documented site that triggered a plethora of debates and discussions. If the meaning of monuments is to be judged not simply by what they embody or represent, but also by their effects—their political and social impact—then their essential function is to “give impetus to critical debate, a source of friction for public discussion” (Christoph Heinrich in Carrier 2006, 213). But what can be considered critical debate and is such critical debate enough to justify the construction of an expensive monument? A journey through the *Coloso*’s making, display, and abandonment will invite us to reflect on what it means to commemorate in times of violence and to analyze the relationship between art, monumentality, and ephemerality.

Calderón’s Mexico: a pathological public sphere

During his presidential campaign, Felipe Calderón rarely mentioned the topics of security and drugs, focusing instead on economic matters. However, ten days after taking power, he launched a security initiative that turned out to be the first step of the ongoing “war on drugs.” The 2006 presidential elections were highly contested. Both Calderón and his main rival Andrés Manuel López Obrador obtained approximately 35% of the votes.

Eventually, the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) declared Calderón to be the winner, but many people remained suspicious of the verdict and demanded a recount of the ballots. Not only were the ballots never recounted, but they were burned, a sign that was widely interpreted as a confession of fraud.⁴

There are good reasons to believe that Calderón launched the war on drugs as a way to improve his popularity. Yet this plan (if indeed this was his plan) failed miserably. Despite an increasing budget for security issues—during his six-year term, this budget increased four-fold (Guerrero 2013)—the federal government never managed to convince the public of the need for the drug war. In September 2010, the month of the commemorations, 63.3% of the Mexican people perceived the security situation to be either “worse” or “much worse” than the previous year, while only 6.5% perceived it to be “better” or “much better.”⁵ Indeed, the homicide rate in Mexico, which had been decreasing systematically between 1990 and 2007, began to rise sharply as soon as the “war on drugs” was launched. 2010 became the most violent year to date: an estimated 15,273 homicides took place. As a way of comparison, while in Iraq for every 100 thousand people there were 12 murders, in Mexico there were 18 murders.⁶

These perceptions were partly a response to the types of representations and images that were incessantly being reproduced in the media, namely those of corpses and mutilated body parts, at times bare and exposed, at others covered in sheets to “protect” the viewers from the spectacle of limbs and blood. The mutilation of a corpse is

⁴ Calderón obtained 35.89% of the votes, while his main rival Andrés Manuel López Obrador obtained 35.33%. The suspicion was partly the result of Vicente Fox’s illegal proselytism in favor of Calderón which might have tilted the balance in favor of the PAN’s candidate and partly a result of the irregularities that surrounded the counting of ballots—the electoral tribunal admitted that there had been “irregularities” in the counting process but decided to do nothing about them.

⁵ Index of Public Perception published by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI): <http://www.inegi.org.mx/inegi/contenidos/espanol/prensa/comunicados/percepcionsp.asp>.

⁶ <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2013/02/05/politica/016n1pol>

obviously not meant to inflict pain on the actual victim but rather to generate fear among the viewers. The images that get reproduced spread fear even among those who are in no real danger and who have had no direct contact with the violence, which in Mexico means the majority of the population given that the actual occurrence of violence did not spread uniformly throughout the country despite media messages that sought to show the contrary to be true.⁷

Even though during Calderón's regime Mexico became the most dangerous country in the world to do journalism,⁸ journalists continued to publish shockingly violent images. Nacho Ruiz, a photojournalist from Ciudad Juárez, argued: "Although we are stuck in between the *narcos* and the authority, this doesn't mean that we will stop informing, this is the reality and there is no reason to hide it. (...) One doesn't take pictures out of morbidity, but rather with the intention of capturing real scenes and all their details" (2011, 27). Alejandro Paez, deputy managing editor of Mexico's largest newspaper, *El Universal*, maintained that journalists are not meant to educate their audience and that they do not choose the images they publish based on how they envisage people reacting: "We simply do our job. It is our responsibility to show the reality of this war, no matter how crude and violent it is."⁹ Fernando Brito, the photography editor of Sinaloa's main newspaper *El Debate*, had a similar opinion: "When you work for the

⁷ The homicide rate has increased throughout the entire country but not uniformly (85% of the homicides occurred in 70 municipalities out of a total of 2,435). The states with the highest homicide rate are Chihuahua, Baja California, Durango, Guerrero, Sinaloa, and Tamaulipas followed by Michoacán, Nayarit, Oaxaca, and Sonora. There are also significant differences within each state. For instance, although only 50% of the population in Baja California resides in Tijuana, more than 72% of the murders have taken place in this city and whereas only 40% of Chihuahuans live in Ciudad Juárez, it is here where 65% of the homicides have occurred (Escalante 2010).

⁸ <http://www.article19.org/data/files/pdfs/reports/mexico-resumen-ejecutivo-2011.pdf>

⁹ "Latin American Briefing Series: Alma Guillermoprieto and Alejandro Paez and Claudia Mendez", Nov. 11, 2010. Center for Latin American Studies, University of Chicago.

mass media you cannot stop publishing what is happening in the city or the country. We cannot pretend to be blind” (2011, 25).¹⁰

Despite the atrocity and repulsiveness of many of the images that are reproduced in the media, many people are drawn to them in a manner that resembles what Mark Seltzer defines as a “pathological public sphere.”¹¹ People convene around scenes of violence, showing a “public fascination with torn and opened bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma and the wound” (1997, 3). Although the public sphere in a Habermasian sense is usually regarded as an alternative or substitute to the sphere of public violence (Habermas 1969), at times violence is precisely what triggers the formation of an otherwise absent public sphere. Seltzer argues that in the cases of pathological public spheres, the “political becomes personal” because public experiences narrow down to scenes of privacy: for instance, collective forms of witnessing spring up around the privacy of an individual’s wounded body (1997, 8). Following Seltzer’s logic, in Mexico, the political certainly becomes personal, but given the widespread reproduction of these violent scenes, in a sense it becomes less personal. The constant reproduction of isolated and somewhat localized cases of murder and dismemberment makes them seem less private and less personal precisely because such images often trigger conversations about what this violence means, why it came to be, and what can be done to stop it. These local and segmented (yet, in a way, collective) experiences became national in character and, as we will see, the attempt to make people forget about them during the commemorations failed miserably.

¹⁰ Brito, has won prizes for his pictures at photography biennales and received an award at the World Press Photo in 2011 for his series of dead bodies in front of deserted and, at times, quite beautiful landscapes.

¹¹ All public spheres could be described as “pathological” because by definition they exclude certain people (see Fraser 1992; Warner 2005).

The *Coloso*: an uncanny body politic

In situations of “fragile, eroding and contested sovereignty, and faced with mounting expectation of high profile presence and benevolence, governments often stage high-profile spectacles to make themselves visible. (...) The ‘weakness’ of everyday stateness is often countered by attempts to make state power highly visible” (Blom and Stepputat 2005, 29). The recourse to symbolic displays of power as a means of coercive control is nothing new. Myriad examples abound of “aesthetic overproduction” in which images, books, buildings, and others are used to cover up, fill in, or compensate for a loss of state power.¹² The recent commemorative spectacles were used by the Mexican state in an attempt to displace anxiety of the violence by making itself visible. The state spent over 200 million dollars on more than 2,480 projects that included songs, films, art exhibits, and the delivery of flags and history books to the homes of 25 million Mexicans. Mass spectacles such as sport exhibitions and military parades were organized in which the state proved its power to ensure peace during the commemorative events by deploying troops and police forces, constraining access to certain parts of the city and redirecting traffic.

The pinnacle of the commemorations was the spectacle that took place on the evening of September 15th, 2010. 45 million dollars were spent exclusively on this event (Ejea 2011), which included a four hour-long parade along one of Mexico City’s main avenues (*Reforma*), as well as fireworks, a light show projected onto the Cathedral, a series of concerts, and the *grito* ceremony at the *zócalo*.¹³ The main figure of the parade

¹² Geertz 1980; Schnapp 1993; Berezin 1991; Wedeen 1999, 2008. For examples about Mexico see: Beezley, English and French 1994; Beezley and Lorey 2000; Lomnitz 2001b.

¹³ The *grito* ceremony is a reenactment of the episode that took place at daybreak in 1810, when Miguel Hidalgo incited people to raise up in arms and fight for Independence and it consists of the president

in 2010 was the *Coloso*: an eight-ton, sixty-six-foot-tall figure of a man with a prominent mustache and sideburns. The *Coloso*'s tilts his head downward and holds a broken sword in his left hand.¹⁴ The figure was intended to resemble the pre-Hispanic figures that are found in different Mexican archeological sites. To achieve this effect, cracks and fissures were carved into his torso, right hand, and left leg.¹⁵ Yet, rather than imbuing the figure with an aura of history, these cracks conveyed a sense of fragility, pain, and despair. In addition to all this, when the *Coloso* was first displayed, it was not done so as a gigantic monument, a Leviathan standing firmly and staring down at the people. It also was not displayed as a healthy body. Instead, it first appeared as a dismembered, mutilated body, chopped into bits and pieces.

Originally, the *Coloso* was going to be paraded alongside the other floats and placed on the *zócalo* plaza during the *grito* ceremony. However, due to its weight and size, it became unmanageable to move him in either a vertical position or even in a single piece. The solution was to cut him up into four parts: the head, the torso, the legs and boots, and the arm holding the broken sword. In this mutilated state, one could get a glimpse at the insides of the body, which is made out of steel rods and rubber resembling bones and muscles, and of hollow polyvinyl chloride tubes that run throughout the body much like veins and arteries.¹⁶ In this dismembered state is how most Mexicans first came across the statue: not as an imposing figure but as a mutilated cadaver. But this was

standing on the main balcony of the National Palace and waving a Mexican flag while shouting "Viva Mexico!" in front of a huge crowd of people.

¹⁴ The broken sword is an allusion to the broken sword found in Pablo Picasso's famous painting *Guernica*, which has become a peace memorial. In this painting, the broken sword is usually interpreted as a sign of defeat of innocent people in battle. Yet, next to the sword, Picasso painted a flower, which is usually interpreted a sign of hope for peace. The *Coloso*, however, holds no flower, only a broken sword and the message seems to be that hope is nowhere to be found. It is important to point out that the original model for the *Coloso* was a man holding a rifle, not a broken sword.

¹⁵ www.casacanfield.com

¹⁶ www.casacanfield.com and email from artist.

not all. During the parade, dark clouds covered the sky and a thunderstorm seemed imminent. Given that the *Coloso* had not yet been made water-proof by the time of the parade, each body part was covered with a white sheet to protect the plaster from the rain.

I found the image of body parts moving along *Reforma* avenue to be disquieting but also uncannily familiar. Sigmund Freud explains that the feeling of the uncanny takes place when one encounters a strange repetition, a weirdly disturbing resemblance. The feeling of the uncanny is such “only because it is secretly all too familiar,” which is why it was repressed in the first place (2005, 240). The uncanny “is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression. (...) The uncanny [is] something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light” (Freud). The reason why I found the moving mutilated *Coloso* uncannily familiar, was because it was reminiscent of the images of dismembered corpses reproduced in the media. It is not as if I chose to see a mutilated corpse. The association was automatic, inevitable. At first I thought this was a message from the government that would use the commemorative parade to talk about the deaths. Soon after, I realized this was not the case and thought that the similarity between the *Coloso* and the mutilated bodies, was just a personal association. I soon realized that I was not the only one who noted this resemblance as remarks that stressed the similarity of the parsed *Coloso* with the mutilated cadavers were made on the social media as the event was taking place and on the regular media the day after.

What is fascinating is that even at the pinnacle of the commemorative events, at precisely the moment when everybody is summoned by the state to enjoy and forget, at

least momentarily, the everyday reality and the atrocious violence, the “return of the repressed” comes back in the least expected manner. Despite the government’s attempt to use the commemorations to redeem itself for its complicity in the precarious situation, in many ways these ended up becoming a prime occasion to highlight the state’s weakness and its failure to curb the increasing violence. As often happens in those contexts in which a regime fails to make its citizens feel secure, instances when it does succeed in doing so raise questions about why it fails to do so regularly. What happens, as political scientist Lisa Wedeen points out in the case of Yemen, is that people remind “each other of the state’s fragilities, so that activities in which the regime is required to be a state are fraught with anxiety” (Wedeen 2008, 83). Despite the fact that during the parade no violent incident was reported, it was an event that was most certainly fraught with anxiety.¹⁷

According to a statement given by sculptor Juan Carlos Canfield, the parsing of the *Coloso* during the parade and its subsequent assembly into a single piece in the *zócalo* was to be a symbolic act of unity: isolated, individual parts would become integrated into an organic whole. President Calderón himself made a clear analogy between the *Coloso* and Mexico’s body politic when, a few days after the parade took place, he pronounced the following words: “The great *Coloso* of Mexico, that *Coloso* is you, it is the Mexican.”¹⁸ Yet people failed to directly identify themselves either with the statue or as

¹⁷ It is no coincidence, perhaps, that only six days before the parade took place, the government asked people to stay at home and claimed (and I quote): “Television is a very attractive alternative to enjoy [the celebrations] with your family.” Although the parade and the *grito* ceremony were not cancelled in Mexico City—as they were in other parts of the country—feelings of fear and hostility towards the government were translated into a sense of apathy and indifference towards the commemorations. Two million people were expected to attend the main parade on September 15, but only 400,000 showed up.

¹⁸Felipe Calderón, September 28, 2010, Auditorio Nacional.

part of a common body politic. Instead, they made fun of the different presumed identities of the *Coloso* and associated it with corrupt politicians and criminals.

Before jumping into the analysis of the *Coloso*, however, it is important to remember what is being commemorated: that is two hundred years of the declaration of Independence and one hundred years of the start of the Revolution. These two moments can be considered, following political theorist Jason Frank, as “constituent moments.” These moments occur when those who are not authorized to do so “seize the mantle of authorization, changing the inherited rules of authorization in the process. (...) [as well as] the conditions and contexts through which [certain claims] are heard and recognized *as claims*.” (Frank 2010, 8). In other words, “the people”, which are a political claim because they are never a pre-given, unified, or naturally bounded empirical entity, are made apparent during these kinds of moments (Frank 2010, 8). Indeed, neither the struggle for Independence nor the Mexican Revolution succeeded in creating a single fraternal community or any kind of real horizontal comradeship that was able to erase “hierarchical relationships” (Lomnitz 2001b, 12). Yet, in both cases, claims to speak in the name of “the people” were made (Annino 2008; Van Young 2008). These claims, argues Frank, “always transcend the horizon of any given articulation, drawing their power from their own unrealized futurity. The legitimating vitality of the people... derives from their constitutive surplus” (Frank 2010, 6). Commemorating these moments, therefore, can become an occasion in which the indeterminacy of “the people” is remembered and sustained in ways that more or less successfully revitalize and dramatize those incipient democratic energies.¹⁹ In the next section I explore how the *Coloso* as a

¹⁹ In fact, one can argue that this power holds for any commemorative site that seeks to make claims about who is a citizen or how he/she should be remembered (see for instance Rothberg 2009).

site/event of commemoration failed to accomplish this, but nonetheless triggered a series of important discussions which reveal a clear discontent against the purportedly democratically elected regime.

The *Coloso*

Days before the parade took place, the artist declared that the *Coloso*'s features were based on those of Benjamín Argumedo, a general who fought in the northern part of Mexico during the Revolution in 1910. Argumedo is an obscure figure who does not appear in history textbooks. Until he was associated with the *Coloso*, most people had never heard of him. There are not many studies on Argumedo, and the ones that exist portray him as a vicious and bloodthirsty man who “burned down *haciendas*, took hold of small towns, and sabotaged the railway tracks” (Salmerón 2004, 201). Argumedo fought against people from all over the ideological spectrum, including many of the country's favorite Revolutionary heroes including Francisco I. Madero, Pancho Villa, and Venustiano Carranza. At the end of his life, however, he changed sides and fought on the side of another favorite Revolutionary hero, Emiliano Zapata (Salmerón 2004; Womack 1985, 208-209, 218).

The artist, however, was not interested in Argumedo's story. In several different interviews he explained that he had not selected Argumedo as a model for the *Coloso* because of his political or military endeavors, but rather that the choice had been solely aesthetic and based on Argumedo's physical features, which showed that he was “a very strong man” with a “lot of personality” and “a very ‘revolutionary’ mustache”.²⁰ Despite

²⁰ “El Coloso del Bicentenario genera controversia en México” by Ira Franco, *CNN Mexico*, September 20, 2010.

these initial claims, in the days after the parade, Canfield changed his mind regarding the identity of the *Coloso*. Although he did not recant his initial declarations, he simply stopped talking about who the *Coloso* was or what he allegedly represented. This sudden silence is in itself telling, but changes on Canfield's Flickr page also reveals trepidation. During the preparations for the commemorative events, Canfield recorded his progress on the sculpture and kept a Flickr page that included a photo of a model of the *Coloso* with the following caption: "First sketches of the sculpture of the *Coloso Benjamín Argumedo*". Three days after the parade, the caption mysteriously changed: the name "Benjamín Argumedo" had disappeared with no explanation.²¹

This erasure was probably the result of the jokes on the subject that began to circulate throughout the media. Given that Argumedo was not a very well known figure and his story was convoluted and difficult to follow, the press opted to highlight one particular aspect of Argumedo's life: his support for Victoriano Huerta. Children learn in school that Huerta planned the murder of the democratic hero Francisco I. Madero—who fought against Porfirio Díaz and whose rise to power gave birth to the Mexican Revolution. After killing Madero, Huerta seized power, which is why he is regarded as the assassin of the man who fought for Mexico's democracy and as an unlawful (or *ilegítimo*) president who was never elected democratically. The parallel between Huerta and Felipe Calderón was made by the press as a way to stress the uncertainty that characterized the electoral process and Calderón's victory. People joked that Calderón had commissioned the artwork specifically because it was inspired by a historical figure known for supporting an *ilegítimo* much like himself. *El Coloso* and his alleged identity

²¹ "Borran referencia a Argumedo en Flickr de escultor de 'Coloso' denuncian", *SPD Noticias*, September 18, 2010.

became a reminder of the fragile electoral legitimacy that tainted Calderón's term in office from the very beginning.

In several official press releases, the Department of Education (SEP), the governmental entity responsible for organizing the commemorations, rejected the possibility that the *Coloso* represented Benjamín Argumedo or any other specific historical figure.²² The “gaze, looks, sideburns, chin, and mustache simply express the strength of character of a particular historical context, any character, no one in particular.”²³ It was argued that the *Coloso* “does not have a specific identity. It does not have a name or a last name;” it represents everyone and, therefore, no one in particular.²⁴

The government's plea not to think about *El Coloso* as a specific figure was mocked by the press in ways that highlighted the discontent with representative democracy. A cartoon by Antonio Helguera, for instance, shows Alonso Lujambio, the officer responsible for the commemorations, saying “*El Coloso* at the *zócalo* is not anybody, nor does he represent anyone.” Behind him stands a man who is thinking, “Oh, then the *Coloso* must be Calderón.”²⁵ The anonymity of *El Coloso* was also linked to the thousands of people killed as a result of the “war on drugs” and whose identity and

²² The federal government has made several declarations of the following type: “*El Coloso* represents an insurgent, one of the many civilians of the New Spain that fought for the principles of the Independence of Mexico. This man is not a hero turned into a sculpture; on the contrary, it symbolizes an ordinary person that followed heroes and leaders and by following them contributed in the creation of a Mexican nation” (“*El Coloso del Bicentenario genera controversia en México*” by Ira Franco, *CNN Mexico*, September 20, 2010). Another declaration: “*El Coloso* pays homage to the hundreds of thousands of *anonymous* Mexicans, almost all poor peasants, that participated in the insurgent movement and that helped to write a central chapter in the history of Mexico” (“*El coloso bicentenario homenaje al mexicano*”, by Ingrid Díaz, *Diario de Morelos*, November 11, 2010). In both of these declarations, the government not only emphasizes the anonymity of *el Coloso* but also the fact that this anonymity commemorates the moment of Mexico's *Independence* rather than its Revolution—this explicitly contradicted the artist's claims.

²³ “*El Coloso* no retrata ningún personaje en particular: SEP”, by Ariane Díaz, *La Jornada*, September 20, 2010.

²⁴ “*El Coloso del Bicentenario genera controversia en México*” by Ira Franco, *CNN Mexico*, September 20, 2010.

²⁵ Cartoon by Antonio Helguera, appeared in *La Jornada*, September 20th, 2010. (<http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2010/09/20/index.php?section=cartones&id=1>)

causes of death are never investigated, many of these people end up in mass graves which usually contain dozens of bodies that are rarely identified—they remain anonymous. The state insists that the victims of this war are members of gangs and drug-cartels and that it will not “waste” resources investigating the causes of their death.

These were not the only reactions to the *Coloso*. For a few weeks newspapers, magazines, television and radio shows, as well as internet forums became saturated with editorials, reports, discussions, cartoons, and jokes that addressed the puzzle of who *el Coloso* was and what exactly he represented. The figure was identified with a wide range of figures, ranging from the Mexican *ranchero* singer Vicente Fernández to more political figures such as Joseph Stalin, the former Mexican president Vicente Fox, Luis Donaldo Colosio, the presidential candidate who was murdered in 1994, and even Jerimiah Springfield.²⁶

One of the main pillars of any democratic regime—at least theoretically speaking—is freedom of expression. At first, the government sought to capitalize on this “democratic” joking around and stressed the fact that such comparisons and jokes were voiced and circulated freely in the press without any fear of reprisals. This fact, they argued, was a sign of a “healthy plural society.” Yet, as the comparisons became increasingly uncomfortable and the *Coloso* was associated with dictators, drug-traffickers, and corrupt politicians, the federal government stepped in and urged the press to “stop politicizing” the figure²⁷ because this would only “cause division where there should be none.”²⁸

²⁶ “¿Quién es el Coloso Bicentenario?”, by Heriberto Yépez, *Milenio*, September 25, 2010.

²⁷ The exact words were: “the artistic creation of this figure should not be politicized”.

²⁸ “El Coloso bicentenario, homenaje al mexicano”, by Brenda Tellez, *La Crónica*, September 20, 2010.

The call was not heeded and the jokes continued. Among the many identities imputed to *el Coloso*, two figures repeatedly came up: Jesús Malverde and Carlos Salinas de Gortari. Jesús Malverde is the unofficial saint of the drug-traffickers (given that the Catholic Church has never officially recognized him as a saint). Until a few years ago, Malverde was a local icon, known almost exclusively in the northwest part of the country. In recent years, however, his popularity has risen, as can be seen by the increasing commodification of his image through posters, scapulars, figurines, songs, and books. The link between the *Coloso* and Malverde is symptomatic of how drug-traffickers have entered the public sphere and have become part of the national imaginary.

The other figure repeatedly associated with the *Coloso* was former president Carlos Salinas de Gortari. In this case, the resemblance had nothing to do with looks. Perhaps, one of the main reasons why this parallel circulated had to do with Salinas' presence during the commemorations. During the *grito* ceremony, Salinas was captured by television cameras standing in the main hall of the National Palace, next to the balcony from which Calderón waved the Mexican flag and shouted “Viva México!” Calderón might have invited Salinas as a gesture of national unity, a way to signal the existence of a common front against organized crime.²⁹ Yet, given that Salinas is one of “the most universally vilified political figures in the history of Mexico” and frequently associated with drug-trafficking, money laundering, corruption, and murder (Lomnitz 2001a, 145), the message seemed to be one of continuity between an old criminal political regime and a newly-elected democratic one. These symbolic acts are reminders

²⁹ The last time all the living ex-presidents had attended an event together had been in 1942 when President Ávila Camacho extended this invitation as a way of signaling a common front against fascism and Nazism.

that Mexico's "democratic transition" was characterized by neither "a rupture with the previous regime nor a foundational pact to inaugurate the new one" (Dresser, 2008, 242). Mexican political elites focused on electoral processes and left many attributes of the old regime untouched, including impunity, corruption, rent seeking, and the arbitrary exercise of power (Merino 2003), all of which are exemplified by Salinas de Gortari.

The fact that the *Coloso* was linked to a political figure that has been reviled and to a certain extent has been exiled for almost two decades (Salinas de Gortari has not lived in Mexico for nearly 20 years, partly for fear of reprisals) might also point to a nostalgia of an all-powerful authority. During the PRI regime, the president was a very powerful figure, much more powerful than Calderón ever was. Hence, it was not uncommon for people to blame all disasters, economic and political, on the president – something that was much harder to do after the formal "democratic transition".

Following anthropologist's Claudio Lomnitz's use of the Freudian term "identification" (2001a), I propose that we read these comparisons as forms of "identification" between many Mexicans and these two figures. "Identification" is a concept that is used to describe the unconscious and involuntary mental process by which a subject's personality is attracted to or emulates the personality of another, usually a powerful person who has access to one's object of desire. Freud provides the example of the son's identification with the father because he has sexual access to the mother. In a way, by viewing the *Coloso*, which allegedly represented Mexico's body politic, as an exemplar of crime and corruption, many people projected their desire to emulate (or become) one of these individuals who have access to power and money through immoral and illicit activities.

Lomnitz argues that identification in a society usually occurs when desirable *long-term* collective projects seem practically impossible to accomplish. The commemorations were clearly organized with only short-term goals in mind. For instance, most of the monuments and buildings that were constructed for the occasion, remained unfinished by the year 2010 which, to a certain extent, stopped them from actually being associated with the celebrations. Given the increasingly atrocious events and the rising levels of violence that the country was experiencing, the commemorations became an occasion in which people voiced their discontent towards a government that claimed to represent them despite its dubious electoral triumph and its responsibility for triggering the violence. The commemorations fell far from being a moment of common joy and celebration, becoming instead a moment in which people came together to mourn the dead and to complain about past and current grievances. Feelings of commonality were certainly triggered, but these did not result from any long-term goal that people imagined being part of and working together to accomplish. Instead, the unity that was felt during the occasion was more a result of common experiences of susceptibility and anger. When this is the case, elements of “voyeurism” that seek to reveal “the morally reprehensible underside of government” gain prominence over an “engagement in dialectical criticism” (Lomnitz 2001a, 144). In other words, rather than seeing themselves as part of the problem and, therefore, as part of a solution, people place the blame entirely on someone or something else. In this case, the people did not see the state – and specifically Calderón’s regime - as being formed by the people, nor as themselves as the ones ruling showing how “elections make representative government amenable to democratization but never truly democratic” (Urbinati, 2006, 15). Not surprisingly,

Mexican citizens are increasingly disappointed at representative democracy: in 2010, for instance, according to the Latinbarometer, only 27% of the Mexican population was satisfied with democracy.³⁰ Unlike most other statues and figurative monuments that are found all over the country that in fact *only* represent an individual hero, the *Coloso* was supposed to embody everyone and therefore no one in particular, yet people continued to interpret this figure as a specific individual and were never able to see themselves as part of this purportedly common body politic.

Conclusion: the *Coloso*, bad taste that did die

Among other things, this story shows how representations and artworks, even those sponsored by the state, are contingent, and their power lies precisely in their ambiguity and openness to interpretation. There is “no simple correlation (...) between state sponsorship and explicit political content” (Schnapp 1993, 92). This is why the same symbols and spectacles that produce idealized representations of the state can also create “alternative spaces of irony and ambivalence” (Wedeen 1999, 30). The plan to build a literal body politic with which people would identify failed. People did not see themselves reflected in that body. Instead, the body was seen either as a specific individual or as an anonymous cadaver.

Peter Carrier, in his study on the Holocaust monuments, argues that monuments should be defined not as isolated objects but as social processes, as a meeting of symbols and words.

Contemporary monuments are largely meaningless if encountered in isolation from their accompanying public debates. Planning and formal styles are determined by a number of

³⁰ http://www.latinobarometro.org/documentos/LATBD_INFORME_LATINOBAROMETRO_2010.pdf

agents and social forces in open conflict: politicians, artists, local and national administrators, local and national traditions, and competition procedures. A true picture of what a monument means can therefore only be attained by taking into consideration all these forces and agents (2006, 22).

Carrier's claims echo Hannah Arendt's insistence that the public realm is constituted by the spectators who are constantly judging all kinds of artifacts such as artworks, narratives, and events (1982, 63). Although Arendt tends to stress "the judging activity of the spectators" over the production and existence of the objects that are judged, it is both the spectator and the objects which create a public space (Zerilli 2005, 179).

The commemorations, and the figure of the *Coloso* in particular, certainly generated a discussion between the population and the government, and among the citizens themselves, many of whom did not know one another. Through these debates, temporary political communities were created, most of which were in clear contradistinction to the state. Like other monuments and artworks, the *Coloso* became an object that brought people together (the representatives and the represented) not because they agreed about what the figure meant or what it represented, or about its aesthetic criteria, but precisely because they disagreed.³¹ The commonalities that emerged when people judged a figure like the *Coloso* were by no means given in advance of the act of judgment itself. In this way, this figure together with the spectators and critics, created a public realm and a community. As Arendt claims, "We all know very well how quickly people recognize each other, and how unequivocally they can feel that they belong [or do not belong] to each other, when they discover [or fail to discover] a kinship in questions of what pleases and displeases" (Arendt, 1968, 223).

³¹ For an account of how objects and things become divisive matters of concern which, nonetheless, bring people together see Latour (2005).

The *Coloso* together with the rest of the commemorations worked to show people's discontent with the political regime and system, but failed to generate any common project or goal that might invite citizens to work in tandem with or without the state. The abandonment of the *Coloso* might be a reflection of such failure: the figure was never permanently placed in the Bicentennial Park as was initially intended. A few months ago, three years after the parade when it was first displayed took place, the *Coloso* remained dismembered, partly covered by the same white sheets that helped to protect it from the rain during the event, and rotting in a parking lot of a building that belongs to the federal Department of Education.

The difference between the monuments Carrier studies and those that were used during the commemorations in Mexico, including the *Coloso*, has to do with the fact that the debates did not precede the creation of the monument, but rather followed both its creation and display. Unlike what happened in Paris and Berlin in relation to several national memorials, Mexican citizens were not consulted by the state as to how they wanted to celebrate the occasion, but neither did they organize themselves in order to advocate (or stop) the construction of specific sites.³² Perhaps one of the reasons why the *Coloso* was never permanently placed in the Bicentennial Park as per the original plan was a result of the jokes and negative reaction from the public following its brief display during the parade. It is hard to know if this was the case, or if the abandonment of the *Coloso* resulted, instead, from some bureaucratic conundrum or neglect. In any case, the situation invites us to reflect upon the meaning of monuments to democracy and their relationship to permanence and ephemerality.

³² People did protest against the construction of the Senate building and against the *Estela de Luz* but only after the costs of these were made public and the decision to build them had already been taken.

What to make of the ephemerality of the *Coloso*? Should we rejoice at the fact that such a controversial figure did not permanently become part of Mexico City's landscape? Could we, perhaps, read this as a triumph of the debates that took place in the public sphere? Even if this is not the case, can we still celebrate the fact that we don't ever have to see this statue again? As art critic María Minera recently claimed with respect to the monument *Estela de Luz*: "Is it only because nearly fifteen hundred million pesos were spent on the *Estela de Luz* that we have to bear living with it for the rest of our lives? (...) Isn't it wise to change one's mind? We should tear it down and end with it." (2014, 24). The same claim could have been made of the *Coloso*, had he in fact not been torn down and left to rot.

As several scholars have pointed out, objects and things, including monuments, memorials, and artworks, provide the shape and necessary durability that is needed to assure stability and continuity in human life, which is itself brief and ever-changing (Arendt 1998; Latour 2005). Political theorist Bonnie Honig, borrowing a term from psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, recently argued that objects are part of democracy's "holding environment," because healthy democracies are rooted in "common love for and contestation of public things. Without such things, citizenship in neoliberal democracies risks being reduced to repetitive (private) work (...) and exceptional (public) emergencies" (2013, 59-60).³³ If in fact the durability of objects is something so valuable, particularly given the voracious consumption and industrialization characteristic of our times, then what to make of the increasing ephemerality of these objects? What to make

³³ What really matter, Honnig argues, is not simply to have those public things, but how we relate to these things. "Do those public objects interpellate those shaped by them into equality? Are we energized or depleted by them? Are they a prod to new forms of life, imagination creativity, resilience or joy?" (Honnig 2013, 68).

of the fact that objects in general, including monuments, tend to last less and less, only to quickly be replaced by new ones? The stability and continuity that is created by objects is increasingly hard to find not because they do not exist, but rather because they can and are quickly substituted.

Perhaps, the question then becomes the following: how to create monuments or public artworks that might withstand the toll of time, but that are, at the same time, open to timely discussions? Writer Robert Musil famously wrote that, “There is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument. They are no doubt created to be seen—indeed, to attract attention. But at the same time they are impregnated with something that repels attention” (in Young 1993, 13). This “something”, as James E. Young rightly points out, is “the essential stiffness monuments share with all other images (...) [that] necessarily vitrifies its otherwise dynamic referent, a monument turns pliant memory to stone” (Young 1993, 13). Many issues, such as national memory, cannot be embodied or represented by a single object, given the plurality of interests that are at stake and the fact that these interests change continuously over time. A plethora of examples of national monuments that have failed to live up to their aspirations abound. Artists and architects around the world have responded to this preoccupation by creating “vanishing” or “counter-monuments” which are characterized by heeding the constant participation of the public but also by making them ephemeral.

Mexico is no exception: In fact, the turn to ephemerality is seen by the local contemporary art world as a positive attribute. Cuauhtémoc Medina, one of Mexico’s most renowned curators, recently argued that “one of the main civic values that contemporary art performs is its relative mortality” (2014, 22). It is hard to disagree with

Medina: after all, “in a nation whose every plaza and crossroad is plagued by a tradition of monuments defined by what writer Carlos Monsiváis called ‘bad taste that never dies’” (Medina 2014, 22) ephemerality might be a much welcomed trait that not only counters “bad taste” but also the authoritarian spectacle characteristic of traditional monuments.

Although the *Coloso* was not planned as an ephemeral monument, it ended up being one. Much like other objects and events that were part of the commemorations that took place less than four years ago, this monument is now almost entirely forgotten. The same is true about many of the people who have died as a result of the war on drugs. Since the election of Enrique Peña Nieto and the return of the PRI to power in 2012, the “pathological public sphere” seems to have disappeared. In many ways, democratic regimes are tainted with ephemerality; they follow time spans based on electoral cycles and campaigns which frequently prevent the pursuit of any long (or longer)-term goal or encourage oblivion. It is difficult to know when this ephemerality is a result of democratic forces and when, instead, is the result of a habitus of consumption. This war is no longer a priority in the events covered by the media and, at least in Mexico, there is less talk about the war on drugs and the consequent killings. The topic of commemorating in times of violence no longer seems timely either. In actuality, however, the number of deaths due to this war continues to rise, and given the increasing silence (censorship perhaps?) in the press when it comes to this topic, one has to wonder how art—which, for now, seems to occupy a safer space, being less censored and considered as less dangerous than other voices in the public press—can intervene.

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