



Mexican art and design as reflection and social denunciation of migration. Interview with Betsabeé Romero, 2019

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ABSTRACT: Contemporary Mexican artists and designers have managed to communicate the reality of migrants from 1930 to date and have encouraged society to reflect on this issue through activism. As an example, the work of the visual artist Betsabeé Romero explains us how she represents her social complaint through her art, with the theme of migration.

Keywords: Betsabeé Romero. Mexico migration. Contemporary and popular art. Activism.

1 INTRODUCTION

Design, architecture and art are the reflection of society within a certain time and space. It responds to the needs of a historical moment than changes according to the political, social and cultural conditions. From the historical avant-garde with Futurism, Surrealism and Dadaism to the use of Grafitti, performance and Urban Art during the XX century, the new way of communicating through social art was permeated. Art in the XXI century has established itself as a space of political, social and cultural experience rather than merely artistic (ROMEU ALDAYA, 2017) and sometimes be mediators and a bridge between people who have experienced a personal or family immigration process.

This is when activism arises. It is a hybridization between art and activism. This is defined as a new language that appears outside museums and art academies, being configured toward urban and social spaces with the aim of using it as a tool for social transformation (ALADRO-VICO; JIVKOVA-SEMOVA; BAILEY, 2018) before the different problems to provoke a public debate. Art has become, then, a way to ask, to remind the community of the responsibility to face tensions and inequalities (MANONELLES, 2009) as in the case of migration, a topic that currently afflicts so many communities.

There are several social studies, of social anthropology, of social, artistic and urban activism on the subject of migration such as those carried out in Mexico by Angel Giglia, Luis Valarezo, Lourdes Arispe, Guillermo Boils, Vivian Romeu and monographs on the works of visual artists and Photographers like Betsabeé Romero, Gerardo Suter, however, there is no document that has analyzed in a relational way the contemporary migratory historiography of Mexico and the respective artistic productions in Mexico.

The text will be divided into two parts. The first will expose the historical process in correlation with Mexican artistic proposals for the general understanding of the art of emigration, with special emphasis on the displacements of Mexicans to the United States. And finally, the work of Betsabeé Romero, a Mexican visual artist interested in contemporary and popular Mexican art, will be exhibited.

2 METHODOLOGY: THE DESIGN FOR SOWING PEACE

It is a qualitative, documentary and historiographic investigation of visual art with the theme of migration. An interview was conducted with the visual artist Betsabeé Romero where she explains contemporary art and its relationship with the migrant.

3 RESULTS

Contemporary artists, through so-called relational art or emergency art, seek an essentially political art, that is, with the subversion of the power of art, an institution of power (CALVO, 2011). Activism on the other hand, as Lippard (1984) says, is not an oppositional art but works with alternative images, metaphors, irony, humor, provocation or compassion, to generate an informative process. What distinguishes it from political art is the progressive, developing character than leads it to work

within contexts, to be directly involved in the public social space and to represent in direct contact with the people (ALADRO-VICO; JIVKOVA-SEMOVA; BAILEY, 2018).

That is why the artistic proposals that will be explained later, referring to the border and to the migrants, are a reflection of the identity and of the processes of transformation of the culture and tradition that have been generated in the era of the Globalization represented through installations and plastic proposals.

To understand the phenomenon of migration, we must mention that the importance of the phenomenon is that it is precisely the second half of the twentieth century, the era where it has had its peak. Migration is a social problem that derives and is related to politics (VALAREZO, 2018). This has caused great chain changes that range from increasing cultural exchange, encouraging globalization that does not recognize borders, to crime and insecurity issues such as sexual commerce with women and children, organized crime and terrorism (ARIZPE, 2015).

The public who likes contemporary art has the need to understand the work and perceive it through their senses and their intellect. Therefore, it is important to provide a concept to each proposal, although the work is endogenous, that is, it is related to the ideo-aesthetic discourse and the internal problems of the field of art itself. However, activism, on the contrary, seeks belonging from the assumption of the artist's social-social role, so that his political posture allows him to express his feelings through his artistic proposal (CALVO, 2011). Therefore, the strength of activism is to possess a type of communication and catalytic power to indicate injustice, inequality or emptiness in human development. It works to revitalize the word of human sensations and cognition (ALADRO-VICO; JIVKOVA-SEMOVA; BAILEY, 2018) and that is just what the next plastic proposals show us. Harvesting, post-harvest and processing of Cumare.

The traditional management of chambira palm populations in the region in terms of harvesting, processing of raw material, processing and marketing of items has been demarcated by ancestral practices still adopted by indigenous women of the two communities.

The Tukanos moves for long journeys of road between 4 and 5 hours' round trip until the areas of collection of cumare, prefer to collect in adjacent lands to chagras, also near military checkpoints (police, army) by the proximity of cultivation areas. As far as the Nukak are concerned, they do not harvest but, they gather according to their needs, they make strategic trips to secondary forests near paths where settlers live, rarely go alone to collect cumare and take advantage of mobility to collect more fruits such as honey, fish and to lower seeds or fruits of other palms, these are the factors that help to mark the strategic areas of mobility.

The women begin the trek making long journeys of 5 to 6 hours on the way and return another 5 hours, they look in morichales and stubble forest because in these conditions the cumare grows.

In contrast, the two ethnic groups have different harvesting methods, the Nukak harvest without being guided by the fact that the palm has characteristics suitable for harvesting, practice an unnecessarily destructive use by tearing down the palm to cut the buds, lower its fruits and attract the Mojojoy (larva coleopteran) causing an intentional sacrifice of the cumare unlike the Tukano that use a non-destructive harvesting method by cutting the leaves and taking the fruits without knocking down the palm, using as a tool the crescent in which at one end they hook the bud and pull it hard to cut it, these practices were considered as one of the key axes in the decision making in the establishment of the action strategies. Having said this, the processing of the cumare is divided into the prior preparation of the fiber under appropriate drying conditions, cooking to prevent the fiber from deteriorating faster and staining, which includes the twisting of the fiber or spinning to obtain long and thick ropes joined by several filaments of yarn, this process provides stability and resistance to the fabric. Thus Chambira fiber is dyed with natural pigments and commercial dyes based on chemical anilines (artificial dyes) the Tukano occasionally use commercial products (instant powdered soda), on the other hand, the Nukak leave some fibers without staining because, they prefer the natural color of the fiber. Among the natural pigments used are:

- Pucapanga – Carayuru (Arrabidaea Chica) dark reddish color
- Achiote (Bixa Orellana) light reddish color
- Turmeric – Choique (Curcuma Longa) yellow color
- Beet (Beta Vulgaris) purple color
- Acai (Euterpe Precatoria) light purple color

The Tukanos add salt and lemon as binders to lighten the shades and better fix the color in the fiber, the Nukak do not use any biting to dye the fiber.

4 HISTORIOGRAPHY OF ARTISTIC WORKS ON MIGRANTS 1930-2019

The history of migratory displacements in Mexico has a past of just over one hundred and thirty years (ARIZPE, 2017). Before, there was only an internal migration derived from labor supply and demand in the agricultural environment. It was until the 19th century when the migration of Mexicans to the United States of America began, whose driving factor was the connection between the Mexican railroad of the Paso del Norte and the American rail network in 1884. Later with the Mexican revolution (1910-1917) peasants, cowboys, day laborers and landowners who broke racial boundaries, preserved national territorial integrity and managed to bring together cultural, ethnic elements in search of Mexican nationalism (ARIZPE, 2015).

The post-revolutionary stage was characterized by its constant political movements in favor of peasants and those with less power; improvement in infrastructure and urban planning. These were reflected in socio-cultural aspects (art, lifestyle and education), health (interior spaces and architectural programs) and economic. The answers were diverse, becoming a melting pot of contributions in the world of design, art and architecture. The indigenous and the popular merged to give body to a new art that reflected Mexican culture; Hence the mural painting, literary and cinematographic works, stylistic styles and architectural movements. (MAGAÑA, 2017).

As a first indication of the reflection of the migrant society, there is the portable mural that Diego Rivera presented for his retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in NY (MOMA) between 1931 and 1932 entitled Frozen Funds, through which he criticizes the economic inequalities that exist with the dispossessed immigrant workers that made the city's growth possible.

From the forties, with President Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940-1946) Mexico expanded its industrial plant and increased the import of manufactured products in the United States, which led to the industry and work being concentrated in the City of Mexico. It was here when the migration of peasants and indigenous people between different states began to be evident. For the sixties with presidents Adolfo López Mateos (1958-1964) and Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-1970), this migration was the result of expulsion factors aggravated by the high population growth and the high poverty rate that existed mainly in Tlaxala, Oaxaca and Chiapas. In such a way that the integration of indigenous people to the city led to awareness of cultural pluralism and the right to conservation of indigenous languages and cultures. (ARIZPE, 2015)

In this period (1942-1964), the Bracero Program between Mexico and the United States was signed, a period that coincides with the Petroleum Expropriation, the Agrarian Reform and the end of the Second World War. The United States needed to improve its production goals, which required farmers and workers. In this phase, the undocumented or "wet" had a contract in which they could return to Mexico. Immigrants from other regions were included in this program, so the US government began implementing the visa program starting in 1968.

It was under this political context that the idea of art emerged as a form of conceptual art research. At this time the artists opposed the vision of art as an isolated production of history, politics and the social world, and way of thinking and cognitive knowledge. (GARCÍA-HUDOBRO, 2015).

The work is materialized in artistic elements that strengthen the idea, pointing to the burden of meaning that a possible cultural alteration has on an individual by adopting customs outside his people, creating social impacts that determine changes in families and destabilizing their customs (VALAREZO, 2018).

The first example we have of this movement was when the artists joined the so-called Chicano movement, an abbreviated form of Mexican. About his work it is possible to find Rupert García, Gilbert Luján, Carlos Almaraz, Patsi Valadez and Eloy Torrez. In the sixties and seventies several groups were created, such as Mechicano, Self-Help Graphics and Plaza de la Raza (ARIZPE, 2015).

For 1997, the Tijuana Cultural Center was founded where Marcos Ramírez Erre performed the Toy an horse work. It is a horse of monumental proportions that the artist located on the border as a metaphor of the Trojan Horse (ARIZPE, 2015). A similar object, was designed by Alfredo Gutierrez, a Tijuanaense artist, who installed a wooden structure in the form of coyote right in the area of Lechería in Tultitlán (State of Mexico) as it is one of the points where “The Beast” passes, the train network that transports migrants from Central and South America. It is a piece of wood, and it also keeps a map that locates the places where migrants can go, shelters and routes.

“It’s not just a sculpture, the coyote is designed to serve as a point of reference, rest and meeting point for migrants on their way to the United States” and whose message is ... I don’t know you, but I care about you” (CRUZ, 2017).

Mexican artist Enrique Chiu conceptualized the border wall of more than a thousand kilometers as a mural and with striking colors. He called it “Brotherhood Mural”, as a way to unite the two nations that are divided. Murals convey messages of peace to people who cross the border by car or on foot and also claim to be a final vision

of hope for migrants who are in danger when crossing north (ENRIQUE..., 2018). Similarly, Noel Vargas Hernández, a Oaxacan artist painted the border wall with the United States as a social activity in which he represented a cornfield without corn, the food that represents the quintessential Mexican culture.

“We are all corn, because thanks to corn we have food in families, we are all corn” (NOTIMEX, 2019).

The architect Ronald Rael, in 2009 designed the border wall of the United States and Mexico called “Teeter Totter Wall” in Sunland Park. It is a foothold where children from both countries live together and play in a healthy way to show what happens on one side of the border.

Also within the scope of photography, in 1994 the photographer Eniac Martínez took as inspiration the flow of migrants between the United States and Mexico to create the Mixtecos photojournalistic project: North / South for the National Indigenist Institute. In it, he exposed the reality of the Mixtecs of northern Oaxaca. And Gerardo Suter, in his photographic work, exposed the adversities that migrants have to cross from their countries of origin and the borders of the world.

Suter redefines the relationships between original texts, sounds and images to build a story that transcends the weak temporality of news photography (...) these pieces by Gerardo Suter enrich a critical look at this drama and incorporate us as partners in the terrible stories of forced migration (PALACIOS, 2019).

As we have realized throughout the text, the semantic language of activism implies the use of the artist’s subject as a means to interrupt abstraction or to avoid the loss of representative capacity. During this process, the subjectivity of the artist is used as a bifurcation system of political discourse, to make it reach the people.

“The structure of subjectivity forks: the subject is understood as a sensational subject of desires and bodily needs and on the other hand, the desiring subject in the discourse, denoting its biological level through the symbolic” (KOMBAROV, 2017).

Betsabeé Romero

Art can touch consciences so that dreams do not disappear, scars have no border form.

Betsabeé Romero

Betsabeé Romero (1963) is a Mexican visual artist who studied the Bachelor of Communication at the Iberoamericana University and a Master of Visual Arts and a PhD at the UNAM. She also studied at the School of Fine Arts in Paris.

His art was considered contemporary in a mix with popular art focused on denunciation and social issues such as migration, traditions and miscegenation.

Betsabeé Romero has participated in more than 20 biennials and has held more than 40 individual exhibitions in Mexico and abroad. Among those that stand out are those of the British Museum, the San Ildefonso College, Carrillo Gil Museum of Art, the UNISA University of South Africa and the Recoleta in Buenos Aires. This trajectory has made her one of the main representatives of Latin American art of the 21st century (HISTORY NOW, 2019).

Below is an interview that was conducted with the artist Betsabeé Romero (2019), in which she explains her artistic process; her political stance toward.

(CM) What is your creative process to reinterpret and unify so many cultures and synthesize them into a single identity called migrant?

(BR) In my artistic practice the phenomenon unfolds into several frontier concepts. From the symbolic border to the geographical one. For example, the symbolic frontier in which migrants are separated from others; of how there are social symbolic borders such as when they ask for a visa to enter a restaurant or certain shopping centers. These social barriers of socioeconomic levels, of race, sex, of religion generate borders and hard edges especially in large cities such as Tijuana in the north or towards the southern border. On this last point, it was terrible to realize the cases of illegality, the lack of respect for Human Rights right on the border with Guatemala and Honduras.

(CM) Postmoderns do not plant new ideas, they only reinterpret the reality that surrounds them, they pose the hybridization of constructivism where they take back values from the past and reinvent them. Under this scheme, a sublimation through art, what concept parties and why migrants, women, peace?

(BR) Well, I think it is a phenomenon that has global but also very local facets, so this question of the "glocal". To understand it you have to go into the history of each site and I believe that, in that sense I have a historian, social sciences and communicologist training, but especially in Research. It was so, through a social methodology, that I have entered into art and its relationship with the traditional public through my facilities.

(CM) Do you consider that your art is objectual and ephemeral, that is to say that art is incorporated into an everyday object of artistic production where traditional iconography is replaced by theory so that viewers can try new concepts, these are the ones that Do you describe the fit of all your works?

(BR) Well, my concepts always accompany the work. However, sometimes I consider that there is a lack of attention precisely to the public in relation to the doors that may have towards a work, towards its content, then as far as I can do it because I do it, although the work is what the work is, and it does not have to be ephemeral because it is conceptual and it does not have to be ephemeral because it is in an everyday object and it does not have to be ephemeral because I use recycled objects for nothing, bone, unfortunately the tires, just do not die are of the materials that They are garbage, they recycle little and last a lot.

(CM) Based on this, what concepts in common are you applying in the facilities of your facilities in museums? What symbolic elements do you use in common in all of them? On the “altar on the borders of Mexico”, on the border of the United States, the “place, imagination and possibility”, the “altar to the unknown migrant”

(BR) In common I would tell you that there is an attempt to accompany the grief of those who have lost relatives in their wake. On the other hand, it is to make a presence in terms of common culture beyond the border in the sense of intertwining the Mexican that may exist on one or the other side of the border, since there is a fairly strong debt to the artists who exercise the other side. Chicano artists are like other types of artists. And I believe that Mexican culture unfolds throughout the entire territory of where there are Mexicans. There definitely is a way to subvert the political issue and geopolitical divisions by recognizing that this culture today in terms of culinary, design, art, music, is on both sides. It is to recognize that, to reinforce that and to draw ties between those who do it on one side or the other of the border, is in itself to make a resistance.

(CM) Your work seeks to touch the viewer with the senses, is it interactive?

(BR) But that does not mean that it is only with the senses, the interaction is cognitive, and it has to do with rational knowledge. Knowledge for me is not only rational, I believe that the experience of art is a form of knowledge that luckily involves in

addition to reason, all the senses, and that is why I think it can be an experience where knowledge can be appropriate the person more comprehensively.

Betsabeé in several of its facilities as Footprints that bloom, in the Clavijero Cultural Center, Morelia, 2019; Your mark is the road, Rubin Center, El Paso Texas, 2018; Ballad for Peace, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2017; Your mark is the road, your flag is from Paz, Ciudad Juárez, 2017; Walled, Arizona, 2017, shows us the mix of contemporary art and popular art. He specializes in topics that talk about everyday life, their traditions, rites, identity and religion through different symbols such as tires, tattoos, cars, textiles, demonstrating with us that their facilities are a reflection of the contradictions that have generated globalization and what we call modernity.

5 CONCLUSION

Contemporary art and design, linked to the social and political sciences, have brought categories and paradigms of modernity, since they have generated impacts and questions to society as is the case of migrants. With base is that artists and designers like Betsabeé Romero, have developed creative processes from a social, philosophical and aesthetic analysis through symbolic illustration capable of producing social and educational changes.

Artivists like Betsabeé Romero generates “things” because it breaks the structure of conventional communication, breaking into the social space, through emotionalization, subjectivization, breaking and invasion of spaces or adapting non-artistic means and times to artistic expression (ALADRO-VICO; JIVKOVA-SEMOVA; BAILEY, 2018). The results are that his art connects directly with people’s daily lives through material and pragmatic elements than make them responsible for the social structure and urban context.

It is from his contributions that his works generate an impact even more tangible than a text, since “the true work of art is not the physical object produced by the artist, but consists of “concept” and “ideas” (VÁSQUEZ ROCCA, 2013) who stay in the collective memory and teach the feelings of migrants and their respective families.

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