ZAPATISTA:

Imagery of the Peasant Revolutionary

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Cover Image: Produced by Gráfica Malla, *¡El Zapatismo existe Y resiste!*,date unknown. Cultural ephemera preserved at Interference Archive, Brooklyn, NY. Courtesy of the Archive.

Right Image: Elizabeth Mota, Detail of *¡La Autonomia se siembra!*, 2014. Cultural ephemera preserved at Interference Archive, Brooklyn, NY. Courtesy of the Archive.

Imagery of the Peasant Revolutionary

Curated by Rose Bishop '17 , Natasha Siyumbwa '17,
and Jenna Wendler '17

With additional research and text by Harlee Mollenkopf '17,
Gabrielle Bing '19, Ally Cirelli '19, Erica Littlejohn '19,
Jess Alperin '18, Roberto Vásquez '19, Phoebe Pohl '18,
Caroline Chang '18, and Hannah Anain '19

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Gambier, Ohio

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Introduction

After the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in January 1994, over 3,000 guerilla soldiers emerged from the jungles of Chiapas and declared war on the Mexican government. Known as the Zapatistas, these soldiers stormed the state capital clad in distinctive black ski masks and red *paliacates*, responding to the government's continuing disregard for the land rights of indigenous people. NAFTA signaled a tipping point for the rural people of Chiapas, as the trade agreement forced small farmers to compete economically with larger agricultural operations in the US and Canada. The group's concern for indigenous land rights has historical roots in the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) as led by peasant hero Emiliano Zapata (1879-1919), the Zapatistas' namesake.[1]

The Zapatistas were ill equipped in comparison to the heavily armed state forces, but that was beside the point. Many soldiers carried sticks carved in the shape of guns or knives, which acted as props in a highly effective performance of political theater. The goal of this uprising — which lasted two short weeks — was not necessarily to incite violence; instead, the Zapatistas employed the image of militancy to capture the attention of a wider audience. Local clergy brokered a peace agreement between the Zapatistas and the state, an action that precipitated the group's shift from violent to nonviolent protest.[2] From this point onward imagery of resistance and solidarity — rooted in the unconventional political performance of the 1994 uprising — became a central means of focusing international attention to issues important to the local peoples of Chiapas.

In particular, the Zapatistas relied heavily on printmaking as a means of generating awareness. Dating back to before the Revolution, printmaking has long been a platform for political propaganda and discourse in Mexico. Printmakers working at the turn of the 20th century, like José Guadalupe Posada, used printed imagery to communicate political messages to the illiterate populace, comprised mainly of peasants and indigenous peoples. In a similar manner, the Zapatistas rely on the immediacy of printed images to convey

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[1] John Holloway and Eloína Peláez, *Zapatista!: Reinventing Revolution in Mexico* (London: Pluto Press, 1998) 19.
[2] Brad Evans, "Revolution without Violence," *Peace Review*, 21 (2009), 85-94.

their message to local, national, and international audiences, as language poses barriers for cross-cultural comprehension. Additionally, printmaking allows for the economic production and distribution of their message through Chiapas and beyond. The Zapatistas work with printers in various parts of the country —notably urban centers such as Mexico City. In solidarity with the Zapatistas, these printers integrate posters, flyers, and pamphlets into urban street life and Mexican counterculture, making the Zapatista struggle an underlying presence in the national consciousness.[3] In tandem with their printmaking endeavors, the Zapatistas utilize the internet heavily, posting art, writing, and music online in efforts to reach audiences transnationally.[4]

This unconventional and multifaceted approach to political activism has led many to charge the Zapatistas with inciting the first "postmodern" revolution, an idea that can be further understood through the study of their art and propaganda.[5] While postmodernism has a particularly nebulous definition, it is best understood as a reaction against Modernism. Modernism has been criticized for championing narratives of social, political, and technological progress in a relatively narrow and linear fashion, largely excluding the voices of minorities and women. Seeing as the development of Modernism in Mexico coincided with the Mexican Revolution — the historical predecessor of the Zapatistas — this exhibition aims to clarify this relationship through the presentation of art and ephemera from both movements.

The treatment of the individual most notably distinguishes Zapatista propaganda from the art of the Mexican Revolution. Modernist artists centered the struggle for autonomy on the dignity of the individual. In doing so, these artists were able to bring stately themes of freedom and sovereignty down to a human level, shedding the didacticism present in previous modes of politically motivated art. Yet, Modernist constructions of Mexican peasants were sometimes problematic, more often reflecting the cultural background and biases of the artist over accurate portrayals of indigenous identity.[6] Take for example Manuel Álvarez Bravo's *Mayan Boy of Tulum*, in which Bravo represents a child of indigenous descent standing next to an ancient Pre-Columbian statue. While Bravo positively asserts that the power of the modern indigenous struggle stems from their Mayan predecessors, he inadvertently reinforces othering tropes of indigenous mysticism and decline. Bravo's interpretation of the Mexican indigenous population is in fact rooted in European artistic traditions, such as Primitivism and Surrealism, schools of thought Bravo explored as a member of the art elite in Mexico City.[7]

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[3] Interview with Kevin Caplicki, Interference Archive, by Rose Bishop, Natasha, Siyumbwa, and Jenna Wendler, March 2017.

[4] Evans, "Revolution without Violence," 86.

[5] Roger Burbach, Bill Robinson, and Fiona Jeffries, *Globalization and Postmodern Politics : From Zapatistas to High Tech Robber Barons* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 1-21.

[6] Mary Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art Became an Official Culture: Murals, Museums, and the Mexican State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 5-12.

[7] Benjamin R. Fraser, "Problems of Photographic Criticism and Question of Truly Revolutionary Image: The Photographs of Mario Algaze, Juan Rulfo, and Manuel Alvarez Bravo," *Chasqui*, 33.2, (Nov. 2004), 104-122.

Similarly, José Clemente Orozco made work featuring peasant revolutionaries with foreign art audiences in mind. Orozco's lithograph *Rear Guard* is based on a series of drawings made in 1926, entitled *Horrores de la Revolución*. The series reflects Orozco's personal reckoning with the bloody reality of the revolutionary struggle, featuring graphic and brutal renderings of bodily violence. In 1928, American patron Anita Brenner brought the drawings to a host of New York art dealers and gallerists to little fanfare. At this time U.S. audiences consumed a domesticated image of Mexico that promoted idyllic depictions of rural life. Primed by years of anti-Mexican rhetoric, the graphic nature of Orozco's series seemed to confirm negative stereotypes promulgated about Mexico in the U.S. Orozco decided to turn the drawings into a series of lithographs, removing many of the brutalized bodies characteristic of the original body of work as to appeal to U.S. audiences' expectations.[8] While *Rear Guard* is relatively faithful to the original drawing, the work's focus on a unified group of female fighters presents a relatively tame view of the Revolution, fitting for the reinvented themes presented in the new series. Yet, the dark undertones of *Rear Guard* still challenged American tastes, as the work offers an ambivalent alternative to more heroic portrayals of the peasant revolutionary.

José Clemente Orozco (Mexican, 1883-1949)

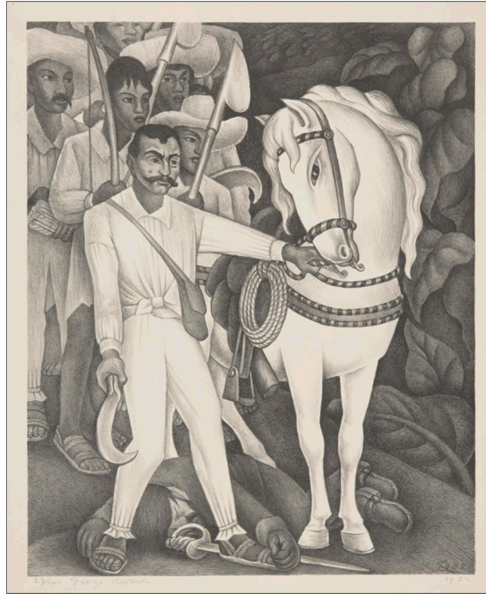
Rear Guard, 1929.
Lithograph.
15 3/4 x 22 3/4 inches.
Collection of the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts; Director's Fund Purchase, 1964/5.740.

Other artists, notably Diego Rivera, structured the indigenous struggle around a single figure, such as revolutionary hero Emiliano Zapata. Early on in the Revolution, Zapata, a mestizo farmer from Southern Mexico, challenged the political power of landowning *hacendados*, positioning him as a major revolutionary leader in the South. In 1911 he drafted the Plan of Ayala, which called for the redistribution of land among indigenous populations, a revolutionary proposition that ultimately never fully came to fruition. He was assassinated by the state in 1919, but lived on in Mexican cultural memory as a monumental figure representative of the diverse needs of rural communities.[9] Rivera's 1932 lithograph *Zapata* proudly

[8] Anna Indych, "Made for the USA: *Horrores de la Revolución*," *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estèticas* 79 (2001), 153-164.

[9] Enrique Krauze, *Mexico Biography of Power: A History of Modern Mexico, 1810-1996*, trans. Hank Heifetz (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), 274-305.

perpetuates such mythology, depicting Zapata heroically standing over the dead body of a wealthy landowner, with his followers dressed-identically in white behind him. Rivera's focus on Zapata's leadership inadvertenly excludes any narratives of difference or discord among revolutionaries. Additionally, it perpetuates an uplifting retelling of the revolutionary struggle at odds with the revolution's true outcome for rural Mexicans. This flattening of Zapata into a monolithic marker of peasant identity ironically lent itself to later propaganda designed by the state to promote a positive, unified national narrative.[10]



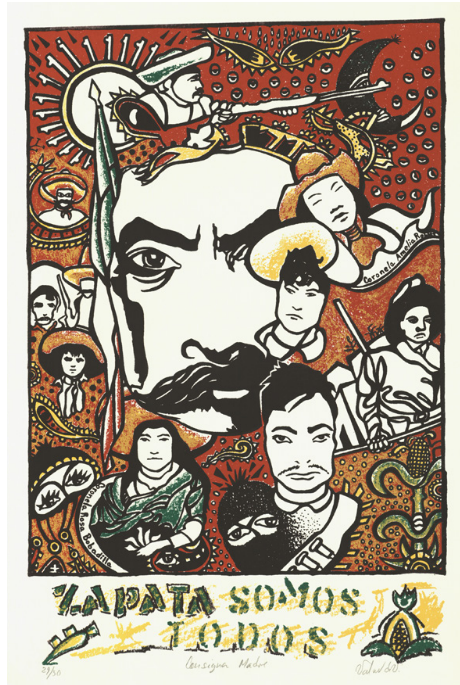
Diego M. Rivera
(Mexican, 1886-1957)

Zapata, 1932.
Lithograph.
22 1/2 x 16 inches.
Collection of the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts; Director's Fund Purchase, 1964/5.741.

The government's co-opting of the peasant revolutionary struggle into its iconographic platform did little to serve communities championed by Zapata. This discrepancy reached a tipping point with the signing of NAFTA in 1994, the moment that launched the Zapatistas. The Zapatistas fought against the hollow irony of state-sponsored attitudes surrounding indigenous people, which to a certain extent were promoted by art. In stark contrast to the Modernist art on display, the art of the Zapatistas finds visual power in the anonymous and collective. For the Zapatistas, political action was guided by the local community's needs, and progress could only be achieved through a confluence of diverse people and ideas, not through a single great man.[11] While Zapata is a recurring character in the art of the Zapatistas, he is often placed alongside masked rebels — both male and female — and iconography pulled from indigenous, Catholic, Communist, and capitalist traditions in a non-hierarchal fashion. This democratic approach to iconography reflects the Zapatistas' egalitarian ideology, in which community consensus and difference championed over individual leadership. Through the postmodern pastiche of symbolism, the Zapatistas sought to challenge established truths and structures in order to make room for historically silenced narratives.

For example, in the poster *Consigna Madre/Zapata Somos Todo* (which translates to "Mother's slogan/We are all Zapata") dozens of figures and forms —

[10] Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art Became an Official Culture*, 13.
[11] Evans, "Revolution without Violence," 95.



Antonio Valverde Villagrán

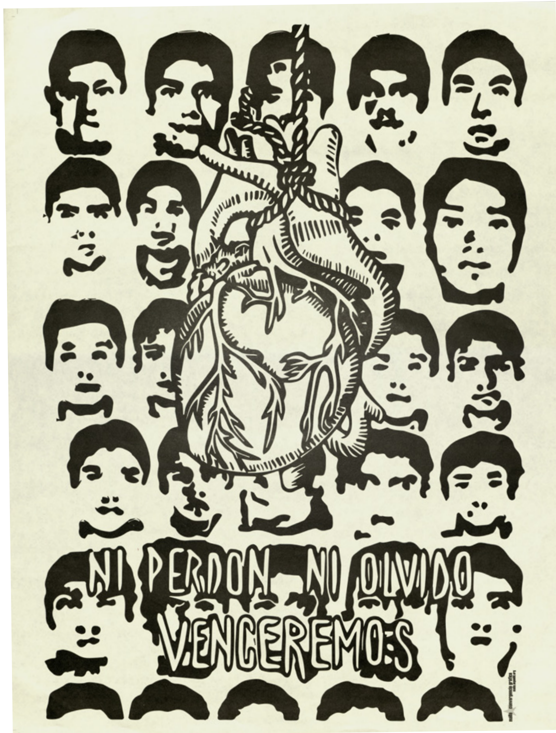
Consigna madre/Zapata somos todos, date unknown.
Screenprint.
19 3/4 x 12 7/8 inches.
Cultural ephemera preserved at Interference Archive, Brooklyn, NY.

ranging from masked Zapatistas to maize to the Communist star — are chaotically overlaid against an abstracted depiction of Zapata, who is quietly reduced to his identifying features In doing so the artist makes room for lesser-known leaders, Amelio Robles and Rosa Bobadilla, who appear over Zapata's eye and below his mouth respectively. Robles, a colonel in the revolution, was an openly transgender man, whose transition was institutionally recognized and accepted by the Mexican government.[12] Bobadilla led a cavalry unit with her son, becoming a tabloid sensation in Mexico and abroad.[13] By superimposing Robles and Bobadilla over Zapata's image, the artist complicates the historically masculine picture of the Revolution. In keeping with Zapatista ideology, this poster reinforces the relationship between the peasant fighters of the Mexican Revolution and the Zapatistas, while simultaneously critiquing the hierarchy of this historical lineage.

The postmodern approach to political art championed by the Zapatistas continues to influence contemporary activist culture in Mexico. Protest material stemming from the 2014 Ayotzinapa tragedy provides a compelling counterpoint to Zapatista propaganda. Similar to the Zapatista movement, the Ayotzinapa protests grew out of a continuing concern over the state's failure to address corruption within the police and other government agencies. In September 2014, a group of 43 students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers' College in Guerrero went missing en route to Mexico City. Near the town of Iguala, state police intercepted the students and a confrontation ensued. While the details of what occurred remain unclear, it is believed that the students were handed over to a local crime syndicate and presumably killed. The government did little to address the situation, not out of fear of crime organizations, but out of complicity, inciting widespread

[12] Stephany Slaughter, "Queering the Memory of the Mexican Revolution: Cabaret as a Space for Contesting National Memory," *Letras Femeninas* 37.1 (2011), 47-70.
[13] Andrés Reséndez Fuentes, "Battleground Women: Soldaderas and Female Soldiers in the Mexican Revolution," *The Americas*, 51.4 (Apr., 1995), 525-553.

protests in the region and beyond.[14] The political art and ephemera generated during these protests are visually and ideologically linked to the Zapatistas.The Ayotzinapa protesters, like the Zapatistas, found visual power in the combination of multiple sources. Notably, the Christian symbol of the sacred heart appears repeatedly throughout this body of work, often juxtaposed with the Communist star or Aztec-inspired patterns. A popular motif of Mexican Catholicism, the sacred heart symbolizes brutal sacrifice and martyrdom.[15] *Ni Perdon Ni Olvido Venceremos* confronts this weighty symbolism with full contempt, presenting the sacred heart hanging from a noose over images of the missing 43 students. In other works, such as *Estalla Corazon 43*, the sacred heart is impaled with a torch, passionately asserting that God's light will eventually expose the government's impunity.



Produced by Gráfica Malla

Ni perdón ni olvido venceremos, date unknown.
Poster.
22 1/2 x 17 inches.
Cultural ephemera preserved at Interference Archive, Brooklyn, NY.

Produced by Gráfica Malla

Estalla corazon 43, date unknown.
Poster.
22 1/2 x 17 1/8 inches.
Cultural ephemera preserved at Interference Archive, Brooklyn, NY.

Notions of truth, justice, and memory are often ciphered through careful portraits of the missing students, a notable divergence from the anonymous figures used in Zapatista propaganda. This tactic has far reaching global implications, rooted in the Argentinian activist group, Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. The

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[14] Kirk Semple, "Missing Mexican Students Suffered a Night of 'Terror,' Investigators Say," *New York Times*, April 24, 2016.

[15] Alice B. Kehoe, "The Sacred Heart: A Case for Stimulus Diffusion," *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (November, 1979), 763-771.

group was composed of mothers whose children had gone missing during the 1970s and 80s, a period rife with violence and state corruption in Argentine history. Challenging the state's complicity in these disappearances, the mothers organized several high profile marches across the country, in which they wore white head scarves stitched with their children's names, in addition to carrying their photographs. [16]

This form of protest replaced the absence of the missing children with the undeniable presence of their mothers, a tactic used by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer in his work dealing with the Ayotzinapa tragedy, *Level of Confidence*. Through the use of facial recognition software, the work analyzes the features of any viewer who approaches the work against those of the missing students, displaying the closest match in under a minute. While the machine's mission is in vain, as the students are most likely dead, *Level of Confidence* substitutes the faces of the missing students with those of museum-goers to challenge viewers to empathize with their absence on a personal and visceral level.

Although *Level of Confidence* diverges aesthetically and functionally from most of the art and ephemera on display, it is rooted in the same mindset of globally-facing, locally-rooted activism championed by the Zapatistas. Lozano-Hemmer made the software that powers *Level of Confidence* available online for free download, actively encouraging others to revise and expand upon the work.[17] The faces of the missing 43 students could, for example, be replaced with those of Black Americans killed by the police. The adaptable nature of Lozano-Hemmer's

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer
(Mexican, b. 1967)

Level of Confidence, 2015.
Face-recognition algorithms,
computer, screen, webcam.
Variable dimensions.
Courtesy of the artist.

[16] Margaret E. Burchianti, "Building Bridges of Memory: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Cultural Politics of Maternal Memories," *History and Anthropology* 15 (2004), 133-150.
[17] "Level of Confidence," Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, 2015, accessed April 11, 2017, http://www.lozano-hemmer.com/level_of_confidence.php.

work presents an opportunity for personal communion with victims of state violence across the globe. Simultaneously, the iteration of *Level of Confidence* designed for gallery spaces brings issues of state violence and inaction directly from the picket lines in Guerrero to the museum. In doing so, Lozano-Hemmer specifically reaches out to an international art audience who are otherwise separated from these problems geographically, politically, and economically.

In the same vein as Lozano-Hemmer's work, *Zapatista: Imagery of the Peasant Revolutionary* addresses the visibility of indigenous and Mexican concerns in the context of the museum. This exhibition seeks to trace an art-historical lineage from the canonized artists working in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution to the Zapatistas, and on to later Mexican activists in order to explore shifting political and visual constructions of *indigenismo* on the same plane of discussion. At the core of this historical dialog is the question of how to represent individual and communal identities. While the Modernist artists often positioned specific individuals as aestheticized representatives of their communities, later artists and activists destroyed such visual hierarchies among their subjects and sources. In turn, this postmodern mode of representation challenges the neutrality of viewers as members of an internationally connected community. Viewed from this perspective, the artwork on display questions how indigenous activism efforts in Mexico have historically resonated on a local, national, and global scale.

Rose Bishop '17
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