

AL FARO ZAPATISTA COLLECTION

Art and Politics in Contemporary Zapatismo: An Unbreakable Relationship

Francisco De Parres Gómez



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*To all of those who in their constant search build
freedom and harvest the seeds of life to face death...*

Art and Politics in Contemporary Zapatismo: An Unbreakable Relationship

Francisco De Parres Gómez

*But what are political actors if they are not in search of power?
Can one take them seriously, especially when they take refuge
in humor and self-irony? For the authorities, for the “realistic”
politicians of the political system, including the statist left,
the Zapatistas frequently pass as idealists or naïve dreamers.
The Ejército Popular Revolucionario (Popular Revolutionary
Army, EPR) even categorizes them as “guerrilla poets.” “Politics,”
affirms this guerrilla as “serious”; “the continuation of
poetry cannot be by other means.” Did Marcos not describe the
occupation of San Cristobal as a poem?*

Le Bot and Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos 1997: 35
(translation made for this edition)

Beyond being “the continuation of war by other means,” in contemporary Zapatismo we find a dialectical relationship between art and politics that we consider unbreakable, taking into account that, within the praxis of autonomous communities, the symbolic and poetic

power that they use to communicate their organizational proposals and articulate the struggles is something that has characterized them since the beginning of the clandestine period until today. In the present text we reflect upon some ideas that evidence the importance of art in the making of new future horizons.



Zapatista unity and diversity. Dance that evokes the union of everyone in the Caracoles. Dance Festival “Dance Another World,” Caracol Tulán Ka’u, Chiapas, 2019. Photo: Francisco De Parres Gómez.

Poets? Yes..., Guerrilleros? Also...

Part of the success for which contemporary Zapatismo has awoken sympathies on national and international scales lies in that, on one hand, it has efficiently managed the distribution of information and, on the other, because since its foundation in 1983 (11 years before the armed uprising), it reconciled ideological postures and subjective historical places that were very different in principle, like *guerrillas* with a majority of urban presence, other *guerrilla* groups that passed many years preparing themselves in clandestinity, sheltered by the forest and Mayan Indigenous world views, that contained organizational processes that articulated the communities and their own struggles for land.

We consider that the aforementioned reconciliations are the result—among many other elements— of the importance and strength that they attributed to symbols, such that they could create, in the decade of 1980, a new struggle proposal: that of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN, Zapatista Army of National Liberation).

Thus, they appealed to the *memory of culture* (Lotman 1998) since their most creative phase, and now, after nearly 40 years of organization, they continue updating themselves based on certain symbols to cohere their ideology and, at the same time, open the door to new opportunities for revitalizing meaning, always with innovative proposals of struggle and organization.

What we observe is that insurrectionist movements, alongside the battles they need to fight against the system, the dominant symbols and values also need to create their own codes of identification that allow them to generate cohesion inside of their own movements, even in contexts of war, that which art can be very useful for. In the words of Zapatistas: “The arts and sciences prior to the uprising, within the *eezeelen*, had a very small universe and a brief history. Both the sciences and the arts had a purpose, a direction, and an imposed reason: war” (*Subcomandante Insurgente* Moisés and *Subcomandante Insurgente* Marcos, 2016).

However, even though they were preparing for war, communities found the necessary creativity to reconfigure their own *imaginary* (Castoriadis 1988) from liminal spaces, like the making of festivities and art, practices that always manage to make cracks in the everyday.

As an example, we recovered an anecdote that recounts how festivities and art have worked together as two elements that catalyze the cohesion between the *guerrilla* and communities in the form of conviviality that fosters bonds of complicity to organize:

Contact with the communities broadened this limited horizon: at the celebrations, the *compas* would set aside time for “the cultural program,” as they called it, and “for the party.” Thus, in a program that shrunk over the years, they recited poetry, read thoughts aloud, and sang songs, all about struggle. Gradually, the duration of “the party” got longer and better. At that time, they danced and sang whatever was in fashion at the time. Eventually, what we call

“pop music” started to be displaced by music that was produced locally. First, they changed the words of the songs; later, they wrote the music as well.

The dances changed: from dancing in two lines facing each other, to dancing in couples. Originally, in the dances in the communities, they used to dance in two lines: one was made up of women, and, in front of them was another line made up of men. This had its own logic: with a clear line of women, the mothers could control their daughters, and they could see whether they escaped or if they had remained in the continuous flow of “La del moño colorado”¹ Later, little by little and after some very heated assemblies, they were allowed to dance in couples, but they still had to maintain the same rhythm. However, because they had been so accustomed to the form of the lines, it was not uncommon to see a couple dancing, but with the woman looking off to one side and the man looking to the other. Theater, or what we called “sign,” happened very sporadically. The drawings and paintings of the periodic murals of the mountains moved to the communities, but the themes remained the same (*Subcomandante Insurgente Moisés y Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano* 2016).

Comandante Abraham also remembers how, during the first years of organization, festivities and art worked in tandem so that the guerrilla and different communi-

¹ Translates to “the girl with the red ribbon,” and is the title to a cumbia song that is often heard at parties in Mexico.

ties who joined could get to know each other, so as to establish, based on fraternity, internal secrecy pacts to strengthen the organization, taking distance from those who hadn't adhered to what was being created or differed with the project, what unveils the importance of these elements for the revolutionary processes:

As progress was made and we began to grow, the forces began to organize. The insurgents started to visit the villages more often, to live and talk to the people there. We made celebrations with them; they made their cultural programs and all. This is how we grew in a year. Between 1985 and 1986, the entire town joined the struggle. We no longer had to keep secrets between us, only with those outside that aren't yet *compas* (Muñoz 2003: 32-33).

Through both the written and spoken we can find literature, sometimes in specific formats like stories and tales or, in some cases, through public statements filled with literary resources, that, while they are densely political, they make use of poetics. Worldwide, the movement has been known for the recurrent use of metaphors and symbols in its texts.

It was about creating, before and after the armed uprising, an identity and code in common that allowed the elaboration of their own value systems for the collective struggle based on the plurality and, in that, art played a fundamental role.

Like this we can see how Zapatismo takes symbolic elements, Latin-American symbols like Che Guevara, national revolutionaries like Emiliano Zapata, heroines of

the movement like *Comandanta* Ramona and Marichuy, or figures that transport to ancestry like the *Votán*—or guardian for the Mayan people—, in which what is achieved is the conjunction of different realities that translate into symbolic and material efficacy for the communities in resistance and that they express in their arts.

A Plurivocal Spectrum of Possibilities: About the System of Zapatista Arts

With time, Zapatista communities have developed an artistic continuity that is expressed in at least ten different aspects with a shared thematic structure. Currently, it is possible to observe that in autonomous territory they practice: literature, music, poetry, paint, sculpture, textile art, theatre, cinema, dance, and even ritual. We have named this group the System of Zapatist Arts (SAZ, by its acronym in Spanish).



Diagram: *System of Zapatista Arts*. Elaboration: Francisco De Parres Gómez.

Although the presence of art and poetry in relation to politics has been present since the foundation of this insurrectionist movement, 2016 marked the beginning of the autonomous communities' willingness to share their arts with the organization of the *CompArte for Humanity* festivals (CompArte por la Humanidad), which took place annually until 2019 and where, with profound creativity, they made it clear to us that some of the fundamental topics that they were interested in exploring were, for example, highlighting the ancestral knowledge of their communities, the historical resistance in the face of colonial exploitation and the *fincas*, their revolutionary stories, their current resistance, their forms of organization, the fundamental importance of women in the process of autonomy, the multiple threats we face in the form of the Capitalist Hydra, and also, invitations to emancipation and collective liberation.

In this way, communities make a bet to rewrite their history, setting up different strategies to achieve it. The works of art that refer to the past denounce injustices, while exalting the resistance that their grandfathers and grandmothers have maintained since the colonial period. In the past, they vindicated the memory of those who fell in the battle, and they promised to continue their struggle in the present. The references to organization, autonomy, and resistance are constant. For the future, the possibilities and meanings that are projected vary: ominous panoramas announce a global crisis borne out of the neoextractivist dynamics that damage nature, or hopes are vested in making more balanced systems, whe-

re Indigenous peoples necessarily take on central roles on a global level.

It is worth remembering that in 2016 they expressed, from a very *other* conception of the arts, that, for Zapatismo, an artist is:

...all those who partake in ART as a practice. For Zapatismo, an artist is anyone who considers art to be their activity, independent of canons, art critics, museums, wikipe-dias, and any other “specialist” schemas that classify (that is, exclude) human activities (*Subcomandante Insurgente* Moisés 2016a).

From the poetics of the public announcements and the literature we find that the support bases of Zapatismo (BAZ, acronym in Spanish) are making a connection with poetry; the process of writing of this discipline—like all the others—is collectivized, even though there is a possibility that only one person declaims it, if its contents were previously agreed on in assembly by the communities. In most cases, interpretations are done between two or more voices that accompany the performance, intonation, and gestures, to make emphasis.

The oldest compilation of poetry that we found is a collection published in 2009, entitled *The flower of the word will not die: Collection of poems of the voices of the Zapatista rebel youth*, even though it is not truly possible to know the date of the 18 texts that compose it, we find continuity with what is made in the present. This copy has brief one-page texts made on a typewriter, with titles like: “The heart of the people; “It is not time to cry”; “Ode

to the Dialectic”; “The government has soldiers”; “The liberators,” and “For you everything is worth it, proletarian.” We could infer that this last one refers to romantic or partner love, but, on the contrary, it revolves around the meaning of solidarity and companionship in the struggle. Like most of Zapatistas’ poetry, it is not possible to have information about the authorship since it, too, is also done collectively and primacy is not given to the individual. On the back cover, the book reads: “This is a facsimile edition of a poetry notebook elaborated, both the drawings and the poems, by young insurgents of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional for their political and cultural formation activities” (EZLN, 2009). This reveals that it was made by the armed faction of the movement and not by civilians.

In music, the Zapatistas have a very wide range of production that goes from revolutionary *corridos*² made in the period of clandestinity, to lyrical songs that tell the contemporary autonomic processes. The musical instruments that they use are varied: guitars are privileged, but they also play bass, accordion, violin, double bass, marimba, keyboard, trumpets, maracas and even the conch.

The means of musical distribution can be done through public presentations, but also, thanks to the work of the *Tercios Compas*³, recordings made on compact discs are circulated and sold at the Caracoles and in the *Municipios Autónomos Rebeldes Zapatistas* (MAREZ), as well

² Traditional musical genre from Mexico and other countries of Latin America, characterized by its narrative form (N. from the T.).

³ The Tercios Compas are the media of the EZLN (N. from the E.).

as reproduced in many communities by the movement's own radio station, named *Radio Insurgente: voz del Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (Insurgent Radio: voice of the Zapatista National Liberation Army), that was inaugurated in 2003 and that can occasionally be tuned from San Cristobal de las Casas. Additionally, there are some Caracoles that have their own communal radios, like Morelia that has three: *Radio Zapata* in the municipality 17th of November, that transmits in 96.1FM; *Radio Dignidad* (Dignity Radio) in the municipality Comandanta Ramona and *Radio Rebelde* (Rebel Radio) in the municipality Lucio Cabañas.

Even though music is practiced indistinctively by members of the communities, it is relevant to note that groups that provoke more sensation than others do not cease to exist and that they even become popular amongst the communities, for example: *Dueto Horizonte* (Horizon Duo), *Grupo Amanecer* (The Dawn Group), *Los Originales of San Andrés* (The Originals of San Andres) and, recently, the group of *jovenas*⁴ *La Dignidad y Resistencia* (Dignity and Resistance). Still, their relationship with fame does not manifest as the exaltation of an individualist ego within the communities, as they always act from the logics of collectivity.

Regarding the visual and the plastic, the most notable paintings range from large-scale murals that can measure over five meters, to artworks created on the easel, like fabric and, on a smaller scale, watercolor. Famous has been the graphics and some murals that have been pro-

⁴ Zapatista way of naming young women (N. note from the E.).

duced throughout the history of this peasant struggle, it is even possible to identify the moment in which one enters autonomous territory because from the highway, the roads and the paths, large metal signs announce: "You are in Zapatista territory. Here the people command and the government obeys."

In Chiapas, it is easy to recognize when a community is part of the organization because they stand out for their colorful mural graphics, and specifically in the case of the Caracoles, it is difficult to find a wall that is not painted with libertarian references. However, it is not always known that the communities also count on collectives to help them with works of drawing, embroidery, sculpture, etc. These groups serve as links in the commodity chain because, in economic terms, they support the material subsistence. In some cases, these activities are transmitted from generation to generation.

We also find the production of sculptures. Though this may be the least explored field, important efforts are being made to develop it. Embroidery, we can infer, first started as part of the textile arts that the communities wear on their traditional clothes, since the variety of clothes that are found in Chiapas is immense. Autonomous communities keep using this identity aspect although in some cases, new generations prefer denim clothing (jeans), since it is a garment that provides them practicality for work.

At a general level we can affirm that these embroideries are mainly made by collectives of women; however, thanks to the questioning of traditional gender roles, we can also find some men that make them. Still, it is ap-

parent that this is a primarily feminine activity; on one occasion, a Zapatista woman commented that this was the case because it allowed for them to continue with maternal care: when breastfeeding, it is possible to continue embroidering, as opposed to other artistic activities. In relation to what we can consider *object art*, autonomous communities embroider fabric, bookmarks, earrings, bags, shirts, and other similar items.

New Generations Born in the Autonomy: About the Art Demand within Zapatismo

The constant transformation as part of the dialectics of social reproduction is an element that contemporary Zapatismo has known how to integrate inside of the construction of autonomy. It is necessary to think art—and, concretely, the festivals *CompArte for Humanity*—mainly as a demand from new generations, that ask for more cultural events and other forms of struggle. In this sense, these events work as a way of “passing the torch” to the youth. There remains, for the most part, the importance of generating these spaces as pedagogical tools inside of the movement.

The characteristics of these gatherings have changed year after year. For example, we see that with each version of the festivals, the increasingly numerous presence of the support bases from the territory is something notable, which encourages intercommunal conviviality at the interior of Zapatismo itself. Due to this fact, *CompArtes* are really a sharing and gathering between commu-

nities and the youth of different regions that resist and that, probably did not know of each other before. Thus, art serves as a transgenerational communicating vessel.

Since this new stage of Zapatismo, organizational committees that did not exist before were created, like the one of Art and Culture, with which various Caracoles already count on. Unlike other committees—like health or education, that in many cases are assigned according to the qualities that the community sees in others—this one is of free choice. From what we know, the *Comisión de Arte y Cultura* (Commission of Art and Culture) in particular, does not operate through rotative charges and its duration is for an unlimited time. To be part of it, the only requisite is the will to join. Thanks to this, creative processes are socialized in the form of collective learning, where, to create, specialists are not needed.



Jóvenes and jóvenes support bases assisting the Dance Festival “Dance another world” (Báilate Otro Mundo), Caracol Tulán Ka’u, Chiapas, 2019. Photo: Francisco De Parres Gómez.

The case of Marcela and Efraín⁵ from Comunidad Zapata, Caracol Morelia, 17 and 18 years respectively, is an example of the generational transformations in Zapatismo. This young couple has lived in a domestic partnership since a year ago, they have plans to marry in the future, and have the support of both of their families. Living as a couple before marriage was something unthinkable in the past due to the conservative ideas that are still present in some communities. Nonetheless, in the autonomous communities, changes are adopted more dynamically.

Efraín and his brothers are, as they say in the communities, *musiqueros*. He plays the keyboard. All of the instruments are the inheritance their dad, Don Hilarío, whom was a member of a cattle collective and sold 18 heads to buy the instruments of his sons, which cost around 200,000 pesos; this was what his sons asked for as inheritance. They bought everything in Ocosingo. The relevance of this is that the father asked his sons what they wanted as inheritance and, when he found that the answer was that they wanted to dedicate themselves to an artistic practice, his reaction was to accept their decision, recognizing that, thanks to autonomy, they could now perform these activities like any other type of work; in other words, as a way of subsistence that is also part of their autonomous productive system. Still, this does not mean that the family refrains from participating in collective work, like the production of coffee and the *milpa*.

5 In all cases the names were changed.

After six months of learning music, Efraín and his brothers had their first public presentation and they now play in their communities to accompany festivities. Up until 2018, when I met them, they had never performed in the *CompArte* festivals, but they were preparing to do so for next year. Their music group was called “Sentiment”.

Efraín’s mother, *doña* Marta, is teaching Marcela to embroider. Marcela enjoys music and has even tried playing an instrument with her partner; however, says that when she saw the her mother-in-law’s embroidery, she discovered that she felt happier directing her creative exploration toward textile art. For Efraín’s mother, it is important that her daughter-in-law learns this activity because, as a family unit, she and her son can have more sources of income and better material support by working in the Zapatista embroidery collectives. Additionally, Marcela participates in bread and livestock collectives; this highlights how art and work have a close relationship, even though it is far from being its only function.

During the time that Marcela was seven months pregnant, she expressed that, despite being far along in her pregnancy, she couldn’t miss the *CompArte* because they had been waiting for it all year long. Fortunately, their community is located very close to Caracol Morelia. When the *jóvena* Zapatista can, she dances “even if it’s a little,” because it makes her feel “full of joy.”

Another example of this generational transformation—that is to say, of young people with an avid interest in art—is the case of Ricardo, who is 19 years old and

from the community of Javier López, Caracol La Garrucha, where Tseltal communities live.

Ricardo is a trainer for promoters of education; he had been a promoter himself for a year, but the community appointed him to train more teachers because of his skills.

While we were at one of the art festivals, he expressed feeling very glad. He said that, perhaps “[...] my parents didn’t teach us the struggle with other tools [...],” referring to the theatre play that we were watching in that moment. The play itself is an example of how art functions as critical pedagogy and ideological transmission of liberation, given that the contents of the play referenced the bad practices of political parties and how, through welfare government programs, community organization is weakened little by little. The performances of the play, the stage, the costumes and the music were designed in their entirety by support bases.

In Ricardo’s community, there are two musical groups: one of nine members and the other one of ten. He is a member of one of the groups and plays the guitar alongside his brother. Like Jorge, his 15-year-old younger brother, still doesn’t have a charge in the community, so Ricardo motivates him to dedicate time to music and nurture his interests in other arts. This young man, trainer of Zapatista education promoters, saved for three years to buy his guitar, and expresses feeling very proud of his accomplishment; after achieving this goal, he worked for two more years to buy his little brother a guitar as well.

As an educational promoter, he expressed that in his community there are still not any schools or subjects de-

licated specifically to teaching art but that, when he can, he teaches his *compañeros* revolutionary songs. Additionally, he thinks that there will be art schools in autonomous territory in the future, both because he considers it very necessary and the youth asks for it. For now, he sometimes plays music in the festivities of his community, during important dates of the movement, and the church.

Stories like this are increasingly more common in the everyday life of rebel communities. In the first years of organization, the difficulties and urgencies were more nuanced, but with the passing of time and the consolidation of their own autonomous production systems that guarantee them their material subsistence, the relationship with art has gradually transformed. Now, they can practice it at greater depths, like another dimension within the integrality of the spheres of life and their own revolutionary process.

A singular case is the one of the *jóvenas*⁶ Tsotsiles members of the musical group “Dignity and Resistance”, of the region Pancho Villa, Caracol Oventik, who played in the closing act of the festival in 2016 at CIDECI⁷ Las Casas/Unitierra-Chiapas, and presented themselves as:

⁶ Expression used by the Zapatistas to refer to young women from support base communities (N. of the T.).

⁷ Acronym for its name in Spanish, Centro Indígena de Capacitación Integral. (N. of the T.)

“... Indigenous [and] proudly Zapatistas”.⁸ At the time, the vocalist was the eldest, being 22 years old, the accordionist was 15, the bassist was 14, and the guitarist was only 13 years old. To the rhythm of the *corrido*, the song that they covered during the event was called “The Capacity of Women” and they dedicated it to “...the missing women, the tortured, the raped, the ones killed for being fighters, for being women...”. The chorus of the song is “...if there is no woman, there is no revolution, in the same way that, without Mother Earth, there is no living being...” This song reveals that, despite their young age, they know about gender grievances, and that they denounce extreme problems, like feminicide and patriarchal violence.

The particular thing about this group of rebel *jóvenes* is that, for their debut in 2016, they had only planned to perform the song mentioned; however, before the overwhelming shout of the public that was composed of approximately 700 people asking for an encore, they, not knowing how to respond immediately, ran off stage only to return minutes later and perform their original song, which the public had liked so much. The statement entitled “The art that is neither seen nor heard” details other details of this event:

When they performed at Oventik, on June 29 in the afternoon, the sound system failed and it made them a little bit sad. And so, on June 30, in CIDECI, SubMoy asked the

⁸ The video of this presentation was filmed by the *Associazione Ya Basta*. Watch online: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-sU9KHu8UopA>>

compañero musicians, Panteón Rococó and Oscar Chávez, to stop for a minute and give up a few minutes of their time (Thank you Don Óscar, thank you Panteones). The *compañeras* were able to present what they had been preparing for more than 5 months. When they finished, they reported back to SupMoy. “We’re back,” they said. SupMoy said, “How did it go?” and they said, “we won.” SupMoy didn’t say anything but surely, he was left thinking, “All in all, 500 years is a short time, but I never thought that I would get to hear this.” They continued, “We felt a little bad because the people were asking for another. A lot of people were yelling ‘One more! One more!’ but we didn’t know another one. It took us a long time just to make this one. If they want another one, they are going to have to wait another six months.” SubMoy asked, “And so what did you do?” “We left the stage quickly and hid ourselves among the *compañeros*.” That’s what they said and then they went onto the dance floor (*Subcomandante Insurgente* Moisés 2016b).

For their second performance in a massive concert the panorama was very different, it happened in the presence of approximately 8,000 women from all five continents at the First International Gathering of Politics, Art, Sport, and Culture for Women in Struggle (Primer Encuentro Internacional, Político, Artístico, Deportivo y Cultural de Mujeres que Luchan), the 8th of March of 2018. Since this event was only for women, I couldn’t attend the occasion. Nonetheless, there are various videos where one can observe how their corporality and use of stage demonstrated a significant ease and liberation compared to their first presentation. Even though they had

balaclavas on, the smile on their faces is noticeable as thousands of women make the song their own and chant in unison. By that year, the repertoire of the group of Zapatista women, whom meet once a week to practice, had grown in terms of diversity.



Jóvena member of the Group “Dignity and Resistance” (Dignidad y Resistencia) interpreting the song “Women’s ability” (Capacidad de las mujeres). Third Festival CompArte for Humanity, Caracol Morelia, Chiapas, 2018. Photo: Francisco De Parres Gómez.

Ulises and Brayan are another example of how the Zapatista youth are committed to the unbreakable relationship between art and politics. In 2018, after their *hip-hop* presentation, I met them when they got off the stage. At the time, they were 22 and 21 years old, respectively; both of Tsotsil origin, and from the Caracol Oventik. They are both also promoters of education in their communities, and they decided to make *hip-hop* music inspired by the organization because, where they live, the youth: “[...] listens to *hip-hop* that is meaningless, destructive, and talks about drugs and violence, without any useful content for life.” For that reason, they started to create their own songs and lyrics inspired by the resistance and the autonomy.

Brayan, “MC Brayan,” as he calls himself, had rapped for four years, in contrast to Ulises, who had only been writing lyrics for six months and was performing in public for the first time when we met. He was very nervous, but said that when he went up on stage, he managed to overcome his fear; when getting off of the stage after having sung, he said that he felt “very happy because [he] had poured out everything that [he] felt from the heart.” Ulises makes himself known in *hip-hop* as “MC 7SC”: “... seven because I am the seventh in my family. Seven because it is the day of the month in which I was born; but above all, seven because of the seven principles of command by obeying (*mandar obedeciendo*).” The “SC” means “Seed of Change” and expresses that it is precisely what he wants to do with music.

Unlike other artistic activities that the community designates the participants to, Ulises and Brayan decided

from the beginning that they would participate in rap. In their community, they all know that MC Brayan is a rapper and has participated by singing at the three *CompArte* Festivals that were held that year.

Oventik has its own Commission of Art and Culture, where they take charge of organizing all of the cultural events and whichever part that the Caracol is assigned to do for the *CompArte*. We can affirm that the festivals belong to the public sphere that the movement opens up to be attended by civil society; however, activities of this type are very recurrent to celebrate specific events that the community values, like anniversaries, school year closures, and particular commemorations of each autonomous municipality.

MC 7SC stated that, although he and Bryan are from different communities and villages, they had the opportunity of collaborating in the house of the one that had more experience in order to write the songs together and, just as they both reaffirmed when I asked them if they would continue making music: "...this, is just the beginning..."

Militia Guerrilleros and Zapatista Insurgents in the System of Zapatista Arts

In contrast to the logics of war of extermination and neocolonialism (Mbembe 2011), at the beginning, the Zapatistas manifested, through their poetry, that they "made themselves an army so that the armies would cease to exist" or, in other words, that "they declared war so that

war would end.” Nonetheless, the aforementioned, more than being just political rhetoric, is demonstrated in the way the armed part of the movement operates and is subordinated: indeed, they are under the command of the communities in a type of inverted pyramid of power, which also fosters an idea of democracy that is very different from that which is practiced by nation-states.

For example, in the embroidery shown on the next page, the different levels of power within the organization of the Zapatista communities are condensed: in the back, a house that represents the Junta de Buen Gobierno can be seen, along with a pair of women that are part of the support bases or the civilians, and in the front, two armed men and an armed woman, all whom are members of the guerrilla.



Embroidery made by support bases, year 2018. Technique: Yarn over fabric. Photo: Francisco De Parres Gómez.

In the case of the theatre plays, it is also common to find stage productions representing the confrontations of 1994 between EZLN and the federal forces. What stands out is that, even though they are artistic interpretations, the support bases don't always feel sympathetic in playing the role of those who repressed them for many years. Julio, who was at the *CompArte* of 2016, said that the community had assigned him and his *compañeros* the role of federal soldiers in the play—an idea that they didn't like; nonetheless, because the community had chosen them, they decided to fulfill the roles.

In regards to concrete pictorial art made by militiamen/women and insurgents, it is easily identifiable since, in general, they are made atop wooded blocks and are accompanied by the legend that read: "Made by insurgents. The themes portray *guerrilleros* in mountain pose communicating by radios or representations of literary characters, like Don Durito of the Lacandon, who is a beetle that serves as an allusion to the chivalric novel transposed to the mountains of southeastern Mexico; Caballo Choco, a horse that is ridden by the members of the Comandancia General; Gato-Perro, which alludes to the relationship of the communities with animals and their importance within collective life; or the Niña Defensa Zapatista, which symbolizes one of the objectives that this army has: to defend Indigenous childhood and create a world where women grow without fear.

The performance activities, an example of the discipline and training of the EZLN, are also constantly exhibited in public acts attended by militiamen/women and insurgents. Although they could be compared with the

martial marches of any other army, the metaphors of the snail or unity within diversity, are elements of a powerful poetic charge that make these displays different as part of the body-politics of the *guerrilla*.

In diametrical difference to other armed organizations, like the ones of the State or organized crime, where the objective is the intimidation of the opponent through the demonstration of strength and violence, Zapatista marches represent strength as part of a necessary defense in the face of the enemies, but always oriented towards life. It suffices to observe the videos where militiamen/women and Zapatista insurgents kneel before the earth with arms intertwined as a sign of safeguarding nature and their territory, in contrast to other examples, like the newly created *Unidad de la Policía Metropolitana* (Unity of the Metropolitan Police) in Mexico City, named *Grupo Thánatos* (Thánatos Group), in allusion to the Greek deity of death. This is the legend that is on the State's trucks as they patrol the capital. As described, the referents for meaning making and the ethical values that are produced are starkly different.

The songs and poetry referring to the heroism of the *guerrilla* in the form of legendary-epic speeches (Echeverría 2001) are also very common within Zapatista arts. In the field of sculpture, we find two very representative examples that, even after being exhibited in rebel territory, were shown in various places around the country in spaces that share values with the movement.

The first one, by the name *Elige de qué lado estás* (Choose which side you are on), *the side of reason, or the side of strength*, was made in allusion to a story in which the Vie-

jo Antonio says that it is always better to be on the side of reason:

If you cannot have both reason and strength, always choose reason and let the enemy have strength. In many combats, strength can obtain victory, but in the struggle, only reason can win. The powerful can never get reason from their strength, but we can always obtain strength from reason (*Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos* 2012: 114).

The second example, a group of sculptures, or installation, that was presented by the insurgents of the EZLN, goes by the name *Habr  una vez* (There will be a time) and is accompanied by a text that says: "Collective work by female and male Zapatista insurgents from EZLN. *CompArte* 2017." In the installation, one can observe a complex representation of the community life of a village in autonomous territory, where the houses made of wood and palm rooftops stand out, giving shape to the ejidal houses, as well as the "Escuelita Aut noma Zapatista" and the house of "*como mujeres que somos*" (as the women that we are).



Installation of sculptures *Habrá una vez* made by Zapatista militiamen and women, 2017. Technique: mixed. Photo: Francisco De Parres Gómez.

The characters that are shown, mostly women, carry out activities, like forming an assembly, where they make decisions; teaching and the education system; the labor of collective work, like the cultivation of *milpa* and coffee; as well as the care of animals, mainly made of clay and cloth, like rabbits, chickens, fish and also some Gato-Perro on the rooftops, some armadillos, and other species suited for rainforest climate, like snakes.

To end this chapter, we revisit a quote from the statement, “Between light and shadow” (*Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano* 2014), the last pronouncement by *Subcomandante Insurgente* Marcos before disappearing, and at the same time, the first time he signed by the name of Galeano. The text explains what the bet of Zapatismo has been after all these years of practicing politics oriented towards the cultivation of life and in opposition to the necropolitics (Mbembe 2011) that is exercised by the hegemonic power and its armies of death:

And rather than dedicating ourselves to training guerrillas, soldiers, and squadrons, we developed education and health promoters, who went about building the foundations of autonomy that today amaze the world. Instead of building barracks, improving our weapons, and building walls and trenches, we built schools, hospitals, and health centers, improving our living conditions. Instead of fighting for a place in the Parthenon of individualized deaths of those from below, we chose to construct life (*Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano*, 2014).

Art as Part of the Autonomous Zapatista Integrality

When thinking about art as an activity for all of society, there are points of convergence with Zapatismo. Indeed, it is art that is positioned against capital and monopolies; however, the fundamental point that deeply changes the conception is that in autonomous territory, there is no division between artists and spectators or, as they call them, the “listeners-seers” (*escuchas-videntes*). Thus, all the community is involved in the creative process, whether it’s by being part of the assembly that decides on the topics to exhibit in their SAZ, organizing events that make gatherings possible, as artists or, on occasion, all of these roles at once. The latter exemplifies that which integrates art into other spheres of life where work and decisions are made collectively. In other words, art is not conceived as a specialized activity of society that is detached from the integrality of their autonomy.

There is a constant struggle to subvert the moderna/colonial order, where art, from a positioning of resistance, has had a fundamental role because, since it is a system of representations, it is simultaneously a territory of dispute where it is possible to materialize conceptions of the world from the place of enunciation of struggles that beat and are born *from below and to the left*.

In their art, the autonomous communities express a strong critique of the Colony and its current processes, like *coloniality* (Quijano 2007), not only because of the topics that seek to dignify the past of their communities

and rewrite the apparent dichotomies between the victors and the defeated but, also, because their art is articulated from what we can understand as the liminality or the edge of what is considered valuable by modernity/coloniality.

If we read these processes in light of the reflections of the movement itself, we understand that art is understood as yet another element of their different collective labors, reaffirming that it is not necessary to have specialized studies, or an accumulation of economic or cultural capital to exercise art practices, because they are part of the integrality of the Zapatista autonomic process. In this sense, the art that is practiced breaks from classism, racism, and the status quo of Western-Eurocentric aesthetics.

The distribution of space in the festivals is another example that reinforces the aforementioned idea. The figure of the creative genius that reaffirms individuality and is concerned with ego and unipersonal cults is not exalted; there are no main stages, exclusive treatments, or courtesies for a specific artist, especially in relationships that are established within the same support bases as the artists.

Something that might seem simple, like the existence of a place designed for artists to change their clothes to perform their plays, represents the communities' capacity for adaptation and conflict resolution, since, for other festivals and with the creation of the new Caracoles, for example, in the case of Tulan Ka'u, an auditorium named "*La Ballena*" (The Whale) with capacity for more than 1,000 people was built in a couple of months. The films

for the *Impossible Movie Theater Festival Puy ta Cuxlejaltic*" (Caracol de Nuestra Vida) and the dances from the *Dance Another World* Festival were shown.



“La Ballena” (The Whale) auditorium, Zapatista support bases and national and international audience assisting to the 2° *Impossible Movie Theater Festival: Puy ta Cuxlejaltic* (2° Festival de Cine Imposible: Caracol de Nuestra Vida), Caracol Tulán Ka’u, Chiapas, 2019. Photo: Francisco De Parres Gómez.

The creation of infrastructure for the practice of art in autonomous territory continues, of course, without any governmental resources and based on the collective work of the movement. In December 2019, their model and plans to build the first space dedicated specifically to theatre was made public; it was designed by a Zapatista architect.

These seemed to be the artistic practices of the Indigenous rebel people of the Mexican Southeast who, in being aware of their exclusion from modern/colonial museums and galleries as both producers or audience members due to their race and class, decided to build their own spaces to share their art from a truly alternative conception of art tied to resistance. However, in this same vein, there is a dichotomy created by the civil society that acquires Zapatista artworks, given that they may be valued from a Western perspective, such as, being interpreted as objects of worship, sacredness, or reverence. Conversely, within Zapatismo, art is just one more facet of the many spheres of life and work that can be valued, and it is not necessarily exalted from a place of fetishism, beyond the fair treatment that can be given to other activities, like the production of maize and coffee, in other words, as part of their autonomous integrality.

For a World Where Many Arts Fit

The Zapatistas have taught us that it is not enough to change the economic system if the cultural and education systems are not transformed because, if the structu-

res of domination and the capitalist logics and ideology of the colonial modernity are still reproduced at a cultural level, it is not possible to break with the reproduction of necropolitics (Mbembe 2011).

It is possible to affirm that art is part of the integrality of the autonomic process of communities, in addition to the fact that it has helped the consolidation of their central demands over time. In the dialectics between fire and word, there is a greater weight in the latter, although the weapons remain ready in case it is necessary to exercise legitimate defense.

Therefore, we consider that to actualize, strengthen and, at the same time, consolidate, their autonomy, Zapatistas stake for the creation of symbols and the dynamization of their system by the use of art that creates and recreates its own version of history and society from the periphery or the limits, and, at the same time, from a *sentipensante*⁹ politics that proposes the building of new horizons based on speeches and praxis that they make collectively.

We can see that, within the relationship between art and politics that accompanies the Journey for Life with

9 Category of Patricio Guerrero Arias that sets distance from dichotomic and cartesian thinking and emphasizes the continuity between the sensible and the rational, mainly in Indigenous communities. *Sentipensar* is articulated to the category *corazonar*, that appeals, also, to the experiential dimension of humanness. We do not overlook that there are previous approaches from similar categories like the one of Fals Borda from the *sentipensante* sociology; however, we return to Guerrero Arias due to the proximity with the approaches from the Decoloniality in which we position ourselves (N. of the T.).

which the EZLN will go around the world to link resistances, it is possible to consult numerous performances or rituals at *Enlace Zapatista*. All of them show celebrations accompanied by music, ritual acts in which the communities go up to motorized boats and *cayucos*—types of handmade wooden canoes—in which one can see them cross the rivers of the Lacandon Forest in a festive and artistic atmosphere.

The *cayucos*, collaboratively carved, painted for different reasons, in varying sizes and shapes, are four; they represent a powerful symbolism that they carried with them in the boat *La Montaña* (The Mountain), as the public statement titled, “The Route of Ixchel,” says:

The canoes represent 4 phases of who we are as Zapatistas:
—The first canoe represents our culture as Indigenous people of Mayan descent. This is the largest canoe into which all three of the others fit. This canoe is an homage to our ancestors.

—The second canoe represents our time of clandestinity and our uprising. This canoe is the second largest and is an homage to those who have fallen since January 1, 1994.

—The third canoe represents the phase of autonomy. This one ranks third in size (from biggest to smallest) and is an homage to our communities, regions, and zones that, through resistance and rebellion, have organized and continue to organize Zapatista autonomy.

—The last canoe represents Zapatista childhood. This one is the smallest canoe which the Zapatista boys and girls have painted and decorated with drawings and colors of their choosing (*Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano*, 2021).

Through figurative representations that connect different times and spaces, we can witness how in the SAZ, this insurrection movement begins its most recent adventure, where art serves as a long breath and planetary scale political praxis.

We consider Zapatista art as a system designed for wide consumption and not only for specialized audiences, as well as being a device that articulates the recovery and transmission of memory. In this sense, it also works as a reaffirmation of ideological content and apprehension of new cultural codes. As a counterhegemonic practice and affront to power, art functions as a pedagogical tool that represents both a denunciation platform against inequality, and the expression of class struggle. Therefore, it can be thought of as a decolonial exercise that emancipates the subjects, given that it is a tool for social transformation and collective liberation.

In contrast to hegemonic modern/colonial art as an apparatus of domination and tool for regulating sensibilities as an exercise of power, the art of the autonomous communities teaches us that it is not possible to compare the processes of art with onto-genetics or phylogenesis, as if art had superior and inferior stages from the perspective of a lineal development where “the latest” is necessarily a synonym for “the best.” Indeed, this vision infantilizes the productions of the peripheral communities and devalues otherness.

The legitimizing speeches and instructive practices about art as a possession of power fundamentally conceal the exercise of domination over the experiential, sensible, and the representational dimensions of human-

ness. Control over the symbolic is directly related to the control of the ontological. If the possibilities of being represented are canceled, the possibilities of existing are canceled too, and, in turn, those of transcending. Since the 1st of January of 1994 until now, Zapatista communities have shown us that it is always possible to build new future horizons, and what better space to do it than through art? We hope that this work contributes to the necessary discussions about the unbreakable relationship between art and politics that the Zapatista communities have taught us.

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About the Collection

The *Al Faro Zapatista* Collection is a tribute to Zapatista women, children, elders, *otroas*, and men in their more than 500 years of resistance and almost 28 years of rebellious public life. The initiative seeks to join the Journey for Life. We do it from what we are: social science workers, active activists.

We do it because Zapatismo has been the beacon for many of us and other inhabitants of planet Earth, the lighthouse in the middle of The Storm caused by what, in 2017, the Zapatista women named the “machista and patriarchal capitalist system,” fueled by racism and “cisheteronormativity,” as the sexual diversities in motion and re-existence call it.

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AL FARO ZAPATISTA COLLECTION

In contemporary Zapatismo, art and politics are bound together in a dialectical relationship that we regard as inseparable. Within the praxis of autonomous communities, the symbolic and poetic force through which they communicate their organizational visions and articulate their struggles has been one of their defining features, from the years of clandestine resistance to the present day. This text reflects on a set of ideas that underscore the centrality of art in imagining and building new horizons for the future.

We understand Zapatista art as a system oriented toward broad public engagement rather than restricted to specialized audiences. At the same time, it functions as a dispositif for the recovery and transmission of memory. In this sense, it reaffirms ideological content while enabling the appropriation of new cultural codes. It thus operates as a pedagogical tool: a platform for denouncing inequality and for expressing class struggle, insofar as art constitutes a counter-hegemonic practice that confronts power. From this perspective, it may also be understood as a decolonial practice that contributes to the emancipation of subjects, insofar as it serves as an instrument of social transformation and collective liberation.

