

Rainbow of Re and Rebellion



Resistance

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Community Art in the Zapatista Army of National Liberation

Why create a painting that represents indigenous landworking women cultivating land, their faces covered with balaclavas and bandanas? These paintings embody the ideals of the Zapatista resistance, advocating care for Mother Earth. They highlight the importance of women in revolutionary processes and the need for collective work for the creation of anti-capitalist economies. They speak of a sense of community, while at the same time challenging the capitalist, racist, classist, and heteropatriarchal system, which includes the individualizing art and galleries catering to elitist consumption. The work shows the emancipatory potential of art, reinforced by the phrase “Another world is possible”. Mexico is a country with a complex history. Even though there are at least 68 native popu-

“It is [art] (and not politics) that digs into the depths of the soul and rescues the human essence. It’s as if the world were still the same, but with art we can find hope among so many nuts, bolts and gears grinding with anger. Unlike politics, art doesn’t try to fix or calibrate the machine. It does something more subversive and unsettling: it shows the possibility of another world.”

**Subcomandante
Insurgente Galeano¹**

lations, the profound racism promoted by the state through its policies of miscegenation has attempted to erase diversity. Just a few decades ago, most Mexicans were unaware of this immense ethnic diversity. However, on 1 January 1994, in the mountains of Chiapas, an unusual event took place before the eyes of the world, when thousands of indigenous Mayan communities took up arms to voice 13 demands: land, work, food, housing, health, education, independence, democracy, freedom, information, culture, justice, and peace. This process brought to light the emergence of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), a guerrilla movement that had been preparing clandestinely for ten years with the objective of redefining and constructing an alternative history of its peoples.



The importance of art within this political project has been made explicit in the Zapatista communities themselves. By “covering their faces to be seen”, the poetic and corporeal-political power of the people was manifested in the use of balaclavas and bandanas, as well as the slogan “*¡Ya basta!*” (Enough is enough).

Over time, these heterogeneous communities made up of Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Tojolabal, Chol, and Mam ethnic groups – all with Mayan roots – have made multiple calls to civil society to establish dialogues with actors for whom creativity has played a fundamental role. Now, thanks to the gradual consolidation of their autonomy, they recognize that the struggle for the life and salvation of humanity must start with “the arts, the sciences, the original peoples, and the basements of the world”.²

“Before the beginning of the uprising, the arts and sciences had a very small universe and a short history inside the EZLN. Both the sciences and arts had a motive, a direction, an imposed reason: war.”

Subcomandante Insurgente Moisés and Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano³

Starting the struggle for life with the arts

To reaffirm the above in the struggle against racism and exclusion, recently the EZLN, as an indigenous organization that inhabits the forests and jungles of south-east Mexico, organized on its territory the CompArte Festival for Humanity (2016-2019). The festivals brought together thousands of people from civil society and communities in resistance to show that it is possible to create art without hierarchies. In other words, art in which all the content is discussed collectively to decide what to exhibit; art based on listening, dialogue, sharing, and coexistence, where what matters is collectivity and creation by community. It is thus diametrically opposed to the art that is produced for commercial purposes or for show as cult objects to be displayed in museums.

The communities affirm that they focus their creative processes on the consolidation of community ties. Art is an activity that can be practiced freely by everyone. It is not exclusive to the elites, nor does it require specialization. In their own words, “for Zapatismo, an artist is anyone who claims their activity as art, regardless of canons, art critics, museums, Wikipedias and other ‘specialist’ schemes that classify (i.e., exclude) human activities”.⁴

Exploitation and rage turned rebellion

Indigenous poems and songs often refer to painful moments of slavery. Their titles include: “El sufrimiento de nuestros abuelos y abuelas” (The suffering of our grandparents); “Látigo de la finca” (The whip of the estate); “Vida esclavizada” (Enslaved life); “Se hicieron ricos por esclavizar” (They got rich by enslaving); and “La explotación de antes” (Exploitation of the past). However, these songs and poems serve as a reminder as to why the indigenous people resist and why they refuse to return to oppressive conditions. Going beyond a victimizing posture, they highlight the construction of free self-determination, which is evident in texts such as “La explotación y la rabia que se transforma en rebeldía” (Exploitation and rage turned rebellion) or in the song “¿Quiénes somos?” (Who are we?) (2016), which depicts their anti-capitalist struggle:

We are the original peoples of these lands, the smallest, the most forgotten, the most humiliated and the most despised; those born as a collective. We are the Others! In just 22 years of resistance and rebellion, we are building our autonomy.

We are the truth in practice, with a new system of government where the people rule and the government obeys the seven principles of ruling by obeying.

We are small, so small that we have already announced that this house is collapsing. But we are building a new one together with all those below

and to the left. We are determined peoples, ready to face the great storm that is approaching. This is why we have already chosen such a great enemy to fight; we will defeat it with resistance and rebellion.

We are men, women, children, and elders, who want to transform the world for the good of humanity through our small arts.

What does the life of man matter? Among us all, children, women and the elderly, we want to save humanity.

This is why we are here!



The creation of other worlds

The processes for the creation of art in Zapatista territory are different from those in hegemonic galleries. The most important thing is the sharing of experiences to unite struggles. In contrast to the art that is made from within the capitalist system, the art of the Zapatista peoples shows the other worlds that they are creating. They

portray what they have achieved through their struggle and show the progress they have made in education, food, health, and economy – all thanks to resistance and organization, and without any help from the state. This is expressed in the poem “Camino hacia los trece puntos” (The Path to the thirteen points, from 2016):



You, EZLN, started the war; you fight for thirteen demands, but mainly for land. Your thinking delivered you, and those from above are annoyed by your work.

You look, you say, you walk with action; you make demands so that we all have roofs over our heads.

Nourishing food to escape death in all nations. You fulfil your mission; you build for the situation and you guide with information.

You have given us virtue, to achieve the dream of good health.

Democratically, you are just and necessary; because of your conscience you are independent now. You advance through education, organization and building throughout the world; keeping your firm position of rescuing and defending the good of culture.

Thus, your word, your dignity, and your lifelong illusion is to see your fruit live in freedom. And now you do not plan to leave it behind; you tell your people to fight so that they can live in peace.

And through the sea of your dreams, the world is surprised; we are all awake.

Resisting the hydra

The Mayan Zapatistas have made it clear from the movement's conception: art is not merely a collection of ornamental or folkloric objects. Its importance lies in the strengthening of communities to discover what unites the resistance against the common enemy: the capitalist Hydra. Additionally, through the arts we seek to promote the necessary organization, resistance, and rebellion as the paths to emancipation – not only of the Zapatista peoples, but of all the peoples of the world.

As an anti-authoritarian counterstrategy, art for these communities is a communal celebration; a collective re-creation lived from joyful rebellion. At the same time, it functions as a platform for denouncing inequalities. This is why it can be considered art against authoritarianism, against the denial of otherness. In other words, it is an affront to the power of global policies causing the dispossession and death of oppressed peoples. It is an anti-capitalist art, against racism, classism, and the prevailing heteropatriarchy, manifested in the ruling of nation-states, which stands in opposition to the Zapatista governance form of “ruling-obeying”, and whose highest decision-making body is the people's assembly in the form of direct democracy and highly participatory intensity.

“Rainbow of resistance and rebellion” is a metaphor that expresses the plurality of the struggles that shout *digna rabia*, dignified rage, from different geographies, and rebellious community art is for them a powerful space to show that the construction of other worlds is possible.

Endnotes

- 1 Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano, *Las artes, las ciencias, los pueblos originarios y los sótanos del mundo*, México: Chiapas, EZLN, Enlace Zapatista, 2016.
- 2 Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano, *op. cit.*
- 3 Subcomandante Insurgente Moisés and Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano, *Las Artes y las Ciencias en la historia del (neo) Zapatismo*, México: Chiapas, Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena, Comandancia General del EZLN, Enlace Zapatista, 2016.
- 4 Subcomandante Insurgente Moisés, *Convocatoria zapatista a actividades 2016*. México: EZLN, Enlace Zapatista, 2016.



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Authoritarianism operates at a visceral level rather than relying on arguments. How can we counter authoritarian affects?

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[transcript]