

Zapata Gay

The Queering of a national icon

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In December 2019 the contemporary art world witnessed the clash of campesinos and queer activists in Mexico City over a small portrait entitled *La Revolución*, leading to both a riot and a runway show. I have identified three layers of protest surrounding the artwork and the series of events that made this otherwise inconspicuous painting famous. In the following essay, I intend to trace these events and introduce you to my ideas.

On December 10th, 2019, shouts of homophobic slurs and calls to “Burn it! Burn it!”¹ were heard in front of the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City. This is the scene where a series of events began to unfold, that would make Fabián Cháirez become known as “the most controversial Mexican artist of the 21st century”.² The shouts came from members of Mexican farmers unions who had gathered in support of Jorge Zapata González, the grandson of the Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata. Jorge Zapata was in the process of suing the Palacio de Bellas Artes as well as the artist Fabián Cháirez, with the goal of permanently removing *La Revolución* from public view. During the protests, openly queer reporters were attacked and beaten by the campesinos who were blocking the entrance to the museum. 72 hours later at least

500 counter-protestors dressed in various Zapata-themed costumes, gathered in the same square. On a runway Drag Queens presented their Mexican folklore inspired looks while a terrified but empowered artist held a press conference. Images of these protests made waves internationally online and in mainstream Mexican media.

The portrait in question features a naked Zapata wearing nothing but a pink sombrero and black stilettos with pistols for heels. Poised on a white horse with a bold erection, a delicate ribbon in the national colors wraps around his body as he poses sensually for the viewer. The title of the artwork *La Revolución* reminds us of the central role Emiliano Zapata played as the leader of the peasant revolt in the Mexican revolution and how he has remained an iconic symbol of social and economic justice for Mexico’s poor and working class.³ But through this he has also become a symbol of masculinity and it is this masculine imagery Cháirez sought to dismantle.

Herein lies the first layer of artistic protest: In the artists act of dismantling the ideal of masculinity associated with Zapata’s legacy and popular machismo by feminizing his appearance and dramatizing his most recognizable features such as the moustache and sombrero. Cháirez explained that this was intended as an attack at those who believe „issues of femininity, race or social position can be used as insults.”⁴ He goes on to describe how “there are some people who are bothered by bodies that do not obey the rules. [...] They see an offense because [Zapata] is

feminized".⁵ However, feminization technically does not necessarily imply homosexuality in men, but in this case the associations are clear. At this time the Palacio de Bellas Artes had been hosting an exhibition for the 100th anniversary of Zapata's death entitled [*Emiliano. Zapata después de Zapata*](#) (Zapata after Zapata), looking at how his legacy lives on in contemporary Mexican culture. Amongst the 130 artworks exhibited were two further depictions of him that could have also been considered questionable: one featured his face in a racist caricature, and another portrayed him dressed as a maid.⁶ Neither of these were mentioned in the entire debate.

Since the 1990s there has been an emergence of aesthetic proposals that confronted nationalist values promoted in post-revolution Mexico. They questioned hegemonic models of masculinity and denounced machismo as a condition of oppression for women and homosexuals.⁷ Hereby the goal is the "denationalization of the body", with the intent to enable visibility of subjects otherwise excluded from social and official narratives.⁸

It is here, that I locate the second layer of artistic protest. For this, I would like to take a brief look at the dynamics and mobilization that occurred surrounding the painting. We first had the legal action taken by Zapata's grandson and the reaction to this in the form of the homophobic protest on December 10th. Followed by counter protest in the form of drag shows featuring many more versions of what the media called *Zapata*

Gay. It appears that the national media used this term *Zapata Gay* as an umbrella term for the artwork and the critiques and subversions that arose from the protests. This second level goes only slightly beyond the artwork itself in the sense that it is not the artwork alone that caused political action, but the reactions to it. However, the visual aspects of these actions drew heavily on the imagery from the artwork itself, which in turn was based on the iconography of both a historical revolutionary figure and visual cues associated with contemporary queerness. In this way, the painting links Mexican queerness and Zapata's legacy on a visual level. The artist himself recognized this by stating "A revolution is just that: moving ideas, moving established things to take them to another place, [...] in favor of freedom and dignity". He continued with the reassurance that "If Zapata were a contemporary person, he would surely be on our side."⁹

The authorities and the descendants of Zapata came to the agreement, that official publicity for the work had been withdrawn and a statement of nonconformity would be displayed on the wall next to it in the exhibition.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the painting continued to gain traction through online publicity that resulted from the protests. This painting may have otherwise been forgotten by history without the attempts to censor it. My reasoning behind this is that for one, the painting had received little to no attention and only one public appearance since its conception in 2013. Secondly, as Kerstin Schankweiler proves in her book *Bildproteste*, it is undeniable that the spread of images associated with political

movements on social media is precedent. Additionally, she states that in these cases it really is “about the images themselves, and the possibility to spread them”.¹¹ Watching these events unfold showed that this was about the visibility of the Mexican LGBTQ+ community and their rights of expression in a discourse entirely dominated by machismo, both in Mexico and in the international art world online.

Collectively, these observations show an intertwining of politically loaded cultural and historical references clashing with the power of digital media, making an artwork immortal, that otherwise would not have seen such international attention. Looking at the different levels of these charges can help in understanding the unprecedented reactions to, and sociopolitical content within an artwork. I argue that it is this content that becomes visible through the dissemination of artworks online, amplifying the inherent effect of artistic protests.

Maggie Hogie [she/they] studies Art History and Sociology, with a passion for the sociopolitical contexts of queer and transcultural artistic protest and digital media, as well as experimental film and photography. Their geographical focus is on the regions of South America and East Asia. Maggie was the organizer for the 99th KSK at Goethe-University in Frankfurt.

Links

Fabián Cháirez in Drag at the opening of the exhibition on December 4th 2019, via the artists personal Instagram profile:

Link: https://www.instagram.com/p/B5oNqpEhG9_/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

Image of the painting La Revolución (2013) via the artists personal Instagram profile:

Link: https://www.instagram.com/p/Bx1Sn17FFQV/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

¹ Javier Ortega Figueiral, “Emiliano Zapata y La Masculinidad.”

² Caitlin Donohue, “The Pin-Up Revolutionary.”

³ Vanessa Romo, “Nude, Pin-Up-Style Portrait Of Emiliano Zapata Sparks Protests In Mexico City.”

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Referring to the following artworks: Isadore Freleng, “Speedy Gonzales” (1955) and Daniel Salazar “El Mandilón” (1995)

⁷ Uriel Vides, “El Macho Subvertido.”

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Vanessa Romo, “Nude, Pin-Up-Style Portrait Of Emiliano Zapata Sparks Protests In Mexico City.”

¹⁰ Emilia López Pérez, “La ‘pintura’ Es de Quien La Trabaja: Cuadro Gay de Zapata Se Queda En Bellas Artes.”

¹¹ Kerstin Schankweiler *Bildproteste*.