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Final Paper
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**THE MURALS IN GUATEMALA AS A MEMORY AND RESISTANCE
INITIATIVE**

*"We want to learn how to talk about
what has happened to us with beauty.
We want to paint what we remember. "*

Anonymous victim.

During the decade of the 70's and 80's, Latin America had a period of conflict, military dictatorships, and clashes between left and right wing political views, ending with: massacres, forced disappearance, forced displacement, sexual violence, homicides, genocide, torture, etc. Years after their processes of transition from conflict to peace and from dictatorship to democracy, the victims of these unfortunate events still struggle to make memory, and not to leave in the past what happened, because even after 40 years of violence, people do not recognize their own history.

Guatemala is not the exception; impunity has become a phenomenon that reflects the impotence of the legal system, there are still victims to compensate, truths that should be told, and perpetrators that should be brought to justice. Though, in order to avoid and prolonging impunity, in Guatemala the persistence of memory of what happened during the armed conflict has become a civic responsibility. This responsibility has been carried out by pro-human rights groups, collective citizen groups and groups of victims (Contreras. 2009. pp 168-170).

The first memory initiatives by different groups appeared in the 90s, in the form of academic books, biographies, monuments and art, showing the severity and magnitude of the facts, revealing the atrocities committed by the army. This paper focuses on art, understanding it as a memory tool that has been used before, during and after the period of repression. Those who make this art are divided in two different groups. The outsiders artists, who are committed to collective remembrance and denunciation of human rights violation, but who are not direct victims of repression and conflict; and the insiders artists, the direct victims of the conflict and repression, who through arts

express not only a claim against what happened, but also their individual memory, which feeds the collective memory and reveals the truth that is being denied.

Into the kind of art chosen by the victims to portray their memory about what happened, stand out: theater, painting, poems, monuments, and street art where you will find murals. Due to the importance of the murals in the Mayan culture, and therefore in the Guatemalan culture, this paper focuses on the way murals are create, the stories they tell, and their importance for the community and the Guatemalan society, by analyzing and describing four community based murals in different towns of Guatemala: San Juan Comalapa, Santa Lucia Cotzumalguapa, San Pedro la Laguna, and the mural made by 30 indigenous women in Huehuetenango

Usually, people focus on the art and works that gives voice to the voiceless; these paper hopes to speak about hearing the voice of those we assume are voiceless. It is not about showing the pain of the victims through the art of others, instead, is about the art made by victims who explains their own pain, their own memory.

Murals: its importance as a memory expression form.

Murals are understand as a type of art that is in function of something, meaning that they are not a work of art in itself, like a drawing or a painting, they are a work applied to another. The other is a wall that is part of a building which in turn has its own meaning. This meaning comes from the culture; each culture assigned its own meaning to the materials or abstract objects that surrounds them, depending of their way of thinking, and feeling and interpreting reality; this is why a mural constitutes a complex art that involves the meaning given to the objects with the meaning given to what is painting on them (Oxlaj. 2012. pp. 24-27).

The murals as art have been used over time in Guatemala to tell the story of the people. Most buildings were painted with murals narrating historical, religious and commemorative topics. They became only interior murals for churches during the colonial era. It is until the twentieth century -seen as the rebirth of art in Guatemala- that the murals reemerge not only as an element to portray the customs and beliefs of the people, but also as a form of denunciation and political representation. By mid of the

century, most murals are created at the University of San Carlos, which contained a great patriotic sentiment and political struggle. But it is not then until the late twentieth century, in the post conflict era, that murals are used by communities victims of the conflict as a way of remembering and demand truth, justice and reparation.

Historical murals can be divided into two types of murals according to their origin, technic, and meaning. There are the murals, of historical memory and political content made by artists or people who are interested in reflecting what happened in the conflict, as other political issues. An example of these murals will be the murals of the University of San Carlos in Guatemala. These began in the late 70s, each one, on their time, represented a manifestation of a political sense; there also were those made to remember the ones who had dedicated their lives to helping the people either in the guerilla warfare, unions, research or political struggle.

On the other hand, there are the murals, which are only done in cities, with the same purpose: tell what happened to those who still ignore it, but with urban methods, not ancestral. An example of these murals, will be the murals made by organizations pro-human rights such as H.I.J.O.S, where victims and civilians are united. This type of murals do not involve painting on a wall, they are about stick something on a wall that is called *empapeladas*. An *empapelada* consists in using paper posters with a strong message or photographs of victims and place them in places related to the conflict. The decision to use this form of expression arises from the criminalization of so-called "street paint" or "graffiti". The impact that the message of H.I.J.O.S. can make in Guatemalan urban population is linked to the amount of paper posters or photographs that the organization can stamp in the capital's streets. Therefore, it is noted that redundancy is an important factor to expand the message. Also, to help in the diffusion of the message, it must be clear, simple, concise, direct and easy to understand and simultaneously maintain a visible and striking design (Contreras. 2009. pp 177-178).

Lastly, there are the murals made by indigenous communities, victims of the conflict, which are the ones this paper analyses and describes, since they are initiatives carried out by communities who are direct victims of the conflict.

Creating a Mural about the conflict.

Through lectures that examine various murals in Guatemala, whether they are about the conflict or not, as well as through interviews with collective group initiatives that support the communities. It has been defined six steps that are carried out in all muralist memory initiatives by local communities direct victims of the conflict.

The first step towards the realization of this kind of murals is to have the support and guidance of an organizations or a collective human-rights group. The organizations or collective groups are those who promote and seek the necessary funds for the development of the murals. Although the victims are who paint and decide what to paint, the organizations are the ones responsible for search spaces where the victims can paint, get the correct permissions, and organizing the community in a way where every person that wants to get involve with the project can participate in an active way and without any fear to tell their story.

In other words, these organizations and collective groups are the ones that make feel the community comfortable and safe, because they don't feel alone and with the fear that someone ruins their work. And they are also the ones with the knowledge of gather the necessary resources to execute the project, and guide a common interests towards a greater good.

With the help of the organization or collective group, being international or national, the second step is developed. This step consists on doing a workshop with the people of the community that want to create a mural. During this workshop, people are encouraged to tell their own story as victims of the conflict. Then, as a second part of this step, they are encouraged to tell their own vision about the history of the community during the conflict, their own emotions and they way they will want it to show.

After the individual memory workshop, comes the third step, which consists in the creation of a collective memory. This collective memory is created after a workshop where all the participants agreed in one and only version of what happened, that arises from discussions of their individual memories.

The memory that finally is drawn on the mural, is the collective memory developed during this second workshop. Because it is a memory that comes from a transitional process from conflict to peace, the memory selection made by the community usually involves not only a critique of what happened, but also an ethical, political and demanding position, to the government and the Guatemalan society.

Once the collective memory is determined as well as the size of the mural the people involved, with the guidance of the organizations, make several kinds of proposals. If the mural is composed by several pieces, each one telling a different part of the history, the people involved will be divided by groups where each group will be in charge of sketching that piece. If it is a small mural or the mural has only one frame, each person will make its own sketch, and then they will choose one or superimposed all the sketches proposed to create one that includes them all.

After deciding the way the mural is going to be, they choose the colors that are going to be on it. This step is really important, because of the meaning that are attached to the colors, according to the Mayan culture.

All communities use the colors with the same meaning, granted by the Maya. This is done for two reasons: first, to maintain the ancestral knowledge and prevent its oblivion, and second to maintain a connection with their ancestors and as way to tell them what has happened. These are the meanings for each primary color, taken from the text of Oxlaj, on pages 30 to 34:

- *White: is compared with white corn, which is the main power supply of the Mayan people. Therefore, it is linked to the breath of life, the seed of hope. It represents clarity, truth and purity.*
- *Black: is compared with black corn. Represent Xibalba, darkness, death, night, and bad ideas. However, it also means rest, which is to recover energy. Therefore, means hope and the possibility of reaching tomorrow what could not be reached today is the sense of continuity, not the end.*
- *Yellow: it is the color of yellow corn. It means maturity, is the core of the seed. It is the color of gold and represents wealth, nobility and opulence. It symbolizes the sun, light, and energy. Moreover, it also means disease. When the seed does not germinate, it is sterility.*

- *Green: it's Mother Nature, environment, and plants. It represents youth and favorable time for sexual reproduction. It is the color of life, jade and quetzal, which symbolizes elegance and nobility.*
- *Blue: represents the sky, the sea and infinity. It is the color of the firmament, science and knowledge. Many birds have this color and therefore it means freedom.*
- *Red: it is the color of red corn, fire, strength and blood. It is strongly linked with war, euphoria and patriotism. Also with duality of triumph and defeat and life and death.*

After the mural is decided, including the colors that will be on it, once again with the help and guidance of the organizations or collective groups, the people involved divided themselves in different groups according to their age, gender and profession. So first the women go and draw their part, then men, then young people, then children, then the elderly, and later the professional artists if there are any.

Murals Analysis.

San Juan Comalapa.

The mural of San Juan Comalapa cemetery was created between 2002 and 2003, it is considered as an emblematic monument because its artistic, cultural value and historical content. The mural has a total longitude of 184 meters and 2.30 meters high. It is divided into two macro sections separated by the cemetery entrance. The first section contains 31 paintings where the history of the Comalapa people is told from the beginning of the human being, according to the Mayan culture, until its present in 2003; The second part contains 33 paintings which reflect the customs and traditions of the municipality, giving a total of 64 frames distributed in 23 thematic sections, among which is the history of conflict and post-conflict current situation (Oxlaj. 2012. pp. 43-48).

Sixty artists from the community including youth, women, men, teachers, artists and children made the mural. Three institutions coordinated it: the municipality of Comalapa, the Culture of Peace Project of UNESCO and FUNDAMAYA. The mural was done in three stages according to UNESCO. First, the institutions made an awareness campaign, where the degree of interest of the population was measured; the historical memory of the town was shared and a collective memory, which was to be

projected on the mural, without this implying to be the truth of what happened, was established. Subsequently, a training stage was carried out, where it was established the art and the sketch of the mural. Lastly, was the implementation phase where most of the community participated freely (Oxlaj. 2012. pp. 43-48).

The mural was done in the context of a culture of peace in Guatemala, focused on the recovery of the local historical memory and that it can be transmitted to new generations, as well as the reaffirmation of cultural identity through the exercise of memory and revalidation of artistic expression of the Maya people. This mural also represents the voice of the voiceless, the history tell by the loser side (Oxlaj. 2012. pp. 43-48).

In three different pictures of the mural, victims reflect the massacres, forced displacement, torture and fear experienced during the time of conflict. In these frames the members of the national army are illustrated with their red berets killing men, women and children, these deaths represent more than 200,000 victims who lost their lives during the conflict, they also highlights the innocence of the victims, their ethnicity and savagery and brutality of the army. Similarly paintings illustrate indigenous women, as those who were most vulnerable and who lived closer to fear, they are shown constantly crying, pleading for the lives of others, and trying to forget. Then there are five more frames showing the post-conflict, that involved domestic violence, poverty, remembrance of the murdered and disappeared victims, and the peace process, in which the community constantly symbolizes the impunity left and the resentment they have for the members of the army and the Guatemalan State (Oxlaj. 2012. pp. 43-48).

In these eight pictures the colors that are use the most, are: brown, red and dark green, but when it comes about the post-conflict pictures, the blue is use with more frequency, indicating freedom.

This mural has become a media, through which different sectors of the community have expressed their history, their social practices, thoughts and dreams as a people and as individuals, using ancestral methods and colors.

Santa Lucia Cotzumalguapa Mural.

Created in 2011, this mural was made by the relatives of victims of the armed conflict in Guatemala. Women and children mainly composed the group. With the guidance of the organization Impunity Watch, the relatives of the victims made a book with their testimonies, titled *Why we wanted so much to get out from poverty*. The book narrates both the lives of the people who were killed or disappeared and the impact this had on the lives of the surviving families. With the mural, young and adults, wanted to illustrated what the book tells, make visible the violence lived on the town of Santa Lucia Cotzumalguapa, the effects on the people who suffered this violence, and contribute to a tradition of visualizing memory and history. However, their biggest aim was to signify their loved ones and demand reparation and pursue justice, since they are still in a state of impunity (Impunity Watch. 2011).

This mural is not divided by frames, but it has a mix of different scenes that represent what happened during the conflict in the village. You can see people being tortured, bodies on the river, people being kidnapped by the military, as well as mixed dark colors that seem to symbolize fear and terror. However, there are also different scenes of post-conflict situations, women and men shaking hands symbolizing how the community decided to move on, there are also scenes of exhumations which portray hope for the people who are still looking their love ones.

The importance of this mural is that it tells the story of what happened from different memories, this means that the memories comes from those who lived through the era of terror but also from those who have no memory, but their parents or grandparents have passed them their memory of what happened, and express it in the mural.

Likewise, this mural does not divide the horror experienced from the presently felt hope, since it tries, through this mixture of images, to demand to the State and the society the realization of that hope.

San Pedro la Laguna¹

In 2012, Canal Cultural a collective group of Guatemala arrived in the community of San Pedro la Laguna, to develop a program of cultural engagement and historical memory. They started doing different events to get people's attention about the knowledge and implementation of ancestral art to today's issues and the war memories.

When they finally found people from the community who wanted to get involved and create a street intervention that will reflect the memory of the violence lived by the community, the collective group implemented a workshop to do research on what happened during the conflict. This workshop took several sessions due to the fact that most of the people involved didn't wanted to talk, since there was still much fear and taboo in the air.

After sharing their stories and created one collective memory, a group of women and men between 19 and 30 years, all victims of the conflict, coordinated themselves, with the guidance of Canal Cultural, to impact every night a different part of the village. The street interventions were conducted at night until dawn, so people were surprised with something new and shocking in an unexpected place when they got up and left their houses.

The murals were made in unusual places, like walls of houses, grocery stores or places with an apparently unimportant meaning for the community, this with the intention of get people's attention. For these kinds of interventions, they counted with support of the municipality, the community and the person who owned the place where the interventions was performed.

Most interventions are intended to illustrate the forced disappearance, forced migration, and some current issues that still affect the community. When it comes about human rights violation during the conflict the background is always red, reflecting the Mayan meaning of blood, death and war. Another particular characteristic was the use of phrases on the murals and the repetition of words like: murder, sadness, disappearance, torture, etc. These murals have helped the older to sit with the young people to talk

¹ All the information here told was obtained through an interview conducted with Manuel Chavajay on December 9th, 2014

about what they have silent for a long time, the story of what happened during the conflict.

Huehuetenango Women's Mural.

In August 2008, the ECAP (Psychosocial Community Action Team of Guatemala) invited the School of Art and Open Studio of Perquin from El Salvador, to work with thirty indigenous women survivors of sexual violence during armed conflict. The project was developed in Huehuetenango².

The women invited to participate on the project, wanted to paint a mural to speak the truth that had never said. However, they felt afraid to tell that truth and show their feelings about what happened, at the beginning, because many of the men whom they had identified as responsible for the violations had become important political figures in local municipalities³.

However, on blank papers scattered on tables, pencils and crayons, the women began to draw lines, shapes, of known and unknown people, animals, corn plantations, burning houses, military uniforms. They create a sketch of their own life stories, and then they superimposed all the sketches and create a single story that reflected all of them.

On the mural, Huehuetenango women painted helicopters and military aircraft, people hanging from trees, mass graves where the army forces only "half-buried" them so the dogs could eat the bodies. The central part of the mural became the "sad part" with a dark background where a spiral absorbs life, a tunnel sorrows with weapons and destroyed houses⁴. In that center part, the colors that stand out are: red, brown, black and dark green. Nevertheless, the women paint themselves shaking hands and create a circle, a belt of light around the area of the sad memories. They were painted with attention to every detail, to the delicate embroidery of the blouses. Everything that is outside the sad circle is light green, yellow and vivid blue⁵. The memories of damage were contained in a restricted area. Outside the circle, where everything is colorful they

² Urdimbre de historias: at Aesthethika.
<http://www.aesthethika.org/Urdimbre-de-historias> (October, 2014)

³ Ibidem

⁴ Ibidem

⁵ Ibidem

painted what they want for their children and their communities; they painted their demands to the government.

The mural was painted on canvas so it could travel to different communities, to open it, display it and again have the opportunity to tell their stories.

Conclusion.

As we could see in the four examples of murals made by communities directly affected by the armed conflict, the murals can be understood, not only as an art form of expression, but also as the only close resource that the victims have to tell their own stories and show their point of view about what happened and their demands, since some of them doesn't know how to read or write.

Because the murals reflect people's memories, they can be identified as a initiative of memory, which have several purposes. First, is to recover the memory of what happened and make public denunciations; second, is to give dignity and honor the memory of the victims; third, promote community organization and social reconstruction, as we see above, every mural needed at the beginning that each community organizes and join efforts for its creation. Fourth, they try to inform and educate new generations; finally, it demands justice and reparation (Impunity Watch.2012)

In the process of memorialization and creation of the mural, and other thing that evolves is the representation and participation of victims. Since, making a mural involves make the community get closer to each other, this makes them have a more active political role off dialogue with the State. Many victims who suffered repression are no longer represent as naïve and passive, but as brave survivors. The murals, as a memory initiative, help the victims to re-identify their role and motivate them to continue demanding justice.

In sum, murals become their voices, as Anastasia, an indigenous woman victim of the conflict, mentions *“When people come from outside and ask us to tell our story and they write in notebooks, we have to believe that what they write is what we say. But*

really we don't know, because we don't know how to read or write. When we paint a mural, we can see and know the story we are telling”.

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