

Tecerunquinto: Doble fondo (False Bottom)
PROYECTOSMONCLOVA, Mexico City
February 7 – March 11, 2017

by Su-Ying Lee

During my weeks in Mexico City, I saw several exhibitions about socio-political conditions and the structures that uphold them. As is my tendency, I looked for indications of what art in the context of its presentation platform is able to achieve. Tercerunquinto is a collective of two Mexican artists, Gabriel Cázares and Rolando Flores, who describe their practice as “institutional critique-driven” and “dedicated to investigative explorations into the dynamics of public and private spaces.” Their work is produced through analysis of and intervention into architecture and sculpture in urban environments and gallery spaces. For their exhibition *Doble fondo (False Bottom)* at the commercial gallery PROYECTOSMONCLOVA, the artists continued their reflection on social and political commentary found painted onto public spaces in Mexico with significant attention given to “graffiti” that responds to the disappearance of 43 Mexican students in 2014.

43 students from Escuela Normal Rural Raúl Isidro Burgos teachers’ college were part of a group of about 100 headed to Mexico City to march in commemoration of the 1968 student massacre. The college is known for leftist politics and student activism. The police violently intercepted the students leading to the injury and deaths of bystanders and student protesters and, ultimately the disappearance of the 43. Though the exact motives remain unclear, implicated in the horror are the former mayor of Iguala, where the students were stopped, his wife and a local drug gang said to have burnt the students’ remains and thrown them in the San Juan river. Corrupt officials and paramilitary gangs motivated by criminal activities such as drug smuggling are also said to be involved.

Mexicans have marched and rallied in response, upholding the case as emblematic of the systemic impunity and corruption that avert justice and accountability.

Recognizing graffiti as both popular memorial and a form of resistance within the mural tradition of Mexico, Tercerunquinto worked with archaeologists, conservators, anthropologists and archivists. Visiting sites marked by remonstrance, the artists sought to develop a method to register the spray-painted texts. Using cloths to remove samples of paint, Tecerunquinto also photo documented and completed a registration form for each. Graffiti paint swatched onto cloths are then displayed stretched and grouped by subject matter, including feminism, anarchism, education reform, government critique, Indigenous rights and the missing 43. An artwork layout key quotes the original texts that the pigments were taken from. Material representation of the original milieu is encapsulated in several boxed sets each containing a paint-stained cloth, photo documentation of the graffiti site and completed registration form. Reminiscent of antiseptic museum storage systems, this ordering subdues the heat of the political fire.

The divide between gallery-hung canvases and city streets feels like a chasm in Mexico City, where galleries have façades and signage as discrete as the doorbell that must be rung to gain entry to the locked spaces. The canvases and documents draw me into Tercerunquinto’s motivation and methodology, but leave me with a sense of alienation and blocked urgency.

Thus far the works have been impassive. *Gramática de la tristeza* (*The grammar of sadness*) is a single channel video assembled from photo documentation of graffiti confronting the disappearance of the 43 students. Architectural settings have been removed, leaving the texts floating against a blank backdrop to the music of Gustav Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* (*Songs on the Death of Children*). The spare sombre work forefronts the anger, mistrust and accusations levelled at authorities. The elimination of architectural structures reflects the absence of systemic and structural accountability.

Another video, *Graffiti, Representación en grado cero* (*Graffiti, Degree zero of representation*) spans three sides of the back gallery. A young man methodically applies his tag, moving from white wall to white wall while discussing his practice. The clean interior setting, together with his unconcerned pace imparts a documentary quality. The tagger, actually an amateur actor enlisted to create and perform the persona, was found through a government cultural program that involves marginalized youth in cultural training. This earlier work was filmed at the Museo de Antioquia in Medellín, Colombia. Producing the video by these means was intended to demonstrate falsity between stereotypes and reality, policy and outcomes. Its placement at the end of the exhibition comes across as an afterthought. Loosely related, the work dangles rather than punctuates the exhibition as a whole.

Throughout the main space is the foundational work that is the exhibition's namesake. Visitors to the gallery stand upon *Doble fondo*, the concrete floor of the gallery, that has been raised an inch. The false floor buries and conceals and is difficult to distinguish – not unlike the political conditions that prevent justice.

Doble fondo treats graffiti with the care given to murals in Mexico, placing it within the same lineage of political and social critique that effectively conveys complex conditions. Graffiti as a spatially connected and influenced practice endures both disruption and heightening in Tercerunquinto's translation of the material from written in the street to abstracted in the gallery.

My experience of socio-politically themed exhibitions in Mexico City took place in elite environments. On each occasion I was hyper-aware of the severing of inside from outside. I rarely encountered another viewer, leading me to wonder who considers themselves invited in. It is only now, approximately fifteen years into my professional involvement in visual art, including Bachelor's and Master's degrees, institutional positions and independent projects under my belt that I feel assured that someone on the inside will allow me to enter. Though the nature of the barriers at each platform may vary, internationally the interpretation of vital themes expressed through contemporary artworks appears to be reserved for the few.

The public spaces where the imperative to broadcast difficult truths manifest in graffiti are within close proximity to the gallery, yet they are held distant by design. Exclusive exhibition spaces circumvent the potency of artwork's social and political reach and preserve and intensify class divisions. If exhibitions of political art are meant to engage viewers in critical inquiry, the physical and social boundaries set out by the galleries restrict discourse through exclusion.