



NACLA Report on the Americas

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rnac20

Art Against Forgetting

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To cite this article: Leonardo Aranda Brito & Dora Ytzell Bartilotti Bigurra (2024) Art Against Forgetting, NACLA Report on the Americas, 56:2, 175-182, DOI: [10.1080/10714839.2024.2356312](https://doi.org/10.1080/10714839.2024.2356312)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714839.2024.2356312>



Published online: 29 May 2024.



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Art Against Forgetting

When the story of forced disappearance in Mexico is told through statistics, it lacks a beginning and an end. Artistic practices of resistance seek to make absences visible.

In *Monumento a los desaparecidos*, by Leonardo Aranda with graphic and interface design by Dora Bartilotti, hundreds of voices speak the names of disappeared people in Mexico. Started in 2018, the project uses digital tools to build a participatory online platform, through which visitors can state the name of any of the 34,441 missing people who are part of

the project's database. The main goal is to create a repository of voices that can be taken to public spaces in moments of protest.

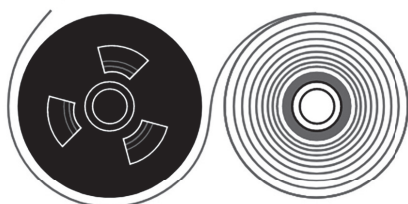
The project aims to give a voice to people who have been silenced, taking a step forward in the fight against forgetting and abstraction that turns missing persons into numbers and statistics. In this sense, the

MONUMENTO A LOS DESAPARECIDOS

ACERCA DE

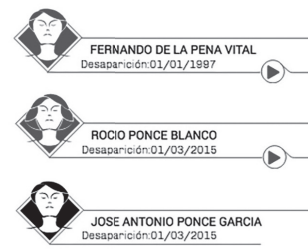
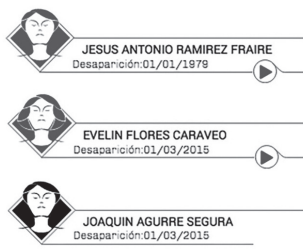


Aún hay 34,130 personas sin voz



Mostrar personas: ☐ sin voz ☐ con voz ☒ todos

Nombre completo



¿Cómo colaborar?



Monumento a los desaparecidos (Monument to the Disappeared), Leonardo Aranda, 2018-present.

voice becomes a tool that embodies a person's identity; participation and the act of naming become gestures of solidarity with those who have lost their ability to speak, promoting an act of memory against silence.

Artistic practices and forms of solidarity such as this seek to respond to the various challenges presented by Mexico's crisis of forced disappearance as it relates to the construction of collective memory, representation of victims, narratives of violence, and making visible the efforts of organized civil society. The representation offered by the state is characterized by its vertical nature, by abstracting violence in figures and detaching violence from its historical and sociopolitical context. In this state narrative, civilian victims are presented as either collateral damage or under the shadow of suspicion. In contrast to this official version, family groups and organized civil society have tried to build an alternative interpretation that complicates the role of the state, attempting to understand the origins of violence and propose possible solutions.

In some instances, artistic practices attempt to bolster the analysis and research that supports this alternative knowledge construction. In other cases, artistic practices seek to create channels of circulation and dissemination that counteract the hegemony of the official media and help make the crisis visible. In a cross-cutting way, these practices face three challenges: How can we create alternative forms and spaces of collective memory around the disappeared? How can we support and give visibility to the search work undertaken by groups of relatives? And, related to these two questions, how can we appropriate digital technologies to facilitate both tasks?

In the case of *Monumento a los desaparecidos*, the project's starting point is the database of disappeared persons developed by the organization Data Cívica. The objective of that initiative was to centralize information that was dispersed in the databases of multiple different organizations and government agencies, while naming disappeared persons. In this sense, *Monumento a los desaparecidos* stands in solidarity with this mission and takes a step forward in

individualizing the missing. The project proposes a form of memorialization that seeks to create a hybrid space of protest between the internet and public space, redefining the concept of monument beyond the margins of state narratives.

In this way, this and other artistic projects support a counter-narrative, constructed by civil society groups and collectives of families, that proposes creating a space of hope. Under the slogan “¡Vivos se los llevaron, vivos los queremos!” (They took them alive, we want them back alive), used in multiple contexts of protest by family members and organizations, we must understand four principles: the refusal to give up the search for disappeared people; the responsibility of the state within the crisis; the reappropriation of collective memory in a way that seeks to destigmatize the disappeared and restore their individuality; and the agency of the relatives of the disappeared and organized civil society, who refuse to assume a passive place as victims and have instead taken a leading role in responding to each aspect of the crisis.

Constructing this counter-narrative involves several important conceptual challenges. The Chilean philosopher María José López Merino argues that the crime of forced disappearance has a series of particularities that make its violence more gruesome than death alone and that extend into the victim's community. For López Merino, this form of violence can be described by four characteristics: the ambiguity of death, its extended temporality, the deindividuation of the victims, and the disengagement of victims from their communities. The first characteristic transforms the very limits of death, surrounding it with conjectures and speculations that deprive relatives of certainty about the fate of their relatives and deny them the right to mourn. This same characteristic extends the temporality of this crime.

As López Merino explains, the disappeared person becomes a spectral figure, “the sign of damage that has not stopped being inflicted on an entire community.” On the other hand, this form of violence has the effect of erasing victims' marks of individuality, turning them into anonymous subjects whose remains, piled

up in mass graves, are torn from any trace of identity. Finally, the disappeared person is a subject who is separated from their community as their death becomes a solitary event and a story that cannot be closed or remembered.

It is precisely in the context of these challenges that artistic practices and other forms of solidarity, such as through journalism or academia, become relevant. In Mexico, various artistic practices seek to make this crisis visible, intervene in its narratives, and break with abstraction to represent the victims of this humanitarian catastrophe in an embodied way, in solidarity with the disappeared and their families.

"A War Against the People"

According to official figures, nearly 100,000 people have been victims of forced disappearance since the beginning of the so-called war on drugs in 2006. However, civil society groups and independent human rights commissions insist that this figure could be much higher, given the nature of the crime and the reluctance of many families to report to authorities.

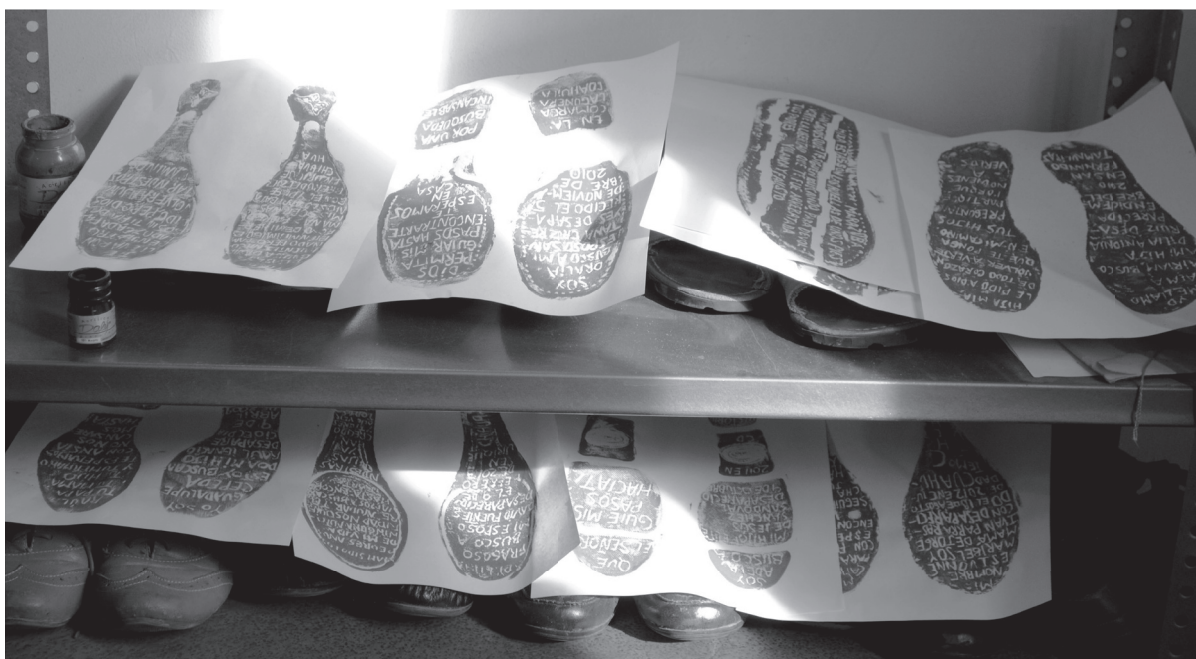
As Canadian journalist Dawn Marie Paley argues in her 2014 book *Drug War Capitalism*, published in Spanish with the subtitle "A war against the people," the conflict initiated in 2006 by Felipe Calderón cannot be characterized as a war, nor can it really be said that its objective is the elimination of drug trafficking. In reality, the result of these almost two decades of conflict has been the strengthening of organized criminal groups, the diversification of their activities, the consolidation of their political power, and the increase in the production and circulation of illegal substances. According to Paley, this is not a strategic failure of the state. Rather, the true objectives of the "war on drugs" has been to displace rural populations, weaken local and community organizations, and inflict violence against activists and journalists, all while protecting foreign investment and controlling migration through violence. One of the most pernicious effects of this conflict has been the crisis of forced disappearance.

In this new context, the state's position is twofold. On the one hand, the state is in charge of responding to and containing violence. On the other hand, in many cases, the state itself is the entity that inflicts the violence. In this scenario, organized civil society has taken on an important role, not only by keeping this phenomenon visible and exerting constant pressure on the government, but also by effectively carrying out state tasks, such as searching for bodies and organizing systematic information on missing persons. An example is the great work carried out by the National Search Brigade for the Disappeared (BNB), made up mainly of relatives of missing persons. In their efforts to find their loved ones, they have generated an important accumulation of knowledge, methodologies, and technologies, which have led them to successfully identify a large number of mass graves throughout Mexico.

Memory and the Fight Against Oblivion

Memory is one of the central fields of struggle within the crisis of forced disappearance. The state's strategy focuses on creating museums or memorials, where, with language of solemnity and abstraction, possibilities for critical reflection are closed and violence is talked about in past tense. Conversely, the strategy of search collectives has taken on a much more testimonial character, seeking to return individuality to the victims and open pathways for the construction of collectivity and resistance. In solidarity with these efforts, artistic practices offer proposals to displace not only the official narrative, but also the spaces, formats, and agents involved in the construction of this memory.

In their extensive review of expressions of art, memory, and resistance, Juan David Villa-Gómez and Manuela Avendaño-Ramírez describe how alternative spaces of memory are constructed outside of an institutional logic and seek to occupy other types of territories, such as the street, the fiesta, or the protest. This displacement allows a vitality that is open to new formats of enunciation and representation, such as anti-monuments or performances, which emphasize



ABOVE:
Huellas de la Memoria (Footprints
of Memory), photo by Xavier Kat.



RIGHT:
Recetario para la memoria
(Recipe Book for Memory),
Zahara Gómez Lucini, 2021.

ÁNGELES VALLEJO LÓPEZ
SALAMANCA

TOTOPOS CON UNA SALSA DE BANDERA Y CUERITOS PARA JUAN CARLOS

INGREDIENTES:

Tatopo
Frijoles
Jitomate
Cebolla
Cilantro
Repollo
Cueritos
Sal
Limon
Salsa de bandera
o salsa de árbol

PROCEDIMIENTO:

Se pica el jitomate, la cebolla, el cilantro, el
repollo; se muelen los frijoles. Los totopos se
hacen o se compran preparados.
Se agregan los totopos —pequeños los
totopos dorados—, se le echan los frijoles, el repollo,
la salsa de bandera, los cueros, sal, limón y salsa
al gusto. Quedan riquísimos.



JUAN CARLOS MORALES VALLEJO

Tiene 23 años cuando fue desaparecido el 25 de julio de 2017. Le gusta
la música, jugar videojuegos y motociclismo. Es muy alegre. Su familia lo sigue
buscando.

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the participation and agency of civil society. In these expressions, it is essential to present memory as something that belongs to the present and to continue interrogating it as a way of orienting and organizing indignation toward resistance.

An example of this approach to the construction of memory can be found in *Huellas de la Memoria*, a project (and collective by the same name) initiated by

the artist Alfredo López Casanova in 2013. This project represents stories of disappeared people, as well as their families' experiences of search processes, through a series of engravings on surfaces of the soles of shoes belonging to the searchers themselves. The search becomes a metaphor through walking, while testimony offers a way to recover the individual dimensions of these experiences. The project

transforms the object of walking—the shoe—into a living memory device that serves to record and make printed copies of these stories by pressing them on a sheet of paper, leaving a testimony and record of their struggle and their step. Memory appears as a personal story, which creates links that allow for the experiences of the victims and their families to be recovered.

Another notable example of the construction of this type of alternative narrative is the *Recetario para la memoria* (Recipe Book for Memory), a project published in 2021 by Zahara Gómez Lucini in collaboration with 10 search collectives from the states of Sinaloa and Guanajuato. The project consists of a printed publication and photographic exhibition made up of a set of recipes for the favorite dishes that the searchers once prepared for their now absent loved ones. In each recipe, the ingredients and instructions are accompanied by a series of photographs and stories about the missing people.

The project is a gastronomic, photographic, and social commitment that tries to reclaim the ritual of cooking to honor the women who are searching for their relatives, while also giving the victims a human dimension to resist their stigmatization. The project presents the disappeared as people with particular tastes and personal stories, while the testimony of their relatives helps us feel the dimensions of their loss and longing to see their loved ones again. The publication creates a bridge between the realities of those who are not present and those who search for them. On the other hand, the project seeks to become a means to generate resources to support the cause, and half of all profits go directly to the participating search groups.

The Performativity of the Search

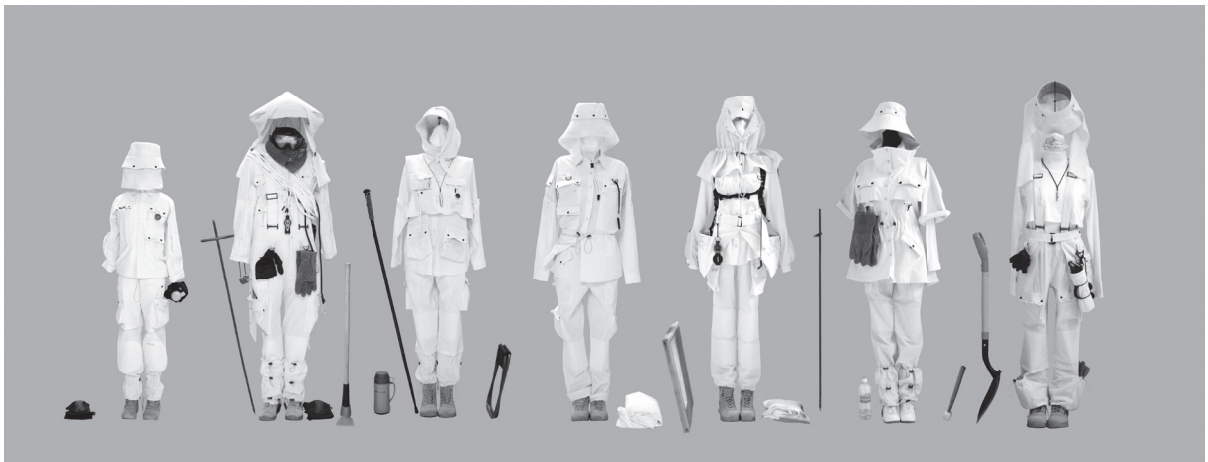
Another set of artistic practices aims to make visible the different dimensions of the performativity of the search. In this regard, Leana Diéguez argues that these practices not only seek to make absence visible, but to also highlight the bodies behind the search, their political agency, and everything that triggers and surrounds that activity. In other words,

this performativity deals with everything that makes up the fabric of the search. Gestures, actions, voices, technologies—embodied discourses and practices through which life experiences and their sustenance are intertwined within processes of tracking and identification. Here, the searching body, its experiences, affects, strategies, and devices become potentialities that point to the construction of other ways of addressing the complexity of the phenomenon of forced disappearance. In this context, artistic practices seek to amplify and mobilize solidarity toward these efforts.

Prototipos para buscar (Prototypes for Searching) from the series *Indumentarias para no desaparecer* (Clothing to Avoid Disappearance) by the Colombian-Mexican artist Sabina Aldana, is an example of this type of practice. Started in 2021, the project presents a series of garments that make reference to the clothing worn by relatives of missing persons during their search activities, together with the devices and accessories that protect the body from the environment and provide spiritual accompaniment. The project uses these outfits to create a dialogue between reality and fiction. Based on references to the real garments used by searchers, the clothing items in the project are speculative exercises that, from the design point of view, propose a visuality that standardizes the search and tries to respond to the needs and challenges of this arduous work.

In the installation, these textiles are accompanied by a series of recorded sounds capturing the testimonies of the family members. These stories give voice to the experiences of the work of searching, where emotions and memories of their disappeared relatives pass through them at every step. The project reveals the inventive capacity of the searchers, as they have had to develop various low-cost forensic search tactics in order to respond to the urgency of finding the bodies of their loved ones.

Another example of this type of artistic practice is *Luz contra el olvido* (Light Against Forgetting), a project carried out in 2023 by the Veracruz artist Dora Bartilotti. This project seeks to create a poetic gesture that makes visible the story of Teresa Magueyal, a



ABOVE:

Indumentarias para no desaparecer
(Clothing to Avoid Disappearance),
Sabina Aldana, 2021.



LEFT:

Luz contra el olvido (Light Against
Forgetting), Dora Bartilotti, 2023.

searching mother who was murdered while she was fighting to find her son. On May 2, 2023, Teresa was riding her pink bicycle when she was shot to death on a street in broad daylight. She was a member of the collective *Una Promesa Por Cumplir* (A Promise to Keep). As part of her work within the collective, she promoted the search for her son, José Luis Apaseo, who has been missing since 2020 in Guanajuato.

Teresa's femicide joins the various cases of women rights defenders searching for their loved ones whose lives have been taken during their fight for truth and justice, within a context of femicidal violence, impunity, and a lack of effective protection in Mexico.

The project consists of an interactive kinetic sculpture supported by a pink bicycle, to allude to the vehicle on which Teresa Magueyal was traveling at the time of her death. The bicycle is equipped with a homemade projector, made up of a dynamo light and a set of magnifying glasses as a pre-cinematic device. When users activate the piece by sitting on the bicycle, an audio recording begins to narrate Teresa's story, and as they pedal, the light turns on, projecting the face of her son, José Luis.

The project seeks to create a poetic gesture that puts the participants in Teresa's place, attempting to embody her experience and to performatively make

her search visible. The repeated motion of pedaling helps give presence to the participants' own bodies, their effort, and their fatigue. In this sense, the user becomes part of a mechanism on wheels that holds up a light against forgetting.

Appropriation of Technological Tools

In addition to the challenges posed by the search, the need arises for search collectives to create and appropriate technological tools. In this sense, the agency of collectives is not limited to the political sphere, but transcends to other spheres, such as communication or technological development. Through their search activities, they become generators of knowledge, which in turn amplifies their voices as interlocutors in the political arena.

The profound and pioneering research of Darwin Franco Migue on “Technologies of Hope” is a clear example of the exercise of agency by search collectives and the importance of solidarity. As Franco Migue describes, these forms of appropriation have

the power to articulate collectivities through their group agency. Appropriation is expressed in two ways: first, as a communicative act that generates and develops the capacity for enunciation through digital media and tools; and second, in the development of search techniques and forensic methodologies that give family members a leading role in the face of the crisis. In this context, solidarity in the form of artistic practices is expressed in the ways that skills and knowledge can be used to deepen how the crisis is made visible to other social strata, as well as in the development of tools, techniques, and methodologies that support search efforts.

A clear example of solidarity between artistic practices and search groups in the context of the appropriation and creation of technologies can be found in the investigation carried out by Forensic Architecture around the 2014 forced disappearance of 43 students from the Raúl Isidro Burgos Rural Teachers' College of Ayotzinapa. The state, supported by its own investigative agencies, manufactured an



A mural captures conflicting accounts of the events of September 26-27, 2014, the night the 43 Ayotzinapa students were disappeared in Iguala, Mexico. From the Forensic Architecture investigation “The Enforced Disappearance of the Ayotzinapa Students,” 2017.

“official version” of events that claimed that the group of students had been disappeared by one of the cartels that operated in the area. In contrast, over the years, a large group of activists and other organizations have established the collusion between the police, the state, and organized crime actors in the execution of this crime.

In this context, Forensic Architecture, in collaboration with collectives of families, Mexican human rights groups, and the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team, developed an investigation of the case using a set of digital tools that facilitate the reconstruction of the facts. Using field recordings, cell phone videos, call logs, 3D modeling of the incident area, and a large number of other forensic materials and tools, the group was able to create a detailed reconstruction of the night of the events, giving rise to a narrative that refutes much of the state’s “official version” and plausibly demonstrates collusion with criminal groups.

The conclusions of this investigation were published in 2017, accompanied by digital mapping, a timeline, and a video that recreated the events. This series of resources brought together testimonies, interviews, telephone records, and videos to present an alternative version of the events, amplifying the voices of those searching for truth and justice.

Vivos Los Queremos

Over the nearly 20 years since the beginning of the “war on drugs,” thousands of people have disappeared across Mexico. The state has not only proven insufficient to respond to a phenomenon of this magnitude, but on many occasions has hindered a resolution and even actively participated in this form of violence. Faced with this role of the state, it has been the collectives of family members and organized civil society groups that have presented the most effective response to forced disappearance, carrying out searches, organizing information, and developing forensic protocols, methodologies, and communication campaigns that have sought to confront official narratives.

This enormous task has received support and solidarity from other sectors of society, which from their own trenches are also trying to make visible and amplify the voices of these organizations and groups. Through artistic practices, acts of solidarity emerge that attempt to respond to specific problems, such as creating a collective memory about these events, giving visibility to the efforts of search collectives, circulating counter-narratives, and developing and appropriating technologies that facilitate each of these tasks. These acts must be seen as efforts to support a social cry against forgetting and for truth and justice, summed up in the slogan: ¡Vivos se los llevaron, vivos los queremos! **n**

Translated from Spanish by NACLA.

Leonardo Aranda Brito is a media artist with a doctorate in Media Study from SUNY Buffalo. He is director of Medialabmx, an organization focused on the links between art, technology, and politics. He has exhibited his work in countries including Mexico, Russia, Austria, the United States, Spain, Canada, and Brazil.

Dora Ytzell Bartilotti Bigurra is a multimedia artist whose work seeks to generate critical dialogues between art, design, pedagogy, and technology. She is part of Medialabmx, where she directs Costurerx Electrónica, a technofeminist program. Her work has been presented in Mexico, Canada, Brazil, Japan, Austria, and Colombia.

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