

Contemporary Guatemalan Bus Art: A Study of Public Art in a Regional Context

By

Claire Waugh

University of Colorado at Boulder

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Thesis Advisors:

Robert Nauman, Art History Department

James Cordova, Art History Department

Anne Becher, Department of Spanish and Portuguese

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores a form of public art, Guatemalan bus art, which is largely unexplored and undocumented. Guatemalan public buses are old American yellow school buses which undergo a structural and aesthetic transformation in order to become Guatemalan public buses. Through a description of the theoretical framework of public art and a presentation of the aesthetic transformation of the Guatemalan buses, this thesis attempts to draw a connection between art in theory and the actual creative process of decorating a bus. By looking at two categories of images that appear on the buses, religious images and images of machismo, this thesis asserts that the culture of fear in Guatemala provides insight into why these two categories of images are valued for their ability to provide safety and protection. Relevant artistic movements are also presented in this thesis for the purpose of comparison/contrast with Guatemalan bus art in terms of the varying functions of public art. In summary, this thesis argues that Guatemalan bus art is a form of public art which is responsive to cultural need.

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## **Introduction**

The presence of public art in Latin America has been studied extensively from different disciplinary perspectives. This thesis will examine one form of contemporary public art, Guatemalan public buses. My intention in this paper is to introduce both descriptive and theoretical ideas about the existence and function of contemporary Guatemalan bus art which merit further study. The descriptive information in this study was collected during a two week trip I took to Guatemala in the summer of 2011.

The purpose of this thesis is to draw a connection between art theory and a form of contemporary public art. This thesis addresses the question of why the aesthetic transformation of the public sphere would matter to someone who has no academic or formal artistic training. Why an individual with no artistic background decides to express themselves through a creative process, in the decoration of a public bus, is important and relevant to understanding the function of art itself. An understanding of this question is fundamental to this study.

In this thesis I assert that contemporary Guatemalan bus art is a manifestation of cultural and community identity; that through the placement of religious images and images of machismo on buses, contemporary Guatemalan buses are representative of a local Guatemalan culture and identity. A dialogue is established between the bus owners, the bus drivers and the bus riders in response to the continuous presence of fear in Guatemalan society where references to religion and male sexuality are used to allay passenger anxiety when riding a bus. Understanding Guatemalan bus art calls for an original category of public art, one which emphasizes site-specificity and audience involvement. The two categories of images discussed in this paper, religious images and images of machismo, were chosen because of their importance in Latin American culture, their constant presence on the buses, and because of my own personal interest in both categories.

This thesis is divided into four sections. The first section will provide a detailed description of the Guatemalan buses. This section will provide a context in which to understand the rest of the thesis in terms of further descriptive and theoretical discussion. The second section will discuss theory of public art, especially in a contemporary (twentieth century) context. In particular this section will define public art and present several critical issues that are raised by the theorist Jürgen Habermas and art historians Erica Doss and Eva Sperling-Cockroft. In the third section I will present three examples of public art movements in the twentieth century: Mexican muralism, Chicano muralism and graffiti art. An understanding of other forms of contemporary public art is useful as a method of understanding by comparison and contrast. The fourth section will give a brief overview of the contemporary socio-political context in Guatemala; given that the historical (political/economic/social) context of Guatemala is the basis for the need of bus decoration, this section is important. Following the historical context of Guatemala the fourth section will discuss two categories of images present on the buses: religious images and images of machismo. This section will provide examples of the bus art through detailed description and photographs. The fifth and final section, the conclusion, will pull together the descriptive detail and the theoretical framework provided throughout the paper to assert the importance of Guatemalan bus art and establish the relationship that exists between art in theory and the actual creative process of decorating a bus.

## Background

The decoration of public buses is a common practice in Latin America. Each Latin American country has its own name for decorated buses. In Guatemala the buses are *camionetas*, in Argentina *colectivos*, in Colombia *guaguas*.<sup>1</sup> Different names for the buses in each country indicate different traditions of bus decoration. Each country has a different style of decoration so public buses will look different depending on the country in which they were painted. Guatemalan public buses in specific are old American yellow school buses which have been brought down to Guatemala after they no longer meet safety requirements in the United States. When the school buses arrive in Guatemala they undergo an extensive cultural transformation, both physically and aesthetically, in order to become the decorated Guatemalan public buses that are discussed in this paper.

Information about the structural and aesthetic transformation of the Guatemalan buses was collected during a two week trip that I took to Guatemala during the summer of 2011. In Guatemala I visited eight *talleres*, mechanical workshops where the buses are altered and painted, in the town of Ciudad Vieja. In Guatemala Ciudad Vieja is the place to have a bus altered, of the ten *talleres* in Guatemala eight of them are located in Ciudad Vieja.

Guatemalan buses have a commanding presence; due to the increase in the suspension and the replacement of the hood of the bus, Guatemalan buses are higher off of the ground and physically bigger than normal yellow school buses. Also, due to the alteration of the bus engine to a diesel engine, the bus makes a lot of noise when it is running. Therefore when a large and noisy Guatemalan bus goes careening down a narrow city street in Guatemala it is an impressive sight. A bus on a Guatemalan city

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<sup>1</sup> Harris, Moira F. *Art on the Road: Painted Vehicles in the Americas* (Minneapolis: Pogo Press, 1988), 10.

street demands the attention of everyone on the street through its size, its noise and its colorful paintings.

In order to understand the structural and aesthetic transformation of the buses it is important to understand the relationship that exists between the bus driver and the bus owner (or the bus company). Bus companies in Guatemala are private, they are not owned by the state. Most bus companies are also small; they consist of two to eight buses. Because of this most bus companies run one route, usually a loop between two to three towns. When the owner of a bus company hires a bus driver he gives him one of his buses. The bus driver is then responsible for that specific bus as long as he works for that bus company. Often bus drivers are responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of the bus as well. The bus drivers pay the bus owner (or company) a certain amount of money per week for the use of the bus.

Physically American yellow school buses are altered to meet the demands of the Guatemalan geography; Guatemala is a mountainous nation with many steep and curving roads. Structurally, American yellow school buses are unequipped to meet the demands of the Guatemalan geography and of the Guatemalan people, who often bring small animals (chickens), fruits or vegetables, and other cargo onto the bus. To accommodate the geography, the bus is shortened: American yellow school buses traditionally have eleven to twelve rows of seats; Guatemalan public buses have eight or nine. A shorter bus fits better on the Guatemalan roads and allows navigation around hairpin turns. Due to the shortening of the bus, the location of the axles is changed; both axles are moved forward and closer together. The suspension of the bus is also raised so that when the bus is navigating dirt roads with large pot-holes or cobblestone streets (which is often) the passengers of the bus will not bounce around as much. The engine of the bus is also replaced with a diesel engine and altered from being an automatic gear shift to a manual stick shift. These alternations all facilitate easier mountain driving. A

rail is also added around the top of the roof of the bus so that cargo may be carried up there. Inside the bus, shelves are hung from the ceiling for additional storage space too.

The aesthetic transformation of the buses, which is the focus of this thesis, changes the buses from their identifiable American yellow to a multicolored expression of identity. While visually each Guatemalan bus looks different, the aesthetic transformation follows a certain format which consists of two parts. The first part of the aesthetic transformation is painting the bus new colors. The buses are traditionally painted in three colors, one color that covers the whole body of the bus and two other colors which form parallel, or sometimes interweaving, stripes down the length of the bus, under the passenger windows. The colors of a bus indicate the bus company, and no bus company has the same colors as another. Buses belonging to the same company will be painted with the same colors. Some companies paint their buses with the same colored stripes so they look identical while others use the same colors for the background but the design of the stripes on each bus will be different (one will be straight, another interweaving, etc.). The name of the bus company is often painted over the stripes (figures 1, 2, 3 & 4).

The second part of the aesthetic transformation is the addition of images and phrases, which I argue reflect a Latin American identity. For the purposes of this paper I focus on two categories: religious iconography and references to machismo. The images and phrases are different on each bus, so that every bus is original and visually distinct from the other buses. The religious images most often take the form of devotional images of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Jesus, Saint Simon and Saint Christopher. Images can be placed on any available surface of the bus; however religious images usually are put in a place of prominence, for example on the side window next to the driver, on the window of the rear door of the bus or on the front window shield. Images of machismo often come in the form of the playgirl, a voluptuous woman in profile who is a sexual object. The playgirl image is often placed next to the

destination sign of the bus, which is located above the front window shield of the bus, in the middle.

Text in the form of short phrases or sayings are also placed on the bus, often on the outside of the back of the bus, is another method through which messages of religion and machismo are displayed.

The aesthetic transformation of a bus is the product of a shared creative process which includes the bus owner, the bus driver, and the artist who paints the bus. The bus owner decides the colors which he would like his bus painted. The artist helps the owner decide which color will be used for the body of the bus and which colors will be used for the stripes; they also decide the design of the stripes, whether they will be straight or interweaving. The bus driver is responsible for the images of religion or machismo on the bus, which he chooses in relation to both his own personal preferences and the relationships he has with the people who ride his bus. The color of the painted bus and the images serve several functions. One function is logistical; the color of a bus and its images provide bus riders with a method through which to visually identify each bus. As mentioned earlier, each bus is painted with different colors; therefore the color of a bus provides a visual identification of what bus company the bus belongs to and its destination. The distinct images and text on each bus specifically provides identification of the bus driver. Visual identification of a bus is important if a bus is far away and one cannot read the sign indicating the destination of the bus. The colors and images on a bus therefore provide an easy and quick method of identification. Visual identification of a bus is also useful in Guatemala as many bus riders are illiterate. The bus paintings distinguish the buses from one another which visually allows illiterate passengers, who cannot read the destination card, to board the correct bus.

Stylistically the images of religion or machismo that appear on the buses do not demonstrate individual creative skill. Rather, the images are generic and universal. The images often come in a sticker format and because of this many of the images on the buses are identical. For example, the

playgirl is a popular generic image which looks exactly the same on every bus. By using pre-made images bus drivers place a value on the message of the images rather than the artistic process of creating a stylistically innovative or unique image. The images are often in the form of a sticker which is attached to the bus with some sort of adhesive.

Emphasis is given to the brand of bus. Having a bus from the Bluebird company demonstrates a masculine knowledge of mechanics. There exist several car companies which make yellow school buses; Ford, Bluebird and Thomas are the most well known in Guatemala. Bluebird buses are the most sought after, however, because of the way they are made. It is easy to structurally alter their physical form. In addition, Bluebird buses are a status symbol; it is a mark of good taste to own a Bluebird bus. Bus drivers who own Bluebirds want to make their status known and to do this they place the icon of the Bluebird Company, a stylized bird, in a place of prominence on the bus. Most buses have the bird on the front top portion of the sides of the bus, above the passenger windows. Traditionally there is one bird at the front of the bus and its tail feathers extend to the rear of the bus. The tail feathers form a stripe down the bus which runs parallel to the stripes that run under the passenger windows of the bus (figures 5, 6, 7 & 8).

Previous studies about the aesthetic and structural transformation of Latin American public buses exists only in the form of photo documentation. Collections of images often focus on decorated buses from specific Latin American country or region.<sup>2</sup> These previous studies provide visual data but no critical analysis or context; especially in concern to Guatemalan bus art. This thesis presents a critical context through which to understand Guatemalan bus art, which is a relatively undocumented and unexplored form of contemporary public art.

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<sup>2</sup> Harris, *Art on the Road*, 9.; Soto Eguibar, Enrique. *Rodando* (Mexico: Volkswagen, 2006).; Ulanovsky, Julieta. *El Libro de los Colectivos: Buenos Aires City Bus* (Buenos Aires: La Marca Editora, 2005).

## Theory of Public Art

Theory about public art provides a framework by which to understand contemporary Guatemalan bus art. This chapter will briefly discuss issues of public art raised by theorist Jürgen Habermas, and more extensively address the work of art historians Erica Doss and Eva Sperling-Cockcroft. Habermas provides a background of the public sphere, how public space has been created and used in western society. It is important to understand Habermas work, however it is the work of Erica Doss which provides an applicable framework through which to understand contemporary Guatemalan bus art. The analysis leads to a definition of public art.

### *The Public Sphere*

It is important to connect public art to the intellectual history of political theory on the formation and function of public space. Jürgen Habermas analyzes the history of the public sphere by tracing its presence through the philosophical theories of Kant, Marx, Hegel, Mill and de Tocqueville. Habermas defines public space (which he terms “the bourgeoisie public sphere”) as “... conceived above all as the sphere of private people who come together as public”.<sup>3</sup> According to Habermas the public sphere was created by private individuals who came together to interact in a public realm. Habermas defines private individuals as property owners. The unification of private individuals into a larger and more powerful group created the public. In the public realm (such as at coffee houses or through literary journals and periodicals) private individuals could debate rationally and engage in public authority.<sup>4</sup>

According to Habermas, the creation of the public sphere is recent; it emerged during the eighteenth century. Two factors which influenced the creation of the public sphere were capitalism and

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<sup>3</sup> Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Translated by Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 30.

<sup>4</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 31-56.

the emergence and expansion of an educated upper-middle class. Habermas defines capitalism in its societal function to determine the difference between the public and private realms.<sup>5</sup> Habermas additionally asserts that through the emergence of literary journals, periodicals and coffee houses, private educated men were able to meet in a public sphere to critically discuss art and literature. It was the critical discussion between private individuals which in fact created the public sphere.<sup>6</sup> Because contemporary critical art theory is so influenced by Habermas, it is important to acknowledge his influence in a study of public space.

### *The Function of Public Art*

While Habermas provides the critical theory of the formation and function of the public sphere, the art historian Erica Doss provides an analysis of the function of public art in contemporary society which might better address issues of Guatemalan bus art. In her article "Raising Community Consciousness with Public Art" Doss presents several critical issues of public art in contemporary American society. While Doss focuses on contemporary American society, the issues she raises in concern to public art are issues which, I argue, are applicable to other socio-cultural contexts. This is why Doss work provides a method through which to understand contemporary Guatemalan bus art. Doss begins her article by that there are "...widely held notions that public art is generic and non-specific- a form of ornamentation with little critical complexity, directed towards an audience construed as an all-inclusive mass".<sup>7</sup> Doss seeks to dispel the "notions" mentioned above by arguing that successful contemporary public art should be (and can be) dynamic, site-specific, audience aware and a reflection of cultural needs.

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<sup>5</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 14-26.

<sup>6</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 31-42.

<sup>7</sup> Doss, Erica. "Raising Community Consciousness with Public Art: Contrasting Projects by Judy Baca and Andrew Leicester." *American Art* Vol.6, No. 1 (Winter 1992),63. Accessed September 28, 2011.

Doss frames her argument around the public art created by Judy Baca in Los Angeles during the 1970s. By using Baca's murals as an example, Doss is able to raise critical issues around the definition and function of contemporary public art. One critical issue, which is central to the argument of this thesis on bus art, is the function of contemporary public art to "foster individual and community identity".<sup>8</sup> Using public art to foster identity is a way in which art can meet cultural needs and avoid being generic. To foster the identity of a population, a piece of public art must be site-specific; it is a response to one community's cultural needs. For example, Baca's murals were specific to the barrios of Los Angeles during the mid-1970s; their purpose was to raise community consciousness in Los Angeles through depicting the marginalized identity of minority groups.<sup>9</sup> This identity, which was different from the mainstream American identity, was specific in terms of time and place, 1970s Los Angeles.

Using art as a method to foster identity also incorporates the viewer into the 'art making' and the 'art meaning' process. Doss states that art which reflects the identity of a population achieves its position through promoting "civic dialogue and ...raise[ing] community consciousness"; one way a population takes ownership of public art is through speaking about it.<sup>10</sup> When public art responds to cultural needs it engages with its audience and therefore avoids eliciting an ambivalent or negative response from its viewers, which Doss identified as a critique of many generic contemporary public art works.<sup>11</sup> This is not to say that public art which is responsive to cultural needs will avoid controversy or negative dialogue; Doss just focuses on the opportunity for the creation of positive and constructive dialogue in cultural-need based public art. The Chicano murals responded to a cultural need, that a community of people could not see their identity reflected in the society in which they lived. The

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<sup>8</sup> Doss, "Raising Community Consciousness with Public Art", 68.

<sup>9</sup> Cockcroft, Eva Sperling, and Holly Barnet-Sánchez. *Signs from the Heart: California Chicano Murals* (Venice, CA: Social and Public Art Resource Center, 1990), 4.

<sup>10</sup> Doss, "Raising Community Consciousness with Public Art", 64.

<sup>11</sup> Doss, Erica. *Spirit Poles and Flying Pigs* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 17.

Chicano murals gave this community, the self-identified Chicanos, a method through which to explore their own cultural identity.

When evaluating a piece of public art it is important to understand its political, social and economic context. In her article Doss emphasizes that if a work of public art truly is site-specific and responsive to cultural needs, then each public work will have a different political and cultural context. In her book *Signs from the Heart* Eva Sperling Cockcroft also emphasizes this point; she states that “All art has a relationship to the social structures and political events of the society in which it is created (that is found in both content and form)”.<sup>12</sup> Sperling-Cockcroft states that support for public works of art comes in two ways, monetary support and community involvement. Public works require funding, which can come from the government or private institutions. Government support often indicates that the work of art will have a political message while funding from private donors may indicate other cultural or social messages.<sup>13</sup> Community support for works of public art often come in the form of volunteered time, money and participation. An involved community will have concerns about the content and form of the public art being created in their community.<sup>14</sup>

In her article and book *Spirit Poles and Flying Pigs: Public Art and Cultural Democracy in American Communities* Doss presents a critique of Habermas theory. Critiquing Habermas, Doss states that “Contemporary public culture... has been defined and established within an ideal, autonomous realm distinct from the real-life tensions of politics and economics”.<sup>15</sup> Doss argues that public art should respond to political and economic tensions; that in order for public art to respond to cultural needs, community consciousness is critical. Doss states that in Habermas’s public sphere where public objects are meant to be viewed uncritically, there exists a failure of engagement. This emphasizes Doss’ idea

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<sup>12</sup> Cockcroft, *Signs from the Heart*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Cockcroft, *Signs from the Heart*, 20.

<sup>14</sup> Cockcroft, *Signs from the Heart*, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Doss, *Spirit Poles and Flying Pigs*, 16.

that public art needs to engage the viewer and does so through an awareness of community and cultural tensions.

### *Defining Public Art*

A review of literature and theory has led to a definition of public art. Public art is a broad term which is used to describe any form of art which is located in a public place which can be a park, the street, a square, and engages with a specific population or community. The generality of the term 'public art' allows it to encompass a broad spectrum of artwork made in different mediums, sizes and locations. To better understand or categorize works of public art three attributes may be evaluated: site specificity; target viewer/audience; and viewer involvement/collaboration.<sup>16</sup> Evaluating how a work of public art relates to these three categories helps to better understand what aspects of the work define it as 'public art'.

Defining public art in terms of its location is one method to understand (or categorize) public art. Public art by definition is located in a public, shared, location; however there exist two ways in which works of public art can relate to their specific urban/rural location. While some public art draws inspiration from its surroundings and derives its meaning and significance from them, other works of public art are not specifically related to their location and can be seen as generic.<sup>17</sup> For works of public art which respond to cultural needs, transferring the piece to another context would change its intended meaning. For example Judy Baca's work is specific to Los Angeles during the 1970s with the formation of a racial and cultural identity.<sup>18</sup> For generic works, such as many public sculptures, their distinct

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<sup>16</sup> Knight, Cher Krause. *Public Art: Theory, Practice and Populism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 2-10.

<sup>17</sup> Riggle, Nicholas Alden. "Street Art: The Transfiguration of the Commonplaces." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 68, No.3 (Summer 2010) 243. Accessed September 15, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Doss, "Raising Community Consciousness with Public Art", 67.

urban/rural location does not directly affect their meaning as a work of art.<sup>19</sup> For example, many abstract public sculptures, such as Mark di Suvero's work *Lao Tzu* (which is located outside of the Denver Art Museum), can be placed in any public setting and still maintain their integrity and meaning. This paper focuses on the function of public art as dependent on cultural need; public art which is specific to a certain public space, either urban or rural.

Defining the viewer or target audience for a work of public art further specifies the definition of public art and/or the intention of a work of public art. Public art is created with a specific type of viewer in mind, a specific audience to whom the artist desires the effect through their piece.<sup>20</sup> For example the work *Great Wall of Los Angeles*, which was created by the artist Judy Baca between 1976 and 1983, depicts the history of California from colonialism up to the twentieth century. The mural depicts historical events from a non-traditional perspective; it gives emphasis and priority to the minority groups of the United States and the hardships that they have endured. *Great Wall of Los Angeles* intended viewers are of people of minority groups; the mural attempts to give them power and a sense of dignity by incorporating their history, one which is often overlooked in contemporary American society. The mural, however, also includes any viewer who sees it by narrating a history and educating its viewer, whether they are of a minority or not. Examples of other categories of viewers include women, Jewish people, World War II veterans or workers of a specific industry, such as steel workers. A work of public art with a specific intended audience does not exclude viewers who do not belong to the target audience, rather the piece will affect the "outsider" viewer in a different way and the viewer may likely understand the piece differently from how the artist intended.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Senie, Harriet F. and Sally Webster, Editors. *Critical Issues in Public Art: Content, Context, and Controversy* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 31.

<sup>20</sup> Knight, *Public Art*, 27.

<sup>21</sup> Knight, *Public Art*, 30.

A defining aspect of public art, in relation to other forms of art, is that it emphasizes interaction and collaboration with its viewer. It is the viewer's interaction with the work of art that gives the work its meaning.<sup>22</sup> Viewer interaction can occur in different ways; sometimes the viewer is physically responsible for creating the piece, such as with the Chicano murals in Los Angeles where the physical application of paint was done by volunteers of Chicano identity, the people about whom the murals were created. Viewer interaction can also entail function use of the artwork; for example in artist Scott Burton's work *Urban Plaza North* (1985) the piece consists of groups of cement stools and tables.<sup>23</sup> This work, located in New York City, emphasizes community and social interaction by providing a location for people to sit and communicate with one another. In total, the most important part of viewer involvement in public art is that it is the viewer and his/her collaboration or interaction with the artist and the artwork that gives a piece its meaning.

In her book *Public Art: Theory, Practice and Populism* Cher Krause Knight outlines four primary and traditional categories of public art: monuments (whose purpose is to celebrate; memorials (to commemorate); art as park (for enjoyment); and art as agora (for social interaction). Knight describes these categories of public art as "...understandable but not innovative".<sup>24</sup> A lot of public art does fall into the aforementioned categories but other types of contemporary public art cannot be categorized in these ways as well. This suggests that contemporary public art has moved away from the traditional, and toward what Knight terms 'the innovative'. As it pertains to the decoration of contemporary Guatemalan buses, another category of public art may be proposed, one in which art confronts public space in a new way. Erica Doss, in her critical discussion of the function of public art, addresses this idea by identifying two new functions of public art: to meet cultural needs and to foster community

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<sup>22</sup> Doss, *Spirit Poles and Flying Pigs*, 157-160.

<sup>23</sup> Knight, *Public Art*, 43.

<sup>24</sup> Knight, *Public Art*, 22-37.

identity.<sup>25</sup> The decoration of Guatemalan buses can be understood in terms of the new functions of public art as defined by Doss.

Public art is a social agent that can demonstrate identity. It can be used as a declaration of a marginal identity against a hegemonic culture, as in the Chicano murals, or it can be used as a method through which to assert a unified identity, given legitimacy and prominence by its public display. Public art emphasizes the union between art and life, which means that public art is a synthesis of functional and aesthetic values.<sup>26</sup> Sperling-Cockcroft states that “A truly ‘public’ art provides society with the symbolic representation of collective beliefs as well as the continuing re-affirmation of the collective sense of self”.<sup>27</sup> The manifestation of identity is most often shown through the content of a piece; themes and symbolic representation of ideas demonstrate that which is fundamental to the identity of the community which is creating the work of public art. For example in the *Great Wall of Los Angeles* Judy Baca represented the history of California, from the perspective of the minorities, specifically the Mexican-American population. By positioning a specific community’s importance in the history of a state and country, Baca achieved both resistance and affirmation; “a continuing re-affirmation of a collective sense of self”.<sup>28</sup>

Public art also has an aesthetic function or value. In *Signs from the Heart* Sperling-Cockcroft writes that “The desire by people for beauty and meaning in their lives is fundamental to their identity as human beings” which identifies a critical function of public art.<sup>29</sup> The desire to beautify the places in which we live is a distinctly human desire. Public art not only alters the space it occupies with its content, it also alters it aesthetically. Located in an urban setting public art can beautify ugly and dull

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<sup>25</sup> Doss, “Raising Community Consciousness in Public Art”, 64.

<sup>26</sup> Riggle, “Street Art”, 243.

<sup>27</sup> Cockcroft, *Signs from the Heart*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Cockcroft, *Signs from the Heart*, 6.

<sup>29</sup> Cockcroft, *Signs from the Heart*, 5.

pieces of municipal furniture.<sup>30</sup> For example, the Chicano murals were painted on the pillars the supported bridges, on the concrete walls of industrial buildings and the fences that run alongside the highway. What was unadorned public space before, was beautified and therefore transformed into a manifestation of identity and something of aesthetic value.

Public art has a distinct relationship to the art world. Many pieces of public art are commissioned and created for commercial purposes. Artists can be well paid to create public art which decorates commercial locations such as the buildings of large companies or the interior of commercial spaces, such as stores or malls. Other works of public art defy the commercial market in pursuit of other ideals. With the lack of a commercial goal or purpose, public art has the freedom to define itself in different ways; namely though its function as a social agent to beautify an urban setting or to be a means through which to demonstrate social identity.<sup>31</sup> Its denial of commodification is what appeals to many artists in concern to public art. For example, to the Mexican muralists, who are arguably the most well-known public art movement of the twentieth century, the fact that public art could not be bought or sold was fundamental to their theory of their art.<sup>32</sup> A fundamental aspect of muralism is that it is available to the public; for example to Diego Rivera it was extremely important that his work be accessible to the Mexican society at large, and not just to those individuals of power and wealth.

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<sup>30</sup> Rojo, Jaime, Steven P. Harrington, and Carolina A. Miranda. *Street Art New York* (Munich: Prestel, 2010), 3.

<sup>31</sup> Knight, *Public Art*, 22.

<sup>32</sup> Indyck-Lopez, Anna. "Mural Gambits: Mexican Muralism in the United States and the 'Portable' Fresco." *The Art Bulletin* Vol. 89, No. 2 (June 2007) 288.

## Relevant Artistic Movements

To understand Guatemalan bus art it is useful to place it within a framework of other artistic movements of public art that occurred during the twentieth century. This section will discuss three different movements, Mexican muralism, Chicano art and graffiti art for the purpose of conducting a comparison and contrast with Guatemalan bus art. These three movements vary in terms of their function as public art, the public space they occupy, their viewers and their content. A discussion of the three aforementioned art movements is used in order to provide insight into the function and purpose of Guatemalan bus art as public art.

### *Mexican Muralism*

Mexican muralism is arguably the most famous public art movement of the twentieth century. The movement, which lasted from 1920-1960, is characterized by its leftist social and political goals; the most important of which was to establish a unified Mexican identity based upon the glorification of the indigenous and working classes.<sup>33</sup> The muralist movement was significantly shaped by its most famous artists, “The Big Three”: Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Jose Clemente Orozco, all of whom had their own distinct styles but adhered to the fundamental principle that art is for the people. It is this principal preoccupation, that the muralists desired to create art for the proletariat and not the bourgeoisie, that makes the Mexican muralist movement an important point of reference for the understanding of Guatemalan bus art.

Creating and publicizing a unified Mexican identity was important to the muralist artists because the Mexican revolution (1910-1929), which was just ending when this movement was beginning, had left Mexico without a cohesive national identity. It was the Mexican intellectual and minister of

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<sup>33</sup> Kleiner, Fred S. and Christin J. Mamiya. *Gardner's Art through the Ages: The Western Perspective* (Belmont: Thomas Wadsworth Publishing, 2006), 800.

education to the Mexican government in the early 1920s, Jose Vasconcelos, who conceptualized the idea of large paintings, murals, as a method of national propaganda: a space in which to easily communicate with an illiterate public through a visual/pictorial language.<sup>34</sup> The Mexican murals were accessible to the public because of their size, location and visual style. The Mexican murals range in size; they can be as short as 4 feet long or as long as 50 feet in length. The large sizes of mural paintings emphasize accessibility, which enforces the populist goal of the muralist movement; to create art for public consumption. Located in public buildings, murals were also accessible in terms of location. If murals had been painted in private residences, instead of in public buildings, they would not have been as available to the public. The muralist artists also desired to use an understandable visual language, based on figural forms. Indeed, it is easy to identify figures and their actions in many murals, whether they are indigenous farm workers or proletariat factory workers.<sup>35</sup> An easily understandable visual language was desirable to the muralist artists because they wanted the illiterate Mexican public to be able to interpret their mural works, in order to draw a sense of Mexican nationalism from them.

Diego Rivera was one of the “Big Three” painters of the muralist movement. In his murals Rivera demonstrates an interest in depicting historical events, the modernization of technology and the glorification of the lower and indigenous Mexican classes. As an outspoken communist Rivera’s murals assert the power and respect of the working classes over the bourgeoisie, who are depicted as ugly and impervious to the plight of the lower classes. In his essay “The Revolutionary Spirit in Modern Art” (published in 1932) Rivera criticizes the bourgeois idea that art can only be appreciated or possessed by “...a very limited number of superior persons”.<sup>36</sup> Rather Rivera argues that “...it is time that the proletariat develop artists from their own midst” which emphasizes Rivera’s ideology on art and its use

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<sup>34</sup> Indyck-Lopez, “Mural Gambits”, 298.

<sup>35</sup> Kleiner, *Garner’s Art through the Ages*, 801.

<sup>36</sup> Harrison, Charles and Paul Wood. *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 422.

as a propagandist tool of the proletariat classes.<sup>37</sup> Rivera saw the way to a public, proletariat, art through form and visual language; the physical size of murals and a visual language based upon figural forms.

David Alfaro Siqueiros was one of the “Big Three” Mexican muralists and was arguably the most political of the muralists; he was repeatedly exiled from, and jailed in, Mexico and other Latin American countries for his involvement in leftist politics.<sup>38</sup> Siqueiros’ paintings, like Rivera’s, thematically focus on the history of the Mexican nation as well as the customs and traditions of the Mexican people. Siqueiros, whose painting style is often referred to as social realism, identifies and conveys the injustices of poverty on the lower and indigenous classes. Additionally, Siqueiros often depicts Mexican historical events in which the government repressed, or wrongly used violence against, the lower working classes. In his work Siqueiros elevates the labor classes, demonstrating his belief that the working and indigenous classes possess an inherent respect. In his manifesto *A Declaration of Social, Political and Aesthetic Principles* (written in 1922) Siqueiros very clearly states the intention of Mexican muralism as a public art. He states:

“We repudiate so-called easel painting and every kind of art favored by the ultra-intellectual circles, because it is aristocratic, and we praise monumental art in all its forms, because it is public property. We proclaim that at this time of social change...the creators of beauty must use their best efforts to produce ideological works of art for the people; art must no longer be the expression of individual satisfaction which it is today, but should aim to become a fighting, educative art for all.”<sup>39</sup>

Siqueiros, like Rivera, saw the way to public art through form, but unlike Rivera, Siqueiros emphasized the use of new physical materials (and not a new visual language). In his essay “Towards a Transformation of the Plastic Arts” Siqueiros states “We want to produce an art which will be physically capable of serving the public through its material form.” (Harrison, 429). Siqueiros emphasis on

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<sup>37</sup> Harrison, *Art in Theory 1900-2000*, 423.

<sup>38</sup> Kleiner, *Garner’s Art through the Ages*, 801.

<sup>39</sup> Harrison, *Art in Theory 1900-2000*, 406-407.

technique is demonstrated through his use of synthetic paints. He would layer paint so that the surface of his paintings had a materiality and a texture.

Rivera and Siqueiros, although part of the same art movement, had different ideas on how to create a revolutionary public art. Rivera tried to make his revolutionary message readable to a larger public through his visual language by depicting marginalized groups, the indigenous people and farm and factory workers. For Siqueiros, a revolutionary technique was the most important aspect of his approach. By utilizing new methods of paint application, Siqueiros wanted his work to be available to a larger public.

While Mexican muralism was fundamentally preoccupied with its function as a public art, the biggest critique of Mexican muralism has to do with this very same goal. Critics argue that the murals, while intended for the education of an illiterate Mexican public, were actually difficult to access and to understand (especially in concern to Siqueiros).<sup>40</sup> Often located inside of government buildings, murals were difficult to find, and contrary to what the muralist painters desired, were not seen by the Mexican public at large.

A basic comparison of Mexican muralism and Guatemalan bus art can begin with the fact that both art forms are based in a Latin American cultural context (although of different countries and time periods). In concern to form and technique Mexican muralism (which emphasizes painted figural forms) and Guatemalan bus art (which uses stickers of images and text) are very different. However, one principal concern of the Mexican muralist movement was to create art for the proletariat and not the bourgeoisie. Taken to the next level Guatemalan bus art can be seen as art which is created by the proletariat for the proletariat. The Guatemalans who own, drive, and ride the buses all belong to the indigenous lower working class. In terms of content, both forms of art address the identity of the

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<sup>40</sup> Indyck-Lopez, "Mural Gambits", 303.

proletariat, the indigenous lower working class, but with different intentions. Mexican muralism wanted to incorporate the marginalized working and indigenous population into the Mexican national identity. Guatemalan bus art specifically addresses the indigenous lower working class because that is who rides, drives, and owns the buses.

### *Chicano Art (Chicano Muralism)*

The Chicano art movement took place during the 1960s and 1970s in the northwest, midwest and southwest regions of the United States.<sup>41</sup> In specific, the Chicano art movement flourished in California, especially in Los Angeles. The Chicano art movement is defined by class, race and ethnicity; the Chicanos are people of the working classes who are of Mexican descent and live in the United States, often in regions which were once Mexican territory. In her article "How, Why, Where and When it all Happened: Chicano Murals of California" Shifra M. Goldman defines the fundamental function of the Chicano murals as one of communication. The Chicano murals promoted social and political goals associated with the creation of a positive image of a cultural heritage and identity.<sup>42</sup> It is their location in urban streets and their goal to legitimize an identity which makes the Chicano movement a useful comparison in a discussion of Guatemalan bus art.

The social and political goals of the Chicano movement were the primary concern of the movement while aesthetic considerations were secondary. Deriving their inspiration from the indigenous cultures of pre-Colombia and the Mexican Revolution and leaders of the Mexican/Chicano movement, Chicano mural artists demonstrate their social preoccupation with the exploitation and disenfranchisement of their social group.<sup>43</sup> The main goal of the Chicano movement was to reclaim a specific cultural heritage through creating a politically and socially positive self-identity. Working against

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<sup>41</sup> Cockcroft, *Signs from the Heart*, 30.

<sup>42</sup> Cockcroft, *Signs from the Heart*, 27.

<sup>43</sup> Cockcroft, *Signs from the Heart*, 28.

the American ideal of universal beauty that existed in the 1960s and 1970s, where cultural differences were minimized in favor of a unified heterogeneous cultural identity, the Chicano murals are self-defining and demonstrate a cultural pride.<sup>44</sup> One way in which cultural pride is claimed is through a re-examination of history where well-known historical events are retold from the perspective of the marginalized population. This theme is evident in Judy Baca's *Great Wall of Los Angeles* (1976) but also in Barbara Carrasco's *The History of Los Angeles, A Mexican Perspective* (1981-1983).

Since the Chicano movement was preoccupied with the formation of an identity, it is important to define the group of people who sought this identity. While the term Chicano refers to a specific group of people defined by class, race and ethnicity, the Chicano movement actually involved more than just the Chicano people. With the goal to dispel the idea of "the other" and claim a cultural heritage, the Chicano movement incorporated other marginalized racial and ethnic groups.<sup>45</sup> Chicano youth had no examples of a cultural identity which fit their own. Their parents had emigrated from Mexico and did not understand an identity which fit with both and neither that of Mexican culture or American identity. Instead the desire to claim a cultural heritage came from a group of people who had no examples of a cultural identity which was in accordance with their own, which is why the Chicanos active in the movement were often youth.<sup>46</sup>

An important aspect of the Chicano murals is that they involved extensive community participation. The Chicano murals facilitated community interaction and identity formation through their creation. The participation of the community in the creation of the Chicano murals is in accordance with the greater goals of the movement, to establish community and cultural identity. Many of the Chicano murals were community projects in which an artist would create the composition

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<sup>44</sup> Cockcroft, *Signs from the Heart*, 55.

<sup>45</sup> Cockcroft, *Signs from the Heart*, 10.

<sup>46</sup> Griswold de Castillo, Richard and Teresa McKenna. *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985* (University of California: Getty Grant Program, 1991), 20.

of a mural and the actual painting of the mural would be done by Chicano youth.<sup>47</sup> Murals were painted on the walls of public buildings in the neighborhoods where Chicano's lived. Located on the walls of public buildings in an urban landscape, Chicano murals gained visibility by their size and location. With messages of cultural identity it was important that the Chicano murals be visible to the people about whom they spoke. The incorporation of Chicano youth and other marginalized groups into the actual art making process emphasizes the importance of the social functions of art.

One critique of Chicano muralism focuses on the marginalization of Chicanas. Chicano art was often gendered; focus was given to male artists and male subject matter. While there are famous women Chicana artists, in general women artists struggled to assert their identity and role in the Chicano art movement. Guatemalan bus art is a gendered art as well. While women ride the buses it is men who own, decorate/paint, and drive the buses. This male dominance is emphasized in the images and text of machismo that appear on the buses.

Chicano muralism provides an interesting contrast with Guatemalan bus art because of the different relationships the two art forms have with their viewers. The Chicano art movement incorporated many of its viewers into the art making process. Chicano murals depicted the identity of marginalized groups and it was these people who, as volunteers, physically painted the murals. The decoration of Guatemalan bus art does not incorporate its viewer into the art making process. The bus driver, the bus owner and an artist/mechanic are the only ones who make creative decisions in relation to the decorating of a bus. In terms of location the Chicano murals were painted in the neighborhoods where Chicano and other marginalized groups lived. In this way the art was available to the people whom the art addressed. Guatemalan buses are not in a fixed location, they move around a town or community, but like Chicano murals are located in the public space which they address. In urban and

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<sup>47</sup> Cockcroft, *Signs from the Heart*, 23.

rural streets Guatemalan buses are seen by people of the indigenous lower working classes. In relation to content, both Chicano murals and Guatemalan bus art address similar subject matter: religious images (for example of the Virgin of Guadalupe), images of masculine identity and images of popular culture (such as cartoons).

### *Graffiti Art*

Street art is a sub-category of public art which is specifically associated with the urban landscape of city streets. In the book *Street Art New York* Carolina Miranda defines the function of street art as the desire or ability "...to turn dull municipal furniture into a dynamic piece of sculpture".<sup>48</sup> This definition emphasizes the transformative quality of street art. It is this manipulation or transformation from functional to aesthetic which gives street art its power and intrigue. Street art appears in different forms; it can be paintings, pasted posters or sculptures. Graffiti art, a specific type of street art, provides a useful comparison with Guatemalan bus art because of their shared location in the streets and their function as a vehicle through which to assert identity.

Graffiti art began in New York during the 1960s, but since then has expanded its breadth to become a contemporary worldwide phenomenon.<sup>49</sup> It can be difficult to define graffiti art because the movement is not confined to one geographical location or time period. Some graffiti art can be defined as subversive, while other graffiti art is better understood in the context of identity formation. Most definitions of graffiti art focus on the existence of graffiti art in New York City during the 1960s and extrapolate out into the existence of graffiti art in a different geographical location and time period.

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<sup>48</sup> Rojo, *Street Art New York*, 5.

<sup>49</sup> Bowen, Tracy E. "Graffiti Art: A Contemporary Study of Toronto Artists" *Studies in Art Education* Vol.41, No.1 (Autumn, 1999), 22. Accessed October 10, 2011.

On a basic level graffiti art can be understood in terms of location, style/medium, and purpose. Located in the urban space of city streets, graffiti is placed on municipal furniture such as public buildings, mailboxes, lampposts or subway cars.<sup>50</sup> Graffiti art is generally executed in spray paint. Formally graffiti can appear as images or text, where text consists of stylized letters. In graffiti art there exists a connection between medium and form; the way in which spray paint is used influences the forms that are made. Often forms are executed in one continuous motion using a bottle of spray paint to spray continuously. Works of graffiti art are called “tags” which is indicative of their purpose, to establish ownership or to indicate a presence within a specific urban neighborhood.<sup>51</sup>

Academic definitions of graffiti art are plentiful. Anthropological, sociological and art historical definitions all attempt to identify and define the complex characteristics of this art movement.<sup>52</sup> Definitions of graffiti art vary, depending on whether the art movement is defined by its social and political context or whether it is defined by its creative and stylistic attributes. In a socio-political context, graffiti art is defined as a socioeconomic phenomenon where tags demonstrate a need by a specific population to establish its place in society.<sup>53</sup> This definition focuses on how the graffiti tags function in relation to the artists and their connection to societal and economic structures. A definition of graffiti art in terms of creativity focuses on the stylistic and formal expression of the tags. The application of spray paint, the location of the tag, and the composition of the tag are all factors in a creative definition of graffiti art.

In terms of audience, graffiti art is exclusive. The images and text of tags are not meant to be understood by the public at large, rather their purpose is to claim a specific urban space. Tags are only

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<sup>50</sup> Riggle, *Street Art*, 245.

<sup>51</sup> Bowen, “Graffiti Art”, 25.

<sup>52</sup> Bowen, “Graffiti Art”, 27.

<sup>53</sup> Bowen, “Graffiti Art”, 35.

intended to be understood by a select group of people, often other graffiti artists.<sup>54</sup> Because graffiti art has an exclusive audience and functions to claim a specific urban space, graffiti art can be seen as a representation of identity. An individual graffiti artist will have a specific tag, which functions like a signature. Placing a tag in a specific urban setting indicates the presence of a particular graffiti artist in that setting.<sup>55</sup> Indicating or claiming one's presence in an urban setting can be seen as a declaration of one's place in society.

One of the biggest critiques of graffiti art has to do with its location in an urban setting. Often graffiti art is seen as vandalism, the defacement of public property, and not valued for its creative contribution or innovation. In relation to its perceived function as an act of vandalism, art historians often debate the question of when graffiti becomes art, and not vandalism or something else.

Graffiti art provides a contrast with Guatemalan bus art. Graffiti art has an exclusive audience; tags are meant to be understood by only a certain group of people (often other graffiti artists). Guatemalan bus art has an inclusive audience; it incorporates anyone who sees a bus in the street. This is not to say that Guatemalan bus art affects its audience all in the same way; the purpose and function of the bus art changes whether it is viewed by an audience who desires to ride a bus or an audience who simply sees the bus in the street. Graffiti art and Guatemalan bus art also share the function of being representations of identity. However while graffiti art denotes an individual identity, Guatemalan bus art depicts a larger shared cultural identity. Both art forms, however, establish the presence of a specific group of people (or person) in a distinct public space.

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<sup>54</sup> Riggle, "Street Art", 255.

<sup>55</sup> Riggle, "Street Art", 247.

## **Guatemalan Bus Art**

### *Guatemalan Bus Art in the Theory of Public Art*

An evaluation of Guatemalan bus art from a perspective of art theory is best done through the previously discussed ideas of art historian Erica Doss. Doss argues that public art should be responsive to cultural needs. Guatemalan bus art can be seen as a response to a cultural presence of fear and danger. Religious images and images of machismo are placed on buses because a certain group of people, the indigenous lower working class, need to feel safe and not powerless when riding a public bus. Doss also argues that public art should foster a cultural identity. The Guatemalan buses depict a cultural and community identity through their use of religious and machismo images. The buses demonstrate a shared Latin American cultural identity but also a more specific community identity. Because bus art is meant to be seen by potential bus riders, the bus art responds to specific cultural needs of the communities through which the bus drives.

In this chapter I argue that the decoration of Guatemalan buses functions both to beautify an urban landscape and also to provide meaning to a Guatemalan identity. In terms of the definition of public art, Guatemalan bus art is site specific to public streets, urban and rural. Due to the nature of the medium of the art, the exterior of a bus, it makes sense that Guatemalan bus art is intended to be viewed in the context of a street. The buses are more richly decorated in the northern part of the country, which geographically are the highlands, a very mountainous and rural area where the population is primarily indigenous. In addition to location, it is important to understand the role of the viewer when evaluating Guatemalan bus art in terms of the definition of public art.

An evaluation of who understands what appears on the buses is fundamental to understanding the purpose of the bus art itself. Specifically, the intended viewer of the bus art is potential bus riders. Due to the current political and social environment in Guatemala the people who ride the bus are a

specific economic and racial sub-set of the general population. The majority of the people who ride the buses are indigenous people of the lower class. Because riding the buses is dangerous, anyone who can take another form of transportation does so. Therefore, those individuals who ride the buses do so because they have no other means of getting around. The images and text with messages of Catholicism and machismo that appear on the buses serve a marketing or advertising function; they indicate reasons why someone should ride a bus. The images and text indicate such issues as the safety of the bus, the technical skill of the bus driver and his social standing. All of these attributes serve as reasons that an individual would choose to ride a certain driver's bus.

The images and text that appear on the buses also incorporate a larger audience, anyone in the general Guatemalan population who sees the buses. This second category of viewers can also be defined by economic status and race; it is people of the middle and upper classes who are Ladinos. Ladinos are Spanish speaking, westernized people of mixed ethnicity; indigenous and Hispanic. It is important to acknowledge that the images and text of Catholicism and machismo that appear on the buses may be interpreted differently by this audience. Because of their economic and social standing it can generally be assumed that this audience has a higher level of education and due to this, a different understanding of the bus images and text. People of higher economic and social standing show their devotion to religion and their social identity differently than people of the lower class. To these people, who are less dependent on riding the buses, the bus images serve a less defined and more vague function. People of the middle and upper classes are able to understand the meanings of the images and text on the buses, but perhaps look at the function and use of the images and text as characteristic of the lower classes.

In relation to its primary viewers, potential bus riders, the bus images and text serve a logistical function; the paintings provide the bus riders with a method through which to identify each bus. Each

bus is painted with different colors, which are a visual identification of what bus company the bus belongs to and its destination. Each bus also has its own distinct images of decoration, which identify the individual bus driver. Visual identification of a bus by its colors is important if a bus is far away and one cannot read the sign indicating the destination of the bus. The paintings and colors of the bus therefore provide an easy and quick method of identification. Visual identification of a bus by color is also useful in Guatemala as many bus riders are illiterate. The bus paintings distinguish the buses from one another which visually allow illiterate passengers, who cannot read the destination card, to board the correct bus.

The images and text also serve a social function as a depiction of a Latin American identity. While images of Catholicism and machismo serve an advertising or marketing function to potential bus riders, the images are also used as a method through which to demonstrate different aspects of a cultural identity, such as religion and a masculine identity. While the bus riders do not participate in the creative process of painting the buses or selecting the religious and machismo images, they do view the buses as a representation of a shared Guatemalan identity. The use of images as a representation of identity is a response to the contemporary sociopolitical context in Guatemala.

#### *Guatemalan Social and Political Context*

When evaluating a form of public art it is important to understand its political, social and economic context. There has been extensive study of the history of violence as a central theme in Guatemalan social and cultural history over the course of 500 years, through colonial and post-independence eras. Some of the scholars of this process include historians, such as Daniel Wilkinson and Greg Grandin, and particularly extensive work by anthropologists such as Beatriz Manz, Linda Green and Robert S. Carlsen.

Guatemala has a long and complex history which has been characterized by violence and social inequality. Contemporary Guatemalan society is one of race and class disparity whose origins lie in the Spanish Conquest.<sup>56</sup> Significantly, Guatemala has a prominent indigenous population, greater than fifty percent. The indigenous peoples are descendants from the Mayans, who were native to the Guatemalan region. The other part of the Guatemalan population is referred to as *Ladino*, they are westernized indigenous people or mestizos, people with a mixed ancestry of both white European and indigenous race. A colonial structure of dominance still exists in Guatemala; the Ladinos (mestizos) have economic and social opportunities and comprise the upper and middle classes. The indigenous people comprise the lower class and have few economic and social opportunities; they are traditionally agricultural workers and have little or no access to educational opportunities.<sup>57</sup>

The Guatemalan civil war has played a defining role in contemporary Guatemalan society. Class and race disparity was the basis for the Guatemalan civil war which lasted 36 years, ending around 1996.<sup>58</sup> The civil war occurred during different governments, coups and dictatorships, during which time the government had a prominent military presence in the highlands. While the government claimed that the military was protecting Guatemalan citizens, they were actually systemically terrorizing and killing a large percent of the indigenous population. For the purposes of this paper, it is the important to understand the human rights violations that occurred; more than 200,000 people, mostly indigenous, were kidnapped and killed.<sup>59</sup> Structural violence, while present in Guatemala since the Conquest, was emphatically reinforced and entrenched in Guatemalan political and social structure during the period of the civil war.

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<sup>56</sup> Manz, Beatriz. *Paradise in Ashes: A Guatemalan Journey of Courage, Terror and Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 6-20.

<sup>57</sup> Manz, *Paradise in Ashes*, 6-20.

<sup>58</sup> Carlsen, Robert S. *The War for the Heart and Soul of a Highland Mayan Town* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 14-19.

<sup>59</sup> Green, Linda. *Fear as a Way of Life: Mayan Widows in Rural Guatemala* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 3-11.

Structural violence, according to Paul Farmer, occurs when a social structure oppresses a group of people to the extent that they are unable to meet their basic needs.<sup>60</sup> Inequalities of gender, class and ethnicity creates groups of people who are ignored by political/social structures and are therefore vulnerable to social suffering. Linda Green describes the connection between structural violence and the Guatemalan civil war as “...long term systematic violence connected with class and gender inequalities and ethnic oppression”.<sup>61</sup> During the Guatemalan civil war it was the indigenous people, especially the indigenous women, who were the most affected by the violence. In her book Green exposes the many layers of structural violence in Guatemala, based on divisions of gender, class and ethnicity which lead to a culture based on fear and a sense of powerlessness. With no political representation or economic power indigenous people felt powerlessness in concern to their social situation. Green asserts in her book that the Guatemalans “... refashion social memory and cultural practices, both as consequence of and in response to the fear that circumscribes their lives”.<sup>62</sup> Green asserts that to the Guatemalans fear is a way of life. This explanation provides insight into the decoration of Guatemalan public buses: I argue that one reason buses are painted is a consequence of and response to the violence that is ever present in contemporary Guatemalan society.

Fear is an integral part of Guatemalan society and identity. Today, riding a public bus is dangerous for several reasons. One reason is that there exists a large gang presence in Guatemala. The most recent form of intimidation comes not from the military but from urban gangs, many of which include men who were corrupted by the culture of violence they grew up with. The gangs often target the buses as a way to threaten and frighten less powerful members of society and as a way to collect money. Extortion is common among bus drivers; gangs will demand a certain amount of money from a bus driver each week and threaten his life if he does not cooperate. One bus driver with whom I spoke

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<sup>60</sup> Green, *Fear as a Way of Life*, 7.

<sup>61</sup> Green, *Fear as a Way of Life*, 8.

<sup>62</sup> Green, *Fear as a Way of Life*, 6.

had given up driving his bus for this reason, he refused to be extorted by the gangs and had to quit driving to preserve his life. Gang members also board buses, most often crowded ones, and hold the bus driver at gun point as they go through the bus demanding valuables from the riders.

The threat from gangs is one of many reasons why the buses are dangerous. Fear and danger are also associated with public buses in terms of the roads and the bus drivers. Guatemalan roads are poorly maintained and designed. It is common for roads to be uneven, narrow and have many potholes. Northern Guatemala is also mountainous and the roads in this part of the country are notorious for being located on the edge of steep cliffs with no shoulder. It is common for the roads to be washed out during heavy rainstorms.

The bus drivers also have a negative reputation for being unsafe drivers. Many bus riders with whom I spoke believed the bus drivers to be unconcerned with the safety of their buses and of their passengers. The bus drivers will allow many more people to board the bus than will fit or is safe, in order to collect more money. Also, the bus drivers have a reputation for driving faster than is safe; and due to their size they obstruct traffic with their passing and stopping. To bus riders, it was also a concern that bus drivers were driving drunk.

The bus drivers adorn their buses with images of protection in response to the dangers associated with driving a bus; the threat of gangs, dangerous roads and possible unsafe driving. These images most commonly take the form of religious icons, saints who are prayed to for their protection. For centuries faith has provided the less powerful with a means to ask/pray for safety and safe passage. It is important to acknowledge here that although religious images and images of machismo are placed on buses asking for safety that people are still afraid to ride the buses. Although the images provide protection, they do not negate the presence of fear when riding a bus.

## *Religious Images*

Religious themes have been an important subject matter in Latin American art ever since the Spanish Conquest.<sup>63</sup> Catholicism is an important part of Latin American culture, and therefore Catholic images appear frequently on buses. Catholic images on buses are a visual heterogeneity; formally the images represent a European Catholicism, but the images are interpreted within an indigenous Latin American context. One example of a visual heterogeneity is the Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Latin America who first appeared in Mexico. Her image, which appears frequently on buses, has a specific significance in concern to protection and fear. Another example of how Latin American Catholicism is used today relates to in the formation of a Catholic identity and how this identity is used and understood in the context of everyday life. This section will provide a description of the religious images that appear on the buses and an interpretation of them within a context of fear and protection.

In order to understand the religious images that appear on the buses it is important to frame them within a context. The religious images and text that appear on buses are universal images of Catholicism; they are images that any Latin American Catholic believer would be able to identify and understand within a religious context. The discussion of the meaning of the images and text in this paper, however, focuses on a localization of meaning: how universal Catholic images are interpreted within a specific cultural and social context. For the purpose of this paper I explore how Catholic images are interpreted within a contemporary Guatemalan context. The way in which the Catholic images and text on the buses are interpreted is specific to the country of Guatemala, but more precisely specific to certain geographical regions where the buses travel. Interpreting the meaning of the Catholic images and text on buses is also specific to the two groups of viewers who see the bus images and text; the lower class of indigenous people and the middle and upper classes of Ladinos.

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<sup>63</sup> Ades, Dawn. *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era, 1820-1980* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 5.

By placing a religious image on a bus, a bus driver is signifying two primary messages. First, the bus driver himself is emphasizing his devotion as a Catholic believer. Catholicism is an important part of Latin American society and culture; therefore by identifying himself as a devoted Catholic the bus driver is asserting that he is a good and trustworthy man. The bus riders should feel safe riding a bus knowing that their bus driver is a Christian. The Catholic identity is a trope which is used as proof of an individual's moral character.

Secondly, in relation to Latin American identification with the Catholic identity, there exists an idea that because one is a faithful Catholic believer that God is watching out specifically for that individual. In Latin American this idea is very important and often taken to an extreme. For example, bus drivers, as Christian believers may feel that don't have to drive carefully because God is watching out for their safety. The idea is that God will not let anything bad happen, so the bus drivers don't have to worry about the consequences of their dangerous driving. The Catholic identity of a bus driver reassures the bus riders of their safety riding a bus because not only is the bus driver a trustworthy man, but God is guiding the actions of the bus driver. It is important to note the existence of a contradiction here; although the bus drivers place religious images on their buses to convince bus riders of the safety of a bus, the bus riders are still frightened to ride the public buses.

Catholic messages on the buses come in two different forms, images and text. Images appear in the form of Saints such as the Virgin of Guadalupe, Christ and Saint Christopher. In reference to religious images this paper will primarily discuss the Virgin of Guadalupe because of her status as the patron saint of Latin America. The placement of religious images on buses serves a devotional purpose; the images of saints are prayed to for protection, asking for safe passage of the bus on its route. The religious images come in the form of saints because the purpose of Saints in the Christian faith is to provide assistance to Christian believers, they are the intercessors between the believer and God.

Devotional images are used as protection against accidents and the threats of gang robberies. Messages of Christianity also appear on buses in the form of religious sayings. Similar to the function of the images of saints, text is also used to demonstrate a Christian identity and pray for protection. Examples of text will be provided later.

The Virgin of Guadalupe is an icon of the Virgin Mary who first appeared in Mexico, she is also the patron saint of Latin America. According to myth the Virgin of Guadalupe first appeared to an indigenous man, Juan Diego, who was a recent Christian convert. Juan Diego was walking beside a hill, Tepeyac, outside Mexico City when a young woman appeared to him on the hill side. The woman asked him to build a church on the site that they were standing; Juan Diego, as a good Christian, went to his local Bishop to ask for the church to be built, but was refused. Juan Diego returned to the hill where he had seen the apparition of the young woman and again she appeared to him. Juan Diego told the woman that the Bishop had denied his request. In response the woman told him to pick the roses from the bush behind him and bring them to the bishop as proof of her divine nature and reason that the church should be built. Juan Diego cut the rose from the bush and put them in his cloak to bring to the bishop. Upon meeting with the Bishop Juan Diego emptied his cloak of roses but found that on the fabric of his cloak there was a portrait of the woman that he had seen. This act was proclaimed a miracle and the church was built in honor of the woman, who was the Virgin.<sup>64</sup>

The image of the Virgin of Guadalupe is specific, she is depicted as a young woman who stands upon a crescent moon clothed in a blue cloak and surrounded by a mandorla, an almond shape made of the sun's rays.<sup>65</sup> When placed on a bus the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe is located in a place of prominence such as the window next to the driver, or on the windows located on the back of the bus (figures 9 & 10).

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<sup>64</sup> Peterson, Jeanette Favrot. "The Virgin of Guadalupe: Symbol of Conquest or Liberation?" *Art Journal* Vol. 51, No. 4, Latin American Art (Winter, 1992), 39. Accessed October 11, 2011.

<sup>65</sup> Peterson, "The Virgin of Guadalupe", 40.

The Virgin of Guadalupe is an important and well known Latin American saint. In any discussion of the Virgin of Guadalupe it is essential to acknowledge that the meaning and the use of an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe is dependent on time and place. In her article “The Virgin of Guadalupe: Symbol of Conquest or Liberation?” Jeanette Peterson addresses this issue by tracing the use of the image of Virgin of Guadalupe over time. She states “Not until the nineteenth century did Guadalupe’s cult gain in strength among the largely disenfranchised population. Moreover, only in the twentieth century has her image taken a new meaning compatible with her title, ‘Mother of the Mexicans’”.<sup>66</sup> The analysis that Peterson presents demonstrates that the Virgin of Guadalupe has embodied a national identity, in concern to Mexico, and an ethnic one, in relation to the indigenous people, depending on the time and place in which she is used/interpreted.<sup>67</sup> While a detailed historical analysis of the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to understand the complexity of the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe in order to understand her meaning in a contemporary Guatemalan context.

Saint Christopher is another saint whose image often appears on buses. Saint Christopher is, among other things, the patron saint of transportation and of travelers. According to myth Christopher was known for his large size, especially his height. Christopher served Christ by transporting people across a large and dangerous river. He worked hard and never had trouble carrying people because of his strength, until he carried a small child across the river. The child felt very heavy to Christopher and the river became swollen so that he struggled to reach the other side. When Christopher had safely placed the child on the opposite shore, the child revealed himself to be Christ in disguise.<sup>68</sup> Christ then acknowledged Saint Christopher’s dedication to him.

Latin American society today still celebrates Saint Christopher for his devotion to Christ and his protection of transportation and travelers. The saint day of Saint Christopher is celebrated on the 25<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Peterson, “The Virgin of Guadalupe”, 39.

<sup>67</sup> Peterson, “The Virgin of Guadalupe”, 39-42.

<sup>68</sup> Ades, *Art in Latin America*, 51.

of July in Latin America. On this day, public transportation vehicles, especially buses, are decorated with balloons and crepe paper in celebration of Saint Christopher (figure 11).

Jesus, the primary icon of the Christian faith, appears often in images on bus art. His image, I argue, is used to demonstrate faith in God and Christianity as well as to seek protection. Similar to the use of the icon of the Virgin of Guadalupe, images of Jesus on a bus are protection against danger and a way in which fear may be mediated or managed (figure 12).

Text is often used in addition to images to convey a Catholic message. Short phrases are located in places of prominence on a bus that emphasize the Catholic identity of the bus driver. For example on one bus there is a phrase *“Este camioneta tiene llave de seguridad, la llave está con Dios”* which translates to *“This bus has a security system, the key is with God”*. This saying comes from a slogan for a car alarm system, where in their ad the key to the security system is a law enforcement agency. In the phrase on the bus, God is substituted for the security system, which is a pun; the power and protection offered by God is infinitely greater than any security system. Located on a bus this saying indicates that while the bus lacks a physical security system it has a religious one.

A relationship is established between faith in God and trust in the mechanical garages where the buses are altered and maintained. It is common for the signs of these garages to say the name of the garage and below, indicate their faith in God (figures 13 & 14). Faith in God is often represented in the simple saying *“Fe en Dios”*, literally *“Faith in God”*.

The phrase *“Fe en Dios”* also appears on buses themselves. The common location for religious sayings is along the top of the exterior of the front window shield (figure 15). There exist many examples of religious sayings on buses, the saying, like the religious images, serve to emphasize the Christian identity and faith of the bus driver. One example of a saying is *“Sali con Dios, si no regreso estoy con el”* which translates to *“I left with God, if I do not return I am with him”* (figure 16). This saying

references fear as well as Catholicism, its coded meaning is that if the bus driver is killed for some reason on his rounds then he will be taken by God into heaven with him. The reliance on the Christian faith as protection against danger and fear is evident in sayings such as “*Jehova es mi Fortaleza*” which means “Jehova is my strength” and “*Bendicion de Dios*” which translates as “Blessings from God” (figure 17).

Examples of text which use Christianity as a form of protection against danger or fear are abundant on buses. The prevalence of text with Christian meanings emphasizes the importance the text has to both the driver and his bus riders. The text is genuinely seen as protection and a method through which to mediate fear. For example, on one bus the phrase “*Señor guarda mi camino*” (God guide my path) is accompanied by an image of a pair of clasped and praying hands (figure 18). This text very clearly demonstrates how God is used as a protective agent. Another saying “*Mi Dios es Real*”, which translates as “My God is Real” demonstrates the connection between everyday life and the divine (figure 19). This text is significant because a bus driver needs God to be real, for God’s actions to be evident, in order that he may have faith in God to protect him and his bus. A declaration that God exists also emphasizes one’s faith. The text “*Jesus la Paz de mi Alma*” appears on one bus which translates to “Jesus, the peace of my soul” (figure 20). This text, like the previous example is a declaration of personal devotion. Unlike the previous example however, this text does not emphasize the existence of God but rather exalts Jesus’ actions.

### *Machismo*

Machismo is a phenomenon specifically discussed in relation to Latin American culture; it is a term used to describe a masculine identity which is hyper-sexual and hyper-aggressive.<sup>69</sup> Machista men act in ways that emphasize their masculine sexuality. Stereotypically machismo values male sexual

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<sup>69</sup> Basham, Richard. “Machismo” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* Vol.1, No.2 (Spring, 1976), 126. Accessed on September 28, 2011.

prowess, decisive action and aggression, and exaggerated self-confidence: men can act in whatever way they like, without consequence.<sup>70</sup> In his article “Machismo” Richard Basham asserts a relationship between machismo and the Latin American family structure, where the father is the unequivocal head of the family, in charge of all decision making. A relationship also exists between machismo and education level. Machismo is often more pronounced in males of lower social classes; the greater the education level the less likely a male will demonstrate exaggerated traits of machismo.<sup>71</sup> In relation to fear, men of the lower classes lack the economic and cultural means through which to gain power and mediate fear. In this way exaggerated machismo can be understood as a method through which to combat fear, much like the use of religious image.

The Guatemalan bus culture is dominated by men; the owners of the bus companies, the bus drivers and the people who structurally alter the buses are almost exclusively men. Guatemalan bus art is a male art in the sense of its creation, however I believe its influence incorporates women. Guatemalan bus art reflects a Latin American identity in general, not an exclusively male one. Rather machismo and the importance of the male sphere is emphasized through the images placed on the buses and the male importance in the creative process. It was interesting as a woman studying the buses because I was out of place in the garages and the bus stations.

Of the people that I spoke with, there was a general consensus that the bus drivers were machistas because of their aggressive methods of driving and their disregard of the safety of their passenger and their bus. The bus drivers themselves certainly wish to project their machista identity because it is an acceptable and respected male identity in Latin America. On the buses themselves a driver asserts his machismo through images and text.

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<sup>70</sup> Bolton, Ralph. “Machismo in Motion: The Ethos of Peruvian Truckers” *Ethos* on behalf of *The American Anthropological Association* Vol.7, No.4 (Winter, 1979), 312. Accessed on September 15, 2011.

<sup>71</sup> Basham, “Machismo”, 129.

In the context of machismo the decoration of Guatemalan buses has a connotation of competition. There exists a connection between the level of decoration of a bus and the masculine identity of its driver. The more decorated a bus the more masculine the driver is. The Orellana bus company is one of the larger bus companies in Guatemala and has a reputation for having very decorated buses (figure 21). The bus company structurally alters the buses to a greater extent by adding custom designed bumpers, grills, scrolling LED destination signs and many extra tail lights. In addition to the greater structural alterations of the Orellana buses, the bus drivers add their own decorations of religious, machismo or popular culture icons or text. In total, the Orellana buses are a visual statement of masculinity and are respected by other bus drivers for this. Therefore a connection exists between the decoration of a bus and the cultural understandings of masculinity and respect; through bus decoration a bus driver is able to represent himself in accordance with a socially acceptable masculine identity and therefore earn social respect.

The language used to speak about buses is gendered as well. In Guatemala the buses are called *camionetas*, which in Spanish the ending *-eta* signifies a feminine object. The buses are female. The bus companies also often are female names so that a female name such as *Gilda* or *Norma* will be written on the side of the bus. The buses are referred to by their female names. Buses carry people instead of cargo, which is seen as a lighter, daintier cargo. This distinction of buses gendered as female can be compared to trucks, which are called *camiones* and with the ending of *-es* are gendered as male. *Camiones* carry heavy cargo which is considered to be man's work. Therefore, *camiones* do the heavy and dirty work while their female counterparts, the *camionetas*, carry lighter loads, namely passengers. As is evident, the use of language to talk about buses reinforces machismo stereotypes.

Images appear on the buses which represent the machismo of the bus driver. One such image is the popular culture image of the playgirl which depicts the profile of a woman seated; she is resting on

her hands which are placed behind her, her breasts are pushed up into a place of prominence, and her knees are bent. This image represents a sexual objectification of the woman's body. Through placing this image on a bus, the bus driver is signifying his sexual desire and fortitude. The playgirl image is often placed in a location of prominence on the buses, such as next to the destination sign or the name of the bus company, which is written along the top of the front window shield (figures 22, 23, 24, 25 & 26).

The machismo of the bus drivers also manifests in *letritos* which are sayings, or aphorisms, that are often located on outside of the rear door of the bus. These sayings have double meanings which emphasize both the ability of the bus driver's driving techniques and his sexual prowess. Due to their location, these sayings are meant to be read by the people looking at the bus from the outside, such as people driving behind the bus. One example of a *letrito* is "*Los hoyos me estan matando*" which can loosely be translated as "The (pot)holes are killing me". In this saying the work *hoyo*, hole, has a double meaning; an *hoyo* is both a pothole in the road and a woman's vagina. In reference to the potholes the bus driver emphasizes his profession and skill as a driver; he works hard to avoid the potholes in the road for the safety of his passengers. In the reference to woman's genitals the bus driver emphasizes his sexual prowess by insinuating that he is such an accomplished sexual being, his services are in high demand.

Other sayings are more straight forward and refer to only one aspect of masculinity. For example "*Perdon por el polvito que te eche*" appears on the back of one bus (figure 27). This text loses its mischievous tone when translated into English, but translated it means "I apologize for the dust I'm leaving". Speed and force are the intended meaning of this text; the implication is that the bus driver drives so quickly that he leaves dust behind him and he forces the cars and people that are left in his wake to deal with the discomfort of the settling dust. Another saying "*No somos los mejores pero si los*

*preferidos*” appears on several buses with slight alterations (figures 28 & 29). Translated, the text means “We are not the best but we are the preferred” which means that the bus driver has a good reputation both as a driver and also as a lover. While the text states that bus driver is not the best driver or lover, he is the favorite, which implies that he has a lot of people ride his bus and a lot of women who benefit from his sexual prowess.

In addition to text which holds meaning in terms of both the sexual prowess and technical abilities of a bus driver, there exists text which refers to both the sexual prowess of the bus driver and his faith as a Catholic believer. For example the word “*Pecadora*” sometimes appears on a bus, which translates as “Sinner” (figures 30 & 31). A sinner is a Catholic believer who has acted outside of the Catholic identity and doctrine. In popular culture, a sinner is also a reference to someone who is an overly sexual being. It is interesting to note that “*Pecadora*” in Spanish is in a feminine form; the saying is meant in reference to the bus driver but as he is masculine, so the saying refers to him indirectly. The bus which is characterized as feminine receives the action of being a sinner but reflects the meaning, of being sexually active, on to her bus driver.

This reference emphasizes an additional sexual significance that exists between the bus driver, who is masculine, and the bus, which is feminine. The bus driver’s technical skills in driving the bus are compared to the prowess of the bus driver in managing a woman sexually. For example the text “*La más querida*”, which translates as “The most loved”, can be interpreted in several different levels (figure 32). In terms of Catholicism “The most loved” refers to the Virgin and the Catholic devotion of the bus driver. “The most loved” also refers to the bus itself, in her faithfulness to the bus driver. The text also refers to the bus driver; he is respected by the people who ride his bus and the women with whom he shares his sexual prowess.

Aggression is a stereotypical characteristic of machismo and Guatemalan buses have an aggressive presence. Due to the structural alterations Guatemalan buses are higher off of the ground and physically bigger than normal yellow school buses. Also, with diesel engines Guatemalan buses make a lot of noise when they're running. Therefore when a large and noisy Guatemalan bus goes careening down a narrow city street in Guatemala it is an impressive sight; an exaggerated performance of masculinity.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Guatemalan bus art is a form of public art which is relatively undocumented and unexplored. Through a description of the theoretical framework of public art and a presentation of the aesthetic transformation of the Guatemalan buses, this thesis has attempted to draw a connection between art in theory and the actual creative process of decorating a bus. While a review of the theorist Jürgen Habermas provides a basic understanding of the formation of the public sphere, it is the art historian Erica Doss who provides a context through which to understand Guatemalan bus art. In her discussion of the function of public art in contemporary society, Doss asserts that public art can and should be dynamic, site-specific, audience aware and a reflection of cultural needs. This is the framework through which Guatemalan bus art can be understood as a form of public art. By responding to cultural needs and fostering community identity, Guatemalan bus art confronts public space in a new and innovative way. Guatemalan bus art is also audience aware and site specific to the contemporary Guatemalan social and political climate.

The three art movements of Mexican muralism, Chicano muralism and graffiti art were presented in this thesis in order to compare and contrast with Guatemalan bus art in terms of the varying functions of public art. The Mexican muralist artists desired to create art for the proletariat, and Guatemalan bus art can be seen in accordance with the ideas, for example, of Siqueiros. Guatemalan bus art is created by the working poor for the working poor. Chicano art addresses viewer involvement much differently than Guatemalan bus art. The Chicano murals incorporated their viewers into the art making process. People of marginalized groups, who were depicted in the murals, often did the physical painting of the murals. In terms of location Chicano art is similar to Guatemalan bus art in that both art forms occupy the public space which they address; Chicano art in the neighborhoods where the Chicano people live and Guatemalan bus art in the urban and rural streets, busy with people of the lower Ladino

and indigenous classes. Graffiti art engages with a very specific and exclusive audience, which contrasts with the inclusive nature of the Guatemalan bus art. However both graffiti art and Guatemalan bus art signify the presence of a specific identity in the public sphere. This analysis demonstrated that different public art movements confront the function of public art in different ways.

A discussion of the contemporary social and political situation in Guatemala provided a context through which to understand some of the motivations for the formation of Guatemalan bus art. Specifically, the discussion of fear focused on what anthropologist Linda Green terms 'a culture of fear'. Through the systematic violence of the civil war and the contemporary presence of gang violence, fear is an ever-present part of Guatemalan culture. This thesis asserts that understanding the culture of fear in Guatemala provides insight into why religious images and images of machismo are valued for their ability to provide protection and safety. In the discussion of religious images the presence of the Virgin of Guadalupe was emphasized, as well the presence of text which emphasized a Catholic identity. Images of machismo are also used for protection and safety but they also function to establish an acceptable Latin American masculine identity. Also, it is interesting to note that in terms of images and text of machismo, the buses are often denigrating to females. Females still ride the buses and their acceptance of the machismo images demonstrates the accepted position of machismo in Latin American culture.

Guatemalan bus art is a complex and rich topic which merits continued academic research. Topics of study could include research on public buses in other Latin American contexts. This thesis focused on Guatemalan bus art, yet many Latin American countries decorate their public buses in different ways. In terms of aesthetic considerations, an interesting observation I received during my research connected the images and colors of the decorated buses to the traditional embroidered dress of the indigenous people. The observation emphasized similarities between the formal qualities and

function of both the clothes and the buses. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss these considerations but they emphasize the complexity of Guatemalan bus art and the possibility for continuing research on the topic.

The exploration of the topic of Guatemalan bus art is a unique contribution to the art history discipline. Guatemalan bus art is a relatively unexplored form of contemporary public art and this thesis presented a context through which to understand bus art within an established theoretical and art historical context.

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## Figures



Figure 1: Painted stripes run along the side of the bus, below the passenger windows. Photo by author.



Figure 2: Painted stripes run along the side of the bus, below the passenger windows. Photo by author.



Figure 3: The name of the bus company can be written over the stripes that run along the side of the bus, underneath the passenger windows. Photo by author.



Figure 4: The name of the bus company can be written over the stripes that run along the side of the bus, underneath the passenger windows. Photo by author.



Figure 5: The logo of the Bluebird bus manufacturing company is painted above and below the driver's side window on one bus. Photo by author.



Figure 6: The tail feathers of the Bluebird logo extend in a stripe down the sides of the bus, above the passenger windows. Photo by author.



Figure 7: The Bluebird name is written on the front bumper of a bus. Photo by author.



Figure 8: The Bluebird name is written on the splash protectors located behind the rear wheels of the bus. Photo by author.



Figure 9: An image of the Virgin of Guadalupe appears on the exterior windows of the rear of one bus. Photo by author.



Figure 10: An image of the Virgin of Guadalupe appears on the interior of the driver's side window in one bus. Photo by author.



Figure 11: A Guatemalan public bus decorated for the day of Saint Christopher. Photo by author.



Figure 12: An image of Jesus on the exterior window of the rear door of a bus. Photo by author.



Figure 13: The term 'Faith in God' (*Fe en Dios*) appears on the sign of a bus reconstruction and mechanic facility. Photo by author.



Figure 14: The term 'Faith in God' (*Fe en Dios*) appears on the sign to a bus reconstruction and mechanic facility. Photo by author.



Figure 15: The term “Faith in God” (*Fe en Dios*) appears along the exterior of the front window shield on a bus. Photo by author.



Figure 16: The text “*Sali con Dios si no regreso estoy con el*” appears on the exterior of the window on the rear door of a bus. Photo by author.



Figure 17: The text “*Jehova es mi fortaleza*” appears along the top of the exterior front window shield of a bus. Photo by author.



Figure 18: The text “*Señor guarda mi camino*” accompanied by an image of two hands clasped together in prayer is shown on the exterior window on the rear door of a bus. Photo by author.



Figure 19: The text “*Mi Dios es real*” appears along the bottom of the exterior of the front window shield. Photo by author.



Figure 20: The text “*Jesús la paz de mi alma*” appears along the top of the exterior part of the front window shield.



Figure 21: A bus belonging to the Orellana bus company. Photo by author.



Figure 22: Multiple images of the playgirl are located along the top of the exterior part of the front window. Photo by author.



Figure 23: Multiple images of the playgirl are located along the top of the exterior part of the front window shield. Photo by author.



Figure 24: Multiple images of the playgirl are located along the top of the exterior of the front window shield. Photo by author.



Figure 25: An image of the playgirl appears on the side of a bus, by the driver's side window. Photo by author.



Figure 26: An image of the playgirl appears on the exterior of the rear door of a bus. Photo by author.



Figure 27: The text “*Perdon por el polvito que te eche*” appears on the exterior of the window on the rear door of a bus. Photo by author.



Figure 28: The text “*No somos los mejores pero si los preferidos*” appears on the exterior of the window on the rear door of a bus. Photo by author.

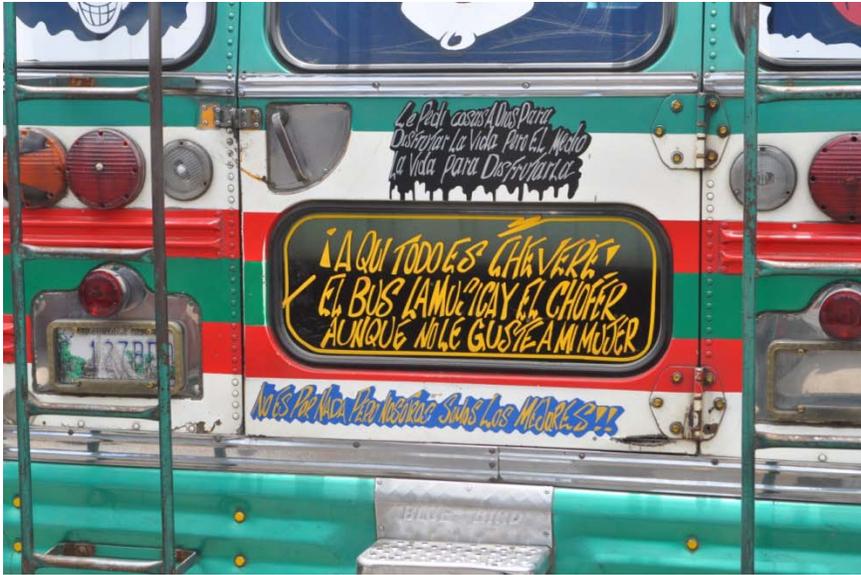


Figure 29: The text “No es por nada pero nosotros somos los mejores” appears on the exterior of the window on the rear door of a bus. Photo by author.



Figure 30: The text “Pecadora” appears on the exterior of the window on the rear door of a bus. Photo by author.



Figure 31: The text "Pecadora" appears on the front hood of a bus. Photo by author.



Figure 32: The text "La más querida" appears on the front hood of a bus. Photo by author.