

**“The brush is like a candle, it has light on one end”  
Doña Elena, Nebaj.**

### **Art Recuperates Memory as a Demand of Justice**

**By Claudia Bernardi**

In October 2006, I got a phone call from Franc Kernjak, from **ECAP**, Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial, Community Studies and Psychosocial Action Team, asking me if I would go to Guatemala in 2007 to work in a project creating art with a group of survivors of massacres.

I was intrigued and inspired. I suggested to Franc that he would go to Perquin to witness first hand what we do in the **School of Art and Open Studio of Perquin**, Morazan, El Salvador, to evaluate if the “Perquin model” would be pertinent or advisable to be implemented in the upcoming conference in Guatemala.

Franc came to Perquin accompanied by Olga Alicia Paz, who worked extensively with women survivors of sexual violence as result of the armed conflict in Guatemala. In the weekend we shared in Perquin I took Franc and Olga Alicia to locations where we had created murals or public art projects. They were impressed both by the scope of the work in terms of scale and numbers but, more importantly, by the artistry with which the final product was accomplished. Franc and Olga left with the certainty that a model of community and collaborative art, similar to the one used in Perquin, would be applicable in the communities they serve.

The ***First International Conference on Psychosocial Work in the Exhumation Process, Forced Disappearance, Justice and Truth*** took place in La Antigua, **Guatemala** on February 21 to 23, 2007.

Organizations around the world were invited to be participants of this conference to learn about common experiences with psychosocial work related to the search of disappeared people with an special focus on the pre and post work related to exhumation processes of mass graves.

ECAP states:

- “Since 1998, ECAP has carried out psychosocial work in the process of searching for the disappeared, including psychosocial support of more than 70 exhumations in Guatemala. Based on this experience, we believe that both survivors and the families of victims must be supported during investigations (i.e. anthropological, historical, and forensic research) and documentation of violent actions committed in the context of political violence or armed conflicts. In addition, they and the larger society should

be provided with the elements necessary to help interpret the dynamic and consequences of violence and its concrete manifestations. Taken together, this work strives to reduce the impact of violence in the past, present and future.”

**The School of Art and Open Studio of Perquin** was invited to share with the participants of this project the strategies that have allowed us to build art from communal trauma and historic memory.

America Argentina Vaquerano, (Dina), Claudia Verence Flores Escolero and myself arrived to Antigua, Guatemala with a luggage filled with mural paints. Our contribution within the conference was the creation of a mural project. The participants of this collaborative and community effort were survivors of massacres from the North/ Western region of Guatemala.

The group of 15 people came to La Antigua from distant regions: Don Juan Francisco and Domingo Caba came from Estrella Polar, Nebaj. Don Luis and Don Santiago came from Chajul and Quiche, Doña Elena and Jacinta came from Nebaj and Ixcan. Doña Margarita and Gloria came from Chimaltenango. Andrea, Maria, Marcelina, Paulita and Anabella, came from Rabinal, Baja Verapaz. The group was further conformed by Lidia Yok, Otilia and Pedro, three “capacitadores” from ECAP.

They wore remarkable garments of great beauty. Their indigenous languages spoke of their traditions, unique and ancient. They came from distant lands expanding geographically from the mountain range and cold climate to the tropical central region of Guatemala. The “*huipiles*”, masterfully embroidered textile pieces most frequently created by the women who wear them, narrated in color symbols the history from their communities. One can identify where a person comes from according to the colors of the garments he/ she wears. The group was varied in origins, their languages and traditions. What they all had in common was the tragedy of being a survivor of a massacre.

The state terror inaugurated in the late 50’s in Guatemala leveled the life and people of the communities to “ground zero”. A more perverse “ground zero’, than the one we are accustomed to hear about related to New York, 9-11, for its voracity against indigenous people (pueblos originarios) has its start five hundred years ago and it still savages the land and culture of the Guatemalan people. The casualties of violations of human rights are uncountable but, as a way to state the calamity and seriousness of the carnage against civilian population it is usually accepted a number reaching half a million people “*disappeared*” in the last five decades as consequence of political violence. The numbers of displaced or exiled Guatemalans are virtually unknown and unrecorded.

With these references of their history in mind, Dina, Claudia Verenice and myself started our work, sharing with the group some of the murals we have created in El Salvador.

We were all staying at a small hotel that led to an easier communication since we were housed in the same space we ate together, came and went as a large group. We did need assistance with translations for the languages they spoke brought sounds of tongues spoken before Columbus ever arrived to our continent. They spoke Achi, Quiche, Kaktchikel, Kanjobal and Mam. Most of them understood Spanish but chose to talk to us through their interpreters.

On Sunday night we gathered as a group in a small hotel room. All of them and all of us concentrated in front of a screen to see the art from Morazan. Prominently, we described the mural at El Mozote for the resemblance to their own history being survivors of massacres. They were moved. They were astonished to learn of such carnage elsewhere. They had thought, until that very moment, that the humiliations and damage of their own communities were unique.

On Monday, early in the morning we started the rendering of the first ideas, producing the first and most important question:  
 “What would you like to say in this mural?”  
 Think of the mural as pages in a history book, “ What history would you like to tell to your family, to your community and to the world?”

They were silent. Attentive.

Some of them declared that they did not know how to write or read. We insured them that words were not necessary. We were writing this large history book in the form of a mural with images coming from memories.

“Do you have memories that you want to share?”

They asked if the memories needed to be “happy” or “sad”?

We explained that they were the ones to decide.

It is important to remark that none of the participants of this project had ever done art in this way. However, we pointed out the mastery with which they are able to embroider their textiles. This allusion proved helpful allowing the group to focus on a blank page with no fears and almost no hesitation.

We were perplexed at witnessing their capacity to select images gathered through the monumental tapestry of their memories, drawings landed on the papers like anchors of episodes. Most of them painfully eloquent: helicopters, people being killed by helicopters, crops on fire, houses on fire, animals killed,

people running away, hiding. There were corn plantations and there were images depicting vernacular life.

Paper and pencils, markers and colors defined a mapping of their history that became personal and tangible causing some women to weep while they rendered. The ones who did not cry comforted the ones who did. The men wrote a long poem later to become the words of a song. The words narrated the massacre of Estrella Polar (March 22, 1982) in Nebaj and the 12 years that the few survivors of the massacre lived in hiding in the thicket of the jungle. They stressed how arduous it had been to live deprived from salt.

The conference and the mural were to take place at the Spanish Center of Cooperation, El Centro de la Cooperación Española, a beautiful colonial building that had been a convent. The mural would be painted on canvas allowing that the final piece could travel to the different communities where the survivors came from.

On Tuesday, the drawings were transported to the location of the mural. The canvas was stretched on temporary wooden walls. The participants applied gesso on the canvas becoming familiar with the vastness of the piece. The extended canvas measured 8 m long X 1,80 m high (approximately 24 ' long x 6 ' high). Most of the participants voiced concern of not being able to paint such a vast field.

We told them, "Fear not! You will!"

While the gesso settled the group concentrated on the first guidelines of composition deciding where some of the selected images would go and what would be the central part of the mural.

The participants seemed to gravitate towards a composition divided in five narrative segments identifying the five communities they came from. We, artists from the School of Art and Open Studio of Perquin accompanied the process clarifying doubts and concerns. We intervened only when we were asked. The Guatemalan artists took most decisions.

Don Luis from Chajul stood up. He said:

*"Brothers and Sisters, until now I have believed that what happened to us in our community of Chajul was tragic. I also thought that had not happened elsewhere. To my horror I see now, that what happened in Chajul happened also in your lands. We have the same memories. We have lost families, our homes and our children. For this, I propose that we will paint a mural not divided in five parts for our stories are the same."*

The participants agreed. The composition was resolved identifying the left part as the past, the center as the present and the right section would be the future.

The borders of this mural were created observing the abstractions of the women's *huipiles*, which identified in colors and design their geographic origin, The top of the mural alluded to Chimaltenango, the right and left was inspired on Nebaj and Quiche and the bottom was referential to Rabinal.

The left part of the mural presents a community on fire. There are people lined up by the army, their un-free hands clasped with ropes. The people are depicted small while the army men are large and threatening. There are pathways leading to the mountains, secret passages known by local people only. In the ferocity of the massacre some women and men found refuge in hiding. Children, by in large, had perished. They were too small to run and too heavy to be carried.

The very few people who survived the massacre were now painting the mural. No one else was left alive.

The participants of this mural project had acute memories of everything they saw.

In the creative process, the group of Guatemalan artists started noticing that Doña Elena was a fabulous depicter of helicopters while Santiago was a "landscape artist". Many of them, intuitively first and very purposely later, became aware of their unique talents and without our intervention, they would ask one another to paint a helicopter here, or a corn plantation there, or a cardamom bush in front of a hill. This exchange inaugurated a collaborative project in which the capacities of some would be at the service of the ideas of the others.

It was wonderful to witness how these collaboration strategies got implemented.

Dina, Claudia Verenice and I assisted the group by mixing colors for them until, of course, they discovered that they could do the mixing of colors themselves. With no hesitation they transited on this first day of work at the mural (let's remember that it was only Tuesday!) from never having done murals or paintings to mixing their own colors, choosing how to apply them, being aware of shadows and lights, transparencies and opacity of colors and how to better use background and foreground.

Doña Elena smiled at me and said: *"Brushes are like candles, they have light at one end"*

On Wednesday morning Dina, Claudia Verenice and myself arrived to the site of the mural at 8:30 am to find that everyone else had arrived earlier. They had taken the box of art materials from storage and they were painting, mixing colors, going from one place to the other of the mural collaborating with each other

adding color to background fields while some others were rendering new images on the mural.

Periodically, I would recommend: "Artists! Take few steps back to see how wonderful it is!"

They did take the step back and in astonishment of their own accomplishment, laughed and celebrated. And, rapidly, they went back to work!

Doña Elena, a 62 year-old respected midwife and a healer, leader in her community of Nebaj had not been a midwife at the time of the massacre. I saw Elena painting with unbreakable concentration a pregnant woman assisted by another woman wearing a huipil from Nebaj. When I had the opportunity, I asked her if she knew who those women were?

*"When the army came to our community and we saw they were killing everyone, many of us run to the mountains. Many died. Others were able to hide. I was running with one of my sons. I reached the top of a hill and could hide. He was caught. He was killed. From where I was, I saw his body being thrown into the river, his head disengaged from his body. I heard screams that were no loud but were screams of pain. I turned around and saw a woman, few steps behind me. She was in labor. I was aware that I could do nothing more for my son but I could help another child to be born. I opened the legs of that woman and another son came to this world. From then on I became a midwife."*

A while later, Elena asked Jacinta to paint her son being taken to the river and being killed and thrown into the agitated waters. Elena asked Jacinta: *"Please, paint him kindly. He was a good man"*.

That same afternoon, I saw Doña Elena touching her neck, gently. I asked her if she had any pain, if she needed assistance.

She said:

*"I could run no more and I was caught. I was hanged and left for dead dangling from a tree. But I dropped. That is how I survived. The rope they wrapped around my neck made these scars. I am touching the scars because I want to remember. I want to paint what happened that day."*

This revelation carries an incalculable calamity. Doña Elena, a woman that exudes wisdom and compassion, was suspended from a tree, left as dead, as a tragic fruit of madness. Doña Elena touched the scars of her neck to bring the memories as compass of her sorrow.

Doña Margarita, from Chimaltenango, seemed to be praying. She was on her knees, painting on the center of the mural. She was painting what appeared to be

squares, one on top of the other, vertically. She was crying quietly. I approached and asked her if she needed anything, if I could be of any help?

*“These that I am painting are boxes. The boxes we are given after the exhumations. These are the boxes that bring the remains of my six sons killed in the massacre. But we still need to find other sons and four daughters. We do not know where they are buried.”*

Doña Margarita painted the boxes with the remains of her sons and she also painted the yet to be found killed sons and daughters. She did this with agonizing tenderness. She surrounded the boxes and the laying bodies on the field with a singular line that resembled a protected receptacle, a womb, confining organ of life, not of death.

When Doña Margarita finished with the depiction of this uterus of love and despair, she stepped away from it studying carefully what had emerged from the continent of her remembrance.

She said: *“Now I want to paint a tree of chile and one of lemon because these memories are sharp and they are sour.”*

*El Chile y El Limón* became a mantra amongst all of us, a way to summarize the incalculable multifaceted constellation of human suffering and the unimaginable endurance, the beauty, the determination to remain dignified.

On Thursday, the Guatemalan artists who had been cautious on Tuesday, timidly stating that they would never be able to cover the large surface of the canvas, were asking two days later if there was any extra fabric left to create an extension to our mural.

The right part of the mural representing the future became a joy of colors where a school is painted with great enthusiasm; a boy and a girl in the foreground dressed in Mayan garments have books in their hands; a lake; a helicopter not of war but of tourism; a church surrounded by people celebrating; a marimba and musicians; a doctor and a pregnant woman painted by Doña Elena who, at that point, said that she was willing to share the responsibility of bringing children to this world in partnership with a trained physician.

What the future hopes for is health and education. They deserve education and they expect health.

They have neither.

After much suffering they do not yet have the most elemental services that a community have the right to expect, to claim or to demand.

The mural was finished on the late afternoon of Thursday, to our shared surprised,

“Artists, please, take a step back and see how beautiful the mural is”, I said.

We all took several steps back to see the mural in its glory, a remarkable collaborative and communal experience that took the shape of colors and forms, a history book that narrated terrible events culminating with a vision of hope for a future less tragic than the past they all shared.

We all shared.

We were speechless. Soundless, nesting happiness so profound that words could not assist us in communicating the emotions.

Some of us cried.

We embraced and thanked each other aware that nothing of what had just happened could or would have taken place had it not been for a communal vision.

That was, in fact, the success of the mural.

The conference was scheduled to close on Friday afternoon. Initially, the Guatemalan artists had decided not to speak publicly which we respected and understood. But on the last day of the event, the Guatemalan artists changed their mind. Now, they wanted to present the mural publicly. They selected Domingo from Nebaj and Anabella from Rabinal to be the public presenters of the piece.

They requested to move the mural to a more visible and prominent part of the building. Painted on canvas, we could move the mural to the center of the building and attach it from the second floor balcony allowing it to be seen in its full magnificence.

There are unique moments in life when instants that are fugitive conglomerate in a form of light, like a diamond of truth.

This was such an instance. Domingo and Anabella spoke, the rest of the Guatemalan artists were behind them as a Greek chorus, echoing with their presence the witnessing of the massacres. They spoke about the damage they carry in their personal experiences. They told the audience about the importance of having come to work together in this mural. They voiced that they learned how to speak about terrible memories with beauty.

And for that, they thanked us.

More than two hundred people coming from all parts of the world, participants of this conference, celebrated the mural as the most successful part of the five days event. They congratulated the Guatemalan artists and asked them permission to photograph them and the artwork.

At the end of the day, the Guatemalan artists in groups or individually approached Dina, Claudia Verenice and myself to ask to create art schools in their communities.

Anabella, who is both a survivor of a massacre and a survivor of sexual violence as result of state terror said:

*“ We are now at the point in which we have to tell our daughters what happened to us. Please, come to Rabinal, we want to learn how to speak about terrible pasts with the beauty you have taught us. Come to Rabinal to create a school like the one you have in Perquin”.*

We said we would.

The mural was ready for traveling. It would be shown first in Rabinal. From there it would travel to other locations.

In early April, I learned from Lydia Yok that the presentation of the mural in Rabinal had been a success. Its welcoming had surpassed all expectations. The problem now was the transporting of the mural to other communities. Safety and security could not be taken for granted. ECAP members were concern about receiving personal threats.

The peace process in Guatemala is precarious. This episode shows the fracture of a process towards justice. Our Guatemalan artists friends are beholders of monumental courage. They defiantly arrived to Antigua in February to share with us their truths in the pages of a history book made of memory, color and “candles” that have light at one end.

We are honored to have met and worked in partnership with the Guatemalan artists and with ECAP. We will remain devote to our promise to return to their communities to implant the seeds of another **School of Art and Open Studio** with the model of Perquin.

Claudia Bernardi  
Perquin, El Salvador, 2007.

[www.wallsofhope.org](http://www.wallsofhope.org)