

[ arts & culture ]

**WHAT IS A REBEL? A CONVERSATION WITH  
GUILLERMO TREJO**

**MARC JAMES LÉGER<sup>1</sup>**

Ottawa-based artist Guillermo Trejo recently exhibited a series of prints during the 2014 Manif d'art in Québec City (the Québec City biennial). Titled BANDERAS (flags), these pieces draw from the iconography of the Zapatista movement and related struggles, fusing its symbols to that of the colour code of the Québec national flag, thereby making links between the political history of Québec and Latin America. Intrigued by this provocative work, I interviewed Trejo by email in the summer of 2014.

**Marc James Léger:** I've been aware of your work for a few years now and appreciate the simplicity of the techniques that you use, your avoidance of pop imagery and your focus on what seems to me like the language and aesthetic of political protest. For these reasons I was very much interested in your installation at the Manif d'art. Could you describe the work and its references. I would also be interested in knowing your thoughts on why

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<sup>1</sup> For biographies, please see the end of the chapter, page 239

Québec nationalism could or should be compared to the struggles of the Zapatista.

**Guillermo Trejo:** Thanks for the comments. When I found out that I was going to participate in the biennial, my first idea was to create a project that reflected somehow my reality as Latin American, but also as a resident of Canada. The next thought was to create a project that was even more specific: Latin America and Québec. This established the parameters for *BANDERAS*—or flags.

*BANDERAS* consists of a series of eight flags. The flags were made using MDF (medium density fibre-board) relief cut plates. The idea was to make prints by using the simplest system of printing, as if you were in hiding and had limited resources, and from there were struggling along with different separatist or revolutionary movements from Latin America. I appropriated the designs of these flags and re-made them using only the colour blue so as to reference the Québec flag and by doing this tried to reflect the political history of this province and the relations I believe exist between Québec and Latin America.



**PHOTO 1. Guillermo Trejo, BANDERAS, 2014.**

Installation view. Eight relief prints on heritage cotton, each print 60 x 90 cm. Photo by Ivan Binet. Courtesy of Guillermo Trejo.



**PHOTO 2 (&3-6 on following pages). Guillermo Trejo, BANDERAS, 2014.** Eight relief prints on heritage cotton, each print 60 x 90 cm. Photos by Ivan Binet. Courtesy of L'Oeil de Poisson, Centre de production et de diffusion en art actuel et multidisciplinaire, Québec.



PHOTO 3.



PHOTO 4.



PHOTO 5.



PHOTO 6 (& ◀3,4 &5 ▶). Guillermo Trejo, **BANDERAS**, 2014. Eight relief prints on heritage cotton, each print 60 x 90 cm. Photos by Ivan Binet. Courtesy of L'Oeil de Poisson, Centre de production et de diffusion en art actuel et multidisciplinaire, Québec.

I am not sure how this idea came to me—maybe someone mentioned this to me, but I’ve been thinking about Québec as the forgotten Latin American state. They have a more or less a similar background and there has been constant resistance and political stand against a foreign force. For me, this was confirmed by the student protest in 2012. The reason for the protest, and the reaction of the society, was almost as if we were in Mexico or Chile.

There is then the question about whether Québec nationalism can be compared to the Zapatistas. In principle yes, I believe that all emancipatory movements have similarities. The main mandate of the Zapatistas is to have an autonomous government that respects their traditions and that is not racist towards the indigenous population. From what I understand and from what I have seen the Québec separatist movements emerged with the same ideal, to be independent and to have the right of self-government. I have read about the struggle of the Québécois and I was surprised to find that until the 1960s there were jobs in some places for only English people. There was the belief that the Québécois were somehow not equal. This is in some way similar to what happens with the mestizo and indigenous population in Latin American, where the European descendants have control over the main corporations and political institutions.

So yes, I think that historically there are similarities, especially if we add to the conversation the FLQ (*Front de Libération du Québec*), which is a far left organization like the EZLN (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*). I think though that it’s important to mention that I use more than one flag because I’m trying to reflect the different faces of the idea of resistance. For example, the *Los Macheteros* (The Machete Wielders) are a group of citizen militants that have constantly fought for the independence of Puerto Rico. However, they are not “indigenous” to the

land. They are Latin Americans that are against the social and political influence of North America over their nation, which is somehow similar to the language problems in Québec.

Do you think there are similarities between Latin America and Quebec? Could you see Québec as a forgotten Latin American state?

**MJL:** Well, thanks for asking. As a Franco-Ontarian I'm very aware of what Robert Choquette once referred to as "*le siècle de l'injustice*"—the period from before the rebellion of the *patriotes* in Lower Canada, in which the British project was to assimilate the colonial French—known at that time as simply *les Canadiens*—up to the *Révolution tranquille* and the *Crise d'Octobre*. I understand the history of imperialist conquest and capitalist exploitation in which French people in North America became second-class citizens, which is perhaps similar in some degree to what the Uruguayan historian Eduardo Galeano wrote about in *Open Veins of Latin America*.<sup>2</sup> In this light your *banderas* could possibly be seen as similar to the gesture of Hugo Chavez giving a copy of *Open Veins* to Barack Obama. But who are you giving this to? To those who don't know or to those who are already aware?

My immediate response, though, as both an internationalist and as a Lacanian, is to affirm that I have no interest in bourgeois nationalist projects and in petty bourgeois identity politics. In an essay I wrote recently, published in the journal *Third Text*, I refer to Slavoj Žižek's critique of

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<sup>2</sup> Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, trans. Cedric Belgrave (New York: Monthly Review Press, [1971] 1997).

cultural studies approaches to hegemonic contestation and his reassertion of the communist project of universal emancipation.<sup>3</sup> Žižek argues that Frantz Fanon understood very well the notion of superego predicament when he asserted the possibilities for an emancipatory collective outside of the hierarchical particularisms in which he could be thought of as nothing more than a black man. “I will not make myself the man of any past,” Fanon wrote in *Black Skin, White Masks*, “my black skin is not a repository for specific values.”<sup>4</sup> Fanon’s refusal to capitalize on the guilt of the colonizers rejects the negative universality of victim politics and asserts instead the space of universal emancipatory struggle. We all have identities, which our narcissistic selves can’t do without, but the affirmation of this identity against someone else’s difference from mine does not constitute a politics, except maybe the worst kind of liberal pluralist capitalism. If your politics cannot be universalized, if it cannot be imposed with force as the same for all, it’s not a politics. It becomes increasingly urgent, then, and as capitalism becomes more coercive, for activists to be aware of how the culture wars function today in relation to the capitalist class war against revolutionary politics. Alain Badiou wrote about this in his 1997 book *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, as did Tim Brennan in his 2006 book *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right*.<sup>5</sup> In this regard it is clear

<sup>3</sup> See Marc James Léger, “Art and Art History After Globalization,” *Third Text* 26:5 (September 2012) 515-27.

<sup>4</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, [1952] 1967) 226-7.

<sup>5</sup> Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, [1997] 2003). See also Tim Brennan, *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).



that the Zapatista struggle is indeed a universal struggle, especially insofar as they have from the start linked their struggle with that of all Mexicans and anyone who struggles against neoliberalism. In this sense, the Zapatistas, as far as I know from reading the writings of Subcomandante Marcos (now Galeano), do in fact resist the logic of victim politics and instead remain very constructive and universal, rather than asserting specific interests at the expense of someone else's identity.

In terms of the Québec situation I also wrote about these questions in the introduction to my edited book *Culture and Contestation in the New Century*.<sup>6</sup> When I started this book I wanted to do something similar to what Hal Foster did with his 'little red book' on postmodernism, *The Anti-Aesthetic*. I wanted to write a book that would be useful to the new generation of politically-minded activists, artists like yourself, who are aware of what Badiou refers to as "*le réveil de l'histoire*," the return of emancipatory projects against the rule of the so-called free market and against the "democratic materialism" that reduces everything to languages and bodies, which has become little more than an adjunct to the worldlessness of the market.<sup>7</sup> I included in this book Mathieu Beauséjour's project *1½ Métro Côte-des-Neiges: Do They Owe Us a Living?*, a re-performance of Gaetan Montreuil's reading of the manifesto of the Front de Libération du Québec on Radio-Canada television on October 8, 1970. In this project the name of the FLQ is presented as an English logo alongside the Québec government insignia, as though this

<sup>6</sup> Marc James Léger, ed. *Culture and Contestation in the New Century* (London: Intellect, 2011). See also Hal Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983).

<sup>7</sup> Alain Badiou, *Le réveil de l'histoire* (Paris: Éditions lignes, 2011).

revolutionary group had succeeded in taking state power by abandoning most of its cherished ideals. Isn't this exactly the problem now that the Parti Québécois and the provincial Liberal Party share the same neoliberal policies of austerity? And to add insult to injury, the PQ embarked on a project of demagogic populism with its Charter of Values clause that it would not reconsider. In relation to this I had posted on my blog for a while Lenin's 1905 text "Socialism and Religion" in order to politicize this discussion—to politicize culture rather than to culturalize politics, as Žižek puts it. I also voted for the New Democratic Party in the last federal election but was extremely disappointed to see how the new leader, Thomas Mulcair, refused to pronounce himself on the Québec student strike, because it's a provincial issue, but he did weigh in on the Charter of Values question, because, ostensibly, this issue is more important to the constituents of his riding—so he has something to say about multiculturalism but nothing to say about social democracy. This gives you an idea of what social democratic politics has become in its rightward drift toward the neoliberal right.

About *1½ Métro Côte-des-Neiges*, which by the way is a project I think has an interesting relationship to *BANDERAS*, I argued that the work questions the relevance of the FLQ's radical ideas to *today's* Québec nationalism, now referred to by anti-capitalist leftists as "Québec Inc.," the Québec of Paul Desmarais and Pierre Karl Péladeau. In this context, leftist worker solidarity has been replaced, at best, by what Žižek refers to as the "postmodern racism" of tolerance, by conservative populism and the restoration of class power. Politicization is thus presented against the background of the privatization of public issues.

In relation to the student strike, which is undoubtedly the most important expression of anything here having to do with the struggles of the Zapatista, Badiou gave an interview that no doubt upset many people. He argued that the student strike has to be seen against the background of the brutal global phenomenon of transforming universities into corporations and is therefore an echo of May 68, and so the strike was beneficial to all of Québec society, even if it was divisive. He added that the “becoming world” of Québec has to do with the experience of contact among identities, nationalities, and with indigenous peoples. For this reason, he views with skepticism the shift towards independence. Everywhere in the world, he says, in Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Somalia, the Congo, there is a pulverization of federalist agreements and a shift towards national identities. These negative phenomena of contemporary historicity are responsible for human tragedies.<sup>8</sup> One can see this playing out in Ukraine, where deputies in the Kiev junta are arming far right militias and in some cases calling for the extermination of ethnic Russians. The U.S. and the E.U. are directly responsible for stoking this situation of civil war, just as they have done in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Egypt, and as you know, as they have done with impunity throughout Latin America. Americans rightly criticize Putin for his anti-gay laws, but they ignore that their ally, Saudi Arabia, kills people for the same reason. The obvious point is that they can’t do without an enemy power that would justify their military-based economy. But this military power has absolutely no moral authority.

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<sup>8</sup> See François Gauvin, “L’enjeu philosophique mondial du conflit étudiant,” *Le Devoir* (June 11, 2012), available at <http://www.vigile.net/L-enjeu-philosophique-mondial-du>.

To come back to *BANDERAS*, I would have two questions for you about this work. One would have to do with what I see as something that operates like Emory Douglas' theories on revolutionary art. Revolutionary art, he argued, gives people "the correct picture of our struggle," "the correct understanding of our struggle." In this vanguard way he argued that art should raise awareness and educate the masses through participation and observation.<sup>9</sup> So I would ask you about the level of undecidability that you talked to me about at the opening of the biennial—the fact that you also want to avoid a clear propaganda message. You mentioned something about Albert Camus. In this regard you also included in your installation a work from your *Instigators* poster series, a print that shows a toppled statue of a man and the words "everything ends with a beginning." Who would be a good statue candidate for you in terms of your installation? Can this base actually be occupied or is it purely ideological?

**GT:** I'm a big follower of Emory Douglas, for his work and activism, and also as an icon of political art. I also think that for him, in his historic moment and reality, as an African American, it was easy to find "the correct picture of our struggle." Emory was maybe the first black American visual propagandist. His work has the intention to educate and to be accessible. In an interview he mentions that he had to do all the posters with images because the "brothers did not know how to read or write," and so he had to develop a system of visual education where blacks could be reflected and see the "correct picture."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Emory Douglas, "Position Paper No 1: On Revolutionary Art," in Will Bradley and Charles Esche, eds. *Art and Social Change: A Reader* (London: Tate Publishing/Afterall, 2007) 166-70.

In my case it's harder to find the correct image. We are in a time where idealism and ideologies are blended and consumed as popular culture and sadly the fierceness of capitalism is that it consumes all idealisms and transforms them into soft ideologies. For the same reason, it's harder to find positions. Albert Camus starts his 1951 book *The Rebel*, with this question: "What is a rebel? A man who says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation. He is also a man who says yes, from the moment he makes his first gesture of rebellion."<sup>11</sup> He then elaborates the rebel as a man who maintains his position against oppression at all costs.

I try to avoid propaganda with my work because I am not clear about positions. But I am clear that I want to maintain positions against oppression. My ambivalent position is not due to the fact that I am ambivalent in my beliefs but rather because I am ambivalent about the political and social structure of the world at this moment. You have to remember that I grew up in Mexico where the ideal of revolution was corrupted to the point that it was transformed into a dictatorial party called the INSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION PARTY. In this context democracy is based on corruption and clientelism, the Green Party favours the death penalty and the left is completely fragmented. My beliefs are informed by this chaotic reality and so yes I am ambivalent. Still, although we no longer believe, many Mexicans are still calling for change.

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<sup>10</sup> See the contribution by Kathleen Cleaver in Sam Durant, ed. *Black Panther: The Revolutionary Art of Emory Douglas* (New York: Rizzoli, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt* (New York: Vintage, [1951] 1992).



**IMAGE 7. Guillermo Trejo, everything ends..., 2013.** Letterpress and lino cut on paper weed pasted to gallery wall, 90 x 60 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

About the poster *everything ends...*, I think the base of that statue could be occupied by almost any dictator and so the image stands for any ideological position. However, the poster was designed after a specific event that hap-

pened in Mexico. In 2010 or 2011 there was a celebration of Mexican independence. During the festivities, a massive sculpture was assembled in Mexico City. Afterwards the monument was disassembled, placed in storage and forgotten. The monument is supposed to represent a man of the revolution but I found this event to be a kind of parody, assembling and disassembling and with supposedly an ideological meaning but that cannot be permanent. It was as if the government was dismantling its own ideas. And by doing that they were opening a space for a new monument.

**MJL:** My second question has to do with the usefulness of the example of the Zapatista (and maybe also the Macheteros) for us here in Québec. There are various forms of anarcho- and combative syndicalism—like that used by the ASSÉ (*Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante*)—that balance the anarchist principles of horizontalism and participatory democracy with a willingness to take on state power through its representative institutions. There are forms of revolutionary movement that can work to bridge the anarchist-communist opposition. This points though to some of the limits of idealism. As Gene Ray argues, the Zapatista are tolerated only as long as they don't become a revolutionary threat to the Mexican government and as long as they do not reorient the whole of Mexican society along revolutionary lines.<sup>12</sup>

**GT:** I think it's true that the Zapatistas and other movements can exist in Mexico because they are somehow tolerated, but I also think that the reason why these groups

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<sup>12</sup> See Gene Ray, "Antinomies of Autonomism: On Art, Instrumentality and Radical Struggle," *Third Text* 23:5 (September 2009) 537-46.

can exist is because the government has lost control of or is not interested in these mainly rural indigenous and ethnic communities. For example, at this moment there are several “community self-defense organizations.” These groups are taking control of places in the centre of Mexico. These civil movements are possible because for years the different levels of government were not concerned about small towns, that is, until they started to organize against the drug lords and somehow create a self-government status. The only reason these groups were stopped was because they started using weapons and openly calling for armed resistance against politicians, against the corrupt police and the drug lords. If this had not happened the government would have allowed them to pursue self-government practices because it’s cheaper for them and they basically could care less about these people.

I’ve recently heard a good description of the world that seems applicable to this conversation: There are two types of people on this planet—those with no security and those with some or lots of security. The ones who have no security have nothing to lose and so they can react. The others have the kind of security that stops them from reacting because they worry about losing their stability. Canadians are on the whole part of this second group and for better or for worse there is no real reason to react—or at least that’s how I see it. But I also feel like this stability is damaging to democracy. The lack of social concern is reflected in poor electoral participation and civil society fails to be active in calling for change. I have to say that I’m disappointed that there were only two major demonstrations on Parliament Hill this year and these were for the legalization of marijuana and for the pro-life campaign.

**MJL:** There was also an action by the Council of Canadians and Frack Corp, who placed a 14-foot fracking rig



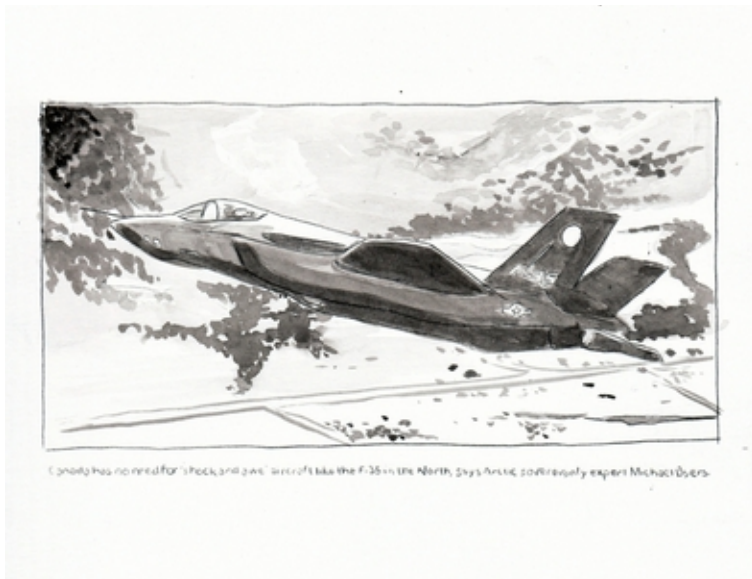
spilling fracking wastewater on the federal government's front lawn in order to bring attention to the risks associated with this environmentally hazardous practice.

In terms of the relation between art and politics, is there a difference for you between a series like *Instigators*, which uses a simple poster style to present quotes from Friedrich Nietzsche, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jack Kerouac and Buddha, and a series like *Black bloc*, or *We are angry*, which depicts front-page news events, mostly images of protest against poverty and violence? In the case of *Instigators* I'm reminded of Jenny Holzer's work, especially as she based many of her works on the political speeches of such people as Emma Goldman, Adolph Hitler, Vladimir Lenin, Mao Tse-tung and Leon Trotsky. Her work though was initially based in postmodern irony, attempting to rework ideas that had turned into media clichés and looking into how the mass media neutralizes the language of extreme situations. Like Holzer it seems that you maintain a kind of postmodernist's critique of authorial voice, of the violence of representation and power discourses. She also used simple, everyday vehicles such as printed matter and T-shirts. She has made more poetic and more emotionally compelling statements in larger and more monumental forms. How do you see your work evolving? Where would you like to see it go?

**GT:** I did not know about Frack Corp, that's great!

Yes, there are differences between the *Instigator* series and *We are angry*. Both came from the idea of appropriation and how to understand symbols. *We are angry* was a project that started by analyzing how western media depicts non-western countries. The idea was to take the free *Metro* newspaper and create a drawing based on the images in the international section. For me drawing is a sys-

tem of observation and “visual research.” This allows me to slow down the process of observation and to see more in the image. I consider this really important as an artist. The project evolved to a more complicated level, where it was not only about the representation but also about the relation of text and image, how images are constructed and not “reality.” The series was influenced by the work of Roland Barthes and specifically the idea that a traumatic image cannot transmit information because the traumatic aspect cancels the communicative capacity of the image.



**FIGURES 8▲ & 9► Guillermo Trejo, Untitled (2011)**  
 from the series *We are angry*, 2011. Carbon paper, ink and pencil on Bristol paper, 30 x 22 cm. SAW Gallery, Ottawa. Collection of the artist. Photo: Remi Theriault.



*We are angry* starts with a drawing of the newspaper image along with its caption. Beside this I place an abstract image that has as a caption the title of the column. The abstract image on the right is created at the same time and with the same material as the newspaper image on the left. The process for these “drawings,” as I call them, is to draw with carbon paper and then to use ink for the tones. I then clean my paintbrush on another piece of paper the same size and type. In this way I am creating two images: one where the visual elements are organized in a way that can easily be understood, and a second for which the visual elements are not organized in such a way that we can understand it. The only obvious connection between the

two is the text. This project was about how media can give meaning to images and how image lose their veracity when they are presented alongside a text.

This process was a strange way for me to understand images insofar as I was drawing dead people or people in terrible situations. This made me very uncomfortable. I became aware of the ethics of the image and how as an artist I have to question myself. That's why I stopped using these kinds of images and started working with concepts and words instead.

The *Instigators* series came from a personal question that was "why do people protest?" My thesis is that people who protest are in a collective adolescent stage, not in a negative sense, but as a period in life when things are changing rapidly and someone becomes aware of their existence. The adolescent has a need to kill the father and be emancipated. My posters were made with the idea that a protester thinks that the only way to make sense of their life is to protest. This is similar to the existentialist premise that we have to find a reason to exist because there is no external reason. I don't see this as necessarily political, but more a philosophical stance that connects somehow with the notion of ambivalence of position that I discussed. As you can see *Instigators* and *We are angry* came from different places, but I think that it's making *We are angry* that brought me to the second series.

I'm not sure about where my work will be going in the distant future. I can tell you that I have been moving more into abstraction. This only started recently but I'm still not sure yet where it's headed. My work is becoming more about how we understand symbols. Knowing how symbols create the visual world can be part of the evolution of how we understand political problems. I'm tempted to go into video but I want to avoid using new media simply because it's accessible. I don't like art that "looks" contem-

porary if only because of the technology and so I wouldn't want to go there.

**MJL:** Thanks for this interview.

**GT:** Thanks for the interview, Marc. I would later like to know what you think of abstraction.

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**Guillermo Trejo** holds a bachelor's degree from the Escuela Nacional de Pintura, Sculptura y Grabado in Mexico City, where he specialized in printmaking and drawing. He recently completed a master's degree at the University of Ottawa. His work has been presented in the U.S., Canada and Mexico. He has recently presented solo exhibitions at The Ottawa Art Gallery and SAW Gallery. See <http://trejoguillermo.com/home.html>

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