Empty Beer Bottles & Full Ashtrays: Joaquin Segura and the Aesthetics of Provocation

Dr. Amy Marie Pederson

Throughout his 1982 book *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, Marshall Berman returns over and over to a single passage from Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*:

*All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face... the real conditions of their lives and their relations with their fellow men.*

Published very shortly after the death of his son Marc at the age of 5, this collection of essays is ostensibly dedicated to a parsing of Marxism and its various legacies and applications. Yet in many ways Marx is an oblique figure here, a character through whom the melancholic narrative of loss that defines the Modernist condition is performed. Berman’s accounts of Marx’s theories and their operations in the world are in part autobiographical, and include indirect accounts of Berman’s own sadness, his loss, his feelings of alienation and homelessness, of being unmoored and unanchored in a melting world. Some thirty years later, we still exist in this eschatological place of desublimation. Superficially at least, everything has changed, but underneath nothing is different when it comes to a shared feeling of permanent malaise.

Segura shares the dread Berman articulates in his essays, and perhaps also responds to it in an indirectly autobiographical fashion. In a recent interview with Thomas Jeppe, Segura noted, "I always have a sense that in Mexico, in Latin America, your context is escaping through your hands, you can barely grasp at it. You should approach it in this immediate and more effective way to make it mean something somehow." I’m reminded here of a game played by children in science class in order to test their reflexes. One person holds an object a few inches above another person’s closed hand. The first asks the second if they are ready. When they say ‘yes,’ the object is dropped. The second person almost never catches it. To grasp for one’s context, one’s placement in time and space, is to grasp at straws.

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A few years after Berman wrote *All That is Solid*, Paul Virilio and Sylvère Lotringer published *Pure War* (1983), an extended conversation about the invisible global conflict between technology and humanity, and the collapse of the boundary between war and peace. Almost twenty years later, they reconsidered some of these same concerns in *The Accident of Art* (2005) and came to this conclusion: *art is the casualty of war.* In our present moment, the fear and paranoia of the 1980s seems hopelessly old fashioned, even romantic. The world was altered through the failure of classical war and the disintegration of the nation-state. The concept of cold warfare through military deterrence is a laughable specter of simpler times, and all war today is transpolitical, asymmetrical and utterly terrifying. Art now, Virilio tells us, is terrorist and terrorized.

Beginning with trench warfare as reflected in the horrifying images of Otto Dix, the Frankenstein’s monster of Cubism created by Braque and Picasso from the fragmented corporeality of World War I, and so on and so forth, art is a distorted mirror for the causes and effects of social violence. Attempts to camouflage this reality can only occur on the surface, with the blood of these deep lacerations welling up beneath the paint. Efforts to ignore or repress these facts result only in disfigurations that draw even more attention to this brutality.

In *The Accident of Art*, Lotringer tells an anecdote about a WWII memorial built in Vienna in the 1950s. While celebrating the military combatants involved in the conflict, the installation neglected to make any mention of the role of Jews during wartime. In the 1980s, this oversight was rectified by the addition of a bronze figure of a stooped old Jew pushing a broom. This statue was of a proportion and in a location that tourists began using it as a place to sit and rest. The Viennese, in an attempt to prevent this behavior, surrounded the Jew with barbed wire, seemingly without giving any thought to the historical or aesthetic implications of this addition. “To me,” Lotringer commented, “this desperate attempt to repair the desecration by committing a new one was the best memorial to what had been done to the Jews and they should have kept the barbed wire right there, possibly unroll it around the city of Vienna while they were at it.”

In 2009, Segura was famously the victim of censorship when the Guadalajara City Council refused to grant permission for the installation of a previously authorized work in the

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5 Ibid: 97.
Parque Mirador Independencia. Modeled after the Welcome To Fabulous Las Vegas sign on the outskirts of that city, this sign proclaimed “Fuck off you chili-eatin’ gringo loco up your ass!” To me, the real mystery is not that this sign was censored during its installation, but that it was approved in the first place.

Segura’s natural habitat is what Hakim Bey called the Temporary Autonomous Zone, a punk rock anarchism littered with empty beer bottles and full ashtrays. In the TAZ, the permanent terrorism warned of by Lotringer and Virilio has been leavened by poetry, the hamstrung artist has remade himself as a saboteur of the first order and art as a criminal act.

I first met Joaquin in Los Angeles in 2006 when he came to do an artist’s residency through the organization Outpost for Contemporary Art, along with Renato Garza and another young artist from Mexico City. They showed at the storefront Gallery 727, located in a framing shop in a downtown neighborhood with a large Salvadorean community. Garza made fake rubber flayed skins of Mara Salvatrucha gang members and displayed them prominently on the floor of the gallery. Segura produced “ethnically correct” California license plates that read beaner, brownie, and wetback, and distributed t-shirts illustrated with instructions on how to make a suicide bomb. The third artist gave a poorly conceived and executed lecture about the film The Matrix and the art critic Cuauhtémoc Medina.

After a heated argument with the third artist about the quality and quantity of his work, Renato left the apartment and Joaquin went to bed, but was soon awoken by a full-blown physical attack. The bad lecturer smashed Segura’s head against the concrete floor repeatedly, and after returning to Mexico he was diagnosed with serious neurological trauma and swelling of the brain. He could easily have died from cerebral hemorrhaging and become another foreign corpse in the LA morgue, not so different from the dead gangsters Renato made while they were here.

In her 2008 essay on contemporary Mexican art titled “Pull the Trigger,” Gabriela Jáuregui describes Segura as a guerilla artist, possibly even a terrorist one. But, she warns, his band of rebelliousness can easily be recouped by the cultural establishment, acting as an

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inoculation against the infection of real social and aesthetic change. Jáuregui posits artistic self-referentiality as Segura’s response, and points to *Los dos Gabrieles* (2005), a parodic reimagining of Frida Kahlo’s doubled self-portrait in which her visage is replaced by two Gabriel Orozcos.

An interesting result of this adversarial strategy has been its recent détournement. After leaving the opening of an exhibition of video in DF in early October of last year, we returned to the artist’s car to find that it had been vandalized. A series of bumper stickers (*I heart bumper stickers* [2004]) Segura had printed as part of another recent exhibition at the Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros had been unpeeled and stuck all over the car, with the paper backings stuck under the windshield wiper in a stack. His Renault was now covered with the slogans: “I heart Goebbels,” “I heart Gaddafi,” “I heart Pol Pot,” etc. Joaquin was really angry. He could only guess that whoever had done it had read on his Facebook wall that he was in town and would be attending the opening. I wondered if it wasn’t one of the younger students at SOMA who seemed to idolize him so much, imitating his look, his style and his art. No one can be a permanent teenager, just as no one can be a permanent revolutionary. At a certain point, and with any measure of success, we cross the border demarcating outsiders from the establishment. Beyond this limit, an army of Oedipal minions wait to attack.

On a recent trip to Guadalajara, Segura asked me if I could bring down some books that he wanted to buy online. When the box from Amazon.com arrived, I was embarrassed to find copies of *The Unabomber Manifesto*, Mao’s little red book, and Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*. Of course, my bag was searched by customs official in the airport. I felt like a complete asshole, and it occurred to me that I might have been unwittingly drafted to participate in some kind of art performance. Joaquin assured me that was not the case, but a trace of doubt remains. When we got to the apartment, the books were put on the table in a stack and started to accumulate ashtrays, papers, other books, and sticky rings from beer cans. Next to my library books and the research materials that I had brought from my own collection, the new books started to take on a plastic hollowness, and the weight and force of their contents in regards to politics, violence, and modern history became lesser and lesser until they started to disappear. The books became homogenous sculptures, and the information contained on and in them was almost completely evacuated. To me, this was a melancholic loss.
A similar emptying out can be detected in Segura’s engagement with identity on both a personal and collective level. To Jeppe, Segura made the claim: “I absolutely despise the idea of national identity and I don’t really believe in the idea of country, and most of the work I produce just mocks this idea of Latin American art, or Mexican contemporary art, which I think is absurd. It’s just an accidental geographical event that I was born and work here.”

Race is a construct, nationalism is a fiction, and “Mexican” is only a random attribute. This is a clever feint, but one that does not eliminate the problem of overdetermination. Denial and repression always leave a trace, and from Schelling by way of Freud, “everything is unheimlich that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light.”

Nationalism is not neutral, and it bears within it the stratification of history, the presuppositions and biases of hundreds of years. An accident of birth may be just that, but nevertheless it results in certain facts.

The category of Latin America has a complicated relationship with historical bodies of all sorts. Colonialism is an indelible weight, but this region is characterized by a special, doubled modernism that can be strategically attacked. Cannibalism in the New World, whether real or imagined, was one of the central moral rationales for colonialism, and it is no accident that the etymological and sociological origins of the cannibal coincide with the discovery of the Americas. I hereby propose Joaquin Segura’s work as inherently anthropophagous. According to Romanian philosopher Catalin Avramescu, the cannibal is a scholarly creature, a thought experiment that interrogates identity on the verge of collapse, posits an ethics without morals, and instills anarchy into the social order. In the West, “the cannibal is the messenger of disorder, the proof that moral chaos has descended upon us, human nature at its worst, the unusable atom of an impossible social order.”

Recently, Segura told gallerist Brett Schultz:

*The fact that I live and work in Mexico is a completely random geographical and temporal factor, which of course affects what I think and what I do, but I’ve chosen not to be limited by this*

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7 Jeppe/Segura: 48.
9 Ibid: 623
specific circumstance. In the past, while working abroad, I’ve taken advantage of this preconception of Mexico—to be more exact, pretty much all of Latin America—as one of the last barbaric bastions of western civilization.

Segura plays the role of the anthropological savage, employing the Mexican label as a temporary and expedient strategy for making art and fucking with culture.

Individuals who repeatedly transgress the socially policed standards of cultural identity are inherently threatening to the authenticity and power of this entire ideological edifice. But within these transgressions, as Jauregui noted, the potential for assimilation and neutralization is ever present. Possibly Segura’s work indicates a solipsistic miring in the practice of overdetermination from without. The perception of Mexicanness he plays with lines up with the most racist fantasies of gringo outsiders, but a feeling of complicitness often outweighs any evidence of critique. Beyond categorical rejection, what Joaquin himself thinks of Mexico and Mexicans remains largely a secret. Certainly, it is a fraught relationship.

Thomas Jeppe writes, “Segura’s themes are enlivened by the cultural-political environment of Mexico, so far from the conditions that generate the contemplative Conceptualism of Europe and the United States.” While perhaps true on its face, this contemplation leads to complacency, and often results in the widespread production of art of the most banal and mediocre sort. This cultural production is propped up by the sorts of governmental subsidies that protect the commodity trade for such other things as butter and wine. Certainly, the booming but largely conservative art market has long supported this work. Against this, I propose Virilio’s theory of the accident as a corrective. The accident is relative, unexpected, and necessary; the invention of air travel is the invention of the plane crash, after all.

The modern condition is perhaps writ large within the present context of Latin America. A permanent state of crisis, the institutionalization of revolution, a conglomeration of failed states, each of which is crumbling into pieces. This uncertainty and instability can be

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11 Jeppe & Segura: 47.
considered as a boon to art making, if as Segura suggests, "you learn to function within a context that forces you to do more with less. To potentialize what you have."12

Facts about a Mexican context include the hyperviolent climate of everyday life, and the question of class that affects contemporary artistic production and reception on every level. The normalization of violence produces a permanent state of semi-fearfulness accompanied by numbness. In this light, it seems difficult to get upset by some of Segura’s more provocative images, since they cannot hope to compete with the theater of cruelty performed daily in the world. The intent of the artist in relation to his audience (indeed, his intended audience) can be called into question. But it seems unfair that there can be any added or specific regard for reception that Mexican artists must take into account, some extra burden from which European or American artists are exempt. As Hakim Bey asserts, “…even the truest secret becomes yet another mask.”13

Almost every review of Segura’s work refers to him as an enfant terrible, but I think this is a title he has outgrown. His rage is cut with melancholy and deepened by maturity, but I wonder if this kind of practice is sustainable in the long term.

I didn’t understand the nature of subtlety before. I used to think that you needed to be loud and manifest anger and unconformity in the most aggressive manner possible. Then I finally realized that you can actually permeate and rarify a battleground—because after all, this is low intensity war—if you actually aim at silently building up the contradictions and making the symbolic value of ideas and acts clash within themselves. Or perhaps it is that I am just getting old. I guess I used to be an angry kid until recently.14

An aesthetic of provocation is perhaps the strongest continuous legacy of the historical avant garde. Segura states: “I’m trying to formulate some sort of poetics of disaster.”15 I believe this to be true and entirely in keeping with the most radical and utopian modern traditions. To summarize Adorno, the mark of truth and freedom can only be found in art of

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13 Bey: 88.
15 Jeppe & Segura: 47.
all stripes, or, to quote Berman directly, “to give up the quest for transcendence is to erect a halo around one's own stagnation and resignation.”

To paraphrase revolutionary filmmaker Melvin van Peebles, Segura may be an asshole, but he’s not stupid. Segura’s art is like fireworks: a weapon, but one invented to cause aesthetic shock, and not intended for use in war.

*If I were to kiss you here they’d call it an act of terrorism—so let's take our pistols to bed and wake up the city at midnight like drunken bandits celebrating with a fusillade, the message of the taste of chaos.*

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Dr. Amy Marie Pederson is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Art History at Woodbury University in Burbank, CA. She is a co-curator of the MexiCali Biennial and was the curator of *La Quebradora: Lucha Libre in Contemporary Mexican Art* at the Mission Cultural Center for the Latino Arts in San Francisco (Summer 2012). Her research interests include poststructuralist theory and zombies.

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*16 Berman: 120.*

*17 Bey: 4.*