

Abril Castillo*

MEXICAN ILLUSTRATION, 1968-2018

A Conversation with Fabricio Vanden Broeck and Éricka Martínez

Did Mexico's 1968 student movement point the way forward for art and culture in our country? Have we taken it upon ourselves to forget it? What was the significance of illustration in the middle of the last century? What links up politics, society, and culture? Can we understand one without the others?

To answer all these questions, two very experienced, well-known Mexican illustrators offer us a complex picture that, paradoxically, poses even more questions about Mexico's graphic identity. They talk about how complicated it is today to define illustration, how it has developed in the different decades of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and how this relates to social movements, that is, to living history.

1968, a Movement that Broke the Mold

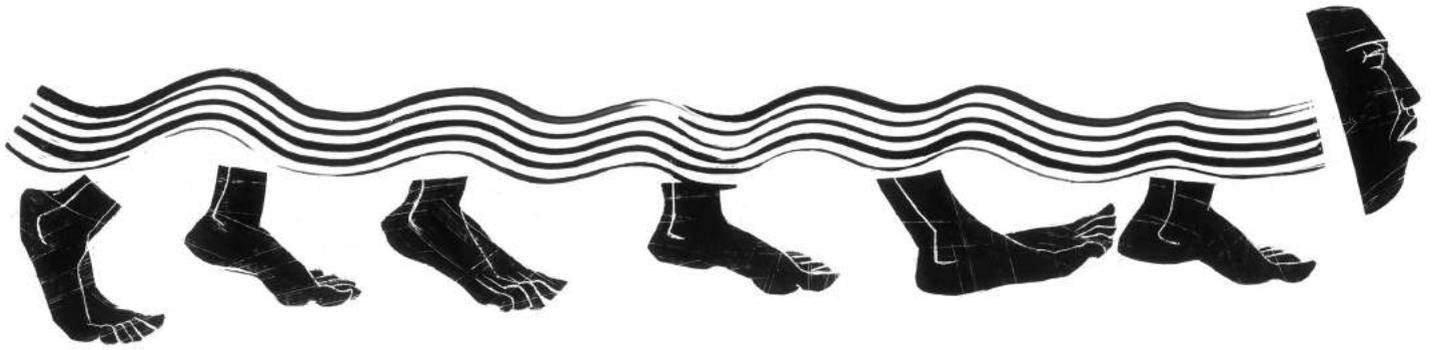
Fabricio Vanden Broeck's mother was a professor at the UNAM School of Political Sciences at the time. He was 12 and remembers,

A lot of students paraded through my house and the ambiance was high-spirited. I remember it as a huge party. After October 2, Televisa began spreading its tentacles and brutalizing the audience with its programming, toeing the government line, I suppose. That lasted ten years or more. The country's artistic and cultural development was brutally cut short and in



Saying "No" to Repression, Mauricio Gómez Morin.

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Fabricio Vanden Broeck.

general fell into a mediocre patronage system that we are still partially subject to.

For Fabricio (<http://fabriciovandenbroeck.com/#display>), 1968 changed an entire cultural universe, not just illustration. It broke the mold and brought new paradigms, partly thanks to the musical explosion that began in England with the appearance of groups like The Beatles. He says,

Surrealism, until then called “kitsch,” seeped into pop culture. People recovered the margins for going beyond the stage and expressing themselves with album covers designed by irreverent visual artists like Peter Max, Andy Warhol, or George Dunning. That’s where the possibility of contemporary, “*d’auteur*” illustration emerged.

But, who were the forebears of Mexican graphics and how have they influenced artists and their relationship to social causes, even if their work is not editorial or a textbook or a narrative? For Vanden Broeck, José Guadalupe Posada, Leopoldo Méndez, and Gabriel Fernández Ledezma are the main influences in the graphics of the ’68 student movements. He does not think, however, that they influenced contemporary Mexican illustration very much, with one exception: the work of Mauricio Gómez Morin, whose work does reflect those influences.

For her part, Éricka Martínez thinks that the 1968 graphics took a lot from the “official design” for the Olympic Games, that were “much more bourgeois,” with references that more clearly came from the United States, but with Mexico adding aspects of pop culture, concretely Wixárika art.¹ “That repetition of lines that lasted into the 1970s was the same as Mexico ’68, which also was related to the Wixárika “God’s eyes” that the students use

to mock that [official] aesthetic. Take it, appropriate it, turn it into something else.”

Éricka points out that publishing houses like Siglo XXI (Twenty-First Century) or the Fondo de Cultura Económica (Fund for Economic Culture) and social movements throughout Latin America continued to use these design elements in their own graphics.

’68 had an impact not only on design, but it also nourished all the arts. In theater, for example, CLETA was born with the Cisneros brothers;² in Uruguay, [the] El Galpón [theater group]. Groups sprang up all over Latin America involving theater and painting . . . and music! So many groups doing protest music emerged after ’68. What happened that year in Latin America was fundamental for all the arts: architecture, painting, design. The literary boom began. In pedagogy, prominent currents wanted children to be freer, to learn how to plant crops, to reason, and for their voices to begin to be heard. I don’t know if it had that much of a repercussion in illustration.

Mexico took in an enormous number of exiled Bolivians, Argentineans, Uruguayans, Chileans, and Brazilians. For Éricka Martínez, it is undeniable, for example, that Carlos Palleiro’s presence in Mexico defined design to a great extent in this country, giving preponderance to the committed, revolutionary work characteristic of exile.³ This was a determining factor in the work of future gen-

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erations of creators, something that can be observed in the book covers of the Ministry of Education’s free textbooks and those of the National Council for Education, the Fondo de Cultura Económica, and Siglo XXI. The last two distribute throughout all of Latin America and have been the bearers of that graphic tradition inherited “not from the Taller de Gráfica Popular [José Posada’s Popular Graphic Workshop], but rather from the graphics of ’68, that lasted into the 1970s,” explains Éricka Martínez.

This kind of graphic design can be found in publishing, logos, and in the collective work and artists’ groups from that period with a leftwing focus, like Imprenta Madero, headed by Vicente Rojo. Éricka says,

He collaborated on many covers of great books. He was a great designer. After him, we saw Rafael López

Castro, Germán Montalvo, and Mauricio Gómez Morin, who is very important because he belongs to the last generations who really used design to express ideas with social content; later this intention faded away.

For Vanden Broeck, “Mauricio Gómez Morin’s images link up identity-wise to the tradition of the Taller de Gráfica Popular. For my generation, experimentation, structuring a personal language, and references to the Mexican visual universe have been central concerns.”

Martínez, for her part, emphasizes that the Taller de Gráfica Popular dealt with issues like the post-revolutionary peasant struggle, inequality, and poverty, and in ’68 began another stage: one that involved urban struggles and young people’s demands the world over. This made it a more urban, immediate aesthetic, heir to certain techniques and the popular roots already present in the Taller:

The Taller de Gráfica Popular aesthetic strove for formality. This contrasts with that of ’68, which emphasized the immediacy of events and was obsessed with certain topics. The “gorillas,” military tanks, chains,



Mauricio Gómez Morin.



No More Aggression!, Francisco Moreno Capdevila, 1968, 59.5 x 87 cm (poster, silk screen on paper), UNAM University Contemporary Art Museum Collection, donated by Arnulfo Aquino in 2002.

gagged women, and repressed students spontaneously emerged from the San Carlos and La Esmeralda workshops, in the clandestine workshops that invited artists, designers, non-designers, cartoonists, and everyone else to join in. This knowledge, these skills, were put at the service of the movement in '68 and expressed them very economically, using stencils, silk screening, and printing on reconstituted paper; this gave form to what we would later recognize as an aesthetic of the period.

Vanden Broeck reiterates that contemporary illustration is not linked to the Taller de Gráfica Popular or the Mexican School of Painting, in the first place because illustration *d'auteur*, which has a dynamic relationship with the text and the search for a style,

is something that has come to us from abroad, and the social movements of the 1960s in Mexico put a priority on political and social demands, but graphic expressions were secondary, more collective, and anonymous. Observed from afar, they seem coherent and compact, and we like thinking that they were orchestrated. But I don't believe that. On the other hand, at the end of the 1970s, groups like Suma or the Non-group appeared, with a collective intent, but then came the 1980s, and they disappeared to make way for individualities, in harmony with the times.

He says that, before '68, each publishing house, like Fernández Editores or Trillas, had a full-time, versatile, anonymous sketch artist, who one day would do a techni-

cal drawing, the next, a realistic drawing, and the next, a narrative drawing. "That versatility was what was looked for in an illustrator," says Fabricio. "The name was irrelevant. No credit was given, and the idea was that the sketch artist's personality was neutralized to make way for a style that combined with everything. A universal style."

After '68, illustrators appeared from advertising agencies, "good for everything and for nothing in particular, according to advertising needs," says Fabricio. And in the 1970s the free textbook project reared its head again, involving several illustrators and artists.

Another key moment was when the early 1980s economic crisis led to closed borders: this forced Mexican illustrators to develop a dynamic of their own. Beginning with the first International Children and Young Adults Book Fair in 1981, small, more dynamic independent publishing houses began to spring up. Éricka tells us that, before that, there were not many children's illustrators:

There were children's literature collections, but nothing like today. At that time, they used painting or engraving. The fair included publishing houses, but few of them focused on children's books. Some had a division that did things for children, like Trillas. The Ministry of Education (SEF) produced some, and some collections existed in which painters participated as illustrators, like Diego Rivera or José Clemente Orozco. In the 1980s, a series of books illustrated by cartoonists like Helioflores, Naranjo, and Palomo came out: the SEF Books from the Corner collection, with huge printing runs of titles like *Matías y el pastel de fresas* (Matthias and the Strawberry Cake), *Patatús* (Pass Out), and *La abeja haragana* (The Lazy Bee).

As Fabricio says, today, illustration tries to establish a dialogue between the text and specific topics. For him, a before and an after exist in the craft in Mexico, marked by the appearance of the magazine *Letras libres* (Free Letters), where he collaborated for 14 years as art director,

Carlos Palleiro's presence in Mexico was determinant in the work of future generations of creators and, can be observed in the book covers of the Ministry of Education's free textbooks.

a relatively new position for the country. Before, to a certain extent, magazines were reserved for artists' contributions: "The editor would go to an artist's workshop, pick up sketches, and use them to create images for the magazine; but for me, that's not illustration as we understand it today."

In a paper presented at a conference in Colombia, Fabricio states, "The first generations of contemporary Mexican illustrators look at and deal with the issue of cultural identity to a greater or lesser degree. They look to their own cultural roots to construct a personality that distin-

Martínez emphasizes that the Taller de Gráfica Popular dealt with the post-revolutionary peasant struggle, inequality, and poverty, and in '68 works that involved urban movements and young people's demands the world over.



Promenading in the Ocean, Éricka Martínez, año. Cartel. Watercolor, 40 x 20 cm.

guishes them from what was coming in from Europe and the United States." However, what is considered illustration today is not at all closely related to what was being done in the 1960s. "Perhaps, [there were] a few exceptions, like the covers by Vicente Rojo, and [only] up to a certain point, because while in principle that was linked to the content, he did it freely. The illustrator has to dialogue with a text by contributing something."

Something was also lost in the 1990s. Éricka Martínez states that during the dictatorships, the relationship between social issues and art was very close. In that sense, the era after the death of Che Guevara, the Cuban Revolution, and the rest of the Latin American social movements fostered art in which design became a tool ruled by certain aesthetic guidelines, but that also marked stages and styles both in illustration and in painting. However, the "children" of the dictatorships lost that voice, and "in the 1990s, social consciousness clearly was getting lost. The Televisa generation was brought up with other kinds of art and no commitment remained like the kind that existed after '68."

Fabricio, for his part, points to another important moment for design in Mexico: the appearance of the newspaper *Reforma* in the 1990s, which was

a proposal by young people who greatly appreciated design, making for a newspaper that was much easier to read and more interesting visually. I think that was a golden moment that lasted from the beginning to the end of the 1990s, a very important period that led to the appearance of *Letras libres* (Free Letters), a magazine that marked a difference with what had been done before in terms of publishing illustration. It was the spiritual heir to *Vuelta*, but with a more contemporary idea, closer to *The New Yorker* or *The New Republic*, to cite just two examples. One of my proposals was that each article should have its own illustrator, something quite polemical at the time. People didn't question that a magazine could publish different writers, but they did question that there be several illustrators. That proposal was very criticized during the first year of *Letras libres*, and later, it was not only widely accepted, but became the example to follow for many other magazines.

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Have we forgotten how to see
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For Éricka Martínez, today, there is no commitment between design and illustration and social issues, or, if there is any, it is momentary. This can be seen in how events of the magnitude of Ayotzinapa take place: "When something so brutal happens, groups and movements emerge that try to bring together designers and painters to do something interesting that will have an impact, but that's as far as it goes until it fades away."

In contrast, when I asked Fabricio about these social initiatives, he responds with another question: "Is it a vocation of illustration? Don't you run the risk of trivializing such a painful, profoundly devastating issue with images that seek the aesthetic? Because, if we're honest about it, that kind of initiative serves more to promote the illustrator than to create awareness or help a cause."

We want to help from our own firing line, but we cannot find the way. Even though the intent is never to do damage, we are living in an era in which the individual is always at the center of everything. Have we forgotten how to see the other?

Fabricio notes a fourth generation of illustrators in Mexico that emerged in the first decade of the twenty-first century, characterized precisely with a greater group consciousness and less interest in searching for roots and references to themselves: "Their diverse proposals are the result of an influence of global trends, with a particular accent on the Asian and the use of digital techniques. This generation focuses on personalizing trends created in other latitudes, and today, the illustrators of the world often look like each other, wherever they're from."

Up to what point is illustration seen as a minor art? What graphic expressions speak to us today about the social? Do we remain silent or are we using media that are not within everyone's reach? In the twenty-first century, who are the ones breaking the system with their discourse and forms? What graphic revolutions are about to happen? Can we continue looking through the lenses of 1968 to see the future? Is now the future?



"*Hypocritical, murdering government!*, Men die. Ideas don't," Jorge Pérez Vega, 1968, 36 x 54 cm (poster, linoleum print on paper), UNAM University Contemporary Art Museum Collection, donated by Arnulfo Aquino in 2002.

People are not doing the same thing young people did in 1968, that's true. But so many things have changed. Undoubtedly, today's market is not the fertile ground of the 1970s, and printed publications have been in crisis for over a decade. But even so, the book publishing industry forges ahead, above all with independent, underground initiatives.

And what happens if what we do not see is overshadowed by the new "official design"? Where is the democratization of expression, freedom? Will those voices come in fanzine format, in hybrids, on the Internet, in a group, in do-it-yourself, in quality, responsible production, and in new ways of publishing and consuming?

Asking ourselves about illustration, about the work of those of us who labor in it, seems like it continues to be a question about identity. Perhaps, yes, we should begin to forget what separates us from others in times and ways of doing, and instead embrace our common ground, the transversalities. Perhaps we are everything all at the same time. What quality illustration tries to be: at the same time both form and content. **NM**

Notes

1 This is art by the Wixárika or Wirrárrika people, incorrectly called "Huichol," who live in parts of Jalisco and Nayarit states. [Editor's Note.]

2 The Center for Free Theatrical and Artistic Experimentation (CLETA) was created in Mexico in 1973. See more about this at <https://www.proceso.com.mx/130231/cleta-teatro-popular>. [Editor's Note.]

3 Palleiro is a graphic designer who, after being exiled from Uruguay, came to live in Mexico, where he has been very prolific.