

## Counter-mapping and Refusing Silence How artists in Ciudad Juárez protest and denounce feminicide.

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August, 15, 2023

Y LAS MUJERES DE MI CIUDAD? Painted in large, bold black capital letters on a bright yellow concrete wall strip below a fence guarding a nearly vacant parking lot, this question is a visible reminder to anyone walking or driving by on this busy street that women (and girls) in this city continue to go missing. A pink cross, the symbol of what has become known *feminicide*<sup>1</sup> in Ciudad Juárez, the rest of Mexico and other parts of Latin America, is painted along the right side. The painted pink cross and its variations such as the black crosses painted on a pink rectangle and the pink wooden crosses planted in the ground are all interpretations by various local activist groups of the first cross, “La Cruz De Los Clavos” or the Magenta Cross<sup>2</sup>, which was installed in 1993. This memorial, which still stands today in downtown Ciudad Juárez right at the entrance of the U.S./Mexico border bridge Paso Del Norte, marked the beginning of a movement that has continuously and persistently demanded an end to the kidnappings, sexual and physical violence and murders and justice for thousands of girls and women who have gone missing and their families in this border city. This movement was started by the mothers of the missing and has, despite government impunity and death threats, grown into a massive wake-up call all throughout Latin America forming new and radical forms of activism that bring families, communities, artists, journalists, scholars and human right advocates together to defend and protect the lives and integrity of all girls, women, gender non-conforming and transgender people.

In Ciudad Juárez this wake-up call started as what I call site-specific, visual and embodied counter-mapping radical art practices that have refused silencing and invisibility for three decades. In other words, artists (and non-artists) work with the pink cross, in any or all of its various renditions, as a long-term and enduring symbol, to make it known in a public way that a girl or woman went missing or was murdered by painting or planting a pink cross at the site where they were last seen or known to have

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<sup>1</sup> Lagarde, Marcela. “Del Femicidio al Feminicidio”, Desde el Jardín de Freud, Número 6, p.216-225, revistas.unal.edu.co, Universidad Autonoma De Colombia, 2006

<sup>2</sup> Espinoza, Laila. “Public and Intimate Performances of Gendered Violence: HerStory of Feminicide in Ciudad Juárez”, Center for Latin American Studies, March 30, 2021.

been. Tragically and unbelievably, the city (both in the urban and in the *colonias* (peripheral impoverished neighborhoods), is marked with these crosses everywhere. Another crucial visual part of these counter-mapping practices are the ongoing pasting of *pesquisas* (missing person ads) on posts and telephone booths accompanied by either a painted pink cross or a black cross painted on a pink rectangle. These single-page flyers showing a photograph of the missing person with the legend “Se busca”, along with their names, height, weight, color of hair, eyes, age and the last day they were seen become memorials that echo the question Y DONDE ESTAN LAS MUJERES DE MI CIUDAD?

In the same way that the pink painted crosses get bleached by the scorching sun and dusty winds that this border city is also known for, the *pesquisas* also become faded and tattered, telling from a distance that these girls and women have been missing for a long time. Some families refuse to allow time and the elements to erase their daughters’ memories by repasting new *pesquisas* while other families maintain the large scale, free standing, full color *pesquisa*, enclosed in a plexi-glass cover of their daughter. This particular *pesquisa* in memory for Esmeralda Castillo Rincón has been standing in the entrance of what is called “El Mercado Indio” (a multi-block outdoor flea market near Downtown) for fifteen years and her photo appears as if it had been taken yesterday. Some *pesquisas* *still* can be seen to be newly pasted from a distance as well only to see once up close that Diana Corina Medrano Escobedo went missing just a few weeks ago on July 7th.

What is being countered by these practices of counter-mapping? If the spaces in which we live, grew up in, work, and move our bodies through continuously attempt to make us and our loved ones disappear, then making ourselves and our loved ones hyper-visible through memorials, crosses, altars, *pesquisas*, murals, graffiti and other visual expressions of public art, is a direct countering against the femicide and gender-based violence. Because human bodies, *all human bodies*, like other “bodies” such as mountains and rivers and land markers such as buildings, streets and borders also are part of the map of a city, then counter-mapping, as a practice, is both a form of agency and a refusal to forget loved ones. This practice has evolved and transformed into a highly condensed, larger scale and across the distance (covering several blocks) memorial, or series of memorials, in protest and in reaction to the murder of Isabel Cabanillas, an artist and activist who actively protested, organized and made art against the femicide was shot to death on her bicycle in Ciudad Juárez on January 18, 2020. For at least five blocks leading up to Isabel’s first and last mural on Avenida 16 de Septiembre across from Calle Constitution, electrical posts, parking meters, walls and sidewalks all have become sites of memorial in remembrance of Isabel. Large and small photographs of Isabel are printed on paper and pasted on walls along with an army of pink crosses coupled with eyes painted and graffitied with the words ISA VIVE (ISA LIVES) everywhere. Several murals all in dedication and in memory to ISA, lovingly her

local nickname), painted on the walls of houses and businesses, visually echo her own mural titled "Te Observan" (They are watching you). Her bicycle, which along with sunflowers, was an offering at the altar in front of her mural created the community recently after her death, is now preserved inside the panaderia called Rezizte, across the street.