



Image courtesy of Pedro Reyes

Palas por Pistolas

Pedro Reyes

The project “Palas por Pistolas” (Shovels for Guns, 2007-present) was initiated in the city of Culiacán, in western Mexico, in response to the city’s high rate of shooting-related deaths. I was invited to put together this project by the botanical garden, a visionary initiator of contemporary public art projects.

Working together, we started a campaign that called for community members to voluntarily donate their guns in exchange for a coupon, which could then be traded at a local store in exchange for domestic appliances and electronics. A local television station featured a number of ads promoting this exchange.

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Stills from the campaign, courtesy Pedro Reyes

In total, 1527 guns collected, making this a record campaign; 40% of the weapons collected were high-powered guns used exclusively by the army. The guns were then gathered by the Ministry of Defense and crushed with a steamroller in a public ceremony. The crushed remnants were taken to a foundry and melted into raw metal that was used to fabricate shovels. With the collaboration of a major hardware factory, these remnants were made into 1527 shovels. Each shovel was made with precise specifications and the handles were engraved with a legend telling the story of the project.

The act of making shovels out of the guns is symbolic in turning an agent of death into an agent of life. These shovels have been distributed to a number of public schools where children have engaged in the act of planting 1527 trees. The ritual has a pedagogical purpose: if the overwhelming power of a gun can be transformed, so, too, can other realms of human experience and production. Several institutions in different countries have participated in campaigns for planting trees and some have adopted several trees as part of their art collection. Tree plantings continue to this day, with at least one tree being planted for each shovel. Other states in Mexico are preparing for new editions of this campaign to collect arms, initiating a new cycle for “Palas por Pistolas.”

Recent Plantings: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2008; Maison Rouge, Paris, 2008; San Francisco Art

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Institute, 2008; Lyon Biennial, 2009; Denver, 2010; Boston, 2010; Guelph, 2011; New York, 2011

Pedro Reyes' recent exhibitions include: Sanatorium, organized by the Guggenheim Museum, N,Y and Baby Marx at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. His work will be featured in 2012 at dOCUEMNTA13 Kassel and can be viewed at: www.palasporpistolas.org, www.pedroreyes.net, and www.blog.pedroreyes.net.