Abstract:
The photography, video, and installations of the artist Ernesto Salmerón have continually questioned the performance of memory in the context of post-war Nicaragua. Through highly mediated documentary works, the artist delves in the function of the media, the state, and individual bodies in the construction of a national memory, particularly in the form of the archive. An analysis of the intertwined relationships between identity and memory, nationalism and revolution, and forgetfulness and politics in the works of Salmerón and the Nicaraguan context allows for a critical reading of the instability of cultural memory and official historical narratives. Taking as their basis images of Sandino, graffiti marks, and celebratory gatherings in public spaces, these works propose contradictory ways of understanding the negotiations and omissions involved in the creation of a resistant memory in the midst of national reconciliation efforts.

The use of pink paint for coloring the Modern Art Oxford Gallery’s exterior walls in April 2009 during the exhibition “Transmission Interrupted” (figure 1) was no feminist manifesto. Previously, the grey walls had been graffitied in black with what may have
seemed to passersby as an unintelligible word: “chimalpopoca.” The term was then partially covered in pink and replaced by more black words in Spanish: “que se rinda tu madre” (let your mother surrender). As if responding to the pink whitewash, the second phrase seemed like a rebellious reflection on the first, “chimalpopoca” being a Nahuatl term that alludes to an Aztec ruler. The last sentence was taken from a poem by Ernesto Cardenal and makes reference to a phrase associated with Leonel, a well-known revolutionary leader in Nicaragua, which is also the birthplace of the artist who had begun the mural project titled Guerra colorida (Colorful War): Ernesto Salmerón. If the bubblegum pink can be read as a form of soft repression contrasting with the violence of the graphic mark, the half-legible words also point to the continuity of a struggle in a language foreign to the British working class residents that inhabit the neighborhoods around the gallery. Though the specific message might be interpreted by the same passersby as one of many encounters with otherness in a globalized context, particularly those explained and justified by art, the very action of pink-wash spoke of a more somber form of political and social oblivion.

Figure 1: Ernesto Salmerón, Guerra Colorida (Colored War), 2009. Ritual with “ocote” (a type of pine wood) in the artist's room.

Photo: Ernesto Salmerón

In 2007, a similar action took place in Graz, Switzerland, when the graffitied murals were brought into the interior of a gallery. The white walls were painted with phrases like “faggot, you went from the mountain to the gallery!” and then whitewashed in pink and yellow colors. The aggressive, spray-painted words still remained visible underneath the new coat of bright paint as a past trace and a complaint. Though the question of who had left the mountains and gone to the gallery could be easily answered as “the artist from Nicaragua now exhibiting in Graz,” there was more to the colors and how they represented the idea of translation and betrayal. These colors were not neutral: pink and yellow had been used by Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega during his 2006 presidential campaign, altering or softening the red and black colors of the revolutionary flag of FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front) of which he had been a primordial figure during the 1980s and 1990s. Ortega, who was leader of the FSLN and
president of Nicaragua from 1984 to 1990, lost the 1990 elections to Violeta Barrios de Chamorro of the National Union of Opposition (UNO), a coalition of opposition and right-wing groups. In 2006, Ortega was once again elected to the presidency, this time under a renovated pink, rather than red, banner.

The colors chosen by Salmerón thus allude to a particular transition and transformation in Nicaraguan politics, signaling a brighter future and promising a new beginning. Though the symbolism of the colors would be largely lost on European audiences, the brutality of the stain and whitewash remained. “Reconciliation,” “progress,” “unity,” and “peace” were some of the words that emerged out of the pink backgrounds in Ortega’s campaign and subsequent presidency, suggesting a moment of coming together rather than division—a triumph not of Marxism or the Revolution, but of mindfully concerted forgetfulness about a present and a past marked by violence and social divisions. Yet reconciliation would not be limited to that between the revolutionaries and the U.S.-backed “contras” who attempted to topple Ortega’s first government, or the displaced, the poor, the unemployed, and those who had profited from the arms’ sale or government positions and continued to own most of the land. In the current context, it has also meant the marriage of the state and the Catholic Church and renewed vows between capitalism and Marxist concepts. Pink was not just a happy color; it was red painted white.

Part of the relevance and effect of Ernesto Salmerón’s intervention in the London façade might support his own words at the Swiss gallery regarding the cooptation of the unruly, especially as manifested in the figure of the revolutionary or the artist. The phrase could thus reflect on the widely held notion among Nicaraguan intellectuals and the press that Ortega changed colors, meaning he sold out the Revolution. Yet the works produced by Salmerón since the 1990s have consistently addressed and problematized the question of constructing public memory by dislocating notions of the permanent and the unstable in relation to the archive. In the context of Nicaragua, where the revolution has acquired a mythical status, historical memory is an issue highly guarded by the state, which over the years has promoted the creation of cultural deposits to preserve the revolutionary past. What is being remembered and how the national archive is produced and used are questions continually posited by Salmerón through his work with three genres associated with documentation and memory: photography, video, and performance/installation. The artist’s constant movement between genres often reflects the displacements and transformations produced by memory and the difficulty of fixing the past in a single space or image. In this sense, the European graffiti and their white-washing not only allude to a larger political process in which political slogans and colors are refashioned but also to the very production of the archive as a “permanent” receptacle of historical facts and materials. The problem of the archive, its construction and use, has become more poignant as the current Nicaraguan government attempts to distance itself from the Revolution’s violent legacy while keeping a relationship of nostalgia to it in a process labeled as a democratic transition.
As a film student in Colombia during the late 1990s, and as a documentarian and artist living in Nicaragua since early 2000, Salmerón has engaged with the document and the archive not only as fragile yet potent social inscriptions in the construction of cultural memory and the creation of identity but also as theatrical and performative instruments. From his early photographic documentation of large public events and their relationship to the individual actors comprise them, to the transit of the crumbling image of a national icon through different cultural institutions, Salmerón often theatricalizes the already theatrical—mixing performance and reality, past and present in works that question the alleged fixity of the document. Salmerón’s works perform memory through the incarnated reiteration of archival material, complicating readings of the past and its myths, and how this reiteration shapes the experience of the present. Working in tandem and often collaborating with young artists from Central America, which has become a hotbed of socio-political critiques coming from the art field, Salmerón and his generation are reimagining ways of participating in the creation of social memory, reworking what may seem static and breaking down the already ruinous in order to reorient the past and its current reiterations.

Photographs of the July 19th Celebrations: The Revolution and its Masses

The production of a popular and public memory has been central to the continuity of the Sandinista party and its myth in Nicaragua. Since its inception in 1961, the FSLN has produced and reproduced documentary evidence of the revolutionary battles and the FSLN’s victory, clinging to the heroic image of popular revolutionary icons such as Sandino by using his image as a guerrilla fighter to gain popular support, and maintaining cold was discourses in a radically altered historical context. By constantly appealing to past discourses and forms, through public reenactments of important moments associated with the Revolution, for example, the Sandinista party allows the heroic revolutionary past to be experienced by the masses in the present, however briefly. The recent slogans employed by Ortega in which the notion of “the people” is simultaneously invoked and joined to the religious, such as “cumplirle al pueblo es cumplirle a Dios” (to serve the people is to serve God) or the more populist “arriba los pobres del mundo” (poor people of the world, rise up), transform ideological tropes and popular images associated with a strongly felt recent history into new mantras. Though the religious feeling invoked in the present stands in stark contrast with the communist-inspired and highly secular revolutionary government of the past, it nevertheless taps on a deep Christian legacy in Central America. This transcendentental, higher-than-human discourse endows the government’s actions and the heroes it resurrects with a new aura of sanctity, on one hand, and an apparently a-historical mission on the other.

That Salmerón should title his ongoing project as Auras de guerra (War Auras) is not a coincidence. The problem of memory and violence in the construction of socially shared historical narratives has been at the center of the series of projects developed by the artist since
1996. Each of these projects are interconnected, changing names and fusing and reiterating themes that become operative links attesting to the complexity and intertwining of actors and meanings in the construction of national memory. The most extensive of these began in 1996, when Salmerón began setting up a small portable photographic studio in Plaza de la República in Managua, also known Plaza de la Revolución, on the date of the Sandinista Revolution’s Anniversary. Since its ritual beginning on July 19, when the leading revolutionaries gathered at the National Palace in front of the crowded plaza to celebrate the ousting of Anastasio Somoza Debayle’s government and the dissolution of the National Guard, each year the masses gather to reenact the moment of “liberation” from oppressive foreign-backed forces and commemorate the victory of the revolution at the site where the original events took place.

For a period of ten years and like an old-fashioned, traveling popular photographer, Salmerón took photographs of the crowd gathered at the Plaza de la Revolución to celebrate the triumph of the Sandinista revolution. An early black and white photograph by the artist taken around the year 2000 shows a wide angle view of the Plaza taken with a fisheye lens, with the old cathedral in the background, FSLN flags being raised throughout, and children, older men and women gathered as a large mass under the scorching sun—homogenous, pulsating, and in expectation of the changes to come. The use of black and white accentuates the sense of the revolution being at a standstill, of freezing the euphoric moment of celebration, and of the present suspended each year so as to relive the past. Yet the moment remembered at Plaza de la Revolución was not that of the revolutionary battles, the lives lost, the violence involved in the annihilation of the past, or the continued poverty left in its wake. It was not the Revolution as a “one-time-only event” that was revived but the celebration of its victory over the prior regime and its restaging as spectacle. If the gathering on July 19 at Plaza de la Revolución was turned into a secular ritual that allowed for the public display of national identification and political fervor, most of the journalistic photographs published each year in relation to the celebrations reiterated this effect of coherence and direction by featuring a spreading, ample sea of people sometimes with the FSLN logo emerging painted on their foreheads. While the street adopts the shape of a theater, the mass becomes the sign of the revolutionary victory, the fulfillment of its social promises of equality, and its document. The image supplants actual social action. But in Salmerón’s photograph, such an effect is broken by means of an odd focus on the face of a child found in the image’s foreground. The boy not only appears almost distorted as he gazes towards the camera rather than face the rest of the crowd as the older men do, but his turned face marks a break with the homogeneous appearance of the crowd, emphasizing the theatricality of this massive display. Aware of the photographer’s presence, the boy’s gaze not only defiantly returns Salmeron’s look but even slightly poses, stressing how photogenic the scene is and the role of photography in preserving and reiterating this effect.

The image also slightly differs from other journalistic documentary photographs of the event by the type of curved lens used, which creates a peeping, almost voyeuristic and artificial distance from the crowd. The round aspect of the photograph could also be read as a reference to the concept of “revolution,” particularly its etymological connection to an act of revolving. Though
generally understood to be an event that marks a new beginning in history, a revolution not only destroys symbolic and actual edifices to start anew, turning the world on its head in a carnivalesque manner, but also implies a return. If as argued by Paul Connerton in connection to social memory, “all beginnings contain an element of recollection,” a revolution creates a cycle, a series of turns that are repeated, even while apparently changing the present. Though the political meaning of the revolution as the changing of a social order for another has overtaken the earlier celestial meaning, the term nevertheless retains the idea that to begin something new there must be another pre-existing element to demolish. The past becomes the revolution’s undergarment, its fold, and its necessary other. And the past must be remembered so as to make the present even more distinct from it.

Such a cycle of past and present returns was part of the Plaza’s own history. In the 1990s, Arnoldo Alemán’s government first renamed the plaza “Plaza de la República” and then installed a fountain and palm trees in it. The radically changed aspect of the square in front of the National Palace and old cathedral (in ruins after the 1972 earthquake) found an echo in the rest of the city, since many political murals celebrating the Revolution that had been painted by artists in the 1980s were simultaneously whitewashed. But if the traces of the Revolution and the spectacular reenactment of its victory through the mass gathering were slowly being effaced, by the time Ortega came into power in 2007, his government demolished the fountain and dutifully repaved the hole so that it would regain the aspect it had during the early revolutionary years. Eliminating the traces of liberal governments and restoring the past, the revolutionary cycle seemed to assume a new life, abolishing what had been previously torn down. If the plaza was an urban document of the past, it reflected the fluctuating trajectory of the memories it embodied and the difficulty of claiming the site as “original.” Though the city could be envisioned as a stage, it was also an archaeological ground, a magic pad bearing traces of the past, memories of demolitions and uprisings, with chants sung equally by spurring fountains and masses.


Photo: Ernesto Salmerón
After three years of capturing the masses, Salmerón stepped away from such celebratory spectacles and focused on the individuals gathered at the plaza. If the mass was constantly reproduced by the media as a vast physical force overcoming all differences, Salmerón’s black and white photographs made from 2000 onwards regained the vantage point of those forming the mass, returning to the street and the everyday. Such a descent from the god-like vantage point implied a refocusing on the actual bodies literally and physically supporting the Revolution. The corporeal element was enhanced when the artist began using a dark or white backdrop to partially isolate the individuals from the Plaza where the photographs were taken, as in the case of *Invencible Agustín* of 2000 (figure 2). Emerging from a surrounding darkness, or sometimes because of the sun exposure from a white film, the individual bodies not only revealed stark differences—from the muscular to the infirm and jagged, from torn clothes to those brilliantly imported—but a variety of attitudes and poses as well. Kissing couples oblivious to their surroundings, children smiling maliciously for the camera, rugged and scarred ex-combatants and street vendors proudly displaying uniforms and banners with FSLN logos, or young men dressed up like rappers, documented the underside of the revolutionary archive: not the enlarged images of leaders, the iconic moments of battle, but the remaining physical traces of a disparate body politic. Such was the case of the man featured in the photograph *Marchante sin delantal* (*Merchant without Apron*) of 2000 (figure 3), a juice seller who for the occasion decided to leave behind the feminine apron he regularly wore to work and replace it with the more masculine army pants and shirt.

![Image of Marchante sin delantal](image)

**Figure 3:** Ernesto Salmerón, *Marchante sin delantal* (*Merchant without Apron*). Part of “Retratos con Telón,” *Auras de guerra.* (“Portraits with Backdrop,” *War Auras*). Managua, Nicaragua, July 19 2000.

Photos: Ernesto Salmerón
If the changed vantage point of the document eliminated the mass as a sign of social change, the full or half-length portraits evoked a bourgeois past. The self-consciousness of those portrayed—the poses adopted following certain learned conventions (the smile for the camera)—and the idea of suspended time and its relation to family memorabilia invoked the realm of private photography and the studio as well as the origins of the photographic portrait and its connection to painting. But while photographed nearly for free (only 5 córdobas at the time) in an apparent gesture of solidarity with those portrayed, none of the latter went back for the results. If Salmeron’s portrait project had escaped the bourgeois interior or family album in order to get to the streets, it became instead a record of social classes, concrete and fleshy examples of specimens of a social fauna, tied to a scientific history behind photography. As Ernesto Calvo has noted, the archival project of Salmerón can be tied to a form of anthropological photograph, a classification practice that could be further connected to criminology. Yet one could add that such an act of recording and ordering was reoriented by Salmerón through the emphasis placed on the theatrical insofar as social actors were acting as themselves for the photographic instant of capture.

For several writers, Salmerón’s use of a dark sheet invoked a theatrical element that worked to counter the documentary aspect of the photographs. As Tamara Díaz Bringas argues, the people gathered at the Plaza, “actors of history, former Sandinista combatants and Revolution enthusiasts, became actors of commemoration, immersed in a transit from the historic to the histrionic.” According to Díaz Bringas, such a passage would be possible because the use of black and white photography and the reference to a historical event that would allude to a “documentary” tradition was nevertheless exposed as artificial in the reference to the pose and the studio. While I agree that this transit from the historic to the histrionic can be seen in how the backdrop precariously installed by Salmerón accentuated the sense of the portrayed as evidently posing, I would emphasize the sense of the characters playing out for the camera not only their presumed roles as historical actors but as themselves. In other words, Salmerón’s device theatricalized real people as “real,” asking them to perform themselves as evidence of their specificity in contrast with the masses behind them.

But this was no studio, only a makeshift copy. Though the curtain seemed to de-contextualize the bodies set up in front of it, attempting to act as a neutral ground or become a point zero of representation, the continual presence of the curtain’s borders and palm trees in the background invoked, at a minimum, images of more specifically tropical locations. The event that had gathered the individuals into a crowd in the first place was absent, yet present like a specter. Nevertheless, the ambiguity of the space recreated left a question hanging in the air: without the backdrop of the Revolution, what became of these bodies? What traces of history were revealed in their corporeality?

Part of the photographic series’ title refers to this relationship between the theatrical and memory. While aura is a term that resonates with the writings of Walter Benjamin in relation to photography, it also has multiple connotations in Spanish. From a soft breeze to a more
diaphanous and mystical emanation of a person’s or an object’s energy, a certain longing of a special quality is attached to the term. War, in Salmerón’s photographs, is surrounded by this mystical quality, which some of the photographs curiously reproduce. In one of the best-known images from Salmerón’s series, a man is only seen from behind, his arms extended towards the sides as he barely touches the billowing dark sheet. Enveloped in darkness, his body seems to be framed by an aura of light, a filmy and tenuous halo, his cape resembling wings, as if at the point of departure or flight to another realm. Quasi-divine, sacred, anonymous: perhaps an image of “the people” invoked and gathered at that same plaza.


Photos: Ernesto Salmerón

When Salmerón brought together several of those faces in a double-sided poster that he distributed on July 19 2004 at two different plazas in Managua, there were strong reactions and even public confrontation regarding the action. On one side and under the title Auras de guerra. Intervenciones dentro del espacio público revolucionario nicaragüense (War Auras. Interventions within the Nicaraguan Revolutionary Public Space) he placed several of the black and white portraits (figure 4), while on the other the word “ex-” was added to a
photograph taken by the artist in 1996 of the half-effaced contours of Sandino’s iconic hat traced on a crumbling wall in the city of Granada. Thus, what seemed to be a patriotic salute to the body of the Revolution became a questioning of its political affiliation. What the poster seemed to ask was whether Sandino’s image was disappearing under the weight of its own influence.

The distribution of the 5,000 posters took place on the 25th anniversary of the Revolution in front of the new cathedral and in the Plaza that had been rechristened by John Paul II. As mentioned by authors like Díaz Bringas, the political implications of such an act and location were important insofar as Ortega had recently entered into a relationship with the Catholic Church that seemed to disavow the secular principles of the revolutionary movement. The sign thus acquired multiple meanings, as it could reflect not merely on the specific men and women portrayed and their relation to the revolutionary ideals and ideology, but also on the current government and its own changing use of history and commemorative celebrations. Curiously enough, though apparently documenting “the people,” the artist was called a “foreign journalist” in the Plaza and had to stop distributing the posters because of the direct threats he received. If the poster was a way of reclaiming public space as a place of protest and dialogue, it also pointed to the archive as a fragile and fluctuating source of meaning.

“Documentos”: Video and the Flux of History

The problem of preserving memory was directly addressed by Salmerón in his series of documentos (documents). Arranged as an edition and numbered 1/29, 4/29, documentos are videos based on fragments of films, newsreels, and political propaganda taken from the Archivo Fílmico de la Cinemateca Nacional (National Film Archive of Nicaragua) and INCINE. The Instituto Sandinista de Cine Nicaragüense, later renamed Instituto Nicaragüense de Cine (INCINE, Nicaraguan Institute of Cinema), was founded in 1979 and was soon followed by the establishment of the Cinemateca Nacional in December of that same year. Both were partially the initiative of a growing group of filmmakers eager to establish a national film industry and recover national identity, as much as of the revolutionary government, which funded and promoted the work of INCINE under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture. The archive was set up to promote and conserve the works of Nicaraguan filmmakers and disseminate knowledge about the Revolution’s participants and supporters, and also to preserve the memory of what the Revolution had struggled against.

Throughout its history, the archive has funded films on the works of the Revolution’s international supporters, such as Julio Cortázar (Semblanza de Julio), and it still proudly displays films made in Nicaragua about the Revolution, such as Ken Loach’s Carla’s Song (1996), or Miguel Littin’s Sandino (1990). Yet the archive obliterates from view and historical inscription other works that problematize and question the means of the Revolution, most notably Werner Herzog’s Ballad of the Little Soldier (1984). Filmed in
Nicaragua (and possibly Honduras) in camps of the “contra” insurgents, Herzog’s documentary focused on the entangled web of violence that led orphan children whose families were massacred by the Sandinistas to seek another kind of family among the insurgents and to exact vengeance for the assassination of their parents. If memory itself is subject to lapses, both personal and collective, the national archive has set up its own coherent narrative of courage and alleged liberation through a selection of moving images, restricting access to other discourses and images that might upset what it considers to be “authentic” revolutionary memory.

Film, however, has for a long time served political interests in its performance of memory and the archive’s development has been subject to changing political tides. In the 1950s, two film production companies were created, EDICIN and PRODUCINE. These companies later produced documentaries and newsreels related to the Somoza government. While these films served multiple purposes, at times mixing information with outright propaganda, the Somoza government appropriated the movie image, its syntax, and physical manifestation to recreate its own sense of the national family. Films with an apparently documentary nature concerning the Somoza family and its everyday life were shown in movie theaters as news reels before the featured film, with a Spanglish caption that read “Con Somoza forever” (With Somoza Forever). The mass experience of the moviegoers was transformed into that of one large bilingual family, gathered together under the glowing light of the screen and Somoza’s smiling patriarchal image.

Yet during the revolutionary struggles, documentary film was resignified by guerrilla members from FSLN. The brigade “Leonel Rugama” documented battles against Somoza’s National Guard and the front lines, as well as the destruction left in villages in the wake of the revolutionary army’s passage. With rapid cuts interspersing images of dead bodies, trucks carrying soldiers, shattered and abandoned homes, pieces of interviews with leaders and regular soldiers, the films created and sustained a sense of forward movement that was held together by the narration, gaining strength from the sense of immediacy evoked by the moving image and its correlation to the urgency of battle. Celebrating each success along the way, the films provided testimonies of the battles against oppression, replacing the figure of the father symbolized by Somoza with portrayals of brothers and comrades. Interestingly, the national film archive is now divided into three historical periods with specific individual names: Somoza, Ortega, and Chamorro. History is neatly packed into moments and figures passing from oppression and external influence to revolutionary fervor and nationalistic independence, and then to a more compliant form of the bourgeois government.

The “documents” produced by Salmerón revise the different kinds of memory reproduced by the national film archive. They ask how the notion of the nation is built through the audiovisual document and how a collective history is mediated through cinema, television, and other media. Each short video makes use of a series of historical documents: photographs, movies, radio broadcasts, music, and literature, which are disrupted in their narrative unity and treated as
fragments and traces of the past that are repeated, disrupted, effaced, and revisited again. The very idea of the “document” as a reflection of reality and its relationship with the media is questioned through a moving medium capable of electronic reproduction, editing, and distortion. As a register of reality, video is turned into a fluid memory where time is repeated yet constantly transformed.

All the narratives are tied to national history, with its heroes and villains, though the exact position they occupy is continually questioned. *Documento 1/29* (2002) begins and ends with a half-seen fragment of a poem by Ernesto Cardenal: “la gloria no es la que enseñan los textos de historia” (glory is not the one taught by history books), superimposed and followed by grainy images of peaceful and lush Nicaraguan landscapes. The phrase establishes a relation between history, the written word, and the image: they are all texts, inscriptions that would apparently allow for a hermeneutical procedure to derive their historical significance. Yet their meaning as documents and how they mold our perception of reality are subject to change, their relations are complicated when they are juxtaposed. Cardenal’s phrase addresses the problem of the heroic and those exceptional acts for which men receive praise, renown, even worship. Though the Spanish words glory and history rhyme (*gloria* and *historia*), honor does not reside in these official histories, which at first hand and in regards to the footage of the National Guard present in the video would correspond to the Somoza government. Somoza’s own appearances in the video are supplanted by the brief mentions of the colloquial word “jodido” (fucked). But Cardenal’s phrase and its repetition at the end of the video with the addition of the poem’s following stanza, “es una zopilotera en un campo y un gran hedor” (it is a pungent smell in a field and a great stench), deny the bright aura of glory, replacing it instead with the pungency of death. Through the phrase’s repetition, the video creates an echo that speaks of reproduction in the present and of other heroic histories that supplant the first ones and claim authenticity and authority. The battlefields, the media, the city, and everyday actions, moreover, also form texts, creating more transient and ephemeral marks that can nevertheless become permanent scars. Thus, the juxtaposition of airplanes flying in formation with the sound of military trumpets allow the video to put these different stories in tension, from the celebratory parade to the menace of war.

Cardenal himself became a national heroic figure. A Roman Catholic priest from Nicaragua whose Marxist Socialist views led him not only to vocally critique Somoza’s government but actively engage in social activism prior to the Revolution, Cardenal became the leader of the liberation theology movement and the Sandinista government’s Minister of Culture, holding the post until 1994. Famously admonished by Pope John Paul II for mixing politics and religion during a papal visit to Nicaragua in 1984, Cardenal addressed social injustices, human oppression, and the plight of the dispossessed in his poetry, themes that still resonate in the local context. Though in the video Cardenal’s phrase acts as a frame to multiple images of soldiers, military parades, and training camps, its repetition also evokes the mindless reiterations of poems by children at schools, the
indoctrination of youth and the effects of propaganda carried out through education. Taken from Cardenal’s *Hora 0* (Zero Hour), an epic poem relating the counter-revolutionary ways of humanity and the brutal heroism of the revolutionaries, the phrases also ennoble and praise new heroes, replacing those of the past.\(^{11}\)

The repetition implied in propaganda is also associated in the videos with the Revolution as an event that is not over—one whose meaning is not exhausted and which can nevertheless become a static historical form. The continued iterations of another text in the audio, “sean cuales sean las diferencias entre los nicaragüenses, cada uno tiene su lugar” (whatever may be the differences among Nicaraguans, each one has his own place), aurally performs the effects of the homogeneity it suggests. While the actual place that each Nicaraguan occupies is not detailed, the phrase suggests an implicit equality. In this context, the people are figured as a homogenous collectivity, an organic body in which all parts are related and need each other, even though they might not know each other or be related. But the social hierarchies present in the video raise the question of who determines this history and the location to be occupied by each national subject. *Documento 3/29* (2003) makes this difference more prominent in the repeated image of a peasant woman carrying a basket and placing it in front of a makeshift white cross, possibly a burial or altar. In the audio, and interspersed with images of an FSLN placard, a woman’s tired voice is repeatedly heard saying that one must continue to work, so that the blood of these martyrs is not stepped on. This phrase, however, goes beyond the utopian revolutionary struggle, suggesting that the battle over poverty, discrimination, and inequality is not over, particularly in a country where more than half of the population lives in poverty and lacks access to education. The Revolution itself did not once and for all end with the past.

The nationalistic discourse of homogeneity is exacerbated by the soldier image that is constantly reiterated in *Documento 1/29*. By working with the repetition of images, phrases, and concepts, the video’s own structure plays with the formal elements of propaganda, iterating a message until it is internalized as a natural truth. Yet that very repetition serves to break through the images’ appearance of objective truth or of having a unique meaning, puncturing the memory screen.\(^{12}\) While the recurrent and rewind images of the exercises performed by the soldiers might seem at first a celebration of the army’s prowess, the iteration of movements also invokes the disciplining of the body, exercising control over it, suppressing the individual. The juxtaposition in the audio of a phrase by Somoza when he was the head of the National Guard—stating that he felt touched when seeing the soldiers—adds a sentimental note to the military image. Yet the multiple soldiers (or insurgents?) bearing arms in the cities, controlling traffic and everyday flow, suggest a more sinister and menacing element in the everyday, where armed struggle becomes part of the urban landscape.

Salmerón’s series of videos posit memory and remembrance as acts of editing. On one hand, the notion of revision is literally enacted in the multiple times an image is rewound and played
again, emerging at times after longer lapses, testing the viewer’s own memory and the
associations made between the passages after each reiteration. But the past never reemerges
in the same way, no matter how technologically sophisticated the copy is. Each displacement
implies a change in the original material, a transformation of its meaning. Each act of
remembrance is an edition. In his videos, Salmerón makes evident this act of framing, of looking
again, through the sound distortions, the slow-down of the images, the act of going back again
and again, stopping, freezing, manipulating the document. If the archive presupposes a way of
cataloguing and rationalizing knowledge, in the videos it appears as a non-linear puzzle. Like
history, the video is filled with fragments, texts, and discourses that are juxtaposed and which
the viewer reconstructs and fills with meaning. Memory is unstable, like the electronic images:
the archival images are constantly interrupted by signal malfunctions, scrolling bands, and
acutely distorted sounds. The videos enact in their own materiality the discontinuity of history
and memory, manifested by means of splices, jumps, repetitions that suggest that there is no
linearity, no sense of progress, no narrative with a definitive end.

Another Kind of Wall: *El muro* and the Mobility of the Image

![Image of a wall with graffiti](www.hemisphericinstitute.org)

Salmerón’s documents attempt to open up history and the archive to others. They
appropriate historical documents so as to intervene in history, manipulating the archive
and reconstructing it according to the artist’s perception. The viewer is invited to do the
same, to look again at the images, make his or her own journeys, connect the dots,
reconfigure the document, and make a new edition. *Auras de guerra*, on the other hand,
continues to grow and has become its own archive, generating a series of interventions,
mutations, reenactments, and contaminations. Using as starting point a photograph taken in
1996 of the fading contours of Sandino’s hat and its silhouette on an adobe house, the artist
had in 2006 the portion of the wall that contained the drawing completely removed by a group
of architects before the house was demolished (figures 6 and 7). The whole process was captured in the video *El muro* (2004–2007), its title resounding with popular culture, music, notions of oppression, and other walls coming from different historical and physical locations. Soon after, the wall was set up as part of an exhibition at the National Institute of Culture (the ex-National Palace), which was cancelled by cultural authorities of Enrique Bolaños' government (figure 8). The director of the institute, Julio Valle, argued that the work was political proselytism, a statement explained by the fact that 2006 was an election year. As Díaz Bringas has stated, the image of Sandino “taking over” the National Palace “required the opposition of the authorities,” because it implied a political position associated directly with a revival of the revolutionary myth. Curiously, during the encounter with Valle, Salmerón wore a red ski mask and stood in front of the building with a handheld video camera in a gesture that would reiterate the propaganda effectively used by Ortega later in his presidential campaign. History repeats itself as farce, as the memory embodied by the wall was wheeled out of the building like a sick patient (figure 9).

If Cardenal’s poem was attacking the consumption of heroes, Sandino’s hat and silhouette as it appeared in the mural represented another kind of icon and cult image in popular culture. Acting almost as a holy presence alluding to the past, particularly the anti-imperialist battle of the 1930s in Nicaragua and the betrayal of Somoza ending in Sandino’s 1934 assassination, the image of Sandino still revives the political commitment to resist foreign influence and to the revolutionary struggle. Yet the crumbling aspect of Sandino’s silhouette in the wall, captured by Salmerón, renders the revolutionary leader’s image phantasmagoric, not quite real yet still present. For Pérez-Ratton, Sandino’s image is similar to other iconic revolutionary figures insofar as it is used and appropriated by a wide variety of groups to fulfill contradictory ideas. Thus, for the curator what Salmerón’s wall exposes in its “tragic military funeral caravan for
Sandino” would be the latter’s own betrayal by his people. As a “dead utopia,” the leader’s image and its emplacement in the adobe house becomes an inverted monument, Here, the founding father of resistance in Nicaragua comes to embody and literally enact the transitory aspect of memory in the removal of the house’s foundations. As with the 2009 graffiti, the whole wall was turned into a transient artwork, only this time one that is more mobile, precarious, and disposable. *El muro* contrasts the process of extraction, which lasted several months, with the slow movement of the passersby in front of the crumbling colonial house. The enthusiasm of those removing “the monument,” as they called it, is juxtaposed with the distant and disinterested pedestrian flow of the street.

Figure 8: The Wall during the installation of Auras de Guerra (War Auras). Managua, Nicaragua, August 2006.

*Photo: Ernesto Salmerón*

Figure 9. Workers from the Nicaraguan Institute of Culture remove *Auras de Guerra* show from the National Palace of Culture. Managua, Nicaragua, August, 2006.

*Photo: Rodrigo Peñalba*

The whitewashing image mentioned at the beginning of the essay is relevant to the trajectory and fate of the wall as well as to the reincarnations of the Sandino image. The extracted wall travelled inside an IFA truck to El Salvador, where it was exhibited in the Quinta Bienal de
Artes Visuales del Istmo Centroamericano (Fifth Visual Arts Biennale of the Central American Isthmus), and then to the 2007 Venice Biennale, for which the truck itself was transported by ship. The wall and a video documenting the journeys was then bought by Tate Modern, a passage that might confirm the statement annotated on a wall in Graz regarding the artist that left the mountain for the gallery. Yet the traveling connections are multiple: the IFA trucks were sent to Nicaragua from the former Democratic Republic of Germany (though they were fabricated in the Soviet Union) in a gesture of friendship between socialist governments, and were used to carry soldiers to the front lines. Ironically, the truck was re-christened by Salmerón as “El gringo,” bearing its name on the front window, along with a flaming eagle and star-studded emblem. In the end, the truck “returned” to its symbolic European home, though in the form of the artist’s consecration at the Venice Biennale and as a mobile reminder of the varying trajectories and meanings of the iconic image that it carried.

Inside the truck and protecting the wall along its journey were Rigoberto López, a former combatant of the “contra,” and Adolfo Palma, a former Sandinista fighter (figure 10). Maimed by the war and largely unemployed with the exception of work watching over parked cars at the Plaza de la Revolución, these former enemies came together not around the discourse of reconciliation adopted by the Nicaraguan government, but around their scars and their shared condition of unemployment (figures from vet 5 and vet 8). In another theatricalization of the real, the former combatants were representing themselves as both past warriors and current veterans in their double condition as images and living bodies.

Figure 10: IFA Truck El Gringo and war veteran Adolfo Palma Castro and truck driver Junior Pérez in Honduras while travelling from Nicaragua to El Salvador. November 2006.

Photo: Ernesto Salmerón

Parked outside the Arsenale’s main exhibition space and accessible through a small ladder, the bright red truck and its contents installed a different type of heroism and epic travel narrative. The heaviness of the wall, the stout solidity of the truck, and the presence of its “guards” as living traces of the Revolution and its consequences suggest the enduring
persistence of the social and political problems Sandino and later revolutionaries sought to eliminate. The juxtaposition of real men performing themselves, hired by the artist to transport an apparently “fixed” yet decayed image found in an adobe house representing a particular political stance and national history, posited a more complicated reading of what an embodied document might look like today. If the wall project puts in tension different elements usually believed to pertain to the archive (from photographs to video and the recording of performances), it does so to go beyond a mere act of salvage. While Salmerón’s whole “Auras de guerra” project actualizes the past, it does so not to create a comfortable or conciliatory image of the present (as could be easily deduced from the “reunion” of ex-combatants inside the truck) but to confront us with a living wound and a question mark. It questions the ephemeral and permanent aspects of the archive, crossing over their boundaries as well as those of nations, cultural institutions, times, and genres, attesting to the intertwining of trajectories and encounters that archival materials and documents form and can articulate. The work also reflects on the artistic and political usages of the repertoire of images, gestures, poses, and materials that the Nicaraguan Revolution has produced and continues to reinterpret, further problematizing any kind of autonomy left in art and its institutions when understood as cultural deposits (however impermanent a Biennial might be). Whether the work comprising the wall and its own documentation will stay in the Tate’s vaults or becomes an object of exhibition, its living elements effaced from view, it reminds us that it will continue to be remobilized in each of these acts, like memory itself.

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**Notes**

1 See, for example, the photographs by Miguel Álvarez for *The New York Times’* article “Ex-Firebrand Ortega on the Comeback Trail,” published on September 30, 2006.

2 There has been a growing literature and an expanding art system supporting the works of young Central American artists, which has grown exponentially in the past decade. Costa Rica has acted as an artistic hub and among the most prominent and effective efforts coming from the area have been those of MADC (Museum of Contemporary Art and Design) and Virginia Pérez-Ratton at the art center and foundation TEOR/ëTica. The latter’s work as a curator for international projects (from Documenta to the Venice Biennale) has been instrumental in helping certain Central American artists, among them
Salmerón, acquire international visibility beyond the isthmus. The writings of the curator Ernesto Calvo and María José Monge, to mention only a few, have also contributed to the literature regarding new art in the region, particularly video and new technologies. I am excluding here the importance of the Habana Biennial or of writers like Gerardo Mosquera, who have for a longer period centered on larger Latin American concerns. See Ernesto Calvo and María José Monge, “New Technologies in Central American Contemporary Art: A Partial Archaeology and Some Critical Appreciations from the Institutional Realm,” *Third Text* 23, no. 3 (2009): 281-292.

3 The image can be found in the blog [http://leoneldelgadoaburto.blogspot.com/2007_06_01_archive.html](http://leoneldelgadoaburto.blogspot.com/2007_06_01_archive.html), last accessed December, 2010.


7 In his most well known description of the “aura,” Benjamin defines it as that “strange web of time and space: the unique appearance of a distance, however close at hand.” Walter Benjamin, “A Short History of Photography,” trans. Phil Patton, *Artforum* 15, no. 6 (February 1977): 49.


9 See Elizabeth Ugarte Flores, “Un breve recorrido por la expresión audiovisual de Nicaragua,” *Istmo* 13 (July-December 2006).

10 Bernardo Chapa has noted in *Cultura Logía* that Salmerón also uses eponymous figures as alter egos of sorts, from Cardenal in the video to Ernesto Salmerón Flores Alvarado, a militant man.

11 Even the following phrase in document 2/29, “los jóvenes son los más aventurados que los viejos y más propensos al cambio” (the young are more adventurous than the old and more prone to change), seems to echo Herzog’s documentary, particularly the responses of the insurgents in charge of training the young boys.

12 I am here thinking of both Sigmund Freud’s theories on memory and repetition, and Jacques Lacan’s notion of the “screen” that protects against the Real or the effects of trauma.
In a curious intertwinement of memories, the artist later discovered that the house had belonged to his paternal grandparents.

14 Díaz Bringas, “Tactics of Intervention in the Public Sphere.”

15 In a statement written by Nicaraguan artists in 1984, the figure of Sandino is reawakened as a limitless icon along with that of the poet Rubén Darío, as when stated: “If we have already said that our true frontiers are defined by our forebears Rubén Darío and Augusto César Sandino, today we proclaim that the universal consciousness represented in the people of the world, in the intellectuals and artists of the world, will widen without limits our moral frontiers.” In “A Call From Artists and Intellectuals of Nicaragua to Artists and Intellectuals of the World,” reprinted in Nicaragua Under Siege, eds. Marlene Dixon and Susanne Jonas (San Francisco: Synthesis Publications, 1984), 227-229.


18 Ernesto Salmerón, quoted in “Mi trabajo ha sido censurado por la izquierda y por la derecha,” La Prensa Gráfica, November 18, 2006.

19 There were other previous travels of the work, starting with the truck’s journey to San Salvador to participate in the Fifth Central American Biennial of Plastic Arts, going back to Nicaragua and then setting off to Costa Rica, from where it was shipped to Venice.

20 For a description of the men’s impressions in Venice, see the unsigned text, “Augusto va por los canales de la Serenísima pero su reloj lo tiene en el Chipote,” in TEOR/ética.

Works Cited


Nicaragua. Austin: University of Texas Press.


