

Isabel Morales Quezada\*

## REBUILDING THROUGH ART

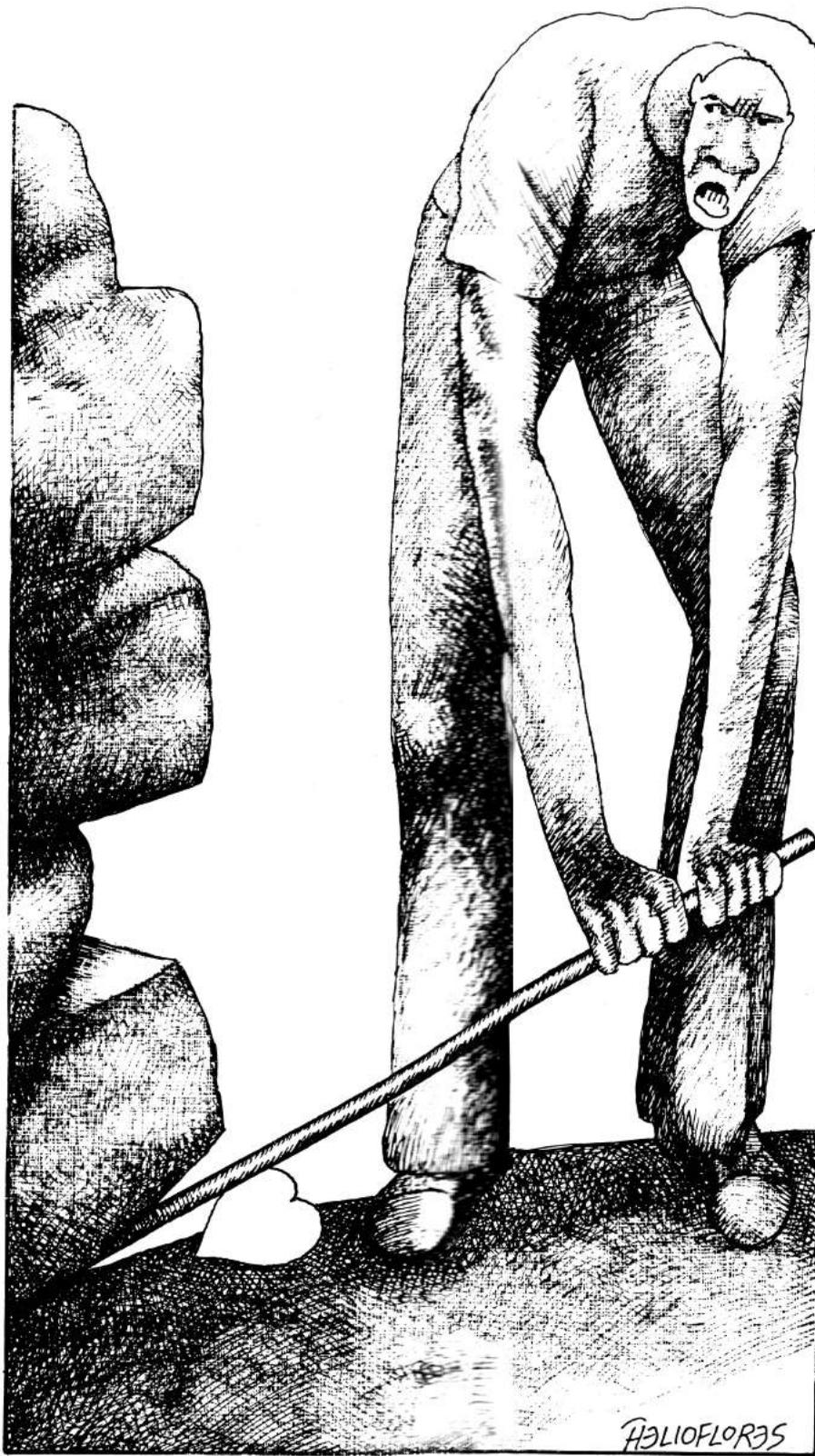


You belong to the place where  
you gather garbage.  
Where lightning strikes twice  
on the same spot.  
Because you saw the first,  
you wait for the second.  
And you stay on here.  
Where the earth opens up  
and the people come together.  
You belong to the place where  
you gather garbage.  
Where lightning strikes twice  
on the same spot.

“Fist Held High,” Juan Villoro

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◀ **Rogelio Naranjo** (Michoacán, 1937),  
*Standing*. Published in *El Universal*,  
September 21, 1985 (caricature).  
Rogelio Naranjo Collection, Tlatelolco  
University Cultural Center.

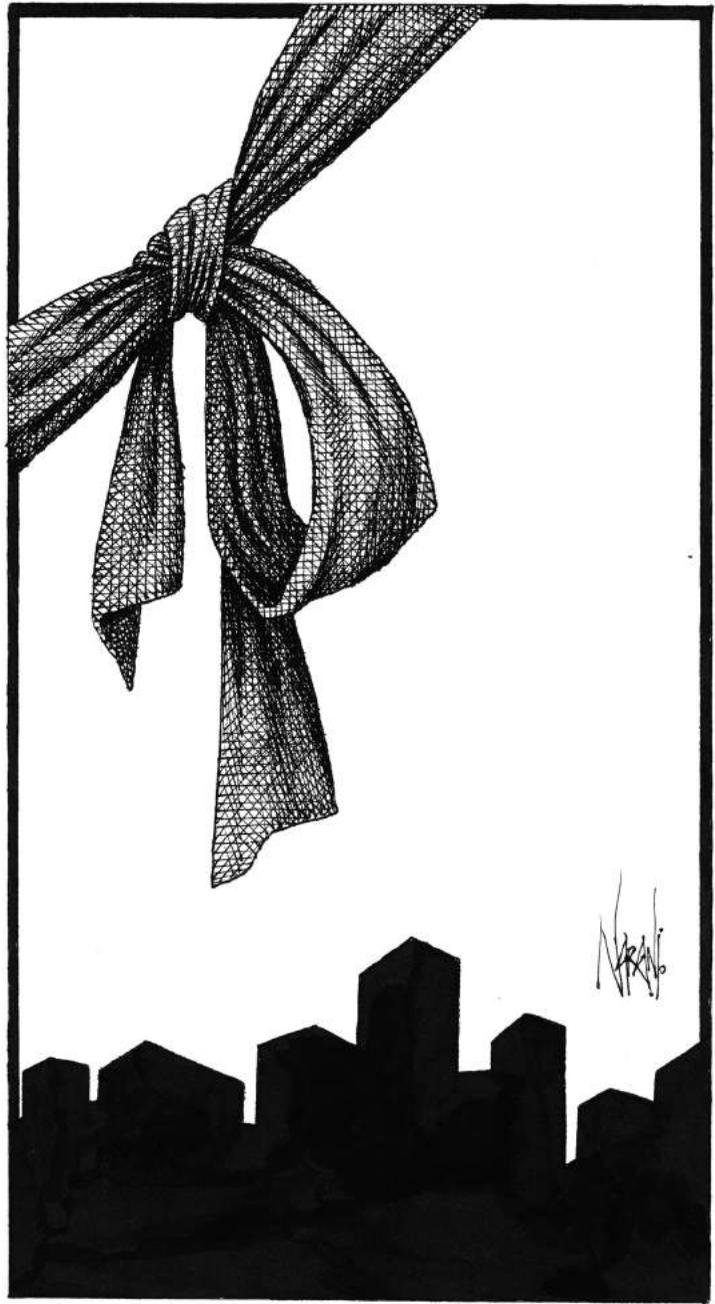


▲ **Helio Flores** (Veracruz, 1938), *September 19*. Published in *El Universal*, September 1985 (caricature).  
Author's collection.

Fissures in the walls, broken glass, huge cracks in the pavement, and the remains of what a few moments before had been homes, schools, or workplaces. When a natural catastrophe such as the September 17, 2017 earthquake occurs, what remains are the ravages it leaves in its wake. However, there is deeper damage that cannot be seen at a glance: fear, bewilderment, a feeling of helplessness. How can you rebuild and pick up from the rubble the spirits of those who have lost everything? How can you give moral support to a citizenry fearful in the face of catastrophe? The generalized disquiet among Mexico City inhabitants made it imperative to get those feelings out in some way and help alleviate them. In the face of tragedy, many responded with art.

The morning after the September 19, 1985 quake, the front pages of all the newspapers published photos of collapsed buildings and information about the number of dead. On the inside pages, the country's most important cartoonists (Rogelio Naranjo, Helio Flores, Rafael "El Fisgón [Busybody]" Barajas) also gave their version of the earthquake: a man peeks through a door leading to a devastated Mexico City; a flag at half-mast emerges from the rubble; a volunteer picks up some heavy concrete slabs under which a heart is seen.

Carlos Monsiváis's collection of artwork that came out of that earthquake was shown 30 years later in an exhibition, "The Days of the Earthquake," at the Museo del Estanquillo (Corner Kiosk Museum). In addition to the caricatures, the photographs testifying to those days are also on display, as well as everything created later, when the wound was still open. Canvases of some artists like Rubén Ortiz stand out; in his *The End of Modernism*, he paints buildings among clouds of dust that seem to collapse on top of the viewer. Germán Venegas's *Yearning and Penitence* looks like a nightmare with human beings lying inert and a half human/half monster rising up carrying a victim. A lithograph by Francisco Castro Leñero, *Movement in the Night*, reminds us of the swaying construc-



▲ Rogelio Naranjo (Michoacán, 1937), *Poor Mexico* (caricature). Published in *El Universal*, September 20, 1985. Rogelio Naranjo Collection, Tlatelolco University Cultural Center.

Fissures in the walls, broken glass, huge cracks in the pavement, and the remains of what a few moments before had been homes, schools, or workplaces.



▲ Helio Flores (Veracruz, 1938), *Two Months After* (caricature). Published in *El Universal*, October 1985. Author's collection.

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tions during the quake that caused fissures and breaks in their structure.

In 2017, most of the newspaper cartoons underlined the solidarity of the residents of a city wounded once more. This time, the caricature artists decided to join together to exchange their sketches for food, calling on people through the social media to take water, toilet paper, and canned goods like tuna or sardines, plus beans and bags of rice, to the Zapata Subway Station. People responded to the call that made them feel useful and at the same time happy to be able to receive a sketch from professionals whom many of them had always admired. A month later, the caricaturists collected all their cartoons touching on the 2017 earthquake—and some from 1985—in the book *19 de septiembre. Moneros solidarios* (September 19. Cartoonists in Solidarity), also launching it at the Zapata Subway Station. The volume includes cartoons by different artists like Magú, Naranjo, Helio Flores, El Fisgón, Hernández, Calderón, Kemchs, Helguera, and Rapé.

The creative impulse and the desire to help permeated the entire artistic community. Graphic designers and illustrators came up with designs to comfort all those who lost something that day, even if they apparently came out unscathed. In contrast with 1985, when establishing communication among the city's inhabitants had been very difficult, this time the existence of social media, which little by little have begun replacing traditional media like radio and television, meant that what people expressed went out to a large number of people almost instantaneously.

The cartoons were seen by many, many people. It was enough to have access to a smartphone for the images to flow continuously. That was also how young artists and independent illustrators disseminated designs to help alleviate the sadness of the city's inhabitants and the homeless, as well as to thank people for their help and the physical efforts by so many volunteers. The illustrations were imbued with a combative spirit that, instead of showing ruins,



▲ **Rubén Ortiz** (Mexico City, 1954), *The End of Modernism*, 1985 (oil on canvas). Aguascalientes Cultural Institute/ Contemporary Art Museum Collection, no 8. Courtesy of the Corner Kiosk Museum (Museo del Estanquillo).



▲ **Lucie Torres**, "Minilibrito para colorear" (Mini-Coloring Book), 2017.  
Download the file and color in the story.

portrayed the unity of a society that had not forgotten how to express solidarity.

One image that went viral nation- and world-wide was of Frida the Rescue Dog, a Labrador from the Mexican Navy that helped rescue 12 people alive from the rubble. The protective goggles and little booties that she wore to inspect collapsed buildings in search of survivors caused a sensation. Her touching, serene, but at the same time valiant figure became a symbol of hope. Frida's image began to be reproduced and soon designers put her on T-shirts, sweat-shirts, and stamps that were offered on the social media in exchange for a donation that would go entirely to the cause of the homeless and to the famous group of Mexico's Topos (moles)

rescue team, who in 1985 risked their lives as volunteers by insinuating themselves into the narrowest fissures in the ruins and who, since then, have helped in other earthquakes not only in Mexico, but even internationally.

The most vulnerable people were those in shelters, and although a large part of the aid was aimed at them, such as food donations, some artists went beyond that and came up with ways of consoling and encouraging these people facing the greatest difficulties. This was the case of Mexican designer and UNAM graduate Lucie Torres, who, thinking about how to cheer up the children, designed a little coloring book with drawings of the Navy rescue dogs, flanked by a brief biography of each of them.

She and her friends distributed them in the shelters and also uploaded them to the Internet so they could be downloaded and printed and even more people could distribute them.

Some people even offered their work from far away. This was the case of Mariana Barrón, an artist from Ciudad Victoria, who works in yarn and wove a design of the rescue dog Frida. She never imagined how successful it would be, but she received requests from several parts of the country, so she decided to put them up for sale and donate the proceeds to the earthquake victims.

Creating something with your hands, weaving it both in your mind and in reality, reminds us of the case of the seamstresses whose place of work collapsed in the 1985 earthquake, exposing the exploitation they were prey to. After losing everything, to support themselves, they created a cooperative that made dolls for sale; it was supported by recognized artists like Vicente Rojo, Helen Escobedo, Arnold Belkin, Marta Chapa, Beatriz Zamora, Lourdes Almeida, and Rogelio Naranjo.

But out of this tragedy also came a wave of human solidarity the like of which had seldom been seen before, and even those who had lost everything were able to gather the strength to start again.

That was the case of the seamstresses of the September 19 Union, who, after the earthquakes had obliterated their places of work and taken the lives of many of their co-workers, took up their needles and thread once again to create dolls, which served at the same time to give them employment and heal their pain.<sup>1</sup>

One of the seamstresses said of the dolls, “The faces made out of cloth and buttons reflect ‘the grimace of the pain we were experiencing,’ but the need to create and ‘know we were alive’ was stronger.”<sup>2</sup> It seems like a logical, though paradoxical, response: create something, emerge from the rubble, and rebuild a small part of the lives snatched away from us,



▲ *Still Standing*, design by Smithe for Tony Delfino.



▲ *We Can Be Heroes*, design by Pogo for Tony Delfino.  
T-Shirts courtesy of Tony Delfino.



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◀ **Ernesto Núñez**, *Untitled*, mural honoring #19s rescue workers at 54 Ricardo Flores Magón Street, Guerrero Neighborhood, Mexico City, 2017.

stripping us naked, even if at the beginning maybe it's only dreams or wishes.

Creating on a pile of rubble was strictly speaking exactly what five Mexican cartoonists did in 2017. Members of the Sacatrapos (Rag Pickers) Collective recovered pieces of rubble to draw images on to protest the corruption in the construction of certain buildings that had collapsed. Later, the blocks of concrete were exhibited in the esplanade of the Benito Juárez Borough, one of the areas hardest hit by the most recent quake.

Walls on some streets also served as canvases to express messages of hope and thanks. Celeste Byers, a San Diego artist who had already done other work in Mexico, painted a great mural of Frida surrounded by colors and flow-

ers in the Roma Neighborhood, another of the hardest hit areas.

Thus, Mexico City's public spaces, not only its virtual ones, acted as cathartic areas: through different artists' sketches and graffiti, they expressed the feelings of a population that had taken over the streets. These were streets and avenues that days before had been prisoners of an unexpected, violent movement, that had filled with dust and rubble, streets where it became difficult and dangerous to walk, but that we would once again appropriate for ourselves thanks to the expressions on their walls. Art is also a catharsis.

The September 19, 2017 earthquake prompted a wave of solidarity, of collective organization, of heroic individual acts, but also creativity

The work of artists, designers, musicians, architects, graffiti artists, sketch artists, and cartoonists were the shoulder on which many laid their heads and unburdened themselves.

**Celeste Bryans**, mural depicting Frida the Rescue Dog, on the walls of the neighborhood beer hall at the corner of Durango and Oaxaca Streets, Roma Neighborhood, Mexico City, 2017.



even in the most adverse of circumstances. The work of artists, designers, musicians, architects, graffiti artists, sketch artists, and cartoonists were the shoulder on which many laid their heads and unburdened themselves. It showed that art also nourishes and restores, that it is needed to be able to get up and continue, an encouragement inviting you to create even in the most difficult times.

No one may know the name of the authors of certain designs that circulate on social media, on the street murals, but deep down, we will know who to thank. The art generated in response to the earthquake is also testimony and memory, since when the city is completely rebuilt, as has happened over the years after the 1985 earthquake, the art will remain as wit-

ness to those days when the earth shook us to the core physically and emotionally. The Guerrero Neighborhood mural has a phrase that summarizes and exalts the actions of all those impassioned with art who believed in its ability to regenerate: “Actually, we’re not in this world to adapt to it, but to transform it.” **MM**

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**Notes**

1 Fernando Camacho, “Exitosa muestra de las muñecas hechas para ayudar a las costureras en 1985,” *La Jornada* (Mexico City), January 23, 2006, <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2006/01/23/index.php?section=cultura&article=a04n1cul>.

2 Ibid.