

Electoral Campaign Materials in Twentieth-Century Mexico An Exhibit at the MODO

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With election campaigns in full swing and only shortly before Mexico's 2012 presidential balloting, the founder of the Museum of the Object of the Object (MODO), Bruno Newman, decided to show the public his collection of electoral campaign promotional materials. It covers the 21 elections that took place in Mexico throughout the twentieth century. "Displaying the objects and letting them speak for themselves: [the curator] simply put them in chronological order so the visitor could make a journey through them and read what they say, what the complete collection says." That was the objective of the exposition "From Porfirio Díaz to Vicente Fox. Electoral Promotional Materials in Mexico in the Twentieth Century," says curator Juan Manuel Aurrecoechea.

The exhibition is made up of objects that in their original context were disposable or only briefly useful: buttons with the candidate's picture or the acronym for his party, T-shirts, pens, caps, ashtrays, cigarette lighters, matchboxes, aprons. Objects designed to be used in a specific moment, for the limited period of the election campaign. However, what is valuable about this collection is that items that seemed ephemeral have managed to survive and, with time, established a dialogue with the current moment.



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Photos by Patricia Pérez



Politics is a higher activity because the country's progress depends on it.



Courtesy of the MODO

The predominant aspect in Mexican electoral campaigns, even today, is the saturation of absolutely everything with images and symbols that, for Aurrecochea, fulfill the function of positioning a candidate. On the other hand, however, it also causes a counterproductive reaction: at the end of the day, those on the receiving end detest it. The saturation has gotten to the point that these objects have been dubbed “electoral garbage.” The exhibit, in contrast, seeks to reappraise what content these pieces considered empty may have and what turns them into the spark that sets off a series of reflections about the figure

of the president, history, and democracy in Mexico, as well as about the evolution of promotional methods over time.

From the very first glance, these objects spark memories, the recollection of definitive moments for the country; they also invite the viewer to recount its democratic history, facilitated thanks to the exhibition being divided into several sections, each preceded by a brief introduction to the specific electoral period. It spans the administrations of Porfirio Díaz (in office in the terms 1884-1888, 1888-1892, 1892-1896, 1896-1900, 1900-1904, and 1904-1910), considered a dictator; the victory of Francisco I. Madero in 1910 and the Revolution; up to the democratic transition, after a single party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), had been in government for 70 years.

Immersed in a maelstrom of spots and billboards that have invaded the city during the 2012 campaign, Mexico City residents enter here into a space where they can pause while figures from the past are evoked, the faces of candidates and politicians who perhaps no longer appear in the media, or at least not as frequently, but who are indispensable for understanding the present.

The first room boasts 400 buttons with the image of all the candidates who won Mexico’s twentieth-century elections and some of their important opponents, figures counterposed



Francisco I. Madero earrings, 1910 (metal).



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to each other because of their ideological positions, whether they be left, right, or center. Certain uniformity can be perceived; what changes are the colors and the party acronyms. Nevertheless, some pieces have special value, comments the curator. One example is Lázaro Cárdenas's 1934 six-year plan, a 150-page book from the collection of writer and teacher Armando Bartra, the first systematic government plan a candidate ever presented. "Prior to that, the candidates made promises, made speeches, but the discourse was not a systematic governmental program like today. The first to present one was Lázaro Cárdenas, and his entire campaign turned around the six-year plan, organized by area. It is also very interesting because the cover—which is very beautiful—was designed in accordance with the stridentist graphics of the time."¹

Of all the items on display, perhaps this is one of the few that contrasts with the majority of the promotional materials used until today by politicians, in which the image or name of the presidential candidate and perhaps his campaign slogan are the only thing visible. The question about the way the democratic system functions in Mexico is inevitable when



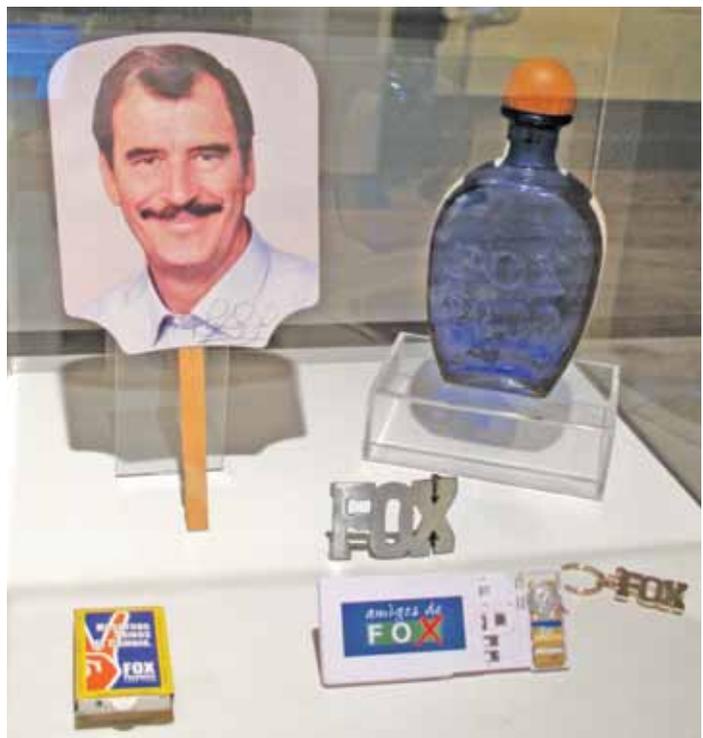
we think about the quotes accompanying the exhibition. One got my attention: "My political ideal is democracy. Everyone must be respected as a person and no one must be deified." Albert Einstein.

The campaigns always placed special emphasis on the figure of the president, as if the government were made up of a single person. Using this logic, government and society are distanced, and politics should only interest politicians, who appear as miraculous beings. Suffice it to look at the

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In freedom, we will conquer social justice.





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publicity shots used by President Luis Echeverría Álvarez, of the PRI, and the phrase accompanying them: “Politics is a superior activity because the progress of the country depends upon it.”

One of the sections explains what came to be known as “el tapado,” the hooded one. It began in 1952, during the administration of Adolfo Ruiz Cortines (PRI), and continued until 1988, when the official results were that Carlos Salinas de Gortari, also of the PRI, had come out the victor. The “hooded one” phenomenon consisted of the president in office choosing his successor, but not publicly announcing the candidacy until election time approached. The “hooded one” was then “unhooded” and seen as the sole candidate, with opposition candidates, when there were any, having little possibility of winning. The “hooded one” was first caricatured by Mexican cartoon artist Abel Quezada who humorously presented these figures with hoods with two holes to be able to see out of. So, what was the function of electoral publicity if everyone “already knew” who the next president was going to be? Perhaps solely to win acceptance from the people, giving him a certain appearance of legitimacy.

According to Juan Manuel Aurrecochea, the exhibit can be viewed as a re-



flection of the Mexican political system’s unconscious, since it allows for looking more closely at the humor, cynicism, and frivolity that also characterize it, and, of course, the creativity of the creators of these pieces, their links to popular culture, and a peek at certain elements that appear among the objects, creating a feeling of the absurd, like Miguel de la Madrid’s seeds or Vicente Fox’s belt buckle. Every object sparks reflections about the political system, communications, and design. Some are unexpected, like earrings in the shape of the face of Francisco I. Madero (Porfirio Díaz’s opponent from the National Anti-reelection Party), a deck of cards to promote the candidacy of Adolfo López Mateos (PRI), a soft drink with the image of Ernesto Zedillo (PRI), and a seafood restaurant tablecloth advertising Vicente Fox Quesada’s (PAN) candidacy.

Electoral propaganda, particularly in the first half of the twentieth century, operated from two different vantage points: objects that alluded to the figure of the president, and campaign activities. The exhibit includes a video showing fragments of campaign events carried out by all the candidates in the twentieth century, from Madero, whose events were more spontaneous, to the PRI activities in the second half of the century, including their famous *acarreados*.²



The pieces—all of them, including the televised ones not present in the museum—manage to interact with the audience, which can opt for dealing with the phenomenon from different perspectives.

Today, although campaign events are an important element, and different items are still distributed among the population, the main publicity vehicle is television. However, these spots can also be considered promotional objects, says Aurrecochea: “So, the link with the people, that used to

be made through the participation of unions, merchants, guilds, and regional groups in the election campaign, now being lost, is giving way to the campaigns’ professionalization, using the services of publicity and marketing firms.” The candidate’s image, not his/her proposals, continue to be the most important element, but now the politician is advertised like a product; the main concern is caring for the pose he/she strikes, a clean image, and a harmonious design that can be easily recognized by the public.

The exhibit does not include examples of these spots, so the viewer must complete the display from his or her own personal experience. In this sense, the pieces—all of them, including the televised ones not present in the museum—manage to interact with the audience, which can opt for dealing with the phenomenon from different perspectives.

It is true that the collection offers a journey through the country’s electoral and democratic history via objects that in their original context we tend to ignore, reject, or accept as natural. But their scope goes beyond that: they also allow us to stop along the way and reflect about the impact of propaganda mechanisms in the country’s history and what their function has been. And finally, after remembering or rediscovering this chapter in the history of twentieth-



“The hooded one,” a legendary figure in Mexican politics in the time of the quasi-single-party regime.

century Mexico, we might ask ourselves the question of how far we are from the ideal expressed by President Benito Juárez, writ large on one of the exhibit’s walls: “Democracy is the destiny of humanity; freedom its indestructible right arm.” **MM**

NOTES

¹ Stridentism was an interdisciplinary artistic movement that formally began December 31, 1921, in Mexico with the publication of a manifesto, *Actual núm. 1* (Current No. 1), by poet Manuel Maples Arce. Other artists interested in including expressions of Mexico’s popular and mass culture joined this eclectic movement; however, they were also influenced by other avant-garde movements like futurism, cubism, and Dadaism. [Editor’s Note.]

² An *acarreado* is a person who attends a political party’s campaign events not out of personal political conviction, but expressly in return for financial compensation, whether in kind or in cash. [Editor’s Note.]



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