



MEMORY AND COUNTER-MEMORIALS: ADRIANA CORRAL'S *UNEARTHED: DESENTERRADO* ON THE UNITED STATES-MEXICO BORDER

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Abstract

This article focuses on Texas-based artist Adriana Corral's temporary memorial Uneearthed: Desenterrado (2018), a white cotton flag hoisted sixty feet above the site of a former bracero processing center located near the United States-Mexico border in Socorro, Texas. For the three months that it flew above Rio Vista Farm, Uneearthed: Desenterrado acknowledged the contributions of braceros who helped to build the United States' infrastructure and cultivate its crops between 1942 and 1964. This article situates Uneearthed: Desenterrado within contemporary art trends that address the racially motivated exclusion of Mexican and Mexican American histories and individuals from mainstream narratives in the United States. Building from memory studies and borderlands arts pedagogy scholarship, the paper investigates artwork produced to contest the contours of US history by inserting lesser-acknowledged accounts into the public sphere.

Key Words: Adriana Corral, Contemporary Art, Public Art, Bracero Program, Public Monuments and Memorials, WWII Labor Shortages, Narratives of Erasure

During March, April, and May of 2018, El Paso-born artist Adriana Corral's *Uneearthed: Desenterrado* flew sixty feet above the site of a former bracero processing center located near the United States-Mexico border in Socorro, Texas (fig. 1).¹ While waving over Rio Vista Farm, Corral's white cotton flag was visible on the horizon from El Paso and Ciudad Juárez. Its embroidered images of Mexico's golden eagle and the United States' bald eagle symbolically acknowledge the contributions of millions of Mexican *braceros* (manual or "strong arm" laborers) who played crucial roles in the maintenance (farm work) and growth (railway and other infrastructural jobs) of the United States between 1942 and 1964. One of a network of processing centers that dotted both sides of the United States-Mexico border, Rio Vista processed approximately 80,000 braceros each year between 1951 and 1964; it was designated as a National Treasure in 2016 by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Corral's *Uneearthed: Desenterrado* appropriates the internationally recognized symbolism of the white flag,

Figure 1: Adriana Corral, *Unearthed: Desenterrado* (2018). Site-specific installation at Rio Vista Farm, Socorro, Texas. Flagpole (60 ft.) and cotton flag (18 x 30 ft.). © 2018 Adriana Corral. Photo courtesy Adriana Corral and Black Cube.



in this case signaling the artist's intent to negotiate public memory and hegemonic narratives that strategically exclude labor contributions. Corral's tattered flag acknowledges bracero labor, highlights their persistent mistreatment, and temporarily reinserts their narratives into the public realm.

Archival Silence and the Urgency to Address Historical Omissions

Beginning in 2010, Corral's interest in the indefinite relationship between cultural memory and material preservation compelled her to attempt to recover the names and identities of dozens of women who were murdered with impunity in Ciudad Juárez, their bodies abandoned. Corral draws upon Jacques Derrida's philosophical device *sous rature* (under erasure),² which entails crossing out words within a text to signify that a word is inadequate, but still necessary. In *Per legem terrae (Law of the Land)* (2014), Corral transfers the names of murdered women over and over again on a wall until the names become illegible, reaching the point of erasure. The work temporarily acknowledges Claudia Ivette González, Esmeralda Herrera Monreal, Laura Berenice Ramos Monárrez, and others³ while their names are legible, but Corral's process underscores the impossibility of the task of full recovery. Their names are inadequate in representing all the women who have been murdered, but still necessary as part of an effort to contest violence against them and others. Corral's artistic practice addresses archival silences – those aspects of culture that resist material preservation.⁴

Corral's impulse to insert lesser-known narratives into the public realm situates her work within a wider contemporary conversation focused on what art historian Evie Terrono has described as the "urgency of addressing historical omissions and obfuscations."⁵ Terrono's work focuses on the problematics of the Confederate flag in contemporary art, but it also helps us understand how memorials can uphold or confront established historical narratives.⁶ While ongoing debates about public monuments, especially Confederate statues, focus on issues of longevity,⁷ Corral's work investigates ephemerality. Corral planned *Unearthed: Desenterrado* as a temporary memorial publicly accessible for only three months. Her strategic placement of *Unearthed: Desenterrado* on the grounds of a former bracero processing center calls attention to the center as a site of human rights violations, while simultaneously acknowledging the contributions of the braceros processed there. In interviews, Corral suggests that key aspects of US history have slipped from public consciousness, indicating that her installations "address human rights violations and the ways that memories of them are threatened by erasure."⁸ To qualify to cultivate US crops, braceros were subjected to inhumane processing protocols and unsafe work conditions.⁹ Braceros were racialized and rendered as foreign bodies. As historian David Dorado Romo points out, they were treated as "disposable appendages, a pair of arms to be sent back across the line once they served their purpose."¹⁰

Corral's work reveals a conviction to make publicly visible aspects of history that have been devalued or ignored, linking her work to artists who have challenged the racially motivated exclusion of Mexicans and Mexican Americans from mainstream art historical narratives in the United States. Pioneering Chicana muralist and public artist Judith Baca stated the point directly in her seminal 1995 text, "Whose Monument Where?: Public Art in a Many-Cultured Society." Baca suggests that the ultimate purpose of public monuments may be to "investigate and reveal the memory contained in the ground beneath a 'public site,' marking our passages as a people and re-visioning official history."¹¹ Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s with the rise of the Chicana/o mural movement, Baca and other Chicana and Chicano artists argued that public art—at the time, a genre largely rooted in the celebration of white men and their accomplishments—should proportionately represent national demographics and the accomplishments of minoritized communities and individuals.¹² Baca issued a mandate, contending that, "socially responsible artists from marginalized communities have a particular responsibility to articulate the conditions of their people and to provide catalysts for change."¹³ Art historian Guisela Latorre underscores the perceived social responsibility that resounds in Baca's statement. Chicana and Chicano muralists promoted greater inclusion but also critiqued the power structures and discriminatory practices that disenfranchised their communities.¹⁴ Almost twenty-five years after Baca's call, Corral stands among a

Figure 2: (Detail) Adriana Corral, *Unearthed: Desenterrado* (2018). Site-specific installation at Rio Vista Farm, Socorro, Texas. (60 ft.) and cotton flag (18 x 30 ft.). © 2018 Adriana Corral. Photo courtesy Adriana Corral and Black Cube.



new generation of socially engaged artists still utilizing art to reckon with the past and to provide catalysts for public change. In this postmodern epoch, however, Corral's piece—which was designed to slowly disintegrate during its three-month installation in Texas (fig. 2)—seems to question the ability of art to achieve this lofty goal.

Site-Specificity: Landscapes of Memory and Violence

Corral's *Unearthed: Desenterrado* represents an evolution of place-bound, site-specific art in its conceptual coupling with Rio Vista's historical identity. Art historian Miwon Kwon argues that recent site-oriented projects produced by artists such as Mark Dion, Andrea Fraser, Renée Green, Christian Philipp Müller, and Fred Wilson have redefined possible locations for art sites, pushing them beyond the walls of traditional gallery and museum spaces and into more public realms. As Kwon notes, the "site can now be as various as a billboard, an artistic genre, a disenfranchised community, an institutional framework, a magazine page, a social cause, or a political debate."¹⁵ Site-specific art, as articulated by Kwon, tends to be determined or directed by its environmental context.¹⁶ *Unearthed: Desenterrado* evokes a landscape of distant memory; the artist proposes a counter-memory for the site by incorporating materials and symbols into the project that remind the viewer of the site's historical