

# ART — LATIN — AMERICA



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**AGAINST  
THE  
SURVEY**

EDITED BY **James Oles**  
WITH LISA FISCHMAN

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**Taken in the town of Matagalpa**, in the northern highlands of Nicaragua, this photograph documents a scene from the armed insurrection against the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza. It shows a group of young men, *muchachos* as they were called, standing guard on one of the city blocks, sheltered by a barricade. The graffiti on the wall behind them is illegible, although it may have spelled out the name of someone disappeared by the National Guard. A torn piece of paper above the figure on the left reads FSLN, the initials of the Sandinista National Liberation Front, while the lettering behind him reads GPP or *Guerra Popular Prolongada* (Protracted People's War), the militant strategy employed by the revolutionary Sandinista movement to upset the Somoza regime. Such small, yet meaningful details impart a fuller sense of time and place to the image, bearing witness to a series of transformative events surrounding the Nicaraguan revolution of 1978–79.

Magnum photographer Susan Meiselas travelled extensively throughout the country during this period. Here, as in many of her other pictures, the scene shows a revolution launched by everyday people, in everyday circumstances, on everyday streets. Dressed in regular clothing, the men here disguise their faces with a handkerchief, a bandanna, a t-shirt, a piece of cloth. Red and black were the identifying colors of the FSLN. Other details connect the photograph to wider networks; one of the caps reads “New Orleans,” perhaps an acknowledgement of less overt economic ties to the North. This sense of familiarity can be overwhelming and contradictory, bearing in mind the reality of the violence taking place.

The scene presents itself as orderly, given the context. Most of the men are unarmed, a shocking realization considering that they are awaiting retaliation by the heavily armed National Guard. Such disjunctions heighten the tension already present in the scene. Only one of the men looks, and vaguely, at the camera. Has this photograph been entirely posed? Does it tell us anything about what is actually going on? Instead of spectacle, we are offered a scene both shocking and banal. In comparison to customary news pictures, especially those showing conflict and war, there is a blatant lack of action and drama.

The Sandinista revolution was one of the most documented events in recent history, as photographers from all over the world—particularly from Latin America, the United States, and Europe—



came to witness and record the momentous events. Meiselas's pictures were published in the press immediately, and later in book form; the present photograph graced the cover of *Nicaragua: June 1978–July 1979*.<sup>1</sup> They were revisited by the photographer in subsequent film (1991) and mural (2004) projects, and have remained relevant even as mass protests have once again swept through the country. Shared by Nicaraguans on social media, Meiselas's pictures continue to draw parallels across four decades, reigniting imaginaries of resistance and dissent.

—Ileana L. Selejan

1 Susan Meiselas, *Nicaragua: June 1978–July 1979* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).





**cat.24\_Susan Meiselas**

Baltimore, Maryland 1948

*Awaiting Counter Attack by the Guard in Matagalpa,  
Nicaragua, 1978 (printed later)*

Chromogenic print, 16 × 20 in. (40.6 × 50.8 cm)

Museum purchase, The Dorothy Johnston Towne  
(Class of 1923) Fund, 2002.72



Left  
fig.30\_Ann Parker  
London, England 1934  
*Young Couple with Cityscape, Sololá, 1970s*  
Gelatin silver print,  
12 × 8 in. (30.5 × 20.3 cm)  
Museum purchase, Ina Brown  
Ramer (Class of 1956) Endowed  
Fund for Acquisitions and  
Educational Program Support,  
2016.106

Throughout the 1970s, US photographer Ann Parker documented the work—now obsolete—of itinerant photographers across Guatemala. She trained her lens on practitioners and their subjects alike.<sup>1</sup> The *ambulantes*, also known as *fotógrafos de cajón*, *fotógrafos de caballito*, and *minuterios*, produced the most common portraits in Central and South America, at least until the advent of digital photography. Whether taken for pragmatic purposes, such as identification cards, or as *aide-memoires*, these pictures have only survived, if at all, in family albums. Unlike their photo-studio counterparts, itinerant photographers rarely kept the paper negatives produced by their artisanal box-cameras.

The color photograph of a young boy was taken in Sololá, on Lake Atitlán. Parker watches as he is told to stand perfectly still for a few seconds, the time needed to make an impression on the paper negative. His eyes are fixated on a point far to his left, perhaps in awareness of the distance between his world—the world of the picture—and that of the viewer. A band of light on the floor, just beneath the backdrop, separates the real from the imaginary. His gestures reveal nervous tension, as well as an uncertainty about how to stand and what to do with his hands—emotions anyone sitting for a formal portrait might experience. The unexpected juxtaposition of his traditional Maya clothing and the

modern cityscape behind him—which shows Guatemala City’s main square, with the National Palace and the Cathedral—might be read as an affirmation of civic pride or perhaps of participatory citizenship, though not necessarily evidence of a desire to move to the capital or enter the mainstream of social power. Other backdrops curiously depict remote locations, as in Parker’s photograph of a Maya couple posing in front of one labeled “Avenida Wilson, Lima”—a rendition that was most probably inspired by a postcard.

Nonetheless, the brutal events unfolding in the Guatemalan countryside during the 1970s, around the time these photographs were made, unsettle this stance, as the co-existence of indigenous citizens—their participation in the national project from a position of equality—was being questioned by the state. Throughout the long-lasting Guatemalan civil war, deliberate attempts were made to strip indigenous individuals of their dignity, their rights, and often their very lives in a continued questioning of their belonging to the nation. Yet the extent of that violence remains invisible in the box-camera pictures. Their purpose was instead celebratory, as they were usually taken at fairs or during holidays.

Details that were to be disguised in the “actual” pictures—hanging strings, leftover items, the photographer’s accoutrements—are left in plain sight in Parker’s images. She does not seek to sustain the artifice; the magic of the backdrop is revealed as a fiction, and we see the entire scenography—the canvas slightly elevated above the ground, its edges pressed against the edge of the picture frame. Yet none of these sitters addresses Parker’s camera, and their identities remain entirely unknown. These are “stolen” pictures, taken from the side, of a world-image that was separate, and that may have deliberately kept itself separate from the visitor’s gaze. As artist Benvenuto Chavajay argued when discussing this very picture, in the Maya worldview, people still believe photographs can steal a person’s spirit.<sup>2</sup> For a picture *not* to take away their spirit-image, sitters had to “own” their image, to feel like it was theirs entirely, which is precisely what the itinerant photographers allowed. Yet whatever the ethical concerns raised by Parker’s project, her snapshots record, in color and black-and-white, a cultural practice that would otherwise be lost.

—Ileana L. Selejan

1 This work is documented in Ann Parker and Avon Neal, *Los Ambulantes: The Itinerant Photographers of Guatemala* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982).

2 Conversation with the author in Managua, Nicaragua, May 2018.

Opposite  
cat.74\_Ann Parker  
London, England 1934

*Country Boy in front of National Palace Backdrop, Sololá, 1970s*  
Silver-dye bleach print, 20 × 14½ in. (50.8 × 36.8 cm)  
Museum purchase, Ina Brown Ramer (Class of 1956) Endowed  
Fund for Acquisitions and Educational Program Support, 2016.105



PALACIO NACIONAL, GUATEMALA, C.A.

