

**Group Material, Photography, and the Cold War
Building Global Solidarity with Central America at P.S.1**

by
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[SLIDE] In a speech to the National Association of Manufacturers on March 10th, 1983, President Ronald Reagan told the American public: [quote] “Central America is simply too close, and the strategic stakes are too high, for us to ignore the danger of governments seizing power there with ideological and military ties to the Soviet Union.”¹ [end quote] The Reagan administration began to lay the foundation for this Cold War agenda immediately after Reagan took office on January 20th, 1981. Within a month of taking oath, [SLIDE] Reagan’s newly appointed Secretary of State, General Alexander M. Haig, Jr., boldly declared that Central America and, more specifically, El Salvador was, [quote] “‘the place to draw the line’ against communist influence.”² [end quote] [SLIDE] To provide so-called “irrefutable evidence” for this claim, on February 23rd, 1981, Haig released a eight-page State Department White Paper entitled *Communist Interference in El Salvador* that outlined [quote] “the central role played by Cuba and other Communist countries...in the political unification, military direction, and arming of insurgent forces in El Salvador.”³ [end quote] For Haig and the State Department, however, it was not enough to simply verbalize these Cold War beliefs; they also sought to visualize them. To this end, the White Paper—purported drawn from hundreds of pages of confiscated insurgent documents—[SLIDE] included a map detailing arms flow to El Salvador, [SLIDE] a copy of a list of weapon commitments from Vietnam, [SLIDE] as well as two sets of photographs of captured weapons [SLIDE]. Together these documents, as was detailed in the White Paper itself, provided “definitive evidence” that [quote] “over the past year, the insurgency in El Salvador has

been progressively transformed into a textbook case of indirect armed aggression by Communist powers through Cuba.”⁴ [end quote]

[SLIDE] Visuals were also highlighted in a press briefing that the Reagan administration orchestrated on March 9th, 1982. This time, the State Department turned to the government’s so-called “premier photo interpreter,” John T. Hughes—who in 1963 had been chosen by President John F. Kennedy to provide evidence to the nation that the Soviets had removed their offensive missiles in Cuba—to make a case, via blown-up aerial reconnaissance photographs of military installations in operation or under construction, that Nicaragua, via Russia and Cuba, was supplying arms to the Salvadoran leftist guerillas.⁵ As in the previous year’s White Paper, the State Department believed that in using photographs as part of their carefully planned publicity campaign, they could provide “irrefutable evidence” about Communist involvement in Central America and thereby not only dispel mounting doubts by both the American people and Congress about this so-called communist interference but, more critically, justify the escalation of U.S. military and economic aid to the supposedly moderate Salvadoran government.⁶

[SLIDE] In making photography a central component of these propaganda campaigns, the Reagan administration seems to value the medium foremost for its ability to be perceived as an objective record of information. The photographs of the confiscated weapons and reconnaissance photographs, in other words, were believed to provide visual proof that arms were being supplied to the Salvadoran insurgents via Cuba and the Soviet Union. Yet, upon closer inspection, the relationship between what these photographs depict and what the Reagan administration assumed them to mean was not so cut and dry. [SLIDE] A number of the photographs included in the White Paper, for instance, were not newly discovered but rather had been in the government’s possession since the Carter administration. While these intelligence

photographs had influenced Carter's decision to resume aid to the Salvadoran government that he had briefly suspended in the wake of the widely publicized human rights abuses represented by the murder of four American churchwomen in El Salvador in December of 1980, they by no means had convinced his administration that the leftist Salvadoran insurgents were part of a larger Communist takeover in the region. [SLIDE] The bird's eye view of the seized trailer truck reproduced in the White Paper further underscores the contingency of these photographs. This image, which purportedly depicts 100 M-16 rifles, some of which, as the caption notes, were traceable to Vietnam, has been noticeably montaged together on the right side to make the truck appear to be longer (and hence the weapons more expansive) than they actually were. [SLIDE] Finally, while the grainy aerial photographs that John Hughes pointed to in his publicity event, "demonstrated," as an article in *Newsweek* explained, [quote] "that the Sandinistas had been far from candid about the size of their military buildup," [end quote] at the same time, as the article also pointed out, there was [quote] "nothing in the declassified material showed a direct conduit of arms into El Salvador."⁷ [end quote] In short, though presented as objective records, the meanings of these photographs were far more open-ended and uncertain.

The indeterminacy of these photographs would have been familiar to the American public. In addition to discrediting the purpose to which the State Department put their aerial reconnaissance photographs, the aforementioned article in *Newsweek* also called into question the photographic evidence presented in Haig's White Paper through the inclusion within the article of [SLIDE] a political cartoon by Don Wright. For this cartoon, which appeared alongside other documentary evidence, including news photographs and a map, Wright eschewed his usual medium of drawing for a photograph to which he appended the following caption: "Evidence just released by Secretary of State Alexander Haig includes this actual unretouched photograph taken

by Spy Satellite showing group of Nicaraguans directing guerrilla war in El Salvador.” As is evident by the nineteenth-century attire and hairstyles of the subjects, the photographic evidence that Wright supplies in his political satire is not an “actual unretouched photograph” of Nicaraguans. [SLIDE] Instead, as baseball aficionados might recognize, the image is actually a woodcut reproduction of a photograph of the 1882 New York Mets baseball team that [SLIDE] had been initially published in the August 5th, 1882, issue of *Harper’s Weekly*.

[SLIDE] In including Wright’s political satire as part of their special report on Reagan’s “Propaganda Blitz,” the editors at *Newsweek* lightheartedly poke fun at the current administration’s efforts to use photography to establish a causal link between the leftist insurgents in El Salvador and Communist governments worldwide. On another level, the inclusion of Wright’s cartoon also underscores the malleability and contingency of photographic meaning. For a news publication, this understanding was especially noteworthy given that, as Communication scholar Barbie Zelizer notes, [quote] “fact and actuality of photographic depiction has been so central to supporting the journalistic record.”⁸ [end quote] Put differently, rather than value photography’s “factuality” and “actuality,” the inclusion of Wright’s political satire enables the editors at *Newsweek* to emphasize what Zelizer calls the medium’s “as if” or “what could be” over its “as is” or “what is” qualities. For Zelizer, photography’s “as if” qualities, or what she also terms its subjunctive voice, has far reaching implications since, by emphasizing the “as if” rather than the “as is” qualities of an image, the presumed causal relationship between what is shown and what is seen begins to break down, thereby encouraging an active engagement on the part of viewers in what they are looking at. Zelizer elaborates, [quote] “The territory of the ‘as if’ is an invitational one: it summons possibility, chance,

experimental, hypothesis, play, elaboration, involvement, supposal, denial, liminality, impossibility, and speculation.”⁹ [end quote]

Given the tendency of the Reagan administration to use whatever means necessary, including outright deceit, to establish their ideological agenda in Central America, it would seem that such criticality on the part of the news media would be especially welcomed. The problem is that while the *Newsweek* editors used Wright’s cartoon to question the transparency of photography and by extension the propaganda strategies of the Reagan administration, they did little to expand the Cold War debate beyond whether or not a communist threat in fact existed in the region. In other words, rather than examine the imperialist underpinning of the Reagan administration’s foreign policy in Central America much less the longstanding geopolitical and historical implications of U.S. involvement there, the questions that the editors at *Newsweek* raised about the validity of communist aggression worked to affirm rather dislodge the ideological framework already put in place by the Reagan administration. [SLIDE] It was within this context that Group Material, a collective of young artists working in New York City, conceived of their multi-media installation *Timeline: The Chronicle of US Intervention in Central and Latin America*, on view at the P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in Queens, NY, between January and March of 1984. [SLIDE] Produced as part of a network of exhibitions, performances, and other events known as “Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America,” *Timeline* was designed not only to educate its audience about the history of U.S. military interventions in Central and Latin America but, more critically, to shift how U.S. cultural memory around this history was deployed. Photography’s “as if” qualities played a crucial role in this solidarity raising effort.

[SLIDE] *Timeline* filled four walls at P.S. 1 with a disparate group of objects that ranged from cultural artifacts and documentary materials to contemporary and historical works of art. Included among these items were propaganda from the leftist revolutions in Nicaragua and El Salvador, including a FSLN banner and a FMLN scarf, [SLIDE] commodities—bananas, coffee grinds, tobacco leaves, cotton, and copper—that directly referenced imperialist interests in the region, [SLIDE] as well as newspaper clippings and press photographs, including several recent and particularly gruesome images from El Salvador taken by Associated Press photographer Bolivar Arellano and Magnum photographer Susan Meiselas. [SLIDE] Interspersed alongside these cultural artifacts were works of art made by around 40 contemporary artists, including Richard Prince and Barbara Kruger, among others, as well as by such historical figures such as Tina Modotti and John Heartfield. [SLIDE] In addition, in the center of the room, Group Material installed a large red sculptural navigational buoy that artists Barbara Westermann, William Allen, and Ann Messner had recently made for use in a march against U.S. intervention in Central America that had taken place in Washington, DC.

[SLIDE] Group Material displayed all of these objects in a collage-like array with relatively little explanatory material save for their placement above or below a three inch red painted timeline that extended horizontally across all four walls of the room. [SLIDE] Spanning the years 1823 to 1984, the dates marked off in black on the timeline correlated approximately to a chronology of U.S. interventions in Central and South America as well as the Caribbean that had been prepared by members of the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador and mounted on the installation's entry wall. Yet, as Thomas Lawson notes in his review of *Timeline* in *Artforum*, [quote] “Those seeking exact correspondences between dates and display items would have been disappointed for the evidence was put to a different use.”¹⁰ [end quote]

Here Lawson refers to the fact that, though many of the works in the exhibition were made in the 1970s and 1980s, their placement along the red painted timeline did not synchronize with these time periods.

[SLIDE] Ecuadorian photographer Bolivar Arellano's image of the mangled bodies of recently killed Salvadoran guerrillas piled haphazardly onto the flatbed of a military truck is one example. Taken in March 1982, while Arellano was working for the Associated Press, the photograph references recent events in El Salvador, specifically fighting in an impoverished suburb of San Salvador between military forces and rebel insurgents that resulted in these killings as well as the horrific dragging of three guerrilla rebels through the streets behind a pickup truck. Rather than reference this fighting directly or make a commentary about the scant coverage that it received within the U.S. print media, within *Timeline*, [SLIDE] Group Material places Arellano's photograph just to the right of "1932," the year of the Salvadoran peasant massacre or "Matanza"—in which up to 30,000 civilians (mostly indigenous people) were brutally killed by the Salvadoran military—that is listed as part of the chronology found on the exhibition's entry wall.

The asynchronous placement of this news image may at first appear contradictory. In displaying Arellano's 1982 photograph in terms of a massacre from 1932 that is not even depicted in the image itself, both sets of killings appear to be denigrated. Such an understanding, however, assumes that the value of this news photograph lies in its "factuality" and "actuality" or its "as is" qualities. That is not the case. Though Arellano's photograph does not in fact depict the 1932 massacre, its placement next this date activates the image's subjunctive voice, which as Zelizer explains, "counteracts the notion that whatever is depicted is over and done."¹¹ In other words, through its asynchronous placement on the red-painted timeline, the meaning of

Arellano's photograph no longer belongs exclusively to the present but rather is linked to the past and, more specifically, to the larger history of state-sponsored inequity and subjugation that existed within El Salvador and that was closely intertwined with U.S. interventions in that region.

As the timeline mounted on the exhibition's entrance wall noted, the year "1932" was not just the date of the 1932 peasant massacre, it was also when five U.S. and British/Canadian warships were sent to El Salvador out of fear that the "revolt was being backed by Moscow."¹² Given the Reagan administration's efforts to justify U.S. intervention in El Salvador through its own Cold War agenda, this linking between the "here-and-now" and "there-and-then" in Arellano's photograph would have been critical for redescribing how U.S. cultural memory around the history of U.S. intervention in Central America could be deployed. Rather than ask viewers to consider the accuracy of Reagan's assertions of Soviet expansionism in the region, the placement of Arellano's photograph within *Timeline* challenged them to think more critically about the history of U.S. interventions in the region and the ways in which communist aggression was repeatedly used as a smokescreen for these imperialist objectives. [SLIDE] The heap of rotting bananas placed on the floor underneath Arellano's photograph would have further encouraged such reflection. Mirroring the pile of bodies depicted in Arellano's photograph, the rotting fruit shared not only formal parallels with the decimated bodies but also ideological ones since it was one of the very commodities upon which U.S. economic interests and by extension U.S. backed repression in the region depended.

[SLIDE] The importance of the 1932 peasant massacre for the "here-and-now" is also reiterated on the exhibition wall directly across from Arellano's 1982 photograph of the slain guerillas. There just below and to the right of "1984," the year when *Timeline* was on view at

P.S.1, Group Material hung a silkscreen print of Agustín Farabundo Martí, the legendary revolutionary leader, who helped to instigate the peasant uprising in 1932 and was subsequently executed by the Salvadoran military after they massacred up to 30,000 indigenous insurgents. [SLIDE] In honor of his memory, the 1980s Salvadoran leftist revolutionaries called their organization the Farabundo Martí Movement of National Liberation or FMLN, which is referenced through a scarf bearing their name that Group Material places just above “1980,” the year of the group’s founding. Through these numerous references to the 1932 peasant massacre, Group Material links the past to the present and thereby modifies the ways in which the Reagan administration and even the press attempted to ignore and even suppress this larger history in order to uphold the ideological framework of communist aggression. At the same time, however, for Group Material, such redescription of cultural memorization around the current conflict in El Salvador was not an end in itself. Also critical to this process was building global solidarity with victims of the U.S.-backed repression in Central America in the future. Two additional photographs that Bolívar Arellano took of the dead are central to this activity.

[SLIDE] In the first image, the bodies of four murdered Dutch journalists are stacked by twos, head to toe, on morgue refrigerator drawers. Taken in San Salvador, some 30 miles south of where they had been killed, the photograph initially functions primarily as objective information. It provides historical evidence of state-sponsored atrocities in El Salvador that the Reagan administration continued to deny in their effort to link the oppositional movement in El Salvador as Soviet-inspired. According to the Salvadorian government, a report, which at the time the Reagan administration found no evidence to “contradict,” the journalists had been accidentally killed in cross fire between the Salvadorian guerrillas and a group of government soldiers on a routine patrol. The Dutch government, however, vehemently denied this official

account, insisting instead that the journalists had been deliberately killed by the government soldiers who had trailed them to an interview with the Salvadorian guerrilla leaders. In addition to spurring protests against U.S. policies in Central America across Europe, the controversy over these murders also caused several members of Congress to publicly question whether the United States should continue providing foreign aid to El Salvador's government if they continued to commit such human rights violations.

[SLIDE] Within *Timeline*, however, the meaning of Arellano's photograph while linked to these historical facts also exceeds them. In other words, rather than use the photograph to weigh in on contemporary Cold War debates over accountability or even culpability, Group Material sought to use the spatial and temporal terms of its display to again place viewers in a position of active involvement with respect to this history. To this end, Group Material mounted Arellano's photograph, which he had taken in March 1982, just below the date "1984." Like Arellano's previous photograph of the slain Salvadoran guerillas, this asynchronous placement served to underscore that the meaning of this photograph is not over and done but continues to inform the present moment of 1984 when viewers would have initially encountered the exhibition at P.S.1. At the same time that Arellano's 1982 photograph is linked to the present moment, its placement directly above a second photograph that he took of the murdered journalists encouraged viewers to also reflect on the ways in which this past and present might shape the future. Whereas in Arellano's first photograph, the stacked, laid out bodies emphasize the photograph's informational capacity, [SLIDE] the second image's close-up of the top two deceased journalists's right hands, poignantly clasped together, arouses greater affect, the result of which is to blur the explicit referentiality of the atrocities represented in the first photograph and, in so doing, promote, returning once more to the words of Barbie Zelizer, [quote] "Not

‘What are we looking at?’ but ‘What does this remind us of’ and ‘What possibilities does that raise?’”¹³ [end quote] In other words, within *Timeline*, this second photograph of the slain journalists, as Zelizer continues, [quote] “allows us to recognize [death’s] finality while facilitating the inclusion of possibility, contingency, and even the illogical conclusion of its postponement.” [end quote] [SLIDE] Together Arellano’s photographs documenting atrocities in the Salvadoran civil war, then, were not just objective historical documents that belonged to the past; instead, on the walls of *Timeline*, they became dynamic, affective objects, whose mobility and mutability could empower viewers to think differently about the present and, by extension, the future.

¹ “Remarks on Central America and El Salvador at the Annual Meeting of the National Association of Manufacturers March 10 1983,” *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1983/31083a.htm> (accessed 13 December 2013).

² Chairman Charles H. Percy, quoted in Don Oberdorfer, “Salvador Is ‘the Place to Draw the Line’ on Communism,” *Washington Post*, 20 February 1981, A20.

³ *Communist Interference in El Salvador*, 1.

⁴ *Communist Interference in El Salvador*, 1 and 8.

⁵ See Philip Taubman, “U.S. Offers Photos of Bases to Prove Nicaragua Threat,” *New York Times*, 10 March 1982, A1.

⁶ “Taking Aim at Nicaragua,” *Newsweek*, 22 March 1982, 20.

⁷ “Taking Aim at Nicaragua,” *Newsweek*, 22 March 1982, 20.

⁸ Zelizer, *About to Die*, 6.

⁹ Zelizer, *About to Die*, 326.

¹⁰ Thomas Lawson, *Artforum*

¹¹ Zelizer, 311.

¹²

¹³ Zelizer, 163.