

# IMAGINATIONS

REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE L'IMAGE ▪ JOURNAL OF CROSS-CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES



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## The Visuality of Scenes

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## SCENES OF THE SONIDERO MOVEMENT: PORTFOLIO AND INTERVIEW WITH LIVIA RADWANSKI

NATHALIE CASEMAJOR & WILL STRAW

The Sonidero movement is a festive musical scene that emerged in Latin-American cultures in the 1970s. Sonidero DJs and producers appropriate tropical rhythms such as cumbia, merengue, or salsa and mix them with elements of electronic music. The street parties they organize are popular gatherings for dancing and neighborhood celebrations. The movement's rich visual culture ranges from screen projections to colorful clothing, banners, posters, religious icons, and drawings on musical equipment.

In 2008, Marco Ramirez and Mariana Delgado founded *El Proyecto Sonidero*, a research group dedicated to the study of the Sonidero movement. Livia Radwanski, a Brazilian photographer based in Mexico City, participated as a visual coordinator. The group collaborated with anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, producers, and photographers from Mexico, the United States, Colombia, Brazil, Bolivia, Argentina, and Spain. Together they produced an e-book titled *Sonideros en las aceras, véngase la gozadera* (2012), edited by Mariana Delgado and Marco Ramírez Cornejo, with photographs by Livia Radwanski and Mark Powell. It can be downloaded under a creative commons license from Tumbona Ediciones' website.<sup>1</sup> More information can be found on the Proyecto Sonidero's blog.<sup>2</sup> In 2016, the group presented its work in a collective exhibition at the Museo El Chopo, in Mexico City.

This portfolio presents some of the pictures that Livia Radwanski created for *El Proyecto Sonidero*. She acted not only as the photographer but as also the visual coordinator for the group. In the interview, conducted by Nathalie Casemajor and Will Straw, she highlights some of the cultural features of the Sonidero Movement and describes her work of visually documenting this musical scene.



How did you discover the Sonidero movement and start documenting it?

*I came across the Sonidero culture through Mariana Delgado who, along with Marco Ramirez, was doing research and collaborative work with the Sonideros in 2008 as part of a collective called El Proyecto Sonidero. They invited me to collaborate in documenting visually the Sonidero culture. With time, I also became the visual coordinator of the project, which has lasted for over seven years.*

Fig. 1. Sonido Consentido is joined by thousands of Sonideros marching towards the Guadalupe Basilic Church from surrounding neighborhoods throughout the city and nearby States for the annual procession for thanking the Virgin of Guadalupe and seeking protection and success. Mexico City. Nov, 2009.



What does it mean to document a music scene in visual terms? In what ways do the visual elements you capture in your photographs express something of the music?

*You have to be immersed in the culture in order to understand the motivations of those invested in a specific musical genre and the ways in which they are united as a community. As a photographer you direct your attention towards the elements that characterize a scene, including the context, the individuals, and the various kinds of paraphernalia that form part of the musical movement in its entirety. The Sonidero culture thrives on its graphic and visual elements, which are quite unique and differentiate it from other music scenes, and photography has been an important medium for communicating that visual element within the scene.*

Fig. 2. The Virgen of Guadalupe, or also known as the Queen of the Sonidos, arrives at the Basilica on the shoulders of devotees, The procession for Guadalupe happens each year on November 11th. Mexico City. Nov, 2009.



Fig. 3. Catholic devotees attend mass wearing and carrying their personal sonido's paraphernalia symbol of their devotion to the Virgin and to Saint Cecilia, patron of the music for the Sonideros in an annual Sonidero process in La Villa Guadalupe Basilic Church. México City. Nov, 2009.

Those who write about Sonidero (in the book in which your photographs appear, for example) talk about the syncretism of the music, the way it pulls together so many styles and practices. Can we say the same of the images that surround it? Are these images producing a new visuality that runs

from Mexican communities in New Jersey down to Colombia?

*The visual aspect of Sonidero culture pulsates with a unique tone, a mixture of influences ranging from Caribbean tropicalism to elements we might call urban industrial. The visual style depends on the region; the graphic elements are not the same for Mexico City as they are for Colombia, nor is it the same from one neighborhood to the next, since each Sonidero has own identity depending on the style of music they decide to focus their repertoire upon.*

*Sonideros need to catch the public's attention and at the same time need to have a very determined personal visual identity that helps shape their brand. They do it through the use of unique paraphernalia, which is absolutely necessary in this respect: the big speakers that dominate the soundscape, the large graphics that fill shirts, trucks and banners with names, the music collections being their LPs or digital remixed files, etc.*

Many different types of designs are displayed during the musical performances and processions: banners, clothes, posters. Which traces of this graphic culture remain visible in the city after the performances are over?

*Designs are present everywhere and all the time, and people wear the names of Sonideros on jackets, t-shirts, and tattoos. Cumbia and salsa music are sold on CDs on the subways, posters stay up on streets*

*until new ones replace them, banners can be seen in different stores throughout the city, and in the city markets the music is blasted continuously, as there is always someone selling CDs or playing music from their store. So the audiovisual elements are everywhere. If you move around the city, walking or taking public transportation, you become aware of their constant presence.*

One of the most interesting things about Sonidero—and several of the authors in the book stress this—is that it endlessly absorbs new technologies and uses them to keep renewing the music. Does technology work the same way in relation to the image-making that surrounds the music?

*Technology works in favor of the Sonidero community, making it easier for more people to become a Sonidero since the cost and size of the equipment has been reduced significantly over the years, and making it more accessible and easier to transport. The forms of distribution have taken new routes with the arrival of the internet, also reaching a larger public. Documenting the scene has also been made easier with the arrival of cellphones and video cameras that allow everyone to become a witness with the ability to create archival documents. The horizontalization and democratization of media recording and distribution has given the movement another tone, whereas before the sonideros would thrive upon the LP collections which they would bring from trips to Colombia mostly. Nowadays streaming of music online and recording CDs for*



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Fig. 4. Fans push and squish to get close to Sonido Sonoramic. They expose their salutations- saludos- in the hope of a shout out by Raúl Lopez, founder and owner, of one of the Sonidos with greatest popularity at the moment, in the annual Tepito neighborhood party. Mexico City. Oct, 2009.

Fig. 5. Sonido La Conga sending shout-outs in the annual Merced market anniversary. The party is so popular that a major avenue – Circunvalación- is usually closed and mechanical lights and ginormous speakers are set up in the avenue in one of the three days of celebrations. Mexico City. Sep, 2009.

Fig. 6. The streets of Tepito neighborhood are overcrowded with music lovers. Dancing circles are created for couples to dance and expose their expertise. The sound blasts with a mix from two Sonideros and their reverberating speakers. Mexico City. Oct, 2008.

Fig. 7. Couple dancing a coordinated and choreographed dance as the public stand aside to watch forming dance circles. Stylized clothes and hairstyles are essential among teenagers. Mexico City. Oct, 2009.

Fig. 8. Sonido Momis Music from San Miguel Teca neighborhood setting up audio and lighting for the Martin Carrera neighborhood annual carnival. Martin Carrera, Mexico City. Feb, 2015.

Fig. 9. Speakers of Sonido Caribe in the Merced market anniversary celebration. Mexico City. Sept, 2009.



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Fig. 10. Music cds for sale in of the many street stores in Tepito during its annual anniversary celebration. Mexico City. Oct, 2009.



Fig. 11. A fan holds a message for Sonido Changa and bus from Sonido Disneyland in the annual Merced anniversary party. Mexico City. Sept. 2009.



Fig. 12. Ricardo Mendoza- father- wearing a shirt of his sound system Sonido Duende during an interview. Mexico City. Nov.2008 / Music tape collection belonging to Sonidero fan Luis Cortez. Huixquilucan. Feb. 2013.



Fig. 13. Sonidero fan and collector Luis Sanchez, sits in his bed surrounded by his personal collection of posters and paraphernalia. Huixquilucan, Feb. 2013.

*instant sales after a gig have created new forms of transnational communication. Visual technology has become a tool which allows the fans to create their own personal account of the events without depending on an official version of them. We now have many more interpretations of the same event, which are constantly being shared through websites and social media. At the same time, there are still*



Fig. 14. A dancer reclines in Sonido Leo's speaker as he takes a cigarette break. Mexico City. Mar. 2013..



Fig. 15. Sonido Cubaney's record player in a dancing party in the neighborhood of Peñon de los Baños, also known as "Small Colombia". They have the greatest record collection of Colombian cumbia and salsa acquired in the 70s-90s as they would go on trips to find music abroad. Mexico City, Sept, 2010.



Fig. 16. Sonido Leo holds the advertisement at Salon Lerdo Chiquito in Guerrero neighborhood that night. The names of the Sonideros playing are presented in the flyer with their own typography and style. Mexico City. January, 2011.



Fig. 17. La Miguela y sus Edecanes, a famous dancing club, wearing a Sonido Sonoramico jacket at Carmen Jara's awards ceremony in the Alteña Saloon. Pioneer in sonidero internet radio, Carmen is an icon in difusion and promotion of the sonidero culture. Mexico City. May, 2009.

*official photos and video recordings, created for a specific Sonidero's website, and they are also sold as pirate DVDs in the local markets.*

**How does the visual culture around this movement circulate online? Are there website and platforms dedicated to disseminating its music and images?**

*There are countless websites devoted to the Sonidero culture, as well as radio programs playing this style of music, which is mostly cumbia and salsa but can also be high energy or vallenato. Many Sonidero parties are streamed live internationally from the event on different websites. The events are also shared through such media as DVDs, the Web, and radio and TV. The big local neighborhood markets hold*

*Sonidero video parties. As previously mentioned, with the boom of cellphones with cameras, and with the democratization of the photographic medium, everyone now has an opportunity to share their experiences and they mostly share the images on*

social media. Most Sonideros have their own Facebook page, where they share images of the parties or of the paraphernalia. Fans usually share images of themselves at the events.

These are some Sonidero websites that you can check out:

Sonideros.TV  
<http://sonideros.tv/>

Impacto Sonidero  
<http://www.impactosonidero.com/>

Onda Sonidera  
<http://www.ondasonidera.com/>

Rincón Sonidero  
<http://www.rinconsonidero.com/>

El Mundo Sonidero  
<https://mundosonideromix.wordpress.com/>

Audimix  
<http://www.audimix.com/>

Carmen Jara Sonideros  
<http://www.carmenjarasonideros.com.mx/>

Ambiente Sonidero  
<http://www.ambientesonidero.com/>

Your photographic work contributes to building a visual archive of these cultural practices. Are memory institutions such as museums and archives in Mexico interested in preserving or exhibiting artefacts of the Sonidero movement?

My work has been exhibited as part of the work compiled by the collective *El Proyecto Sonidero - The Sonidero Project*. We have had two very important exhibitions in the Spanish Cultural Center in Mexico City, one on Sonidero culture as a musical community, in 2009, and another in 2003 that focused mostly on our investigation of the graphic elements—such as posters and paraphernalia that surround the scene—with an emphasis on the tropical and electronic (high energy) music genres. Those exhibitions have toured among cultural centers and public spaces around Mexico and have been exhibited internationally, in museums in Spain and England. Several international publications have showcased the work we have compiled throughout these years. We published an e-book called *Sonideros en las Aceras, Vengase la Gozadera*, which is the result of years of investigation. For the later exhibition, *Grafica Sonidera - Sonidero Graphics*, we carried out the arduous labour of photographically documenting the posters for high energy and tropical parties from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, building an archive from the private poster collections of several renowned Sonideros.





Fig. 18. Sonido Banes audio and image setup in the annual Martin Carrera neighborhood anniversary. Mexico City. Feb, 2015.



Fig. 19. Couple wearing jackets with the logo of two of the most famous sonideros in Mexico City and who were playing that same night in the annual Bosques de Aragon 3 day neighborhood party: Sonido Pancho from Tepito and Sonido Sonoramico from Peñon de los Baños. Mexico City. Feb, 2015.

## Image Notes

Figure 01: Sonido Consentido in procession to the Guadalupe Basilica holding its banner in the annual sonidero procession. . The processions follows the avenue that leads to the Basilica called Calzada de Guadalupe, and is joined by thousands of devotees, coming from surrounding states and all neighborhoods of the city and its metropolitan areas. La Villa, México City. November, 2009.

Figure 02: The Virgen of Guadalupe, or also known as the Queen of the Sonidos, arrives at the Basilica on the shoulders of devotees, who come to ask for protection and to show gratitude. The Sonidero Procession to the Guadalupe Basilica happens each year on November 11th. La Villa, México City. November, 2009.

Figure 03: Catholic devotees attend mass wearing and carrying their personal sonido's paraphernalia, as a symbol of their devotion to the Virgin and to Saint Cecilia, patron of the music during the annual Sonidero procession. La Villa, México City. November, 2009.

Figure 04: Fans push and squish to get close to Sonido Sonoramico and to expose their salutations- saludos- in the hope of a shout out by Raúl Lopez, founder and owner of Sonido Sonoramico, one of the Sonidos with greatest popularity at the moment, in the annual Tepito neighborhood party. Tepito, Mexico City, October, 2009.

Figure 05: Sonido La Conga sending shout-outs in the annual Merced market anniversary, which usually gathers thousands of people. The party was so popular that a major avenue used to be closed for the festivities, where Sonideros would set up gigantic structures with mechanical lights, but government has been putting limits to the gathering of people in the streets as a means to repress popular celebrations. Merced, Mexico City, September 2009.

Figure 06: The streets of Tepito neighborhood are overcrowded with music lovers. With the speakers at the sides, dancing circles are created for couples to dance and expose their expertise, as the sound blasts with a mix from two Sonideros playing at the same time, one at the extreme left with its allocated number of speakers, and the other at mid street. Tepito, Mexico City. October, 2008.

Figure 07: Couple dancing a coordinated and choreographed dance as the public stand aside to watch forming dance circles. Stylized clothes and hairstyles are essential among teenagers. Tepito, Mexico City. October, 2009.

Figure 08: Sonido Momis Music from San Miguel Teca neighborhood setting up audio and lighting for the Martin Carrera neighborhood annual carnival. Martin Carrera, Mexico City. February, 2015.

Figure 09: Speakers of Sonido Caribe in the Merced market anniversary celebration. Merced, Mexico City. September, 2009.

Figure 10: Music cds for sale in of the many street stores in the Tepito neighborhood during its annual anniversary celebration. Tepito, Mexico City, October 2009.

Figure 11: A fan holds a message for Sonido Changa and bus from Sonido Disneyland in the annual Merced anniversary party. Merced, Mexico City. September 2009.

Figure 12: Ricardo Mendoza- father- wearing a shirt of his sound system Sonido Duende during an interview / Music tape collection belonging to Sonidero fan Luis Cortez.. Roma, Mexico City. November 2008 / Huixquilucan, Mexico State, February 2013.

Figure 13: Sonidero fan and collector Luis Sanchez, sits in his bed surrounded by his personal collection of posters and paraphernalia. Huixquilucan, Mexico State, February 2013.

Figure 14: A dancer reclines in Sonido Leo's speaker as he takes a cigarette break. Oceania, Mexico City, March, 2013.

Figure 15: Sonido Cubaney's record player in a dancing party in the neighborhood know as the "Small Colombia" for having the greatest record collection of Colombian cumbia and salsa music which were acquired in the 70s-90s as the sonideros would go on trips to find music abroad. Peñon de los Baños, Mexico City, 2010.

Figure 16: Sonido Leo holds the advertisement for the dance party at Salon Lerdo Chiquito that night. The names of the Sonideros playing that night are presented in the flyer with their own typography and style. Guerrero, Mexico City. January, 2011.

Figure 17: La Miguela y sus Edecanes, a famous dancing club, wearing a Sonido Sonoramico jacket at Carmen Jara's awards ceremony in the Alteña Saloon. Pioneer in sonidero internet radio, Carmen is an icon in diffusion and promotion of the sonidero culture. Tlalpan, Mexico City. May, 2009.

Figure 18: Sonido Banes audio and image setup in the annual Martin Carrera neighborhood anniversary, Mexico City. February, 2015.

Figure 19: Couple wearing jackets with the logo of two of the most famous sonideros in Mexico City and who were playing that same night, Sonido Pancho from Tepito and Sonido Sonoramico from Peñon de los Baños, in the Bosques de Aragon neighborhood anniversary which lasts for two nights. Aragón, Mexico City. February, 2015.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.tumbonaediciones.com/descargas/SONIDEROS\\_EN\\_LAS\\_ACERAS-lo.pdf](http://www.tumbonaediciones.com/descargas/SONIDEROS_EN_LAS_ACERAS-lo.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://elproyectosonidero.wordpress.com/about/>