Artistic resistance to the US-backed juntas

Losing the Human Form: A seismic image of the 1980s in Latin America

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During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Latin America was a social powder keg. The growth of the working class, as millions left the countryside for the cities, and the increasing radicalization of the times ultimately led the workers into a direct confrontation with the respective national bourgeoisies and imperialism.

Tragically, without a revolutionary socialist party, the working class was led into a dead-end. Stalinism and its centrist (Pabloite-Mandelite) accomplices blocked the revolutionary upsurge, subordinating the working class to the bourgeoisie, which—as Trotsky had established—due to its ties to imperialism and fear of the working class could not carry out even the unfinished bourgeois-democratic tasks in the oppressed countries.

The result was the disarming of the working class before the imperialist offensive. CIA-backed coups in Chile in 1973 and Argentina in 1976 crushed the two most promising revolutionary opportunities and led to "Operation Condor," the infamous network of dictatorships that coordinated the hunting down and slaughter of socialist-minded workers and youth in the following years.

In this hellish situation of death and repression, one would think the emergence of artists opposed to the powers-that-be would be almost impossible, but that wasn't the case.

"Losing the Human Form: A seismic image of the 1980s in Latin America" is a fascinating compilation of works of the time that voiced opposition to the militarized regimes of the region, exposed their criminality and attacked their ideological foundations. The assorted selections—"artistic interventions," silk screen works, posters, photography, street performance, graphic art—will leave no viewer unmoved and present a powerful testimony to the suffering, loss and the outrage of the times.

The exhibition was organized by the Madrid-based Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía and 31 investigators from the Red de Conceptualismos del Sur (Southern Conceptualisms Network), an "international platform of work, thought, and taking a stand" that aims to promote and restore the most critical works of art of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, with the aim of "reactivating such critical potential today." The exhibition debuted in Madrid in 2012 and recently finished its presentation in Lima, Peru, where it was well received.

The exhibition begins by explaining its title. "It refers, on the one hand, to the slaughter and murder by the dictatorship and wars within and to the metamorphosis of the bodies and, on the other, to the experiences of freedom that ran parallel as resistance and subversion during the 80s."

Located next to this text is "Hablo por mi diferencia" ("I speak for my difference"), a photograph of Chilean gay author and Stalinist Pedro Lemebel, with the hammer-and-sickle painted on his face. Approaching this image, one hears a speech Lemebel delivered about the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile interwoven with "The Internationale," the international workers anthem.

The first installation, "Doing politics with nothing," deals with social movements and activism during the 1980s, which "sought to make visible everything that was erased by the dictatorships and democratic peace accords." This finds expression in the Siluetazo ("The Big Silhouetting"), which involves creating a silhouette by tracing a volunteer's body on a large piece of paper and writing the name of one of the *desaparecidos* (the victims who "disappeared" under the Latin American, CIA-backed dictatorships), or texts such as "I am a victim of the dictatorship. They tortured, disappeared and killed me. Have you forgotten me?"

Photographs by Argentinean Eduardo Gil show dozens of people gathered in a Buenos Aires square painting the silhouettes on the ground; protesters carrying placards with the silhouettes bearing the names of "disappeared" relatives and friends; walls with the silhouettes pasted on them; and, inevitably, policemen tearing the silhouettes down.

Another example of "doing politics with nothing" is "Arte al paso" ("fast art"), political silk screen works that aspire to be "cheap, fast, street-oriented and popular," just like "fast food." Despite emerging at different times and in different contexts, the various "fast art" works are linked by the desire to intervene in the struggles of the working class through media that can be easily reproduced.

The collective Paréntesis (Peru, 1979), for example, made agit-prop collages supporting a strike by SUTEP, the teacher's union, while Taller E.P.S. Huayco (Peru, 1980-1981) combined dozens of hammer-and-sickles to form a huge portrait of Communist poet Cesar Vallejo. The Plastic Youths Association (Chile) supported working class struggles and the fight against the amnesty for the Pinochet regime, rethinking political posters with Dadaist-like aesthetics.

CAPaTaCo (Argentina) mocked the politicians of its time—including Argentina's right-wing president Carlos Menem and former US president George H.W. Bush—vandalizing posters in public places with silk screen-produced material. Many members of CAPaTaCo were aligned with the Morenoite Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) and produced propaganda for it, including a pop-art collage of four portraits of Trotsky.

In between those two installations, curators placed a map of Latin America on the floor and covered it with broken pieces of Coca-Cola bottles.

The Art Action Collective (Colectivo de Acciones de Arte, CADA), a Chilean art collective, is represented by a 1985 performance of "Viuda" ("Widow"). In this "intervention" a solitary woman in black dances the *cueca* —declared by the dictator Pinochet to be Chile's national dance. The performance speaks to the loss of the disappeared and the suffering imposed on those who survived them, most of them women.

In 1989, at the headquarters of the Human Rights Commission in Santiago de Chile, the "Mares of the Apocalypse," a duo formed by artists Francisco Casas and Pedro Lemebel, arrive and dance a gay *cueca* on that

aforementioned map of Latin America "in the face of the government's repression, the danger of AIDS contagion, the wounding pieces of glass and the baffled commission members," in order to "denaturalize" and "demystify" the image of the suffering, selfless woman.

The next section of the exhibition presents three experimental theater groups from the late 1970s and early 1980s, whose focus on "artistic interventions" probably lifted them, on artistic terms, above most of the other artists in the exhibition.

The Theater Investigation Workshop (Taller de Investigaciones Teatrales, TIT), the Cucaño Experimental Group (Grupo Experimental Cucaño, GEC)--from Buenos Aires and Rosario in Argentina, respectively--and On a Trip without a Passport (Viajou Sem Passaporte, VSP) from São Paulo, Brazil declare their aim to "reclaim a revolutionary art for the creation of a new surrealist movement in a time when militarist repression had suffocated the emancipatory revolutionary movements." Appealing to "imagination, provocation and collective creation" they tried to "transform normal existing conditions." This, the introduction explains, is a "vindication of the first surrealism and its intersection with Trotskyism."

"For fewer artists—and more men and women who make art," was the Brazilian VSP's motto, printed at the top of the wall dedicated to the group. "Intervention as a method of transgressing the ideologies that rule art production," reads their manifesto. "Our function is to violate contemporary art's restrictive conventionalities and build the basis of liberated mankind's sensitive expression that lies in the future."

Another passage declares: "Today artistic production has owners and masters at the expense of the sacrifice and usurpation of its true end as a means of enriching humanity's perception. [...] Artistic Intervention as art production serves to subvert the bourgeois ideology of production by tearing from its claws the creative act, the designated space (a cloister of weekend pastime), in order to transgress with full and true art the convulsion of imagination in conscious and ordinary reality."

Argentina's Cucaño, a group of 15 to 20-year-old artists, according to another text, believed the most important source of art was life, reality and all its potential. This outlook was based, in no small part, on the influence of André Breton's writings and manifestos, which they themselves cite, but also on the urgency of responding to the crushing of revolutionary potential inside the country.

The group wrote: "Rosario is one of the cities hardest hit by the military dictatorship's repression [...] Young people who never witnessed the coup, live with its consequences: disinformation, isolation, and violent coercion. Now that we lack everything for our cultural development [...] we feel stronger than ever the necessity to revert to life, our life."

One of the most famous "interventions" by the group was on display in documentary format. The Penetration or the "Lautreamontian Surge" (named after the Comte de Lautréamont [Isidore-Lucien Ducasse], the French poet and one of surrealism's heroes) was a satirical attack on the Catholic Church that took place inside a church in 1982 (the documentary begins with comments by Argentinean priests defending the dictatorship).

"We went there because we knew many military families were attending it. It was an oligarchic mass," recalls member Carlos Ghioldi. Dressed in tuxedos and black sunglasses, they performed several bizarre and simultaneous acts to create a sort of "counter-mass," shocking the audience. "It was pure theater, [French playwright-director Antonin] Artaud's theater idea," explains member Guillermo Giampietro.

In Brazil, the same motives impelled art collectives like Viajou Sem Passaporte, 3Nos3 and Manga Rosa, who engaged in so-called "inter-versions": artistic interventions to "revert the order" in public places.

VSP declared in one of its manifestos: "We want to end the mysticism of … techniques that arbitrarily separate those who know from those who don't, those who can from those who can't, those who consume from those who don't. Our only weapons for this activity are our bodies, our creativity and our belief in the liberation of mankind."

The Brazilian group performed provocative public acts without permission, such as placing plastic boxes on the heads of statues of national heroes, or the simulation of massive intoxication during an international art encounter—1982's Alterarte II, with the participation of TIT and Cucaño—that ended in a scandal and the arrest of those involved.

The Gang collective, also from Brazil, was also active in the public arena, but its target was the "castrating austerity" and the "moral repression" of the Brazilian dictatorship (1964-1985), which they attempted to subvert through sexual liberation. In 1982, members of the collective invaded Ipanema Beach in Rio de Janeiro and began to recite poems of their "Movimento de Arte Pornô" (Porn Art Movement) to a crowd of dozens while they undressed, in defiance of governmental repression. This act was recorded on video and projected at the exhibition.

Sexual liberation under conditions of repression was also the subject of Peruvian photographer and performance artist Sergio Zevallos's work. *Rosa Cordis* (1986) is a series of self-portraits with Zevallos dressed as a transvestite version of Santa Rosa—patron saint of Lima—in a bloodstained corner. Zevallos's target was not only the Catholic Church, which supported military repression during Peru's so-called Internal Conflict of the 1980s, but to also expose violence against gays and other minorities.

While the most powerful element of the exhibition lies in its reminding us of the courage and spirit of resistance of dozens of artists throughout the region, it should be noted that one of the principal reasons for the show's considerable success, both in Madrid and Lima, is the absence today of artists committed to social change.

The majority of young people who were born in the time period covered by the exhibition not only have never encountered such an art movement, but have never experienced a mass social movement. The work on display in the exhibition stands in sharp contrast to a cultural world presently dominated by postmodernism and its rejection of art as a means of understanding and changing the world.

Why have artists and collectives with similar (or even more sharply focused) objectives not arisen when the conditions of the working class are worse today than in those previous decades, not only in Latin America, but around the world?

The Red de Conceptualismos del Sur, the organization that put on the exhibition, refers on its website to "state violence" as the main reason for the dismantling of the "emancipatory project." Since then, the authors write, the "inoculation of collective memory by the state apparatuses, defensive oblivion assimilated by the civil society, the depoliticization of subjectivities in their rearrangement within neoliberal economies [and] the beautification of the counterculture" have prevented the "reactivation" of art linked to social movements and revolutionary change.

All true, no doubt. But the brain of the socially committed artist is designed not only to receive blows, one after another, but also to nourish itself from the outside world and its possibilities of change. The artists who emerged in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s were products of different circumstances, found themselves in an extraordinary period and carried forward an art inspired directly by revolutionary social aspirations (either during the rising radical tide or its crushing and the time of mourning).

The artists of today are heirs to a culturally reactionary era. An era that arises from the "end of history," the elevation of the pursuit of individualistic achievement in place of that of the common social good, the glorification of money and social status and the intellectually toxic dissemination of postmodernism.

However, the objective socioeconomic factors that produced the uprisings of the 1960s and 1970s have not disappeared. On the contrary, the current crisis of capitalism is bringing them back all over the world with unimaginable destructive force, which will once again bring Latin American workers on the offensive and thus create once again the conditions for the emergence of new artists with important and world-

changing political and artistic objectives. “Losing the Human Form” provides a basis of inspiration for this future, which may be not that far off.