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Tactics of Intervention in the Public Sphere

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I would like to share with you some of the artistic practices that, in the context of recent central america, work towards intervening in the public sphere. From printed publications to internet based actions, these projects try to interfere with the dominant structures of representation, and in a way, extend the horizon of "the public" realm. There is an essential communicative component in these projects where the function of the artist overflows towards practices such as edition, communication, and management, among others. Besides being grounded in collaborative processes, these projects foster and encourage an active participation from the public who, in many cases, become co-authors of the work. In this sense, these are practices that activate new processes of subjectivity. I would like to present three examples that in their specificity, give us an account of their strong political dimension.

Artefacto/Estrago.

http://www.ibw.com.ni/~quintani/artefacto/

Artefacto magazine, founded and established in Managua by the artist Raúl Quintanilla, is one of the projects that since the early 90s has worked towards the effective intervention in the public sphere. Its foundation date, 1992, suggests that the project was born under the sign of political contestation. Against the (almost always) innocuous celebrations of the "V centenary of the Discovery of America", *Artefacto* responded with an editorial note that read: "Of the 500 years: tell me nothing!". This was accompanied by furious colonial criticism, which has been one of the most active fields within the magazine, as well as within Quintanilla's artistic production. At the same time, *Artefacto* was created as a response to certain local events which lead a group of artists, intellectuals and academics from various counties to sign, in April of 1992 an open letter - published in the first issue of the magazine - addressed to Violeta Chamorro, president of Nicaragua. The text protested

against the burning of books written by Gioconda Belli, Ernesto Cardenal, and Sergio Ramirez, that took place in the city of León, as well as against the removal of some public murals in Managua, by orders of the mayor Arnoldo Alemán, which depicted achievements of the Nicaraguan people, such as the victory over Somoza and the alphabetization campaign, among others.

In one of its first editorial columns, *Artefacto* denounced the so called "national" settlement between the traditional bourgeoisie and the new Sandinista elite, as well as the abandonment of popular culture in favor of official programs, and the complacency demonstrated by certain cultural agents with an elitist agenda, among other disappointments. The text concluded with a declaration of a particular position in the following terms: "That bunch of 'agarralavaras' who one day filled with hopes the plazas and the borders of the revolution and even the vanity of more than one comanche, are now constituents of unemployment percentages, extreme poverty, criminality and hopelessness articulated through economic indexes easily transformed into laughable topics for discussion. Against such a "sympathetic and enjoyable" situation, availed by the new critical apparatus of the new status quo, there are only margins left. The periphery, consciously assumed despite its bittersweet taste of harakiri. Born there and from there is our role as snipers whose ammunition is already accounted for"[1].

Artefacto has not abandoned its role as a "sniper" which they announced, and in fact, every issue is conceived as a political action. Thus, even though it includes texts of diverse emphasis and breath, the magazine does not renounce its critical edge, its insistent will to confrontation. From the editorials, to the design, the selection of texts and the inclusion of seemingly secondary sections with sarcastic undertones such as "Occurrences and Verdicts" (Ocurrencias y veredictos), the magazine always probes different orders. The artistic field, as well as the avatars of local politics and the diverse forms of cultural hegemony have been among of the most targeted fields. Themes such as popular culture, central american artistic practices, local or regional events, and cultural and postcolonial critique have also been recurrent spotlights for the magazine. Likewise, it is worth noting the location of poetry within the pages of the publication, where names such as Baudelaire and Mallarmé are frequent. In any case, the insistent reference to a modernist tradition does not go unnoticed, with Rubén Darío as the Saint that they seem to entrust themselves to. It is as if, through that gesture, *Artefacto* included in its pages the clues to

its own genealogy. Is this a case of a political actualization of modernism? Of bringing to the present its obstinate anti-conformism?

Perhaps it was a sense of discomfort, a deep sense of irritation towards a state of affairs that encouraged the group of artists that founded *Artefacto* in Managua and soon afterwards "Artefactoría": a house located in a popular neighborhood that housed for almost seven years exhibitions, readings, performances, talks, screenings and not a few "bacchanals" (bacanales). But these projects were, above all, animated by collaborative work: Denis Núñez, Teresa Codina, David Ocón, Patricia Belli, Celeste González, Alicia Zamora are among the most tireless accomplices - along with the poet Carlos Martínez Rivas, who would be, until his death and beyond, a prominent figure in the magazine. We would also have to mention David Craven, Gerardo Mosquera, Jacinta Escudos, Virginia Perez-Ratton as some of the most assiduous international collaborators. But it has been Raúl Quintanilla who has acted as both editor, writer, designer and producer of *Artefacto.* His tireless activist labor finds, perhaps, one precursor - and no doubt an accomplice- in Rolando Castellón and *Cenizas:* an arts and literature magazine founded by this Nicaraguan artist in 1979. Ever since its foundation it has been edited, produced and distributed from San Francisco, California or San José de Costa Rica to the most remote destinations.

As in Castellón's example, it is not possible to separate Quintanilla's artistic production from that other realm of political action that takes place in the editorial, managerial and curatorial processes. Neither would it be convenient to disconnect Quintanilla's editorial work from the work he produces based on assemblages. After all, the same device seems to be played out in both practices: montage. Quintanilla's proposals are based on the gathering of heterogeneous elements that refute any illusion of unity or totality, to show precisely their artificial condition, their structural heterogeneity. It is about - as with many of the most politically engaged avant-gardes of the 20s and 30s - producing a collision between diverse, even irreconcilable elements. One example would be the assemblages created with pre-Columbian ceramic fragments and plastic figures from transnational mass culture. Equally, just like in magazines, Quintanilla's objectual proposals concede a privileged role to language, through games and detours that produce a transformation in the syntactic and semantic order - and no doubt, reach further than that.

After almost 10 years and 20 numbers, and being presented alternatively as an "Art, Culture and Criticism Magazine" (Revista de Arte, Cultura y Crítica) or "Autonomous Cultural Zone" (Zona cultural autónoma), Artefacto bid farewell with the subtitle "Limited Action Magazine" (Revista de acción limitada). For this number, September-December of 2002, the site where the edition took place was declared to be in "Nicaragua Liebre"[2]. But perhaps it was less about an ending and more about an escape, of a change of name as a political tactic. Ever since then, the group (reconfigured) began to edit the *Estrago* magazine, which in its virtual edition presents itself as a "web site dedicated to the perturbation of the dream of the Kool-ture of the New Age (?)". Although the (certainly rigid) digital version does not seem to take advantage of its place on the internet, Estrago has worked as a collective means to produce openly political interventions. "Expo 100", realized in 2008 for the decriminalization of therapeutic abortion in Nicaragua, is a clear example.

The acknowledgement of its own limits, its self-critical dimension, and sense of contingency, foster the political efficacy of a project such as *Artefacto*. Against it, perhaps, is the gesture of locating itself on the margin, and in that sense, becoming rather calming. But it is possible that the expression "with the ammunition already accounted for" has less to do with the exhaustion of "bullets" (texts, actions) than with the need of hitting the target. Or it could perhaps be read in reference to the limits of the printed media and the precarious conditions (although effective) of distribution with which the magazine has relied on. The connection between the term "avant-garde" with the military expression has been signaled many times, and in *Artefacto* it is common to find explicit references to military language: snipers, weapons, enemies, adversaries. Luckily, it would not be the only one.

Auras de Guerra (Auras of War).

http://www.ernestosalmeron.com/e/noticias/category/aurasdeguerra/

Like a palimpsest, *Auras de Guerra* carries out a successive inscription of texts, in which the trace of a previous erasure is legible. And, in some way, it allows a glimpse at the possibility of a future erasure. The project, developed by Ernesto Salmerón for over 10 years, does not correspond to a linear process, but to a discontinuous and heterogeneous development. In successive rewritings, *Auras de Guerra* has made its formats and reach,

much more complex. Starting in the beginning with photographs, it has moved towards the most diverse forms of public intervention: posters, graffiti, performance, and above all, the participation of other agents. It is convenient, perhaps, to go around the meanderings of the project in order to trace, as much as possible, it's proliferation.

Since its beginnings in 1996, *Auras de Guerra* appealed to a will to public intervention. Every 19th of July, during the celebrations of the Sandinista revolution, Salmerón went with his camera to the Plaza de la Revolución in Managua. In 2000 he placed a backdrop to take portraits of individual subjects. This device distinguished the individual from the context: "the original idea was to make the plaza disappear and have only people, decontextualized, for the plaza, the revolution, did not exist anymore", the artist has suggested[3]. In these photographs, the actors of history, ex-Sandinista combatants and enthusiasts for the revolution, became actors of a commemoration, immersed in a movement from the historic to the histrionic. The resort to black and white, as well as the reference to a historic event, suggest certain "quotations" from documentary photography. However, as documents, Salmerón's photographs are precarious, in that they were conceived in a studio setting and emphasized a posture which weakened its condition as a document.

By 2004, those photographs achieved massive support, which allowed for their propagation through the public plaza. Instead of participating with his camera, the photographer wanted to return the images to their owners, those who were photographed during the previous celebrations. Thus, Ernesto Salmerón created an edition of 5 thousand copies of a poster for the "25th Anniversary of the Sandinista Popular Revolution" (25 aniversario de la Revolución Popular Sandinista) which included some of those previous photographs. On the reverse of the poster was an image of Augusto César Sandino, which would become a pivotal clue for the project. It depicts the silhouette of an "ala ancha" hat, which is enough to allude to the hero of the resistance against American occupation, murdered in 1934, and transformed, decades later, into an emblematic figure for the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (Frente Sandinista para la Liberación Nacional). In any case, the act of spreading and circulating the posters - around sites such as the new Cathedral of Managua - would not be innocuous for a context in which a new pact between the Church and the FSLN had been reached under the command of Daniel Ortega. Pieces of text included in the poster such as "portraits in the ex-plaza of the Revolution" (retratos

en la ex-plaza de la revolución) would cause agitated debates between radical Sandinista supporters and the artist.

Sandino's image, which had passed from graffiti to a photograph, and then to a poster, would travel an inverse path towards its physical space - although no less unstable - in a house in Granada. Thus, in 2006, a new journey by *Auras de Guerra* had the fragment of the "wall" on which the graffiti was inscribed, removed and transported to the Instituto Nacional de Cultura, for an exhibition that would be closed down on the same day of its inauguration. In a political context radicalized by the electoral climate, it would not be hard to exceed the precarious limits of official intolerance or permissibility. The show was, then, successfully censored. In a manner perhaps unexpected by the authorities, Salmerón's tactical gesture took advantage of this situation. After all, the image of Sandino "taking over" the former National Palace (Palacio Nacional) seemed to require the opposition of the authorities. Thus, after activating the mediatic spectacle - through interviews, "censored" marks, pictures of the artist with his camera and balaclavas - , the way was clear to continue the journey. This time towards San Salvador, to participate in the V Bienal Centroamericana de Artes visuales, where the project was awarded the first prize.

The transportation of the "Wall" was carried out by an "IFA" truck, fabricated in the ex-Democratic Republic of Germany, which must have made its way to Nicaragua in the context of solidarity with the former socialist block. Branded as the "Gringo" on its front, this truck with a proper name would become an inseparable component of the project. With him travel not only a history of contradictions, but also an interminable register of customs and border paperwork. From Managua to San Salvador and then back. Then to San José and Puerto Limón in Costa rica, where it would be shipped, destined for Venice. In its trajectory, the peculiar caravan registered the resistances and the random encounters that crossed its path. If *Auras de Guerra* had to avoid countless obstacles, on the other side, it relied on the complicity of chance. One of the most precise was "Augusto", the name of the ferry (and Sandino) that transported the "Gringo" to its final location at the Arsenale, where it would participate in the 52nd Venice Biennial. Another curious chance-happening is that the graffiti was in Granada, the Nicaraguan city with a name that means both fruit and projectile. The wall-grenade. Or Salmerón's gesture as the explosion of a grenade in the public sphere.

But there has also been two other indispensable agents in *Auras de Guerra*: Don Rigoberto López, ex-"contra" soldier, and Adolfo Palma, ex-Sandinista combatant. The former adversaries of the war that devastated Nicaragua during the 1980s, accompany the "wall" with a run down graffiti of Sandino. If this gesture has been often interpreted in the key of agreement and reconciliation, it is perhaps convenient to read it as a contestation (maybe tragic) of history. In some way, history itself, or their disenchantment, had already reconciled them. Currently, the "desmovilizados" are equally facing unemployment in disabled conditions. Before the custodia del Sandino, they already were part of an association for war veterans that was organized in Managua to denounce their abandonment by the public powers. In a gesture similar to the initial photographs of *Auras de Guerra*, which prioritized the subjects instead of the plaza, Ernesto Salmerón accentuates people and their destinies, as opposed even to history.

If it is possible to reed *Auras de Guerra* as a palimpsest, it is perhaps useful to imagine its contention towards history as a palimpsest, as *once again erased,* according to the Greek voice from which the word is derived. In many ways, Salmerón's project challenges certain successive erasures. One of them would have to do with a traditional space, almost emblematic, of the public sphere. The Plaza de la República converted in 1979 in the Plaza de la Revolución, to which, 20 years later, an enormous fountain was added to cancel its role as a public plaza. In 2007, another political "adjustment" removed the fountain and recovered the plaza. Ernesto Salmerón would not be absent from registering the sounds and sights of the demolition. Was he thinking, perhaps, of a soundtrack to revolutions? In any case, in the work of Ernesto Salmerón history (that is the present) is assumed as a battle ground. A political space in which he does not hesitate to write about previous neglects, nor neglect previous stories. Waiting for the writings to come. And for new erasures, all over again.

Canal Central.

http://www.megafone.net/SANJOSE/intro.php?qt=7.5

"A project of mobile audiovisual communication for collectives without active presence in the prevailing mediums of mass communication". This is how, usually, Antoni Abad's collective work is presented: taxi drivers in Mexico DF (2004), gypsies in Lleida y León (2005), prostitutes in Madrid (2005), disabled people in Barcelona (2006) and Genoa

(2008), motorboys in Sao Paulo (2007). In 2006, as a part of the *Estrecho Dudoso* event organized by TEOR/éTica, the Catalan artist was invited to work with a collective of Nicaraguan immigrants in Costa Rica. <www.zexe.net> projects are based in the possibility of transmitting to the internet, almost immediately, multimedia registers such as text, photo, audio and video from mobile telephones (as used by the latest generations). The communicative mechanism set in motion through these channels has software, developed by Eugenio Tiselli, which simplifies broadcasting to the internet down to its easiest form. Once the technical conditions are guaranteed, the project intends to foster a social use of such technologies.

Canal*Central, the project realized in San José, had to deal with previous negotiations with the public institution that has a monopoly over telephone services. The fact that it was a collective of immigrants (some of them "paperless") entailed sidestepping the legal requisite of having Costa Rican residency to have access to a mobile telephone connection. On a different front, the equipment bought for the project had a suspicious and "irregular" appearance, for they did not have the authorized software required to operate in Costa Rica. The institution ended up bending its own rules in order to support the project, to allow its functioning as a "pilot" space (for although the technology was available, the service was not, because of bureaucratic limitations in the institution that regulates the tariffs). But besides the technical and institutional conditions, the project would require the configuration of the collective, and its familiarization with the use of such technologies.

In the first instance, the intention was to create the conditions that would make it possible for a collective of Nicaraguan immigrants to transmit their own channel of communication. The artist functions, therefore, as a facilitator and the context of art as an excuse for the attainment of the technical device, financial support and of course, visibility. Antoni Abad has insisted on his tactic of "deviating" funds dedicated to arts and culture for the benefit of the collective that he works with. In any case, it is they who give birth to the content, through periodical meetings in which common problems are discussed and collective channels determined. For this group of Nicaraguan immigrants, the priorities for communication included topics such as "legal papers", work, health, housing, but also cultural and identity related concerns, mixed families, and new generations born in Costa Rica. At the same time, the project includes individual channels where each of the broadcasting agents configures his own space of enunciation.

One of the main interests of the project is to work with collectives with a problematic presence in the dominant mediums of communication. In this sense, Canal*CENTRAL functions as an alternative communicative device, in which the collective of immigrants finds the conditions for self-representation, and in a way, challenge the most habitual images associated with topics such as violence, crime, work, deterioration of public services, etc. Antoni Abad's initiative is not to speak for others, but to create the devices for others to be able to speak. Thus, the image, test and sound registers are sent directly from their mobile telephones to the Internet with no editorial process in any of the channels. The device also allows the possibility to be answered by the recipients, who can actively participate in the communication through forums on the internet site. Similarly, a part of the project contemplates the channel's strategies of diffusion, profiting from the art system and its devices for visibility.

Without producing any other representations it is an essential work. It is also about producing other processes of subjectivity-forming. In this sense, the political practice of a project such as Canal*CENTRAL is not exhausted by counter information work, but it also affects the possibilities of the collectives themselves. In Costa Rica, the Nicaraguan immigrant group was not constituted prior to the project. Canal*CENTRAL not only fostered other modes of communication, but also championed new ways of producing collective knowledge and self-organization. If the project requires certain organizing processes (such as periodical meetings) it could also activate unexpected and autonomous forms of organization. In San José, for example, a brigade of issuers self-organized to report the removal of a precarious urban settlement, where a big percentage of immigrants reside. Another form of self-organization was directed towards a course on project presentation and tools for seeking employment.

In a recent interview, Antoni Abad argued: "To me, the goal is that they have access to the technology. They have the phones and we keep the server up for them so they can continue on. The best thing that can happen is that they organize themselves to continue with the project". He added a few examples: "The disabled people of Barcelona organized an association and continued with the project. They are still webcasting. The Motorboys of Sao Paulo, the 'art project' was finished in June 2007, but they are still meeting every week and are going to create an NGO, not only to continue with the project, but to fight for

their rights. It's only that now they do it in another way because they have a tool. In a way the technology is kind of a trick that clicks and makes you think of some parts of your life that you don't normally think about. And this brings me back to the question of liberation from routine"[4].

Even though the Abad himself seems to emphasize the device in terms of communication, it is evident that the process involves a battle for representation. In this sense, Alberto López Cuenca noted: "But it is not just about revealing, of making visible the translucent web that orders social life (from the interpersonal relationships of teenagers to the use of the mobile phone or the journey through the city), but that in its practice they open up a space for unexpected and reconfigured social relations"[5]. Thus, it is convenient to move the emphasis from a device for communication to its effectiveness as a device for subjectivity-forming. That affects not only the possibility to "speak" through these technologies, but what its use produces as an effect. It is worth asking in what way the active use of these means of communication, their location as "issuers", could produce a degree of emancipation in the subjects. In what way are these processes emancipatory for a collective group of immigrants in urban zones which offers as their main means for sustenance, domestic service and private security. Is it possible that the "central" aspect of the channel is located less in its alternative communicative function, than in the processes of subject-making that it is capable to activate?

Translation by Andrés David Montenegro

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[1] "Como siempre brodersito", en Artefacto No.?, 1992.

[2] Word play with the popular slogan "Nicaragua Libre".

[3] En conversación por chat, de la que fueron incluidos algunos fragmentos en el texto "Diálogos, fotografías y otros malendendidos". Por Tamara Díaz Bringas, con Jonathan Harker, Ernesto Salmerón y Cinthya Soto. Presentado en Seminario en Cali, 2005

[4] Registering realities, parasiting networks: an interview with Antoni Abad Kim Sawchuk

[5] La ruta está siendo recalculada. El motoboy y la economía política del afecto. Originally Publisher in canal*MOTOBOY: www.zexe.net, Centro Cultural de España, São Paulo, 2007.