

Rough Draft of responses to questions for the exhibition "Art for the Future: Artists Call and Central American Solidarities" January -April 2021 (forthcoming) Tufts University Art Galleries, Tufts University. 7/23/20

### How did Artists Call begin, and what were some of its precedents?

When Daniel and I last met, neither of us could remember why and when, but sometime in the early spring of 1982, Daniel Flores y Ascencio called me, and I arranged that we meet at the then Group Material "Headquarters" on 26th street. It is most likely that Lucy Lippard directed Daniel to me with the work of GM in mind. The year just before, the work of GM had brought me into a dialogue with many aspects of the then growing movements for self-determination in South and Central America. Earlier revolutions and repetitions of US military invasions across the hemisphere were already informing the work of many scholars, activists, and artists close to GM and across NYC. (Lucy Lippard, Papo Colo, (get the GM book) Ernesto Cardenal)

For perhaps at least a year before, I had been attending meetings of CISPES, PADD and other activist or cultural groups and participating in their demonstrations. In the organization of *Primer (for Raymond Williams)* produced by GM that spring as well, I was in communication with Ernesto Cardenal, then cultural minister for the Sandinista government of Nicaragua. I'd had an initial mail exchange with Cardenal in researching liberation theology and his Solentiname community in relation to the work I was doing as a public high school teacher in Bedford Stuyvesant. Group Material used some of these exchanges and the revolutionary paraphernalia that the Sandanistas and reproductions from the center Cardenal had sent to me in our *Exhibition For Raymond Williams*.

When Daniel and I originally met, I think he was also approaching Catalina Para, Josely Carvahlo, and Dore Ashton. Dore had been my art history professor at Cooper Union for many semesters, though her I met Catalina at one of the evening discussions she had at her house on 12th street. So there were many crossovers and connections of both young and established artists and activists who Daniel had sought out. We all shared a desire to respond to the US govt's policy of military intervention and support for paramilitary violence in Central and Latin America from diverse professional contexts.

That spring, Group Material produced the exhibition *LUCHAR: An Exhibition for the People of Central America* at the Taller Latino Americano on 21st street in Manhattan. For the opening of this exhibition, we designed a public event with panels, performances and public descriptions of how the work of artists in dialogue across continents might effect social change. This event was attended by political activists across the city. Many were brought by exiting constituencies the Taller and CISPES, cultural workers from many other NYC contexts, North American journalists, historians, other scholars and political organizers from Central and Latin America (Revolutionary Democratic Front, Nicaraguan Consulate to the US, Univ of El Salvador student groups and others). At the end of the event, we had a shared speech event where Lucy, Daniel, and a representative from the FMLN/FDR spoke, and the public formation of INALSE was announced.

(Bernardo Palumbo of the still operating Taller may be able to help with identifying other solidarity organizations who were there.)

### **What role did you play in Artists Call?**

In the summer of 1982 I attended the first organizing meetings called by INALSE. Attending with me were Julie Ault, Dore Ashton, Leon Golub, Jon Hendricks, Coosje Van Bruggen, Lucy Lippard, Tom Lawson, Josely Carvalho, Jon Hendricks, Fatima Bercht, and others I cannot call to memory.

The initial early meetings established a working group to organize the seed funding we would need to produce more significant events. (At one meeting at Lucy's house we came up with the phrase: "If we can witness the destruction of culture...")

The idea was to begin the planning stages of exhibitions, theatrical productions, publications, readings, film showings and street events while we in the smaller group designed a letter-writing campaign to raise money. This letter-writing group became in effect the organizing committee for other groups that would work in collaboration with us, soon becoming a national effort with other Artists' Call efforts organizing themselves across the country.

Later key members were Thiago de Mello, Kimiko Hahn, Jerry Kearns, Ted Hanson (sp?), Brian Wallis,

### **How did your previous activism or art making practice influence your involvement with this campaign?**

The intersection of artmaking and political activism appears to me now as a kind of overall atmosphere of the time. At least that condition was part of most of the art being made by the community of artists around my work. The history we inherited and the urgency we felt were part of an aesthetic/political drive for art to become a part of the liberation of life that we saw as part of all art production. As a student of Martha Rosler, Dore Ashton, Hans Haacke, and Charles Simmonds, amongst others, I was exposed to the critique of the false neutrality projected upon art that I had in mind since high school. Throughout my Cooper Union years, I and other students and friends produced collaborative projects in official and unofficial spaces. But of course, this too, was part of the overall field of practice then understood as crucial to valuable artistic work. A condensed list: went to PADD mtgs and participated in demonstrations against US foreign policy while in school; joined Group Material right after I graduated; developed issue specific exhibitions and public projects for GM and with other artists, became a public high school teacher in 1984 and dedicated most of my creative thinking to producing democratic contexts for art and education since that time.

### **What was different about your activism and political protest with this campaign compared to before?**

I think that for many North American artists of this period, participating with the cultural workers of Latin and Central America produced a radical re-appraisal of what art can do to address life. Theories of critical negation or structuralist readings had to be considered in relation to the appearance of artmaking positions that had long accompanied the histories of political, sometimes armed, struggle in the regions. The economic system of gallery-based financialization in the states also had to be rethought in ways that it failed the resistance and poetics of non-anglo culture. The context for the symbolic political acts available to North Americans when compared to the life and death conditions for artists elsewhere in the hemisphere, seemed to fall short. To show with artists whose language, social health, or actual survival was at stake – meant

recognizing that the *system of art* we in the north understood through our all institutional contexts – from the university to the museum – was complicit with organized state violence.

For me Artists Call in particular brought deeper understandings of the paradoxes implicit in ethical critiques of art institutions: the need to continue them faced with the need to have them be more inclusive of narratives of affect. Also, the possibility of a broader coordination of social and aesthetic momentum shared across national and international working groups became more understandable. Up until this time, most of the work I saw as possible was local and specific to familiar institutions. This was and still is important lesson: everyone can begin the work to change things anywhere.

**How did this campaign influence your subsequent activism or art practice, if at all?**

It made clear the remarkable capacity that collective work has to produce real resources for social movements. We raised money and made the war in El Salvador apparent to many. Accordingly, it made me aware of the politics of visibility itself. That art, by showing things that were hidden before, is political directly in this act. Also, Artists Call helped me understand how actual political work is different than the symbolic politics of spectacle critique: both can change history but with radically different velocities and with involving often opposing forms of labor.

**Were you aware of U.S. policy and military involvement in Central America previous to your involvement with Artists Call? If so, how did you become aware of the larger history around U.S. interventions in Central America? Were there particular books or news media sources that you read?**

Yes, a child raised in civil rights and anti-war movements was part of my immediate surroundings. Egbal Amed, Daniel Berrigan, and Alison Lurie were part of my family's circle of working friends. Right after school I became a public school teacher in a city that at that time was ravaged by the collapse of public infrastructure. Unless you were wealthy in those times, it would be hard not to see the effects of our government's policy in my neighborhood and in the lives of my students. As the oligarchies of the south and economists of the north redistributed wealth towards themselves, it seemed to be the same story everywhere.

**In her article on Artists Call in *Cultural Correspondence*, Eva Cockcroft describes the organizing techniques of the campaign as "top-down". Do you agree with this characterization? What was the rationale for using such techniques over more "grass-roots" ones.**

I'm not sure the application of this dichotomy applies to the example of Artists' Call as there were so many organizing fronts and groupings. For some, as in the letter-writing campaigns and gallery shows organizing efforts, they did have high powered curatorial professionals and established artists in those groups. But the work of the performance events, the people working at Taller and CISPES, I am not so sure this distinction between "top and bottom" really fits if we look at the folks involved in the work.

But perhaps Eva's point was that as a group Artist's call main tactic was to get the elite contexts of US cultural institutions to reflect a new politics. In that sense, yes, many of our goals involved cross-class relationships with dominant institutions of representation: professional organizations, museums, newspapers, etc.

**Artists Call was organized into steering committees. Why did you structure the campaign in this manner? Did you borrow this organizational format from other activist groups? What was the decision-making process like? Was there a lot of conflict? How would you resolve it?**

This was a “left-corporate” model used by activist groups and other communal contexts that many in the group knew and used. Group Material had an embryonic notion of everybody doing everything at that time: so we knew how complex and time consuming it is to design shared labor contexts in activism. I think if you look at the numbers of spaces and events utilized, and see the scale of resources raised, the logic of specialized groups taking advantage of site oriented events made sense.

The only conflict I remember was a very long meeting after the events, months of gallery sales and Judson church exhibitions were over. At this time all the money was collected. There was a strong push by many to use these resources to create a longer-term organization here in NYC for continuing the work we had completed. In the end, we voted to stay consistent with our goals stated initially and sent the money to cultural workers in the region.

**Over 1,100 artists participated in Artists Call in New York City alone. This kind of participation feels almost impossible today. How were you able to involve this many people in this campaign?**

This is a lasting question and the hardest to answer. I think there are many answers – because of the context for Artists Call and First that different atmosphere for working as an artist in NYC, which I tried to describe above. Also, the receptivity of mainstream art world institutions was very significant. (What gallery in NYC would do anything more than house a one day auction these days for anything? What young artists would ask their gallerists today to donate profits?) But also, I believe the front page NY times reporting by Raymond Bonner accompanied by Susan Meiselas’ photo work had a lot to do with the support we got. No-one I called to participate in the LUCHAR exhibition was unaware of the death squads of ES, massacres of Morazan, Somoza regime’s draining of Nica economy. But then again, journalism worked differently then – as we know.

**Artists and organizers came from all kinds of backgrounds to participate in Artists Call, including artists operating in art institutional settings and those who were from more community organizing backgrounds. What were some of the productive (or unproductive) tensions that you saw within the group and in the resulting exhibitions and public activities that took place in both mainstream and alternative spaces?**

The separations between formally constituted art and what is understood as political activism were (and still are) prevented some shared definitions of value for some participants. There were, of course, many discussions over tactics. Still, Artists Call began with the insistence that we practically raise money, AND that we raise consciousness about how cultures are managed by imperialist extraction economies, threatening life. So in a sense, we were tactically diverse from the beginning.

Also, the actual “field” of art practice at that time had already made space for non-material and critical re-invention outside of the tradition of autonomous definitions of the art object a very long time before. For many activists, the sense of cultural politics was also already very inclusive, as the earlier models of base vs. superstructure gave way to a more nuanced understandings of spectacle. But above all was the fact that we knew people were dying: the momentum of concern for matters of life and death in this case allowed for new alignments of artistic and activist value.

**What kind of collaborations, friendships, and/or alliances with Latin American artists and political organizations existed prior to Artists Call? How did they inform the art activism of Artists Call?**

I think this is covered in my answers to the questions above.

**How did your involvement with Artist Call end?**

All of our involvement ended in NYC with the last meeting where it was voted to stop work, tally up the money and send it to central American cultural workers.

**Do you think that the organizing around Artists Call was ultimately successful?**

Success as a measurable quantity is hard to assess with cultural work. We did raise considerable resources for cultural work in the region. Also we did position the art industry in NYC and other cities across the country to see themselves and be seen by others as part the active political solutions. Younger artists had new models of activism with in their work, and tools to ask for civic responsibility from the institutions that they worked for and with.

**What is its impact or legacy?**

Here in the states the impact is part of a much slower process of the political understanding of artists role in determining the effect of economies of representation and hope within our industries. My sense is that Artists Call and other collective labor of the 80's to bring political consciousness to art institutions has inspired many threads of continuing effective activism. Of course the scale of investment in narrowing cliché's of artists roles in society is much more powerful than any grassroots effort. However, I think we have seen many changes in our working field – from decentralizing museums to changes in art school curriculums.

As a reader of contemporary events in CA I think a comparison between the asylum narratives of Nicaraguan and Honduran contexts might be something to consider. The state-sanctioned civic violence in Honduras and El Salvador appears overwhelming compare to Nicaragua, where the context for violence seems lower. It has been described to me that the revolutionary establishment of civil and cultural institutions of self-government, literacy and economic equity set up during the Sandinista times, which American activism did help, are part of this reality.

**What parallels do you see with what was happening today with respect to artist activism around Central America and the activism of Artists Call?**

In CA I really have no critical knowledge to have much to comment. From friends in ES, I know the situation is very bad, but only anecdotally.

Here in the states, it is clear that the art industry has changed radically in its orientation towards more and more aesthetic regularity, acceptance of financialization, and cooperation with existing norms of address - within both its public museums and private manifestations. Cultural activism is still part of many humanitarian movements and growing within the ranks of artists themselves - but the sense of responsibility within establishment art world institutions appears to be much harder to inspire.