

ART

Revolting Issues

By Lucy R. Lippard

I think human rights must be only for the American people, because here there are no human rights. We know that we will be killed so we've all become revolutionaries. We have nothing to lose. We will fight.

—Indian peasant woman in Salvadoran refugee camp

Your problem is not your life as it is in America, not that your hands, as you tell me, are tied to do something. It is that you were born to an island of greed and grace where you have this sense of yourself as apart from others. It is not your right to feel powerless. Better/people than you were powerless....

—Carolyn Forché, from a poem written on her return from El Salvador

"¡Luchar! An exhibition for the People of Central America" took place last month at the Taller Latinoamericano on West 21st Street. The group show was organized by Doug Ashford as a project of the Group Material collective with the Taller and associated solidarity groups. The call for entries stated, among other things, that "all artwork should either directly or thematically address the relationship between popular movements for self-determination in Latin America and United States government policy" and that it would include "works not traditionally seen as fine art: multiples, reproducible and work by non-artists as well as flags, campaign graphics and propaganda materials."

About 100 Hispanic and North American artists responded. Ashford received a lot of apprehensive phone calls that fell roughly into two categories: artworld artists worried that their contributions would be seen as naive and politically incorrect; and artists working in left organizations worried that their contributions would be seen as "too dogmatic" and not artful enough. If that split continues, a still more complex set of worries will be justified, though those phone calls are a hopeful sign. In the meantime, what interested me was figuring out why much of the work and ¡Luchar! as a whole was more moving than other similarly motivated shows—for instance Ronald Feldman's "The Atomic Salon." That included some of the same artists, though in more elite company. It was cleaner, more distanced in its professionalism, less real.

Certainly this context was different. A populist egalitarian attitude (though not all submitted work was hung) was reflected in the somewhat haphazard installation and the rather scruffy, ill-lit space. The title of the show was mounted with a pair of terrifying photographs by Bolívar Arrellano of four male corpses piled two by two, head to foot, on a bunk bed, juxtaposed against a letter from one of the murdered Dutch journalists, saying he cried all night after filming the stories of the Salvadoran people. The exhibition's effect—partly conscious and partly emerging from the art, the pamphlets, the banners themselves—was one of unmediated reality. The prime reason for the emotional impact of ¡Luchar! was the cause behind it.

Purists will say that U.S. intervention in Central America and the miseries it causes should have no bearing on the evaluation of the art. I am not a purist. This work was made in solidarity with the people of Central America and it would be an aesthetic crime to ignore the fact. At ¡Luchar!'s opening, Salvadoran artist Daniel Flores announced the founding of an Institute for Arts and Letters of El Salvador in Exile. He has worked on a major campaign to collect the art of exiled Salvadorans. In El Salvador itself, there is no university, no freedom of press or expression, no place for art. In exile, most of the artists are illegal, impecunious and/or expending their energies on political efforts. The new institute, modeled on the now-beleaguered Institute for Cuban Studies here, would provide Salvadoran artists with community, materials, space, education, technical assistance, exposure, participate in, and support from, the broader North American culture.

North American artists on the left receive little support from our own dominant culture. But we can scarcely imagine what it's like to be totally deprived of the means to make art, to reach out to a familiar audience, and to receive in turn that exchange of energy that makes artmaking make sense. Our espousal of such causes is important not only to the Latin artists but to our own senses of ourselves as socially responsible artists and intellectuals. In the U.S., where art is considered harmless, the artist's feeling of powerlessness often leads to cynicism and defeatism. We tend to forget that elsewhere art is considered dangerous. We may not have too many illusions anymore about the pen or brush being mightier than the missile, but we do know that the heart goes out of a people when it is deprived of its culture, and that culture is always an early target of repressive governments.

Flores's painting in ¡Luchar! is at first glance totally "apolitical." It is simply a large oil of a white, towerlike blossom growing from spiky "leaves" against a rich blue ground which can be read as either ominous or hopeful. The flower is the *icote*—the national Salvadoran emblem. At a recent forum, Flores emphasized that Salvadorans in exile are trying to develop an art for the future, a long-awaited rebirth of culture for a country that has had

no autonomous art for 50 years, since 1932, when the brutal right-wing takeover and massacre of 30,000 people closed the doors on education and expression. He emphasized the importance of the artists identifying with the process of the struggle in their country (even now determining new conditions for their art) and cited a similar history in Nicaragua. Noting that he "gave up his art for three years to fight for his art," he said what we were all raised to believe (though it sounds different in our own context and it might embarrass some of us to remember): "Art is life, a proof of existence."

I hate writing about group shows, superficially judging what was well done, medium rare, over and underdone. But it seems unfair to bypass the art which is, after all, the very reason I am writing and you're reading this. Depending on one's taste, then, ¡Luchar! included works that were good, bad, earnest, superficial and moving, in various combinations. I was



Pitrone's *Homage to the Dismembered*

touched that many of the artists had taken the call seriously and had clearly considered why they were making this particular image. Despite fears to the contrary, the quality of the work was affected by this move toward clarity only for the best. Several pieces achieved a depth that enriched the basic rage and vitality of the show as a whole.

Group Material has developed an installation style of its own for "single-issue" shows. The inclusion of "non-art," an urban roughness or downward mobility, and a chaotic mixture of artworld styles all originated in the pioneering Co-Lab and Fashion Moda shows from 1979 on—their apotheoses being the on-target Real Estate Show and the grimy, gritty, and occasionally grand Times Square Show of 1980. In its 13th Street space from 1980-81, Group Material refined that approach within a

more determinedly progressive framework. The trademark red walls and black stenciled words integrated anarchy into an informative and still dynamic whole.

¡Luchar! (struggle!) is far less decoratively integrated than the usual GM show and harks back a bit to a Co-Lab randomness. The non-art—FDR and Sandinista banners, a triangular red FMLN neckerchief/mask, occasional Central American kitsch, and some marvelous histories of the Nicaraguan revolution painted by schoolchildren there—merely filled some interstices. The real difference between ¡Luchar! and the Times Square Show was the relative clarity of the politics. The willful, if often well-intentioned, "My-art-is-my-politics-but-I-don't-know-what-I-think" style that characterizes much alternative art is mostly absent.

Here, then, are some of the works I found impressive, with apologies for the list's opacity: Mike Glier's nastily expressionist drawing of a white North American male saying "Cut the Dialogue and Do What I Say"; Christy Rupp's cardboard bananas labeled "at least 65% of the fresh fruits and vegetables produced in Central America are dumped or fed to animals because of oversupplied markets and blemishes"; three parts of Peter Schumann's wonderful and horrible painting series on the Rio Sumpul massacre (shown in its entirety at Gallery 345 last year); Martha Rosler's chilling 1977 *Restoration of High Culture in Chile* with some new and rather mystifying photographs attached; an eerie portrait of a Puerto Rican revolutionary by Vilma Maldonado; Anne Pitrone's suspended paper piñata figure, bent double as though bound and dying, deceptively festive, scary, titled *What's in the Campesino's Homage to the Dismembered*; Jerry Kearns's monumental and disturbingly lurid painted photodiptych combining a protest march caricature of the CIA as an evil blind man and a Nicaraguan fist graffiti; a silkscreen of screaming women by Josely Carvalho; Doug Ashford's personal/political fusion of drawings of Eisenhower and the United Fruit president confabbing, his parents' wedding picture, and a politically astute commentary on these '50s scenes from his mother; Anton van Dalen's schematic blowup (explosion) of a Lincoln Continental; Ana Mendieta's gunpowder *Siluetas*; Louis Laurita's masked dolls (titled *It is Not Marxism*); powerful, typical works by Nancy Spero, Juan Sanchez, Candace Hill-Montgomery, OSPAL (the Cuban official propaganda poster group), Leon Golub, Conrad Atkinson, Tim Rollins, Julie Ault, and John Ahearn, whose painted plaster-cast portraits of South Bronx people seem to respond to different contexts almost the way the people themselves would; they are more and less at ease in ¡Luchar!, Fashion Moda, two impressive street murals in the South Bronx and the now numerous classy galleries that have recently "discovered" Ahearn. If many of these names sound familiar after a year of reading me—there must be a reason. *Hasta la victoria siempre.* (Taller Latinoamericano, 19 West 21st Street, 255-7155)