

THE PAINTERS OF THE BRIGADES

The following is an abridged translation of an interview given by Jose Balmes and Gracia Barrios to Gilles Arnould, Paris 1974

JB In Chile the Painting Brigades were formed by the young, by students, artists, workers in general, specifically to express in imagery all the problems of the country, political, social, and so on. They shaped an artistic expression in forms and colours on different themes, for example, literacy, the modes of production, agrarian reform, or the struggle against fascism. The Brigades existed throughout the country, those in the big cities organised into teams of 20 or 30 young people to cover all the walls. The Ramona Para Brigada in Santiago was the best organised and most active. Each team had its own materials, place of work, and beds to sleep in, for we often painted at night, until day-break. Each painting was discussed communally, the theme being chosen according to the dictates of political urgency. Then one of us would draw in the rough outline, arrange the composition and distribute the shapes; another would take yellow, someone else red, and each quickly filled in the space allocated to his colour. The black was used last of all, to separate the other colours, and this gave to all the designs the same very simple and direct style. Sometimes the Brigade was directed by a young person who had come through the School of Fine Arts or the School of Architecture, but other people soon came to understand how to direct a group, and thus workers often gave the directives, and the painters (professional painters or teachers at the School of Fine Arts) were formed by the Brigade. When full group participation was not possible, for example when there were problems of material or supply, the people in the Brigade asked painters for projects to be put into action at once; and when an important fresco was at stake, the work could be directed by a professional painter.

GA Were the frescoes designed to last? Were they dominated by the 'decorative' or the 'expressive' spirit?
JB Expressive values dominated, since the young people were commenting on social and practical reality. Thus they did not see themselves as producing art with a capital 'A' for future generations, but rather solely as delivering a message to the people. This form of expression was very interesting, often of great quality. Sometimes a wall that was already painted would be repainted two weeks later with a new design. You could say that art destroys art, that creation is continual; this is a very generous, spontaneous attitude, since to efface what one has produced is often a terrible thing. Now in Santiago mural

painting as a form of expression no longer exists — there is not one wall which bears a trace of it. It remains only in the spirit of those who understood what was happening.
GA Did this form of expression exist before the Government of Popular Unity?
JB No, but many artists and painters had begun to work together, to examine real problems, not simply Chilean ones, but those of Vietnam, Latin America, the struggle against imperialism, the question of torture — I mean, there had been collective works, and connections with other kinds of art such as folk-art, cinema, theatre and so on. There had been a popular tradition in the plastic arts — not a major one, but a tradition nevertheless. Thirty years ago there had been a kind of influence from Mexico, and this form re-emerged during the Sixties. This time the artists joined in collective works, and often they worked with the Brigades, as was natural for them.

GA With your classical training, did this way of working cause many problems?
JB Since 1960, I have been painting with the same characteristics as those of today: I have been dealing with problems concerning humanity, with social and political problems. For me this new experience was wonderful. We have often said that the things in galleries, exhibitions and museums are not in touch with life, and we have struggled against this in Chile. So the commitment of painters young and old to the problems of the nation, from 1970 onwards, and the creation of the brigades, was a fantastic thing for us! It was an experience we have absorbed. . . we have found a language which has been a revelation to us: I may say that I have done many things with the Brigade, but the Brigade has also taught me a great deal about space and form, and it has helped me to lose respect for the canvas and the preciousness of painting.

GA As a teacher also, how did this context affect your methods?
JB Teaching is very closely tied to the social phenomenon, to the reality which students and teachers live and breathe every day, so it was entirely natural to adapt the programme of study to the necessities of life. It was for this purpose that the students organized their projects, when they had found a wall in the street. The isolated projects were gathered together, fused, so that small enterprises took on a monumental dimension. During the transport strike we worked as volunteers in the stations, and we noticed that they were full of walls. So we got the appropriate permission and painted them. For the final examinations, the degree committee had to make the round of the frescoes!

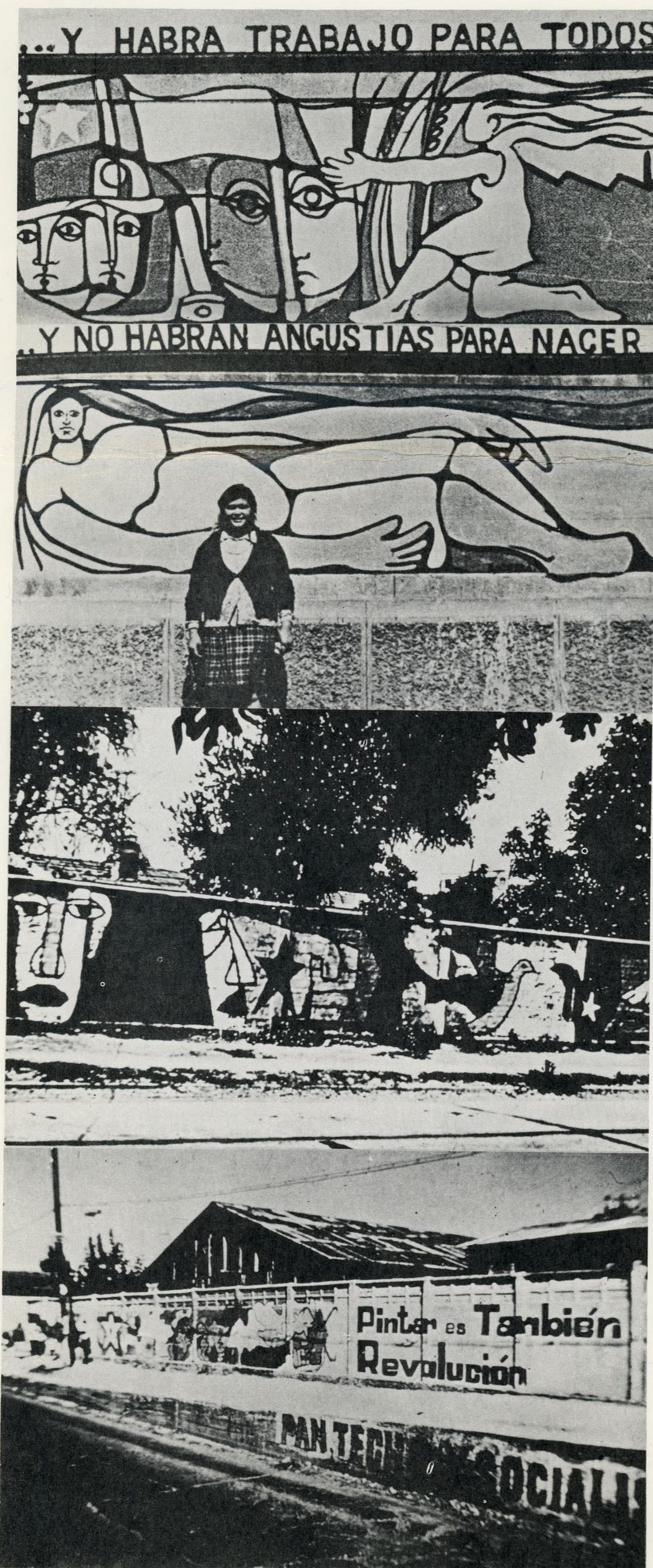
The students worked collectively, yet each retained his own personality, and this enriched the work, since they complemented one another.
GA Your work has been criticised for being mere 'political propaganda having nothing to do with art'.
JB Many painters like myself find it very difficult to understand this attitude: since the last century people have talked about freedom of expression. This is the painting of freedom! That is to say, we have discovered the means of expressing oneself freely on all the problems on which one wishes to speak. But it is very odd, it seems that in this context only certain forms of expression are allowed. I believe in TOTAL free expression, and that is why I produce this kind of painting. I am neither a propagandist nor a politician — I have been painting for more than thirty years, so it was no mere whim to produce political propaganda, but rather the result of a whole mode of thinking. For me this 'dogma' was a kind of moral imperative; if my style, my relation to the world, the things which touch me personally, are the only things which I can turn into pictorial form, and everybody says 'this is politics', well and good: perhaps it is politics. And why shouldn't it be? But for me it is art. I don't think a distinction can be made between political man and man in general — I think man is a whole being. It's not a question of a political function at one time, another function at another. Certainly not . . . the more so because we are here in Paris precisely because of this problem. One can criticise, of course, one can say that such and such an element is less good, that the images lose their force. Fair enough, but it is not possible to proscribe the use of any device in the composition of a picture. If you like, you could say that my work is very simple, that it contains many texts; but there is also the problem of space, of relations in space, of structure. It's not a case of simple propaganda, even if I use things in this way. For me the politicization of the image is a very important matter — perhaps the most important one. I often use faces, symbols which already exist, but they have to be made to work. For me the symbol is a starting point, to go beyond, to go deeper. When a concrete painter draws a square, it is not a creation, for the form exists already, a concrete

form. Creation comes afterwards, in the work around the square, in space. So why not work with symbols? I firmly believe that they have to be given a new life, the more so since they are a means of contact with other people. During our work with the Brigade, we discovered a new context, different from the traditional audience for art. That is why it was so enriching for us, so very important. We really found what the people thought, and they found that our work had relevance to their lives — they came to love it, to feel that it belonged to them, because it dealt directly with their problems.

GB It's the same for me in teaching: knowledge of the reality is the most important thing, together with the knowledge of how to express it. I believe that there are many taboos. The prevalent belief, I think, is that art is the property of an elite; it has been pushed in one direction only, without any freedom, and as it used to be said that religion was the opium of the people, so certain people want art to be the opium of the people. I believe that we have to be very simple. There are people who talk about liberty without really wanting it! In my painting I have always represented man, and I find that to do so on a scale smaller than life-size is not satisfying. And I never paint a single person, but always groups. I feel uncomfortable

working on a small scale. This is peculiar to me, since if one thinks, for example, of Leonardo, his figures are smaller than life-size, but the composition allows this. In my case I think I like a realism that is even closer to reality. I am looking for something non-intellectual.

GA All the same, your realism is very different from much contemporary realism — for example photorealism.
GB Yes, I look for emotion above all, and with a photo the image is mechanical — even if there is a great deal of poetry in such images. This is why, for example, I often include the word 'CHILE', simply because I like to include a word, but also for formal reasons: as the Cubists wrote 'BAL' in their pictures, so we write 'THE PEOPLE' in ours. I've painted a canvas containing peasants, a family, with their silhouettes outlined in very arbitrary colours, like the earth and sky in yellow, and I put in a corner the slogan: 'THE EARTH BELONGS TO HE WHO WORKS IT'. This adds a white note to a sombre canvas, and I left the letters very crude. So I don't think it is a weakness to add a text to a painting: it is a visual element. There are many examples in the history of art . . . for instance, religious painting uses a great deal of text. If you are a journalist, you have an idea and you express it straight away. In painting expression takes a long time . . .



AN EXHIBITION OF PAINTINGS AND GRAPHIC WORKS DEDICATED TO THE VICTIMS OF THE JUNTA

LA GUERRILLA INTERIOR



In my opinion, one of the most important themes put forward by the programme of the Congress, is the one referring to the 'Integral development' of the individual. May I be allowed to outline my own criterion regarding this question, and particularly where this relates to one of its essential aspects: the development of a creative imagination, of an intelligence which can make use of a poetic imagination, of an imagination which is subversive, of an imagination which is erotic also. It seems to me that insofar as Revolution is a collective effort on a social level, it is also a process which should be tested within each individual. For intellectuals and for artists, and for everybody, I consider that this personal revolution is an entirely necessary thing. Particularly if the intellectual, or the artist, or the individual is aware of belonging to a world which finds itself in that difficult stage of constructing a new social organisation, in which the concept of 'Integral formation' is of outstanding importance.

In my opinion, it is not merely a question of being WITH the revolution, but of being A revolutionary. To be a revolutionary implies, quite clearly, being free, or struggling to attain freedom. Just as people free themselves from political and economic oppression by struggle, so individuals can only free themselves by struggling with their own inner tyrants: hypocrisy and fear. Prejudice, vested interests, false self-criticism, conventional and schematic notions, all make up a shadowy army (frequently mercenary) against which the GUERRILLAS INTERIORES must fight for the liberty to create. With more consciousness, a greater light. With greater light, more consciousness.

In order to carry out a cultural revolution, a REVELATION must occur, so that all the potentialities of the individual are made evident. Having a highly developed sense of responsibility means more than the systematic practice of self-criticism. In the field of the imagination, pugnacity must be sustained as on a battlefield. Those who construct a new world either in a social context, or in the context of culture, the intellect and the arts, are defined inevitably by their generous spirit, by their commitment in their work — but by their daring also, by the capacity to take up, with sufficient courage, the risks implied by any creative act, which is an act of renewal, and a true revolution. And this problem is not only for the poet. I believe that every true human being is a poet too, that the whole man must be a poet, because poetry means a stronger grasp on reality, on all that is real. Ultimately, an intellectual, an artist, differs from other people only by the capacity to live out with intensity the world which is experienced, not only in fact, but in imagination. To stimulate the creative imagination of a people, to make it possible for everyone to have access to a real culture (which is something more than the accumulation of knowledge, and the interpretation and appreciation of such knowledge in depth) should be the aim of a revolutionary process, truly fertile in the cultural field. The person shaped in such a way would be truly whole, which means being a poet even when the task does not demand the writing of poems.

Art is a longing for that which does not exist, but at the same time it is the fronts new social problems and finds new ways of resolving them, so too in the field of artistic creation and intellectual work, the really creative imagination will attempt to resolve those problems which are continually renewed, discovering the methods of research and the forms of expression which lend themselves to the task. Art is longing for that which does not exist, but at the same time it is the instrument for fulfilling that longing. I hope that this Congress will not only achieve the undeniably necessary aim of collecting the information and exchanging the ideas which are of such value to us as artists and intellectuals. I hope for something more: that we should discuss the extent to which the achievement of our GUERRILLAS INTERIORES may generate fruitful results, and to what extent the fully formed being, the poet, the new man, may become a reality.

Matta
Havana 1968

[This statement was made by Matta, as the Chilean delegate to the Cultural Congress of Havana, in 1968. It has been translated from the Spanish].

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