

# CUTBACKS

*Contra-style*

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B Y K E N B U R K E

**C**utbacks to culture funding are nothing new to Raul Quintanilla. For lack of resources, students at his visual arts school are limited to painting with ordinary house paint and using cement for sculpture. Their photography section has a developing lab but no cameras. And one-fifth of the students and teachers can't attend classes.

With these problems, you might expect a school outcry against government funding policy, but there isn't any. That's because Raul's visual arts school is located in Managua, and the missing one-fifth of the campus population are mobilized on the borders to keep the Sandinista revolution alive. Supplies are scarce due to the U.S. embargo and the cost of the border war. These are arts cutbacks— *Contra-style*.

As assistant director of Nicaragua's National Visual Arts School and head of the visual arts department of the Sandinista Ministry of Culture, Raul Quintanilla lives every day as an embattled artist with far more than his artistic integrity at stake. While in Canada for the "Issues for the Next Generation" conference in Toronto, he spoke about the National School and the role culture plays in his country's revolution.

Like many other institutions in Nicaragua, the National Visual Arts School was organized after the revolution in line with Sandinista populist aims. Coming from the shell of the country's only fine arts school, the National was set up as a free school, with the Ministry of Culture funding all supplies and tuition. Enrolment was encouraged from all areas of the country, with a lengthy acceptance process ensuring that talent, not privilege, was the main requirement for entry.

These changes have been opening up the previously-closed areas of fine arts study more surely than slowly. More than 30 per cent of this year's 150 students come from regions outside the capital city of Managua, up from virtually none before the revolution. "It'll take a bit of time before we get more people coming from these areas," says Quintanilla. The number of women students has also risen dramatically. "Before the revolution, there was maybe one or two women students in the school and now we have almost 40 per cent," he says.

The truly revolutionary change in Nicaraguan art took place outside the walls of the National School. Students spend their first three years in classroom setting. In the following year their academic roots are pulled out and replanted.

From the relatively isolated artistic atmosphere of the National School, fourth-year students are thrust into a

year of social service in popular centres of culture (known in Spanish as CPC's) spread out across the country. At one of the 50 CPC's, the students is "confronted with the reality of the country they are living in," says Quintanilla.

"In the school they work with relatively traditional materials, even if they are putting up with housepaint on plywood," he explains. "In the communities, they use materials they find in the places and work with a range of people like old people, young people, children. . ."

"In the CPC's, our students are confronted with a different reality, one where a 15-year-old worker wants to paint and has never done anything academic. He hasn't done any colour scales or perspective, and still comes out with some very rich things when he expresses his desires and the way he sees life itself."

Quintanilla knows what he's talking about first hand. He began attending university in the mid-1970's, in an education system where "only about one per cent of the population had access to higher education. We were very separated from reality." Even though he was a student activist during the revolution, contact with campesinos (peasants) and people outside the art world profoundly affected him. "I didn't have any consciousness of the poverty that people lived in before," he says.

He sees similar changes in students returning from CPC's every year. "We understand that art education as people see it is very individual — very personal, you know?" he says, gesturing toward himself. "When they get in touch with people and work in collectives, it . . . marks them. After they come back to the school they have a different approach; a different view of what they do from the last year."

This notion of the artist as an active participant instead of passive observer

in society is also expressed clearly by one of the National School's five areas of study. Besides such basics as painting and drawing, sculpture, graphics, and theory, the school also has a new programme in *muralism*.

Aside from the very communal nature of murals in public places, Quintanilla emphasized the political roots of Nicaraguan muralism. It's a view of art percolating from the bottom up.

"Before the revolution, there was practically no mural development in Managua," he says. "There was a lot of repression in the streets, so the only thing that could be done to counter it was graffiti, which I think is the closest relative to muralism."

**F**rom this affinity with resistance graffiti— omnipresent during the battle with Somoza's regime— artists working with the school's *muralist brigade* have chosen to use murals as a form of community self-expression. Soon they hope the ideas they're trying out in one section of Managua can be repeated all over the country.

"The process is to first go to the community to see what they want expressed on the walls," says Quintanilla. "then the students make initial sketches." In these sketches, people from the community are used as models for the mural, and the students also work with their "subjects" on the projects. Not surprisingly, these murals are proving to be popular.

"Since they participate from the conception of the work, people feel identified with the project itself," he reports. Through the neighborhood murals and community outreach of the CPC's, art is reaching — and coming from — more people than ever before. "In some areas almost every neighbour has been identified in a different form, either by sculpture —

monumental sculpture — or by the murals themselves. It's a very close relationship between the artist and the work being done."

Muralism also solves the problem of many Canadian artists — getting their work *seen*. "We have problems with people going to galleries," grins Quintanilla. "Everytime we have a show, the only people who go are the artists, their families, and their friends . . ."

The Sandinista Ministry of Culture is also attempting to break down barriers between the public and art by taking exhibitions on the road and into the workplaces. "We think now that it's very important to develop art that can be seen by the people," says Quintanilla.

The actual art being produced through this network is surprising in its diversity. Unlike the monolithic Soviet approach to art — at least the officially-sanctioned type — there is no "party line" approach apparent in the works of the National School's collection.

There are images of Sandino — the Nicaraguan Peasant leader of the 1920's and 30's who gave the revolution its name — but also linoleum tiles designed with the simple image of a bottle and cup, celebrating the everyday in art. There is the striking work of Cecelia Rohas, a teacher at the school, in paintings exploring Nicaragua's pre-Columbian background through masks the Indians left behind. Her masks jostle with each other for space in the frame glowing with an almost-neon, part-otherworldly colour in distended, warped shapes. It's not exactly the stuff of sterile propaganda Nicaraguan art is sometimes said to be.

There is also a surprisingly large amount of abstract works being done in Nicaragua, representing something of a tradition in the country's art. "Most of the artists tend to be abstract: very influenced by the Spanish cur-

rents of the 50's and 60's," says Quintanilla.

While no works were shown which seemed to criticize or question the revolution, there was at least one print whose image cut deep into the notion of glory in war. A woodcut by a third year student features an exhausted, battered soldier walking towards the viewer, with a white void left in his torso in the shape of a dove. Above his head a crusted, ugly swatch of blood-red — the only colour in the print — either hovers in waiting or is descending. The print's artist is now among the troops fighting the *Contra* along the border.

The border of the soldier is an apt symbol of the burst of popular culture under the Sandinista government: there's still a cloud of death dogging its steps, preventing the culture from living up to its capacity, and threatening its very existence. The war with the US-backed *Contras* demonstrates this.

"With 20 per cent of our students doing military service, there are some areas where no students were left. In sculpture we only have two students left now," says Quintanilla. "The other students are conscious that we're able to be in the school because there are others on the frontier fighting for us."

The shortfall in teachers is being made up somewhat by the "solidarity work" of a group of artists from around the world. A West German, Mexican, and American and three Italian teachers are all assisting with the National Visual Art School's programme.

The School suffers from more than lack of people, though. The American embargo on shipments to Nicaragua has drastically cut the availability of art supplies. "We have a lot of problems with materials," Quintanilla readily states. Besides limiting the use of oil paint to final touches on paint-

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