

Jade Dellinger

Arturo Vega: To Hell With You

Music and visual art for the late downtown New York painter Arturo Vega were truly revolutionary forces. He believed that each had the capacity to effect profound change, and he used them in ways both defiant and seductive. He critiqued capitalism for its lack of conscience while questioning social norms, commonly held beliefs and widespread conformity. The artist's deceptively simple approach to graphic/visual production (as evidenced by the ubiquitous t-shirt designs that helped to support the band) perfectly suited the stripped down rock 'n' roll of The Ramones.

"I was almost always into the basics—trying to make things as simple as possible," Arturo Vega once confessed. "Your brain reacts to primary colors," and, as he continued, "everything else is trying to make things pretty." Black, white, red, yellow and blue—applied flat with mechanical precision, hard-edged geometric order and uppercase-only sans serif typeface (a thin Bauhaus-inspired Futura with an extruded drop shadow for weight) provide the distinctive Pop-meets-De Stijl/neoplasticist vibe that makes Arturo Vega's *"Insults"* truly iconic. Like the punch-in-the-gut affront of a shouted slur—"HEY YOU FAG", "YOU FAT COW" or "YOU FUCKIN' ASS"—these paintings speak with the brevity and clarity of a seminal Ramones song. Often divided into quadrants, like "LOVE", "LIFE" and "LUST" (perhaps as a nod to Robert Indiana), Vega's paintings are a call to action—a much-amplified "1-2-3-4" with the visual impact of a stage banner (by the same steady hand) that both announced and backed the band for most of The Ramones career spanning 2,263 shows.

"Rock 'n' roll was always my guiding light," as the artist recalled. "I heard Elvis Presley when I was eight years old." So, while it stands in sharp contrast to the messages delivered in many related works from the series, Vega's painting LOVE ME TENDER is an homage to the 1956 song recorded by the King of Rock 'n' Roll and is intended to represent the life-changing "happy music" he described hearing on the radio for the first time as a young boy growing up in Chihuahua, Mexico.

"WHAT THE HELL"—much like "PEOPLE ARE ROTTEN" - plays with the same horizontal and vertical word composition that would be typical of a Scrabble board if only the letter tiles relied upon each other or were used to form the next word. So, whereas, the "T" in the horizontal "WHAT" might create the first letter in the vertical "THE", and the middle "H" in "THE" might have provided a start to another horizontal "HELL", instead Vega's "WHAT" and "HELL" panels are connected by the downward reading "THE"—causing something of a double take and giving the effect of a misspelled "WHATT" and "EHELL" separated by an "H" (and the lack of any "blue" on the corners of those square letter tiles) that spell "THE." Unlike the board game first named Lexiko, later Criss-Crosswords and finally Scrabble (literally meaning "to grope frantically") or the popular newspaper puzzles, the words found in Arturo Vega's *"Insults"* certainly irritate yet never actually cross.

The Situationist-inspired, ransom note designs of so-called British Punk that attempted to hold hostage and point to the hypocrisy of institutional power, like the bands they promoted, would hardly have been possible without Arturo Vega and the Ramones. Jamie Reid and the Sex Pistols proclaimed Her Majesty, the Queen (with safety-pinned lips) pretty... pretty vacant. While, in much the same way, Vega's Presidential seal-inspired insignia for The Ramones (pre-dating the Brits) remained open to interpretation—a celebration of the quintessential all-American band and, perhaps simultaneously, a satirical assault on the nearly-sacrosanct symbol of the highest office in the land. And, much like the Louisville Slugger baseball bat in the talons of the eagle that "Beat on the Brat" (and was a "Hit on Sire"), Vega's series of *"Insults"* from the early 90s—now presented at How! Happening—were intended to deliver a vigorous wallop. Just as "Hey ho let's go" replaced "Look out below" on the banner in the beak of our national bird on his omnipresent Ramones logo, we were never fully-warned about the blitzkrieg bop of insult bombarding we would soon receive. However, for Vega, "it's some kind of purification process—like an exorcism," and we are the beneficiaries of the evil expelled. According to the artist, "The most important element is that the concepts and ideas [are] executed, completed," so, TO HELL WITH YOU.