

Ted Riederer

Arturo Vega, Making Headlines

Arturo Vega (October 13, 1947 – June 8, 2013) was a Mexican-born artist who lived and worked in New York City from 1971 until his death in 2013. While he initially moved to New York to pursue a career in the performing arts, he had been actively producing collages since 1970. Vega's love of theater, costumes, and performance was a constant theme in his life and work. Known worldwide for his designs as the artistic director for The Ramones, Arturo Vega explored his fascination with the power of the printed word in hundreds of paintings and prints throughout his prolific career.

One vibrant example of this work Vega called *Insults*, a series of paintings emblazoned with phrases like “HEY YOU FAG” and “YOU IDIOT BASTARD.” These paintings were part of a larger body of work that the artist described as “sentence” or “word “ paintings.

The *Insults* were first shown in 1992 at CB's 313 Gallery in New York City, and subsequently in 1994 at Raleigh Studios in Miami. Arturo continued to revisit text-based work until his death. Later in his career he produced a series of additional word paintings called *Love, Life, Lust* and *Lie, Cheat, Steal*. His final large-scale commission was a text-based collage, which read “LIFE ISN'T TRAGIC LOVE IS JUST BEING IGNORED.”

A more careful analysis of his choice of a simple bold type-face in his designs, painting, and print work reveals a heretofore unnoticed connection. The typeface used in the *Insults* is in the same family of fonts used in the headline of the October 1968 independent Mexican paper *Por qué?*, declaring “Murderers” in reference to the infamous Tlatelolco massacre, where an unknown number of student protesters were slaughtered by the military. We see the same style type-face again in a *New York Daily News* headline from the same year: “Actress Shoots Andy Warhol.”

In lectures, Arturo Vega often referred to another batch of newspaper clippings that he carried with him until his death in 2013. “Federal Judicial Police Arrest 149 Drug Addicted Hippies of Both Sexes” reads the headline of the Mexican daily *El Nacional* on February 13, 1971. This headline represented more than an ideological trauma for Arturo: he was one of those arrested along with 148 of the most important actors, actresses, artists, writers, poets, and filmmakers of the day. They were detained at a party in an affluent suburb of Mexico City.

A student of the National Institute of Fine Arts, where he studied acting and theater production, Arturo Vega was actively performing throughout Mexico. He toured with a student production of The Who's rock opera *Tommy*. He performed in drag in “Festival Pop” at the Fine Arts Palace in Mexico City, and he performed in a Broadway musical called *Your Own Thing* at the Teatro Los Insurgentes.

His 1971 arrest alongside plastic artists Jorge Luke, Helen Escobedo, and the Chilean filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky, who were all in attendance, highlights the persecution that Vega and other artists, actors and actresses suffered under the PRI, the repressive ruling party that encouraged gangs to attack hippies on the streets of Mexico. In search of artistic freedom, Arturo Vega moved to New York City later that same year, where he would begin his career as the world famous designer and visual artist.

In faded microfiche printouts from 1971, the pictures and small point type are faded and illegible, but the bold headline letters remain as crisp and exclamatory as the day they were printed. These 40-year-old headlines not only match the same font used in the insult paintings—the masthead of *El Nacional* is printed with an almost identical font as Vega's logo for the band The Ramones, which he composed with Franklin Gothic

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Letraset dry-rubbed letters. It is revelatory to note the masthead of *El Nacional* also contains the main building block of The Ramones logo, an eagle within a circle.

Arturo Vega chose the inculpatory urgency of a sans serif headline because the honesty of unembellished text was the most direct way to communicate a message or idea. These phrases from the *Insults* may have been hurled at Arturo Vega as he walked the streets of Mexico City, a young gay hippie during a period of repression in late 60s Mexico, or overheard between a shop owner and a vagrant on the Bowery during 70s.

In an interview with *On Creativity* from 2012, Arturo Vega says, “I cannot get a book and read it and say my next series will be based on this, this, and this. No. my ideas come from the streets.” The *Insults* certainly did, and as he composed the script that he would enact through his paintings, designs and prints, he made headlines..



From top to bottom:
Masthead from *El Nacional*,
February 13, 1971;
independent student newspaper
Por qué?, Mexico, 1968.

