

Sandra Schulman

Hell, Love and Other Insults

YOU BIG APE. YOU IDIOT BASTARD.

No one could insult you quite like Arturo Vega. And because he was brutally honest, fiercely intelligent, and spoke several languages, you knew that he meant it. And it was true.

Then he would laugh.

Ah ha ha ha.

Words as art always had a power and meaning to him, from the real grocery store signs CHICKEN PARTS and BLUEBERRIES that he first earned money off of when he hit NYC in the 1970s, to the HEY HO LETS GO fist pump chant heard round the world. Cue Zippy the Pinhead and his hand-painted sign under the giant hand-painted RAMONES banner.

HEY YOU FAG. PEOPLE ARE ROTTEN.

The insult paintings probably came from the years he spent in the Ramones van listening to JohnnyJoeyDeeDeeTommyMarkyCJRichieElvis rip each other to shreds on the endless drives where racial, homophobic and religious slurs flew past like so many exit signs.

TO HELL WITH YOUS. YOU FUCKIN ASS.

Or maybe they came from the band's songs, short, sharp, pop pow punches to the gut all sung to a headbanging melody. Words as logo. Words as lyric. Words as cretin credo.

Pure porn poetry. He made a series of shirts and designs that read PORN IS THE NEW PUNK. In the sex-crazed 80s it was true.

LOVE. FUCK. LOVE. FUCK.

Gary Indiana it ain't.

But it is some Warhol
Brillo and Campbell's Soup

It is some Basquiat
SAMO

It is some Rene Ricard
Blowjobs 5¢, w/lipstick 25¢

It is some Barbara Kruger
The future belongs to those who can see it

It is some Keith Haring
Crack is Wack

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LIE CHEAT STEAL YOU KNOW YOU WILL.

How did he know us so well?

Or perhaps they came right from the mean streets of New Yawk City, where just walking his interchangeable Boxers named Diesel could yield a gallery's worth of rude sayings. Get outta my way. Watch where you're going. Walk Don't Walk. Hey I'm walkin' here! Whadda ya want, punk?

Letters became words became symbols became art became something more.

YOU IDIOT BASTARD

The primary colors of red blue yellow black ensured a major pop wow factor. The slant on the letters gave it a visual edge. You can't read this head on. There is always an angle. I didn't mean it THAT way.

AIN'T REAL. AINT LOVE.

He had words inked into his skin—E PLURIBUS UNUM across his shoulders, LOVE bordered by decorative bands on his arm, and in a huge scroll across his chest JUSTO Y NECESARIO. And of course The Ramones logo huge on his back, arm to arm, neck to waist.

Words to bleed for. Words to live and die by.

In one of his last public pieces, a mural on Elizabeth Street, words showed up one last time in a halo around Jesus's head that read: LIFE IS NOT TRAGIC, LOVE IS JUST BEING IGNORED.

Maybe by spelling it out Arturo made sure it could not be ignored.

As he wrote in a 1994 statement for an exhibition of his paintings I curated in Miami Beach:

“Art is everywhere but there is never enough Art. Art has stopped being a chronologically correct string of schools and isms and is being born all the time, everywhere; Art connects to the eternal demanding fast changes and a reckless appetite for truth, justice and a better way of life. I want my art to look clean and clear, and like light rays to be loaded with a vast spectrum of meaning. I want it to be direct and instantly engaging and above all I don't want my paintings to carry any waste; my ideal painting should be in its form and context 1000% just and necessary.

Art is the better way of doing things.”

Even if it's insulting.