

Mexico City, Circa 1970

Dan Cameron

Arturo Vega had already enjoyed the beginnings of a burgeoning career in Mexico by 1971, the year he arrived in New York to launch the chapter of his career highlighted by his 18-year collaboration with the Ramones. This early chapter of Vega's life, which seems to have provided him with a visual and conceptual framework for both his Ramones saga as much as his studio paintings, has not really been explored until now, and many of the pieces of the puzzle have still to be located. Nonetheless, based on some basic things that are known, it is possible to begin tracing an outline of some early artistic influences and cultural inspirations that became amplified once his sensibility melded with lower Manhattan during the explosive pre-punk era.

One thing we do know well enough about Vega's late adolescence and early manhood is the startling degree of social and economic mobility he demonstrated in his interactions with the larger world. An attractive, charismatic young gay man from the relatively provincial city of Chihuahua, Vega, while barely out of his teens, managed to make his way to San Francisco in 1967 to experience the Summer of Love firsthand. For more than five years after leaving Chihuahua as a high school dropout, however, Vega mostly lived in Mexico City, where he soon met and was drawn into some of the city's most elite and avant-garde cultural circles. Working at an antiquarian's shop by day, Vega presented himself as a singer-actor, although like many at the time, his true vocation seemed to be complete self-immersion in the late 60s wave of peace, love and universal creativity.

As befits a man who had a tendency to be exactly in the right place at the right time, Vega's years studying acting and theater production at the National Institute of Fine Arts coincided with a compressed period of remarkable cultural transformation in Mexico. The expansion of mass media throughout the country, coupled with the internal migration of millions from rural to urban areas, had overlapped with the rapid growth of Mexican cinema, radio and television production in the early 60s, such that the emergence of a nascent counterculture, in the form of a youth-driven nonviolent movement known as La Onda (The Wave), was all but inevitable. La Onda spawned magazines and graphic artists whose work adorned their covers, but its greatest impact seems to have been in the forging of strong cultural bonds between student activists, fans of rock music, free love advocates, and the emerging widespread use of marijuana, which for sociopolitical purposes had been especially demonized by the reigning Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) political party.

A key element to this fusion of interests was the close philosophical alignment between the worlds of visual art and rock music in the late 60s. Alejandro Jodorowsky, the experimental Chilean filmmaker who moved to Mexico at the beginning of the 60s, was signed to direct a TV program called *1, 2, 3... a Go Go*. The show regularly featured upcoming groups such as Los Dug Dug's, who performed in elaborate costumes and incorporated visual artists as a key factor in their lineup. Jodorowsky regularly collaborated with German-born sculptor Mathias Goeritz in his theater productions, while the quintessential 60s artist José Luis Cuevas chose the Las Rosas neighborhood in 1967 to produce an "ephemeral mural" that symbolized the end of the mural movement that had dominated Mexican art since the 30s. Soon after, future filmmaker Sergio Arau would launch his

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own rock project, the group Los Tepetatles, whose stage presentations were carefully art directed in a manner that bordered on the theatrical and also featured Cuevas as band member.

One prominent visual artist into whose orbit Vega was quickly drawn was the painter and designer Pedro Friedeberg, who was rapidly becoming well known for his tightly patterned, wildly colored compositions, which often featured Pop-like distortions of pictorial space accompanied by vaguely hallucinatory optical illusions. More than any other Mexican artist of the 60s, Friedeberg's unabashedly countercultural imagery and compositions signaled an abrupt break with the postwar artistic status quo, which had emphasized the struggle of the Mexican peasant in the post-revolutionary era, in tandem with Olmec, Mayan and Aztec pre-Colombian cultural sources. By contrast, Friedeberg's glamorous, cosmopolitan world seemed like an open door to the kind of universal consciousness that was slowly becoming popularized north of the border by way of the indigenous drug odyssey novels of Carlos Castaneda. At the same time, Friedeberg's art and public image symbolized the constant lingering threat of foreign-made cultural influences, which were dramatized as expressions of cultural imperialism coming from the north, especially through music.

At surface level, any formal comparison between Friedeberg's and Vega's pictorial styles reveals a shared interest in heraldic and symbolic imagery, repetition, hard-edged graphic borders, eye-popping color, and written language. Possibly a more important lesson the young Vega appears to have absorbed from his mentor centered on the pragmatic dimension of the artist's life, which so easily becomes unmoored and directionless in the face of poverty and indifference. Friedeberg, whether by design or happy accident, developed an ingenious method of being free to work on his paintings without ever worrying about money, thanks to the runaway commercial success of his signature hand-shaped chair, which has been produced over the years in innumerable sizes, materials, colors and stylistic variations, and is arguably the most Mexican contribution to the psychedelic 60s, without many people being able to pinpoint its roots. For Vega, a student performer who also constructed collages, the principle that every struggling artist should find a way to survive off some aspect of their art, even when it is not precisely connected to painting or drawing, is one he took to heart upon arriving in his adopted country.

As was true for many other countries, the pivotal year in any discussion of Mexico's modern era is 1968, when Mexico City hosted the Olympic Games in front of the entire world, only days following a police massacre of as many as 300—the number has never been verified—university student protesters and antiwar activists. Being a student himself, the Tlatelolco massacre undoubtedly made Vega deeply aware of his own precarious position in Mexican society, as well as the inherently oppositional core of cultural transformation in a society where a single political party monopolizes all authority. Still, the distinctive 1968 Mexico Olympics logo, with its op art rendering of "Mexico 68" and Olympic rings, and typography that evokes Olmec lettering, perfectly encapsulated the country's ideal of honoring its deep folkloric roots while fully engaging the modern world.

Vega's last few years in Mexico City were a time of increasing artistic experimentation. He played a rock singer in a staged musical production called *Sigue tu onda* (the Spanish-language version of

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the Broadway musical *Your Own Thing*), worked as costume and production designer for a touring Mexican production of The Who's *Tommy*, and nearly got arrested at the Festival Pop, held in the Palacio de Bellas Artes, for a striptease drag performance that climaxed in Vega wrapping himself in a Mexican flag and then quickly fleeing the scene. By this time, it also seemed the underlying connections between being an artist and being involved with rock music were no longer mutually exclusive concerns, if they ever were. In the four years between the initiation of his formal studies and the decision to move to New York, Vega had directly experienced a Mexican mini-renaissance, in which all forms of creative expression were celebrated equally. Artists formed rock bands and experimental filmmakers directed TV shows about rock and roll, while at the same time the state had shown it would not hesitate to use violent force to counter too much change too soon.

Vega's final role as a performer in Mexico was as part of a local production of *Hair*, the quintessentially 60s American rock musical. While there were a handful of productions of the show going around the city, its climactic performance took place at the *Festival de Rock y Ruedas* music festival, which would soon be simply known as Avándaro, the name of the lakeside resort where it took place. Nothing sums up the collapse of the Mexican art-rock nexus which provided the basis for Vega's earliest artistic explorations quite like Avándaro, which for years was known as Mexico's Woodstock (although Altamont might be a more apt description). Staged in September 1971, at a race track two hours away from the capital by car, the event was planned to draw 25,000 people, and ended up with nearly 10 times more in attendance. There was open drug use and nudity on the part of many erstwhile hippies who made the trek. After the festival concluded, conservative media began to spread false stories, claiming violence and even deaths had occurred during the event. The Mexican government, in an effort to assert its control, immediately banned all large rock concerts, and started harassing music clubs and stores. Arrests of cultural provocateurs soon began, followed by a rushed exodus of musicians, promoters, actors, dancers and publicists, mostly to New York and Los Angeles.

In retrospect, it seems clear the Avándaro debacle and its aftermath proved to be the catalyst that propelled Vega towards New York that fall. With the crackdown on countercultural activities in Mexico City, and a blanket tour ban on foreign rock groups that lasted 10 years, artists like Vega evidently envisioned a bleak future for themselves in their native country. While passionately lunging into artmaking and earning a living in New York—and emphatically arguing that rock and roll was dead or dying—a few years would pass before artist-rocker Arturo Vega would fully recover from a temporarily broken heart.