

Empire

Anthony Haden-Guest

The sheet of paper Arturo Vega carried in a pocket until his death told the story. It was a newspaper clipping, headlined on the front page of *El Nacional*, the Mexican daily, reporting the arrest of 149 “Hippies” *drogadictos de ambos sexos*. Men and women, that means. The bust had been at a party in a well-to-do suburb of Mexico City and the “hippies” had included Alexander Jodorowski, director of the cult movie *El Topo*, and Vega. That had been February, 1971. The Students Movement had a rally in Mexico City that June. Bottles were thrown and Los Halcones, a specially trained shock troop, opened fire with rifles. There were 210 deaths in what came to be known as the Corpus Christi massacre, with some youths being slaughtered in their hospital beds. The heavy political clouds intensified. Arturo Vega left expeditiously for the U.S., hitting California before homing in on New York. He soon found a loft space on East 2nd and Bowery.

Arturo was interested in getting some performance gigs, but his goal was a career as an artist and he was working in the young but thriving tradition of Pop. It was those times. Irving Blum, who gave Andy Warhol his first solo show at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles, once told me, speaking with wonderment of precisely that period, “There were two hundred Pop artists.” But it’s plain to see in *Empire* that Arturo Vega was a Pop artist of an unusual sort.

“In some examples of pop art, acceptance of the environment has changed into a campy game about it,” the critic Thomas B. Hess wrote in 1964. “The vulgar, instead of being taken for granted, admired and transformed, becomes a cult object or fetish or inside joke for esthetes. An epicene simper is sensed behind some of these works that go all out to seem daring or risky.” Presumably the late critic had second-tier Popsters in mind when he delivered this searing critique but certainly there is also ironic distancing in the work of Claes Oldenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, if arguably less so in the Andy Warhol of Marilyn and the Electric Chairs. But I detect neither camp nor irony in Arturo Vega’s early *Supermarket* series. These paintings are the scrupulously un-arty replications of food labels that he was making pre-Ramones, and both in their subject choices—CHITTERLINGS—and the occasional misspelling—CHIKEN PARTS—they radiate acceptance, which also, to me at least, suggests this is an acceptance of the service economy and the individuals likely to be doing some heavy lifting within it. “I get my ideas from the streets” would become Arturo’s mantra and it was this forthright acceptance that he brought with him when he segued from being a full-time artist to becoming an artist/designer who would be described by *The New York Times* as the “Shepherd of the Ramones.”

The tale of how Arturo melded with the Ramones has been often described. It so happened that Douglas Glenn Colvin, not quite yet rebranded as Dee Dee Ramone, was climbing the stairs of Arturo’s building to see a girlfriend. He liked the music he heard welling out of Arturo’s loft, banged on the door. Next thing, the Ramones were embeds in that loft, and Arturo was an embed in the embryonic group. Anecdotal touches in the memoir co-written by Joey’s brother, Mickey Leigh, and Legs McNeil, *I Slept With Joey Ramone*, bring out the closeness. As when they quote Pam Brown, described as “Joey’s first girlfriend who wasn’t from the ‘nuthouse’ and wasn’t on medication.” Pam speaks of falling for Joey while watching him perform at CBGB. “I packed my bags and moved right

Empire

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(Page 2)

in with him in Arturo's loft. I don't think Arturo was too happy about it at first, but soon he really liked me. I cleaned up Joey's old cereal and everything."

As for Arturo Vega's visual contribution to the Ramones, well, part of this was on the production side. Lighting was tremendously important in the culture of Nightworld. Arthur Weinstein began in lighting, became the clublord behind *Hurrah*, *The World* and the after-hours explosion. Arturo handled the lighting for the Ramones. Inarguably, though, one of his most durable contributions to the Rock Economy was his invention of the rock tee—a generation before anybody wearing a tee with Coca-Cola written on it was presumably working for the Coca-Cola company. Marlon Brando had sexualized the tee in the 1951 movie *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Hippiedom flaunted tie-dyes in the 60s, but it was Arturo Vega who birthed the rock tee, a wearable that made a definitive statement, was a tremendous promotional tool and a useful source of revenue too.

Arturo's design for the Ramones tee incorporates an eagle, in large part the American eagle, the eagle on the presidential seal, though his bird is clawing a baseball bat rather than a sheaf of arrows, but it's clearly not a coincidence that an eagle also features on the sheet of paper that Arturo was seldom without, being that it is the logo of *El Nacional*, a borrowing from the Mexican flag. Arturo's Ramones tee shirt became so wildly popular that Danny Fields, a convert to the group since he heard them in 1975 at CBGB, and who became their manager, signing them to Sire, has claimed that the group sold more tees than albums. This notion of the subversive tee would shortly be one of the many elements of U.S. Punk that Malcolm McLaren would borrow for the store-with-many-names that he and Vivienne Westwood ran on the Kings Road in London. No wonder Sid Vicious famously wore one on a gig, an unusual example of a member of one band of rock marauders selflessly promoting another.

Arturo's work with the Ramones doesn't wholly dominate Empire. His *Insults* series from the 90s seems to connect with the *Supermarket* work in that he is dealing with a cheerily vulgar patois, with no suggestion that the speaker or listener are likely to go for a knife or a gun. And his *Silver Dollar* series reflects the fact that artists and performers in the U.S. frequently draw on the symbolic potency of the currency, as when Warhol painted dollar bills and Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman, referencing Antonin Artaud, tossed dollar bills onto the floor of the New York Stock Exchange on April 24, 1967. Arturo's silver dollars nestle on the palm of—an equally meaningful—open hand, his own, and are often charged with geopolitical meaning being accompanied by paintings of national flags. So Arturo Vega's oeuvre, his lasting and growing reputation are by no means Ramones-dependent. But what of the meaning the Ramones relationship had for Arturo in the life he lived? He wore the Eagle image he had created for them tattooed across his back.