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Art Before
The Revolu

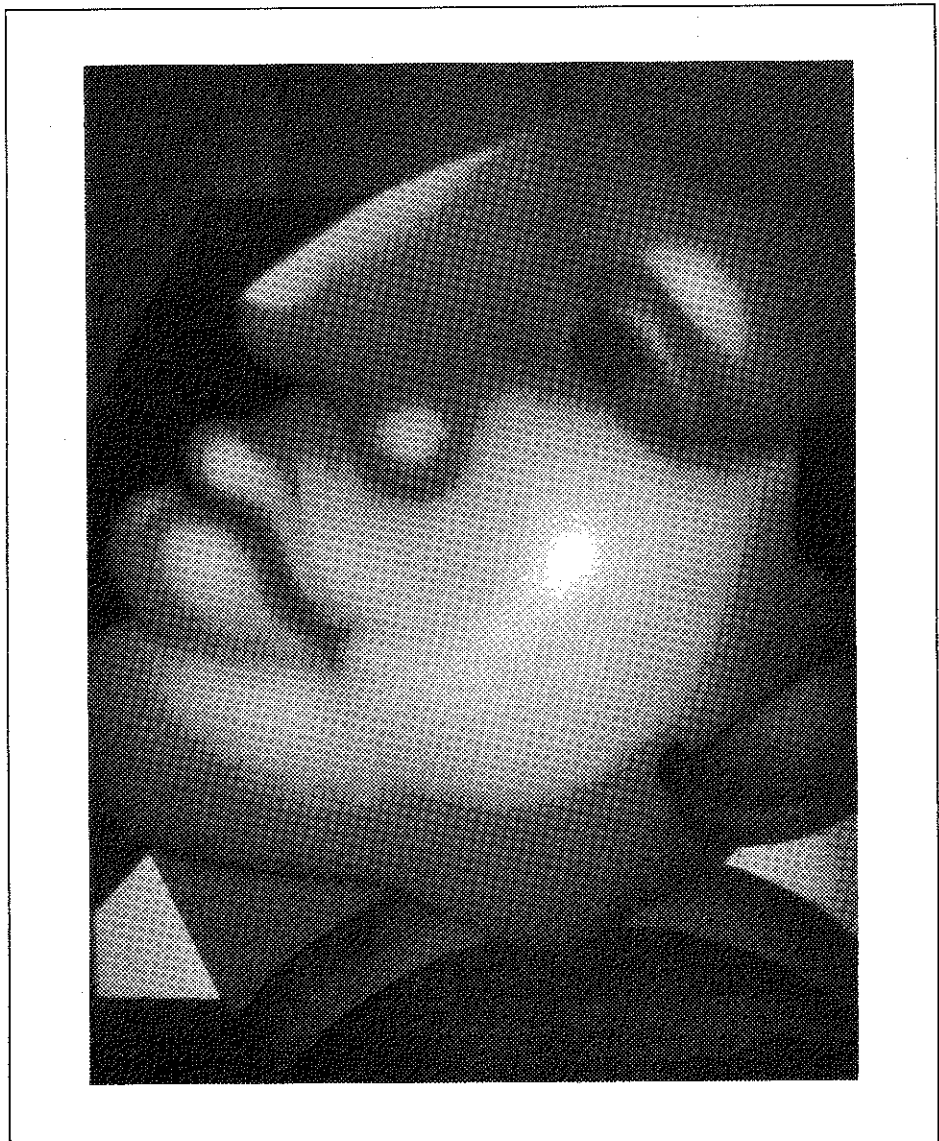
Several authors - for example, Judith Doyle in *Impulse* - have written of art in contemporary Nicaragua as if revolutionary practice emerges out of a timeless present. As this article indicates, the struggle for a people's art - indeed for any art - goes back to the origins of colonialism, and the problems of creating a popular culture are only beginning to be appreciated. Ingrid Mayrhofer provides the groundwork for understanding how difficult it is to make truly revolutionary art. - I.D.

The strongest single impact on Nicaraguan society this century was the 1979 triumph of the Popular Sandinista Revolution (RPS). Even though with this triumph the culture of resistance became institutionalised, the process of deculturalisation of the 45-year dictatorship could not be reversed overnight, nor could the new human being, "el hombre nuevo", be born and raised independently of 400 years of underdevelopment.

During each epoch of the nation's history, new generations were influenced not only by the dominant culture, but also by the cultural response of the subjugated peoples. The double standards of the colonial rulers may well be the base for contemporary "machismo" - the brutalisation of Indian women by the Spaniards, who protected the virginity of their own daughters - but the same racist differentiation allowed for partial continuation of indigenous culture. Native dualist mythology, with its belief in spiritual forces interacting with the phenomenal world, originated in the need to explain human and natural relationships, and was adapted after the conquest to deal with the new oppressive reality. Characteristic of the reaction to Spanish rule are beliefs in supernatural appearances, such as the "Padre sin Cabeza" and "Carreta Nagua", which

were responses to the actions of the conquerors. The Indians, helpless in the face of brute force, first attributed supernatural powers to the Spaniards. In the post-conquest period, the origin of beliefs in non-human apparitions was concealed and indigenous culture developed a fatalism that mystifies the human responsibility for shaping destiny. Catholicism, with its focus on immaterial redemption, was internalised by the Indian. However, once imposed upon the colony, the Catholic hierarchy also had to accept indigenous influences, such as fertility dances and masked parades at patron saint festivals, black saints, and even the image of the sun-god in a church.

After independence from Spain in 1821, the introduction of French liberalism towards the end of the 19th century brought new thoughts to the anachronistic values of the colonial ruling class. The relative economic wealth and progress based on coffee export during Zelaya's liberal dictatorship (1893 to 1909) coincide chronologically with the birth of Modernism, which was introduced to the archaic Spanish language by Rubén Darío, Nicaragua's first great poet. But just as the creole aristocracy was becoming more decadent, the new mestizo bourgeoisie lacked a tradition of its own. Freemasonry, transcendentalism and eastern philosophies became readily adapted to native spiritual practices, allowing for broader participation in intellectual life. It is therefore possible for



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Art Before The Revolution

INGRID MAYRHOFER

Sandino, a leader of peasant stock and hero of national resistance between 1926 and 1934, to hold ideas about literacy education, land and labour reforms, cooperatives, wage parity for women - and at the same time believe that his generals were reincarnations of Indian chiefs. This belief was shared by many people and supernatural powers were attributed also to the guerillas of that time as a result of their skillful strategy of unpredictable ambush and traceless escape. (The General Juan Gregorio Colindres is still referred to as "the cat" because of his agile escapes from the enemy, alluding to his mythological animal spirit.) With Sandino's liberation struggle, popular mythology manifested its strength as a tool of resistance and rebellion, by functioning as a unifying element in communication between the guerillas and the peasant base against the foreign invaders.

Most representative of the contradictions within the post-Zelaya society, torn by civil war and United States intervention, is the Vanguard movement of writers and poets. Touting a self-proclaimed reactionary ideology, the "Vanguardia" sought a return to pure Catholic values, rid of democratic-liberal prejudice. While rejecting U.S. intervention in a political/cultural sense, and idolising Sandino as their pure savage and nationalist hero, they also admired Franco and incorporated elements of Italian Futurism, and even of Dadaism, in their style. They saw dictatorship as the only possible way of achieving the purification of society and accepted Somoza as their new hero after Sandino's assassination. The Vanguardistas, members of Granada's decaying provincial aristocracy, enjoyed the economic benefits flowing from the opportunistic and U.S.-supported bourgeoisie, while they despised the unrefined cultural values of the new business class. They ignored the blatantly un-aristocratic and corrupt background of Somoza, who had worked as a toilet inspector and had learned to speak "American" on the streets of Philadelphia (a factor that made him extremely popular with the wife of U.S. ambassador Hanna). Culturally, Somoza em-

bodied everything that Sandino had aimed to liberate his people from, such as alcoholism, corruption, ignorance, and the sell-out of the homeland to the United States. (The infamous Chamorro/Brian treaty signed by the conservative Diaz government in 1914 leased the rights to build an inter-ocean canal and parts of Nicaragua to the United States on a 99-year lease.)

The fatalist nature of Nicaraguan mythology had made it politically inept as a tool of resistance to Spanish rule. During the dictatorship following Sandino's assassination by Somoza in 1934, the subjugated workers and peasants were again forced to submit to physical exploitation and an intensified process of deculturalisation. In the effort to wipe out resistance and subdue public awareness, the dictator used military repression and took advantage of the fatalist and redemptive aspects of religion, while also trivialising and commercialising traditional popular culture. Based on an export economy of agricultural products and raw materials, the dictatorship saw no benefit in public education, nor in the preservation of indigenous languages or the nation's cultural patrimony. Some intellectuals of the vanguard movement, such as Pablo Antonio Cuadra and José Coronel Urtecho, realised the failure of their saviour, but only Manolo Cuadra became a socialist and later supported the revolutionary resistance movement. They continued to write, as well as publish poetry, and thus allowed for a continuous development in poetry through the 40s and 50s up to the revolutionary "Frente Ventana" in the 60s. In 1956 the young poet Rigoberto López Pérez executed Anastasio Somoza García, and thus prepared the "beginning of the end".

Parallel to the Frente Ventana in poetry, there appeared in 1963 the manifesto of the group "Praxis", founded by two painters, Alejandro Aróstegui and César Izquierdo, and the writer Amaru Barahona. Unlike poetry, the visual arts had a very limited presence up to, and within, the Vanguard movement, who made only isolated efforts to include modern art in the form of illustrations and caricature. Aside from woodcut

reproductions in poetry magazines, the prevalent genre until the 60s had been portraiture and religious paintings in a 19th century academic style. In 1949, Don Rodrigo Peñalba returned from Italy to revolutionise the Fine Art School by introducing German Expressionism 40 years after its origin.



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When Praxis manifested its rebellion against the school and public taste, it did so in an organic abstract style influenced by European informalism, cubism, surrealism, etc. The content of the paintings exhibited in the Galería Praxis was human suffering in a nature wounded and destroyed by a "hostile and wretched" society. But public taste in art in 1963 was limited to the gusto of a certain "clan" of appreciators. The same idealist nationalists, who proclaim that every Nicaraguan is a poet or the son of a poet, also recognise now that, despite Peñalba's annual exhibitions in Managua's central park, very few people appreciated or had access to painting.

Though initially elitist in their choice of qualified participants, Praxis made an effort to take part in intellectual activities in rural centres, especially after reorganising in 1971 and broadening the membership. Most successful of all their efforts, however, was the pictorial integration of popular culture in their visual language.

With Praxis, pre-Columbian symbols, as well as contemporary mythology, found their place in the fine arts, reinforcing the nation's roots and identity. While Peñalba, who had encouraged his students to look for "lo Nicaragüense", limited his representation of nationhood to the narrative in his own paintings, the Praxis generation approached the search for identity analytically. Primeval landscapes, mythological figures and rituals are represented in grainy textures, petroglyphic line, telluric colours and timeless compositions. Initially rejected by the bourgeois art clientele for its unpleasant aesthetic and political undertones, the Praxis style became a known language of social

movements of Frente Ventana, Praxis and the FSLN emerged at a time when the dictatorship had achieved a pathetic state of deculturalisation.

The dictatorship's cultural decadence manifested itself most overtly in Somoza's ignorance of art. Rubén Darío had decried the lack of education and interest of the generals, who failed to pay him a living wage, and he ridiculed the ruling class in his story "El rey burgués". In the 50s, Peñalba's students signed a petition against cuts in the already minimal public funding of the art school. The spouse of Somoza, (Tachito) Debayle, considered herself a great patron of the arts, but her imports of foreign

While Montenegro sees a purity and honesty in the peasants' ancient grounding in nature, his statement expresses not only a paternalistic lament over the country/city dichotomy, but also his own lack of awareness of the extent of deculturalisation and internalisation of the corrupt U.S.- sponsored dictatorship. In a similar attitude Pablo Antonio Cuadra laments in his 1969 book "El Nicaragüense" the bare state of walls in Nicaraguan peasant houses, and that his people do not decorate their wagon wheels as do the Ticas - ignoring that Costa Rica did not waste millions on an army, which in Nicaragua maintained an oppressive and ignorant dictatorship; as well, he leaves out the fact that the middle class clutters its homes in Nicaragua just as it does in Spain. On the other hand, Sergio Ramirez, founding member of Frente Ventana, explains the ready acceptance of Mexican "ranchera" music among Nicaraguan peasants as escapist entertainment that idealises the rural life and reinforces machismo.

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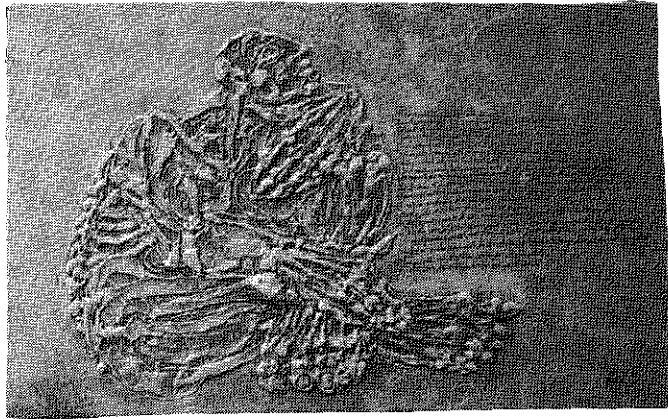
performers betrayed the prevalent motivation of the ruling class: to accumulate a fortune at the expense of the people and waste it by imitating high society. After the triumph, hundreds of fake masterpieces and still-wrapped art books were found on her deserted estate.

The statement by painter Carlos Montenegro, originally published in 1976 in *Revista Centroamericana*, sums up the level of public deculturalisation:

"...the contemporary Nicaraguan city-dweller is kind of traitor, as he tries to eliminate traditions which he considers inferior. He himself discriminates against what is of him...The truth is that we have a what-do-I-care attitude, laziness; the Nicaraguan doesn't read, doesn't think. There is little seriousness, little responsibility, we make jokes about everything to escape the seriousness. And the predominant objective of life is superficial entertainment and money. All this is who we are and all this is what we pass on to our children; this is how we teach them to be."

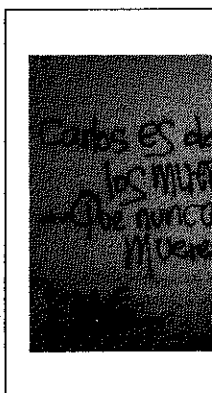
In addition to the city-dweller's ignorance of folklore, the prevailing prejudice against artists as good-for-nothings was internalised as bohemianism by the artistic community and many a painter is known for his hard drinking and womanising as for his painting style. This attitude among lower-class artists and intellectuals descends from the practice by the landed aristocracy in sending their sons overseas, where they would inevitably join the bohemia in Paris and waste their parents' money. As so many of the destructive elements of the ruling class, socially irresponsible behaviour has been readily adopted by the lower-class male as a glorified evil of his own. Strongly opposed by Sandino, as well as the master Peñalba, alcoholism had cost Rubén Darío his life: in 1916, at age 49, the poet died of cirrhosis of the liver.

The severe repression of students following the first protests in 1959 and the 60s shows the dictatorship's fear of its own impotence in the face of intellectual activity. On the popular level, painting and writing gained a new perspective as a tool of resistance.



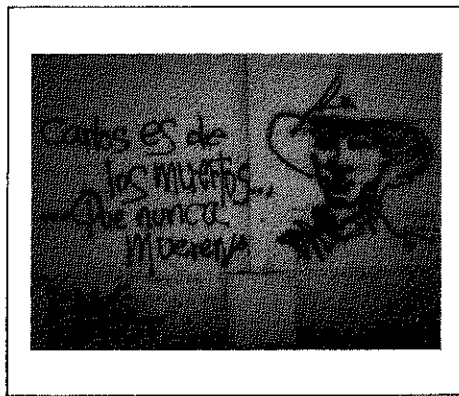
criticism and was published in the cultural section of *La Prensa*, the official bourgeois opposition daily. Contrary to Vanguardia's paternalistic idealisation of the heroic and peasant as a symbol of a heroic past and purity, Praxis presents a profound understanding and sincere attitude towards the need for social change, with a particular focus on urban problems and rural backwardness.

In the early 60s, the dictatorship faced a new and organised political resistance. The heroic act of Rigoberto López Pérez, in 1956, who lost his life immediately after shooting Anastasio Somoza García, brought about increased repression. There was a crisis in the world cotton market, the Cuban revolution, disunity among the military, the annihilation of the resistance of El Chaparral and the student massacre in León in July 1959, followed by more student protests. The acceptance of Sandino's example presented a political base for the resistance and his heroic image became a unifying cultural symbol. When Carlos Fonseca, Silvio Mayorga and Tomás Borge founded their political organisation in 1961, they called it the "Sandinista" National Liberation Front, or FSLN. The intellectual



Militant artists, still in general too timid to express their support for a very political popular response, the writings contained Sandino's struggle and spontaneous private walls. Ri ening the dictato "pintas" meant th or even death for

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Just as naive painting was not indigenous to Solentiname, the choice of abstraction as the fine art style of the 60s and 70s did not develop out of a long national history of art in Nicaragua. Nor was it ever an exercise in artistic escapism like Abstract Expressionism in the United States. The painting of an often ugly, but rarely representational imagery, could be interpreted as an artistic rebellion against the dominant taste and the expressionism of the master Peñalba. It can also be seen as a form of self-censorship, as more explicit statements of social criticism would not get published, even in the opposition daily, where Pablo Antonio Cuadra was in charge of the cultural news. But the strongest reason for the particular abstraction that all the members and affiliates of Praxis have in common, if not in imagery at least in intensity, is found in their shared need to deal with their personal emotions in the face of social contradictions. The monochrome treatment of fragments of the figure by Orlando Sobalvarro, for example, impedes any identification with it as a human; their linear stylization removes Leoncio Sáenz' drawings from a time-bound reality; the telluric extractions of Leonel Vanegas seem to be happening below rather than on the worldly surface of the earth; there is not illusionary pictorial depth in César Izquierdo's heavy textures; and the cold colour and metal of Aróstegui's collage-paintings present an intellectual rather than tactile relief. The need for academic distancing from the daily experience of the painter as a social being is most evident in the paintings after the 1972 earthquake, despite a sudden market for their works during the reconstruction boom, which saw the terrible misappropriation of international relief funds by the dictator. The immediacy of the mostly singular subject matter, organic monochrome earthcolours, detailed textures and compositions reminiscent of photographic close-ups, betray the intimate personal involvement of the artist with his lived reality, despite the effort of artistic distancing. In the intensity and stillness, with which a fragment is presented, the work allows for an emotional distance from the whole - not unlike the effect of beliefs in supernatural appearances by the Indians after the conquest. Intellectually aware of the human cause of their unjust society, the painters share with the viewers a psychological need to separate and protect the most intimate of their personal feelings in the face of public despair.

Militant artists, students and the public in general took up brushes or spray cans to express their demands, or their support for the FSLN in "pintas", a very political form of graffiti and popular response to increased censorship of the press in the 70s. These writings contained symbols of Sandino's struggle and the mythological quality of appearing mysteriously and spontaneously on public and private walls. Ridiculing and threatening the dictatorship, the making of "pintas" meant the risk of torture, jail or even death for the protester.

When art galleries or exhibitions were closed by the military, it was never over a particular painting, but rather because of political speeches, as was the case in a German embassy exhibit of Carazo painters, or because of "subversive" literature or graffiti that was found in "La Cascada", a studio and gallery space in Managua. The experience of the primitive painters of Solentiname is a painful example of the dictatorship's attitude toward art. The island community in the south of Lake Cocibolca had been founded by poet/priest Ernesto Cardenal and organised as a practice in the theology of liberation. Aside from their political and religious studies, the members of the community took up naive painting with the help of Cardenal and Praxis member Róger Pérez de la Rocha. After the 1977 attack on the garrison of San Carlos by guerrillas from Solentiname, the National Guard burned the library, and painting became an illegal "communist" activity. The few remaining members of the community were closely watched by Guardsmen, so that they would not paint. However, as Marina Silva says, after she clandestinely left the island for Granada, she exhibited her paintings in the well-known gallery "Tagüe" in Managua. The members of Solentiname were the only painters directly involved in the armed liberation struggle, although Praxis and other individual painters, as members of the group "Grada", collaborated with the FSLN.

The artistic consequences of the painter's personal involvement in the national emotion becomes even more clearly evident when we compare the current works of Vanegas, for instance, with those of his contemporary and compatriot Armando Morales, who has spent most of his painting life in Paris. Morales, the most recognised of Nicaraguan painters, had the same teacher in Peñalba and the same turbulent national history.

His emotional experience of the homeland is manifest in his latest paintings, but isolated from the collective memory of those who continued to live and suffer the oppressive reality. Dore Ashton in her intro-



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duction to the 1986 Claude Bernard Gallery catalogue, has called Morales "more Nicaraguan the longer he remained abroad", but what the painter captures in his Nicaraguan works, is an independent national beauty, that is unspoiled and does not reflect a history of human suffering. While Morales is painting mythologically real landscapes and timeless historical scenes, members of the Praxis generation now encounter the process of a changing reality, which they themselves have helped create. The imagery of the Praxis generation, and of their disciples among the young painters, still maintains the pictorial language that the art-educated public has learned to read during the resistance. Their style, however, developed as a response to a different, hostile environment, and some painters are now struggling with a tendency towards stylistic stagnation in their work, which has become comfortably accepted by the appreciators and buyers of art.

The same phenomenon of academism and commercialism can be found in the naive painting, which developed from a parallel experience to Praxis. As Marina Silva says, new painters often merely copy the

Solentiname style without the original feeling and an equal lack of orientation with the new experience in the young revolution, which has yet to overcome the historical "hangover" as well as the present U.S. military aggression and economic hardship. The "nausea" that Praxis set out to treat in 1963 no longer has a cause in the revolution, but their aspired "symbiosis between people and culture" demands a long process. Despite the admirable and enthusiastic efforts of cultural workers and brigades that followed the triumph, the process of public education is moving slowly. The recent introduction of adult and children's classes at the art school in Managua has sparked broad participation, but most of the rural cultural centres face the lack of materials and experience, as well as the casualties of a dragging war among their workers, such as poet Ahmed Campos and painter Madrigal. As a consequence of the war, government spending priority is in production and defence, and the numerous urban and rural Popular Cultural Centres rely heavily on volunteers, thus perpetuating the myth of artist's work not being productive.

On January 9th, 1987, the revolutionary government, elected in November 1984, proclaimed its first constitution. Throughout the previous year, members of the national assembly held open council with various interest groups, including the artistic community. Of the 13 paragraphs covered by "Titulo VII, Education y Cultura", three deal with the rescue, development and protection of national creativity. A separate article contains three paragraphs on the specific cultural rights of the Atlantic Coast Region. Billboards, advertising the proposed constitution in towns and countryside, emphasised slogans promising freedom of religious worship, the protection of the family, human rights and national sovereignty. The artists, in Art. 127, got absolute creative freedom, the state's commitment to facilitate materials for production and distribution, as well as protection of the copyright. The national patrimony is protected under Art. 128, and includes not only archaeological and historical values, but all the visual art that is now being created in the country.

The permanent collection paintings of the ASTC (Association of Sandinista Cultural Workers), housed in the unique "Ruinas del Gran Hotel", the ruins of the once grand hotel of Managua, contain what is left of the best of the Praxis Generation, as well as new acquisitions. The "Ruinas" also has an open-air stage, space for experimental and non-commercial exhibitions and individual artists' studio space. In addition, the union has at least five galleries of commer-

cial exhibition spaces, of which the Casa Fernando Gordillo is the most prominent one.

The Ministry of Culture organises big exhibitions, such as the retrospective of Peñalba, or their collection of colonial paintings, on the walls of the Rubén Darío theatre. Smaller shows are held at the Sala Leonel Rugama and the art school, while its permanent collection and patrimony is distributed among the various government buildings and is not readily accessible to the public. Other exhibitions are organised by special interest groups, such as the Red Cross, the Architects' House, the Arabe-Libio Cultural Centre, the Ministry of Interior, and so on, as well as private dealers. The most extensive collection of art belongs to the Central Bank, which also has a slide library and funded the publication in 1977 of a bulletin on painting and sculpture, the only one of its kind in Nicaragua. Outside of Managua, exhibitions are mostly organised by the Ministry of Culture in collaboration with local painters, members of the union, students and an occasional foreign resident artist.

The patrimony and copyrights are important gains for Nicaraguan artists, whose best works have in the past been exported without any records, and reproduced without acknowledgement. Some smuggling continues now, especially of naive and regional art, for the nostalgia market in Miami. A typical example of ignorance of authors' rights sparked a heated debate last August in the cultural supplement of the *Nuevo Diario*, when the *Nuevo Amanecer Cultural* used trivial images of women to illustrate a feminist article. The editor did publish the women writers' letters of protest, but did not admit defeat. *Ventana*, the cultural supplement of *Barriacada*, often neglects to give credit not only to the painter, whose work is used to illustrate, but also to writers of articles, sources and translators of foreign material.

The traditional neglect and condescending attitude towards the artist is only one of the many obstacles the the 45-odd members of UNAP (the visual artists' branch of the ASTC) have had to confront since its foundation after the revolutionary triumph. While many of the goals and activities of the ASTC overlap and interact with the work of the Ministry of Culture, the main characteristic of the ASTC is that it is the first union that represents professional artists. Rosario Murillo, the secretary general of the union, has explained what is meant by "professional" as the "...achievement of a higher aesthetic level through years of practice". In the short history of art in Nicaragua, pub-

lic taste has always lagged behind artistic innovation, even though the artistic introduced by the master Peñalba and the members of Praxis may have been already dated internationally. With its place behind, as Leoncio Sáenz put it, on the tail of Halley's comet in the arts world, Nicaraguan art has rarely made waves - with the worthy exception of Armando Morales - outside of Latin America, or even within the continent. José Gómez Sicre and later Marta Traba were the better-known among the few critics who appreciated the achievements of Peñalba and Praxis. On the national level, art criticism never developed beyond isolated attempts and the practice of "art appreciation. Perhaps because of the lack of a critical vanguard also in literature, perhaps because of the acceptance of its irrelevance upon the international trend-setting or because of a traditionally fragile artistic psyche in a small community, art criticism is one of the many cultural casualties of the underdeveloped country. This lack of criticism, together with the democratic nature of the union, often results in very uneven quality among exhibitors in a show, as well as within the *oeuvre* of the individual artist.

But perhaps it is in the younger generation that the artistic potential is being realised in the present and is beginning to reflect the liberated reality of the individual in society. The political "rebellion" which brought with it the innovative style of Praxis is now history, and both artists and public have come to terms with this history. Along with all the conflicting identities and technical problems, the Nicaraguan public is now also allowed to identify with the experience of the individual artist as a social being. The accessibility of a more figurative and intimate art should bring closer an audience which has learned to appreciate the music and poetry of the resistance more so than its painting. This does not mean that the artists have to lower their standards, but rather to raise them, as public taste has become more demanding since the revolution. (Standing tall in the surrealistically empty centre of Managua, the realist monument to the heroic combatant, is popularly known as the incredible hulk, or "el mole".) The people have been participating on a broad scale in the popular poetry workshops, they write and read and paint and they will continue to participate in the process of democratisation of the fine arts.

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Ingrid Mayrhofer is an artist who lives in Newmarket, Ontario, and who has taught visual art in Nicaragua. She is curator of an exhibition of contemporary Nicaraguan art at A-Space.

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