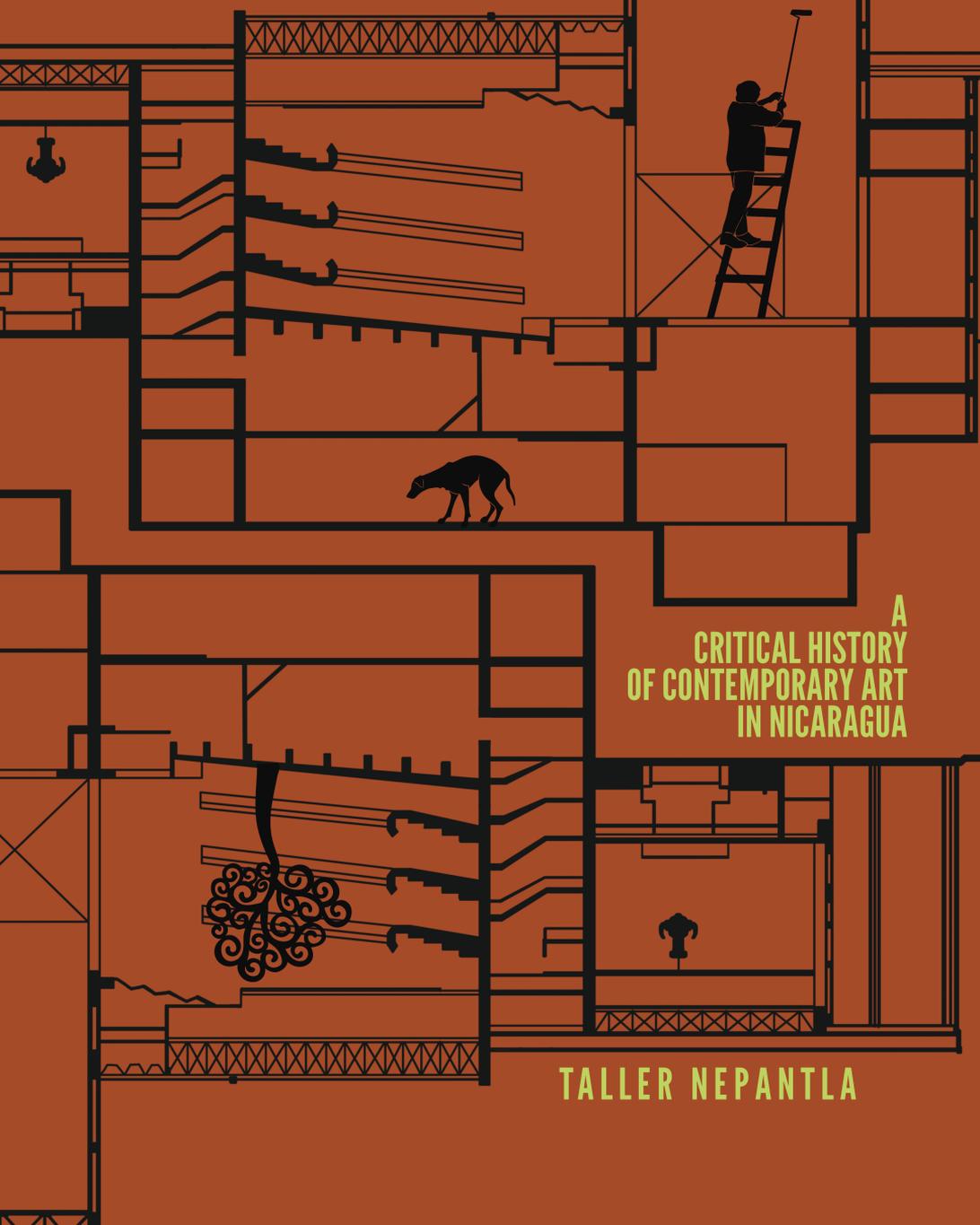


ANTI LOGY



A
CRITICAL HISTORY
OF CONTEMPORARY ART
IN NICARAGUA

TALLER NEPANTLA

antilogy: (noun) a contradiction in ideas, statements, or terms. In rhetoric, meaning controversy or discussion. Etymology: from Latin *antilogia* meaning contradiction and ancient Greek ἀντιλογία meaning contradiction, controversy. Root: ἀντι- meaning “against” or “in opposition”, and prefix + -λογία - meaning “word” or “explanation”.

Taller Nepantla

Founded in 2018, Taller Nepantla is a borderless institute/collective that invests in social relationships within arts and culture. *Nepantla* is a Nahuatl word that describes a place as “being in the middle” or the concept of the “in-between”. For us, nepantla characterizes the liminal and non-binary processes we occupy to think about identity, territories, politics and art. As a workshop, we are one-third community center, one-third laboratory, and one-third academia.

Since the founding of the collective, our collaborations focus on criticizing the cultural industry and subverting the standards of the dominant culture. We explore the use of everyday materials and prioritize the process. Our artistic intention always aims towards the liberation of everyone.

Yarince Perez

Nicaraguan anarchist. MA in Critical Theory, 17, Institute of Critical Studies, Mexico. BA in Psychology and Philosophy from Warren Wilson University, U.S. Co-Director of the *Casa Cultural La Rizoma* in Managua (2015-2018). Led cultural initiatives in Central America such as *Zona de Transición* and *COLMENAS*. Participated in the RAPACES residencies (2015 and 2018). Curated art exhibitions in Nicaragua, Mexico, and the USA. Professor of documentary media and journalism. Writes about philosophy, art, politics, social criticism, and the history of Nicaragua. Currently exiled in Mérida, Yucatán.

ANTILOGY

**A Critical History of
Contemporary Art
in Nicaragua**

Antilogy: A Critical History of Contemporary Art in Nicaragua

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Note

This book is a compact version of my final research project done during my Master's degree in Critical Theory. Most of my arguments were developed between 2021 and 2023, in the company of a community of readers, friends, colleagues, criminals and comrades.

As a researcher, I am interested in democratizing resources, revisiting archives, organizing art exhibitions and creating study groups dedicated to politics, art, and culture. My motivation in these efforts is based partially in my experience of the precarious situation of education and the arts in Nicaragua. I position myself outside of a system that frames the role of an academic or art historian as the arbiter of opinions accepted as "knowledge". I am opposed to how such systematic practices work first and foremost to facilitate the transit of objects within an economic system of art. Rather, my intention is to rekindle the many creative and artistic practices that have the capacity to build community and that can politicize culture. I do this in the hopes that these practices offer a possible solution to the abundance of historical problems that the Nicaraguan and Latin American people experience.

In this book, I am reflecting about the community to which I belong. I am celebrating the history of close friendships and at the same time I want to be brutally critical about the root of our oppressions. This project is an interdisciplinary process that combines the writing of a brief history of contemporary art in Nicaragua, the piecing together of a critical apparatus inspired by the artists themselves, and the examination of the mechanisms that govern our cultural institutions. That is how I am practicing a labor of care, such as the way care has been described by artist Patricia Belli. That is how I share my fondness for the art scene in Nicaragua, by using a practice based on love, desire, and happiness. In other words, I use the labor of caring to re-center the importance of what is at

stake emotionally in work that intervenes in the circulation and formulation of ideas and cultures within a community.

To think about Nicaragua is dangerous. All current critical research about Nicaragua is conducted amidst a mass-censorship project that has so-far resulted in the closure or confiscation of over 30 universities and 5,000 non-profit organizations by the government. My research is born out of an already politicized field and has been developed against the current of violent political forces that impose how to think, dialogue, and research.

This book is a product of exile and was not produced on Nicaraguan soil. It was the fruit of material conditions that allowed me to study and work full-time in the territory that historically belongs to the Leni Lenape and more recently in the Mayan peninsular territory. Additionally, this publication is intentionally self-published and printed to be as accessible as possible. All profits directly support my local community in Mérida, Yucatán.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge Cecilia Brawley for her companionship, Eleonora Croquer for her patience, Marcos Agudelo and Ileana Selejan for their encouragement and Miguel Díaz for their gossip. Additionally, gratitude to all the friends in Philadelphia, Mérida, and Barcelona, and all the family in Nicaragua. *All writing is always already polyphonic.* Artificial Intelligence was not used in any part of the production of this text.

This is not the “definitive history” of contemporary art in Nicaragua, but instead it is a story: an intervention, a possibility, a proposal. A starting point that hopefully inspires curiosity, opens more questions than answers, and succeeds in building new art worlds.

I hope that this work is another brick in the foundations of many barricades to be built.

INTRODUCTION

We need to understand not only the importance of art for Nicaragua, but also the importance of Nicaragua for art.

-David Craven, 1989¹

Institutional Critique within the art world describes both a movement and a tendency of artists focusing their work on critical and political research of the art institutions at power. Much of this work was exhibited through methods such as pieces of art, curatorships, and provocative essays. In a creative environment stemming from the social struggles of the 1960s, many artists developed a critical rigor that sought to politicize the field of art and expose its bourgeois, sexist, and racist ideology.² Specifically, these cultural actors aimed to make visible the ways in which the entire artistic circuit of creation, circulation, and interpretation are not inherently sacred and benevolent, but are instead complicit in social stratification and oppression.

¹ David Craven, *The New Concept of Art and Popular Culture in Nicaragua Since the Revolution in 1979: An Analytical Essay and Compendium of Illustrations* (Lewinston, New York: E. Mellen Press, 1989).

² Alexander Alberro, "Institutions, Critique and Institutional Critique", in *Institutional Critique an Anthology of Artists Writings*, ed. by Alexander Alberro y Blake Stimson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011).

In my project I seek to explore the legacy and practice of Institutional Critique and transform it, just as curator Simon Sheik recommends, into an "analytical tool, a method of critique and spatial and political articulation that can be applied not only to the art world, but also to disciplinary spaces and institutions in general".³ Inspired by Gilles Deleuze's gesture towards experimentation, we can use the wealth of examples in IC to develop an entire toolbox of sorts that can help us analyze, deconstruct and critique the field of contemporary art in Nicaragua. By doing so, we can creatively give birth to new concepts and new ways of living.

In Nicaragua, we desperately need to think about the contemporary art scene and its relationship to institutions and political powers. Although some artists and critics such as Raúl Quintanilla, Patricia Belli, Miguel López and Virginia Pérez-Ratton have written and commented extensively on the situation of contemporary arts in Nicaragua, there is still a lack of a critical study on the origin of cultural institutions, their cultural policies, their relationship with the history of contemporary art in Nicaragua and the political implications of how the arts have been managed.⁴

My position is that the management of contemporary art in Nicaragua is not neutral, benevolent, or a vocation committed to cultural development, but instead, operates to gentrify creative practice, trivialize art, and pacify its political potential. To construct this argument, I work in dialogue with the history of contemporary art in Nicaragua and its institutional structure.

³ Simon Sheik, "Notes on Institutional Critique", in *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique* ed. Gerald Rauning and Gene Ray (London: Mayfly Books, 2009).

⁴ See, for example, *Area of Turbulence: Art in Nicaragua, from Revolution to Neoliberalism*, by Raúl Quintanilla, and *Patricia Belli. Balance and Collapse*, both edited by Miguel A. López and published by TEOR/ética in Costa Rica.

This general argument is deployed in two parts. The first part outlines this history through the exploration of key moments in the institutional development of contemporary art. Chronologically, I investigate the origin stories and current missions of state institutions such as the Ministry of Culture and the Nicaraguan Institute of Culture, private institutions such as the Ortiz Guardian Art Center and CÓDICE Gallery, and non-governmental institutions such as the Cultural Center of Spain in Nicaragua and the Nicaraguan Institute of Hispanic Culture. Simultaneously, I examine controversial cases of censorship or controversy in the arts to understand how institutions reacted and what specific interests they protected⁵. The development of this art scene comes in contrast with the concerns of Institutional Critique and the theoretical apparatuses of philosophers such as Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Rancière, Michel Foucault and Gabriel Rockhill.

The second part revisits and celebrates some experiments in “critical management” of the arts in Nicaragua. These were local examples of self-management, critical writing, feminist education, extra-disciplinary work, and commitment to justice. If art involves a process of imagination, and institutions limit what we can imagine as possible, then it is important to occupy art itself as a means of imagining other kinds of infrastructures. This second part describes the potential that already exists in the history of contemporary art in Nicaragua and positions it as a wellspring of possibilities to think, create, and manage the present.

The investigation of art and its political potentials become essential when it is placed in conversation with contemporary

⁵ Such as the case of *Vuelo Difícil* by Patricia Belli, *Exhibición #1* by Habacuc, and *Solo Fantasía* by Elyla Sinvergüenza.

discourses of critical theory. For example, marxist theorist Gabriel Rockhill argues that the generation of contemporary researchers associated with critical theory has abandoned aesthetic analysis and the emancipatory power of the arts, thus promoting the thesis that art cannot radically transform the world.⁶ For Rockhill, contemporary authors like Seyla Benhabib, Nancy Fraser, Rainer Frost, Axel Honneth and Thomas McCarthy, embrace the separation between art and politics and instead care more about "enhancing the democratic debate".⁷ For these theorists, who represent the canon critical theory, the art field is no longer worth thinking about. My position, in contrast, agrees with Rockhill, and encourages the investigation of art and the awareness of its emancipatory potential. I propose the idea that art is a fundamental part of the world and that its effects have the capacity to intervene in reality itself, creating a more equitable, just, and responsible humanity.

The main historical weight behind this research does more than simply fill the gaps that exist in this history within Nicaragua, but can serve to inspire how we consider the always-in-crisis situation of the arts on a global scale. For example, in the United States, we are seeing a wave of union activism among cultural workers that respond to precariousness and labor exploitation.⁸ In Europe, climate activists are taking aim at museums highlighting the economic investment between the museum and non-renewable energy.⁹ In Africa, we find new initiatives to encourage the reparation of colonial violence

⁶ Gabriel Rockhill, *Radical History and the Politics of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

⁷ Rockhill, *Radical History*, 95.

⁸ Zachary Small, "U.S. Museums See Rise in Unions Even as Labor Movement Slumps," in *New York Times*, February 21, 2022,

⁹ Alex Marshal, "U.K. Museums Face a Sticky Problem From Climate Protests," in *New York Times*, July 6, 2022,

promoted by cultural institutions and the return of heritage artifacts from the region.¹⁰ In Asía, a fast growing art market reveals an unregulated capitalist control over aesthetic production. Paving the way for art to freely transit new wealthy economies, mostly focused in China. In Latin America, cultural institutions have to place themselves within the historical convulsions of feminist and student protests, radical changes in political leadership, environmental extractivism and mass migrations.

At the end of the day, as Rockhill argues, the creation, circulation, and reception of art is less about the economy of fabulous objects displayed to a privileged audience, but rather it is more about *social agency*. These aspects of the art world relate more closely to our capacities as subjects and communities that are able to freely create, imagine, intervene, and question the world and its history.¹¹ This is how thinking about the arts and their emancipatory potential will always be a necessary political adventure no matter where we begin. For now, let's start in Nicaragua.

¹⁰ Suyin Haynes, “European Museums Keep Talking About Repatriating Colonial Objects. African Artists and Curators Have Ideas on How to Actually Make It Happen”, in *Time*, October 20, 2022

¹¹ Rockhill, *Radical History*

PART I

A Critique of Contemporary Art Management in Nicaragua

CHAPTER 1

To study the history of the arts in Nicaragua

*How can we think of an alternative to canonization,
other than a counter-canonization?*

-Stefan Notwojny

It is exhausting to study art history in Nicaragua. Currently, its *corpus* is fragmented, very infrequently consulted, and there are no institutional resources such as art departments in universities or research areas in museums that encourage the study of art history.¹² Even within the academy dedicated to history and cultural criticism in Nicaragua, contemporary art as a symbolic practice that reflects historical anxieties and resistances is largely ignored.¹³ For example, the recent publication, *Anthology of Contemporary Nicaraguan Critical Thought*, edited by researchers Juan Pablo Gómez and Camilo Antillón from the Institute of History of Nicaragua and

¹² In the U.S., for example, academic institutions are the ones that primarily agree and fund a new generation of artists and art researchers, through MFA programs and affiliated institutions.

¹³ An exceptional case would be that of Dr. María Dolores Torres, who from the Department of Art Research of the Institute of History of Nicaragua and Central America (IHNCA) played an important role; however, this department ceased to exist after 2010.

Central America, does not include a section dedicated to aesthetics or the arts.¹⁴ Additionally, the highly consulted CLACSO Virtual Library on Nicaragua contains more than six hundred scholarly articles in English and Spanish devoted to the "Nicaraguan question," but offers no texts on contemporary art or aesthetics in Nicaragua.

So far there is no written document, public archive or educational curriculum fundamentally dedicated to the "History of Contemporary Art in Nicaragua".¹⁵ However, there are some sporadic texts and publications that provide a lot of content and analysis in spite of this academic vacuum.

Some fundamental references are found, for example, in the research of David Craven, an American academic who dedicated decades of his work to study the revolutionary arts of the eighties, during the Sandinista revolution. His book, *New Concept of Art and Popular Culture in Nicaragua since the Revolution in 1979*, is one of the most complete sources we have, since it includes interviews, photographs, archives, and interpretations. These sources, which now more than forty years after the Sandinista revolution, are incredibly difficult to find or replicate.¹⁶

Moving forward to the nineties, we find the collection of essays, *Zona de Turbulencia*, by artist and critic Raúl Quintanilla. This publication compiles his articles and publications about art,

¹⁴ Juan Pablo Gómez, Camilo Antillón Najlis eds., *Antología del pensamiento crítico nicaragüense contemporáneo* (Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2016).

¹⁵ This research lays the foundation for this library to eventually come into existence.

¹⁶ Another Marxist reference, but from the perspective of craftsmanship and craftsman during the revolution is found in the ethnographic work of Les Field, in *The Grimace of the Macho Ratón* (Duke University Press, 1999).

culture and political transitions of the last thirty years in Nicaragua.¹⁷ Considering that most of the texts are short and scattered in many different journals, this collection of essays is one of the most comprehensive publications that aims towards what we can call a "critique of the management of contemporary art in Nicaragua". From another angle, the closest thing to an analysis of the public and cultural policies of each historical period in Nicaragua we can find is in Margarita Vannini's recent book, *Politics and Memory in Nicaragua: Resignifications and Erasures in Public Space*, where the author examines a series of transformations on public space led by state orders, directly designed to affect the historical memory of the nation.¹⁸

For the rest of our "art history", we find a fragmented and isolated body of essays, articles, reviews, speeches, presentations, interviews, curatorial texts, and oral histories. The Nicaraguan artist and architect, Marcos Agudelo, attributes this fragmentation to the "recurrent challenges faced in any resource-poor country."¹⁹ Nicaragua is one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere, creating an unsustainable and precarious institutional framework for any academic field of study. Agudelo argues that there is "in general, a lack of systematization of experiences, of specialists studying the phenomenon, of sporadic publications that are out of order and that overall it is difficult to cohere in order to have a scientific analysis that isolates itself from the partiality and precariousness of the oral

¹⁷ Interestingly in 2021, I was the first to organize and facilitate a study circle dedicated to this collection of essays.

¹⁸ Another not-so-contemporary example is David E. Whisnant, *Rascally Signs in Sacred Places: The Politics of Culture in Nicaragua* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

¹⁹ Interview with Marcos Agudelo, March 18, 2023.

“anecdote”, the latter being the most common in our environment.”²⁰

We must add that, from the governmental sector, there is widespread privatization and confiscation of bibliographic materials. Followed by an attack on critical research spaces, which makes it difficult to consult texts and files, but also limits the open and shared analysis of these sources. In fact, many cultural agents, artists and former managers refuse to provide interviews or participate in academic investigations for fear of getting on the “state’s radar”.

From the perspective of the global academic apparatus, many of the references and critical research about the political and cultural history of Nicaragua circulate in a restricted manner in North American universities, out of reach of Nicaraguan historians, students, artists and researchers. We also must add a reminder that much of the popular version of the “history of Nicaragua” actively ignores and renders invisible developments that occur on the Caribbean Coast and in rural communities²¹.

As we will point out at different times in throughout this book, one way to deal with such precariousness in publishing systems has been that of self-publishing and web publishing through blogs²² and the use of publishers abroad. This can be observed in the contemporary art center TEOR/éTica, which has published several books about Nicaraguan art from their homebase in San José, Costa Rica. TEOR/éTica is practically the most important publisher that focuses on contemporary art of Nicaragua and yet is not based

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Unfortunately, this book does not have the conditions to enter into dialogue with the art of the Atlantic Coast region; that work will be for another time.

²² Tragically, many of the writings and blog posts have disappeared due to the expiration of their web servers.

within the country. Examples like this show how inhospitable the political situation is, making it nearly impossible to reach critical acclaim in a publishing industry that will enforce such drastic censorship and alienation if it were attempted from within the country.

Consulting and organizing this material comes with the difficult task of encountering many obstacles, dead ends and gaps. However, in this book, what critical material we have will be complemented by oral histories collected through interviews with artists, teachers, and cultural managers, as well as through visits to galleries and museums. Only through this interdisciplinary approach has it been possible to open a path to the much-needed task not only of synthesizing, creating and sharing an exemplary bibliography, but also of critiquing and analyzing the content consulted. I find it remarkable that in all of the sources I gathered, I could not find a single critique of arguably the most important institutions for Nicaraguan art such as TEOR/ética, the Cultural Center of Spain in Nicaragua, Galería Códice or the Ortiz-Gurdián Foundation²³. Considering every critical avenue of these institutions is my responsibility as a militant researcher-artist.

Anti-Canon

In this first part, I am not attempting to write a comprehensive "history of contemporary art in Nicaragua", nor is it my intention to "canonize" certain experiences and practices. Art critic Stefan Nowotny warns us that every attempt at canonization

²³ TEOR/ética and the Ortiz Gurdián Foundation are the ones that mainly control the discourse of contemporary art in Nicaragua, their publications would not promote discourses against their own interests.

has material and economic consequences, marked by the forgetfulness or neglect of certain artists, or the promulgation and centralization of certain "artist-geniuses".²⁴ Attempting to describe a definitive history of contemporary art is an exercise that belongs to the institutional practices that we aim to criticize. For example, it is important to recognize how, in documentaries or publications dedicated to an artist's life, the institutional or economic contexts that are cemented into the foundation of their artistic practice are often brushed over, whitewashed, or ignored²⁵. Instead, these canon-creating publications focus more on the trajectory of the symbolic content of the created art and its biographic relationship with the artist, painting an individualised arc of self-improvement in the face of social challenges while neglecting to mention systematic challenges.

The invisibility of the economic context and the public or institutional policies in which an artist emerges operates to maintain the myth of the artist as an individual genius. Their accolades are attributed to a liberal ethos that says personal effort and attitude are the only ingredients needed to excel in the arts. The so-called "canon" that is formed under these circumstances should be considered suspicious at best for the way it frames biography as a strategy to preserve the myth of the exceptional artists. Thereby increasing the unique value of their work. But also in how this kind of canonical

²⁴ Stefan Nowotny, "Anti-Canonization: The Differential Knowledge of Institutional Critique", en *Art and Contemporary Art Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, ed. Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray (London, Mayfly Books, 2009), 23.

²⁵I would argue that most writing about artists' biographies are framed by public relations committees who meticulously control how an artist is portrayed as a way to signal a safe investment in their work.

thinking encourages and primes the next generation of artists to exclude politics from their biography.

We must refuse the urge to create a canon, but rather, as Nowotny suggests, "an open field of knowledge of action, a practical knowledge that rejects reintegration into the form of ends proper to art."²⁶ In other words, we are invited to write about art history as a practical and strategic action which can resonate outside of the limits of the artworld. This anti-canonical gesture is what guides the exposition of this book.

Lastly, it's hard to know *when* to begin to tell the modern story. Many historians have divided recent history from Nicaragua in different easily identifiable periods. However, each period overflows the one that follows, and the consequences of the present can always be traced back to the past. As we mentioned earlier, the process of periodizing history also has material consequences. Nonetheless, the concise nature of this book forces me to synthesize many historical periods. Let's keep in mind that I am just scratching the surface of the full history of Nicaraguan art and its institutions. Each chapter of this book has the potential to become an entire book in itself. The historical periods that I prioritize and that are the most highlighted by the Nicaraguan historians are: the Revolutionary (1979-1990), the Neoliberal (1990 - 2000), globalization (2000-2006), the Orteguita (2006 - 2018), the civic insurrection (2018-2022) and the contemporary, distinguished by the current political crisis (2022-2024.)

In each of these periods we find moments of climax that are intertwined with controversial events, which solidifies the main

²⁶ Nowotny, "Anti-Canonization: The Differential Knowledge of Institutional Critique", 27.

ideological and institutional tensions of their corresponding field. I linger on these moments of rupture, rather than to provide a condensed chronological description of the history of contemporary art. Additionally, the perspectives granted by Institutional Critique allow us to explore and question the institutional mechanisms of creation, circulation and reception generated by these controversial moments.

Finally, this process that I have just described culminates in what can be called a “critical history”, an anti-canonical proposal to think about a given period, not from the dominant narratives, but from a suspicious, underground and politicized position.

We aim for a “minor history” in the Deleuzian sense. It is not concerned with perpetuating ruling narratives that mythologize art and legitimize the will of the powerful, rather it asks in what ways is art complicit with the dominant powers. Critical art theory does not seek to simply interpret or describe what art represents but, as theorist Gene Ray argues, must instead “orient itself toward creating a clear break with the version of art that capitalism has dominated.”²⁷.

²⁷ Gene Ray, “Towards a Critical Art Theory”, *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice. Reinventing Institutional Critique*, ed. Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray, (London: Mayfly 2009)

CHAPTER 2

Authors as Producers (1979 - 1990)

After the triumph of the revolution, culture has become a popular movement. It has been democratized [...] the people are no longer marginal to culture; The people themselves are producers of culture. We are not looking for a low culture for all, but rather a high culture that is accessible to all [...] an integration of popular culture and high culture, of indigenous culture and international culture.

-Ernesto Cardenal, Minister of Culture of Nicaragua, 1979-1988

The Sandinista Revolution was described by the writer Eduardo Galeano as "the most beautiful revolution on the continent".²⁸ This description, later used as a revolutionary slogan, corresponds to the strong prioritization of the arts, creativity, and poetry as fundamental elements of the Nicaraguan revolutionary project. This optimistic perception of revolution spread around the world, not only in the mouths of the global left of the period, but through writers, artists and intellectuals. Internationally, the Sandinista revolution became "the *cause célèbre* of intelligence around

²⁸ Lioman Lima, "Gioconda Belli: 'Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela have become a degradation of the humanist sentiment that I believe the left should have'" in *BBC Mundo*, June 9, 2022,

the world"²⁹. All which highlighted the cultural dimension of the revolution and the redefinition of the 'intellectual' that this revolution proposed.³⁰ The memories, moods, and experiments that came up during this period still resonate in the imaginary and artistic discourses of the present. And these experiences will still contrast with many of the institutional initiatives of the next forty years.³¹

Almost immediately after the triumph of the revolution in 1979, the Sandinista project deployed an abundant network of public institutions, cultural policies, and state financing. All aimed at the "development, democratization and massification of culture."³² Among the most important initiatives we can underline the creation of the Ministry of Culture and its network of Popular Culture Centers, and the creation of the Association of Sandinista Cultural Workers.

Furthermore, during this period there was a substantial increase in film productions, literary publishing, and muralism. These three fields received funding and institutional support, and thus a new generation of artistic producers emerged. With respect to cinema, the 1980s were considered the "golden years of cinema".³³ At this time, Nicaragua had the largest literary publishing industry in

²⁹ David Craven, *The New Concept of Art and Popular Culture in Nicaragua since the Revolution in 1979* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

Among the most prominent writers and public intellectuals to celebrate the Sandinista revolution are Gabriel García Marquez, Julio Cortázar, Eduardo Galeano, Mario Benedetti, Silvio Rodríguez, Simone de Beauvoir and Noam Chomsky.

³⁰ Craven, *The New Concept of Art*, Introduction.

³¹ This nostalgia for the revolution is read several times in the essays and interviews of artists Raúl Quintanilla and Marcos Agudelo.

³² Raúl Quintanilla, "Apertura del Nuevo Arte Mural", *Zona de Turbulencia: Arte en Nicaragua, de la Revolución al Neoliberalismo*; ed. Miguel A. López, (San José, Costa Rica: TEOR/ÉTica, 2018), 21.

³³ Interview with Marcos Agudelo, March 18, 2023

Central America.³⁴ The country also created the first school dedicated to the development of muralism, so groundbreaking that researcher David Craven referred to Nicaragua as "the capital of muralism in the world".³⁵ Throughout the revolutionary project and during the civil war, all these initiatives enjoyed a brief moment of funding, autonomy, political will, and popular support. This time period can then be studied as a laboratory of cultural practices, comparable with those of Mexico and Cuba.

The type of cultural institutionality established at this time would demonstrate how art and culture are conceptualized, and how they should be managed in both optimistic times of revolutionary fervor and in pessimistic times of economic paralysis. Art would go on to be fundamentally politicized and intertwined with identity-forming, aesthetic, and historical practices. There were many internal conflicts between artists, managers, audiences, and intellectuals, creating tension in the fabric of the entire artistic field – including its humanistic and emancipatory purpose.

Curiously, the Ministry of Culture and the Association of Sandinista Cultural Workers offer two opposing ways of administering culture. These two different missions will come head to head opening up questions about the revolutionary role of arts and how culture is positioned into a wider national political project.

³⁴ "Nicaragua: mayor producer of books in Central America", published in *Diario Barricada*, July 1985.

³⁵ David Craven, "The Nicaraguan Revolution", *Art And Revolution in Latin America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 118.

Ministry of Culture

The most important institution for the arts, the Ministry of Culture, was established just a week after the triumph of the revolution under the leadership of the priest and poet Ernesto Cardenal.³⁶ Father Cardenal was already immersed in experiences of cultural self-management in the community of Solentiname, an isolated archipelago inside of Lake Nicaragua, and was already a famous poet and liberation theologian. He deployed multiple cultural initiatives designed to encourage popular participation in the arts, culture, and poetry. As the poet Daisy Zamora says, he was working to "socialize the means of poetic production", and in extension: artistic and cultural production.³⁷ These initiatives to democratize culture by the Ministry of Culture were a continuation of the massive social campaigns proposed at the beginning of the revolution, such as the National Literacy Crusade and the Health Campaign.³⁸

Overall, the Ministry of Culture facilitated and financed multiple unique social programs such as poetry workshops, a new school of Monumental Mural Art, and a school of visual arts³⁹ led by the artist and critic Raúl Quintanilla. In addition, the Ministry created a network of twenty-eight Popular Cultural Centers dedicated to the creation and appreciation of arts and culture at the local community level. This mobilization guaranteed access to

³⁶ Craven, *Art and Revolution in Latin America*, 11.

³⁷ Amelia Barahona, "Ernesto Cardenal y la Cultura, una conspiración olvidada". *Revista Abril*, February 23, 2023.

³⁸ Les Field, *Grimace of the Macho Ratón*, 77-88.

³⁹ I have translated "artes plasticas" (plastic arts) to "visual arts", since the use of this term in Nicaragua corresponds more than just the modeling of objects.

culture for thousands of Nicaraguans who, for the first time, were participating in spaces and initiatives specifically designed for them.⁴⁰

This genuine recovery and democratization of cultural institutes represented a humanistic and modernist return to the foundational purpose of art and culture. The cultural offerings of this period invited citizen participation and encouraged the creation of a public space open to popular dialogue. The public, which for the first time became a cultural protagonist, could widely participate and lead the programming that was offered.

The proposal of the entire cultural program established during the Sandinista revolution seemed to fully satisfy the ambitions of the first generation of Institutional Critique, precisely, the democratization of art institutions so that they would genuinely serve the public interest and not the interest of the elite. Specifically, the philosophy underlying these practices corresponds to what David Craven, Ernesto Cardenal and Raúl Quintanilla called the "dialogical model": a policy based on participation and dialogue among citizens themselves to encourage the creation, direction, and maintenance of cultural practices.⁴¹ Cardenal prioritized this model inspired by the pedagogies of Pablo Freire, and his experience with self-management in artistic communities such as those of Solentiname.

For Quintanilla, this dialogic process "would link art with popular culture, the intelligentsia with ordinary people, in a unique dynamic that would not only enrich the lives and culture of the Nicaraguan people, but also set new parameters for the socialist

⁴⁰ In relation to contemporary art, the Ministry of Culture created the "Julio Cortázar Latin American Art Collection", donated by international artists and sustained by the constant visit of artists who traveled to Nicaragua during the revolution.

⁴¹ Craven, "The Nicaraguan Revolution," 136.

experience as a whole."⁴² The dialogic model materially democratizes the artistic experience, making art and culture accessible and popular. Most importantly, making it sustained by the community itself through feedback loops between all involved agents.

Quintanilla echoes this "modernist intention" to which the first generation of Institutional Critique aspired to, arguing that "the revolutionary project as the maximum cultural project in history (of Nicaragua), finally made it possible for the country to enter a true human modernity".⁴³

This is how the cultural proposal of the revolution managed to modernize the precarious and outdated definition of culture imposed during the Somoza dictatorship. During the Somoza dictatorship culture was directly influenced by the United States. Culture was seen as commercial entertainment catering to the taste of an elite minority. In contrast, during the revolution, through art and dialogue, people can construct and affirm a proper Nicaraguan identity.⁴⁴ A dialogical model intervenes in the democratization of the arts towards the autonomous creation of a popular identity and in the agency of a historically marginalized community.

The definition of art as a good and a public right not only points to its democratic potential or a certain political modality, but also contains within itself an economic dimension. At this point, artists are encouraged to organize into unions, cooperatives and associations.

⁴² Quintanilla, *Area of Turbulence*, 67.

⁴³ Quintanilla, 94.

⁴⁴ Craven, 121.

Association of Sandinista Cultural Workers

The Association of Sandinista Cultural Workers was the most important artist-forward union of this period. It was made up of unions of writers (UNEN), visual artists (UNAP), musicians (UMN), theater workers and photographers.⁴⁵ It was made up of "more than 9,000 members, among which more than 100 were full-time artists".⁴⁶ Led by the poet Rosario Murillo, partner of then-president Daniel Ortega, the ASTC promoted art forums, contests, professionalization workshops, access to materials, financing, and much more.⁴⁷ A substantial portion of the members of the association received a state salary that maintained and promoted all the work that was generated.

We must highlight the labor character present in the formation of this union for artists and cultural workers. Within the framework of this institutional structure, the artist is understood as a *producer*; that is why they propose a labor-forward definition of the artist, so often left invisible by mainstream art history under capitalism. The art world has always grappled with thinking of the artists as a worker. In the United States, it would take two more decades, in the mid 2000's, for critical artists and cultural workers to start organizing around job insecurity, lack of rights, and the obligatory amenability to adjust to neoliberal temporality.

Artists and cultural workers organized in unions and associations combat the individualistic myth of the artist as a solitary author; on the contrary, they can be organized as producers. Philosopher Walter Benjamin intervenes in the debate on political art

⁴⁵ Cardenal, *Hacia una política Cultural (Managua: Ministerio de Cultura, 1982)*, 285-286

⁴⁶ Craven, 170.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

by highlighting the need for authors, and by association, artists, writers, etc., to organize themselves as workers in a militant fashion whose "mission is not to account but to fight; it is not about acting as a spectator but about actively intervening".⁴⁸ For Benjamin, political intervention and material commitment to the proletariat is even more important than the content that is distributed through the works of art or literature. In this vein, Benjamin concludes that, "while the writer experiences their solidarity with the proletariat only as an ideological subject, and not as a producer, the political tendency of their work, however revolutionary it may seem, will fulfill a counterrevolutionary function."⁴⁹ For this reason, revolutionary and creative energy must be organized in militant associations directly intertwined with the reality of the proletarian class, rather than with an ideological, elitist, paternalistic position or associated blindly only with a political party. According to Benjamin, only in this way will we arrive at the genuine political function of art and its capacity to generate structural changes.

Compaction, Cultural Policy and Audience

Unfortunately, the intervention of the United States through its financing of the counterrevolutionary war and the following economic embargo of 1985 profoundly affected the continued operation of the state. In response, the government prioritized military recruitment and civil defense at the expense of public and cultural institutions.⁵⁰ This period of economic

⁴⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The author as producer*, trans. Bolivar Echeverría, (Mexico: Editorial Itaca, 2004), 26.

⁴⁹ Benjamin, *El author As producer*, 33.

⁵⁰ Many artists who no longer had state funding joined the Sandinista army.

precariousness and the additional ideological difference caused irreconcilable friction between the Ministry of Culture and the ASCW.

The main indictment of the Ministry brought forth by the ASCW, headed by Murillo, argued there was a push to impose a unique and "official" model of creation and aesthetic appreciation based on a populist, commonplace, and vernacular concept of art. The ASCW critiqued some proposed cultural policies such as those of the poetry workshops and their "guidelines" for writing poems. These policies were seen by some poets, such as Gioconda Belli, as "very confined and self-repressive".⁵¹ For Belli, in these workshops, any popular expression would be inherently conservative, traditional, and celebrated without criticism. This position was promoted through articles published in the official journal and the cultural supplement *Barricada* and *Ventana*.⁵² The ASCW, however, wanted to fund mainly established urban artists and professionals.⁵³ It sought to prioritize the professionalization of the artistic sector, to "generate an intellectual and literary respectability to the revolution."⁵⁴ This position involves fostering a kind of literary and artistic "front" that would manage to aesthetically elevate cultural production, or as Murillo says "our purpose is to produce good art regardless of style... We are talking about quality art that expresses profound ideas... Poor quality art is bad for the revolution."⁵⁵ This model involved the implementation of a hierarchical model of power that invested less in

⁵¹ Craven, "Appendix E: Interview with Gioconda Belli of the FSLN, 1990", en *Art and Revolution*, 188.

⁵² Craven, 171.

⁵³ Fields, *Grimace of the Macho Raton*, 217.

⁵⁴ Craven, 172.

⁵⁵ Craven, 170.

the popular sector and more in fostering a “high and genuine” Nicaraguan aesthetic expression.

In 1983, Ernesto Cardenal emphatically opposed these attacks arguing that they were destabilizing actions organized by an “upper class desire” to reduce access to the arts for a working class.⁵⁶ Moreover, he remarked how even “literate” poets were appropriating popular language to better describe their own individuality, thereby validating the strategy promoted by the Minister of Culture for the use of popular, everyday language.

Strategically, the ASCW sought to monopolize the financing of culture and direct it towards its own goals. Daisy Zamora, the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Culture, recounted how in many cases, the ASCW did so to “obstruct(ed) or directly trample the work of the Ministry of Culture, creating conflicts that always favor the strongest or those closest to power.”⁵⁷ Coincidentally, Rosario Murillo was the partner of Daniel Ortega, the at the time, president of Nicaragua. Murillo would leverage her closeness to power to sway policy in the favor of the ASCW. For many, these obstacles created deep fractures in the cultural scene and manifested a more authoritarian turn within the revolution.

For anthropologist Wes Field, who was, at the time, conducting an ethnography on artisans in Nicaragua, the root of the conflict centered on two different definitions of the socialist model. On one hand, the definition bore a model that was more involved in concentrating the means of production and directing a legitimate state line to advance the socialist project. On the other hand, the opposed definition bore a pluralist model, one open to different

⁵⁶ Craven, 172

⁵⁷ Barahona, “Ernesto Cardenal y la Cultura, una conspiración olvidada”.

currents and debates on all intellectual and cultural fronts. In the first model, the allocation of resources was preoccupied with recruiting more intellectuals to maintain and promote the State line.⁵⁸ In the second, more pluralistic model, the legitimacy of the party was not necessary. Murillo and the ASCW were interested in creating a "canon" designed by an elite core of artists rather than a model based on dialogue between all the cultural actors present, favored by Cardenal.⁵⁹ For Craven, these controversies correspond to the role of the revolutionary State as manager of patronage and cultural direction, where in one possibility an aesthetic and official line can be imposed, or in the other possibility it can engage in "artistic pluralism".⁶⁰

From an Institutional Critique perspective, this controversial exchange between institutions is due to a difference of position with respect to the *audience*, as conceptualized by the artist Martha Rosler. For Rosler, art is created and distributed based on different audiences, and each audience establishes its own social relationships and its own tastes. There is an observant audience that knows art and its values only through second hand"and does not qualify to participate in discourses of high culture.⁶¹ This audience has a passive connection with art and makes up the large number of people who attend museums and galleries. For Rosler, there is another more active audience class that has the purchasing power to collect and sell art. This audience has power to influence the

⁵⁸ Les Field, *Grimace*, 218.

⁵⁹ Interestingly, Fields portrays how artisans at different times rejected both proposals from the Ministry of Culture and the ASTC.

⁶⁰ Craven, 173-174.

⁶¹ Rosler, Martha. "Lookers, Buyers, Dealers, and Makers: Thoughts on Audience", en *Institutional Critique an Anthology of Artists Writings*, edited by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Boston: MIT Press, 2011), 211.

decisions of galleries and museums and directly interfere in the art market. This elitist audience, even if it is made up of a minority, is the one that has the power to define what is considered "good" art.⁶² Rosler argues that historically artists are taught not to think about the audience and to carry out their work free of judgment.⁶³ Artists will then develop different works of art, depending on what kind of audience they have in mind. Rosler ends her reflection on the audience by examining the political consequences underlying the art world and how the entire circuit of journalistic distribution, collection, criticism, and reception employs a very narrow definition of its audience. It does so to satisfy the demands of a certain bourgeois taste and uphold an economic system based on materially maintaining this taste. In this case, the market becomes the sole mediator between artists and their audiences.⁶⁴

Rosler's arguments help us decipher the root of the differences between the Ministry of Culture and the ASCW. Essentially, each employed a different conceptualization of the audience. The Ministry of Culture administrates art and culture under an expansive and popular definition of audience, which allowed it to detonate a short circuit in the bourgeois systems of taste and economic determination. The ASCW, on the other hand, sought to appeal to a more closed audience, one with a specific literate taste, which was trying to stand out in an ecosystem of literary and cultural production which had already established an international reputation.

⁶² Rosler, "Looker, Buyers", 209-216.

⁶³ Rosler, "Buyers Lookers", 214.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

It should be noted that the confrontation between these two institutions was totally asymmetrical. The Ministry of Culture not only produced popular art, but also promoted a cultured and internationally respected standard. The influence of the ASTC cannot be compared to the massive impact of the Ministry of Culture. In a way, this was what Rosario Murillo envied the most.

Eventually in 1988, given the financial weight of the counterrevolutionary war among other reasons, Rosario Murillo would fulfill her desires for control and assume the powers of the Ministry of Culture, transforming it into the Nicaraguan Institute of Culture. Under her management, several social programs were considerably reduced and almost disappeared. The vibrant cultural scene had to adapt to this new scenario. Thus, forcing cultural policies and their institutional framework to redefine the artist under the "western idea that art production is reserved for a professional class of trained specialists."⁶⁵ On the economic side, a lack of state financing propels artists towards a neoliberal modality that will force them to compete against each other in the art market to survive.

Quintanilla diplomatically reflects on this period and states that both institutions:

Despite their contradictions and their confrontational and distorting leaderships, which eventually led to the top-down closure of both institutions and the creation of a failed Institute of Culture in 1989, they opened the door to a cultural project, albeit anarchic and at the same time centralist, largely democratic and experimental, which based its achievements precisely on the

⁶⁵ Craven, 174.

premise of creative freedom and the non-existence of official cultural policies.⁶⁶

What Quintanilla omits is that this confrontation was totally unilateral. One cultural institution with more political power but less cultural power confiscated another institution that had more cultural power but less political power.

Therefore, the most important lesson that we should celebrate from this period would be to think about institutionality from an experimental, decentralized perspective – based on freedom, labor, and popular dialogue – to materialize the modernist promise of what a cultural institution can and should be. For a brief moment, in the 1980's, Nicaragua was a lively example of how culture and art could be democratically managed within a global context that was accelerating towards fascism.

The Sandinista revolution officially came to an end with the 1990's elections, and with it its revolutionary project. A new neoliberal government that promised peace and economic stability was established and the revolution became, as Nicaraguan philosopher Alejandro Serrano Caldera says with disappointment, a "sociological joke"⁶⁷. Nicaraguan art, culture, and identity will be eternally affected by the new neoliberal policies that arose in this shift.

⁶⁶ Quintanilla, 95

⁶⁷ Raúl Quintanilla, "Un Dialogo Suspendido: La Revolución Nicaragüense y las Artes Plásticas", in *Zona de Turbulencia, Arte en Nicaragua, de la revolución al neoliberalismo*, edited by Miguel A. López, (San José, Costa Rica: TEOR/ética), 65.

With the defeat of the Sandinista National Liberation Front, all of the art schools, the Popular Culture Centers, the muralism school, and the poetry workshops shut down. The museum of contemporary art was put in limbo and thousands of cultural workers lost their state sponsorship. All the creative and artistic vitality, generated in the last ten years became a remnant of the past. These experiences live on in the memory and talents of a generation that managed to take advantage of them.

The revolution, and with it, all the cultural experiments, aesthetic debates, and failed cultural policies, continue, to this day, to haunt every artist in Nicaragua.