

Revolutionary Nicaragua

By Paul Buhle from *Insurgent Images: The Agitprop Murals of Mike Alewitz (2002)*

Nicaragua, 1982-85

The Nicaraguan Revolution inspired artists around the world. The Sandinistas' stubborn resistance in the face of growing United States-sponsored military intervention seemed to him incredibly courageous, so courageous that it might somehow hold on until some other breakthrough took place. The immediate rewards of the revolution could be seen in the flourishing of culture. Extensive, highly successful literacy campaigns went on apace. The poetry that Nicaraguans had so cherished was given support and brought to those who had once been excluded.



TWO SANDINOS, City Hall/ Leon, Nicaragua/ 1983 by Mike Alewitz & Joel Katz with volunteers from the Leon Center for Popular Culture

Traveling, taking in the excitement, Christine Gauvreau and Alewitz opened their eyes to the revolutionary process and glimpsed the beginnings of the late twentieth century's greatest mural movement, which created nearly three hundred murals during the Sandinistas' decade of power. Internationalista artists like Alewitz came to learn and to teach, to contribute their talents to reinventing a visual culture for Nicaragua. Here, the demands of the situation were most pressing, and here, he began to see his art as Agitprop (Agitation-Propaganda) in the deeply practical sense of the artist hard at work, doing what he does best. The corrupt Somoza government had not only inflicted terrible pain upon the population of this small, impoverished country, it had also badly damaged the once-rich artistic traditions, institutionalizing a style that Nicaraguans scoffingly called "Miami kitsch." Reinvention-on-the-spot demanded close attention to local perceptions, and quick response to the requests of activists and workers who wanted a mural here or there. As a sign painter, Mike had indeed learned to work quickly and accurately, so his talents lent themselves to an immediate, responsive (later "performance") art. In 1983, on a second tour, Alewitz joined with Arts for a New Nicaragua, mostly musicians and a few fellow muralists including David Fichter, Susan Greene, and Joel Katz. At that moment, his mural skills really began, in Leon, with "Two Sandinos." Mike's own conception for a design that could be filled in by a squad of trained amateurs (thus retaining a signal clarity for the mural at hand, but also diffusing the necessary skills) had been inspired by the work of Chileans working using a similar format. In the mural, one of the two Sandinos symbolized the great reforms, like the redistribution of land previously held by Somoza's cronies (and, after the 1989 "democratic" restoration, safely back in crony hands), the other Sandino symbolized defense of the gains of the revolution. Returning to Nicaragua again in 1985, under the auspices of the official Nicaraguan artists' union and its supporters in New York (organized in large part by the Brazilian jazz musician Thiago DeMello), Alewitz honored an American

martyr, Benjamin Linder, a water purification internationalista, who sidelined as a clown for village children. In Alewitz's version, the brave and kindly Linder was a red-nosed idealist playing god's own fool (or holy clown of Carnival tradition) before being gunned down by the Contras. Alewitz quoted Daniel Ortega's funeral speech on Linder: "He is the smile of the children who saw him in his clown costume, illuminating the future that we are making together in the new Nicaragua." Alewitz also painted Mother Earth at the Children's Hospital in Managua. Designed primarily as a fantasy to distract the children from their pain, the mural depicted an outstretched woman as the earth. Her mountainous breasts were applauded by hospital officials then supporting a national breast-feeding campaign (for which the mural became a popular photo backdrop). It also contained its share of subversive elements. The woman's hair became a river with a school of fish, a genuine school for the revolution as some of the fish were reading Marx and Malcolm X. Lenin can be found fishing in the river alongside Max, the heroic Alewitz frisbee-catching dog. Every one of his murals was effaced, as a matter of course, after the massively destructive Contra War and the American-orchestrated vote against the Sandinistas in 1989. How could the new rulers leave behind evidence of another way of thinking, glimpses of another way of life? On both mural trips, Alewitz worked closely with local FSLN leadership. The total integration of his work into the revolutionary process had a profound effect on his thinking. As he worked and traveled with the Arts for a New Nicaragua musicians and muralists, and as he learned about the various ways in which Chilean and other international artists worked, he began to ask himself if a movement of artists to aid emerging struggles could be established back in the United States..."