

## **Taller 4 Rojo, Graphics And Politics In Colombia During The 1970s**

### abstract

The collective of graphic artists Taller 4 Rojo (Bogotá - Colombia, 1971-1974) is an important part of Colombian cultural history that is pending to be documented. Today, we've come to a kind of revival of interest in our cultural history and the production of this group of artists committed to the social reality of the country, provides a significant overview of the hectic moments that marked the 1960s and 1970s. The aim of this paper is to highlight the graphic testimony offered by the set of actions that established the collective Taller 4 Rojo, beyond the official circles of Colombian art.

### keywords

taller 4 rojo, graphic production, politics in Colombia, protest, social movements

### Introduction

*Taller 4 Rojo* was an artist collective whose work has important implications in Colombian cultural history. This short-term (1971-1974), but highly influential in the production of the national graphics group, counted among its most important members with artists such as: Nirma Zarate, Diego Arango, Umberto Giangrandi (Italy), Carlos Granada, Jorge Mora (Graphic Designer-Universidad Nacional de Colombia), and Fabio Rodriguez Amaya. *Taller 4 Rojo* was the result of a committed cultural practice with the political reality of Colombia during the 1960s and 1970s, and certainly responded to the influence of an international situation marked by ideological disputes, social struggles and the claim of civil rights.

In early 2013, the Museum of Modern Art of Medellín (MAMM) brings to town the retrospective of Taller 4 rojo: "*Rojo y más Rojo, producción gráfica y acción directa*". During the planning process of this exhibition, the School of Graphic Design of the Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana is invited by a team of professionals at MAMM to link itself to the project, promoting a group of students who would assist the museological designs supported on curatorial scripts raised by the curatorial team *Transhistoria* from Bogotá (made up by Camilo Ordóñez and María Sol Barón) who made the first retrospective that took the same name. This exercise allowed some students, as graphic designers, to be part of the process and even make a proposal for the intervention of a specific space in the museum. All of this under the guidance of a team of research faculty professors, members of the City Museographic project.

Thus, the reflection here presented was produced by these series of actions, as well as by the concern for the neglect and oversight of a portion of graphic Colombian history and its relationship to national politics. In Medellín traces of this artist collective were long lost, maybe because there were more important issues to deal with such as: drug trafficking, who imposed on us unexpected social dynamics; or maybe because

we're just recently surpassing social, political and cultural centralism imposed from time ago by the capital Bogotá. Profiting on the positive changes that our society is currently experiencing, it is important that this chapter of art history and aesthetics of the country is shown. Students, researchers and teachers in our study areas should be aware of this essential content for the consolidation of an academic tradition in graphic design, which in Colombia is still awaiting to be built.

**Figure 2.**  
Exhibition Rojo  
y más Rojo,  
*producción gráfica  
y acción directa.*  
Museum of Modern  
Art of Medellín.  
March 20 - June 2  
of 2013.



#### Taller 4 Rojo and Colombian politics of the sixties and seventies

After General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla (1953-1957) being deposed as president of Colombia and being appointed an *ad hoc* military board (1957-1958), the only totalitarian experience in Colombia since its establishment as an independent republic, the country went through one of its most uncertain political periods at the time. The political party violence, precariousness of agricultural production systems, high levels of social and cultural backwardness, kept the country in a general marasmus. Thus the two traditional parties, the Liberals and the Conservatives, decide to agree on a distribution of power in equal parts and a presidential succession rule in each period until 1974. Those facts, coupled with the inability to mediate power democratically and the ideological radicalization of the left, powered by the strength of the Soviet Union, China and the recent Cuban victory, resulted in the emergence of all kinds of resistance movements and opposition to the imposed conditions. Guerrilla movements of greater political and military involvement in Colombia arise precisely in this context: FARC (1964), ELN (1964), EPL (1967). In addition, the labor and student movements seem stronger, protest activity extends, and the Communist Youth (JUCO), main source of young rebels in Colombia, which will feed both civil and armed resistance during the subsequent years, arises (Villamizar, 1995)

As can be seen, the political moment in Colombia at the beginning of the seventies is pretty agitated, and in terms of the participation of university students and their ideological diversity was evident in a wide range of protest movements. So says Manuel Kalmanovitz G. (2012):

Then there were pro-Soviet Communists (Communist Party), the Maoists (of MOIR and EPL), Trotskyists (PST), the ANAP (National Popular Alliance founded by Rojas Pinilla and then led his daughter Maria Eugenia Rojas) and camilistas (pro-Cuban guerrilla sympathizers from ELN). In this atmosphere of ideological competition deep enmities, which seen from the outside seem inexplicable, were developed.

This is the sociopolitical environment that students of arts and design, members of the collective Taller 4 Rojo, had as reference in the early 1970s. However, there's something

that draws special attention over this group of activists: their interest and commitment in national policy beyond mere militancy. For example, their approaches to armed left groups only occurred circumstantially given the ideological atmosphere of this decade, plus their struggle did not respond to the interests of power but, arguably, to aspects much more oriented towards an emancipatory and utopian ideal of a cultural nature. In this sense María Sol Barón (2009), one of the curators of *Rojo y más Rojo* says:

Indeed, the discontent of workers, housewives, students and intellectuals, expressed in 68 was not only an experience of the French May, but of the 68 of Mexico, which became tragedy in October with the slaughter in the *Plaza de las Tres Culturas* in Tlatelolco; and 68 of Argentina, which led to the manifestation of social and artistic resistance called *Tucumán Arde* with Rosario and Buenos Aires as epicenters. These events had great impact on the youth and Latin American artists and their effects were spread over the next decade (p. 3).

This group of graphic artist's open and dreamy character corresponds to the claim of many young people with intellectual concerns from that time who expressed a rebellious spirit but also a reluctance to armed struggle. Jorge Orlando Melo (Quoted by Kalmanovitz G. 2012) tells us:

We shared utopia - explains historian Jorge Orlando Melo who was part of the Black Sheep Editorial at its first stage -. Some of the artists didn't militate, but had the vision that their art had a political task. However others went out pasting posters under orders of their political parties. But there came a time when things were incompatible, there was too much sensitivity around certain positions.

The lack of interest in weapons of this collective evidences itself, first, on their work's orientation toward political denunciation and fight for the vindication of rights, plus their plead for a specific view to the Colombian problems occurring here and now. Perhaps, in this sense, they shared a similar assumption to that of the guerilla movement M-19, which was settled in 1974. This armed movement led by young democrats and bourgeois ideals, rather than by a communist internationalist ideology, was intended to "recover memory" and to seek a revolution "Colombian style", primarily within urban scenarios (Darío Villamizar, 1995). In addition, the M-19 considered graphic communication as an expedient to get closer to the masses through the national press. "In 1974 the M-19 began a propaganda campaign announcing the release of a new product: 'Parasites ... worms? Coming up: M-19; Decay? ... Loss of memory? Wait: M-19' "(Villamizar, 1995, p 52.). After this campaign this movement began its armed struggle.

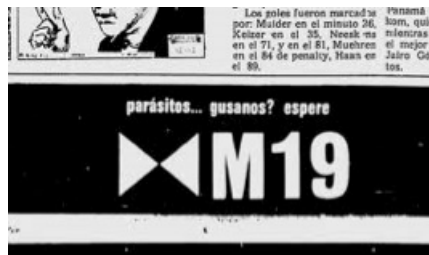


Figure 2. M-19. Graphic campaign. Journal El Espectador 1974.

On second hand, apart from the collective's refusal to join the armed struggle, evidence of their form of rebellion based on utopian ideals lies on a steadfast pursuit to form critical

consciousness through cultural practice. Among other actions, this group offered training courses in their Bogotá based workshop teaching techniques such as silkscreen graphics, photo-silkscreen and printing. Incidentally, some of the members of the group had a high academic training in this field, mainly Diego Arango and Nirma Zárate who studied graphic techniques in depth at the Royal Academy of London (Iriarte, 1986). With this it is evident that the search was focused more towards an emancipatory political practice, product of an ideological shakeup, legacy of the hectic sixties, rather than to an exercise of power itself from partisan politics. According to María Sol Baron (2009) (one of the curators of Transhistoria team who developed the first retrospective exhibition in Bogotá):

In this social and political climate (in the 1960s and 1970s) an unexpected potential for visual creation, conditioned by the inclusion of new graphic techniques in the sixties and seventies expanded the possibilities of production and distribution of engraving. This phenomenon happens because media such as screen printing as photomechanical (Offset) were adopted by a large group of artists and writers who resorted to them in search of other uses and other publics located beyond the artistic field established (p. 2).

### Participation in Alternativa magazine

There was a decisive fact for the consolidation of the idea of forming a group, besides being one of the scenarios that helped to enhance the practice of Design in Colombia during the 1970s: the First Biennial of Graphic Arts: drawing, printmaking and graphic design. As María Sol Barón states (2009a):

The significance of this event for *Taller 4 Rojo*, has to do with the fact that all of them converged in the same place, since, apart from Diego Arango and Nirma Zárate, two professors from the *Universidad Nacional de Colombia*: Umberto Giangrandi and Carlos Granada, participated with works relating to the repression of the student struggle. Therefore, there is no doubt that it was in Cali, with its hectic political and social scene, where a group of artists began to find interest in common issues and means that eventually would move to the idea of founding a collective (p. 4).

During its years as an artistic "formalized" collective *Taller 4 Rojo*, which takes its name from the street 4 in Bogotá where it was located, initiates a strong workflow shown in the prolific production of prints and photo-silkscreens that were beginning to appear on the walls of the city, universities and cultural center of the capital city. However, one of the most significant testimonies of the national graphic production, legacy of Taller 4 Rojo during their work as a collective, can be found in its active and vital participation in the magazine *Alternativa* (1974 -1980). The magazine was founded by leading Colombian leftist intellectuals, including the figure of Gabriel García Márquez, who besides directing, published his opinion column titled "Macondo". In addition to the Nobel Prize, Enrique Santos Calderón (brother of the current President of the Republic), Antonio Caballero and Orlando Fals Borda (founder of the first faculty of Sociology of the country) made part of it.

This publication gave the opportunity to disparate political positions to converge through image and word, in a magazine that became the only mouthpiece of the leftist thought in its diversity of nuances. This magazine is perhaps one of the most important cultural and political media in Colombia during the second half of the twentieth century. In this magazine ideas and rifles had presence. Dario Villamizar (1995) notes that:



**Figure 2.** Issue Alternativa magazine. Number 12. 1974.

*Alternativa*, whose motto was ‘atreverse a pensar es empezar a luchar’ (daring to think is starting to fight), became the hub of the publications of the Colombian left, by collecting on their pages positions of all legal and illegal groups; in its 256 editions (until March 27, 1980), over a period of six years, proposals for the social sectors that were struggling were known; likewise, the facts presented in other countries were widely spread. The M-19 was present in *Alternativa* and financed a certain period of its publication; Gerardo Quevedo Cobo, commander Pedro Pacho, third in command of the M-19, managed the magazine between 1977 and 1979 (Villamizar, 1995, p. 60).

As a group, collaboration with *Alternativa* was short considering that the circulation of the magazine, in its beginnings, was fortnightly; they only appear in credits to issue number 10 and the subsequent participation of Jorge Mora as a graphic designer does not go beyond 1976. Their participation in this medium not only as opinion makers, but in their role as graphic designers, marked an important fact: switch from the production of images with an artistic pretension, to the production of artwork as a form of functional communication. In other words, there is a transit during its presence in the magazine ranging from creating art to strictly editorial illustration.

## Conclusion

The collective Taller 4 Rojo is certainly a version of Colombian cultural history that is pending to be documented. In areas related to Design (Graphic, Interior, Industrial, Garment) the approaches to the historic course of these disciplines in the country is quite shy, not to say non-existent. Our students know little about the cases in our own context which have produced interesting events, such as the graphic production and political criticism displayed by the collective Taller 4 Rojo.

Note that in our case it is not about making a historical tracking of the relationship between art and politics in Colombia in the traditional sense of visual arts, but an attempt to draw attention to the way in which in our context the production of graphic images plays an important testimony to the national aesthetic. Thereby highlighting the role of collective Taller 4 Rojo is a challenge not only to the field of the arts, but also a challenge for researchers of Design, for its contribution to this discipline could be the proof that there is a visual production that is yet to be documented in Colombia and can be comparable with the tradition of Latin American graphic design.

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