

# **The Tupamaros**

## **Luis Camnitzer**

### **(2007)**

## 6 The Tupamaros

*Tupamaros: as close as possible to ART*

*Tucumán Is Burning: as close as possible  
to POLITICS*

The Uruguayan guerrilla group known as the Tupamaros certainly meddled more directly in reality and everyday life than Simón Rodríguez, but then again, it was this meddling that actually defined them. If there is a line that separates art from politics, there are two events in Latin America that touch this line from their separate areas. The Tupamaros exemplify politics coming as close as possible to the art side of the line. Some years later, in 1968, the Argentinean group Tucumán Arde (Tucumán Is Burning) is an example of art coming as close as possible to the political side of the line. Yet, it should be clearly stated that the Tupamaros never declared themselves to be artists or as doing art. They were clearly a guerrilla movement, albeit an idiosyncratic one. By analyzing their actions as an aesthetic phenomenon, and therefore minimizing the unpleasanties of day-to-day guerrilla warfare, there is the danger of excessive romanticizing (in their time they were often characterized as “Robin Hoods” by the foreign press) and of a historical distortion of events.

The Tupamaros started to organize during 1962, but it was two years before they identified themselves by that name.<sup>1</sup> Also known as the MLN (Movimiento de Liberación Nacional), the group was started by people from different political sectors, but mostly by members of the Socialist Party and dissidents of the Anarchist Federation.<sup>2</sup> The organization also drew heavy support from the student population, and though there were art students among them, the Tupamaros did not develop overt artistic ambitions. Their main role was to become the “people’s prosecutors” and, as such, to uncover corruption in the government, banks, and industry. Uruguay had been, until then, a model of stability in Latin America. However, the agricultural production that had provided the country’s wealth until the Korean War had not updated its methods and had become noncompetitive. The economy suffered, and the oligarchy was unwilling to share its wealth in order to keep the progressive social system functioning. What had been a primarily middle-class society became increasingly polarized. The crisis started to become visible during the beginning of the decade of the sixties with an enormous strengthening of the police.



Figure 6.1. *Bala (Bullet)*, 1969, graffiti on the wall of the University of Uruguay pointing out bullet holes. Photo Luis Camnitzer.

The movement originated as a voice against all of the above, but also as a reaction to the activities of right-wing gangs that were acting under the protection of the police. Starting in 1960, these gangs terrorized left-wing militants through kidnapping, scarring bodies with swastikas drawn with razor blades, and occasional murders. One of the deaths, that of high school teacher Arbelio Ramírez, was particularly poignant.

It is presumed that the bullets that killed Ramírez were actually intended for Che Guevara, who, on August 17, 1961, was giving a lecture at the university. The bullets missed Che and hit Ramírez instead.<sup>3</sup> It was ironic that in his remarks that day, Che had gone to great pains to explain why one should not use weapons when legal options are still available.<sup>4</sup>

The group started organizing shortly after this incident, but only became public in 1967, with the publication of an “Open Letter to the Police” in one of the daily newspapers. In it they stated:

... For these reasons we place ourselves outside the law. This is the only honest solution when the law is not applied equally, when the law exists to defend the false interests of a minority in detriment of the majority, when the law functions against the progress of the country, when even those who created the law depart from it with impunity whenever it is convenient for them.<sup>5</sup>

At the time, Uruguay was a country with roughly three million inhabitants, half of whom lived in Montevideo, the capital. The ensuing urban culture that marked the country led the Tupamaros to operate primarily in an urban environment, something that had no precedent for successful guerrilla activity. Moving constantly in densely populated areas led them to develop a strategy that would not only avoid alienating the public but would also make them instantly attractive and persuasive in the eyes of the people.<sup>6</sup> The axiomatic quality they gave to these ideas separates the Tupamaros from most of the other Latin American guerrilla movements. In 1969, for example, Brazilian guerrilla leader Carlos Marighela proclaimed rather bluntly:

The urban guerrilla's reason for existence, the basic condition in which he acts and survives, is to shoot.<sup>7</sup>

In this schema, according to Marighela, guerrillas are distinguishable from outlaws because they eschew personal gain, and the public is expected to see and understand this difference between revolutionary heroes and exploiters.

Given the particular situation of Uruguay within the Latin American context, schematic positions of this kind were of no use to the Tupamaros. They were keenly aware that no blood had flowed in Uruguay since 1904, and they believed that the fight now required was a bloodless one, since Uruguay was a country whose population took pride in a long tradition of civility. For both practical and ideological reasons, they believed this was the only way to move the public to support their cause. Although this policy unfortunately was not sustained during the life of the movement, it certainly informed its beginnings. To this effect, the Tupamaros, unlike many other guerrilla movements, ignored the use of "focalized" war violence (Che Guevara's term) to generate wildfire opposition to the system. Instead, they resorted to a pedagogical process of image building. During its earlier stages, the movement had notably passed on several opportunities to kill high-ranking enemies.<sup>8</sup> The humane character of their operations was designed not only to elicit sympathy but also, it was hoped, to elicit, promote, and encourage collaboration from the public. Their operations were scrupulously or-

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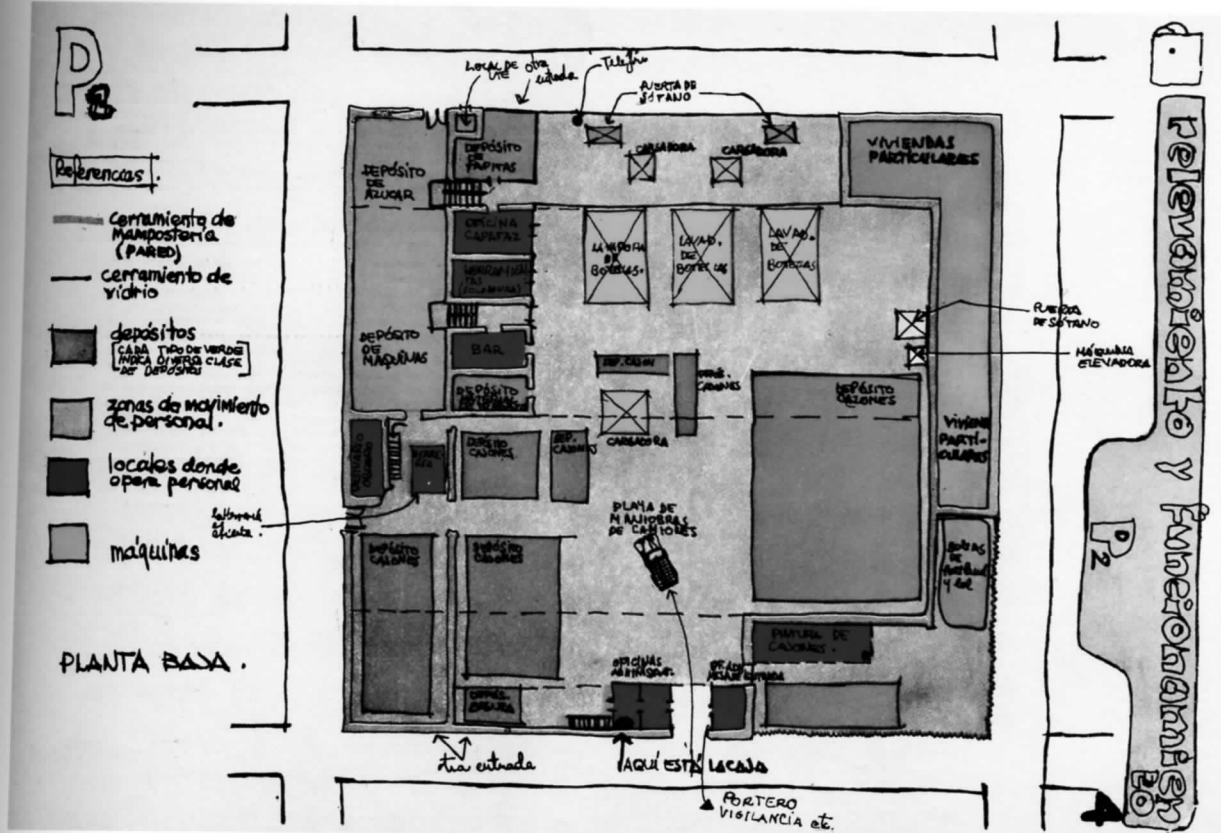


Figure 6.2. Tupamaros, *Subversión, Las Fuerzas Armadas al Pueblo Oriental* (Subversion, The Armed Forces to the Oriental People), 1971, blueprint for an operation at the Coca-Cola plant in Montevideo, Uruguay.

ganized, and they often had a medical doctor on hand to take care of any persons, whether friend or enemy, who might be harmed if violence broke out.

Among the things the Tupamaros sought to achieve with their operations was a lasting effect on the memory of the public. They wanted the public to see beyond any functional results of a given operation and to build something less tangible but more powerful in the long run: a mythical image. Publicity and communication, their primary goals, governed and hybridized all other actions. In one of their strategy papers, they spoke of “armed propaganda” and noted that it

becomes particularly important under certain conditions, like becoming [publicly] known in the beginning of the guerrilla’s development. It also is important in the moment of clarifying positions toward the people during those periods in which drastic measures have to be taken that do not

clearly illustrate the guerrilla's aims and that might be difficult for the popular mind to comprehend.<sup>9</sup>

Some years later, in 1977, the armed forces published a self-promoting book in which they evaluated this strategy with unexpected and surprising objectivity:



Surrounded by great publicity, these actions try to present the methods of the Police and the Government as clumsy and inefficient, so that the organization may appear, [while] ridiculing them, installed on the cusp of imagination and ingenuity.<sup>10</sup>

The general theory of the Tupamaros was that “it is the revolutionary actions that lead to revolutionary situations.” It was premised on a completely different understanding than that of the traditional “*foco*,” or spark action, employed by other militant groups.<sup>11</sup> Analyzing the movement in relation to other Latin American guerrilla groups, French writer Régis Debray pointed out the absence of any prejudgments in the organization. In his comments, he sounds as if he is describing creation rather than strategy:

There is no traveling dogma, no revolutionary strategy independent of the conditions determined by the place and time; everything is to be reinvented every time on location.<sup>12</sup>

Debray's comment reminds me of Richard Huelsenbeck's introduction to the *Dada Almanach*:

The dadaist is the freest man on Earth. An ideologue is every man who falls for the lie presented by his own intellect: that an idea, that is, the symbol for an instant of perceived reality, is absolutely real.<sup>13</sup>

Debray's admiration is particularly remarkable, because the Tupamaros had acted against his own wisdom as expressed in his *Revolution in the Revolution?* where he had written that

armed propaganda follows military action but does not precede it. Armed propaganda has more to do with the internal than with the external guerrilla front. The main point is that under present conditions the most important form of propaganda is successful military actions.<sup>14</sup>

With his statement, Debray had endorsed the traditional strategy of hit-run-and-hope-for-wildfire, a position shared by most of the other guerrilla movements. Marighela, for example, discussed armed propaganda as “the coordination of

urban guerrilla actions, including each armed action.”<sup>15</sup> The assumption was that the accent had to be on “armed,” based on the aura this word had thanks to the success of the Cuban Revolution. The Tupamaros, more deeply rooted in the student movement and in intellectual circles, shifted the accent to “propaganda.”

It was the design of the operations that stood out and that led observers like Régis Debray to refer to the Tupamaros as a “cultural phenomenon.”<sup>16</sup> It prompted descriptions of their use of time and timing more likely to be found in discussions about filmmaking.<sup>17</sup>

The Tupamaro leadership clearly wished to affect the media, but they didn't theorize about it, and to some extent were not self-conscious about this aspect of their actions. In response to a question I asked him, one leader of the movement, years later, speculated that there probably were two factors that influenced their use of “creativity.” One was a deep distrust of all stereotypes, a distrust that led them to break from traditional political groups in the first place. The other was the hard fact that most of the leaders of the movement were taken off to prison before the movement had a chance to plan any major operations. During their imprisonment, they befriended many of the nonpolitical prisoners and discovered unusually creative thinking and resourcefulness among them. These insights were translated into political methods once they broke out of jail, and led to one of their most famous capers, the “Operación Pando,” discussed below.<sup>18</sup>

Operations generally were conceived of as “theater” and planned accordingly. Every “player” or “actor” rehearsed not only his/her own role but also that of somebody else as well, so there was always an understudy prepared to take over if events took an unexpected turn.<sup>19</sup>

The first couple of events organized by the Tupamaros did not at all qualify for aesthetic consideration. They consisted of plain money-and-arms gathering through simple break-ins. One of these actions led to the jailing of Julio Marenales, the fired sculpture teacher I referred to in Chapter 1. When interrogated by police after being caught, he simply told the truth, that he had held up a bank not for personal gain but to finance revolution. The idea seemed so far fetched that he was suspected of insanity and set free three months later.<sup>20</sup>

Over the years, the Tupamaros were able to seriously improve their bank-robbing operations. Between September and November of 1968, they took money thirteen times. One of the banks was successfully targeted twice in the span of two weeks. But the more interesting operations were not directly bank related.

In 1963, the group engineered its first major plot involving food distribution. Guerrillas posed as members of a neighborhood political club and ordered a

truckload of goods from a major food supplier. Given the proximity of Christmas, they made sure that a large supply of sweets was included in the shipment. The truck was directed to an address close to a shantytown and then was kidnapped upon arrival. The food was then distributed among the local people. Though the operation was successful, the Tupamaros did not develop this format into a general tactic. They decided that the actual help provided to the people did not justify the risks taken and was not commensurate with the investment of time and energy by the guerrilla movement.<sup>21</sup>

The Tupamaros also resorted to such debatable actions as kidnapping, although this was mostly for interrogation and sometimes also to embarrass the government. They had a "People's Jail" for this purpose, from which the prisoners were released as soon as it was deemed feasible. One exception to this policy was the case of Dan Mitrione. Mitrione was a former chief of police in the United States who had been sent to Montevideo to instruct police personnel in torture techniques. Caught by the Tupamaros, he was imprisoned, and his possible release was used to negotiate the freedom of jailed guerrilla members. The discussions went well until the last moment, when the government pulled back from any deal. The guerrilla cell that held Mitrione and had threatened to execute him if the negotiations fell through kept their promise against the better judgment of the majority of the movement. Although there was no question about the criminal status of Mitrione, the execution, in August of 1971, seriously damaged the image of the whole movement.<sup>22</sup> Subsequently, other acts of violence more typical of armed warfare followed and further tarnished the early image of the movement.

Meanwhile, during the same period, 106 prisoners died in government jails. According to regulations, prisoners in government jails

may not have books with underlined text or handwritten comments. May not have books of Marxist ideology or related tendencies or other forbidden topics. . . . It is forbidden to produce crafts containing tendentious drawings such as: a rose, a bleeding rose, the Aztec sun, a five-pointed star, a dove, a fist, hands united to make the shape of doves, a mosquito, a fish, a pyramid, a couple, a woman with child, a pregnant woman. One may not make standardized crafts that may be identified as made in the Establishment.<sup>23</sup>

Punishment for any infraction was solitary confinement.

It should be said that the Tupamaros used no torture with their prisoners; they offered qualified medical service when needed, and interrogation—when used—



was generally polite. In one of their operations during 1971, the Tupamaros kidnapped both the director of the Public Energy Department and a former minister of agriculture and held them in the People's Jail for a whole year. For the director, it was actually a second experience. Ulysses Pereira Reverbel, a very unpopular character accused of being profoundly and irredeemably corrupt, had been taken in once before, in 1969.<sup>24</sup> Claude Fly, an American Agency for International Development (AID) adviser, spent seven months (August 7, 1970, to February 27, 1971) imprisoned in the People's Jail. After his release, he refused to give any information to the police and maintained friendly correspondence with some of his captors. It was a relation that cannot be easily dismissed or explained as a case of Stockholm syndrome.<sup>25</sup>

During that same year (1971) and for short periods, the Tupamaros also took over movie houses and used the captive attention of the public to project slides in which they showed the prisoners and their well-being, added to slogans about the movement.

Both the Tupamaros' initial emphasis on bloodlessness and the conditions provided by the urban environment as a theatrical stage may have unconsciously led them into this aestheticization of operations. And although they were armed and increasingly subdivided into autonomous cells that took part in military encounters that sometimes produced unnecessary and unjustified casualties, by the time they ceased their underground operations, the total body count was relatively small. Over the period of eleven years in which the Tupamaros were active in the underground, their operations led to the death of forty-nine guerrillas and fifty army and police members.<sup>26</sup>

The year 1969 proved the most fertile in actions with a spectacular staging and aesthetic appeal. During that year, the movement performed eleven highly publicized operations and eighty others that lacked publicity. Even if not all the operations were a media success, the sophistication of the use of propaganda kept increasing, and it is clear that the Tupamaros had chosen to give this primacy. The military component in the operations worked only as a supporting instrument, flying in the face of favorite models like the Cuban and Vietnamese experiences. And years earlier, Fidel Castro had expressed his condemnation of any urban-based guerrilla movement when he proclaimed that the city was "a cemetery of revolutionaries and resources."<sup>27</sup>

On January 1, 1969, while a trial was in process against the Tupamaros, members of the movement entered the rooms of the district court and reclaimed forty-one weapons. The weapons had been found earlier by police in a Tupamaro hiding place and were kept in storage in the court building. On February 7, some

**A LA INJUSTICIA DEL REGIMEN  
SE OPONE LA JUSTICIA DEL PUEBLO**



**Frick Davies y Ulysses Pereira Reverbel,  
detenidos en la Cárcel del Pueblo**

**Hemos ganado una batalla  
pero no la guerra ★★★★★**

**Por la libertad de todos  
los presos políticos ★★★★★**

**Habrá patria para todos o  
no habrá patria para nadie**



Figure 6.3. (left) Tupamaros, *Subversión*, *Las Fuerzas Armadas al Pueblo Oriental*, 1971, slides for movie theaters.

Figure 6.4. Tupamaros, *Cloaca minada* (Mined Sewer), 1972, sign left to disconcert the police during an escape through a specially dug tunnel, news clipping.

Tupamaros deposited a package with 220 pounds of explosive gelnite in front of the house of an army official known to be a bomb expert. The material was initially taken from an army depot, but the group decided later that it was too dangerous for the use they had in mind. They returned the package with a note containing detailed explanations about how and why. On February 19, dressed as policemen, they took the equivalent of 220,000 dollars, which was an enormous amount of money for Uruguay at the time, from the Casino San Rafael in Punta del Este. San Rafael is the fanciest state-owned gambling house in the country. Too late, they realized that the money taken included the tips for the employees. The Tupamaros immediately offered (unsuccessfully) to return the corresponding percentage. On May 15, they took over a major radio station during the broadcast of an important international soccer game. With most of the population of the country listening, they read a political message six times over the next half hour. On July 16, a faction called the OPR 33 stole the original flag used by a group of thirty-three patriots who had entered Uruguay in 1825 to free the country from Spain. The flag was on permanent display in the Museum of National History. After the national flag, this one is ranked second as a civic symbol. On it is an inscription proclaiming "Freedom or Death." In a public an-

nouncement, they promised to return the flag to the museum once the political situation deserved it. At the time of this writing, it has yet to be returned.<sup>28</sup> On December 30, 1969, a box was left on the grounds of the Feria de Libros y Grabados (Book and Print Fair), a very public and popular event that takes place once a year. At that time, the fair was held in the front plaza of the municipality building. Activated by clockwork and to the delight of most of the public, the box broke open and started spouting propaganda leaflets into the crowd.<sup>29</sup>

The most elaborate and spectacular of the public events performed by the Tupamaros was "Operación Pando," and it involved about one hundred guerrilla members. On October 8, pointedly coinciding with the second anniversary of Che's death, they hired cars for a funeral procession. The excuse given for the occasion was the reburial of a relative who had died in Argentina several years earlier. The entourage included five cars and a van. The reburial was to take place in Pando, a city of twenty thousand people about twenty-five miles from Montevideo. On its way, the procession stopped at several points to pick up more "relatives," all of whom bore an appropriately funereal demeanor, most of them crying. The coffin was full of arms intended for the operation. Once the group was assembled, they overpowered the hired drivers and the real work started. What followed included the takeover of the police headquarters, the fire station, the telephone building, and, finally, the four banks in town.

From a practical point of view, the operation was a big failure. During the return to Montevideo, a confrontation with police took place, and three guerrillas died and eighteen were arrested.<sup>30</sup> However, from an aesthetic point of view, especially with regard to the narration of the sequence of preparations—the takeover of each station constitutes a complex subplot—the operation was a memorable achievement. It set the tone for further theatrical staging of events for which the city and its inhabitants played a role in the script designed by the guerrilla "actors."<sup>31</sup>

The Tupamaros may not have had aesthetic ambitions, but they certainly were eager to establish a good and efficient communication system. To achieve this, one would presume that they needed some kind of iconography, but they didn't use any, at least not in the form of literally illustrative images about the movement or their cause. Unlike the case of many other guerrilla movements, the publications by the Tupamaros were mostly without pictures. They were also dry and boring. Their effort was invested in the public relations image they projected. This projection required the use of mass media, and it is here where some actions by Latin American conceptualists, U.S. Yippies, and the U.S. war resistance movement may come to mind. However, while the U.S. examples

catered to the media format, the Tupamaro operations did not. Or, if they did, it was in a much-reduced form.

With their own mobile radio station and print shop, and the occasional takeover of public airwaves, the Tupamaros were relatively independent and immune to any manipulation of their image. The feat mentioned earlier, the use of a popular radio station to beam their messages during a soccer game, did more for the Tupamaro image than the actual content of their proclamation. The design of their operations did not have to be compromised by unfriendly “mediation.” Instead, the operations made use of a very direct and sympathetic rumor mill that exploited the mechanisms of folklore more than those of advertising.<sup>32</sup>

With all these actions, the movement became successful enough to provoke the government (in 1970) into officially prohibiting the use of six words (or terms) in the press. “Extremist cells,” “commandos,” “political delinquents,” “ideological delinquent,” “subversive,” and “terrorist” could not be printed by any newspaper in the country. The government issued a list of permissible words to be used in their place, among which were “evildoer,” “delinquent,” “criminal,” and “offender.”

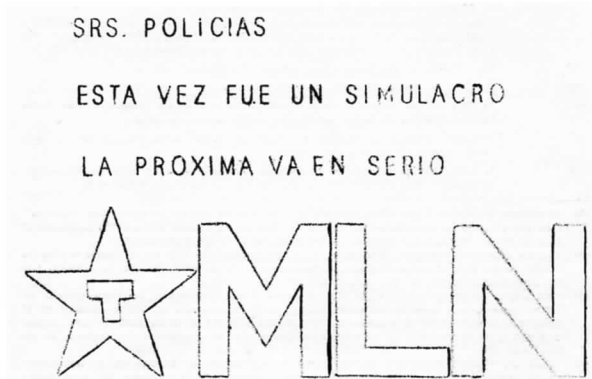


Figure 6.5. Tupamaros, “Messrs. Policemen, This time it was a simulation; the next time it will be for real,” 1969. Mimeographed flyer, collection of Luis Camnitzer.



Figure 6.6. Uruguayan government’s six prohibited words, 1970 news clipping, Montevideo, Uruguay.

This step was followed by further and unprecedented acts of censorship. Even the “*murgas*,” the popular groups that perform during the Carnival season on open stages in the different neighborhoods of Montevideo, felt the repression. Their songs are always topical, and they humorously and critically refer in their lyrics to events of the previous year. In one incident, the word “captain” had to be taken out of a reference to *Peter Pan’s* Captain Hook, since the context was

deemed offensive to the armed forces.<sup>33</sup> Temporarily, the war had shifted to the field of language. It was something of an orthodox conceptualist dream.

During April of 1972, the Ministries of Defense and the Interior joined in issuing a declaration in which they not only reasserted that the use of public force was a prerogative of the executive branch of the government, but they also rejected "any private organization that presumed to usurp any competencies of the State." What amounted to a government's recognition of its own weakness was embellished the following year, when the government/army climaxed with an oxymoron of classic proportions. In the same decree in which the Parliament was abolished and dictatorship was officially instituted (1973), it was declared that

it is forbidden to divulge . . . any type of information . . . that directly or indirectly attributes dictatorial intentions to the Executive Power because of the present decree. . . ."<sup>34</sup>

By then, the Tupamaros had already been defeated (the army coup was not connected with any ongoing warfare), but there were other and more immediate reasons than those predicted by the skeptics that led to their demise. One was

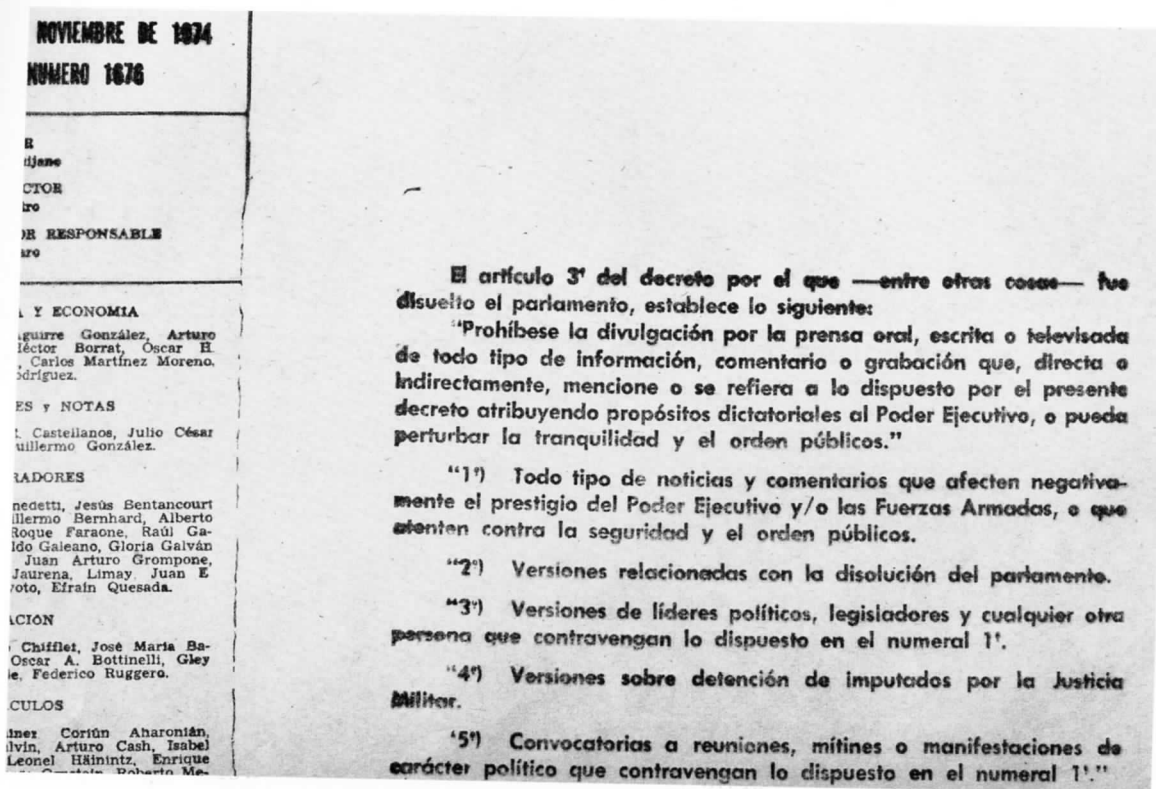


Figure 6.7. Army communiqué, 1974 *Marcha* news clipping, Montevideo, Uruguay.

grew too  
big, got out  
of control.

the excessive and rapid growth in their ranks. The result of their success in affecting public opinion proved fatal once this combined with a lack of appropriate screening systems. What had started as a relatively unified strategy became a fragmented one, with units taking it upon themselves to engage in unneeded violence. Another factor, although linked with the first one, was enemy infiltration in the higher ranks. The third cause was a general improvement of the Uruguayan intelligence service, including a remarkable sophistication in the use of torture, which was being aided by heavy U.S. financial support, as well as by technical training through "advisors." Finally, an increase in internal dissention caused lateral defections, secessions from the movement on strategic grounds that, although not based on ideological discrepancies, weakened the movement's overall structure.

In 1984, after the withdrawal of U.S. support, the army abandoned its support of the government and allowed for the reinstatement of democracy. As of 1985, the Tupamaros are organized as a legal party and have members in the Uruguayan Senate, the Chamber of Deputies, and the City Council of Montevideo. Their main function for the moment is to be ombudsmen.

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The Tupamaros developed, if one were to use artistic terms, a new form of theater. To accommodate what he called "environmental theater," U.S. critic Richard Schechner offered a diagram that goes from public events (demonstrations), to intermedia (happenings), to environmental theater, ending in traditional theater.<sup>35</sup> The range went from "impure" (life) to "pure" (art). The Tupamaro operations subverted this diagram because they were nearly as rigidly structured as traditional theater, but functioned under unpredictable conditions. Therefore, one would presume a need for total improvisation.

In this context, one remarkable feature of the Tupamaro operations was their utilization of time. In our modern culture, time has acquired a sacred status that rules how we look at things as much as it controls the rest of our lives. A work of art usually requests our time for contemplation in a polite manner, and the spectator grants it at his or her own discretion. We can leave whenever we want to. Part of the subversion instituted by the Tupamaros relied on the fact that they completely appropriated the viewer's time, either as a witness or through direct involvement. One could not leave whenever one wanted to. They also managed to take over time under nonmatrixed conditions, that is, uncontrolled by constraints of space or structure.<sup>36</sup> They were able to force decisions after the fact,

decisions that ranged from sympathy/antipathy, to the need for change or lack thereof, to just evaluating the success or failure of an operation. That is, there were conditions that, although not pegged to traditional patterns of consumption, could not be ignored. This way of dealing with time is usually reserved for disciplinary actions by armies and governments (whether democratic or regimented), including schooling and jailing. In fact, several years later, Nicos Poulantzas described the capitalist state in relation to time and space, a description that actually applies to any state structure with a central government:

What is specific to the capitalist state is that it absorbs social time and space, sets up the matrices of time and space, and monopolizes the organization of time and space that become, by the action of the state, networks of domination and power.<sup>37</sup>

Poulantzas's description complements what Anthony Giddens wrote during the same period about the nation-state and its claimed monopoly of violence:

The nation-state, which exists in a complex of other nation-states, is a set of institutional forms of governance, maintaining an administrative monopoly over a territory with demarcated boundaries (borders), its rule being sanctioned by law, and direct control of the means of internal and external violence . . . only in modern nation-states can the state apparatus generally lay successful claim to the monopoly of the means of violence, and only in such states does the administrative scope of the state apparatus correspond directly with territorial boundaries about which that claim is made.<sup>38</sup>

Political-military rebellions usually address the issue of enemy power in a straightforward manner and try to change the balance of power to their own advantage. In doing so, they justify their actions by invoking the monopoly and misuse of the administration of violence. Since the field of art concerns itself with changes in the representations of time and space, it is expected that artists have the clearest ability to subvert the monopoly of the state. It is here where the Tupamaros unwittingly come close to art.

The line separating liberating activities from crime, always blurred by changing definitions of legality, was even more confusing under dictatorship. It became, then, even more urgently a subject of attention for the artist and for the creative fighter.<sup>39</sup> What words were allowed, what was offensive to state and armies, what constituted a "crowd"—all were unpredictable variables that changed almost daily. Art therefore became a tool for liberation, and an even

more suspicious activity under authoritarian regimes. This increased the temptation of many artists to seek subversion through art, to flirt with political illicitness, and, sometimes, even to go underground.

It could be said that the attacks of the Tupamaros, with a sizable anarchic component in their outlook, were reactions against the misuse of overdetermination more than against ideology.<sup>40</sup> By broadening the scope of actions in this artistic direction, the Tupamaros departed from the traditional realm of military guerrilla movements and came closer to something that can be called active aesthetics. There is some parallel to ideas espoused by situationism in as much as there was a revelation of how capitalism organizes time, but unlike the situationists, the Tupamaros' focus was on the appropriation of time rather than on the relation between leisure and exploitation.

Audiences captive against their will generally don't like their predicament. They express resentment, regardless of whether iron bars or school desks formalize the captivity. It was amazing that in the case of the Tupamaros the appropriation of the public's time elicited sympathy and not resentment. It was a further indication that their actions did strike responsive chords other than ones of ideological agreement (which they often did not).

Parallel U.S. experiences were different in the sense that, with the advantage of a less repressive environment, the actions were designed to be seen on the television screen. For example, in the November 13, 1969, "March against Death" to the Arlington National Cemetery, the demonstrators carried black balloons to symbolize the casualties of war. They created a spectacle that could only be perceived by those who were outside the rally, but not by the participants. The public, as in many other similar events, was not intended to be on-site. Anybody present was marching; the onlookers were home in front of the TV watching the news. The public here was ultimately defined by the consumption of the spectacle.<sup>41</sup> In Uruguay, a much less media-dependent society, the Tupamaros hoped to have the public join the events.

The most structured operations performed by the Tupamaros fit somewhere between "happenings" and mass media events. Both the immediately perceivable activity and its "memory" recorded by the media (or by the popular rumor mill) ultimately led to a revolutionary folklore wherein the goal was not to make artistic information a sociological issue or to anesthetize politics, but to create political awareness.

The introduction of aesthetics into politics has its dangers, since it can create a spectacle that ultimately remains isolated and can have fascist connotations, especially when it involves mass movements. Walter Benjamin speaks of aes-

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theticization of politics as a fascist strategy, and of politicization as a communist approach.<sup>42</sup> But in the case of the Tupamaros, the purpose of the entry of aesthetics into politics is to activate and empower people; the purpose of fascist aesthetics is to achieve the opposite through indoctrination and derailed focus. As Susan Sontag points out, "they flow from (and justify) a preoccupation with situations of control, submissive behavior, extravagant effort and the endurance of pain."<sup>43</sup> The effective use of aesthetics is therefore rather tricky from a political point of view. The popular rallies organized to protest World Trade Organization (WTO) meetings raised this concern once again. Analyzing these issues in the context of a society that is not openly repressive, Uruguayan artist and critic Clemente Padín wrote:

In a political act we find political elements, and subsequently elements that are social, religious, aesthetic, etc. Art in the street doesn't aestheticize politics, but assumes the aesthetic instances of politics and tries to direct them against their creators. . . . [A]rt in the street does not formulate positions, but criticizes the apparently evident, normal and natural rules of the game that, without openly being repressive, determine what is allowed and what is not. . . . Attacking [them] and formulating one's own rules means to question the legitimacy of the system.<sup>44</sup>