

ART AND CULTURE



Secret Alphabet 2.

Fernando Gálvez de Aguinaga*

ROJO

The Creator's Geometric Rain

It rains. The listless rain gives off
the scent of an insipid, icy flower.
The day is long and sad. One understands
That death is like this... that life is like this.

It rains still. The day is sad and long.
The self sinks in remote gray.
It rains... And still, one hopes
The rain never ends.

Fragment of *Olas grises* (Gray Waves),
a poem by Leopoldo Lugones



Mexico under the Rain 4.

The rain of geometry fell around him, and the bricks extruding from the corners of his Coyoacán studio façade painted a canvas with the afternoon’s play of light and shadow—a piece of his own authorship. It was almost as if Vicente Rojo stood at the edge of his painting, as if his anatomy, cloaked in a sweater with blue and yellow rhombuses, were just another stroke of the brush in that big, geometric painting whose architecture he’d designed with his accomplice, architect Felipe Leal. That’s how I met Vicente Rojo in 1993, surrounded by his almost kaleidoscopic visual imagination. It was the early 1990s and I was a young reporter who had already held dozens of books whose covers the maestro had designed. I already admired his editorial work; writing on his sculptures and paintings already existed; and I’d found his work in museums, galleries, magazines, and newspapers. I felt like the fact that he was named after his uncle—a staunch military man who had led the Republican armed forces in the Spanish Civil War—had come out of a storybook. I tried to understand his early life—how the war in Spain had erupted and how his father suddenly had to leave for Mexico in exile, given

that his brother was a leader in the Republican resistance against Franco and his fascist cronies. How had a child who had grown up amid so much chaos become such a generous and orderly artist? If Vicente Rojo’s sober personality gave off anything, it was a sense of generosity and serenity—something I also found in his prints and paintings. That first meeting was like a spring of revelations. His answers to my questions went beyond what I avidly jotted down in my notebook. They were in the row of four or five easels lined up in his studio, in the clean, impeccable paintbrushes beside the canvas he was working on, in the garden sculptures, in the stairway climbing up to the second floor like a drawing—everything seemed to be replying to my questions while Don Vicente shared stories of his nostalgia for his father, his journey to Mexico, his friendships, what he’d learned from the journalist Fernando Benítez, and how the cultural supplements in newspapers would ultimately help consolidate him as a designer, while those same journalistic spaces ended up being fertile ground for the lush friendships he cultivated through intellectual and emotional bonds.

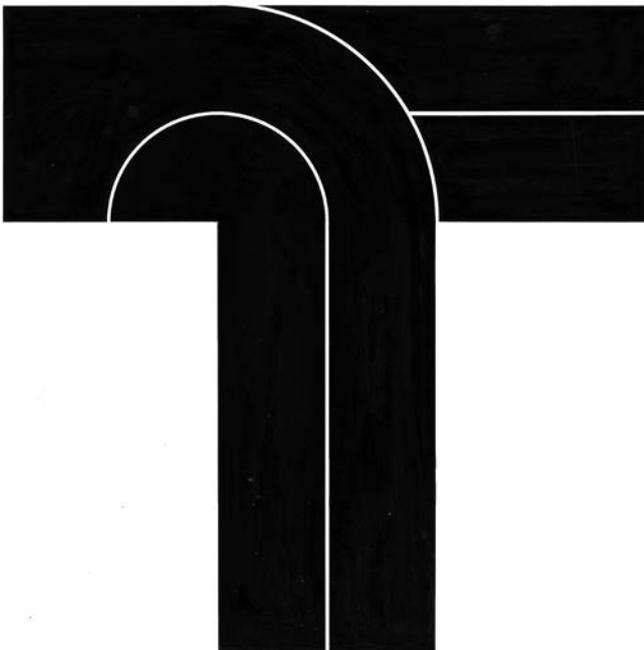
While Vicente Rojo told me about his nation’s pain, the people he missed, the precariousness of armed conflict, historic injustices, but also about certain sense of commitment, solidarity, and

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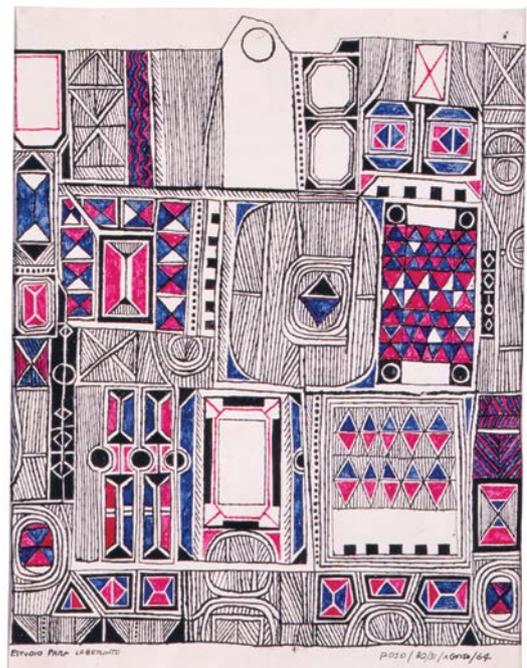
intellectual integrity, I suddenly understood that his work embodied a persistent quest for order. These expressions emanated from someone whose daily existence had been utterly turbulent, with family qualms and the tensions of ideological persecution hitting close to home. In his work, as he attempted to organize a book or compose a piece of art within the four edges of a canvas, what he sought was to create an orderly universe. Thus, as Vicente told me about his war-torn childhood, I understood how his quest for freedom had found an orderly route to happiness in his creative discipline and geometric compositions. In his fabulous book *Puntos suspensivos, escenas de un autorretrato* (Ellipsis: Scenes from a Self Portrait), published by the National College (*El Colegio Nacional*), Maestro Rojo looks back on a photograph of when he first arrived in Mexico: at age 18, he was photographed painting at the Pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacan. Perhaps this first incursion into painting Mexico's landscapes was really a harbinger of his path toward geometry. The pyramids towering amid the natural landscape were lessons in the metaphor of architecture: the mountains as sacred spaces would appear geometrically translated, as the natural landscape's organic curves became shapes. Years later, Vicente Rojo's artistic aesthetic ended up translating life —pushing its wilderness and natural phenomena into dominant lines and triangles, and into the pure shapes of the square, the triangle, and the circle, much like the masters of the legendary Bauhaus did in their predominantly abstract proposals.

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From 1919 to 1933, Bauhaus artists and ideas elevated graphic and industrial design into professional careers, significantly influencing Vicente Rojo's ideas, as he mentioned in that first interview I did in 1993. Besides Klee and Kandinsky, color theory, the emergence of universal fonts in the printing world, photographic and photomontage exploration in graphic design, the renovation of museography and industrial design, and the concept of housing for workers also made their mark on Rojo. He fed off the creative and intellectual revolution at the heart of the Weimar Republic, but like he said, the revolution reached him through Mexico's cultural scene, through discussions at soirées and newspapers, manifestos, exhibitions, and lectures. Rojo viewed Paul Klee as artistic kin —he liked emphasizing how close to his heart he kept these influences and ties. Don Vicente spoke about how Mexico's youth—including himself— suddenly took up the fight for abstract art, following the most forward-thinking people of his generation. He had his own position within abstrac-



Negation 07.



Study for *The Labyrinth 7*.

tionism, with geometry taken to the extreme and explored through thousands of varieties and nuances. Thus, when I first saw him immersed in the geometry of his work, before his studio's façade, I felt like I was seeing him amid this other world in which he was a creator, a world that had marked my vision, in which a Mexico City was enclosed in Vicente's visual prism where the rain never stopped. I'd like to cite a phrase from his self-portrait: "I see geometry as 'second nature' because it supports us; without it, there'd be no doors, no chairs, no wheels." There also would be no paintings framed within the four edges of a canvas, nor rectangular or square books housing lives and landscapes, nor the variations in Vicente Rojo's prints and paintings. I still remember the time I organized an exhibition of his graphic series *Volcanes* (Volcanoes) at the Institute for Graphic Art in Oaxaca (IAGO), in 2005. He told me about how Paul Westheim's writing decidedly impacted his approach to geometry, both giv-

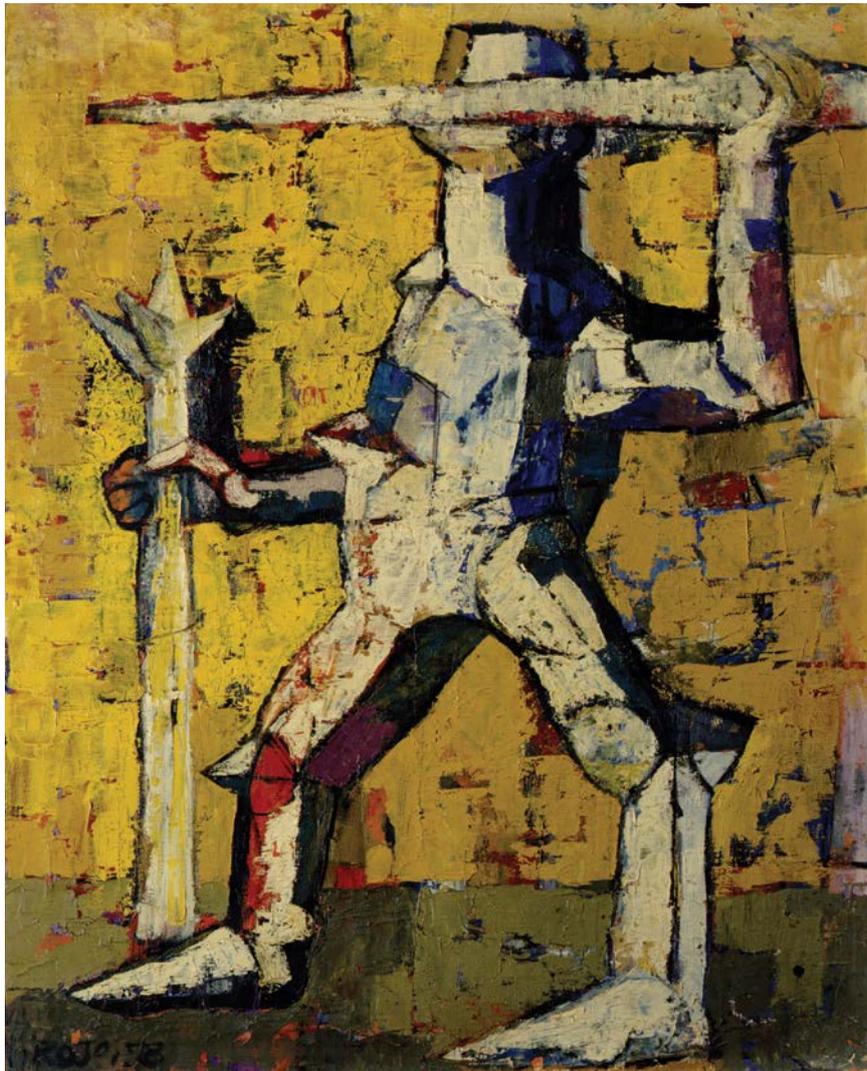
Vicente Rojo's revolution changed history through his sensibility, and the rain of his refracted light and colorful triangles remains in his prints, lithographs, and silkscreens.



Extinct Volcano 2.

en his texts on artists like Klee, Kandinsky, and other avant-garde artists from Europe, and because of his perspective on pre-Hispanic art. When we spoke at his Coyoacán studio before the Oaxacan exhibition in 2005, I reminded him of that famous letter from former Bauhaus students and teachers, Joseph and Annie Albers, to Kandinsky, in which they somewhat rejected Breton's surrealist appropriation of Mexico, telling the Russian master that "Mexico is truly the promised land of abstract art." "Why, yes, they were right," Don Vicente replied, "but, for the record, it was my dear friend, the marvelous gallerist Antonio Souza, who taught me the inextricable relationship and influence between two or more colors on a canvas—and he also taught Toledo; we'll ask him about that in Oaxaca soon enough."

When I delved into this genius's art at age nineteen or twenty, I'd already been trained in graphic design, and I'd read Pacheco and Monsiváis's books, which were printed by ERA publishing house, with their front covers created by their dear friend; and I'd read the cultural supplements in the magazine *Siempre* (Always), and the *Uno más Uno* (One Plus One) and *Novedades* (News) dailies, which my father piled up like treasures—treasures I'd devour on the most fruitful, sleepless nights of my youth. Gabriel García Márquez, Octavio Paz, and José Revueltas would mark my life with their poetics, and their titles were often published in books whose front covers had been designed by Maestro Rojo. Over the years, my generation became almost unconsciously imbibed with the mastery of his brushstrokes and publishing ideas. Rojo founded ERA in 1960, giving Mexico's best intellectual ideas an editorial home. But he built his practice across several spaces, including newspapers, magazines, and more. We could understand ERA as the living room to his graphic house, but he also participated in many of the most important print workshops of the time, creating his portfolios (*carpetas*) alongside the classical print masters of his generation, but also with older and younger printers like Emilio Payán. In these spaces, young designers like Alejandro Magallanes, and older ones like Rafael López Castro, had the chance to have Rojo's advice and open-ended conversation. Rojo's way of conceptualizing books, newspaper covers, headlines, and logos seeped into our everyday lives. We ate up the news for breakfast, peering at the headline in the *Jornada* newspaper, taking in the paper's logo and first text box, its first few supplements . . . In Oaxaca, many of the logos for Francisco Toledo's institutions, like the Handmade Paper Workshop and the Museum of Contemporary Art (MACO), among others, were donated by Vicente Rojo. Likewise, we could mention Mexico City's Londres bookstore, as well as private gallery spaces like Juan Martín, museums like the National Museum of Art (MUNAL), and other companies.



The Warrior.

His work at the *Revista de la Universidad* (University Magazine) boasted a markedly avant-garde aesthetic in the style of the 1960s and 1970s, sometimes influenced by pop, minimalism, and even psychedelia. If we pulled out an LP record with the voice of a celebrated poet from the UNAM's *Voz viva* collection, the album cover would be the product of his graphic sensibility, which went beyond design, created with the poetry and literature that would enter his mind and transform into a simultaneously aesthetic and functional piece, in which the letters, the image, and color emanated from an expressive and informative strategy that marked our lives.

Then his work took over the public space, with sculptures on Miguel Ángel de Quevedo Avenue, a fountain for the building Ricardo Legorreta built for the Ministry of Foreign Relations (SRE), and the Anti-Mural at the National Center for the Arts (CENART), to name a few, transforming our relationship to the street and to public buildings by making them more than mere spaces to get through red tape, get in line to see a show, or walk to a bookstore.

His pieces opened to letting the spectator build the piece with her own experience and were more suggestive than determined, opening fantastic universes within the everyday—in intimacy and on the street. Through his three-dimensional work, the dialogue between architecture and urban engineering seemed almost natural. Vicente has the last name of a leftist—Rojo, or Red—and came to our country when General Cárdenas opened the doors to the marvelous personalities of the Spanish exile community, who would ultimately make Mexico complete. Families came in waves, and our nation received art, lectures, science, and the intellectual, economic, and political work that helped build much of the best that Mexico has to offer. Vicente Rojo's revolution changed history through his sensibility, and the rain of his refracted light and colorful triangles remains in his prints, lithographs, and silkscreens, and in the indigenous-style collages he made with cut-up *amate* bark paper, with infinite squares still ruling this creative downpour, whose rain will never cease. **MM**