



BRILL

# Poetic Anarchism

## *The Revolutionary Bridges between Nadaísmo and Surrealism*

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### Abstract

In 1966, the Colombian poet Gonzalo Arango published the article “Jazz para una misa negra por el alma de André Breton” [Jazz for a Black Mass for the Soul of André Breton] in Bogotá. In the text, he paid homage to the French poet and declared him “an impossible corpse”. Arango was the founder of the literary and artistic avant-garde movement called Nadaísmo that surfaced in Colombia in the 1950s. Its members were self-declared “cultural guerrillas” and established as their target moralism in politics, aesthetics, and social issues using the arts as their weapon. This article explores Nadaísmo’s ideological links to French Surrealism and its revolutionary spirit by examining the life of the group and the ideas exposed in the first and second nadaist manifestos.

### Keywords

surrealism – Latin American art – cultural revolution – Colombian art – Gonzalo Arango – Cold War

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Nadaísmo is a kiss sent from the tip of a boxing glove.<sup>1</sup>

JOTAMARIO ARBELÁEZ (Arbeláez, 1970: 3)

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On 6 November 1966, a Colombian poet named Gonzalo Arango (1931–1976) published an article in the Bogotá newspaper *El Tiempo* titled “Jazz para una misa negra por el alma de André Breton” [Jazz for a Black Mass for the Soul of André Breton], lamenting the death of the French poet two months earlier. The text read: “September 28, what a pity, Breton died in Paris, he died of living, of what he loved the most. I cannot imagine men like him dead: they are impossible corpses. To say that Breton is dead rings false, it is to deny the spirit, the sun, the genius, the poetry. Death is definitely disgusting!” (Arango, 1966). At the time, Arango had already made a name for himself as the founder of a Colombian literary and artistic avant-garde movement called Nadaísmo. The movement first surfaced in the cities of Medellín and Cali in the late 1950s and later spread its influence throughout the country until the late 1960s;<sup>2</sup> its professed aim was to systematically undermine the hold of moralism in Colombian politics, aesthetics, and social customs. Among its ranks, the group included the poets Jaime Jaramillo Escobar (under the pseudonym X-504), Jotamario Arbeláez, Amílcar Osorio (under the pseudonym Amilkar-U), Elmo Valencia (under the pseudonym El Monje [The Monk]), Raquel Jodorowsky, Dina Merlini, theater producer Patricia Ariza,<sup>3</sup> and the visual artists Álvaro Barrios, Norman Mejía, and Pedro Alcántara. After bursting onto the scene, Nadaísmo quickly managed to achieve enough stability as a movement to become an important guideline for many Colombian intellectuals in the 1960s.

Although its impact on the literary scene in Colombia has been recognized and established beyond the notion of an irreverent reception by scholars

1 All translations are the author’s unless otherwise indicated.

2 As often happens with cultural movements, it is difficult to determine the exact date Nadaísmo ceased to exist. With the effects of May 1968, there seems to have been a short last breath that included international protest in the face of the war in Vietnam. After that, wider student movements tended to overshadow Nadaísmo.

3 Ariza was, until recently, the minister of culture for the first left-inclined government that has existed in Colombia.

Armando Romero and Laura Alejandra Rubio, attempts to connect Nadaísmo to the broader context of rebellion linked to social issues have fallen short. This article explores the way in which Arango, and his group consistent with the left-inspired social movements operating at the time, used some tools/weapons of Surrealism such as humor to lead an insurrection against the authoritarianism of the dominant conservative class that ruled Colombia in the context of the Cold War. We will see how, in its role as one of the nodes of a broad network of Latin American movements, Nadaísmo made palpable its faith in the power of collective destruction and subsequent construction as the only way to generate change in bourgeois, domesticated, and colonized minds.

Nadaísmo was a countercultural movement whose members identified as “cultural guerrillas”. This identification takes on a specifically charged meaning in the context of a country that had endured civil struggles for many decades. Although the armed guerrillas that were active in Colombia at the time had formed and operated for the most part in rural areas, by the early 1960s they had become a source of inspiration for progressive city dwellers who idealized their struggle and related it to the recent triumph of the Cuban Revolution. It was common, then, for academics, intellectuals, and cultural agents to loosely or symbolically interpret their doings as contributions to the struggle. Yet Nadaísmo introduced a new inflection into the local understanding of what a guerrilla movement could entail by decidedly framing cultural institutions as dimensions of the battlefield. Armed guerrilla movements for social justice had gained a new form of prominence in urban Colombia through the figure of the revolutionary priest Camilo Torres,<sup>4</sup> but the Nadaístas took a critical stance toward the orthodox Marxist understanding of their task; instead, they maintained that a social revolution could be brought about without relying on weapons and the violent annihilation of the adversary to establish power and that the powers of cultural transformation should play a primary role.

In their poetic approach to the practice of social critique, Nadaístas promoted idleness as a strategy of resistance and protest. For them, idleness could in fact be exercised as an active and inventive refusal to participate in the circuits of capitalist production. The radicality of their position was particularly significant in the city of Medellín—where Arango was initially based—which had endeavored for decades to position itself as Colombia’s industrial capital. The city had come to metonymically represent a uniquely Colombian blend

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4 Camilo Torres (1929–1966) was a Colombian Marxist–Leninist Catholic priest and sociologist who, inspired by the ideas of liberation theology, joined the guerrilla group ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional). While a member, he died and became a martyr and a powerful symbol of revolutionary struggles in the country.

of modernizing entrepreneurship and social conservatism. In response to this, the Nadaístas promoted poetry and artistic actions as paths of liberation from an increasingly constricting form of rationalized social being. Believing in the agency of simple irreverence, the group issued a call to unleash unruly subconscious torrents in order to engage in the production of *nada* [nothing]. For them, a form of creative action that refused to be directed toward the production of traditional artworks could bring about a real change in the values of Colombian society. As Arango put it: “Nadaísta poetry is the freedom that brings disorder into what reason has organized, that is, the reverse creation of the universal order and of Nature” (Arango, 1958, reprint 2018: 5).

Recent scholarship on Surrealism has turned its attention to the movement’s lives and afterlives beyond its original incarnation as a French avant-garde movement. Academic research like that for the exhibition *Surrealism Beyond Borders* made it widely known that Surrealism studies go beyond finding the influence of the French manifestation of Surrealism in other latitudes. Instead, there is a drive to bring forward a depiction closer to its true spirit: Surrealism was and still is built from the summation of many dissenters around the world, including those places not in its initial map. Today it is fair to say that this new historical framework more accurately conveys what the movement had set out to do in the first place: To function as a flexible and mutant vehicle for spiritual revolt in many different contexts. In the “First Manifesto”, Breton asserted the power of imagination and condemned its enslavement as a betrayal of the sense of justice (Breton, 1969: 4–5);<sup>5</sup> this call was heard all around the world and produced myriad, multiform reverberations. According to Effie Rentzou, “Surrealism’s universalism bypassed national structures and imbued its world vision with an ethical urgency” (Rentzou, 2021: 309). Placing Nadaísmo within this continuum of resonances may allow us to understand how surrealist sensibilities and strategies could play out in a relatively unwelcoming cultural environment like Colombia.

Known as “*la ciudad de la eterna primavera*” [the city of eternal spring] due to its mild climate, Medellín was ruthlessly redescribed by Nadaísta poet Eduardo Escobar as an “eternal spring of hypocrisy, skittish, cruel, vengeful, corrupt, and puritan” [*eterna primavera de la hipocresía, asustadiza, cruel, vengativa, corrupta y rezandera*] (Escobar, 2018: 66). The city’s fast economic rise seemed to paradoxically strengthen the conservatism of its social and cultural

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5 The first surrealist manifesto was an important referent for the Nadaístas; the text had been translated and published in the local cultural magazine *El Gráfico* in April 1925, followed by the publication of interviews with Breton and Eluard in the newspaper *El Espectador*.

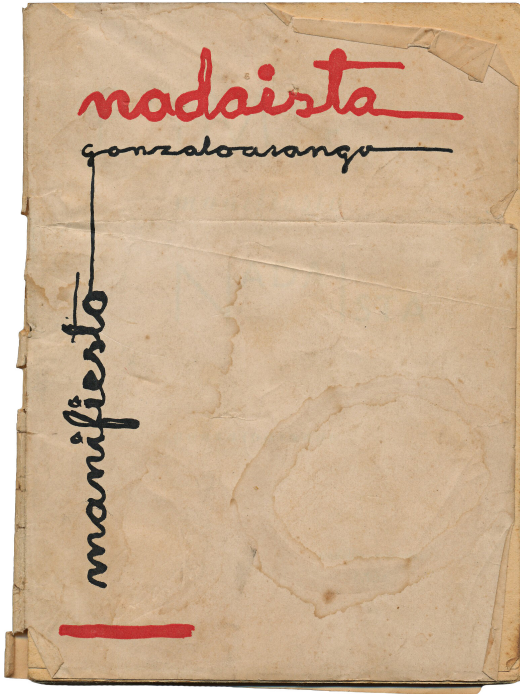


FIGURE 1  
 First manifesto *Nadaísta*, 1958  
 © COURTESY CORPORACIÓN  
 OTRAPARTE

élites, and this sense of claustrophobic enclosure triggered the wave of irreverence and provocation that peaked in Nadaísmo. The group would often convene in La Bastilla, one of Medellín's traditional coffeehouses, and following the paradigm established by earlier international avant-gardes, they set out to draft a manifesto to establish their ethos and collective battle calls (Figure 1). The opening lines of this manifesto read: "Nadaísmo is a very limited concept, a revolution in the form and content of Colombia's ruling spiritual order. For the youth it is a schizophrenic-conscious state against the passive states of spirit and culture" (Arango, 1958, reprint 2018: 3).

First and foremost, Nadaísmo was a truly collective and affirmatively shapeless effort. Although Arango functioned as the visible leader, the movement was in constant transformation as new individuals joined in and explored different fields of symbolic practice. Nadaístas engaged in forms of proto-performance, drawing, theater, partying, poetry, and experimental documentary, and in all manner of combinations of these. Their doings sparked a moment of fruitful chaos, creating a sense of possibility in a country that was in the process of becoming a contested site of diplomatic and cultural battles as the postwar period evolved and the struggle against communism set the ground for new forms of US interventionism in Latin America.

Like many preceding avant-garde movements, Nadaísmo can be read as resulting from a sustained tension between tradition and rupture. To some extent, the movement can be seen as both continuing and disrupting the activities of an earlier literary collective known as Los Nuevos [The New Ones], a group that had originally proclaimed a commitment to radical modernity but whose capacity for revolutionizing was in fact fairly tame. When the Nadaístas showed up, the “new ones” quickly responded by calling them “a natural product of a perverted age [...], of cultures led by illiterates”, and an “immediate consequence of dictatorships” (Arciniegas, 1958). Unsurprisingly, the movement met with rabid opposition and was generally misunderstood to the point of being the object of censorship and prosecution.

A climate of instability and altercation was certainly part of what the Nadaístas had set out to achieve, and to do so they perfected what could be described as provocative media strategies partially developed, as their very name suggests, in conversation with Dada. However, the manifestos published by the group in 1958 and 1962 clearly signal their affinities with Surrealism, and specifically their adherence to Breton’s understanding of freedom in the first manifesto. Like Breton, Arango fleshed out the term as a space for action rather than as an intellectual construct: “In synthesis, Freedom is engaged action. It is neither a feeling, nor an idea, nor a passion. It is an act that pours out to the world of History. It is, in essence, the negation of solitude. [...] The artist owes no mercy to a world that has betrayed him” (Arango, 1958, reprint 2018: 28). Arango did not envision the movement as working toward developing a particular novel aesthetic—a goal that seemed insufficient given the absence of truly engaged experimental cultural practice in Colombia; instead, he called for a plurality of divergent aesthetic strategies that could be applied in local settings to promote the true value of freedom and build a new and inclusive regime of sensibility beyond the confines of established institutions. This programmatic absence of form is explicitly conveyed in the first manifesto:

We do not want to work on what is definitive. Nadaísmo is born free from fixed systems and dogmas. It is a freedom open to the possibilities of Colombian culture, with the smallest amount of fighting presuppositions that will evolve over time toward an appreciation of man, a new form of beauty, and an aspiration deprived of romantic or metaphysical idealisms towards a Society that is evolved in the cultural and artistic orders.

ARANGO, 1958, reprint 2018: 3

The absence of a well-determined definition for the movement and its goals can be read as an index of the evocative pull of Surrealism, and the same can

be said about the stated commitment to search for “a new form of beauty”. For Arango, this search entailed a radical transformation and expansion of poetry as a practice: “Poetry is now, for the first time in Colombia, a rebellion against traditional laws and forms, against the aesthetic and scholastic precepts that have fruitlessly struggled for the truth and the definition of beauty” (Arango, 1958, reprint 2018: 5). Modifying and localizing surrealist premises, the group embraced active experimentation with the nether reaches of the psyche as a crucial resource in their struggle for a form of aesthetic renewal that was immediately social in scope: “The irresponsible creative spirit produces beauty that is simultaneously Conscious–Unconscious; Irrational–Conceptual; Oneiric–Awake; that is, beauty born pure like an original sin” (Arango, 1958, reprint 2018: 5). In a retrospective appraisal of the moment, the Nadaísta Elmo Valencia summarized it as follows: “What stayed with us from surrealism were the erotic dreams provided by Brigitte Bardot, our first muse in flesh and blood, and the admiration we felt at a certain time for André Breton, when we realized that his movement was completely anti-literary, anti-poetic, and anti-artistic” (Valencia, 2001: 9). The Nadaístas found surrealist iconoclasm profoundly inspiring in their countercultural convictions.

In the group’s second manifesto, penned by the poet Amilkar-U in 1962 and published under the title “Explosiones radioactivas de la poesía nadaísta” [Radioactive Explosions of Nadaist Poetry], the Nadaístas were depicted as enlightened individuals intent on vindicating poetic opacity as a potent source for a renewal that could only be understood as comprehensive, that is, as connectedly social, cultural, and spiritual. This text also reveals Dadaist and surrealist influences in its invectives against the “cult of an unreal reality” and its defense of art as the sole true weapon against the structures of a state that was completely subservient to those who struggled for economic power. Amilkar-U traced the roots of Nadaísmo back to the “land of schizophrenics” that had spawned Rimbaud, Breton, and Tzara and reaffirmed the group’s interest in the various strategies used by surrealists to disengage from all standing social parameters. Indeed, echoes of Breton’s manifestos are often to be found in the group’s writings. In “La rebelión estética” [Aesthetic Rebellion], for instance, Arango presented aesthetic freedom as the only fundamental value underlying their thought and practice, with the premise of doing away with all possible absolutes. Most importantly, Nadaísmo followed Surrealism and other avant-garde movements in its effort to surpass the framework of literature. As it came into shape, the group’s core program was determined as the cultivation of an existential attitude that could not be exhausted by the production of culturally valued objects. They took the interaction between artists and their surrounding social context as the decisive locus for creative work and argued that the fate

of the artist in such work should be driven by the irrational or, alternatively, by the determinism of a “bio-psychic consciousness” that could variously break into the sphere of ordinary reality through political action, madness, or mysticism. In that sense, *Nadaísmo* understood itself as an effort to intensify and reconfigure the agency of art.

In an interview published before the 1958 manifesto, Arango explained the movement as a “schizophrenic-conscious” revolution and already explicitly avowed the precedence of French Surrealism, arguing that *Nadaísmo* aimed to provoke what the surrealists had described as “a state of frenzy” (Arango, 1958). He added, however, that the challenge for *Nadaístas* was to achieve this in a context that considerably diverged from that of historical avant-gardes. Indeed, the fact that Colombian cultural agitators took an interest in adopting and adapting the attitudes of earlier international avant-garde movements at this particular point in time must be understood against the background of a shift in relations between the United States and Latin America with the Cuban Revolution looming. After 1959, US foreign policy in Latin America was framed as an effort to block the spread of Cuban influence in the region. To advance its goals, the United States leaned on promoting regional institutions like the Organization of American States, which, through its Department of Visual Arts, furthered US aims by reinforcing the notion that modernist art was a manifestation of liberal, capitalist “freedom”.

In Latin America, the convulsive decades after the Second World War and at the beginning of the Cold War drew many intellectuals to militancy in or sympathy for radical leftist movements. Quite a few intellectuals actually joined subversive organizations that equated the local fight for social justice with armed opposition to US neocolonialist intervention. In the late 1950s, Colombia's political powers had spent over a decade engaged in an undeclared and violent civil war known as *La Violencia*. The Liberal and Conservative parties had led their followers into a deadly struggle for political power, and many of the young intellectuals who became involved in *Nadaísmo* had grown up as witnesses and victims of this process. Like many Colombians, some of them came from rural families that had been forced to flee to urban centers to escape persecution and violence; these first-generation urbanites were often the first in their families to receive a university education and be exposed to new cultural and political horizons, which they enthusiastically embraced as glimmers of hope in an uncertain landscape.

*Nadaísmo* was particularly informed by two historical events: The military dictatorship of General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla (1953–1957) and the ensuing institution of the National Front (1958–1974), an agreement between Colombia's two traditional political parties intended to curb the devastating violence and



share political power while severely curtailing the spread of left-leaning organizations, some of which originated as self-defense peasant militias associated with the Liberal party. The agreement was intended to create a closed two-party system and led many leftists to believe that armed struggle was their only option. This prompted the emergence of a broad range of movements that eventually sought to align themselves with various Marxist, socialist, and communist international tendencies and, especially after the Cuban Revolution, came to be perceived as the only vehicle, both practical and symbolic, for social and cultural alternatives in the 1960s. The Colombian establishment unleashed stern repressive measures against this entire spectrum of social, political, and cultural activities, and this set the stage for the development of Nadaísmo as a cultural movement. According to Arango, Nadaísmo interpreted the situation as one in which uncompromising rebellion was the sole available option; accordingly, the Nadaístas coded their activities as a contribution to an overarching insubordination, understanding art as “a loaded weapon” and describing their work as “gang poetry” [*poesía en pandilla*]. This, then, is the specific lens through which the Nadaístas reinterpreted and elaborated on the surrealist program.

One of the recurrent aspects in the Nadaístas' interpretation of the surrealist program was anticlericalism. Mirroring the surrealist agenda against Catholicism that deemed it the source of all evil (Escribano, 2023: 80), in the first manifesto Arango argued that Colombia's cultural backwardness was above all the result of the firm hold of the Catholic Church on the country's educational system and an unaccomplished separation of church and state (in fact, the country was constitutionally consecrated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus until a new constitution was adopted in 1991). In response, Arango promoted a form of poetic activity understood as an epistemic immersion in immediate experience. Direct, unprejudiced perception and sensation were in turn conceived as capable of tapping into and amplifying latent alternative currents in social reality. In the words of Eduardo Escobar, a founding member, Nadaísmo was “a technique for the perception of the marvelous in the everyday” (Escobar, 2018: 70). Since their projected revolution was not limited to the production of cultural artifacts and was expected to alter the field of experience as a whole, Nadaísmo purposefully evaded any stable definition of its intent. As Escobar put it, no one knew exactly what it was, “whether it was a body of ideas, an outbreak of madness, the new poetry, a sociological phenomenon of misery, or a perfume in a hammer factory” (Escobar, 2018: 66). This indeterminacy was precisely what endowed them with the freedom to act in ways unexpected even by the art world.

The embrace of group dynamics and the sense of a collective struggle were also central to Nadaísmo, and following the surrealist template, the group also

converged around a leading figure whose role was coded through religious imaginary, although with slightly different inflections. While Breton was known as the “black pope” of Surrealism, Arango was referred to as the Prophet—the former a figure of centralized power, the latter a figure of exalted disruptiveness. Although Nadaísmo claimed to be neither religious nor romantic, mysticism and other forms of anti-institutional spiritual practice had a firm grip on their imaginations and arguably allowed them to reconcile their transgressive tendencies with their cultural background.

A significant factor in the movement’s development was its ability to secure a space in Colombia’s mainstream printed press. Their key platforms in this regard were the cultural supplements of Colombia’s two major national newspapers, *El Tiempo* and *El Espectador*. Their decision to promote their ideas and actions through this medium clearly manifests their intention to address a broad social spectrum and disregard the museum-going elite. By 1960, several members of the group had relocated to the capital city, Bogotá, and met regularly in the bohemian cafe El Automático, a meeting place for major intellectuals and politicians. As described by the painter Alejandro Obregón, El Automático

was almost like a Cabaret Voltaire back then: León de Greiff, Gaitán Durán, Cote Lamus [...] it was a fantastic environment. I remember that soldiers would come in daily, because all of us who met there were suspects in something, the army perceived us as a rebel hub [...] but we were simply a group of people who met often to talk and argue; we were bursting with enthusiasm.

PANESSO, 1975: 88–89

One day at El Automático, Arango famously ensconced himself in the toilet and then reappeared holding a manifesto written on toilet paper that he proceeded to read aloud using the mode of intonation of political speakers (Figure 2). That action was the group’s inaugural statement in Bogotá, and although its symbolic eschatology may have been familiar to the literary audience, it was certainly surprising for the broader public to witness a poet transforming the act of reading into a new kind of gesture. Indeed, Arango’s disruptive action was designed to endure *as* an event, recollected and retold by those who had witnessed it; it was, therefore, crucial that the action not be performed in a location that was socially instituted as a site for literary or artistic presentations and that it evade description as a piece of literature, a work of art, or a conventional theatrical performance. This, and ensuing Nadaísta actions, introduced an entirely new dimension into artistic practice in the Colombian scene,



FIGURE 2 Gonzalo Arango presenting *nadaísmo* at *El Automático* coffee house in Bogotá (1961c.)

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where “modernity” as a value had become monopolized by painters who dabbled in abstraction.

Although Nadaísta actions consistently confounded available categories (they were experimental in a broad and fluid sense), they were strongly repressed by law enforcement under the command of local governments. In 1963, the director of Cali’s public library canceled a poetry reading by Jotamario Arbeláez arguing that

lectures or poetry readings that attack social peace, the tranquility of people’s consciences, Christian morality, due respect for legally established authorities, the private lives of individuals and homes, proper manners, and the religious devotion of the Colombian people, are not and will never be allowed in this library. [...] Colombian society and people, specifically those of our city, deserve respect, and therefore blasphemy, obscenity, vulgarity, the effort to destroy everything while building nothing, the abuse of truth and the true values of the spirit, cannot and should not enjoy the benefits and privileges of a cultural institution like this library.

RUBIO, 2020: 192

As Elmo Valencia remembers:

[A]t first we were open to anything. [...] Meanwhile, the establishment was fucking with us, finding any excuse to put us in jail. [...] We wanted the country of the Sacred Heart to forget about false prophets and celebrate our advent passionately and deliriously. We showed up as long-haired holy men who stood up to fight in the name of Nothingness [*la Nada*]. *From Nothingness to Nadaísmo. Because only Nothingness exists. It is the creative principle. The rest is counterfeit whisky. Cheap capitalism, so despised by Whitman.*

VALENCIA, 2001: 10

The Nadaístas regarded carnivals and parties as crucial components of their creative program; they wore costumes, made music, and experimented with psychotropic drugs, alcohol, and open sexuality as forms of artistic experimentation (Rubio, 2020: 247). Through extravagance and playfulness, they sought to redraw their own sense of embodiment and to disentangle themselves from the remnants of a Puritan Catholic education. The body thus became a very important locus for their artistic revolution, something that their contemporaries failed to comprehend. A 1958 article in *El Tiempo* already warned readers about “those intellectuals who call themselves Nadaístas”, stating that “they make themselves seen all over the city of Medellín adopting the most outlandish poses; some of them are even making the case for hairdos in the style of Françoise Sagan” (Arango, 1958). Misperceived as bratty attention seekers, the Nadaístas were in fact looking to apply strategies from the visual arts in everyday public spaces in order to upset boundaries and givens through their embodied presence.

At one point the group organized an extremely controversial gathering, during which copies of their own books were burnt in front of the Universidad de Antioquia. Arango issued a provocative invitation: “As a direct descendent of Attila, Nero, Erostratus, Hitler, and all the pyromaniacs of history, I invite you to burn our books to prove to the world that we have no regard for hereditary knowledge, since there is no longer anything to believe in, not even ourselves” (Valencia, 2001: 33). The declaration did not aim to declare their allegiance with Fascism; instead, this action can be read as an effort to make explicit their passage into a new phase. No longer interested in discursive constructs, the group was now preferentially committed to ephemeral embodied action as their ultimate medium. The Nadaístas accordingly turned their attention to what they described as *actos pánicos* [panic acts], referencing Arango’s claim that “terror was a weapon in the fight against the established order” in the first manifesto, and establishing an alliance of sorts with the group Teatro Pánico, founded by Fernando Arrabal and Alejandro Jodorowsky around the same time (and partly inspired by their frequent encounters with Breton in Paris). In 1959, they staged an attack against the First Congress of Catholic Intellectuals, also at the Universidad de Antioquia; they threw gas bombs and mimeographed manifestos from one of the balconies of the auditorium. The national newspapers reported on the incident and took sides in their editorials, either supporting or criticizing the group, and Arango was arrested. The same year two Nadaísta artists, Carlos Granada and Alonso Quijano, disrupted the awards ceremony for the XIth Salón Nacional de Artistas (still the country’s most important arts event) by blowing on whistles to protest the decision to give first prize to the abstract artist Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar. Abstract

art was a nemesis for the Nadaístas; for them, it complied with the kind of art that was officially accepted and supported by the cultural establishment as the sign of modernity reaching Colombia's culture. Nadaísmo was not in need of being declared "official", but it was, however, in need of wider attention to get its message through; the way to achieve this was by implementing aggressive disruption as one of its main strategies to keep people curious about its message.

In the city of Cali, from 1965 to 1968 the group organized a yearly gathering called the Festival de Vanguardia, mockingly referencing the Cali Art Festival, an official event (to which they were also invited). For the opening of the first edition, Arango gave a lecture titled "Striptease of the Forbidden", where he described Nadaísmo as "the *Iliad* of the atomic age". Raquel Jodorowsky later made an entrance riding a donkey with Arango and gave another lecture titled "A Poet in Search of Bread".<sup>6</sup> The visual artists Pedro Alcántara and Norman Mejía then performed a "painted lecture", during which they jointly created a large erotic painting before the audience while they explained what they were doing (Figure 3). Elmo Valencia gave a poetic performance titled "Artificial Insemination in Mars", reading poetry over a prerecorded background of industrial machine sounds.<sup>7</sup>

At the time these actions revolutionized artistic practice in Colombia, and they were followed by other provocations in public spaces. These were, for the most part, dismissed by cultural critics; the Argentine art critic Marta Traba, a figure of authority in the local arts scene, wrote:

Underdeveloped cultures tolerate the childhood disease of Nadaísmo with a wide benevolent smile. Traditional and reactionary newspapers welcome them in their pages with remarkable sympathy. [...] What could be better than having a few small harmless buffoons, who work for no pay and go about making shocking statements with no consequence!

TRABA, 1964

It was not underdevelopment, as Traba argued, that allowed Nadaísmo to flourish and get their message heard. It was a public malaise and the need to stand against what was sold to society as the benefits of "development". They aimed to provide a differing path from the forces of capitalism and neocolonialism; to

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<sup>6</sup> Raquel, who was Alejandro Jodorowsky's sister, had recently migrated from Peru and worked with the Nadaístas throughout the 1960s.

<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, these actions were not reported in the press, and there is no known record of them.

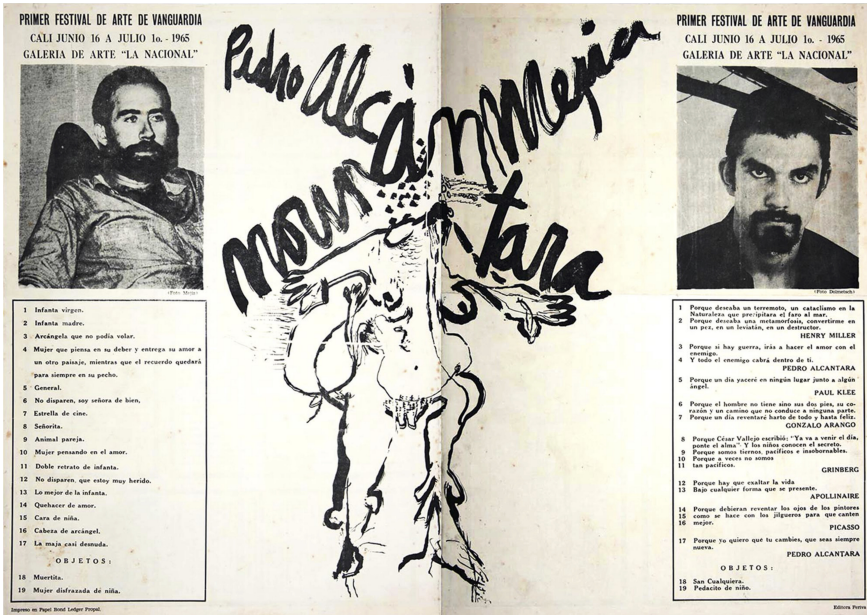


FIGURE 3 Leaflet of the Primer Festival de Arte de Vanguardia [First Avant-garde Art Festival], 1965

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achieve it, the group needed to constantly break the pattern of an increasingly homogeneous art to build something more appropriate to address the local circumstances.

For the closure of the first Cali festival, the Nadaístas organized an Oral War Council on Contemporary Art, where speakers called out proposals for contemporary art and asked the audience to approve or disapprove.<sup>8</sup> This action introduced participation as a component of their creative toolkit: The attendees were no longer passive onlookers but found themselves—perhaps unwittingly—involved in a process of disorderly decision-making. Audience members who had come to learn about contemporary art now became, through spontaneous participation, both students and objects of study and found themselves empowered to determine what new art could or should be.

The festival, in fact, reviewed and condensed almost fifty years of avant-garde activities from Europe and the United States into a sort of live collage. Two works of contemporary drama (*Act Without Words* by Samuel Beckett

8 The speakers were Gonzalo Arango, Jotamario Arbeláez, Elmo Valencia, Norman Mejía, Eduardo Escobar, Pedro Alcántara, and Santiago García.

and *The Zoo Story* by Edward Albee) were staged by local theater directors, who agreed to join forces with the Nadaístas for the occasion. The festival also included screenings of the films *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) by Robert Wiene and *Time in the Sun* (1940) by Sergei Eisenstein—although these were already avant-garde classics, it was the first time that they could be viewed by many of the attending Colombian artists. Moreover, the choice of the two films was far from capricious: The first offered a keen metaphor of the evils embedded in authoritarianism, and the second explored the rituals and ceremonies of a Mexican native community, presenting them as exotic subjects of observation. The selection thus provided a background for Nadaísmo's invectives against local bourgeois culture and perhaps also an indication of the problematic sources on which they based their sense of what a true living culture could be. Unlike other Latin American avant-garde movements, their utopia was certainly not part of a national affirmation program. It was instead the ideal of building a continental culture that could reinvent itself as often as needed without the restraint of the institutions of power.

Although the movement emerged and was active in Colombia's midsized provincial cities, Nadaísmo was not isolated from other parts of the country or other Latin American nations. They interacted with other regional groups like Los Mufados (Argentina), Los Tzántzicos (Ecuador), El Techo de la Ballena (Venezuela), and the editors of the journal *El corno emplumado* (Mexico); most—if not all—of these groups equally tapped into surrealist streams at some point in their development. The links between them were built mostly through the journals published by the different groups, and the Nadaísta manifesto was published in several of them, including *La bufanda del sol y Pucuna* (Ecuador), *Los huevos del Plata* (Uruguay), and *Rayado sobre el techo* (Venezuela). They also published poems and letters by various Nadaístas, as well as drawings by the visual artists Álvaro Barrios and Pedro Alcántara.

In 1970 the Nadaístas decided to publish a journal of their own, *Nadaísmo 70: Revista americana de vanguardia*, edited by Arango and Jaime Jaramillo Escobar under the motto "Nadaísmo is the bridge toward the new reality" [*El nadaísmo es el puente hacia la nueva realidad*] (Figure 4). In its short existence (eight issues were published between 1970 and 1971, with a press run of 5,000), the journal sought to establish a forum for discussing cultural concerns disregarded by conventional cultural media, with particular attention to the expressive potentials of eroticism. The cover pages were unsurprisingly irreverent and suggestive, reflecting the group's commitment to shock as a strategy for enlivening and energizing local culture. However playful and bratty, the journal was conceived and produced as a political organ. Issue number 6, for instance, borrowed John Heartfield's photomontage *Peace and Fascism* (1939), which



FIGURE 4 Front cover of *Nadaísmo* 70 # 8, v.II, 1971  
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depicts a dove (a symbol of peace) pierced through by a Fascist bayonet before the League of Nations building, whose white cross has become a swastika. The Nadaístas modified Heartfield's work by isolating the dove from its original context and relocating it to a Colombian setting, economically but effectively denouncing the naturalization of repression and Fascism as elements of everyday social and political life in their country (Figure 5). In the following issues, the group organized a campaign designed to justify their existence as a necessary force of renewal: "It is yet to be known whether Colombian Nadaísmo was born to verify the final prophecy of Nostradamus, or whether the outburst of an insane poetic force became a necessity once the country bled out in the fires of politics" (Arbeláez, 1971: 28). Another issue was mailed inside a customized envelope that stated, "We want to express ourselves as Cassius Clay at the Madison Square Garden, that is to say, through punches, so that people may understand us and love us". These efforts to make a case for their positive contribution to their cultural and social environment were part of a sustained dialectic by which the group intended to activate a dormant and complacent audience at the expense of their own consistency and respectability as a movement.

In their own way, and arguably beyond the scope of their intent, the Nadaístas managed to blur the limits between art and life as their irreverent stances and performances spread beyond the realm of poetry and into the sphere of true political revolutionary action. Although the connections between Breton's Surrealism and Arango's Nadaísmo are mostly circumstantial and seemingly superficial, a recent intervention by the musician and cultural critic Sasha





FIGURE 5  
Back cover of *Nadaísmo* 70 #6, 1971  
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Frere-Jones at the annual meeting of the International Society for the Study of Surrealism (ISSS) may offer a way to nail down the sense of what may be described as their structural kinship.<sup>9</sup> Frere-Jones argued that Surrealism's distinct achievement was to deploy a unique assemblage of pleasure, humor, and social commitment as vectors of artistic practice. These three components can most certainly also be described as the core constituents of Nadaísmo, and in that sense, the movement can be said to exemplify the properly fluid and shifting historical shape of Surrealism. Although a new wave of scholarly interest in Nadaísmo has focused on its contributions to Colombia's literary avant-garde, it can be argued that the group's most outstanding and resonant contribution to the country's cultural sphere should be traced back to their ephemeral, underdocumented, and undervalued attempts to bring poetry into action. Their cunning and effective use of the manifesto, the pamphlet, and the letter as media strategies, their urban interventions, works of performance, and political actions brought the spirit of the avant-garde directly into Colombia's cultural sphere in a way that bypassed stagnant settings like the gallery and the museum. Their approach must certainly be interpreted against the background of the consistently failed attempts of Colombia's progressive political forces to coalesce, agree upon, and achieve a utopian vision of what the country might be. As Armando Romero phrased it, Nadaísmo emerged "as an expression of the failure of a generation that turned that same failure into a weapon" (Romero, 1988: 15). For just under a decade, the group created an insurgent art with all the implications of violence and destruction that this entails. They articulated

9 Sasha Frere-Jones in the discussion panel "Surrealism Beyond Borders" at the ISSS conference, 11–14 November 2021.

a radical protest to interrogate structures of power and control. They pictured themselves as the heirs of an eclectic lineage that included intellectuals like Breton and Sade but also Colombian nascent guerrilla figures like Camilo Torres and even boxers like Cassius Clay.

For years Nadaísmo was criticized for its failure to establish a legacy as a literary movement, but this clearly amounts to a misunderstanding of the group's nature and project. Nadaísmo did not aim to establish an artistic or literary school but to destroy the limits that confined art to a dormant and irrelevant niche of a troubled and unstable culture. This led them to consciously and actively work against any possible form of institutionalization. The creative thrust that led to their "panic actions" can be described as an earnest attempt to destroy the established order of Colombia's literary and artistic milieu, but their attacks against art as an institution were carried out in the name of art as the vehicle for a potential and unexplored expansion of the possibilities of social life and personal experience.

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