

**Nicolás Guagnini “Para los hijos de la revolución fallida” at  
Galería Marta Cervera, Madrid**

by [mouse](#)

December 29~2013



For his first solo exhibition at Marta Cervera Gallery, Argentine born and New York based artist Nicolas Guagnini will present four quasi-white-on-white paintings. The almost indistinguishable works comprising this open series that stage the same famous slogan written on a Paris street corner in the early 1950s. The paintings represent a photographic image only made decipherable as such when the viewer identifies an inscription. The image is a crop of a controversial postcard of a Paris building wall marked by the Situationist graffiti, “NE TRAVAILLEZ JAMAIS.” The writing was probably executed with chalk by

theorist, filmmaker, activist and cultural critic Guy Debord.

In 1963, Debord received a letter from the Cercle de la Librairie demanding payment for copyright infringement on behalf of a publisher named Buffier. As in fact he had, Debord was accused of lifting the photograph of the graffiti published in the journal *Internationale Situationniste* from one of a series of postcards of Parisian scenes with “funny” captions. However, in a brilliantly crafted response, Debord argued that since he was the author of the original inscription of the slogan (something for which he claimed he could produce several witnesses), it was in fact the photographer and the publisher who had infringed on his authorship. Rejecting the whole of intellectual property law, Debord magnanimously proposed that he would not press charges. The phrase itself went on to become one of the most remembered slogans of May ‘68.

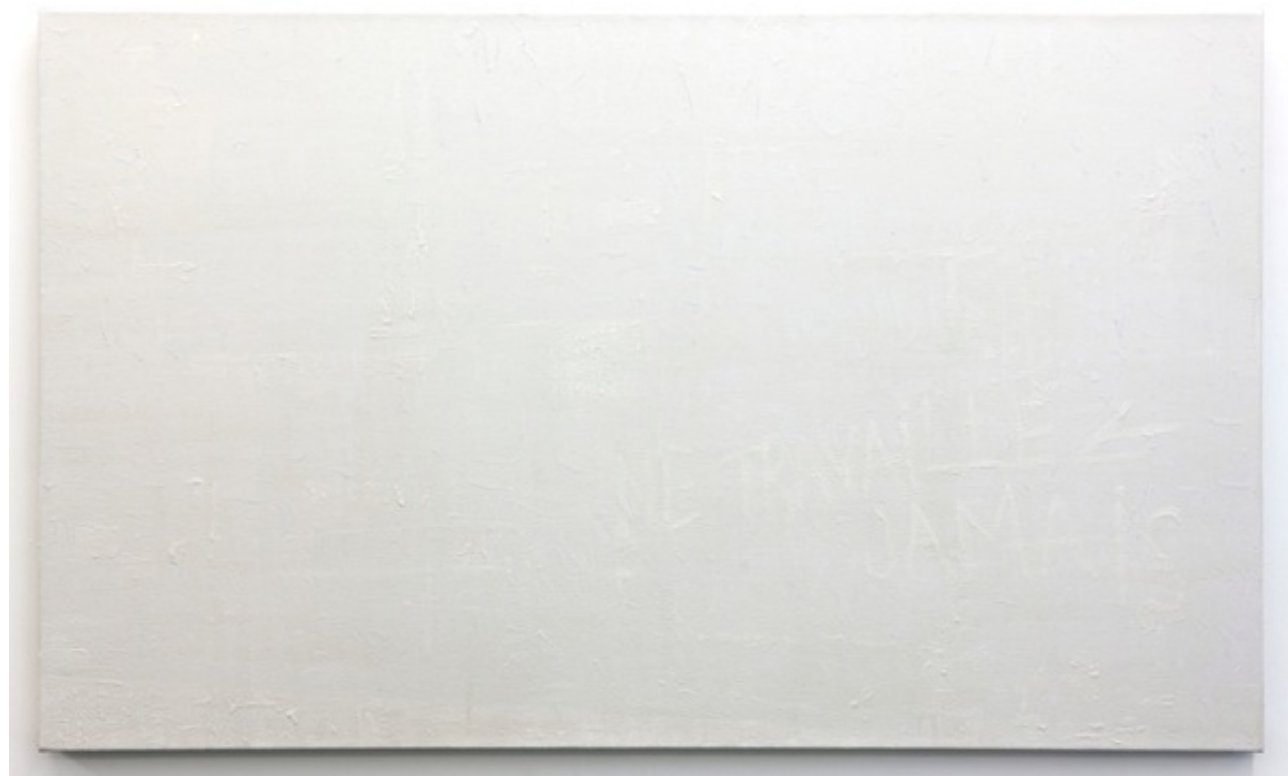
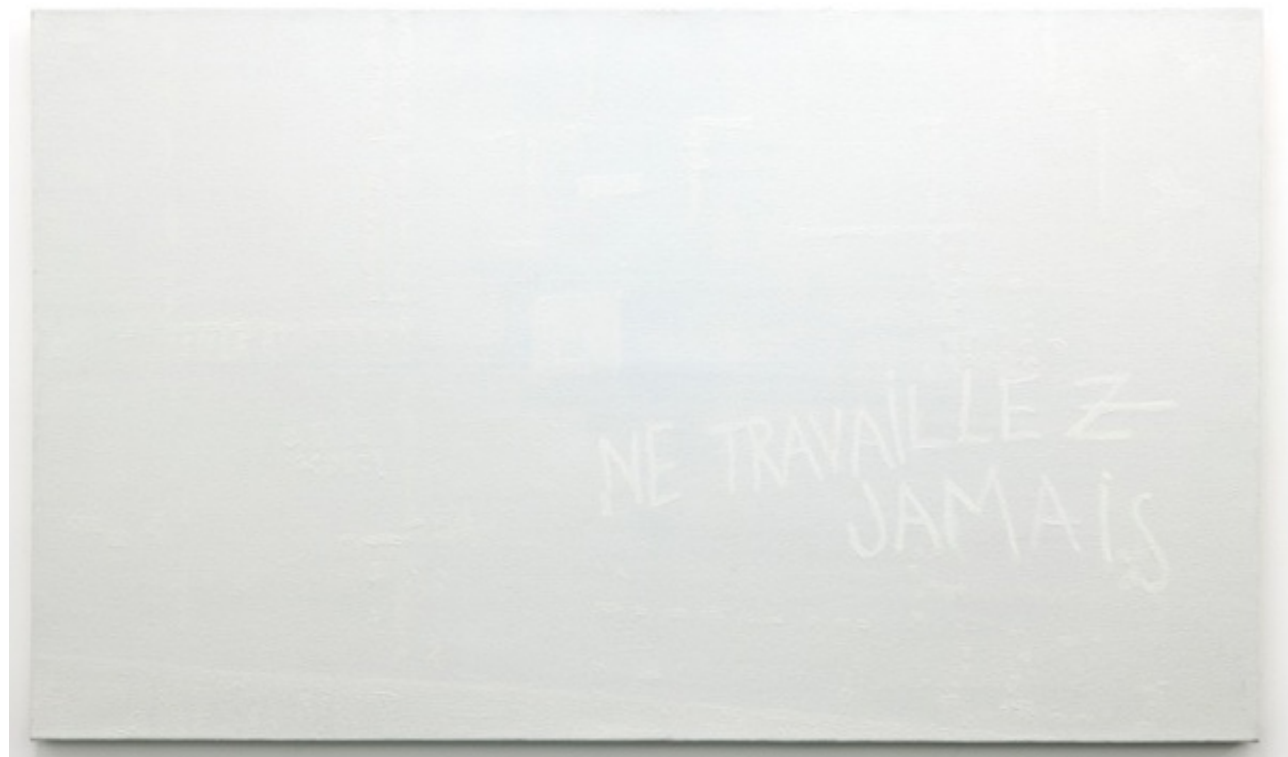
“Ne travaillez jamais” is celebrated, oft-repeated, yet has proved difficult to place into effective circulation — despite (or rather, maybe, because of) its strange familiarity. Ironically, the Situationist critique of labor doesn’t function any longer, as the whole of the SI can be said to have been reified into a cultural totem, the business of Art History departments, and footnotes in exhibition catalogues, a defined unit of value in the knowledge economy. The works presented in this exhibition, moreover, attempt to put the phrase into circulation anew by way of painting, the one locus, to be sure, where the Situationist proscription should not, cannot, and will not circulate. The space of meaning and object production claimed by Guagnini’s works, and the specific spatial and temporal design for their marketing, seem to systematically cover all the grounds for expulsion from the SI.

Connecting Debord’s actual inscription on the wall of the rue de Seine, Buffier’s postcard of the graffiti, the recuperation and publication of a cropped version of the postcard in *Internationale Situationniste* #8, Guagnini’s paintings feature an even slightly more reductive crop. The paintings further reduce the photographic image as they oscillate between monochromes and duotones. Their spatial and planar ambiguity is obtained by overlaying transparencies of white, silver, and gray. Guagnini installed two paintings in a specially designed quasi-public display structure, in part derived from his interest in Litfassaulen (the Euro-style advertising columns that originate in Berlin). These differ from American forms of commercial public address, the billboard for instance, because they target pedestrians in a 360-degree space. In Guagnini’s version, also reminiscent of a police control booth, two paintings are displayed and the other two sides are covered with one-way mirror, creating an infinite interior space and placing the viewer in the place of the surveyor.

Completing the exhibition, in the second space of the gallery, the video *Clear Allegiance* (2012, 36 minutes, camera by Jeff Preiss and Leigh Ledare, edited by Guagnini and Jessica Burgess) features the artist demonstrating by himself in the streets of Harlem with a transparent flag. Guagnini starts in the poorest part of the neighborhood, near a trash processing plant, and walks up to Columbia University, an island of privilege to which he indeed belongs himself as a professor. In keeping with the entwined politics of disenchanted capitulation and sly subversion, repositioning himself as a child of the failed revolutionary promises of 1968, Guagnini waves his flag in non-heroic moments, making the context his content, contingency his ideology. Negation and retreat are not an option, but neither is utopia. Transparency, surveillance, public space, reflection and reflexivity constitute the elements of Guagnini’s critical poetics of his time and space.

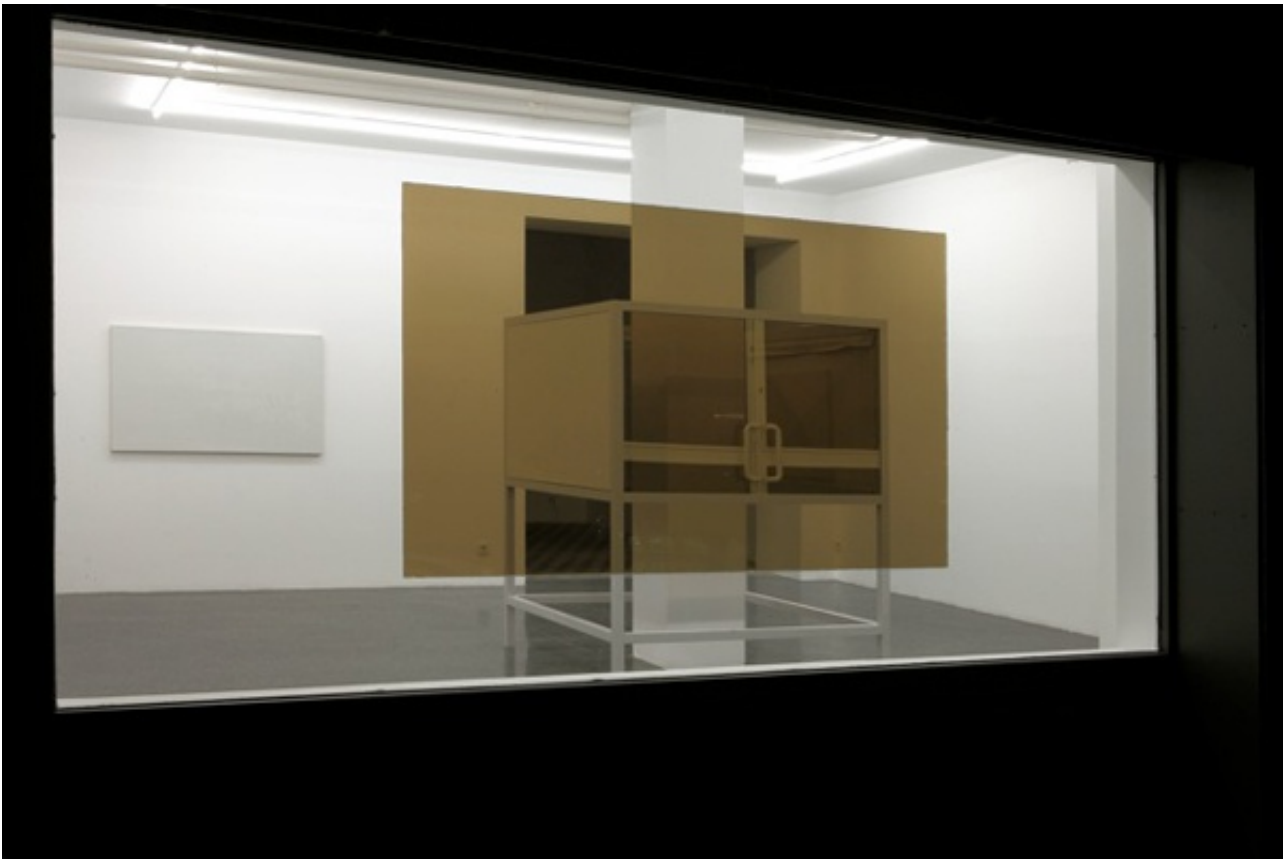
[at Galeria Marta Cervera, Madrid](#)

until 4 January 2014











Nicolás Guagnini, installation view at Galería Marta Cervera, 2013

Courtesy: the artist and Galería Marta Cervera, Madrid.