

# The Importance of Being Artist

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“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is, which is to be Master,” said Humpty Dumpty, smugly explaining to Alice the power of language: He or she who controls the meaning of words -- and therefore people’s understanding -- wields the power of control far more. Human consciousness is given shape by images, rhythms, sounds, words: the tools of the artist. The significance of this fact is obscured to us artists by the elitist myths -- at once disparaging and exalting -- that surround art. The potential power of art as a force for change has long been known to censors and dictators. It is a potential that can be fulfilled once we rediscover and proclaim the rightful and natural place of art and artists in the life of our people.

**T**he battle over meaning is everywhere reflected in billboards, radios, newspapers, workplace rules, video stores, zoning ordinances, television, and spray-painted walls. These public spaces are the arena in which society speaks to itself. They are shaped by and in turn help shape who we think we are. Whoever controls these spaces has tremendous power over the meaning of language -- and the imagery of thought. The battle plans are hammered out in journals of the advertising industry, the inner circles of political campaigns, and CIA headquarters. They are also shaped in union halls, community theater meetings, and church social action committees.

This decade has seen the growth of networks of activists who explicitly look to culture and human consciousness as the terrain upon which struggles for social change ultimately take place. Many of those who accept that premise describe themselves as “cultural workers.” Cultural workers encompass teachers, organizers, artists, publishers, distributors of cultural goods, radio producers, concert promoters, and many more. They are those whose work is intended to affect the ways in which people understand themselves and their world.

It is difficult to write about art from a radical or revolutionary perspective without railing against “them.” “They” are the art world critics; curators’ record, film, and advertising executives, publishing magnates; and others who control or define the bulk of artistic production in our society.

I will indeed refer to “them” and the folly of their elitist ways. I think, however, that it’s important to define our cultural/political work in terms of our own visions and experience, independent of the voices of art world orthodoxy. Often in our rebellion we accept the limiting definitions that are cast upon us. When they accuse us of being no more than political pamphleteers, we shout “damn right, and proud!” When they scream “form!” we bellow “content!” We lose in this exchange. In accepting the artistic ghettos they fence us into, we surrender vast areas of our people’s cultural experience.

**I** learned the power of fantasy on the street. At age eleven I found myself uprooted from my highland Puerto Rican barrio, wandering an alien maze of city streets. This new landscape was controlled by the Chicago police -- armed and arrogant as an army of occupation -- and by competing remnants of the disintegrating street-gang armies. All of these parties were intensely interested in young men of my age. I felt extremely vulnerable. The rules of survival itself seemed to be controlled by forces far beyond my own control.

To survive on my own terms, without being beaten up, ripped off, or recruited, seemed too tall an order -- for these were the only options offered. In my mind I rehearsed a thousand variations of confrontations in empty lots and dark alleys (like most sensible young males, I avoided the brightly lit

avenues where the police held sway). As I played out my daydreams in real-life encounters, I discovered an unexpected freedom. If I declared my own rules -- "Sorry, brother, I don't have much cash now and I need it all" -- they were often respected, even by those who should have been able to overrule me.

I learned that my fantasies, a realm to which I retreated for comfort in the face of my fear, had provided me with real avenues for action. They had led me to discover that the supposed rules of the game are not the real rules -- once I cease to consent to them.

If, as the African revolutionary leader Amilcar Cabral described it, culture is the "collective personality of a people," then the arts are its collective dreamlife. In the absence of coercive control, the arts, like dreams, are naturally drawn to the deepest hopes, fears, and truths that are suppressed in daily life. Whatever the stresses in your life you wish to avoid, you can count on encountering them in your dreams.

One of my greatest inspirations has been the Latin American New Song movement, especially its Chilean pioneers. They transformed themselves from performers of and for the student left into the creators of an authentic voice for their people's aspirations. Moving easily between songs of love and songs of land reform, between nonsense verse and traditional lament, they dissolved rather than accepted the barriers that divide politics from the rest of life.

What these musicians accomplished was to master the "dream language" of their people as expressed in ancient and contemporary musical traditions. They then used it to voice the secret hopes and feelings that were not finding expression in the commercial culture monopoly, dominated by imported, "Western," music.

In a class society such as the United States, the so-called national art scene represents the rather confined dreams of a small segment of the population. It's considered a sacred duty for artists to remain isolated from any broad community that might influence their art. Artwork must remain personal in the narrowest sense while fitting into the moment's specifications for saleable work. Alienation is one of the requirements. A friend told me of a Midwestern painter who finally got a favorable review of her show after having worked in New York for a couple of years. The critic was elated that, in contrast to her earlier, optimistic paintings, her new work was starting to show the "angst" (read depression) of a mature artist.

The greatest form of pressure that cuts artists off from the living currents of their communities is the designation of some subject matter as "political." As it applies to art, "political" is a clear "no trespass" sign forbidding access to whatever the ruling elite does not wish people to think about. It varies from country to country and over time. New York artist Lisa Blackshear's paintings of interracial couples would be politically explosive in South Africa, cause some discomfort in the United States, and not raise an eyebrow in Brazil. In South Africa, the book *Black Beauty* was banned, for although it is the story of a horse, the linking of the two works in its title was seen as dangerously revolutionary by the censors. In General Pinochet's Chile, teaching evolution was seen as subversive because it described a world in which change is constant and inevitable. It is therefore seen as challenging the rigid stability preached by the dictatorship.

The "political" label -- and the funding, performance space, display and publishing decisions that enforce it -- serves to prevent artists from fulfilling their function as conveyors and interpreters of their people's dreams.

For the majority of the potentially artistic population a form of dream suppression is practiced. Organic cultural expression is discouraged by the denial of resources and the promotion of the arts as the province of a gifted few. In the crude tracking system of the schools, an artist is whoever is left when the rest are bludgeoned into silence. Those who survive this assault on their creativity may pursue it through arts schools, where they'll be safely taught to respect taboos.

These systems of suppression and control are far from fully effective. At best they work as damage control to limit the number of artists who survive and the imaginations of those who do. But still,

artists who have been successful within the cultural industries, as well as those who develop outside of the educational system, are drawn by the gravitational pull upon the artist to explore every area of communal life.

Too often, activist artists ourselves accept the “no trespass” signs of the elite, simply choosing to set up camp on the other side of them. Thus, we miss the subversive potential coming straight from the deepest springs of artistic inspiration. If we listen and convey the dreams of our people, we will ignore the signs and property lines. If we violate the warning signs, it will be while being true to our mission as artists. To grasp the full potential of cultural creation as an arena for social transformation we must go beyond seeing ourselves as simply “political artists,” “oppositional artists,” or even “voices of dissent.”

**T**he great tide of cultural and political awakening that swept across the U.S. social landscape from the spring of the civil rights movement fed and was in turn nourished by a blossoming of artistic expression and exploration. Artists, caught up in the upheavals of their communities, gave direct voice to them. Their drawings, poems, songs, and jokes were a daily barometer of people’s feelings and understandings. This cultural outpouring represented the efforts of the exploited and marginalized to reclaim and reassert their own unique identities. Thus, blacks, Chicanos, Native Americans, gays, lesbians, Asians, and others proclaimed the power and beauty of their own cultural values in defiance of the dominant, melting pot ideology.

The initial response to this upsurge attempted to contain it, (while protecting conservative notions of “high art”), by channeling it into such categories as “ethnic art.” Under this system we are each the artistic spokesperson for a particular cultural population whom we represent to the world through the use of certain recognizable styles or symbols. (White male artists are exempted from these limits and are free to do whatever they want.) This schema, while seeming to finally give official recognition to cultural diversity, is ultimately reactionary. As painter Patricia Mainardi stated fifteen years ago in response to attempts to define a “feminine aesthetic” for women artists, “Women artists must be free to explore the entire range of art possibilities. We who have been labeled, stereotyped, and gerrymandered out of the very definition of art must be free to define art, not to pick up the crumbs from the Man’s table.”

As a printmaker I work within a well-developed tradition in Latin American art. Silkscreen printing, my medium of choice, has reached one of its most advanced expressions in my homeland of Puerto Rico. But these choices are a product of my history, not of obligation. Certainly, it’s natural that my work will reflect the rhythms, colors and smells that have shaped me. It’s understandable that I should address those who dream in the same secret codes or speak with the same gestures. But to see in our heritage a wall around our art limiting our styles, our messages, our “voice,” is to be disarmed.

Like millions of my fellow humans I’m what is known as a person of mixed heritage. We are rivers that spring from multiple sources. To purists in search of “ethnic art” and “authenticity”, (a much abused term), we are an invisible category. We also happen to be the majority of real-life people.

The truths that are expressed in our art will be shaped, at least indirectly, by the real-life people we know, love and listen to -- whoever they may be. The “authenticity” worth aspiring to as an artist or as a person is to be authentically, uncompromisingly who you are. My people will be defined for me not by racial or ethnic or national categories but by whom I love. My relationship to them, not questions of style, media, or political line, will determine the usefulness of my work.

Art, like language, is a means of communication. If I wish to communicate with you, not just talk at you, I need to know something about you. For starters it helps to know what language you speak. The more intimately I know you, your language, your way of seeing, the more able I am to choose words or images that will be meaningful in your life.

Eduardo Galeano tells the story of the first contact between a band of Spanish conquistadors and a native head of state in what is now Paraguay. The Spanish priest read long passages from the Bible and then waited expectantly for a reaction. The Indio leader stood in silence for a time. “It scratches,”

he affirmed at last. "It scratches very well. But it scratches where there is no itch."

The key to scratching where it itches is to know where it itches. Stories are my way of learning about my people. The prints I create are mostly other people's stories. In them I try to reflect the sometimes frightening dignity that is the central fact of human existence.

During the process of producing a poster I often work alone. I learn about the ways my work affects people through the stories they tell me and those that filter back to me by indirect routes. I cherish the stories: the political exile who didn't believe that my screen print of Guatemala was created by one who had never been to her homeland; the woman who credited a woodcut of mine with providing her with the strength and clarity to leave an unsatisfying relationship; the school librarian whose interviewer hired her, he told her, because of her enthusiastic response to my poster on his office wall. Listening to stories is my main schooling as an artist and an activist. As a teenage hitchhiker crisscrossing the continent, I listened hungrily to people who would share freely the details of their lives with a passing stranger.

Later I learned how to eavesdrop on the lives of other communities. I turned to their artistic dreamlife. One year I went on a binge of reading the writings of black women. I can't remember what started me. A collection of short stories by black women, *Black-Eyed Susans*, had just been published. I devoured novels, essays, poems -- hearing the rhythms, soaking up the details, the feelings. Listening to the stories. On the bus, in the laundromat, I watch faces, fascinated by the tales they tell, and those they hide. Sometimes the political struggles I've been involved with have opened doors for me into other communities, providing opportunities to learn new recipes, gestures, ways of seeing. The stuff of falling in love.

All these stories enrich my life. Ultimately it's how I live, who I make myself into, that will affect the lives of others and the direction of change in the world. The artwork I create is a series of progress reports from that process. I return my art to those who nourish me. I hope it will act as a magic mirror, reflecting back, but in new ways, their own and each other's stories.

My introduction to art classes, after moving to the States, was confusing for me. Here we were, learning art, an activity that for me had always meant comfort, escape. But here there were rules, "correct" ways to draw, fears of doing it wrong. I had friends who were afraid to draw. I began leaning on them to try, showing them tricks, getting them to doodle with me. Maybe it was a bit like forcing water on them to quench my own burning thirst. Scratching where I itched. I'm still scratching in the same place. It's the place where we store the lies that hold us back, that keep us from knowing our true power and the joy it contains.

One of the challenges for cultural workers is to identify the forms of internalized oppression that affect their people and consider the best ways to attack them. We each carry the scars of our oppression, the internalized messages of invalidation that everyone who was once a child has absorbed. It's different for women than for men. We have different "itches," determined by our own and our peoples' histories.

If we want our art to be a force for social change we need not only love our people and learn their dreams. We must also learn to think critically about them, as we would a loved one to whom we wish to be a worthy ally.

**I**f the first ingredient for effective revolutionary art is love for one's people, and the second is clear thinking about one's people and their dreams, then the third is craft.

We experience the world sensually, as a place of textures, sudden smells or colors, laughter, heat. To develop our craft is a tribute to that sensual world, a proof that we care enough to pay attention to detail, a statement of faith in the sense that any labor of patience and love is.

We develop our skills as we try to translate the nuances of shape, motion, color, and feeling that we observe around us into our paintings, songs, and pots. The time spent teaching ourselves to do this

well is a gift to ourselves. It's a kind of self-nurturing that is worked into our art and reflected outward. A gift to our communities.

Attention to detail, to craft. It's the life-affirming nature of artwork that while not revolutionary certainly has its part in the broad current of social transformation. The quilts, clothing, wood- and beadwork, weaving, and gardening. The careful use of the world's resources combined with thinking about people's needs.

**E**very night, whatever the weather, I step outside and look at the sky. It helps me feel connected to a larger world beyond my city streets -- to my people, scattered across a thousand lands, working, struggling, breathing under the light of this sky. Sometimes the stars seem to shine back to me with the gaze of ancient faces. People who crisscrossed these lands in times long past. People to whose survival we owe our own. The silent night sky reflected their questions and ideas about the world as tonight it does mine. This is my link of intimacy with them. Perhaps another 15,000 years in the future someone else will share these quiet moments and it will be my gaze they imagine in the stars.

I see myself as a representative of that future. As an organizer I've learned that without a future it's difficult to organize the present. If the sun probably won't rise tomorrow we may as well throw our beer cans on the lawn, our chemicals in the sea, our topsoil to the wind. If there's no tomorrow then living for the pleasures of the moment, getting it while we can, is a reasonable thing to do.

In my time and in my adopted, second homeland, the United States, hopelessness reaches epidemic proportions. It is the toxic by-product of racial, sexual, class and every other oppression. It weakens our ability to act, to see beyond the "rules of the game" to other ways of being.

In a society governed by lies, cynicism becomes the street corner philosophy. Hope and respect are scorned and hungered for. To be optimistic, in a broad, social sense, is to be regarded as some kind of nut. At the same time, to express hope in a persistent and credible way it to be sought after like a water merchant in the desert.

The fear (worse yet, the resignation!) about nuclear holocaust is one of today's most widespread and paralyzing expressions of hopelessness. It hangs before our daily lives like a misty curtain, dimming the bright colors of the world. It is the ultimate message of disempowerment: "In the face of this you are nothing."

Artists are as infected as anyone else and their art can become a reflection of their people's nightmares. Much of the art that tries to grapple with the dangers of nuclear weapons does little to challenge the disempowerment. Antinuclear art is usually a desolate wall of grief and fear, inviting viewers or listeners to leave their comfortable life of distraction for one of despair. Some people continue creating scenes of destruction year after year in an apparent hope that someone will come along to reassure them that it just ain't so.

My impression is that for a brief moment twenty years ago, the mushroom cloud, doomsday art, played a positive role. At a time when the reality of the arms race was hidden from the public mind, these images helped to break the silence. It was a conversation starter. Since then they have tended to reinforce the passivity they were meant to challenge.

When faced with problems that seem bigger than ourselves, we sometimes wait around hoping that sooner or later a grown-up will come along to set things right. Our supposed grown-ups aren't always so helpful. *Their* experts blandly assure us that we can run along and play, everything's under control. *Our* experts are mesmerized by the deadly scenarios of destruction with which they try to frighten us into action. Your presence, reading this, is a defiance of both scripts. So we must be our own grown-ups and tap our own sources of hope. As artists we must find the resources to work through our own fears if we're to help our people move through the dangers.

Every inhalation is an act of love. Medical people say that when a person loses hope they stop breathing, they die. In every living human there remains an ember of self-love. It's the hidden story

behind every headline. An ember that when kindled becomes the driving force of history.

Missing that fact means missing the whole story. Sometimes even in our moments of generosity we miss it. Antiwar art of our day often depicts Third World people as mere victims: tortured, beaten down, cheated of life. European and U.S. cartoons against the war in Vietnam fit this pattern, (Vietnamese art did not). This artwork is a form of protest against injustice and as such is praiseworthy. Without the bond of love, however, the acknowledgement of dignity, it remains an act of pity and can never project the power of solidarity.

Art that disempowers is best kept to oneself. This is self-censorship at its best. Being honest with your loved ones does not require saying anything that pops into your head. You remain aware of whether your words will be hurtful or irresponsible. Art seen as the dreamlife of a people is a useful metaphor. But a metaphor is not the same as reality. This one breaks down because with art we have the tremendous power to choose what we say. Thus, art becomes conscious dream-telling, responsible creation with the potential to affect the life of our people.

**T**he nature of art as flowing from the emotional, symbolic, “right-brain” side of experience makes it inherently subversive. The more a society has to hide, the greater control it must exercise in order to keep artists from doing what comes naturally: exposing its most private dreams to the light of the sun.

We artists have no special answers unavailable to other people. What we have is work that’s intricately entangled in our people’s dreams, hope, and self-images. Like it or not, we are part of society’s process of dreaming, thinking, and speaking to itself, reflecting on our past and finding new ways forward. Our greatest challenge is to accept that what we do with our work and our lives is exactly as important as we believe our people and their world to be.