

which the symbolic and the power of the imagination influence the political direct and help us to better understand social reality.

I do not express this with blind enthusiasm. I have come to suspect all those who depend on and are moved only by enthusiasm. So when I say that I believe in the fundamental role of art in life—to provoke, to provide a critical outlook, a paradoxical reassurance of our common humanity. I am not implying that this is a universal, shared judgment. Nor am I saying that art should conquer the world. It is enough for me to be conquered by art and to be able to let it go wherever it must go. So my bet on art is my bet on life. It is my bet on the possibility of linkage between the political struggle and the struggle for survival in a hostile environment. I am not referring merely to prison per se, but to all those environments created by the prison of social systems, in the name of the people and freedom, as well as by the prison of “communication.” Political awareness makes us confront all that reality. It makes us both assault the status quo and critically inspect our selves.

Art is an extension of life, and if you have artists whose politics are insubornable, committed, and uncompromised, then they become as strengthening and inspiring to others, artists and non-artists, as art is to life.

1. The political is ubiquitous in today's world, but its more pure form is when you engage directly in the struggles for change and power. Tactics and strategies involve who does not exert power, who has the right to decide for society: to lead, prescribe, normalize, control, and manage the social reality. So for the purpose of making a differentiation between this more specific aspect. I would call this one the “political-direct.”

2. Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis, MO: Telos Press, 1981), 160.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizam Escobar was captured in 1980 along with other comrades, and given a 68-year prison sentence on seditious conspiracy and related charges. Throughout his incarceration, he maintained his position as an anti-colonial prisoner of war resisting the illegal U.S. occupation of his homeland. Escobar was granted clemency by President Clinton in September 1999.

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# ART OF LIBERATION

*A Vision of Freedom*

*Elizam Escobar*

But how one is going to affect others is another matter, since it is almost impossible to know how an artwork will be taken. The effect is always diverse, contingent, and unpredictable. Whether this ambivalence is richer than a clear-cut message is for others to decide. But the important thing is that an artist must reestablish an element of confidence through his/her intentions of being as honest as possible and as consistent in his/her views as convictions allow. In this sense a “solitary voice” is as strong as a collective one.

Works of art are provocations, but in order for an artist to be provocative she/he first has to have true vocation, that is, true dedication to her/his art and to those who have been reduced to invisibility. It is from there that art cannot only obtain relevancy but also can transcend its immediate references.

The political aspect of art thus is to confront all of reality, without ideological permissions and through its own means. In order to discover our real needs we must be incredulous about what we are told and why we believe it. We must re-find the internal relationship between human desires and aspirations and human necessity, but in a new way. We must put into question any philosophical system or form of knowledge that claims to be the only and absolute truth. To that Marxist thought of freedom (“freedom is the knowledge (or recognition) of necessity”) I add a concept of art: art is the necessity of freedom.

## Art, Prison, and Liberation

Twenty-five centuries ago, when Socrates was incarcerated, he wrote his first and only poems. Ever after, the experience has been repeated. In prison, many non-artists, men and women of action and thought who never saw art or poetry as important or “useful,” have engaged in some sort of creative expression. Art has come through prison. But also through art, prison has come to the outside; many poets, writers, and painters have had some essential experiences in prisons or other places of internment, and many others have become writers or artists in prison. Certainly, art usually comes to the rescue of those who have to confront these conditions at one point in their lives, people who otherwise may never have done much of anything for the defense of estimation of art. Art demands certain introspection, solitude, abandonment; and certain confrontation with the self and death; that is, themes that are usually repugnant to “revolutionaries” and “practical” people unless it has to do with heroism or the glorification of a personality. Therefore, it is no surprise that adversity and forced solitude are able to liberate that “obscure” region of the Imagination.

In prison life, there is—consciously or not—a constant and extreme interaction between the pleasure principle and the reality principle (for example, the realization that in politics as in love one must learn how to wait), much sublimation/desublimation, daydreaming, hope/cynicism, disillusionment, anger, unreality, skepticism, repression, censorship, and hypocrisy. All this shapes one’s life and art. We are penetrated as much by the means of

have been in prison. Here, my “fourth period” is taking place, and it is from the perspective of these experiences that I consider the visionary role of the artist.

## The Structures of Simulation

We live in societies divided into social classes, where there is no true consensus, only the fictitious and spurious consensus determined by the ruling classes. Electoral processes are national epics manipulated in the name of the people to legitimize social control and coercion. To resolve these contradictions we must assume the class struggle in all its diverse forms and confront the questions of Power. Only then will the immense majority of excluded, oppressed, and exploited obtain the real power.

But we cannot wait for the day when the majority will rule in order to bring forward the structures needed for building a free, just, egalitarian, and nonclassist society. We must build within the ruins and the hostilities of present conditions by creating transitional alternatives now. We must build socioeconomic, political, and cultural structures that are controlled by those struggling for change and the communities they serve. These structures, “schools” for discussing all these problems, will put into practice the notion that only by confronting the reality of subjection can we begin to be free and to create an art of liberation that frees people from the illusions perpetrated by the dominant culture.

The contemporary State creates structures of simulation. These are indispensable both to cover the real nature of the system, and to show tolerance and acceptance for dissidents. Furthermore, they not only create their own structures, but they obligate us to create our own.

For example, the ruling classes create the simulation of cultural democracy (the illusion of real political power, equal opportunity and the freedom of difference in order to make others believe that they have a real participation in the cultural space) through the mass culture and the media. They need “false enemies” to wage relatively inoffensive and limited “cultural wars” that end up strengthening the social body’s health. One example is what happened to the spontaneous street graffiti expression: from symbolic exchange it became another commodity with status exchange value. In Puerto Rico under colonialism, popular art is institutionalized and becomes a folkloric domestication of the people’s unconscious. Some of the Left’s culture of resistance has been depoliticized by obligating artists to make false choices between a sort of one-dimensional domesticated “nationalist art” and mass culture. This way, artists either turn their “criticism” against an abstract enemy or they wear themselves out by contributing an “original” aesthetic to the status quo (but always in the name of “Puerto Ricanness”) because they fear the worst evil, that of U.S. statehood—to the benefit of the colonial bourgeois lackeys. Part of the Puerto Rican independence movement reproduces itself as a simulation model through this “cultural nationalism.” At the same time, artists are domesticated by continuous government subsidies, status, fame, wealth, and by aspiring to national titles, while

The political is found in the least likely of places, covered by multiple layers of ideological counterfeiting and acculturation. Our daily lives, our dreams, love, death, and even our bodies are all spheres of “invisible” yet intense political and human dramas that take place behind the “visible” political struggle. This inner struggle is, above all, more painful and more real. For it is from inside that we must decide our real needs, both material and spiritual. Art of liberation springs from this perspective, recognizing the power of the imagination’s struggle. Throughout history, the imagination’s struggle against prohibitions based on fear and ignorance has been one of the leading political processes that pushes forward the liberation of human spirit by rescuing and creating new territories of freedom.

I have been active in the struggle for Puerto Rican national liberation since the ‘60s. From the socialist-Marxist perspective, I have simultaneously engaged in political-direct as well as art/cultural work in support of this struggle, but not always with the same intensity or understanding.

In my “first period” I separated “personal” work my paintings from more “public” works political illustrations, propaganda, caricatures, etc. Both activities were done under the dictates of my ideological assumptions. Nevertheless, there were always elements that would completely or relatively escape the dictates of my “ideology.” Thematic elements drawn from my particular experiences exposed me to conflicts between what was supposed to be and what actually was, creating tensions that were contained by oneiric images (political monsters, doubts repressed by ideology, etc.) Formal elements, devalued by socialist realism and other “realist” aesthetics, also escaped.

The “second period” began when I moved from Puerto Rico to New York, and was defined by an almost total exclusion of painting due to the demands of my job (schoolteacher), my political-direct work, and my mixed feelings about art. I was under the influence of the politics of “art is useless unless it is for direct propaganda purposes.” My work was limited almost exclusively to political caricatures for the party publications. (Not a bad thing.)

In my third period, I made an almost about-face toward “personal” painting, but this time working as a “professional” artist for different cultural institutions, where I combined teaching art with learning other art techniques. At that point, I was seriously dealing with the fundamental question of the relative autonomy and the specificity of the theory and praxis of art (i.e., that art has its own “rules” within a space that is its own but always in relation to all other levels or spheres of reality, so to speak), not out of an academic or abstract drive but as a result of an accumulation of experiences. Both my political and artistic commitment were more intense than ever.

In 1980, I was arrested, together with ten other Puerto Rican independentistas, and accused of seditious conspiracy and participation in the Puerto Rican armed clandestine movement for national liberation. Since then I

communication as people on the outside; sometimes more, because of our en-cloistering and lack of direct outside contact. This combination of suppression and diversion keeps prisoners as apathetic consumers and participants in a vicious circle. The human condition, in a state of extreme control and intensity, distorted to the most complete absurdity: either life is only a simulacrum (the art of the living death) or only through simulation are you able to survive.

There are exceptions, but the final balance is dehumanization, a waste of human lives. Cheap slave labor, and the continuation of criminal activity through other means and under different circumstances, are what characterize the “rehabilitation shop” of a society that is itself in need of radical transformation. The decadence of this society is displayed in its prisons through a spectacle of extreme collective madness. To “liberate” this experience through art is a responsibility to others.

Prison has reconfirmed to me the great importance of art in our lives because the deep reflection and the intense involvement that art requires to help us to better understand the real necessities and the true meanings of freedom, for the individual as well as the collective. And to fight for that truth, to defend that truth, art also becomes a weapon. A weapon not only because one can create meaning for one’s own existence or inspire others to continue the struggle. But simply because one can understand better the intrinsic relationship between the visions coming through the praxis of art and those unveiled aspects of the too much rationalized and arbitrary aspects of our ideologies, as well as our daily mechanical rituals and common nonsense. My own experience of repression expressed through art can relate to other general human experiences of repression and exclusion better than, let’s say, if I start to think through through my “ideological eyes.” Art must spring from real life.

If art becomes theoretical discourse, that is also a necessary weapon. To theorize art directly from the praxis of art is a necessity in opposition to those who would like to keep art as inoffensive “aesthetics” or as mere echoes of the political-direct. And since some people would like to reduce art to a slogan of metaphysical proportions, one must always make the distinction between the art of propaganda, publicity, or design; and art as an act of liberation. The fundamental distinction is that an art of liberation can neither be a model nor a specific aesthetic or style. It is a concept and an attitude with no specific formulations, only that it must be open to any strategy that can help liberate art (and through art, people) from the dictatorship of the logic, politics, and metaphysics of the sign.

## Art of Liberation

To me, art is the best argument for talking about freedom and about necessity when one does not separate the body from the spirit. In my experience I have learned more about politics through art than through politics. And by art here I mean all the arts and their discourses-and all the ways in

those who persist to the contrary, whose politics are to unveil the whole system of simulation are censored even by some orthodox Left publications who want to reduce the debates to their own political good, that is, they won't allow dissent within the dissent.

Paradoxically, art (as the power of imagination), the only "true" simulation, is the one that can lead us to the understanding (not necessarily the resolution) of that other "false" simulation.

## The Culture of Fear

But in order to liberate art from the nets of political power, we, the artists, must first liberate ourselves from the nets of the culture of fear, and the inferiority/superiority complex we have in our dealings at the political direct level. If art is to become a force for social change it must take its strength from the politics of art, art's own way of affecting both the world and the political-direct. It must take strength from that specific manner in which our praxis expresses the aspirations of the people, the political collective unconscious, the contradictions, etc., through a symbolic language. But the politics of art will happen only if the power of the imagination is able to create a symbolic relationship between those who participate, the artwork, and the concrete world; and then always understanding the work of art's sovereignty (or relative autonomy) in relation to concrete reality.

What is important is not the didactic pretensions that we possess the solutions, but the idiosyncratic ways in which works of art can bring out the real aspects of the human condition in particular and specific contexts or experiences. Art is, from this perspective, an encounter where we have the possibility for a symbolic, political, and real exchange. Since our forms are also used to deliberately appeal to people for political-direct goals, it is logical that at some point these strategies become dominant and in conflict with the internal problems (the how) of art. If we can understand how the political affects and shapes everything else, and the difference between the specific practices of art and the practices of the political-direct, then the artist would be clearer on how to decide his/her strategies, sources, themes, aesthetics, etc. When it comes to the theory and praxis of art, the political is beyond any "political (direct) issues."

Most U.S. "Political Art," as I have come to understand it, wants to present political-direct Issues through images, in a clear and communicative form, irrespective of the medium, the style, or the aesthetic selection. It presupposes that one can predict the kind of political effect a work of art is going to have. Thus the important thing is the message. This emphasis on the message is akin to Marshall McLuhan's naive optimism "the medium is the message," and finds its extreme in the inversion of McLuhan's dictum: "The message is the message." Both are founded in the arbitrariness of the sign, which artificially separates and reunites everything in terms of a signifier (in this case, the medium) and a signified (here, the message). The political and the symbolic are depoliticized by the imposition of a code that comes directly from Ideology since as Jean Baudrillard argues, "every attempt to

surpass the political economy of the sign that takes its support from one of its constituent elements is condemned to reproduce its arbitrary character.

In this way the participants are excluded from creating meanings other than those already transmitted by the message since once the signal is sent either you accept it or reject it. There is no need to search for more. In this respect the art of the message shares common ground with the formal theory of communication which goes like this:

transmitter (encoder)

I

message

I

receiver (decoder)

One speaks, the other doesn't. The message is assumed to contain information that is legible and univocal, based on a pre-established and rationalized code composed of signs. Two terms are artificially reunited by an objectified content called a message. The formula has a formal coherence that assures it as the only possible schema for communication, since a code names everything in terms of itself and anything else that is not "designed" or "adapted" to the agency of the code cannot be utilized since it won't work in this schema. The problem then is that this structure denies the ambivalence of exchange; the reciprocity or antagonism between two distinct interlocutors. As soon as ambivalence shows up the structure collapses, since there is no code for ambivalence, and without code no more encoder, no more decoder.

I am not saying that U.S. "Political Art" is equal to this over-obsession with "communication," but that it is constricted to the code if its intentions are mainly to present a message. Thus, anything that is not in the sign form is ambivalent and it is from ambivalence (I. e. the impossibility of distinguishing respective separated terms and to positivize them as such) that any symbolic exchange (allusions through images, discourse, objects, etc.) can emerge. On the other hand, this impasse is, of course, disturbing, since we cannot absolutely do away with the signfic code.

The ironic dilemma is that we have to make use of this code though we realize that it reduces and abstracts the irreducible experience of that which we call "liberation" (or "freedom," "desires," "needs," etc.). It is the all-too-familiar situation where words (like "liberation," "political," "freedom of expression") take command over the real concrete experience and are used to legitimize and justify a practice or a state of things. There is a brutal difference between "freedom" as exchange-sign-value or slogan of ideologies and abstractions, and the real freedom of experience-one that is as necessary as it is terrible. Even under extreme repression, individual freedom is unavoidable as we must keep on exercising our decisions and responsibilities. Here again art comes to the rescue, because it has the inventive power and wit to deride, deceive, and betray censorship as well as self-censorship.