



Documents of 20th-century Latin American and Latino Art

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BAY AREA ARTISTS

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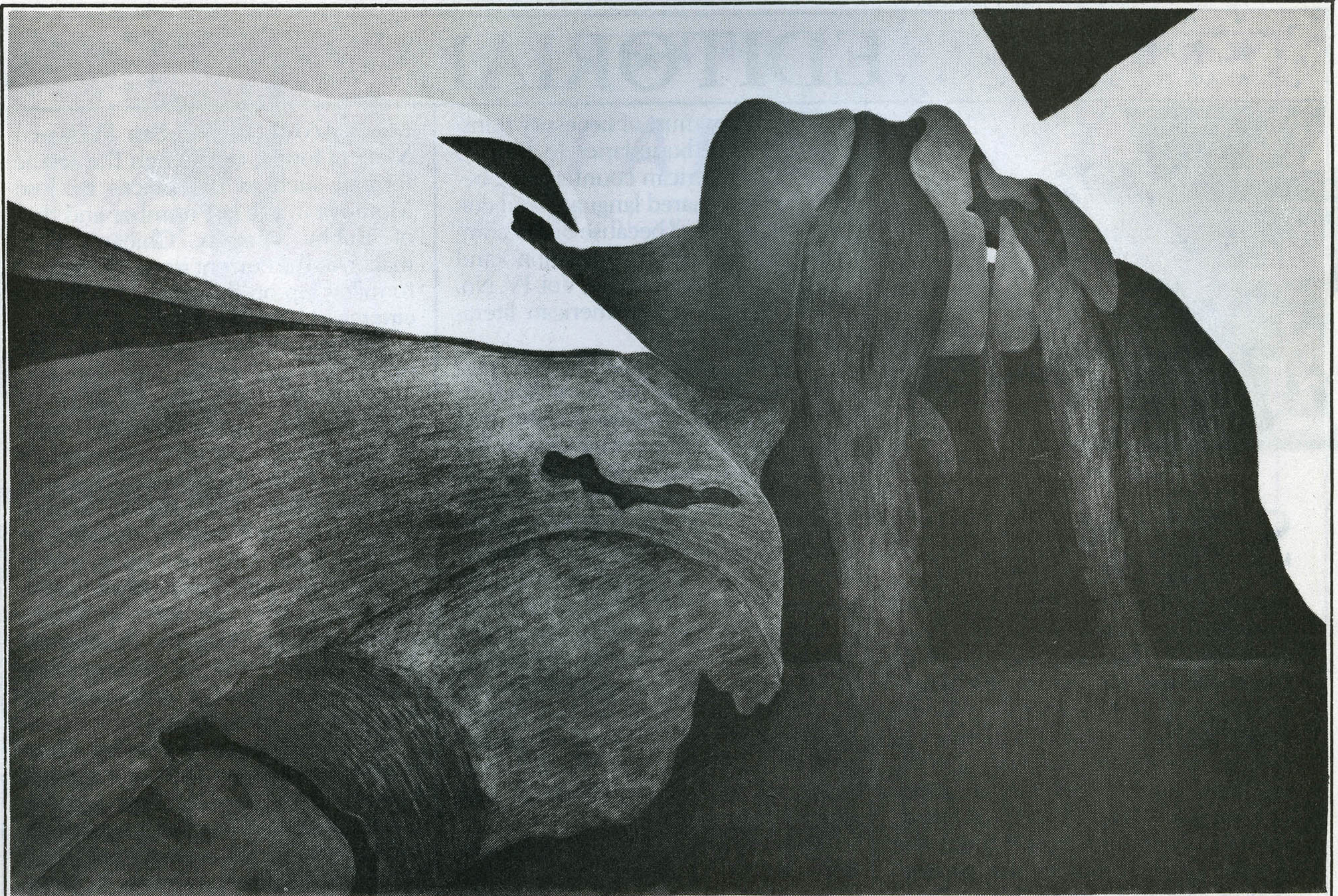
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Rupert García, "Assassination of a Striking Mexican Worker." Photo by Bob Hsiang.

RESPONSE: ANOTHER OPINION ON THE STATE OF CHICANO ART

**"The enemy is not abstract art but imperialism."
—Fidel Castro**

Shifra M. Goldman

Shifra M. Goldman is a Los Angeles art historian whose focus is modern Latin-American and Chicano art. Teacher, lecturer, writer and activist, she has been involved with Chicano culture since the 1968 school "blow-outs" and the 1969 Fiesta de los Barrios. She initiated and sustained efforts to restore the 1932 Siqueiros mural América Tropical which hopefully will come to fruition in Spring 1981.

Her book Contemporary Mexican Painting in a Time of Change, a social

history of Mexican art in the period after World War II, was published by the University of Texas Press and appeared in February 1981.

This paper is a direct response to the feature article "A Critical Perspective on the State of Chicano Art" by Lezlie Salkowitz-Montoya and Malaquías Montoya published in the last issue of Metamorphosis. We invite artists and critics to present their views on these two positions, which we will publish in future issues.

Los compañeros Malaquías Montoya and Lezlie Salkowitz-Montoya, in their article "A Critical Perspective on the State of Chicano Art," have raised for consideration one of the most difficult problems confronting the radical (or reformist) artist functioning within a capitalist context — that of co-optation — a problem which is neither new nor necessarily solvable in that context except by degrees. Final solutions depend on basic structural changes in the society itself.

To begin, I would like to state that I am grateful for the opportunity to comment on the article, and that I agree with many of its general premises. My purpose here is one of clarifying certain definitions, refuting what I perceive as some unwarranted assumptions, and pointing out certain contradictions. Whatever conclusions will be advanced are of a tentative character, since the problem is part of a much larger, ongoing debate.

The main argument of the Salkowitz/Montoya article seems to be that separatism from the dominant culture is desirable since the dominant culture (a) espouses a harmful philosophy which Chicanos oppose, and (b) is all-powerful and capable of totally co-opting any artist who unwisely participates in any of its facets. The article further states that such participation consists of exhibiting in museums, galleries, colleges, and universities (and waging the fight to do so), and being exposed in the mass media as Chicano artists. It concludes that "art that is produced in conscious opposition to the art of the ruling class and those who control it has, in most cases, been co-opted [by these means]. It has lost its effectiveness as visual education working in resistance to cultural imperialism and the capitalist use of art for its market value."

Among the subsidiary issues raised by the article are variously phrased statements to the effect that Chicanos embracing only the cultural nationalist aspects of the movement (not its political aspects) were middle-class oriented, and that the Chicano movement was based on defining its status under capitalism, breaking the yoke of imperialism, and making common cause with Third World nations.

An alternative method for Chicano artists to proceed, according to the article, was that of participating minimally in the system, limiting production to posters, leaflets, and street murals, and exhibiting only in community centers and agencies. In other words, severe restrictions on both the productive forms and consumption of visual arts produced by Chicanos.

Leaving aside for the moment the main argument concerning the present danger of Chicano artists' co-optation, I would like to point up some of the fallacies of the subsidiary issues. Since the original article considered

the Chicano art movement and its ideas over a period of time, it should not leave the mistaken impression that the movement from its inception was based on a conscious opposition to capitalism and/or imperialism. This may have been the net result of its struggles and the reason why various Latin American cultural workers welcomed the Chicano artistic movement to their ranks, while reserving the right to criticize its romanticism, mysticism, and lack of theoretical rigor in regard to the internal and international class struggle. This was true in the early 1970s when theatre groups like Teatro Campesino participated in Latin American encounters, and it was still true in 1979 when Chicano filmmakers were honored during the First International Festival of New Latin American Cinema in Havana, Cuba. However, not only have participants within the Chicano political and artistic movement been notable for a range of ideologies, but the predominant thrust of the movement has been basically reformist (seeking changes within the structure instead of structural changes), not revolutionary. Those who have been anti-imperialist were decidedly a small minority, and they were more manifest in the political than the artistic arena.

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By the same token, it is inaccurate and unhistorical to characterize the adherents of cultural nationalism (expressed by the uncritical immersion in Mesoamerican pre-Columbian culture, Catholic belief, and the glorification of everything Hispanic or Chicano regardless of merit) as middle-class oriented. Cultural nationalism was the single issue that united very diverse elements in the artistic sphere in the early years of the movement. It was a common rallying point that brought together the urban and the rural, the big city and the small, the student and the worker, the artist and the political activist. For a period of

time, until its inadequacies became apparent, it dominated the slogans of the movement. However, as occurred earlier in Mexico where cultural nationalism was appropriated from the Revolution and converted into a governmental rhetorical tool to impose a false national unity across class boundaries, Chicano cultural nationalism became a respectable motif for middle-class aspirants at the expense of its political implications.

Is Separatism Possible or Desirable?

To return to the main argument, I would like to engage the issue of separatism from the dominant culture. Let me start by stating that separatism (unlike resistance) is an illusion, and to preface that statement with the following modification: that the recent history of minority and oppressed groups within the racist and sexist United States has required an initiatory period of separatism from the majority culture for self-articulation (knowledge of history and heritage, awareness of unique culture, challenging imposed doctrines of inferiority); political formulation (isolating the specifics of economic, racist, and sexist oppression and determining a platform of opposition); and organizing a constituency. By 1980, the Chicano movement has attained many of these objectives, and can confront the mainstream from a position of strength and self-awareness. Its vanguard — political militants, artists, intellectuals, self-educated workers, students — now have the twin obligation of disseminating and testing constantly evolving new ideas within the U.S. Mexican community, and among potential allies outside that community. To accomplish that means moving away from separatism and functioning within the mainstream, including the media, always bearing in mind the difficulties and dangers in so doing.

Let me further suggest that for Chicano artists, as for others, separatism in the production and consumption of art has never been possible even if it were desirable. To develop this point, I would like to clarify certain definitions, and outline some conditions that pertain to art produced within a capitalist context.

Characteristics of Art Production

The several properties of art production include (1) the technology of art, (2) its formal expression, (3) its ideology. These three properties can be controlled by the individual artist (or even an artistic collective) to a limited extent since neither the individual nor the collective can function completely outside the social/economic structure of the society in which they live and its dominant ideology. The artist can legitimately assume a stance of *resistance*, but not of separation, and this stance is most operational in art production within the territory of the "ideology" of the work of art.

The artist can legitimately assume a stance of *resistance*, but not of separation . . .

Technology of art. Technology of art includes under its rubric such things as canvas, paint, brushes, paper, presses, inks, sculptural materials, tools, kilns, cameras, film, projectors, photocopiers, chemicals, etc. These materials are controlled at some point in their manufacturing process by large national or international corporations who determine quality, availability, and price. It was brought to my attention while traveling that artists in Latin American countries suffer the same problems with artistic materials that affect them when importing other manufactured goods from the developed industrial nations: limited access, insufficient supply, higher prices than those paid in the metropolis. In addition, protective tariffs in their own countries raise prices even further, sometimes double or triple what is paid in the United States. This is particularly true, for example, with film and related products dominated by the U.S.-based multinational Kodak corporation. In Argentina, certain types of film can be developed only in the United States, making them inaccessible to professional photographers with time deadlines. In Peru, the cost of a roll of 35mm film is

three to four times higher than in the U.S. In Mexico, the costs of lithographic inks and presses are so much higher relative to Mexican income that artists are limited in their production; they have met the problem by experimenting with producing their own. And so forth. It is a well known fact that economic imperialism draws its profits from the production of raw materials and the merchandizing of goods in (neo-) colonized countries, a process which enriches the ruling classes and cushions the exploitation of workers in the dominant economy. If we extend this to artistic materials (an aspect of cultural imperialism), it is obvious that Chicano artists, though part of an oppressed and economically exploited group by U.S. standards, function with a favored domestic price structure for their materials, and greater personal income, actually or potentially. Thus, willingly or not, Chicano artists cannot be separatist in this sphere of art production over which they have no control. They are subject to the same economic rules as all U.S. artists.

Style and technique of art. The other two categories, the formal means and ideology of art, are more subjectively determined, though they also are subject to the ubiquitous pressures of the dominant culture. My position, however, is that not everything produced by the dominant culture is necessarily negative; a great deal depends on what is utilized, and toward what ends. Since the "ends" of art production fall into the category of art consumption, I would like to return to that aspect later, and deal first with formal means. Formal means refer to style (the "isms" of art), and to technique (procedural methods and skills), and the two are interdependent. Likewise, both style and technique are based on ideological determinants. In other words, the techniques and styles chosen are those which best serve the burden of the message or statement the artist wishes to make. This is further defined by the audience the artist wishes to address.*

Within this framework, artists who were consciously Chicano from the mid-sixties on, overwhelmingly opted for some type of representational visual art to best convey objective messages. The self-taught artists or the art

students having, as the Salkowitz/Montoya article pointed out, "very little knowledge of the craft or lacking technical skill" often opted for a naive naturalism, or an "arty" art-school semi-abstract. They also indiscriminately copied the Mexican masters, folk art, or the works of pre-Columbian America, mixing them with U.S. commercial, illustrative, and mass media visual sources and blending the pastiche together with great conviction and sincerity, if not always with aesthetic success. This aspect is not to be despised; it is an important part of the creative explosion of people's art that formed a unique part of the early Chicano cultural movement. It had its counterparts in theatre, dance, and literature. Two factors have to be understood about this aspect: (1) a great deal of it, particularly in street murals, was understood and appreciated by its mass audience in the barrios whose aesthetic tastes had been formed, in part, by many of the same sources, and (2) the true range of Chicano artistic ideology can only be determined by considering this outpouring. It is elitist to think otherwise.

Without detailing the subject matter covered in this phase of visual art, it is clear that the bulk of expression was neither anti-capitalist nor anti-imperialist, though it overwhelmingly contained elements of cultural nationalism. Its producers were generally of working-class origins.

Along with self-taught and student artists were also mature and maturing artists who made conscious choices about technology, technique, and style from the multiplicity of such choices available to them as a result of education and exposure to Euro-American as well as world art. There was (and is) a range of means, from traditional mural and easel painting and print technique, to avant-garde photo-silkscreen, photocopy, conceptual, and performance methods to be found in the Chicano art commu-

. . . not everything produced by the dominant culture is necessarily negative . . .

nity. There are also varied uses of vernacular materials (folk and popular) like altars, *calaveras*, *papel picado*, Mexican foodstuffs, Chicano costume and personal ornamentation, items of car culture, etc. that have been integrated into the material resources.

The Salkowitz/Montoya article argued, using the 1970 travelling show "El Arte del Barrio" as an example, that Chicano artists using contemporary styles like Pop and Funk have given these styles, institutionalized by Anglos, legitimacy (in the barrio?). I would argue that Chicano artists should feel free to utilize any of the contemporary formal discoveries of Euro-American art — abstract expressionism, Pop, Op, Funk, photorealism, etc. as long as they do not permit themselves to be drawn into experimentation for its own sake (art-for-art's-sake) or into the sterility of endless variations of the formal means. In the course of seeking a visual and plastic language to contain and express a whole set of new ideas and formulations, Chicano artists who wish to draw on the aesthetic products of their own country should certainly do so without qualms. It is not a question of giving such forms legitimacy, but of using whatever is available in existing technology, technique, and style to evolve a new content. For all of us who admire the outstanding example of Cuban poster art, this point has already been made. The Cubans freely appropriated the most contemporary artistic modes of the capitalist world and placed them at the service of revolutionary content. The Mexican masters, especially Rivera and Siqueiros, drew upon the aesthetic experiments of their time (cubism, futurism, neoclassicism, photomontage, photo-documentation, filmic technique, etc.) to express the imperatives of the Mexican Revolution and to criticize national and international capitalism. Siqueiros sought out a Dupont product (Duco) in the United States which led to the use of pyroxilins, vinylites, and other synthetic paints that made outdoor murals possible.

The only valid conclusion possible is that there is no betrayal to the Chicano movement involved in the flexible and experimental use of technology and style if it is infused with a

Chicano vision and world view. It is also to be remembered that the so-called Euro-American styles owe a great debt to the Third World from the 19th century to the present. The Far East, Africa, the South Pacific, pre-Columbian Latin America were all mined by European artists to evolve the styles of post-impressionism, cubism, German expressionism, and so forth, while some Op and Pop artists have wrought variations on indigenous materials of the Southwest and Mexico. Third World artists need feel no reluctance in reclaiming these forms.

The Cubans freely appropriated the most contemporary artistic modes of the capitalist world . . .

Ideology of art. Of what is a Chicano vision and world view composed? This is a most difficult question to answer, partly because the Chicano people are so heterogeneous, and also because the Chicano is a product of two cultural structures, those of Mexico and the United States, but not fully a product of either. Chicano identity and consciousness is in a constant process of formation, evaluation, and re-formation. The present day Chicano is heir not only to Mexican political/cultural lore, but that of a 150 year history of resistance to Anglo domination, racism, and economic exploitation that has left its imprint on culture. To seek and know these two histories, to understand their twin impress on personality, thought, manner of life, customs, political struggle, has been the content of Chicano art. It may express itself with equal validity in the production of a traditional blanket, a geometric abstraction playing variations on pre-Columbian motifs, a poster on atrocities in Vietnam or Iran, or a performance piece questioning general contemporary values, to name but a few. It may be positive and life-affirming, starkly critical, humorous or macabre, agonizing, fantastic, or realistic. In other words, it will express the multiplicity of Chicano

experiences and reactions in an extremely complex modern world in which all corners are tied together by means of the mass media.

Artistic Survival and Art Consumption

We must finally address the extremely important question of artistic consumption in which lies one of the major problems raised by the Salkowitz/Montoya article: that of co-optation through assimilation into the capitalist art market. The article seems to argue that the only valid outlet for Chicano art is the Chicano community; in fact they go beyond this to argue that a valid work of Chicano art viewed and interpreted outside the community has little impact and loses its political significance and strength.

There is no question that the United States has developed an all-encompassing art market structure comparable to Eisenhower's military-industrial complex: the art critic-art historian-museum-gallery-collector complex, the taste makers, validators and consumers of elite cultural products. The struggle of mainline reformist artists who have tried to change some aspect of this structure while remaining within its confines and reaping its material benefits is well documented in national art magazines and other periodicals. The Chicano art movement, both as a result of its exclusion from mainline art institutions (it *did* knock violently on the doors to be accepted in its own terms), and by attempting to by-pass the alienating aspect of art as a consumer product within a consumer society, sought diffusion for its art through an alternative community-based cultural structure: *centros*, *talleres*, store-front galleries, small presses, street murals, etc. (though Rupert García has pointed out elsewhere the contradiction of public art on non-public walls). Everywhere the movement encountered an insoluble problem: the working class communities it wished to address did not have the economic resources to support an artistic constituency. In addition, the communities were frequently not conversant with the kind of art being brought to them, and sometimes — being caught up with primary problems of survival — did not welcome it, or were indifferent to

it. To solve the second problem, educational programs were organized. To solve the first (since artists must have materials, space, walls, rent, transportation and living expenses), the artists sought support for their endeavors from small businesses, government on all levels, educational institutions and corporate agencies, in addition to community fundraising. It very early became apparent that the former alternatives to the commercial art market were not only of small quantity and limited duration, but engaged in direct or indirect pressure on art content, if not outright censorship. The area of greatest pressure was on those Chicanos in mass media since the means of both production (cameras, projectors, studios) and distribution (TV sets, movie houses) were completely in the hands of major corporations or government-funded institutions, and these will not lightly yield their most costly, yet most ubiquitous and persuasive medium of ideological communication to "subversive" producers. Part of the answer has been alternative film production, independently financed when possible, but the consumption end of this process still remains an arena for battle.**

Means and methods of co-optation are many and they do not begin when an artist enters the public arena.

Co-optation. Means and methods of co-optation are many and they do not begin when an artist enters the public arena. Colleges and universities are purveyors of ideology as well as producers of artists. They educate not only the artists but the art critics and the art historians, and thus play their role by creating the components that feed the art market complex. As Che Guevara pointed out, "the law of value is not simply a naked reflection of productive relations: the monopoly capitalists — even while employing purely empirical methods — weave around art a complicated web which converts it into a willing tool. The super-structure of society ordains the type of art in which the artist has to be educated.

Rebels are subdued by its machinery and only rare talents may create their own work. The rest become shameless hacks or are crushed. A school of artistic 'freedom' is created, but its values also have limits even if they are imperceptible until we come into conflict with them — that is to say, until the real problem of man and his alienation arises."

The key inducement to co-optation is "success," which may be translated as financial rewards, middle class amenities and prestige accruing to the artist who has "made it" in the system. Its side products are individualism, competitiveness, insistence on an illusory creative "freedom." This is invariably accompanied by a change in artistic ideology reflected directly in the work of art. Technology, technique, or style become ends in themselves resulting in "slick" products; content becomes vapid or empty; the exploration of new ideas and new forms to express them declines or ceases. The tendency of the art market, which is very contradictory, is to "freeze" the successful consumer product at its point of greatest saleability. However due to the throw-away nature of present consumerism, it also demands constant novelty and change, but change on a superficial stylistic, formal level.

Chicano artists, like others, are subject to the temptations of this system. Sacrifices that many undertook in the early years to contribute to political and artistic struggle were, after prolonged periods of time, found increasingly unpalatable having been predicated on the notion of short-term victories. Some were overextended in their dual role as artists and activists and tired of their roles; others, achieving a new level of professionalism, felt the newly emerging Chicano middle class should now be willing private patrons. Still others opted for the usual commercial road to success and abandoned whatever critical and political content their earlier work contained though they maintained "ethnic" forms.

Given all these factors, we still have to ask if it is necessarily true that any Chicano artist who exhibits in a museum or gallery, or is featured in the mass media, or pursues a dialogue with the mainline, is therefore automatically co-opted. Is it necessarily

true that artists who express complex ideas, not easily comprehensible on the lowest common denominator, or who use avant-garde methods, are also co-opted? Is it even true, as expressed in Che's too black-and-white analysis quoted above, that capitalist society (in the United States) allows for only three categories: subdued or crushed rebels, shameless hacks, or "rare talents" who may produce their own work? Putting aside the "rare talents" category as too exclusivistic for a general discussion, would we agree that all other artists fall into the two other categories? This would suggest that our society is monolithic and impregnable, that there are no divisions and power struggles within it, and no chinks in the armour. It would suggest that artists, and people in general, completely accept and internalize whatever ideological frameworks are set forth by the dominant culture. Experience would suggest that this is an incorrect formulation; if it were not, *any* kind of ideological struggle could be deemed useless, and nihilism would triumph.

I am aware that some people will argue this is an assimilationist position, a rationalization for participation. To that argument I would counter that I have proposed a model above: a set of criteria for determining if an artwork has been co-opted which, while subjective, can still provide a guide for judgement. Slickness, emptiness, static ideas and forms, repetitiousness, superficial novelty are some of the measuring devices, to which many more could be added.

Let us, however, make no mistakes about the nature of the system. The U.S. ruling class is able through manipulation and co-optation to catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. This means that the facade of bourgeois democracy is still in place and considered preferable to a naked display of ideological control through repression such as occurred during the

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repetitiousness . . . are
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McCarthy period, or as regularly occurs in dictatorial Latin American countries where the political power structure is insecure. In the United States, certain urgent Black and Chicano demands (like Affirmative Action, or recognition of the Farmworkers' Union) were won (despite later dismantling) so that the fabric of society would not be further exposed or torn asunder, in a period of liberal reform, by escalated class struggle. Some aspirations were satisfied, including limited access to the middle class. Confrontational challenges, however, like those of the Black Panthers, the Brown Berets, or the militant phases of Chicano activism (farmworkers' picketing, the Moratorium) were ruthlessly repressed. Despite the defacement of street murals, the diminution or denial of funding, obstructionism, censorship, and the operation of co-optive methods, Chicano protest art has, by and large, been permitted to exist under present permissive methods. However, constant activism is necessary to maintain and enlarge whatever gains were achieved during the last fifteen years.

Not everything produced by the "folk" is valid and progressive culture . . .

Artists' options today. There still remains the pragmatic question of the economic survival of the artist, and the ultimate consumption of his/her product. In a capitalist society there are two, perhaps three economic options for the artist. First, for the chosen few who are carriers of capitalist artistic ideology, the art market complex provides ample rewards based on a highly competitive system. Secondly, there are artists who earn their primary living outside of, or in addition to sales of their work, but remain in their artistic discipline as educators, administrators, illustrators, designers, technicians, commercial artists, etc. Finally there are those who practice their art part time and are primarily employed outside their field. Traditionally the

great majority of opposition artists are of the last two categories, both Chicano and non-Chicano. The degree to which artists maintain and aesthetically express their oppositional stance depends on their perception and evaluation of their position. No single, perfect model exists for balancing economic necessity with artistic integrity.

The key question, it would seem to me — since none can be "pure" within any given society — is not whether an artist exhibits in a museum or commercial gallery or chooses to do easel paintings rather than posters and public murals. (Not every painter, after all, can be a successful muralist.) It lies with the ideological stance assumed by the artist in reference to the production and consumption of art, to the uncompromising quality and content of the work, and the refusal to capitulate on either aspect in exchange for prestige or financial rewards.

For those artists who opt to work in the direct service of grassroots organizations, appropriate forms would be posters, public murals, handbills, local magazines, comic strips and *fotonovelas* with new content, community art classes, artmobiles, traveling exhibitions, inexpensive reproductions of paintings and prints, etc. Dangers to be avoided are over-simplification (either assuming that all art must be understood by everyone, or that working people are obtuse), folklorism, populism, and parochialism. Not everything produced by the "folk" is valid and progressive culture; it is often impregnated with regressive values or with capitalist ideology. Chicano artists should be selective about what they exhibit and what they integrate into their own art forms.

Others will function within established parameters (though the two roles are not mutually exclusive) where, correctly, Chicanos have every right to be: museums, funding agencies, colleges and universities, the media, where mass ideologies are shaped and disseminated. They will have a difficult task: not to be dislodged, but also not to be seduced, to maintain ties with community and Third World struggles, but also to learn and use the sophisticated methods of the establishment on behalf of their own conceptions. They should

be situated so as to educate younger generations to their ideals by precept and example, not leaving the field to the opposition.

It is not technology, style, or even the art structure that is at fault . . . but . . . the philosophies and practices that inform them.

It is not technology, style, or even the art structure that is at fault — we are not opposed to the *existence* of galleries, museums, schools, art criticism — but to the philosophies and practices that inform them. They must be adapted to the needs of the people, in small ways and in large.

*Let us not be deterred in this line of reasoning by the argument of some that they produce only for themselves and are not concerned with any audience. A work of art consumed by the artist alone does not exist as a social act and need not concern us. This does not gainsay the fact that the act of production may (and perhaps should) be individual and the content not weighted down by the need for *pleasing* a specified audience, as a critical work may not, as long as *some* audience is a given.

**Unlike painting and printmaking, voluntary separation from the mainline art consumption structure is not only very difficult, but self-defeating because of film's vast viewing potential. In this respect, the story of involuntary "separation" (blacklisting) of the 1953 film *Salt of the Earth* is very instructive.

