

# Documents of 20th-century Latin American and Latino Art

A DIGITAL ARCHIVE AND PUBLICATIONS PROJECT AT THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON

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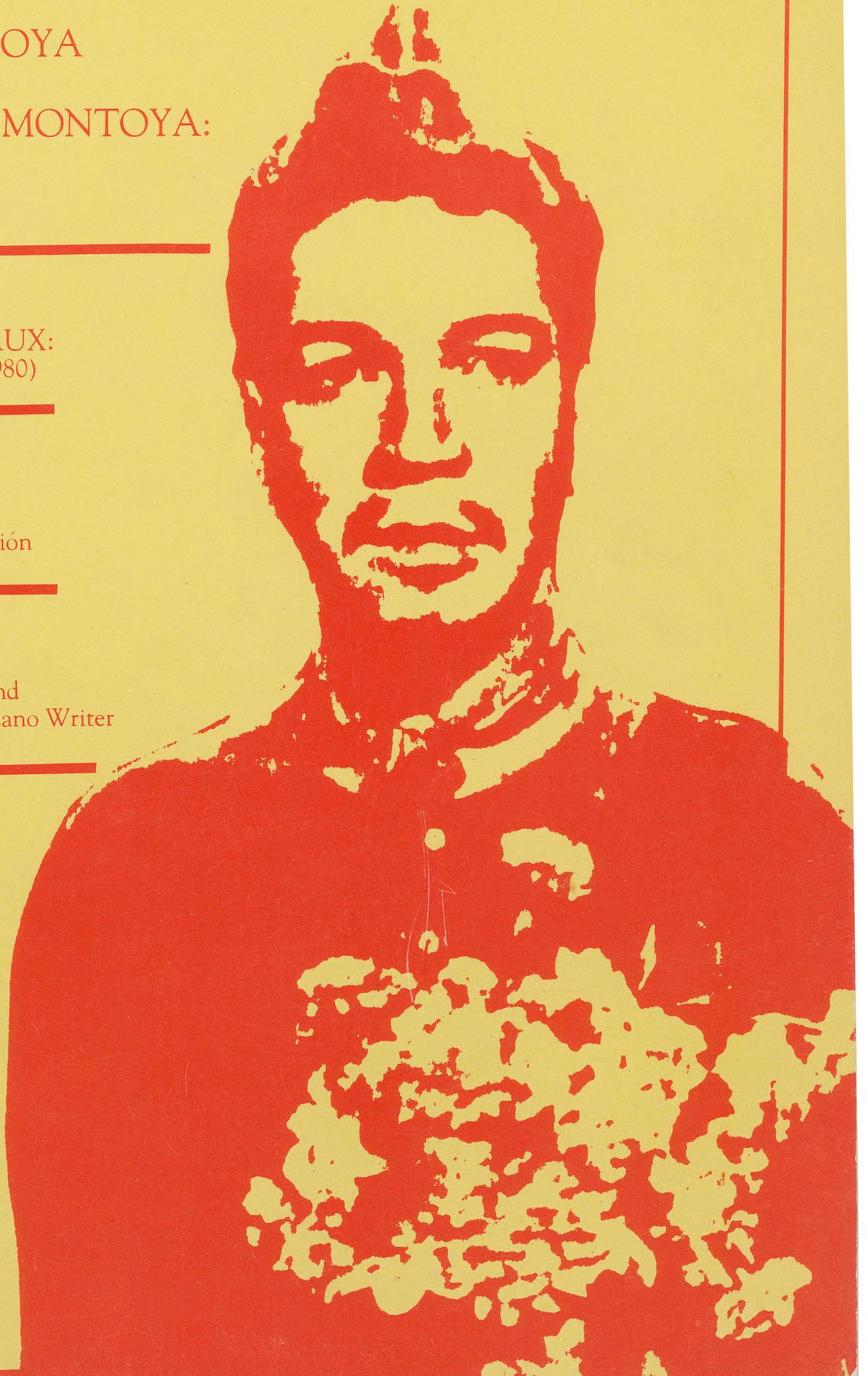
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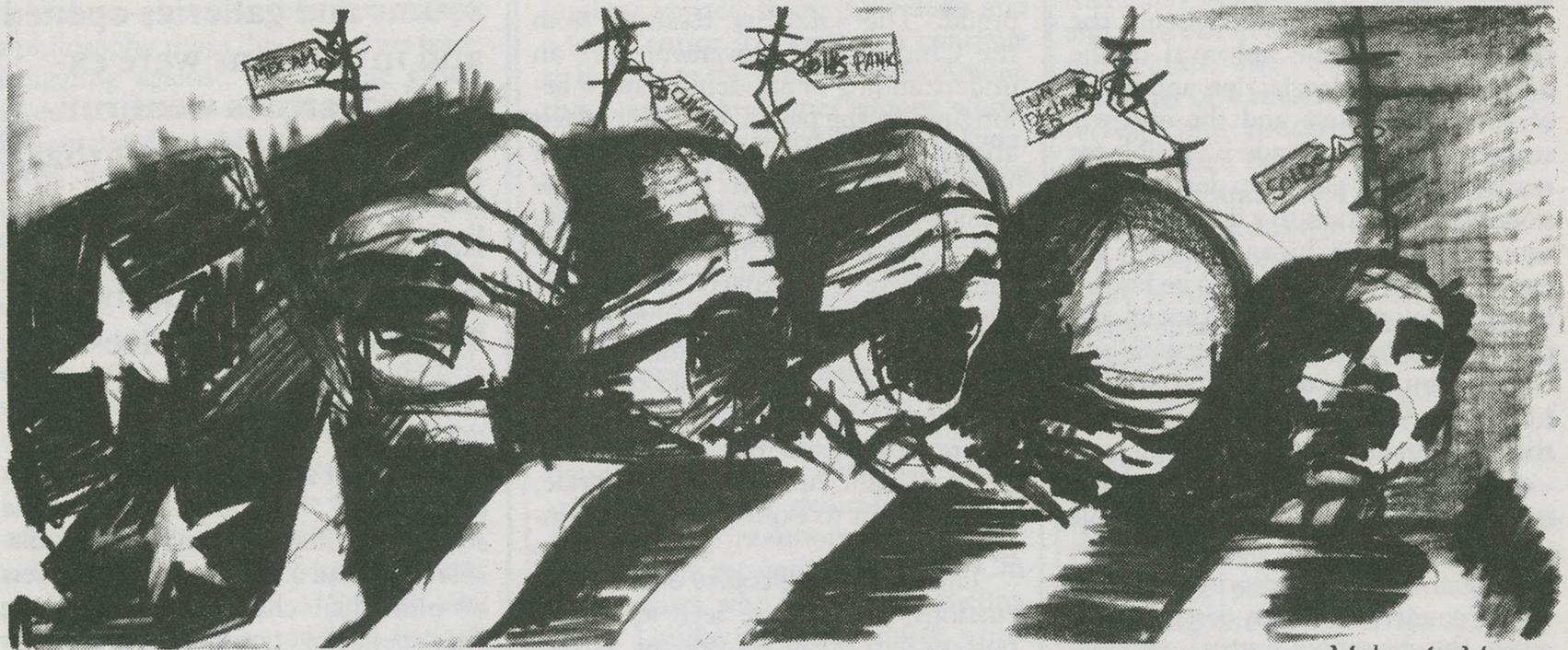
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# F E A T U R E



Malaquías Montoya

## A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE STATE OF CHICANO ART

Malaquías Montoya  
and  
Lezlie Salkowitz-Montoya

Many murals that are going up in communities today are mere decorations contracted by a system that would like to see them remain that way.

Lezlie Salkowitz-Montoya is a graphic artist and photographer, born in New York and raised in the San Fernando Valley, California. She currently lives in Oakland, where she conducts art workshops and cultural/political events in the community. In addition to these activities, she works at the Taller de Artes Gráficas producing silkscreen prints and posters.

Malaquías Montoya was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and raised in the San Joaquín Valley, California. Since 1962 he has lectured and taught at numerous universities and colleges in the Bay Area, where he presently teaches at the California College of Arts and Crafts. He is sponsored by the Alameda County Neighborhood Arts Program as silkscreen director of the Taller de Artes Gráficas in Oakland and conducts community art workshops. His work includes several murals, acrylic paintings and drawings, but he is best known for his silkscreen prints which have been exhibited through-

out the Southwest and published nationally.

Malaquías is a prolific graphic artist whose uncompromising stance has served as a consistent reminder to artists in the community to maintain their political integrity. He defines his art in the following terms: "It is my objective to educate and be educated by those persons whom I come in contact with daily. As an artist I feel it is my purpose to express to each individual the importance of developing that innate quality characteristic of all of us—that of creativity—and to show the relationship between that artistic creativity and community action as both an educational tool and a catalyst for social change."

Metamorfosis presents this seminal article to encourage dialogue on the state and function of Chicano art. We invite artists and critics to respond to the position represented here in the form of letters, reviews or articles, which we will publish in future issues.

**T**he course of the Chicano Art Movement over the last decade stemmed from an awareness that was taking place throughout the United States. The upheaval of the late 60's, the dissatisfaction and revolt of the farmworkers and the anti-war student movement made it possible for many oppressed people to define themselves in opposition to a dominant culture. The term "Chicano" (and "Chicano Art") as it has come to be known today developed out of this social and political movement. In a capitalistic class system, with its economic and political conditions, art cannot be anything else but a protest.

Conquerors must surmount by mental, moral or physical power the people whom they desire to overcome. The American-born Mexican in this imperialist country has been denied a language (by the school system), an identity (by the portrayals of stereotypes) and has been made to feel ashamed and inferior (by psychological impositions). This has resulted in the suppression of a culture. The Movement in the late 60's made it possible for Chicanos to look in another direction, away from the required assimilation process that was to have enabled them to become "something better." Along with this newfound liberation, art began to surface. It became an "art of liberation," an "art of protest," a "political art." By the use of indigenous symbols of the Chicano heritage, artists began to explain the struggle and necessity to unite behind it.

*Talleres* (workshops) and *centros* (centers) started to form throughout the Southwest. They soon became meeting places for discussions on the far-reaching effects of the political upheaval that was taking place within La Raza. In Oakland, California, for example, the Mexican-American Liberation Art Front (MALAF) was formed. MALAF was a group of artists who attempted to analyze the social movement and political awareness that was taking place, the struggle, and the role of artists within that struggle. Up to this point there had been a tendency to form traditional, individualistic relationships within the mainstream art world. Artists aspired to become known and validated in museums and galleries. By coming to realize the political significance of Chicano Art and its unifying power, the Chicano artist awakened, perhaps for the first time.

The terms "Chicano," "Raza" and "La Raza de Bronce," were seen as political identifications of which to be proud. The solidarity resulting from the Chicano Art Movement gave an understanding of an identity and a belonging. In the past, Chicanos had felt alienated from the traditional study of Western European Art. It now became clear why Chicanos were inclined to feel so dissatisfied. Chicano artists became aware that others felt the same way and that art stemmed from like experiences and common traditions. It was felt that La Raza should be recognized by its uniqueness and that the differences should be separated from the dominant culture. Chicano pride, and the right to express it, became important.

Throughout the course of these discussions, artists were seen as an important part of the Movement. Artists had to become the producers of visual education. In order to decentralize the arts from the universities, artists had to move their studios out into the communities. Further discussions expressed the necessity of working in the *barrios* and the importance of using art as a social tool, as a weapon (although at times crude) to combat the circumstances that up to this point in time had made Chicanos feel so alienated from mainstream society. A definition of "Chicano Art" was never intended because to have done so would have restricted the artist. It was felt that through the discussions that took place, with their political content, beliefs and direction, an understanding would result, a frame of reference for struggle and commitment to all oppressed people. As long as this could be identified and clearly understood, only a people's art, an art of struggle, could surface.

Chicano Art began to have a powerful impact. Posters, murals, exhibitions and conferences emerged in the communities, depicting unacceptable conditions and the struggle to improve them. Many people, by identification and implementation, embraced these philosophies.

Middle-class oriented Chicanos in the art realm, however, without specific guidelines or set definitions to follow, started to conflict with what was being pursued. Though they were able to identify with Chicano Art culturally as well as nationally, they did not fully realize the political implications of

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Chicano Art as a "people's art," an "art of protest." The expression of the struggle of "nuestra Raza" began to dissolve. Instead of experiencing a process of individual change and expressing that personal transformation, many Chicanos started to emulate Anglo society and thus started to divert the Movement and what was basic to it. Furthermore, works by artists with very little knowledge of the craft or lacking technical skill were often accepted as valid simply because they were produced by Chicanos.

Due to the lack of political sophistication and structure, MALAF and other art groups were not in a position to overrule or censure what was negative. Having come from the academies and universities where talk of "artistic freedom" took place, artists were not likely to be in conflict with this philosophy. Since they assumed this attitude was correct and did not foresee the conflict that would arise when the members of the different generations began to communicate, the younger artists were provided with no guidelines. Attempts were made by communities and colleges to bring the two closer together by conducting workshops and on-going dialogues in the *barrios*.

The Chicano Art Movement continued on its own momentum, opening up to a series of conflicts and eventual dissipation. Artists worked hard for long hours within the community with little or no glory. Since they received little or no pay as well, the ever-existing reality of subsistence for all artists in this country became increasingly hard to bear. The already diminishing Romanticism of the earlier years began to fade. After two or three years of protesting against the institutions that

controlled art—museums and galleries, colleges, government agencies and publishers—because they perpetuated a philosophy that Chicano artists were struggling against, these same artists agreed to become involved with them. When the doors of museums and galleries opened and invitations were extended, artists went running, despite the fact that Raza communities, which had been the original emphasis for the Chicano Art Movement, rarely frequented museums. The magnitude of the monster that had been the oppressor was not understood and capitalism once again was able to conquer and reduce the ascending power that the Chicano artist had begun to acquire to an aesthetic and academic viewpoint.

Chicano Art became anything created by persons with a Spanish surname. For example, much of the artwork of the traveling show "El Arte del Barrio" was no different from other art being produced in institutions by Anglos, including Pop and Funk Art. Presented in the name of *chicanismo*, these forms were given legitimacy. "Chican-Anglo" became the rage, galleries became *galerías*, museums became *museos*, theatres became *teatros* and in all but a few cases became brown facades, puppets for the ruling class feeding the newly rising brown bourgeoisie. For personal advancement many people became involved in this rising brown class. These Chicanos, unable to make it in an Anglo-American society and assigned to the status of second-class citizens, felt it was necessary. As a result of these actions, people realized that others were protesting simply because of being excluded, and when change was talked about, a purely personal one was meant.

The system, recognizing the strength as well as the weaknesses of the Movement, put into operation the necessary mechanisms to conquer and control it. The process of attempting to weave it into its own capitalistic fabric implied the process of unravelling as well. Although many of the topics, themes and images of Chicano artists are still coming from a Chicano perspective, they no longer have the same meaning as they did when *chicanismo* was first on the rise. Now interpreted by someone else or looked at for its academic prominence, much of the work has little or no impact and has lost its political significance and strength.

Though the current trend of popularizing Chicano Art has robbed it of its original impact, those individuals and a few Centros still exist that continue to hold onto the primary goals. Among these are two distinct groups whose work is characterized by the original aspirations of the Movement: elevating the consciousness of the communities. But due to the nature of the paths taken by each to achieve these ideals, these two groups are in conflict.

One group, because of the lack of political apperception, tends to play with the system and what it has to offer. Through the traditional means of recognition (galleries, museums, television, magazines), dedicated Chicano artists, whose intentions are not opportunistic, are recognized alongside Chicano artists who have these inclinations. Unlike the opportunists, whose goal is obviously personal recognition, there is a group of artists who believe that their art will benefit a wider scope of viewers by this participation in the traditional media. In most if not all cases, this ingenuous approach has caused their work to be consumed and its effectiveness is minimal according to the original goals.

Many have been affected by the last fifteen years of struggling for survival and find it difficult to understand a system that throws people into competition with each other. Thus, the original goal of raising the level of consciousness is constantly sabotaged. Despite this reality, after a mere fifteen years people are leaning toward the belief that Chicanos are ready for another stage in their development as artists: that of trying to achieve change through these powerful institutions. It is at this particular, important point that the two groups are divided. The struggle that is being waged should not be a matter of a few years, but a lifelong commitment to a better humanity.

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At this point in history, the participatory approach is unrealistic. Though there may be a degree of understanding and concern in the liberal sector of the ruling class, when the realities of "the concerns of Chicanos" present themselves, "the concerns of the ruling class" surface as well. Except for a few exceptions and minor favors, they are unwilling to consider a truly just society in which everyone benefits from what it has to offer. When it means giving up some of the wealth in order to establish a reasonable balance, an interchange cannot even be considered.

The other group which continues to work in positive directions understands the system and its dangers and minimizes its participation within it. This group functions as the intermediary between the political action organizations and the ideals of the Chicano Movement. It creates art responsible to this purpose. These artists acknowledge the importance of lending art to the political struggle that is taking place, from announcements on posters and in leaflets to widespread illustrations and exhibits in educational and cultural institutions, community centers and agencies, hoping to reach the apolitical population as well as those who realize the need for change within society.

These Chicano artists continue to live up to the original intentions of the Movement as artists and community leaders. As living examples or role models exemplifying the original aspirations of Chicano people, these artists may accomplish many different things besides their art. It is still apparent that the *barrios* (workers, church groups, schools) have not been educated enough. Many are still unaware that community artists and exhibitions exist. It remains the purpose of this group of artists to continue to work towards this end.

The plastic arts, theatre, poetry and dance have helped propel the struggle and have brought the Chicano Movement into international focus. They have created unification specifically with Latin America and other nations of the Third World. Through increased understanding of domestic issues, Chicanos have been able to empathize with the people of Vietnam, Angola, Nicaragua, South Africa and other countries. Artwork, especially the poster, began to serve as a bridge between those struggles. Chicano people who

view these visual expressions began to recognize that within this perspective Chicanos were not an isolated culture that had failed within this imperialist society, but one in unity with others, who, in varying degrees, were also oppressed. The Movement came to mean the struggle of all Third World and oppressed people.

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. It has lost its effectiveness as visual education working in resistance to cultural imperialism and the capitalist use of art for its market value. It is not easy to contest an all-powerful system that presents an image of the Chicano/Mexicano as having assimilated through the mass media, which reach the homes of most of the population. Chicano artists who allow themselves to become involved in these media, often unconsciously, end up cutting the throats of other Chicanos. As Chicanos become more and more sucked into the system, which is only possible through assimilation, it will eventually convince them, by giving them more and more recognition, that to reach millions through its media is the better course.

Though the two groups discussed above work side by side in our communities and in our colleges and universities as educators of young Chicanos, the division centering on methods of exposure has become particularly dangerous. Many young Chicanos have not experienced the trajectory of the past. The young receive messages/propaganda through the educational system as well as the mass media. Communities have already been bombarded with and influenced by mainstream mass media propaganda. If participation through the same channels occurs, then of course the more powerful, having the money for greater exposure, will dominate. The danger brought on by this participation is that it validates these channels, a situation which results in contradiction if the ideal is still that of opposition. Though some feel that the exposure has been successful and has helped to create a better acceptance of all Chicanos, to open up jobs, etc., in reality it has given the system another tool for pacification, another vehicle by which to "keep Chicanos in place." Chicanos who are unable to consider this dichotomy and do not wish to listen to those who do

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not participate have already begun to be recognized by the system and are benefiting from it. This conflict can only make it very hard for new artists. As the two models are in opposition, it is very difficult for the educational process to gain momentum.

Chicanos cannot claim to be oppressed by a system and yet want validation by its critics as well as by the communities. Chicanos who open up art, poetry and theatre to criticism are attacked by the critics as producing "folk art or craft," as "lacking sophistication" and "having meaning only among Chicanos." These slanderous comments again succeed in making Chicanos feel inferior and at the same time cause some to react with anger by attempting to gain that "sophisticated recognition" and very acceptance of a ruling class against which the struggle is waged. It will be a victory when Chicano communities find Chicano artists a success because they are viewed as spokespersons, citizens of humanity, and their visual expressions viewed as an extension of themselves.

Also presently affecting the arts is the establishment of art centers and murals within the *barrios* which often stem from those institutional sources such as government and corporate grants which control the neighborhood art projects by providing funds for their encouragement. The pretense is to reduce racial and social tensions by providing a *centro* where people can work together in "bettering and servicing the *barrio*" or by funding a mural to enable artists to "decorate the *barrio*." In reality what is happening is that the financial powers have succeeded in diverting people's attention from real issues and problems in the *barrios* and in society. Instead of continuing to ex-

plain through their art the existing conditions and how to change them, as a result of these powerful institutions Chicano artists are competing among themselves for the diminutive funds made available. Once again they are allowing themselves to become subservient to the dominant culture. The power structure can not only afford it, but continues to maintain its control by these pacification methods.

A movement whose base was to break the yoke of the evils of imperialism has again been seized by capitalism, now under the guise of "equal opportunity." In most cases, in order to obtain and maintain these grants, artists must produce according to the "guidelines" set within those "agreements." It is absurd to consider that a program is going to give an artist money to deface or destroy it.

Inherent in the capitalistic system is the condition that unless a person has "made it" within the art world, it is necessary to struggle and compete with others until that so-called goal has been accomplished. There is no support for artists in any form other than by individual recognition and gain by climbing the economic ladder by whatever means possible. For the Chicano or Third World person in this system still plagued by racism, this is a particularly difficult task. If "success" is desired, the Chicano artist must take steps inherent in the capital ladder and climb. For many Chicanos who wish to make a living with their art, both the forces of commercialism (those who buy, sell and grant monies) as well as the attempts to cash in on what Chicanos are doing end up undermining what is being produced. The *centros* end up operating under that control.

As early as 1974, the same thing started to happen within the mural movement: it also started to be co-opted by the system. The system realized the importance of murals and their tremendous potential to bring about a

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raising of consciousness within a community. The system, in order to protect itself, must control anything gaining power. Inbred into capitalism is the mechanism to "buy" into that which it desires to control. An example of this is the large amount of money spent by the Rockefellers on purchasing and funding minority art in Third World communities. By attempting to remove that art from the receptive audience for whom it was originally intended, they caused much of it to lose its power and impact. Many murals that are going up in communities today are mere decorations contracted by a system that would like to seem them remain that way. It wants the walls in the communities to be used for "therapeutic art" to hide the ugliness of the conditions, appearing to make the *barrios* nice places to live, covering up the evidence of a class society and, again, pacifying Chicano people.

The tradition of murals in Mexico is that the mural should be a voice, a voice of the people, a protest. This sentiment was stated in the manifesto of the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors, and quoted in *Art and Revolution* by David Alfaro Siqueiros:

We proclaim that at this time of social change from a decrepit order to a new one, the creators of beauty must use their best efforts to produce ideological works of art for the people; art must no longer be the expression of individual satisfaction which it is today, but should aim to become a fighting, educative art for all.

Though this idea was and still is looked upon with ill favor by many artists, in order to rend the shackles of imperialism the artist must attempt to use the

walls as a vehicle to raise the consciousness of the people. As previously established within the ideals of Chicano artists, the community must never forget that they live in a *barrio* and what conditions create them. Chicanos are in the midst of a struggle. The walls, posters and all art must be used for propaganda. The public steadily absorbs the propaganda of the "American Dream" through the media. Chicano art must be used to counter what is presented by this system.

In our times, to refrain from mentioning genocide, racism, cultural schizophrenia, sexual exploitation, and the systematic starvation of entire populations is itself a political act . . . . As this situation becomes exacerbated, to refrain from mentioning it becomes more and more clearly a political act, an act of censorship or cowardice. (Meredith Tax, "Culture Is Not Neutral, Whom Does it Serve?" *Racial Perspectives in the Arts*)

It is the responsibility of Chicano artists to show the importance of aspiring not for that material accumulation which is so unrealistic for most of La Raza and keeps so many crippled and enslaved, but for a system that truly provides the necessary things for everyone.

In conclusion, it must be stated that the Chicano Movement has come a long way in the last fifteen years. It has come a long way from the excitement of the early moments of the Movement, when young Chicano artists started to rediscover an identity and others, more mature, began to share with them those things that had never been forgotten but had been suppressed. Headlines reported that farmworkers were walking out of the grape fields and later that those same farmworkers were marching to Sacramento to protest the unjust conditions in which they existed. And later still news told about young Chicanos walking out of high schools in Los Angeles protesting against racism in the educational institutions. And sketch books became daily logs of those new phenomena. Canvas became the recipient of new images: Zapata, Villa, Chávez and Dolores. And then one day Chicano artists said, ¡Basta! (enough), and became committed to a Movement.

Before the commitment was made, Chicano artists felt the necessity to be redefined within a new context. First

they attempted to define capitalism and found that under capitalism there must be poor and unemployed, and that Raza filled those ingredients. Artists vowed to assist in the struggle by becoming involved using pens, pencils and brushes—the tools that would be the weapons to fight against the degradation of La Raza.

What became of those commitments and what caused their modification? Could it be that the same system which was opening its museum doors and at the same time planning the overthrow of Allende in Chile had changed? Or was it the artists who had started to change? Had Chicano artists really not understood that the system that supported apartheid in South Africa and at the same time provided funds for the advancement of Chicano liberation had something up its sleeve? A system that feeds with one hand and strangles with the other?

Chicanos *must*, to avoid the shortcomings of the 60's and 70's, seriously analyze the system that Chicano artists have adopted as their patron. As products of society, they must guard against the temptations inherent within that society. Art must be used to facilitate and redevelop that artistic sensitivity within all people. The same system that now gives Chicano artists positions and funds is the same system that formed the values which must be re-examined. It is important to maintain the commitment to negate the perpetuation of the values of the same system whose tentacles reach out and slowly squeeze the life out of those it oppresses.

Through Chicano Art, by the visual education process, a transformation of individuals can take place and make possible a re-dedication to original commitments and to working together. All over the world people are going to have to unite in order to stop the inhumanities of the present. Chicano artists must reaffirm original goals and values must be seriously examined. Once that investigation and reaffirmation have taken place, Chicano artists must prepare for a lifelong struggle along the painful road called change, advancing towards a better humanity.▲

