

ART FOR THE PEOPLE'S SAKE

EMORY DOUGLAS SPEAKS AT FISK UNIVERSITY



Brother Emory Douglas spoke to the students about the role of art in the struggle for survival.

On October 2, 1972, Brother Emory Douglas, of the Black Panther Party spoke at Fisk University: a school with an all Black population, located in Nashville, Tennessee. In speaking to the Black students and professors, many of whom were studying and teaching the various creative arts, Emory explained how art could be used as a vehicle to elevate the consciousness of the Black and oppressed community. His talk exposed art, as it is presently constituted and used in this society. He showed how it functions to the disadvantage of the people. The lecture reads as follows:

ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE, I'm very happy to be here as a representative from the Black Panther Party. Tonight, I would like to discuss with you the relationship of the Black artist to the Black community. We must take that as a very serious thing, because when we look at the world today, we see that we have very serious problems.

We have to understand that we have been duped into believing that we are supposed to criticize all the Greek, the Roman, and all the ancient European art. We have been taught how to criticize them; we have been told how to criticize them. But what happens

when we criticize them? We begin to try to duplicate them. We begin to spend our time in trying to copy something that is old, that is decadent, that is out of date...like the work of Leonardo Da Vinci, and those other painters.

But we have a greater enemy in relationship to art. We have a greater enemy, I would say, in commercial art. What is commercial art? It is a method of persuasion, mind control; it oppresses Black people. If we look around our community, what do we see? We see billboards, with advertising, that tell us what to buy, how to buy. And we go out and buy-- our own oppression.

It (advertising) tells us to go out and buy a house, for 6% interest; we buy the house and suffer for the next 20 years trying to pay for that house. What am I trying to tell you? It's this: We have to take that structure of commercial art and add a brand new content to it, a content that will serve the interests of Black people. We see that they (the capitalists) have done what we should be doing. They have analyzed how to appeal to Black people, so that Black people will go out and buy. They have begun to analyze how to relate to Black people so that we will continue to suffer - peace-

fully.

But we say that if we take this structure of commercial art and add a brand new content to it, then we will have begun to analyze Black people and our situation for the purpose of raising our consciousness to the oppression that we are subjected to. We would use commercial art for the purpose of educating Black people, not oppressing them. So I made that statement, in the beginning so that perhaps I could get off into an outline with a few questions in regards to who art is for. I would say that art is for the masses of Black people; we must bombard the masses with art. We cannot do this in an art gallery, because our people do not go to art galleries; we can't afford to go to art galleries...

We have to put our art all over the United States, wherever Black people are. If we're talking about an art that serves our people, if we're truly talking about an art that is in the interests of Black people, then we have to use, again, the structure of commercial art.

Isn't it true, that wherever you look, all over the country, you see billboards selling a product? Isn't it true, that whenever you look in a

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magazine, it's selling a product? Why can't we use that same structure, in relationship to ourselves, to raise the consciousness of Black people; in regards to using our art in that same form; putting it into posters, thousands upon thousands of posters, so that they can be distributed, so all Black people across the country can get the message...

We also have the question of how to define art (for ourselves)? Many would say that we define art from a dictionary, but we know that the problems are too complicated, too complex, to define art from a dictionary. We cannot even define art by a board of directors. We say that art is defined by the people, because the people are the ones who make art.

If we are truly drawing the people; if we are trying to reflect the society which we live in, then that means that we, the artists, will draw the people; but the people are the real artists. No artist can sit in an ivory tower, discussing the problems of the day, and come up with a solution on a piece of paper. The artist has to be down on the ground; he has to hear the sounds of the people, the cries of the people, the suffering of the people, the laughter of the people--the dark side and the bright side of our lives.

The dark side is the oppression, the suffering, the decadent living, which we always expose. But the bright side is that which we praise; beautiful Black people who are rising up and resisting. There is a difference between exposing and praising. We don't expose the people, we expose the system (of the U.S.) in relationship to art, but we praise the people in relationship to art. We show them

as the heroes, we put them on the stage. We make characters of our people (around the idea of what they know life should be about).

We can talk about politics in art, and many people will get confused on the issue, in regard to what is primary. Is it the political situation, or the artistic situation? Art is subordinate to politics. The political situation is greater than the artistic situation. A picture can express a thousand words, but action is supreme. Politics is based on action, politics starts with a hungry stomach, with dilapidated housing. Politics does not start in the political arena, it starts right down there in the community, where the suffering is. If art is subordinate, then, to the political situation, wouldn't it be true that the artist must begin to interpret the hungry stomach, bad housing, all of these things and transform these things into something that would raise the consciousness of Black people? I think that would be the most logical thing to do.

In regard to criticism in art: We praise all that which helps us in our resistance, for future liberation. We condemn all those things in art that are opposed to our liberation.

If we, as artists, do not understand our role and relationship to the society, to the political situation and the survival of Black people, then how can we create art that will project survival? How can we begin to create an art that shows a love--a true love--for Black people?--When the artist begins to love the people, to appreciate them, he or she will begin to draw the people differently; we can begin to interpret and project into our art something that is much greater than

it was before: Freedom, justice, liberation; all those things that we could not apply to our art before.

How do we judge art...By the subjective intentions of the person (the motive)? Or do we judge art by the effect it has? We have to take both of these things into consideration. The motive is the idea; the idea that I believe a drawing should be drawn in a particular manner is only my personal thought. So, what I have to do is take into consideration, if the art is going to correspond to what's happening in the community. If it is going to elevate the level of consciousness of Black people in the community. That means that I have to go out into the community and investigate in order to find out if what I want to draw is going to correspond with the reality of the community. Then I will be taking into consideration, not only my motive, which is my own personal feeling, but I would also be taking into consideration the effect; the actual, practical everyday activity that goes on in the community. We have to link up the two...

You see, another thing that the reactionary system does, is to carry on a pacification program by using art. They tell us that we should not draw things that deal with liberation, that we should not draw things that deal with violence. But at the same time they perpetrate the worst violence on the planet Earth while they have us drawing pictures of flowers and butterflies. We must understand, that when there are over 20 million people in this country, hungry, then we, as artists, have something we must deal with...



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