

BOOK REVIEW

Art on the Line,

Essays by Artists about the Point Where their Art and Activism Intersect

Edited by Jack Hirschman, Curbstone Press 2002 418 pages (unpublished)

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“Since culture is the human expression of ideology, the destruction of culture as an agent of resistance is imperialism’s favorite operation. “ Jorge Sanjines (137)

Roque Dalton (1935-75), the patron saint of the struggle in El Salvador, opens this book with “Poetry and Militancy in Latin America” (1963) an essay on why he writes poetry as a means of struggle against imperialism. As we read we feel the power of the conjunction of politics and aesthetics in his work, a tradition that in the United States has been aggressively suppressed.

Dalton’s essay and the next five chapters of *Art on the Line* are based on pamphlets published in the 1980s which the editor Jack Hirschman refers to as “a modern classical foundation in Marxist and Marxist-Leninist cultural ideas and attitudes.” They include comments by Peruvian Cesar Vallejo (1892 – 1938) on Soviet culture in the late 1920s an important moment of its transition, from the early exuberant agit-prop to the emergence of proletarianism, worker’s culture. Another essay is by Vladimir Mayakovsky, the great Russian agit-prop poet himself George Grosz, John Heartfield and Wieland Herzfelde, writing as a collective in mid 1920s Germany, scathingly condemn bourgeois culture: “There is only one task: to accelerate through every available means, the downfall of this oppressive culture.” (109)

Jorge Sanjines and the Ukamau Group of Bolivia give a powerful account of the cinema that came out of the revolutionary era of 1952 – 1964. These essays of the 1970s speak directly to our current moment: “it is all too obvious today that the military-economic machinery of imperialism ... is linked to and planned in conjunction with the policy of the means of mass communication whose function it is, on the one hand, to spread disinformation, and, on the other, to consolidate the ideology of the system.” (135) Sanjines emphasizes that for Indians it is community and collaboration, not individualism that are the basis of freedom.

The rest of *Art on the Line* as it moves toward the present is equally potent. Ngugi WA Thiong’o, the famous Kenyan playwright, celebrates Abdilatif Abdalla’s poetry after he got out of jail “N’shishiyelo ni Lilo” “The Truth I held, I hold on to even more firmly.” (219) On the subject of “freedom” for the artist, that oft cited reason why writers do not engage with political issues, Ngugi declares. “Even if a writer or an artist had a liberated vision and was allowed to write freely, can he be said to be free when the very society in which he lives is a class-structured society with a few living on the labor of millions. ?” (218)

Ernesto Cardenal, Minister of Culture for the Sandanistas in Nicaragua, contributes “Democratization of Culture in Nicaragua” (1982) an astounding narrative of the formation of a new culture for a new society based in indigenous traditions, media,

production, and politics. We all know about the tragic, and ruthless destruction of that new society through the arming of the Contras by the CIA. But the model that Cardenal outlines lives on

The rest of the book includes writers who address North American indigenous culture, African American culture, Feminist writing, working class intellectuals, radical radio, and other topics. Intriguingly, what is almost missing, except for an essay on murals by Miranda Bergman and George Grosz, is visual art. I would also like to have seen Rosa Luxemburg and Clara Zetkin among the seminal writers. And finally, a clear identification at the beginning of each essay of when it was written, would have been really helpful.

But, of course, these essays are timeless. Each of them provides a model for activism, resistance, and potent creativity, paired with revolutionary goals. Everyone interested in producing resistance culture needs to read this book right away.

“Aunque la revolucion termine por ser para todas las buenas personas.” (Though the revolution ends up being for all good people) Roque Dalton (186)