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Emory Douglas and the Art of Revolution

Mark J. Rainey

Emory Douglas was the first and only Revolutionary Artist and Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party. The party was founded in California in October 1966 and led by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale. Although famous for its militant stance, the Black Panther Party also ran a series of community programs including free breakfasts for school children. A counter-intelligence program led by the FBI resulted in the assassination, incarceration, and exile of party leaders, which further exacerbated growing divisions within the party. By 1980, one of the most significant left-wing parties in the USA was all but defunct.

Urbis is an exhibition center in Manchester, UK. Opened in 2002, it focuses on urban and popular culture as well as running community programs. The exhibition, Black Panther: The Revolutionary Art of Emory Douglas, ran from October, 2008 to April, 2009.

Introduction: Emory in Manchester

Mention of the Black Panther Party (BPP) often raises the image of angry young African Americans in military dress, complete with black berets, leather jackets, and guns in hand. However, behind this image there is an important social context and political discourse. The artwork of Emory Douglas, the BPP's Revolutionary Artist and Minister of Culture, provides a means to a deeper understanding of the BPP. The art of Emory Douglas is uncompromising. It is confrontational and often violent, yet at the same time celebratory, inspiring, and empowering. Essentially, his work provides a visual expression of the aims and ideology of the BPP and offers a wide insight into the African American civil rights movement of the 1960s.

The exhibition Black Panther: Emory Douglas and the Art of Revolution, on display

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at Urbis, Manchester is the largest exhibition of Emory's work to date and his first in the United Kingdom.¹ The exhibition not only presents Emory's work from the mid-1960s to present, but also sets the social context behind the rise of the BPP, with the long shadow of slavery, segregation, and racist violence in the USA. Working at Urbis, I have had the opportunity to spend time in the exhibition and interview Emory Douglas for the Urbis website. Like myself, many visitors are encountering this lesser known side of American politics for the first time. It is the purpose of this article to present a wider encounter with the politics and practice of the BPP through the work of Emory Douglas and its display at Urbis, Manchester. I also hope to address the relevance of Emory's artwork today.

While there is no immediate connection between the BPP and Manchester, the city does have a rich and radical political heritage. By the early 19th century Manchester had emerged as the centre of the manufacturing world. The city had embodied the essence of the Industrial Revolution, and the rise of factory production created horrific living and working conditions in the city. In 1842, a young Friedrich Engels arrived in the city from Germany in order to manage a factory owned by his father. Engels was shocked and appalled by what he saw and at the age of 24 published *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1844), which included a detailed account of the working slums in Manchester². Engels contributed to the development of communist political theory, and his political brother and fellow German, Karl Marx, would visit him in Manchester during the 1840s.

¹ I will often refer to Emory Douglas using his first name. This is because it is the sole name he uses to sign his work and also because of the friendliness and openness of Emory himself. All quotations from interviews with Emory are quoted directly in the vernacular.

² For Engels' description of Manchester see the chapter 'The Great Towns' and in particular pp. 85-109.

Together they studied at the historic Chetham's Library and hammered out their theories that would lead to the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* in 1848. Engels and Marx advocated the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system in order to establish an egalitarian, socialist society. Although not the first working class movement to develop in Manchester, Marx and Engels' socialist thought would become hugely influential, providing a backbone to the ideology of the BPP.

A direct political link with the USA occurred during the American Civil War (1861-65). Manchester's textile based economy was dependent on raw cotton shipped in from the southern states of the USA. These states produced cotton through black slave labour and formed a breakaway Confederacy from the USA. Abraham Lincoln, then president of the USA, had the Union navy blockade the southern ports, preventing any cotton from leaving. Although this broke the Confederate economy, it also had a disastrous effect in Manchester as cotton supplies ran dry and factories began to close, leading to mass unemployment. The cotton workers held deep empathy with their slave counterparts, and despite their own hardship the cotton workers union openly declared its support for Abraham Lincoln in a meeting on New Year's Eve, 1862. Earlier that year, president Lincoln had issued a preliminary Emancipation Proclamation that committed the Union to ending slavery in Confederate states. Through this proclamation the abolition of slavery became a major war aim for the Union and led to Lincoln becoming a hero-figure in Manchester. The president wrote a letter to the city's workers, thanking them for their support and a statue of the 16th president of the United States of America now stands in Lincoln Square, not far from Manchester Town Hall (Goodwin, 2002; Worthington, 2005).

The Politics and Practice of the Black Panther Party

Established in 1966, in the wake of the assassination of Malcolm X, the BPP had a complex set of political influences both from within the African American civil rights

movement and from without. From its outset the Urbis exhibition gives the visitor insight into the political and social context of the BPP by confronting the visitor with accounts of the racist violence meted out on the black population in the first half of the twentieth century, including shocking images of the lynching of black men. The opening section of the exhibition also includes audio speeches and texts from key politicians and activists of the 1960s, including John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Robert Kennedy—all of whom were assassinated in that turbulent decade.

Beyond the wider context, specific insight into the politics of the BPP is provided through recent portraits of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. by Emory Douglas. Set side by side, the portraits represent two important, but divergent figures in the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King, Jr. is perhaps the most recognizable face of the African American campaign against racial segregation and inequality. Drawing from his own Christian beliefs and the model provided by Ghandi's independence movement in India, Luther King based his campaign on the philosophy of non-violence, taking the moral high ground in the face of brutal racist attacks. His emphasis on peaceful protest is seen in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech where he stated, "Non-violence is the answer to the crucial political and moral questions of our time: the need for man to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to oppression and violence" (Martin Luther King, 1964, ¶5). Directly opposed to this was the politics preached by Malcolm X, the black Muslim leader who advocated self-defense, claiming "I believe it's a crime for anyone who is being brutalized to continue to accept that brutality without doing something to defend himself" (1965/2001, p. 484). The politics of Malcolm X attracted many young African Americans disenchanted with the inability of non-violent protest to realize immediate change or even dampen racist violence. For the BPP there was a real need for self-defense, self-reliance and immediate change and the politics of Malcolm X provided this. The link became direct when the BPP initially formed as an armed security

guard to escort Malcolm X's widow, Betty Shabazz, from the San Francisco airport in 1966. However, as Emory Douglas himself makes clear, it was the philosophy of the later Malcolm X that was influential, as he was willing to work with groups outside the cause of black nationalism. To Emory, "Malcolm was a person who, after breaking his relations with the Nation of Islam, would work with anybody who was working for freedom. It didn't matter if they was atheist or Catholic. It didn't make a difference" (as cited in Rainey, 2008). From the openness that Malcolm X advocated at the end of his life, the Black Panthers would themselves go on to work with a variety of political parties representing other American minority groups and predominantly white parties such as the Peace and Freedom Party.³ The BPP also looked to international revolutionary groups for its inspiration. The Urbis exhibition emphasizes this internationalist outlook by abutting an Emory Douglas cover of the *Black Panther* newspaper featuring Chairman Mao's image over BPP members holding his *Little Red Book*. This image is hung next to the portraits of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. Together these images show the BPP's position within black politics and its commitment to international Marxism. This commitment was reciprocated by leftist groups around the world, including the Japan Committee in Support of the Black Panther.⁴ Marxism was an important political discourse for the BPP, but unlike other Communist movements, it was never its sole ideology. According to Emory, "The party wasn't stuck in the dogma of Marxism, it was just a guide to action. That was one of many points of view that we looked at" (as cited in Rainey, 2008). Marxism was essentially a tool for

³ For further information see Kathleen Cleaver (2001), *Women, power and revolution* (p. 125).

⁴ Michael L. Clemons and Charles E. Jones (2001) stated that the Japan Committee included a variety of different leftist groups in the country: "The Japan Committee in support of the Black Panther included four Japanese leftist organizations; the International Revolutionary League, the South Osaka Liberation Front, the Young Chinese Organization, and the Isolated Island. Panther Support Committees were critical linchpins in the party's international approach to combating political repression" (p. 35).

liberation, to be combined with and utilized alongside their struggle for black self-reliance. In 2007, the commentator, Greg Jung Morozumi, expressed the complex relationship between international Marxism and black nationalism within the party when he wrote, "It is true that the Black Panther Party was internationalist and that 'All Power to the People' subsumed chants of 'Black Power'", but "there could be no multinational united front without simultaneous black unity" (p. 130).

Beyond Marxism and Malcolm X, a close read of the party's Ten Point Platform (1966/2001, see Cleaver & Katsiaficas, p. 285) reveals the key influence of the Constitution of the United States of America on the party's ideology, an influence left untouched and unrecognized by many commentators. The Constitution is fundamental to the freedoms granted to Americans and the BPP raised awareness of these freedoms to African Americans. In particular, the BPP emphasized the right to bear arms and the right to a fair trial by jury selected from one's peers. "You had people naïve of the fact that they had these rights," claimed Emory, and "it was based on these principles that the Black Panther Party began to show people that they had the right to bear arms and what have you" (as cited in Rainey, 2008).

When considering the combined roles of the philosophy of Malcolm X, Marxism and the American Constitution on the politics of the BPP, a diverse mosaic of political influences emerges. Each of these ideologies and texts was a resource for the BPP and each became a guide for black liberation, testament to the party's ability to bring together and adapt a variety of political viewpoints to achieve its ends.

The political practices of the BPP had to adapt to changes on the ground. The party initially gained fame through its call for 'Community Control of Police', with party members following police patrols through the ghetto, often leading to violent confrontation. The Mulford Act of 1967, passed by the California state legislature, banned the display of loaded weapons within the state and was seen as a direct response to the actions of the

BPP. As the party leadership wanted to work within the law, the BPP shifted its focus from militant self-defense to establishing socialist community programs.⁵ These Survival Programs provided the ghetto community with free health clinics, clothing and food distribution, and a program of free breakfasts for school children. These Survival Programs also attracted broad support outside the black community and would pose a serious threat to the authority of the government as, according to Emory, “Here you have us exposing to the American People what the government wasn’t doing and what it should have been doing” (as cited in Rainey, 2008).

The attraction of the BPP’s politics and practice was bound to the everyday experience of many African Americans in the 1960s. With the exhibition at Urbis being viewed primarily by a British audience, I asked Emory how he would introduce the BPP to a new audience. Rather than provide a detailed ideology, Emory immediately turned to his own experiences that led to him joining the party:

As a youngster growing up I was exposed to a lot of injustice like many other people. [...] On a local level, you had all across the country police brutality with young blacks being shot, murdered and being justified. [...] Then you could turn on the international news from time to time and see the same things happening in South Africa (as cited in Rainey, 2008).

It was experiences such as these that led people to join the party and provided the impetus for the BPP’s political program. Emory’s artwork, while reflecting the party’s ideology, created a visual image that deeply resonated with the everyday experiences of African Americans.

⁵ In an interview with St. Claire Bourne (2007), Emory stated, “When the gun laws began to change, we began to change. So Huey and Bobby said that we were going to work within the law” (p. 202).

The Revolutionary Art of Emory Douglas

The art of Emory Douglas is defiant and unflinching while being simple and direct. However, in this simplicity is the ability to communicate a potent political message to a wide audience. Emory Douglas (1968) defines Revolutionary Art as being art “for the whole community and its total problems” (¶1). As art for the whole community, it can be understood by the broad spectrum of African Americans, reflecting their anger and aspirations:

From the Christian to the brother on the block, the college student and the high school drop out, the street walker and the secretary, the pimp and the preacher, the domestic and the gangster: all elements of the ghetto can understand Revolutionary Art (Douglas, 1968, ¶4)

While Emory’s account of “community” was embedded in the predominantly African American ghettos of the USA, it also extended to other oppressed groups both nationally and internationally. During 1969 the *Black Panther* was published together with *Basta Ya!* a Latin American newspaper, and his artwork often asserted solidarity between oppressed peoples throughout the world (see Durrant, pp. 135, 170).

Although art for the community, Emory’s work also echoed the political aims and objectives of the BPP. His work gave a political direction and visual solidity to the problems that African Americans faced living in the urban ghetto. For Emory (1968), his art offered the “correct picture” (para.1) of the struggle. However, behind this unequivocal language and distinct political agenda is a dynamic relationship between the Revolutionary Artist and his audience. The problems of the community influenced the art, and the art responded with a political definition to these problems, or as Emory (1968) stated, “Revolutionary Art can thereby progress as the People progress because the People are the backbone to the Artist and not the Artist to the People” (¶3). As there was no set definition or precedent for the Revolutionary Artist within the BPP, Emory was able to develop this dynamic relationship with the community as he grew into the role.

Emory stated, “I was able to define my role by broadly being around and beginning to learn the politics” (as cited in Rainey, 2008).

It was through the party newspaper, *The Black Panther*, that Emory was able to present his work to a wide audience. At its height the paper was distributing 400,000 copies a week (Seale, 2007, p. 14). Overseeing the design of the paper, Emory utilized the front and back covers to create widely distributed, high impact images. The centerfold spread became a pull-out poster that could be pasted on the walls of the city. Revolutionary Art is art that could be seen and displayed within the community and, for the Revolutionary Artist, “the ghetto itself is the gallery” (Emory, 1968, ¶5).

The posters and cover images were often a collage of drawings and recycled and reused photographs. Emory also made use of heavy black lines that made the central figures stand out and simultaneously referenced traditional African art, connected to communist propaganda and provided a means of covering over any color overlap in the production process.

Central to his work were the figures he developed, taking the anger, frustrations and hopes of the community and translating them into careful caricatures that would define a movement. As Bobby Seale (2007) wrote, “Explain to Emory your issue or problem, and before you know it, Emory has a caricature of it” (p. 13). The two most significant and recurring figures were that of the pig and the ghetto dweller with the former being the most famous and influential of Emory’s creations. Through the pig caricature, Emory was able to depict the oppressor as a slovenly and stinking policeman (see Figure 1). The pig caricature of an uninformed, uniformed, racist, and brutal official was uncompromising and deliberately confrontational, yet it astutely tapped into the anger felt by those living in the ghetto. Through this representation Emory was able to give a clear depiction of who the oppressor was. Through it, he was also able to communicate the broader aspects of BPP ideology and as his work developed, Emory not only depicted racist policemen as pigs, but also soldiers, corrupt politicians, and even

entire nation states.⁶ Through the pig, the problems of the ghetto were connected to wider international issues and the American government’s treatment of the black



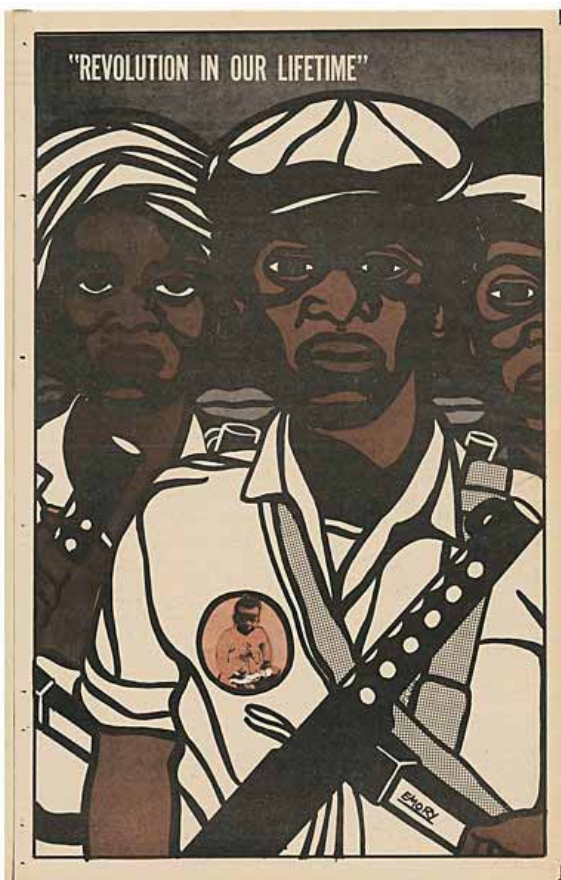
Emory Douglas, poster from *The Black Panther*, December 20, 1967, offset lithograph, Collection of Alden and Mary Kimbrough, Los Angeles, © Emory Douglas, photograph by Gene Ogami, digital imaging by Echelon

Figure 1. “What is a pig?” by Emory Douglas. Used courtesy of Urbis.

population were viewed in direct relation to America’s overseas wars, particularly in Vietnam. These wider issues would appear in the slogans that accompanied the pig caricature. For example, in the poster *January 3, 1970* the text reads “U.S. Imperialism. Get out of the Ghetto. Get out of Latin America. Get out of Asia. Get out of Africa” (Durrant, 2007, p. 34). Establishing a link between the statutory racism of the American government and its war in Vietnam was of particular importance to the BPP and the issue of conscription occupied point 6 of the Party Platform, which stated ‘We want all black men to be exempt from military service. [...] We will not fight and kill other people of

⁶ See ‘March 21, 1970’, ‘April 11, 1970’, ‘September 28, 1968’ and ‘January 3, 1970’ in Durrant, 2007 (pp. 32-34).

color in the world who, like black people, are being victimized by the white racist government of America” (Cleaver & Katsiaficas, p. 285). The BPP viewed conscription as a further example of governmental oppression. Young black men, particularly those not in full-time education, were among those being drafted into fighting the war in Indochina. Drawing from the Party Platform and the bitter experience of conscription in the ghetto community, Emory introduced slogans such as “Our Fight is Not Vietnam” into his work and began to equate black soldiers with prisoners under the slogan “Free the GIs” (Durrant, 2007, p. 135).



Emory Douglas, poster from *The Black Panther*, November 8, 1969, offset lithograph, Collection of Alden and Mary Kimbrough, Los Angeles, © Emory Douglas, digital imaging by Echelon

Figure 2. “Revolution in our lifetime” by Emory Douglas. Used courtesy of Urbis.

Placed in opposition to the pig oppressor was the representation of the poor men and women of the ghetto. After the pig image of the oppressor had been established, the ghetto dweller became central to Emory’s work. The everyday person became the hero and was transformed into a dedicated and focused revolutionary, making a headstrong stand for their rights (see Figure 2). These

representations were set in context within the cracked walls and crumbling homes of the ghetto and often in violent confrontation with the pig policemen. Accompanied by unequivocal, high impact slogans such as “Death to the Fascist Pigs” and “In Revolution One Wins or One Dies”, the previously neglected poor took center stage (Durrant, 2007, pp. 66, 82). Not only were they being represented, but they were also being empowered. According to Colette Gaiter (2007), Emory’s work “maintained his subject’s dignity while illustrating the harsh reality for the disenfranchised of the ghetto” (p. 101). The thick black outlines of the figures helped accentuate the heroism of the everyday person and Emory also made use of radiating lines leading from the figures, creating a sense of beatification on par with a religious icon (see Figure 3).

Emory viewed the development of his work in stages for “the work changed as the party changed” (cited in St. Clair Bourne, 2007, p.201). As the party shifted its focus to the Survival Programs, “the art began to reflect those survival programs” (Emory, cited in St. Clair Bourne, 2007, p. 202). Militant slogans were replaced by ones celebrating the social work of the party such as “We Black People ain’t beggin’ no more” and “We Shall Survive, Without a Doubt” (Durrant, 2007, p. 153 see Figure 3). Rather than being a militant, the everyday ghetto dweller was now depicted in support of the Survival Programs. A badge declaring “People’s Free Health Clinics Now!” replaced the gun (Durrant, 2007, p. 154). Coupled with this shift towards the Survival Programs was a turn towards the pressing concerns of the party including election campaigns and protest campaigns against the imprisonment of party members. Emory (1969/2007) depicted ordinary people demanding the freedom of Huey Newton, incarcerated on murder charges in the autumn of 1967 which were subsequently dropped, and wearing the images of assassinated party members on their badges (Durrant, p. 42).



Emory Douglas, poster from *The Black Panther*, August 21, 1971, offset lithograph, Collection of Alden and Mary Kimbrough, Los Angeles, © Emory Douglas, digital imaging by Echelon

Figure 3. “We shall survive. Without a doubt.”
By Emory Douglas. Used courtesy of Urbis.

The Urbis exhibition attempts to emphasise the different trajectories of the work of Emory Douglas. His work on the Survival Programs, as well as his international influences and posters relating to specific protest campaigns are each given their own space, providing a balanced view of his artistic output and moving beyond the more famous militant images. Colette Gaiter (2007) remarked that, “few people are aware of the hundreds of drawings of ordinary Black people that Douglas published” (p. 107), and the exhibition certainly raises an awareness of the importance of the everyday men and women in his work.

The exhibition also makes his work contemporary and relevant, displaying Emory’s most recent work dealing with issues such as gang violence and AIDS, as well as offering visitors the opportunity to respond with their own creations. By a grand coincidence, the exhibition coincided with the historic election of Barack Obama, the USA’s first African American president. This

heightened the importance of the exhibition of Emory’s work as it provided an important opportunity to review the struggles of African-Americans over the past century, in view of contemporary events. As much as visitors depict Barack Obama and write about his election in their response to the exhibition, Emory holds a tempered view of the new American President. His most recent work, as yet unpublished, depicts Obama in front of the American flag stating ‘I Barack Obama the 44th President of the United States of America Apologize for Slavery’ (personal communication, January 25, 2009). The piece is a harshly direct critique of Obama’s election, stating that even with an African American President, the office of the president still has to come to terms with the racism and oppression of its past.

Also important to the exhibition is the display of art produced out of workshops led by Emory during his time in Manchester. In the summer of 2008, when Emory made his first visit to the city, he led a workshop as part of Urbis’ Reclaim Project.⁷ The Reclaim Project aims to mentor young adults from areas of the city that are known for their gang violence, such as Moss Side and Gorton. These young adults are mentored by older role models and take part in a series of activities at Urbis. Emory’s workshop gave the opportunity for those in the project to express their positive achievements and focus on ways to better their community. Importantly, it was Emory himself, as much as his artwork, who inspired the teenagers.

Conclusion

A review of the art of Emory Douglas, and its display at Urbis, Manchester, offer a powerful visual insight into the politics of the BPP and the wider struggle of the African American Civil Rights movement. For those new to this aspect of American culture, and in particular to the BPP, Emory’s work is invaluable. However, its true importance lies beyond acting as historic pieces. In Emory’s work, Revolutionary Art emerges as a distinct practice seeking “change and overcoming obstacles” (Emory, as cited in Rainey, 2008).

⁷ For more information see www.reclaimproject.org

It is art born in the community and art reflecting the community. It is not art seeking beauty, or art for consumption, but is able to inspire and empower. 40 years after the heyday of the BPP and in the UK, Emory's work retains this ability in a cross-cultural context.

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