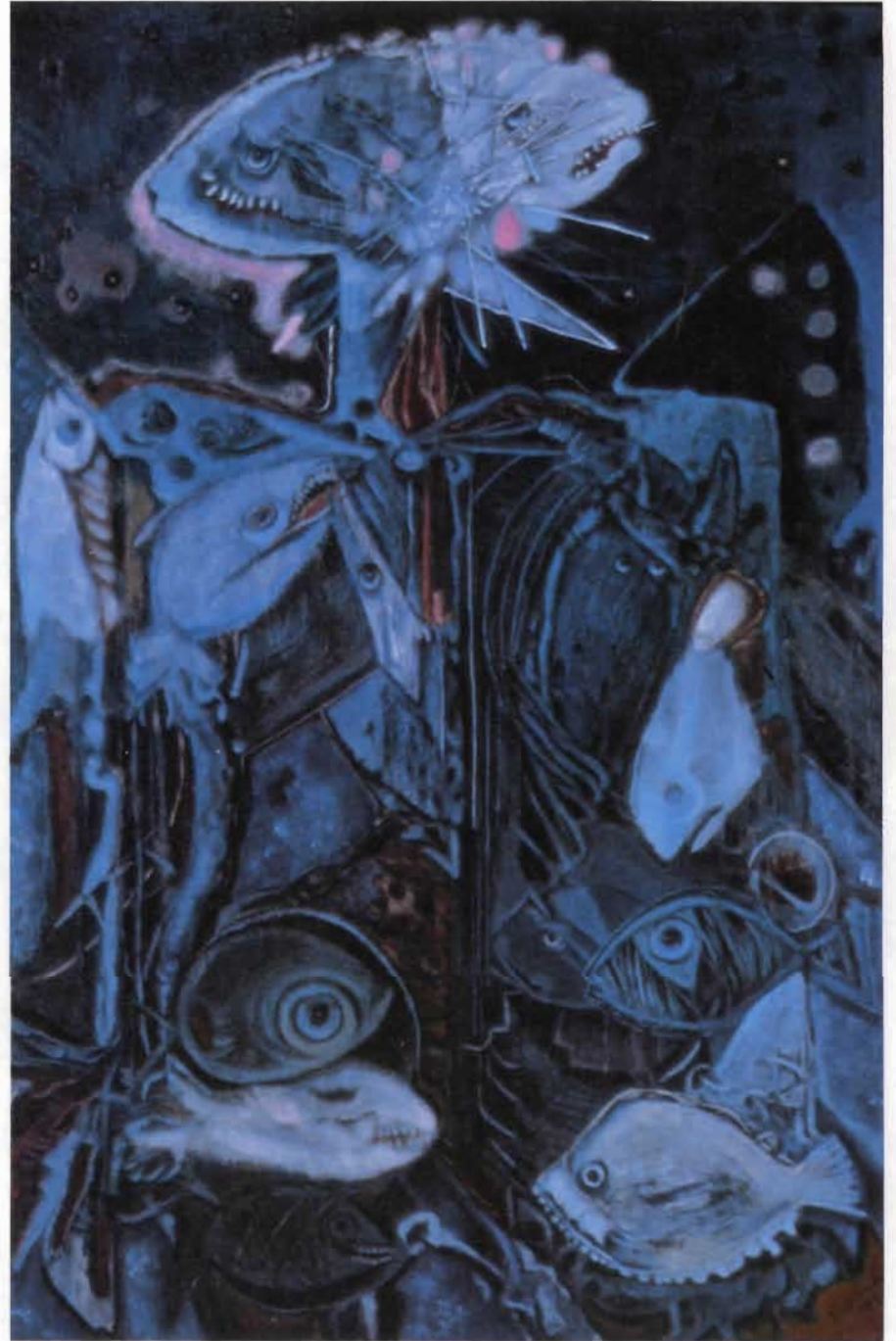


18 *Pez #2 (Imagen Claustrofóbica)* (*Fish #2: Claustrophobic Image*), 1984



20 *Los Amantes (The Lovers)*, 1984



4 *Los Insomnes Dormitantes* (inspirado en *Campesinos durante la Siesta* de Picasso)
(*The Sleeping Insomniacs*—inspired by Picasso's *The Sleeping Peasants*), 1983

“Art and poetry, and their discourses, if they are for real, are always critical of Power: their politics is to transform reality and not to merely ideologize it. We should not pretend to possess truth or to have the only, unique truth. But an artist or a poet with a critical consciousness is always uncompromising with Power in relation to truth, in order to be for revolution and real democracy.”

E. Escobar

Lippard *(continued from p.8)*

stronger than he was, and adds: "This has no sense at all, but that's the way it is some of the time if not always with some kind of painting and some painters"—of which he is clearly one.) The roiling curves and lines of *Las Oneiras* (The Ones Who Come from Dreams) (p. 13), for instance, suggest a vast space unseen in its entirety, rather than a dissolving space. It is as though the artist has access to a perpetually reforming universe which is revealed to him only in fragments.

In the painting *Los Sepultureros* (The Gravediggers) (p. 21), Escobar might be illustrating one of his theories. He has written that the self-and-socially-conscious artist "would assume *not* the role of the Undertaker (the preserver of ideology, the State's Chef), but the Gravedigger, who, even recognizing the difficulty of being a-ideological, proposes to be the anti-ideologue, and the true 'mortal of mortals.'" Thus the three figures in the painting wield not shovels, but guitars.

In his effort to be an anti-ideologue, and to transcend both "folklore" and "primitivism" as sole reference points for a Latin art, Elizam Escobar has developed an interesting, if still evolving, concept of multiculturalism:

In the same way that European art at a certain moment sought elements that were not part of their own cultural-historical experience (Arabic, Japanese, African, Indo-American elements), similarly today Latin American art is being nourished by these European digestions and other elements. This is not to the same purpose or in the same way, but rather through the lens or specific conditions of Latin America, and within the specific cultures and individual or social situations, such as the colonial situation of Puerto Rico.

He then cites the "necessity of the individual to use his language (like color) in spite of, as part of, his creative endeavour against the slavery of external conditions and as a fulfillment of his will to transform reality."

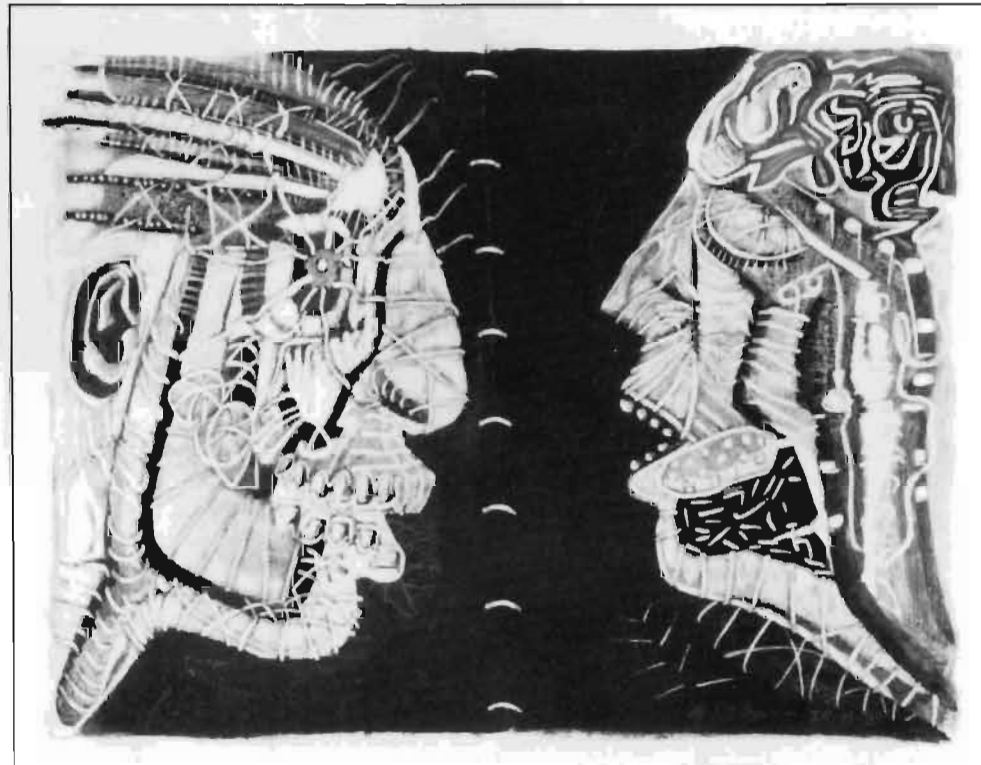
There is no question that some kind of new eclectic and dialectical energy is bubbling up in Latin America as a result of combined repression and revolution. Its roots in visual art are indeed multiple, and the potential result of this rich mixture of sources is increasingly important to

Euro-American culture as well, offering a needed shot in the arm to a high art that has been palely narrowed to the taste of a single class.

In *Perfiles en un Album* (Profiles in an Album) (p.11), Escobar seems to be working around this issue. Two powerful heads confront each other across the center of a looseleaf notebook. Both heads are composites, giving the impression that the skin, or the veneer, has been stripped away to show the muscle, or the components of humanity (or the artist); some elements are "bound" as though held together with thongs. On the left, a white head with wide blue lidless eyes stares in surprise or amazement or fear at the red head on the right, whose eyes are closed but whose mouth seems open to speak. A fine linear branch is drawn before the dreaming red head.

Such an intensity of longing and communication pervades this painting that I have to see it as the artist confronting himself, his dreams, his past, across the pages of his notebook/canvas—his primary tool of escape. Together the two heads might also be seen as an image of Caribbean *mestizaje*—the "civilized" and colonized white head drawing knowledge and energy from its Indian counterpart as if illustrating Jose Marti's concept of "*Nuestra América*." Whatever the meaning (and Bertha Husband has suggested that Escobar doesn't offer interpretations because he wants the work to create its own dialogue with the viewer), this is a compelling painting that forces us to enter it.

Escobar's work would be shown and respected
(continued on p.14)



6 *Perfiles en un Album* (Profiles in an Album), 1983



1 *Sueño en la Cara (Masked Dream)*, 1983



2 *Las Máscaras dentro de las Caretas (Masks inside Masks)*, 1983



40 *Las Oneiras (The Ones Who Come from Dreams)*, 1985

"Today, nearing the end of the '80's, experience tells us that real marxism and real marxists have and sustain multiple and diverse interpretations on the relation between art and politics. Nevertheless, even within these interpretative conflicts, the marxist method, dialectical materialism, continues to be, in my view, the most effective method to deepen and bring light on the problems that comprise the relations between art and politics.

"Since the late '60's, this topic literally has permeated my participation in the production of images: drawings, caricatures, graphics, and painting. Through the years this has been both healthy and a limitation. Thus, this internal struggle of the forces that debate within

me has been accompanied by a kind of 'ideological judge' or 'demon' who has been in charge of the unpleasant work of having to justify these images.

"Then, in the late '70's, this struggle seemed to take a different direction. My own opinions became less important than, let's say, the use of color, texture, or the freer inclusion of oneiric images. Today, I have better understood that in order to say or show something significant in art, first one has to construct and develop one's own language."



Lippard *(continued from p.11)*

whether he was in or out of prison (though not necessarily in the mainstream). But the fact that he is making this kind of ambitious and visionary work in that kind of place offers a model for cultural resistance. Prison poetry has long been realized as a significant genre. Visual art has not often reached these heights, perhaps because the space and equipment requirements are harder to meet within the walls of a cell. Deprived of direct action, Escobar has brought to bear on his imagination the sharpness of his political thinking and his willingness to take risks. Political practice is now necessarily channeled into theory and art. In the words of Karl Marx: "The dominion of the objective being in me, the sensuous outburst of my essential activity is emotion, which thus becomes here the activity of my being."

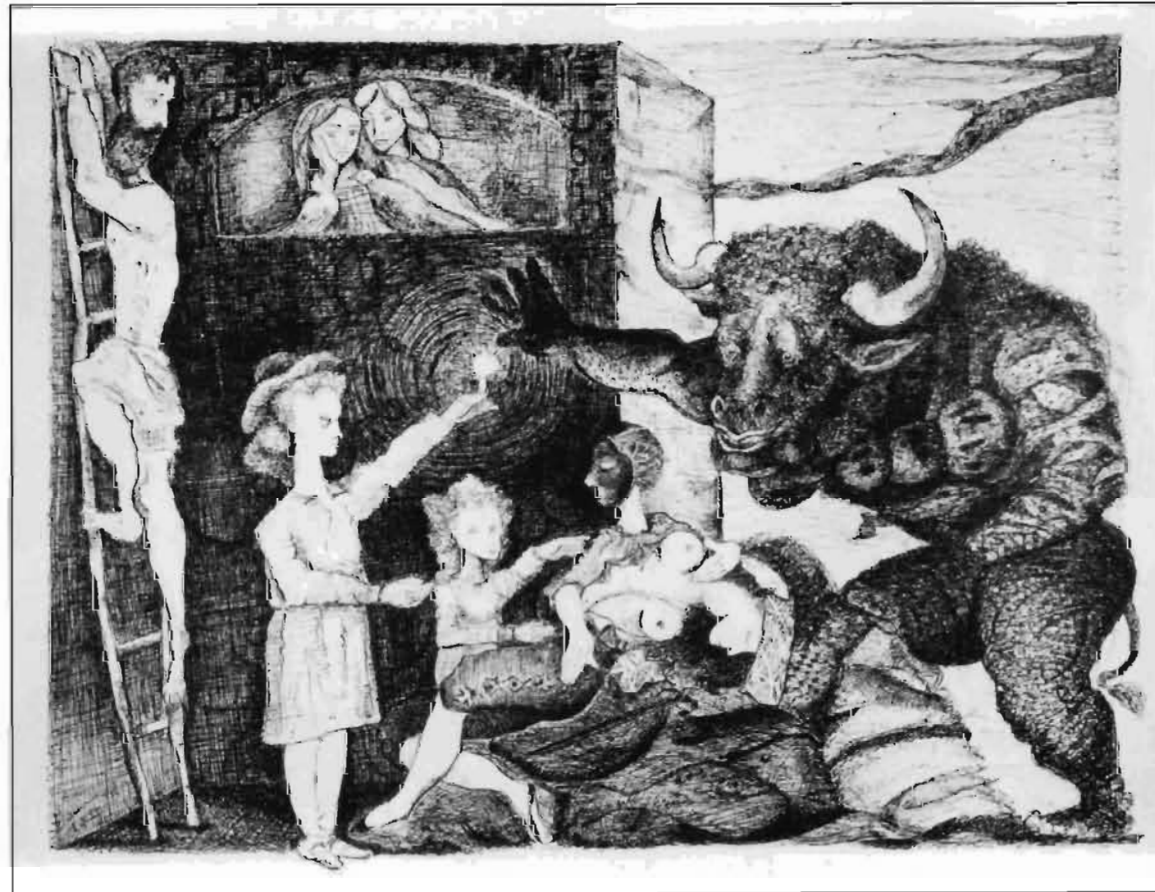
Escobar is impatient with the ideological restrictions laid on art by those of us who try to conquer alienation by integrating our art and our oppositional activism, but he is also aware that all the combinations of art and politics are valid; he knows that social transformation (and all transformation is cultural by definition) will not come from a single direction, that "progress" is not a goal of art (even progressive art) and that "the real is the infinite contradiction in infinite movement." This knowledge is imparted in his painting. Forcibly separated from direct political activity "outside," he seems to be able to see the role of art very clearly, confronting it as he is, from "inside"—not only inside the walls of Oxford Prison, but inside the wall-less home of his own consciousness and experience.

In paintings like *Pez #2* (Fish #2) (p.9), a figure swaddled/trapped inside a fish, or *La Maga y el Vejigante* (The Female Magician and the Vejigante) (cover), one can almost feel the dialectics at work, unanchored from political specificity but expressing nonetheless the struggle between desire and necessity, oppression and freedom—a struggle to the death. Now and then, however, the joy of struggle and the dream of self-determination breaks through, and Escobar produces a work like *Vejigante Alegre* (Joyful Vejigante) (back cover) in which the

many-horned mask (with a curious resemblance to the Statue of Liberty's crown) seems to be burning up with "a passion of the concept." At the same time, this ritualized figure is smiling with a very human look—not mad joy, or an evil joy, but joy *despite* everything.

Nevertheless, it is a mask. Elizam Escobar the man lives beneath the cultural mask as the prisoner lives within the dignity he has forged for himself as a creator. Buried somewhere in these paintings must be images of life outside as well as inside—a

life dedicated to art and liberation. Escobar has been a university student, a garbage sweeper, a sign painter, a community art teacher, a muralist, a journalist, a cartoonist, and a freedom fighter (a real one, not the Reagan imitation). The breadth of his esthetic accomplishment is undoubtedly due in part to the breadth and courage of his experience of reality. His struggles in the world are reflected in the intricacy of his art. And they in turn reflect the triumph of the individual spirit—in itself an allegory for the eventual triumph of the people. □



21 *Variación a Minotauromaquia* (Variation on Picasso's *Minotauromaquia*), 1984

"An artist is not an individual who creates and produces his/her work independent of everything else: nature, society, things. Such a phenomenon can not happen. However, we oppose any type of determinism that denies the capacity of the individual to transform his reality or transcend the limits that external conditions impose, in relation to his work.


"Art is a process that cannot be reduced to such determining causes in space nor to one tradition or specific experience through time. This is the perspective from which we see the individual Puerto Rican artist (either in Puerto Rico or in exile), in relation to his times and his problematic. We also understand that art can not just be seen from the point of view of the individual who produces it, but rather in relation to its class, group or fraction of a social class, its historical epoch, and from the base of its 'universality.' One factor dialectically affects another. In the same way that one factor can be dominant, also a style or various styles will dominate for a specific period. In relation to the individual, we have to add that he/she can not be reduced to a style, but rather in his/her process of production and formation, he/she can either master a style, or can develop or adopt various styles either successively or simultaneously.

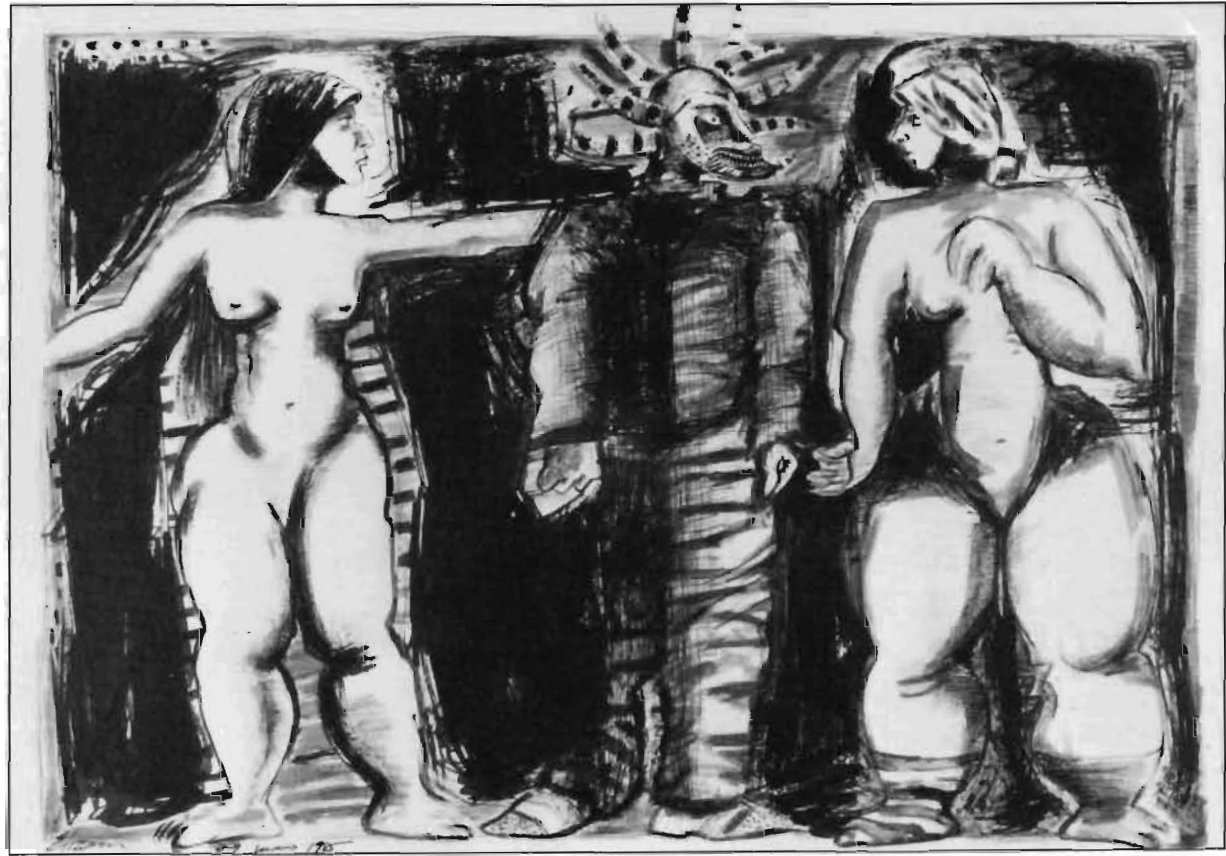
"One of the problems that emerges in the dialectical-materialist analysis of art is that many times the position is put forward that external factors (social class/nation/epoch, etc.) are the only ones that determine the formation of the individual, of his style or world view. If we recognize the capacity of the individual to transform the 'reality' of man as an historical being (of man as the protagonist of history), then there is no basis to reduce him to a 'specific inheritance,' a single tradition, a single style, certain aesthetic norms, etc.

"The concept of 'the true art' only applies to the elaboration of artistic production through the honesty of the individual in his/her possibility of making out of his/her material an artistic language in spite of what is accepted by one tradition and despite what is supposed to be 'determinant.' It is a language in spite of the moral values of the moment, cultural, ideological and political limits, etc. The language is not only what has been done up to the moment, but also the possibility of this language transforming itself

to express (among other things) what the previous language can no longer express effectively. Here, we want to quote José Carlos Mariátegui from his article entitled Rein vindicación de Jorge Manrique, 1927:

Because tradition is contrary to what traditionalists desire, living and moving. Those who negate it, create it to renew it and enrich it. Those who want it dead and immobile, kill it, to prolong the past in a present without strength, to incorporate their spirit in it and to pour their blood into it.

 Escobar




49 La Indecisión (Indecision), 1985

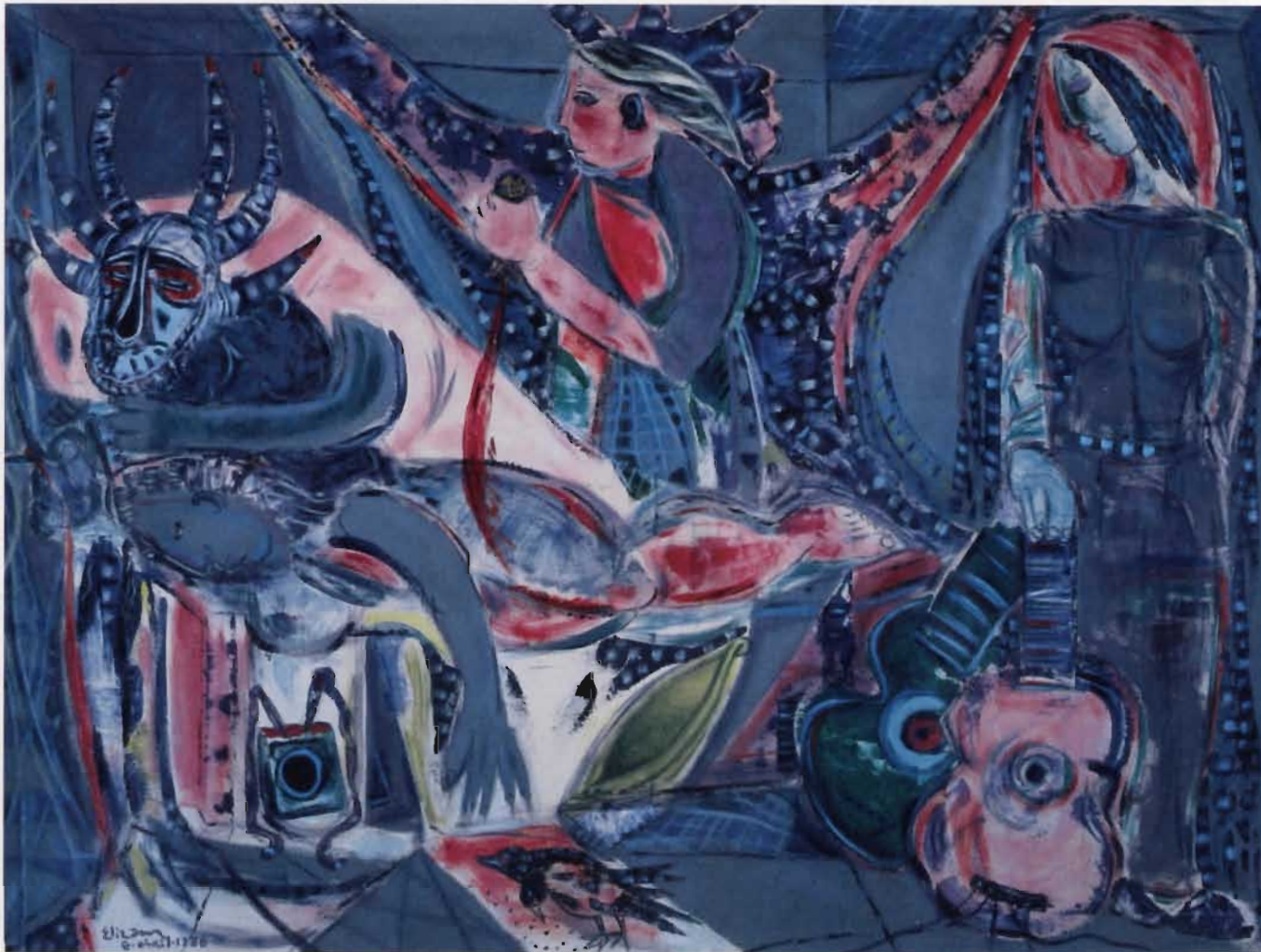


51 *El Ensayo (The Rehearsal)*, 1886

"Art is nourished by all elements, interior and exterior. It is up to the individual to choose among them those he considers most significant for his creative labor. But we do not see the creative act only as a choice or selection of raw material. It is also accompanied by invention, the images of dreams, symbolic images, etc.

"More currents, movements and styles have emerged since the birth of post-impressionism than in all previous epochs combined. Understanding the richness in the variety of styles and manifestations and the complexity of our world, we continue in the great adventure of art. To reduce art is to impoverish art, and in the end human experience and progress."

 *E. Goya*



54 *El Sueño de la Partera (The Midwife's Dream)*, 1986

"We quote Mariátegui again: 'The artist who does not feel the agitation, the worries and the anxieties of his people and their times is an artist of mediocre sensibility, anemic in understanding.' His/her ideology 'cannot emerge from the salons of aesthetes; it must be an ideology full of life, of emotion, of humanity and truth, not an artificial, literary, and false conception.' The Artist and the Times, 1959."

"Nor do we demand that every poet should write in a way that he believes is in compliance with his patriotic and revolutionary duty by making every poem into what Aníbal Ponce called 'to launch onto his patient public an awkward folly with a closed fist.'" Juan Antonio Corretjer, Poetry and Revolution, 1981.

A DEEP SEA DIVER IN THE PHANTOM(LY) COUNTRY

Bertha Husband

The fundamental knowledge of the oneness of everything existent, the conception of individuation as the primal cause of evil, and of art as the joyous hope that the spell of individuation may be broken in augury of a restored oneness.

— Nietzsche

But ideology tries to seduce us through its illusion of universality.

— Iván Silén

Peace with the foreigner would be the treason to the peace which we are. To have faith in your non-violence (that one that destroys our language...that one that turns us into folklore, that steals from us...)

— Iván Silén

All art that aspires to, or achieves, universality, is also rooted in a particular experience. Bearing this in mind, there are certain facts about Elizam Escobar which should be noted:

1. He is from Puerto Rico, a colonized country.
2. He has chosen to dedicate his life to art.
3. He has also chosen to dedicate his life to the liberation of his country for which he is now incarcerated in a U.S. prison.

It is very rare in this culture that the artist and the revolutionary combine in one human being. Although human liberation is the goal of both art and revolutionary politics, the praxis and the language are different for each, creating in the revolutionary artist a tension born of certain contradictions. Choosing to express the inner life, however non-conformist to the ideal it may appear, can often cast the revolutionary artist in the position of the “defector” to decadence, the apologist for the cult of the individual as against the development of a consciousness suited to the new

society. His own closest companions in the struggle often do not approve of the direction in which art takes him, preferring to see all cultural forms dedicated to the service of the revolution, forgetting that for art truly to be an important part of the future, it must allow us to view without trepidation the workings of the deepest part of our imagination, not as a kind of therapy, but so that desire can be freed from appropriation for commercial purposes and set upon its ineluctable path.

But in the trajectory of a single life there may be times for different things. If we believe that the event follows us until we make it happen, we can see that there may be historical conditions which require the artist/revolutionary to abandon the brushstroke in favor of the sure-aim. At those certain moments it becomes very difficult to justify the life devoted to individual development in the face of a mounting need for social action. The choice then becomes one of committing one's artistic skills totally to the needs and uses of propaganda, or becoming another kind of fighter. Faced with this choice, Escobar has chosen to keep his art separate from propaganda, free of the dictates of all ideology, in the belief that “art for art's sake” is not a term that can be applied as an epithet to the work of a committed revolutionary artist, but only to that of a “liberal” or vaguely humanitarian one, whose choice of an artistic vocation was no doubt made for the same reasons any vocation would have been chosen: practical consideration combined with the interest in certain skills and the attraction for the particular social status acquired when success is achieved. For this kind of artist, fashion will rule and expediency will decide which ideology the art produced will reflect. Only for the true revolutionary is there no need to faint at the sight of contradiction or to fear the emergence of that which may not be immediately accessible and therefore useful. “In a class society,” Escobar says, “you cannot escape from ideology, but you have two definite options in art. Either you reduce art to

ideology or you reduce the ideological element through a praxis of liberation.”

To enter an Escobar painting is to descend into a world that appears to be underwater. To have grown up on an island as small as Puerto Rico will mean the ocean is a significant image. It is what nourishes you and may defend you from the intruder—or bring him to your shores. The sound and the smell of it is never very far away. The viewer feels it in the use of deep blues, greens, blue/greens and crimson/violet. Outside of the green and occasional ochre, there is a complete



46 *Mujer Vejiganta (Vejiganta Woman)*, 1985

Bertha Husband is a British artist and a member of Axe Street Arena, a collectively-run art space in Chicago.

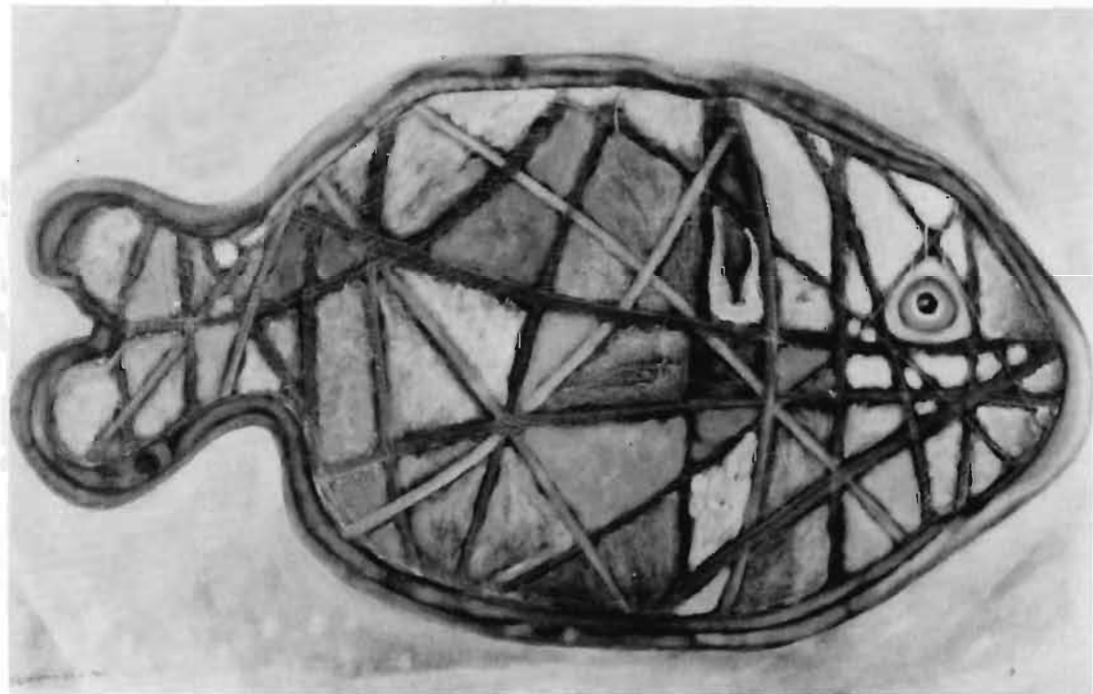
absence of yellow, so much the colour of landscape, the play of sun on trees and grasses. The light which seems to penetrate this world is the transparent light coming from the surface downwards. It is a pale blue/green light with small areas of white and a pink like crushed raspberries. The forms—and this is particularly true of the large paintings, *Los Sepultureros* (p. 21), *Las Oneiras* (p. 13), *La Vejiganta Dormida* (p. 6)—fill the painting and are close to the painting surface, as if they have floated up to the viewer's deep sea diving mask. The space is disintegrated, out of focus, but the similar paint treatment of the figures makes the forms dissolve into the surrounding space which, in turn, comes forward to the picture surface. The viewer selects the figures and guitars from this disintegrated, fluid world and, in constructing them, focuses on them. The viewer as deep sea diver is floating in a world that is constantly changing, dissolving, re-forming.

For Escobar, the process is as important as the finished product; the journey and its discoveries are equal to the arrival at the destination. Everything in his painting process is confined to manipulating acrylic paint with brush or knife on canvas. In this, we are in the presence of "real" painting, painting in which the decisions are made as the work is carried on within the violence of the process. In describing how he works, Escobar has quoted the painter Francis Bacon: "The brushstroke creates the form and does not merely fill it in. Consequently, every movement of the brush on the canvas alters the shape and implications of the image. That is why real painting is a mysterious and continuous struggle with chance." Where Escobar differs from Bacon is on the question of repeating accidents. Bacon believes an accident cannot be used again, as it would cease to be an accident. Escobar "recreates the essence of an accident." "But then, after I have so many accidents turned into technique, other accidents arrive and so forth." It is the creative process that is being transmitted to us when we confront these paintings. This fluid and sensual underwater world, constantly destroying and recreating, is like the process of its creation which in turn mirrors the revolutionary process made up of plans and chance, causes and accident, tension, risk, struggle, love and violence.

"Before, I used to do some paintings without any previous idea or image at all. Everything was decided in the process—a kind of automatism. Not now. Today I have an 'excess' of idea images that I want to develop or simply do variations from, and from them other ideas sprout." We can see from the paintings in this exhibition that the "idea images" that recur are the *vejigante*, the guitar, the fish, the bandaged fish, the dissected fish and the dissected human being. Escobar refuses, however, to be pinned down to giving any explanation as to the specific meaning of any of these images in the awareness that what he does and what he thinks he does are not necessarily the same. The images here are not symbols with a referent; they are forms he allows to be chosen. He likes them. The viewer's interpretations come from the dialogue between the

viewer and the painting. If the images and themes of an individual vision are drawn from our earliest years, those impressionable times when our senses and our imagination are not trapped by the uses of formal logic and practical need, then these images can be seen to have floated up to the surface of Escobar's conscious life from his childhood in Ponce, Puerto Rico. The constant creation of variations of these images may be seen as an act of freeing himself from a double incarceration—not only is he imprisoned by the U.S. government, but he is in exile from his own imprisoned country. When speaking of the *vejigante* image, he says he uses it because "I want to break something that is mine into pieces, like an autopsy. I want to destroy

(continued on p.22)



17 *Pez #1 (Imagen Visionaria) (Fish #1: Visionary Image), 1984*



30 *Los Ciudadanos del País Fantasma #3 (Citizens of a Phantom(ly) Country #3)*, 1985




33 *Los Ciudadanos del País Fantasma #6 (Citizens of a Phantom(ly) Country #6)*, 1985



29 *Los Ciudadanos del País Fantasma #2 (Citizens of a Phantom(ly) Country #2)*, 1985

"Science seems to be for many the supreme god, the new Absolute. And art, poetry, etc., have become more and more just an instrument at the service of ideologies, bureaucracies, politics, or stupidity. Is that what we want? Is that the role of art? Should artists be only mouthpieces? Should we throw out all the poets from the Republic (Plato, Stalin, Hitler) unless they become obedient to ideology or to the State?"

 Escoffier

"From a bird's eye view, we can observe a new chaos in the art world; a great confusion in the artistic values and a sickening picture of the art market. Artists, dealers, gallery owners, museums, auction houses, collectors, etc. are all dancing to the tune of big capital, where art becomes 'a piece of property to be enjoyed not only for its esthetic or emotional value, but for its borrowing power.' The artist becomes a servile factory that produces images, no longer for the old illusion of art-for-art's-sake, but in the spirit of art-for-money's-sake..."

"The avant-garde is dead. The market made it harmless and useless. And we, who may still have something of the avant-gardist in us, would like to make of our works something useless to that same market. We would like that our work would have something which they couldn't use. Maybe that something would be US, because we know that the old fox has been able to convert everything into a commodity. Because, perhaps, there is still a great work of art to realize: the destruction of that market."

"So, either we cooperate with the system, or we struggle against it. Either we become what we say we are, or simply accept the role of mercenary peddlers and useful fools."

"It's true, our pretensions may seem fantastic and unreal, but our century has proved that reality is much more fantastic than our imagination. That the imagination is also a political weapon. And that the struggle is also between one fiction and another fiction. Let's then be daring, as our songs are daring, as our poems, as our images. Let's walk too beside the gravediggers for the wellbeing of art and humanity."



Escobar



50 *Los Sepultureros (The Gravediggers), 1985*

Husband *(continued from p.19)*

something that belongs to me.” The *vejigante* is one of the traditional masked characters from the Puerto Rican fiesta of Santiago Apóstol—horned and grotesque. But Escobar does not believe it is his simply because he is a Puerto Rican, but also because as a child he made *vejigante* masks from papier mâché using his own face as a mold. The bandaged face, the dissection, the *vejigante* mask—the mask which also unmasks. In this sense the *vejigante* can be seen as a metaphor for an art which has as its purpose the unveiling of the prohibited, the washing ashore of a mysterious relic.

The series of small paintings, *Ciudadanos del País Fantasma* (Citizens from a Phantom(ly) Country), does not appear to be floating in the same underwater space as the larger pieces. They inhabit another world that seems also subterranean but bound to the earth, cavelike. Some of them appear to be snapshots of Fiesta characters in front of a backdrop. The stars are out, fish swim by and large shadows overlook them as they pose on a stage with their flesh-like, bent, fat-fingered guitars hanging from their arms. They are part of an ongoing series of small group compositions that Escobar has been doing since he was a child. “In them, I recreate a personal/private world in which I

can satisfy more the necessities and urges of my imagination than I can in the larger paintings.” They have consistently remained in their same world, but from time to time the characters change in appearance. One of these, No. 6 in the current series (p. 20), has haunted me since I first saw it. The three characters do not seem to live in the same hermetic space as the others. They are like dancing shadows cast in a landscape coming ashore on a moonlit night and have the quality of a perfect accident. Escobar has also said of the “Citizens”: “In particular, they have something of the absurdity of our colonial situation; in general, something of the human comedy/tragedy. I am afraid that even



11 *Allegoria del Absurdo (Allegory of the Absurd)*, 1984

“...in prison, I have found time, in a way. Most prisoners look at time as their enemy. They want and they do kill time. In my case, it's the reverse: I never have enough time. This may sound like a dramatic statement to scandalize others. But time has no mercy for those who need Time nor for those who will prefer to 'kill it' in order to escape from it.”

 Escobar

through distortions, satire and irony, I still express sympathy for them.” Their immediate appeal no doubt lies in his affection for them. The “Citizens” are also influenced by the work of another Puerto Rican painter, Carlos Raquel Rivera, an artist from the most influential generation of Puerto Rican painters who emerged in the 1950’s. Rivera’s paintings are small and combine surrealist elements with “a very arbitrary social-realism and magic-realism that produce some very ‘absurd’ worlds.” Escobar recalls that he first saw a Rivera painting at the home of Juan Antonio Corretjer, the late Puerto Rican Independentista and poet, and that this work, which he returned to view many times,

increased his interest in painting.

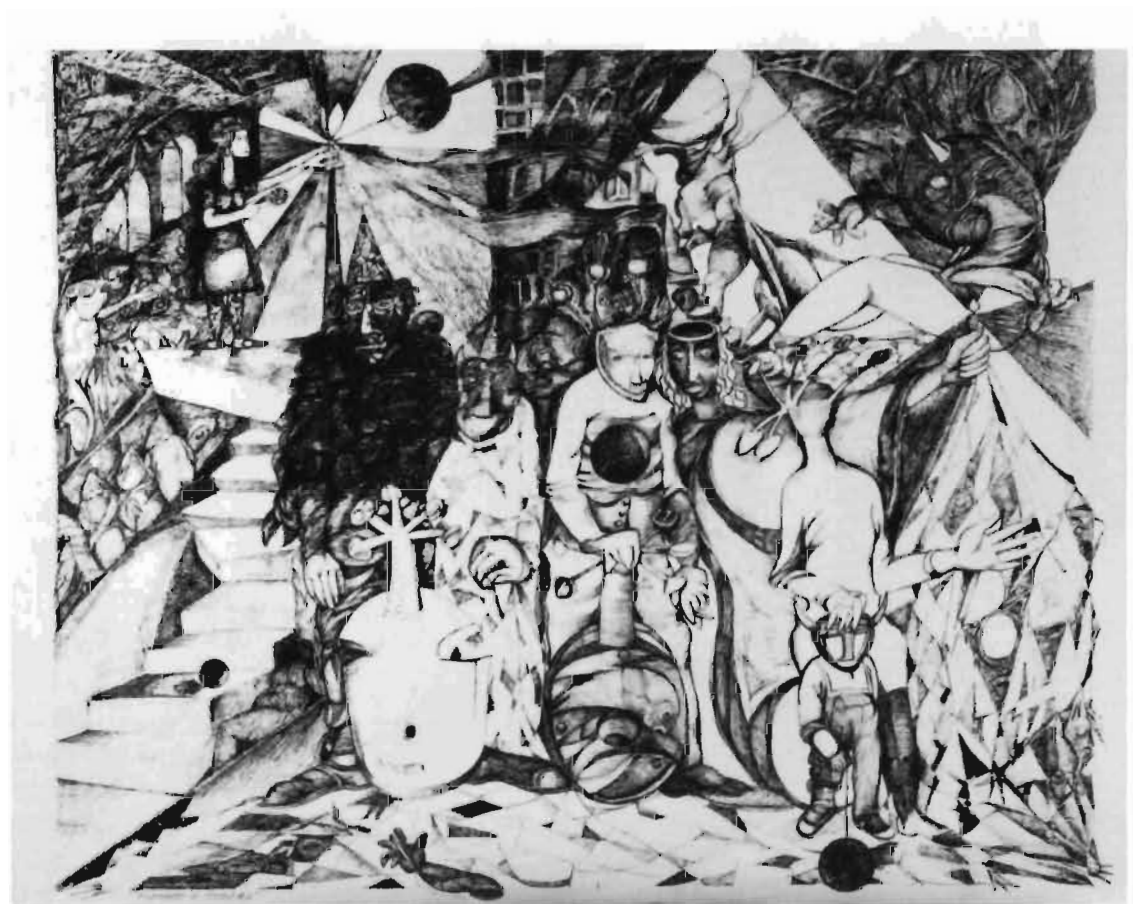
To be an artist from Puerto Rico is to inherit the exclusion from the official history of art of all colonized people, along with most women, who are also never part of the dominant ideology. Their work becomes stigmatized as “folkloric,” “primitive,” or special in some way, rather than the embodiment of another aspect of the human spectrum. But to be excluded from the mainstream can also be viewed as freedom from the constraints of a ruling ideology on the decline. And to be excluded from “official” history is, after all, not the same as being excluded from living history, the arena chosen for our struggle to reach a higher level of social

development and human discourse. Art cannot be eaten or used to clothe. It cannot build schools or tear down palaces. It cannot eradicate disease or educate. In this practical sense, Escobar’s art, like all art, is indeed useless. But for those of us who know that the dream is dangerous and creation is always subversive, these paintings show that an uncompromising search for a truth that springs from the contradictions of the material world, from “dream, experience, mystery, the common and the prohibited”, is a victory over the ideological policeman we harbor within us, nourished by an oppressive state apparatus. It is in this sense that Escobar’s art constitutes a powerful act of liberation. □

“...an artist may become a critic or theoretician, but to become a propagandist and ideologue is to bark up the wrong tree, to become a bird without wings, without imagination.”



Escobar



10 *Esperando a Godot #2 (Waiting for Godot #2), 1984*



12 *Entrevista a Mí Mismo (en invierno) (Interview with Myself-in winter), 1984*

*“Dogmatic style is the ingenuous or perverse desire to make one style into ‘the style.’ Or, in more general terms, it is clutching the conservative aspect of form; form refused to give in to new content, to new thematic. It would not be irrelevant to add that form by its nature tends to conserve, and content or thematic tends to free the form. (From this perspective we can understand the phenomenon of the officiality of a style in many of the socialist countries, adding the name ‘socialist’ to ‘academic-realist style’ to package the new thematic in the old form and convert it into ‘revolutionary art.’ However, the problem is not that the best of ‘realist style’ is taken to express new problems, etc., but rather that one style is dogmatized as the only acceptable.) The ‘dogmatic-anti-dogma’ wants to reverse the roles, to make dissidence into the new unique method. It is therefore necessary to guard against anti-dogma as a fashion or a hidden dogma. **One has to approach each novelty with a hostile calm...***

“Therefore, to say that color is determined exclusively by geography (which many ‘Europhiles and Yankee-philosophers of Modern Art’ declare, who look at the art and the artists of the Third World only as ‘folklore’ or ‘picturesque primitivism’), is to simplify not only history, but also the capacity and the necessity of the individual to use his language (like color) in spite of, as part of, his creative endeavor against the slavery of external conditions and as a fulfillment of his will to transform reality.”

Escobar