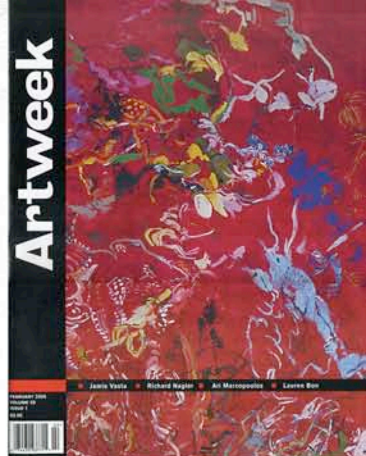
Viewpoint

Annie Buckley



What might it be like if, say, the Democratic Party or the Metropolitan Museum of Art, each had their own Minister of Culture in charge of visuals supporting a cause deemed to be of value to the institution and to the public, be it healthcare or safer communities or art in schools? Judging from the traveling exhibition *Black Panther: The Revolutionary Art of Emory Douglas* on view at MOCA at the Pacific Design Center through January, finding a suitable candidate for this imaginary position would not be as easy as it sounds. Douglas, who served as Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party from 1967 through the early nineties, stands out as one-of-a-kind. Continuously generating original prints and drawings in the service of the Black Panthers for several years, his unique fusion of vision, style and commitment made him the visual voice of a movement, and his powerful iconography, sensitivity to expression, and attention to color and composition allow his art, two decades later, to move easily from the street to the gallery. It is fitting that Sam Durant, a well-respected contemporary artist, conceived of and curated this exhibition. Durant, whose own 2002 exhibition at MOCA explored activist movements from the sixties, expressed immense gratitude, as well as subdued surprise, that the institution immediately leapt on board with the idea. Douglas's powerful work is not the only revolutionary aspect to this exhibition; in bringing an important but underrepresented and highly political artist to the museum, MOCA allows Durant to function, in a limited sense, like its own Minister of Culture for a time. While across town, at its larger downtown venue, MOCA celebrates Takashi Murakami's bid to take the age-old romance between art and high fashion to new heights (or lows), *Black Panther* quietly breaks new ground with its radical hybrid of institutional and activist art.

When Douglas stood up to speak to the press—a small gathering relative to the packed Murakami preview—there were no television cameras trained on him. But this was just as well because, in contrast to his often incendiary graphics, Douglas is soft-spoken and possesses a warm and gentle manner. His remarks were brief but profound. In describing his own commitment to community art, Douglas cast doubt on numerous widely accepted ideas about contemporary art, namely that: Art is a commodity; art is only for those who can understand and access it; art is set apart from the rest of society. Not so in Douglas's case, who readily placed himself in a backseat to the community he spoke for, and whose art was made to be seen and read by the general public. His powerful images were printed on pamphlets and in newspapers; it was hung on street corners only to be torn down by authorities and displayed anew, over and over again for years. When Douglas says that his work "is not a 'me' art but a 'we' art," his unassuming demeanor and years of dedication immediately divest the statement of its would-be rhetorical or propagandistic quality. One feels certain that Douglas believes wholeheartedly in the fact that his art was made for the people and, in a sense, by the people. Within the context of the museum, his conviction reasserts community-minded art as a real possibility today. Durant's own practice focuses on activist art, not as a voice for a community like Douglas's, but in an intellectual sense, probing ideas and relationships between history and the present day. In both his art and curatorial work, Durant has lent his considerable power, as well the institution's, towards activist ideals and causes, but like other conceptual artists whose work addresses political and social ideas, his employs a veil or screen that separates the art from that which inspires it, following the unspoken and as yet unchallenged edict: Art is not a soapbox. By featuring Douglas's work, the artist/curator questions—quite possibly skewers—this notion to great effect. Why indeed, he seems to ask, can't art have something to say, and maybe even make a difference, while simultaneously remaining great art?

Rather than relegate activist or community art to the sidelines—well meaning stuff made by "other" kinds of artists or created separately from an artist's "real" practice—the Douglas exhibition places it center stage (or at least on an important side stage). As Murakami, in collaboration with fashion designer Marc Jacobs, breaks new ground by placing a luxury store within his exhibition, Douglas, with Durant as curator, paves the way for renewed consideration of activist art as an integral aspect of contemporary art history. Since many artists continue to use social and political issues and complexities as fodder for their work, why not open up the possibility for their art to say something about these situations, better yet, to do something about them? Certainly not all community or activist art is good art, just as not all conceptual or formal or representational art is automatically of high quality, but neither should a work's active engagement with a cause immediately brand it as "other." If artists can sell handbags without chagrin, maybe it's time to stop being ashamed of having a political conscience. Kudos to Durant for recognizing this quandary and bringing Douglas's work to light, giving the public the opportunity to appreciate the work of an artist committed to the idea of art as a tool for social change, thus dedicating his talent and vision to speaking plainly and openly about peace, struggle, and improved communities.

As a next step, maybe the museum will create its own Minister of Culture position, allowing an artist free reign to make work that will grace billboards and magazine pages—just as Douglas's work was wheat-pasted to telephone poles and printed in newspapers when the Black Panther Movement agitated for safer communities—in the service of a cause the community deems worthy. Even better, private and public arts organizations could nominate artists to fill these positions, making space within the lively and continuously expanding field of contemporary art for voices dedicated to social change, not in the sanitized, acceptable forms we are used to, but in all their raucous, contradictory, glory. Or maybe a portion of the extravagant sums generated by contemporary art worldwide—including the temporary Louis Vuitton store downtown—could be donated to a fund supporting artists, like Douglas, around the world who continue to believe in and act on the seemingly nostalgic idea that art can make and should a difference in society, whether or not mainstream culture agrees in full with the message. The timing of the Douglas exhibition, opening just a week before the Murakami show, further communicates that, sure, consumerism will always be more popular than activism, but in the realm of contemporary art, there is room for both.

Guest columnist Annie Buckley is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles.