MIXED BLESSINGS

NEW ART IN A MULTICULTURAL AMERICA

LUCY R. LIPPARD

▼▼▼▼▼▼▼▼▼▼

The terminology in which an issue is expressed is indicative of the quality of the discourse, and the fact that there are no euphonious ways to describe today's cross-cultural exchange reflects the deep social and historical awkwardness underlying that exchange. Much has been tried and found wanting. Writing about intercultural art, looking for satisfying ways to describe the groups involved, many of whom are living between cultures, I find myself caught in a web of ungainly, pompous, condescending, even ugly language.

A vital, sensible, and imaginative vocabulary can only be self-generated during the process of self-naming. Even then, consensus is unlikely. Inevitably, there is division in the ranks because frustration, contradiction, and growth are the gears by which the continuing cross-cultural education grinds ahead. From the inside, artists get restless, begin to feel imprisoned or ghettoized by the simplistic aspects even of self-imposed categories. ("Black Art" is so far the most examined example.) From the outside, after an initial period of surprise and dislike, the same categories begin to seem convenient places to keep the image of women, or black people, or Asian Americans. Yet the naming process must continue, if it is to mean anything deeper than internal or external name calling.

I say, for instance, that this book is based in art by people of color, because I can hardly say, ludicrously, that it concerns "art of color." I use the term "people of color" because it is, at this writing, the nomenclature of choice among the self-named. Yet we are all aware that it too is somewhat absurd, when the range of pinks and browns take in virtually everybody across racial borders. Liberals talk a lot about "blue or green or purple people"[21] ("We're all alike under the skin"), hoping for a humanist filter that will rid them of uncomfortable semantics and guilt. But society itself—censuses, segregation, racism, as well as local and family history and memory, affirmative action, and self-representation—acknowledges differences, sometimes for good reasons. And marginalized groups can still be intimidated into veiling themselves and their images in order to be acceptable in the dominant culture.

At the moment, artists "of color" has replaced "Third World" artists, which was more or less acceptable to all concerned in the '70s. Although still used to describe artists living in Third World countries, it has proved confusing when applied to people of color born in, or citizens of, the United States. As Vietnamese American filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha has insisted, "There is a Third World in every First World and vice-versa."[22] Like "the West," the term "Third World" has now most often a geographical and economic connotation. Artist Paul Kagawa offers a new and radical definition of Third World art:

> Artists who create works which support the values of the ruling class culture are ruling class artists, no matter what their color. The "Third World Artist" (hereafter T.W.A.) is one who produces in conscious opposition to the art of the ruling class, not just to cause trouble or to be "different," but because the artist is sympathetic with "Third World" people in other sectors of society and the world. Not all "Third World" people are aware of their oppression (or its cause), but all T.W.A.s must be because they are, by our definition, a voice of the oppressed.[23]

Fig. 3: Mario Torero, *We Are Not a Minority*, 1978, acrylic, 30′ x 40′, Estrada Courts Housing Project, East Los Angeles. This mural with a didactic Che Guevara has an embattled history. In the three times it has been painted, it has been censored and vandalized three times by those to whom Che is anathema. It was painted on August 8, the anniversary of his death, by the Congreso de Artistas Cosmicos de las Americas—seven artists under Torero's direction, including Zopilote, Leonel Heredia, and Charles Felix. Torero was a founding member of the Chicano Cultural Movement of San Diego and remains committed to "The Master Plan of Aztlan," to the "total spiritual liberation of the earth" (letter to the author, 1990).

Kumkum Sangari objects to "Third World" on the grounds that it "both signifies and blurs the functioning of an economic, political, and imaginary geography able to unite vast and vastly differentiated areas of the world into a single 'underdeveloped' terrain."[24]

Is Japan a Third World country? Is Korea? When the question of definitions came up at a panel discussion in 1988, Korean American artist Yong Soon Min pointed out that even within economically developed countries, Third World remained politically valid because it indicated resistance to Western imperialism and referred to the experience of colonialism.

Similarly, "American," hemispherically, does not mean from the United States, but from the entire Western hemisphere. "Anglo America" might once have been a justifiable counterpart to "Latin America," but now it is becoming demographically outdated, and we have yet to find the phrase that expresses José Martí's bicontinental concept of *Nuestra America* (Our America) with its equal emphasis on indigenous populations. Logically, only Native peoples should be called Americans, and everyone else should be a "hyphenated" American. (To complicate matters, the hyphen—in "African-American," for example—is sometimes construed as a divisive insult, as another imposed separation.)

"Minority" artists is another outdated phrase; I use it now and then in antirepetitive desperation (at least it's one word instead of three). In this hemisphere, of course, people of color are the minority only in the United States and Canada. Globally, Caucasians are distinctly in the minority. This fact has been a source of empowerment for people of color in the United States. However, the force of our shared vocabulary is such that, as Sylvia Wynters observes, "we all know what we mean when we use the category *minority* to apply to an empirical *majority*":

> Bill Strickland was the first scholar to note, in a talk given at Stanford in 1980, the strategic use of the term *minority* to *contain* and defuse the *Black* challenge of the sixties. . . . The term *minority*, however, is an *authentic*

term for hitherto repressed Euro-American ethnic groups who, since the sixties, have made a bid to displace Anglo-American cultural dominance with a more inclusive Euro-American mode of hegemony.[25]

Then there is the increasingly popular "multicultural," which many of us have used for years in grass-roots and academic organizing, although it has already been co-opted in institutional and decidedly nonactivist rhetoric. It is confusing because it can be used interchangeably with "multiracial" (voluntary and conscious, or involuntary mixing); or it can be used to denote biculturalism, as in "Asian American."[26] I use it to describe mixed or cross-cultural groups or as a general term for all of the various communities when they are working together, including white.

Finally, the word "ethnic," which is ambiguous in its application to any group of people anywhere (though it is, significantly, rarely applied to WASPs) who maintain a certain habitual, religious, or intellectual bond to their originary cultures. It sometimes serves as a euphemism for people of color or "the Other," and has also been condemned as a vehicle for exclusion.

The vocabulary continues to evolve. "Cross-cultural," "transcultural," and "intercultural," for instance, have not been sorted out and remain interchangeable. While they should apply to culture rather than race (itself a cultural construct), they have all been used euphemistically for cross-racial. I prefer cross-cultural to transcultural, although they mean the same thing, because "trans" to me implies "beyond," "over and above," as in "transcend," and the last thing we need is another "universalist" concept that refuses once again to come to grips with difference. Intercultural, suggesting a back-and-forth motion, might be an improvement on cross-cultural, which implies a certain finality—a cross-over or one-way trip from margins to center, from lower to middle class, rather than a flexible interchange.

▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲

Fig. 26: Yong Soon Min, *Whirl War*, 1987, mixed media, 10′ x 29′ (this wall), installation at the Jamaica Art Center, New York. A Korean American who came to the United States at an early age (becoming part of the "1.5 generation"—betwixt and between two nationalities), Yong Soon Min was first a Minimalist. As she became increasingly aware politically and more alienated by her own identity crisis, her installations became increasingly layered and detailed. *Whirl War* was her first full environment. This wall was a collage of black and white painted newspapers, Korean on one side and English on the other, "a wall of oppositions, of conflict," the "whirls" readable as destructive or life-giving. Painted over the spirals was: "Half the World Knows Not How the Other Lives," a phrase she got in a fortune cookie that expressed her frustration with narrow-mindedness. The letters DMZ (Demilitarized Zone)—the epitome of the senseless divisions imposed by the cold war, and home of "unrequited spirits in search of a resting place"—ran in red vertically down the middle. On the floor another spiral was formed of a mantra: "To live, to love, to live, to love . . ." Four global vessels contained dirt, rice, and water. On the end walls a painted woman hurtled from the ceiling and a life-size image of the artist held a globe on her back, Atlas-like—"a tongue-in-cheek way to symbolize empowerment." (Quotations from interview by Penny Fujiko Willgerodt, *Ikon*, no. 9, 1988, pp. 78–85, and letter to the author, 1989.)

next page, critic John Yau writes: "Born in Taiwan and living in New York, [Yang] has been both blessed and cursed with living in two, vastly different yet subtly linked worlds. If they are to survive and maintain their identity, the ancient and modern must be made to co-exist."[71]

As for "melting in" to North American society, even sansei like Tomie Arai are bitter about its impossibility: "I am a third-generation Japanese American and I still feel like people think I should go back home." There is often no "back home." Poet Fay Chiang, director of New York Chinatown's Basement Workshop, did go to China, where she experienced some of the same exhilaration and malaise reported by African Americans in Africa and found her identity problems intensified: "Everywhere I went, I fit in. I looked like them and could understand the dialect, but people were *so* polite and had a grasp of the ancient culture I didn't know. I thought, I'm an American, I have to go back to New York."[72]

There is a myth in this country that Asian Americans are easily assimilated because they're smart and thrifty and hardworking and well behaved and melt right into the American potluck. At the same time this "model minority" is also "the Yellow Peril"—too smart and hardworking for their own, and our, good. Often in the process of internalizing these facts of life, Asian American artists have decided they would rather "stand out" and have paved the way for more esthetic resistance to the ways their Asian heritage has been adapted to modernism by mostly Western artists. "To find a place for yourself in this culture is a political act," says Yong Soon Min. "To understand 'I have a right to be here and to be who I am.' "[73]