

## **Interview with Emory Douglas**

**Social Café at Urbis, Manchester. 28/10/2008**

**Mark Rainey: How would you introduce the Black Panther Party to someone who doesn't know the background of what gave rise to the Black Panthers, what exactly they were and who they saw themselves as?**

Emory Douglas: Well, firstly I would have to give it in the context of myself and how I got involved. As a youngster growing up I was exposed to a lot of injustice like many other people whether looking at what was happening to the civil rights marches on the electronic media, on the television in the south. Particularly when the protests were around the sit ins and right to sit at lunch counters and the right to ride in the buses without having to go to the back of the buses – and all those things that existed during that time. At the same time, on a local level, you had all across the country police brutality with young blacks being shot and murdered and being justified. There were never any guns ever found as they were running from the scene of a petty crime. Then you could turn on the international news from time to time and see the same things happening in South Africa. Tanks in the community, demonstrations and protestors being beaten – so all of these things played into a desire of wanting to do something at a particular point in my life. It was at the time I was going out to the City College of San Francisco and getting involved with the student movement out there. It was during that period that the Black Power movement, as it related to young black folks beginning to take a lead, and to define who we were and ourselves. We wanted to change the name from the Negro Students Association to the Black Students Association. There was a big uproar around that. There was a lot of resistance from the administrators on those issues. At the same time you still had the civil rights movement going on in the South. And you had it moving up North and you had a lot of sit ins and demonstrations as it related to people of colour, particularly black folks, not being able to access jobs in the major markets of the hotel industry and the mainstream of society. So there were a lot of demonstrations about those issues that came about. All of that kind of formulated my desire to want to do something. Then getting involved in the Black Arts Movement in the Bay Area. Amelia Barack and Leroi Jones – a well known playwright – were involved in the Bay Area, along with Sonja Sanches who was a well known Black American poet and spoken word artist and doing her first book of poetry. All of those things contributed to a desire to want to do something. At the same time there were still high levels of frustration across the country. It just so happens that I was asked to come to a meeting to do a poster for an event that they were planning for Malcolm X's widow. I came to that event – we were talking about some guys coming over to do security. They did come to the next planning meeting and that was Huey Newton and Bobby Seale. It was after that meeting that I knew it was something I wanted to be a part of, so I asked them "how could I join"? Huey Newton and Bobby Seale gave me their phone number and address and I used to call them in the mornings and catch the bus over to Huey Newton's house and then go by Bobby's house and he would take me out into the community and the whole bit. That's how I initially got involved with the Black Panther Party.

**So it comes from an arts perspective, an international perspective and your own experience?**

Well, yeah. It was after that, I got involved as an artist with the Black Panther Party. Because Huey and Bobby were involved in a house which we called the Black House. Eldridge Cleaver used to live upstairs and a lot of cultural activity used to go on downstairs. It just happened that I went by there one evening. They knew of Eldridge Cleaver from his writings and they were trying to recruit him for the newspaper that they were trying to develop. And so they were over talking with him and it just so happened that I went over and there was a little activity going on. I saw Bobby laying out this sheet of paper, legal sized paper – writing it typed on a typewriter and using a marker to make the headlines. This was the first newspaper he was working on. I seen that and I said, “Well, I could go home and get some material and help you out and improve on that”. He said “ok” so I went home and came back. It took me about an hour and they were impressed that I came back. It was there after that they said, “look, you’ve been coming around and you seem to be serious and interested and we want you to work on the newspaper, we want you to be the artist for the newspaper. You will be the Revolutionary Artist”. So that was my initial title – “Revolutionary Artist” for the newspaper.

**How would you define a “Revolutionary Artist”?**

Well, revolution is about change and overcoming obstacles and that was what the artwork reflected. It was reflective of that in the context of the politics of the Black Panther Party and what it represented during that time.

**Were you told “this is what a Revolutionary is” or were you able to define your own role?**

Yeah, I was able to define my role by basically being around and beginning to learn the politics. Because, you know, all of it was a foreign language to me. I was just a young kid off the block – gang banging, getting into a lot of stuff, and not intellectually into the struggle - in that sense and in that context. And so, basically by being around and understanding and I began to understand and hear how things work based on the program and the ten point platform and the request for me to do the first Pig drawing. It was kind of inspiring because people identified with it strongly. That gave you the desire to want to continue to improve on that.

**In regards to the intellectual side to it, and influences, you have mentioned that while you held lots of respect for Dr. Martin Luther King you were more a follower of Malcolm X.**

Yes.

**Both of them spoke in religious terms – did that transfer to the Black Panther discourse?**

Well, of course you have to understand that there was strong religiousness in the Black Community. It comes from slavery. And when you had the slaves, the only thing they

were given to read was the Bible. But then they used to use the Bible for the purpose of calling meetings, and stuff like that – to the underground railroad. And so the roots of that was always a part of the make-up. But 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.

**Touching on that, in bringing together a Black Nationalist philosophy and Marxism, were they difficult to marry together?**

Well, No. The Black Panther Party may have been guided by Marxist principles but it was also looked at in relationship as a tool of liberation. It wasn't stuck in the dogma of Marxism, it was just a guide to action. That was one of many points of view and ideologies that we looked at. But of course coming into the party, everyone coming into the party wasn't a Marxist. The party was able to embrace people of all diverse backgrounds. Because they were inspired by what the key platform represented in dealing with the issues, the particular intensity of police brutality, service to the community and all these things. Young people gravitated to that. So you had people who you could say were atheists, others who may have been Catholics or been Rastafarians. You see all kinds of backgrounds coming into the party around a common ideal and a common desire, which was of course a form of Marxist ideology.

**So it was really the Ten Point Platform, with a mix of people coming in, that became the centre.**

Oh yeah. Everyone had to read that and study that. That was part of the political education of those who came into the party.

**What I found interesting about the Ten Point Platform was that it seemed to me to be grounded in the American Constitution – the right to bear arms, the right to trial by jury by peers, the right to equality among men. Would you see the Black Panthers as being grounded in the American Constitution?**

Oh yeah, yeah. It was always meant to be. You had people who were naïve of the fact that they had these rights. So it was based on those principles that the Black Panther Party began to go out and show people that they had a right to bear arms and what have you.

**I imagine that you had detractors that would say, in today's terms that you were "anti-American", but it seems to be that you are part of the legacy of the American revolution and culture.**

Yeah. Oh, yeah.

**In terms of your artwork, when you have your artwork up here for an audience outside the United States, how do you envisage people engaging with your work?**

Well, you have a lot of people who were from back in that period from all over the world who we had alliances with and who are familiar with the work. Maybe not geographically in this area, but there are those who are in the UK who are highly familiar with the work. There was a smaller exhibit that was in the Biennale, this was in Australia. There were artists from all over the world. Quite a few of the folks were familiar with the work itself. So it's not like it's totally unfamiliar. But I would say that to a large mainstream audience here, I would say it's foreign to them.

**Would you define yourself as an illustrator or an artist? Were you illustrating a message or expressing something personal through a medium?**

It was a combination. It was to communicate ideals and the issues that we were concerned with and in that sense I was an illustrator, a cartoonist you might say, or whatever.

**With the international aspects of it, your work was drawing from and playing off Communist propaganda like that in Cuba and China. One of the differences, to me at least, is that in those posters there is never any single individual attached to them, but you were able to sign your name to your work. So that seems to make it very individual work as well.**

Yeah. It was always signed with a name so the people would know who the artist was who did the work. But the artwork was always for the masses. I mean, sometimes when the Cubans picked it up they didn't put the name on it. They just used it. You had a lot of folks who thought that they Cubans had did the work. You used to have a lot of young folks who used to go to Cuba during the summer to go to work on the sugar canes. There were sugar brigades, particularly from the Bay Area. They used to come from all over the country, but a lot were from the Bay Area. Every year there would be brigades who would go there. They'd help chop the sugar cane. When they would go over there, they would see these posters, but they were seeing my art also. They would come back saying "You didn't do this artwork, they did this artwork". That was for quite a while.

**As minister of culture, your role wasn't just in the production of images, but in a wider sense music, dance and theatre.**

Yeah at different points. When we were put on the programs and wanted to get entertainment, most of the time it was my responsibility to work with others and to procure entertainment for venues that we were putting on and stuff like that. And to set up and do all the flyers and banners and all the information that had to go along with that.

**You also got involved in the social program, fundamental to the Black Panther Party.**

Everybody had to work on those. You had breakfast programs, the food giveaways. Everybody was involved in putting those together. Everybody had a responsibility.

**It's been said that these social programs were more of a threat to the establishment than the guns.**

Yeah. Because of the fact that here you have us exposing to the American people what the government wasn't doing and what it should have been doing. I think not only that, but now you have mainstream people talking about how they supported these programs. Our popularity for this was broad. It transcended colour, it transcended ideology, religious beliefs and all that.

**This is perhaps a broad question, but what is it like to be a Black Panther 30-40 years on?**

We can see a lot of things. We still have an alumni committee. We just had a 42<sup>nd</sup> reunion in Atlanta, Georgia for the Black Panther Party. We had people come from all over the South, back East and New York, Philadelphia and all over to be a part of that program. You've still got different people who are contributing and we still carry the same values. We can see a lot of things that perhaps a lot of other folks couldn't see because of our basic foundation and scientific approach to observing and dealing with things in a very fundamental way. It instills in us a whole way of being able to see through a lot of stuff going on today.

**What would you say the legacy of the Black Panther party is?**

It stood up. It showed people their rights and educated people and informed people. And our service to the community.

**As a final question, the artwork is very iconic and the visual style of the Panthers is very iconic as well. In today's terms it is almost a brand. What's it like to see t-shirts being sold in shops and Black Panther Party baseball caps?**

We see it as a way of keeping our legacy. We know that there is profit in it, but it is more about the legacy of the Black Panther Party and what it represented.

**I've got many more questions, but I'll have to wrap it up here. Thanks for your time.**

