I Am a Cultural Worker

Ericson Acosta
Interviewed by Jonas Staal

Jonas Staal: You're a singer, a scriptwriter, a poet. . . . Do you ever speak of yourself as an artist?

Ericson Acosta: Well, the easiest way to answer this question is by saying that I am a cultural worker. That brings together all of the elements contained within the fields of art and literature. A cultural worker is also an artist, but when you call yourself a cultural worker, you imply that you're connected to a political organization and consequently situate your work directly within the field of political struggle.

> **JS**: So what consequences does this position hold for the work of an artist?

EA: Let me begin with saying that there are cultural organizations composed of artists from different fields. As a cultural worker you belong to one of these groups. Part of your practice takes place in the form of collective study or cultural training—the study of the political situation and social issues, and simultaneously, the collective study of culture and the arts. This goes very much against the stereotype of the artist who is wary of being part of a group. As far as cultural organizations in the Philippines are concerned, there is a rich historical tradition of creating art together. Collectively, one can face the kinds of problems that are inherent to the attitude of the individualistic artist who embodies the ideas of private property—or even the so-called "star complex" of artists who want to be stars and, in the process, outdo other artists.

The cultural organizations, especially those belonging to the national democratic alliances, have learned much about handling such issues. A crucial task they have undertaken in order to unite artists is to provide them with

a political education. The creation of regular programs and activities have brought the cultural organizations in contact with the masses.

JS: Here we arrive at an urgent question: How does a cultural worker influence the day-to-day struggle of the people through his or her political education and collective work?

EA: The instrumentality of cultural work in expanding the membership of the organization, crystallizing workers' actions through artistic forms, or simply making the political education of workers more lively is demonstrated by the experience of the unions. It's about finding a way to use visual materials in union education or using songs to agitate their ranks. The revolutionary movement in fact has a strong tradition of revolutionary worker and peasant songs. We can attribute this phenomenon to the period of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the so-called Second Propaganda Movement was launched.[1] These activists immediately understood the decisive role of art, literature, and music in building resistance.

JS: The First Propaganda Movement was a cultural movement that opposed the Spanish rule of the Philippines and the Second Propaganda Movement challenged US imperialist rule of the Philippines. The Communist Party of the Philippines, the New People's Army, and the National Democratic Movement were all born of this second movement.

1. Around 1960, Senator Claro Mayo Recto called for a Second Propaganda Movement, a cultural uprising demanding independence. The First Propaganda Movement was formed in 1872 as a response to Spanish occupation and was led by Filipino revolutionaries and intellectuals. The second movement was directed against the US-backed Marcos regime. It is in the context of the second movement that the notion of the artist as cultural worker emerged.

EA: Exactly. Major mass organizations of the period each had their own cultural arms, which in only a few years would transform into separate cultural organizations. This was of course a period during which great inspiration came from the Cultural Revolution in China.

JS: In general, the commitment of art to political organizations is easily considered "propaganda" in a very negative sense. This, I believe, has much to do with historical tendencies. Let us consider, for instance, the state of art during the early Russian Revolution, under the guidance of Lenin. During this period, substantial space and freedom was granted to avant-garde artistic expression and experimentation, which led to the development of Constructivism and Productivism. Yet only a few years later, and in marked contrast, Stalin's leadership installed Socialist Realism, which lead to the persecution and deaths of many members of the avant-garde. This history has itself been mobilized as a form of propaganda to depoliticize artists, to create and perpetuate the idea that once artists engage with politics, it will inevitably lead them to gulags, mass persecution, censorship, et cetera. . . .

EA: The academy embodies this depoliticization of art and artists. The training of artists in the university stresses that art should not be used for propaganda, yet in the context of the Filipino struggle, the movement has consistently enlisted those who belong to the best of the artist and writer communities throughout its different periods and iterations. This was especially the case in the 1980s, during the Marcos dictatorship, when the most prominent visual artists—the Social Realists—used their works for mass mobilization. But the effect of the regime

change after Marcos led many of these artists to believe that it was no longer necessary to continue the work of Social Realism. Art historians usually refer to the 1980s as the period of Social Realism, but it in fact did not end there.

JS: Could you explain how you distinguish Social Realism from Socialist Realism, and according to what criteria you differentiate propaganda understood in the manipulative, repressive sense from the notion of propaganda as a progressive and emancipatory tool?

EA: There has been an ongoing debate on this question in the academies and art communities. One side claims that art should not be used for propaganda, while others are very firm in stating that those who claim that art should not be used for propaganda are in fact engaging in propaganda themselves, by silencing and disenfranchising the narratives of the oppressed. Practice has shown that the artists who have continued propaganda work in the service of the people and the oppressed have already moved beyond this debate. History has shown that art as part of the movements of reform and radical change has contributed greatly to the cultural wealth of society. One need only think of Amado Vera Hernandez, a union leader in the fifties.[2] He is now considered one of the best poets of the last century. Even academia cannot deny this fact—his intensity, power, and historical significance can never be denied.

JS: I agree with you that referring to so-called "totalitarian art" is itself a form of propaganda with the aim of depoliticizing artists. At the same time, I do recognize the overdetermined role that is often assigned to art in the face of politics. But I also believe that politics is just as well an instrument of art.

EA: One of the basic theoretical documents within which most of the national democratic cultural organizations orient themselves is Mao Tse-tung's *Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art*, which in the simplest of explanations defines art's own criteria as well as the premise that there is no "art for art's sake." However sharp its critique and however correct it might be in following the political line, an artwork that depicts the position of the working class will never be effective if it fails in artistic criteria—that is one of the basic principles underlined by Mao. Indeed, I am aware of the discourse that warns the artist of becoming a mere peon of the commissars of culture. But Mao was very particular, not only about the need to popularize an artwork that positions itself along correct political lines, but also the importance of raising standards of form.

JS: This is something that numerous critiques of the Cultural Revolution have downplayed, so as to perpetuate the myth that there was no avant-garde in China. But the Rent Collection Courtyard sculptures[3] are proof that there was indeed a Chinese avant-garde. Moreover, this avant-garde was very different from that of the Soviet Union, even though people who are unfamiliar with its specific discourse tend to place it under the umbrella of Socialist Realism.

EA: Yes, and now I'd like to return to the question of form as raised by Mao. The challenge of cultural groups in the Philip-

2. Amado Vera Hernandez (1903–1970) was a Filipino writer and labor leader known for his political writings, which criticized various social injustices in the Philippines. Following his involvement in the communist movement, Hernandez was imprisoned and subsequently found himself at the center of a landmark thirteen-year-long legal dispute.

3. The Rent Collection Courtyard (1965) comprises 114 life-size clay sculptures created by Ye Yushan and sculptors from the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts. The collection is hailed as an important work of Social Realism and is located in the courtyard of the home of a rural landlord in Dayi County.

pines is that they face corporate media, Hollywood, and that which academia offers—all of which are in complete opposition to the principles of revolutionary or progressive art. But at the same time, this popular media as well as the historical developments in progressive culture are all useful materials for cultural workers. Some people think that revolutionary or progressive art must be dogmatic—that all music must bear the signature of a march, or that paintings should always be painted in red. But no, the groups of cultural workers are in fact incredibly open to all influences, especially as they concern employing the mass line and understanding what the masses are consuming and familiar with. For instance, in the countryside some revolutionary songs are performed in the style of hip-hop music.

JS: As you well know, the consequences of the type of art and engagement that you demonstrate as an artist and political activist can be highly severe. You have just spent two years in prison, yet you downplay your own story because there are many other political prisoners who are lesser known and who have less public support. As a Dutch artist, my own maximum time in prison was two days, and even that caused quite the stir in Dutch national media.

EA: [Laughs] What was the circumstance?

JS: I was prosecuted for threatening an extreme right-wing politician with death through an artwork.[4]

EA: [Taps interviewer supportively on the shoulder]

JS: So could you say something about the circumstances of your arrest?

EA: I was arrested in 2011, one day before Valentine's Day. I was in one of the interior barriers of the island of Samar, carrying out research on human rights violations committed by the military. I was trying to consolidate all of the data. For example, I learned of a youth leader who was killed because he represented youth peasants. Upon his death, soldiers used his dead body as part of a pile to ignite a smoke signal in order to help a helicopter land. Similar atrocities were committed in the Vietnam War. I was heading back into town after conducting my research when a platoon of military men arrested me along the way because I was carrying a laptop. They wanted to see what was on it and I told them that the battery had lost its charge. I even tried to prove this to them by pushing the power button, but then they punched me due to suspicion that my pushing the button was actually a guise to make the laptop self-destruct or even explode—suspicions that were likely the cause of having watched too many Hollywood films. Then they brought me to their camp. It was an hour walk, and when I arrived there I was interrogated and tortured. They asked me for the location of my camp and what my position in the Communist Party was.

JS: From where did they obtain the information that you were a member of the Communist Party?

EA: *Laptop plus forest equals rebel*: that is the equation. The arresting officer reported to a peer in his camp that he

4. Between 2005 and 2008, Jonas Staal was prosecuted by Dutch authorities for threatening Party for Freedom politician Geert Wilders with his project titled *The Geert Wilders Works*. The project consisted of twenty-one so-called "memorial works," including a photo collage and framed portrait of Wilders, white roses, tea-light candles and a stuffed bear in public spaces in Rotterdam and The Hague. Despite the ambiguous nature of the work—even police spokesmen could not distinguish whether the installations were a threat or the sign of public support for Wilders—Wilders decided to report the project on the grounds that it was a death threat.

had arrested someone and I listened to his conversation. I learned that his superior had used the phrase "charge it to an encounter," which basically meant to eliminate me on the spot. It was to be reported as a rebel confrontation. It took the arresting officer three more phone calls and lobbying to not take my life, as he wanted to bring me to the camp alive in order to earn himself a higher ranking. It was not because he was kindhearted—he simply wanted a promotion. At the camp I was mentally and physically tortured, deprived of sleep. But my situation is not unique. This is what happens to most rebels and revolutionaries upon capture.

JS: What was the official charge against you?

EA: Illegal possession of an explosive.

JS: And the illegal explosive was your laptop?

EA: The laptop was very explosive I suppose, as far as the theoretical content contained within it concerns.

JS: So you were first placed in isolation?

EA: Yes, for a few weeks, before being placed in the regular cells with the regular prisoners.

JS: How many people are in a regular cell?

EA: 12 to 16.

JS: What kind of space are we talking about?

EA: Eight by six meters.

JS: And there you spent the days and nights.

EA: Yes, we were all locked up all day, though exceptions were made when I would request to be part of a basketball game. I was deprived of many things, except for books and writing materials. I was able to receive visits as well, but most of my visitors were harrassed and questioned because of their relationship to me. Sometimes they were even followed. I was the only political prisoner in the cell.

JS: How was your relationship with the other prisoners?

EA: In many prisons, the regular inmates hold a very high regard for activists and revolutionaries. I was accorded that high respect. While in prison, I initiated a literacy class because a lot of inmates didn't know how to read or write. That was one of my projects at the time. One of my students was even a retired member of a paramilitary group.

JS: Did you base your teaching on specific texts?

EA: I'd had previous experience teaching peasants—simple ABCs.

JS: And then you began to incorporate works of dialectical materialism into your class?

EA: We had regular discussions in the afternoon, especially after new materials were allowed into the prison. Materials were brought in by visitors. We discussed political issues—Marxism, I guess. [Laughs]. I was also able to write a book of poetry. It was a great learning experience, of course. [Laughs].

JS: So you essentially continued your work from prison.

EA: Yes, I extended it in prison, even though it was difficult

to write inside. I would start writing at night, when everyone was asleep. During the day it was too hot to work. The heat is oppressive and there were no windows, just air holes. There were coal ovens on all day in the prison. Of course, there were also lots of things going on with the inmates. However, there was a lot of pressure to keep on writing, both from my wife and the campaign, and packages containing writing materials continued to arrive.

JS: You yourself are part of the cultural organization Concerned Artists of the Philippines, and with some colleagues from the group you will soon release the film *The Guerilla Is a Poet*, which highlights the revolutionary movement in the Philippines and the central role of Professor Jose Maria Sison within it. With this upcoming project in mind, what do you consider to be the main challenges ahead of CAP?

EA: The screenplay of *The Guerilla Is a Poet* is the product of a wide-ranging and collaborative effort, including those of my wife Kerima Tariman, who herself is a former political prisoner and Keith Sicat, the producer of the film. My most active and direct participation with CAP took place in the mid–1990s. That period provided me with significant experience in forming national-democratic cultural mass organizations in the urban youth and student sectors, which involved cultural productions, the organizing of artists and writers, and theoretical studies on revolutionary aesthetics. This was very helpful in the work that I did as one of many who successfully revitalized CAP sometime between 2000 and 2001. After this period, I decided to go to the countryside to be part of the antifascist and cooperative movement in the peasant sector, which of course also has a clearly-defined revolutionary cultural orientation and program. Assisting with the film *The Guerilla Is a Poet* was just one among many of CAP's efforts this year. A first challenge for CAP was to effectively encourage the film's crew, cast, and production team to delve further into the study of Philippine society's real conditions and the discourse of nationalist and militant struggle. The process of making the film itself has actually proved to be a very positive advantage. CAP should also be prepared to engage corporate media and the government's spinmasters who, in one way or another—I'm quite certain—will try to assail the film and use it to vilify and "red-tag" the progressive, independent cinema community.

JS: So, you consider the political education of the film crew to be as important as preparing for counterstrategy against possible government censorship of the film? In other words, the education of the artist must come through the people and not the other way around?

EA: Yes.

This is an edited version of the transcript of the interview that took place between Staal and Acosta on 14 July 2013 in Manila, the Philippines. The interview is reproduced here with the authors' permission.