

2009

# An Investigation of the Intersection between Art and Activism

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AN INVESTIGATION OF THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN  
ART AND ACTIVISM

by

EMILY WILCOX

2009

A Capstone Experience/Thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of  
University Honors College at  
Western Kentucky University

Approved by:

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## ABSTRACT

Art has social relevance and is effective as a means of activism. Current social and environmental crises make art-based activism especially relevant today. There are problems with prevailing views on art, which prevent many artists from seeing themselves as agents of change. Therefore, some established views on art need to shift in order for artists to become more empowered. Ways of utilizing art for activism are many and varied. Activism is often approached with attitudes that are problematic and ineffective. An art-based approach is a positive alternative because it stimulates empathy. Empathy is necessary to achieve social and environmental justice. To effect real change, activists need to work through cultural means. Art is a good tool for this because it is cultural production. Globalization makes culture-based activism even more pertinent today. Included are exclusive interviews with artists and activists from all over the world.

INDEX WORDS: Art, activism, social change, globalization, visual culture.

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Emily Wilcox

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ii

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## ***Table of Contents***

Part One. For Artists: Art as Activism.....	1
Social relevance.....	1
Current situation.....	5
Problems with prevailing views on art.....	9
Different kinds of activist art.....	18
Part Two. For Activists: Activism as Art.....	24
The problem with activism.....	24
Art as an alternative approach.....	26
Art and empathy; empathy and social justice.....	27
Cultural globalization.....	33
Working through culture.....	36
Part Three. Interviews.....	38
Lauren Cunningham.....	38
Judi Jennings.....	43
Joyce Ogden.....	51
Josh MacPhee.....	59
Mark Vallen.....	62
Mirko Ilić.....	66
Thierry Noir.....	69
Jan Jordaan.....	71
Fabiola Nabil Naguib.....	76
Part Four. Concluding Reflections.....	79
Works Cited.....	81
Appendix of Additional Suggested Resources.....	83

## ***For Artists: Art as Activism***

### **Social relevance**

If there is one thing that unmistakably validates the impact of visual media and arts upon a society, it is the way in which it is handled by those who seek to gain domination. “Art...unites whereas tyranny separates. It is not surprising, therefore, that art should be the enemy marked out by every form of oppression. It is not surprising that artists and intellectuals should have been the first victims of modern tyrannies, whether of the Right or Left. Tyrants know there is in the work of art an emancipatory force, which is mysterious only to those who do not revere it.”<sup>1</sup>

The human mind is keenly susceptible to the persuasive power of images. This was figured out a long time ago. The first empire in the world was Persepolis, and art historian Nigel Spivey argues that it was won largely on the influence of art.<sup>2</sup> Darius, the emperor, used pictures to communicate with the people who lived in the lands he conquered. Even if they did not speak the same language, they were impressed with the idea of Darius’s power by the narratives that ornately decorated Persepolis, which included pictures of diverse peoples giving Darius tribute. Coins were also utilized, for their surfaces were capable of transmitting an icon of Darius which was thereby carried throughout the empire to ensure that all subjects were exposed to the logo that symbolized his unified power.

Successive empires built upon these techniques and effectively gained and sustained power through designing a visual environment that communicated messages crafted to

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion and Death*, (New York: Knopf, 1961), 269.

<sup>2</sup> Nigel Spivey, “The Art of Persuasion.” *How Art Made the World*. (Dir. Nick Murphey. KCET/BBC, 2005).



transmit the ideas they wanted to be placed into peoples' minds in regards to the social order. For an example that falls closer to the present, one can consider the treatment of artists living under fascist regimes of the past century. The rise of Nazism in Germany was accompanied by a massive propaganda campaign in which visual images were actually used to tell political lies. In the USSR, artists were strictly delegated to produce work in specific styles and with specific subject matter, all of which was to the unfaltering glorification of the state. Styles and content that began to suggest subversive -- or even simply different -- ideas and sensibilities, were harshly censored. Political controllers saw that by preventing freedom of expression, they were able to prevent people from exercising other freedoms as well, and from uniting, connecting, and organizing around value systems that undermined the interests of the dictators. To this day, expression is censored in fascist societies such as China and Cuba – to name two of the more obvious examples.

For another example from the present day, Hans Haacke points out the implications of the ways in which mass media outlets cover the art world:

*The New York Times* calls its weekend section 'Arts and Leisure' and covers under its heading theater, dance, film, art, numismatics, gardening, and other ostensibly harmless activities. Other papers carry these items under equally innocuous titles, such as 'culture,' 'entertainment,' or 'lifestyle.' Why should governments, and for that matter corporations which are not themselves in the communications industry, pay attention to such seeming trivia? I think they do so for good reason. They have understood, sometimes better than the people who work in the leisure suits of culture, that the term 'culture' camouflages the social and political consequences resulting from the industrial distribution of consciousness.<sup>3</sup>

Sri Aurobindo, in his defense of "The National Value of Art," notes that the "impulse to enjoy beauty and attractiveness of sound, to look at and live among pictures, colors,

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<sup>3</sup> Hans Haacke, "Museum, Managers of Consciousness." *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: a sourcebook of artist's writings*. ed. Peter Howard Selz and Kristine Stiles (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 877.

forms,”<sup>4</sup> is universal in humanity. This universal quality connects it closely to human rights, and thus to the interests of justice across all borders and circumstances. Freedom of expression is thus equated with the purpose of art, as identified by Camus: “The aim of art, the aim of a life can only be to increase the sum of freedom and responsibility to be found in every man and in the world. It cannot, under any circumstances, be to reduce or suppress that freedom, even temporarily.”<sup>5</sup>

“A nation surrounded daily by the beautiful, noble, fine and harmonious becomes that which it is habituated to contemplate,” says Aurobindo in his explanation of why art’s presence is of value and use to a society.<sup>6</sup> Yet the artists working toward these ends face the challenge of a particular balancing act: to remain connected to the situations in which they live, while also exploring options of alternate ideas; to keep in touch with the real conditions of the world while also opening their imaginations to more preferable ideals.

“If [art] adapts itself to what the majority of our society wants, art will be a meaningless recreation. If it blindly rejects that society, if the artist makes up his mind to take refuge in his dream, art will express nothing but a negation. In this way we shall have the production of entertainers or of formal grammarians, and in both cases this leads to an art cut off from living reality.”<sup>7</sup> What we need to consider, then, is art that remains part of reality, accessible to the people it reaches towards, and celebratory of the beauty and unity

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<sup>4</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *The National Value of Art*, (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 2005), 21.

<sup>5</sup> Camus, 240.

<sup>6</sup> Aurobindo, 26.

<sup>7</sup> Camus, 253.

that humanity is capable of, while still raising critical questions and aspiring to greater planes of liberty.

“We see a lot of non-committal, sometimes cynical playing on naively perceived social forces...Some artists and promoters may reject any commitment and refuse to accept the notion that their work presents a point of view beyond itself or that it fosters certain attitudes; nevertheless, as soon as work enjoys larger exposure it inevitably participates in public discourse, advances particular systems of belief, and has reverberations in the social arena,” writes Hans Haacke in his essay “Museum, Managers of Consciousness.”<sup>8</sup>

Haacke’s main idea is that museums and galleries, as the major functioning arm of the art world, are part of what is called the “consciousness industry.” Haacke states that “consciousness is a social product. It is, in fact, not our private property, homegrown and a home to retire to. It is the result of a collective historical endeavor, embedded in and reflecting particular value systems, aspirations, and goals. And these do not by any means represent the interests of everybody.”<sup>9</sup>

An example of how those value systems are aimed at specific audiences is the fact that corporate sponsorship of museums and galleries has an insidious way of influencing what kind of art gets shown in these spaces, as curators must remain conscientious of their funding. Often due to financial dependence, decisions about what kinds of ideas to promote are made more in favor of the status quo than they perhaps would be under different circumstances. If the art world is indeed part of the “consciousness industry,” and if that

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<sup>8</sup> Haacke, 877.

<sup>9</sup> Haacke, 876.

industry aims to shift consciousness in a direction that conflicts with big business interests, we may well need to work within different frameworks.

### **Current situation**

There are major shifts happening in many spheres of life today. The world is changing faster than ever, and the systems by which our civilization operates on the planet are facing the inevitability of transformation if we are to survive as a species. “Over the last few decades, the world has accumulated a growing number of unresolved problems,” writes Lester Brown<sup>10</sup>. The spheres of life in which we are reaching a point of crisis are varied but interrelated, from a failing economic system, to corrupt and ineffective governments, to the cultural war-fares that accompany globalization; but one of the farthest-reaching and most drastic is the state of the environment. “We are crossing natural thresholds that we cannot see and violating deadlines that we do not recognize,” writes Brown. “Among the other environmental trends undermining our future are shrinking forests, expanding deserts, falling water tables, collapsing fisheries, disappearing species, and rising temperatures.”

Along with the often frightening changes happening in external structures, there are also shifts taking place in the underground arenas of culture and consciousness. People are becoming increasingly aware not only of the problems we face, but of the beginnings of solutions and the evolution that needs to take place in order to realize them. As the need to develop sensitivity to things that have been ignored or disregarded in our social structures becomes more and more apparent, people are beginning to open their minds to different ways

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<sup>10</sup>Lester Brown, *Plan B 3.0: Mobilizing to Save Civilization* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2008), 4.

of interacting with each other and their surroundings, as well as new ways of defining our activities and their purposes.

In this atmosphere, my hope is that prevailing attitudes towards art are also on the brink of some positive changes. As an art student, I have sensed a certain restlessness among many young artists today, who seem to feel that the ways in which we are taught to execute and place our work may not be in alignment with the expanding consciousness of our generation and the urgent needs of the planet and the global culture. This doesn't apply just to art – I think people are questioning the relevance and context of most of their activities; but when it comes to art it gets more confusing because of the lack of a consistent working definition of what art is or where exactly it fits in the first place. People who are in their early twenties today were the first wave to have the internet as a part of their childhood, which has caused us to grow up with a different attitude toward information than previous generations. We tend to take in a lot of it, without taking any one piece too seriously. There is a focus on exploration of breadth and the ability to peruse a variety of worldviews. At the same time as we digest the implications of crises (such as global climate change), we are also adapting to new tools, such as the ability to be in constant communication all over the planet and to know what is happening all over the world at any given time. Because of this, I think people today are hesitant to settle on theories of absolutes, preferring instead to sift about and consider many options before marrying any idea in particular. This is exciting for art because it suggests that people are willing to stumble upon new ways of viewing it and make visible a variety of possibilities that may differ from previously held norms.

The need for a reframing of the modern world-view and its assumptions in order to forecast the next step for society has been recognized in many professional spheres; within the art world, however, it has, as yet, no

established correlative. The necessity for art to transform its goals and become accountable in the planetary whole is incompatible with aesthetic attitudes still predicated on the late-modernist assumptions that art has no ‘useful’ role to play in the larger sphere of things. But the fact is that many artists now conceive their roles with a different sense of purpose than current aesthetic models sanction, even though there is as yet no comprehensive theory or framework to encompass what they are doing.<sup>11</sup>

So notes critic Suzi Gablik in her book “The Reenchantment of Art.” Gablik wrote this in the early nineties, and while things have certainly progressed since then, I still feel that the above statement is applicable in terms of the majority of things that happen within art institutions.

Figuring out how to balance these forces and proceed into the future with a new cultural vision – one that helps form a just and sustainable way of living -- is the challenge being thrown at today’s young people, and in this context, it can seem that “being committed to disembodied ideals of individualism, freedom and self-expression while everything else in the world unravels makes no sense anymore.”<sup>12</sup> Many artists wonder about other outlets for their skills and energy, while in reality many of those outlets are already in place – they just aren’t always found in the places where convention says to look.

For artists who are feeling uncertain about their work and its worth, it is becoming more pressingly important to face those issues that underlie the uncertainty. In the 1940’s, Albert Camus wrote, “The doubt felt by the artists who preceded us concerned their own talent. The doubt felt by artists of today concerns the necessity of their art, and hence their very existence.”<sup>13</sup> Over half a century later, his observation remains applicable. In regards

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<sup>11</sup> Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1995), 7.

<sup>12</sup> Gablik, 69.

<sup>13</sup> Camus, 251.

to the existential crisis of artists, Camus says that all the various reasons behind artists' sense of doubt "work toward the same end: to discourage free creation by undermining its basic principle, the creator's faith in himself."<sup>14</sup> This is a scary prospect because liberated creativity is one of the human faculties that we will be relying upon most heavily to forge solutions to the systemic problems we face, not only as a society, but as a species. This is part of the reason I think the artistic community is on the brink of significant shifts – those changes in outlook are needed for survival.

Gablik notes that "the romantic exile of the artist"<sup>15</sup> is no longer a helpful concept when it comes to responding to the needs of our times, when "we are all together in the same global amphitheater." She states that "exalted individualism...is hardly a creative response to the needs of the planet at this time." Acknowledging the part we play in destructive systems is an important step to take in opening our minds to real solutions.

"It is not part of [artists'] legacy to view ourselves as powerful agents of change;" writes Gablik, "however, we are being confronted with the necessity of transforming our old modes of understanding if we are to survive the predicaments that are our collective fate right now."<sup>16</sup>

Scottish artist Richard Demarco reminds us, "You've got to see that you're a very useful person as an artist, because your insights and your gifts are such that, as Joseph Beuys

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<sup>14</sup> Camus, 252.

<sup>15</sup> Gablik, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Gablik, 8.

said, ‘If properly used, you’re the person who can bring healing and regeneration to society.’”<sup>17</sup>

### **Problems with prevailing views on art**

“Art for Art’s Sake” became a widely accepted concept about art during the nineteenth and twentieth century. This can be interpreted as the idea that art exists in relation to itself, and is not accountable to the wider society; that aesthetics are practiced primarily for the enjoyment of the artists and art viewers; and that there is little to gain in trying to integrate it with the goings-on of other parts of our life and functioning. This ideology forms the basis of much of the thought within modernism, and has thus influenced successive art movements as well.

Hans Haacke explains the nature and impact of the concept of art for art’s sake. “The doctrine has an avant-garde historical veneer and in its time did indeed perform a liberating role. Even today, in countries where artists are openly compelled to serve prescribed policies, it still has an emancipatory ring. The gospel of art for art’s sake isolates art and postulates its self-sufficiency, as if art had or followed rules which are impervious to the social environment. Adherents of the doctrine believe that art does not and should not reflect the squabbles of the day. Obviously they are mistaken in their assumption that products of consciousness can be created in isolation.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Jan Jordaan, “Art, Advocacy, and Social Development,” *Sustainability: a new frontier for the arts and cultures*. ed. Sacha Kagan and Volker Kirchberg (Germany: VAS-Verlag, 2008) 293.

<sup>18</sup> Haacke, 878.



As Haacke has pointed out, the ideas of art for art's sake, which initially seem quite freeing, can be problematic in their effects. It's not that art for art's sake is invalid as one existing function of aesthetic practice; but when it is postulated as the highest or only goal for art-making, things become unbalanced.

Suzi Gablik shares this view, and sees it as an underlying cause of the state that the art world is in now: "The institutional structures and practices of the art world are modeled on the same configurations of power and profit that keep the ball of patriarchal high capitalism rolling and maintain the dominant worldview of this society in place. The art industry has become not only a very effective protector of the status quo, but also an active contributor to the deforming effects of a whole cultural pathology."<sup>19</sup>

As an explanation of how art for art's sake leads to this situation, Haacke delineates a functional shift from freeing to entrapping. "What began as a liberating drive turned into its opposite. The doctrine [of "art for art's sake"] now provides museums with an alibi for ignoring the ideological aspects of art works and the equally ideological implications of the way those works are presented to the public. Whether such neutralizing is performed with deliberation or merely out of habit or lack of resources is irrelevant: practiced over many years, it constitutes a powerful form of indoctrination."<sup>20</sup>

One of the biggest problems with the view of art for art's sake is the way it compartmentalizes art and separates it from the majority of peoples' every day experiences. "In a bourgeois society art like everything else becomes a commodity. It loses its social nature as a free expression of collective experience," writes muralist John Pitnam Weber.

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<sup>19</sup> Gablik, 117.

<sup>20</sup> Haacke, 878.

“The museums and galleries offer culture as a spectacle divorced from life”<sup>21</sup> The problem with this is that it enables artists not only to ignore the larger society, but to actually alienate themselves from it, and vice versa. “Having loudly proclaimed the self-sufficiency of art, and having established the importance of the untrammelled self, the avant-garde proceeded to scorn notions of responsibility toward the audience.”<sup>22</sup>

In this way, art was essentially isolating itself from the rest of society, and that isolation continues today. While museums and galleries may be open to the public, there is an invisible hand of class consciousness at play when it comes to who is actually able to access those resources. A good example of this elitism is the gentrification of gallery districts that is happening in a lot of cities across the US right now. I have observed it in my own hometown – it starts with an urban area where there are a lot of large old buildings that have been abandoned by industry. Galleries move in and utilize the buildings for showing artwork. Okay, so far so good. But then, the economic status of the area starts to re-orient based on the presence of the wealthier people who show up at the galleries to drink wine and rub stylishly-clad elbows while fashionably standing in front of artwork (which they may or may not bother to actually look at). Pretty soon, the property value goes up, developers start putting in condominiums, and the lower-income people who inhabited the area are pushed out. Even most artists then can’t afford to live in the gallery areas, as things get overtaken by big business in a way that looks alarmingly like local-scale socio-economic imperialism. I think it would make sense, in this situation, for artists to get more conscious about using our

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<sup>21</sup> John Pitnam Weber, “Murals as People’s Art,” *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: a sourcebook of artist’s writings*. ed. Peter Howard Selz and Kristine Stiles, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 269.

<sup>22</sup> Gablik, 61.

presence to integrate rather than divide. Not allowing one's art to become co-opted by economic drives could be a place to start, since as it is, art is such easy prey for capitalist advances (such as gentrification) and has given big business and the upper class a door into essentially buying out areas that were previously unthinkable for them.

On a recent plane ride, I sat next to a truck mechanic who was being sent by his company to a mandatory certification training. When we got to talking, he started telling me about all these ideas he had for welding old machine parts together into new forms that he said would not really be functional, but would “look like something you wouldn't expect” and make people think. I told him it sounded like he was a sculptor at heart, but he wasn't prepared to use that word. He told me he'd never been to an art gallery. I feel like this really illustrates the elitism of gallery culture, because it shows how people who think like artists but are not part of the privileged social class don't consider it their place to enter those spaces.

Here is an observation of another way art trends impact the rest of society. Around the same time that the avant-garde was gaining momentum, other forms of visual media were intentionally reaching out to a wide audience with the purpose of selling. Advertisements have been around for over a hundred years, but they became much more image-based around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When fine art alienates people, and advertising alone invites them, we are left with a very sad visual culture indeed. It is not difficult to understand how, in this situation, the images that we are fed do not help us to develop more positive ways of relating to each other and the world. Much of advertising seeks to manipulate peoples' desires through commodification of individuals and experiences. This type of objectification helps create an attitude of self-absorption and scorn for others – thus, the same value system

of greed that leads to massive corporate exploitation on a large scale is implanted microcosmically within individuals in their own relationships to themselves and those around them.

Graphic designers, the artists whose work is most heavily co-opted by the ad industry, have been aware of this problem for decades. “We think that there are other things more worth using our skill and experience on,”<sup>23</sup> wrote Ken Garland in a 1964 manifesto that was signed by twenty-two graphic designers. The manifesto emphasized turning away from advertising in favor of “all the other media through which we promote our trade, our education, our culture and our greater awareness of the world.”

In 2000, *Adbusters* and six design magazines published a revised and updated version of the manifesto, which they called “First Things First.” It stated, “Many of us have grown increasingly uncomfortable with [the prevailing] view of design. Designers who devote their efforts primarily to advertising, marketing and brand development are supporting, and implicitly endorsing, a mental environment so saturated with commercial messages that it is changing the very way citizen-consumers speak, think, feel, respond, and interact. To some extent we are all helping draft a reductive and immeasurably harmful code of public discourse. There are pursuits more worthy of our problem-solving skills.” The 2000 version of the manifesto goes on to “propose a reversal of priorities in favor of more useful, lasting and democratic forms of communication – a mindshift away from product marketing and toward the exploration and production of a new kind of meaning.”<sup>24</sup> As an alternative to commercial design, the writers of the manifesto pointed out “unprecedented environmental,

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<sup>23</sup> “First Things First Manifesto.” *Adbusters* Sept. 2001, 54.

<sup>24</sup> “First Things First,” 54.

social and cultural crises demand our attention. Many cultural interventions, social marketing campaigns, books, magazines, exhibitions, educational tools, television programs, films, charitable causes and other information design projects urgently require our expertise and help.”

Designers do have the option of empowering themselves by choosing what their work will be a voice for, and this is important to acknowledge; but it doesn’t negate that there is still room for fine artists working in all media to re-insert their voices into the everyday visual landscape and add that particular human element to the environment in which people live. Integration of fine art into the rest of life is something that can happen a lot more than it currently does.

Postmodern attempts to question and rectify the situation of art have not been able to carry us where we need to go, culturally, because they are still executed from a compartmentalized worldview. “Constructivism and Dada; Minimal Art and Pop. The brave challenges of one generation of artists reappear as nicely domesticated absurdities of another. The ‘revolutions’ of the ‘art world’ are stillborn because they remain within the narrow limits of that world. A fundamental change in the artist’s relationship to society is needed,”<sup>25</sup> writes John Pitnam Weber. That change has been difficult to articulate, and is certainly not helped by the status of artists in society. “The overwhelming majority of artists in this country [the U.S.] are unemployed *as artists*. They earn their livings as teachers, taxicab drivers, etc. etc. Artists often explain their isolation and unemployment by an elitist theory of talent, intelligence, and sensibility. There is a widespread conviction that the “masses” are

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<sup>25</sup> Weber, 270.

incapable of understanding or of making art. Therefore, the artist's response to this situation has generally been to retreat further into a hermetic "art world," into art theory building (e.g. making "art history" rather than art) and private games, to surface occasionally in a self-indulgent public provocation, which is increasingly ineffective also."<sup>26</sup> Thus, the idea of art for art's sake isolates artists, and in that isolation, they retreat further into their ideals of divorcement from common life, creating a cycle that does not help bring art and the rest of society back into relationship. At worst, artists – wittingly or not – render themselves irrelevant.

Gablik makes a distinction between two kinds of postmodernism – the deconstructive kind, which aims to tear down outmoded world views (often through irony and parody), and the reconstructive kind, which aims to build a new cultural option upon the ruins of outworn systems. The difference between the two is ultimately the difference between cynicism and hope.

"Increasingly, as artists begin to question their responsibility and perceive that 'success' in capitalist, patriarchal terms may not be the enlightened path to the future, which of these views they hold definitely affects how they see their role: as demystifier or as cultural healer."<sup>27</sup> So far, we have seen a lot of deconstructionist postmodern expressions in the arts. Artists, in recognizing the disfunctionality of modernist frameworks, have turned towards aesthetics of the absurd and isolating. This has its place, as it has assisted in hammering home the message that certain aspects of old thinking are unacceptable and cannot be relied upon. However, we have reached a critical stage in our culture and world

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<sup>26</sup> Weber, 269.

<sup>27</sup> Gablik, 25.

where stopping at deconstruction becomes a roadblock. “We no longer need old authoritarian ideologies which demand that art be difficult, willfully inaccessible and disturbing to the audience,”<sup>28</sup> for this does not allow us the mental and emotional space to imagine new possibilities – and new possibilities are what we desperately need. This is why a reconstructive role is becoming more valuable. The time is approaching to build a new world, and to do that, we need to turn away from our fixation with dead ends and disenchantment. We need to cultivate hope.

Gablik believes that “art will begin to redefine itself in terms of social relatedness and ecological healing, so that artists will gravitate toward different activities, attitudes, and roles than those that operated under the aesthetics of modernism.”<sup>29</sup> She points out a possible direction in which new emerging aesthetic values might lead. “In the past, we have had much of the idea of art as a mirror (reflecting the times); we have had art as a hammer (social protest); we have had art as furniture (to hang on the walls); and we have had art as a search for the self. There is another kind of art, which speaks to the power of connectedness and establishes bonds, art that calls us into relationship.”<sup>30</sup> Suzanne Lacy writes of a similar vision. “Issues of feminist identity, ethnic cultures, ecology, community, and global consciousness are rooted in radical, spiritual, and theoretical practices. Out of the intricacies

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<sup>28</sup> Gablik, 60.

<sup>29</sup> Gablik, 27.

<sup>30</sup> Gablik, 114.

of their links to each other will grow a new and appropriate art: a game that matches its name.”<sup>31</sup>

I don't wish to pose that deconstructive post-modernism has no place; its function is important. “Exposing the inability of present institutional models to bring about transformation has been the chief value of the aggressive ground-clearing of deconstruction,”<sup>32</sup> writes Gablik. It is just that deconstruction is not the place to stop. “Mainstream culture is event culture. It sees more people than ever visit art exhibitions and museums. However, most of them are looking blank and awestruck. No one gets upset, basic questions are seldom asked. It is the event in which they believe.”<sup>33</sup> Something about this situation needs to be changed if the artistic community is to step up to the challenges we face. “An art that deals with values, processes and issues of sustainability will also be an art that is *critical* in several senses: critically confronting modernity and its mythical figures (the individual, progress, affluence, growth, technology). It will also be critically confronting one's art world, the institutions one works with as an artist or as an arts organization...Multiple dimensions of art institutions may be questioned, from the informal powers behind the 'autonomy' of art, the role of art as an elitist social field reproducing social discriminations (even when it claims to constitute an 'institution of critique'), to the art market as a luxury market.”<sup>34</sup> In short, there is room for artists to more consciously integrate

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<sup>31</sup> Suzanne Lacy, “The Name of the Game.” *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: a sourcebook of artist's writings*. ed. Peter Howard Selz and Kristine Stiles (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 787.

<sup>32</sup> Gablik, 124.

<sup>33</sup> Bachmann, 11.

<sup>34</sup> Sacha Kagan, “Introduction.” *Sustainability: a new frontier for the arts and cultures*, ed. Sacha Kagan and Volker Kirchberg, (Germany: VAS-Verlag, 2008), 19.



their work with the “outside” world, to more directly draw aesthetics into connection with everything else. “Contrary to the current presumption,” wrote Camus, “if there is any man who has no right to solitude, it is the artist. Art cannot be a monologue.”<sup>35</sup>

### **Different kinds of activist art**

There are many approaches to activist art, and many assumptions about it already in place. “Activist art exists in many different guises,” writes Kim Berman, “from public art (murals, performance interventions) to community-based projects, for example. Whatever forms they take, all share the belief that art does not belong to an economic elite, but is a communal resource where the line between creators and viewers is often blurred.”<sup>36</sup> For some people, the phrase “activist art” calls to mind traditional-format artwork that is overtly political in its content. This is not the only format that exists under the umbrella of arts activism, but perhaps it is a good place to start.

Artists have created work using political subject matter for a long time, but in the past few decades, many have become more conscious of it. Suzanne Lacy, for example, writes:

The political nature of imagery, the power that comes with the right to name and describe, the ‘censorship’ of people not allowed access to self-representation – these were the avenues of inquiry that led to overtly political artwork by mid-seventies feminists ... The study of power and its uses and abuses leads to a consideration of inside and outside. In the seventies ‘inside’ was fine art as revealed through the glossy art magazines; ‘outside’ was political art, feminist art, ethnic art. ‘Inside’ was galleries and museums; ‘outside’ was the streets, the community, the homes of the working class. Artists considering these ideas developed strategies for accessibility, desiring to reach various and different constituencies. They looked at the culture of

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<sup>35</sup> Camus, 253.

<sup>36</sup> Kim Berman, “The Role of the Visual Arts in Social Change in South Africa.” *The International Journal of the Arts in Society* 1.5 (2007): 124.

these communities in the context of high art and they called it the democratization of art.<sup>37</sup>

Efforts to democratize art and incorporate social significance into it still continue. Much of this type of artwork can be found in galleries and museums by now, but still more is being created that has yet to be accepted by the system. “It is no longer out of vogue to be a ‘political’ artist,” notes Lacy, “but activism is still problematic, as evidenced by its lack of critical theory and support.”<sup>38</sup>

“Political art” can also mean graphic imagery that is created in the context of a justice movement. The art critic Danto points out that often, activist art of this variety is executed in a crude aesthetic that has a specific impact on the average viewer. He describes it as “certainly not beautiful...It is angry, ugly and aggressive. It blames an indifferent society for the illness it seeks to represent. This, too, is activist, for it means to provoke the society into doing something....But then...the artists must not be shocked if the audience is angered by it rather than by what it points to.”<sup>39</sup> This observation does not invalidate use of that aesthetic; it’s just something that the artists might want to be aware of when creating their work. “An activist art should fulfill itself through convincing those it reaches to attack its targets, not itself.”

Josh MacPhee also acknowledges that there is room for justice movements to expand the type of imagery they use. “Often a good picture can articulate a message far better and quicker than a paragraph of text. Humans have known this for tens of thousands of

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<sup>37</sup> Lacy, 785.

<sup>38</sup> Lacy, 786.

<sup>39</sup> A. C. Danto, “Art for Activism’s Sake.” *Utne Reader* 48 (1991): 63.

years...Yet somehow the Left seems to have lost this knowledge in the past thirty years or so. We have an extremely rich history of graphic arts that has inspired political action or educated about social justice. But much of our recent visual material at best reproduces the same dozen or so images over and over again, or at worst is simply a giant wall of text, impenetrable to all but those that are extremely accepting of this kind of visual sadism.”<sup>40</sup>

Muralist John Pitnam Weber points out some of the ways this narrow visual culture impacts artists working within justice movements:

Involvement in ‘the movement’ does not at all solve this problem [of re-orienting art in relation to society], even though it may change the artist’s consciousness in essential ways. In the white section of the movement the artist often finds himself subject to additional pressures to give up art. Why don’t you write? one is told, you’re too articulate to be a painter. Do cartoons for leaflets, do graphics for movement newspapers, design posters, buttons, banners. Anything to be *useful*. What is often demanded is leftist icons – ‘vanguard’ art, ‘consciousness-raising’ art. This means in effect only art for the movement and its intellectual student supporters: who else would buy a poster of Che? None of this ‘movement art’ touches the basic problem of establishing contact with a proletarian mass audience.<sup>41</sup>

Artists who are involved with activist communities face certain challenges in not letting this mindset dictate the way they define the validity of their work.

In a discussion of reproducible political graphics, Josh MacPhee stresses that activist artists “need to understand our own deep and diverse history. Early printmakers like Jacques Callot in the 17<sup>th</sup> century illustrated the horrors of war in engravings that could be reproduced and mass distributed. Two hundred years later Francisco Goya creates his *Disasters of War* etchings, which today remain haunting and powerful statements (which are in the public

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<sup>40</sup> Josh MacPhee and Favianna Rodriguez, *Reproduce and Revolt* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2008), 9.

<sup>41</sup> Weber 270.

domain yet are rarely used by anti-war activists).”<sup>42</sup> The intersection of “fine” art and art history with peoples’ movements of the past, though not often explicitly recognized, validates an activist artist’s engagement with these aspects of their practice.

Another way that activism and art can intersect is through public art – artwork that is created to exist in a shared space. This type of art calls upon the artist to reflect on broader viewpoints when considering the impact of his or her work; to step outside the particular mindsets of those who work in studios and attend galleries. “Many barriers can be crossed by an artist bringing commitment and vision to the work. The artist is transformed in the process of creating public art. He must abandon his private self-examination to speak as a citizen in society, and to become a voice for others,”<sup>43</sup> writes John Pitnam Weber.

Community involvement is the common theme throughout many of the other forms of activist art. This means projects that seek to extend the empowerment experienced through self-expression beyond just one artist and to an entire group of participants. Self-expression should be a right, but in effect it is often experienced as a privilege, because not everyone is able to access the resources that are needed to use their voice in their chosen way. Artists can work as community organizers in providing access to visual creation as a vehicle of expression and self-representation for the oppressed and under-represented. When this takes the form of a group project, it can also help transform a community by bringing people into dialogue and helping people develop the skills that are needed to work together.

“My experience of activism over the past fifteen years has shown that the visual arts can contribute significantly to social transformation, particularly in developing countries

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<sup>42</sup> MacPhee, 10.

<sup>43</sup> Weber, 271.

where literacy levels are low. Visual artists bring a special strength to facilitating the role of the imagination in aspiring for a better future,”<sup>44</sup> writes Kim Berman. In Berman’s analysis of the three community programs that she has helped to initiate utilizing the arts and activism, she states that “grass-roots visual arts projects that ordinarily go unanalyzed in any systematic way are an important research resource and provide the basis for a new knowledge.”<sup>45</sup>

Another thing to consider is the various ways an artist’s personal practice can be a form of activism. Even if it is a traditional solo studio practice where you aren’t directly using political themes, involving others in the process of the work, or any of the other above-mentioned methods that people associate with “activist” art, you can still make your art into an activist outlet if you choose to approach it that way. Gablik’s idea of the reconstructive aesthetic and its potential for cultural healing is an important thing to consider right now, because we’re at a time where the art world actually seems to be opening up to this. After decades of insisting that contemporary work should be disconnected, rough, and self-referential, critics such as Dave Hickey are beginning to acknowledge the relevance of beauty. It’s becoming acceptable again to produce work that reaches out to the viewer with a gentle touch; that offers nurturing and suggests the possibility of a better future. People are realizing that they need a visual culture that can give them hope.

This corresponds with a growing sense of the need for beauty and alignment in all spheres of life. As Beunders writes, “The fine truth about the fine arts is that people in the West these days yearn for common moments of experience and artistic visions of truth or

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<sup>44</sup> Berman, 123.

<sup>45</sup> Berman, 124.

beauty, and this yearning seems to intensify.”<sup>46</sup> Art has the power to unify, to bring people together and to draw them into dialogue. The aesthetic sensibilities that are cultivated within fine art have the potential to expand their boundaries and be applied to conditions on a larger scale, as part of a holistic response. Today’s artists have the tools to be the carriers of this; they just need to gain a sense of empowerment about the value of their skills.

Gablik predicts that “what we will be seeing over the next few decades is art that is essentially social and purposeful, art that rejects the myth of neutrality and autonomy.”<sup>47</sup> She predicts a new aesthetic model of “art moved by empathic attunement, not tied to an art-historical logic but orienting us to the cycles of life;” an art that “helps us to recognize that we are part of an interconnected web that ultimately we cannot dominate. Such art begins to offer a completely different way of looking at the world.”<sup>48</sup>

This is a vision that is hard not to find appealing in the face of so much destruction. What I would hope to see, though, is artists continuing to work in a variety of methods, as they do now. I don’t think there is any one “right” way to address the things that need addressing; in fact a diversity of tactics is preferable, if we are to take any lessons from nature, in which the strongest ecosystems are the most diverse ones. What I would hope to see is artists working with a more developed sense of purpose and a clearer vision of the significance of their work in reference to the things outside of it. In other words, I want to see artists becoming more empowered.

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<sup>46</sup> Henri Beunders, “The End of Arrogance, the Advent of Persuasion,” *Social Analysis* 51.1 (2007): 55.

<sup>47</sup> Gablik, 5.

<sup>48</sup> Gablik, 88.

## ***For Activists: Activism as Art***

Being alive at this time means being called upon to respond to a world in crisis on many levels. Poverty, disease, environmental destruction, institutionalized human rights abuses, corporate greed spinning out of control, cultural imperialism and globalization of the economy... these are all interrelated facets of a world order that cannot be continued; that we must replace with something more humane and sustainable. We are activists because we see these things. And we don't just see them; we feel them deeply. We are activists because we have a vision of a better world.

See. Feel (deeply). Form a vision. React, respond; act.

That's the process of activism, starting from the inside and working its way out. It's also the process of making art.

### **The problem with activism**

The problem with the way most activism is approached is that people want to view it as a fight. It is about pitting sides against each other; you against them. It is about winning. It is a power game. If this is the way you view activism, then you will never succeed in effecting real change, because you are meeting your opponent with the same energy that they are using to wreak the destruction you want to see an end to. You have got to stop acting from your ego, and you have got to stop playing the same game as "the machine." If you are thinking about competition, winners and losers, and gaining power *over* the opponent, then you are caught in their game -- and that is how they want you, because you will never be a real threat that way. You are co-opted by the system. You are adding to it, feeding in more

of the same negative energy it runs on, and thus making it stronger. That is not positive social change; it is a continuation of the status quo.

Anyone who's been in this game of activism for a little while has probably been guilty of this, and has also probably seen the way it can start to consume you. Bit by bit, burnout sets in, and it sets in hard. It is good to give some of your energy to a cause, but people think they need to give themselves, and this is dangerous. No worthy cause will ask you to give yourself, because once that is given, what more do you have to fight with? If your actions for a cause hurt you and make you weaker, then they are coming out of the same destructive energy as the systems they are opposing. But when you think and act outside the system (of combat and mutual destruction), you grow stronger and you become more free. This is positive social change, and if it's the real thing, it self-perpetuates without needing a sacrifice from you.

A basic rule of the universe is that whatever you give your attention to will expand.<sup>49</sup> When you focus on what you are against, that's where you are putting your attention, and not only do you make your opponent bigger by giving it energy, but you also become that same thing. This is why straight-edge kids who hate drug users eventually become drug users, and second-wave feminists become hierarchal and sexist, and proclaimed anti-fascists talk as though their opinion is the only right opinion.

Instead, focus on what you stand for. This can be a lot more challenging because sometimes it means you have to consider options outside of the things you have known. It requires you to use your imagination to envision what you want, and it requires you to trust

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<sup>49</sup> Caroline W. Casey, *Visionary Activist Astrology* (Sounds True Incorporated, 2000), audiobook.



your creativity in order to follow through with your vision. Basically, you have to think like an artist, as though society were your medium.

### **Art as an alternative approach**

“The aim of art, on the contrary [to judgement], is not to legislate or to reign supreme, but rather to understand first of all.”<sup>50</sup>

A sense of understanding – or, at least, of willingness to try to understand – is of assistance when it comes to attaining balance in any kind of interaction, whether it be between one person and another, one society and another, or a civilization and its environment. If we are to attempt to work outside of unbalanced hierarchies and authoritarian conventions (men above women; white above colored; humans above nature) then a sense of understanding of “the other” (meaning that which your culture defines as different from or outside of your identity) is something we should strive towards in order to gain a better sense of how to fairly deal with that “other” – not only in activist movements, but in our societies and lives. Art can help immensely with this task.

I propose that we approach activism as an art because, in my experience, that is when it works best. Art is about being both receptive and responsive; working intuitively and ritualistically; being both creative and disciplined. It is about becoming more and more conscious. In art, there is no right or wrong; there is only what works -- and what works is what is real, what is done out of a place of honesty and courage and integrity. If it works, you will know, because it is beautiful. “Beautiful” doesn’t mean “pretty”; it doesn’t have to

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<sup>50</sup> Camus, 266.

mean it makes you feel good – some work is very intense and it disturbs you, but there is a certain integrity to it that makes it beautiful. And activism can be the same way.

### **Art and empathy; empathy and social justice**

In order to have a just society in which people feel some responsibility about not exploiting each other, it is necessary for people to be imbued with a sense of compassion, which is based largely on empathy. Within human nature is a basic capacity for empathy, which can be nurtured or suppressed depending on the type of cultural environment someone grows up in. Among the ways of helping to cultivate empathy, art is a powerful instrument.

The relationship between art and ethics has long been understood by philosophers, going all the way back to Aristotle, who named the phenomenon of catharsis. “Aristotle was speaking of the purification of feelings, passions and emotions in the heart through imaginative treatment in poetry,” writes the Indian revolutionary and mystic Sri Aurobindo, “but the idea contained is of much wider application and constitutes the justification for the aesthetic side of art. It purifies by beauty. The beautiful and the good are held by many thinkers to be the same and, though the idea may be wrongly stated, it is, when put from the right standpoint, not only a truth but *the* truth of existence.”<sup>51</sup>

If you think about it, this idea of the “good” being defined as that which is beautiful makes sense. When we see a mother forced to traffic herself to feed her children, when we see workers exploited in sweatshops, when we see a clear-cut forest or a topless mountain, it hits us in the gut with its ugliness. In theory, we can understand that these things are hurtful,

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<sup>51</sup> Aurobindo, 9.

but in many cases it isn't until we *see* them that the injustice of it truly grips our hearts. On the other hand, when we see people coming together as a community to feed each other, making small sacrifices to help each other, and when we see people living in harmony with their land, we know it's good because it's simply beautiful. An activist is a person whose aesthetic sense is highly responsive to the situations she sees around her and the conditions of the world at large.

Aurobindo goes on to state that “The mind is profoundly influenced by what it sees and, if the eye is trained from the days of childhood to the contemplation and understanding of beauty, harmony and just arrangement in line and color, the tastes, habits and character will be insensibly trained to follow a similar law of beauty, harmony and just arrangement in the life of the adult.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, if you understand how to see beauty in your physical surroundings, then you are also likely to know how to detect the more beautiful decisions in life situations.

Evidence of this follows in South African artist and human rights advocate Jan Jordaan's observation that societies in which the public has greater access to art tend to also have a better human rights record, whereas communities in which art is less available to the general public tend to see higher rates of violence and exploitation. When people are encouraged with resources to help them recognize and contemplate beauty, they are able to relate to each other in ways that are beautiful rather than hurtful; and when the art of a community is appreciated by the external society, then the society feels more responsible to see that that community is respected. Think about the situation in Appalachia. The people

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<sup>52</sup> Aurobindo, 18.

there remain largely invisible to the wider society of the United States; but if there was a general recognition and appreciation for the art that comes out of Appalachia, would it be as easy for the coal companies to do the things they do there? Art, quite literally, is what brings visibility to a people.

“Art in its various manifestations is what defines us as human beings.... and our cultural evolution is responsible for shaping many of our most human values,” writes Rungwe Kingdon, a co-founder of a nonprofit sculpture foundation in Uganda. “It is the directness of art, its short circuit to the emotional core of our beings, that makes it so powerful a means of communication and, thus, of effecting change.”<sup>53</sup> Art’s impact hits parts of our awareness that are often shunted by rigidly rational worldviews, parts that deserve equal exercise and respect if we are to think and act as whole people and to call upon all the resources within our beings. That is why seeing something communicated through art can impact a person far harder than seeing the same thing communicated through strictly informational means. If you want someone to understand something deeper than just intellectually, if you want them to understand it in their guts – and that is really the only way they’ll be moved to act – then the way to communicate it is not to just tell it in straight fact. Straight fact is a good thing for the sake of clarity and objectivity. It definitely has its place. In some cases it can be enough to move someone if that person is more intellectually oriented. But in general, when you want people to actually *care* about what you are telling them, then you would do better to sing it in a song, or dance it, or tell it as a story, or show it in a picture. Those are the methods that make contact with the heart. And if we are acting

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<sup>53</sup>Rungwe Kingdon, “Art can be a catalyst for social change in Uganda,” *Guardian.co.uk* (2008), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/katine/2008/oct/06/musicandart.news>.

outside the destructive system, the system that validates exploitation through means of strict facts and numbers, then we need more heart.

Art helps build a balanced culture, and it is a powerful means of communication, but its value does not stop there. The experience of making art can be balancing and transformative for the individual. “The creative process makes it possible to work in ways that enable responsibility and agency,”<sup>54</sup> says Kim Berman, who has orchestrated various activist art projects, including some which benefit participants therapeutically. Executing creative projects can help one to release mental and emotional blockages in a productive and nonviolent way; it enables one to practice critical thinking, see abstract relationships, and develop resourcefulness. For this reason, activists can benefit greatly by having an art form that they practice regularly.

“As participating cocreators, we become ourselves the shapers of new frameworks, the orchestrators of culture and consciousness,”<sup>55</sup> writes art critic Suzi Gablik. By involving oneself in the process of making things, one comes into contact with one’s own ability to influence and direct the way something happens, thus stepping out of the timid role of spectator or hapless victim, and into a space of empowerment.

“The ‘observer’ is a notion that belonged to the classical way of looking at the world. The observer could approach the world without taking part. But this is not the case within a holistic view. If ‘world-making’ is the principal function of mind, then social reality does not just ‘happen’ in the world but is constructed from the way our private beliefs and

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<sup>54</sup> Berman, 130.

<sup>55</sup> Gablik, 26.

intentions merge with those of others.”<sup>56</sup> When you become conscious of the possibilities to interact with and alter reality in an immediate material way – that is, by manipulating objects and materials into a new product formed of your own ingenuity – then you have also an allegory and a model for the possibilities that exist for influencing the order of things in the structures and systems which you inhabit. Practicing art (or music, dance, writing, etc), as a positive activity that has a tangible outcome, gives you a way of symbolically understanding the power of your own creativity and energy and the potential you have to alter the world through your intentions and actions.

Art “promotes healing and growth, self-confidence and imagination, thereby accessing capacities of empowerment not normally addressed in development programs.”<sup>57</sup> Practicing art in its variety of forms is a tremendous resource for helping people develop and grow into a state of aptitude and ethical ideals; for giving people a sense of their own ability to create, change, and impact. By utilizing aesthetic sensibilities on a regular basis, people integrally develop their capacity to both discern and design elegance and equilibrium in abstract relationships. As we become more and more conscious of this potency, it is likely that people will develop even more intentional ways of using those underlying forces.

Of course, there will still be the question of whether art is really any more effective than other methods of activism. “Beyond question, art has as one of its functions the moral arousal of its audience,” writes art critic Danto, “But at a certain point the question has to arise as to whether, if the artist cares that deeply, art is the best way of dealing with the

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<sup>56</sup> Gablik, 22.

<sup>57</sup> Berman, 127.

issues.”<sup>58</sup> This question is rooted in a very compartmentalized worldview, but when a more integral approach is taken, one sees that things happening in one sphere of life will indeed affect other spheres as well; that things do not happen in isolation of each other, but that through their interconnectedness impacts can cross the borders that judicious minds assign. Starhawk, a writer and activist in the global justice movement and a teacher of permacultural design, often reminds people of a lesson from ecology: the place where different systems meet is some of the most fertile ground. What does this principle suggest about the overlap between art and activism; aesthetics and values; an artist and the space in which she works?

Danto’s question about whether art is the best way of responding to social issues is pertinent, but it begs another question – what would be a better or more effective response? Time-consuming, challenging, exhausting, frustrating, seemingly futile – these are words that artists often use to describe the more daunting aspects of the creative process; however, these words apply equally to most traditional forms of activism, too. Letter writing, petitions, rallies, direct action, talking to representatives, and other typical methods can be questioned for their effectiveness in the same way that art can.

I think the answer to Danto’s question – “whether art is the best way of dealing with the issues” – is that there is no one “best” way. If you are an artist, then art is the best way. If talking to legislators is your thing, then for you, that is the best way. Our movements need this diversity of tactics; our movements need everyone doing what they do best. Anything you do can become your activism if you choose to make it that way. It is for this reason that art does not, in my view, seem any less relevant or less effective than other channels of

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<sup>58</sup> Danto, 65.

action. In striving for holistic change, all aspects of life and culture need to be addressed, and art, as cultural production, is not only relevant, but in many ways crucial, to that process. Interestingly, social justice and development groups are perceiving and acknowledged this connection far more quickly than the “art world” is (this is a frequent observation of those who work simultaneously in both non-profit and fine art sectors).

### **Cultural globalization**

The world is getting smaller, they say; societies the planet over are no longer separated by a mental and cultural distance. Through the vehicles of communication technologies and of capitalist economics, we have been drawn into cultural relationship with the people who inhabit other parts of the planet. This exposure is not limited to knowing about another peoples’ food or clothing; it involves coming into contact with foreign value systems and worldviews. And this, I believe, can be an extremely eye-opening and liberating thing when approached from the right angle. If humanity is ever to reach a realization about what does and does not work for us as a species, socially, culturally, and systematically, then the only way for that to happen is through the development of an overview that includes and draws upon the vast diversity of human societies. If we can clearly see and understand the experiences of our own human brothers and sisters as a whole, in all their diverse aspects and varieties, we can begin to gain an insight onto how we best function in societies, and can take the best each cultural variation has to offer and synthesize a new way of seeing and being, based on what we have learned collectively. The arts are not simply useful to this end; they are crucial.



Violence, war, and hostility are made possible through xenophobia, the fear of the other. “The fear today is more a fear of the unknown. People live in fear of their neighbors because they don’t know them.”<sup>59</sup> Overcoming this fear is an important step towards being able to work together – and the state of the planet is reaching such an intensity and urgency that it will be necessary for us all around the globe to pull together and act for change.

German social scientist Brocchi succinctly points out the implications of our situation: “If the global crisis has cultural causes, then it requires also cultural solutions.”<sup>60</sup> It does little good to merely point fingers at corporate industry, since “Exxon, the World Bank, politicians, all develop from our group assumptions, the code so many people share: dominance and profit, expansion and waste.”<sup>61</sup> We need to recognize and hold accountable those systems and vehicles which wreak destruction, but just as importantly, we must re-define our culture from the grassroots up.

Bachman’s writing about the involvement of the arts in this culture shift paints a pretty accurate picture of where we are now. “In order to facilitate the understanding of what is at stake globally the value of the arts and culture is a tricky thing. Theoretically, everyone talks about the importance of the arts for a more sustainable thinking. Practically, it is underused and underrated, maybe even not well understood and, worse, not well conceptualized by artists themselves.”<sup>62</sup> Meanwhile, people who work in other sectors such

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<sup>59</sup> Kavitha Rao, “Pieces for Peace,” *The Odyssey World Trek for Service and Education*, 2000, <http://worldtrek.org/odyssey/mideast/012600/012600kavipuzz.html>.

<sup>60</sup> Davide Brocchi, “The Cultural Dimension of Sustainability,” *Sustainability: a new frontier for the arts and cultures*, ed. Sacha Kagan and Volker Kirchberg. (Germany: VAS- Verlag, 2008), 26.

<sup>61</sup> Gablik, 90.

<sup>62</sup> Gunther Bachmann, “Gatekeeper: a foreword.” *Sustainability: a new frontier for the arts and cultures*, ed. Sacha Kagan and Volker Kirchberg, (Germany: VAS-Verlag, 2008), 8.

as development and diplomacy are perceiving the potentials for art much more swiftly and clearly.

“The arts and culture have great role in bridging divisions. They must be used as tools in shaping opinion. Frequent interactions with cultural leaders will help in bridging the gaps between nations and civilizations. The biggest reason for division is the lack of understanding and respect. Use arts where diplomacy fails,”<sup>63</sup> says Cynthia Schneider, the director of the Arts and Culture Initiative at the Brookings Institution’s Saban Center for Middle East Policy. In this specific instance, the tense relations between the West and the Muslim world are brought up as an example. “The lack of support for artistic and cultural interactions with the Muslim world and the lack of integration of arts and culture into policy and agendas represent lost opportunities,” writes journalist Kanady. “The arts have the potential to persuade and alter stereotypes through their emotional impact.”<sup>64</sup> Once again, this comes back to the idea of cultivating empathy and a recognition of oneself in the “other” – a strength that can be utilized not only between individuals, but between whole societies.

“[Art] can be constructed as a bridge among people, communities, even countries,”<sup>65</sup> states artist Suzanne Lacy. In regards to some of the growing pains of our shift to a multicultural and global society, Beunders asserts that the arts are again an important facet. “Although we are going through a phase of uncertainty, with restraint in public expression and downright censorship and self-censorship in the media,” he writes, “the many examples

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<sup>63</sup> Satish Kanady, “Call to involve art in diplomacy,” *The Peninsula Online* (2008): <http://www.thepeninsulaqatar.com>

<sup>64</sup> Kanady.

<sup>65</sup> Lacy, 784.

of very successful public art give reason to believe that there is a need for public art in the multicultural society as well.”<sup>66</sup> Put more simply, Kanady again states, “Artists in any society can push the boundary of freedom of expression. Enhancement of freedom of expression of artists will help with creating healthy societies.”<sup>67</sup>

The long-term nature of art’s impact puts it especially in alignment with sustainability efforts. Empirical evidence on the impacts of being exposed to art is sometimes hard to come by, because art’s force works on viewers over a great amount of time and through intuitive and emotional channels, which are not ordinarily accounted for within academic studies. Some would argue that this makes it a less effective means of creating change, but I would argue the opposite. We live in a throw-away culture where things are judged at their face value and instantaneous impact, and then discarded. This cultural norm is part of what has brought us to the global crisis we are in now. If we are to move towards a sustainable way of living, which necessarily involves considering the future as well as the present, then it makes sense to work through vehicles that mirror this ideal in their way of functioning – that are designed to be durable, and to last, and to ensure that the vision of positive cultural values is carried to future generations and becomes heritage. That’s what art does.

### **Working through culture**

Activists cannot underestimate the significance of the role that culture plays in the issues we address. If we want to change destructive systems from the inside out – to cure the root causes rather than just applying band-aids – then we have to work through cultural

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<sup>66</sup> Beunders, 56.

<sup>67</sup> Kanady.

means, because culture is what defines our entire understanding of how we relate to each other and the earth.

The most important thing to realize about culture is that it is not static. It's not something that's just there, that we need to work within. We *make* it. Collectively, we define our culture, and it is always evolving whether we realize it or not. Activism means becoming a conscious, intentional contributor to that evolution. Activism is not a fight; it is a way of growth – personal growth, community growth, and large-scale human growth. And the first place that growth manifests, outside the individual, is in culture. So don't try to make it a fight; you'll end up hurting yourself. Make it a creative project. And if you must have a weapon, let it be art – either literal art, or, if you have another skill, use that skill and treat it as an art form.

## *Interviews*

During the course of my research, I have had the opportunity to meet and talk with many people who are doing interesting work intersecting art and activism in a variety of ways. Their experiences and insights are extremely valuable in gaining an understanding of some of the models that are already in place, and some of the underlying ideas and relationships that give arts activism its significance in different situations. In this section, I have included all of those interviews in full, organized broadly starting with those who are local to Kentucky and moving out into the national and international.

**Lauren Cunningham** is the former program director of Kaleidoscope, an organization in Bowling Green, Kentucky that works with the goal of “transforming youth and community through art and activism.”

<http://www.wku.edu/kaleidoscope/>

*How did Kaleidoscope get started?*

The visionary for our program was a lady by the name of Erin Barger. About five or six years ago, she started to put together some research about how art can be very transformative when it comes to young people, and community-wise. So she had this vision of bringing together all different types of young people from different economic backgrounds, different ethnic backgrounds, and coupling them with positive adults who would teach them art. Art was like the vehicle to bring us all together, and her goal was to hopefully transform young people, therefore making them feel valuable and feel like they could be positive contributors to the community at large. Her overall goal was to make it a holistic program, meeting the immediate needs of youth, but also moving into meeting the needs of families and the community abroad. Well, Erin got her wish when we were federally grant funded through the Department of Justice, for juvenile delinquency prevention, and that grant came through Western Kentucky University, through the Department of Psychology. Erin was the start of Kaleidoscope because of the idea, but then she and her husband joined the Peace Corps and they actually moved to China. So when they moved to China, myself, a guy by the name of Steve Pavey, who was the director of Kaleidoscope at one point at the beginning, and a guy by the name of Gary Hook – Gary and I, we were program coordinators, and Steve was the director of the program. We took it on and actually, the skeleton that Erin had built, we started to put flesh on those bones and developed a vision statement and a mission statement and developed the program, and so on and so forth. So now, four years later, here we are.

*So what was it that made you want to link art and activism for the program? What, in your view, is the strength of pairing those two things?*

Well, our overall vision is to somehow help create a just and compassionate society. That’s in our vision statement, and we realize that in order to do that, we have to be active participants in that. Bowling Green is a great town; however, there are some things that we need to take a stand on. There are some things that happen here that we want to address, and we want to empower young people to be able to do that. So when we were putting together

our vision statement and we knew that we wanted to work towards a just and compassionate world, we knew that it started locally, and we knew that it started with ourselves. So our mission statement is to transform youth and community through arts and activism. We know that art is a very, very powerful way to communicate injustice. And so the two almost naturally seem to go together. I mean, when you look at how we go about achieving a just and compassionate society, it's not only expressing love and building positive relationships, but it's also about being active in addressing the issues in your local community and the world abroad that need to be addressed, and we feel like art is a powerful, exciting way to do that.

*What are some of the specific ways that Kaleidoscope combines the arts with activism in their projects?*

Well, we have one program that is solely dedicated to using the two, arts and activism, and it's called Voices 4 Justice. Voices 4 Justice is unique in the fact that it brings together youth and adults working side by side to address some issue of social justice. We've dealt with racial reconciliation, we've dealt with poverty, we've dealt with the Millenium Development Goals, the One campaign, we've dealt with fair housing. So it's unique in the fact that, once again, youth and adults work side by side. We're very intentional about sharing the story, about educating each other -- not just adults talking to youth, but a serious interaction and dialogue between youth and adults about where they come from. We have students in our program, not just African-Americans, but also Caucasians, and Hispanic young people from all different backgrounds -- not just Mexican but Colombian, Venezuelan -- so a lot of different folks coming together, sharing their stories. So Voices 4 Justice is definitely hitting at the core of what Kaleidoscope is all about.

*I've seen you all do performances at the Martin Luther King day celebrations. What are some of the other types art projects that you take on?*

Martin Luther King day is one of our annual projects every year. This year, we actually dedicated a whole week to MLK day, and celebrating justice heroes of our past, and bringing to it a local aspect and perspective. We had guest speakers come in who were involved in the Civil Rights movement here in Bowling Green, on Western's campus. We had one of the first African-American males admitted to Western, who is now Dean of Student Affairs there. We had the first African-American homecoming queen, who is a local artist, Alice Gatewood Waddell. She came and spoke to the kids about just what it was like, walking out onto the Homecoming Court and Diddle Arena just being absolutely silent because it was something new, something different. So we try to provide that opportunity for kids to be able to ask questions back and forth. But then the really fun part is that we had some different classes. We had music -- hip-hop music, which is sometimes perceived as being negative, but we try to put a positive spin on it. So we had hip-hop music, we had drumming, poetry, visual arts, and dance. And those classes during this week, it was very intense, but we had a very intentional goal of processing through ideas about justice heroes of our past, the civil rights movement in Bowling Green, and the role that MLK played in all of it. And from processing that through art, some really great things came out of it. We had two banners

painted that say “Now is the Time.” The kids were able to once again work through what it means, and their role in this whole idea of justice, fairness, equality – and not just throwing out those words, but thinking, what does it look like? How does it feel? And the dance class was able to interpret that through their movement, and with the poetry and the drumming, they were able to speak it into existence. So it was a very, very powerful week, and that’s just one project that the Voices 4 Justice has done.

We partnered with Western and the Political Science department last fall to do a project called “Get on the Bus: 40 Years of Political Activism.” We actually painted the side of a school bus, and put a mural on it with a timeline from 1968 to 2008. It walked the line of important events, and it wasn’t just about the Civil Rights movement; it was about events that have happened through our nation’s history where people took the first step of taking a stand. Gay rights, the AIDS epidemic, the Vietnam War, just different things, all the way up to this last presidential election. It was great being able to work through that with our young people. So it makes me excited, and I think it gets the kids excited as well.

*Do you see these projects as having an impact on the people you work with, and what kind of impact do you see?*

I do. Kaleidoscope is unique in the fact that we get calls from the Human Rights commission, and then we’ll get calls from, like, Parker Bennett Elementary School. Because we have this activism side to what we do, we get a lot of attention from activist groups within our community. But then because we have the youth component to what we do, and we feel it’s important to empower them to use their voice for change, we get a lot of phone calls on the other end. You know, “We have a group of fifth-graders that we’d like you to work with,” or, “We have this going on that we’d like you to do.” I think the impact that I see comes from both sides.

For one, the young people we work with, whether it’s in the schools or in our evening art program – they feel supported, they feel valued, they feel confident, they feel like they’re competent in an area of art, and at the end of the day, I think they come through as better people. They’re more aware, they’re more conscious, and hopefully they are able to treat their neighbour a little better and recognize that they do have something to give back to this community as a whole. On the other side, as far as adults and organizations go, I feel like we give adults the opportunity to get involved, to really make a difference. I think people all the time say, “I just want to do something, I want to be involved.” And I think that at the end of the day, everyone wants to feel valued, everyone wants to feel like they’re giving back, they’re contributing. And for organizations, I always tell my staff that “Kaleidoscope adds the spice.” We add the excitement, the youthfulness, the art, and just that – that *energy*, that I think sometimes is lacking in some of our community organization. So I feel like that’s the effect that we have on them. They love when our kids come and perform, they love when they create art, they love having them there in the midst – just because it’s something that’s fun, it’s outgoing. It’s that kind of thing.

*Whenever I have heard or read anything about Kaleidoscope, I have always been really impressed by the impression that the group seems to make – people always seem to say, “These people are so passionate, they express so much love for the world in their work,” that kind of stuff. So, do you think that these same activities would have the same effect if the people doing them didn’t completely love what they were doing? In other words, do you see these things – arts, activism, community engagement – are intrinsically powerful on their own, or would you see them more as vehicles to help express the power from within people?*

That’s a tough question. I think it’s a little bit of both. Arts and activism put together, that’s just powerful on its own. I mean, when you see it come together, it’s great. But, what it brings out of people, and I think what makes it so powerful with the two together... As far as arts and activism, and then what it can draw out of people when they really get into it, is... I think you see *transformation* happening. You see people walking away more aware.

I saw a great movie yesterday, and this is a little bit off subject, but I think it speaks to what you’re asking me. I went to this film series, and it was showing a movie about the Civil Rights movement and the Mississippi Burning, and the three students that went down and were killed in Mississippi. All these folks back up north were gathering together and saying, “What do we do now? We know that Mississippi is not the place we need to go... But, it *is* the place we need to go.” One of the leaders of the group stood up and basically said, “We know what we’re facing, and if we go there, there is a possibility we may not come back. But we need to go there.” It was like, “This is something that we don’t need to do, because we may lose our lives – but it’s something that we *have* to do.” And I think that that’s the power of arts activism. And they even got it, because in the film, when they went to Washington, or Atlantic City, or this political conference, they took the car that the students were burned in, they took banners, they took sketches of the faces of those young people, they took their clothes – they took any remains that they could, to make those folks *identify* with just what happened. And in a way, *that is art*.

And just how powerful that is... I think it’s something where, once all that stuff is put together, you have the arts and activism, and then you have people who are passionate about it, and when those two hook up – and this is what we hope for our kids – that you walk away from the experience better, more active, more aware, and feeling this yearning and pulling that says, “Okay, I know it’s gonna be hard, I know I might be made fun of – but it’s something that I have to do.”

*What are some of the biggest challenges that Kaleidoscope runs into?*

Right now, our biggest challenge is not art or activism – it is funding. That’s our biggest challenge. We were grant funded on a major, major grant that sustained us for three years. But now, we are on private donations. And with the world’s economy right now, we are on a shoestring budget, and we’ve had to let jobs go, and so on and so forth. But that’s our biggest challenge. Having to adapt your program to meet your budget needs sometimes messes with your psyche, because it doesn’t seem fair, and it definitely doesn’t seem right. But that’s just what it is. And I think the powerful thing about our program is that, whether



or not we have funding, the relationships between young people and adults can always be there. There is nothing stopping me, or you, or anyone else, from hooking up with a young person and creating art with them. I mean, you can do that out of your home, you can do that after school. Right now we provide that infrastructure, we provide the facility and everything that we have.. But it doesn't start and end there.

*How about some of the biggest rewards?*

Oh boy, there's tons of them. There's the community building aspect, seeing people come together, and all of the community partnerships. But the biggest reward is seeing our young people come away better. Like seeing them graduate from high school, and they're in college now. Or seeing them pursue their artistic dreams. Last May, we had our biggest graduating class from Kaleidoscope. We had six of our teenagers graduate from high school, and five of those six are now in college and are doing well. And that's a big success, because at the end of the day, we are trying to produce better people who can be active citizens, whether it's in this community or another community. But to know that they have a powerful voice, they don't just have to sit by and let things happen. That they have to be go-getters, and that it takes work, and it takes effort, but that it's their responsibility as a citizen to do some of those things, and it's also their privilege. So we have a lot of great success coming out of our program, but that's the biggest reward, is just seeing them walk away better.

*Would you have any advice for people who want to start projects doing this kind of work, with arts, activism, youth, and community?*

My biggest piece of advice is to have, number one, a clear vision and a clear mission of what you want to do. Number two, involve as many people as you can. Use their strengths. Put together a committee, put together a council. One thing I've learned is that, I have really great ideas and I have my own opinion about things – but when you get in the midst of other folks who are just as passionate as you are, and who have wonderful ideas, and when you start to tailor those and combine them and rearrange them – what you can do or what you can produce and the amount of people you can effect and touch, is way beyond what one person could do. And I think that speaks to the larger goal, that it kind of all starts with you and your passion, but when that hooks up with someone else, and then hooks up with someone else – I mean, I think that's really how our world works. It's all about the collective, but it all starts with the individual. That's my biggest advice, and just work towards peoples' strengths and what they can give, and then... you'll be on your way.

**Judi Jennings** is the director of the Kentucky Foundation for Women, an organization based in Louisville that provides funding for feminist art projects.

<http://www.kfw.org/>

*From what I understand, you were involved in activism first before becoming involved in the arts, and you sort of came to the arts through your involvement in justice movements. How did that process happen?*

It's interesting the way people define activism. I think a lot of people don't think of themselves as activists because there's not always a job where they get paid to be a full time activist. I started graduate school in the fall of 1969, and in the spring of 1970 was Kent State, which was when the National Guard shot and killed several students. I was finishing my first year of grad school then, and the governor of Kentucky was Louie Nunn. And there were some protests and riots against the war at UK (University of Kentucky), and somebody burned out the ROTC building— well, they threw a flaming bottle and it caught it on fire. And Governor Nunn called out the Kentucky National Guard with bayonets and live ammunition... four days after Kent State... But they didn't close the school. And I had a final, and I was in graduate school so I'm like, "Well, I have to go and take my final, because it's my whole grade." So I went onto campus, and it was a beautiful May day, and here's the National Guard standing there with their bayonets glittering in the sun, surrounding shoulder to shoulder, and I had to walk through the line of them to get to my class.

It was pretty intense, and that was the first time I realized that the law enforcement people and the system aren't always there to protect dissenters. And after I took my final and went back out, some people were there saying, "This is wrong, these people shouldn't be here," and someone said, "Let's sit down in the grass." So I'm like, okay. So I sat down on the grass. And the state troopers came with the National Guard and they started throwing tear gas on us. And that's when I realized that the police and the system would actually hurt you if you dissent. The state troopers actually knew who they wanted to get, and they came into the crowd with their billy clubs, and just beat the crap out of the people that they were going after particularly. And I was right next to a guy that just got really beaten bad, I mean they hit him in the head and his head was bleeding and everything. That really made a big impression on me that, if you think something's wrong, you have to say so. That was a turning point for me.

So I became really active in the anti Vietnam War movement, and that brought me into the women's movement, because that was when second-wave feminism was going on. And I was married, and then divorced, because my husband didn't want me to go protesting. He was really embarrassed, and he was a corporate guy and he didn't want me marching around against the war. And I really changed my whole presentation of how I thought and even how I looked. But I was still in academics, and got a job teaching.

But then after that, my mom died at age 55. When my mom died I realized that she had really lived a lot of her life feeling ashamed of being from eastern Kentucky. And nobody anywhere in the United States should have to feel ashamed of where they're from. So I left

academics and I worked for Appalshop, which is a media arts and education center, and their major purpose is to combat negative stereotypes about eastern Kentucky. I loved working at Appalshop and that had a big impact on me about the arts and working with the media. But then, I didn't feel like I was using my PhD [in 18<sup>th</sup> Century British History], after all the tears and sweat it took to earn it. So I moved to Louisville and became the founding director of the University of Louisville Women's Center in 1991, and our big focus there was bringing together activism and the university. We really worked hard on doing that.

*What, in your view, is the strength of using art to help highlight and heal social problems?*

Appalshop is a media center. It started out as a film producing group, but it also has a theatre company, a radio station, and an education program. So what I noticed when I worked there is that the media always thinks that the media is important. Appalshop would get written up in the New York Times because the media people would think it was important. That was an interesting lesson about the power and limitations of film, which I could go into more.

But coming from Appalshop, being out there, doing the work and getting attention for it (because how are you going to combat stereotypes if nobody knows what you're doing?) affected the way I approached arts and activism. When I came to the Women's Center, I didn't just look at the university; I was like, "We have to go outside the walls of the university if we really are going to bring attention to women's issues." It was 1991, and I had really come out of second-wave feminism, and I felt like there's "academic feminism," and then there's "community-based feminism," and there was a big gap between the two. And that even calling yourself a feminist is really a privilege, and that some poor people and people in certain communities cannot even take that privilege. They might be out there doing good work and supporting women, but they might not want to say they're a feminist. And I say, if you're doing the work, it doesn't matter what you call yourself. I would rather people felt okay claiming the name feminist, but I'm not going to shut people out. So how do you prove that? How do you say "I'm really open" when you're at a university? How do you say, "I care about the community people, and I want to be where you are – I don't want you to have to come to my campus, find a place to park, and listen to my program in my language"?

So there was a project based at Appalshop that was a national project, called the American Festival Project, and it was art for social change, art for social justice. And at that time they were doing a lot of events on college campuses to show justice issues – and they were a range of justice issues. I went to one at Brown University in New Hampshire, and it was really powerful, and I saw how the university people related to it in a different way because it was performance and not lectures. We decided to do an American Festival Project at U of L, focused on women and women's issues. So we had Urban Bush Women, a modern dance group of African-American women based in New York, and they do really powerful work. They came, and there was the Traveling Jewish Theater, based in San Francisco, and there was a woman there who talked about growing up within a repressive religious environment, but it was Judaism – and I grew up in a repressive religious environment, but it was Southern

Baptist! And I never would have thought that I had anything in common with someone who grew up in a Judaic tradition, and then when I saw her play called Snake Talk, it was a lot about what she had learned from seeing what women could and couldn't do in "church," only it was synagogue for her. And I was like, "Oh my gosh, that's my story!" It reached across the differences between Southern Baptists and Jews in a way that, if I had studied that for a thousand years, I don't think I ever would have got it. But when she told her story, about women in a religious setting and how it becomes really clear what your place is, I saw that she felt the same way, you know?

And the biggest one was this performer named Robbie McCauley, and I saw a play she did called Indian Blood. She brought together Cherokee removal and African-American issues in a really important way. Her father was Buffalo Soldier, who was pretty important in the black community. So I was like, "Robbie, I want you to do this play in our American Festival Project," because she was in it. And she was like, "No, I want to do a play called Sally's Rape. If you're doing women's issues, then this is what you need to talk about." And in this play, it's Sally Hemmings, who was Thomas Jefferson's longtime liaison, but this was in the early nineties when that issue was just coming out. It's still controversial, but it was *really* controversial then. And then, her grandmother was named Sally, too. And in the play, she gets on an auction block and stands up nude, to show the vulnerability. And I'm like, "You want to do this play at our *campus*? Where you actually go on an auction block?" And she's like, "Yeah."

So I said okay, but I had only been there for two years, and I was afraid, but I didn't want to say no. And it was a very powerful play, she did do it, and it didn't really cause that many problems with the university. But I saw how powerful it was. And there was a white woman in the play, and Robbie says, "I'm telling you my story of these two Sallys." And then the white woman goes, "Yeah, I want to tell my story too!" And Robbie says, "No, this is my story. You need to listen." And that was pretty profound, about what happens when you change who's telling the story. The women's movement had been pretty white, and they said they wanted African-American women and other women to come and be part of it, but did they really want to hear their story? Did they really want to see their vulnerability? Did they really want to take a risk and say, "We want to show your story, when it even includes being naked on an auction block." And I'm not trying to be a hero because I was really scared at the time, I was like, "Oh, crap." But the play – they did it three times – it lasted an hour, and every time, the discussion after went for three hours. And I think I got allies doing that in this community that would be there for me even until today, because they knew that we were there for them, and that you can't just say you're an ally, you have to have proven in.

*So, now you're working your job here at Kentucky Foundation for Women. What exactly do you do?*

Well, after the American Festival Project I really believed in the power of the arts, especially in the women's movement, to break down these barriers. I had actually received a grant from the Kentucky Foundation for Women to do the American Festival Project. So I was already familiar with them. So, who else is doing feminist art for social change? Nobody has really

got that focus. You know, there's not really any other organization with that as their whole purpose. So, when the job came open here, I was really excited about serving as director, and I still am.

The hard part of it is that I'm not doing it, I'm funding other people to do it. So it's sort of more removed. Anne Brady, who died a couple of years ago, she was a huge activist. She and her husband bought a house in Shively and gave it to a black couple back in the 1950's, and the house was fire bombed and her husband was put in jail for doing that. She was on trial also for being a communist and all this stuff, and so I really thought a lot of her and looked up to her. And she told me not to take this job, because she said, "We need you in the activist community and you're going over to the other side." The other side meaning the establishment, not out there in the streets. I think about that a lot, and it does limit what I myself can do as an activist, because I have to abide by federal tax rules, I have to try to be fair and transparent, and not just fund the projects that I think are great. As an administrator of a foundation, I don't think it would be right to use our resources just to support what I want.

But it's great because I've been in it for ten years now and I really do see a change in the movement. I see a lot of young people across the state really wanting to make a difference through their art— and old people too, but in the last couple of years it's been really, really exciting to see young people using digital art and all kinds of new art forms. So what we try to do now is get the word out, be there and transparent, and let people know that we are feminist art for social justice, but we don't have a magic definition of feminism. You tell us what you think it is, and if we think it makes sense in your situation we will try to help you. We also have a peer panel process, so for every application for funding, three reviewers look at it. And I think that's been really good. It's hard sometimes because we are in the room during that, but we don't ever talk, we're just observing. So sometimes we're thinking, "Oh, please give this project the funding!" But I think the fact that we don't make the funding decision in the long run has helped people who are applying to see us as allies, because what we do is try to help people make the best application they can. And sometimes there's people who I really wish would get it, and sometimes there's people who I'm not so sure about who get it, but it's always good. I never feel bad when somebody gets it because I know they will do the best they can.

*So, being in this position where you are involved with supporting a lot of activist art projects, do you notice patterns in terms of what seems to really work well? As far as mediums, methods, or any aspect of it?*

That's a really good question. One of the things we are trying to do right now is look at our impact – the impact on the grantees and then the impact of the programs we do, because we fund individual artists which is unusual – most funding people require a 501c3, which is non-profit organization status, and we fund to individuals. So you have to have different expectations for what individuals can accomplish compared to what organizations, like Appalshop – they're already 30 to 40 years old, they've got 30 people working there, so obviously they're going to be able to accomplish a lot. So we're asking the artists before

they apply to think through, what is a realistic goal of their impact, and now – we haven't started doing it yet, but we're going to try to document more and have the artist tell us what they think their impact was. But we give them the money – when they get the grant, they get the funding right upfront, as opposed to some organizations who will hold back some of the funding and say, "You have to do a progress report, you have to do this, you have to do that."

Also, we know that it takes a long time to make art and social change, so we ask for a final report in a year, but a lot of times people are still working after one year – it seems like a long time, but it's not such a long time. So, we are starting to try to think of how we can work with them, for them to assess their impact. But I think what it's going to be is a process – the pattern is going to be tools that work, not end points that work. I think what we're going to have to say is, what process works? And one of the processes that we know works is that it is really important for artists and community people to be in touch – or whoever they think they're going to work with.

So for example, it might be girls. Say I want to work with the girls at a local place for young kids that have been subject to violence and have issues with drug abuse. So if you want to make masks with those girls to give them a stronger sense of identity or caring or being able to speak, you can't just sit in your art studio and think about masks. You have to be in a discussion with them, and listen to them. You have to ask them, do they even want to make masks? Would they rather make, you know, bracelets? You have to figure out what works for them, and I think that's really hard for artists. I think a lot of people are artists because that's their expressive medium and their way of having their own voice. So you have to spend time with the people you are working with, and listen to them, and be ready to move and change if they say, you know, "This isn't working for me," or, "Hey, I have this great idea, why don't we do a YouTube project instead." You have to be able to say, "Wow, okay, we'll do that."

So having that dialogue with the people you want to work with in the activist situation is really important. It's not just going in with crayons and saying, "Let's make art!" There's a big learning curve about the needs of the people. So those are the things: patience, process, learning, working together, taking into account the people you want to try to be active with. And I think that with the art that happens, it's the process that's more important than the product. You might not come out with the best art that you would ever make. An artist could maybe have made a better product than what the project turns out, so you just have to say that it's not about the product, it's about the process of making it.

*You've talked about some of the challenges about working at an organization like KFW. What are some of the rewards?*

Well, there are a lot of rewards, so it is good to focus on that. I think, again, the rewards feel kind of removed, because the real rewards come through the people who are doing the work. We have a KFW day every year, and it's an opportunity for our grantees to come together and support each other and learn from each other. Sometimes it's a little bit awkward, because if you got funds from somebody, you're like, "Oh, I have to show up, because they

want me to.” But it’s become more and more joyous every year, because grantees are starting to learn from each other a lot, and so it’s not about us anymore – it’s about them, passing their cards to each other and talking about their projects. And last year I was late, and when I walked in, there was just this big buzz in the room and people were talking to each other and helping each other out, giving each other advice about their art projects, and nobody even noticed when I came in. And I was so happy that that happened, because that’s what it was really about, was connecting them – not paying homage or gratitude to us or anything like that. So I thought, “Yes, we are really creating a community!”

And I feel like there is such a great need for an artist community -- statewide, especially, but even in Louisville. Yesterday I talked to a woman who had gotten her MFA and just moved back into town, and she was having a really hard time meeting other artists, and I think visual artists have big challenges with that since they work in their studio. I think being an artist can be really isolating, and I don’t think our American society really values the arts and artists – although that’s happened less in the last few years. But I hate the economic development argument about the arts, because it’s like, if art is part of economic development then why are artists so poor? Artists don’t have jobs, they don’t get appreciated and they don’t get paid. When they say art is economic development, it’s always to benefit someone else, not the artist. That’s not how it’s been working in the United States. There are other countries where people recognize the cultural sector as a really important part – Berlin is the famous example. People put their funding there because they know that having a vibrant arts scene will draw other people, but it isn’t just to bring tourists there, it’s to support the artists that they have, and to have a good community. And we have such an important artist’s community in Louisville that is doing the work with no pay, or little pay, and little recognition. So I think that getting artists to support each other, even if it’s bartering somehow – you know, “I’ll make your website if you get me an exhibit,” something like that. Especially in Kentucky, because people see us as a poor state and we are, but we’re really rich in arts and culture. That’s our card, that’s our thing to be so proud of, and we’re not leading with those strengths, you know? They’re not being recognized.

One thing that’s really good is that we’re part of Grantmakers in the Arts which is a national organization for funders of the arts, and there’s about 400 funders, and about 60 or 80 of those are arts for social justice, and we’re starting to get more together. And now there’s a social justice funders caucus that can meet with other foundations. And that’s really good because we can get pretty isolated. You know, when I say to people, “Oh, we do feminist art for social change!” A lot of people are like, “Oh…” Or they’re puzzled.

“Social change” and “social justice,” I think people get that – whether they want it or not. It’s really been great in this last year to have an art and social justice group emerging nationally because you can really relate to people, people who really get why artists are really important. So I think the KFW grantees are sometimes more recognized nationally than they are in Kentucky, because there’s a greater understanding of what they are trying to do. And we’re right in the middle of that – in the big group of Grantmakers in the Arts we’re little, and we’re state-level, and we fund individuals – so if we say, “Excuse me, here’s what’s happening in Kentucky,” everyone’s like, “Oh, who cares,” because they want to go to these

big grants like the Rockefeller. But in the social justice funders it's like, "wow, you've been around for twenty years doing this work, and you get these great artists." So it's good to have that network of support.

*Do you have any advice for people who are interested in working to help support or facilitate activist art projects from this more administrative end of things?*

Oh my gosh, you know what, it's just patience. There've been several attempts to organize artists, but I think this is a hard time right now for organizing in activist art since it's such an emerging field. People get mixed up between public art, community art, social justice art. And artists are pretty individualistic a lot of times. So what I'm thinking right now, and this might not be the way it's going to happen, but I think that artists working for social justice is going to be more shifting alliances and coalitions and some kind of organization that people maybe pay a fee to belong to. I think artists are going to have to figure out what kind of art they are doing when, and who they are allied with while doing that art. Because I think it's going to change and be fluid.

And we'll see what happens with all the administration changing, but it was really scary to me that when they were doing the stimulus recovery bill, there was a move to strip all the arts out of the bill. And the reason, I'm pretty sure, is that the arts have been controversial, and they didn't want to have some project in there that people would be able to use to nail the whole stimulus to the wall. It was a protection factor, because with the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts), look what happened to them. One conservative politician got hold of Mapplethorpe and Serrano's *Piss Christ*, and the whole program went down. I think that makes people think they can't take a chance on the arts, which is really sad, because people should welcome dissent. But we're not there where we can do it yet. So when funding is at stake, organizations aren't going to be saying, "We need artists out there holding the line and doing activism and speaking out." They're not going to do that. So it's really hard.

Even the bicycle racks here in Louisville, they took down the pink one because people didn't like it. And it was great, it was beautifully designed, but people just got mad that there was a pink bicycle rack, so they took it down. We're not there with freedom of expression. We like to think in this country that we are all about freedom of expression, but we're really not. And so I think we've got a long ways to go to have a governmental embracing of the arts and culture.

So in the meantime, artists need to figure out what they want, what they aim to accomplish, who's going to fund it. I think some artists have been not-so-smart about it, because if you're getting federal money, you don't need to slap the federal government in the face. Don't take their money if you want to make something they won't want, do you know what I'm saying? I'm pretty pragmatic about it, because you're going to take the consequences, and then a lot of people are going to take the consequences for you. So if you want to make a big statement, and you're taking funds from somebody, they are going to react. Just know that, be aware of that.



So, we have a ways to go. And I think this generation of artists has a way of being really resilient, adaptive, smart, moving. I feel good about it, because I feel like there's going to be new solutions. And I feel like there's going to be new solutions in the next five or ten years.

**Joyce Ogden** is a sculptor who teaches art at Spalding University in Louisville, Kentucky. She has been coordinating public and community-based art projects in Louisville for over a decade, often incorporating the projects into the classes that she teaches. At the time of this writing, she is working on a project in the exit lobby of the Jefferson County Jail.



The mural project in the exit lobby of the Jefferson County Jail. This photo was taken while the project was in progress.  
Courtesy of Joyce Ogden

*How did you first get involved with doing community art and public art?*

I started a class that was a public art class, so it was to get students out of the classroom and doing something in the community, a public work that they would be involved in, from the research stage through the conceptualization and execution of it, to give them that kind of hands-on, real-life experience. And then, one of the first projects that we did was a proposal for an inner city park down the street. You know, we realized that it's a park, and so we need to know what the people who are using the park think. That was when I realized how important community was to the process, and so that started influencing how I thought about this work.

*So what kind of process did you go through to try to figure out what the needs of the community were in that space?*

We started with a questionnaire. We targeted an area around the park, about a one block radius in all directions, and left surveys at those sites and then went back and picked them up. So it was arranged from business to residences to schools. And then we used that, not only to help inform us, but then it also became a kind of validation from the community when we

made our proposal to the city. That became a kind of template that I have used ever since, it's exactly how I started the jail project.

When I started work on the jail project we started with a survey. We identified that community as inmates, former inmates, family members and loved ones of inmates, and the staff in the jail. So we designed a survey for anybody in that community to fill out, and basically said, "Do you think it's a good idea to put an artwork in the exit lobby? If so, what do you think it should be about? What kinds of symbols might it include?" We asked other things too because part of what we were doing here, an important part of it, was to provide resource materials for inmates as well as their family members, so we kind of got into some other things that we could bring up as long as we had folks' attention.

But then there was a section where we left a little blank, and said, "Here, sketch out any ideas that you have." We started with the inmates, and we started getting these amazing drawings. So then we went in with big blank sheets of paper, not just a little square, and we would leave that for them. So that, then, really started defining the project, because in the past I have always worked with the community involved in the making, so that the community helps generate the ideas and then helps make it too. But here there was no way inmates could help make it, but they could generate these drawings. And at that point we didn't know what the medium was necessarily going to be (it's all handmade clay).

This was the first time I partnered with another artists, and I specifically wanted to do that because I was interested in collaborating, and I was also interested in expanding the dialogue within the community of artists. She was really interested in learning to work with the clay, because she's a photographer, Mary Yates. So we ended up going that direction with the clay, and just about every project I've done has been that method, and one reason is because I find that it allows for a lot of people to participate. So basically we used the surveys to generate the image, the idea of, conceptually, what this work would represent, and what kind of imagery the folks who completed the surveys wanted to convey. So that's what generated a landscape. People said, "It should represent hope, it should represent change, it should show the concept of going on a journey, going on a new path, going from dark to light" -- light came up a lot -- anything that came up repetitively, that's what stuck out and those were the things we tried to focus on. Missing nature, missing family, how important family was.

So we thought, well, we'll let them -- whether it was inmates, or it was family, or kids in the visitor's lobby -- create their own little message through a drawing that will get transferred onto a clay tile, and we will just generate the sort of landscape, this nature that's so missing there, that would become the backdrop in a sense for that. But then by making it in clay, in lots of little clay pieces -- like, all these small little buttons and small little swirls that are set in a colored mortar -- those can be made by anybody and everybody, so then the community expands, in the process of making it, to people who have been formerly incarcerated, or family members of people who either are or were incarcerated... So those are some of the people who participated in making it.

*So they participated more conceptually than in the actual work of making it?*

The making it was headed up by the students in the class, and that was good, because originally the class wasn't even part of the equation. But we also invited groups to come in and work with us, so, young adults from Youth Build, a kind of program for at-risk young adults, they worked with us. A couple of women's re-entry programs came and helped. Installing is the part where it becomes harder to involve people, so my class was involved in installing it. But then we set up Saturday workshops that were – not open to the public necessarily, although anyone who was sitting there in the lobby visiting was invited to participate – but where anyone who had helped to make it was invited to come back and help. But the installation has been more of a high skill-based thing, with a small group of artists participating.

Another interesting thing that came out of it – the door. This is the door that they exit through, and the mural surrounds that door. That was actually really interesting to me, because at first I thought, okay, we're going to cover that whole wall. And I thought, oh, we've got this door in the middle of it -- *how annoying*, you know? [Laughs] And then when I realized that was the door the inmates exit through, and that they would literally be walking through the artwork, it became so symbolic. So then we decided we would put some kind of text on the door. And working with an institution is very interesting, especially an institution that traditionally doesn't embrace these sort of niceties or things like art.

So that's been very interesting, both from the point of view of the institution and the public. They've been great – the director that we started the project with has since retired, and I haven't met the new director at the jail. But this director that we were working with, Dr. Campbell, was phenomenal. And when we were going to tell him that we wanted to incorporate the door, everyone was like – “Oh no, he's not gonna let you do that.” And he was just like, “Yeah, go for it.” So we wanted to incorporate writing, and use clay letters. We kept asking people that were doing drawings, “We want writing too, if you write poetry or anything, please contribute something,” and we got very little, and we asked for suggestions and we weren't getting anything. So then one day I was making a presentation about this project to the board that the money was given to, and I read them a few of the survey answers that are just really touching, and one woman said, “Excuse me, why don't you put that on the door?” And it was one of those, “*Ohhh, yeah!*” kind of moments. It's another one of those things about when you make it community based – the more people you involve, the richer it gets. So the door is going to be covered with text from what people said that they think this artwork should symbolize, and it's going to tie it all together really nicely.

So what I like about it, even though you can see that the little tiles with people's drawings on them seem kind of small from a distance... When people walk into the room, first of all, people will kind of be like, “What's that doing here?” Then they'll look at it and say, “Oh okay, it's a landscape and there's a tree, that's cute.” But then if you spend a little more time looking at it, you'll start to notice those tiles set into it, and start to get a sense of what it's really about – people sharing their messages.

*Can you talk a little about the background with all the projects you've done in the past?*

The first project I did was in Memorial Park. We started with the bus stop bench, then the strata wall, then the curvilinear bench, then the alley wall. And that was a good project – what’s nice about that project that’s a little bit different from everything else is that everyone got to create their own individual artwork on a tile. It was all called “Creating Communities: Nature and the Inner City,” so it was all based on first studying nature, taking inner city kids on a field trip to the Falls of the Ohio. And they all had cameras. Then when we came back we had an art lesson, and they all got to make whatever kind of statement they wanted.

The next project was at Harbor House, a place for adults with disabilities.

And now I am also working on a project at the Center for Women and Families (a local domestic violence shelter), at the entrance of the building. There’s a set of glass doors, and then a little foyer space, and another set of glass doors where you enter again. And we’re going to line handmade clay tiles on each of the side walls in that entry space. We’re covering the walls with a steel plate and a gridded peg system, and the tiles they make have holes in them so they can hang on the pegs. The idea is that clients at the Center are the ones who will make the tiles. We’re going to ask them to make a tile that expresses something along the lines of “Hope, healing and home.” Then, the idea is that the tiles can be removed and changed – so if someone is in a program there and then leaves, they can take their tile with them, or if someone comes to stay in a program for a while, they can make a tile to add. So the wall is always interchanging. But the other idea behind it, too, with being in that foyer entrance area, is to really embrace people – especially because a lot of people are entering that facility when they are in a pretty traumatic state, so as soon as they will walk in, they can be wrapped in all those warm thoughts of the people who have been there.

*When is that project going to be getting started?*

We’re in the process of installing the steel. It’s been in the planning and preparatory stage for almost a year now.

*Does it generally take that amount of time to get all the logistics worked before starting one of these kinds of projects?*

It does, definitely, easily. Especially depending on how you’re doing it, because the more people you want to involve, the more time you have to give it to accommodate all the different schedules. Doing it through the college class helps tremendously because if you want to talk about creating a dialogue or discourse about art in society, to do it in an art class with non-art majors who have either no, or a very negative, connection to art, and to involve them in the process of making it -- that not only makes them think about art differently, but also makes them think about their community differently. That’s pretty rewarding. And in terms of getting a lot of work done inexpensively, and fairly efficiently, the class is a great way to do that – but then it also, I think, impacts the students. What I found is it’s really hard to do a project without it. I tried once to go into a community and do a community-based project without a pre-existing structured program, like a class, or an after-school program,

and getting people to participate was really hard, because everybody's busy. So I really think the way you make it happen is within pre-existing structures and programs.

*Through the Memorial Park project and everything, you have a lot of experience with getting permission from city officials to make art projects in public places. What is that process like, of getting permission to put something in a public place?*

Today, now I have a reputation and relationship with them – so let me reflect back to thirteen years ago, when we were first starting the Memorial Park project. It helped that it was through a university. We didn't have any experience, so we didn't have credibility. But basically what we said was, "Can we present a proposal to you to revitalize the park?" I mean, it was a whole plan for the park. "Would you enter into a conversation with us? If we make that presentation, and we intrigue you with that presentation, is that something that could happen – a path we could go down?" And they said sure. But I think they said, [mimes snickering behind hand] "Sure – who are you?"

We put together a pretty good proposal, and we impressed them. And then, they were great to work with. There were enough of the right people in place – that's a big factor – and we were lucky enough to be put in touch with those people in the park system. So then it just went on from there – we did one, they saw that we knew what we were doing, and then we went on to the next one. They kept helping to secure funds do their part of what needed to be done, so it was a real good relationship.

Today, it depends. Right now Louisville has an advisory committee to the mayor on public art, but it hasn't been real structured, and it's been like that for a long time. So I know, for example, an artist who approached them whose proposal was not accepted, and he felt real frustrated because he really felt like there wasn't any criteria given. Now, the mayor's committee is actually working on a master public art plan. So, you know, it kind of depends from city to city on what exists. But even in smaller cities, I think people have to know what they are doing – and there is more and more information online, in terms of thinking about funding, maintenance, that sort of thing. But I think cities, parks, and municipalities are very interested when artists approach them and when artists can demonstrate that they have experience, they are organized, and they know what they're doing.

*What are some of the more challenging aspects of organizing group projects?*

The first thing that came to mind when you said "challenging" and "group" was the long-term nature of these projects, and how working with students, and even other people – people that you might be doing the project for – they get real frustrated with how long it takes. And helping people understand that there's a process, and that you want to include as many people as possible, so that's going to take a little more time and we're maybe not going to make a decision today. Often students get real frustrated with that. But even with the jail project – "When are you going to be done? When are you going to be done?" They kind of thought we would be done in two months, and that really should have been clarified a whole lot more. So I think that's a challenge, and depending on how you're working on the project

or how it has been arranged for you to work on the project, if it's not your full-time job and you're not working on it 24/7, it is going to take a lot longer.

*Do you feel like you have a big job as mediator to keep people from stepping on each other's toes with the projects? Do those kinds of issues arise often?*

We really set it up in the beginning, in terms of my class, we really work on setting it up so that doesn't happen. And I don't know what I am doing differently, but I find that it is less of an issue now than it was when I first started. And then when we invite other people in, we work on really respecting them and valuing them and making everybody understand that everyone is sort of equal with the project, and keeping people in the loop. So I really can't say that it's been too much of an issue.

*Do you generally get much feedback from people in the community after the art piece has been installed?*

I don't directly. I think that if it's at a facility, they get feedback. And then if you get, you know, a newspaper article or something like that... One woman who worked on the Memorial Park – someone from a Louisville Peace organization, they like to volunteer periodically – she cut out the newspaper article that was in the paper recently on the jail project and sent it to me – you know, that was sweet. I think people pay attention.

*So how do you determine if a public art piece is successful?*

Good question. By the level of engagement. How many people are participating, what people say while they are participating, or if they are not participants but viewers, passers-by, what kind of comments they make.

*So you really focus more on what's happening during the process of making it, rather than on the product and the way people engage with it once it's been there for a while?*

Yeah, I definitely do. But then, because of what we do—we are creating a product – I want the product to be successful. But I get much more out of the process.

*And I guess the process is easier to focus on since you're there doing it – that it would be harder to monitor the success of the product.*

Right. But for example, one reason why the jail has been so interesting, especially when it got further along to where it is right now – and especially the next few times we go to work on it – enough of it is done so that when people come in and comment on it, whether they are engaging with us or not, we can hear that. And I would say maybe one out of ten, if that many -- actually, I don't think it's even happening anymore, but – in the beginning when they couldn't tell what it was, maybe one out of ten people would be like, "What are they wasting our money on art for? What is that thing?!" You know, that kind of thing. But most people are like, "Wow!" And some people are in there eight to ten hours waiting for

someone to be released, and so we get to know each other, and there's a whole community that is created within there. And they sit there, and they really *get* it, and they appreciate it. So then you're like, "Wow – this is working." And I could go in there and sit for a while after it's finished and just see how people react. I might do that. I mean, in that kind of space, it's a lot easier to see.

*So with the people who come in and express that they feel it's a waste of their public funds, do you respond to them?*

Sometimes. It depends on their demeanor and what the situation is, so I feel it out. But I really do try to address that. And for one thing, we have a sign posted there, a little wall with an explanation of the project and statement about it, and there will be a permanent plaque that goes up. But I let people know that it's not publicly funded.

*How do you think you would respond to someone, if it was publicly funded?*

It would be harder! And it makes it so much easier that it's not. I would have to really work more on a very concise statement, because it is such a hard thing for many people to grasp, and people could always throw out, "Well, there are starving people out there!" But that, you know, it would probably be something along the lines of... "Forty thousand inmates go through these doors every day. Many of them have one or two people waiting here. So that's eighty thousand people sitting in this room, another forty going through the doors. That's a hundred and twenty thousand citizens. I think the small amount of money that's going into this project to make this experience a little less traumatic for them is worth it."

At Memorial Park, it's a more public setting of people coming and going, and the project that took the longest and that was the most visible there was the curvilinear bench. What was fun about working there is that a lot of people would stop and ask us what we were doing, talk to us, and watch it happen. But especially because the people that lived in that neighborhood, it's a pretty bizarre group of people, because there's a lot of, like subsidized housing and a lot of – well, I'm not quite sure what it is, but a lot of people who were mentally ill, or in drug recovery programs or something like that. But there was one guy who kept stopping and talking to us, and we would always invite people to come work with us, so he got really into it, along with some kids from the neighborhood. But I know this guy was going through a drug rehabilitation because sometimes when he came by I could tell he was, you know, not clean. But then I saw him recently, he moved to a different area, and I saw him there with a dog and looking so cleaned up. And I was like, "Yes!! You made it!!"

Anyway, what was your question about? Successes? Telling if somebody is having a different experience in that space as a result of the artwork. I don't know. I have no idea how other people who walk through the park, what they think about it. There's no signage up. There should be probably, that would help people. But I do think in the jail, it's going to have a bigger impact.

*How do you think these projects impact the people who work together to create the art?*



I can't really speak to how it impacts them. I mean, I can a little bit, with my students who share that with me. Other people... I would imagine it is similar to some of the things my students say to me, they just feel a sense of having helped to produce something that is valuable, and there is a sense of satisfaction with that. And I did get letters once from a group of women in a re-entry program who had helped with glazing some of the tiles. I worked with them for a week, when I went there every day because they were in kind of a high-security program. Because of their level of drug use, they were sort of at that risk stage where they weren't allowed to leave the facility yet. And part of their program, I'm sure, was to write me a letter. But you could tell the ones that were really genuine, about how they felt like they had been a bit of a burden on society and it felt good to be doing something where they were giving and contributing.

*Do you have any advice for others who would like to do this type of work?*

I think the important thing, as an artist doing this kind of work, is to see yourself as a facilitator. To see yourself as a different kind of artist. You bring a certain vision and a certain expertise to the process, but you're creating a situation in which a lot of people are going to contribute to making something that's going to be stronger and more meaningful than what any person individually would have done. So cultivating that kind of environment and process, I think, is what's key to doing community-based collaborative work.

*Have you found that working on these projects impacts the way you work when you are doing your own sculptures?*

I don't think so. Well, I don't know yet. Maybe. Okay, I'm not sure if this is because of my community-based work, but it could very well be. But I am thinking about pieces that are more interactive with the viewer.

**Josh MacPhee** is a printmaker who started JustSeeds, an organization that originally existed to distribute a People's History poster series as well as his own artwork. Eventually, JustSeeds expanded to include other artists, and joined forces with Visual Resistance, a street art blog. Today, the organization exists as JustSeeds/Visual Resistance Artist's Cooperative, and is artist/worker owned and run. MacPhee is also co-author with artist Favianna Rodriguez of the book "Reproduce & Revolt!" which serves as a collection of usable political graphics, along with historical and how-to information related to the visual culture of resistance movements.

[www.justseeds.org](http://www.justseeds.org)



Josh MacPhee, "Make Art Not War"

1 color offset poster

11"x17"

unsigned/unnumbered

Source: [www.justseeds.org](http://www.justseeds.org)

*Just Seeds seems like a unique organization due to its involvement and affiliation with both street art and traditional-format gallery shows. Does this affect the way other arts organizations (&/or activist organizations) receive your projects or view your work? Has it been beneficial or a setback in any situations?*

I'm not really in much of a position to answer or speak for JustSeeds, as we are a coop/collective with 24 members, and all of us have different relationships to both street art

and the gallery world. In general most of us are open to both, and will use most opportunities we can find in order to show our work and share the messages we create the work to transmit. We have been increasingly contacted by both activist/social justice/community organizations who are looking for artwork to promote their issues (we recently created a calendar for SEIU, one of the countries largest unions), and by galleries that are interested in us showing with them.

*There seems to be such a push among socially-conscious artists and designers to take the artwork out of the gallery and into the public, whether that is through posters, billboards, or other means of public display. Based on your organization's experience, what do you see as the benefit of the gallery set-up for activist artists?*

Once again, I can only speak for myself, but for me whether or not to show in a gallery is contingent on what I am trying to accomplish. A gallery may not be “the public,” but it is “a public,” and it doesn’t hurt to try to reach as many people as you possibly can. In general I find that the main benefit for showing in a gallery is the ability to sell your work, in order to make some money to pay the bills and make more work, especially work which costs money but doesn’t generate revenue, like large print runs of activist posters which are used in the street or handed out for free.

*What is your take on the idea of differentiating between “fine” art and graphic arts? Do you see them as being distinct, as having different roles or purposes?*

I don’t really distinguish them myself; it doesn’t really make a difference what you call it. I am a cultural producer, and part of what I do is create graphic materials, ideally for people to use in their activism and organizing. At the same time I also create things that would more traditionally considered “fine art.” They both are important to me, and I don’t really make much of a distinction.

*How do you, as an activist artist, gauge whether an artwork is successful?*

Ah, a very difficult question. Once again, I think it depends on the artwork. If a graphic is picked up by a large number of people and becomes an important visual in their organizing, and helps them mobilize, build audiences, accomplish their goals, then I would say it is effective. If a book I write or edit is used in classrooms, and introduces students to art and/or history that they otherwise would never have been exposed to, and pushes them to broaden how they see the world, then the book was effective/successful at changing a reader, which I think is good. Really, success can only be judged by the goals you set out for what you are doing. I want to change the world, so in many ways it is hard for me to consider my work immediately effective at doing that, but at the same time, if I think that helping to build a community of artists that are ready and willing to throw their skills down to help build a social movement is a step to change, then my work is successful.

*In the introduction to the book “Reproduce & Revolt!” you included a brief history of political graphics that highlights some of the rich visual resources that activists already have*

*to draw on. You noted that Goya's etchings about war – which are considered within art history to be very socially powerful – are rarely utilized by anti-war activists today. Why do you think that social and political movements tend to sometimes overlook or underestimate art as a resource for their struggles?*

Most definitely. Something happened in the US, where in the 40s or 50s social movements moved away from culture as an integral part of their organizing. Before that there were a ton of artists doing really rad work as part of unions, community groups, the Communist Party, anarchist groupings, etc., but the Red Scare, HUAC trials, and development of the contemporary art market really cleaved a split between social justice activity and cultural production. “Reproduce & Revolt!” was our attempt at trying to heal that rift and bring the two communities together.

**Mark Vallen** is an artist in Los Angeles who paints in the tradition of social realism. He also has a blog called “Art for a Change,” which is a great resource for staying up to date on issues pertaining to the art world and its intersection with the larger society.

<http://art-for-a-change.com/blog/>



Mark Vallen, “Dia de los Muertos”  
Oil on wood panel  
Source: [www.art-for-a-change.com](http://www.art-for-a-change.com)

*How do you gauge whether an artwork is successful, in terms of social impact?*

Making such an assessment is easier said than done. Like science, art is concerned with the truths of our existence, but it strives at discovering and making known these facts in a wholly different manner than that of scientific research and analysis. It is easy to quantify the successes and social impact of outstanding scientific work, but the achievements of art are much more difficult to evaluate. I would say that at the very least, a successful artwork reveals something profound about human experience. Determining an artwork’s social impact is altogether another matter. Art slowly performs its work upon individuals, subtly boring its way into the psyche, quietly touching the human heart and stirring the intellect. It lays open what can’t be measured or held and makes visible the invisible. The broad social influences of an artwork are usually not immediate, but are felt over time.

If on the other hand we are discussing advertising or propaganda, which are actually quite similar to one another, then calculating the effectiveness of a winning campaign is really quite a simple thing. Did the message reach the chosen demographic and did the target audience respond by behaving in the desired manner? But as I have stated - that is not how the higher arts function.

*What, in your view, is the strength of figurative realism when it comes to making a social statement?*

Figurative realism conveys intent or feeling in an immediate, straightforward manner, communicating directly with the viewer, which is always of paramount importance to artists interested in conveying meaning to a mass audience. However, figurative art does not necessarily go hand in hand with meaningful content; undemanding figuration is not enough. "Realism", as I understand the word, is not just a specific aesthetic, but a way of examining, analyzing, and making comment upon certain objective conditions found in our world. For that reason, a non-figurative artwork can in actual fact successfully express profound social ideas - if created by an extremely thoughtful and skilled artist.

That aside, I would argue that artists have always been involved, consciously or not, in the making of social statements, simply because art throughout the ages has been on the whole a social expression.

The earliest surviving panel paintings from ancient Greece, the Pitsa panels, were created around 540 BC by an anonymous artist who painted realistic figures in mineral pigments on stucco covered wood tablets. The paintings depicted the religious rituals that were widely practiced throughout Greece at the time. Because the artist painted a vision of a social construct, a representation of society as it was believed it should have been - it is impossible to see these paintings as anything less than social statement. Similarly, the Egyptians were creating incredibly realistic portrait paintings starting in the 1st century BC. The paintings were funerary death masks that were affixed to the mummies of those belonging to the upper class. Therefore, it is hard not to view the paintings as declarations pertaining to the legitimacy and supremacy of the Egyptian ruling class, i.e., art as social statement.

*Has anyone ever accused your work of being propaganda? If so, what is/was your response?*

The English writer George Orwell once said that "All art is propaganda", but he also clarified his statement by adding "on the other hand, not all propaganda is art."

The accusation of being a propagandist has not been leveled at me personally, though the dominant view both inside and outside of the elite art world is that artists who deal with social topics are "political" artists, whereas artists who ignore social realities are deemed to have somehow risen above politics. That type of thinking is fallacious. I believe the term "political art" to be a pejorative, not unlike the label "propaganda." The art of David Hockney

or Damien Hirst is every bit as political as my own, but since their works essentially represent the status quo, they are thought of as apolitical artists.

An artwork commissioned by Lorenzo de' Medici of Renaissance Florence demonstrated and enhanced his power and authority, making the art part of a political process. The same type of political undertaking is engaged in when the modern day equivalent to a Medici purchases a multi-million dollar artwork or finances a new wing at a museum. When I maintain that all art is political, I am not referring to the content of the art as much as I am the social relationships it is a party to. There are innumerable examples of how art is politicized by social construct, and it is essential to understand this.

*Your blog "Art for a Change" is unique because of its focus on socially conscious and transformative art, something that's often not explicitly covered in news media or academia. What motivated you to start blogging about that topic?*

I started my web log because I wanted people to think about art and politics in new ways. The catch-phrase "Art for a Change" was a response to an art world scandalously self-absorbed and detached from reality, a rejoinder that declared, "let's have some art, for a change!" But the name also had an overt political meaning that was compatible with a web log given to examining the intersection between art and politics.

*You say that art "points the way to a world at last inhabitable." At the same time, so much of politically or socially charged art – both your own work and the work of others currently and historically – involves depicting the despairs and tragedies of injustice. How can artists strike a balance between spotlighting the problems and creating a vision of the future?*

To say that art points the way to a world at last inhabitable, is not to refer to this or that type of art, nor is it sanctioning one set of aesthetics over another. What it means is that the very act of making art, of being an artist, of participating in and appreciating art - can open the door to a very different kind of society. Plainly that is not enough, as history gives ample evidence of art being used to either liberate or dull the mind, so I am obviously referring to art that is unfettered by market demands and unleashed from the dictates of the politically powerful.

Art is intellectual work of the highest order, but it also has much to do with comprehending and moving the human soul, of plumbing those depths and finding what is real and valuable. Art can not only connect us with history, community, the world, ourselves, it gives us the power to dream and to imagine the impossible. In that sense it represents something that cannot have a price tag put upon it - that is the true subversive nature of art.

Concerning an artist's use of despairing imagery in order to make a point about the state of society or of some injustice in the world. Visual representations of the horrific outrages humans have perpetrated against each other have always been part of art's vocabulary, and I think it is a perfectly acceptable way of trying to appeal to a viewer's better nature. When art brings attention to something intolerable about society, it could be said that people first react

by recognizing their part in that society, then feel shame for their direct or indirect responsibility in the grievance, and finally - are spurred to seek a corrective to the wrongdoing. That is certainly one way of looking at the matter.

However, late capitalism in the 21st century has given rise to art where humanity is relentlessly portrayed as base, venal, empty, and ugly in every respect - an aesthetic that is very much in vogue at present. But when such art goes untempered by images that speak of the decency, kindness, and solidarity the human race is capable of; an entirely false picture is painted of humanity - one that in actually mirrors the system itself.

*Is there any advice you'd like to give to artists who want to make socially relevant and transformative work?*

If artists want to make socially relevant work, then they need to be socially relevant. It is necessary to forsake the studio in favor of the streets. Parenthetically, I do not mean trying to become the next graffiti or street art star. I am referring to becoming immersed in one's own community and learning about the lives of real people - as well as the commotion and turbulence of the world at large. Profound social engagement in art is not something to be conjured up on a whim by those privileged with an art school degree, it comes as a result of life experience and a serious understanding of the social forces that make up and drive society.



**Mirko Ilić** is a prominent graphic designer. Born in Bosnia and educated in Zagreb, he lives and works in the United States today and has published his illustration in Time Magazine, the Wall Street Journal, and the New York Times (where he worked as an art director), among other publications. He is a co-founder of Oko & Mano Inc. graphic design studio, and the founder of Mirko Ilić Corp. He has also co-authored many books on the subject of graphic design, including Design of Dissent, a compilation of political graphics and illustrations from around the world.

[www.mirkoilic.com](http://www.mirkoilic.com)



Mirko Ilić, "Liberty Kissing Justice"

Source: [http://www.opednews.com/articles/genera\\_rady\\_ana\\_080516\\_look\\_who\\_s\\_kissing\\_h.htm](http://www.opednews.com/articles/genera_rady_ana_080516_look_who_s_kissing_h.htm)

*Do you think artists and designers have a moral obligation to consider the social context of their work?*

You cannot force moral obligation on anybody. It's a question of the individual. For instance, one of the most famous artists is Picasso. He created very political work, but if you asked his ex-wives and girlfriends if he was a moral person? They'd probably disagree. So what's important is the responsibility and morality of the work. There are a lot of bastards who do amazing work, and I would prefer that to the opposite. You cannot compromise your work. You can compromise yourself, but not your work. Every work of art not created for your self is a compromise.

Art is always compromised from the start anyway. You have what's in your head, but you can't paint it perfectly, so that's compromise. Maybe you want to create something that's too big for your studio, or for the wall, so that's compromise. Maybe you paint naked ladies, but you don't want to give that to your grandmother, so whatever you made for her was compromise. What matters is why you compromise -- if you do it for financial reasons or to advance your career.

*Do you see a distinction between graphic design and fine art in terms of being effective on a social level?*

On one level, graphic design is more honest, because we know who is paying and what for. Graphic design is more straightforward. If I walk into a gallery and see a painting, I don't always know, who pays for this, why do they want it, what was the motive? With graphic design, those things are out in the open.

In a way fine art is less influential because it's hard for it to reach a wide number of people, whereas graphic design is meant to be mass-produced, so it can reach more people. It's not that either one is more good or more bad, it just effects one on a different level.

Graphic design is like a sign, like a road sign, to warn you. It's not to fulfill you or make you think deeply. Graphic design is like fast food, whereas fine art is like long-term nourishment. In graphic design, there are no secret messages, there's not an idea that you don't figure out until seven years later. A painting can do that.

*What would you say to people working in traditional "fine art" mediums, such as painting, who want their work to be relevant to others or to communicate messages to the masses in the way that graphic design can?*

Golub is a painter who did large political paintings. Sue Coe, another painter. In her work, she doesn't think about others. You need first to satisfy yourself. If you're satisfied, the energy will come across. Otherwise, people will know you're a phony. The energy of honest work always gets through.

*How do you gauge whether an image is successful as a work of dissent?*

It's very hard. In my design of Liberty kissing Justice, that one was successful, because it seemed so easy. When I first made it, I thought I might have been copying something I'd seen before, because it seemed like such a basic idea. But no one had done it before, and now everyone wants it. It symbolizes victory for gay people. It seemed so obvious, it's simple, it's catchy. When you do something right, you know. On a social level, it's harder for the individual to judge. Our society is going to choose what's appropriate art.

Art can't be counted on as "success." If you want to be famous, you don't decide to become an artist – it'd be easier to win the lottery. The only thing that can count in art **is quality**. There are a lot of ingredients that go into making art successful. Some of the most important

ones are honesty, talent, and time – the time you put in, and the context of the time in which it is made.

I like expression. How long does it take to make sand into rocks? It's that constant pressure, that exercise.

**Thierry Noir** became famous during the 1980's for painting colorful characters covering large stretches of the Berlin Wall. After the wall came down, a stretch of it was preserved as an open-air gallery, called the East Side Gallery, which is dedicated to preserving some of the visual culture that developed on the wall in the years before it fell. Noir's website has lots of information about his work and life, including examples of his paintings on the Wall and other artwork.

<http://www.galerie-noir.de/index.html>



A painted section of the Berlin Wall.  
Source: [www.galerie-noir.de/](http://www.galerie-noir.de/)

*You've said (in the FAQ's on the website) that your painting on the wall was "a sort of physical reaction against the pressure of the daily life near the Berlin wall." There are numerous ways that you could have responded to that pressure; why did you choose painting? What is it about visual expression on the wall that made painting a more appealing option than something destructive such as, for example, throwing rocks at it?*

I choose to paint the wall because it was a non-violent action. During all those years before 1990 I never tried to insult the GDR wall-guards or tried to smash any empty color pots over

the wall. Why to throw rocks onto a 6 inch thick wall made of concrete? I just followed the path of Gandhi. I think I was right because those colors have eaten away the concrete segments like acid. People have been hammered heavily on the wall, making holes through it, making holes so big that at some spots, like Checkpoint Charlie or the Reichstag, it was possible to pass through those holes and paint the back side of the wall.

*When you painted on the wall, were you thinking about communicating any certain message to others who would see it?*

I never try to give any “message to the world”. I let everybody interpret by himself/herself what they see on my paintings. It is funny when some persons recognized an uncle or a cousin when they see my paintings. I never say to them that they are wrong.

*You’ve stated that some of the Berliners were upset about your painting on the wall because you had “entered into direct relation with the killing machine.” Why do you think they felt that way? Did they want everyone to ignore the wall? And how did it effect you knowing that your art was upsetting the community that lived around it – did you feel some kind of responsibility about that?*

The wall at that time was a kind of taboo for a lot of Berliners. Most of the West-Berliners never came near the Berlin Wall; expect maybe 2 or 3 times a year for the official celebrations (like August the 13<sup>th</sup>) or to show it during the Berlin visit of relatives or friends.

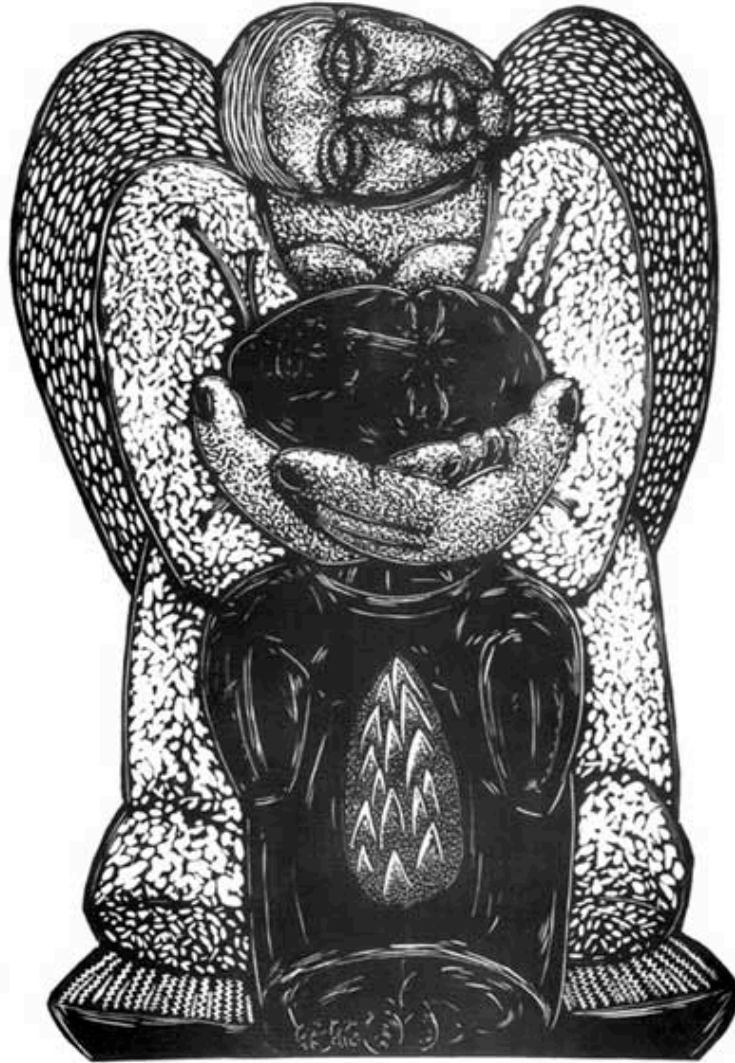
By painting the wall I often met some passers-by or people from the neighborhood. The most frequent question was: "Why do you want to make the wall beautiful? I had to explain each time: "I am not trying to make the wall beautiful because in fact it's absolutely impossible. More than 80 people have been killed trying to jump over the Berlin wall, to escape to West-Berlin, so you can cover that wall with hundred of kilos of color, and it will stay the same. One bloody monster, one old crocodile which from time to time wakes up, eats somebody up, and falls again back to sleep until the next time". After the success of the Wim Wenders film “Wings of Desire” those questions became gentler.

*Your paintings were definitely perceived as political, especially since, as you said, “everything you do on the wall is immediately political. Even if you just piss on the wall, it is a political act.” But did you have a political motive in mind behind the paintings when you created them? Was your goal to make a political statement, or were they more of a natural human reaction that then took on a political significance because of the context?*

There were a lot of political slogans written on the wall, so I follow my style which was different. I try not to imitate any body. This is homage to the eternal youth. Every new generation comes and tries to make things better than their parent have done before. I found the “Kilometart” (Art by Kilometers) that allowed me to cover a considerable amount of surface in a short period of time.

**Jan Jordaan** is a printmaker and a lecturer in the Fine Arts department at Durban University of Technology in Durban, South Africa. He is also the director of Art for Humanity, a non-profit organization that produces human rights advocacy campaigns using visual art and poetry.

<http://www.afh.org.za>



Jan Jordaan, "Hurt"

Tile cut

594x420mm

Source: <http://www.artthrob.co.za/00jan/reviews.html>

*You define art as "that which is created to inspire all of humanity." How did you arrive at that concept?*

Through years of teaching and noticing that all the students would love to see their work exhibited all over the world – that was the one. The second observation is when I stand in

front of a great art work, let's take for example the Mona Lisa, I stand there with representatives from everywhere else all over the world, and that represents all humanity.

*In your view, does that exclude the element of symbols or ideas that are understandable within a certain cultural context? Would that not qualify as art, since it might not apply in the same way to all of humanity?*

If it's not relevant to all of humanity, ultimately...

*So I guess that's up for interpretation as to what makes something relevant, as well?*

That's normally imbedded in the artist's intention, not always overtly so, but if you analyze it. For instance, many artefacts and folk art items get produced – and political propaganda, for that matter – gets produced to serve a very particular agenda, either a cultural or political agenda. It's exclusive. That puts it in a different category from fine art, as I define it.

*Can you explain what differentiates the Art for Humanity projects from propaganda?*

Propaganda normally, as with advertising, focuses on a clearly-defined outcome, and a fairly narrow outcome. The Art for Humanity projects, although we with each project focus on a particular human rights issue, ultimately what we focus on is human rights, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

*Do you think anyone could argue that the UDHR is a very specific document that could almost be seen as a specific political agenda?*

I find particularly Americans often confusing politics with human rights, and they find it particularly difficult to distinguish between politics and human rights. Human rights, as defined by the UDHR, is subscribed to by countries all over the world, both representative of the various different cultures and religions that we find in the world. Politics serve a particular nation or particular agenda or particular political party – it's exclusive. American politics, Republican politics, are not ignored – but very often found to be irrelevant, say, to people in Afghanistan.

*--Except in the sense of them getting bombed? But anyway...*

[laughter] That's your comment.

*Is there any advice you would like to give for activist-artists based on your experience and the work you've done?*

Yes. Firstly, I would say focus on fine art. And focus on human rights. Once you've got that in place, then everything else falls into place. And that, I think, is clearly illustrated when one goes to developed societies. You will find that the two pillars of a developed society are the visual document that we associate with the fine arts, and the conceptual

document that we associate with the UDHR. And then you will look at those societies, and you will find that health issues are not of a pandemic nature, gender abuse is not of a pandemic nature, environmental issues are actively being dealt with.

*Can you name a specific country that you have in mind?*

I hate mentioning countries, but if you look at societies say, within Europe, within France, within the United States, within Canada, you will find societies that subscribe both to the visual arts -- in a very public manner -- and have got a huge respect for the UDHR. And in those societies, you will find that those issues are not a particular problem. If you look at a country, within a country -- say the States -- you are going to find areas where, AIDS is a problem, human rights is a problem. And within those societies, there is very little visual art. The creativity might be there, but the creative people from those societies tend to immigrate from those societies.

*Can you explain your concept of freedom of expression and how that relates? Or rather, maybe, why you emphasize “freedom of expression” as opposed to “creativity”?*

Freedom of expression is a quest, and it's something which society aspires to. Creativity is something which an individual practices. Now, if that quest for freedom of expression is not in place by society, the individual creative practice tends to be oppressed or suppressed. The quest for freedom of expression is the guarantee for creativity to flourish. So freedom of expression is a more societal thing, and creativity is more individualistic. That's a bit of a mind fuck, but it's an observation.

I think it is really imperative that young people today are prepared to step up and respond to some of the challenges facing the world. One thing that worries me is that young people often end up in the military, and are often coerced into joining the military -- whether it's in countries where there's some choice, or countries that make it mandatory, or places in Africa where child soldiers are rounded up. You know, I really think it makes the choices and the work of those who can make a decision, are in a position to make a decision, that much more important. And places that much more -- I hate the word -- responsibility. Every generation leaves the next generation with an ungodly mess, and there's got to be one generation that's going to turn the tide. And in my stupid optimism I really believe the time for that has come.

I really think that time has come, because you know -- I go to Europe, and I see the young people there, and they're great. And I see all the art -- and it's great. And I go to America in some places and it's great -- the young people are great, and the art is great, and it's public. Now what I'm saying is that the models are in place, we don't have to go looking for the models. Now, I will be accused of being Eurocentric, and I'm getting tired of that accusation. Because it's not being Eurocentric; it's identifying in humanity what works, and saying, ok -- there we've got a model.

I was thinking about something on my way to work this morning; it has to do with Zimbabwe. And in Zimbabwe, when that country got its independence, the optimism and the



sense of celebration that existed on this continent was ginormous – it was huge. And for ten, fifteen years, Zimbabwe flourished. One thing that didn't flourish was the public art. It was doomed to failure, because there was no document in place publicly – and it's more than a document, it's *heritage* – none of it was in place publicly that guaranteed that carrying on into the future, that positivism – of *developing* that model into the future. So it was, in a way, doomed to failure, and today we sit with the results. And it makes me very nervous about South Africa, because likewise in South Africa, 1991 after the elections in 1994, the sense of celebration was huge, international. And you look at South Africa today and those documents aren't in place, and there's very little effort to put them in place. That scares the shit out of me.

Now you look at Japan and you look at South Korea, and the social transformation that happened there – but accompanied by huge public art programs, and good, great public art programs. And immediately there's some sort of sustainability of that transformation. And the transformation is really a good thing. Because transformation is – and if you look again at European societies, it's a constant thing of transformation happening – where societies are responding on a continuous basis to problems that get thrown at the society. If you look at environmental issues... I was listening to this thing today on the radio about how in Miami, Florida, they are turning it into the biggest solar-powered city in the world. Now if you take Miami, lots of public art, lots of freedom of expression, I'm not surprised that now as part of their transformation they are responding to a global issue, global warming.

Those models exist. And this is the great thing about working with art students, is they are so actively involved with that, being part of that model and creating that model. And that is what gives one huge optimism.

*Sometimes when you talk about developed countries with public art being more advanced on human rights, and taking America as an example since it's the place I know best... I don't know, when I look at statistics – for instance, rape statistics in America are the same as rape statistics in South Africa, we incarcerate more people per capita than any other country in the world, I mean, it's one of the only developed country that uses the death penalty, we have the School of the Americas where we train Latin American soldiers to use human rights violations against their own people, we have Guantanamo Bay where we actively torture people. So it just raises huge questions in my mind.*

I think the problem there is with looking at America as a society. America is not one society, it is many different societies. And I think it's unfair, and Americans themselves flog themselves, punish themselves, because if something terrible happens on one side of the country, all Americans are painted with the same brush. If Bush creates Guantanamo Bay, then all Americans are bad, all Americans are torturers. And that's wrong. It's like because a murder happens in South Africa, all South Africans are murders. And that's wrong. One's got to look at those areas of America that are underdeveloped, and compare that to parts of Africa that are less developed. You can't compare Appalachia to Cape Town, but compare San Francisco with Cape Town and you'll see a lot more similarities. That's why I hate

using country statistics to support arguments. Look at societies. One compares apples with apples.

*Yeah, that makes sense. But even in the studies that I have seen, say on child sexual abuse, as far as I'm aware, they don't notice trends based on economic status or things like that, that you would expect to divide the societies by.*

I would like people to start researching more and look at those areas, focusing not on economic status, but on the art. And the level of art appreciation in that society. And then see how that compares with societies where there's very little art appreciation. And I think that's where you'll start to see some very interesting patterns.

**Fabiola Nabil Naguib** is an artist, writer, and activist who uses a variety of mediums and formats in her work. She often works in site-specific ways, and explores themes of cultural and ecological interconnectedness. Her writing and artwork have been published internationally. She is also the author of a book called *Uninhabiting the Violence of Silencing: activations on creativity, ethics, and resistance*.

*According to Algonquin Press, you “cite no separation between [your] practice as a “visual” artist, poet, or activist, energizing all that [you] create as an integrated process rooted in the continuity of creativity, remembrance, and connectedness on the planet.” I think this is something that many artists and people would agree with about the creative process, but few acknowledge it so distinctly, or engage it so directly when making art. What do you see as the strength of this integral approach, and why is it important to articulate?*

My approach or the strength that integrative approach carries is embedded in the very fabric of living and being in the world. In other words, I do not compartmentalize nor hierarchize my artistic practice from any other creative aspect of doing or being. My approach stems from my sincere and multifaceted attempts at bringing together and foregrounding what for me is the interconnectedness between the personal, political, social, spiritual and creative. As an artist and activist these considerations are interwoven and have as much to do with accountability as they do with interconnectivity. I have thus come to understand and activate my creative process as an integral part of what I call *connective practice*. *Connective practice* is a way of incorporating my personal responsibility, creativity, and consciousness while bringing attention to the need for more widespread awareness, acknowledgement, and efforts toward non-centric and non-human centric socio-political and eco-ethical movements for justice. *Connective practice* as an ethic, philosophy, reality, and worldview has thus become the framework within and from which I gather, instigate, and ground my creative practice—as well as every other aspect of my life. It has become the material expression of an intimate and intricate internal experience of the world, essential in retaining a meaningful and purposeful artistic practice. I can go further to say that my practice as an artist thus becomes one of many manifestations of connected and conscious living.

*Art is a great tool for communicating and building understanding across cultures, and in a globalizing world this is something that’s become increasingly important. In your experience, as someone with a multicultural background, do you have any specific insights onto this? Is there anything that artists who wish to engage this potential need to be aware of when approaching their work?*

I believe that all artists that are committed to working across contexts need to be conscious and responsive as to the potential our work has to communicate or build across communities and borders – regardless of our heritage, culture or nationalities. I strongly believe that the onus of communicating or building across contexts needs to be more widely acknowledged and addressed as processes that all artists, regardless of culture or origins, need to be more concerned with, accountable to and work in the service of. Too often this onus is placed heavily and narrowly on people of colour and indigenous people (including artists of colour and indigenous artists). In Canada for instance, this inequity and thus relinquishment of

responsibility underscores unequal power relations perpetuated by the dominant culture and hegemonic narratives that render “cross-cultural” communication as more of a responsibility for or somehow a more “natural” process of engagement or endeavour for artists who are people of colour, immigrants of colour or Aboriginal. The official discourse of multiculturalism in Canada, as I see it, is often energized in the spirit of consumption and the presumption of “Other-ness” along with limited renderings of our contributions – eat our food, watch us dance, listen to our music – ignoring the complex and multifaceted and diverse socio-political realities and contributions of various communities. Similarly as an artist, my work is sometimes reduced or boxed as “ethnic,” “multicultural” or “exotic” versus being acknowledged in its complexity and for the epistemologies and ontologies and research that inform my work and the potential of these elements of my work to contribute to knowledge, cultural production and socio-political transformation.

For artists who wish to engage art as a means of communicating across reified borders and diverse terrains it is important to consider issues of context and personal and social responsibility with regards to the voice our work can carry, along with the intentions and possible implications of our work. As an artist, I believe that there is enormous potential for far-reaching implications of my artistic practice; art as activism, art as socio-political-eco-ethically responsible and responsive, art as creative process, resistance, resilience—art as located and accountable. I find that without my accountability explicitly positioned, it is too easy (or perhaps tempting) for curators, critics, and academics to atomize and/or co-opt my work, my philosophies, my identity, creative processes, connections, and considerations. I do not wish my practice to be “ghettoized” or vanquished into narrow parameters circumscribed by galleries, museums, and other institutions. I have thus increasingly explored new ways to engage and sustain my installations with personal responsibility or my “voice,” contextualizing text, video, performance, poetics, and public interventions that challenge normative-ized and professional-ized readings or reductions of my practice and politics. Since colonization, misappropriation, and commodification of art and artistic practices are widely and dominantly sanctioned and codified, I find that art without accountable and meaning-full apparatuses can too readily be reified or dislocated to promote the institutionalized and sanitized project of multi-cult-turalism or related strategies of “Other”-ing.

*How do you gauge whether an artwork is successful?*

I find this question hard to relate to and perhaps even irrelevant to my creative process or why I create. In order to equate an artwork (mine or another artist’s) as “successful” I would have to hold that some artworks are not. This is not the type of framework that informs or energizes my work or how I perceive the work of fellow artists. Yes, it is true that with all of my work I do have specific intentions and motivations as I create; for example, this is often the case for exhibitions I participate in that posit an activist framework. However, I do not measure the success of my artwork by the response of the audience that comes to the exhibit or the reviews of my work or the exhibit. I am rather concerned with what efforts I have made to ensure that my voice and accountability is clear and apparent versus ambiguous – no

matter what the response is to it. I do not create with the hope or the expectation that no one will challenge me.

For me, the most profound value of my work rests in my creative processes and my willingness as an artist to engage with those processes regardless of medium or outcome. My artwork is a material expression of an intimate and intricate experience of living and being in the world and ultimately holds elements of what I wish to contribute.

*Based on your experiences as an artist and activist, is there any advice you would want to pass on to others who are interested in engaging their creativity towards a better world?*

I believe this question is best addressed by each one of us based on our specific contexts, life situations, access, purpose, safety, passion, opportunities, realities, and gifts. What especially comes to mind in this moment is access, safety and context and how they relate to an artist's (and activist's) abilities in being able to publicly share work that is socially or politically relevant or charged. Personally, I also believe that the work of contributing to a more just world is located in all of our social relations, in every aspect of our daily lives. In other words, there are innumerable ways to make meaningful contributions and to activate our creativity for change.

For me, accountability, responsibility and reflexivity are essential to how I activate my creativity in the world. I have found that how I activate my creativity including my actions, affiliations, commitments and contributions, be they small or vast, do affect others, whether I deny this responsibility or embrace it.

I have, however, come across many artists who are not concerned with these considerations, responsibilities or creating a better world, but for those that are I can say this is no easy path. Art schools, many curators, galleries, museums, critics and collectors are most often concerned with the status quo – focused on narrow parameters of the artworld-academia industrial complex, which at this point has largely proven to not be working towards creating a better world (nor based upon the activism that much academic scholarship professes to espouse) but rather commodifying and sanitizing creativity.

The commitment to activating creativity for local and/or global change depending on our contexts, who we are, where we live in the world and what is at stake for us can pose many challenges, creative and practical difficulties, and sometimes even extreme consequences. At the same time, this commitment also carries great possibilities for inspiring dialogue, common cause, collaborations, alliances, new insights into our art and lives, as well as staying connected to the realities of living in a complex world of relations where passion and purpose can keep much of what is still beautiful about the world alive in us.

## ***Concluding Reflections***

After going through the process of writing this thesis, I don't really feel that I know more about arts and activism than anybody else – at least in terms of having answers. Rather, I feel like I am coming out of this project with more questions than I started with. This is not a bad thing; it's often how things seem to go in the field of art.

What I gained from this project was knowledge of a lot of resources – writings from artists and critics, relevant articles and books, interesting organizations, and grant foundations. I also got the experience of communicating with all different kinds of artists, and collected a substantial amount of primary research in the form of the interviews. One of the main things I noticed in the process of conducting the interviews was that there are a variety of approaches to making socially conscious art, and that different artists conceive their work in very different ways that sometimes contradict each other. Each artist is coming from a different set of experiences, and each of their views is based on what they have found to make sense according to those experiences. It is interesting to see how people who may be in close sympathy in terms of their social and political views and their field of work can arrive at such different conclusions about how to work based on where they are coming from.

The experience of interning at Art for Humanity in South Africa was another thing I gained immensely from. While I do not refer to it explicitly in my thesis writing, many of the ideas that I discuss were formulated, challenged, and developed during the time that I was working there. Aside from providing lots of good food for thought about human rights, art, expression, empowerment, democracy, and global culture, it also gave me practical firsthand experience in organizing art projects on an international scale, as well as grant writing for

non-profits. These are important skills that I hope will become of service in exciting future projects.

In terms of my own art, I have been bringing environmental activism into my studio practice by striving to use as eco-friendly materials as possible, a challenging commitment that means the vast majority of commercially-produced art supplies are off limits. I am still in the process of trying different things, but so far it has been immensely rewarding to have a cleaner conscience about my craft.

In terms of my own personal activism, I have realized that my area of contribution is in visual culture, and knowing this has relieved me of feeling obligated to perform other activist rituals that were sucking life out of me. Because of having developed a network with activist artists all over the country and world, I am now able to facilitate cultural exchange in the areas of art, activism, and visual culture (however loosely or distinctly one may want to draw those lines). For instance, this semester I was able to help facilitate two groups, the Beehive Design Collective and Bread & Puppet, to visit my local community. Neither of these groups had been to Bowling Green before, and both events were pretty unique for a lot of the people here to be exposed to. In the future, I hope I can continue to facilitate more events of this nature. Having one foot in the fine art world and the other foot in the grassroots activism world means that as time goes on I can hopefully be of service in helping make connections between the two, and facilitate exchange between people on the frontlines of justice movements and people on the frontlines of fine art and cultural production, since both things are so crucial and close to my own heart.

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## *Appendix of Additional Suggested Resources*

### **Organizations**

- Archive of Humanist Art (Australia) -- A collection of works by artists working at the turn of the century/millennium whose art and beliefs support the notion that there is a fundamental connection between the images we make and the world we create.
- ArtCorps – Similar to the Peace Corps, but for artists. Places volunteer community art organizers in developing communities.
- Art for Humanity (South Africa) – Initiates collaborative print portfolios that advocate for various human rights issues.
- Appalshop – Media center devoted to dismantling negative stereotypes about Appalachia.
- Arms into Art (Mozambique) – Sculpture organization based on creating art out of leftover war tools.
- Animating Democracy – A program of Americans for the Arts, focused on fostering civic engagement through arts and culture.
- Beehive Design Collective – Collaborative, educational graphics campaigns designed to cross-pollinate the grassroots.
- Big Noise Tactical -- Artistic documentaries covering various aspects of the global justice movement.
- Bread & Puppet – Cheap art and political theatre based out of Glover, Vermont.
- Creativity Commons Collective & Press -- Publishing and exhibition projects, community activism, campaigns against gate-keeping and censorship, and transnational networking and collaborations connected to creative and curatorial practice.
- The Foundation for Art in the Community and Cross-Cultural Dialogue – Founded following a peace-building youth art project in Tel Aviv.
- Ghost Bikes – Anonymously created memorials for bicyclists who are hit and killed on the street; can be found in cities across the world.
- JustSeeds -- A decentralized community of artists who have banded together to both sell their work online in a central location and to collaborate with and support each other and social movements.
- Kentucky Foundation for Women – Provides funding for feminist art for social change.
- Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development -- Aims at increasing cultural awareness and promoting exchange between culture and development; initiates and supports artistic and intellectual quality; is a platform for intercultural exchange; believes culture is a basic need.

### **Websites**

- [www.communityarts.net](http://www.communityarts.net) -- Promoting information exchange, research and critical dialogue within the field of community-based art.
- [www.artisresistance.com](http://www.artisresistance.com) – Information on the relevance of street art in a surveillance society.
- [www.opensourceresistance.com](http://www.opensourceresistance.com) – An attempt to bring together people who have messages and broadcast networks to get those messages out.
- [www.sparcmurals.org](http://www.sparcmurals.org) -- the Social and Public Art Resource Center
- [www.apionline.com](http://www.apionline.com) -- Art in the Public Interest

<http://arts.envirolink.org> – EnviroArts

[www.guerrillagirls.com](http://www.guerrillagirls.com) – Offers a feminist perspective on the art world.

**Academic Institutions that offer curriculum in Arts Activism**

Tufts University, Boston (undergraduate)

New York University, New York (graduate)