

Art, Social Justice, and Global Activism 2016
Susan Noyes Platt, Ph.D.
www.artandpoliticsnow.com

In mid May 2016, social justice artists joined political activists on six continents to call for us to “Break Free from Fossil Fuels.” They shut down toxic sites of the fossil fuel industry and stopped trains carrying coal and oil, while demanding a goal of 100 percent renewables in twenty years. Sculpture, paintings, banners, giant puppets, cartoons, and performances created by artists and other activists highlighted the issues at the sits-ins, marches, and kayak-based actions. In some locations, Indigenous activists, accompanied by traditional dances and chants, spoke of our responsibility to preserve the earth through poetic invocations and calls for collective political action.

Social media enabled the massive organizing and global communication involved in organizing “Break Free.” It also contributed to the aesthetics of the protest, as participants immediately posted photogenic art, clothing, performances, and texts online. Framing effective images for Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, as well as blogs and internet sites, exponentially increases the impact of a protest. From a political and aesthetic perspective, this democratic space functions entirely outside the traditional parameters of the art world.

Historically, artists committed to disseminating their socially engaged art often relied on printmaking as an inexpensive and easily reproduced medium. In the nineteenth century, Goya expressed the brutalities of war in etchings of rape, dismemberment, execution, and famine. Before and after World War I German Expressionist/Socialist Kathe Kollwitz depicted the grinding realities of poverty, as well as the devastating effects of war on women with lithography, woodcuts and etching. In the 1930s Communist-run printmaking workshops trained artists to protest workers conditions in mines, factories, and farms, as well as other issues including racism.

The montage film techniques of “agitational propaganda” after the 1918 Russian Revolution stirred the masses, as did photography such as that of Tina Modotti in Mexico in the 1920s which perfectly paired aesthetics and left-wing ideology. At the same time, the vast revolutionary murals by Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros covered walls in Mexico City and the United States with narratives of people’s oppression, resistance and liberation.

During the 1960s and 1970s street newspapers and photocopies made radical art much more accessible. Martha Rosler gave away copies of her devastating collages *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home (1967-72)* in which she juxtaposed US consumerism with the nightmares of the Vietnam War. She inserted her acute critiques into free street newspapers. Today, she continues to give out free posters and photocopies of a second series of the same title made in 2003-08 as we continue our imperialist wars around the globe.

In the twenty-first century, cell phone cameras suddenly emerged beyond the reach of government regulation at the beginning of the Iraq war. Instant recordings of atrocities provided source imagery for

artists. The explicit images of torture at Abu Ghraib provoked artists to produce both street art and traditional paintings and sculpture that clearly spoke out against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Multiple cell phone videos and photographs recording the murders of black youth by police has contributed to the explosion of the Black Lives Matter movement and its direct creative expressions in music, dance, visual art, drama, photography, and street art.

As information on the intersections of global oppressions becomes ever more accessible through the internet, artists increasingly recognize the art world's complicity in multinational corporate abuses. In response they frequently occupy museums with carefully planned interventions. In London artists protested BP sponsorship of the Tate by writing climate change messages on the museum's floor in an all-night performance, pouring oil over people rolling on the floor, marching through the museum wearing black gowns and head coverings and presenting a wind turbine to the museum.

"Agit Prop," a recent exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum about resistance art, itself stimulated protests. While gentrification was one topic in the exhibition, artist/activists held signs declaring that the museum was collaborating with developers and demonstrating a less than energetic commitment to a community dialogue process.

At the same museum, artists and activists challenged the exhibition "This Place", an exhibition of photographs of Israel/Palestine by ten prominent photographers, none of whom had previously been to the area. The protestors exposed the whitewashing of the realities of the occupation in the huge aestheticized images. Protest co-organizer Amin Husain, a member of the Decolonial Cultural Front, declared "The days in which art and artists are instrumentalized to normalize oppression, displacement, and dispossession of any people are over. We are watching you, and we will scrutinize your exhibitions and your funding, and we will act when you fail."ⁱ

In contrast to this problematic exhibition, the Artnauts collective has been collaborating directly with Palestinian artists for many years. Palestinian artists and their supporters have been extremely effective in exposing the oppressions of the Israeli occupation to a world-wide audience. International exhibitions now regularly include films, videos, paintings, and performance about Palestine. In 2005 "Three Cities Against the Wall, Ramallah, Tel Aviv, New York" reached out to artists in the three cities to protest the separation wall. It offered a model of cultural collaboration from opposing sides with art painted directly on the wall, as well as exhibitions of paintings, poetry, graphic art and performances seen in all three cities.

The injustices of immigration, detention and deportation have catalyzed performances and exhibitions both on the Mexican/US border and outside detention centers. Even the voices and art of detainees held in US based detention centers can now be accessed on internet sites such as Detention Watch Network. More conspicuously protesting the unjust treatment of migrant workers, "The Gulf Labor Coalition" called attention to exploitation of workers building the new Guggenheim Museum in Dubai. They organized six occupations at the New York Guggenheim Museum and for 52 weeks published an artist's project that highlighted workers conditions at the construction site, in one case connecting to farmworkers rights in the US. ⁱⁱ

Renowned documentary filmmaker Laura Poitras has made a trilogy of films about the post 9/11 world. In the third, *Citizen Four*, she narrated the story of Edward Snowden's leak of classified documents that reveal the massive invasion of our privacy by the NSA. Recently, Poitras presented the chilling exhibition "Astro Noise," at the Whitney Museum. Beginning with her own slow motion film of people looking at the site of the World Trade Center in the days after September 11, she projected, on the back of the same screen, military footage of the torture in the prison in Bagram, Iraq. She then invoked the omnipresent surveillance in our civil society within the exhibition itself. ⁱⁱⁱ

As a result of new technologies that enable both knowledge of global oppressions and surveillance of every citizen, as well as the dissemination of aesthetically conscious protest images, artist/activists are ever more vehemently and visibly pushing back against the hegemonic forces of racism, social engineering, economic oppressions and militarism.

ⁱ Rebecca McCarthy "Faced with Brooklyn Museum Inaction, Protesters Target Two Exhibitions," *Hyperallergic*, May 8, 2016. For another analysis see Nina Felshin "A Photo Exhibition About Israel and the West Bank that Chooses Sides" *Hyperallergic*, May 13, 2016).

ⁱⁱ For a complete documentation see *The Gulf, High Culture/Hard Labor*, ed by Andrew Ross, OR books, 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Astro Noise, A Survival Guide for Living Under Total Surveillance*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2016. Several chapters are artists' projects or fiction writing invoking surveillance.