

## ESSAY

“Politically Incorrect: Outing the Activist Artist”

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Sue Coe *the Triumph of Fundamentalism* 2005

"The issue [of] whether art should emphasize the realities and tragedies of the world or should soothe and enchant with illusion, is still before us . . . We still cherish the idea of the artist as a serene being sheltered from chaos and shock, producing things to give us peace and inspiration. We hate to lose the illusion that he is a creature not quite human. We resent too, finding agitation where we expected a lyric, and harshness instead of sweetness and light." Anita Brenner, *New York Times*, 1934.

### Post-mortem for Postmodernism

In the last few months, as NATO was brutally bombing Serbia and teenagers were opening fire in high schools, I have been speaking to both graduate and undergraduate art students at several universities on the subject of art, politics, and activism. As I show dramatic images of the artists of the 1930s, marching, protesting and organizing in opposition to fascism and the oppression of workers, I emphasize that critics like Anita Brenner supported the artists' strategies of collaboration and confrontation. Lucienne Bloch, for example, photographed and participated in demonstrations as well as contributing to *Art Front*, the artists' magazine of the Popular Front.

Following the lecture I pose the question as to whether any of the students are interested in addressing political issues in their art. The answer has been yes in many cases. Even more heartening is that these students mean politics in the same way that I do: world events, not identity, body, or gender politics. They are not gazing at their

navels, but responding to the terrible violence both within the United States and in other countries. They want to bring together their technical skill and sensitivity to express opposition to current political nightmares like "ethnic cleansing," the murder and targeting of doctors who perform abortions, as well as the recent stark examples of homophobia and racism in the deaths of Matthew Shepherd and James Byrd, Jr.

These students were born long after the mid-century assault on political artists during McCarthyism and they are too young to have participated in the activism of the sixties and seventies; they are tired of postmodern theory with its dilution of racism into identity politics and sexism into gender and body politics. At the same time, they are trained for an art world that still views the direct expression of a political position as an ugly invasion into the sanctified realm of art.

The design of posters and murals, the historical media of the masses, is not taught in most art school programs. Printmaking, an inexpensive medium that can be used for mass production and mass distribution, is still a fine art and precious commodity. Photography, also a potent means of commentary, is normally taught as an aesthetic and technical practice. Video and film are usually relegated to a separate program outside the art department.

The Internet, computers, web sites, and digitized art forms are the media of the late nineties, gobbling the lion's share of economic resources and huge amounts of time. It could be argued that cyberspace is the new location for activism, replacing out of date street demonstrations with round the world connections.

Take the example of the New York-based German artist Ingo Günter. His "Refugee Republic", recently on exhibit at the Cambridge (Mass) Arts Council Gallery 57, consists of a website ([www.refugee.net](http://www.refugee.net)) and a skeletal metal globe embraced by a dense network of LEDs that wander around without forming an identifiable geographical entity, much like the 50 million refugees currently without a country. Günter, a journalist as well as an artist, proposes a supranational and post territorial federation of refugees and migrants linked only by the Internet. Yet, conceptually provocative as Günter's piece is, it does not lead us to collective public action, it simply gives us information. Cyberspace can inform, it can lead to action, but more often surfing the web keeps us isolated and immobilized.

No matter which media artists use, though, they are all trained to insert themselves into a capitalist system that looks suspiciously on specific political references: visual artists in the United States are indoctrinated, more thoroughly than in any other country in the world, into believing that political references compromise their status as artists.

Consequently, when art is political it is often so indirect and obscure that even an art world insider has difficulty deciphering it. As an advocate of political engagement, I have often have to drag the information out of the artist, and the explanation always comes with the disclaimer that they don't want to be known as "just a political artist." Conversely, when a well-known artist is completely straightforward, as in the case of

Cindy Sherman, who addresses violence against women in our society, many critics avoid addressing the political issues in the work.

For the art world, the repeated mantra is that political art is bad because it is "only propaganda." But, as Sue Coe puts it, "propaganda" refers to "propagating an idea and what's wrong with that?"

Postmodernism has, in some cases, led to effective political interventions, particularly in performance art, but the politics are bundled in such clever theory that they are incomprehensible to the average person. In a performance that I viewed by Guillermo Gomez-Pena and Coco Fusco a few years ago in a London shopping mall, it was obvious that the general public understood it as equivalent to a humorous circus show, rather than a comment on colonialism. Fusco, posing as an exotic travel agent, pretended to "interview" members of the audience on their fantasies about travel. Gomez Pena enacted these fantasies from inside a cage. Such was the distance between artists and the public, that only the postmodern initiate would have seen the piece as a critique of tourism.

As a result of this conceptual gap, conservative politicians can easily convince the public that this art is, at best, elitist and irrelevant, and at worst, riddled with a dangerous sexuality and immorality, as was the case with the misinterpreted Robert Mapplethorpe, Andres Serrano, Annie Sprinkle and Sally Mann. Just as Hitler destroyed modern art in Germany in the thirties by demonizing it as celebrating perversity, so does the right wing dismiss artists as a threat to the social fabric. It is no accident that funding for creative expressions in public schools is losing out to sports.

The well-known Argentinean artist Claudia Bernardi said recently: " Being involved with politics was not a choice in Argentina." "But, "we might protest, "that was Argentina in the era of the disappeared and the ruthless military dictatorships, this is the United States." We are not subject to a ruthless military junta. But, we are subject to costly and ongoing military campaigns that are killing and maiming and starving innocent people in Iraq, Kosovo, and other countries. We have an immense buildup of armaments, in both public and private hands. Violation of civil liberties and exploitation is commonplace for women, immigrants, people of color, and almost all workers. Almost one million African Americans are incarcerated.

#### A Proposal

Think what would happen if all artists publicly and collectively opposed fascism and violence as one aspect of their art practice. The event that is closest to a collective national protest is the AIDS "Day without Art." But what I would like to call for is a multi-issued protest in a public space against the forces that are currently threatening artistic expression in the United States.

When artists contribute in any way to a collective public voice, it is spectacularly effective. The AIDS demonstrations as well as the NAMES quilt are obvious examples. At a recent anti-war demonstration in Seattle, a group of young art students collapsed in the middle of the street in a simulation of death by bombing. Everyone immediately got

the point much more rapidly than simply chanting for change. Another example is Radio B92 in Belgrade, which combined an urgent political agenda to fuel the democratic opposition to Slobodan Milosevic with both traditional and avant-garde media.

#### "Out of the Closet" Political Artists

Political activism today among artists is only rarely tied to socialism and communism, collective actions, or participation in protests. More usually, it involves individual commitments such as work with refugee children, prisoners, inner city youth, people with AIDS, or environmental concerns.

A small number of artists work in a direct line of descent from the social realism of the twenties and thirties: they use a recognizable imagery to communicate directly on a specific political issue such as protesting war and human rights atrocities. These courageous artists are willing to function outside the currently sanctioned parameters for artists, because they are so deeply horrified by the condition of the world.

One such committed artist is Sue Coe. Coe's preferred medium is inexpensive, large edition prints that can be acquired for practically nothing, in order to get her political message out to a wide audience. Coe is confrontational: she works in the tradition of Francisco Goya and Kathe Köllwitz. In dazzling black and white prints and drawings, she addresses the subject of human rights abuses in wars in Central America, the Middle East, South Africa, and in the United States, Canada, and England.

Hired to illustrate articles for such prestigious publications as *The New York Times*, when she first came to the United States from England in 1972, Coe says she is now given only light weight topics, while political subjects are given to more passive illustrators. Her most recent publication, *Dead Meat*, is a survey of slaughterhouses in the United States and England. Its devastating record of animal abuse confronts the inhumanity of corporate meat processing with a clear connection to capitalism's exploitation of all those living beings that are not in a position of power. It is impossible not to become a vegetarian after looking at this book.

Another artist who also works in the tradition of confrontational graphics is Selma Waldman. Waldman created the first works on the holocaust by a Jewish American artist to be acquired by a German museum. Those works, collectively titled *Falling Man*, were life size drawings of dehumanized and distorted figures that were suspended from the ceiling of the Berlin Museum. In making these works, Waldman was so profoundly affected by crimes against humanity and genocide, that she gave up promoting her career as an artist as incompatible with her deep convictions.

Since 1971 she has spent her time as a political activist while also making thousands of powerful drawings. A current series, *The Altars of Fear*, is indirectly based on a photograph of a heavily armed Serbian irregular. It includes images of individual soldiers like "Skelani Stalker, Hunter/Lust" 1998 committing rape and random killing. Waldman has subtly exposed the male organ within the intense tangle of draftsmanship in these drawings, publicly declaring the relationship of male sexual drives and atrocities.

Deborah Lawrence descends from dada collage combined with the precision of the Northern Renaissance. Her humorous works are firmly confrontational even as they keep a light touch of the absurd in their presentation. Lawrence's fictional persona, Dee-Dee Lorenzo, appears at demonstrations in opposition to fundamentalism and racism, and in support of civil rights and environmental issues. The detailed collages place Dee-Dee at actual historical events like the anti-War demonstrations on the freeway in Seattle in the 1970s, the 1988 redress of grievances of Japanese Americans interred during World War II, and the Promise Keepers Rally at the Kingdome in July 1995.

Lawrence's works historically document these events, as well as reminding us that threats to civil liberties are still everywhere. The humor draws in the viewer and suddenly we are with her on the campaign. Lawrence shows her work in non-traditional venues, such as the political headquarters of the Freedom Socialist party or the Women Studies Center at the University of Washington as well as in museums and galleries.



©Claudia Bernardi Zora: The City and the Memory 2004 monotype, 30"x22"  
<http://www.segura.com/BernardiZora.html>

Claudia Bernardi is completely committed to using her creativity to confront injustice, but her resonant drawings and installations are only one reference point within her presentations on violent human rights abuses, and specifically the tragedy of the disappeared in Argentina, Guatemala, El Salvador and elsewhere.

As part of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team she has been directly involved in exhuming the bodies of children and others among the tens of thousands who were massacred during violent dictatorships in those countries. As a way of physically embodying the collective memory of the survivors and the deceased, Bernardi makes installations and stunning frescoes on paper in which pigment is directly rubbed into the

surface. She sees her work, as well as community expressions like the silhouettes of the disappeared painted on walls in Buenos Aires, Argentina, as a tool of resistance to tyranny, as an homage to those who have died, and as a way of healing her own deep feelings about the atrocities. Another aspect of that healing is teaching art to those who have survived torture in Latin America and their children, a project supported by the California Council on the Arts.

#### Getting Art Students Out of the Academy

Bernardi is also a professor in a course at the San Francisco Art Institute "Artists as Citizens of the World." This course as well as "Art for Social Change" at the John F. Kennedy University are directly connecting student artists to communities. Sharon Siskin, a professor in both of these classes, has students who work with environmental issues, with children left behind because of AIDS, , or with the Delancey Street Project which provides a safe haven to people coming out of prison.

Siskin herself was so deeply inspired by the NAMES quilt that she founded "Positive Art" ten years ago, a program with major funding from the California Arts Council. At Positive Art, she and other artists, currently Bob Corti, Marcos Reyes and Nancer LeMoins, provide art materials, art spaces, grant writing assistance, and teaching opportunities for other adults living with HIV and AIDS. The result has been a long series of remarkable exhibitions in the Bay area.

In addition, Siskin makes personal works that elegize people whom she has known personally who have died of AIDS. Her installations make ritual references that relate to her Jewish heritage. Siskin also makes pieces in which the public is invited to add their own comments and she collaborates on murals and installations with other artists. What is striking about Siskin, as well as Bernardi, is that their community activism and collaborative work is not an addendum to promoting their own art, but is at the center of their lives. They have rejected the traditional individualism and isolation that is thought to be a necessary for contemporary art, in favor of a multilayered practice that produces both social change and extraordinary art.

In Chicago, a critic/art historian/educator who stands out as an advocate for an activist role for artists in society is Carol Becker, Dean of the Art Institute of Chicago. Becker's many writings explore the role of artists in a democracy as a subversive presence pointing out that the works that have been attacked are those that offer an alternative to society's acceptable norms. She wrote in 1993 of how we have "internalized the diminished value allotted to artists who are often alienated from each other, the pressing political debates, and the society at large." For Becker, as an administrator of a prestigious art school, the issue is how to educate artists to be part of the world.

Two student artworks, which put the school at odds first with the African American community and second with veterans, triggered an urgent rethinking of the school's role in the community in the early nineties: the issue went beyond First Amendment rights, and affected state and local funding support. As a result, the Art Institute decided to move

beyond its already established tradition of collaboration with groups such as the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, and developed a new course for entering students called, "The Art of Crossing the Street." Eventually, the Art Institute hopes to have a coordinated program on "Art in the Public Sphere."

#### Politics in Public Art

Of course, community art is already well established in Chicago, but there is frequently a big divide between those artists who are being encouraged by an institution to go into the community as an academic assignment or on a big grant from a public entity and public murals by grass roots activists. The Chicago Public Art Group, currently directed by Jon Pound and working with artists like Olivia Gude, John Weber, William Walker and many others has been producing collaborative public art with communities ever since the "Wall of Respect," of 1967. This more politically- motivated and multicultural practice has very different roots than those of mainstream public art, but the two worlds are starting to converge. The Chicago Public Art Group recently completed a huge mosaic project in downtown Chicago in collaboration with designers, architects and neighborhood groups to commemorate the building and history of the Illinois and Michigan Canal. It is not far from the Art Institute.

Public art commissions always require negotiating with many communities, so, aside from a few prominent exceptions, it rarely permits confrontational political statements. When it is linked to the strong tradition of political opposition of the Mexican muralist tradition which was introduced in this country in the 1930s by Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Jose Clemente Orozco. "Los tres grandes" as they are known, provided the model for dynamic content that directly addresses oppression, racism, and imperialism. In fact, the last work of Eva Cockcroft, who recently died of cancer, and spent her career committed to public art and politics, was the recreation on a smaller scale of a seminal mural painted by Siqueiros in Los Angeles titled Tropical America. The painting is a potent commentary on US Imperialism in Mexico. More recent murals are rarely so critical, but they still offer an alternative vision of American society.

Permanent public art that is not in the direct tradition of the Mexican muralists is less confrontational. For Fin Project, University of Washington professor John T. Young buried 22 dive fins from de-commissioned Navy submarines. They form the shape of a whale pod in a public park that is a former Navy base. The straightforward idea is that of "weapons into plowshares," a memorial to those who served on submarines; the piece was even endorsed by the Navy. Another layer is that the fins cost billions of tax dollars and could not be recycled. Finally, the metaphor of whales and submarines competing in the world's oceans forms a powerful image.

A more overt political statement is Edgar Heap of Birds' Day/Night 1991, in Pioneer Square in Seattle. Heap of Birds framed a nineteenth century bronze bust of Chief Seattle by James Wehn with two plaques which read in Salish ( the language of the tribes around Puget Sound) and English: "Far away brothers and sisters we still remember you. Chief Seattle, now the streets are our home." The statement is a direct reference to the fact that

most of the homeless on Pioneer Square are Native Americans. The land originally belonged to them.

Marita Dingus' work in several Seattle community centers went through the public art process, but still maintains an assertive presence outside the homogenous mainstream. At one community center in central Seattle, Dingus made two larger than life size wall paintings of Yoruba deities, then invited children to decorate them. Round metal shapes (decorated juice can lids) painted with simple black forms make jewelry from head to toe and small decorated blocks of wood create a sacred frame. She comments that the Yoruba deities resonate for her and the children because over one third of the African American population in the United States is of Yoruba descent. Dingus' work successfully combines aesthetics, politics, and public appeal, a rare accomplishment. One of her works, *400 Men and Women of African Descent*, currently on long-term display in the Seattle Art Museum, was chosen by the public for purchase by the museum.

Working on the community level on a much larger scale, Ken Parker, a community activist from Northern Ireland, has worked with Catholic and Protestant children during the long troubled years in that country. This spring, he organized almost 1000 middle school children in Seattle to make four-foot paper mache self-portraits. The pieces were made in a two and half hour art class that interrupted the normal schedule of the school. It also created new social groupings among children who had never met. The individual self-portraits collectively made visible a dynamic and diverse community. They were displayed in the display windows of the Bon Marché department store, and assembled at a community festival in the summer. Such a project is quite different from the exposure of injustices, but it is an affirmation of diversity and community, and as such begins a transformation of society.

Political activism can even happen deep within a bureaucratic system. The Seattle Arts Commission in collaboration with Seattle Public Utilities and Seattle City Light funds artists' residencies. Rather than simply making a few objects to hang on the wall, the artists learn about the utilities, and make work that educates and expands the understanding of how the utility works for the public as well as the employees. These are not political in the sense of critique, but they do connect the artists' insights with several new public audiences. In exposing the conceptual framework of a utility, the art explores its political assumptions as well. For example, Lorna Jordan's "Watershed Illuminations" planned to be executed in collaboration with other artists, calls attention to water systems within the city, so that the public experiences water as not simply coming from a tap, but as a journey through a series of gardens consisting of wetlands, reservoirs and detention pools. Jordan's work falls into the healing and educational category, but in the environmental arena, awareness of systems can lead to a new type of thinking for a much larger public.

At Seattle City Light, Dan Corson is also functioning as an educator, but he is concerned with how systems of power intersect with systems of nature. A temporary work in Seattle Control/Illumination (1994) made in collaboration with Tom Meyer, was an interactive piece: it had a control pad that could be activated by any passerby to

project a strong search light that illuminated a street corner. The searchlight and the corner had matching glyphs with alchemical symbols of light and power. Street people took ownership of the piece and its power, which meant, for example, that they could wield a search light on the police or any one else instead of vice versa.

For his Seattle City Light residency Corson has also worked with power relationships: he is part of the staff in the Environmental and Safety Division, a political act in itself. His proposes mounting small color cameras that provide underwater, microscopic and eagles-eye view of a salmon spawning ground, and then transmitting the images to a large video screen in Seattle by means of a fiber-optic link. Given the recent designation of salmon as an endangered species, which is generating lawsuits from anxious developers greedily intent on rampant development along creeks, the project is urgent. In going upstream to spawn, the salmon swims through over thirty different government jurisdictions. Corson's project will make visible the heart of the fragile process of wild spawning.

#### Documentary Interventions

Speaking of fish and bureaucracies, Allan Sekula's current traveling exhibition "Fish story" is embedded in politics that have artistic roots in the documentary tradition of photography, the anti-materialism of sixties' conceptual art, as well as labor politics connected to the global problem of the corporate takeover of maritime industries. At the Henry Art Gallery at the University of Washington, "Fish Story" was part of an extensive commemoration of the Seattle General Strike of 1919 and the Longshoreman's strike of 1934. Sekula's photographs tell the tale of the impact of multi-national corporations on workers' lives. That tale, though, is not linear, nor is it didactic, but can be understood only in the context of a complex series of separate layers of politics (literally separate labels and narratives in the exhibition) that address human and global issues simultaneously. At the same time the photographs as hung in the art gallery were modest in scale and message, invitingly informal, like tourist photographs.

The message was more direct in a partner display, on an actual container ship that was moored in downtown Seattle for a week. The Global Mariner, owned by the International Transport Workers Federation, is a traveling exhibition sailing the world to call attention to the abuses caused by international shipping corporations that use "flags of convenience", that is flags from countries who do not require standard health regulations or unionized labor. The Mariner has huge digitized photo murals hanging in its hold that dramatically depict the health and safety hazards that result for both individual sailors and travelers from unregulated substandard shipping.

As a part of the Sekula exhibition and the strike commemoration, we were also able to actually tour the \$300 million port being constructed for American President Lines in Seattle. This multi acre facility, which is surrounded by fences and barbed wire will be the new West Coast base for a huge multinational shipping company. It will accommodate the world's largest container ships that will be unloaded primarily by robots. The public amenity required by King County in return for its funding, resulted in

two small parks surrounded by high fences; they chillingly underscored the dehumanizing processes of the new corporate waterfront.

Sekula's *Fish Story* provides a window into this enormous, exploitative capitalist endeavor, in which both fish and the quality of life of individuals are marginal to profits. It documents the results of capitalist power politics, but unlike the photomurals on the *Global Mariner* which speak directly to a general audience, *Fish Story* is placed in the art world. Sekula's politics can be discovered by the politically minded, but he can also pass as a historically conscious modernist photographer. Unlike traditional documentary photography, in which telling the story is primary, *Fish Story* deliberately sits at the border of aesthetics and information.

Sekula's ambiguity about his own position as a political artist, echoes the multiple positions that photography, along with film and video, occupy in the context of art and politics. Documentary photography has long been an effective means of communicating on social and political issues to a large audience, but it has only rarely been granted equal consideration with art photography by mainstream criticism. At the same time, once it is absorbed into art history, it loses its efficacy as a political expression, as in the case of say, Lewis Hines' project to call attention to child labor abuses. Its inclusion in the Whitney Museum "American Century: Art and Culture 1900 - 1950" dilutes its powerful political context.

#### Conclusion

That dilemma lies at the heart of political art. Activist art that addresses real issues loses steam when the art world gets hold of it. In the aftermath of the Whitney Biennial of 1993, the majority of mainstream critics dismissed the entire exhibition as "art gallery leftism," and immediately declared that all the political issues addressed in the show were simply art world strategies. Biennials since then have been toothless and boring. The reality was that the 1993 Biennial included a diverse group of artists of color, gay and straight, women and men, who encompassed many different issues. Most critics never even stopped to consider the relationship between the artist and the political issue addressed. They were desperate to reaffirm the ideology that artists must simply create decorative diversions.

In the late 1990s, politically concerned art is widespread, but it is dispersed and much of it hides behind the cloak of aesthetics and postmodern theory. In contrast, in the 1930s, highly respected critics like Anita Brenner or Elizabeth McCausland, and artists like Stuart Davis and Margaret Bourke-White, shared the same political and physical space in collective events like the American Artists Congress. They urgently formed a united opposition to fascism.

Today artists have varying commitments: some are deeply buried in bureaucracies, others are completely public in their beliefs. Their politics range from a straightforward condemnation of American capitalism, war, and violence by artists who have sacrificed art world careers for what they believe, to those who choose the positive position of affirming a new vision of American society. In some cases, artists act collectively around

a single issue or concern, but artists are rarely connected, as they were in the thirties, to collective political actions. But now, once again, the rise of fascism poses a major threat not only to culture, but also to all aspects of contemporary life. Artists are urgently needed to join in public protests, such as those here in the Northwest, against Neo-Nazi skinheads, the Ku Klux Klan and the Aryan Nations.

Politics are not a problem for art. They are a fact and a reality, albeit a well-kept secret. The many artists concerned about political issues counter the powerful forces in society that seek to keep art marginal and meaningless. The only trouble is that unless artists take time out from their private strategies to act collectively and publicly, no one will know it.