

Too Political? Forget It

In memory of David Wojnarowicz, Rudolf Baranik, and Ed Eisenman, art activists

LUCY R. LIPPARD

"Whose history is remembered? Do other stories go untold?"

— REPOHistory, 1992.

Art matters in a different way to me now than it did fifteen years ago. Having fought over three decades for the idea that art and politics do mix, that art can be made effective in social contexts, during the period covered by this book I also had to come to terms with the ways art and politics don't mix.

I remain primarily interested in the contradictory, mysterious ways in which artists and objects or actions enter society, in what images mean and do to people, and how contact and lack of contact with their audiences affect what artists do in the studio. I'm particularly fond of art's potential to open people's eyes, to make them see, think, feel, and act. I want to know all I can about the relationship of the parts to the whole, of the artist to her/his life, of the object to the context in which it is made and to the audience for whom it is intended. I still yearn for artists to find more elbow room in social life, to challenge the liberal assumption that significant artistic questions and analyses can only be made from a so-called neutral middleground, that anything to the left of that particular position is either unsophisticated (read "uneducated") or rhetorical (read "a little too clear for comfort"). But the mostly forgotten history of efforts on behalf of these ideas comes back, both to hearten and to haunt me.

Before the culture war was officially begun and before Art Matters found itself labeled "too political," the image wars had been under way for some time. Those of us further out on the art-world margins were let in on the secret early, and in no uncertain terms. In 1983, an NEA grant to the group I worked with—PAD/D (Political Art Documentation/Distribution)—was vetoed/censored by NEA Chairman Frank Hodsoll, after being approved by the peer panel. This was especially annoying since we never would have bothered to go through the tedious application process had we not been directly solicited by the NEA. In 1984, Franklin Furnace, with the fearless Martha Wilson at its helm, was singled out by right-wing

Chapter opener:

Guerrilla Girls, Guerrilla Girls Review The Whitney, 1987, graffiti installation, The Clocktower, New York City. Photo courtesy of the artists. Art Matters grant recipient, 1986.

Left:

Creative Time, A Podium of Dissent, 1985, performance by Nicholas Goldsmith and Dennis Adams at Art on the Beach. Photo courtesy of Creative Time. Art Matters grant recipient, 1985, 1986, 1991, 1992.

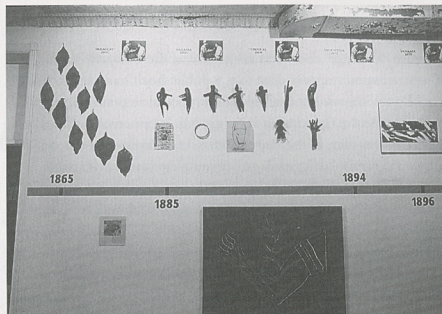




Group Material, *Americana*, 1985. Installation at the 1985 Whitney Biennial. Photo courtesy of Julie Ault. Art Matters grant recipients, 1987, 1988.

the number of women included by some 400 percent? And what studio classes today are given the option of working for varied audiences within and without the art world? Fortunately, there are some exceptions. But they are few and far between. No wonder activist and community art, always a stepchild, is so slow to evolve.

Despite a certain level of politicization that filtered into the art world during the 1980s, the process came to a grinding halt with the reception of the 1993 Whitney Biennial, which daringly featured some work with some politics and was then savaged by the press for its trouble. Fifteen years ago, when Art Matters was founded, feminist and activist art initiatives from the 1960s and '70s were already struggling with cultural amnesia.² We worried then (and we worry even more so now) that our histories would be forgotten and ignored or—worse still—distorted.³ When younger artists express interest in our neglected pasts, we are initially so pleased that it seems ungrateful to challenge their interpretations or even dispute factual inaccuracies. Revisionist histories can be more accurate than the original versions. Yet, when primary sources and first-hand accounts are not respected, when people crucial to the movements are neither consulted nor interviewed for books on the subject, or when the information they offer is passed over in favor of data more sympathetic to other agendas, the conclusions drawn are questionable. It was recent experiences like these that prompted my examination here of memory loss.



Group Material. *Timeline: A Chronicle of U.S. Intervention in Central and South America, 1984*. Installation at P.S.1. Photo courtesy of Julie Ault. Art Matters grant recipients, 1987, 1988.

Among the most commonly forgotten aspects of the art of the late '70s and early '80s are the works of artists of color (especially those who fit none of the pigeon-holes cherished by the minstrel show of modernism) and of lesbian and gay artists. The first specifically lesbian art show in New York was organized by Harmony Hammond in 1977 at 112 Greene Street, and a related issue of *Heresies* was published on the subject. A year later, the "Nigger Drawings" show at Artists' Space prompted many in the art world to wonder where a young white male artist got off using such an inflammatory title for his otherwise innocuous exhibition of black-and-white abstract drawings. (At one point he claimed that all artists were "niggerized" in this society; at another point he said he got charcoal dust all over his face while making the work.) The African-American arts community, alerted by Howardena Pindell, organized protests and the liberal white art world found itself in the villain's role of backing the artist and insisting that in art, anything goes. An abyss emerged between those avant-garde artworkers (myself included) who perceived themselves as the left and those who perceived themselves as automatic liberals by virtue of being artists at all. The spectacle of the art world's encouragement of racism in the name of artistic freedom led to the formation of Artists Against Racism in the Arts (AARA), directly raising consciousness within a racially mixed group for the first time since the late 1960s.

Ironically, such tolerance for racism and sexism in the art world is often based in the concept of free speech, as is tolerance for sexual discrimination and harassment in the legal world. Dangerous as it is to suggest that any external ethical and moral forces should "control" artistic expressions, what about the internal forces? Should there be controls or should artists be allowed any excess, including images that inspire hate, fear, homophobia, misogyny, and xenophobia? The

"Nigger Drawings" show and AARA raised the issue, still unresolved, of where artists' responsibility to the public begins and ends. Some would question whether artists have any social responsibility at all. Is art outside the fray until it is dragged in by external forces? The NEA controversies of the early 1990s, which threatened the arts' economic survival, triggered participation by many artists who would have preferred to remain apolitical.

My own perspective on such questions results from a trajectory that is peculiar in comparison to that of most of my colleagues. Looking back on the past several decades of my involvement with the art world, I sometimes feel like I was living in a parallel, if porous, universe. I've wended my way from a position that was briefly central in the art world to one that is largely outside or adversarial to it. I spent the late 1960s protesting the Vietnam war and looking for ways that artists could participate in those angry, turbulent times. Then I spent most of the '70s writing and organizing in a feminist context, thrust back into the art world on behalf of women's work. By the late 1970s, I was ready to apply what I'd learned to a broader field. I became increasingly involved with left politics, writing journalism as well as "criticism," and trying to forge some kind of new context for the arts in this society. My extended decade was defined by local organizing with artists (which is like herding cats) in PAD/D, publishing with left-wing feminists in *Heresies* (a collectively edited publication devoted to "feminism, art, and politics"), national cultural organizing in the Alliance for Cultural Democracy (ACD), and two other activist projects: Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America (a nationwide campaign of artists' actions in more than thirty cities in the U.S. and Canada, organized in conjunction with the Institute of Arts and Letters of El Salvador); and *How to '92* (an activist's handbook accompanying ACD's Campaign for a Post-Columbian World). Each of these had a profound influence on the work I was doing for a living and the books I was writing, as did trips to China, Cuba, and Central America, and working with Printed Matter, an artists' bookstore I cofounded with Sol LeWitt. I made demonstration art with various groups and, in collaboration with artist Jerry Kearns, wrote articles, did performances, and organized exhibitions (including several for District 1199's Bread and Roses). The idea was not only to include culture in the political arena but also to create a culture that was inherently responsive to political events and community needs.

While I don't enjoy reliving my past, I don't enjoy seeing it vanish either. Reading up for this essay, I was struck by the continued neglect of one sector, one time period: the immensely vital hard-core

art/political activism of the first half of the 1980s, which set the stage for the activism of the late 1980s and early '90s, a time when a lot of things that were made and said in the 1960s and '70s were reframed in more elegant and complex forms and updated language. An otherwise intelligent and inclusive article on activist art in the '80s expertly demonstrated the provincialism of the New York art "scene" by dismissing most of the first half of the decade—the contributions of Fashion Moda and PAD/D, the glorious outpouring of demonstration art in June 1982 at the largest disarmament manifestation ever, billboards "corrected" by artists, guerrilla performance art, gritty anarchist comics like *World War 3 Illustrated*, the hilarious, hard-hitting, and good-natured sex education side shows of Carnival Knowledge, Suzanne Lacy's innovative fusions of performance and community organizing, the groundbreaking cross-cultural exhibitions at JAM (Just Above Midtown), most of the women's art movement, 'zines and artists' books—to name just a few of the omissions.⁴ I list all of this for the record, simply because most of it is not in the record, or else it has been filtered in from irrelevant and ignorant angles. Such absences go to show, yet again, that if artists don't concentrate on the art world, if they are primarily concerned with audiences who will never write, curate, collect or fund art, they run the risk of being forgotten before they are even acknowledged.

It is ironic that PAD/D (1980-87) itself was initiated as an antidote to cultural amnesia. After living for a year in England, I was impressed by the socialist and community-oriented arts there and disturbed by how little I'd heard of them. The lack of communications between progressive artists around the world was depressing. Each group was reinventing ideas and actions that had already been tested and worked out by groups elsewhere, sometimes decades before. When I returned to New York, I curated a small exhibition of British artists from the left, and on the announcement card called for materials to begin an archive of socially concerned art. Despite the awkward name we laid on it before we had any idea what we were up to, PAD/D became an activist art organization at its first meeting.⁵ The time was ripe, again. It was the third progressive artists group to be founded in New York in a decade, following the Art Workers' Coalition in 1969, Artists Meeting for Cultural Change in response to the Bicentennial in 1976, not to mention AARA and all the feminist groups. Over the next eight years, PAD/D tried to reconcile the continuing conflict between art and politics in a society where art has lost its social context. By producing art in direct collaboration with progressive issue-oriented groups, we expanded the models for activist art and made it better known through networking outside the uninterested art mainstream. We were convinced



Ed Koch: The "Acting" Mayor Of New York

PAD/D *Upfront*, Number 3, December/January 1981, newsletter. Visual by Jerry Kearns with John Fekner's stencil in background. Courtesy of the artists.

that both image-making and the art process provided an important symbolic focus for exchange and a rallying point for social action.

The immense PAD/D Archive, which began its life at Charas on the Lower East Side, now rests in state at the Museum of Modern Art Library, perhaps the group's most lasting contribution.⁶ But our goal of finding ways for an artist to have "an organized relationship to society" was best served by the distribution wing: PAD/D's public projects (among them, "Death and Taxes," "the February 26th Movement," and "Not For Sale"), our Second Sunday panels/performances at Franklin Furnace, coalition-building with ethnic cultural groups around the city, and the magazine *Upfront*.

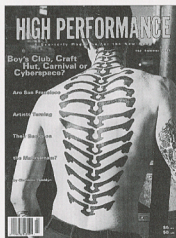
It is not surprising that this blast of activity and increased support for politicized culture took place as the Reagan/Bush administration took power...and took power farther than we thought it could be taken only a decade after the revolutions of the 1960s. As social gaps widened in the early 1980s between rich and poor, CEOs and workers, the housed and the homeless, religious family values and feminist and GLBT sexualities, similar cracks appeared in the art sphere. Tensions were exacerbated between rich and poor artists, mainstream and alternative, theory and activist practice, modernist and postmodernist allegiances, feminist "essentialists" and "deconstructivists." As a boastful, inconsiderate, and greedy Republican ethos pervaded the yuppified nation, a militant activism was sparked on the politicized fringes of the art world. The trend toward public

display, toward art styles used for other than purely aesthetic ends in other than neutral locations (though most posterizing took place in SoHo, Tribeca, and LoIsaida), reflected a larger need for artists to "work in the gap between art and life" that has resurfaced periodically over the last century.

Since the mid-'60s at least, there has been an underground or peripheral movement against the commodification of art. The market-and-magazine system—the only social platform provided for art in this society—is inadequate to art ideas involving communication, responsibility, and social contexts. Conceptual, performance, and installation art as well as artists' books and alternative spaces were all intended to bypass the market. In the late 1960s, Seth Siegelau and his posse of conceptual artists (Doug Huebler, Lawrence Weiner, Robert Barry, and Joseph Kosuth) devised ways of distributing art that subverted the power structure with international catalogues and artists' books that were art and exhibitions in themselves. They were so successful that they too were absorbed into the commercial framework. With less commercial success, the women's art movement in the early '70s developed its own versions of these forms within women-only events and spaces, especially in California and then in New York.

During this period there was a growing understanding that socially conscious artists would have to create the contexts and distribution systems as well for these new art forms—an awesome responsibility for those who had expected to spend their lives cloistered in studios and praised in museums. I recall yelling at lecture audiences comprised mostly of art students and working artists, "Do you think anyone else cares enough to change the art world? If artists don't do it, who do you think will?" Knowing that the art context would change only superficially if the world itself wasn't changed, by 1980 I was even angrier, or more frustrated. I questioned the effectiveness of our efforts to date in a performance piece called "Propaganda Fictions," berating my disconcerted audiences (who tended to be friends or sympathizers): "YOU LOUSY ARTISTS..."⁷

Yet many younger artists emerging from art school in the late 1970s were refusing to melt passively into the current system. Their diversely expressed malaise resulted in the formation of collectives like Group Material, Fashion Moda, Colab, ABC NO Rio Dinero, High Performance, Franklin Furnace, World War 3, CUD (Contemporary Urbacultural Documentation), and (later) Bullet Space, among others.⁸ Sometimes—as in PAD/D—they joined forces with those of us who had been tackling social issues for years. The Lower East Side (allied with the South Bronx) split off briefly from SoHo before it was colonized by SoHo (again briefly,



High Performance, Summer 1993, published by The 18th Street Arts Complex, Santa Monica, Cal. Art Matters grant recipient, 1987.

before SoHo itself got bypassed for Chelsea). Young artists were working in ad hoc spaces, on the piers, under the bridges, in rough, poor neighborhoods, forming tentative coalitions with young artists there who were usually untrained but who offered a vitality not to be found within the white cube. White artists aspired to the high energy of hip-hop music, breakdancing, and graffiti. Performance, music, and punk style were integral parts of what came to be known as the East Village scene. Punk music clubs merged with the art scene. There was a lot of dancing. I was always quoting Emma Goldman: "If there's no dancing at your revolution, I'm not coming."

The early 1980s were angry, hyper, and hyped. The art was given to apocalyptic visions, fueled by Reagan's plan to rapture out and leave the hoi polloi below in case of a nuclear holocaust—the greatest global fear, along with the Central American conflagrations, while gentrification as a prelude to homelessness was one of the hot local issues. Urban grittiness and hyperbole was the style of the day. There was a passionately journalistic tone to much of the art that harked back to the 1930s. Even to some veterans of the 1960s image wars, like myself, this looked like a relatively hopeful moment, if marred by alarming symptoms of alienation: drugs, violence, homelessness.

Then came AIDS. If silence had equaled repression and oppression before, now it equaled death. Irony and ambiguity in art seemed increasingly apolitical and disturbing. A "retrochic" syndrome turned leftist political and feminist images back on themselves to evoke very different messages; neo-Nazi signifiers were casually tossed around. Lack of specificity in the art was paralleled by lack of focus in the politics, which emphasized aggression and rebellious behavior rather than issues. Thus, marvelously dynamic events like Colab's Times Square Show or the wildcat Real Estate Show (mounted without permission in a city-abandoned building), could be all over the place in terms of political content.⁹ Most artists avoided saying exactly what and whom they were talking about. Galleries liked the energy, but specificity made them nervous. It wasn't fashionable within the art milieu to name names—that was a strategy that came from outside, from the political left. With a few exceptions, such as Hans Haacke and the Guerrilla Girls, then Gran Fury with ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), such specificity signified the boundary between hardcore activism and the high-art markets and institutions. It was a time characterized by fusion and fragmentation, "shifting" and "contested" grounds, blurred boundaries, hybridized cultures, coalitions won and lost, interwoven academic disciplines—a time almost impossible to summarize except from specific viewpoints. It was also a time when the activist art commu-



nity was highly aware of the need to integrate experimental forms and social action—the avant-garde and community arts, which had rarely met until the early '80s.

There has long been a confusion between the notions of "political" and "activist" art, which is really a confusion between political and activist artists, exacerbated by the fact that they frequently cross over the unmarked boundaries. Loosely, very loosely, I'd say that the "political artist" makes gallery/museum art with political subject matter and/or content, but may also be seen calling meetings, marching, signing petitions, or speaking eloquently and analytically on behalf of various causes. Some of them are artists whose work is not perceived as political at all, such as Ad Reinhardt, Claes Oldenburg, or Elizabeth Murray. Others are overtly engaged within their art as well, such as Leon Golub, Nancy Spero, Martha Rosler, Michael Glier, or Peter Gourfain...I could go on and on. Political art makes people think politically through images, but it may or may not inform the audience about specific events or solutions or rouse people to take action.

"Activist artists," on the other hand, face out of the art world, working primarily in a social and/or political context. They spend more of their time thinking publicly, are more likely to work in groups, and less likely to show in galleries, though many have ended up there. Activists may snipe at the power structures from the art world's margins, or simply bypass conventional venues to make art elsewhere. Then you run into someone like the redoubtable David

Colab, *Times Square Show*, June 1980. Second floor paintings on masonry by Tom Otterness. Photo courtesy Lisa Kahane.

John Malpede/Los Angeles Poverty Department, *LAPD Inspects San Francisco*, 1987, a workshop in basement of "501 Cultural Club" in San Francisco's Tenderloin District. Left to right: Julious Jenkins, Jenny Bass, Linda Burnham, unknown, Vicky Jordan, Candy, Kristan Kann. Photo courtesy of the artists. Art Matters grant recipient, 1987, 1988.



Wojnarowicz, or Sue Coe, who have brilliantly confounded these artificial categories and were never afraid to say exactly what and whom they were talking about. Among the youthful energies snapping at the flanks of what used to be called the establishment, Group Material, in particular, bridged the gap between the avant-garde and the left activist art scene. The collective began on the margins with a temporary space on East 13th Street. Wisely, it stayed small, and soon began to work "parasitically" in other venues, with an atypically focused social agenda. Influenced by the raw quality of vernacular and semi-trained art coming from their Lower East Side home base, Group Material proposed a materialist art process and became a model for artists young and restless in the early '80s. In 1984 they began a series of "timelines" to remind viewers of otherwise neglected social contexts and histories. These one-room exhibitions juxtaposed a conglomeration of art, nonart, and unexpected materials with a superscript of dates painted around the room, a historical chronology of the events under scrutiny that corralled the wild art into some interpretive order and conveyed a political message.

One of the group's cofounders, Tim Rollins, developed a model for community education through art by applying this process to the lives of supposedly "uneducable" students in the South Bronx, when he started K.O.S. (Kids of Survival). Thanks to art-world attention earned by the unique formal and intellectual vigor of their work, Tim Rollins and K.O.S. had their moment in the media spotlight, unlike similarly innovative but less art-world-compatible groups. Far more attention should be paid, for instance, to such exemplary projects as Judy Baca's community murals and their rehabilitative educational branches; to the Woman's Building; to John Malpede's LAPD (Los Angeles Poverty Department); to the Border Arts Workshop and its spin-offs around San Diego; to Suzanne Lacy's brilliant "new genre" community events in Oakland; and to the numerous nonurban community organizations that are virtually



Appalshop, *Rough Side of the Mountain*, 1997, a video documentary by Anne Lewis, 58 minutes/color, produced and distributed by Appalshop. Still courtesy of Appalshop. Art Matters grant recipient, 1986, 1987.

unknown in the art world, such as Kentucky's Appalshop and Atlanta's Alternate Roots.¹⁰ Heirs to these groups have fared somewhat better, but have hardly become household art words.

The second half of the 1980s (in New York, at least) was more focused on "local" issues and direct interaction, on AIDS, media, and homeless/housing issues. Those artists most closely involved with the left were suffering from the post-Cold War abandonment of revolutionary culture. The art cooled down stylistically and became more theoretically (and academically) oriented. By the end of the decade, deconstructivist feminist artists, postmodernist artists of color, and self-identified queer artists were the liveliest sources of postmodern criticism, though they lost some of their potential audiences through their reliance on jargon. More "traditional" feminist art had suffered setbacks with the overwhelming market embrace of a new and often reactionary expressionism that was almost exclusively male, and the advent of so-called postfeminism. (I've learned to be wary of anything rigidly defined as a "post.") The Guerrilla Girls had started wheatpasting their exaggeratedly plain, nonpictorial, public-service texts while wearing gorilla masks in 1985. These were more successful than even their funniest image works from later years, mainly because they impiously named the art world's stars and charged them with collusion. While GG's initial focus on career issues limited their reach, they also brought a hard-hitting humor to bear on the art world bottom line: gallery/museum representation and economics. Around 1992, the Guerrilla Girls were joined in the fray by the huge, vital, and short-lived Women's Action Coalition (WAC), courtesy of the Anita Hill hearings and a growing feminist backlash against postfeminist backlash. With its ecstatically militant drum corps and high-tech graphic-design tactics, WAC demonstrated the power of art at both major parties' political conventions that year.¹¹ Its demise due to infighting was a major blow for the women's art movement.

Artists of color both contributed to and profited from a new kind of hybrid multiculturalism that was simmering by the late '80s, less amenable to accommodating the dominant culture's stereotypes and also resistant to much left and alternative categorization. After an exhilarating (for white activists) period of more and less successful coalition-building, artist-theorists, cultural critics, and art historians like bell hooks, Michele Wallace, Judith Wilson, Coco Fusco, Amalia Mesa Bains, Margo Machida, Theresa Harlan, Marlon Riggs, and others have—often brilliantly—taken things into their own hands. Many well-meaning coalitions between white art communities, postmodern theory groups, and communities of color broke down by the mid-1990s, although they left behind them important friendships and alliances. "Multiculturalism" (for those who will still use the word at all) is now increasingly understood as excluding the participation of white people—sometimes a necessity because less energy is spent on combating ignorance and bias.

AIDS activism in the later 1980s and '90s represented not a new genre but a new level of intensity. As the art world lost (and is still losing) many of its major figures to the epidemic, what had passed for political art in the past seemed inadequate. Fueled by rage and fear of real and present danger, rather than hypothetical and distant disaster, AIDS activists used graphic arts, media savvy, and mass mobilization to great effect. The distinctions between homo- and gynoeroticism and homophobic depictions, like the distinction between retrochic, right-wing, lesbian, and feminist uses of images of nude women, became an ongoing focus of the anticensorship, obscenity and pornography debates.¹² In all too many social sectors, the mere depictions of man and man or woman and woman together ignited homophobia. So the anonymous San Francisco collective Boys With Arms Akimbo's "Just Sex" posters, and images by Gran Fury, ACT UP's art branch (including their inspired bus posters of beautiful young people in every permutation kissing, and Kruger-like posters for a 1988 "Kiss-In") took off from a ready-charged base of political immediacy and personal intimacy that few other issue-oriented artists could claim. Video, too, plays a major role in the GBLT community's activism, with 1980s groups like Testing the Limits and Visual Aids leading the way. Lesbian activist artists weighed in with collectives Fierce Pussy, Lesbian Avengers, and Dyke Action Machine. The logo of the Silence=Death project, with these words in white below a pink triangle on a black ground, went from a 1987 street poster to an art icon to a global symbol of resistance. Gran Fury summed up the art activist's dilemmas in a bold text poster that read in part, "With 42,000 Dead, Art Is Not Enough."

KISSING DOESN'T KILL: GREED AND INDIFFERENCE DO



CORPORATE GREED, GOVERNMENT INACTION, AND PUBLIC INDIFFERENCE MAKE AIDS A POLITICAL CRISIS

Despite all this activity, much of it highly visible, during the 1980s the atmosphere within the art world itself became so rarefied that much activist energy was drained away. Theory, generally characterized by obscure language, apolitical pretentiousness, and academic elitism divorced politics from actual practice, although there was never a clear line between left activists and radical theorists. Many of the deconstructivist ideas and analyses were powerful and important, but the mainstream art world's flirtation with Baudrillardian cynicism tended to reduce everything to construction and simulation. While some artists fed off the tensions produced, a kind of "be there or be square" attitude tended to discourage activist engagement. While claiming to be more politically sophisticated than their predecessors, some theorists tended to undermine all that feminist and political activists had fought so hard for since the 1960s. The ground indeed shifted beneath us. The rules were different. It is virtually impossible to continue organizing politically in an art world that dissects every act and idea into smaller and smaller fragments, until there is little left that can be believed (in). At best, the debates fueled a theorized praxis. At worst, the theorists were ignorant of the practice, or ignored it, and the gaps widened between the two. Although the '90s were predicted as the decade of renewed energies on the left and renewed activism in the art world, neither panned out. In 1991, the Gulf War briefly reignited a rash of reactive activism, but it had little influence or staying power.

One of the high points of the last fifteen years has been the rejuvenation of the notion of a public art. As public funding to individual artists is abolished and public confidence in art reaches an all-time low, there is a paradoxically vigorous outgrowth of outdoor art work intended for public enjoyment and edification (thanks in part to Creative Time, the Public Art Fund, and the Public Art Review, as well as to more spontaneous unfunded actions). Public

Gran Fury, *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, 1990, bus panel, 136 x 28 in. Photo courtesy of Tom Kalin. Art Matters grant recipients, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991.



art has become a necessary urban amenity, not particularly radical but a great improvement on the ubiquitous bank plaza plunk art. Still more miraculous in this day and age is the burgeoning “new genre” public art (which includes performance, signage, impermanent monuments, community organizing projects, and social interactions with various groups), that has pushed the boundaries further, exemplified by the current work of Suzanne

Lacy, John Malpede, and the San Diego sometime-collaborators David Avalos, Louis Hock and Liz Sisco, on the West Coast; New York’s radical collective REPOhistory and their public sign projects, David Hammons, Mel Chin, and Marty Pottenger, on the East Coast; haha in Chicago; Rick Lowe’s Project Row Houses in Houston; and the international feminist activists Women in Black, among many others.

Socially oriented artists of the early 1980s made public art or objects with all the apparent crudity and emotional power of outsider artists and pop culture. Within the mainstream, appropriated images and ideas led to some interesting new variations on the dada/photomontage/ found object/ Warholian vortex, most of which were dependent on photography and text. The prevalent “scriptovisual” forms of the decade’s second half were heavily dependent on conceptual art of the 1960s and ’70s, now enlarged, slicked up, and cyber-technoed out of history. Video and performance were already in full swing, but branches of both became more accessible, with Paper Tiger television leading the way. By the early 1980s, video was taught in all the art schools. Since the equipment had gotten so much cheaper and lighter, it was far more compatible with real-world forays and activist interventions. Performance forked into spontaneous, often rude and crude improvisation and guerrilla/community events on one hand, and more theatrical high-tech spectacles on the other. Photography came into its own as a high (and high-priced) art in the ’80s, but also lent itself to the growing interest in analytical documentation, gritty urban dramas, and social deconstruction. The installation format, often spiked with audio, video, or film, had reappeared after a

boomlet in the mid-’70s. And all these “new” techniques and mediums were accompanied by an increased savvy about how to get ideas across to a broader public.

Commercial artists had long borrowed ideas from high art, but now their practices became attractive in turn to fine artists who understood that the competition was communicating more successfully. (The motives were very different from earlier pop art.) Graphic design and signage

severed from the commercial sector became art forms in themselves in the 1980s and ’90s, crossing aesthetic and political boundaries at will. Artists with a message began to compete with mainstream advertising and mainstream artists, without access to the deep pockets available to both. Signage ranged from John Fekner’s stencils on industrial remains to talented graffiti writers like Lee Quinones, Crash, and the soon-to-be-high-artist Jean-Michel Basquiat. Other notable sign projects were Jenny Holzer’s ambiguous polemics; the Guerrilla Girls’ unambiguous polemics; Barbara Kruger’s powerful admonitions; Edgar Heap of Birds’s reminders of Native land origins; PAD/D’s “Groundworks” and other stencil and sign projects; Robbie Conal’s media-reactive posters; Ilona Granet’s hilarious antisexist warnings; and Gran Fury’s outraged wit. These artists were resorting to less equivocal means to get their messages across, even as theoreticians were preoccupied with other kinds of signs and signifiers. The widespread use of signage in public art may also suggest something of a loss of confidence in the power of the aesthetic image itself, or a need to separate from dependence on the image as manipulated by art critics, dealers, and curators. Like the activists’ street stencils and “corrected” billboards, stealthily appropriated from the commercial sector by artists since the 1970s, sign language comes as a surprise from the alternate viewpoint, intervening and reinterpreting power plays from above.

When art happens on the margins of the art world, however intentionally placed, it is often shot down by the center’s preferred weapons: quality, taste, publicity, and economic support. Denizens of the art world’s upper echelons dislike the notion of either political or activist art, priding themselves on their ignorance of what goes



Left and above: Ilona Granet, *No Cat Calls and Curb your Animal Instinct*, 1986, silkscreen on metal, 24 x 26 in. Photo courtesy of the artist. Art Matters grant recipient, 1987, 1990.

on outside the institutional and commercial milieu. But they reserve a special venom for those making art with social content. Activist art is often simplistically perceived as anti-intellectual, anti-aesthetic, dumbed down, or reduced to the lowest common denominator. Artists involved in activist campaigns in the 1980s were well aware that they (we) were considered aesthetically uninteresting by the arbiters of "high art" taste. While it's dangerous and inaccurate to say, as neoconservatives do, that any recognizable political content makes art superficial by its mere presence, it's true that irony, subtlety, wit, and calculated ambiguity can be powerful when consciously coded for specialized viewers rather than merely providing symbols of anarchy or rebellion or intellectual superiority. However, no matter how closely their inventive street posters and demo art may resemble "scriptovisual" gallery art, activist artists still tend to be considered too "earnest" or "naive," or "simplistic" by those who remain on the sidelines of the image wars. This is unjust, since many of them could be (and sometimes are) also turning out groundbreaking studio art for the market system. Those who avoid the commercial art system altogether have simply chosen to break different ground, making courageous choices not recommended by the art educators, the art critics, or the art funders.

In addition, nobody funds activist art (which explains to some extent why activist artists are often somewhat unsympathetic to the plight of those artists who have been more fortunate and are suddenly defunded). As we learned in PAD/D, it's a waste of time to ask government sources to subsidize potentially "subversive" activities. The aesthetic arbiters are usually unhelpful, since when you are making art to make a political point it is rarely ambiguous enough to be acceptable. Private funders are also out of the question since the values under attack tend to be their own. And left-wing political funders, strapped as they are, would rather fund grass-roots groups than the "art elite," which is always expected to pay its own way, even when it provides eye-catching and thought-provoking attention for the cause.

Art activists are always being asked if they think they can change the world, make a difference, have any effect at all. It seems harder for people to understand that in the early 1980s we were not under the illusion that artists could change the world alone or that we could take credit for a list of specific victories. Many of us were in it for the long haul, trying to develop art forms that would reach and mobilize people. We were trying to get under the cosmetized skin of representation not only in the mass media but also in art itself, to develop a more complex understanding of the connections between studio and street work, academic and populist writing, and

all the stuff in between. We wanted to know how all the different kinds of art worked in the world, and how they complemented each other. We wanted to open up new contexts without entirely abandoning the conventional contexts. We wanted to protest simplistically, but do so imaginatively. On the one hand, we wanted to communicate with and persuade a nonspecialized audience; on the other hand, we wanted to participate in the highest levels of discussion, to avoid being simplistic and rhetorical. We wanted to be innovative, but maintain a critical stance. In other words, we wanted to have our cake and eat it, too.

At the same time, like most progressive artists, we often labored under the illusion that we could make "the people's" art for them. (We dreamed of artists' books in airports and at supermarket check-out counters. For a while I had the idiotic idea of writing some kind of populist art "criticism" in the form of comics, handing them out on the street corners. I finally published a couple... in an art magazine.) Actually, we were often hanging out in the avant-garde hoping to make art more people could relate to. The reach for huge new audiences can exceed an artist's grasp to the point of absurdity, often resulting in a very small audience when the producer hasn't taken social and political reality into consideration. We were always trying to reach the "grass roots," but to our amazement, the religious right got there first.

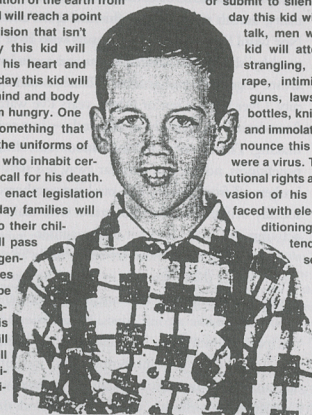
These realities have resigned politicized artworkers to a certain level of blackout. We broke some new ground in the 1980s, but often felt mired in the contradictions that make activist practice so challenging and so vital. One form of internal censorship comes from the left, which doesn't always respect the role of culture, especially unfamiliar culture. At the same time, we were pressured from the right and the cultural mainstream. The art world demanded more complexity of activist artists and the political groups demanded more accessibility. Looking back, I realize that these factors probably contributed to the fact that PAD/D and three other rejected groups took the 1983 NEA vetos with a curious passivity and stoicism. (As did I when I was fired by the *Village Voice* in 1985 after four-and-a-half years of doing exactly what I'd been hired to do—write a monthly "column" on political, feminist, community, and activist art.¹³) We never expected much from the "establishment," and we were wary of being defined by the opposition. In the feminist movement, in particular, we were always debating the problem of being controlled by the process of reaction, which swallows up offensive energy in sometimes unnecessary defense. As literary theorist Homi K. Bhabha, paraphrasing Frantz Fanon, warns, "Paranoia never preserves its position of power, for the compulsive identifica-

tion with a persecutory 'They' is always an evacuation and emptying of the 'I.'"¹⁴

In some ways, the arts community has been asking for the problems brought down on its head since the late '80s. As a feminist, I'm certainly aware of the dangers of the blame-the-victim syndrome. Yet, the average avant-garde artist is extraordinarily isolated from her or his audiences. There needs to be some entrance, some clues, for those viewers who don't get it—not because they're dumb, but because they don't read the art magazines. Modernists and post-modernists alike are internally encouraged to "épater le bourgeois," and it should not have been such a surprise when the middle class was indeed flabbergasted. Artists themselves must take some responsibility for alienating their audiences simply for alienation's sake—or even for art's sake. On the other hand, responsibility is not the same as self-censorship, which is the insidious result of the lack of responsibility.

For better or worse, the prime constituency of a socially engaged art (for me as a writer, at least) is, first and foremost, artists themselves. If artists could be mobilized to think socially, to think out, the art market's hold on art-making might be loosened. The more artists are brainstorming and creating new contexts for art, the more exciting and effective an option activist art will be. One of the key issues raised by the fifteen years in question here is whether there still is a community of artists, a group of people who share beliefs and goals and will stand up for them and for each other when threatened. When a crisis arose—the threat to freedom of expression posed by the enfeebling of the NEA—was there a community to meet it? The fragmented, career-driven, rugged-individualist center supported by powerful galleries and institutions did not come through for artists in general when push came to shove. Art activists were unused to protecting artists; we were more often concerned with "others," ironically agreeing with the political groups dismissing art as less deserving of attention than broader social issues. Since many activist artists had been confronting the patriarchal right wing since the Vietnam War era, the mainstream's belated recognition of a "crisis" when censorship struck higher on the aesthetic ladder was taken with a certain skepticism. Some artists on the left wondered where everyone had been for the last decade, while others were uninterested in supporting colleagues whose work they perceived as apolitical and economically too far ahead of their own careers. As conservative watchdogs moved into mass culture and the corporations took over the cultural institutions, bringing self-censorship in their wake, art-workers began to understand better where we fit into the whole picture. And it was not a pretty picture.

One day this kid will get larger. One day this kid will come to know something that causes a sensation equivalent to the separation of the earth from its axis. One day this kid will reach a point where he senses a division that isn't mathematical. One day this kid will feel something stir in his heart and throat and mouth. One day this kid will find something in his mind and body and soul that makes him hungry. One day this kid will do something that causes men who wear the uniforms of priests and rabbis, men who inhabit certain stone buildings, to call for his death. One day politicians will enact legislation against this kid. One day families will give false information to their children and each child will pass that information down generationally to their families and that information will be designed to make existence intolerable for this kid. One day this kid will begin to experience all this activity in his environment and that activi-



ty and information will compel him to commit suicide or submit to danger in hopes of being murdered or submit to silence and invisibility. Or one day this kid will talk. When he begins to talk, men who develop a fear of this kid will attempt to silence him with strangling, fists, prison, suffocation, rape, intimidation, drugging, ropes, guns, laws, menace, roving gangs, bottles, knives, religion, decapitation, and immolation by fire. Doctors will pronounce this kid curable as if his brain were a virus. This kid will lose his constitutional rights against the government's invasion of his privacy. This kid will be faced with electro-shock, drugs, and conditioning therapies in laboratories tended by psychologists and research scientists. He will be subject to loss of home, civil rights, jobs, and all conceivable freedoms. All this will begin to happen in one or two years when he discovers he desires to place his naked body on the naked body of another boy.

When the realities of the censorship crisis became evident, a loose-knit group of artists who had organized together off and on since the '60s immediately called meetings for "Censorship Emergency," a short-lived initiative that attracted large crowds but was soon replaced by more sophisticated national lobbying techniques. Suddenly, there was a mobilized resistance that brought previously apolitical groups together with working activists into a real force. The nonprofit group Art Matters led the way by funding (and founding) the National Campaign for Freedom of Expression (NCFE). This could be seen as a moment of truth for left-affiliated art groups as we knew them, a moment when higher-tech and more sophisticated strategies took over, better suited to the challenge of a well-organized right with its direct mail and talk shows than were the older means of visual confrontation. New techniques and approaches are crucial in the image/culture wars.

But there is no point in being nostalgic for other times and places in which a more "natural" context for art existed. The question today is how to find a space for culture in this society. The prolonged whine I've written here is a kind of mourning—not for a kind of activist art that no longer works as well as it once did, but for the loss of memory, for the loss of respect for what did work, and for what was boldly attempted. I'm not claiming points for activist art

David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled*, 1990, photostat, 30 x 40 in. Photo courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and PPOW, New York. Art Matters grant recipient, 1989, 1990, 1991.

groups on the basis of conventional notions of "quality" or "originality," but in terms of its influential spirit and expanded context. Nor will I drop the names of artists who have profited from the accomplishments of lesser-known and more specifically political artists. Competition has already done its damage in the art community. Over the last ten or fifteen years I've watched artist friends floundering—creatively, intelligently—in a sea not of their own making. The moment that was 1980, with all its passions and purposefulness, now seems very far away, less part of a continuum than broken off from history and rarely remembered even by those few socially oriented mainstream artists who make work influenced by activism, but make it closer to the center.

Yet today there is more art being made around social issues within the art world than there was in 1985. The tentacles of the art context now reach beyond the mainstream galleries and museums, thanks to innovative public art initiatives. Boundaries between mediums and disciplines continue to be challenged. Cultural inclusion is a matter of course... up to a point. Some major institutions are not afraid to support social (not usually political) projects outside of their own upscale neighborhoods. On the other hand, the "moderate" value system of the art world's center has swallowed many once recalcitrant figures, and it has become unpopular to advocate any disapproval of bigoted, biased, or reactionary art lest it be interpreted as an attack on the freedom of expression. The crucial question across the economic spectrum today may be how to get people to think for themselves and at the same time be able to listen to the thoughts of others with different backgrounds, needs, and tastes.

My real point is a general one: that younger artists seldom understand where they are coming from and thus lose track of where they are going. They are flushed out of art schools on a rush of idealism and inflated self-esteem into an indifferent world where poverty awaits them, where they are seen as weirdos and elitists. Once out in the cold, cruel world, even the greatest art is a commodity, and the standards are determined outside the artists' communities. This is confusing to young image-makers. The loss of continuity engenders both an arrogance and a political pessimism that is unhealthy aesthetically and socially. It's also a terrific waste of time, and activist art is all about time—the intensity of the moment that needs elucidating; the time away from studio, friends, family, and wage earning; the time it takes to launch a major activist project; and the time past, the time ahead, into which the action must fit.

One day, maybe we'll understand better how bad the present context is for art-making. All across the political spectrum we have been dulled and diminished by our own fears. But you can't be an

activist without being an optimist, and you can't be an activist without being a pessimist.¹⁵ It is too simple to say that the art world never recovered from the Reagan/Bush era of greed and grandiosity, that it now lacks passion and purpose, that it has sold out. What has changed since 1980? Everything and nothing.

"I just want to change the world, that's all."

— MARTHA WILSON

1. Cee Brown, Art Matters board member, has made a similar point about the way WPA demise paralleled decline of NEA.

2. See my essay "Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power," in Brian Wallis, ed., *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York and Boston: New Museum of Contemporary Art and David R. Godine, 1984), pp. 340-58.

3. Students at Cal Arts in 1998 were not even aware that the pioneering Feminist Art Program, instigated and taught there by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, had existed.

4. David Deitcher, "Taking Control: Art and Activism," in Nilda Peraza, Marcia Tucker, Kinshasha Holman Conwill, eds., *The Decade Show* (New York: The Museum of Contemporary Art, New Museum of Contemporary Art, and Studio Museum in Harlem, 1990), pp. 180-97. Deitcher did, however, mention a lot of important activist work, most of which was not included in the catalogue for *The Decade Show*. For the most part, this book-length catalogue provides a good alternative view of the 1980s, despite lousy copyediting. (Judith Wilson, for instance, asked for but did not receive an errata to her article which had been changed to make it sound as though she disapproved of my book *Overlay* and approved of Bill Rubin's *Primitivism in 20th-Century Art* show at MoMA, when she had written the exact opposite.)

5. We soon added the second D, for Distribution, to the D for Documentation.

6. Its acceptance by MoMA was entirely due to the fact that the then librarian, Clive Phillpot, was a founding member of PAD/D who had helped set up the archive in its first incarnation. It has since been used to recall that period in the current less-politicized moment. For instance, Deborah Wye used the archive when curating *Committed to Print*, a 1988 MoMA show on political art, and in 1998 the education curator at the New Museum, Greg Shollette (himself a member of PAD/D), used the archive as source for *Urban Encounters*, an exhibition on artists' groups in the 1980s and '90s.

7. The text is published in my out-of-print book *Get*

the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1984). See also "Hot Potatoes: Art and Politics in 1980" in the same collection.

8. For a lively overview of this period and many of these groups, see Alan Moore and Marc Miller, eds., *ABC NO RIO Dinero: The Story of a Lower East Side Art Gallery* (New York: ABC NO RIO with Collaborative Projects, 1985).

9. I considered the contradictions at length in "Sex and Death and Shock and Schlock: A Long Review of the Times Square Show" by Anne Ominous, *Artforum*, (Oct. 1980), reprinted in *Get the Message?*

10. For an excellent overview of this kind of work, see Suzanne Lacy, ed., *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).

11. See *Confessions of the Guerrilla Girls* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), *WAC Stats: The Facts About Women* (New York: New Press, 1993), *Cultures in Contention*, ed. by Douglas Kahn and Diane Neumaier (Seattle: Real Comet Press, 1985), *Reimagining America: The Arts and Social Change*, ed. Mark O'Brien and Craig Little (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1990), and my own *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Essays on Feminist Art* (New York: New Press, 1995).

12. For strategies to combat censorship, see *NCFE Handbook to Understanding, Preparing for, and Responding to Challenges to your Freedom of Expression* (Washington, D.C.: National Campaign for Freedom of Expression). For AIDS activism, see Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston, *AIDS Demo Graphics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990), a book "intended as a demonstration."

13. I wrote about this in my last column, "Clash of '85," *Village Voice* (June 11, 1985); reprinted in *Get the Message?*

14. Homi K. Bhabha, "Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche, and the Colonial Condition," in Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani, eds., *Remaking History* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989), p. 142.

15. Along with many of my colleagues, I am always quoting, and identifying with, Antonio Gramsci's famous line, "Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will."