

2008 is the U.S. presidential election year. It also coincides with the 40th anniversary of the Columbia University Riot. Today, there is a surge in activism amongst the artistic community, revisiting the spirit of the New Left movement in the 1960s. Is this a nostalgic reminiscence, or are they riding on the significance of the times to express the collective sentiments towards undesirable socio-political conditions?

Artists as Public Intellectuals by Nicole Wong



Nicole Wong
Independent curator, writer, consultant
Born in Hong Kong, lives and works in New York



Suzanne Opton,
Soldier: Birkholz, 353 Days in Iraq, 205 Days in Afghanistan,
Photo: Courtesy of the artist

America is haunted by ghosts. The country has made ghosts of its pragmatic idealism and egalitarian aspirations. The nation is witnessing a melting away of its founding principles: freedom of speech; self-determinacy for the people. Since the beginning of the century, a critical mass of artists, writers and intellectuals have presented ideas and visions that confront the deep fears and intense suspicions creeping between the crevices of the nation's perceived power and prosperity. At the same time, environmental issues, mounting imbalance of wealth, political hypocrisies and corporate frauds loom large. Pronounced ideals are compromised by degrading practices within public and corporate institutions.

Questioning the *raison d'être* of war

Artists have always been vanguards in troubled times when they step up to the roles of public intellectuals: here I am especially referring to Edward Said's notion of intellectuals who represent the public in defiance of violations towards freedom, justice and human dignity. Collectively, and by way of beautiful images, strategic practices and thought-provoking innuendoes, their works pique our consciousness and manifest a sense of urgency for outcries.

Four decades after the world was ignited into revolutionary frenzies in 1968, artists are revisiting many of the historical concerns raised by the New Left - issues that are not only unresolved, but magnified as time passes.

The *Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society* (1962), manifesto for the American New Left movement, still anchors the concepts of many interventions instigated by artists today. In reflecting upon some of these ideas, Mark Tribe's *Port Huron Project* presents a series of New Left speeches

made by activists in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Historical messages addressing issues of poverty, racism, exploitation and military aggression are re-enacted by actors and actresses at the original sites where those speeches were made.

On a recent Sunday afternoon, as I was watching the re-enactment of Stokely Carmichael's speech *Let Another be Born* (1967), I find the reverberance in relation to current socio-political conditions alarming. Carmichael accused America as being an oppressor upholding white supremacy to exploit non-white countries through military and economic aggression. In the face of the second gulf war, the speech resonated as it called forth vivid images such as: 'The President sends young men to die without the consent of anyone.'

Who are these young men and women and what do they stand for? Suzanne Opton's compelling photography offers a close examination of soldiers travelling between tours from the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. While we often think of soldiers as fearless heroes or nameless people, Opton is interested in getting closer to the spirit of each unique individual.

"I chose an intimate pose for these soldiers. This is how we see those closest to us - our lovers, our children," Opton expressed.

There is no cynicism in the photos. They are simple, straight forward, beautiful images that bring us closer to the human reality. Quietly and poetically, Opton poignantly questions the *raison d'être* of the war.

Defending freedom of expression

On American soil, a different kind of war is being fought. Some artists are fighting to defend their freedom of expression.



Protest supporting Steve Kurtz by Sybil D'Argento and Morgana Fey
Photo: Aaron Gach



Mark Tribe,
Port Huron Project 6: Let Another World Be Born, 2008
Photo: Robin Hastings



Paul Chan
Baghdad in No Particular Order: Mosul, 2003
Photo: Courtesy of the artist

America is perceived to be one of the freest countries in the world; at least that is how the world has come to understand through Hollywood persuasions. Yet the notion of freedom was contested when artists Paul Chan, Ramak Fazel and Hasan M. Elahi were investigated and prosecuted by the FBI, either for the nature of their work or for their ethnic identities. (1) The signature exemplification of artistic freedom infringement can be witnessed through the prolonged investigation thrown upon artist-scientist Steven Kurtz.

The works of Kurtz and his collective Critical Art Ensemble involve unveiling myths and misunderstanding about genetically altered foods, reproductive technologies and bio-warfare. For the past four years the artist has been prosecuted by the FBI for suspected conduct of bio-terrorism. He was finally cleared of all charges this June. However the case has become a wake-up call for the artistic community: their freedom of expression could be jeopardized if such practices infringe upon political and economic interests. It also raised questions as of how much freedom an average American could assume. In a society engineered by corporate greed and dominance, how much risk and sacrifice would artist-interventionists have to take?

One could only be sure that individuals such as Kurtz are responding to the call of the times: to seek fundamental truths veiled by sophisticated technologies, advertisements and propaganda; truths that are no longer accessible through common sense.

Acting as guardians of humanity

Though the current Leftist movements echo the New Left movement of the 1960s, distinguished differences could also be observed of the two generations.

Today, artist-activists work mostly by themselves, rather than within a coordinated movement. They question fundamental facts that might have been fictionalized by contemporary propaganda. They investigate universal human

conditions beyond national and geographical boundaries.

In 2002, shortly before the U.S. attacked Iraq, Paul Chan went to Baghdad to witness the damages of the American led U.N. sanctions. His video documentary *Baghdad in No Particular Order* depicts the daily lives of Iraqi people. Many of them share similar values as the American people. This is especially seen through their love for American popular culture. Images such as these are rarely seen in any U.S. media. They clearly contradict George W. Bush's accusation that the Iraqi nation is an 'axis of evil' (2002). Upon return, Chan made strong statements denouncing the American aggression in Iraq, calling for the injustice towards humanity to be "exposed to the daylight of both reason and hope".(2)

In the same spirit, some artists have made themselves the archaeologists and guardians of humanity by uncovering information that is deliberately obscured by the government under the pretext of anti-terrorism. Recently, the Conflux Festival brought together a group of artists, writers, and geographers who work in the legacy of psychogeography. The festival presented a momentum in which the boundaries between artists, intellectuals and activists were deliberately blurred. It relaxed the narrow confine of specialist outlook in favour of a broader spectrum of participation and collaboration. In one of the panel discussions, artist John Emerson talked about how he teamed up with military geographer Trevor Plagen to create the research-based work *Selected CIA Aircraft Routes and Rendition Flights, 2001-2006*. Their work, prominently displayed on a billboard in Los Angeles, implicated locations of secret prisons and the unjust detention of terrorist suspects in areas outside of the United States.

Are artists able to change the world?

One of the premises of art is to present the unthinkable, and to invoke in us a sense of reality that we are not able to fathom. Historically, the condition of humanity has always been one of the key subject matters in the arts. However, the conflict with Iraq has brought about a surge in artists' activism here in the U.S. Driven by empirical practices and research rather than by lofty ideologies and utopic visions, artists embrace the belief that "all human beings are entitled to expect decent standards of behaviour concerning freedom and justice from worldly powers or nations, and that deliberate or inadvertent violations of these standards need to be testified and fought against courageously." (3) In time when apathy prevails, they place democracy under close scrutiny. Today, their works are not so much about calling for action as they are calling for collective reflection and realizations.

Are artists able to change the world? Intrinsically, they may not have the mechanism to do so. Yet historically, and as we witness today, they have undoubtedly been potent agents of articulation, empowerment, and catalysts for change.

Notes

(1) Paul Chan was prosecuted for breaking American sanction when he went to Iraq in 2002. He was later found guilty by federal court. In 2006, during a road trip trying to visit all 50 capitols of the United States, the Iran-born artist Ramak Fazel was detained and interrogated by the FBI on account of being a terrorist suspect. Bangladesh-born American artist Hasan M. Elahi was mistakenly listed as terrorist suspect by the FBI while arriving at the Detroit airport from the Netherlands. He now operates a website that offers 24/7 surveillance on his own activities. The site serves as protest to racist abuse in the pretext of counter-terrorism.

(2) Paul Chan, *Statement of Declaration for Going to Iraq*, November 14, 2002

(3) Edward Said, *Representation of the Intellectuals*, New York: Pantheon Books: 1994, pp.10-11

