



Social Responsibility

AND THE

PLACE of the



BY Carol

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LAKE VIEW Press



Social Responsibility and the Place of the Artist in Society



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Redding, CA

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The Artist in Society

Art is the individual's way back to the collective.
—Ernst Fischer, *The Necessity of Art*

This has been an amazing period for the art world.

After the Harold Washington painting, the Dred

Scott Tyler flag installation, the Mapplethorpe,

Serrano and Artists Space exhibitions, artists and

art students have been forced to rethink their position in relationship to the art world, to each other and to society as a whole. Together we have

watched in horror as serious work has been taken out of context, held up like pornographic smut on the floor of the Senate, defamed by the media. And we have seen Congressmen—not the most art-

literate author-ities—make decisions concerning the fate of arts funding in the U.S. based on literal, neanderthal, reactionary interpretations.

In another context, at another time, I would talk about these actions as attempts to reify the prototypical American as a white, male, heterosexual patriot. I would rant about increasing repression, the attempt to squelch diversity and to punish those who choose to project an opinion about American society and the nature of daily life different from that which Jesse Helms finds comfortable and comforting. And I would speak, probably exclusively, about the responsibility of society to create a supportive environment for the artist, while making reference to countries like the

Netherlands, which for many years subsidized visual artists in the hope that they actually would challenge society. But tonight I have been asked to talk about a different and, for the art world, definitely more controversial aspect of the problem—the artist's responsibility to society.

I have learned that this is a sensitive issue, one that many in the art world systematically attempt to avoid because it makes everyone uncomfortable, defensive and insecure. But I believe the unwillingness of American artists to debate this question is only in part the result of a kind of laissez-faire elitism. It is actually more attributable to the ambiguous place of the artist in this society and, also, to fear: fear of accusations of those both inside and outside the art world who might label the work in question narcissistic, sexist, racist, classist, elitist, indulgent, hermetic, or, even worse, naive and unpolitical. Instead of attempting to clarify the meaning of art in society, to validate the work they do, to struggle with the complex issue of the place of the artist in society, many artists simply refuse to address the issue at all—as if artists alone did not have the obligation to ask themselves how their work fits into the broader social framework of which they are a part. I saw this pattern occur most blatantly around the Harold Washington painting at the School of the

Art Institute of Chicago, where it seemed impossible to address the complexity of the incident without discussing the content of the work. Yet the art community of Chicago focused primarily on the outrageous tactics of the aldermen. One was forced to choose: for or against the painting, for or against the artist, David Nelson. That was, for the most part, the extent of the discussion. But this put many who perceived the painting as outrageously offensive, especially many African-American and Hispanic artists, in a bind.

Why couldn't we, as an art community who believe in freedom of expression, also talk openly about the issues of racism, homophobia, and accountability provoked by the image? Why couldn't we deconstruct the image in an attempt to understand and thus perhaps ultimately to assuage its effect on race relations in Chicago?

The silence around the content of this painting disturbed me then and continues to disturb me, especially given the events of the past year. I feel that implicit in this silence was, and is, an unconscious complicity. In our own reluctance to ask how work engages within the larger social context, we are attempting to protect art and the artist from censorship; however, in practice we are actually participating in the bourgeois notion of

the isolation of the artist from society and of so-called high culture from the debates about representation and plurality current in popular culture. Instead of healing the split between the flatness of mass media and the complexity of the art world, we are allowing the split to become an abyss. In our refusal to contextualize the work historically—not art-historically, but world-historically—we contribute to the relegation of art to the sphere of entertainment and commodification. In our resistance to confronting the content of a work and the emotions it generates, we make it easier for the work to be rendered impotent and vulnerable by Congressmen who would turn the process of evaluating art into McCarthy-like witchhunts. The goal of these hunts is no longer simply to ferret out communists, but rather all those whose ideas might be considered deviant, subversive, or just downright “unAmerican.” To truly fight these battles effectively we must not fear the more difficult debates.

As a writer, professor, educator, and art administrator, I have thought a great deal about these issues and have tried to analyze the problem in various essays I have written. In these essays I have explored the elements of the art education process itself and have attempted to understand why the art world, as reflected in the art school

environment, has not developed a stronger methodology and discourse for addressing issues of social responsibility and accountability.

I have observed, for example, that although we talk endlessly about post-modernism and now about post-post-modernism, in fact the way in which we educate our students in art school is better suited to a romantic paradigm. We unconsciously continue to envision the artist as a marginalized figure, cut off from the mainstream of society—operating out of what Freud calls the Pleasure Principle while the rest of us struggle within the Reality Principle, or within its present manifestation—the Performance Principle. Even though this model never did, and certainly now no longer does, fit the actual lived lives of artists, we nonetheless unconsciously expect “creative,” “intuitive” people to be ill-equipped to function in the adult world. We even tend to be suspicious, as Arthur Danto notes, of those artists who survive too well within the “straight world.” We wonder about their creative credentials. We tend to train people as we ourselves were trained, and so the myth tends to lag behind the actuality. We do not, for example, add to this category of the child-like artist the new invention—the artist-businessman. Like Jeff Koons, stockbroker become artist, this artist stands in a post-modern parody of his own

dilemma, a charlatan reflecting with every work and every posturing the lack of distinction between himself and the money-making world of art collecting which sustains him.

Even in this post-modern era, when all traditional categories have been thrown up for grabs, we continue to reinforce certain archaic dichotomies. For example, we separate the aesthetic acumen developed in the studio from the more linear intelligence cultivated in the classroom. We divide the physical space of the school and the credit hours in accordance with this division. At the undergraduate level a great deal of time is taken up developing technical skills. Students are trained to work in many media and technologies without equivalent time or guidance in determining *what to make work about*. It is assumed that they already have many of the intellectual tools they need to think through the dilemmas in the content of their work. Or that they will look inside themselves and find imagery already articulated, or that the process of physically making the work will reveal its inherent contradictions. We relegate a proportionally small percentage of educational time to those courses which actually teach students how to think about their work. We rarely analyze to what extent we are all the sociological products of our individual

up-bringing as it converges with the collective condition. In the same vein, we do not always help our students to rigorously challenge their ethnocentrism or to recognize that ahistoricity—the tendency to deny history—is endemic to this society. One need only listen to Chicago's 10:00 evening news to understand how on one night a fire in the small town of Joliet, Illinois, will be given more time and coverage than the overthrow of governments in Eastern Europe. The media, reflecting and creating the society, focuses on what *seems* to affect us, the so-called American people, directly. The result, as it trickles down, is that American art students, like most American college students, tend not to be trained to think globally or politically about their own position.

This inexperience in dealing with broader societal issues with an historically-based, global perspective becomes particularly apparent when students choose to make overtly political work. Because of this general isolation of art students from society, such work often takes its definition of "political" from what the art world defines as political, responding to ideas once removed from their societal framework. This work tends to be naively informed, dogmatic, one-dimensional, confrontational, dependent on shock and on art world references, which means that it becomes

difficult for those outside the art world "to read."

This issue of accessibility, which might in itself be a subject of political debate, is often not addressed as such within the art school environment. This is because art students, like other anthropological sub-groups, together share knowledge of the hidden signifiers—the references to which the work alludes—and rarely notice that these signifiers are unknown to those on the outside. Added to these difficulties, student artists often are ill-equipped to research their subject matter thoroughly enough so that they can integrate what may be a sincere outrage at the world in which they live, with the objective facts that can infuse their critique with meaning and credibility. The work may therefore have a confrontational or heavy-handed feeling, assaulting the viewer with its lack of subtlety and generosity to the audience it supposedly wishes to influence. Hence, the examples of political art most students encounter further convince them that work which is socially motivated is destined to be narrow, limited, literal, and defensive. But perhaps the most dramatic, and at time disastrous extension of the difficulties posed by educating artists within the romantic paradigm is that they often develop a very naive sense of artistic freedom, one which permeates the entire art

world. Students become unable to separate the need to freely express and explore the *entire* range of ideas, fantasies, and creations within their studios, from the decisive editing process necessary for artists to choose what they will show and how they will show it. They come to perceive *all* serious queries about the effect or potential social impact of their work as an impingement on freedom of expression—hence the resistance to real discussion around the Harold Washington painting; hence the limited analysis and narrowly-defined debate in relation to the recent censorship events. Freedom for the young artist thus comes to signify the right to do whatever one wants, however one wants, whenever, wherever one wants, without consideration of consequence. This does leave the artist alone, free to do whatever he or she imagines possible, but inevitably lonely, without an on-going dialogue with a world larger than the art community.

By this definition of freedom, artists have been categorized, along with children and emotionally impaired adults, as the only members of society not held responsible for their actions. The historical result of such thinking is that it perpetuates an infantilized notion of the artist, keeping student artists at an arrested stage of

development. Such polarizations also foster the notion that most people must relinquish the pleasure principle in order to enter the adult world, while the artist alone remains in a state of unobstructed childhood. But the fact of such an imagined condition of innocence disenfranchises the artist, who then becomes a blank screen upon which the rest of society projects its desire for a lost narcissism. The implication for the culture as a whole is that works of art, relegated to the world of "culture," become objects of sentimental longing, intellectual curiosity, or objects which may be consumed for economic gain. The implications for the art school are that it is forced into the role of permissive parent, while its students play out their respective parts as precocious and at times unruly children.

At this point we can begin to see the complicity of art education in this infantilization, and the consequences of relegating the artist and the art world to a position of "other," "different," or "exotic." These categories, which artists themselves often reinforce in their attempt to find self-definition, only further isolate the artist and his or her work from the society as a whole.

When Jesse Helms held up the Mapplethorpe and the Serrano and asked good god-fearing Americans if they wanted their tax dollars to fund

such work, he was capitalizing on the myth of the artist and the artist's bohemian lifestyle to unnerve his audience. But however grotesque his manipulations may have been, they have forced the art world to ask some serious questions, the most significant to this discussion being: What is the place of art in American society? What is the place of the artist?

In the nineteenth century, American writers, Walt Whitman, Melville, and others, had a vision of the artist-writer in America as the voice of democracy, integral to the daily life of a pluralistic society, representing diverse, hidden, necessary points of view. But there have been only few times when this vision actually became a reality, as in the 1930s when the economy collapsed and artists aligned with workers and intellectuals to form a strong progressive movement—not unlike what we are now seeing in Eastern Europe. But "modern art," as we know it in this country, has often existed outside the lives of many Americans. Although it does reflect the ontological changes of daily life, most find the forms employed by the art world to be incomprehensible and obscure, because these are often dependent for effect on knowledge of the art-historical precedents which are removed from the recognized iconography of many people's daily lives. In other words: Most people simply don't

have the information or training that would allow them to "get it." When post-modernists attempt to use popular imagery to break down the distinction between high and low culture, and to adopt forms already popularized by the media, they are in a bind, because many outside the art world see such work as a joke, a scam, perpetrated on them by artists. People outside the art world rarely understand the seriousness with which even humorous, parodic art is executed. And artists have often remained silent, unwilling, or unable to explain their work to a popular audience—hence the hostility people feel to the art world which excludes them and which they fear deceives and mocks them as well: While all this is going on, the art world itself feels alienated, misunderstood, and definitely unsupported by mainstream society.

At this moment the art world and the general populace, although actually closer than ever in their shared post-modern dilemma, are nonetheless at a stand-off. Into this historical mess walks Jesse Helms, ready to promote his career by furthering this confusion and aggravating this tension. But ironically, at the same time that artists in this country are personae non-gratae, fighting to be heard and understood, artists around the world are much in demand, asked to assume, of all things, politically useful positions.

Right now, while students, artists, poets, philosophers, and workers have made a revolution in Rumania, and intellectuals are influencing the reunification of Germany and the transformation of Poland, Vaclav Havel, the playwright, actually has become the transitional president of Czechoslovakia. He is the only president in history, as the Village Voice proclaimed, "who can quote John Lennon, Samuel Beckett, and Immanuel Kant" in the same interview. Havel has spent decades of his life in and out of prison opposing the governing ideology. But at this moment he is in the Prague palace as the voice of Civic Forum—a movement which brings together artists, intellectuals, students, and workers—a coalition of diverse groups which is inconceivable at present in the U.S. Imagine, if you can, a person of creativity, morality, integrity and vision—imagine an artist—with enough mass support and backing to become President of the United States. Imagine if that person were a leading playwright. Imagine Sam Shepherd, for example. He might one day run for President, it's possible, but if he were elected it would not be because he makes serious work, has an artistic vision, a critique of American society, or a level of intelligence respected by his peers, but rather because he is a handsome, glamorous movie star, who has appeared on the pages of *People*.

magazine—many times. Art in this society, like politics in this society, has been relegated to the realm of entertainment. The rest of the world understands this about the United States and felt it perfectly fitting, poetic justice that Ronald Reagan, a Hollywood actor, a bad actor, actually became President.

But the art world itself has been corrupted by this laughable, but infinitely, globally, dangerous capitalist system which can chew up, spit out, sell and commodify controversy at will. The art world has been corrupted by the market's inflated prices and by the dream artists and art students alike now have of "making it big" (whatever *it* is), like Jeff Koons, like Julian Schnabel, like Jenny Holzer. The market has taken the edge off the art world. The individualism, romanticism, and competitiveness of the art world has played right into the hands of the investors. The result is that even art which begins as a critique of society often becomes depoliticized, objectified, institutionalized, consumable by those who have the money. Often it is work which somehow can be assimilated because at its core it does not threaten the prevailing ideology. It does not unmask the basic contradictions. Often it is work which challenges the art world itself, but which stays safely within that arena, often devoid of emotion,

uncritically embracing new technologies, obscure in form, incomprehensible to many outside, and finally comfortable within the existing social system.

What might the position of artists be were work not assimilated by the marketplace? If there were no market-place? For twenty years, five hundred Czech writers, Milan Kundera and Vaclav Havel among them, officially were banned. However, they were still stars. They mimeographed their manuscripts or smuggled them out of Czechoslovakia, printed them in the West and smuggled them back to Prague and all cities where there were Czech readers. They voiced the dreams and courage of the people. These writers were forced underground because they refused to infuse their work with the "obligatory optimism" demanded by the party in power. There was no comfort in their work, and there was no comfort in the life of the artist. There was no money to be made. There was no quantifiable success to be had. Success was measured by the strength of the work in conveying the complexity and absurdity of the Czech situation—poetically. Most writers went into exile, or to jail. Those out of jail, formally banned from any established positions, were forced to work as waiters, waitresses, janitors, furnace stokers, for low wages. When Joseph Papp

tried to get Havel out of jail and to bring him to the Public Theater as a dramaturgist, Havel agreed to go, but only if the Czech government also released all his co-defendants. The result: Havel did not go to New York. In fact, he spent the next years working in a prison foundry, where he almost died of pneumonia. The point is that these artists stayed true to a personal political vision that kept their spirits alive—kept them in touch with all those, in all areas of Czech life who shared this vision. They appeared to be repressed and silenced, but in fact they were neither. They were preparing for history to take an inevitable turn, at which time they would be ready—intellectually and philosophically ready—to seize the moment and assume real political power.

Now, twenty years later, those with whom they aligned, who were in fact the majority all along (albeit seemingly silenced), have made Havel interim President. This will mean, as he acknowledges, that inevitably his writing will cease for a time, until the interregnum has passed. And he has said, he will “miss the writing.” He is reluctant to be a political leader, but, as he says, “history has overtaken me.” His first identity is as a “citizen,” and as a citizen he has assumed the challenge of a desperate economy and a country in chaos.

Why do I go on about Havel and make this seemingly obscure analogy with Czech society? Because these dramatic changes are living proof that the role of the artist is an historical, social, construction. It is not an eternal fixed role. It is not romantic. It is not without context, as many of the art world’s recent opponents would have us believe. It changes, evolves, grows, diminishes, dictates and is dictated to by history and by the market economy. And as such, the creative vision of an artist can be utilized both to construct art and to construct a new society, because these goals each depend on bringing into creation that which does not as yet exist.

In many societies in Europe, Latin America, Africa, Asia and here, artists use their voices to struggle against the master text, to create alternative narratives in visual imagery, dance, in music, in theater. They interweave all that is silenced, repressed, feared, hidden, and attempt to make it known. The difference between these countries and ours is that here there is no public recognition of the importance of art to daily life.

The recent “A Day Without Art: A National Day of Action and Mourning,” was a brilliant, powerful and successful attempt to make people recognize the place of art and artists in society, and the loss of both as a result of the AIDS

epidemic. But imagine a day that was truly without art, not just a day with paintings covered in museums and galleries, but one without architecture, interior design, graphic design, fashion, film, photography, video, theater, music, dance, magazines, books. Imagine every place where these would be, shrouded in black, and you can understand the power artists actually do have. They fill the void, give meaning to the tedium of everyday life, and make society civilization. We do not feel that collective power in the United States because art has been either placed on a pedestal, removed from daily life, or pushed to the peripheries of the society, manipulated by politicians or used as a means for rich people to become richer. And although artists in this country can produce what they want (as long as no public funding is involved), art actually has little direct societal impact. I believe we are beginning to see that in the nineties this will change and that the goals of the art world will change as well. I think we will be hearing more from those who may not have received visibility in the eighties but who have a great deal to say—those who cross over, move between cultures, those who have struggled to raise serious issues of gender, class and race, those who understand the process of self-definition to be a political act, those who refuse to

allow the imagination to be colonized. I think these artists will find ways to seize visibility and to control the means of distribution. I think the more superficial aspects of postmodernism will die a natural death, and from the best of this movement will evolve a new form, which will attempt to reach out to an audience greater than just the art world and will not see it as enough to mirror the fragmentation, banality, and destructiveness of this society and its physical environment, without also offering some vision for developing a less alienated future.

Artists in this country now appear to be refusing the place of isolation and marginality they have been given and which they themselves romantically have often confused with freedom. It is time for artists to challenge that with which they cannot live, and to bring into view that which they refuse to live without. This task of confronting contradictions in all forms, at all levels, of crossing beyond the parameters of the art world to do so, is not the work all artists will have the inclination to choose. It need not be understood so much as a “responsibility”—any more than the “responsibility” which we all must assume for securing the survival of this planet—but rather a possibility which I personally hope many will embrace.

Schindler's *But I'm Not a Day Old* has been a favorite of mine since I first saw it in 1978. It is a film that I have seen many times and each time I am struck by its power to move me. It is a film that I have come to love and that I have recommended to friends for years. It is a film that I have seen many times and that I have loved every time. It is a film that I have seen many times and that I have loved every time.

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