

Art and Politics – Bill Hood

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Art is fundamentally a paradox. Albert Einstein once said it well *"Art is the simplest expression of the most profound thought."* The dictionary says it more simply – *"the creation, by human endeavor, of thought provoking work."* Politics on the other hand is defined as *"the interrelationships, in society, involving power authority and influence."* So it is not too much of a stretch to say that, given that people struggle over the issue of power and authority on a daily basis, and that many of us occasionally are involved in thinking, that art and politics will always be intricately entwined.

We resort to art to give voice to ideas and questions about our most powerful truths in a language beyond words. Unfortunately for people like me, it is much easier to recognize the political truths embedded in a great work of art than it is to place them there. We can identify with the insight of a carefully crafted poem or story, or recognize the brilliance of a precisely framed film shot, or feel the power of a beautiful melody, or appreciate the universality of a simply sketched image, but the skillful creation of these things usually remains elusive.

There are many reasons for this. First of all, artistic skill does not grow on trees, and the desire to mix this skill with stories of struggle is even rarer. We can of course all try our best, and fortunately for us all, many do. Finally even when you give it your best shot, you can't really have effective control over who will pay attention, and exactly what people take from your work. So the artist (who is usually creating mostly to try to keep sane) just takes the risk and creates. In the words of Gil Scott-Heron *"I am neither a poet, composer, or musician. These are merely tools used by sensitive people to carve out a piece of beauty or truth that they hope may lead to peace and salvation."* (Liner notes to "Small Talk at 125th and Lennox", 1970).

This having been said, it is extremely difficult to survive for any extended length of time working to bring stories of struggle successfully into your work. Artists who try often end up being a mess of contradictions. On the one hand, they live just like us, actively amongst the large masses of people that make up our cities and towns and, just like us they experience the vast array of information and messages that wash over us each day. At the same time the artist exists apart from day to day life, - able to see the powerful forces that shape our lives, while working to remain open to inspiration and intuit the minds of the audience. They must also simultaneously strive for both a lightness of touch, and firmness of conviction that remains invisible enough for them to succeed in convincing us to join them in the search for truth – all the while trying to make a living.

At the same time, each of us desperately needs some sort of creativity exchange in our lives to help us understand the world we live in. We each make meaning from the details of our lives in our own way, and struggle to resist the pressure towards the standardization of our consciousness. To do this, we use the process of observing, questioning, imagining, creating, sharing, experiencing and reflecting that is at the core of all human interaction. This process is also at the core of the creation of art.

The vitality of this creativity exchange in any society depends on both brave artists risking their energy and time in creation, and others, just like us, searching out those creators whose work resonates with us personally (helping us to better know our world) and offering these artists our support. This support can take many forms, and can be quite simple or massively generous, but it is really the life blood that encourages people to keep reaching and searching for those particular statements or visions that might resonate with the imagination of the many. Through our solidarity, we also encourage others to speak the truth, as they know it. Through the assembled collection of these truths we all are able to see and understand our world more clearly, and in fact enrich our lives.

Let's check out a few of the many "mountaintops" of this creative process in history. This list will reflect my own biases, and undoubtedly leave out many of your personal favorites, so I apologize in advance for this.

- 1.** When an American singer wrote a song based on the story from a novel (about people being dispossessed during the Great Depression) to make sure that everyone - even those who could not read, or afford the ticket to see the movie - would know its truth, he ensured that we would all understand that if you look into the eyes of those standing up against injustice, or daring to speak for freedom, you will see the better part of each of us.
- 2.** When a Hungarian refugee took his camera into the mountains of Spain with Republican volunteers from many countries and captured a photo of one of those volunteers, at the instant he was shot, people around the world used this image to help understand the risks we all faced, and the action that was necessary to respond to it.
- 3.** When a British *ska* band looked to the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, where people routinely sang as they marched, and made a brilliant song that combined the power of words about injustice with the insinuating dance beat of hope for freedom they continued the tradition they admired, and helped increase world attention on this struggle.
- 4.** When a Mexican artist decided that he would tell the stories of his country and people in giant, massive images that could never be owned by a single person, he spoke for a new collective vision of remembering our history, that still echoes around the Mission District, across the Bogsides, and on the spray-painted walls of cities like Bristol.
- 5.** When some former gospel singers mixed tunes and images of their own spiritual beliefs with the dreams of the civil rights movement they transformed these personal beliefs into brave beacons of hope for a more just world for all, and a change that was going to come.
- 6.** When the students in Paris, in May 68, made and displayed large silk-screened posters pointing to the contradictions of the events of the day, people saw themselves and the contradictions they were living. Through this art they were offered a way of participating in an immediate political discussion on a large scale. The posters were not

the answer, but the flags of people collectively asking questions, and actively searching for answers.

7.When writers and filmmakers, who had been blacklisted for their political views, created an acclaimed film about a miners' strike, and choose to use mostly actual workers and their families from this event as actors, they reflected a hope that art is still within the reach of each of us, even when we face attack for daring to stand up and speak our minds.

8.When an anonymous group of feminist artists began showing up at formal art events in New York City in 1985, dressed in gorilla masks and using as pseudonyms the names of dead female artists, they exposed discrimination and corruption in the art world, and encouraged us all to seek out, and demand respect for, the creative truths of women.

9.When, in 1980, a Jewish American comic artist decided, along with his partner, to start a magazine, printed on a press they had brought into their loft, and begin serializing his family's story of surviving the Holocaust he demonstrated that the power of art will never be contained by, or limited to, the high tradition of galleries, museums, and professors.

10.When a Spanish artist painted a reflection, through his cubist lens, of the terror and despair being experienced by civilians, as they were targeted by fascist bombs, against the backdrop of the Spanish Civil War, people understood it as a profoundly anti-war statement whose universal message crossed boundaries, cultures, and languages.

11.When some punks in East Vancouver picked up electric guitars in 1978 and began making loud thrashy records about the need for change, on their own record label, they spoke for the ability of each of us, regardless of our formal background or training, to speak our mind in a powerful and creative way, and make a difference as we do this.

In conclusion, I want to leave you with a few potentially contradictory thoughts.

I sadly now believe that it is co-incidence and the course of events – in the end – that play the largest role in deciding what becomes the most widely appreciated, and effective Political Art. The people of the world choose those creations in which they see themselves, their struggle and their hopes, and then claim and adopt them as their own.

In the meantime, the artist's job remains to survive. To simply and powerfully be there – and keep creating – wherever they are ... and continue - in the face of all odds - to offer their ideas to their communities. To talk and listen to the people they live among. To reflect in their creations, the reality we inhabit together, the stories we tell each other, and the dreams we share - daring that their risk, the questions they ask, and the truths they reveal, will be seen or heard, and will resonate, find an audience, and make a connection.

At the same time each of us has the power as citizens of the world to create, support and care for that art (and those artists), which we feel tells our stories, asks questions we care about, and reflects our dreams. Whether it is the soundtrack, the library, the

narrative, the wall decorations, or the entertainment we choose, we each have a role in this process. In taking up this challenge we become connected to the conversations that societies have within themselves, about both what is our current collective truth and what is in fact might be a better, more just, way to live together. Stephen Stills eloquently warned us about the slippery slope of a closed mind, when in 1967 he wrote *“Paranoia strikes deep, Into your life it will creep, It starts when you’re always afraid. Step out of line, the man comes to take you away.”* (“For What It’s Worth”, 1967.)

Through mixing art and politics our actions of creation and support enrich our lives, help us each learn about the world, and pay it forward in the process by reinforcing those collective lenses that reflect and clarify the stories we care about. As we do this, we also help move our world a tiny bit closer to those rare moments in history when large numbers of people can see the hands (and strings) of the puppet-masters, the oppression of the many by the few, and the opportunity of a new way of being. We participate in the possibility of producing great effective political art. We must do this not just to support good causes like the one we are focused on today, but also to show everyone how much we value the efforts of those who have both the inclination and guts to make this art.

Finally, art gives us a chance to help each other learn to profoundly embrace the possibility of an alternate and better reality, to feel the depth in the simplest daily truths we know, and to risk taking action based on what you believe. When we can do this as individuals, acting together, these acts of imagination, respect, courage, and solidarity will bind us firmly to those around us. This is as true in art as it is in all types of political work.

Woody Guthrie epitomized this paradoxical but *profoundly activist* political spirit of curiosity, risk, experimentation, respect for experience, humility, and humor when he said - *“Let me be known as just the man that told you something you already knew.”* (“Notes About Music”, 1946.)

Art has the potential in the end do the same thing. It can show us - with passion, and beauty, and love - a world that we know to be true, and dreams we dare to be ours.

Examples cited :

1. “Grapes of Wrath” – John Steinbeck (1939) ; “Tom Joad” – Woody Guthrie, (1940).
2. “The Falling Soldier” – Robert Capa , Cordoba front, Spain, (1936).
3. “Free Nelson Mandella” – The Special AKA, (1984).
4. Diego Rivera (various locations – mostly Mexico City); Various artists in the Mission District (San Francisco); Bogside Artists (Derry, Northern Ireland); Banksy (graffiti artist – originating in Bristol, England – now worldwide)
5. Staple Singers, Sam Cooke, Marvin Gaye, Nina Simone, etc.

6. L'atelier populaire des Beaux-Arts, Paris, (May 1968).
7. "Salt of the Earth" – (1953) directed by Herbert Biberman and written by Michael Wilson- both blacklisted - based on a strike at Silver City, New Mexico, in 1951. Film sponsored by the Mine Mill & Smelter Workers Union.
8. Guerrilla Girls, various locations, (beginning in New York City, in 1985).
9. "Maus" – Art Spiegelman (with Françoise Mouly) – serialized in RAW magazine, beginning in 1980. Published as "Maus 1: A Survivor's Tale", in 1986.
10. "Guernica" – Pablo Picasso, 1937.
11. "Something Better Change", D.O.A. (1980).