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## Art and Politics after the Culture Wars

### Kevin Concannon

"The 1960s are dead and gone, their liberationist language long since co-opted and corrupted by the social and economic forces it was directed against. Resistance--even the word sounds musty--has a different form, at least in art."<sup>1</sup>

At the most contentious moments of the Culture War that characterized the decade of the 1990s in the United States, it was often argued that there was simply no place in art for politics. It was generally understood, however, that in this context, at least, "politics" meant "oppositional politics." The Culture War was and remains an ideological battle fought between the Left and the Right. For the radical right, artists provided ideal ammunition. Contemporary art was (perhaps deservedly) regarded as the preserve of an elite out of step with the broader American public. As fundamentalist Christianity increasingly captured the American imagination, politicians seeking to pander to this growing and reliable voting block found easy opportunities in the works of artists such as Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe. If there was no room in art for politics, it seemed there was ample room for art in politics.

In 1989, Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987) provoked the ire of the Reverend Donald E. Wildmon, executive director of the conservative American Family Association. In a newsletter that he claimed had a circulation of 380,000, Wildmon rallied his readers to contact their congressional representatives and demand action.<sup>2</sup> Ironically, his sensationalized characterization of Serrano's *Piss Christ*, a work the artist himself has described as a "protest against the commercialization of religious imagery," would energize and expand Wildmon's conservative donor base and precipitate an assault on cultural funding that would soon lead cultural institutions in this country to the altar of market forces.<sup>3</sup> Serrano's anti-commercial icon had been transformed into a cash cow for these new champions of moral rectitude. By 1995, the National Endowment for the Arts would eliminate its grants to individual artists, and government funding for cultural organizations would spiral downward over the following decade, forcing museums to depend

increasingly on the vicissitudes of the marketplace.

As Michael Brenson has insightfully and succinctly demonstrated, the federal government had certainly recognized art's potential for controversy long ago. In his analysis of the NEA and the Culture Wars, Brenson quotes the words of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, from a recorded message sent on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Museum of Modern Art in 1954:

Freedom of the arts is a basic freedom, one of the pillars of liberty in our land. For our republic to stay free, those among us with the rare gift of artistry must be able freely to use their talent. Likewise, our people must have unimpaired opportunity to see, to understand, to profit from our artists' work.... As long as artists are at liberty to feel with high personal integrity, as long as our artists are free to create with sincerity and conviction, there will be healthy controversy and progress in art. Only thus can there be opportunity for genius to produce a masterpiece for all mankind.<sup>4</sup>

Nine years later, President John F. Kennedy would insist that the artist was the

last champion of the individual mind and sensibility against an intrusive society and an officious state.... The men who create power make an indispensable contribution to the nation's greatness. But the men who question power make a contribution just as indispensable, especially when that questioning is disinterested.<sup>5</sup>

A few years later, at a signing ceremony effectively marking the birth of the NEA, President Lyndon B. Johnson famously remarked: "In the long history of man, countless empires and nations have come and gone. Those which created no lasting works of art are reduced today to short footnotes in history's catalogue."<sup>6</sup> How different the situation is today. The "intrusive society" and the "officious state" of which Kennedy spoke have clearly prevailed. But this too had been predicted.

In their curators' statement for *Dissent: Political Voices*, Kristen Baumliér and Craig Lucas cite the ideas of Herbert Marcuse, the influential philosopher and cultural critic and author of *One Dimensional Man*, an extremely influential book published in 1964, the year following Kennedy's prescient remarks (and assassination one month later). Disturbingly, Marcuse's critique of the "intrusive society" seems even more relevant to current conditions. Marcuse scholar Douglas Kellner distills the argument laid out in *One-Dimensional Man*:

As capitalism and technology developed, advanced industrial society demanded increasing accommodation to the economic and social apparatus and submission to increasing domination and administration. Hence, a “mechanics of conformity” spread throughout the society. The efficiency and power of administration overwhelmed the individual, who gradually lost the earlier traits of critical rationality (i.e., autonomy, dissent, the power of negation), thus producing a “one-dimensional society” and “one-dimensional man.” <sup>7</sup>

...economic freedom to sell one’s labor power in order to compete on the labor market submits the individual to the slavery of an irrational economic system; political freedom to vote for generally indistinguishable representatives of the same system is but a ratification of a non-democratic political system; intellectual freedom of expression is ineffectual when the media either co-opt and defuse, or distort and suppress, oppositional ideas, and when the image makers shape public opinion so that it is hostile or immune to oppositional thought and action.<sup>8</sup>

The co-optation that may have struck some readers as “conspiracy theory” forty years ago, seems a given in our own time. But, as Brenson points out, the battles over the fate of the NEA—the very heart of the Culture War—were always about, among other things, individuals versus institutions and contemporary art standards versus museum standards.<sup>9</sup> Brenson suggests that through the elimination of grants to individual artists, the NEA supplanted the language of contemporary art (one characterized by experimentation and critique) with the institutional language of the museum (one more concerned with aesthetics and “quality”). The alternative space movement was predicated on the belief that commercial galleries and museums represented a set of concerns not entirely consistent with the needs of contemporary artists and their publics--and an alternative exhibition context was thus needed that spoke this language of contemporary art. As Brian Wallis has demonstrated, alternative spaces became targets of the very organization that had arguably institutionalized them and financially sustained them for years—the NEA.<sup>10</sup> Some were absorbed by the very institutions to which they originally offered alternatives (WPA, or the Washington Project for the Arts, by the Corcoran Gallery of Art, for example, or PS1 by the Museum of Modern Art). Others necessarily adapted more mainstream institutional models. Some, such as Spaces, managed to survive in forms truer to their original missions.

As government funding for museums themselves became increasingly

scarce, and institutions came to depend more and more on appeal to leisure and entertainment market pressures, the commodification that much art had railed against since the 1960s, became a prominent feature of contemporary art itself. Producing art objects in the form of *putatively* ironic commodities, artists such as Jeff Koons could seemingly have it both ways. His *New Hoover Convertible* series of the mid-1980s, a selection of Hoover vacuum cleaners encased in plexiglass vitrines, exemplifies this trend. Commonly understood as a critique of the powers of display common to both the department store and the gallery/museum, his work has thrived in the very market place it seems to critique. As critic Katy Siegel recently observed, "In a strange way, what the market itself wants, and buys, is art that appears critical of capitalism."<sup>11</sup> Koons was perhaps at the cutting edge of this trend, achieving significant market and critical success while other artists, more overtly politically engaged, worked on the margins. *Artnews* recently named Koons one of the "ten most expensive living artists" in an article of the same name.<sup>12</sup> As with the broader culture of which it is a part, many now see the artworld as thoroughly absorbed by institutions (in the conventional sense of the word). The lack of criticality and the emphasis on marketing and promotion has been observed by Katy Siegel, among others.

Curators have taken over the role of critics; curators discover and promote art by having their employer-institution subsidize its creation. Unlike critics, curators have institutions bankrolling their travel, and so curators are the only ones who can keep up with the itineraries of the most interesting artworks as they travel the globe. They now do what critics once were thought to do, which is to produce synoptic, informed judgments through a comparison of the period's most important art. This is why *Artforum* has become a curators' magazine. Criticism exerts ever less value over the attribution of value to art.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, one logical extension of Siegel's argument is that the magazines, formerly forums for critical analysis are becoming mere instruments of publicity; much the same is now often claimed of the mainstream news media. Indeed, the "artworld" and the "art market" can sometimes seem coterminous.

The idea of the artist as cultural critic (or even the legitimate place of criticism in democracy) evoked by Kennedy in his 1963 comments can seem naïve in a world in which the press, once seen as the thorn in the side of government now seems more an instrument of propaganda. A little-covered news story recently revealed that the federal government has systematically introduced "video news releases," a long standing publicity tool of industry, into the living

rooms of America—as news stories.<sup>14</sup> Government employees or contractors, posing as reporters, “spin” stories to show government policy in the best possible light. Facing increasing market pressures and fewer resources, local, national, and international news media insert this publicity seamlessly into news programs, further blurring the line between the government and its critics. If the role of the press in the world’s leading democracy has been thus corrupted, how one wonders, might the artworld be expected to escape the same fate? The “mechanics of conformity” articulated by Marcuse have clearly prevailed in recent history.

If the Culture Wars seem to be all about religious beliefs and moral values, it is noteworthy that most of the artists whose works were attacked were artists of color, or gay, lesbian, or feminist. While claims of offense to religious sensibilities provided the cover, it is clear in retrospect that the Culture Wars were really about the Identity Politics that also defined the art of the 1990s. And the NEA itself can be seen as not simply implicated—but instrumental—in the contemporary artworld’s shift toward Identity Politics. No matter what the category of support requested, it seemed that NEA grant applications required demonstrated commitment to multicultural diversity. Answering the charges that the artworld was an elite preserve of the privileged few, funded organizations were required to demonstrate inclusiveness and racial and cultural diversity. The legacy of the Civil Rights movement of the sixties and the feminist activism of the seventies, multiculturalism promoted the celebration of difference. The effect of this emphasis on diversity and multiculturalism arguably exerted a major impact on the trajectory of Identity Politics as it emerged in the artworld of the later eighties and nineties. And rightly so. Perhaps more than anywhere else in our culture, the artworld seemed to have institutionalized racism. Through the efforts of the NEA, the artworld moved from tokenism to what seemed to some observers an obsession with race and gender politics. And it is this emphasis on the celebration of difference that would prove to be the NEA’s downfall.

The Mapplethorpe photographs that the State of Ohio found so offensive (prompting its arrest and unsuccessful prosecution of Dennis Barrie, then Director of the Contemporary Art Center in Cincinnati) were the ones that depicted so called “deviant” sexual behavior. Serrano, whose protest against the commercialization of religion so offended religious fundamentalists, is a person of color. So are Chris Ofili, and Renee Cox, whose *Holy Virgin Mary* (1996) and *Yo Mama’s Last Supper* (1996) (respectively) prompted New York Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani to attempt to shut down the Brooklyn Museum based on the argument that this was taxpayer-funded blasphemy (even as he himself conducted a very public adulterous affair in which taxpayer-funded security was provided to his mistress).

Arguments about “decency and community standards” were actually debates about the valorization of conformity over individual identity and difference. As Marcuse perhaps predicted, liberty itself (in this case the freedom from offensive acts of speech) could be transformed into oppression. Michael Brenson describes 1995 as “the precise moment when multiculturalism, with its insistence on difference, was being replaced by a global corporate-media-internet empire intent on developing a global monoculture that waters down differences” and in which this “new global empire was denying that difference mattered.”<sup>15</sup>

As the institutional critique and politics of identity that characterized much art since the sixties have been increasingly co-opted, globalism has subsumed identity. Artists such as Takashi Murakami (who holds the price record for a work by a contemporary Japanese artist) operate not in the context of difference, but of sameness.<sup>16</sup> As Arthur Lubow recently explained in *The New York Times Magazine*, Murakami is known for his theory of “Superflat,” “linking the flat picture plane of traditional Japanese paintings to the lack of any distinction between high and low in Japanese culture”—a state of affairs increasingly characteristic of global culture under late capitalism.<sup>17</sup> Murakami, not the elite cultural worker of decades past, is perhaps best known for his redesign of the Louis Vuitton handbag (2003), a landmark moment in the conflation of culture and capital. As if proof of the parallel trajectories of culture and capital, the same issue of *The New York Times Magazine* features an article by Pulitzer Prize winning columnist Thomas L. Friedman titled “It’s a Flat World After All.” A banner headline informs readers: “Globalization will be driven by a much more diverse—non-western, non-white—group of individuals, connecting all the knowledge pools in the world.”<sup>18</sup>

The mechanics of conformity have not gone altogether unchallenged, however. In spite of the pervasive co-optation of dissent that has characterized the Reagan years and beyond there have consistently been artists challenging the received order and exposing the mechanisms by which it operates. Some, like Hans Haacke and Adrian Piper have remained important presences since the heady and revolutionary years of the sixties and early seventies. Artists such as Leon Golub, Nancy Spero, David Wojnarowicz, Group Material, Alfredo Jaar, Barbara Kruger, and the Guerrilla Girls were major forces in the eighties and nineties—some still working in politicized modes.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the early nineties artworld as a whole was often characterized by Identity Politics. More recent political voices in the art world have included Rirkrit Tiravanija, Francis Alÿs, William Pope L., and a host of subversive artists dubbed “Interventionists.”<sup>20</sup> (Interestingly, many of these aforementioned artists first came to prominence in the context of alternative spaces.) The sixteen artists, teams, and collectives represented in *Dissent: Political Voices* take their cues from these

earlier artists and advance this heritage.

Even so, *Dissent's* curators ask "Is art the last uncensored form of dissent?" Yes. And no. As history has demonstrated, it can certainly not be categorically stated that art transcends censorship. Forced to play to the market, institutionalized art in this country certainly engages in at least subtle forms of the most insidious kind of censorship--self-censorship. But as this exhibition demonstrates, art still retains the very power that so frightened those who would crush it. Art has always been political. The question now for artists with *specifically* political agendas is how to insinuate their work into the systems of domination that seek to contain it—without losing its critical edge. The artists in *Dissent: Political Voices* demonstrate not simply the viability of such strategies, but their rich possibilities.

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1. Holland Cotter, "Work Whose Medium Is Indeed Its Message: 'Rirkrit Tiravanija,' Guggenheim Museum," *New York Times* (18 March 2005).
  2. William H. Honan, "Congressional Anger Threatens Arts Endowment's Budget," *New York Times* (20 June 1989).
  3. Honan.
  4. Dwight D. Eisenhower's message of 19 October 1954 is quoted from a press release in the MoMA archives. See: Michael Brenson. *Visionaries and Outcasts: The NEA, Congress, and the Place of the Visual Artist in America* (New York: The New Press, 2001): 6.
  5. John F. Kennedy in an address at the dedication of the Robert Frost Library at Amherst College, 26 October 1963. Cited in Brenson: 16.
  6. President Lyndon B. Johnson speaking at a Rose Garden ceremony for the signing ceremony creating the National Foundation for the Arts and Humanities, 29 September 1965. See Brenson: 1.
  7. Douglas Kellner, "Introduction to the Second Edition," in Herbert Marcuse. *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1991 (1964): xix-xx.
  8. Kellner: xxxi.
  9. Brenson: 80.
  10. Brian Wallis, "Public Funding and Alternative Spaces," in *Alternative Art New York, 1965-1985*, Julie Ault, ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002): 161-81.
  11. See Katy Siegel et. Al., "Talk," in Katy Siegel and Paul Mattick, *Art Works:*



*Money* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004): 182.

12. Kelly Devine Thomas, "The 10 Most Expensive Living Artists: Tracking the Highest Prices Paid for Contemporary Artworks," *Artnews* 103, no. 5 (May 2004): 118-23.

13. Siegel: 191. Siegel is, in fact a contributing editor to *Artforum*.

14. See David Barstow and Robin Stein, "The Message Machine: How the Government Makes News," *New York Times* (13 March 2005).

15. Brenson: 106.

16. Arthur Lubow, "The Murakami Method," *The New York Times Magazine* (3 April 2005): 50.

17. Ibid.

18. Thomas L. Friedman, "It's a Flat World After All," *The New York Times Magazine* (3 April 2005): 34-35. Friedman's new book is titled *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).

19. For an excellent recounting and analysis of political art in the eighties, see: Lucy Lippard, "Too Political? Forget It," in Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine, eds. *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America* (New York: New York University Press, 1999): 39-61.

20. Recent exhibitions of these artists have included *Incorporated: a recent (incomplete) history of infiltrations, actions and propositions utilizing contemporary art*, on view at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati through 8 May 2005, and *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere*, which closed in March 2005 at MASS MoCA. A catalogue for the latter exhibition has been published under the title *The Interventionists: A Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life* (North Adams, Massachusetts: MASS MoCA Publications, 2004).

