

Editors' Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century artists have associated with various political and ideological causes and have taken clear stances on actual armed conflagrations. The futurists' alignment with fascism in its early days is well documented, as is the surrealists' with communism, and Pablo Picasso's membership in the French Communist Party. In terms of visual culture and resistance, numerous studies exist on the role artists have played in opposing and supporting various political movements. The South African struggle produced well-known works of literature, music, theater, and visual art, while the murals of Nicaragua and the conflict in Ireland are notably documented. Less analysis is available on the role of visual culture in other recent conflicts. Painting, video, and cinema produced in conjunction with liberation struggles such as those in Palestine or Lebanon and among the popular movements in Latin America remain relatively unknown outside the places in question.

The role of visual culture in conflict situations also prompts an examination of the implications of artistic "neutrality." Despite the perpetual global instability that forms the backdrop to twentieth-century history and characterizes the current era, many artists and cultural producers, especially in the Western artistic tradition, have considered their work to be apolitical or neutral. Can artistic neutrality be said to exist in conflict situations, or is culture ultimately, in the words of Edward Said, "a battleground on which causes expose themselves to the light of day and contend with one another"?¹ The question remains, what motivates artists to choose sides when political and ideological divisions arise and to take stands beyond the safety of neutrality? Moreover, can neutrality be said to exist at all when artists are socialized by the political landscape of the societies in which they reside? This raises the larger question of the social function of artistic production in any society, and the relationship of the artist to the state.

In the West, the 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence, or reemergence, of the

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artist as activist against the background of the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, an activism that in turn foreshadowed contemporary feminist, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender), and antiracist currents in visual culture. While the Western art world largely posits itself as progressive, pluralistic, and liberal, where do the politics of partisanship lie historically, and how (if at all) do they shape current trends in the production of politicized visual culture? In fact, the major trends in visual culture have tended to be market driven and overtly apolitical, reflecting the capitalist model of artistic production, circulation, and consumption. This continues even against the backdrop of changes in globalization and economic downturns. Visual culture seems to remain in a similar position to that which it has occupied throughout the twentieth century; more often than not bound within the framework of luxury consumer goods or “entertainment.”

The editors of this issue of *Radical History Review* contend that visual culture is explicitly political in any given situation. Cultural production reveals vital and compelling clues as to the social situations, political context, and national circumstances that give rise to its existence. The articles in this issue interrogate the dilemmas artists face when the political situation shifts, and seek to explain how partisan viewpoints shape artists’ work. For example, how has the experience of war affected the work of artists who have fought in actual combat situations, or those who have gone on to become artists, as well as our perception of it? Finally, if visual culture can be said to deal explicitly with representation, how are situations of war, occupation, and resistance represented, and can these depictions be said to be artistically successful? Moreover, by what criteria does one evaluate such strategies of representation?

These and related questions are addressed in this issue. The features included contribute not only to broadening our understanding of the social function of visual culture on a historical basis but also to explaining the relevance of visual culture and social engagement on a contemporary basis and in a global context defined by imperialism, war, instability, and ongoing movements for liberation, self-determination, and autonomy. Features in this issue include contributions from K. Luisa Gandolfo, who traces the development of Palestinian art since the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. Despite the ubiquitous media commentary on this conflict, little scholarship exists on the development of Palestinian visual culture as defined and shaped by over sixty years of occupation and resistance. Strategies of resistance to occupation are also explored by Walid el Houry and Dima Saber, who examine Hezbollah’s use of video. In 1986 the group began to film its armed operations in occupied southern Lebanon and to circulate videos of these operations as a strategy for popularizing its resistance movement and intimidating the Israeli occupation forces. Similarly, through the lens of two documentary films, Camilo D. Trumper examines the relationship of film to political change and social inequality in Chile during Salvador Allende’s presidency in the 1970s.

Documentation and scholarship exist on the role of murals as a means of popular expression, but many areas of local production remain underrepresented. David

Carey Jr. and Walter E. Little examine one such site in the Comalapa community in Guatemala. In this case, muralism is used as a means of documenting the experience of war, resistance, and collaboration in the effort to reclaim a sense of nation. Muralism is also examined by Jack Conway in his interview of the Irish republican muralist Danny Devenny. Devenny describes in detail the role that murals played in challenging antirepublican mainstream media and articulating popular resistance in the republican movement in Belfast.

Attacks on militarism and the established capitalist order in the form of popular cartooning are personified in the work of Art Young. Michael Cohen examines Young's work for the newspaper *The Masses* in the context of the United States' imperial projects in the early decades of the twentieth century. Interestingly, it is the politics and social orders of war and capitalism that Kristopher Imbrigotta and Leesa Rittelmann evoke in distinct pieces on the role of photography in Europe during the era of World War II. Imbrigotta outlines the ways in which Bertolt Brecht juxtaposed appropriated press photographs and poetic commentary to help us rethink our approach to history, war, and visual representation, while Rittelmann explores photography in relation to the Nazis' desire for a racialized order, seen in their rejection of modernism and imposition of a romanticized depiction of an idealized *volk*.

In our (Re)Views section, David Ogawa discusses the relationship between art, revolution, spectacle, and subversion in the twentieth century, and Ian Gordon reviews a cluster of graphic novels that chronicle the biographies of Ernesto "Che" Guevara, Emma Goldman, and J. Edgar Hoover, along with the histories of the International Workers of the World (IWW) and Howard Zinn's *A People's History of American Empire*. In addition, Johanna Gosse explores the theoretical contradictions surrounding contemporary art's engagement with politics in a review of "On the Limits and Possibilities of Politics in Art," a symposium held at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 2008.

This issue's "Curated Spaces" section features the visual work of artist Meir Gal, whose photographs, installations, and interventions challenge the historical, political, and militaristic nature of the Israeli state. Gal interrogates the myths that characterize the foundations of Israeli statehood, thereby exposing the body politic's dangerous internalization of the state's explicit military identity.

We conclude this issue with a memorial to Cecil Skotnes, whose work is featured on the cover. Skotnes, who recently passed away, was one of the most influential post-World War II artists in South Africa, and a steadfast opponent of apartheid throughout his life.

—Lisa Brock, Conor McGrady, and Teresa Meade

Note

1. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), xiii.

