Art-as-Activism and Public Discourse: A Conversation with Diane Bush

By David LaRocca

Diane Bush is an American photographer who has lived and worked in Buffalo and London, and currently resides in Las Vegas, where she has served as curator of exhibits for Clark County. She is the recipient of awards and grants from institutions such as Kodak, Nikon, Ilford, Polaroid, the Royal Photographic Society, Yorkshire Arts Association, Women in Photography, and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, as well as a fellowship from the Nevada Arts Council. In 2008 she was nominated for a USA Artist fellowship. Her work has been published and exhibited internationally, and she is the author of the monoprint (2006). This conversation began in person in Buffalo in June 2016 and continued via email through the fall.

DAVID LAROCCA: Your recent project, Dishing It Out 2016, uses items familiar to the kitchen cupboard—mainly dinner plates and coffee mugs—to make a political point. What sorts of imagery are you creating and how is your art being used for political agitation and activism?

DIANE BUSH: I've affixed satirical images of the 2016 Presidential candidates, as well as other images that comment upon our current political state, to ceramic plates and mugs, and then I invite viewer-participants to smash them. The original idea (inspired by a kitschy commemorative Nixon plate) was to make a sequel to my 2008 community performance piece, The ImBLEACHment of George W. Bush, by making satirical 2016 Presidential candidate plates that folks could break. I watched a YouTube tutorial on ceramic printing, forked out some cash on a hot press, dye sublimation inks, and a new printer, and after a few stumbles, I was in business! I put out a call to other artists across the country—first, just asking for artwork about the candidates—but few artists took the bait, so I widened the scope to include anything about our current political situation. To make any impact, I decided I would have to do something splashy, every month, leading right up to the election. So, each month starting in January, the newest and best of the previously shown work was exhibited in a different Las Vegas gallery, except during the performance months: May (Inflated Dreams, Broken Promises), September (Hogging the Mic, a poetry contest), and October (Let America BREAK Again). The project launch (Mug Shots), in January, was shown at the Brett Wesley Gallery. Subsequent exhibits (Mug Shots #2, #3, #4, etc.) were held at Dray’s Space, the Left of Center Gallery, Jana’s Room, Wonderland Gallery, the Sahara West Gallery (Vanity Plates), and the Victor Xiu Gallery (The Final Tally). My own images are photo-based with fiber art enhancements. All artists were invited to submit work in any media, in a wide range of genres, from realistic to abstract.

DL: And to what end?
DB: The project had four main goals: to amuse the public, to celebrate free speech, to register new voters, and to encourage artists to embrace political satire as a way of getting the public to think critically about who will next lead the country. I had also hoped to gain some positive national press for the visual arts in Las Vegas—something most Americans consider nonexistent, or is only expressed through a bombardment of kitschy glitter.

DL: Political, especially presidential, satire is becoming something of a defining frame for your work.
DB: Yes, but mostly during major election cycles. I’m a lifelong fan of satire, from The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers comic books, to Monty Python, to Comedy Central. As in past election-based projects, such as The ImBLEACHment of George W. Bush, I wanted the public to be physically involved, so they could experience an emotional and therapeutic release. They were invited to throw (watered-down) bleach at a photograph of George W. Bush in order to visually erase him.

DL: I see a conjunction here of de-facing (something, someone) along with a kind of erasure—as if the hope were not just to mock a figure (by means of an
effigy), but with more subtlety and political cunning, to tap into the desire to rewrite history. Hence the "emotional and therapeutic release." Is your art activism, in some measure, designed to make viewers act (and react) by involving them?

DB: Yes, the physical involvement allows the public to be part of the work, and also be involved via YouTube, because the event is being videotaped. Without them, the event would lack community buy-in, and be too controlled, too high-concept. Smashing plates is a large part of the project’s appeal, and it also allows me to become engaged with folks on an individual level.

DL: So your work is reaching beyond the display of photographs to the realm of interactive installation? It’s not enough to offer the public an image—you invite them, as Nietzsche said, "to philosophize with a hammer."

DB: I hope so. These projects—Dishing It Out 2016, and The ImBLEACHment of George W. Bush, as well as earlier work, such as Warheads—explore the “twilight of the idols.”

DL: But “explore,” in these works, has many resonances.

DB: Yes, of course, I’m aiming for the public to face their leaders (and yes, occasionally deface them), but not for sheer sport or a kind of public shaming. I see the art as activism. Throwing the bleach, for example, is not just about its effects, but the freedom of the gesture: Reveling in the hard-won, and ever-harder-to-keep, freedom to express ourselves. I think of these as public participation projects. Their involvement also makes “art” more approachable on a street theater level, and less mysterious.

DL: These works of art-as-activism, and your description of the “freedom of the gesture,” seem to be nudging us into the territory of conceptual art (e.g., insofar as similar kinds of events could be organized by others after your model), and from this, there is something so compelling about the way you appear to be doing photography without photographs.

DB: I do think I’ve internalized imagemaking to such a degree that the photograph is an ingredient or aspect of my work, and it’s no longer the core of my work. It’s true that the idea is the thing. At this stage, I’m not aiming for a solo exhibition of rarefied photographs behind glass (not that there’s anything wrong with that); it’s just that people, I’ve learned, respond better—that is, more fully, rationally, and emotionally—when they see the stakes, and then understand themselves to be involved and responsible for addressing them. After years of gallery shows, I felt I had fulfilled that kind of expectation from the art world, and had no need to keep doing the same thing (gallery shows) over and over again. This style of participatory work is a rewarding way to create impact, get the work out there on YouTube (via the video taken at the events), and reach new audiences—obviously, not just art-goes in a local area but a global audience. Plus, watching the participants having a good time, with smiles on their faces, is a very different feeling from seeing the guarded gallery response we are all familiar with. During the October Let America BREAK Again performance/plate-smashing event, the universal public refrain was a smile and the phrase “Great idea!”

DL: One could archive the shattered plate, but the point is to dwell on its breaking.

DB: I encouraged folks to archive or do something creative with the shards, but the point was to activate the viewer. In fact, no one wanted their shards, so I still have them all, in baggies. The plan is to create a community mosaic with them. Nothing gets wasted.

DL: And both are elemental to your conception and practice of citizenship.

DB: I’d say our conception and practice, since even if you disagree with my (personal) idea, there needs to be a vigorous public thinking. The heart of politics, after all, is the proletariat, to use a Marxist term. It’s the people, not their leaders, that matter.

DL: Long before Marx, though, Plato warned about the dangers of democracy—that it was the last stage of government before tyranny.

DB: That’s why an informed, active citizenry is so important. If we all become herd animals, or worse, lemmings, it’s true the tyrant will lead us off the cliff. The satirization of our leaders, I think, is a very effective way of diminishing their (actual or potential) power. And laughter is healthy.

DL: Let’s look back now, and get a sense of how you got to this point. You were born in Buffalo and grew up there during the 1960s. How did this place and time affect your lifelong artistic practice, which continually drew on social commentary, art activism, and political satire?

DB: I’ll have to blame the Vietnam War and my older brother, Jerry Ross, for introducing me to art and politics. Jerry is himself an accomplished activist and artist. While the Vietnam War engulfed our lives, he led the local chapter of the Youth Against War and Fascism party. He was one of the Buffalo Nine [a group of war protestors arrested together in 1968] and he organized the defense committee that fought for the release of Martin Sostre. Sostre was selling Black Panther [Party] and other radical literature in the ghetto, so “the Man” framed Sostre on false drug charges. Jerry moved Martin’s bookstore to the University at Buffalo campus union hall. Our family was harassed by the FBI because of Jerry’s work both on and off the University at Buffalo campus.

DL: Did that harassment precipitate your move to London?

DB: Oh, yeah! I was eager to get away from such a hostile environment. Many people don’t realize that back then, anyone with long hair or hippie clothes was considered good target practice. I feared getting shot in the back by a redneck, à la Easy Rider [1969, directed by Dennis Hopper], while demonstrating against the war. I was also being counted at the time by a fellow who served in the Peace Corps with my other sibling, Ron. After two four-year Peace Corps stints and other draft deferment jobs, my suitor was running out of ways to avoid fighting a war he didn’t believe in; he asked me if I wanted to go to London with him, and I said yes. I was eager to put an ocean between myself and the Nixon administration . . . and my over-protective parents. We wed on a construction site and illegally left the States via Fort Erie, on a rust that we were crossing the border for Chinese food. My folks followed with all our luggage, and we flew out of Toronto for London. During our courtship my fiancé taught me how to use an SLR [Single Lens Reflex camera], at which point I gave up drawing and painting for the camera.

DL: How did the shift to the camera—to photographs—affect the kind of art you were doing?

DB: I was bored with painting and drawing. I could make an apple look
like an apple, so the challenge was gone. Photography was difficult—there were no automatic settings, and a lot could go wrong at every step of the way. I avidly read *Creative Camera* magazine (UK), and loved *Suburbia* (1973) by Bill Owens and *The Somnambulist* (1970) by Ralph Gibson. My photo heroes were Lewis Hine, Bruce Davidson, Danny Lyon, Duane Michaels, Eugene Richards, Robert Frank, and others who came from the “Concerned Photographer” camp. Their images inspired me, and that’s what I wanted my work to do: inspire.

**DL:** Were you working on your own in London?

**DB:** To begin with, it was just my new husband and me in a kitchen-turned-darkroom. Later, I became a member of Exit, the first photo collective in the UK—under the leadership of Paul Trevor. Our first project was a black-and-white documentary essay about the gentrification of London’s Docklands, called *Down Wapping* (1974). It was exhibited at the Photographers’ Gallery in London, and was published as a small book. I stayed with the group while we worked on the series titled *The City of London* (1975), and by this point Chris Steele-Perkins had joined the group. We worked alongside Josef Koudelka who was in London, shooting some of the same events (the Lord Mayor’s parade), and I also worked with a group of London-based feminist photographers for two exhibits at the Half Moon Gallery in East London.

**DL:** But you moved on soon after, right?

**DB:** After six years in London, I was just hitting my photographic stride, but I was also burnt out on the commuting and the crush of London. I ended up moving to Scotland to give my marriage another try. That failed, and I ended up in Cheshire, then Manchester, and finally, Yorkshire. In 1976 in Manchester, I met Aileen Farriday, and we formed Reflex—a collective similar in spirit and approach to Exit: working in black and white while trying to create some impact. We were very much the model of those involved in the so-called Concerned Photographer genre. In Yorkshire, I met Martin Parr, who lived in the same small town (Hebden Bridge) as I did, down the road from Sylvia Plath’s grave, in Heptonstall. I met Angela Kelly, who now teaches at Rochester Institute of Technology, through Aileen, and I also started the first photo gallery in Manchester, Grass Roots Gallery. It was just a wall in a bookstore, but it got good reviews in the *Manchester Guardian*.

**DL:** And then you moved back to the US. What prompted the return home?

**DB:** After four years in Manchester/Yorkshire, I had reached a point where nothing special was holding me there, having separated from my husband, with no special love interest. I was also working in a tech college photo department where I was not clicking with anyone or anything. Then I got news that my mother’s health had taken a turn for the worse, and that clinched my return to Buffalo in 1979. Soon after arriving, I was encouraged to apply to the MFA program at SUNY Buffalo, and was offered a teaching assistantship. As luck would have it, on my “first day of school,” I discovered that the professor who liked my work so much—and had encouraged me to enroll—had relocated to California, thereby leaving me in an educational environment that was actually hostile to documentary work.

**DL:** Did you persist with the MFA? And how did your experience with “academic” art inform your thinking and practice?

**DB:** Moving back to the US during the Reagan years was very traumatic in its own right, but the culture shock I endured while working on my MFA thesis project (*Main Street*) at SUNY was a two-year torture. Younger photographers at CEPA Gallery in Buffalo endlessly ridiculed me for “still doing documentary” work. Anything that referred back to ’60s culture actually seemed to be vehemently loathed. Photographers were stacking colorful blocks in their studio, aiming to create images that were totally divorced from reality. We were heading in opposite directions. One or two people (thank you, Alida Fish and Anthony Bannon) were supportive of my efforts, saying that the documentary genre would come back into favor, if I waited long enough. But those supporters were few, and their words, though true, didn’t help my feelings of alienation.

**DL:** Is there a moment when your documentary work shifted from the kind of black-and-white street photography you were doing in England to the kind of work you’ve been producing in recent decades?

**DB:** There was a decisive moment when I abandoned street photography. I needed to gain acceptance in the local art community to survive, and I was tired of being labeled “out of touch.” I needed a subject that was universal, timeless, and cultureless, so I began with a series of self-portraits and nudes—*Parts of Me I See* (1982). I had to play the waiting game until American culture got its head out of the mindset of Reagan’s “ME” generation. I had just begun taking abstract macro images of the TV screen surface when suddenly the first Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm) [January 17–February 28, 1991] broke out. I was immediately jolted out of my complacency.

**DL:** This was our first 24/7 cable news war.

**DB:** There’s that and (in addition to the technological shift) I was in total shock that everyone else seemed to have forgotten what a mess the Vietnam War had been. As a photographer, I thought, “I should go to the front and document the war,” but by then, I was already in my forties with a full-time teaching career, a house, and a husband, so I knew a split-second later that I wasn’t going anywhere. Still, I also knew I had to address my shock and horror through the act of making art.

**DL:** What did you do?

**DB:** I did what we all did. I turned on the TV.

**DL:** And what did you see?

**DB:** One of the peculiarities of CNN’s twenty-four-hour news feed is that all I had to do in order to “cover” the war was photograph the TV screen. I know, for example, that the war lasted forty-three days, because I made sure, like a real war photojournalist, that I photographed the war (as seen on CNN) every day.

**DL:** Still, the war exceeds the screen. And shooting what is already shot by someone else seems a perfect case of manufacturing simulacrum. Moreover, I’m thinking of Frederic Jameson’s “suspicion that war is ultimately unrepresentable”—how it resists or stands stubbornly beyond our comprehension by means of images, sounds, and other medial forms.

**DB:** First of all, I retain a basic level of faith in the documentary image, and I think the re-presentation of images can be its own form of social and cultural statement.

**DL:** In your case, then, the critique comes on our second viewing of the image. First CNN presents the image, and then you intervene—interfere—and
re-present it to us (as framed, as distorted, as de- or recontextualized, etc.)

DB: Yes, I want us to watch ourselves watching, and notice what we don’t see on our first encounter.

DL: You’ve become something of a watchman. You were photographing the TV anchors, the journalists-in-the-field, and the images from the battlefront, and then your meta-coverage became your critique?

DB: Well, in addition to the re-presentation of the image, my critique was also often made for me by the optics I employed. For example, I found that my experimenting with a macro lens, either shooting extremely close, or held at an extreme angle to the curved glass screen (no flat screens then), did a fantastic job of optically skewing and distorting the image. By making sure the aperture was wide open, and shooting at the required fifteenth of a second, I ended up with just a narrow band of focused red, green, and yellow square “pixels,” and the remaining image was a soft blur—but undoubtedly, a face.

DL: All of the distortions and effects were made in-camera? And this work became the book Warheads?

DB: Right, no computer enhancement was used. Just optics and a narrow depth of field. The Desert Storm pictures were first exhibited as a series called Read My Lips or Suppose They Gave a War and Nobody Had Cable (1991). Then I stressed the same Desert Storm pictures with bleach to create the series Warheads (2003). My later 500 Channels series (including The Teleangelsists; Global Swarming; Well, I’m Not a Crook; and You Stole My Baby; all 1993–98) had the extra element of color distortion created by manipulating the TV controls, rather than computer controls (even though I had access to Picture Publisher back then).

DL: Still, “covering” a televised war—and here I admit your skepticism is catchy, since I’m now wondering about allusions to covering up a war—is endlessly mediated and also distinctly antiseptic (in addition to being obviously quite safe).

DB: I agree. Unlike the Vietnam War, where cameramen were walking directly behind soldiers treading through dense Vietnam jungles-combat-battlefields, all we saw of Desert Storm on CNN were talking heads in a remote studio—sealed off from the fighting and any mortal danger. What kind of war is that? Where were the images of war? This sanitized war appeared to be without a front line, without carnage, without consequence . . . or so they would have us believe. In the UK, a picture of a charred body of an Iraqi soldier was published on the front cover of a British publication, but it was not shown here. This may have been when they stopped showing returning American caskets on TV.

DL: A war without a war?

DB: Well, for us—for viewers. But it was a war, right? So what I saw on TV—even for twenty-four hours a day—was not coverage, but as you nicely pick up on, a covering up. There was indisputably a significant case of visual censorship. And I don’t mean this in a conspiratorial cast—as if the networks were trying to protect the government or its soldiers. No, the news corporations were giving us the war they wanted us to (not) see. “Ratings war” takes on a whole new significance. Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949) had come to life: It was the censorship that riled me most, and I was surprised that anyone else my age who had witnessed that extreme jungle-sniping gunfire, a nightly occurrence on every evening newscast for ten years straight, said nothing about the lack of real reporting during the short but violent Desert Storm. We saw oil fields burning. We saw little rockets in the air. We saw interviews with generals and experts, but no casualties, no bomb craters, no blood, no damage! We were told the press was not allowed. And so our minds. No one was talking about the censorship! Amazing!

DL: So, your rebellion—your protest against the perceived distortions, lacunae, and the mercenary financial interests of the cable company, etc.—took the form of an artwork?

DB: Precisely. Outraged at the censorship, I mounted Read My Lips or Suppose They Gave a War and Nobody Had Cable, with various images from the series exhibited in group shows in the US and Europe. When I showed more than one image I hung the images next to each other, touching, so they looked like a bank of TV monitors in a TV control room.

DL: Then history repeated itself?

DB: It seems to be doing so endlessly. Again, I seriously considered leaving the US. But, again, I was even more entrenched, and less able to uproot. There was no choice but to make more anti-war art.

DL: Then came the bleach?

DB: I was so upset that our collective memory had been erased, and the country was so willing to go to war again, that I ended up throwing bleach at the Read My Lips images, and in time that series became the monoprint Warheads. The book begins with an introduction by Anthony Bannon, formerly long-serving director of the George Eastman House [now the George Eastman Museum], and the work was exhibited in New York City, Las Vegas, Seattle, Chicago, Los Angeles, Albuquerque, London, and Rhode Island, among other places.

DL: A common mechanism of nationalist bullying can come in the form of “If you don’t love our country, leave it.” But you, time and again, seem to be saying that loving the country and holding it to task are mutually reinforcing.

DB: This is why political satire is such an important art genre.

DL: Especially important in a democracy.

DB: That’s right. And even in an age of endless polls and popularity ratings, loving or fearing one’s leaders will not affect their poor decision making.

DL: With the bleach still in hand, and thinking of your use of plates, mugs, and blankets, “domestic politics” takes on a whole new meaning in your body of work.

DB: Those connections are coincidental. The use of bleach came from an attempt to stress my photos, to depict the violence of war, to emphasize the faces that were presenting a whitewashed war. I tried tearing, cutting, scrunching my photos, and then I remembered using bleach in black-and-white darkroom work, but—up to that point—had never used it with color prints. I had no idea what to expect. The resulting colors, when applied to a C-print, mimicked the colors of fire. Nothing could have been more perfect—an incendiary war now had its “firescorched” images. The symbolic content of the photographs was . . .

DL: Profound . . .

DB: Plus I had never seen any other photographer use bleach in this way.

DL: More bleached works followed, right?

DB: Yes—in 2008, The ImBLEACHment of George W. Bush developed in the wake of a failed impeachment attempt by Congressman Mark Kusinich. I “ImBLEACHed” Sharon Angle and Mitt Romney in 2012, this time adding the image to mass-produced blankets. As part of my Blanket of Lies (2011) and The Big Cover Up (2012–13), I gave the blankets away to homeless vets and youth connected to the Occupy Movement. This time I let the public help me with the bleaching process, via a performance piece called Schmear and Loathing (2010) as an invited artist for the Off the Strip performance festival, created by the Las Vegas Contem-
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temporary Arts Center (then Collective). Mine was the only overtly political performance piece, and I felt a bit like the black sheep of the festival.

DL: I’m noticing a pattern here—anti-Vietnam, anti-Reagan, anti-Bush I, and anti-Bush II. Does your “artivism” run against the grain of other political registers? I saw some Hillary Clinton faces (as well as those of Donald Trump) in your Dishing It Out 2016 series. But no Bernie Sanders. Is your skepticism of government broad as well as deep?

DB: Bernie was not left out . . . We had fun with everyone willing to toss their hat into the ring, as well as our entire political system. While I was born into a Democratic household, my brother taught me early on (through exposure to radical papers such as Ramparts, and the Black Panther newspaper) that all kinds of back stories and secret motivations lie beneath the surface. So I’m a skeptical humanist, whatever that means!

DL: You believe in people, you just don’t trust them. So, your attack on the surface—whether it be a photograph or a TV screen—seems fitting. You are calling our attention to the superficial nature of these images?

DB: Actually, I do trust people. I just don’t trust “the Man” or corporations behind “the Man.” With Warheads, I wanted to provide a visual contrast between the safety of a TV studio and the violence of a bomb blast. These sheltered “talking heads” were telling us about a war we were not allowed to see!

DL: Partisanship is a familiar, perhaps necessary, aspect of activism, but the wide sweep of your critique (from, say, Vietnam to Trump), suggests that, to a significant degree, you’re not aiming to sway so much as to agitate the political complacency. In this respect, are you more of a Socratic gadfly than a cliché of an “East Coast/left-wing/Jewish/liberal artist, etc.”?

DB: Hey, I’m proud to be a product of that “East Coast/left-wing/Jewish/liberal artist, etc.” tradition. I grew up on the New York Times, and still read it, as the writing is still enjoyable, even if the facts are not always one-hundred-percent accurate (“weapons of mass destruction,” anyone?). Maybe I’m an anti-monopolist? I consider our government not a democracy, but a corporocracy.

DL: Maybe standing with Cornel West and his critique of the US as a plutocracy—where the rich rule and the poor are invisible and thus deprived of power?

DB: I love Cornel! We share the big hair look!

DL: If the government is a business, then politicians are like its spokespeople—the ones who go on TV to sell us things (e.g., “democracy in the Middle East”). Reagan was the apotheosis that proves the point—the actor/salesman-as-politician. Does thinking about the government this way—as a corporate and financially motivated body—put pressure on your work as a kind of anti-advertising? The politician says, in effect, “our product is sound, safe, and worth your money,” and your gesture of free speech is perhaps more important than the resulting “imBLEACHed” image. As a photographer, have you transcended photography? Does photography matter as art as never before?

DB: I still think of myself as a photographer who will use any means possible to solve visual problems. I feel perfectly free to use anything (bleach, embroidery thread, found objects) and enjoy experimenting with new (at least to me) materials, but I still like to pay homage to my technical training as a photographer (four years at the Paddington Technical College in London).

DL: Somewhere in the midst of these projects, you moved from Buffalo to Las Vegas. How has almost twenty years in Nevada informed your politics, your art, etc.? What do you see as your role as an artist activist in Las Vegas? Are the needs for public thinking through art different there than in Buffalo?

DB: Yeah, I’m a temperature coward. A near accident on black ice one winter clinched the decision to leave Buffalo. My husband and I had a contest to see who could get a job in the Southwest first. He won! I followed, and soon had a job teaching photography at the College of Southern Nevada. Sure, we were concerned about leaving a healthy and thriving art community in Buffalo. The lack of one in Las Vegas—some twenty years ago—allowed me to be a pioneer in helping organizations like the Contemporary Arts Center gain recognition and stability, while I worked as a curator for Clark County. In more recent years, though, I feel that my role has changed from “pioneer” status to a more pronounced, activist status. Few artists here specialize in art that addresses the political. Some artists have admitted to me that they make political art, but they won’t show it—for fear of reprisal, for fear of losing customers. Showing satirical work has become one of my missions, in part, because the expression of political art is another practice of free speech.

DL: Aside from its political uses, how does thinking about art differ in Las Vegas from anywhere else in America, since the place itself seems to be fasci-
nated by (and proud of) its status as—shall we use a trope familiar to the desert—a mirage?

DBG: Reality has an interesting art museum, though we have a population of over two million. Compare that to cities with robust, long-surviving arts communities serving about half that population. Meanwhile, trying to push in the other direction, the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, the College of Southern Nevada, civic entities, and our community of small galleries in the arts district are gallantly promoting and displaying work, and creating events to draw attention to it.

DLC: So the city is getting more involved in supporting the arts?

DBG: Right now we are seeing signs of life such as new galleries and new programs. For example, the County, like the City, has embraced a percent-for-public-art program: very encouraging for the local arts community! But the Las Vegas arts scene has always seemed to be on a roller coaster, with high points and recurring dips . . . very cyclical. There is always talk of a major museum—so one day it might happen.

DLC: Are you at work on another project—either as an artist (an installation, for example) or perhaps something in your capacity as a civic leader?

DBG: As tempting as the money could be, I don’t have the thick skin needed to run for any office. In between elections I love dabbling in large yarn-bombing/word-bombing installations, and our local group, the West Flamingo Yarn Stormers [all seniors!] are helping me wrap the Gene Autry Center in California in yarn, under the leadership of our sister yarn-bombing group, the L.A. Yarn Bombers.

DLC: This sounds like Christo gone political.

DBG: Yep, along with a bit of outsider art, American vernacular hobbyism (crochet anyone?), and hippie pranksterism. I’m a big fan of Abbie Hoffman’s 1971 Steal This Book.

DLC: Since your work has taken us from black-and-white street photography (made on Tri-X film!) to color stills of television screens, and onward to plates and mugs and blankets, what do you make of the role political satire is finding in the emerging realm of internet-based technologies, principally social media? How does one, say, de-face Facebook? How does an artist/activist “im-bleach” the abuse of political power in the age of the selfie and Instagram?

DBG: Ask me again in a year or two. I’m still trying to wrap my head around the election results. At times I feel like I have traveled into an alternative reality, as if I’m in an old black-and-white Twilight Zone episode. Maybe that’s what really happened—that may be the only explanation that makes sense! Meanwhile, we just have to put everything into perspective. Stay calm, put one foot in front of the other each day, and make art, if that is how you cope. I know that’s how I carry on.

DLC: A last question, then. Cultural critic David Denby has noted that “the desire to satirize dies hard in an American.” Buffalo native and painter Philip Burke has been satirizing politicians for decades, but his recent retrospective at the Burchfield Penney Art Center (2015) shifted attention, yet again, to the relationship between a (political) “Illustration” and a (bona fide) “work of art.” In the light of, or even apart from, its potential presence as an American trait, what do you make of satire’s role in art? Why or how is it something you find worthy of art, as art?

DBG: Philip Burke rocks! My concern is that the genre of political satire is an endangered species, and that is why I’m even more passionate about honoring past efforts, and inspiring this generation to give it a try. Philip, and other artists, make a fair enough living (I imagine) specializing in satire. Think of the other Buffaloan (now in DC), Tom Toles, who does cartooning for the papers. The Getty in LA had an incredible show not too long ago on World War I posters, magazines, and other anti-war illustrations that showed (some) famous artists contributing to the effort. Wonderful stuff. Those artists’ careers still flourished, despite their taking up the paintbrush as a sword! They were also talented. For Dishing It Out 2016, the gamut ran from outsider street artists, to university faculty, to just plain talented, disciplined, and experienced artists who loved the concept. At the end of it all, I’d like to publish a catalog of all the artwork alongside the Dishing It Out 2016 installation shots. It could possibly inspire future satirists, and provide that edge of amusement we will all need to get us through to the next election . . . and beyond. Something tells me it’s much better to be laughing about our predicament than crying about it!

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