

## A GALLERY OF SOCIAL/POLITICAL ART: AN ESSAY

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### ABSTRACT

Boston's Gallery of Social/Political Art (GSPA) was started to encourage artists and non-artists to make and share social and political art in a public space. The Gallery, which has been located at the Community Church of Boston, engages an open board in the process of making democratic decisions about social and political art. The writer of this article, Yoshiro Sanbonmatsu, helped to start this gallery and has worked as an active board member since the beginning. Yoshiro Sanbonmatsu writes about how he started to paint political artwork at the end of the article and in the "Contributors" section at the end of the book. He provided a number of slides of his paintings, which appear in black and white prints.

### INTRODUCTION

A call for artists declaring the founding of the Gallery of Social/Political Art (GSPA) was placed in periodicals and a few key locations in an area of Boston that was perceived to be highly energized and activist-oriented. The intent was to form a street level gallery open to all artists, and non-artists as well, who wished access to a public visual space for their social/political views. The gallery was to be founded on simple principles honestly applied. It believed in democracy, which meant access for all, and in equality, which meant respect for everyone's voice. It was not to be a showcase for individual artists; it was not to encourage individual aesthetics, ideas or goals as such; it was designed to be social/political in its scope and address current and socially relevant themes. It was to be a collective voice, ranging from radical to mainstream, urging eradication of social injustices.

The response was tepid and a meeting a year later of those interested signaled the problems the gallery would later face. Only thirteen artists and one non-artist attended and

many were skeptical of the work and energy required to start and successfully operate a gallery. For them, time and money were a premium; free time went into their art and discretionary income into supplies. For some, a cooperative gallery with a thematic agenda ran counter their individual and artistic integrity. It seemed that most were primarily interested only in showing their works. The group decided against the formation of a gallery and opted to form an artists' support group, Artists for Social Justice (ASJ).

### THE IDEA OF THE GALLERY

The idea of a gallery was kept alive by the enthusiasm of a few, which translated, with the help of a sponsor, into a show "Getting Together on Social Issues," so titled with the hope that it would harbinge additional ones. Fortunately, this first show attracted the eyes of two members of a radical church in Boston who suggested the show be moved to their assembly hall. Discussion ensued and the goals of the gallery and the radical vision of the church were found to be mutually supportive and a trial show was held. The reception was enthusiastic and the gallery, though remaining completely independent, joined them in residence. The arrangement was near ideal. Space for shows could be rented at a nominal rate; we had complete freedom to operate according to our tenets; and we were able to join an existing community that was actively current with a broad range of social issues and causes.

During the first season of operation, we over-scheduled and had to cut back because there was an insufficient number of volunteers, but there was sufficient interest to keep us encouraged. Most entries came from an ad placed in *ART New England*. We were not deluged but we got responses nation-wide, and in addition, comments as, "I never knew such a gallery existed." Alternative galleries abound but they are more than likely to be artist centered and not issue oriented. Our shows were thematically based: war and peace, sex and sexism, race and racism, and environmental justice. A catch-all show called individual concerns, not surprisingly, drew the largest group. Applicants were permitted to enter five slides of their work, of which at least one would be accepted as long the work reflected the theme of the show. Even non-artists were encouraged to show.

Though artists are inclined to feel that a work of art speaks for itself, we requested that each accepted piece be accompanied by an artist comment which would place the work, not in terms of the artistic merit or intent, but in the context of his social/political perspective. The show would then become a collective of social/political voices centered about a particular theme.

### ORGANIZING THE GALLERY AND ART SHOWS

Operation of the gallery has never gone smoothly. We were plagued by the lack of volunteers and relied on the dedicated few, most whom lived outside of Boston. Though over a hundred artists had shown with us, most did not return. The reasons were many, ranging from single issue artists, dissatisfaction with the exposure the gallery received—political art is never a draw, and radicalism—though most were mainstream—associated with shows, to the more mundane reasons such as the lack of a professional staff and attendant courtesies and

inconvenience of the location. Here too, a small core of returnees who believed in the gallery sustained its efforts. And surprisingly, new members always seemed to emerge.

In addition, there were recurring problems that conspired to make the gallery more artist-centered: more than a few argued to permit artists to include non-social/political pieces, permit small group shows, promote the sale of works and to apply for grants, arguing that supporting social/political artists supported social justice. Most artists seldom sold their works and, understandably, their first instinct is to survive, as art is their mainstay. The pressure to showcase artists for promotion and art sales was anticipated during the very beginnings of GSPA. The Artists for Social Justice, whose membership disappeared when no one came forward to take its helm, became an ad hoc organization. When it was suggested that those who wanted to showcase artists or allow nonpolitical pieces into shows use ASJ, no one was interested—they wanted a ready-made establishment.

The gallery as conceived stood against the art establishment's practice of awarding grants. Grants were dedicated to the improvement of the arts or the artists; the gallery was to be dedicated to social issues. Some felt that the gallery could be both a showcase and an instrument of social protest and tried to democratically work through the board, which comprised of any member who attended meetings, to modify the policy. Perhaps a grant could be found that would in no way compromise the gallery's tenets. Doubts were expressed: money would lead to upgrade, to improving the aesthetics of the gallery proper, to giving attention to appearance, to search for recognition, etc.

True, the showcasing of art and the artist would produce many more volunteers and create a lot of social energy for publicity and fund raising, all of which would feed the artists' hunger for attention and accomplishment. Artists could then say they were supporting, or was it marketing, social justice. They wanted the aesthetics and artistic success along with a marginalized kind of social activism. However, such a position would undermine the foundation of the gallery.

At times we faced our demise but moments of crisis always produced leadership and cohesion. There was always the danger that the art was just another show, but over time, the cohesion of the theme and the inspiration felt through the artist's comments proved uniquely satisfying for the public and for the participating artists.

## ARTISTS AND THE POLITICS OF ART

Artists for most part are members of the establishment, formalized in their training and in their integrity and ambition. This formalism is habitualized, time-tested art history and is a part of the myths of our cultural legacy. Forgotten is the underlying reality of what transpired. Western civilization conquered the world and spread its dominant culture (male)—all is glorified in our history. But the truth is the light of enlightenment that was exported was essentially cultural imperialism (based on race) with its attendant genocide. Forgotten too is the cultural awe that the arts inspire to the detriment of our natural inclination to express ourselves. The most inhibiting is the use of the human voice in song. If everyone were able to, at anytime and anywhere, sing, solo or in groups, without formalized training, how much healthier would society be (though musicians might be up in arms). And similarly what percentage of the population feel inhibited because they've been numbed into "I can't draw."

The foundation of the art world remains the establishment with its board rooms, museums, trading houses, aspiring galleries and so on, all under-girded by treasures, i.e., money. It is not interested in freedom for those denied access; it is interested in genius and fame. The establishment assumes a preemptive philosophy that great art is an expression of freedom, a universality that ironically becomes unfreedom for the disenfranchised and marginalized. Artists are part of the establishment in this process. They are given a privileged position in society as the vanguard of free expression, but too often freedom means one's own and not the others.' This is not to say that artistic freedom should in any way be curtailed, but it should be realized that artists unwittingly curb the freedom of expression for others and, therefore, contribute to social injustice.

Traditional art operates on a transcendent principle that aesthetics leads beyond reality to higher truths. The core to this principal is the notion of self-expression and artistic integrity. There is art and there are artists but for a gallery of social/political art the bottom line is the question of social justice. It must be remembered that the history of art is implicated in the cultural genocide that accompanied the conquest of the world. "Memories of fire" lay buried and continue to smolder because of injustices done. Art needs to become honest—though not to necessarily espouse political/social views; it must encourage total freedom of expression, not only for those who make the so-called grade, but to provide access for the expression of injustices and demands of justice, immediate or in retrospect. Victims are the other who have been obliterated by historians of so-called great event and great men, just as cries for justice are shunted by the worship of works by the "great" artists.

### CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE GALLERY OF SOCIAL/POLITICAL ART

A social /political gallery is the other gallery. Traditional galleries for the most part are museum centered and aspire to showing 'great' works of art that meet certain criteria; the other gallery is street or reality centered and strives to give access to all and let the voice of the victims speak irrespective of aesthetics. It is victim centered and not artist centered—though it could be both. It is democracy at work in that it is participatory and provides access for all; it believes in equality because it fundamentally respects everyone and says one person's political statement is equal to another's, not deemed irrelevant and not worth bothering about. It thrives to speak out about the inequities and injustices of past, present and the likely future today, not posthumously in a mausoleum.

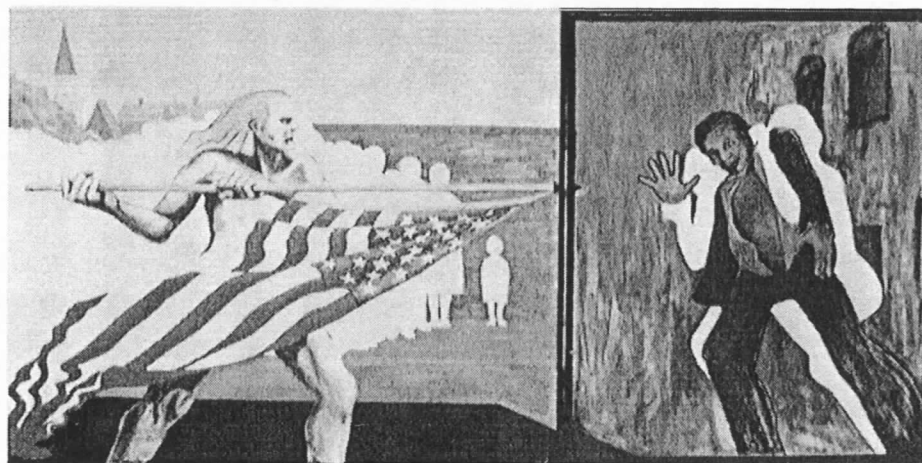
### YOSHIRO SANBONMATSU'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ART STATEMENT

I consider myself more social critic than painter and look at what happens today as an extension of a past that is buried by denial and covered by myths and lies. Unless we are honest and admit to what we've done and are doing, the problems of society will forever resurface. And to be honest we have to admit that history didn't or doesn't just happen—individuals, groups and institutions, especially those in position of power, govern the process.

The problem of ethnicity has more or less been the context of my life. Internally, however, I was brought up, like many Asians, to believe in social harmony and therefore be deferential to circumstances and the social order. With World War II and the civil rights and anti-war movements of the sixties my upbringing changed. The realities of American policy and politics, both domestic and foreign, obliterated that deference.



Michelangelo / Dorothea Lange (24 X 30"). Oil, 1994.



'76 (32 X 38"; 30 X 24"). Oil, 1991.