

1. I intend to shape my answers throughout from my direct experience of an art world where I have been closely engaged. To my knowledge, the reactions against the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq have been sparse and rather dispersed throughout the cultural forum here in the States. Few events have been significant enough to draw a crowd and fewer yet have attracted attention. Some artists and academics have openly and publicly taken a stand against the Iraq War, most of them—and this I find remarkable—belonging to the former generation who also opposed the Vietnam War: Nancy Spero, the late Leon Golub, Hans Haacke, Martha Rosler, and Richard Serra, to name a few.¹ There were also a number of emerging artists who actively denounced the cruelties of the war, not least the barbaric treatment of prisoners of the so-called war on terror in Guantanamo Bay and in Abu Ghraib (for example, Amy Wilson's *A Glimpse of What Life in a Free Country Can Be Like* [2004] and Zoë Charlton's *Homeland Security* [2004]), and other abuses by the U.S. government as it attempted to dismantle those parts of the Geneva Convention not seen to be in the interest of the United States.

Charbel Ackermann's questioning of the "Axis of Evil" in the 2005 summer exhibition at the Drawing Center was one of the projects described by the *Daily News* and the *New York Post* as "denigrating America." The exhibition, together with other presentations, such as *Mark Lombardi: Global Networks* in 2003 and *Talespinning* in 2004, may have been considered to be what Judith Butler in an analytical essay ironically calls "an excess of democratic ethos."² Attacked in lurid headlines by the tabloid press, the institution, selected to be part of the rebuilding of downtown post-9/11, was as a result evicted by Governor Pataki from Ground Zero, losing its newly designed building on the site. Anyone who reacted against the war was instantly demonized as un-American, unpatriotic, and unaware of the great dangers that were threatening our lives, our customs, and our freedom. As the Director of the Drawing Center at the time, I felt as though we were going through in microcosm what was happening in the country at large: the suppression of creative and critical expression in the name of commemoration of the dead, a loss of hope, and an increasing confrontation with manipulation, fostered by conservative strategizing in Machiavellian power-playing and financial dealing, resulting in a policy of intolerance and overwhelmed by a new wave of (self-)censorship.

Mark Lombardi had pieced together from diverse published accounts the flow of money within all these fraudulent connections long before the war started. And there is a price to be paid in terms of intimidation and harassment

1. In another time, it would be more than diverting to hear the sordidly surreal rewriting of the withdrawal from Vietnam being rehearsed by the President today.

2. Judith Butler, "Commemoration and/or Critique? Catherine de Zegher and The Drawing Center," *Texte zur Kunst* 16, no. 62 (June 2006).

for opposition—and this, of course, very distant from the war itself. We can readily understand why people don't want to give up their livelihoods to combat injustice and corruption, though this attitude is, in fact, not so very different from the invested self-interest of the downtown real estate developers. When, in fall 2005, I organized the exhibition *Persistent Vestiges: Drawing from the American Vietnam War*, I was reminded that I was not American, I was European . . . I had an accent and could have access to the U.S. denied. But I believed then, as I do now, that exhibiting art from the past can be an attempt to understand the present and to prompt awareness and reconciliation. And this is what a cultural institution should do—or maybe no longer?

Currently, even with the wider shift of sentiment concerning the Iraq conflict, any antiwar action is still seen as extremely offensive toward the soldiers and their families. And here we touch on a crucial factor: language and media framing. Over decades, the radical Right and its patrons have transformed the language of American politics and, controlling the language, have come to control the message; the corporate media do the rest (It is all too easy to draw the connection *New York Post*/Murdoch and Ground Zero/Bush). And this is, I think, one of the fundamental reasons why the progressive voice in cultural institutions—and this includes academics, artists, collectors, and funders—could not communicate its resistance nor get its antiwar message across.

2. It would be invidious to suppose that self-interest, however tightly drawn, does not play a part either with regard to tenure or sales, or in the numerous shadings of fear or anxiety, or the self-interest reflected in the simple deep-rooted skepticisms of those who imagine little is to be done. The absence of the draft is quite evidently a major factor, but it is by no means the only one. During the era of the Vietnam War protests, significantly, there were numerous liberation movements: the Black Power movement, the women's liberation movement, the gay and lesbian rights movement, and others, including the antiwar movement. Together they formed a wide platform for contestation, hoped-for emancipation, concord, and peace. The protest against the Vietnam War has to be considered in this context of persistently contesting and re-imagining the world, and of advancing alternative ideas for socio-political change. To an extent it was effective. It sometimes seems that since then progressive thought has assumed that an interesting cultural program that builds consciousness and gives an explanation of the facts is enough to persuade a wider and uncommitted audience to engage in opposition; nothing could be less true.

Meanwhile, the conservative Right has figured out the critical power and broad influence exerted by academic and artistic institutions and has systematically and steadily infiltrated those cultural institutions (universities and museums), taking hold of their boards, tightening a grip on the discourse, and promoting regressive programs. In addition, a savvy right-wing government has been manipulating language such that a semantic problem cannot be ignored. What we need is

a reframing: new mental structures that correspond to and shape the way we see the world. Isn't this in part what art has always provided? Perhaps art falls short in shaping new frameworks because the recuperation of any revolutionary thought by the media and corporations is so immanent and so intense that there may be no more space in our contemporary society for any truly effective radical gesture.

As Julie Mehretu's work, for example, suggests, today the restratification of marks and signs and the recurring recuperation of social movements happens with such speed, that the space of intervention is in danger of disappearing altogether. Where, then, is the space of oppositional action and interaction? This is what I understand Alain Badiou's thinking to be about:

Classically, politics, revolutionary politics, is a description with places. You have social places, classes, racial and national places, minorities, foreigners and so on; you have dominant places, wealth, power. . . . And a political process is a sort of totalization of different objective places. For example, you organize a political party as the expression of some social places, with the aim of seizing the state power. But today, maybe, we have to create a new trend of politics, beyond the domination of the places, beyond social, national, racial places, beyond gender and religions. A purely displaced politics, with absolute equality as its fundamental concept. This sort of politics will be an action without place. An international and nomadic creation with—as in a work of art—a mixture of violence, abstraction, and final peace.²

3. As I have noted, this may, unfortunately, come very close to the truth. Yes, much has changed in the arts, and its professionalization is an important factor. At several moments in the twentieth century, especially in the 1920s and '60s, art can be construed to have had an effective subversive/constructive force that has been slowly but surely eroded in the following decades. At the same time, there is an intense competition of imagery around the world: another *Guerre aux Images*. Perhaps the rhetoric has become more straightforward, but it is articulated in such sophisticated structures that it affects people in often unascertainable ways. Have we now become so dependent on these structures that socially and politically communicative, transgressive, or critical activity and resistance has been eliminated as the institution and its professions are yet further bloated? Perhaps it is the professionalization, but even more so it is the corporatization of the art world, linked to its absolute and undeniable imperative of the law of success.

In the arts, the political meant passion and risk, vision and imagination, but also despair and failure. Art is the possible inscription of what is yet to exist, of the inexistent, the invisible, the unknowable, while it recognizes that such inscription itself may in fact be impossible. A failure that is a success is the tension of every

2. Alain Badiou, "Drawing," *Lacanian Ink* 28 (Fall 2006), p.48.

artistic intention and creation, in the sense of opening a new possibility. Only as such is contemporary art the matrix for the political. This is what artists can achieve: challenging the existing status quo, drawing on the relational and trans-subjective, inscribing the inexistent as possibility, and unraveling and transforming the social fabric—here art in its failure/triumph, however swiftly it is recuperated, makes manifest the potential of our present.

But today, in this open space for contemplation and critical reflection, artists have often come to understand their prime mission as one of success (or “suckcess,” as Lee Lozano put it), celebrity, recognition, and wealth, rather than first of all focusing on newly developing parameters and perspectives. And an artist needs to be subtly inventive to realize a new freedom outside the recognized transgressions. When asked what his art addresses, Richard Tuttle replies: “The moment where we feel least understanding.”

4. It seems to me that this question concerns the discussion of “place” versus the “no place” for contestation, of placed politics versus displaced politics, of real space versus virtual space for protest—a question which could be seen to echo Badiou’s notion of classical revolutionary politics as a description of places and a new sort of politics as perhaps an action without place. In my experience, it was the classical approach of the alternative space that led me to believe that rightly or wrongly a museum complex at Ground Zero could be envisioned as a powerful place of relation and resistance, no matter the outcome. I do believe that art, being of a material and visual nature, needs place, just as it may be displaced. In any case, for any cultural institution, it was a unique opportunity to be part of the revitalization of downtown New York and to create an international stage for cultural activities and for artists locally and worldwide.

Those who value an open democratic society must take a stand and claim such territory to counterbalance an escalating colonization of public space. The voices of oppression and of greed have taken theirs and, in the presence of a vacuum, they are likely to fill it. After 9/11, New York reacted with a strong sense of community at odds with its usual *modus operandi*. At first, Libeskind’s masterplan reflected this coming together and proposed an at least potentially interesting way of healing. Culture would act as a buffer between commerce and commemoration. Unfortunately, this vision turned out to be utopian. However, we should not underestimate the gravity of the meanings that attach to this place for New York, for America, and for the world, as much because of the history that followed as for the events themselves. I still believe that it is the responsibility of engaged people, people of goodwill, whatever their political affiliation, to ensure that all voices be heard, not in cacophony, but as the expression of a democratic society. To give up contesting such a site is to resign from that responsibility—how can we then decry the cruelty that ensues, the malign banality of commercial malfeasance, of careless oppression, and the unresisted and hardly remarked suborning of freedom and justice that follows on?

5. The notion of the public political subject, its social sphere, and its separations, in these terms is no longer sustainable. While it may appear otherwise, there are no universally accessible tools of communication. Social confinement and depoliticization do not depend on advanced technologies. What's new?

6. At this time, open-ended dialogue and counterhegemonic discourse are urgently needed. Even in the face of menace and intimidation, we have to continue to speak the unspeakable. Art is not silent, nor need it be pusillanimous, fearful, or overwhelmed by its anxieties, wholly neutered in world-weary resignation or in exhausted cynicism. Even though in the early stages of the planning process of the Drawing Center's new building at the Ground Zero site there was sharp criticism from the art world, I consider that progressive voices could and should have been more vigilant about what was happening instead of wringing their hands and considering the site as too tainted by the Bush ideology and its violence of mourning, too much corrupted by the "difficulty" of the event, too confusing, so that it was abandoned in the determination to give unto Caesar.

While artists and intellectuals have sometimes preferred to excavate each last remain of past crimes and genocides rather than addressing the crimes of the present, the neocons continue their "Putsch" to power and its sites. The negotiations with the LMDC (Lower Manhattan Development Corporation) over the proposed move became controversial as a part of a large and complex set of politics concerning national identity, the perceived direction of American democracy, memory, and the present, as well as the usual dismal and persistent scrambling for real estate. Several factors were used to attack the Drawing Center, but what was most vigorously assaulted was the freedom of speech, a cornerstone of a free society.

In fact, no museum can accept, as was to be demanded of the Drawing Center, the absolute curtailment of autonomy and, centrally, the abrogation of responsibility and volition to others whose remit was opaque and purpose malign. To concede would have been to open yet further every museum in America to such attack. To remain silent means to give in, when too much is at stake, and this goes far beyond immediate self-interest. What we need is an aesthetics of relation and an ethics of possibility that challenge cultures of death: no sacrifice but mercy, no separation but reciprocity, no imperative of success but an imperative of engagement.