

Introduction

The intersection of art and politics has long engendered passionate, wide-ranging responses. In much of the world, though, political art—while not free from controversy—is the norm. A debate on the desirability of socially conscious art is difficult to imagine in Central America or the Middle East. Yet in the United States, these issues are far from settled. Art and politics here have had a fluctuating, complicated interrelationship.

The United States, though, does have a notable, inspiring history of artists of all stripes utilizing their craft in the cause of political struggle and the advancement of human rights. In the early years of the twentieth century, Upton Sinclair's novel of immigrant struggle, *The Jungle*, stunned the country with its graphic, stomach-turning descriptions of the truly vile nature of meat processing and was an impetus to the cause of consumer protection. The IWW—the Wobblies—the pioneering, radical activist union, made full use of song, as did subsequent labor struggles and the Civil Rights movement. The human catastrophe of the Great Depression can be conveyed via

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the searing photographs of Walker Evans. It takes exactly one word—*Babbitt*—to describe a narrow-minded provincial; it takes two—*Archie Bunker*—to describe a loud-mouthed bigot. The lunacy of the cold war is perfectly encapsulated in Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*. And in the recent past, it was assumed that a politician could overcome all manner of controversy—except becoming fodder for Johnny Carson's monologue.

The eponymous protagonist of E.L. Doctorow's *Book of Daniel* observes, only partially tongue-in-cheek, that there is a direct, causal connection between Holden Caulfield's rebellious disgust and sixties radicalism. And the sixties, of course, was the era in which practically every conceivable medium was utilized in the service of social change.

But what about now?

Something to Say is a collection of profiles and photos of an eclectic group of American artists working in a wide range of media. The focus of these narratives is, quite broadly, thoughts on political art-making, with *political* as expansively defined and jargon-free as possible.

The decision to focus exclusively on creative talent in the United States should not be interpreted as a parochial. It is simply an acknowledgment of political peculiarities that are, more or less, unique to the United States. The broad issues faced here are not exceptional—there is nothing intrinsically American about a bloated military or a huge gap between rich and poor. But there is much about the American body politic that simply doesn't translate: A high-tech, global superpower where a sizable proportion

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of the population believes in UFOs; a country with deep, entrenched racism that nonetheless elected Barack Obama.

An enormous amount of consideration was given as to who would be included in this book and a concerted effort was made to be as far-ranging as possible when it came to artist and medium. *As possible*, though, is the operative phase. *Something to Say* is not at all a random sampling, but it is a sampling, not the last word or in any way a comprehensive survey of the current state of radical creativity—if such a thing could exist. In this same spirit, Lily Prince's photography is not merely an exercise in formal portraiture but instead an effort to convey a deep sense of each of the interviewees in a painterly fashion.

There were some surprises along the way. It was fascinating to discover how many of those profiled had roots—personal roots, artistic roots or both—in places other than the United States. Pete Seeger has brought an enormous amount of international music to the attention of the American listening public. The poet Quincy Troupe is strongly aware of his family's origins in Haiti. To standup comic Maysoon Zayid—a child of Palestinian immigrants—the ongoing turmoil in the Middle East is an intrinsic part of her life offstage and on. Painter Freddy Rodríguez emigrated at a young age from the Dominican Republic—a small country that has tragically suffered the consequences of close geographic proximity to the United States. Filmmaker Gini Reticker's lens has been aimed at Africa and the Middle East; likewise, one

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of screenwriter Ron Nyswaner's accomplishments has been a version of Somerset Maugham's *The Painted Veil*, set in China during the 1920s. The intricacies of Greek music were a formative influence on violinist Alicia Svigals, who later rose to prominence playing klezmer, the colloquial music of the vanished world of Eastern European Jewry. John Yau's Chinese heritage has been a central motif in his writing. Howard Zinn's parents were immigrants, and painter and performance artist Sheryl Oring has a family history of immigration—seminal influences for both of them. Franklin Stein of the punk-activist band Blowback spent his younger years in Chile; he has been deeply affected by the coup that toppled the government of Salvador Allende. And Yoko Ono, as the world knows, was raised in Japan.

Equally striking are the global ramifications of those whose work is not specifically international. Didi Emmons's focus on an egalitarian, sustainable food system has enormous worldwide importance. The foibles of the American system, as per the cartoons of Jen Sorensen, (unfortunately) affect people around the world. Writer Jacqueline Woodson's themes are also—again unfortunately—easily relatable outside the United States: families in crisis and turmoil, adolescent strife, missing parents.

The willingness of these interviewees to speak candidly about their politics, their art, and their creative process—as well as let us into their homes and work spaces—was a real act of trust and generosity.

Howard Zinn was interviewed just months before his

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death. It was an honor, in the truest sense of the word, to be able to meet with him.

The biggest and most significant surprise was the absolute, across-the-board optimism. These artists have plunged into some of the messiest, ugliest, seemingly intractable issues. They would be more than justified taking refuge in cynicism or despair. But as these pages reveal, any private angst or pessimism has somehow been subsumed by this overriding imperative to create. In other words, Don't mourn, organize—or, more precisely: Don't mourn—sing, write, draw, paint, cook, listen, construct, make music, make 'em laugh.

In addition to the unexpected consensus of hope and optimism, there was the shared feeling that yes, art can change the world. “We Shall Overcome” didn't single-handedly dismantle segregation, nor did Picasso's *Guernica* save the Spanish Republic. One doesn't learn a song or read a book and abolish injustice the next day. But art—of all sorts—has been part and parcel of every social struggle in this country. And sometimes the good guys do actually win in the end.

As these words were being written, an environmental cataclysm was threatening to obliterate an entire ecosystem in the Gulf Coast. Art can't clean up the torrent of oil. But perhaps it can help ensure that nothing like this happens ever again.

—Richard Klin
Hudson Valley, New York