

The Social Responsibility of Art

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**Tutorial K
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Art through the ages has served numerous different purposes but most importantly art has been a vehicle for social change. Artists have always created primarily for aesthetic or utilitarian reasons in all fields of art - whether we are talking about the traditional fine arts, pop art, crafts to folk art. Art should not act as if it could exist in isolation. True art should deal with reality, grapple with political circumstances, and work out proposals for improving human coexistence. I believe today's artists have the freedom and the opportunity to take a more active role in shaping the world we are living in, and building for our future. One might ask if this makes aesthetic art any less valid. My response would be that as artists we hold a unique place and have the responsibility in a world where communication today has become instantaneous and worldwide.

Artists responding to the Renaissance and Baroque periods of art pushed art through many changes during the last two hundred years. But for the most part these changes which in retrospect record and tell us a lot about the people and culture from that time, appear to me to be changes made only for the sake of change with no intention of social change. Impressionism, Expressionism, Abstract Expressionism, Cubism, Surrealism, Minimalism, and Pop Art just to name a few, are all artistic movements that have had a great impact on contemporary art and have changed how the world looks at art today. The primary focus of these movements I feel was the art itself. Art has only recently been seen as a vehicle for social change. Impressionism for example focused on transitory visual impressions, often painted directly from nature, with an emphasis on the changing effects of light and color. Minimalism from the late 1950's emphasized pure, reduced forms and strict, systematic compositions. None of these movements did anything more than record the social constructs and value systems for their time. Art was not seen as a communication vehicle. Daily life was merely seen as a source for art, a way to record a moment in time.

What I find interesting about the art from these different periods is that great social issues and problems did exist but are only discussed on how they impacted the artist and not how the artist impacted the issue. Most of the social issues that existed then, while existing in different ways and forms and in different areas of the world, still exist today. Today, 24,000 people die daily from hunger around the world. While feminism has done much to advance women in industrialized countries it is still far from equal and in some 3rd world countries women are still

considered second class citizens. AIDS and other health problems exist. Animal extinction and environmental issues exist. Every second more than acre of rainforest disappears. Racial riots and religious persecution exists today. And the list goes on and on. Open up a paper or watch the daily news and that's practically all we see.

So the question arises about what to do – whose responsibility is it to make social change? The simple answer is we are all responsible - each and every one of us. With today's advanced communication and the immediate access from the media, Internet or other sources, it is definitely easier than ever to get and remain informed. The media to date has been very good at recording and presenting the issues, although some would argue that their views are biased and they don't necessarily present the true or the whole picture. But as educated viewers and sensitive to the propaganda that bombards our senses daily, artists have a social responsibility to take these social issues to a new level. We need to promote social change. I hold that art, in its many forms, is communication in its most powerful form and has a special role to play in the fast-breaking communications revolution. While it is naïve to think that art all on its own can bring about social change art does have the power to communicate social problems and propose solutions. It is through our creations that as artists we can have a profound impact on the future of our thinking, our environment and our planet. An artist's statement can have a significant impact on the thinking of the day. And it is by thinking and the bringing about of dialog of social issues that we can make the greatest contribution to change. As the creator of these statements, the artist's role demands a commensurate level of responsibility within the context of artistic freedom and the necessity to allow difficult, and sometimes uncomfortable artistic statements to have a place within that context. By taking on this responsibility, artists can transform the relationship between the artist and the community at large.

Over that past few decades while many art movements have not particularly focused on social change, there have been certain artists who have made contributions to social awareness through their freedom of artistic statement - if not actual social change. Some of the best examples of this appear during the feminist movement. Martha Rosler's 6 minute video produced in 1975 called *Semiotics of the Kitchen* is a short black-and-white video of a woman in a kitchen. It reveals the suburban kitchen to be a veritable war zone where routine food preparation with the use of ordinary cooking utensils masks the many frustrations felt by women at being confined at home. Another example that tried to dismantle male and female stereotypes is the 1968 film *Flesh* directed by Paul Morrissey. In the film clip that was shown in the FFAR 250 lecture a full frontal male nude was seen in bed with a fully clothed female partner

on top, something which even today is rarely seen. Although this film went far to reverse certain aspects of visual gender roles in films it still held the 60's stereotypes that the women still performs the daily domestic tasks like doing the laundry.

While many attempts were made in the 60's, 70's and 80's to take on a certain social responsibility with art, for the most part the activists left behind little more than declarations of intention. With the nineties came a change of thinking and in fact a renewal of reflection on the social responsibility of art. Since then visual art has developed in two directions: into an art that is defined by economic interests and bottom-line thinking, that lures the populace with spectacles and lots of horn blowing – what I find to be art for aesthetic function. And then there is art that acts – independently of profit and populism – in possibilities, that seeks to examine and improve the conditions of our lives. Art as a vehicle for social change. More and more artists are finding that this is a decision they must make – that they have no choice. Their choice leads away from more simple satisfaction of leisure-time needs and towards the cooperative shaping of life in society.

I was greatly impacted by the two lectures this semester of John Grande and Robert del Tredici. A teacher of photography and drawing, Robert del Tredici has been documenting the nuclear age since 1979. After reading *Romancing the Atom* and listening to his lecture I felt like I had been awakened to new reality. Del Tredici's work and use of powerful imagery elevates the audience's awareness of the nuclear bomb. In describing the disparity between how we view the nuclear bomb and the current reality he says:

“What spurred me on in this project was the chance to create images able to close the gap between our icons and in this reality of the Bomb. Nuclear weapons have from the start been bigger and other than our capacity to envision them. Birthed and bred in secrecy, they revolutionized our physics more than our imaginations. Their atmospheric test explosions caught the world's attention, but the inner life and culture of the weapons complex eluded us. Thus while scientists raced to enhance and reinvent fission-fusion devices, humanity was left behind in a kind of nuclear Stone Age to weigh out the power of the Bomb in kilotons of TNT, as if it were a giant firecracker.”¹

¹ Del Tredici, Robert. “Romancing the Atom.” Shambhala Sun. Vol. 4, No. 5. May 1996, Pages 40-41

This does not mean that art must always have a message of social change or that it can't be just beautiful to look at. That can be and it is still valid art. But even art that is aesthetic can be socially responsible. A good example of this is environmental art. John Grande, while not an artist himself, is an art critic that believes that a lot of contemporary art, other than environmental art, has missed the mark with the general population. Grande feels that "... an attitude that segregates human culture from nature, perceives the two as parallel rather than complimentary histories, still persists. Holistic, social and spiritual sources for art are anathema to the modern day museum."² Grande cited examples of environmental art like Nils-Udo's 1995-6 *Blue Flower Landscape for Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (in Munich, Germany) and Walter de Maria's 1977 *Lightening Field* (in Catron County, New Mexico). These earth sensitive and non-intrusive art pieces treat the earth as a living, breathing organism. Interestingly, these environmental art examples are aesthetic and non-utilitarian but they are also excellent examples of how art can be socially and environmentally responsible and at the same time deliver a message of social change. What is the message you might say? In explaining how we are connected to art, Grande states that "nature and art are less critically segregated, life takes precedence over the art. Links are established between human culture and the culture of nature. With each successive experimentation this new language of expression that involves respecting our place in nature becomes better understood. Elements from nature are the media and the environment is the canvas. Artists are the catalysts."³

More than most people, artists seem to ask questions about life, about its purpose and meaning. It is my belief that many artists desire to make some sort of positive contribution to the changes that are happening in our world. It is through our art that we can deliver the messages of social change and make that difference that we so desire. I also believe that if any one has the ability to make significant changes in the world around us, it is the artist - the people who have dedicated their lives to the pursuit of creative excellence. Artists have the ability to look beyond differences that divide, and toward the things that can bring us together.

² Tyndall, Joy. "Contemporary Art Made Relevant." Review of John K. Grande's "Intertwining". Canadian Forum. July/August 1998. Page 8.

³ Grande, John K. "Earth Sensitive." Public Art Review. Fall/Winter 2000, page 24.

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