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Artists and Social Change

Curtis L. Carter

I. Introduction

When exploring the topic of the arts as a force in social change, one is immediately confronted with a long history, beginning in the West with ancient Greece; as well, other parts of the world foster their own respective histories of art and social change. Pericles's vision for transforming the world's view of Athens from a small Greek city state, one among others, to a world power embodying the principles of democracy, employed the arts as the image of the new Athens. Architecture, sculpture, theatre arts including drama and dance, as well as poetry, all were marshalled in the service of changing the image of this ancient Classical city. Architecture and sculpture were especially important in creating the new image required to symbolize the cultural and political aims of Pericles. The results significantly helped shape the history of the Classical Western Arts and remain a benchmark of civilization for all times. Influences from this Classical model for the arts recur again and again throughout history in Roman art, European art of the Renaissance, and extending to the Neo-classical era of the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries. The philosopher Hegel, writing in the Nineteenth century, named one of three main ontological and historical categories in his examination of the philosophy of art after the Classical art of ancient Greece.[1]

[1] Some interpreters of Hegel's Philosophy of Fine Art believe that he found in Classical arts of Ancient Greece, especially sculpture, art's highest achievements. My own view is that poetry in the Romantic mode represents the highest form of art in Hegel's system. See Curtis L. Carter, "A Reexamination of the 'Death of Art' Interpretation of Hegel's Aesthetics," in Selected Essays on G. W. F. Hegel, edited by Lawrence S. Steplevich (New Jersey, Humanities Press, 1993), 11-26. First published in *Art and Logic in Hegel's Philosophy*, Hegel Society of America Biennial Convention of 1974 (New Jersey: Humanities Press and Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980), 83-102.

Hegel may have been influenced in part in this judgment by the important role of the arts in shaping the identity of the new Athens, arguably one of the great examples for demonstrating the success of art in realizing social change. However, if one of the objectives of social change is to advance individual freedom, the example offered by Pericles may not suffice. Pericles' engagement of the artists of his time in the service of the state reflected *his* vision for the community and not necessarily the free choice of the participating artists. Still, the artists were free to realize their best artistic aims by participating for the greater good of the community. This example suggests that the contributions of the arts to social change are not necessarily measurable in terms of the personal aims of the artists themselves. Rather, the contributions of the arts to social change are measured both in relation to the actions of individual artists and through the influences of art as an institution. These influences may consist of art's impact on a particular set of events taking place in a culture, or on the ongoing stream of civilization.

The example of Pericles' relationship to the artists of ancient Athens suggests as well that the engagement of art with social change takes place in a variety of ways. One of these is when the change refers to influences in the culture — politics, economics, religion, technology — on changes in art. In the case of ancient Athens, the political needs of the community helped motivate certain changes in art, i.e., changes suitable to accomplish the aim of fulfilling Pericles's vision for Athens. In the Twentieth century, innovations in technology including television, video, digital computers, the internet, and various other electronic devices, have significantly altered the practices of the image-making arts as well as the performance arts.

A second understanding of art and social change applies when artists seek to initiate changes in the thinking of a community's political, economic, and moral life. Such influences are difficult to quantify and can be documented mainly by anecdotal evidence. However, artists' efforts to draw attention to the need for change can be a significant means of raising the consciousness of a nation or a community to problems detrimental to social well being.

Of course, not all artists have had interest or opportunity for using their art to advance social change. Some devote their efforts solely to creating autonomous works concerned with art itself and the enjoyment it provides. Others, voluntarily or involuntarily, create art to reinforce existing social conditions. In the most extreme cases, as in the Old Kingdom of ancient Egypt, art in the form of colossal sculptures depicting the ruling pharaohs, as well as giant temples and tombs, was in fact intended to inhibit social change. These sculptural and architectural works symbolized permanence, stability, and order, the values thought to be essential to the maintenance of

Egyptian civilization. In order to assure the permanence of these values, every detail on how the figures should be posed and proportioned was prescribed. Artists who deviated from these values dictated by religious and political ideology would do so at their peril. Similarly, modern totalitarian regimes have undertaken to establish and maintain control by using art to reinforce beliefs and actions.

My focus here will be mainly addressed to the role of artists in influencing social change. Among the questions to be addressed are these: Is social change through art limited to representational art? Has art lost its relevance for social change in view of the recent claims of theorists referencing the end of art? Or, what would it mean for art's role in social change if the theorists who view modernism as the "end of art" are right? Investigation of these issues and related ones will take place through examining the works of artists in past and contemporary life whose works respond to a variety of social concerns. I will offer examples of artists who created works aimed toward directly or indirectly influencing societal attitudes and behaviors with the belief that resistance or protest was warranted against certain prevailing conditions believed to be harmful to the well being of humanity. It is my intent by this procedure to provide evidence of artists' widespread participation in social change. The instances will include a selection of works West and East beginning in ancient China and continuing with the Eighteenth century up to the present post-colonial and Postmodern eras, in a variety of media.

II. Art and Social Change Before the Twentieth Century

To begin, let us consider the actions of the Chinese statesman-poet Qu Yuan (??-278 B. C.). Qu Yuan attempted to institute reforms against corruption in the administration of the Chinese state of Chu by satirizing in his poems the "corruption, selfishness, and disregard for the people on the part of dubious characters who achieved trusted positions in the Imperial Court."[2] His actions resulted in banishment from the kingdom. When he felt unable to do anything to save his state, he ended his life by clasping a big stone and leaping into the Milo River in northeast Hunan province. However, his efforts were not lost on his countrymen who continue to honor him each year on the day on the lunar calendar marking his drowning. The celebration includes drag boat races in symbolic search of his body, and throwing into

[2] Han Lin Scholar," State of Chu, Warring States Period," Internet Post 7, 251, August 17, 2007.

the water bundles of zongzi (glutinous rice wrapped in bamboo) to divert the fish from eating his body. Perhaps this celebration itself carries forth the artist's intent to institute social change by calling attention to the vices of those entrusted with power and the attending responsibilities for leadership. Qu Yuan's experience also points to the difficulties that artists encounter when they attempt to change social and political practices through the arts.

The emergence of social protest art is particularly notable during the period surrounding the French Revolution. Among the artists active at this time in the use of art to advance social change was the Neo-classical artist Jacques Louis David (1748-1825). His paintings, "The Oath of Horati," 1785 (Paris, The Louvre) and "The Oath of the Tennis Court," 1791 (Paris, The Louvre) complement the writings of philosophers such as Denis Diderot in advancing the cause of revolution. Diderot's art was an important force in stirring the revolutionary fervor of patriotism in support of fighting for change from monarchy to a people-centered nation. The art of David and other artists was available to help instill in the minds of the citizens the principles of fraternity and equality necessary to the success of the Revolution.

In Spain, the painter Francisco Goya (1746-1828) responded to the atrocities of Napoleon's invading troops. His painting, "The Third of May, 1808, at Madrid: The Shootings on Principe Pío Mountain," painted in 1814 (Museo del Prado, Madrid) is a striking condemnation of the "inhumanity of warfare." This painting portrays the execution of Madrid rebels by Napoleon's soldiers at the behest of the government after the expulsion of the French. In the words of art historian, Frederick Hartt, "Goya treats the firing squad as a many-legged, faceless monster before whose level, bayoneted guns are pushed group after group of helpless victims, the first already shattered by bullets and streaming with blood, the next gesticulating wildly in the last seconds of life, the third hiding the horror from their eyes with their hands."[3] This painting, according to Hart, is the earliest example of social protest in Western art. The painting reveals the artist's emotional and moral outrage at the brutality of the scene.

Jean-Louis André Théodore Géricault (1791-1824), working in France at the turn of the Eighteenth century produced another master work of social comment, "The Raft of Medussa," 1818-19 (Paris, The Louvre). The

[3] Frederick Hartt, *A History of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall and New York: Harry N. Abrams, second edition, 1985), 800, 801. Kenneth Clark commented concerning "The Third of May" that "it should be a model for the socialist and revolutionary painting of the present day." Kenneth Clark, *Looking at Pictures* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), 136.

Medussa was a naval ship wrecked when it ran aground off the West African coast of what is now Mauritauna. The painting shows the 149 shipwrecked passengers who were unable to fit into the ships life boats crowded onto a makeshift raft being towed by the officers' boat. The passengers are left to starvation, thirst, cannibalism and madness, resulting in death for all but fifteen of the passengers. The tragedy depicted in Géricault's painting addresses what became an international political scandal involving the French's government's actions in sending the shipload of persons out to sea without adequate preparations and the incompetence of the ship's captain, apparently appointed for his support of the newly installed monarchy. Géricault researched this incident at great length including interviews with survivors and newspaper accounts before deciding on the final version of the painting. The artist's aim was to be artistically and politically confrontational in the move away from Neo-classical style toward Romanticism and in its liberal anti-imperial viewpoint. The placement of a Black man at the focal point of the composition also carries a hint of the artist's abolitionist sentiment, thus adding a further dimension of advocacy for social change.[4] His aim was to impress upon his contemporaries and generations to come the responsibility of a government to perform with justice and humanity toward all its citizens.

Phillippe Auguste Jeanron's (1808-1887), paintings advocated social change through their "sympathetic mirroring of the life and hardships of the common people" in France at the time of the French Revolution. In contrast to the tradition of art mirroring the life of the monarchy and high officials of the royal court, his paintings celebrated such themes as "Young Child," "Poor Family," and "Hunger," all shown in the 1836 Salon. His focus on such themes made him an attractive candidate for leadership of the Louvre after the Revolution. He was selected in 1848 to lead the Louvre, and set out to introduce a series of reforms including making available a larger scope of artists past and present in the collections of the museums to the public. His aim was to make the Louvre as the National Museum of France "a Palace of the People." In the spirit of democracy, the Louvre was open to all citizens under his leadership. The words of the painter Jacques Louis David at a festival held in conjunction with the liberation of the museum capture the spirit of the day:

> All individuals useful to society will be joined together as one; you will see the president of the executive committee in step with the blacksmith; the mayor with his sash in color,

[4] See Lorenz Eitner, *Géricault's Raft of the Medusa* (New York: Phaidon, 1972).. Also Christine riding, 'Staging the Raft of Medusa," *Visual Culture in Britain, Volume 5, 2 winter 2004: 1-26.*

> beside the butcher or mason; the black African, who differs only in color, next to the white European.[5]

Of course, this audience posed new challenges for the museum mandating an emphasis on education, because the new audiences did not come equipped with experiences and knowledge to prepare them for appreciating the treasures of the museum. Jeaneron was successful in carrying out some of his ideas for making collections more accessible to the public by organizing the collections into a historical framework and linking the Louvre with other French museums across the nation.[6]

Up to this point the artists' means of expressing their concerns with social change have taken place in the context of one or another style of realist or representational art. This fact raises the question of whether art concerned with social change must be limited to Realism in order to effect social change. György Lukács, a Marxist aesthetician who understood Realism in art to display the features of an epoch of social development, believed that "non-realist forms of art were not only decadent but incapable of yielding any social insight."[7] A look at modern artists of the Twentieth century will provide a different answer to this question.

III. Art and Social Change in Modern Art

In the Twentieth century, artists continue to make works directed toward social change. Among these, the Spanish artist Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) is especially noteworthy. Here, I have chosen the artists Picasso and Jean Fautrier's work because they both apply non-representational means in their respective approaches to social change. One might otherwise have as easily chosen examples form the great Mexican muralists José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949), David Afaro Siqueros (1896-1974) or Diego Rivera (1886-1957), whose murals enlivened the debates over revolutionary matters in Mexico throughout the early Twentieth century.[8]

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[5] J.L. David, *Rapport die décret sur la fête de la Réunion républicaine du 10 août* (Paris, 1793), 4.

[6] Gabriel P. Weisberg, *The Realist Tradition: French Painting and Drawing 1830-1900* (Cleveland Museum of Art and Indiana University Press, 1981), 92, 296, 97.

[7] Tom Rockmore, "Modernism, Post-modernism and the Social Function of Art," *International Yearbook of Aesthetics* Volume I, 1996: 72.

[8] Among the works of the Mexican mural artists dedicated to art and social change are the murals of Orozco "The Trench," 1926-27; Rivera, "Distribution of Arms,"

Both in his words and in his art, Picasso manifests a deep concern for the artist's role in advancing positive social change. He lent support through his art to the resistance movements in Spain and in France during the Nazi occupation.[9] In response to a journalist's interview concerning his views on art and politics, Picasso made the following statement:

> What do you think an artist is? An imbecile who has only his eyes if he is a painter, or ears if he is a musician or a lyre at every level of his heart if he's a poet....? On the contrary, he's at the same time a political being, constantly alive to heart rendering fiery or happy events, to which he responds in every way.... No, painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war for attack and defense against the enemy.[10]

Picasso did not mean by these words that he would compromise his style or subject matter merely to provide propaganda for social or political matters. Rather, he believed that it is necessary for an artist to uses his/her talents in the service of humanity, while doing so in a manner consistent with his vision as an artist. When questioned as to why he chose a "difficult" approach to art, he defended his radical style. "Now is the time...in this period of change and revolution to use a revolutionary manner of painting and not to paint like before...."[11] Picasso's revolutionary approach to art is in tandem with his commitment to social change. "I have always believed and still believe, that artists who live and work with spiritual values cannot and should not remain indifferent to a conflict in which the highest values of humanity and civilization are at stake."[12]

Among the most important expressions of artists of the Twentieth century in support of social change, is Picasso's "Guernica," 1937 (Madrid, Museo

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1926-27; and Siquerros "Catharisis," 1934. All of these works are located in public buildings in Mexico. See David Craven, *Art and Revolution in Latin America 1910-1990* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002?).

[9] For a discussion of Picasso's relation to the Resistance movement in France see Alfred Barr, *Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1946, 1974), 226-45.

[10] Pablo Picasso, cited in Alfred Barr, *Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1946, 1974), 247-249, 268, 269.

[11] Pablo Picasso, Interview with Jerome Seckler, cited in Alfred Barr, *Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1946, 1974), 268.

[12] Pablo Picasso, quoted in the New York Times, December 19, 1937 on the occasion of a meeting of the American Artists' Congress. Cited in Alfred Barr, *Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1946, 1974), 264.

Reina Sophia). "Guernica" is one of several paintings by Picasso in support of the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War. Concerning his involvement with the Republican cause, Picasso wrote the following at the time of an exhibition of his Spanish Republican drawings in New York in 1937:

> The Spanish struggle is the fight of reaction against the people, against freedom. My whole life as an artist has been nothing more than a continuous struggle against reaction and the death of art.....In the panel on which I am working which I shall call Guernica, and in all my recent works of art, I clearly express my abhorrence of the military caste which has sunk Spain in an ocean of pain and death....[13]

The immediate precipitating event for Picasso's "Guernica" was the destruction of the Spanish Basque town, Guernica, by German bomber airplanes acting on behalf of the Spanish Facist General Franco on April 28, 1937. In this work, Picasso employs formal devices drawing on both Cubism and Expressionism, using only black, white and gray lines and shapes. The painting on the left side shows a woman with raised arms falling from a burning house; on the right is a woman clutching a dead child in her arms and a wounded warrior with sword in hand lying on the ground. In center right of the picture towering above is the head of a bull, and in the very center is positioned a white horse, perhaps symbolizing respectively the forces of "brutality and darkness" and innocent suffering of the people. Picasso's "Guernica" joins the works of Goya, Gérricault, and other artists as efforts to contribute to social change in their respective societal contexts.

The response of the French *Informel* artist Jean Fautrier (1898-1964) to Nazi atrocities in France during World War II produced a shocking series of paintings during 1943-1945 called "Les Otages" (The Hostages). Fautrier's paintings offer a very direct and personal response reportedly based on his witnessing of the screams of victims of Nazi torture and executions in the woods outside Paris near Châtenay-Malabry, where the artist moved his studio during the war after the Gestapo searched his studio in Paris.[14] These

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[13] This statement was made by Picasso in May or June 1937 at the time of the exhibition of Spanish war posters shown in New York under the auspices of the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy and reprinted by Elizabeth McCausland in the Springfield Republican, July 18 1937. Cited in Alfred Barr, *Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1946, 1974), 202, 264, 265.

[14] Yves Alain Bois, "The Falling Trapeze," in Curtis L. Carter and Karen Butler, *Jean Fautrier: 1898-1964* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002),

"Otages" memorialize the tortured bodies of the massacred prisoners. The images bear little resemblance to actual human body parts. Rather, the approach of Fautrier in these modern, semi-abstract works allows for physical and psychological trauma to be conveyed "by the formal conditions of the paintings themselves—their specific combinations of oil paint, gesso, pastel and paper mounted on canvas"— rather than by representational means. At this point Fautrier had invented a new approach to painting which was called *haute pâte*.[15] He uses these formal devices to evoke a sympathetic response, both physical and emotional, in the viewers.[16] Art historian Benjamin Buchloh describes Fautrier's "Otages" in these words,

> ...they are *memento mori* still lifes, but their skulls are decapitated heads; they are not portraits, but they are pictures of the dead; they are not figurative delineations, but they are automatist depositions of matter and texture; they are not paintings that depict, but neither are they self-reflexive modernist abstractions.[17]

Based on the works of Picasso and Fautrier, the answer to our question concerning representational art and social change, is that non-representational art can also be effectively employed in the service of social change. In effect, both artists invented new languages of art that proved useful in realizing their desire for social change. However, it is important to note that both representational and modern abstract artists shared a common aim: to draw attention to inhumane conditions of society such as corruption and war by using the most advanced means of the art of their time. While the artists may have lacked the political and economic power to implement such changes, they possessed the ability to influence feelings and ideas through their work.

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[15] For a description of the process see Curtis L. Carter, "Fautrier's Fortunes: A Paradox of Success and Failure," Carter and Karen Butler, *Jean Fautrier: 1898-1964* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 20.

[16] Karen Butler, "Fautrier's First Critics," in Curtis Carter and Karen Butler, *Jean Fautrier: 1898-1964* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 39, 54.

[17] Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Faturier's Natures Mortes," in Curtis Carter and Karen Butler, *Jean Fautrier: 1898-1964* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 69.

III. Has Art Lost its Relevance to Social Change?

Up to this point most of the examples cited fall within the domain of Western art before the end of modern art and the beginnings of postmodernism in the 1970s. But contemporary theorists such as Jean Baudrillard, Arthur Danto, and Hans Belting, among others, each in his respective way, have raised the question as to whether art after modernism still retains any meaningful role in human affairs other than its own self-referential meaning or its function as a commodity. In the words of Baudrillard,

> The art world presents a curious aspect. It is as though art and artistic inspiration had entered a kind of stasis—as though everything which had developed magnificently over several centuries had suddenly been immobilized, paralyzed by its own image and its own riches.[18]

Danto posits "the end of art" in a series of writings on the subject beginning in 1984, including most notably *After the End of Art* (1997) and *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (2005). Danto argues that, when modern art replaced mimesis with abstraction and identified reflection upon its own identity as a defining characteristic of art, a new era for art began. With the emergence of Marcel Duchamp's readymades and Andy Warhol's Brillo Boxes, he argues, it is no longer possible using perceptual means without the aid of some conceptual theory to distinguish art from non-art.[19] The art itself thus participates self-reflexively in its own philosophical interpretation.

These developments, together with the emergence of radical pluralism and the blurring of the lines between art and popular culture in the era of postmodernism, led Danto and others to question the sustainability of roles that art has previously held as an active feature of living cultures. It is not that art ceases to be created and distributed in the market place and in galleries and museums after Modernism. The question is whether it will continue to have the social relevance, in either a utopian sense or as a

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[18] Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena* translated by James Beneádict (London, New York: Verso, 1993), 11, 15. First published as *La Transparence du Mal: Essai sur les phénomènes extrêmes* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1990).

[19] See Curtis L. Carter, "Hegel and Danto on the End of Art," *Literary Review No. 5* 2008: 112-117.

practical force, as a reflection of important ideas or feelings capable of evoking social change.

The issue for our discussion of art and social change, then, is this: what if the analysis of Baudrillard, Danto, and the others turns out to be correct? What would the implications be for the future of art's role with respect to social change? To explore this question, it is necessary to look beyond the immediate confines of Western Modern art. We must examine whether conditions outside the immediate sphere of Western art history support the claims of Baudrillard, Danto, and the others concerning the presumed end of art, and with it the end of art as a means of social change. For example, does the "end of art" thesis hold for all cultures or only for Western art? If the thesis is credible at all, is it limited to a particular temporal period of Western history such as the Postmodern era, or is it applicable for art universally?

To address the challenge posed by those who found in recent Western art its demise, it is necessary to look especially at the changing state of art and culture in Post-colonial cultures such as India and Eastern cultures such as contemporary China. Among the issues guiding the participation of artists in post-colonial societies is that fact that the very notion of East and West as distinct geographic or cultural entities may no longer hold significance as a key issue in cultural understanding. 'East' and 'West' are both constructs which have ceased to have a specific meaning in the context of globalization and the changes undergoing particular cultures worldwide, especially those undergoing a phase of transformation from colonial to post-colonial existence. A second consideration concerns the motivation of artists in environments undergoing extraordinary change. "Whether or not Asian and Pacific artists can make a difference [with respect to social change], there can be no doubt that many are committed to doing so."[20]

IV. Art and Social Change in Post-colonial India

For a closer examination of this issue, I turn to a brief look at art in Post-colonial India.[21] From the 1850s following the British occupation, the art in

[20]Caroline Turner, editor, *Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific* (Canberra, Australia: Pandanus Books, Australian National University, 2005), 12, 13.

[21] An equally interesting case is the development of contemporary Chinese art. Apart from simply noting that the seemingly thriving state of art currently undergoing many changes in China does not suggest the end of art, I will defer this discussion to

India was officially guided by British founded art schools in Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay. These efforts were augmented by visits from important professional artists from Britain including John Griffith, a prominent Victorian painter, and Lockwood Kipling, the father of Rudyard Kipling.[22] Collections of British painters of the Nineteenth century were put on display in an effort to influence the development and appreciation of Western art. Alongside these developments were emerging self-taught artists such as Ravi Varmi (1848-1906) known as 'Raja,' whose art spawned both European influenced portraiture and indigenous subjects from Indian epic and mythological tales. The Bengal "renaissance" in Indian art, in the early part of the Twentieth century reflected the efforts of Indian social reformers, cultural elite, and the political vanguard to revive and reinvent Indian traditions. It was in part an attempt to counter Western colonial materialist influences, as well as Muslim influences, in Indian culture by the infusion of Indian spiritual ideas and a "purer version of 'Indian style painting.'" The artists, including Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951), introduced pictorial conventions from the "medieval" Mughal and Parari schools styles of miniature painting. The Bengal artists were part of a larger effort to move India toward "a cultural ideology of nationalism."[23] Their aim was to hermeneutically transform Indian culture of the past and simultaneously to foster engagement with European cultures and in particular the colonial legacy so as to make the past relevant to the needs of the time. The Bengal artists were part of the Indian national liberation movement leading to the conclusion of British colonial occupation in 1947.

Leading up to Indian Independence in 1947, Indian artists continued to foster the cultural ideology of nationalism with influences from Western modernism in Paris, Berlin and New York, as well as from China and Japan. The Santiniketan school under the guidance of Tagore drew upon the Bengali mythology and folk art and the "naturalism of every day life," inspired in part by Gandhi's interest in the politics of Indian peasant culture.

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its ample consideration in the essays of this volume. No less important would be the multifaceted connections to contemporary visual artists and musicians throughout Mexico, Cuba, and virtually all of Latin America, which is beyond the scope of the present essay.

[22] My treatment of Indian art is indebted to the writings of Indian art historian and critic Geeta Kapur. See Geeta Kapur, "Dismantled Norms: Apropos other Avantgardes," and "A Stake in Modernity: A Brief History of Modern Indian Art," in Caroline Turner, editor, *Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific* (Canberra, Australia: Pandanus Books, Australian National University, 2005), 46-101, 146-164.

[23] Kapur, "A Stake in Modernity…", 150, 151.

Tagore was invited by Ghandi to the sessions of the Indian National Congress and produced posters for the Congress in 1938.[24]

After independence a distinctive Indian modernism characterized by ecclecticism, incorporating Western, Asian, and distinctively Indian elements continued to develop. Throughout this stage, Indian artists increasingly experimented with the theme of reciprocity between their own histories and the changing societal forces in a postcolonial environment.

As India moves beyond initial settling into its stature as an independent nation, the focus of artists reflecting on the use of art as a means of social change shifts from nationalism to more concrete, fragmentary issues relating to class, caste and gender. Increasingly, artists of the 1990s and beyond have employed representational strategies in painting and sculpture, as well as in performance and media arts to address such concerns. For example, the painter Surendran Nadir (1956-) employs the body of Gandhi in his repertoire of cultural symbols. Nair's "The Unbearable Likeness of Being," 1998, (Private Collection, New Delhi), a pictorial allegory with multiple layers of meaning, shows Gandhi on a weighing scale, his body laced with salt crystals and sand that pierce the body like nails, giving the experience of Gandhi as a martyr for his efforts at social change.[25] Five circular miniatures positioned vertically on the right side of the painting: a hand, sandals, a clock face, a tent, and two figures extend the symbolic references of the painting.

Nadir uses his art to explore India's changing political and social landscape. Regarding his art, Nadir says,

> I imagine it to have political undertones, however subtle, which is informed of history, mythology, real and imaginary events, notions of tradition and identity and its relationship with modernity, of language, sexuality, politics, religious and other faiths, etc.[26]

His painting, "An Actor Rehearsing the Interior Monologue of Icarus," (2000) created a stir when the Indian government Minister of Culture demanded its removal from an exhibition at the National Gallery of Modern Art in 2000 just two days before the exhibition was to open. The painting depicts a naked Icarus, the Greek Mythological figure, on top of the Ashoka Pillar. The Ashoka Pillar, which dates from the reign of Emperor Ashoka, ruler of India from 273 to 232 B.C., became India's national emblem at the

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[24] Kapur, "A Stake in Modernity…",151.
[25] Kapur, "Dismantled Norms: Appropos other Avant Gardes," 73.
[26] Internet: Artist's Profile, SaffronArt, Summary Biography.

end of the British rule. The reason offered in defense of the banning is instructive. The Minister stated that "the national emblem had been portrayed in a less than reverential manner and could prompt objections from nationalist elements." [27] Outraged, the 25 young Indian artists scheduled for the exhibition unanimously withdrew their works in protest when the museum director decided to remove Nadir's painting. The artist's choice of a subject for this painting, and the reasons cited for removal of the painting from a government sponsored museum, point to the fact that the utopian idealization of nationalism in postcolonial India has itself become a target for questioning and critique. Perhaps the painting signals a call for social change moving beyond the spirit of nationalism that was necessary for the changes that set free India from the Colonial era.

Never far down the list of unresolved social issues in India at the end of the Twentieth century and continuing into the Twenty-first century is the ethnic tension between Hindu and Muslim cultures in India, where there exists the perception of a hegemonic dominance on the part of the Hindu majority.[28] This tension has its historic roots beginning with the Mughal Renaissance in the Sixteenth century and has continued with increased intensity since Indian independence in 1947, resulting in a perception of discrimination and expressions of violence toward Muslims.

Artist Vivan Sundaram (1943-), whose work is often politically conscious and focused on matters of social and environmental protest, brings to consciousness the concern with violence against Muslims in India. This theme is especially pronounced in his 1993 installation with sculptures and photograph, "Memorial to the Dead man on the street—victim of the carnage against Muslims in Bombay in 1992-93." In this work the artist takes a photograph of the dead man and places it on an iron coffin as a symbol of the violence against Muslims in contemporary Indian society. In another of his works, the media installation "House/Boat" (1994), Vivan Sundaram addresses the problem of transportation for "people who have been driven from their homes for political or religious reasons to an unknown destination." [29]

> The cube-shaped house is constructed of walls of thick, handmade paper with rusty metal connectors. In this humble self-made dwelling, of which you see millions in India, is a

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[27] "Surendran Nair Work Withdrawn for National Gallery of Modern Art in Delhi," Internet Press, 2000.
[28] Alex Perry, "India's Great Divide," *Time Magazine*, August 5, 2003.
[29] Johan Pijnappel, "New Media Art from India: 16th World Wide Video Festival," translated by Pat Raff, *HAS Newsletter Online*, No. 17,Asian Art: 2.

> metal cube upon which sits a large dish of water with a glass bottom. Video images of burning gas flicker through it. Only the common basic elements of water and fire are present. The big boat next to it seems to be stranded on a dozen railway sleepers, the last useful leftovers of British rule.[30]

Rumanna Hussain (1952-1999), an Indian painter and conceptual artist active in Indian politics, also addresses her art to turbulent subjects such as the religious strife in Indian society as reflected in the destruction of a Mosque by Hindu militants in 1992 Ayodhya. Hussain approaches this theme from the perspective of a Muslim woman's identity in Indian society. In such works as "Home/Nation," (1996), "The Tomb of Begum Hazrat Mahal" (1997), "Is It What You Think?" (1998) she focuses on the politics and the personal aspects of social rupture and marginalization. Her work is focused on how these elements affect a Muslim woman's engagement with social concerns and also personal identity.[31] In exploring these themes, Hussain juxtaposes familiar images of Islamic architecture such as the mosques and minarets in Ayodhya with texts, religious and other symbolic effects, personal artifacts, and autographic photographs of her own body. In the process of creating and offering for public contemplation these works, she raises fundamental questions concerning the need for political reform and an end to a violent history that currently divides Muslims and Hindus in Indian society. Underlying the complex mix of ideas and actions expressed through Hussain's work is the hope that change aimed at reconciliation through personal and societal actions is possible.

There is good reason to think that artists in this Post-colonian context have managed to avert the crisis that has prompted Baudrillard, Danto and others to entertain the notion that art has come to an end of its usefulness. A part of the argument for proclaiming the end of art was based on the assumption that representational art ended its meaningful functions with Modernism. This is not the case in India, as the most innovative artists of the day continue to find meaningful ways to use representational means in developing their works. Art as a means of fostering social change holds a strong place and continues with strength as India's major artists such as those cited here remain actively engaged as advocates for social change.

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[30] Pijnappel, "New Media Art from India….": 2.

[31] Kapur, "Dismantled Norms: Apropos Other Avant Gardes," 93-95. See Also the following: "Rummana Husssain," Artists's online profile, Chermould Prescott Road Contemporary Art Gallery, Mumbai; Chaitanya Sainbrani,*Edge of Desire: Recent Art in India*, Exhibition Catalogue (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2005).

V. Art and Social Change in Other Contemporary Art

Returning to the question on a broader world sphere, what is the state of art and social change today in other parts of the world including the "West"? A few representative examples will suffice to support my claim that artists remain active in their respective cultures and across the global world in the pursuit of social change. In short, they persist as if their work has a meaningful place in social change. Among these artists are Willie Bester, South Africa; Guillermo Gomez-Peña, Mexico; John Newling, Great Britain; Susan Crile, USA; Guerilla Art Action Group, USA, and Yes Men, USA.

In South Africa, Willie Bester (1956-) uses images constructed in part from materials collected from the garbage and altered to comment on Apartheid and Post-Apartheid issues of interest to the community including unchanged racial attitudes, social violence and lack of freedom, the failures of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee and the Group Areas Act which mandates the segregation of people into districts based on color, and ongoing violence and injustices. His monumental sculpture "Security Guard" symbolizes the lack of freedom in South Africa.[32]

Moving beyond the social protest paintings of the Mexican Muralists of the early part of the Twentieth Century, Mexican performance artist and writer Guillermo Gómez-Peña (1955-) explores current border issues, race, and gender focusing on Latin American-U.S. border culture issues. His works focus on topics including immigration, cross cultural and hybrid identities, and the politics of the brown body with special attention to confrontations and misunderstandings between cultures and races. He approaches these topics through virtually all contemporary media including "performance art, installation, experimental radio, video photography and installation art," as well as experimental poetry and writing books.

Peña collaborated with performance artist Coco Fusco (1960-) in "Two Undiscovered Amerindians," 1992-1994, which I viewed at the Walker Art Museum. Fusco and Peña presented themselves for display to museum goers in a ten by twelve foot cage, dressed in "primitive" costumes (she wearing a grass skirt and leopard skin bra, he dressed in a breast plate and leopard skin face wrestler's mask) as specimens of an unknown Guatinaui

[32] Ivette Perez-Vega, "Willie Bester: An Artist Resisting the Injustice in Post-Apartheid South Africa," Paper, The Law and Society Association, Berlin, Online, May 24, 2009.

people.[33] The installation, which took place during the year of the 500th anniversary of Columbus's voyage to the Americas, was a pointed reference to past and present practices of objectifying native peoples for amusement and exploitation.

In a conceptual installation, "Samuel A Maverick Refused to Brand his Cattle, "created for the Haggerty Museum in 2005, British artist John Newling explores through the symbol of the golden calf basic human ideas concerning ownership and freedom. For this installation, Newling constructs five life sized golden calves made of resin and foam and double gilded in 24-karat gold, each branded with the word 'mine.' According to the artist, the golden calf represents both a commodity and an iconic symbol. Newling's Installation draws upon the Old Testament biblical references to the golden calf (Exodus 32), and to the story of Samuel A. Maverick (1803-1870), the Texas cattle owner who neglected to brand his cattle. Before long the calves that roamed in the area became known as "mavericks," and the word became associated with persons of independent or unorthodox views. By branding the calves in the exhibition, the artist warns against material encroachments on individual freedom in daily life.[34]

American artist Susan Crile's (1942-) paintings and drawings based on photographs taken inside the prison at Abu Ghraib that surfaced in 2004 showing American soldiers engaged in torturing of prisoners. Criles' images show in vivid terms the humiliation, degradation, and suffering of the victims. They are intended to protest, and hopefully deter, any future government policies or military intelligence practices that permit torture against prisoners of war.[35]

Even the artists and the art world are not immune from scrutiny by self-appointed artist peers. The Guerilla Art Action Group (GAAG),a collective of artists founded in the late 1960s in Greenwich Village, perceived the need for change in their ranks and the supporting institutions of the art world. They delivered their call for social change on the part of fellow artists and the art world by "happening events," body art, political protest,

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[33] Coco Fusco, *English is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas* (New York: The New Press, 1995). Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Peña, *Undiscovered Amerindians* (1992).

[34] Curtis L. Carter, "John Newling British Conceptual Artist: Mixed Media Installation," Exhibition catalogue, Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University, 2005.

[35] Andrea K. Scott, "Susan Crile: Abuse of Power," *New York Times*, October 13, 2006.

and art collectivism. Their main message is expressed in these telling comments:

> Art has become the supreme instrument thought which repressive society idealizes its image; Art is used today to distract people to accept more easily the repression of big business; Museum and cultural institutions are the instruments of sanctification of the artists who collaborate in such manipulations.[36]

For the last case of art's deployment in actions aimed at social change, and most likely the most subversive and surely the most controversial, I cite the efforts of the performance group "The Yes Men." The lead artists in this instance are Dan Ollman Sarah Price, Andy Bichlbaum, Mike Bonnano, and Michael Moore, with some 300 players across the world. Their art is even more challenging than Andy Warhol's Brillo Boxes concerning the distinction between art and non-art. They practice what they call identity correction, by pretending to be powerful people and spokespersons. Their aim is to "fix the world" by exposing the corporation leaders and other power leaders who put profits above everything else including the honouring of human life. The art consists of entering into real life gatherings such as conferences, meetings and the media interviews, posing as corporate officials and other power holders. For example, they represented Exxon Officials at a national gathering of oil producers in Canada. On other occasions they have 'represented" McDonalds, Dow Chemical, World Trade Organization, and the U. S. Government Housing agency, HUD. Dow Chemical is a favorite target, especially for its failure to address the harm to Bhopal by the oil spill in 1984. Their presentations to conferences, policy makers, the media, and the public introduce absurd proposals while appearing to be under the guise of normalcy. They incorporate disruptive subversions aimed at exposing "the real ideology" behind the official facades under which corporations and other power agencies operate.[37] The Yes Men intend to change the world "one prank at a time." Their approach not only is a challenge to power centers but also raises again questions concerning what distinguishes art from non-art. They do not employ any conventional art media, unless what they do can be

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[36] Guerilla Art Action Group, 1971. Cited in Shifra M. Goldman, *Dimensions of the Americas: Art and social Change in Latin America and the United States* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 32. Michael Kimmelman, "Confrontations: Gureilla Art Action Group 1969-76", exhibition review, Printed Matter, *New York Times*, May 2, 1997.

[37] The Yes Men Online Website, http://www.theyesmen.org/; Also "The Yes Men," Wikipedia Free Encyclopedia, Online.

counted as performance art or perhaps as a form of anti-art life theatre. Their actions simulate real events, often convincing, and may contribute at least in some small measure to social change.

VI. Concluding Note

Concerning the question whether art must be representational in order to be effective in advancing social change, the answer would be no, as the work of Picasso and others indicates. Contemporary artists employ both representational and non-representational art in their social action projects. They engage all manner of media including painting, sculpture, installations, video, internet, and performance in ways that challenge all media boundaries. Some have accepted and moved beyond the concern that the means of creating and deploying art for social purposes cannot always easily be distinguished from the stream of life.

As will be evident by the discussion offered throughout, I remain unconvinced by the claims of those who find that the art of the late Twentieth century and beyond entails the end of art, as Baudrillard, Danto, and others have argued. As Joseph Margolis proffers in his book, *Interpretation Radical But Not Unruly*, in defense of historicity, there is no need for the present and future progress of art to get hung up on the efforts to permanently fix the concept of art as in Modernism, or to hopelessly diffuse the state of art as in Postmodern thought.[38] As exhibited here, there exists a long tradition of Western and Eastern artists, both representational and non-representational, whose works take up social issues. If the "end of art" thesis is intended to apply universally or globally to the present state of art, including post-colonial societies such as India, its claims go against the reality manifest in the actions of so many active Indian and other artists with inarguable credentials. Over the past century, many artists in India have participated, often passionately, in social change, before and after the end of colonial rule. Their expressions remain visible in the contemporary debates crucial to the well being of Indian society. As the sampling of artists

[38] Joseph Margolis, *Interpretation Radical But Not Unruly: The New Puzzle of the Arts and History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). See also Joseph Margolis, "Beneath and Beyond Modernism/Postmodernism Debate," *International Yearbook of Aesthetics*, Volume I, 1996: 59-68, and Joseph Margolis, "The Endless Future of Art," in *The End of Art and Beyond: Essays After Danto, edited by Arto Haapala, Jerrold Levinson, and Veikko Rantala (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1997).*

engaged in social action from other parts of the world, including Africa, Latin America, Great Britain, and the USA shows, artists in these varied locales also continue to address social change issues. (The same applies in China, for example, where contemporary art is thriving.)

What is the outcome of artists' efforts to initiate social change? A full answer to this question would take us beyond the scope of this paper. However, I would propose that a start would be to point out that art is an essential part of the social capital of a nation.[39] It helps to build the networks and to establish norms of trust and reciprocity among the citizens across racial and ethnic lines. It aims to improve the quality of life and overall well being. In this capacity it can contribute to fostering responsive government and serve as a means of tempering corporate greed by raising community awareness of abuses. In educational settings, art contributes to learning skills necessary for happiness and well being.

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[39] "Social capital refers to the those stocks of social trust, norms, and networks that people can draw upon to solve common problems." Carmen Sirriani and Lewis Friedland, "Social Capital and Civic Innovation...," *Civic Dictionary, CPN*, Online. Robert Putnam, "The Prosperous Community: Social Capital and Public Life," *The American Prospect*, 13, Spring 1993: 35-42.