IN SUPPORT OF THE PAMPHLETEER

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I have chosen the word "pamphleteer" to stand for socially committed artists because it conjures up all the worst prejudices we have been taught about propoganda. Pamphletters are artists that injoin themselves and their artwork with organizations and causes. They distinguish themselves from commercial artists by being part of and believing in projects they undertake.

In the arts, there is a new conciousness. It is a healthy critical focus on the ills of our society but to the rulling classes' delight it does not yet threaten the status quo. .Due to the separation between art and activism our potential to affect social change is not being realized.

At one time or another many of us are asked to do a drawing for an organization or a cause. At first we feel complimented, but by the end of the endeavor, we are frustrated and disappointed. Our work has become contrived. It reads as a cliche or worse, its purpose is completely incomprehsible. Rather than acknowledge that this is a typicaly unsatisfactory first try, we claim it is something we are not cut out to do. We forget how stiff and clumsy our first still life painting or figure drawing looked.

Others rationalize their disappointment as the natural consequence of transforming art into propaganda. They equate working for a social cause with working for an ad agency. These individuals claim that both are forms of prostitution and therefore, are not true artistic statements. These observations are oversimplified, and have no basis in history. Almost all of the art prior to the 19th century was commissioned.Whether an idea comes from the individual or an organization has no bearing on an art piece's success .Only when an artist lacks sympathy with a cause or lacks expressivness does the work become weakened.

More tragic than ignorance of our history is the immobilizing effect bourgeois ideology has on our total political power. If we are convinced that as an individual we make our most valuable contribution to society, we will never join forces with a movement or revolution .This divide and conquer technique has separated our visual artists from organizations. The result is a less articulate,culturally weak progressive movement.

Most visual propoganda is done by untrained graphic artists on stressful time schedules with microscopic budgets. The resulting bad design is what erroneously leads many to the conclution that politics and art do not mix. But well done propaganda contains all the artistic elements of what is referred to as" fine art". A poster or flyer can be a formal experiment as well as lead, educate, and inspire.

One other type of confusion circulating among us is that creativity, in itself, stands against militarism and injustice.

Artistic labor can be used in a positive sense for enriching society or in a negitive sense for controlling.Today, artists are paid large amounts of money to design and sell products which overtly or covertly promote sexism, war,racism,and the immage of prosparity and happiness.Less ovious supporters of the state is the artist that doesn't work for profits,but by their refusal to address society's problems become welcomed accomplices for the establishment.Their esthetics experiments serve the status quo by creating the illusion of unrestricted freedom. Their work when chosen by the empowered class is reproduced and shown around the world as proof of the U.S.'s openess and tolerance.

Our art becomes effective when we concern ourselves with content, form, and context. Too many of us feel our job is done when we complete the first two, but are unwilling or too drained of energy to take on the task of exhibiting.At this point we have given up our say in how our art will be exhibited and who will see it. An anti-war poster shown in an art gallery will have little effect on the U.S. war in Central America. Just as a piece about degrading working conditions exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art will have little effect on wage and benefits demands by workers. However those same pieces at a rally, union hall or wheat pasted to a billboard could inspire and activate large numbers of people.

How we exhibit is important. Written documentation from the artists can help identify the purpose of our work and protect it from establishment misrepresentations. Organizations aquir a new public support when their information is combined with our work.

The formal aspect of pamphleteerism is its most glaring weakness. The quantities of poorly designed and unattractive leaflets and posters are monumental. By catering primarily to one form of expression: "realism"; our work has become predictable and dull. We have let the elitists' perspective prevail by believing that realism is all the general public understands. New forms of expression and experimentation have always attracted attention and controversy.IF our art is to be associated with freedom and change than experiment and invention have to become synonymous with our work.

We have been told throughout our schooling that when our art work merges with politics it becomes a lesser art form. This is incorrect. A utilitarian dimension does not diminish its fullness. MORE DOES NOT EQUAL LESS! We have been taught to be observers in our studios but the crisises of the times require that we become activists. As we undertake the risky job of an activist so should our visual work take risks. Experimentation has to go hand in hand with practical organizational needs. If we are to move from recorders of injustice to full participants in making history we must begin taking sides and making proposals. What we should ask ourselves about our artwork is not whether it is propoganda, but who is it for, and how do we do it best?