Crisis art is directed rather than disinterested—more closely related to art as process than product. Crisis art is keenly aware of text and context. Crisis art often works best collaboratively. Collaboration contests the auratic view of the artist? “Auratic,” coined by Walter Benjamin, refers to art as process rather than product. What is the difference between art as it is usually constructed and what might be called crisis art, or cultural activism? The preceding represents four examples of creating art in times of conflict. In every instance, the art is problematic; not esthetic, as such; not even palpable in the instance of Tiravanija feeding the homeless. What is the difference between art as it is usually constructed and what might be called crisis art, or cultural activism? The preceding represents four examples of creating art in times of conflict. In every instance, the art is problematic; not esthetic, as such; not even palpable in the instance of Tiravanija feeding the homeless.

**Crisis artists must swallow the poison in order to reconstitute it.**

Art that responds to a crisis is situational, hence created rapidly rather than painstakingly revised and refined. Crisis art is directed rather than disinterested—more closely related to art as process than product. Crisis art is keenly aware of text and context. Crisis art often works best collaboratively. Collaboration contests the auratic view of the artist? “Auratic,” coined by Walter Benjamin, refers to the artificial elevation of the artist to a position above his or her fellows. Crisis art is “immoral.”

George Batille insisted that the strongest art must function as an “immoral subversion of the existing order”—because “morality” is in the possession of the existing order, and as such is never what it professes to be. Crisis art is (to quote a still fashionable term coined by the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin) “dialogic.”

The idea is not that the artist stands above the fray paring his fingernails, bemusedly observing his creations. Dialogic articulates the more humbling notion that the artist interacts, even integrates, with the community, on a largely equal basis, each affecting the other.

Crisis art is “immoral.”

Crisis artists must swallow the poison in order to reconstitute it. Exemplify it as art.

The poison, currently, includes our crazily spinning, electronic-obsessed, war-making culture and its profit-mad institutions—along with the rapidly worsening environmental crisis. The image of swallowing the poison and expelling it as art is shamanic.

But can art actually have any appreciable impact on the lives of humans who are oppressed, disenchanted, struggling merely to survive? Can art affect cynical politicians and their corporate brethren?

There are precedents that were successful against great odds: Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906), anti-slavery writings during the abolitionist period, French writers and artists helping to end the colonial war in Algeria, Aleksand Sолжннннсннн’s denunciation of Stalinism and the Gulags, ACT UP’s culturally activist response to the demonizing of gay men during the AIDS crisis in the eighties and early nineties.

Do the kinds of strategies and calculations necessary for making and employing crisis art stand in opposition to the notion of the artist as dreamer, as creating from the deepest levels of consciousness?


Surely these artists continued to imagine complexly, to—as it were—dream, even as they fought through their art against injustice.

Might socially activist art also be created for its own sake, its seeming ethical rightness, without calculating its effect?

If art of a certain strain is committed to process rather than product, it is especially difficult to sum up its final success. Was the art in the aftermath of Hiroshima successful? Was the art that characterized the takeover of Greenham Common successful? Were the arpilleras made by disenfranchised Chilean women successful?

Crisis art, dissident art, social activist art (largely synonymous) are perennial; one can’t anticipate when an injustice or string of injustices, will invoke an art to register it.

But how will this art be appraised forty years from now when the crisis that evoked it is no longer a factor?

Paradoxically, art produced rapidly under crisis conditions will sometimes have more lasting power and even esthetic appeal than the painstakingly created seemingly disinterested art that most people identify as quintessential. Crisis art has an energy and focus which more than compensate for its relative lack of refinement.

In the US, there have been historical “moments”—the Quakers, the abolitionists, and Transcendentalists, the thirties Marxists, the sixties counter-culture, ACT UP in the late eighties and early nineties—but overall American writers have been contemptuous of socially activist writing. It doesn’t sell; it is more didactic than “esthetic.” Moreover, why should artists be in a special position to address political crises?

Writers cultivate consciousness, contemplation, and in many instances learning. They view through a broader lens. If they have a reputation, they can find a platform to make themselves heard and express their opinions precisely.

What good will it do? Wars, oppression, colonialism, profit-mania have been with us since human hegemony? And now authoritarian power is...
decentered, much less visible. Serious art of any kind has been rendered negligible in the market place, which in the US epitomizes the country’s ethos.

With effort and intelligence, decentered power modules can be identified, as young dissidents and hackers have located and attempted to deliberately elusive nexuses of power and control.

Human history, however bloody and unjust, has not ceased; and, crucially, the planet we inhabit and have debauched is dying. Bangladesh is one of the world’s poorest and most densely populated countries, with its people crammed into a delta of rivers that empties into the Bay of Bengal, which because of the Antarctic ice melt is behaving like an ocean, flooding rice paddies and entire villages. Animals and plants throughout the globe are becoming extinct rapidly. The sun, lacking sufficient protection from Earth’s ozone layer, has become toxic. Lethal bacterial agents set loose from leveled rain forests or industrialized seas migrate into the general population.

 Possibly the hardest factor for concerned younger artists to accept is that there will always be an incommensurateness between their imaginative efforts and the result. The primary obligation is to not avert your eyes—to bear witness.

Harold Jaffe is the author of 18 books of fiction, "docufiction," and nonfiction, including most recently Anti-Twitter: 150 50-Word Stories, Paris 60, and OD. Jaffe is editor of Fiction International.