

Crisis Art by Harold Jaffe

*This guitar kills fascists.*  
—Woody Guthrie

On September 5, 1981, the Welsh group that called itself “Women for Life on Earth” arrived on Greenham Common, in Berkshire, England. They had marched from Cardiff, Wales, with the intention of challenging the decision to site ninety-six US cruise nuclear missiles on Greenham Common. On arrival they delivered a letter to the Base Commander which said, “We fear for the future of all our children and for the future of the living world.”

When their request for a debate was ignored, they set up a “Peace Camp” just outside the fence surrounding the Royal Air Force Greenham Common Airbase. This surprised the authorities and set the tone for an audacious, lengthy protest that was to last nineteen years.

The protesters refused to allow authorities to enter the camp, which became known as the Women’s Peace Camp and gained international recognition with imaginative images such as eggs, spiders webs, and children’s toys with which they decorated the chain link fences and contested area. In the end, the UK and US withdrew their attempt to site the cruise missiles in Greenham Common.

During the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship, a number of Chilean working-class women created complex tapestries depicting the harsh conditions of life and the pain resulting from the disappeared victims of Pinochet’s repression. These tapestries, or *arpilleras*, get their name from the Spanish word for the burlap backing they used.

Working quietly and using traditional methods, the women’s *arpilleras* came to have a wide influence within Chile and internationally. The tapestries preserved the memory of *los desaparecidos* and the dictatorship’s brutality, as well as the unemployment, food shortages, housing shortages, and other hardships of daily life attributed to Pinochet’s rule. Preserving this collective memory was itself an act of art-as-protest, but creating the *arpilleras* also empowered the women, many of whom experienced a liberation through their work and became involved in further protests against Pinochet’s regime.

Krzysztof Wodiczko, born in Poland, emigrated to Canada, and currently lives in the US. He is particularly well known for his guerrilla projections on official buildings purported to embody public values. Guerrilla, because his images were subversive and often projected without official permission. He sought, he explained, to unmask the buildings’ existing rhetoric.

One of his first projections was a swastika on the façade of the South African embassy in London during Apartheid to implicate the British government and align them with the white Apartheid regime in South Africa. And to implicate the public building itself, which presented itself as an architectural emblem of moral value.

Rirkrit Tiravanija is a Thai artist. One of his installations consisted of the following: he bicycled around looking for space—empty warehouse or aircraft hangar, deserted K-Mart, abandoned Rite-Aid, haunted Burger King.

He rented the space and furnished it with stoves, cooking gas, freezers, fridges, microwaves, counters, bowls, cups, glasses, plastic cutlery, chopsticks, Tupperware, folding tables, chairs.

He purchased food: noodles, rice, potatoes, bread, soup, salad, tofu, fruit, green tea, bottled water, cocoa, curry spices. Comfort food.

He engaged the homeless as helpers.

Food prepared, he invited the homeless helpers along with the lined-up homeless to eat.

Continued through the day, into the night. Clean up, close for the night. Sleep on the premises.

Do the same thing for sixty days.

After sixty days, he closed the space, got on his bicycle and looked for another empty warehouse or aircraft hangar, terrorized Rite-Aid, spooked McDonald’s, gutted Gap, bombed-out Home Depot.

Select the space, rent it.

Feed the homeless for sixty days.

Close up, move on, find another space, repeat.

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 use of cultural means to effect social change or a wider social awareness?

---

***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.”*

Georges Bataille 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 and affected.

*Crisis artists must swallow the poison in order to reconstitute it. Expel 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, disenfranchised, 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, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’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?

Consider Francisco Goya, William Blake and the French Revolution, the Mexican muralists, George Grosz and John Heartfield, Bertolt Brecht, Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica*, B. Traven, John Berger, Elsa Morante, Victor Serge, Clarice Lispector....

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

————— Jaffe continued on next page

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 disable 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.*