

Opposing the System: Social Activism Expressed Through Art in the Modern Era

Curator: Jimmy Watson

Artist Statement: Social Activism has been around for centuries. Whether it has involved religion, race, or gender, activism has provided the spark necessary for change and reform. This exhibit illustrates the idea that art can be a vehicle for communicating a particular wrong within society and giving a voice to protest. It is also very diverse. Artists include everything from Picasso to Barbara Kruger to Banksy. “Opposing the System” shows the progression of activism under the artistic umbrella of the modern era.

#1 *Guernica* by Pablo Picasso



As you enter the exhibit, you walk through a small entryway and the hallway is black. You are forced to turn immediately to the right and begin walking down a dimly lit corridor. On your right on the wall is the first piece of the exhibit. That is, *Guernica* by Pablo Picasso. Perhaps one of his most famous works, *Guernica* is a massive piece spanning 11 feet by 25 feet. It is largely black and white and is cubist in genre. It is a powerful political piece opposing war and violence. The name comes from a city in Spain that sparked a revolution in the Spanish civil war. The city was a victim of an aerial bombardment in which many lives were lost.

I put *Guernica* as the first image in this exhibit because it highlights the atrocities war brings. Activism against war is one of the oldest forms of reform. Picasso outlines this in his piece. Picasso's images are not all about social or political change; however, this one piece speaks volumes and gets its message across. It is also one of his most well-known works and many people have seen it. This makes for a perfect first image. It is recognizable and has a captivating message.

#2 *White Crucifixion* by Marc Chagall



As you walk past Guernica, the hallway is dark once again except for the one light shining about Marc Chagall's *White Crucifixion*. This is the second piece you come in contact with. The image is striking and bears little resemblance to other crucifixion images. This piece is a great transitional piece for the exhibit. We see a shift from activism about war and terror, to religion. The important parts of this image do not focus just on war and destruction, but also on religion. Marc Chagall highlights Judaism in this piece. He notes the atrocities committed against Jews within the background of the image. We see Nazis, the burning of books, and images of the Torah and Menorah.

The purpose of this image is not to show the suffering of Christ, but the suffering of the Jewish people. It highlights Nazi involvement and other stories of persecution. The entire idea Chagall tries to convey is that Jesus on the Cross sums up the suffering of the Jewish people. In turn, his goal is to stop some of this persecution in hopes that Jews will be accepted as true people of God, as Jesus was. Again, it is a great transitional piece in terms of the kind of activism that is being communicated.

#3 *Cardinal Sin* by Banksy



Continuing along the hallway, there appears to be a continuous curve. The viewer begins to realize that the entire exhibit is in a continuous circle (this will be explained later). The next image is *Cardinal Sin* by the street artist Banksy. This is one of Banksy's few non-street art pieces. This piece is also the first sculpture we have seen at this exhibit. Banksy continues the theme of religious activism in this piece. We see an apparent bust of a religious figure. However, where the face normally is, there appears to be tiles. It is reminiscent of a "censored" face, similar to something blurred out on television. The piece is meant to challenge the Catholic church as a whole. It is a response to the child sex abuse scandal within the church.

This piece is perfect when speaking about religious activism. We see a shift here in medium, but still see that continuous message that the exhibit as a whole is trying to convey. Banksy's art is all about "challenging the system", and we see this with *Cardinal Sin*. Banksy defaces the bust in order to get the inappropriate behavior many are committing into the limelight. It is extremely provocative... but that is entirely the point. It is meant to arouse change.

#4 *Woman Series* by Willem De Kooning



As we continue around the bend of the exhibit, another transitional piece ensues. However, these are different. It is not just one image. It is a group of images. As you walk along, you come in contact with 5 abstract images... Woman Series by Willem



De Kooning. Gone is the religious activism and now the feminist movement and sexual equality are highlighted. Each of the images displays a female as the dominant character. Each is an attempt to highlight the feminine person and glorify who she is. The largest of the 5, *Woman I*, is very controversial. The figure is aggressive, erotic and threatening. The main purpose of these images is to move away from the idealized women that have been so commonly depicted throughout art history.

This piece by De Kooning is perfect for this exhibit because it is a move away from social norms and challenges an idea. The idea he is challenging here is the idea that women are individual, and they can stand alone. He tries to rid each of his paintings of stereotypes and of classical images. Instead, he glorifies each individual in a new, controversial way. These pieces are some of the first in the feminist movement and they speak volumes. It is only fitting that they form a perfect transition from religious activism, to sexual equality.

#5 *Lilith* by Kiki Smith



Continuing along the theme of feminism and sexual equality is perhaps the most disturbing image within the entire exhibit. Kiki Smith's *Lilith* is the 5th piece in *Opposing the System*. Similar to De Kooning's *Woman Series*, *Lilith* hits upon Women and who they are at the very core. No stereotypes are present. Instead, Smith takes us back to who women are at the very core. The structure is tense, it is dramatic... and it is just straight up creepy. We see that there is an appreciation for the figure, despite not being idealized or glorified. Instead, Kiki gets us to recognize that women are just human beings... and should be treated as such.

This piece belongs in the exhibit because it is controversial, and its message attempts to arouse change. Feminists have loved this image because it hits upon who people are at the very core. The piece is intense, and the name has a rich history. The name *Lilith* goes back to medieval history. *Lilith* is a story contained in a medieval text in which *Lilith* declares equality with Adam (from the story of Adam and Eve). She refuses to be submissive. She abandons Eden, and lives and thrives alone. Overall, Smith's piece really is a great one to have when looking at sexual equality.

#6 *Untitled* by Barbara Kruger



This piece is the final piece within the exhibit that speaks of sexual equality. That is, as its main focus. Barbara Kruger's *Untitled* is a very well-known image. The words, "Your Body is a Battleground" are present and the image appears to be cut in half. The message is extremely controversial. Barbara created this image in response to Anti-Abortion laws that began to pass in the late 1980s. Kruger is a strident feminist, and she declared that women should have the right to choose. She created this image for the Women's March on Washington in 1989.

This image is a great one, regardless of opinions on a controversial issue. It was created for a protest, and that alone is great criteria for being in this exhibit. It is a piece that gets an intense message across, but in an appropriate and creative way. The idea that a body can be a battleground is controversial, but very effective when trying to arouse change with a particular issue. Overall, it is a great piece for the feminist movement and a great piece that strives for sexual equality as a whole.

#7 *Power to the People* by Carrie Reichart



Once again, there is another transitional piece as you continue around the bend of the museum. This next piece is a mosaic from Carrie Reichart entitled *Power to the People*. In it, there appears to be a woman protesting something, with police officers waving clubs. It is in this piece that we see a shift from sexual equality and the feminist movement to economic activism. The woman appears to be holding a book which contains the words, “ART IS NOT A MIRROR TO REFLECT THE WORLD... RATHER IT IS A HAMMER WITH WHICH TO SHAPE IT.”

I think that is really a powerful quote. Reichart attempts to simply highlight activism within this piece. As you look closer, you see that different images of protests are created within the mosaic tiles. Overall, the image attempts to glorify activism and protests and contains so many motifs relating to the topic. This normally is visible on the street in New York, however it is going to be placed within the exhibit for a limited time.

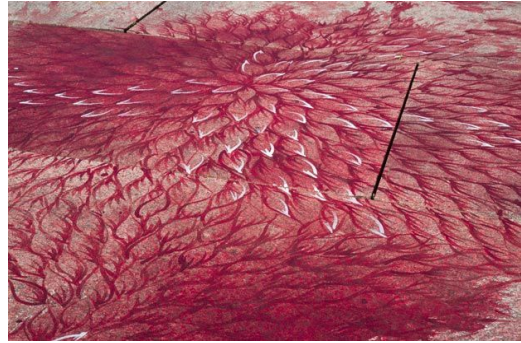
#8 Study of Perspective by Ai Weiwei



Continuing along with Carrie Reichardt's theme of economic and social activism, Study of Perspective is the next piece. This is arguably the most provocative piece within the entire exhibit. In it, Ai has 8 photos of himself flipping off numerous monuments and important structures. This works as a perfect transitional piece as well because Ai is pretty much protesting everything. Within the piece, he flips off the Eiffel Tower, the White House, and even the Mona Lisa. He challenges each system by making an obscene gesture.

This work is perfect for this exhibit because it covers all of the bases. Sure, parts of it are comical. But its message is profound. Ai Weiwei has been imprisoned numerous times for challenging corrupt systems. He is one of the paramount artists when it comes to opposing corruption. It is only fitting that he be featured within this exhibit.

#9 Roof Garden by Imran Qureshi



I think this is the perfect place to mention a major piece of the entire exhibit. In the middle of the circular shape of the museum, there is a massive installation. The entire exhibit circles a massive, concrete piece called the Roof Garden by Imran Qureshi. There are three different places within the exhibit in which you can peer out onto this really cool piece. From up above, it looks as if there is just a bunch of blood splatter on the pavement. It is meant to signify the spilling of the blood of refugees. However, as one looks closer, they notice that each splatter is actually a flower. The entire point of a piece is that there is beauty in struggle, while at the same time giving a voice for refugees and challenging a system that currently is flawed within the United States.

The artist, Imran Qureshi, is himself a refugee. He is from Pakistan, and his family lives in Boston, Massachusetts. He is a prominent activist for refugees within the United States and his art reflects this activism. This is perhaps his most famous work, and he is still an up and coming artist.

#10 *West Bank Wall* by Banksy



Continuing on in the exhibit, we see Banksy's second installation within this exhibit. His West Bank Wall image is perhaps his most captivating. His protest shifts from religion to political change. In the piece, he draws a person pulling back what seems like a curtain, displaying a very serene landscape behind it. It is a way of pulling back a divisive layer in the West Bank Wall and showing that behind it lies a beautiful place with beautiful people.

There are numerous portions of the wall that Banksy graffiti. We took three of these portions and displayed them within the exhibit. Banksy continues to show the world that systems need changing and he does this through art. Soon after they were created, most were covered up. This further proves that the system that Banksy attempts to protest needs changing.

#11 **Rebellious Silence** by Shirin Neshat



The second to last piece within the exhibit is one of the most jarring. *Rebellious Silence* by Shirin Neshat is yet another transitional piece, this time from political activism to just flat out social activism. This image combines feminism with equality, with the tension of the middle east, and with the need for freedom of religion. In the image, a muslim woman stands with a gun dividing her face in half. Across her face are several lines of the Quran. The left side of her face is darker than the right. Overall, she is stoic and the image is very moving.

Shirin Neshat is a muslim herself, and she has endured the same oppression as so many other Muslim women. Through this piece, she is able to give a voice to thousands of women hoping for more equality. She is able to give a voice to thousands of muslims hoping for understanding. And she is giving a voice to millions of refugees and oppressed just hoping for a home.

#12 **We the People** by Shepard Ferrie



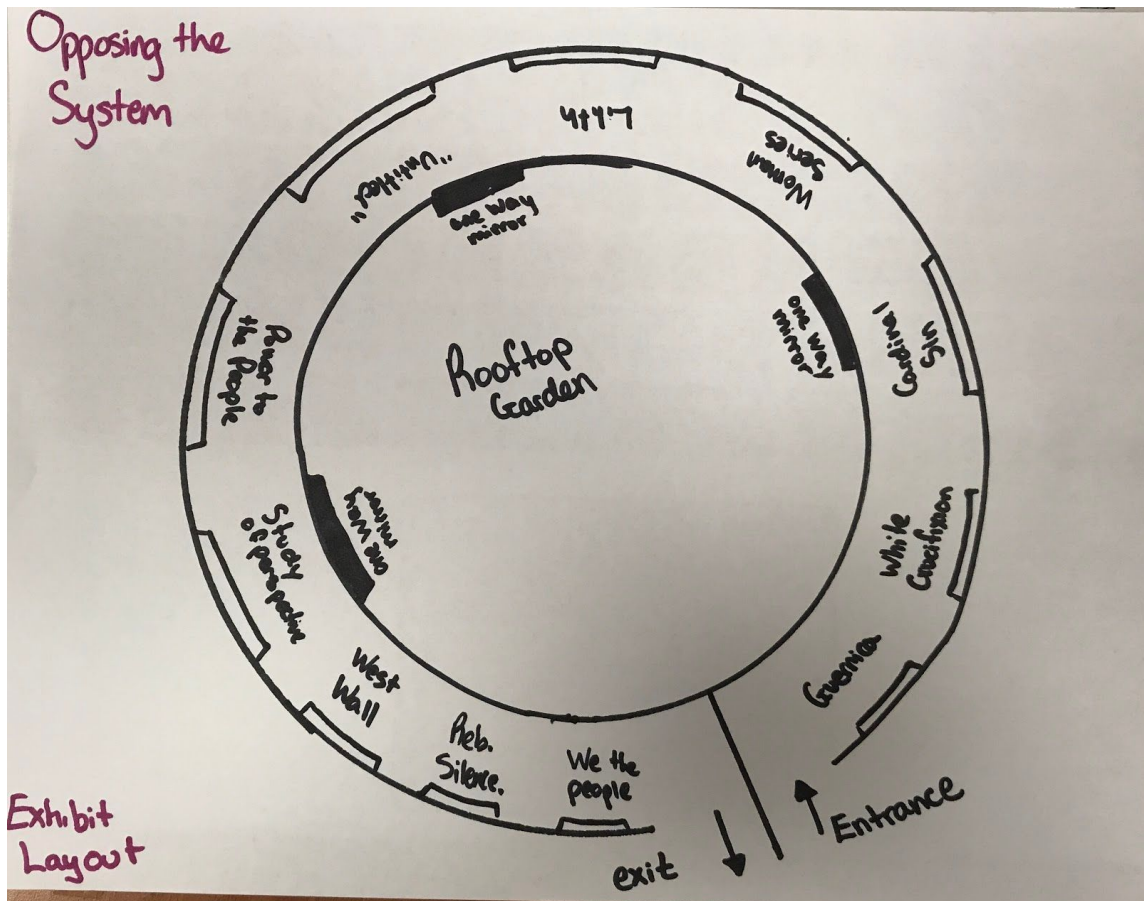
The 12th and final piece of “Opposing the System” is brought to you by the same artist that created the Obama “Hope” poster from the 2008 Presidential election. This time, Shepard Ferrie gives us We the People. This rounds out the exhibit in a very cool way. The piece is divided into three distinct panels. An African American boy sits on the left with the inscription “We the People Protect Each Other”. In the middle, a Middle Eastern woman sits above the inscription “We the People are Greater than Fear”. Finally, on the right, there is a white woman above the inscription “We the People Defend Dignity”. Overall, this piece speaks volumes when speaking about equality and social justice.

The main message of this image is that no matter who you are, what you believe, or what your background is, you belong. While each of these people are distinctly different, each of them bears the red, white and blue in some way. Therefore, they are all connected. That is what makes the United States so incredible. Everyone has equal opportunity. However, it is not always that way. The goal of Shepard is that equality. Hopefully, with this image and with this exhibit, that equality seems a little bit easier to obtain.

Location:

“Opposing the System” will be a special, limited time installation in the Smithsonian Art Museum in Washington D.C. I thought that this was a fitting location for two reasons. For one, it is a museum in which young and old alike visit. It sees thousands of visitors per day and that means there will be quite a bit of traffic. Activism is not something that can be taught; rather, it needs to be shown in a way. In order for my exhibit to work, there needs to be an influx of people visiting. The more people, the better chance that there are people who take what is being shown to heart and stand up for what they believe in. The second reason to put it in Washington D.C is rather obvious... the government. There are a lot of things wrong with the government and the country as it currently stands. By placing this in D.C, this exhibit displays an idea of activism just blocks away from a system that obviously needs changing.

The exhibit itself will be constructed in a circular, cyclical type way. It will be dimly lit, with the only lights coming from an overhead light above each work, and the four “one-way mirror” windows throughout the exhibit (use the map plan as a guide). So, why the circular shape? Well, activism is a continuous cycle. Everything that has happened in the past directly affects what is to come. As a viewer enters and exits in essentially the same place, we see that even the art is cyclical. Social, economic, and political reform is just like the exhibit itself. Just one, continuous cycle for changing society.



Closing Statement:

The goal of this exhibit is to do exactly what the pieces attempt to do. That is, invoke some sort of change in the world. Within every society, there are flaws. These flaws go unsolved unless something or someone decides that they need solving. Each of these twelve pieces is a physical example of that decision to change something. It is an ongoing process and it manifests itself in different ways. This art exhibit is meant to invoke change. It hopefully gives you the courage to stand up for a particular wrong you see in society and do something about it. Always remember... "Art is not a mirror to reflect the world. Rather it is a hammer with which to shape it."

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