

1



The Artist as Public Intellectual

If the United States stands for civilization, a thoroughly secular notion, Europe symbolizes culture, a quasi-religious one. Art is finally compromised by a society which enthuses over it only in the auction room, and whose abstract logic strips the world of sensuousness. It is also tainted by a social order for which truth has no utility, and value means what will sell.

—Terry Eagleton¹

Of the multiple images that exist for artists in U.S. society, most continue to be fraught with complexity and contradiction. There is, for example, the romantic image of the artist on the fringe—wild, mad, alone, ahead of his or her time, misunderstood, somewhat like the prophet raging in the desert. There is the artist as bohemian, socially irresponsible, less than adult, immersed in the pleasure principle, at times able to create something truly extraordinary and at other times able to fool the public with work that passes for art but is really fraudulent—“putting one over on its audience”—or so esoteric that only a handful of people “get it” or want to “get it.” There are images of artists working out of their intuitive selves, in tune with the universe, envisioning the future. And there are also images of artists as shrewd businesspeople able to out-psyche the difficult, sophisticated, and fickle art market, make a fortune, and live like celebrities. At the same time there are images of artists whose work never sells in their lifetimes, who die unacknowledged, poor, and depressed, only to be discovered later when others can make a profit from their vision and friendship. At times we have been known to revere artists, to think of

them as unique or even superior beings who live deeply inside their creative selves, while the rest of us often forfeit these more ephemeral aspects of ourselves for jobs that we may find less fulfilling, but that might provide us with more stability and a greater anchor to the reality principle. Art collectors or museum curators pay exorbitant prices for work that has gained market value—a type of recognition and respect that often comes too late for the artist. These purchases often have everything to do with admiration for the work and little to do with attitudes about the artists who made them. We may revere the work, but we may still mistrust artists, imagine them as self-serving and lacking in the practical skills that would enable them to be statesmen or public personalities, capable of running the world. To further complicate these issues, U.S. citizens, still often seeped in a dominant though hidden puritanical tradition, may unconsciously fear the power of graven images and want to inhibit the right of secular individuals to create images that might become icons or focal points of adoration. Perhaps this is why North Americans largely do not condemn the moving images of pornography, degenerateness, violence, voyeurism of various kinds that appear on TV or in film, but become indignant when such images are frozen in time, transformed and manipulated by artists, then presented to a general public as art.

It is this ambivalence, predominant in the culture, that young artists enter into unwittingly. Such confusion causes ontological insecurity—a primal fear and uncertainty about their place in the world, an unstable location from which to meet an unarticulated and often precarious future. At the same time artists have often played into these complex ambivalences, defining themselves as a subgroup, outside society, relishing their otherness, while often at the same time longing to be embraced by society, understood, and acknowledged.

In our collective Western consciousness, and probably our unconsciousness as well, we do not have images of artists as socially concerned citizens of the world, people who could serve as leaders and help society determine, through insights and wisdom, its desirable political course. We do not typically ask artists what they think about social conditions or politics—the degeneration of our cities, our natural environment, school systems, or young people. We do not ask them to help solve these problems, even though problem solving and communication at the visual and spatial levels are much of what they are trained to do. Artists are also conscious of negotiating audience involvement and response, skills that are not taken into account when most people describe the work of artists.

I have tried for years in my own writing to articulate the vital place of artists in society because I believe in the educational process that produces them, a process that encourages the crossing of all creative and intellectual boundaries and affirms the importance of the work that results

from such training. Artists have sensibilities that are distinctive and important to the well-being of society. Were artists taken seriously within U.S. society, were they sought out for their opinions and concerns and recognized as having rare skills, some of which are about how to see the world, they would enter their chosen profession with a much greater sense of confidence and self-esteem. Were society ready to accept them into its fold as fully participating citizens whose function, like that of intellectuals, is to remain on the margins, asking the difficult questions, resisting assimilation and socialization in the traditional ways, refusing to accept the simplistic moral values that reflect the present political climate, there would be a great deal of psychic relief for artists. Perhaps under such conditions artists would be less engaged in a frantic clamor to reach the top of the art world pyramid. Artists might be freer to focus on what they do best—concentrated visual experimentation that, when successful, advances society's ability to see itself more clearly.

In their role as spokespersons for multiple points of view and advocates for a healthy critique of society, certain artists should be understood as public intellectuals—those who believe in the importance of the public sphere and who create, for a collective arena less able to house real debate, work they expect the world to recognize as potentially significant to the evolution of the species. It is the absence of such a response, and the sensationalized miscommunication of artists' intent when there *is* response, that proves most devastating for artists. In their dual role as critics and mirrors of society, artists are often negotiating the public realm—tenacious in their insistence on presenting to society a reflection of itself, without regard to whether society seeks such representation or chooses to look the other way when it is offered.

In a series of essays called the Reith Lectures, delivered in 1993 and then broadcast on the BBC, Edward Said attempted to articulate the role of public intellectuals. Out of these lectures came a very important small collection titled *Representations of the Intellectual*.² Writers have criticized Said's understanding of this role, citing the narrow theoretical basis for his analysis and the degree to which he presents himself as the prototype for the engaged intellectual.³ But many do find his observations very useful, as they illuminate the potential role of artists in North American society, an association Said himself does not make but one that seems quite obvious to me. It is not surprising that Said did not include artists in his discussion; even an intellectual attuned to writers and musicians, as is Said, does not necessarily understand the work of artists as analogous to that of intellectuals, and yet in many ways it is.

Throughout, Said refers to Antonio Gramsci's notion of the organic intellectual. In the *Prison Notebooks*,⁴ Gramsci writes, "All men are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men have in society the function

of intellectuals."⁵ Among those who function as intellectuals, there are for Gramsci two groups. The first is that of priests and teachers, those for whom knowledge can remain stable, steady, and at times even stagnant. Their job is to transmit this knowledge to the next generation. These might be called "professional intellectuals." They are distinct from what Gramsci calls "organic intellectuals," those who are "always on the move, on the make,"⁶ constantly interacting with society and struggling to change minds and expand markets. These fluid intellectuals may also be what he calls "amateur intellectuals," forever inventing themselves and renegotiating their place on the border zones between disciplines, never stuck in any *one* of them. These amateurs, wedded to no one fixed body of knowledge, are open to all thought and to the renegotiation of ideas as that becomes necessary, whether through the merging of disciplines to solve complex problems—as in the creation of new disciplines called such things as cultural studies, critical studies, visual studies—or in the evolution of knowledge, as a discipline questions its own history, motivations, and methodologies and becomes self-reflexive—as in the case of the philosophy of science. Important to these distinctions is the idea that the intellectual "is an individual with a specific public role in society that cannot be reduced simply to that of a faceless professional, a competent member of a class just going about her/his business."⁷

Said affirms that the organic intellectual is one

whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug. The intellectual does so on the basis of universal principles: that all human beings are entitled to expect decent standards of behavior concerning freedom and justice from worldly powers or nations, and that deliberate or inadvertent violations of these standards need to be testified to and fought against courageously.⁸

According to Said, there is "no such thing as a private intellectual," certainly not a private organic intellectual, "since the moment you set down words and then publish them you have entered the public realm." Adds Said, "Nor is there *only* a public intellectual, someone who exists just as a figurehead or spokesperson or symbol of a cause, movement, or position."⁹ He states: "My argument is that intellectuals are individuals with a vocation for the art of representing, whether that is talking, writing, teaching, appearing on television."¹⁰ I add to this the most obvious historical form of "representing"—the use of images in multiple forms of art-making to re-present conscious reality or dreams.

Said goes on to say

That the vocation of the intellectual is important to the extent that it is publicly recognizable and involves both commitment and risk, boldness and vul-

nerability; when I read Jean-Paul Sartre, or Bertrand Russell, it is their specific, individual voice and presence that makes an impression on me over and above their arguments because they are speaking out for their beliefs. They cannot be mistaken for an anonymous functionary or careful bureaucrat.¹¹

What makes them unique is that their voice is heard—booming from their particular orientation, carrying their unique inflection. We might say to ourselves that from everything we know about the life and work of a particular writer, the writing before us could be no other than Jean-Paul Sartre, Toni Morrison, Walter Benjamin, Nadine Gordimer. But we might just as well say of visual or performative work that it could be no other than Picasso, Max Ernst, Louise Bourgeois, Bettye Saar, Bill T. Jones, Anselm Kiefer, Andres Serrano, Carrie May Weems, Bruce Nauman. The voices of these artists are also quite unmistakable, distinct, powerful—their particular mark unique, reflecting originality in language, tone, subject matter, and style. They too have become known to us for their lives, associations, and political orientations.

Said's two categories of intellectuals, like those of Gramsci, are divided between those who simply represent the information that they were trained to pass along and those who are innovative, daring, and public in their re-presentation of their own personal interaction with the world. These distinctions hold for artists as well. Most of the artists whose National Endowment for the Arts funding was revoked in the past decade might be said to be organic artists in Said's terms. In each instance the work that was targeted for public denunciation was art that took on serious issues, passed through the iconography of the individual—the private sphere—and was placed into the public sphere. It was work that crossed borders, took a powerful stance, and risked upsetting the moral status quo by exposing conventional hypocrisies. In Said's words, the work was "resistant." What truly terrified mainstream America about this work was that it seemed to debunk so-called traditional values. The myriad discussions about this art never communicated the very strong political messages that the work put forth about gender, class, and sexual equality, or the fact that these artists cared about society enough to put their bodies on the line to represent its injustices to a general audience. The integrity of the artists and their commitments to social causes were never discussed because there was no attempt on the part of their detractors to understand their intent.

Said quotes Isaiah Berlin, who, in discussing Russian writers of the nineteenth century, talks about how conscious they were that they were "on a public stage, testifying."¹² Several artists whom politicians have tried to humiliate because of the nature of their work were most assuredly "testifying"—acting out of conscience that they considered neither

pornographic nor degenerate. Ron Athey, one of several performance artists whose NEA grant was revoked, has often performed work focused on his HIV-positive condition. He does body piercing and tattooing of others on stage and, with the blood let from these exercises, makes prints, onto paper towels. These blood prints are not made from the blood of HIV-positive people, but when Athey hangs them high above the audience on clotheslines, they are a looming reminder of our own fear of the proximity and ubiquity of AIDS. The content of the work is a testimony to what it means to be young, creative, talented, and successful, as is Ron Athey, and to suspect that you probably will not live a normal life span, that your own death is closely hovering, that you are in easy reach of it and it of you. The literalness of the sacrifice involved in the work is reminiscent of Kafka's story, *In the Penal Colony*, in which an elaborate machine engraves words into the flesh of the sinner, denoting the crime of which society has deemed the individual guilty. Through protracted pain supposedly comes the realization of the meaning of the crime—the epiphany—and then the possibility of redemption. Through the physical comes the spiritual understanding of sin. Redemption through the body is the task Ron Athey has set for himself. But the literalness of these performances—the stark painfulness of them—frightens those who only *hear* about the work and makes Athey an easy target for politicians eager to discredit the metaphoric value and cathartic function he embodies in these pieces. It is also clear that this type of work makes no sense to those who do not think about art or the nature of symbolic representations. Such people do not know how to “read” the work, and the literalness with which they interpret it makes it easy to mock.

Such artists have defined their task as that of making their own personal conditions public and of taking that which is in the public domain and translating it into the private. And yet these essential functions of intellectuals, so well articulated by Said, are not valued enough in U.S. society to secure support for the public funding of such work. Despite the work's complexity, the media have focused on the supposed “pornography” of the art, rather than its affirmation of what Said describes as “resistant intellectual consciousness,”¹³ a term he uses to describe Stephen Dedalus, Joyce's prototypical autobiographical protagonist in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Such artists resist assimilation. They defy simplistic descriptions or literal analysis. They attempt to reach large audiences, but they refuse to render themselves benign in order to do so. They see themselves as engaging in these activities to “advance human freedom and knowledge.”¹⁴ And they will not compromise.

All this is beyond conservatives like Newt Gingrich, who once likened the National Endowment for the Arts and its funded projects to a “sandbox” for the rich cultural elite. Most artists in the United States are neither

rich nor elite and, in truth, neither is their audience. What makes them elite in the eyes of archconservatives is that they are familiar with what is often termed avant-garde work. They are sophisticated about culture and cultural production. The anti-intellectualism rampant in the United States and deeply embedded within its cultural traditions attempts to isolate this more sophisticated art audience, equating their appreciation for such work with a type of elitism that, by inference, is deemed akin to anti-Americanism.

Right-wing intellectuals, especially those who write for the publication *The New Criterion*, denounce such artists as working against the public good. My perception is that they dislike these artists because, instead of falsely elevating society, these artists assume the role of "immanent critique" in a dialectical sense, which is to say that instead of offering superficial solutions, they expose society's inherent contradictions; and instead of pursuing absolute truths, they offer complexity, ambivalence, and, at times, aggressive confrontations with the status quo. This offends right-wing art critics, who continue to believe that artists should limit their endeavors to presenting ideals of visual beauty. Instead, these organic artists choose to confront that which haunts their own sense of reality and that of contemporary society. Their critique is fundamentally linked to their belief that the world *can* change. Embedded in their critique is hope.

If the artwork being produced by many contemporary artists cannot bring the American psyche together under one homogeneous totality, if it can no longer re-present harmonious images, this is because, to these artists, the world does not allow for such idealized image making. To them it would constitute a lie. They feel they must be true to their historical moment and to that which has been largely silenced and therefore must be stated within the public realm. Because they defy prevailing norms and refuse conventional notions of order and continuity in their work, they are rightly understood as subversive to the silent complicity around them. They also refuse the de-politicized talk-show mentality, which gives the illusion of a public realm but in fact focuses on the personal, emotional, and psychological, often negating or denying the historical-sociological moment from which these personal issues evolve. To use Oscar Wilde's phrase, these artists see themselves in "symbolic relationship to their time."¹⁵ And those who are not able to understand the symbolic, or who do not value it, find little of merit in their work. Unfortunately this has been the fate of many of the most interesting artists of both modernity and postmodernity.

Said also writes that to the intellectual's responsibility of "representing the collective suffering and testifying to its travails . . . there must be added something else." This something else is the ability to "universalize the crisis, to give greater human scope to what a particular race or nation

suffered, to associate that experience with the suffering of others."¹⁶ All great writing, art, and poetry has this capacity. Even the poetry of Neruda, or the paintings of Picasso, are not exempt from this requirement. No matter how particular its historical references, the work itself, through form and the emotional weight it achieves as it moves through the individual, is able to re-create and touch a deep level of human suffering. The best art goes so far into the personal that it broadens its own particularity and touches the world. Through the strength of its execution, it becomes emotionally, intellectually, and aesthetically available to a more heterogeneous audience. No matter how particular the images of Picasso's *Guernica* may be, Picasso has plunged into the nature of civil strife so deeply and found images so rooted in the historical-collective consciousness and unconsciousness that the subject becomes even more expansive than the Spanish Civil War, and the painting is transformed into an icon for all the monumental horrors and devastation of war.

Artists stand at the edge of society. Although many do try, few ever dare to hope they might create an image or representation like Picasso's, one that actually affects or changes society. This is because the task of artists, which is to pull what is personal into the public sphere, is very difficult to do and is rarely valued. Artists must find this social motivation and sense of purpose within themselves. Few artists would describe themselves as attempting to enter political life through their work; however, Said quotes Genet as having said, "The moment you publish essays in a society you have entered political life; so if you want not to be political do not write essays or speak out."¹⁷ This is also true of artists. Once work is placed in the public sphere, it is subject to scrutiny by everyone and potentially to the range of intellectual strengths and weaknesses of the society. It has, deliberately or not, entered the public realm.

Artists are uncomfortable with the notion that once their work is presented in society, they are no longer in control of the response it might elicit. Even those artists who have made deliberately provocative work often do not understand why people react to it as they do. Once the work is in the public domain, the various publics feel they have the right to respond as they wish. And however intently artists try to imagine and control the nature of that response, they often cannot. The deeper the work probes and questions common assumptions, the more likely it is to upset someone. And if the work is shown in the United States and attempts to make a strong statement, it had best not be funded with government money, or its function as a vehicle for public debate about real societal concerns will surely be eclipsed. U.S. society has tried to position art in a small, insignificant, restricted, commercial, and mystified space, yet artists resist these definitions. Art is thus constantly pulled into a complex relationship to society by conservative groups who see artists funded by

the NEA as having betrayed the "public good." But artists who raise these issues often believe it is in the best interests of many distinct publics to have certain issues brought into the collective arena, and they believe it is their job to raise these concerns, to speak out in whatever forms are available to them. Unfortunately, the attention such work receives is too often simple notoriety rather than serious consideration and illumination of its success or failure as art.

Although I see the role of artists as a public one, only certain artists would choose to embrace this identity and would identify their task and their life's purpose as serving the public sector through the rigor and unconventionality of their work. And within this group there are those artists and art students who may at one stage appear radical in their work but who, unfortunately, will eventually fall into Said's category of "professionals." They will find a form within which to work—one that is safe, one that receives a certain level of recognition. They will become content within traditional art world parameters, and that is where they stay. In their own way they become as conservative as intellectuals who remain within their circumscribed fields, never expanding, venturing forth, crossing over, making alliances with any other worlds, or speculating on the relationship of their work to the larger whole while attempting to place their work in a more public arena. They will not take the risk of breaking the expected parameters. But they will hope, nonetheless, that their work finds an audience in the public sphere. As Said asks, what could it possibly mean to be a private intellectual? One would have to write books, make paintings, and simply lock them in a closet to achieve such an end. Yet, many of us know people whose work is intended to fit within remarkably narrow parameters.

What is it that we as audience hope to draw from the work of artists? In my sense it is not that different from what we might expect from the work of public intellectuals—that the intent of the work is to have an impact on society, to challenge existing forms, to raise significant questions, to bring ideas into society that might not yet be visible, and to do so in a way that can be accessed and, with some scrutiny, understood.

The job of those of us who are writers, intellectuals, artists, and also educators, or who someday *may* teach the next generation of public intellectuals and artists, is to up the ante in our own educational environments, to provide every opportunity imaginable for our students to be challenged in both form and content, to encourage them to become as radical in form as they are in content, to help them learn to ask themselves the most difficult questions, to push themselves as far as they can, and to be educated in such a way that they will not hesitate to take their stand within the public arena. It is also our job to take seriously the need to give our students the tools to become the sophisticated artists they

want to become. They need art-making skills, of course, but they also need knowledge that includes history, contemporary theoretical thought, and the workings of democracy in order to negotiate contemporary society. Students need to know how to think about the world analytically and to have the skills to express their "immanent critique" with authority and clarity about their work's intent.

To do this, students must meet artists and intellectuals who position themselves to be effective in these ways. They need to work with such people and to learn how they think about their work, their role in the world, and the negotiations of the complexities of these realities daily.

Perhaps if the next generation of artists emerges more committed to the public sphere, more able to articulate the complexity of their intent, less intimidated by societal ambivalences, they will feel more confident to insist that their essential importance to society be more greatly acknowledged. If they enter society clear about their role and purpose, perhaps society will take them more seriously and come to understand that in denying artists their rightful place in the public consciousness, we are in fact negating the most creative part of ourselves individually and collectively and in so doing are also damning our future to one without experimentation and the vision needed to give it meaning.

NOTES

1. Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 25.
2. Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Pantheon, 1994).
3. Michael Walzer, "The Solopsist as Hero," a devastating review of *Representations of the Intellectual*, *The New Republic* 211, no. 19 (7 November 1994): 38.
4. Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, as cited in Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, 3.
5. Said, *Representations*, 4.
6. Said, *Representations*, 4.
7. Said, *Representations*, 11.
8. Said, *Representations*, 12.
9. Said, *Representations*, 12.
10. Said, *Representations*, 13.
11. Said, *Representations*, 13.
12. Said, *Representations*, 13.
13. Said, *Representations*, 16.
14. Said, *Representations*, 17.
15. Quoted in Said, *Representations*, 55.
16. Said, *Representations*, 44.
17. Said, *Representations*, 110.