

Art for Social Change by Karen M. Gutfreund

The collection of art in *Not Normal: Art in the Age of Trump* is a visual protest. It is the result of a phenomenal outpouring of outrage and visual protest from artists across the US and around the world. These artists are reacting to “The Age of Trump” and are addressing the issues and chaos caused by our President. Art has the power to bring people together, to open our eyes, to see new perspectives, and inspire us to think beyond our own experiences and disciplines. As a curator, my goal is to amplify these voices, so that together we can facilitate needed social and political change.

Art as Activism. When I coined the term “art as activism” I was describing art that is grounded in the act of ‘doing’ and addresses societal issues with the motto of “changing the world through art”. Previously, my work was focused on women’s rights and feminist art. Now I seek to employ artwork as a weapon in the fight for all human rights and social justice because these rights are all interrelated, interdependent and supposed to be— indivisible for all. In this “Age of Trump” rights are allotted to a privileged few, and we are bombarded with a leadership that supports xenophobia, racism, promotion of hatred and violence, mistrust of science and facts, misogyny and of course, a narcissism that puts our entire country and world at great risk. And so my work, particularly in the last four years still includes but has expanded beyond promoting women in the arts.

My curatorial partnership, Gutfreund Cornett Art, with Sherri Cornett—has created six national exhibitions that focused on themes of activism to address topics such as democracy, social justice, immigration, and women’s rights and empowerment hosted in art centers, museums and university galleries around the country. Upcoming is *Deadlocked and Loaded: Disarming America*, an exhibition curated by me on gun issues and our culture of violence in the United States titled that will open at ArtRage Gallery and the Community Folk Art Center in Syracuse, New York in January 2021.

Through my curatorial practice, I promote and support local, national, and global art activism. I believe that the artist’s voice can help to foster important dialogues and inspire others to add their voice. Quite simply, I cannot stand on the sidelines and passively watch what is happening. I want to make a difference, and a difference through art is the best way I know how. I am continually energized working with such passionate and talented artists with such fabulous work. A caveat however, it’s been a challenge to look at images of and statements about Trump day after day, ad nauseum, for 10 months as I worked on assembling this collection. Thank goodness many of the works are delivered with great wit, which helped keep my sanity and continued optimism during these dark days.

Art is not just about depicting beauty, but rather encapsulating and expressing the viewpoint of the artist drawn from their experiences and perspectives into a visual form. They create the manifesto and others follow their lead. Art can produce a visceral response and can provoke, inspire, or disturb, and opens one’s eyes to worlds other than your own.

Nic Abramson
Or Do They, (2015)
Mixed media installation
82 X 72 X 30 inches
www.nicabramson.com



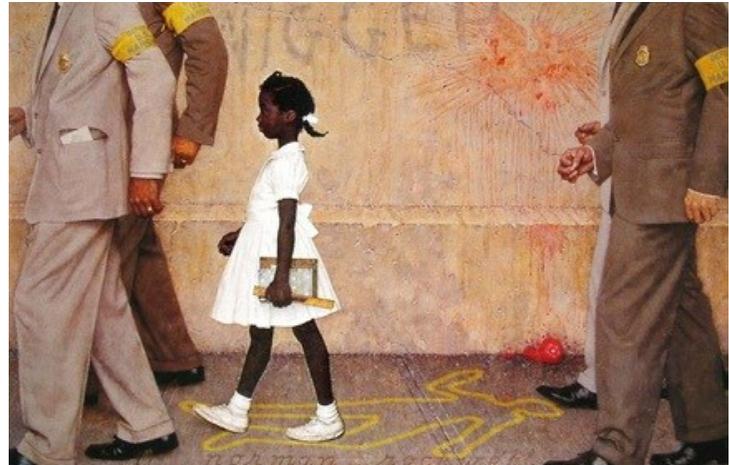


Veronica Cardoso, *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky/La Niña que se Cayo del Cielo* (2009)

With to make steps toward fixing the problem of segregation in the 1950s. He would not allow people to turn a blind eye to an important issue while he had the ability to reach a wide audience, especially whites.

Art as Social Commentary. "I hear and I forget; I see, and I remember." This Chinese proverb comes to mind when I think about art for social change...that pictures are remembered better than words. Art goes directly to our emotions, then to our minds. And art as social commentary is not new. Think of Francisco Goya who created *The Disasters of War*, 82 aquatint etchings between 1810-20 boldly detailing the horrors of the Napoleon Peninsular War. Picasso's painting *Guernica*, (1937) portrays the bombing of a village in Spain by Nazi Germany. And just a few decades ago in the 1950's and 60's we saw protest art from an unlikely source—Norman Rockwell. He was ordered by the magazine companies that he could only depict minorities as servants on the covers. In defiance of this command, Rockwell continued to illustrate racial issues. He painted *The Problem We All Live*

An organization Sherri Cornett and I have worked with, as Gutfreund Cornett Art or independently, is **For Freedoms**. They are an **anti-partisan** organization founded in 2016 by artists Hank Willis Thomas and Eric Gottesman, creating a platform for creative civic engagement, discourse, and direct action. Inspired by Norman Rockwell's paintings of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Four Freedoms (1941)—freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear—For Freedoms' exhibitions, installations, and public programs use art to deepen public discussions on civic issues and core values, and to advocate for equality, dialogue, and civic participation. As a nexus between art, politics, commerce, and education, For Freedoms aims to inject anti-partisan, critical thinking that fine art requires into the political landscape through programming, exhibitions, and public artworks.
forfreedoms.org @forfreedoms



Beth Costello *What is and What Should Not Be* (2014)

Art is a mirror we can hold up to look at ourselves. We can change the social narrative through art and it can influence the way we think and act as individuals, and as a society.

Advocates and Ally for Democracy. America, at its best, is an advocate and ally for democracy, refuge for the endangered and oppressed, and a sanctuary for peoples—women, children, and families looking for a better life. Political and activist art is not new, but now, is stronger than ever. The collective consciousness, which has galvanized a movement for resistance and social engagement, is evidenced by the quantity and quality of the art being produced on these topics. Art does more than depict beauty; it tells a visual story. Activist art helps us actualize emotions and express hopes and fears and depict injustices. For the viewer it can elicit a visceral reaction, and it can provoke. When it inspires us to action, then art and culture feed into each other and can result in transformation necessary for lasting change.

Life Imitates Art. Oscar Wilde once said that “life imitates art” more than “art imitates life”. Pop culture and artistic expression is assimilated into the common vernacular and personal identity is formed through consumption of this contemporary culture whether it is music, film or visual art. Cultural transformation is necessary for lasting change, but that requires a shift in beliefs and values. Rallies or protests will not have a lasting impact unless the issues resonate as true with the general public. A society’s culture creates their politics—what they support and live by, or what they will deem intolerable and reject. Often what is important, desirable, and sought after is created and visualized by the artists in our midst. They initiate and shift the conversations. Once society embraces those ideals, it becomes embedded in the culture. Think of civil rights, women’s rights, human rights, income inequality and LGBTQIA rights; the shift in attitudes and ideals creates the new normal—what is perceived as right and correct, then shifts the culture in ways big and small.



Sawyer Rose *Anna & Hillary* (2017), *The Carrying Stones Project* is an ongoing series of sculpture, data visualization, and social practice works that explores women’s work inequity in its many forms.

carrying-stones.com @ksawyerrose

The president and right-wing commentators often complain that the country has been “taken over” by the “cultural left.” There’s an element of truth to their paranoia—contemporary art, film and music has increasingly been a space of representation for marginalized voices. The idea of art as a political weapon and a form of protest has become mainstream, and artists have taken on the role of political activist.

Aimed at Hearts and Minds. Artistic activism is a cultural approach and is inherently non-violent. It is aimed at hearts and minds, not bodies or buildings. The goal is not to force compliance, which art can never do, but to persuade by creating moving experiences that prompt people to question the mainstream status quo. Many of the artists in this collection use humor and irony in their work—which is an effective way to make a point.

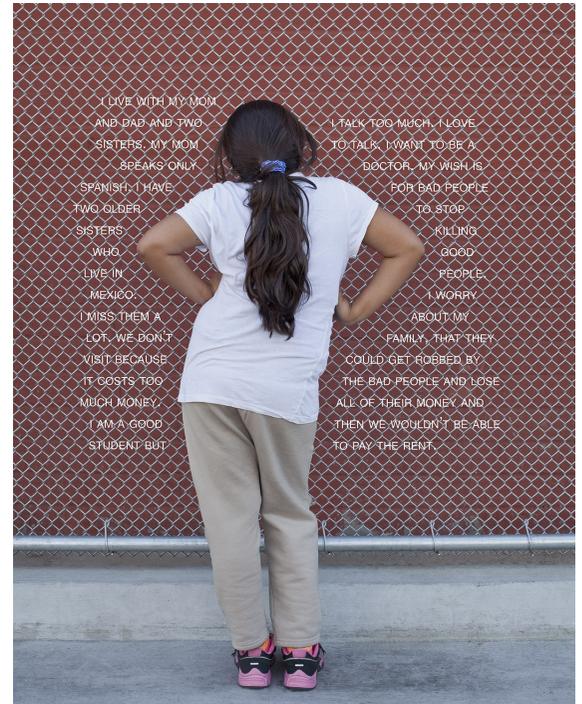


Gigi Salij *Sandy Hook—Sally, Dick and Jane* (2013)

Art, while illustrating a message, is less direct than vocal or written activism which is usually very specific in what it is asking or commanding: believe this, don't believe that, it's just fake news, I'm right, you're wrong. This leads to polarizing views, making a bridge to understanding other points of view nearly impossible. Differing from a newspaper headline, a tweet or sound-bite that demands immediate attention, art requires the participant to slow down and spend time absorbing the work and its meaning. Artwork leads not to one conclusion, but rather stimulates our subconscious and emotions, that may then move us to alter our perceptions and viewpoints.

Judy Gelles (1945-2020) was a wonderful artist I worked with in many exhibitions over the years and will be greatly missed. Judy created art to bring awareness. Her powerful series *The Fourth Grade Project* was a global art project teaching the power of empathy and understanding. She interviewed and photographed over 300 fourth grade students around the world and asked each student the same questions: Who do you live with? What do you wish for? What do you worry about? Their collected stories reveal the depth of their diverse experiences and gives a better understanding of peoples and cultures other than our own.

"The Rent. I live with my mom and dad and two sisters. My mom speaks only Spanish. I have two older sisters who live in Mexico. I miss them a lot. We don't visit because it costs too much money. I am a good student but I talk too much. I love to talk. I want to be a doctor. My wish is for bad people to stop killing good people. I worry about my family, that they could get robbed by the bad people and lose all of their money and then we wouldn't be able to pay the rent."



Judy Gelles *The Rent* (2008-16)



Linda Friedman-Schmidt *Contagious Silence* (2009)

Art and activism are on the rise, particularly in the last four years. It used to be rare that art institutions would address activist topics. Now we are seeing galleries, museums and even public spaces in conservative southern towns hosting exhibitions on themes of immigration and racism. Even just a few years ago, these shows would have been improbable. Many artists have committed their practice to address pressing issues of our time. It has been said “perhaps art cannot change the world, but if artists said nothing the silence would be deafening.” The whirlwind of rhetoric and hyperbole from the current administration spewing xenophobia, misogyny and racism, has galvanized art institutions into action to bring to light injustice and inequalities. Now more than ever, mainstream curators, universities and museum professionals are compelled to exhibit activist exhibitions. Silence on the issues would suggest complicity and collusion. While countless artists have created one or two works in protest of Trump, there are many that have created large series since the 2016 elections. The majority of the works in this collection are paintings, sculptures, drawings and mixed media works. My intent in assembling this body of works is to focus on fine art—of what you could and should see in museums across the country.

National Projects in Protest. It is truly “Sophie’s Choice” in writing about these artists and the art I love, but a number stand out by the projects/series they have created. They are detailed in a subsequent chapter, Protest Projects, but highlights are Sally Edelstein’s blog *Envisioning the American Dream*, Eric Corriel *#tinytrump* cardboard cut-outs, the Trump Sculpture Initiative living sculptures by Bryan Buckley, and Diana Weymar & Studio *Tiny Pricks Project* crowdsourced embroidered quotes by Trump. Penny Mateer’s work *In Today’s News*, daily collages from the NYTimes, and India Tressalt *Not Normal* stitching are both series comprising works they create every single day.



This protest sign was made by me and artist Sally Edelstein, for the march in D.C. in 2017 and we want to participate in the current political controversies!

Documenting Cultural History. Recently, the National Archives “whitewashed” and blurred images critical of Trump from photographs documenting the 2017 Women’s Marches in an exhibition in spring 2020. An Archives spokeswoman said “We blurred references to the President’s name on some posters, so as not to engage in current political controversy.” This is inconceivable and why we need to document the truth, in this book, and other public venues to capture and highlight what is being said and created in response to this administrations atrocities. There have been many exhibitions, projects and books documenting anti-Trump sentiment, but I’d like to highlight a few.

Andrea Arroyo, a kindred spirit, created *Unnatural Election*, a website collection of artist responses to the 2016 US presidential election. She says: “*In my despair, I went into my studio to paint, and I realized we needed to address our trauma together, so I emailed a group of artists inviting them to send me their reactions. It created a beautiful community of artists from dozens of countries, all with one goal, to use creativity to impact positive change.*”

Still They Persist: Protest Art from the 2017 Women’s Marches started as an idea to collect protest signs and posters. Sara M. Vance Waddell began soliciting signs from artists as soon as she knew there would be a Women’s March on Washington. With fellow activists Marie Seda-Reeder, Jaime Thompson and Cal Cullan, they turned the collection into a traveling exhibition for the public and called themselves “FemFour” with the mission to keep the words and images of progressive activists and allies in the hearts and minds of the public.

The Northern California Women’s Caucus for Art (NCWCA) is part of a national organization originating in 1972 to promote women in the arts and a founding member of the Feminist Art Project (TFAP). I was a co-curator for the exhibition *F213*, short for fahrenheit 213, one degree above the boiling point of blood. This exhibition was hosted by Arc Gallery & Studios in San Francisco in 2019. It brought together nearly 100 feminist artists and writers incensed about what is currently happening in the United States, spotlighting strong and bold artistic expressions of feminist protest. This exhibition showcased a diverse and inclusive mix of multicultural, intersectional, multigenerational feminist artists and writers to not only express their concerns, but to offer insights to all those interested in remedying current injustices and atrocities.

#MeToo Also, within the “art as activism” movement there is a ground-breaking crusade in who can tell the stories and who is represented. Historically, the institutional artworld has been a white man’s club for what is shown in art galleries and museums.



Vanessa Filley *#MeToo* (2018), Archival pigment print, 30 x 20 inches each

Currently museum collections are roughly 87% white male. That is slowly changing towards more diversity, and it is about time. As with the #MeToo movement, breaking away from patriarchal hegemony, activist art is giving added voice to underrepresented women, people of color, and LGBTQIA. These voices need to be heard. We have come to a tipping point, the doors are wide open, and new invigorating conversations are happening worldwide. I am thrilled by the number of exhibitions for women artists in this coming year once exhibition spaces are open

again. This includes *Agency: Feminism Art and Power*, a show I've curated in conjunction with The Feminist Art Project for the Museum of Sonoma County in California, opening September 2021 and a part of the Feminist Art Coalition. This exhibit showcases artists who challenge identity, social, cultural, and political norms related to women as individuals and as global citizens. It is underpinned by the feminist principle that believes in political, economic and social parity for all.

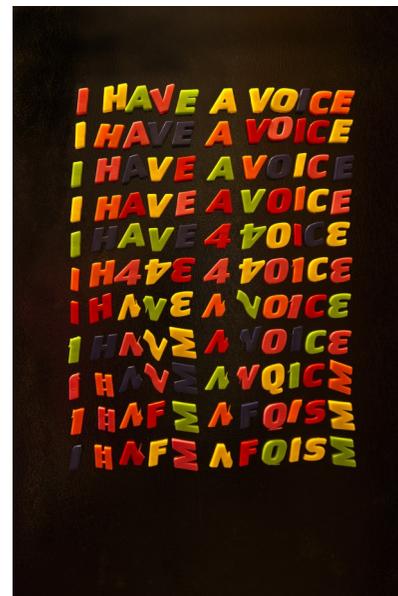
Impact of Activist Art. When I was in grade school, I remember taking my markers and adding unbecoming facial features to a photo in my yearbook. The photo I embellished was of a mean teacher I dubbed Mrs. Fergy-Fart. Looking back now, this was my first foray in activist art. At the time, I had no voice—no recourse for change, so the only bit of power I had was to express myself through art. Now as a grown up, I realize that my voice along with thousands of other artists have a collective voice and I'm still creating art on topics I cannot keep quiet about.

#ICANTKEEPQUIET. Connie Lim, who performs as MILCK, co-wrote "Quiet" #icantkeepquiet and performed it with a group at the Women's March in Washington, D.C. It went viral and now it is performed world-wide, from choirs in Austin to flash mobs in Stockholm. Actor and activist, Samantha Bee called it "a protest anthem for the ages." It has been years since I first heard "Quiet" on that dreary, dismal January day and it still squeezes my heart every time I listen to it. Every time I watch the video it empowers me in a way I cannot put into words.

Art can encourage change
and bring people together,
crossing the borders
and boundaries of
cultures and languages.

This is one reason why I've dedicated myself to activist art. I want others to feel the same power and passion that art can engender. Once you feel it—it changes you, you can't ignore it. So, corny as this may sound, I can't stay quiet about wanting to make a difference and creating positive change. Art gives us a vision and a means by which to communicate to others in the here and now, and

to dream the impossible dreams of what could be. The creatives are the soul of a community and reflects societies best and highest ambitions. My hope is that the messages in this book get absorbed into the culture at large and produces positive social change and a more equitable world for all.



Deborah Davis *I Have a Voice* (2014)
Assemblage, 30 x 20 inches

As a curator, I want the viewer to experience the layers and complexities of current events that confront our values in a culture of exile and alienation between race, religion and political dogma in our turbulent society. While an individual artist may not consider themselves to be a revolutionary, by bringing to light issues and concerns, art can effect change. Activist art is powerful and does the following—representation of political injustice, seeds political alternatives and builds and bridges communities. In addition to documenting injustice, art can gesture towards new ideas, solutions, and priorities. Art can create a new normal for inclusivity rather than creating divides with marginalized peoples being considered “other.” We need art that helps us to understand what is happening in our society, who we are, where we come from and where we’re going. Only then can we make our world a better place for all. I encourage you to take action in “the Age of Trump.” Regardless of how that looks for you, you have the power to affect change with your vote. I hope you enjoy this collection and see you, socially distancing, of course, and with a mask, at the polls! We need positive change because this is “Not Normal!”

About: Karen M. Gutfreund is an independent curator and artist. She creates exhibitions with the motto “changing the world through art”, working to stimulate dialog, raise consciousness and create social change. Actively promoting the work of activist and feminist artists with national touring exhibitions, she has produced over thirty-five to date, managing all aspects from curation, artist management, budgets and contracts along with installation and is writing a book on DIY Exhibitions. Gutfreund is co-partner in Gutfreund Cornett Art, a curatorial partnership to create exhibitions on social justice issues. She has worked in the Painting & Sculpture Department for MoMA, the Andre Emmerick Gallery, The Knoll Group, the John Berggruen Gallery, and is an art consultant to both corporations and individuals. Gutfreund served as the National Exhibitions Director for the Women’s Caucus for Art, is a member of ArtTable, the Northern California Representative for The Feminist Art Project (TFAP), and curator for UniteWomen.org. Born in Lexington, Kentucky, but having lived in all four corners of the country, she currently lives and works in Syracuse, NY and is developing a ranch outside of Yosemite, CA to raise grass-fed beef and host artist residencies. Lastly, Gutfreund is also an exhibiting artist with a focus on “Art as Activism” and exhibits extensively around the country.

