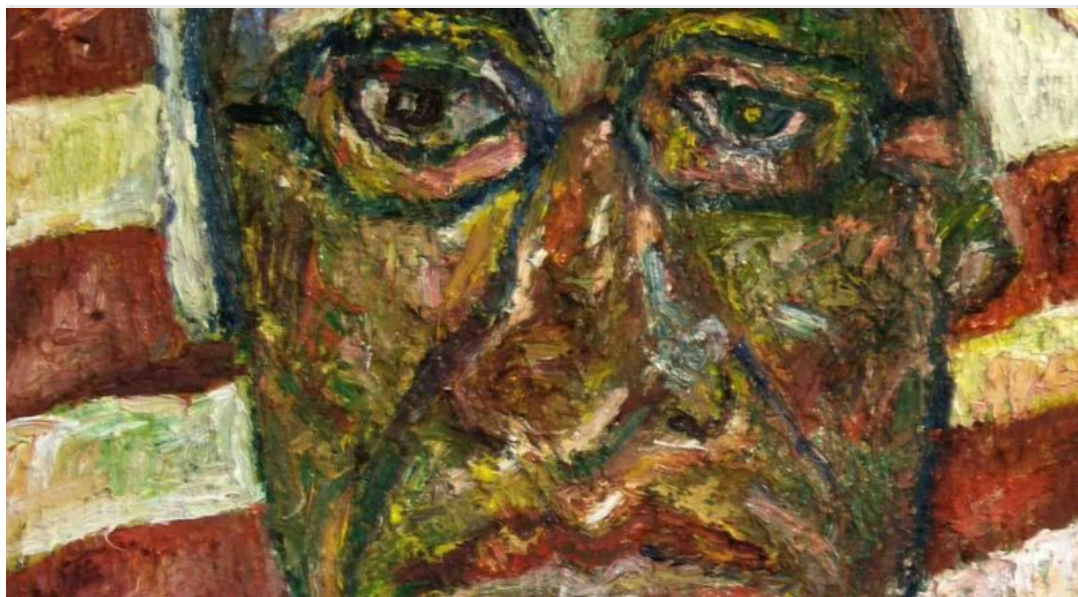


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## INTERVIEW: In age of Donald Trump, New York gets International Human Rights Art Festival

📅 February 28, 2017 👤 John Soltes 💬 0 Comments 📍 International Human Rights Art Festival, Sub-Basement, Tom Block

When Tom Block started work on New York's first-ever International Human Rights Art Festival, the world was a little different politically. Now with the controversial election of Donald Trump and the rise of populist movements around the world, the festival has taken on a new light and new meaning.

For Block, an activist painter, author and playwright, the show is less about the Trump era and more about the positive energy that the more than 150 artists

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can produce. The festival, which is presented by Dixon Place and the Institute of Prophetic Activist Art, takes place March 3-5 at Dixon Place.

“I’ve run two other human rights festivals, both in 2010, one in Washington, D.C., with Amnesty International and then one at DePaul University,” Block said recently in a phone interview. “They were different times, different president, but it seemed that there’s a tremendous amount of energy in the artist world. And by bringing it all together, we can expand that energy

exponentially and reach a much greater audience, so I came up to New York and got to know Ellie [Covan] at Dixon Place. I just thought it would be a great event. There’s never been one in the city, so I thought it would be a great event to do here. When I started planning it exactly one year ago, I didn’t foresee the turn of the events in our political world, so it feels far more salient now than even it did when I began. I don’t know if that’s luck or destiny.”

Block said he knows most of the artists who will perform in works that cut across many mediums. Joya Powell of Movement of the People Dance Company will showcase her work at the festival. Joining her during the weekend of events are playwright Mashuq Deen, playwright Catherine Filloux, musician Ari Gold, Oscar-nominated filmmaker Josh Fox and performance artist James Leonard, among many others.

“I curate for some very specific aspects,” Block said. “One obviously is quality. You don’t just get into the festival on heart and soul. I mean, there’s a lot of very heartfelt activists that, in my opinion, is mostly heart and soul, so I need



Tom Block is the producer of the first-ever International Human Rights Art Festival, taking place at Dixon Place March 3-5. Photo courtesy of artist.

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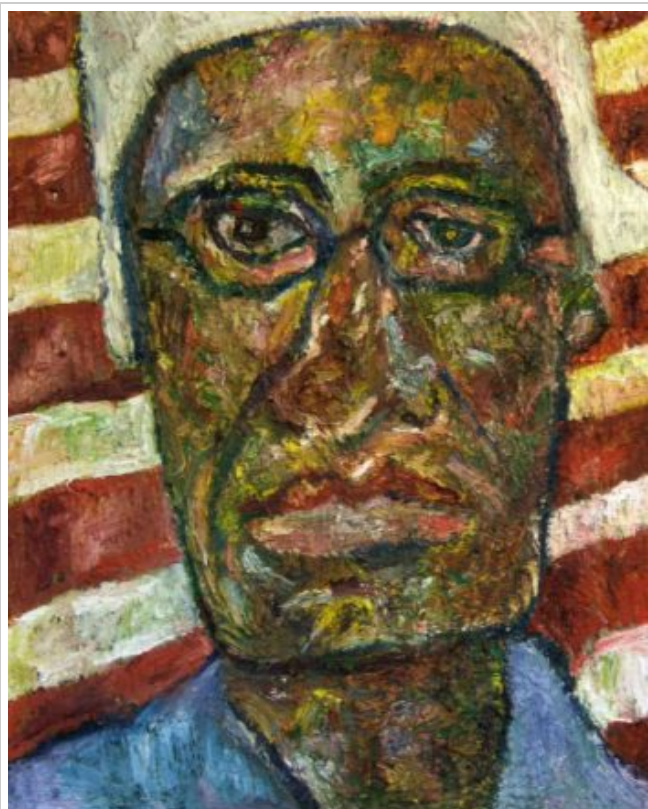
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the heart, the soul but also very strong quality and talent and technique. And the second thing I curate for is positive messaging, so these are pro-messages. It might be Mashuq Deen, [who] is a new dramatist playwright, and he’s explaining his transition from a woman to man as a member of the South Asian immigrant community. And it’s very much about him just being vulnerable and sincere and honest. It’s not angry. It’s a very personal look, so I really try to curate for a positive message around these important issues, rather than an oppositional take on things.”

Another performer will be Angela Polite, who *Hollywood Soapbox* recently featured for her one-woman show *Mary Speaks*. Block’s own work will be represented with a performance of his play *Duck*, which follows an award-winning CIA agent who has reached the end of his rope. Rosary Solimanto will present a short piece called *The Patient* and present her activist artwork about disability identity.

Even more impressive is the list of honorary co-sponsors, including legendary TV producer Norman Lear, Sen. Bernie Sanders and several local politicians.



Sojourner Truth is the International Human Rights Art Festival godmother and represents the highest ideals of activism. She was an African-American abolitionist and women’s

Block expects to see a wide range of audience members. There may be people who love theater but are unfamiliar with the issues of human rights, while some people may know the issues but are new to the art world.

“You do hope to have a lot of cross-pollination there and certainly connections among the artists during these festivals, and you would hope that connections are made among people in the audience as well,” he said. “We try to draw from the widest pool

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rights activist, who escaped slavery with her infant daughter in 1826. After going to court to recover her son, she became the first black woman to win such a case against a white man. Image courtesy of artist.

possible for these kinds of things ... I think it's the kind of festival, you get a day pass for \$15 or \$20, and you can see four or five events in the course of the day."

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All of the festival's offerings aren't dance or theater-based. There are discussions and panels, including an event called *Muslim Women Speak*, which will have five Muslim women recounting their experiences living in the United States. There will also be a Kidsfest in the morning hours for free, hands-on activities for children. "They can come in and kind of learn about using art for advocacy purposes through hands-on activity," Block said. "So that's a unique offering. Get them while their young."

Block is a busy man in the month of March. After the festival is complete, he will gear up for the world premiere of his play *Sub-Basement*, which will run March 24 to April 15 at the IRT Theater. The piece is a dark comedy that explores the importance of art.

The main character is a woman struggling over an important decision in her life. Does she become a Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer, like her father wants, or a poet and possibly homeless? "That's a development process that started about three years ago with Athena Theatre Company, and I wrote a play for the producer that fit their specifications," he said. "It's a journey of discovery into a one-woman psyche."

Block started his art career in Spain in the early 1990s. He was a painter who showed his work in Madrid, Lisbon and around Iberia. "Then when I moved back to the States, all of a sudden, painting had no meaning," he said. "I mean, it had no social role in our country. ... I was like, you know, I want to be socially engaged. I want to have a social voice, and I began the activist work in the late '90s and started showing various activist projects, and then in the early 2000s, I worked with Amnesty International and the Human Rights Painting Project. And I developed a whole activist model, and then all of my art and writing got wrapped into this idea of using art for social change."

He added: "Every era has its artistic movement that kind of stands out when you look back, and I think that our era, what's really going to stand out 100 years from now will be socially engaged activist art. This will be the era when art moved out of the gallery and moved out of the museum and into the

street and into society. I really believe that is what is going on right now.”

And that brings Block back to Trump. The International Human Rights Art Festival is not a direct response to the current administration, but some of the topics discussed at Dixon Place this weekend are surely a bone of contention in society and government. For Block, the connections go deeper and further back.

“I think these energies go back 3,000 years,” he said. “I look at Donald Trump as the representation of a human energy that goes back to the beginning of time. He’s not an individual. He’s a representation of fear. He’s a representation of human tribalism. These kind of ideas go back to the caveman, so I feel very strongly that ... positive energy becomes part of the reverse movement.”

*By John Soltes / Publisher / [John@HollywoodSoapbox.com](mailto:John@HollywoodSoapbox.com)*

*The International Human Rights Art Festival will play Dixon Place March 3-5. Click [here](#) for more information and tickets. Tom Block’s Sub-Basement will play the IRT Theater March 24 to April 15. Click [here](#) for more information and tickets.*

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