



PROPHETIC ACTIVIST ART: ART ACTIVISM BEYOND OPPOSITIONALITY

October 22, 2018
by Tom Block

The H.E.A.T. Collective was founded by Artistic Director Jessica Litwak to create, advocate and inspire artistic expression rooted in healing, education, activism, and theatre. We work to build collectives in every context: in our performances, workshops and community events. Engaging artists across the world, we aim for powerful bridge building art of courageous generosity. In this series, guest experts will write a piece representing each letter of H.E.A.T. - week one will be healing, week two is education, week three is activism, and the last week of the month is theatre. Together these pieces will highlight the work that is being done across all aspects of The H.E.A.T. Collective in the hopes that we can ignite dialogue, spark further exploration, and encourage more people to get involved.

Prophetic Activist Art presents a new paradigm of the ancient art of prophecy, combined with the historical purpose of art to raise the human gaze into the spirit.

Bringing together medieval conceptions of *legislative* prophecy (where the prophet engaged with society, instead of simply commenting on it) with our contemporary belief in the power of the individual, and combining these with the artistic urge, this model offers a new path for our ailing human soul. It introduces a mysticism of action, where the historical search for personal realization – which historically involved a single person’s search for expanded consciousness – is replaced by the ideal of a socially empowering artist, bringing the spirit to life in society through art and action.

I developed this theory through my own career as an artist and writer, and then published it as a step-by-step guide to building an activist art project with quantifiable social impact: *Prophetic Activist Art: Handbook for a Spiritual Revolution* (Centre for Human Ecology, Glasgow, Scotland, 2014).

After devising this idea, and the specific strategies* for bridging the chasm between the art world and society/politics, I implemented it as the Founding Producer of New York City’s *International Human Rights Art Festival* (IHRAF.ORG). This week-long Festival (this year at the Wild Project in New York’s East Village, November 12-18, 2018) expands activist energy by bringing together 30 events and 150+ artists over a full week of advocacy performance and art.

Curating for art grounded in beauty, sincerity, vulnerability and engagement, we are able to work with national and international artists, activists, politicians and social leaders. The work moves beyond oppositionality — pointing fingers, leveling accusations and presenting what is wrong with the world — to a welcoming, though challenging, collection of work which can soften the hearts and minds even of those who might initially be in disagreement with our positions on social concerns.

In our time defined by anger, hatred and partisan finger-pointing, the *International Human Rights Art Festival* carves out a small social space where people can come together to listen, learn and grow.

Appearing at this year’s festival are Congressman and Civil Rights Hero John Lewis (GA), by way of video; Chinese Democracy Activist Wei JingSheng, and lending their names to our Honorary Committee: Barbra Streisand, Norman Lear, Kathleen Turner, Senator Charles E. Schumer, (NY) Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (NY), Senator Bernie Sanders (VT), Senator Chris Van Hollen (MD) and many more.

By lending their time and names to our project, they help us raise its profile, and reach a far wider audience for our artists, who are uncompromising in their commitment to justice.

The bedrock of this model is *infiltration*, not opposition. We use art, heart and soul to engage with social leaders and policy-makers so that we may influence them. We acknowledge the world and try to influence it on its terms — by engaging through the honesty and vulnerability of the performers, plus the aesthetic of beauty in their creative outputs.

In this manner, those in power as well as those in agreement will open to our message.

While all great activists (Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela) operated on the “system” from the outside, ultimately the change they wrought took place *within* the political and legal structures of their society.

For this reason, we engage with these very same structures.

While it certainly becomes easy to despair when reading the newspapers and watching the news (believe me, I share this with you!), it is vital to keep in mind that prophetic activist artists must offer a specific and viable manner of changing society for the better. While the results may not be immediate or even evident, we must keep in mind the words of a great 20th-century prophet, Albert Einstein:

All of us who are concerned for peace and the triumph of justice must today be keenly aware of how small an influence reason and honest good will exert upon events in the political field. But however that may be, and whatever fate may have in store for us, we may rest assured that without the tireless efforts of those who are concerned with the welfare of humanity as a whole, the lot of mankind would be still worse than in fact it even now is.

*These strategies include a list of political and activist honorary co-sponsors for projects; partnerships with non-art NGO’s; concentrating on the aesthetic of beauty; developing specific metrics of success (such as funds and membership raised for partner organizations; press engaged; ancillary activities or products spawned; volunteers engaged etc.) and reaching outside of the “usual suspects” for audience through creative marketing, special pricing and other methods.



Tom Block is a playwright, author of five books, 25+ year exhibiting visual artist and Founding Producer of New York City’s *International Human Rights Art Festival* (IHRAF.ORG). He was the Founding Producer of the *Amnesty International Human Rights Art Festival* (2010), a Research Fellow at DePaul University (2010), LABA Fellow (NY, 2013-14), Hamiltonian Fellow (2008-09) and recipient of funding/support from more than a dozen foundations and organizations. His 20+ plays have been developed and produced in New York and Washington DC. He has exhibited artwork more than 150 times. His books on social philosophy, activist ideas and a novel have developed novel manners of thinking about war, politics and the Jewish-Muslim historical affinity. He has spoken about his ideas throughout the United States, Canada, Europe, Turkey and the Middle East. TOMBLOCK.COM

1 Comment 0 Likes Share

www.theheatcollective.org Comment Policy
We welcome all relevant and respectful comments. Please read our [Comment Policy](#) before commenting.

1 Comment Login

Join the discussion...
LOG IN WITH OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS
D f t G Name

Sort by Best
Jessica Litwak · 4 years ago
Thanks Tom - this is a marvelous blog and I am so grateful for your contribution. The International Human Rights Arts Festival is such an inspiring and community building event and I was thrilled to be a part of it.
Reply · Share

Subscribe Privacy Do Not Sell My Data DISQUS

Posted in Community Blog Newer / Older

JOIN US
Email Address JOIN US!

