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Prophetic Activist Art: Art Activism Beyond  
Oppositionality

Tom Block

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# Prophetic Activist Art: Art Activism Beyond Oppositionality

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*Abstract: Prophetic activism represents a new paradigm of the ancient art of prophecy. Bringing together historic conceptions of prophecy with our post-modern cult of the individual, this model offers a contemporary spiritual palliative for our ailing human soul. It introduces a mysticism of action, where the historical search for personal realization is replaced by an ideal of the socially empowered individual, bringing God to life in this world through action. For the prophetic activist artist, the central facet of playing a legislative role through art demands that he or she proffer creative responses to specific problems. More than just venting their spleen, acting on blind emotion or looking to their art-making for cathartic release, prophetic activist artists must consider the issues at hand, understand them and provide a candle to help light the way out of whatever social or cultural morass that they involve themselves. This luminescence is provided through an activation of specific energies through the work of the artist. Here, art, and its historic purpose to raise the human gaze towards the highest aspects of the human spirit find a way out of the mausoleum of the contemporary gallery/museum world, and back into the world of the general public. Using my own experience as an activist/artist, including my Shalom/Salaam Project ([www.tomblock.com/shalom.htm](http://www.tomblock.com/shalom.htm)), Human Rights Painting Project ([www.artsforamnestyinternational.org](http://www.artsforamnestyinternational.org)), and Cousins public art project ([www.tempe.gov/arts/PublicArt/AATS.htm](http://www.tempe.gov/arts/PublicArt/AATS.htm)), I will limn the philosophical structure of this new manner of envisioning activist art, and then discuss specific manners in which art can be used for activist purposes. Most importantly this session will distinguish between shock or rage art – art that simply points out the horror of war, poverty, our American cultural desiccation or other social ills – and that which moves beyond this expression of anger, towards inserting a healing impetus into the general society.*

Keywords: Art, Activism, Spirituality

**E**VERY ERA OF human development represents a time of profound crisis, one in which the very survival of the species hangs in the balance. The invention of the crossbow in the fourth century B.C. foretold a time of unlimited casualties in war, leading to the potential destruction of civilization. Fifteen hundred years later, the end of the first millennium of the Christian era brought with it prophecies of imminent doom. During the European “Dark Ages,” the Bubonic Plague, now an easily treatable infection, destroyed one-third of that continent’s citizens. Recently, the invention of the nuclear bomb foretold the end of humanity. Today, not even a hundred years past those tragic days at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, global warming, nanotechnology, bird flu and a host of other ills, some human-made and some natural, all point toward the impending demise of the human experiment.

Although all of these crises appear factual and ominous within the worldview of a particular time period, the human test is ultimately an ongoing, psycho-spiritual one. The true challenge of being human takes place inside of each person’s head, not in overcoming the latest prediction of doom. What is called for in each epoch is a positive response to the interior confusion of being human, in a time of calamity. And those that can best offer this affirming

impetus to help heal the fragile human soul are the seers and shamans – the prophets.

## Prophecy and Art

Each era of humanity, each specific crisis demands a particular, prophetic response to help heal the ills of that time. Successful prophets must speak the language of their time period; they must be able to reach into the general society and mindset that surrounds them in a manner that is contemporary and meaningful. The prophet that trundled the cobbled roads of ancient Judea would be out of place in our time; those that prophesied doom and searched for a way out in medieval Europe would most probably end up today in a mental hospital “for their own good.” The packaging of the message is as important as the message itself: it must jibe with the manner in which the citizens of an era ingest their information and order their reality. Otherwise, the ideas, no matter how well intentioned and salient, will be rejected due to their “eccentric” presentation.

Prophetic activist art represents a new paradigm of the ancient art of prophecy, combined with the historical purpose of art. Bringing together medieval conceptions of prophecy with our post-modern cult of the individual, and combining these with the creative urge, which has historically been charged with expressing humanities highest spiritual ideals, this



model offers a contemporary spiritual palliative for the ailing human soul. It introduces a mysticism of action, where the historical search for personal realization – that which led medieval anchorites into the desert, onto the tops of mountains and generally to expend all of their spiritual energy in serving their own personal needs – is replaced by an ideal of the socially empowering artist, bringing God to life in this world through action.

Given the insecurity as well as possibility of our epoch, we are desperately in need of prophets to help light the way. Historically, artists have played the role of pointing the human gaze towards the highest aspects of the human spirit, using their art to bypass the rational, conscious sense of the audience to activate a place inside the viewer beyond cognition: a tranquil place of the spirit. The 20<sup>th</sup> century artist, Wassily Kandinsky, in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, even posited that the artist was most attuned to the spiritual needs of all humanity.

In the past, artists accessed this place deep within their audience by utilizing the symbolic and spiritual expression of a major religious tradition, to which most people in their milieu belonged. In this manner, they had easy access to the spirit life of the viewer, as their images fit into a preconceived view of how God and sacred matters were visually imagined.

Now, in an era where more and more people identify themselves as “secular,” though still feel the press of spiritual desire, the work of the artist is needed more than ever before. The human spiritual impulse represents the healing balm necessary for any age – and it is incumbent on the post-modern prophet/artist to help activate these very energies, lying latent in every single human, no matter how they feel about “religion” or religions’ gods. The post-modern artist must devise personal manners of reaching into the individual spirit of the audience, to point the way to spirituality *beyond* religion, where the contemporary audience can find true meaning in the world, beyond the traditional sacred structures offered by religion.

### Medieval Conceptions of Prophecy for the Post-Modern World

This new prophetic activist art grows out of ideas of the 60s – but not the 1960s, the era most considered when talking of “activist art,” but the 1260s, one of the most spiritually fecund times in history. It was during this time period that a new conception of prophecy developed which is far more relevant to contemporary activist artists than the “shock” ideas of the 1960s. Activist artists *are* contemporary prophets, but the conception of prophecy itself must be understood in the medieval sense: it is in these

prophetic models that contemporary activist artists will find their truest inspiration.

Mystics of the 13<sup>th</sup> century developed a conception of prophecy that moved beyond simply acting as society’s conscience. Medieval prophets such as Moses Maimonides, a Jew, Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi, Muslim and St. Francis of Assisi, a Christian all believed in an *activist* prophecy, in which a socio-political role was demanded of the prophet, instead of their simply providing societal oversight. It was no longer enough for a seer to simply point out the ills of society, understood through their own personal relationship with God. The new paradigm demanded that he or she propose concrete steps to help remake the society in the moral, caring image of a spiritually conscious world.

### Prophetic Activist Art

Today’s activist artist must follow this model, moving beyond the “sky is falling” shock art of the 1960s, towards that earlier conception of prophecy. Most importantly, activist art must move *beyond* oppositionality as the basis of its message – as defined by recent manners of expressing ideas in ways that separate the audience into “us” and “them.” This type of art mirrors the worst binary energies emitting from the political class and the corporate media, helping to harden people in their positions, instead of opening their minds to new possibilities. Shock art only turns people off; prophetic activist art wants to make a positive difference, not just make a splash.

A central aspect of accepting a legislative role in prophetic art making is that the artist must offer creative responses to specific social ills. It is not enough to simply repackaging the news in creative manners, thereby picking at the scabrous wounds of the human condition; creative and positive *thinking* must underlie a successful activist art project. Obviously, this takes quite a bit more intellectual work than recent models of activist art, and the 21<sup>st</sup> century prophetic artist must add the duties of savvy political thinker and social philosopher to their resume.

It is imperative that artists be honest about exactly what art can and cannot achieve. Artists will never change the world through their art alone; these utopian visions from the 20th century are definitively buried beneath the ashes of two great wars, and many lesser ones. However, art can focus positive energies and inspire individuals in unique ways. The activist artist must view him or herself as playing a Confucian role: that of inspiring people to change the world, instead of attempting to change it through their art, alone. Through the art and the ideas behind the art, an activist artist can make a difference by seeding creative, positive motivations into the very populations that are working within the cultural and

political worlds where true change will be effected. Like a magnifying glass focusing the energy of the sun, a successful activist project coalesces positive energies and reseeds them back into the greater society.

It is imperative that activist artists not take sides in ongoing political conflicts. It is impossible to be *for* one thing, without being *against* something else. Activist art based in medieval prophecy must be *for* the greatest human ideals – truth, justice, peace – and *against* ignorance, war and abuse, instead of taking sides for or against a particular ethnicity, state group or political party. If artists create work that stands for the universal ideals, the clarity of the message will ring clearly and objectively. In this manner the activist message is based in positive energies, providing the impetus for healing, and not for further pain or vengefulness.

One of the most powerful aspects of the arts, perhaps unique to this field, is its ability to bring people together, both like-minded persons – inspiring them to do greater deeds working together – as well as people who might view themselves as enemies. As a true activist art stands for humanity’s highest ideals, this type of creativity can form a gentle bridge for the first rapprochement between warring parties (such as the Israelis and Syrians), or politically estranged groups (e.g. Palestinian political factions). Undoubtedly, no matter what political views or cultural traditions are held by estranged partners, they can come together around our highest human ideals. True activist art will heal and strengthen.

Additionally, a successful activist art project can focus the media on ongoing issues surrounding peace, human rights and universal respect. As the BBC journalist Jake Lynch recently noted, the media covers *events*, not processes. While the international struggle for human rights, for instance, is a laborious and ongoing process, an art exhibit concerned with these ideas is an event, and therefore works in unique ways to focus the issues, attract the press and help raise the awareness of the underlying and ongoing process of this struggle. By collapsing processes into events, art can shine the spotlight on important work in numerous peace and justice fields.

Creative means must be utilized to ferret out targeted audiences and novel exhibition spaces that will better infiltrate activist work into the arena that the art is trying to effect. The gallery/museum system must be viewed as ancillary to an activist art project; there are untold other spaces that will provide far better access to target audiences. The lobbies of non-profit groups working in the same area of concern, university galleries, in advertising spaces – thereby co-opting this important contemporary manner of influencing people – in transit centers or any other

space that the artist can conceive of, will all offer better audience participation than gallery venues. Again, it is creative thinking that underlies the conception of *where* the art might be exhibited; the limits are defined only by the imagination of the artist him or herself.

Activist artists must devise and utilize diverse methods of expressing their underpinning ideas, thereby attracting a wider audience and providing a bridge to bring together like-minded people working in different fields. Visual art alone is not enough; art coupled with the work of experts from other fields, such as academics, policy makers, artists working in other media etc. will expand the audience and the import of the project. The more vectors of infiltration into the society, the more will the project have an impact.

To offer a healing and emboldening energy, it is important that the art not rail against the prevailing culture, as this will immediately turn-off populations that the project is attempting to reach. Successful activist art, even if based in the pain, frustration and anger that we all can feel, must leave a sweet taste in the mouth; it must offer a positive creative response to the issue in question. Purely negative shock-activist art has proven to do little more than calcify people in their positions – and give cultural conservatives a folkloric hobgoblin to point to as the “boogey-man.” Ultimately, shock art does more to harm a good cause than to help it.

As such, it is vital that the activist artist think in terms of breaking down the walls of “oppositionality,” making it possible for their ideas to infiltrate into a more general, mainstream public. This “breaking down of the walls” should not be done with a metaphorical sledgehammer, however. As Lao Tzu said, “Nothing in the world is as soft and yielding as water. Yet for dissolving the hard and inflexible, nothing can surpass it.”<sup>1</sup> A successful prophetic art should be like water. While the artist should in no way dilute the quality of their work, or compromise its message to make it more palatable, by increasing vectors, the art and message will become appreciated by a wider and perhaps even philosophically opposed audience. To reach those who are in initial disagreement with the artist’s message is one important mark of successful activist art.

### **Creating a Prophetic Activist Art Project**

The true challenge of developing a prophetic activist art project is to collapse the unbreakable creative passion felt by the artist into an activist endeavor, using art as the catalyst for quantifiable change in the world. This is a true test of creativity: to view

<sup>1</sup> *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu (D. C. Lau, translator). Middlesex, England: Penguin Publishers, 1983. pg. 140

artistic output as the expression of an historic obligation to make the world better, and to find explicit manners of putting this theory into practice.

Perhaps there is no greater fallacy when talking about prophetic activist art than that the artist must somehow “dumb-down” his or her visual language to reach into the greater society with their message. To bring a vision of personal beauty into the general culture, with activist and immanent purpose, is the highest calling of the visual artist, a conception that has been recently lost among the formaldehyde sharks and inflated, aluminum bunnies of the New York and London art markets.

It is important to note that “beauty” and “aesthetic standards” are not the same thing: beauty will touch people in their hearts, while contemporary aesthetic standards are simply a representation of the lowest common visual denominator in a culture. As Donald Preziosi, Professor of Art History at UCLA, stated: “Aesthetic standards are conventional and arbitrary, and not neutral, absolute or independent of institutions, classes or social ideologies. In short, they are instruments of power.”<sup>2</sup> Prophetic activist art should *not* be constrained by contemporary aesthetic standards, as this would only represent the artist’s bowing before the altar of power and the powerful.

The contemporary “aesthetic” must influence the output of activist art, however, as it *does* represent the manner in which the general society has become accustomed to ingesting visual information. For example, if a contemporary artist was to use a Renaissance visual language today, the output and symbolic references might appear so obscure and outdated that it would be hard to find an audience for the work. In a very general sense, we have a field of contemporary visual art that is defined by a few things: expressionism in mark-making; pushing at the technological and cultural boundaries of what art is; a general movement from popular culture images into high-art (as opposed to the reverse, which had been the case up until the 1960s) and a sense that art, like technology, must continue to attempt to be “new.”

Beauty based in shared religious symbols is no longer relevant; but a beauty that marries the sublime, the personal quest for knowledge and an understanding of contemporary aesthetic standards will reach the greatest audience. It is through marrying timeless ideals with the contemporary spirit that we can find true meaning, and in conceiving of beauty as something that not only uplifts, but also questions and teaches, we can bring together spiritual impulses with the restless character of our age.

The artist must excavate beauty from out of his or her own interior experience. They must shut out exterior influences, never allowing them to infiltrate the creative process. “Passion” is a personal experi-

ence, and only becomes diluted when the creator consciously considers the pushes and pulls of the surrounding aesthetic. The contemporary artistic zeitgeist needn’t be considered, as it will already have become so imbedded in the individual adult by osmosis that it can suffuse all creative output. That is to say, the visual language of the era will be natural, to some extent, to all true artists of that era.

### Working toward Beauty

The personal visual response of each artist will vary from each other, and even with each different activist project by the same artist. To reach toward a beautiful response to a specific concern, the artist has to work their way slowly into the visual facet of the project. To give an example of exactly what I mean, how an artist can work towards a beautiful, seductive and sublime response to such nuts-and-bolts concerns as war, peace, affordable housing issues, racism or whatever other issues trouble the specific prophetic activist, I will share my working method. This is not the only way, of course – each artist must define his or her personal manner of building a beautiful, prophetic response to this world in need. However, it will give some insight into how one might translate the desire to create beauty and to inspire change through the artistic working process, into a personal visual response.

My personal search for beauty in begins with the activist inspiration. Having identified my area of concern, I spend time reading and studying the theme. Although I don’t expect to become an expert in the field, I do want to understand the subject matter enough to offer something fresh from the intellectual and activist standpoint, as well as the artistic. Often, I blog, or write articles and essays on the subject, pieces that emerge from my study. Through this study and writing, a personal, activist angle begins to emerge, and my reading list focuses in this direction.

This intellectual work becomes inspiration for the visual response. Surrounded by notes, quotes and quick sketches, I begin by drawing my way into the subject. If I am working with a figurative theme, such as portraits of the specific medieval mystics from my *Shalom/Salaam Project*, I begin with quick, blind contour drawings of the models. This gives me an idea of how I can best translate the portrait ideas into my own visual vernacular, thereby developing a personal sense of beauty that will not only “illustrate” the story, but go far beyond that.

From the original quick drawings, I work my way up through charcoal, ink wash and acrylic drawings on paper and then finally move to paint on canvas. Using discoveries made in the first, quick sketch, I

<sup>2</sup> Donald Preziosi quoted in *Art Journal*, Summer 2006, “The Problem of (the Term) Art,” Carolyn Dean, pg. 30

am able to infuse these more finished works with the personality and passion that turn them from illustrations into art. By the time that I begin working on finished paintings, I have already translated the ideas and images into a personal idiom, and the finished paintings bear the mark of these earlier, quick studies.

### **Infiltration Vectors**

Once a personal, deeply felt visual response to the issues at hand has been developed, it is vital to conceive new manners of infiltrating the work into the world of a general audience. The most important leap for the prophetic activist artist to make is that of creative thinking in terms of this dissemination. The prophetic activist artist must be part social philosopher, part psychologist and a touch, even, of the Madison Avenue shyster.

This model implies a serious commitment on the part of the artist to engage with the general culture. Far from turning away from the common society, back into the studio, prophetic activist artists must steel themselves for battle: the only way to have a voice within post-modern popular culture is to understand it.

The best way to begin the public aspect of a prophetic activist art project is to expand the sense of ownership in the endeavor through partnerships. These associations represent the most important aspect of a project's ability to reach out beyond the art world. By increasing stakeholders in the venture, wrapping in non-art individuals and institutions, the project takes on respectability that allows it to reach far beyond the constricted audience of the gallery/museum world. These partnerships also expand the impetus for press coverage, sales, advertising, outreach and a whole plethora of other, vital activist impulses.

There are three general groups that should be approached to look for these associations: non-profit groups working on the issues of concern to the project, politicians and the business community. All three demand very different approaches, and all three offer specific, positive energy to the prophetic activist project.

The first group that should be approached is the non-profit component of the project. Nothing will lend more respectability to the activist endeavor, for approaching unconventional exhibition spaces, the media, politicians, business interests and even purchasers of the work, than the attachment of a non-art NGO working in the same area of concern. The easiest manner in which to begin working with a group, even a large, national or international group, will be to approach a local affiliate. This will cut down greatly on the bureaucracy in terms of de-

cision-making, and make it easier to make the initial contact.

Individual honorary co-sponsors and associates from the political, religious and cultural worlds should be attached at this early stage of the project, to give the whole venture a wider range of stakeholders. The higher the profile of the project, as represented by the groups and names attached to it, the easier it will be to find volunteers to help with the production of catalogues, website, outreach, raising funds, gallery sitting and any other aspects of the project that need to be addressed. Everything from sales pressure to media attraction will be heightened by the names that can be listed on the letterhead of the project's stationary.

Politicians will be far more approachable if there is already a respected non-profit group attached to the project. This will make them feel as if they are partnering with an important constituency, instead of just an individual artist.

Another vital community that must be considered and worked with is the business community. In point of fact, the business community is already becoming engaged in social and environmental issues, where even politicians have not yet to go, in response to public pressure. Newspaper columnist Sebastian Mallaby recently noted:

"If brands are both mighty and vulnerable, political consequences follow. Mighty companies have so much riding on their corporate image that they quiver in the face of customer opinion. And if they are mass-market companies, customer opinion is the same as public opinion, so corporate bosses become as sensitive to political and social shifts as elected officials . . . The next stage may be for companies not merely to outpace government, but to pull government along."<sup>3</sup>

This growing consumer awareness gives prophetic activist artists an important opening. If huge, multinational corporations are taking such steps on their own, than they will surely be open to partnering with activist artists as a manner in which to raise their positive profile, with little or no economic outlay. There's no question that a business partner can do a lot to help a prophetic activist art project – and that the small amount of money they might bring to the venture or advertising power can help disproportionately in disseminating the endeavor's ideas.

Once non-profit, political and business interests have been attached to a project, it will be much easier to draw in greater numbers of interested people. With the raw-number count of people belonging to a social movement being so important, espe-

<sup>3</sup> *Washington Post*, Sebastian Mallaby, "A New Brand of Power," A15, August 7, 2006

cially in a country such as ours that often bases public policy on polling figures, vectors to attract people to a prophetic activist art project are vital.

After engaging these various pillars of the general society, the activist can utilize a whole succession of different methods to inject their ideas into the greater society. Public art projects, guerilla art in public spaces, exhibition venues such as libraries, transit centers, universities, lobbies of non-profit groups; in advertising spaces, through partnerships with like minded groups, academics, activists and other artists – any and every opportunity to bring the art in front of the eyes of a widening audience must be explored.

Additionally, the art should be viewed as impetus for a wide range of other products, all of which make it easier for the audience to purchase, contemplate or simply view the work. Catalogues, notecards, liaisons with writers or photographers, inexpensive prints, playing cards – any manner of disseminating the work and ideas should be explored. If a person is able to purchase some aspect of the project, no matter how small or inexpensive, they will have been made “partners” in the venture. And if part or all of the monies from the sale of these goods can be donated to the host non-profit group, then the ripples of prophetic activism will carry that much further.

It is vital to attract media attention to the project. The combination of the various sponsors of the project, the concern with a real life problem and a sublime art will remove the endeavor from the “known,” into a unique realm. Add some kind of “event” – such as an appearance by an important speaker, a symposium, or a fundraiser attended by the head of the non-profit partner – and the project will become not only newsworthy, but also laudably so. People *believe* what they read in the newspaper – so why shouldn’t they be reading about a prophetic activist art project, instead of the latest football player’s arrest?

Once all of this support has been successfully garnered, it can be parlayed into the sense that the project is “gathering steam” and represents more than the ideals of a single artist. Wider general support can be presented in the form of petitions signed, monies raised, “members” (if you are inclined to start some kind of group) or just events that spring out of the activist project.

The ultimate goal is to turn the disparate audience into a political force, a like-minded community that can impose change on leadership. When the impetus (i.e. numbers of people that can be counted as supporters in some verifiable manner) for these issues gathers to a certain point, the “leadership” will be forced to acknowledge the concern of these constituents, and perhaps even offer legislative responses. This is because the “activists” will now be a “voting

bloc,” and voting blocs are serious business in our society.

## Methodology

The goal of this paper is not to simply express this new idea of activist art, but to devise an implementable system that can be taught in universities, or executed by individual, working artists. In keeping with the realism of the prophetic activist artist, these projects must have specific goals and manners of reaching them. Along with this, come a series of markers that can stand for artists, activists and funding organizations, as representations of “success” – goals that show real-world influence of the art endeavor.

Here is a general list of possible measuring sticks of success for this kind of project:

*Stakeholders:* The list of national and even international leaders that sign-on as honorary co-sponsors are an important marker of how deeply the project is making inroads into the general culture.

*Press:* Press clippings, newspaper and television interviews and other manners of reaching out through the media are vital. These give a good sense of how far outside of the gallery/art world that a project is reaching.

*Exhibits and Events:* An expanding series of exhibits and events will help the project gain its own momentum, and carry on past the initial impulse of energy. A list of these exhibits will stand as one measure of success in reaching into different communities and creating an ongoing project.

*Grants and Outside Funding:* Another important marker of success is when the project is considered fundable by outside organizations, and individuals. Obviously, this funding helps expand the project, but it also gives it solidity, as well as further interested stakeholders.

*Ancillary Products:* Notecards, catalogues, t-shirts, posters and other products are vital markers of the potential reach of an activist art project. Each one offers a different injection vector.

*Money Raised:* Money collected from the sale of art, as well as ancillary products, and the donated back to the participating non-profit organization gives an important sense of real-world impact of the activist art project.

*Individual participants:* Many people will get involved in a personal way with an activist event for the first time through the art project, captivated as they are by the novel and creative manner of attacking the issues. Individuals will be enlisted to provide support, utilizing their



personal skill set. Another important marker for the project is to conduct follow-up interviews with these people to see if they have become empowered to take on other tasks, and put their skills to work in other ventures.

*Ancillary Events:* One of the most important aspects of prophetic activist art is to bring people from different fields, though working in the same area, together, coalescing activist energies. Cultural events, roundtables with diplomats or academics, symposiums and other activities represent an important marker of success.

*Organizational Liaisons:* Bringing people together is important; it is just as important to bring different organizations together. The art can provide a catalyst for like-minded non-profit groups to come together, hosting a show, increasing audience and awareness and impressing the issues into the general awareness. Additionally, these events can spark ongoing relationships between groups, which leads to an increase in positive, activist energies.

Taken together, these various manners of measuring the success of a project can stand as methodological markers for the activist artist. Given that this model is devoted to utilizing art to make quantifiable change in the surrounding society, a set of specific markers is vital – and the manner in which the prophetic activist artist can coalesce and increase energies, as

shown in these (and other) particular manners, is central to its success.

Prophetic activist art projects explore in specific ways how art can positively influence conversations of human rights, peace, justice and other social issues. By offering an ever expanding menu of vectors to infiltrate the work and ideas into the very populations that care most about the issues and which might make the most difference if inspired by the art, this activist model moves beyond 20<sup>th</sup> century utopian ideals to the nitty-gritty of trying to affect the world, one person at a time. Additionally, it models manners in which to personally involve ever-wider groups of people as stakeholders in the project, thereby harnessing the diffuse and all-too-often ineffectual energies for common good that lie dormant within a society, waiting to be activated.

I personally do not believe that art, in and of itself, will never change the world on its own. But art can open avenues, build bridges and inspire others to see manners in which they might be part of changing the world for the better. Oftentimes, the first step is the hardest and if art can offer a gentle first step towards a better world in any of a variety of manners, it has answered an historic call to help humankind reach its highest potential.

(If you would like to see two of my own activist art projects, from which I developed this general model, please see my *Human Rights Painting Project* – [www.humanrightspaintingproject.com](http://www.humanrightspaintingproject.com) -- and *Shalom/Salaam Project* – <http://www.tomblock.com/11shalom/index.php> .)

## About the Author

### *Tom Block*

An activist/artist myself, this theory has grown out of my own practice. I have presented my ideas underpinning prophetic activism at numerous conferences, symposia and universities over the past few years, including Perspectives on Creativity (Holy Family University, PA, 2008), Media, Spirituality and Social Change (University of Colorado, 2008), Globalization and Human Rights (Bethany College, WV, 2008), Rethinking Resistance 2007 (Emory University, Atlanta, GA), International Peace Research Association (University of Calgary, Canada, 2006), Peace and Justice Studies Association (Manhattan College, NY, 2006; Elizabeth College, PA, 2007), Southeast College Art Conference (Nashville, TN, 2006), Mid Atlantic Popular Culture Association (Philadelphia, PA, 2007) and the Committing Voices conference (Goddard College, Plainfield, VT, 2004). Additionally, I have spoken about prophetic activist art as part of the “Robert & Elizabeth Johnson Professorship in Leadership” lecture series (Franklin College, IN), and at other universities, including East Carolina University (NC), Antioch College (OH), Franklin and Marshall College (PA), American University (DC), George Washington University (DC), Michigan State University (MI), Ohio State University (OH), Hanover College (IN), Ohio University (OH), Manhattan College (NY), Washington Theological Union (DC) and others. I have exhibited my artwork at museums, galleries and non-profit spaces around the United States and Europe.



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