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Tom Block: An Activist Artist Who Infiltrates and Inspires

by: **Ben Spielberg** on May 22nd, 2012 | [No Comments](#) »



Baal Shem Tov / Courtesy of Tom Block

While artists do not change the world by merely raising awareness of a social issue, their activist art can mobilize people and resources around a cause. [Tom Block](#), a witty and eloquent artist and writer based in Silver Spring, Maryland, revealed this philosophy to a mixed-faith crowd at the Mishin Fine Arts Gallery in San Francisco from May 4 to May 6. Block uses both his book (*Shalom/Salaam: A Story of a Mystical Fraternity*) and his artwork to spark conversations between people of various backgrounds interested in “infiltrating and taking over ‘the system.’”

The first ever Amnesty International Human Rights festival, produced by Block in 2010, showcased many of his paintings and furthered several goals of activist art. Congressional sponsors of the festival included Congressmen John Kerry, Bernie Sanders, Olympia Snowe, and Chris Van Hollen, names which helped “inject the work into the worlds of social and political leaders.” More than thirty-five exhibits appeared throughout the US, Canada, and Europe. Dozens of newspaper articles, radio, and television interviews spawned by

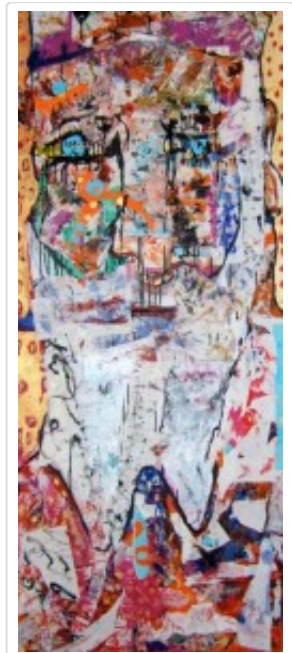
the festival drastically increased media awareness of the plight of political prisoners like Jose Gallardo, a brigadier general in the Mexican army who spent nine years in jail for publishing an academic paper that exposed the army’s human rights abuses. The festival also helped bring together more than a dozen NGO’s and art sales raised more than \$15,000 for Amnesty International.

Another Block venture, The Iraq History Project Art Festival at DePaul University in 2010, “gathered and analyzed first-person narratives of severe human rights violations committed under the government of the Ba’ath Party and Saddam Hussein (1968-2003) and by a variety of groups after the U.S.-led invasion (2003-2008).” Not only did the project offer valuable perspective on the ongoing human rights abuses in Iraq, but it also demonstrated the power of uniting lecturers, filmmakers, playwrights, photographers, and painters within the activist art framework.

Block’s other art projects have similarly identified areas of social need, created awareness, and brought like-minded activists into contact with one another. His first showing of the Human Rights Painting Project in 2002 convened William Schulz and John Sweeney, then heads of Amnesty International and the AFL-CIO, respectively. Though the two men were certainly aware of each other before the show, Block provided the space

for their introduction and laid the groundwork for the significant collaboration between the two organizations in the years since. Block's Cousins Public Art Project, installed in Tempe, Arizona bus shelters in 2005-2006 and in Silver Spring in 2007, co-opts advertising space with inspirational messages about "peace and acceptance" from the likes of Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King Jr. This project, as Block puts it, "[sells] wisdom instead of toothpaste or a newfangled type of undergarment" and uses the public space it occupies to remind potential enemies of their shared vision for humanity.

Shalom/Salaam shares the purpose of bringing rival groups together non-politically, thus providing an appropriate complement to Block's artwork. Because academics fear the political backlash of describing the "undeniable interrelationship between Judaism and Islam," Block comprehensively documents a long history of the reciprocal influences of Muslim and Jewish thinking. Moses Maimonides, for example, one of Judaism's most esteemed scholars, drew most of his inspiration from Sufi sources like Ibn Sina and al-Ghazali. Sufi mystic Jalal al-Din Rumi also helped influence ideas in the Baal Shem Tov and Hasidism. Block travels widely to present the book at mosques, synagogues, and college campuses to highlight the similarities in both religions' histories and the connection with today's conflicts between the two. As Block puts it:



Solomon Ibn Gabirol /
Courtesy of Tom Block

This tale of mystical fraternity is important not only for its historical significance, but also for the relevance it has to the contemporary situation between Jews and Muslims. Looking at today's news, it is easy to believe that Judaism and Islam never enjoyed a period of mutual enrichment, a time of peace and reciprocal respect. Hatred runs so deep and the relationship is so combustible, it is hard to imagine that these pervasive attitudes cannot be traced back to the founding of Islam (c. 630). In this climate, positive truths such as the one outlined in this book are overlooked and even denied. This book is offered as part of the dialogue of peace. Though clearly controversial, Shalom/Salaam represents a reality of shared roots that we can no longer afford to ignore.

Neither the book nor Block's artwork can, nor is intended to, save the world, but their targeted approach to specific social goals makes them quintessential activist art.



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