

toward making the highest human ideals the victor for all involved.

Granted, to raise oneself and his motivations out of the sense of righteous indignation that underpins oppositional activism is very difficult. One of the greatest motivators for activist art is just this sense – a feeling predicated on the belief that the activist is on the correct side in an ongoing conflict.

As Nelson Mandela stated, however: “To make peace with an enemy, one must work with that enemy, and that enemy becomes one’s partner.”<sup>18</sup> And to make peace, one must be respectful. If Nelson Mandela can say of one of his prison guards on Robben Island: “All men, even the most seemingly cold-blooded, have a core of decency and if their heart is touched, they are capable of changing,”<sup>19</sup> then surely the artist can be a bit forgiving, even when he is convinced that he is absolutely right.

If artists create work that stands for the universal ideals, the lucidity of the message will ring clearly and objectively. In this manner, the activist message is based in positive energies, providing an impetus for healing and not for further pain or vengeance. This may be one of the most difficult aspects of Prophetic Activist Art, as it puts into practice an almost Gandhi-like spiritual maturity. However, the Prophetic Activist Artist must address the underlying spiritual challenges of humanity. In so doing, he or she will help heal that which ails the human spirit.

In the end, the truth will out. As William Cullen Bryant avowed: “Truth crushed to dust will rise again.”<sup>20</sup> And the healing power offered by Prophetic Activist Art will not simply re-shuffle the deck, installing another group of people to lord their power over the previous oppressors. Prophetic Activist Art will touch oppressor and oppressed alike and lead, at the very best, toward a world where these both view each other as individuals to make peace with, instead of ciphers against whom to wage battle.

<sup>18</sup> Mandela, Nelson, *Long Walk to Freedom*. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), p. 612.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 482.

<sup>20</sup> William Cullen Bryant quoted in Martin Luther King Jr., *I Have a Dream*. (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992), p. 23.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Specific Strategies for the Prophetic Activist Artist**

*An activist art practice,  
far from being antithetical to the  
"true" meaning of the aesthetic,  
can also be viewed as one of its most  
legitimate expressions.<sup>21</sup>*

One central challenge of developing a Prophetic Activist Art project is collapsing the creative passion felt by artists into an activist endeavor, using art as the catalyst for quantifiable change in the world. This is a powerful test of creativity: to understand one's artistic output as heritor to a historic obligation to make the world better, as well as to discover explicit manners of putting this theory into practice.

#### **Breathe Deeply**

The artist is now entering the realm of prophecy. He or she will no longer be judged by the paper-thin standards of the contemporary art market, but against the timeless rhythms of the spiritual and prophetic worlds. The peers of the Prophetic Activist Artist are St. Francis of Assisi, Thomas Merton, Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Michelangelo, Van Gogh, Fra Angelico and the sculptor of the Venus of Willendorf (c. 24,000 B.C.E.).

Successful activist art, even if based in the pain 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 at hand. Purely negative shock-activist art has proven to do little more than calcify people in their positions – and has given cultural conservatives a visual hobgoblin to point to as the boogey-man.

Perhaps you have seen images of folkloric war protestors or folkloric gay-rights activists, their pictures splattered across the news, and then used by the forces of the status quo as something to point to as not us! While the angry and creative art activists certainly have their hearts in the right place, I personally believe that they do more harm than good to their cause through this form of crusading. They would have been far more effective with a mature response to the issues at hand, rather than simply providing the six o'clock news with a visual tid-bit with which to raise its own ratings.

It is vital that the Prophetic Activist Artist think in terms of breaking down the walls of oppositionality, making it possible for his ideas to infiltrate the consciousness of the 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. The soft overcomes the hard; the gentle overcomes the rigid."<sup>22</sup>

A successful activist art project should permeate the culture like Lao Tzu's water. By thinking in this manner, the prophet-artist will create work that resonates within the general society. To reach those who are in initial disagreement with the artist's message is one important mark of successful activist art, a goal that will never be realized by the "tear down the walls" oppositional art of the past few decades.

I believe that model of activist work is but an admission of impotence. True strength has more faith in itself than that – and more humility. As Mencius (d. 289 B.C.E.; a Chinese philosopher) said: "If others do not respond to your love with love, look into your own benevolence."<sup>23</sup> If ignored, the post-modern prophet must simply redouble his or her own positive efforts, not rant all the stronger against the audience.

<sup>21</sup> Kester, Grant (editor), *Art, Activism and Oppositionality*, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching* (Stephen Mitchell, translator) (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), p. 78.

### **Trust in God, but Tie Your Camel's Leg**

Part of this search for contemporary prophetic relevance must be an admission of what art can and cannot do. The Prophetic Activist Artist must trust neither in the ultimate power of art nor the sustained interest of the audience. Both of these forces have been called into question recently, as contemporary art has too often become absurdist and irrelevant to the greater society due to its auto-referential content, or simply abusive in its shocking subject matter.

The activist artist must move beyond hoping that the audience opens to his art, to demanding relevance for the work and ideas through the art's creative content, sublime quality and novel avenues of infiltration into the worlds of the audience. The Prophetic Activist Artist cannot take on the wry, ironic and spiritually-bereft attitude of the contemporary art market, where reaching a handful of well-heeled audience members with visually confused and insincere work is considered "being true to oneself," while making art based in beauty that attempts to reach toward the general public is viewed as "selling out."

### **Beginning the Project**

The project begins with identifying and then studying a particular issue of activist concern. This original impulse must be powerfully felt, representing a passion of the artist. Whether the artist's motivation is solving homelessness, creating peace between warring peoples, furthering civil rights for Kurds in Turkey and Iraq or working against the economic anarchy that so often powers social ills, he must realize that he will live with this subject over the course of months and even years.

After identifying the area of concern, time must be dedicated to better comprehending it. This involves reading, outreach to non-art activists and thinkers in the field of choice, perusing newspapers and magazines to better appreciate the latest aspects of the issue,

taking notes and perhaps even writing. Here, the artist forms his or her bedrock conception of the matter, not simply from emotion or hearsay but from understanding.

I suggest that the activist artist should finish the research phase of the project with a written summary of the issue, as well as an outline of the goals of the project. In terms of specific objectives, a number of markers can be laid out. These might include a target number of people who learn about the issue through the project; money raised to help a non-profit group working on the issue; press attention garnered; liaisons created between individuals and non-profit groups through membership or donation, or between non-profit groups themselves; involvement of other artists in the project, etc. These will stand as baseline goals to help define the project as successful, in a manner that can be understood by all.

Additionally, a specific action plan and timeline should be developed. Although this kind of structure might feel antithetical to the emotionally driven, organic inspiration of artistic creation, this organization is central to moving the activist art project out of the realm of entertainment and personal catharsis, and into the world of real and quantifiable social transformation. The whole project will be built on this foundation, so it must be well considered and solidly constructed.

### **Partnerships**

Once the intellectual structure of the project is in place, the Prophetic Activist Artist should build partnerships. By increasing stakeholders in the venture, involving non-art individuals and institutions, the endeavor takes on a social relevance that allows it to reach far beyond the constricted audience of the art world. These partnerships become pillars of support that also expand the impetus for press coverage, advertising, outreach, sales and a plethora of other socially transformative impulses.

There are three that should be approached to look for these partnerships: 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 Art project.

### **Getting Started: A Non-Profit Partner**

The first group that should be approached is the non-profit component of the project. Nothing will lend more respectability to the activist undertaking in its approach to unconventional exhibition spaces, universities, the media, politicians, business interests and even purchasers of the work than the official inclusion of a non-art NGO working in the same area of concern. Additionally, this relationship will lend the project IRS 501(c)(3) non-profit status, which will make it easier to apply for grants to support different initiatives that are part of the intervention. Lastly, the non-profit group will introduce the art and ideas into a population that already cares deeply about the issues – and will be energized by the artwork and, oftentimes, become personally involved in supporting the project.

Most importantly, by partnering with a non-profit group the project can use its name. I did this in two of my endeavors: The Human Rights Painting Project in conjunction with Amnesty International, and the Amnesty International Human Rights Art Festival. The addition of a name such as Amnesty International immediately adds gravitas to an activist art project.

### **Going Local**

The easiest manner in which to begin working with a non-profit group, even a national or international organization, is to approach a local affiliate. This cuts down on the bureaucracy, making it easier to forge the initial relationship. The artist should approach the group with a strong proposal, leading with ideas of how the host organization will benefit from the association (money donated from sales of art; awareness raised; membership gains; free media and advertising, etc.). A press kit, lists of past exhibits and associations (if there have been any) and letters of support will all help. This should be a professional presentation, dressed for an interview, references in hand and with a strong outline, including a time frame for implementation of the project.

This works best if the artist already has some relationship with the group. When I made my first request to the local Amnesty International group about a “painting fundraiser” (which turned into my ongoing Human Rights Painting Project), I was sitting at

the local meeting as a member. I also allowed them to imagine the project as they would be most comfortable.

In this case, they envisioned a one-time painting fundraiser in a local coffee house. I, on the other hand, thought along the lines of an ongoing, international event with major political and religious leaders involved. I didn’t argue with them. At that stage, I wanted only to attach the Amnesty International moniker to the idea. Once the umbrella group had been successfully secured, I was able to build the endeavor as I saw fit. No non-profit group will complain that a volunteer-driven art event has gotten too big and successful!

### **Political Partners**

Once the non-profit name has been attached to the project, other partnerships can be explored. Individual political and social leaders can be attached under the heading “Honorary Co-Sponsors” or “Honorary Committee” at this early stage of the project (Appendix A), to give the venture a wider range of stakeholders, as well as a sense of social importance.

Although artists may place little value on such liaisons, the point of the project is to bring the ideas to the general public. And these names and titles do have resonance with most people. A Prophetic Activist Art project acknowledges objective reality and masters it, through just such real-world connections.

Although this might chafe against the activist sensibilities of the artist, in that he is approaching the very people against whom he sees himself struggling for the common good, the benefits of these relationships to the success of a project far outweigh any uneasiness that enlisting their support may inspire.

Here, Prophetic Activist Art further separates itself from recent shock-art activism, as well as activist history, which usually has seen art’s role as raising awareness of issues by any means necessary while offering little or no specific direction to forge a better world. To effect real change, however, community and social leaders must be engaged. The social relevance that politicians bring with them and their ability to focus press attention can be co-opted to advance the goals of the project.

By partnering with politicians in a non-confrontational manner on projects centered on the rigid moral and social

consciousness of Prophetic Activism, the political class will be seen as endorsing the activist goals, helping to raise them in importance, as well as presenting the ideas to the general public as acceptable and mainstream.

This highlights another reason why getting a non-profit group involved first is so important. Politicians will be far more likely to sign on to the project if there is already a respected name attached to the project. Politicians feel as wary about artists as artists do about politicians. A respected organization will make them feel as if they are partnering with a known quantity instead of an individual artist.

One should begin looking for political co-sponsors in the same manner as the non-profit group was approached: starting out locally. For instance, I began my search for honorary co-sponsors for the Amnesty International Human Rights Art Festival at a public art unveiling at which I was speaking. Three local politicians, a County Councilwoman, State Representative and State Senator also were present to acknowledge the importance of public art to the community. After we all spoke, I queried them privately as to whether they would lend their names to a human rights art festival, in conjunction with Amnesty International, and they agreed on the spot. I followed up the next day with a confirmation email.

After these three names were attached, it was easier to build out, adding our County Executive and two local U.S. Congressmen, then our state's U.S. Senators and finally major names such as Senators John Kerry (D-MA), Richard Lugar (R-IN), Susan Collins (R-ME) and others. (See Appendix B for a sample letter requesting support.) In every case except the very first, the political figures could look on the letterhead and see names that made them feel comfortable, such as Amnesty International and other politicians. As for the first three political figures, they were dealing with a constituent they knew personally as well as the Amnesty name, making it more comfortable for them to join the endeavor.

Do not underestimate the importance of these relationships. Politicians offer a vital entryway into the public square. If an artist has been able to partner with respectable names, then the general public will believe that the ideas proposed by that artist are officially sanctioned. By politicians signing on to a project as "Honorary Co-Sponsors," as well as perhaps writing a letter of support or showing up to speak for a few minutes at a reception or opening event, they

will have leant a patina of social respectability to the project. Additionally, the media follows politicians, so this will increase the project's visibility.

Politicians can help out in another important manner. Necessary but sometimes recalcitrant community members – art organization directors, civic leaders, community college provosts, local businesspersons and developers – either work indirectly for these politicians as county or state employees, or will feel more inclined to become involved due to the project's evident importance, in response to seeing names they trust attached to the project.

The political support that I garnered for the Amnesty International Human Rights Art Festival was vital in helping me build the event. In many cases, I don't believe I could have secured art spaces or enlisted business support without the political personalities attached to the project. "Tom Block – activist artist" meant little to the local business community, but our local and national leaders' names certainly did.

### **Businesses as Engines of Positive Social Change**

The goal of prophetic art is not to simply assume an air of moral superiority, but to inspire change in the world. This often means dealing in a respectful and mutually beneficial manner with groups that are often viewed in an oppositional way. Business and developer interests represent another vital group with which to engage. Like it or not, this is reality: businessmen and women are social leaders due to their money, influence and constituency. They have a place of consequence in our society.

Connecting with the business community can seem particularly daunting, as many businesses are primarily concerned with one thing: making money. But as Nelson Mandela said: "Seditious thoughts accompany a freedom fighter wherever he goes."<sup>24</sup> Any social group must be seen as a potential partner in the fight for the common good. The true revolutionary utilizes the tools at hand.

<sup>24</sup> Mandela, Nelson, *Long Walk to Freedom*, p. 187.

Our era is one of the best times to partner with business interests. We live in a period of growing social and environmental awareness, when a growing number of consumers make purchasing choices due to a product's positive impact on society. Whether acquiring hybrid automobiles or Fair Trade<sup>25</sup> coffee, consumers support socially beneficial products. This provides an opening to engage businesses in an activist art venture.

There is already precedent for the intersection between business and activist interests. Newspaper columnist Sebastian Mallaby noted in the *Washington Post*:

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.<sup>26</sup>

“Political and social shifts” are trending toward an educated consumer, one who makes purchasing decisions based on environmental and social impact. This dynamic is not hard to discern. For instance, Wal-Mart, the largest retailer in the world, has become more aware of how its business practices affect workers in the out-of-the-country regions where they produce their inexpensive goods. A news report noted: “Wal-Mart stores found a higher rate of severe violations at foreign factories this year, as it stepped up inspections for labor and environmental standards in more than 60 countries where it buys clothes, toys, shoes and other products.”<sup>27</sup> The “stepped up inspections” were due, no doubt, to customer pressure.

Wal-Mart also added an “Environmental Ombudsman” to its staff. The company issued a “Sustainability” pledge stating its broad environmental goals, which include being supplied entirely by renewable energy, creating zero waste and selling products that sustain people and the environment. To what extent Wal-Mart meets these goals is open for review, but the commitment to publicly

state and attempt to live up to them represents a novel business value. Wal-Mart is hardly alone in this movement. Safeway food stores introduced their own brand of organic foodstuffs, under the name: “O!” McDonald’s fast-food chain began a partnership with Newman’s Organics to sell organic coffee in more than 650 New England restaurants. Both organic and Fair Trade products are experiencing 20% growth year after year, far outpacing the economy’s growth, which recently has expanded around 2% a year.

Do you believe either Wal-Mart’s environmental and labor reforms or the corporate movement toward organic foods has grown out of a spiritual awakening in the business community? Heck no! It’s good business. As consumers become more aware of the inter-relatedness of markets and the environment, as well as how important their purchasing decisions are in healing the world, many of them redirect their spending accordingly.

### **A Partnership Based on Mutual Need**

If corporations are taking such steps on their own, they might be interested in partnering with activist artists as a manner in which to raise their positive profile. A business collaborator can do much to help a Prophetic Activist Art project in terms of money, advertising, in-kind support and general visibility.

Granted, this kind of partnership can and should make the artist nervous. The question can fairly be asked: who is co-opting whom? The business community is in a much better position to use artists (think only of Altria/Philip Morris or Absolut Vodka’s work with artists for their advertising) than vice versa. However, as long as Prophetic Activist Artists remains rock-solid in the commitment to their ideals, this is a risk worth taking. If the artist is certain to never compromise artistically, philosophically or spiritually, then the relationship can be a positive one for the project.

To help safeguard the project, the activist must be willing to give up the business relationship at any time if he is asked to do something that doesn’t sync with the prophetic goals. It is necessary for the artist to be completely clear on the terms of the partnership from the outset.

For instance, it makes no sense to allow the art to become part of the product advertisement scheme. Instead of more widely

<sup>25</sup> A market-based approach that helps producers in developing countries obtain better trading conditions and promote sustainability.

<sup>26</sup> Mallaby, Sebastian, “A New Brand of Power,” *Washington Post*, (August 7, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> National Briefing, *Washington Post*, (September 28, 2006).

publicizing the activist message, this method will do little but denigrate the artist's intention. Difficult though it will be to retain the proper balance, the business interest must remain in service to the activist art project and not vice versa. The artist will retain control over how the business name and products are utilized in conjunction with the endeavor.

### **Strategies for Partnership**

To facilitate working with small and large businesses, as well as property developers, prophetic activists must learn to use language and symbolism that will facilitate those social leaders' appreciation for the project. Most in the business community will respond to slick packaging and a savvy understanding of the "marketplace." If the ideas and art are presented in a form that feels familiar, business interests will be more likely to become involved. This does not mean changing the art or its message in any way, just the manner in which it is presented as part of a proposal.

Knowing how to talk about issues such as price points, selling pressure, stakeholders and re-imagining a business is very important. In fact, you might even refer to your project proposal as a "business plan." It is not necessary to become an advertising executive, but a bit of sensitivity to the manner in which people in different fields think—and process their reality and sense of worth—will go a long way in selling a project to a potential partner.

It is also vital to point out to the corporation what's in it for them. Prophetic Activism is predicated on "win-win" situations, and this dynamic is no clearer than in linking with for-profit companies. For instance, when I was gathering business support for the Amnesty International Human Rights Art Festival, I spoke of the event as an economic stimulus package.

In return for businesses providing in-kind support like venue space, window advertising and outreach to their customers, they would receive dollars via the extra customers attracted by the Festival, as well as free advertising from media coverage. The re-imagining of the area as an arts destination was also discussed. Through this strategy, I ended up involving more than 30 different businesses, including a shopping mall, two property developers and more than two-dozen restaurants, and even was offered an in-kind donation

from a trophy and award store.

Although I did not hide the content of the Festival (though, human rights artwork!), I highlighted what the businesses' participation would bring to them. I also spoke with the county Economic Development Office, explaining in specific terms how we would use the Festival to attract customers to local businesses. We left each establishment with an economic impact study to fill out after the event (Appendix C) to help us do a better job for them the next time. All of these actions made our business partners feel as if we were working with them, and on their terms. In this way, we ended with a wide range of venues and a unique Festival threading the art and ideas throughout the community.

### **Increasing Community Stakeholders**

Once these major pillars of support are in place, attracting community volunteers to a Prophetic Activist Art project becomes easier. Polls often show that many, if not most, people in our country are in agreement with the ideals and specific legislative solutions proposed within the prophetic activist tradition (helping the poor, working for a healthier planet, diplomacy rather than war as a means of solving geopolitical conflict, etc.). These principles represent the world that they want, too. A major sticking point in getting people involved as volunteers in an endeavor, however, is that the issues of concern are so vast, and their own free time and energy so limited, that they often feel hopeless.

A Prophetic Activist Art project organizes the ineffable desire for a better world into specific and quantifiable actions. This dynamic goes far in attracting volunteers. Instead of asking people to master the entire issue, the project comprises particular tasks, such as graphic design for posters, catalogues or t-shirts; press outreach; volunteer coordination; website design; community and business liaison work; staffing tables and venues, and other aspects of the endeavor. In this way, people with diverse skills can find their own manner of helping that is within their comfort level and time availability.

In my art activist endeavors, I have worked with many people who have volunteered various skills. I have been amazed at the willingness of people to work, often deep into the night, for no money and seemingly little recompense. They were fueled solely by the desire

to use their talents to help heal the world.

For instance, in conjunction with my Human Rights Painting Project, I wanted to create a catalogue that paired images of my paintings with biographies of the human rights defenders, using this document as a manner of outreach as well as a fundraising tool for the umbrella non-profit group, Amnesty International (Appendix D). This presented numerous specific opportunities for engagement, all of which brought more stakeholders to the project.

A local Amnesty International volunteer, who was an environmental scientist, offered to write the biographies of the people, because she wanted the chance to do some creative writing as well as help the organization. A professional photographer donated his services to document the art. A graphic designer, who said that she loved Amnesty International but never knew exactly how best to help the group, designed the catalogue. Two different writers proofread the text. Another person re-directed his very nice yearly donation from Amnesty International USA to pay for the printing of the catalogue, still receiving the charitable tax. The entire process ended with zero dollars out of pocket from the project and 2500 copies of a beautiful, four-color catalogue. The catalogues were then sold for ten dollars each, with the complete sales price donated to Amnesty International, helping to raise thousands of dollars for the host group.

This aspect of a Prophetic Activist Art venture should not be underestimated. Not only is the artist able to achieve many goals with the help of volunteers, but also these specific tasks coalesce energy working for the common good. Many people wish to use their skills to better the world, but sometimes don't know where to begin. By offering individual specific tasks, the project can engage community members. After finishing work on the project, these people often are inspired to seek out other creative volunteer opportunities, with a better sense of exactly what they might offer and how to offer it.

Like so many other aspects of a successful activist art venture, this is a "win-win" dynamic, with the project expanding its outreach through the work offered by volunteers, and the volunteers gaining an understanding of how valuable their particular skills can be in helping the struggle for positive social transformation.

### **Infiltration Techniques: Language**

Once these aspects of the project have been solidified, the focus of the endeavor turns outward. The artist must conceive of fresh manners to amplify the ideas, expanding the audience to include as many members of society as possible. Most artists feel that their innovation is necessary only within the context of a personal creative search. However, the Prophetic Activist Art model demands far more resourcefulness from the artist. He or she must be part social philosopher, part psychologist and a touch, even, of the Madison Avenue shyster.

There is no reason not to learn marketing strategies from the advertisers and political advisors that inhabit the public square. Language can be thought of in terms of "packaging." Using the idiom of the mainstream media and those in power will help the ideas be more easily appreciated by the general public. In this model, "peace" becomes "security;" and vocabulary like "patriotic," "courageous" and "safety" might become the watchwords of justice-oriented activist projects. And far from being leftist or out of touch, a group like Amnesty International safeguards the "quintessential American values of human rights and justice for all, as they are enshrined in the Constitution of the United States."

This use of the language of power in no way demeans the activist impulse or its goals, but it does present these ideas in a manner that even a conservative source like Fox News might appreciate! And since the ultimate goal is outreach and social change, representing the highest mystical possibility of activism, methods perfected by the keepers of the status quo can be co-opted and used to undermine those very same forces.

### **Infiltration Techniques: Venues**

Within the Prophetic Activist Art tradition, the gallery/museum world is the least important venue. In its place, the artist looks for alternative sites and methods to exhibit the art and its inspiring message. If people won't come to the gallery to see the art (and few do), then the art must go to the people.

There are numerous possibilities. Official public art projects; "guerrilla" art in public places; exhibition venues such as libraries,



transit centers, restaurants and universities; in advertising spaces; through partnerships with like minded non-profit and other groups, academics, activists and other artists – any and every opportunity to bring the art to wider audiences must be explored. Once in these spaces, the unique beauty and relevant message will attract a much more diverse group of spectators than the miniscule numbers that frequent “high art” galleries and museums with exorbitant entrance fees.

Public art is one obvious outlet for a Prophetic Activist Art project. There are many mainstream manners of winning grants or applying to requests for proposals from towns and cities looking to install interesting artwork in public spaces. These are certainly viable alternatives, although they can also be quite difficult to attain, as requests for proposals often attract hundreds of artists for every open slot. It might well take years of applying for these projects before being accepted for one.

Barring one of these commissions, artists can go “guerrilla” in their search for far-reaching infiltration. For instance, a prophet artist might produce inexpensive color photocopies of his or her activist work and then place them clandestinely on elevator walls, in stairwells or even in public bathroom stalls. To be fully respectful, use easy-to-remove two-sided tape. (Appendix E). Imagine how much of an impact these small prophetic moments can have when surprising people as they go through the course of a normal day! Art is much more powerful when the act of contemplating it comes as a surprise. Perhaps the audience might not be sure if it is “art” or “advertising,” thereby adding to its effect.

### **Infiltration Techniques: Ancillary Products**

The art can serve as an 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, inexpensive prints, playing cards, products created through liaisons with other artists, writers or photographers: any manner of disseminating the work and ideas to a greater public, even utilizing “pop culture” methods, should be explored. People who are able to purchase some aspect of the project, no matter how small or inexpensive, will have been turned into stakeholders, as well as returning with it to their home to share with other members of their

household. If part or all of the money from the sale of these goods is donated to the host NGO, then the positive impulse of the project will be that much greater.

Pop-culture events can also be wrapped into the endeavor. A “Poker for Peace” fundraiser will bring out a unique audience. An Ethiopian coffee ceremony for a project concerning Africa or Ethiopia; food tasting for a hunger-oriented project; a children’s picture drawing party to send cards to incarcerated human rights defenders; a contest to build small models of moveable homes for a homeless project – any creative manner of expanding the profile and audience of a project should be considered and, if feasible, undertaken. Each of these facets is an infiltration vector, another manner of attracting new people to the endeavor and raising the profile of the issues with the general public as well as the media.

### **The Media**

There is no more important megaphone than the news media. Engagement with the press helps the endeavor’s ideas be more widely disseminated. Once the project is in its implementation stage, attracting media coverage is a central goal.

This model of activist art can play a vital role in focusing media attention on an ongoing issue, such as human rights abuses in the American penal system, the continuing destruction of the Tibetan homeland or any number of other issues. As BBC journalist Jake Lynch suggested,<sup>28</sup> the media covers events, not processes. Journalists who create a general sense of reality often overlook aspects of life which don’t lend themselves easily to a start and finish point, or can be captured in a 1000-word article. For instance, few journalists will follow the difficult and perhaps never-ending work of bringing a sense of respect for women in tribal regions of places like Burma, Lesotho, Waziristan or Utah. They will, however, cover a single, sensational rape story, though often without contextualizing it within the greater narrative of horrific treatment against women.

The Prophetic Activist Artist can overcome this journalistic deficiency by transforming the energy of an ongoing process into an

<sup>28</sup> Lynch, Jake, *Keynote Speaker* (Calgary, Canada: University of Calgary, International Peace Research Association Biennial Conference), July 1, 2006.

event, like a magnifying glass concentrating the sun's rays. An art exhibit or activist project concerned with ongoing peace and justice processes is an "event." It operates in unique ways to focus the issues, attract the press and help raise the awareness of the underlying and ongoing progression of the particular struggle. By collapsing processes into events, art can shine the spotlight on important work in numerous peace and justice fields.

There are numerous strategies for gaining press attention. The first and most important is to have press releases (Appendix F) sent out by as many partners as possible, spearheaded by the partner organization. These should go to a very wide press list, from local bloggers and community newspapers to the largest national press organs, and television and radio stations. For the Amnesty International Human Rights Art Festival, we had a press list of more than 200 different contacts. Each one received at least four different press releases. Additionally, many of these reporters got follow-up phone calls from one of our volunteers. In the end, we had two TV sponsors, two radio sponsors, coverage in more than a half-dozen newspapers and on numerous blogs, and live television coverage of our opening ceremonies.

If journalists receive a single press release from the artist, they may or may not become interested. But if they receive notices from the producer of the event, the non-profit group, a politician, the local government offices and others, the venture will appear important and newsworthy.

Another manner of engaging press attention is to have a kick-off event with political and social leaders speaking. This encompasses the ideas and ongoing process of the activist project in a specific time and place, giving the media something on which to focus. If there are local and/or nationally known political or artistic personalities involved, there is a better chance of getting coverage.

A third manner of press outreach is via non-traditional media. Notices and articles can be posted on blogs, listservs and Facebook pages; covered by issue-oriented (though non-art) press; and disseminated by local radio and TV stations and other media that might be a "off the radar," but still offer an outlet to the general public. Any coverage is good coverage, and one builds a press kit and project portfolio the same way the original structures of the project were set in place: from the smaller to the larger, local to regional to national.

### **Expanding Vectors, Expanding Support**

Expanding the infiltrative vectors of the project is vital. An honored speaker might attract people who have no interest in the art, while an art fan may be introduced to the important issues via the creativity inspired by the ideas. This is another area where Prophetic Activist Artists must think creatively, as they devise new manners of attracting different audiences to the project. Panel discussions with artists and activists; movies followed by dialogues on the themes of the project; lectures by experts in the field; appearances by actors or musicians willing to lend their voice to the endeavor; concerts, and any other event that will introduce a widening audience to the project should be explored.

Also mine popular culture for ideas. Videotaping and then posting comments about the art and issues to YouTube or other web vehicles expands the outreach. Inviting comments via a website or blog, holding mock game-show type activities, mimicking reality TV or a favorite sitcom, making a short documentary, holding poetry slams and spoken word events, sponsoring activist cooking classes: any creative outlet centering on the themes of the intervention can expand interest.

### **Colescing a Community**

A Prophetic Activist Art project can coalesce a specific community out of the general society, bringing together individuals who otherwise might not have come in contact with each other. A series of lectures, cultural events and other one-time activities associated with the venture will attract different audiences from the general public, mixing and matching a widening circle of concerned citizens.

This manner of attracting an audience and then, from that group, creating a collective centered on the issue is vital. Once a collective has been identified, the project can get them to sign a petition, write letters on behalf of the issue, join the sponsoring non-profit organization and/or offer whatever artistic or volunteer talents they might have. This creates community. Here, the full breadth of society can be engaged, one person at a time.

The ultimate goal is to turn the disparate audience into a

political force: a like-minded collective that can work together to help inspire positive social transformation. When the impetus (i.e. numbers of people who can be counted as supporters in some verifiable manner) for the issue grows to a certain point, the political leadership is likely to acknowledge the concern of these constituents and perhaps even offer legislative responses. The activist project has now created a “voting bloc,” a group of people energized by the concern, who may judge their political representatives by how they (the politicians) react to it.

### **Bringing Groups Together**

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 are at odds with each other due to social or political reasons. The bridge between like-minded groups is easiest to create, but also essential, as it can exponentially increase positive energy. The first exhibit of my Human Rights Painting Project provided a perfect example of this multiplicative energy. It began an alliance that continues to this day.

The inaugural exhibit of those works took place at the AFL-CIO labor union headquarters in Washington D.C. in 2002. At this time, the AFL-CIO was emerging from a troubled period in which it had been on the wrong side of some human rights issues in Central America, siding with various dictatorial governments and against the general will of the people in those countries, due to what its leaders perceived as our own domestic labor interests. The curator of the exhibit related that the president of the AFL-CIO wanted to use this exhibition and collaboration with Amnesty International to highlight the organization’s renewed commitment to human rights issues.

At the opening reception, the President of the AFL-CIO and the Executive Director of Amnesty International spent some time together in the President’s office. There, they pledged that they would work together on issues where they found common cause (Appendix G). That began a relationship which continues to this day, with the AFL-CIO and Amnesty International partnering on various initiatives.

The Human Rights Painting Project did not cause this partnership. However, the art project did provide the impetus for these leaders

to meet, and in a positive and non-confrontational environment. It offered a fertile ground for a fresh start. The spark provided by the art endeavor tinderred an ongoing relationship, bringing the two groups together to pool their resources on issues of common concern.

### **Bringing Enemies Together**

Art also can provide a non-threatening environment in which oppositional groups can gather, creating the space for further collaborations and perhaps, in rare cases, the cessation of hostilities. Because art operates outside of the political realm and because

Prophetic Activist Art focuses on illuminating positive aspects of the human character – something that all people feel is inherent to their particular group and cause – a Prophetic Activist Art project can provide a platform for rapprochement between two conflicted parties.

For example, a peace-oriented art project might offer the first bridge between countries like Syria and Israel or between leaders of religious institutions such as the Pope and Muslim Imams. The art itself could point to similarities in beliefs or even history. In the case of Syria and Israel, for instance, this might mean art based on shared beliefs between Jews and Muslims, or representing past spiritual leaders that are revered by both sides, such as the Biblical Moses (also a central figure in the Koran) or medieval religious masters who enlightened both the Jewish and Islamic spheres. Shared history might inspire the art project, and create an atmosphere for reconciliation.

Of course this is no mean feat. To act as a go-between for oppositional political or ethnic interests, the art must be viewed as positive from both sides. This dynamic becomes especially delicate when activist art attempts to insert itself into a contemporary political situation, as nerves are raw and tensions extremely high. The artist must offer work and a demeanor that soothes.

Prophetic Activist Artists must look for ways to maximize the healing aspect of their project. At the same time, they should try to make certain that “justice” means equal rights for both sides in a conflict, not simply flipping the power dynamic so the erstwhile victims can vent their spleen on their one-time oppressors, whether in Bosnia/Serbia, Palestine/Israel, South Africa or other conflict areas.

## Uplifting Spirits

Lastly, never underestimate the importance of uplifting the spirits of those striving to make the world a better place. We live in a culture where much respect flows to money and power: social workers and elementary school teachers need not apply. Imagine how much less “respectable” must be people who commit their skills to something as un-remunerative as the struggle for human rights, or peace in a far-off land.

The activist artist, by spending his or her time and considerable talents bringing attention to social issues and doing so through beauty, gives these toiling souls a sense of existential worth, a pat on the back, a feeling of pride that they, through their devotion, have had some part in the creation of the art. This aspect of a project should not be overlooked. Though it is difficult to quantify or test, a gentle pat on the back to those underappreciated persons does much to help them continue to battle for the common good.

To make a difference, art activism must be based in art’s historic purpose: that of highlighting the human connection to the universal life force. Through inspiring action, it can reinsert this subtle but very powerful presence into our seemingly banal world. This is healing energy. Expanding it within the general society is the goal of Prophetic Activist Art. Artists must leave the field of angry (and often irrelevant) social commentary to the pundits who hold forth on the Sunday news programs.

## Accountability and Results

This model requires accountability and results. Our society demands nothing less.

Bringing together medieval concepts of legislative prophecy with the reality of our era means that the average person must be able to see worth in the endeavor. Prophetic Activist Art coalesces the inefable energy driving the prophet-artist in such a way that it can be appreciated within mainstream culture.

Projects must be judged by a series of specific markers. This separates Prophetic Activist Art even further from recent ideas of art’s purpose which, even when inspired by the spirit, often have offered little more than a wish, dream or blind hope. Prophetic

Activist Art relates to the world on society’s terms, affecting it in ways that even a newspaper reporter can appreciate.

What follows are a series of measurable markers providing a means of judging whether a Prophetic Activist Art project is truly making a difference. Although specific indicators of success will be different for each project and individual artist, these goals help define the impact of the prophetic endeavor.

It is vital to appreciate the importance of quantifiable results to this model. Through these achievements, the prophetic undertaking moves its impact out of the art world, and into the real world. It is through these effects that the circle is closed between art, prophecy and contemporary society.

Here are a few examples of specific indicators that might indicate the success of a project:

- The list of national and international political, religious and social leaders who sign on to the project as honorary co-sponsors.
- Press generated about the project and issue.
- Number of exhibits and events generated by the project.
- Funding received from outside sources.
- Ancillary products to expand outreach, such as notecards, catalogues, t-shirts, posters, etc.
- Money collected from the sale of art and ancillary products for donation to non-profit organizations working in the area of concern.
- Number of volunteers engaged.
- Liaisons built among different non-profit organizations and individuals with interest in the issue at hand.
- Petitions signed.
- Legislation inspired.
- Elected leaders supported or exposed.

Judging an activist art project by specific indicators is perhaps the most foreign aspect of this paradigm. Many people become artists to get away from this kind of goal-oriented thinking. However, if one wants to accept the mantle of Prophetic Activism, he or she must be willing to operate within the society, influencing it on its own terms.

Otherwise, the artist – no matter how sincere or visually successful – remains little more than a cultural curio.