

Radical positions

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1 Anna Minton, Down to a fine art, Society Guardian, 10 January 2007, republished with kind permission on www.a-n.co.uk/radical_positions

Cover:
Lida Abdul, *White house*, Kabul, 16mm transfer to DVD, 4'58", 2005.

Courtesy: The artist and Giorgio Persano Gallery



Foreword

On the occasion of Sharjah Biennial 8, 'Still Life: Art, Ecology and the Politics of Change', this a-n Collection focuses on creative processes at the intersections between art, radical politics and the environment. The full collection held on www.a-n.co.uk/radical_positions features articles from a-n's archive, which has borne longstanding witness to artists' socially engaged practices and networks, alongside republished specialist research and new artists' profiles. Manick Govinda's essay discusses artists and curators who problematise the current 'environmental emergency'. As Michaela Crimmin of RSA (Royal Society of Arts) said "It's about habitats, social issues and survival... from biodiversity... through to conflict and poverty"¹. Curator Kate Fowle's a-n interview with Russian artist Anatoly Osmolovsky back in 2001 characterised the embedded and almost barometric pressure placed on an artist's role in shifting socio-political climates, when Osmolovsky spoke of the trigger to re-align his practice: "When the general cultural climate changes in such a radical way that basic functions of contemporary art are no longer required". As platformed in Sharjah, artists' actions and often non-commercial working practices valuably highlight our shifting cultural climate and appeal to our personal feelings of responsibility about our impact in the world.

Louise Wirz, Director of Development & Publisher

Born in Kabul, Afghanistan in 1973, Lida Abdul currently resides there, having lived as a refugee in Germany and India. Her work fuses the tropes of 'Western' formalism with the numerous aesthetic traditions – Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, pagan and nomadic – that collectively influenced Afghan art and culture. Recently, Abdul has worked in different parts of Afghanistan on projects exploring the relationship between architecture, identity and memory. She has worked in many media including video, film, photography, installation and live performance. www.lidaabdul.com
 Read Kim Dhillon's profile of Lida Abdul on www.a-n.co.uk/radical_positions

Radical positions

It would seem that politics has taken centre stage in contemporary art. A quick scan of recent exhibitions reveals a range of provocative shows such as the group show 'Paranoia' at the Freud Museum¹, Mark Wallinger's 'State Britain' at Tate Modern complete with the parental warning that the display "contains images of human suffering which some visitors may find distressing"²; 'Lapdogs of the Bourgeoisie: Class Hegemony in Contemporary Art' at Gasworks, and the 2nd Seville Biennial: 'Unhomely: Phantom Scenes in Global Society'.

Sharjah Biennial 8 is a major contribution to this direct engagement between art and politics³. The frisson between art, freedom, ecology and cultural tradition is strongly felt in Sharjah, a princely state that is part of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Ruled by a dynastic royal family that, politically, has had a 'special relationship' with Great Britain since the early nineteenth century, as the strategic location for trade (bordering the Persian Gulf) with India and the Far East, meant that during the era of the British Empire, the ruling family was allowed to govern its lands under a special treaty with the British monarch.

The UAE is also rooted in Arab and Islamic Culture; oil and gas are its only natural resources and its labour force is comprised almost exclusively of expatriates and migrant workers, professionals from the USA, Europe and Japan, to unskilled labourers and servants from South Asia, the Philippines, China and Vietnam. The population of UAE is 4.1 million, of which a little over twenty per cent are actually UAE nationals or citizens.

Such a social-political-economic context begs the question: why is the 8th Sharjah Biennial focusing on Art, Ecology and the Politics of Change? Perhaps change is afoot. The director of the biennial, Hoor Al Qasimi, is twenty-six years old and currently completing an MA in Curating Contemporary Art at the Royal College of Art, London. She is also the daughter of Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammed Al-Qasimi, the emirate's ruler since 1972. As a new generation of leadership develops, change may take a long time, but the immediate answer is that the organisers want to make an important and timely contribution to the role of art in social and political discourse, internationally *and* locally.

Sharjah's location within the Middle East means that it neighbours with territories at the centre of international conflicts. Not to engage with the big issues of environmental and global politics would be a case of burying its head in the sand. Over eighty artists from all over the world are taking part in the Biennial, but most importantly, twenty-eight of these artists are from the Arab worlds.

Jonathan Watkins, Director of Birmingham's IKON Gallery and one of three invited curators of Sharjah Biennial 8, comments that the event "is a positive contribution to an activism in the face of looming threat. It favours openness as opposed to insulation, falling within other attempts to merge together art, society, and environmental issues. It is not intended as a judgemental exercise, telling people how to live their lives, but aims instead to point at urgent concerns in the light of contemporary culture, in its broadest sense. This Biennial is at once a celebration of the natural world and a response to the countless alarms being set off as a result of human thoughtlessness, a concerted effort to convey poignant observations on the seriousness of the impact we have and the extent of our responsibility."

Artists invited to develop new, and sometimes challenging site-specific commissions include e-Xplo, Graham Gussin and Lara Almarcegui. Existing work of relevance to the themes include work by Gustav Metzger, Zineb Sedira and Lara Baladi among many others.

Gustav Metzger is probably one of the most interesting figures included in the Biennial. A recent recipient of the Paul Hamlyn Foundation Visual Arts Award, his work has uncompromisingly critiqued and attacked the horrors of man's

1 Press Release, 'PARANOIA' Exhibition at the Freud Museum
www.freud.org.uk/paranoia.htm

2 Mark Wallinger, 'State Britain' at Tate Britain, www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/wallinger/

3 'STILL LIFE: Art, Ecology and the Politics of Change', Sharjah Biennial 8, United Arab Emirates, 4 April - 4 June 2007
www.sharjahbiennial.org



Lida Abdul, *Brick sellers of Kabul*, Kabul, 16mm film transfer to DVD, 6'00", 2006.

Courtesy: The artist and Giorgio Persano Gallery



Lida Abdul, *Clapping with stones*, Bamiyan, 16mm transfer to DVD, 4'50", 2005.

Courtesy: The artist and Giorgio Persano Gallery

destruction of other people and the planet. Born in 1926 in Nuremberg, Germany to Jewish-Polish parents, he came to Britain as a refugee in 1939 when the Nazi persecution of Jews intensified. Metzger has lived the horrors of the twentieth century, not only witnessing the evil of Nazism, but also bearing witness and being a social agent of resistance against the Vietnam War and the Arab-Israeli conflict. He was imprisoned as a CND activist in the early 60s. Many of his ambitious experimental installations were never realised. One of them, a 1972 proposal for the UN Environmental conference in Stockholm, is produced for the first time by the Sharjah Biennial, 120 cars connected to a transparent square structure creating a cloud of black dust on the top of the structure when the cars overheat.

Thirty-five years on, the proposal is even more poignant and controversial than when he first conceived of the idea for the Documenta 5 in Kassel (a modest four-car project at the time) and for the UN conference in Stockholm. Metzger's work is still challenging and outrageous, showing a political engagement that is not merely protest. Metzger shuns the cult of celebrity, living modestly and without email, telephone or fax in the East End of London⁴. The uneasiness of witnessing such a spectacular work in the oil-rich UAE raises many dialectical questions.

Metzger comes from a romantic tradition of the artist as rebel, depicting the world as brutal, violent, dehumanised and oppressive. The viewer confronts the horror head-on. Jack Persekian, Artistic Director of this year's Biennial sees the role of artists as "provocateurs, taboo breakers, cultural activists and members of society *engaged* on all levels." He has a formidable knowledge of the contemporary Arab art scene, as he is the founding director of The Anadiel Gallery and the Al-Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art in East Jerusalem⁵. His view of the art world is not the decadent wealthy display of the Art Fairs. He supports emerging artists from the Arab worlds, particularly Palestinian artists. Al-Ma'mal means 'workshop' in Arabic, and the organisation runs many community and educational programmes in East Jerusalem.

This form of 'socially-engaged art' is not driven by the same forces as those of Britain, where Government funding policy has practically shoe-horned this strategy of creative engagement to one of shallow participation and PR-spin agendas such as the misuse of drugs, anti-social behaviour and yes, climate change. As Jane Trowell, one of three directors of Platorm, stated in her talk on *Art, Education, Activism* at the Ikon Gallery Birmingham: "Most artists in our society need money, but a sudden interest in 'socially engaged' arts practice driven by funding can often be a short road to real disaster for all concerned – we can tell stories of woefully prepared and inadequately supported artists being completely overwhelmed by the social reality of their project. More alarmingly, we can all tell stories where the seemingly well-intentioned project resulted in a 'disadvantaged community' feeling more misunderstood, confused, abused and cynical than ever as a result. Beware the

⁴ Alison Jones, *Introduction to the Historic Photographs of Gustav Metzger*, University College London, Forum for Holocaust Studies, 1998 www.ucl.ac.uk/forum-for-holocaust-studies/metzger.html

⁵ www.almamal.foundation.org/



Lida Abdul, *Tree*, 16mm film transfer to DVD, 3'40, 2005.

Courtesy: The artist and Giorgio Persano Gallery



Lida Abdul, *White house*, Kabul, 16mm transfer to DVD, 4'58", 2005.

Courtesy: The artist and Giorgio Persano Gallery

position of artist as canary; sent in to test how hostile the environment is... Beware the position of the artist as paperer-over-cracks.”⁶

The Sharjah Biennial is an initiative of, and produced by the Department of Culture and Information of the Emirate of Sharjah. This is classic philanthropy supported by local sponsorship, albeit at a centralised level. But a relative autonomy is also at play as the Biennial strives to contribute to addressing the big questions of the contemporary world. Persekian adds that “the Biennial proposes ideas”, and that the contribution to the discussions by successful artists from the USA and Western Europe “*becomes* a humbling experience.” He is particularly addressing invited artists who also court the big brash commercial art fairs of the Western world. Over fifty per cent of the work is newly produced for Sharjah.

Persekian is a strong believer of the transformational potential of art as a collaborative relationship with local people. “International artists and intellectuals bring discussions to the table. They don’t come to slap locals in the face; they take the social and cultural context into consideration. The local people are open for that kind of dialogue.” I asked him for examples of this form of creative engagement, artists who work differently to the direct approach of someone like Metzger. He cited e-Xplo.

e-Xplo are three artists based in New York and Berlin who work as a group. Erin McGonigle, Heimo Lattner and Rene Gabri see this framework for collaborative practice as a way to engage with and investigate location, context, social identity, landscape, and the public space of information. For Sharjah, they invited Ayreen Anastas to work with them. A glance at their website articulates clearly the contradictory forces at play between politics and the social context of Sharjah:

“The political circumstances in the UAE are by no means the worst in the world; however, at least when one reads about the Emirates, it appears as though there could be no more ideal situation for corporations. A state as not only a shelter for corporations, but a state as a corporation. Its citizens, the few, its shareholders. Foreign workers... comprise the majority of the workers in the country. For these same reasons, however we have been extremely curious about Sharjah and Dubai and the social, ecological, political, and economic conditions in the area.”⁷

The project is called *Workers Voices*. e-Xplo came to Sharjah and did the research and recorded songs from fifteen nationalities of people who work in Sharjah – from Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, Iran, Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Iraq and the Philippines to name some. e-Xplo got the participants to sing a song in whatever social context they chose. They were even invited to weddings. A CD of the songs has been produced and the songs are played back in the social locations of where they were recorded – mainly workplaces. The project aims to “call attention to their voices, which politically speaking remain unheard. What unfolds in the process is a series of encounters and disjointed glimpses into the possible

6 Jane Trowell, ‘Art, Education, Activism’ presented at Seminar 1, Artist as Educator, IKON Gallery Birmingham 12-13 May 2003 as part of interrupt: artists in socially engaged practice, first published www.interrupt-symposia.org, 2003. Re-published by kind permission on www.a-n.co.uk/radical_positions

7 www.e-xplo.org/ahead.htm

future of labourers worldwide.” The USA’s double-edged dependence on migrant workers from Mexico, while increasing its militaristic-style border controls, is the most obvious example.

e-Xplo’s research into Sharjah also brings attention to what they describe as “the dream factory or utopian wing” of neo-liberal expansion in contrast to the military expansionism in Iraq and Afghanistan. “The UAE presents an incredible picture of how in fact neo-liberalism has not only reached every edge of the globe, but has actually taken hold and re-fashioned itself through these edges.” This is not a far cry from JG Ballard’s dystopic visions of future cities.

The Sharjah Biennial wants to engage with science and art, and as Jack Persekian describes it, “to dream the future”. The symposium brings artists, scientists, practitioners and people from other sectors together to debate ecological issues and find solutions to what is now described by the media as an issue that could lead to global catastrophe in less than 100 years.⁸ Such scare-mongering tactics need to be discussed and science and art could pose the solutions rather than the morally draconian consequences of closing ourselves in physically in order to be carbon-neutral⁹. Jack Persekian has no time for such Western liberal guilt nonsense such as carbon off-setting; “there are bigger social issues to deal with”.

Environmental issues now dominate both cultural and social spheres. Grassroots green activism is now mainstream business high-handed moral superiority. Austin Williams from Future Cities Project, notes that: “The logical consequence of an unquestioning acceptance of limits, reduced resource use and individual responsibility – the essential ingredients of the environmental agenda – is a tendency towards small-thinking, while pretending that we’re looking at the Big Picture.”¹⁰

Two organisations with strong activist positions are Platform and The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination, who in radically different ways are tackling ‘the big picture’. Recently they collaborated on a sound art commission. James Marriott (co-director of Platform) and John Jordan (co-founder of LOII, and a former director of Platform) commissioned composer Isa Suarez to work with them on a project that critically maps the effects and causes of climate catastrophe and peak oil within London’s financial district. The sound-work is a guided walk, available as a free downloadable MP3 file that guides the listener across the cityscape, weaving stories of London past, present and future. Some of the material for the soundtrack came from interviews with people who have been involved in working against and within the oil industry, exploring the relationship between oil and London.¹¹

Artist and writer Emma Safe makes the case for environmental engaged art: “As soon as the world’s natural habitats are viewed as an active rather than passive environment, and when we understand ourselves to be within, not above or beyond, ecological processes, then it becomes clear that environmental action is not about putting nature before people, nor is it a hopelessly idealised practice founded in some cranky moral crusade to save the world’s insect populations. Rather, it is in its synthesis with conservation that art can perform its most truly social and human task.”¹²

There is nothing new about the politically committed artist who wants to make us look at the world differently or protest against social or political injustice. From Hogarth to Picasso to the Chapman Brothers we see political satire and the horrors of war depicted to great visual effect. However, the area of social activism, art practice, collaboration, building dialogues and relationships with communities of interests (whether that is a local housing project or working with international pressure groups) have become potent spaces for artists to contribute towards influencing social change or discourse. “I know what I want to do as an artist with political activist ideas; I want to open my world to other people, using any medium to make my ideas visible.” Thus spoke Yara El-Sherbini in in 2003¹³, but more recently El-Sherbini felt

8 5-6 April 2007 at American University of Sharjah, presented in collaboration with the Royal Society of Arts, London and the curatorial practice latitudes, Barcelona, on the theme of Art and Ecology, following the RSA Art and Ecology conference at the London School of Economics and Political Science, in December 2006.

9 Josie Appleton, ‘Life’s too short to be carbon neutral’, 15 January 2007 www.spiked-online.com/index.php?/site/article/2710/

10 Austin Williams, ‘Eating the greens’, 18 February 2007 www.futurecities.org.uk/articles/art01072.html

11 John Jordan, James Marriott and Isa Suarez, *And While London Burns* can be downloaded at www.andwhilelondonburns.com

12 Emma Safe, ‘Artists Save the World?’ *a-n Magazine*, April 2001

13 Yara El-Sherbini, ‘Yara El-Sherbini’ *a-n Magazine*, November 2003

uneasy about the preaching nature of her approach, and has adopted a more playful and subtle form of engagement via the pub-quiz format. Using humour, general knowledge questions about the media, culture and politics she gently plants uneasy thoughts and questions into the players' thinking on race and the war on terror debate. Currently the pub quiz has taken place in cultural settings (Tate Britain, Rich Mix in East London, The Brewhouse in Taunton) but, depending on the ethnic and social diversity of the players, the art engagement depends on how the players perform to the quizmaster's questions, such as: "Name one movie in which an Arab was not shown as either a bomber, a belly dancer or a billionaire?"

The War Against Terror is perhaps the next biggest global issue that has engendered panic and fear in Western society. US Steve Kurtz of The Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) was arrested in May 2004 following a 911 call to get emergency help for his wife who died of a heart attack. The US Buffalo police became alarmed by the presence of art materials in their home which consisted of several Petri dishes containing harmless bacteria and scientific equipment which would be used in socially engaged performances, to test genetically modified food brought in by the public, and charged Kurtz as a potential bio-terrorist. The charge of bio-terrorism was dropped but The Grand Jury handed down two charges each of "mail fraud" and "wire fraud", both of which can carry up to twenty years' imprisonment. CAE's work explores the intersections between art, science, radical politics and critical theory. Their position paper *When Thought Becomes Crime* captures both the US and British Governments' strategy against free thought and free speech: "The CAE's legal battle reveals that the government has made *thinking* into a crime: a citizen can be arrested without having committed any act of terror, or without having done anything illegal at all." Former US Attorney General John Ashcroft has unofficially reformed law enforcement policy and practice according to the Bush administration's idea of 'preemptive war'. He has argued that if indicators – any type of dissent in relation to 'national interest' or the interests of the investing classes – suggest that a person or group *could* do something illegal, then they should be arrested, detained, deported, or otherwise persecuted with the full resources of all repressive state agencies."¹⁴

Freedom of thought and expression are the basic tenets of artistic, social and political life. Without this basic human right, we lose our freedom to fight against oppression and injustice. Leon Trotsky may be discredited as an icon of the old revolutionary left, but it is fitting to end with his remarks on art and politics, as it holds as much currency in the twenty-first century as it did seventy years ago: "Art, like science, not only does not seek orders, but by its very essence, cannot tolerate them. Artistic creation has its laws — even when it consciously serves a social movement. Truly intellectual creation is incompatible with lies, hypocrisy and the spirit of conformity. Art can become a strong ally of revolution only in so far as it remains faithful to itself. Poets, painters, sculptors and musicians will themselves find their own approach and methods, if the struggle for freedom of oppressed classes and peoples scatters the clouds of skepticism and of pessimism which cover the horizon of mankind."¹⁵

Manick Govinda is Head of Artists Advisory Services at London-based Artsadmin, and a Board member of a-n. He researched and edited *Future forecast: Curated space* in November 2005 and directed the associated think tank. Formerly arts projects officer at the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, his recent projects include the deciBel/Artsadmin Investment in Artists and Curators initiative with Arts Council England, the Artsadmin artists' bursary scheme, talent scouting for NESTA's Creative Pioneers Programme and developing an action-research project with Creative Partnerships London East.

¹⁴ Critical Art Ensemble, 'When Thought Becomes Crime', 17 March 2005
www.caedefensefund.org/thoughtcrime.html

¹⁵ Leon Trotsky, 'Art and Politics In Our Epoch', 18 June 1938
www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/1938/1938-lit.htm

Art, Education, Activism

Republished with kind permission of Platform and *interrupt* project organisers, David Butler and Vivienne Reiss
www.interrupt-symposia.org
Jane Trowell, co-director of Platform, puts forward the organisation's position as art educators and activists, and the importance of setting an agenda of promoting creative processes of democratic engagement towards social and ecological justice.

Artists save the world?

a-n Magazine April 2001
Emma Safe discusses artists tackling environmental issues, against the backdrop of the 2001 UK general election. From artists' interventions in protest at road-building to the merging of art with local efforts to effect social change, explores the work of the Harrisons, Platform, Jean Grant, Stephen Turner, Luis Carvajal, Michelle Reader and more.

Down to a fine art

Republished with kind permission The Guardian and Anna Minton
This article by Anna Minton was first published in the Guardian Society section on Wednesday 10 January 2007. It reports on the Royal Society of Art's (RSA) Art & Ecology conference 'No Way Back' that took place 11-12 December 2006 at The London School of Economics and Political Science.

Grace Ndiritu

a-n.co.uk April 2007
British based artist Grace Ndiritu makes highly charged but rhythmically composed performances to video that ask the viewer to reconsider the West's exploitative relationship to African and other subaltern worlds. Her recent video work has Ndiritu behind the camera, capturing the everyday work and leisure activities of a nomadic African community. Profile written by Sara Raza, independent writer and curator.

Lida Abdul

a-n.co.uk April 2007
Born in Afghanistan, and currently residing there, Lida Abdul's work attempts to "juxtapose the space of politics with the space of reverie, almost absurdity, the space of shelter with that of the desert... I try to perform the 'blank spaces' that are formed when everything is taken away from people." At Sharjah, Abdul shows a video projection of work showing people selling old, used bricks in Kabul for recycling – not as a lifestyle choice but as an essential re-use of scarce resources and materials to earn a living in a war-torn society. Profile written by Kim Dhillon, independent writer and curator.

Sharjah Biennial

a-n Magazine October 2003
Richard Priestley, artist and co-founder of Cell Project Space in London gives a personal account of his invitation to the 6th Sharjah Biennial: "The political and cultural significance of supporting a Middle Eastern cultural event which included artists from Iraq, Iran, Palestine, Israel, UK, USA and more than twenty other countries, at a time when demonstrating how different cultures and communities could drop their governments' shackles and get along just fine, did and does feel important."

Tea Mäkipää

a-n.co.uk April 2007
Finnish artist Tea Mäkipää's work confronts her viewpoint of impending ecological catastrophe through interventions and installations positing an alternative vision of existence. Her project for the Sharjah Biennial distributes postcards and posters proposing ten commandments for the twenty-first century. She travelled to Sharjah from Weimar Germany by public transport avoiding air travel. Profile written by Manick Govinda.

Yara El-Sherbini

a-n Magazine November 2003 as 'It makes cents'
The artist outlines her methods of engagement with art and politics in an artist's story. "...as an artist with political activist ideas, I want to open my world to other people, using any medium to make my ideas visible".

Research references:

www.critical-art.net

The main website of Critical Art Ensemble, US performance art group that works at the intersection of art, technology, radical politics and critical theory.

www.e-xplo.org

e-Xplo perform the role of topographic agents by engaging with people and their socio-geographical habitat. They have developed projects in London, Berlin and New York involving bus tours, sound-works and performance. The website has extensive descriptions and documentations of their projects, as well as outlining the research for their Sharjah Biennial commission.

www.futurecities.org.uk

The Future Cities Project has a critical take on contemporary attitudes to modern life and the way we live it today. It promotes a human-centred approach to nature, rejects the increasingly bureaucratized approach to architecture and urbanity, challenges risk-aversion and the precautionary principle, and believes that environmentalism is driving down social aspirations.

www.labofii.net/home

The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination (lab of ii) "is a network of socially engaged artists and activists whose work falls in between resistance and creativity, culture and politics, art and life."

www.manifestoclub.com/artques

The essay, *Championing Artistic Autonomy*, was written by a network of artists, arts administrators, researchers and students who want to defend artistic autonomy in all its forms. "A vibrant artistic culture is founded upon artistic freedom. The only limits for artists should be the limits of the discipline and limits that they choose for themselves."

www.platformlondon.org

Platform is a ground-breaking inter-disciplinary organisation that "combines the transformatory power of art with the tangible goals of in-depth research with the vision to promote alternative futures." Its website highlights its methods and projects over the last twenty-one years. For the last ten years, its spotlight has focused on how trans-national corporations affect our quality of life and the global environment.

www.rsa.org.uk/arts/index.asp

The Royal Society of Arts (RSA) has set up a programme called Arts & Ecology "to support the work of the arts in examining and addressing environmental concerns in an international arena."

www.sharjahbiennial.org

The Sharjah Biennial has been going since 1993. The site contains its history, details of the organisers and past curators, details of the 7th and 8th Biennial and a list of the participating artists.

www.spiked-online.com

An independent online phenomenon dedicated to raising the horizons of humanity by waging a cultural war of words against misanthropy, priggishness, prejudice, luddism, illiberalism and irrationalism in all their ancient and modern forms.

www.wikipedia.org

Wikipedia is the free international open knowledge online encyclopedia that anyone can edit. It is accessible in ten languages and contains 1,645,778 articles in English. It's a non-profit-making initiative and relies on donations.



Through advocacy and information and from the perspective of artists, a-n's mission is to stimulate and support contemporary visual arts practice and affirm the value of artists in society.