

Violaine Roussel, *Art vs War : les Artistes américains contre la guerre en Irak*

Paris : Presses de Sciences Po, 2011, 314 p.

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- 1 Rather than focusing on the aesthetics of committed art, *Art vs War, les Artistes américains contre la guerre en Irak* examines the reasons behind an array of actions undertaken by artists involved in the anti-war movement. Violaine Roussel presents the results of a sociological study, which draws on a wide range of interviews published in a previous work (Violaine Roussel and Bleuwenn Lechaux, *Voicing Dissent, American Artists and the War on Iraq*, New York and London, Routledge, 2009). She first traces a chronology of the Iraq war, from George W. Bush's characterization of North Korea, Iraq and Iran as an "Axis of Evil" in his 2002 State of the Union Address to Barack Obama's 2009 promise of troop withdrawal. The author provides a record of all the military operations and the diplomatic advances negotiated on an international level, thus providing a historical background to the anti-war movement.
- 2 The introduction emphasizes the difference between engaged artists and committed art, considering that the anti-war movement's attraction was based on its independence from politics. Apart from a few radical groups (*Artists to Stop the War, Refuse and Resist*) that created specific artistic events in opposition to the war (demonstrations, concerts...), the movement revolved around petitions that were circulated by *Not In Our Names* (NION - founded in March 2002) and *Artists United to Win Without War* (AUWWW - created in December 2002), using the Internet as a powerful

linking medium. The author distinguishes two types of commitments among artists, opposing the staunch and long-term involvement of the pioneers emerging in 2002 to the short-term commitment of celebrities, who gained media attention, but whose participation in the movement flagged after George W. Bush announced the end of major combat operations in Iraq on 1 May 2003.

- 3 The first part of the book explores the relationship between engaged artists and the war, arguing that fame ensured the legitimacy of the citizen artists' public stance. While documentary filmmaker Barbara Trent blended her film practice with her engagement, using her art to organize resistance, first-time activists Robert Greenwald and Mike Farrel (founders of AUWWW) used their professional connections to collect more petition signatures among fellow artists working in Hollywood. Violaine Roussel analyses the reasons of their success, suggesting that their exclusive focus on the Iraq war allowed them to draw widespread support; they presented the movement as a coalition deprived of a broader political agenda. Then the author assesses the professional consequences of this type of commitment: be they actors, directors, painters or writers, many young artists relinquished endorsing an anti-war message that might endanger their professional career. The author gives a series of examples drawing on the interviews she conducted among actors and painters who would rather not be perceived as politically committed for fear that they might be categorized as 'Hollywood liberals' or 'activist artists.' The label would either undermine the value of their art or cause them to be blacklisted (66-70, 158-161, 173-181). Paradoxically, the anti-war movement also opened up new venues for others, boosting the careers of street artist Shepard Fairey, or of such documentary filmmakers as Barbara Kopple and Michael Moore amongst others. George W. Bush's 2004 re-election represented a turning point as many artists abandoned the movement after campaigning for a Democrat agenda.
- 4 The second part of the book highlights the historical relation between committed artists and the war, going back to the McCarthy era and to the Viet-Nam war. The comparison allows the author to pinpoint the specificities of each anti-war movement, which reached out beyond the artists' circle to include Blacks', women's and students' voices of dissent in the 1960s. Artistic practices at the time blended creativity and political commitment whereas most artists refused to compromise their art with their engagement in the 2000s.
- 5 The third part examines the identity of activist artists, whose artistic career and activist engagement are constrained by career patterns. Fearing that their art be judged and devalued on account of their political commitment, artists devised new types of engagement. Being labelled a militant is not seen positively in the profession and artists who display their convictions run the risk of being outcast. Violaine Roussel strikingly remarks that some filmmakers furthered the anti-war debate without openly criticizing America's foreign policy, focusing instead on the impact of the conflict on the individual. Some artists experienced a political awakening as the war broke out, including film director Robert Greenwald who created his own company to produce activist videos and films, without endangering a career that had been constructed in the 1970s and 1980s. Artists thus contributed to the public discussion about the war, using their social prestige to act as spokespeople – including such figures as George Clooney and Sean Penn.

- 6 The book draws a lively portrait of activism in Hollywood, using a series of examples that consistently illustrate Violaine Roussel's sociological analysis. She depicts the ongoing debate from the inside, thus sharing part of her experience and research in Los Angeles, yet maintaining the critical distance that informs a sociological study. Her research provides illuminating insight into the dynamics of art and commitment, politics and business, seen through the prism of the Iraq War. She depicts the constraints weighing on different types of artists, underscoring that individual commitment may differ according to the artist's status in the industry. While there have been many studies focusing on war films as objects to be analysed, Violaine Roussel challengingly discusses the reasons behind professional commitment or artistic restraint, thus drawing a ground-breaking portrait of artists in Hollywood.
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