

Poetic Terrorism and Guerrilla Art in the 21st Century by Jane Crayton aka JanedaPain

“Art as crime; crime as art.” Hakim Bey.

One of the most relevant statements made about art by a man whom walked the line of expressionism. Hakim Bey, did he see the future, or did he contemplate the past, a combination of both I would guess.

The word guerrilla is a word of Spanish descent (guerra, meaning war) first used to describe the Spanish-Portuguese guerrilleros (insurgents). Guerrilleros have existed through out time often in defense of some wrongs imposed to a group of less represented and defended peoples. They often fight a foreign invader or a ruling government and crimes against humanity. In the modern world we have seen these same groups and individuals come out in a new form of guerrilla tactics that is often non-violent and thought provoking art. Unfortunately in the post 9/11 era we are now limited in our expressions, for fear that they may be considered terrorism and not art. Mind you some of these artist push the line, evacuating neighborhood and closing down cities, all in the name of their art projects and political views. But is it the over reaction of our post 9/11 era that has taught us to react with such eager and violent haste, and condemn the works of these political artist?

Is it the art or the tactics, that deliver the fear that resonates in the unaware and suddenly captured audience? That sudden and captured audience today can be an over alerted citizen or government workers. With the heightened threat of terrorism and the orange security levels at the airports, we are all being programmed that we are never to be safe again. And what a great subject for an art project, huh? Artist around the world are finding them selves in precarious positions, and having to explain themselves to courts around the world and defend their art. These artist are the guerrilla artist of the 21st century. But are they justified in their use of guerilla tactics for making their statement? Is this a struggle to control the people and their freedom of expression? Where do we need to draw the lines for artist and government?

To be an artist has always been a daring act and a future of impoverished hell. It has always been looked down upon until or unless you achieve fame for your art. Artist usually tend to lean towards the side of interesting characters, someone daring, someone expressive of ideas and opinions, someone sending a message. Their approach when successful is usually one of great surprise and inventive nature. These artist are often ridiculed at first and later praised for their daring ability to take on a challenge when all are against them. Typically guerrilla artist have been viewed as punks spray painting on the sides of buildings, but this goes far beyond simple vandalism. There is a culture, a revolution and a style of guerrilla art that is comparable to a peaceful protest utilizing guerrilla tactics.

Banksy a graffiti and guerrilla artist from the UK has delivered some of the best examples of well engineered guerrilla art. His art is legendary, from dodging Israeli soldiers to paint beautiful scenes on the 'security' wall in Palestine. To placing a parking boot on a sculpture in a central square in London. He has placed multiple pieces of modern remakes of art like Early Man goes to Market, and The British Pensioner in the Hat and Coat, in London Museums where they were not discovered for days even weeks. What a brilliant mind, how better to get into the museum, than to put your work there, yourself, video tape it and then wait for it to get discovered. But his guerrilla art is not just self promoting, he is making political statements by painting on the security wall in Palestine, and by placing the parking boot on the historical statue in a central location of London.

Mode 2 one of the most recognized graffiti artist in the UK. Known for his unmistakable style and technique of sketchy fill-in with detailed backgrounds and scenes. His work is more like paintings, yet his technique is definitely that of a graffiti artist. His work can be found around the streets of London and his commissioned work can be found on some large Billboards. He is considered a guerrilla artist because of his guerrilla like tactics of graffiti art. The simple fact that most of it is illegal painting on private property, makes it illegal. Although his work is relevant as a guerrilla artist, this trend of guerrilla tactics has grown and become a popular way for artist and activist to render their work in public spaces.

A group of artist who seemed to pickup wisely on the term guerrilla artist is the Guerrilla Girls. "We're a bunch of anonymous females who take the names of dead women artists as pseudonyms and appear in public wearing gorilla masks." is how the Guerrilla Girls describe themselves. This artist based feminist performance group started in New York. They have been surprising people all over the world with their outrageous guerrilla performances that often incorporate social and feminist issues. They focus more on the issues, than their personalities and individual identities, by wearing the gorilla masks. Their feminist conscious statements and demonstrations often transform the audience, and community, addressing a specific theme the girls have decided to share with the public. Would their audience take them as serious if their faces were shown? And do they fear public and social exclusion from their peer groups if their identities are discovered?

Yes Men are a group of artist and guerrilla activist utilizing artistic guerrilla tactics. Utilizing technology, New Media and theatrical tactics to achieve their desired identity alteration or 'correction'. From redesigning dummy websites to recreating fake marketing packages, to spoof the media with live interviews of impersonated persons whose identity they wish to correct. In November of 2004 the Yes Men went on BBC with breaking news that the Dow Chemical Company, (whom they claimed to be representatives of) were going to clean up the mess in Bhopal and compensate the victims for their companies lack of responsibility. From this "identity correction" of Dow Chemical Company, they helped show the true intension of the company which did not intend to help the victims at all. The Yes Men call out ac-

tions by industry, commercial or political persons by utilizing guerrilla tactics. They often imitate company executives, and 'big time criminals' to publicly humiliate them in order to 'correct' their public identities. Their targets have included Mc Donald's, Dow Chemical, and Elected officials just to name a few.

The South Venice Billboard Correction Committee (SVBCC) A collective group of artist who administer radical social art changes to billboards in South Venice. This group works with guerrilla tactics to redesign and illustrate their social and political agenda. This group works to recreate a new politically corrected ad in place of the old ad. The group uses the existing design and redesigns the billboard to create a new public message. These actions are obviously illegal and a defacing of private property. The group is well aware that their activities are illegal, yet they continue to execute these guerrilla tactics to administer what they call "radical social art changes" to the billboards in order to deliver their social message. These guys literally scale the billboards at night and repaint them, and create a completely different message, in this public space. The idea that public spaces are the new canvas for political generated guerrilla art is a unique phenomena of the 21st Century New Media Artist.

Artist Jason Sprinkle (1969-2005), also known as Subculture Joe, was also an artist whom seemed to only catch negative attention from the city of Seattle. On Labor Day of 1993 Jason and his accomplices tied a ball and chain around the foot of Jonathan Borofsky's "Hammering Man" stature, that graced the entrance to the Seattle Art Museum. Sprinkle's guerrilla art performances and installations ranged from celebrated to terrorism related. In 1996 Sprinkle abandon a truck with a large red metal part of an installation in it, flattened all the tires and painted on the fender read a graffiti tag "the bomb". As a result the Seattle bomb squad was called out, city blocks were evacuated and robots deployed to disarm any potential exploding devices.

"Christopher Boisvert, 25-year-old student from the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan, may have the next few years to think over the implications of art in public places. That's because a class project he produced involved some art placed in a very public place that unfortunately went a bit awry. The public place was Union Station, one of New York City's busiest transportation nexuses, and the public art was the placing of close to 40 black boxes at various locations with the word 'FEAR' emblazoned on them," MAY-ORBOB writes. "To say that this project created a stir would be a gross understatement. In this post September 11th world, a display like that is going to engender just one reaction - fear. Union Station was shut down for about five hours while the NYPD bomb squad checked out the boxes. Boisvert turned himself in when he found out that the police were questioning people about the incident." This is just another example where the artist although making a very powerful statement, should have been more aware of his actions and the potential fear that he created with his political and social statement. And if he did think of the potential dangers and the potential reactions to his art piece, should he have considered delivering it differ-

ently, or accepting the responsibility of it, or be prepared to cover yourself adequately like the Billboard Correction group or even Banksy.

But these incidents are not limited to guerrilla artist, because even artist whom simply speak of the controversial subject of terrorism are subject to suspicion. Within a few weeks of the September 11th terrorist attacks, the FBI contacted the Whitney Museum of American Art about Mark Lombardi's drawings' on exhibition there. Mark Lombardi had apparently committed suicide the year before but his controversial work illustrating the links between terrorism and the global economy were still on display in the museum. Lombardi's work is considered not only art but also pieces of detailed and researched history. His art works are obvious interest to the government in the wake of the new era of terrorism we now live in. But is it really as bad as they want us to believe, or has the technology and the tactics of terrorism just fed the fear of radical self expression to be included within these terms.

Zanny Begg, produced a work of 10 life size checkpoint US soldiers for exhibition in the town of Sidney as a part of the [out of Gallery] project. Each life size replica was to have the slogan "Checkpoint for Weapons of Mass Destruction." Her intention was to satirize the US search for weapons of mass destruction. Zanny was instructed to remove her life size soldiers shortly after erecting them by the City Counsel and Mayor Leo Kelly. She was threatened with arrest and her works were later impounded. "It's a disgraceful interference with the freedom of speech of these artists," said Council of Civil Liberties president Cameron Murphy. Another exhibition in November was canceled because the title "Guerrilla Art" somehow "discredited the council" according to Kelly. Artists are now being censored by city councils and mayors, and art work is being confiscated in the 21st Century. Artists are not only being targeted as terrorists, but they can not even display work on the subject of terrorism or occupation. Is our own censorship not just as bad as the ones we are trying to grant to those in which we seek to give freedom through war...yeah...um... that's an oxymoron.

Columbian born painter Fernando Botero exhibited works in California that depict the Abu Ghriab prison and suspected abuse to prison inmates. His works are bold and courageous, and depict the artist's disgust in US policy regarding prison inmates. "I, like everyone else, was shocked by the barbarity, especially because the United States is supposed to be this model of compassion." His goal is to make people remember the human tragedies so that no one will forget the unjust action of the US soldiers to Abu Ghraib's prisoners. His pictures look to shake people to disturb them, to make them think, and hopefully make them act. We have artists that are working with portraying the victims and the perpetrators of terrorism on both sides of the fence.

Nasrin Mazoi, a graduate student selected to present works at the Museum of Israeli Art in Ramat-Gan displayed six portraits of Palestinian males all she averred, were prepared "to blow themselves up in order to change the present situation." Her work has now traveled around the world, featuring

these life size pictures of apparent suicide bombers or family members of one. This is not an isolated incidence of a Pro-Palestinian exhibition but it is a rather bold and very critical one. Some of these works have been lucky enough to squeak by, but others have been subject to censorship and confiscation clearly because of the controversial subject.

Steven Kurtz is an associate professor of art at the University of Buffalo, in Buffalo, New York. He aroused suspicion in Spring 2004 when he called medical personal to his home because his wife unexpectedly died. When medical persons arrived at his home to help, they became suspicious of some medical, scientific, and technological equipment in his home. The authorities over reacted and shut down his neighborhood, evacuating people from their homes in surrounding neighborhoods, and closing streets. They took the body of his diseased wife into custody and arrested him, while dozens of agents searched his property. Mr Kurtz was now facing criminal charges as a member of the Critical Art Ensemble, "dedicated to exploring the intersections between art, technology, radical politics and critical theory". In July of 2004 a grand jury rejected the 'terrorism' charges, but he still faces federal criminal charges today for mail and wire fraud. What is interesting about Steven Kurtz is that he was arrested not for his performance or his art per-say, but because of what they thought it could be. Gary Younge from The Guardian in Buffalo describes the situation. "What began as a personal tragedy for Mr Kurtz has turned into what many believe is, at best, an overreaction prompted by 9/11 paranoia and, at worst, a politically motivated attempt to silence a radical artist." So where is the limit between crime and art, and art as crime? How do we define Kurtz, and other radical artist that work in new mediums that push boundaries with technology, should we limit their research? These are all important questions to be asking artist and their audience in the 21st century.

Are you scared to speak out, demonstrate, or produce radical art? I am, and I think even writing about this could get me on a list of people to be watched. I fear the police-state in which we live today, wants to censor our art and prosecute our artist as terrorist. I think that each of these artist has the responsibility only to themselves to weigh these actions, for they know their art has consequence, that is why it is so potent. It is apparent that the government wants to regulate what is said and demonstrated to the people. It is obvious that the current US administration is prepared to make permanent changes to laws in order to ease the legalities of entrapment for these guerrilla artist.

That said, when Banksy is striding through the Museum with a fresh addition ready to hang, does he not consider what will happen if he is caught and apprehended. Is it not the ultimate publicity for your work to be discovered and captured or even detained? Although horrible in the case of Steven Kurtz, who was not actively presenting work at the time of his arrest. Is he still not aware of his potential surroundings and the danger his work could have to his personal life and freedoms. But as artist and as activist, I think we are all willing to take these risks in our work and activism. I think some of us have been luckier than others. And I believe that

some have carefully executed plans of great detail, with wisdom of potential hazards and legal obstacles.

When we examine the most recent incident in Boston on January 31st, where two artists Peter Berdovsky and Sean Stevens were charged with creating a panic because they placed electronic LED art that somehow caused a bomb scare. The installation was actually commissioned by the Turner Broadcasting Network and the art work depicting a popular animated character from Adult Swim's, Aqua Teen Hunger Force "flipping the bird". The artworks were actually installed for several weeks without, panic or notice throughout the entire country. What is crazy is it was a guerrilla marketing plan by the network, and they had several hundred LED boards placed in cities throughout the United States. Boston Police Commissioner Edward Davis called the stunt "unconscionable," while Boston Mayor Thomas Menino called it "outrageous" and the product of "corporate greed." Democratic Rep. Ed Markey, a Boston-area congressman, added, "It would be hard to dream up a more appalling publicity stunt." It seems that because the city over-reacted, with the resulting "snarled traffic and mass transit closings as the bomb squad fumbled to find all the LED light boards. Do they now seek revenge for their over-reaction, or should they just consider themselves lucky to have gotten a good practice run. According to a student Todd Venderlin, "It's so not threatening -- it's a Lite-Brite," he told the press, referring to the children's toy that allows its users to create pictures by placing translucent pegs into an opaque board. "I don't understand how they could be terrified. I would if it was a bunch of circuits blinking, but it wasn't."

When we look back into history we see that the great artist, scientist and inventors of our time have often had their actions and theories mistaken for evil conspiracy driven terrorism. Even Galileo was taken into custody and held by the church for speaking his views and publicly demonstrating his support of the new heliocentric view of the solar system. The modern inventors have to be risk takers in order to produce their inventions in theory, art and science. Yet they need to exercise extreme caution when demonstrating with guerrilla tactics because their politically charged art is still subject to the new laws of the Homeland Security Act, and may end up face to face with the terrorism task-force in the 21st Century. Hakim Bey said it best, "The best Poetic Terrorism is against the law, but don't get caught. Art as crime; crime as art."

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