



Chapter 33

The International Scene since the 1950s

Activist Strategies and Participatory Art

Like the AIDS activists discussed earlier, many contemporary artists assume an intentionally political stance, turning their attention to the shifting social causes and current issues that garner public concern. Activist art today relies on practices used by conceptual artists in the 1960s and 1970s for institutional critique and by collectives like the Art Workers' Coalition, formed in New York in 1969, and Situationist International, active throughout the 1960s. Their influence is especially apparent in projects that enlist viewers directly as agents of social protest and change. Sometimes called Social Practice, this art encompasses a range of participatory strategies that work outside traditional contexts to engage directly with the public, government, or other institutions to realize the artists' activist goals. One example is Conflict Kitchen, a take-out restaurant in Pittsburgh that serves food that is traditional in countries currently in conflict with the United States. Started in 2010 by Jon Rubin and Dawn Weleski, art professors at Carnegie Mellon University, the project builds on the dynamics of sharing a meal to encourage diners to converse and learn about these other cultures. The Internet and social media have also provided artists with a tool to spread their message, as in the case of Chinese artist Ai Weiwei who, despite Chinese government restrictions on his travel from 2011 to 2015, was able to maintain contact with an international audience.

33-71 Krzysztof Wodiczko
HOMELESS VEHICLE

1988–1989. Aluminum and mixed media.
 Variant 3 of 4, pictured at Trump Tower,
 New York.

Credit: © Krzysztof Wodiczko. Courtesy Galerie
 Lelong, New York



In the late 1980s, Polish-born Canadian artist Krzysztof Wodiczko (b. 1943) designed the **HOMELESS VEHICLE** (FIG. 33-71) in collaboration with homeless people in New York. The vehicle, shown in art exhibitions and prototyped on the streets, was intended to draw attention to the problem of homelessness in New York. Recalling Constructivist product design, the *Homeless Vehicle* includes an extendable metal pod for sleeping, washing, or toilet needs, baskets underneath to store belongings and cans that could be sold, and a brightly colored flag to signal approach. Wodiczko explains its use as “both communication and the transport; a vehicle that could articulate the real conditions of work and life and the resistance of this group” instead of the stolen grocery carts often linked to the homeless. Critics of his work say that the project undermines efforts to help homelessness because it does not address the systemic roots of the problem.

Another of the YBAs, sculptor Rachel Whiteread (b. 1963) made her reputation by casting the inside of ordinary objects like mattresses or book shelves, thus transforming overlooked negative spaces into poignant memorials alluding to absence and loss. Made with materials like rubber, resin, and plaster, Whiteread’s work has the spare appearance of Minimalist sculpture, but visible details offer hints to its functional origins. Whiteread addressed the invisibility of the British working classes in **HOUSE** (FIG. 33-72). She sprayed liquid concrete on the inner walls of a three-story Victorian row house before it was carefully dismantled, leaving a ghostlike replica in its place. The project took place in the Grove Road area of London’s East End, where the last row of the Victorian houses that had originally filled the area was slated to be demolished by developers. Over the years, similar projects had

effectively erased all vestiges of the community by replacing the row houses with high-rise apartments and other structures. Like much of Whiteread’s work, *House* is about the memories



33-72 Rachel
Whiteread HOUSE

1993. Corner of Grove and
 Roman Roads, London.
 Concrete. Destroyed 1994.
 Commissioned by Artangel.
 Received the Turner Prize,
 Tate Britain, London. Photo:
 Sue Omerod.

Credit: © Rachel Whiteread;
 Courtesy of the artist, Luhring
 Augustine, New York, Lorcan
 O’Neill, Rome, and Gagosian
 Gallery. © Artangel. Photo:
 Sue Ormerod

contained in places and times and how easily they can be lost. Whiteread intended *House* as a political statement about development practices in England and “the ludicrous policy of knocking down homes like this and building badly designed tower blocks which themselves have to be knocked down after 20 years.” The publicity surrounding Whiteread’s project, which occurred at the same time as she won the prestigious Turner Prize, succeeded in bringing these critical issues to the public’s attention.

American artist Patricia Cronin (b. 1963) employs many artistic formats for her politically charged subjects. Addressing themes of homosexuality, feminism, and art history, Cronin’s work supports her goal of raising public awareness of these issues. **SHRINE FOR GIRLS** (FIG. 33-73) presented in conjunction with the 2015 Venice Biennale, appeared at the sixteenth-century church of San Gallo. On the chapel’s three marble altars, Cronin placed photographs of young girls next to mounds of clothing to suggest relics of religious martyrs. The monuments referred to incidents of violence against women around the world. Brilliantly colored saris on the central altar related to two Indian teen-agers who were gang-raped, murdered, and found strung from trees in 2014. Muslim hijabs (head coverings) were on the altar to the left, representing 276 Nigerian schoolgirls kidnapped in 2014 by Boko Haram militants in Nigeria; the altar on the right displayed uniforms like those worn by women imprisoned and forced to work in Magdalene asylums across Europe and the United States throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century.

Cronin’s installation exploited the aesthetic contrast of the rich, colorful fabrics and the stone architecture to contribute visual impact and iconographical meaning, and the photographs gave a human face to a problem that might seem far removed from our own experience. Cronin notes that the church context brought about a behavioral change in many visitors, who become quiet and respectful as they viewed *Shrine for Girls*. Cronin’s installation was temporary, but she used the opportunity to enlist visitors to do something by creating a website suggesting ways to help end global violence toward women and listing organizations dedicated to this cause.



33-73 Patricia Cronin SHRINE FOR GIRLS

2015. Installation at Chiesa di San Gallo, Campo San Gallo, solo Collateral Event at the 56th Venice Biennale.