

## MARTHA ROSLER

1. A good number of artists and students I know have in one way or another opposed the present war. Before it began, in the summer of 2002, the art, literature, and activist communities came together by the hundreds, if not thousands, and spurred the formation of the activist coalition group United for Peace and Justice. A group calling itself Not in Our Name issued a statement in opposition to the war both online and in print (including full-page ads in newspapers such as the *New York Times*, with an impressive number of signatories from the arts and literature). Numerous public meetings were held by those in the visual arts, as well as poets, writers, and theater people. Literary groups organized antiwar readings and performances with celebrity headliners, including events at Lincoln Center and other public halls in New York. The activist group Artists Against the War (of which I am a founding member) formed in this context. Many young artists, art students, and others interested in symbolic actions and interventions took part in antiwar activities, from writing graffiti and postering to street theater and performance, as well as joining marches and vigils and engaging in civil disobedience. Many were also involved politically during the election season of 2004, especially during the huge demonstrations protesting the Republican National Convention in New York, when people in the institutional categories you mention are most likely to have joined in.

The most effective action, to my mind, is always the street demonstration and march—especially if it is very large or neighborhood-based and frequent. Some of the art actions and publications were striking and poignant; street theater and symbolic activities in the context of demonstrations were often quite well done. As in the 1960s, people these days are regularly informed that street protests are ancient business, old hat, and useless, but as usual these actions are exactly what command the attention of governments (because traveling, showing up, and marching require a certain commitment and always pose the possibility of escalation and insurrection) and often attract the media and therefore reach a wider public. Images of hundreds of flag-draped coffins or of giant puppets (Bread and Puppet Theater), of satirical street-theater groups such as Billionaires for Bush, or of drumming groups, as well as scores of signs with rude or telling slogans, are the meat and potatoes of publicity for political actions in public spaces. Cell phone and Internet organizing and the dissemination of information have joined other forms of organizing. The Internet has also led to a new genre of political animation: short, political works both informational and critical—a newly intensified form of political speech.

2. To answer this and the following questions it is useful to rehearse some of the salient elements surrounding antiwar protest in the 1960s. The early '60s represented the first moment of awakening in the postwar world after the sleep of

small-town insular conformity or, conversely, the big-city political paranoia of the 1950s. The huge cohort of baby boomers meant that the majority of the population was under thirty years of age. This generation was growing up in the period of increasingly successful civil rights campaigns, international antinuclear organizing, and other nascent social movements, including women's liberation. The amnesia of the postwar world dissipated when the contrast between the U.S.'s stated ideals and goals as the defenders of freedom, self-determination, and democracy and its behavior at home and abroad became starkly apparent. The antiwar movement took quite a number of years to achieve the numbers and intensity of the late 1960s: the better part of a decade of rising economic expectations joined with a fear of a stifling and vacuous (and unjust) domestic future ahead. (The book titles of popular books of the period, such as *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* [Henry Miller, 1945] and *Growing Up Absurd* [Paul Goodman, 1960], are suggestive here.) Many of the protests against the war drew sharp attention to the fact that the vast majority of protesters were relatively privileged economically and racially: middle-class college males could evade the draft, whereas their working-class counterparts could not, a circumstance leading directly to the fact that a disproportionate number of young men of color, particularly black men, were in the armed forces. The antiwar movement also actively militated against academic/vocational "tracking" systems that fed into draft/no draft outcomes, and eventually the administration instituted a draft lottery. In 1967, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. spoke out forcefully against the war, as did the nation's baby doctor, Benjamin Spock.

The long years in Vietnam meant that the number of soldiers who eventually served there was huge. The conditions of the war led to an army collapsing in indiscipline, influenced by the counterculture at home, and, in more than a few cases, promptly joining the antiwar movement upon their return. Today there are far fewer soldiers serving, and many who return are grievously wounded or have brain injuries. Although more than a few have joined forces with the war protesters, the absolute numbers are much smaller. The intertwining of active-duty and stateside antiwar organizing was likely a powerful spur to the movement's continuation in the 1960s and '70s.

I would not say that the absence of a draft has decisively prevented antiwar organizing now; rather, the fact that the now-aged baby boomers still make up the largest population group is a large factor in the diminished presence of the protest movement. The general assault on civil rights, labor, the constitutional rule of law, environmental and personal rights, and the entire New Deal/post-New Deal consensus has meant people are fighting on all fronts. The problem is that except for the remnants of the "global equity" (antiglobalist) and the new environmental campaigns, these all amount to a struggle against, not for something (e.g., socialism, social justice). There is no politics of insurgency, only some version of electoral strategy. Nevertheless, students have consistently organized and protested (and have started an SDS redivivus) and have campaigned assiduously for antiwar candidates

(who promptly proceed to sell us all out when elected, it seems). The 2004 election mobilized a greatly increased “youth vote” for the Democrats. But the successful redefinition of the role of higher education, maneuvering it away from the paradigm of liberal education as the production of an educated citizen and changing it into an elite form of job training and certification, has helped persuade students to lay low and complete their degrees. Such a redefinition is potentiated in large part by the scandalously high costs of higher education (consistently running well above inflation as higher-ed administrators have successfully beefed up their own numbers and salaries to fit the corporate model ever closer). In the early 1980s, banks were discovered to be systematically refusing credit cards to humanities students (then being offered in dramatic abundance to students everywhere in the country); government intervention was required in order to end this practice. But the ground floor of survival for everyone has been raised, along with rents. Now what educated parent would raise a child without health insurance—especially now that embourgeoisement has brought a new love for child bearing? The lessening of precariousness as the student’s lot in life and the heavy plowing of the fields of consumerism have imposed on students a pressure toward respectability that differs somewhat from that of earlier eras.

As to the relatively paltry faculty participation: you don’t need me to support your feelings against the postmodern academy, but I will mention a few key buzzwords and phrases from the past two decades—Althusserians’ “my theory is my praxis,” the Long March through the Institutions, first get tenure, first get promoted, gotta put my kids through college, undecidability, intertextuality, postmodern play, *socialisme ou barbarie*, the alternative in Eastern Europe. Not least was this crashing of the utopian dream of socialism/communism (long space here for requisite disclaimers).

The cynicism of artists in relation to their role seems to apply most directly to the young enrollees in graduate programs, for whom the current definition of a successful graduate career is to obtain gallery representation just before graduation or in the year immediately thereafter. This applies most directly to painters and sculptors, but not exclusively. Let me suggest, however, that young artists do not fear that a performative rebelliousness will be an impediment; rather it might even be an aid. There is a question of having enough time to develop their product; but now that they are freed, in many programs, from the burden of reading and thinking, perhaps they can find more time to learn, organize, and protest. Just a thought; but I will say that there has been a noticeable uptick in antiwar activity and critical inquiry among my U.S. students, especially the women, in the past year.

The much greater integration of visual arts into the celebrity mass-culture industry, which has been under way since the end of the Second World War, has been part of the pressure on the artists to create a “me brand,” but this demand is not unfamiliar to workers as a necessary form of “flexibility” in a mutating workplace. For young people (but not only the young) in all fields, the demands are passingly similar and have sometimes been subsumed under the category of

“performing the self.” As authenticity has fled, it may be difficult to retain an unprofessionalized corner of revulsion against barbarism and deception sufficient to motivate activism. The decline of the public sphere and the concomitant unfashionability of the paradigm of art as communication (more than twenty-five years ago) are part of an underlying acceptance of a need for a certain discipline in the face of career demands, and the seeming adoption of pop life aspirations. If there are no discernible margins, the possibilities of critique are greatly diminished. But many artists prefer to “do it in the road” (including the “information superhighway”), not the art gallery.

Professionalization can mean compartmentalized cynicism. I still see hordes of young people, including high school students, at demonstrations, but where are the sit-ins and teach-ins at colleges and universities? Even if the faculty are tired from their lifetimes of repetitive protesting, they could write collective critiques or hold antiwar teach-ins. The withdrawal of the professoriate may be more pronounced than that of the artists and art students.

3. It seems very likely that the intensification of the digital world’s engagement with and penetration of our lives has decreased participation in public spaces, but then again the identification of public space with public sphere, we can all agree, has been disappearing in the longer term. The idea of the political subject is confined to the legal and electoral arenas. The problem with online activism and participation in political blogs is that they threaten no one and show little signs of the mobilization that thus stands as largely individualized and often frankly imaginary. Bread and Puppet Theater, by the way, unlike New York’s Living Theatre of Judith Malina, Julian Beck, et al., has had its forum not primarily in theaters but in the streets, and continues to do so.

4. The emphasis on technological speech and organizing is somewhat misplaced, it seems to me. People are still gathering, though not in the same numbers (see the demographic argument above). As to the humanities, this relates to the increasing technicization and instrumentalization of education and knowledge, which has been following an upward curve since the concerted attempts by the powers-that-be at pacification of the academy consequent upon the anarchic decade of the mid-1960s through the mid-1970s.

5. Yes. See above.

6. Organize, organize, organize.

MARTHA ROSLER works in video, photo-text, installation, and performance, and writes about art. She teaches at the Städelschule in Frankfurt and the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University, in New Brunswick, New Jersey.