WHEN ARTISTS SPEAK TRUTH

ACT UP / SHIMON ATTIE / MAJA BAJEVIC / LUIS BALAGUER / FÉLIX BELTRÁN / ADIGIO BENITEZ /
ANDREA BOWERS / TANIA BRUGUERA / MATTHEW BUCKINGHAM / NANCY BURSON / YOAN CAPOTE /
MEL CHIN / EMMORY DOUGLAS / SAM DURANT / DYKE ACTION MACHINE / SHEPARD FAIREY / CHARLES
GAINES / RICO GATSON / GUERRILLA GIRLS / EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS / SISTER CORITA KENT / HEW LOCKE /
RAUL MARTÍNEZ / RENÉ MÉDEROS / YOKO ONO & JOHN LENNON / ADRIAN PIPER / FAVIANNA RODRIGUEZ /
ALFREDO ROSTGAARD / DREAD SCOTT / ANDRES SERRANO / FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES / JARO VARGA

THE 8TH FLOOR  NOVEMBER 12, 2015 TO MARCH 18, 2016
1. ACT UP (EST. 1987), SILENCE = DEATH, 1986. SILENCE = DEATH PROJECT. C-PRINT, 22 X 34”. COURTESY OF AVRAM FINKELSTEIN

2. MATTHEW BUCKINGHAM (B. 1963, NEVADA, IA) THE SIX GRANDFATHERS, PAPA SAPA, IN THE YEAR 502,002 C.E., 2002. BLACK-AND-WHITE DIGITAL C-PRINT 60 X 43” / 152.4” X 109.22” (12FT 7” X 9FT 1”). COURTESY OF MURRAY GUY, NEW YORK

3. EMORY DOUGLAS (B. 1943, GRAND RAPIDS, MI) BLACK PANTHER, SEPTEMBER 21, 1974. OFFSET LITHOGRAPH. 17.5 X 11.3” © 2015 EMORY DOUGLAS / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK


12. Adrián Piper (B. 1948, NEW YORK, NY), VANILLA NIGHTMARES #14, 1986. CHARCOAL & OIL CRAYON DRAWING ON NEWSPRINT, 22 X 13 3⁄4”. COURTESY OF FAULKNER GALLERY, GRINNELL COLLEGE

When Artists Speak Truth... —newly how cultural producers, artists in particular, are uniquely positioned to voice critical messages that cannot otherwise be transmitted. The exhibition is presented at the 8th Floor, as a dialogical and discursive space where politically engaged artists and projects set the stage for reflection and interchange. When Artists Speak Truth... is paired as a series of questions: what happens when artists challenge the status quo, and advocate for change? Why are artists able to ask and respond to these questions? What makes art a space where radical ideas can be supported?

Perhaps because their status is constant, shifting, artists have the social mobility and capital to question the power structures that define so much of our society. Considering that artists are in a class of their own — one that is both economically precarious and culturally rich — it is not surprising that they are aligned with activists organizing for workers’ rights, immigrants’ rights, and gender and racial equality.

From 1983 until the 1990s, Enrico David was the Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party, and his graphic art was featured prominently in issues of the Black Panther newspaper. Included in the exhibition is his illustration for the September 21, 1974 issue, which depicts the hand of a corporeal power comprised of The Chase Manhattan Bank, Pan Am, Gulf, PepsiCo, Chevron, Ford, and Mobil, among others — pulling the strings of President Gerald Ford, “the 38th Puppet of the United States.” Sam Durant’s Enrico David Suite (1983) is part of a larger series completed in 20014 in which Durant adapts Diego de la Peña’s depictions of police aggression. Durant’s works engage a variety of social, political, and cultural issues exploring that which connects culture to politics, and shows activist art to be situated between police departments, activist groups, and communities of color across the country.

Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?

Sharon Altschul’s exhibition of Alternatives to the Modern Art sections are women, but 76% of the nudes are female.

“Ask a few simple questions to define aesthetics: whose aesthetics? at what historical time? under what circumstances? for what purposes? and who is deciding quality, etc.? Then you realize suddenly and very quickly that aesthetic choices are politics.” —Felix Gonzalez-Torres in conversation with artist Tim Rollins

Building on Gonzalez-Torres’ questions about the political nature of aesthetics, it’s worth considering what happens when political features become aesthetics. Do they lose their meaning? Perhaps it depends on the artist and the audience in question. Mel Chin has long engaged political processes in his practice, but he is equally known for his conceptually rigorous transformation of obsolete, Dinka Cross for the Unforgiven (2003) is a Maltese cross — a symbol of the Crusades, constructed from eight AK-47s welded together to form a cross. Chin’s artworks in question. Mel Chin has long engaged political processes in his practice, but he is equally known for his conceptually rigorous transformation of obsolete, Dinka Cross for the Unforgiven (2003) is a Maltese cross — a symbol of the Crusades, constructed from eight AK-47s welded together to form a cross.
Andrea Bowers has highlighted excluded groups in her practice, often making American history, contemporary political issues, and protest, taking Action = Life to heart. What appears to be a more directly aesthetic approach, Bowers’ Workers (Right Posters) (2013) with a wide array of political movements, from freedom of expression to workers’ rights and feminism. Posters from this series were presented at Pace-Air Fair in 2013, echoing a concurrent protest of the fair by art handlers and installers, many of them artists, who called for better labor practices, exposing the hiring of non-unions, out of state labor for the fair’s production.

Bowers added to the protest from inside the fair, creating new posters each day, “Don’t F*** up New York workers,” also to real world political movements, Save Our Last Will Peace Tree Sitting Love Seat for Forest Defense (2012) is a lone seat made in collaboration with an Earth First! activist (who cannot be named for legal reasons) known to tree sit for up to a year at a time, relying on his leave-taking skills for survival. The recycled wood sculpture is a fantastic version of actual seats used by tree sitters. Bowers’ involvement in tree-sitting activism has led to jail time and probation. With famed tree sitter and activist John Plagge, she has produced non-violent civil disobedience training videos for environmental activists.

Edgar Heap of Birds’ Invisible of Sky/Worlds Are Open (2017) from his ongoing micro-open series, Indian Bones Standard face, with old and present stories of Native American communities across the United States. Heap of Bird’s text-based public artworks Native Hosts have been deployed since the 1980s in a quest to reclaim the original occupation of Native American land throughout United States history. His most recent series, Navajo Dream, a comprehensive survey of Native American art, explores the history and projected erosion of Mount Rushmore, which so many of us think of as the epitome of presidential Carrara marble. But what has he left out of the image? Perhaps the innumerable Native oral traditions, which are the foundation of American political movements, from the 1970s to the present. Heap of Bird’s works foreground the rich history and cultural diversity of Native American communities and their deep connection to the land. His art challenges us to reconsider the ways in which we think about and represent Native American history.

Oliver is thought of and missed by our group who has not survived. It’s been nearly 35 years but Oliver is thought of and missed by those that loved him always.”

—Brian Howard
WAR IS OVER!

IF YOU WANT IT

Love and Peace from John & Yoko
social transformation brought by the 1959 Revolution. In other words, he was able to subvert pop culture to create a singular iconography of contemporary Cuban history.”

Adolfo Berrío’s Untitled (1972) is a portrait of Emetero “Che” Guevara, one of the leaders of the Cuban Revolution, whose image is the most recognizable symbol of the cause. The Cuban government exported the idea of Che, a figure who represented a desire for freedom and independence, throughout Latin America. For this reason, Berrío depicts Che with a beard in the shape of the region. On behalf of the Committee for the Liberation of Angela Davis, Félix Beltrán designed Cuba Libertad para Angela Davis (“Freedom for Angela Davis”) in 1971. Berrío’s graphic portrait was a call for Davis’ release from prison after her arrest for conspiracy in the takeover of a Marin County courtroom in 1970. Her protest was an effort to free her imprisoned partner George Jackson who was a member of the Black Panthers, a subset of the Black Panthers. Beltrán created the poster for the propaganda department of the Communist Party of Cuba.

During the Vietnam War, Cuba’s Communist Party was also concerned with the plight of the Vietnamese. Alfredo Rostgaard’s silkscreen, Hanoi Martes 13 (“Hanoi, March 13”), 1968, was created as the promotional poster for a Cuban film about the United States’ bombing of Hanoi. The documentary attempts to implicate United States President Lyndon Johnson with the conditions imposed on the Vietnamese. Footage of the population are interspersed with clips of the bombings and casualties of the war. Rostgaard’s silkscreen, which is part of a portfolio of illustrations, produced by the Commission of Revolutionary Orientation of the Communist Party, celebrates the 20th Anniversary of the Cuban Revolution.
the 1953 attack on the Moncada Barracks in Santiago de Cuba. In Action Painting (" Intellectual Abstraction "), 1973 we see a different, more triumphant rendering of Jose Marti, the national hero of Cuba, while Lois Mailou Jones (“The Martyr”). 1973 depicts the martyran and young revolutionaries who died during the 1953 attack.

Andrew Serrano’s Cube (Picture of Fidel). 2012 was shot on the artist’s first trip to the island for an investigative photography project, part of the Havana Biennial in 2013. His relationship to Cuba is both formative and elusive; his mother spent her childhood there, eventually moving to New York City, where Serrano was raised. On this trip he photographed Fidel Castro, among other leaders. Unable to meet with the former president himself, the artist photographed many members of the Castro family, including Mariela, who is an activist for gay rights and the daughter of Raul Castro. Serrano shot 700 rolls of film over six weeks, gaining access to domestic spaces, such as the bedroom pictured, where a portrait of Fidel Castro is propped to the wall above the bed.

In the context of electoral politics, contemporary artists have often playfully taken the role of political critic. Los Angeles-based conceptual artist Charles Gaines’ recent series Notes on Social Justice is comprised of large-scale drawings of musical scores from songs quoting artistic and political manifestos. Culling from sources as varied as Immoral Kante, the Black Panthers, and Desa artist Hugh Ball, Gaines inserts texts into selected songs from the American Civil War to the mid-twentieth century. Notes on Social Justice: Our Country Right or Wrong, (1861), functions as an apologetic advertisement, offering listeners what they have been denied by the dominant culture: power, inclusion, and recognition. Taking the fantasy of the wedding industry as an extreme, Dyke Action Machine designed a poster of a lesbian couple in bridal gow.

Best known for his HOPE poster for Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign, Shepard Fairey designed Sedation (2013), inspired by the title of the Public Enemy album “It Takes a Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back.” The Sedation presidential campaign, Shepard Fairey designed HOPE (2002) was produced by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC) in collaboration with Creative Time. LMCC had been long associated with the IRC and became the cultural organization most identified with the 9/11 attacks, with its artist residency in the World Trade Center, and its work to help artists and arts groups find ways to continue their work in lower Manhattan. Creative Time also organized the Tavens of Light public art project that annually commemorates those whose lives were lost in the destruction of the Twin Towers. For the one year anniversary of 9/11, Nancy Burson sensitively responded to this loss by distributing 30,000 postcards and 7,000 posters with the words “Focus on Peace,” giving a grieving community a positive focal point.

Since 9/11, the dynamics of New York City have changed considerably. From new construction and increased security protocols that surround outdoor areas of public and private buildings, to heightened security in buildings housing corporate and civic power, immigrant and lower income communities face the most difficulty accessing public services for their families. In the summer of 2015, new New Yorkers has been illusive, preventing their ability to establish themselves in the city. In the summer of 2015, the new New York City Department of Cultural Affairs announced a pilot residency program for artists within a small number of city agencies including the Mayor’s Office for Immigrant Affairs. Artist Tania Bruguera was selected for this first residency based on her work in Corona, Queens where she established a community space and project called Immigrant Movement International. Bruguera’s contribution to the exhibition, THE PAKWAS EFFECT (2014) is a starational performative campaign using the slogan “Dignity has no Nationality,” which aims to challenge public perceptions of immigration. The campaign invites letter-writing and collecting signatures on postcards addressed to Pope Francis in support of his compassionable stance towards immigrants who face challenges in their search for a better life and a safer home.

The idea of engaging an artist to help implement the NYCD was proposed by the Department of Cultural Affairs’ Commissioner Tom Farinella to build trust between local immigrant communities and city government. It is unclear how this experimental approach will unfold, but it gives the city an opportunity to explore how artists’ specialized knowledge of social and political engagement can contribute to a sense of increased safety and richer cultural resources at a time when inequality is at an all-time high. This experiment in cultural-political collaboration proposes that we treat artists for their commitment to speaking from a place of truth. When artists speak, it’s time to listen.

— Sara Reisman

3. Ibid.
The 8th Floor is an exhibition and events space established in 2010 by Shelley and Donald Rubin, dedicated to promoting cultural and philanthropic initiatives, to expanding artistic and cultural accessibility in New York City. The 8th Floor is located at 17 West 17th Street and is free and open to the public. Schools groups are encouraged.

Viewing hours are Tuesday through Friday, 11:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M. Saturday by appointment. The8thfloor.Org


32. HEW LOCKE (B. 1959, EDINBURGH, SCOTLAND) CHURCHILL (NEW LOOK PURPLE), 2008. ACRYLIC PAINT ON C-TYPE PHOTOGRAPH, 8.27 X 11.7". COURTESY OF HALES GALLERY, COPYRIGHT OF THE ARTIST. PHOTO BY FXP PHOTOGRAPH. THIS IMAGE IS FROM THE NATIVES AND COLONIALS LONDON SERIES

33. SHEPARD FAIREY (B. 1970, CHARLESTON, SC), SEDATION PILL, 2013. SERIGRAPH ON PAPER 43 1⁄2 X 34". THE SHELLEY AND DONALD RUBIN PRIVATE COLLECTION

34. MAJA BAJEVIC, TO BE CONTINUED, 2014. EXHIBITION VIEWS, “TAKE LIBERTY!”, THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ART, OSLO, NORWAY. COURTESY OF ARTIST AND PETER KILCHMANN GALLERY


36. YOAN CAPOTE (B. 1977, PINAR DEL RÍO, CUBA), DIALOGUSFOBIA (UN NUDO EN LA GARGANTA), 2011. ACRYLIC AND XEROX TRANSFER ON CANVAS 44 X 66" (44 X 33" EACH). COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

37. DREAD SCOTT (B. 1965, CHICAGO, IL), LENIN, BOY AND WORLD, 2011. ACRYLIC AND XEROX TRANSFER ON CANVAS 44 X 66" (44 X 33" EACH). COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

38. TANIA BRUGUERA, /THE FRANCIS EFFECT/, YEAR: 2014 MEDIUM: CAMPAIGN, ART OF CONDUCT MATERIALS, TABLE, POSTCARDS, T-SHIRTS, TOTE BAGS, WEBSITE, IPAD