

critical silence

by R.G. Fleming

Ask an artist to describe his or her source of inspiration and you're about as likely to hear something concrete as you are to bump into a humanist at the Republican National Convention. It's not that the **left brain** doesn't know what the right is doing; it's just that it can't find the words to describe what goes on. If we move the locus of inspiration a little lower, we can describe an artist's motivation as *visceral*—it comes from the gut, which never gave a damn about the left brain anyway.

When terrorists slammed two passenger jets into the World Trade Center and one into the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, visceral responses abounded. The House chamber erupted with applause as President George W. Bush announced on behalf of the American people, "We condemn the Taliban regime." This sentiment—simultaneously sorrowful, angry, and determined—was picked up by the general population, and its popularity translated to massive spikes in the sale and display of American flags and flag-adorned bumper stickers, T-shirts, and Christmas tree ornaments bearing the slogan "United We Stand."

Responses from the art community were diverse. In the months immediately following the attacks, there was a climate of solidarity and sympathy for the victims. Having joined the vibrant community of artists in the Woodstock, New York area little more than a week before September 11, filmmaker Jennifer Lucene began to document artists' reactions for what would become the film *Creative Retaliation*. "All of the artists in my film were paralyzed by what happened and needed to release all of the emotions from the tragedy," she says. "And creating is so much more powerful than destroying."

But what stirs one artist to sympathy may well stir another to criticism. Lost on many Americans was the fact that US retaliation would invariably involve the shedding of the blood of people no more guilty of perpetrating the events of September 11 than the average American or Briton was for the firebombing of Dresden in 1945. That harsh truth was what led Jakob Bokulich to create the work *Red-Blooded American*, a 3' x 5' American flag infused with blood taken from thirteen volunteers. Bokulich had sensed what is referred to in legal circles as a "chilling effect" on the production of politically charged artwork. In the artist's view, however, the chill, normally the result of *government* restrictions on free expression, was being self-imposed by artists. Bokulich wanted to break the silence, but was somewhat fearful of the way his work would be received. "I think I felt that this country is host to some kind of underground dormant tyranny that's just waiting to surface," he says. "So to put myself out there with any kind of political piece felt simply dangerous."

It is not uncommon in America to witness behaviours that are not in accordance with professed ideals. Where else but in the United States would there be such a loud public outcry over a half-second flash of Janet Jackson's boob while the porn industry rakes in over \$10 billion of revenue a year? The attacks of September 11 left Americans with a troubling reality, in which unity became intertwined with intolerance. The First Amendment of the US Constitution safeguards the right to free expression, but artists producing work critical of government action or popular sentiment have frequently found their vices drowned out by an ethnocentric, jingoistic hubbub. It's amid such attempts at self-expression that we begin to hear the C-word tossed around, sometimes indiscriminately. Censorship is a concept often misunderstood, the word itself often misapplied. True censorship only takes place when a message is suppressed by a public official. The private gallery owner, publisher, or production company that refuses to exhibit, print, or otherwise produce a work is not engaging in censorship, per se, but enforcing real or perceived community mores.

Svetlana Mintcheva, Arts Advocacy Coordinator of the National Coalition Against Censorship (www.ncaac.org), understands the distinction well, and points out an important grey area where the line between public and private suppression of artistic speech often becomes blurred. Public officials—directors of publicly funded museums or public university employees, for instance—are, after all, members of communities with certain culturally defined standards. “A public official could well decide to remove a painting from a public gallery because of his or her own [personal] ‘squeamishness’ or plain dislike of the ideas expressed in it,” Mintcheva notes. “Yet that would still be an act of government censorship.”

Mintcheva has documented numerous cases of censorship that fall on various points along the continuum of public to private suppression of artistic expression. Her *Censorship Timeline* records incidents stretching from 1989 until 2002, at which time she displayed the piece at an art gallery in New York. Since September 11, there has been, Mintcheva notes, a clearly discernible change in the nature and frequency of censorship. “Whereas ‘old school’ censorship [focused on] sexuality, nudity and religious topics continues, there has been a significant rise in the censorship of art that presses political hot buttons,” she says. This observation is supported by filmmaker Lucene, who has noticed a new selectivity among organizations that fund the arts.

Namely, they avoid supporting art that hints at terrorism as a theme. Artists, in turn, are careful to avoid language in their grant requests that is suggestive of a desire to explore the theme of terrorism, she says.

One can hardly contest that politically charged themes have been targeted since September 11. It's hard to imagine, for example, that federal agents would have wasted time investigating the artwork that was on display at Houston's Art Car Museum in November of 2001, had it not been for the terrorist attacks. At issue were several works appearing in the museum's *Secret Wars* show, including Tim Glover's *Empty Trellis (revisited)*. Glover's piece, created before September 11 and described by curator Tex Kerschen as a commentary on US environmental policy, consisted of a charcoal drawing of President Bush behind a speaker's podium, covered by a steel trellis formed as a half-sphere, mounted above a smattering of gold-coloured metal leaves. As well, the painting *Millennial Children* by Lynn Randolph (an artist who has most recently been recognized for the powerful work *The Coronation of King George*) came under agents' scrutiny. The canvas depicts a young woman and a girl clutching each other amidst scenes of predation and fiery destruction, while nearby a devil sporting an image of George H.W. Bush on his stomach dances. Ultimately, both Randolph's work and Glover's were deemed nonthreatening.

There is perhaps no more frightening an example of post-attack “vigilance” gone awry than the case of Steve Kurtz, an Associate Professor of Art at the University of New York's Buffalo campus. Kurtz, who is also a member of the Critical Art Ensemble—a “collective of five artists of various specializations dedicated to exploring the intersections between art, technology, radical politics, and critical theory”—woke up on May 11, 2004 to find that his wife had died in her sleep. He called 911. When police arrived and found Petri dishes, test tubes, and various other materials associated with current and past art projects, they called in federal agents, who later detained Kurtz and confiscated his computers, art supplies, and written work. Buffalo authorities sealed his house, citing it a health risk. Kurtz wasn't even allowed to return home to recover his wife's body until New York State authorities tested the impounded materials and found no threat to public health. Despite having discovered no illegal materials among Kurtz's possessions, law enforcement officials are even now forging ahead with the case, possibly bringing charges under provisions of the controversial USA Patriot Act. CONTINUED ON PAGE 52

Lynn Randolph
The Coronation of Saint George, 2004
oil on canvas
48" x 36"



But even if an artist goes unsilenced by the FBI, he or she may still end up muzzled by arts bureaucrats. In the immediate aftermath of September 11, for example, officials at the Baltimore Museum of Art removed from the institution's walls an untitled Christopher Wool painting that consists of nothing more than a stencil of the word "terrorist", repeated three times. The artwork had been in the museum's possession for over a decade, yet museum officials stated they would rehang it only with an accompanying explanation of the artist's motivation for creating the piece. Of course, the suppression of political messages has not been confined only to the months immediately following September 11. In November 2003, officials in Fairfield, California removed Jim Kimberly's *The Super Imposer*, an interactive sculpture mounted on a stationary bicycle, which, when pedalled, fuses images of Osama bin Laden and an American flag, because of both the political sensitivity surrounding the war in Iraq and the presence of a nearby Air Force base. In July 2004 in Denver, Colorado, public officials reacted to private squeamishness by removing from the Denver International Airport parts of an installation by Max Yawney called *The Luggage Project*. At issue was an open suitcase splattered with red and black paint and affixed with a bumper sticker reading "Blood for oil. Billionaires for Bush."

Given the new sensitivity to critical artistic expression since September 11, one can't help but wonder exactly where the wellspring of suppression lies. Has the American public, galvanized by the threat of a common enemy, simply taken a cultural turn less tolerant of political dissent? Or is there an identifiable top-down impetus directed against free expression emanating from the heart of the Bush Administration? It wouldn't be too far-fetched to imagine some version of the latter to be true, given the Administration's aversion to messages that conflict with their own. After all, it was former Attorney-General John Ashcroft who, in his desire to avoid being photographed with the semi-naked statue *Spirit of Justice*—a neoclassical depiction of a woman with her right breast exposed that has graced the Great Hall of the Justice Department building since the 1930s—covered the artwork up with a pricey blue curtain. And why do you suppose United Nations officials elected to throw a blue drape over the tapestry of Pablo Picasso's anti-war masterpiece, *Guernica*, prior to then Secretary of State Colin Powell delivering the US's case against Iraq before the UN Security Council (and numerous television cameras)? Is it possible that what the Bush Administration

has is less a defined program of censorship than an aversion to participation in dark irony? Or does it just have an affinity for blue backdrops?

In any event, if we focus our attention on *all* cases where art that criticizes or dissents is suppressed, the image of a centralized effort to curb free expression begins to fade. While many cases of artistic expression stifled by public officials have attracted attention from the NCAC and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), few of these officials have direct ties to the Bush Administration. The censors tend rather to be motivated by factors that differ little from those that propel some private gallery owners and citizens to silence artists with complaints, threats, and the removal of artwork from gallery walls. With a closer look at the political culture of the United States—particularly after September 11—we begin to see a force at work that is far more insidious than Orwell's Big Brother, and to view official acts of censorship less as a cause, and more as a symptom, of what has ailed artistic expression since September 11.

Although the federal agents who visited the Art Car Museum in Houston demonstrated an intimidating level of concern over Lynn Randolph's *Millennial Children*, they did not remove it. And had they done so, the museum would have had recourse through the courts. But at about the same time that agents were asking silly questions in Houston, a private art gallery director was removing Linda Griffith's work on the other side of the country. Griffith's *Nobody's Perfect*, a digitally manipulated photograph of a nuclear power plant in flames, and her *Republican Pro-Life*, a depiction of a globe spiralling down in the bloody waters of a toilet, and several of her other works had been selected by jury to be included in an exhibit titled *Uncertain Future: Earth Found, Used and Abused* at Orchard Artworks in Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania, little more than a week following the September 11 attacks. Tracy Cass, the gallery's director, said the photographs "did not harmonize with the ambience of the gallery." Griffith sees things differently. For her, it was a question neither of aesthetics nor direct intimidation by public officials. "Ten days after 9/11, the only thing motivating Orchard Artworks to limit what people in this little suburban island can see and deem to be 'art' was simply the same patriarchal/corporate self-interest that underlies the flag-waving and magnetized ribbons on their SUVs in support of the genocide-for-oil campaign," she says. "Orchard Artworks saw gallery income being threatened by the inflammatory nature of my work."

But Griffith does not discount the role of September 11 in shaping artists' lives and working conditions. When asked whether the character of resistance she has encountered has changed since the attacks, she offers "a resounding 'yes.'" A college student barely a hundred miles from Kent State University in 1970, Griffith recalls what she refers to as "the old way of censorship: in-your-face confrontation by weapon." Today, she says, "we are being censored by inches (in quiet little towns like Bryn Athyn) and get accused of lunatic hysteria when we make mountains out of the molehills cumulatively forming mountains." She cites repeated egging of her van following her display of a rainbow PACE flag "in defiance of the red, white and blue expectation," the refusal of a gallery celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of International Women's Year to display a historical photograph of women participating in a pro-lesbian protest, and a case of a major foundation funding women's artwork that announced recent grant winners, "none of them creating politically aware (let alone outspoken) work. . . . The nature of censorship has, indeed, changed to insidiously become a part of our everyday lives and [is] *not* just an issue played out by artists on the symbolic fringe," she says.

Then there are gallery owners who wish to allow artists to express controversial messages but are threatened by the very public they hope to reach. Such was the case when Lori Haigh, owner of the Capobianco art gallery in North Beach, California, displayed an oil painting by Guy Colwell titled *The Abuse*, which depicts US Army soldiers happily inflicting electrical torture on naked Abu Chraib prisoners, in May 2004. A single mother of two, Haigh found herself torn between her legal right to free expression and her own safety and that of her family when she encountered repeated acts of vandalism, intimidation, threatening phone calls, and even physical assaults after displaying Colwell's painting. According to the *San Francisco Examiner* and other local newspapers, Haigh arrived at work to find that her gallery had been egged and that trash had been dumped in its entranceway. She received numerous e-mails and phone messages threatening her life and calling her anti-American—so many that she finally relented and took the painting down. Even after removing the painting from prominent display, however, she still continued to receive threatening phone calls. Finally, after a man entered the gallery and spat in her face, Haigh decided to pack up and close the gallery.

Less vulnerable to vandalism and physical abuse but still beholden to public opinion are political cartoonists, who are well-acquainted with the cultural impact of September 11 and the implications it has had for free expression. By definition, political cartoonists are expected to call attention to the many ironies, inconsistencies, and hypocrisies that are an inherent part of political life. If a political cartoon doesn't inspire critical thought, its creator has somehow failed his or her task. This is a fact that was apparently lost on the *New York Times* when it pulled Ted Rall's cartoon "Terror Widows," which portrayed wives of September 11 victims as opportunists, from its website in March 2002. Political cartoonists have had a hard time selling their work since September 11, according to Asa Pittman and Emma Ruby-Sachs at *Alternet.org*. This is for a combination of reasons, including increased kowtowing to corporate bottom-lines, as well as good old popular intolerance—a blending of the Linda Griffith and Lori Haigh experiences. As Pittman and Ruby-Sachs note, "Political cartoonists are dependent on the mainstream media for their livelihood, but the papers that previously relished a provocative cartoon no longer want to see a satirical critique of a government the people are desperate to rally around."² In the aftermath of September 11, cartoonists Steve Benson, Todd Persche, and Aaron McGruder have all had critical or antiwar work denounced, their publication deals withdrawn, or both, due to reader complaints.

There is a seemingly intractable conundrum embedded deep within American political culture. At its root is the concept of patriotism. It is out of a sense of patriotism that some Americans react with great disfavor toward artists, writers, or anyone else with criticism to voice, particularly at a time when national security has been threatened. But for Americans, what is love of country if not love of the Constitution? It is, after all, the Constitution of the United States that public officials swear to uphold and defend, and it is that document wherein lies the familiar injunction "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press . . . It was *out of patriotism* that this restriction was born—a restriction that is valueless if it is only to be applied to popular or uncritical messages. The censors, whether public or private, are thus part of the very force the founders of their beloved homeland sought to keep in check.

In the end, it wasn't fear of the US government that gave Jakob Bokulich pause about publicly displaying his work since, like any artist, he can always seek a judicial remedy in the face of overt censorship by public officials. Rather, it was the behaviour of the general population he found chilling. It was, he recalls, "intimidating seeing all the flags everywhere you looked because to me they were like team colors at a football game where the herd mentality reigns dominant and anything else is a potential victim." Given that Americans take for granted that power corrupts and understand that a watchful eye must be kept on government, the real threat to freedom of artistic expression rests with the culture at large. The unelected arbiters of right and wrong who blast their views into the consciousness of anyone with cable television, the Internet, or a subscription to *Newsweek* are the same people who insist on America's "us" to the rest of the world's "them," and who, often underestimated, have as much potential corruptive power as any group of high-echelon Washington bureaucrats. In fact, they have more, because they act with impunity.

Ultimately, silence communicates a message, namely, that there is no dissent, that everything's fine. Jennifer Lucene's film *Creative Retaliation* was so titled to evoke the image of artists combating terrorism using artistic creation as their weapon. That same weapon could and should be applied to combating the silencing effect that public reaction to September 11 has had on those artists who have political criticism or dissent to voice because, in the end, censorship is best fought through the generative force in every artist—through the need and the will to create.

¹ <http://www.critical-art.net/>

² <http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20020715&s=sachs20020703>