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Marsden Hartley, *Painting No. 50 (1914)*, 1914-15, Terra
Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Collection, 1933.57

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November 10, 2000

Francis Frascina

*Art, Politics and Dissent: Aspects of the Art
Left in Sixties America*

Manchester University Press, 2000. 248 pp.; none color
ills.; few b/w ills.; 0 ills. Paper \$69.95 (0719044685)

Richard Candida Smith

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nineteenth century, Zola's defense of Dreyfuss set a standard for engagement. The intellectual used his or her mastery of communication to challenge the lies of a corrupt government. American intervention into the Vietnamese civil war sparked poets, theater workers, and filmmakers to produce some of their finest work as they tried to live up to the responsibilities of their social status.

Francis Frascina's *Art, Politics and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America* presents four case studies of U.S.-based visual artists working together to protest the Vietnam War. He focuses on Los Angeles and New York exclusively, and he is concerned entirely with collective efforts to engage the art community in antiwar activity. Frascina first examines the activities of the Artists Protest Committee in Los Angeles in 1965 and 1966, with emphasis on the Los Angeles Artists' Tower of Protest erected in West Hollywood in 1966. He then moves his attention to New York from 1967 to 1970 to discuss the work of Angry Arts and the Art Workers' Coalition. He concludes with failed efforts to have the Museum of Modern Art sponsor a poster protesting the My Lai massacre and the subsequent attempt to ask Pablo Picasso to remove *Guernica* from the museum.

Frascina argues that the separation between art and politics institutionalized in post-McCarthy America undermined the ability of artists to protest the war as effectively as writers or filmmakers did. Trustee opposition to politicization of the museum may not be surprising, but Frascina's account reveals the opposition of older prominent progressive intellectuals such as Irving Howe, Clement Greenberg, and Meyer Schapiro. The latter is a central figure in Frascina's narrative, and the informative discussion should be of particular interest to art historians. Schapiro is emblematic of an older generation of left intellectuals scarred by Stalinism and McCarthyism. In his efforts to protect the imagination as a haven from the deadening hand of ideology, he helped to inscribe a boundary between an artist's formal investigations and his or her political beliefs. Schapiro provides a genealogy for Frascina's claim that contemporary art historians continue to perpetuate the alienation of art and politics by refusing to consider antiwar activities as an important part of artists' careers. In so doing, historians show that they too are embedded in a depoliticized institution that defines "art" primarily as individual expression produced for an autonomous, professionalized realm.

Frascina's argument hinges on a definition of politics that risks flattening the actual political engagements artists made through their work. Most historians who have written about assemblagist Edward Kienholz, including this reviewer, have accepted the depth of the artist's feelings on a variety of issues ranging from race relations and capital punishment to the war. That his aims were what he called "spiritual" rather than political leads Frascina to argue that the assemblages fit readily into a museum framework as an ersatz politics, with a vague aestheticism replacing actual social content. Thus, even if Kienholz's 1966 exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art provoked intense public debate and attracted large attendance, political messages, Frascina argues, were lost in attention focused on the artist and the defense of his free-speech rights.

Frascina similarly considers and dismisses James Rosenquist's *F-111*, one of several large-scale pop art-influenced paintings ironically depicting military fetishes. Locked within a self-referential discourse of art, he insists, the painting fails to confront the spectator with the deadly consequences of American military policy.

The underlying claim that neodada undermined the political effect of socially engaged art by refocusing attention on the individual artist risks can be questioned, if only because it risks silencing efforts to engage viewers' psychological investment in American myths contributing to militarism, racism, and an aggressive confrontation with the rest of the world. As a proposition, however, the claim provides a useful framework for debating the types of intervention possible for artists in post-World War II America as well as the limits that they faced in speaking to a broad public. More puzzling is Frascina's omission of any discussion of the boom in poster art and art collectives occasioned by the Vietnam War. On this subject, there is an existing art historical literature that would benefit from additional treatment. Preceding work by David Kunzel, Lucy Lippard, Shifra Goldman,

Thumbnail

The intellectual as social critic has a long and respected tradition. The works of Dante and Milton, Lessing and Rousseau, Stowe and Hugo vibrate with the intense political passions that motivated each writer to pick up their pens. At the end of the

and others is not discussed and only tangentially cited.

The framework that Frascina advances for assessing artists' engagement rests on the model Zola provided for the role of intellectuals in political debate. For example, the Artists' Protest Committee's placard *Stop We Dissent* (1965), one of three posters illustrated in the book, features a simple graphic image of a ladder with STOP in stenciled block letters underneath the bottom rung. The figure indexes the argument below demanding an end to American military intervention in Vietnam and the Dominican Republic. Nearly 200 artist names follow, the "we" speaking via the poster. The prominence given the names in the poster design stresses the collective political position but also the social status of the signatories, whose decision to protest has graphic importance equal to the argument.

Frascina's tacit definitions of politics and depoliticization are reinforced by the two images illustrating the Tower of Protest, a collaboration that Frascina cites as providing a model for an alternative vision of art. The first is the front page of the alternative weekly, the *Los Angeles Free Press*, announcing the building of a "Tower for Peace" as an internationally important art exhibit. The second illustration is the cover of *Art in America* showing a photograph of the tower frame under construction. The alternative weekly's account occurred immediately after tower was built, but *Art in America* ignored the tower until 1971, five years after the work had appeared and been demolished. Frascina notes that although hundreds of artists participated in the project, the editors of the most important art journals did not consider the work important as art since it stood apart from the context of galleries and museums. Its reappearance half a decade later coincided with the beginning of series of articles by Therese Schwartz on the politicization of the avant-garde. The image chosen focused on the structural framework for the tower designed by Mark di Suvero. The picture, Frascina claims, emphasized the tower's relation to metal sculptures by the artist and legitimated the entire project by subordinating the project's politics to di Suvero's gallery work.

Frascina finds this maneuver indicative of cultural politics in the United States after McCarthy, rendering invisible gestures promoting alternative conceptions of "art." However, the image reproduced from the *Los Angeles Free Press* suggests that the legitimating maneuver that Frascina critiques in the art world was the precondition for the collective protest to be an effective political intervention in the first place. Three photographs show a crowd of spectators examining the square paintings that hung upon the tower. Each square was contributed by a separate artist, many prominent figures in Los Angeles, New York, and Paris. The squares present simple images readable at a glance to people passing by in an automobile or on foot. Some panels have only block letters with short phrases such as "NO WAR!" or "BODY COUNT." Other panels present iconic images of the dove, the peace sign, or a five-pointed star. Others have simple pictures of aircraft, tanks, faces, or crowds of placard-bearing protestors. A few display abstract images with no apparent concrete reference. As a whole, the images on the tower had no explicit political message. The tower gained its political effect through reference to the prestige of the men and women who submitted work as a gesture of solidarity.

The Tower of Protest remains a minor episode in the history of sixties protest because the strategy of mobilizing intellectuals to articulate the highest values of American society (a goal stated explicitly in the text of *Stop We Dissent*), no longer worked unless the mass media responded. As Frascina notes the local press and television blacked out the tower. That other forms of protest, usually more violent, were able to seize the attention of the press more effectively lies outside the scope of this book. Nonetheless, an important but missing element of his story revolves around the eclipse of a politics of prestige. The dilemma facing intellectuals engaged in protest in the 1960s sprang from the changing nature of celebrity and distinction. Those who understood this change successfully injected themselves into public discussion and changed public consciousness. Those who failed to understand the change, those that pined with nostalgia after the role of intellectuals in France, as did the main organizers of the Tower of Protest, found their efforts failing to ignite public attention.

This book is valuable for the detailed examination it provides of a pivotal moment when the nature of protest was changing. The transformations were due, in part, to the expansion of the mass media and the power that reporters and editors had to publicize or to silence. Another factor that Frascina describes was the shift from a party- to movement-centered left political culture. He emphasizes the priority given to individual moral stand, but the shift was also evidence of the internal crisis of Marxism-Leninism following the death of Stalin, a crisis that would culminate with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The historiographical moment is one of change, as the questions the post-Cold War world needs to answer require new ways of examining the past. Frascina's argument is certainly written to our present moment. He examines the Vietnam War period in order to see better "how to produce an oppositional art which escapes the determining effect of the interests that sustain United States imperialism" (215). In his conclusion, he links the controversies during the 1990s over the National Endowment for the Arts to debates over modern art in the 1950s and the failures of artists during the Vietnam War to develop effective practices that could challenge a conservative consensus.

With the United States acting as the center of "globalization," does it make sense to continue conceptualizing the U.S., as Frascina does, as a "conservative" society? This characterization had a logical foundation to the degree that it coincided with the division of the world into two power blocs ostensibly divided on the question of private versus collective ownership of the means of production. Assigning the United States the "conservative" role in the relationship required, however, silencing the persistent transformative aspects of the American political economy, which in the cultural domain, typically include sentimentalizing after the fact what American society has destroyed.

If we think of the United States as a revolutionary rather than as a conservative society, the challenges facing artists and other intellectuals attempting to force collective moral

attention on the consequences of American-sponsored social transformation take on new dimensions. Viable answers to Lenin's famous question "What is to be done?" eluded activists in the 1960s because left political discourse remained trapped within a vision of politics and protest formed at the beginning of the century. In that sense, artists who responded to the Vietnam with work exploring the subjective experience of American expansion provided a model for art as a weapon of micropolitics allowing minorities to maintain distance from dominant myths of nation, race, gender, or sexuality and thus to leave open the possibility for continued struggle. Frascina is not sympathetic to the type of politics this form of dissent promotes. His book nonetheless helps explicate the genealogy of contemporary conceptions of protest art.

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