

## Artistic Beauty As A Political Weapon

Vanina GÉRÉ

**Can art have an impact on sociopolitical reality? What matters most? Political content or aesthetic qualities? These questions have haunted contemporary art since the late sixties. Yet some artists, such as Kara Walker and Brigitte Zieger, have avoided the pitfalls encountered in the effort to reconcile beauty and politics by choosing to heighten their work's capacity for formal seduction—only to plunge the spectator brutally and unexpectedly back into reality.**

### Political Art Is Not Sociopolitical Activism

For an artist like the American Ad Reinhardt (1913-1967), the work of art and sociopolitical action were two watertight realms. Art, he believed, could survive only by asserting its complete resistance to the world. This radical attitude did not prevent the artist from taking positions on sociopolitical issues: all his life Reinhardt was an activist, even as his pictorial vocabulary became increasingly pure, culminating in large, somber monochromes. Yet in his view, the term “political art” was an oxymoron. Reinhardt belonged to the formalist trend in American painting, which the art critic Clement Greenberg formulated into a doctrine. It asserted that art must preserve its independence from all non-aesthetic categories. By the late sixties, however, with the advent of postmodern thought, “content” and, in particular, content testifying to the artist’s place on contemporary society resurfaced in artworks. Over the next five decades, Western political art has ebbed (notably in the first half of the 1980s, in the early 1990s, and in the early 2010s, as evidenced in the latest exhibition of the New York Museum of Modern Art’s contemporary collections, in which it was generously represented) and flowed. According to the American art historian Irvin Sandler, one ebb in political art’s tide occurred in the wake of the Whitney Museum of Art’s 1993 Biennial, which established a precedent for politicized art.<sup>1</sup> Organized by Elizabeth Sussman, the *1993 Biennial Exhibition* broke with the Whitney’s prior curatorial practices for biennials, in that rather than offering a panorama of contemporary American art, it brought together work that combined deliberate formal rawness with “meaning that reflects the disaffection of the socially marginalized, subcultural groups within a predominantly white, male, heterosexual society.” The Biennial presented a synthesis of the demands stemming from identity politics, which had risen to prominence in the United States in

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<sup>1</sup> Irvin Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era*, Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press, 1998, p. 554

the late 1980s.<sup>2</sup> While the press denounced the exhibition for sacrificing aesthetic quality to didactic political correctness, this biennial was retroactively praised for its courage two years later, even as the next biennial, organized in 1995 by Klaus Kertess, returned to formal beauty and to a political “degree zero.” Subsequently, the 1993 Biennial has been widely recognized for its visionary character.<sup>3</sup>

On the other side of the Atlantic, theorists such as Dominique Baqué argued in the 2000s that political art of the second half of the twentieth century has proved incapable, since the late eighties, of influencing sociopolitical reality—paradoxically validating, despite protests to the contrary, the formalist position. Political art would be better off yielding to documentary work.<sup>4</sup> The problem with this argument, however, is that it fails to offer a clear definition of political art’s goals.

If the goal is to impact the sociopolitical realm directly, I would first argue that documentaries and non-canonical art forms like comics trips (Baqué cites Art Spiegelmann’s *Maus* [1973-1986]) are no more successful than their alternatives. Ten years after Michael Moore’s documentary *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), which Baqué mentions, the National Rifle Association remains so powerful in the United States that, even after the recent massacre in a Denver movie theater, it was unimaginable for the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates to propose reforming federal gun laws.<sup>5</sup> Though the kind of information it offers does not belong to art’s domain, the documentary, in many ways, fulfills the “function of vigilance and critique” that Baqué deems to be political art’s last acceptable purpose.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, if one seeks a direct causal relationship between art and life, it strikes me that art forms best suited to such a task are to be found in the realm of applied arts and architecture, which “transform our daily world.”<sup>7</sup> I have in mind, among any number of possible examples, the work of the Japanese architect Shigeru Ban, who popularized the use of such “non-noble” materials as corrugated cardboard as a way of providing an emergency solution to housing crises resulting from natural catastrophes. On the other hand, when it comes to raising consciousness by presenting reality in a different light, I would suggest that the *artistic* practices of many contemporary artists prove that political art still has much to say.<sup>8</sup>

This somewhat lengthy introduction offers a glimpse into the difficulties in defining the function and scope of political art. Acknowledging that the latter are necessarily confined to the

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<sup>2</sup> Lisa Phillips, “No Man’s Land: Art at the Threshold of a Millennium,” in *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, ed. Lisa Phillips (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art/ Harry N. Abrams Publishers, 1993), 52-61.

<sup>3</sup> Jerry Saltz, “Leaving Babylon,” *New York Magazine*, March 1, 2012, <http://nymag.com/arts/art/reviews/whitney-biennial-saltz-2012-3/>, accessed September 23, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Dominique Baqué, *Pour un nouvel art politique : de l’art contemporain au documentaire* (Paris: Flammarion, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Nor did the strident speech that the director delivered against the policies of George W. Bush upon receiving the Oscar for best documentary prevent the then president from being reelected in 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Baqué, *Pour un nouvel art politique*.

<sup>7</sup> Ad Reinhardt, *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 174. The book was first published by Viking Press in 1975.

<sup>8</sup> This is particularly true since Baqué limits her consideration of political art to a relatively restricted overview of contemporary practices, notably the neo-avant-garde represented by Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, and Hans Haacke and relational art of the 1990s.

realm of art does not, in my mind, constitute failure. For if one defines art as an invitation to see differently, then political art clearly offers counterpoints to dominant representations that are all the more relevant in that these poetic associations disrupt the rigid order of prevailing representations.

What, then, do we mean by a work's "political content"? To answer this question, we must first return to Lucy Lippard's distinction between political art and committed art. Evoking political art's frequent pitfalls allows us to see that aesthetic pleasure and politics are not mutually exclusive. To the contrary, the seduction of formal beauty can be one of political art's most effective strategies—and greatest weapons.

### **Political Art or Activist Art?**

In 1999, the feminist theorist Lucy Lippard (b. 1937) proposed the useful distinction between "political" and "activist" artists, transcending the opposition between art-for-art's-sake and artistic militancy.

[I]d say that the "political" artist makes gallery/museum art with political subject matter and/or content, but may also be seen calling meetings, marching, signing petitions, or speaking eloquently and analytically on behalf of various causes. ... Political art makes people think politically through images, but it may or may not inform the audience about specific events or solutions or rouse people to take action. ... "Activist artists," on the other hand, face out of the art world, working primarily in a social and/or political context. They spend more of their time thinking publicly, are more likely to work in groups, and less likely to show in galleries, though many have ended up there.<sup>9</sup>

Following this distinction, one might cite as examples of "activist artists" the anti-AIDS collective GRAN FURY (1986-1995), which developed tactics for promoting its messages based on the principle of invading public space.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the collective ABC No Rio (1980) was founded to protest the commercialism of real estate developers and the gentrification of New York City by illegally occupying vacant buildings.<sup>11</sup> A conceptual artist like Jonathan Horowitz (b. 1966), however, who since the 1990s has continually engaged with sociopolitical issues in work intended for display on traditional artistic circuits, should be considered a political artist. Indeed, by manipulating artistic forms and tropes, he allows us to reconceive the relationship between the individual and power representations. His reconfiguration of the American flag using the colors of the gay, lesbian, and transgender activist banner in *Rainbow American Flag for Jasper in the Style of Artist's Boyfriend* (2005) is more than an act of symbolic misappropriation. It also pays homage to the famous flag series (1954-1960) painted in encaustic on canvas by the

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<sup>9</sup> Lucy Lippard, "Too Political? Forget It," in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York and London: New York University Press, 1999), 39-61.

<sup>10</sup> For an historical overview of their work, see this interview: Douglas Crimp, "GRAN FURY talks to Douglas Crimp," *Artforum*, April 2003, <http://www.artforum.com/inprint/id=4466>, accessed September 10, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> See the [manifesto of ABC No Rio](#) (accessed September 10, 2012). GRAN FURY, like ABC No Rio, gradually returned to the traditional artistic circuit. Thus GRAN FURY exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1990; posters by ABC No Rio, which at present is an alternative art center organized as a voluntary association, are now part of MoMA's collections.

neo-Dadaist artist Jasper Johns (b. 1930), thus adding a further layer onto his initial act of artistic appropriation.<sup>12</sup>

Lippard nonetheless emphasizes the porous nature of the boundary between political and activist art, recognizing that one and the same artist will often assume these roles in succession. I would add that artists can at times engage in activism in order to grapple with intrinsically artistic questions. Thus in the seventies, Howardena Pindell (b. 1943), an abstract and conceptual artist, began, alongside her own work, keeping records on the number of African-American artists represented in commercial galleries and major cultural institutions as a way of fighting the racism endemic to the art world. Similarly, in the early seventies, a number of artist collectives were created that sought to increase the visibility of African-American, Hispanic, and women artists in New York's most prestigious cultural institutions, through museum acquisition policies as well as exhibitions. Examples include the Art Workers Coalition for MoMA, the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, and the Ad Hoc Women's Art Committee, of which Lippard was a co-founder, for the Whitney Museum. The Guerilla Girls, a collective founded in 1985, pursued a similar approach. Action directed against the art world's inequalities thus lie at the frontier between activist art and an effort to reform artistic policies. They borrow the characteristic forms of expression of their time (thus in 1970, Ad Hoc used performance art, while in the eighties the Guerilla Girls, following GRAN FURY, appropriated and misappropriated advertisements) as a way of addressing preoccupations that vary in relation to the historical moment. For example, the artists' collective W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy, founded in 2008) uses performance and speeches, as well as online polls, to call for improved remuneration for artists and independent curators, in light of the "organized irresponsibility of the art market and its supporting institutions"<sup>13</sup> (This makes us dream of a similar movement for interns: without exploiting them, many galleries and cultural institutions would be unable to function).

An argument against this tentative definition would be that it fails to take into consideration all the artistic practices that seek precisely to remove art from its institutional and economic circuits, which in itself is a political gesture. Yet as Lippard, and, three years after her, the artist Seth Price (a pioneer in thinking about the Internet's potential to reinvent democratic artistic practices) remind us, practices such as these that have been attempted since the sixties have either failed because they went unnoticed or were victims of their own success, being sooner or later reabsorbed into the market and institutions.<sup>14</sup>

If Lippard's definition allows us to distinguish between political works (which may consist of acts and action) and militant action (which may use artistic creations that do not aspire to be "works," in the sense that they are not intended for a gallery or a museum), what, then, do we mean by a work's "political content"?

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<sup>12</sup> Horowitz borrows his theme (the Johnsian flag) as well as his "style": the use of glitter, common in the work of his "boyfriend," the conceptual artist Rob Pruitt (b. 1954), who in turn has appropriated various Pop Art works in pieces like *Un Carton de Dasani* (2003), which borrows from Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* (1964) the principle of tautological adequacy between the signified (the soap boxes) and the signifier (the sculpture).

<sup>13</sup> "W.A.G.E. recognizes the organized irresponsibility of the art market and its supporting institutions, and demands an end of the refusal to pay fees for the work we're asked to provide: preparation, installation, presentation, consultation, exhibition and reproduction." ([wo/manifesto](#), accessed September 10, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Lippard, "Too Political? Forget It"; Seth Price, "[Dispersion](#)," accessed September 10, 2010.

## A Question of Perspective

Works that address a specific, topical, and local cause run the risk of being relatively “inefficient,” in that their meaning may elude the public for cultural reasons. This structural problem also applies when the distance is historical: if a work of political art is one that addresses contemporary issues, then it is inevitable that its political potential will dwindle over time. Thus some of the great works in the pantheon of political art, such as Goya’s *Disasters of War* or *Third of May* (Prado Museum, Madrid, 1814), are now seen as denunciations of the violence of war rather than of the atrocities committed by Napoleon’s armies in Spain. We have passed, in other words, from the particular to the universal. Yet while Géricault’s *The Raft of the Medusa* (the Louvre, 1818-1819) is today considered to be a work of political art because its subject matter addressed the incompetence of the restored French monarchy, the artist, himself a monarchist, seized upon this dramatic story primarily to ensure that his painting would cause a stir and launch his career.

The degree to which a work of art is politicized is a function of its cultural context and the politics of its reception. In this respect, the case of works that provoked major controversies with crucial political implications, such as, in the United States, the public financing of art, is revealing. One thinks, for example, of the erotic nudes of Robert Mapplethorpe (1986), which triggered the American culture wars, or *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996) by Chris Ofili, a painter associated with the Young British Artists. While it caused no stir in London during the travelling exhibit *Sensation*, *The Holy Virgin Mary*, which represents the Virgin as the caricature of a black woman surrounded by a constellation of rear ends cut out of pornographic magazines, resting (like most of the artist’s paintings from the nineties) on two lumps of painted elephant dung, provoked a scandal in 1999 when it was displayed at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. The mayor at the time, Rudi Giuliani, a conservative Catholic Republican, tried to cut the city’s subsidies to the museum. As W. J. T. Mitchell notes in his analysis of the controversy, the use of elephant dung is what set off the scandal. Yet Ofili, who is of Nigerian background, maintained that in Africa this substance is highly valued as a symbol of fertility, representing the nurturing earth. The artist thus sought to present an alternative to canonical Western representations of the Virgin, but he in no way sought to be blasphemous.<sup>15</sup>

In the case of Ofili as well as Mapplethorpe, their work’s political content consists in transgressing dominant codes of representation in art (Mapplethorpe introduces a pornographic style into the museum’s space, while Ofili reconsiders the Eurocentric representation of the Virgin) as well as within the broader culture. However, neither artist sought to trigger a public debate with serious political consequences. A work’s political significance is contingent on the sociopolitical context in which it is presented. Moreover, it is best not to locate a work’s political content in its “subject matter,” but rather in its formal manipulation of cultural codes.

## Political Art: Using Beauty to Make a Point

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<sup>15</sup> On the Ofili controversy and its results, see W.J.T. Mitchell, “Offending Images,” in *Unsettling ‘Sensation’: Arts Policy Lessons from the Brooklyn Museum of Art Controversy*, ed. Laurence Rothfield (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 115-133.

Reviewing the exhibition organized by the contemporary African-American artist Kara Walker (b. 1969) at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art (*After the Deluge*, March 21-August 6, 2006), which was conceived as a visual essay conceived to challenge the media's representation of the victims of Hurricane Katrina, the critic John A. Parks discussed political art's main difficulties in these terms: "The use of fine art as a medium of political consequence has always been problematic and is, in fact, rarely successful. Very few works of art have ever managed to be politically potent while retaining their fascination as great works of art."<sup>16</sup> This claim has the merit of identifying the recurrent problem that political art faces: works in which the artist explicitly takes a position on a political or social issue of her time risk being totally consumed by their intention—and completely disappearing behind their message.

Political art is often accused of didacticism. This charge was leveled against the 1993 Whitney Biennial, which presented highly committed works addressing questions of gender, identity, and power in its relation to representation. What most art critics at the time saw as a lack of aesthetic quality amounted in reality to a self-conscious rejection of this criterion for political purposes (a position that characterized American art of the nineties). Lisa Philips, one of the exhibition's co-organizers, explained that in most of the works on display, "formal invention has taken a backseat to the interpretive function of art and the priorities of content."<sup>17</sup> She thus suggests that, in some instances, the visual medium must be deliberately impoverished if the message is to be expressed in a coherent and powerful way.

But at the same time, political art is always threatened by the reverse problem: that the political message will not get through because of the work's retinal character—in other words, because the work is appreciated primarily for its formal qualities. If political art is often considered lacking in formal efficacy, formally remarkable works are often deemed lacking in political efficacy: too much plastic beauty risks making politics a topic like any other. In grappling with this demanding question, some artists have chosen to accentuate their works' capacity for formal seduction by springing visual traps, placing viewers before realities that they did not expect to encounter in the rarefied air of a museum or a gallery.

An artist like Kara Walker exemplifies this approach to political art. Her career was launched precisely between the rejection of beauty by the 1993 Biennial, and its return in 1995. Beginning in 1994, first in large installations consisting of black cutouts positioned along white gallery walls, then in films (2004, 2005, 2009, and then in 2011), she used charming forms in the style of Disney cartoons or illustrations in children's books to depict scenes of unspeakable violence, in which the main characters are racial stereotypes. In this work, the spectator's presence is acknowledged: the black silhouettes, which resemble a projected shadow, could be the viewer's double. Walker presents the violence experienced by her characters as the expression of a collective unconscious, in which individuals are reduced to seeing in one another nothing more than their sex and the color of their skin. Yet because her work is formally seductive, because it is visually appealing and makes viewers feel comfortable in identifying with the shadows, Walker forces them to become conscious of their own involvement: viewers

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<sup>16</sup> John A. Parks, "The Dark, Black Outline," *Drawing* (Summer 2006): 120-127.

<sup>17</sup> Lisa Philips, "No Man's Land: A the Threshold of a Millenium," in *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, ed. Elizabeth Sussman (New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993): 52-61.

become complicit, before ultimately becoming conscious of their participation in perpetuating racist and sexist stereotypes.



*Gone, A Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* (1994, cutout paper on a wall, 4 x 15, 2 m)

Kara Walker, *My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, USA, 2007

© Gene Pittman

The conceptual artist Brigitte Zieger, whose artistic and political sensibilities are close to Walker's, also plays on the fact that the eye needs time to see the violence lurking behind formal beauty.<sup>18</sup> In *Flower of Power* (2009), she invokes a medium that in German culture is traditionally feminine: the minor, decorative genre of flower cutouts. Yet upon closer examination, one sees that these flowers have been cut out of military posters displaying idealized images of the Iraq war. This decorative style's beautifying function thus ironically reproduces an aesthetic vision of war, commissioned for militarist purposes and serving the interests of short-sighted nationalism. The artificial character of these images, which seek to conceal war's reality, is both reiterated by the production of the artistic artifact and torn to shreds by the artist, whose scissors become a creative force revealing the fault lines in militaristic rhetoric by literally cutting into the posters. At the same time, the choice of a feminine medium directly challenges the machismo implicit in these heroic images.

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<sup>18</sup> I am very grateful to Jason Karaïndros, an artist who teaches at the Ecole Régionale des Beaux Arts in Rouen, for drawing my attention to the similarities between Walker's and Zieger's work, first through the joint exhibition of these artists' work that he organized (*Man Is a Shadow's Dream*, 2010), then through the interview he gave me on June 10, 2012. I would also like to thank Zieger for having personally confirmed her interest in Walker's visual strategies in an interview held in July, 2011.



Brigitte Zieger, *Flower of Power 8*, military poser cutout, 70 x 55 cm, 2010.  
With the generous assistance of the artist, © Brigitte Zieger.

In an earlier series entitled *Eye Dust* (2007-2009), Zieger exploits beauty even more deliberately to denounce the way that dominant representations legitimate violence. Using glitter eye shadow to draw clouds rising from explosions, the series creates a dialectical movement in which what we *see* (the makeup) hides what *is* (a face), yet nevertheless sheds light on a form of everyday violence. At the same time, these sumptuously executed images, which gently *shine*, entice the viewer to become increasingly fascinated with images of violence. Zieger's work, by outrageously exploiting its own aesthetic quality in order to offer a critical perspective on representations and manifestations of military violence, demonstrates by this very token that behind every effort to impose beauty lurks a hidden form of violence. Beauty collaborates with politics, as the very concept of beauty is (in part) political. The challenge of such work lies in the precarious balance between the two.





Brigitte Zieger, *Eye Dust* (no.10), 2007, eye shadow on paper, 150x157 cm, 2007-2009  
With the generous assistance of the artist © Brigitte Zieger

This precariousness can be traced back to the (in many respects obsolete) question of the relationship between form and content. Political works of art throw into stark relief the question of the artist's use of form to create meaning. The problem is less that of whether art can impact reality than of how reality shapes art. To take a famous example, by the late sixties, the expressionist painter Philip Guston was particularly struck by the gulf between the violence then rocking American society and the apolitical position of vanguard painting, which had entered what Robert Storr called "one of its most rarefied and self-referential phases."<sup>19</sup> After two years of profound crisis during which he ceased to paint (1966-1968), Guston finally adopted a grotesque figurative style that broke with his prior work and prevailing aesthetic ideas. Because of this transformation, he was ostracized from the art world.<sup>20</sup> While the context in which art is produced and received has evolved to the point that no one would now think of reproaching an artist for abandoning one medium or style for another—or even of seeing it as a symbolic gesture—Guston's example has the merit of calling attention to the way in which adopting a political position can coincide with a formal reevaluation of one's work.

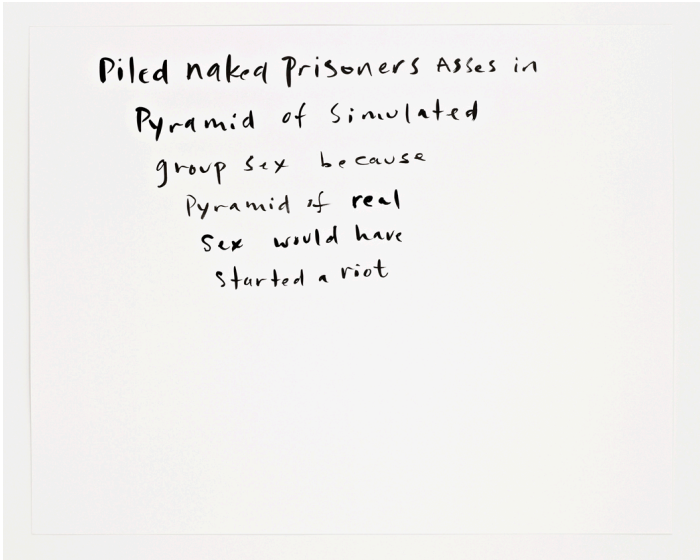
But let's return to the example of the exhibition *After the Deluge*, in which Kara Walker, well known for her ultraviolet images, set out to denounce the media representation of the suffering of the African-American population of New Orleans as a sensationalist spectacle. Offering an alternative way of looking at the catastrophe, she decided precisely not to create new figurative works, only to present works that predated the event, drawn from her own corpus as

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<sup>19</sup> "By the end of the decade the liberal optimism of the Kennedy era has given way to assassinations, demonstrations, and police violence, to the cynicism of the Nixon administration and the desperation of the Vietnam war. Yet, at a time when the United States was experience the most severe civil strife since the Depression, vanguard painting was passing through one of its most rarefied and self-referential phases. Guston was actively conscious of the irony of that situation." Robert Storr, *Philip Guston* (New York: Cross River Press, 1986), 53.

<sup>20</sup> Didier Ottinger, *La Trahison de Philip Guston* (Paris: L'Échoppe, 2000).

well as the Met's. The artist also chose not to showcase violence, in a series that evoked the equation that frequently occurs in American culture between the spectacle of black suffering and mass entertainment, as well as the ethical problem inherent in the fact that Internet users or news consumers invariably confront images of violence directed against others (a concern that was particularly crucial to the diffusion in 2004 of digital photographs showing torture in the Abu Ghraib prison).<sup>21</sup> The work, entitled *Search for Ideas Supporting the Black Man as a Work of Modern Art/Contemporary Painting. A Death without End: An Appreciation of the Creative Spirit of Lynch Mobs* (2007), consists of fifty-two textual paintings which play on the discrepancy between our desire for images and the absence of images by describing abominable acts that spectators are left to imagine on their own. Alternatively, spectators may remember them: one painting, in the form of a calligram, formally evokes and textually describes a photograph showing the piled-up bodies of Abu Ghraib prisoners: *Piled naked prisoners Asses/in Pyramid of simulated/group sex because/Pyramid of real/Sex would have started a riot.*



Piled naked Prisoners Asses in  
Pyramid of Simulated  
group sex because  
Pyramid of real  
Sex would have  
started a riot

Kara Walker, *Search for ideas supporting the Black Man as a work of Modern Art/Contemporary Painting. A death without end: an appreciation of the Creative Spirit of Lynch Mobs*, 2007, ink on paper, 52 pieces, 57, 2 x 72, 4 cm. Reproduced with the generous assistance of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & co © Luciano Fileti

If the question of defining political art proves to be as slippery as it is complex, it is perhaps ultimately perhaps because it requires us to rethink the question (which some would say is old-fashioned, but which persists nonetheless) of the “role” and “place” of the artist in society—that of the quality, the circulation, and the distribution of artistic works. Any “position” an artist takes on such questions is simultaneously a position on art and its history.

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<sup>21</sup> On the question of the sensationalist display of suffering black bodies, see the excellent overview by the African-American author Elizabeth Alexander, “Can You Be Black and Look at This? Reading the Rodney King Videos,” in *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, ed. Thelma Golden (New York, Whitney Museum of Art, 1994), 91-110.

