

ARTISTS AFTER 911

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If we were to write the truth about recent U. S. history, it might read something like this: The spoiled son of the former head of the secret police, having failed at everything else in life, runs for U. S. President. Since it appears he might not win, his brother, the governor of a large state, throws a bunch of votes his way by disenfranchising thousands of African- American voters. The Supreme Court, pals of his dad, put their stamp of approval on the process. The politicians of both political parties agree that we must put this all behind us for the good of the country. -

The President assembles a cabinet that includes a general who got his start by covering up the Mai Lai Massacre in Vietnam. His Attorney General is so hated in his old Senatorial district that he actually lost his last election to a corpse. (He is now engaged in a campaign to drape the breasts on statuary in Government buildings.)

When the new gang gets to Washington, they immediately reward themselves and their rich pals with a trillion dollars in stolen tax money. They then set about the task of the serious long-term plunder of the country.

They were all having a swell time when two jet airliners slam into the symbol of US financial power - World Trade Center - and the symbol of military power, the Pentagon. Fearing attack, the President immediately took off for parts unknown - a reprisal of his role during the Vietnam War (which would have been fine - if done out of principal instead of cowardice.) The Mayor of New York actually stayed in town and showed up at the site of the disaster, therefore he was immediately proclaimed a hero. Prior to this he was mostly known for supporting police violence, harassing the poor and homeless and chasing artists off the steps of the Metropolitan Museum. He proceeded to see if he could have himself declared mayor again.

The hijackers were apparently Arab. Though there was no declaration, war was immediately declared on Afghanistan - although none of the hijackers were Afghani. Evil was denounced. Howdy Doody strode the fields of Crawford, Texas threatening to git the varmints. AFL-CIO officials promptly stepped forward to pledge allegiance in the employer's mission for mutual slaughter of the working class. The most advanced military machine in the world then proceeded to bomb the most backward - spending billions of dollars to turn rubble into finer rubble.

Heroes again.

The purpose of this was to kill a terrorist originally promoted by the U.S. But, after a few weeks that was all forgotten. Like the anthrax scare. Like the pipeline that the oil companies wanted to build across Afghanistan if they could only get a stable government in place.

Having proven their prowess on the field of battle, the politicians are now bickering over what country should

be the next target. Here at home they are celebrating this new victory for freedom with the establishment of military tribunals and a discussion of the benefits of torture. . .

You get the idea. I'm only scratching the surface here. I could go on.

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What has all this got to do with art and artists? Everything. We package and sell the lies. When they drag out the talking heads to convince you to support US war aims, we operate the cameras, create the graphics, design the lighting, handle the sound, write and play the background music, pull out the safari jacket, put on the make-up and otherwise make them appear sincere.

When you see the same twenty Palestinians purportedly dancing in celebration of the NY disaster, it was edited and put together by video artists all trained in our art schools. We create the billboards and posters, the snappy army ads and the tearful ground zero photographs.

When the patriotic extravaganzas are performed, we are the choreographers, dancers, prop and costume makers that appeal so effectively to your emotions.

The entertainment industry is the second largest export industry of the US. The first is war materials. In a sense, they both do the same thing. We make the world safe for Enron.

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Art is a magical process - and you don't see it illustrated any more effectively than when US artists transform war into play. We make the real become unreal, and the unreal become real. We can transform the horror of war into a video game. If you're good at it they will pay you millions of dollars - sometimes hundreds of millions.

Of course most artists don't make much money at all. We are cultural workers struggling to survive. Like workers in the armaments or chemical or nuclear industries, you block out the ultimate consequences of your labor in order to survive.

But while artists are forced to do the employers bidding during the eight or ten or twelve hours, the rest of the time is ours. We can choose to use our skills to fight for peace and justice - to reach across borders or rip the veil off the American system of racist injustice.

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A living art challenges it's audience to look at the world in new ways: to be critical; to look at things from all points of view. It is an active process between the viewer and the author. Revolutionary politics requires the same. That is one of the reasons there has been a historical alliance of artists with the labor movement.

Over the past fifteen years the Labor Art & Mural Project (LaMP) has traveled throughout the US and the world to support working-class struggles for social and economic justice. We have created murals that are projects not of governments but from workers to workers. Wherever we have gone we have been welcomed warmly by those who understand that there is a difference between the American people and the US government. Other groups have created puppets for demonstrations, held hip-hop concerts for global justice,

conducted poetry readings and used their art in a myriad of ways. It's all part of an organic process of building international solidarity.

In recent years the American labor movement has begun to recognize and reach out to immigrant workers. We have also made strides in building unity with our fellow workers in Mexico, Central and South America. The tragic events of September 11 provide an opportunity to extend similar solidarity to the workers of the Middle-East. Whenever given the opportunity, these workers have jumped at the chance to fight for their unions and extend the struggle for democratic rights. We can and must work together in solidarity.

As the politicians rush to create a permanent war, we artists have a special responsibility. Never has there been such an overwhelming deluge of lies. Those who wish to continue the bloodbath are a small minority. The great majority of the earth's working people have demonstrated that they favor peace and solidarity. We can use our art to give expression to that vision. We can be a voice for those who are voiceless. We can use our songs, poems, theater and paint to illuminate a future where human needs come before profits. Amidst the cries for blood we must raise a voice of peace and justice.