

What is the artist's role in civil life and what could it be?

An essay by Dave Randall commissioned by Metal.

The late Max Roach was one of the greatest jazz drummers of our times. I say this not only because of the rich tonality he conjured from his kit. Nor just for the crisp precision of both his hi-hat work and his suits. What also contributed to Roach's greatness was his careful consideration of the role of an artist in society and his decision to live with integrity according to the conclusions he drew. For Roach, art existed not to prettify reality or to help people escape from it – but to reflect reality and contribute to social progress. He summarised his view; 'the artist should reflect the tempo of their times and where possible make changes'. It is this role - of artist as part of, and contributor to, a wider struggle - that has always interested me most.

But just how often is it possible for us as artists to 'make changes'? Damien Hurst may have pocketed £11million last September as economies around the world began to collapse –his art seemingly a safer haven than banks for the investments of the rich. But for many artists, being able to pay the rent with proceeds from their art can be elusive enough. So let me begin by making a clear distinction between what the role of the artist in civil life is, and what the role could and perhaps should be.

To better understand the first of these roles let's begin with a few observations. The lives of artists are often romanticised. We're seen as a rarefied and bohemian bunch of dreamers, drinkers and dilettantes who sit apart from the rest of society. But our role in economic terms is often no different to the role of any other worker. Artists – like plumbers or teachers – sell our skilled labour. Therefore the nature of our art will tend to be determined by who the art is made for and what end it seeks to achieve. For the vast majority of artists over the last millennia or so, putting bread on the table has meant seeking the patronage of the rich. For Leonardo da Vinci this was found in the house of Lorenzo de'Medici, for the griots of Senegal it was sought in the courts of kings and for many of today's best artists it's in the advertising agencies of Soho and Manhattan. The artist's role in such cases: to make their employer feel and appear to others to be special. Therefore art cannot be viewed as being separate from the economic conditions and social relations that underpin society.

In today's capitalist society the role of artists is often, in essence, to make a profit for someone else. Even within 'civil society', with its arts funding and not for profit institutions, economics will tend to influence art. For starters, those with enough money to become patrons of the arts are unlikely to promote work that directly challenges the privileges of their class. Or if they do, the art will tend to end up in galleries or concert halls safely removed from a mass audience and the physical site of potential political struggles.

Perhaps it is for these reasons that many people have come to see the role of the artist as being simply to make our existing reality a bit prettier – or to help us escape temporarily from reality. "Without art" said George Bernard Shaw, "the crudeness of reality would make the world unbearable." This is art as escapism and distraction - art as artificial sweetener in a bitter world.

So is Max Roach asking too much of the role of the artist when he demands that we 'make changes'? I think not. Even if we share George Bernard Shaw's gloomy assessment of reality, a quick glance over our shoulders at human history would tell us that things do change. After all, for 95% of the history of our species we have lived without money, passports or class divisions of any kind –no patriarchy, no kings or presidents, no bosses or employees –just people cooperating to get the best from their natural environments. The emergence of the first class societies some 13,000 years ago signalled a massive change from that previous long period. And the world we see around us today is the result of a series of immense changes since those early civilisations.

But rather than expecting things to continue to change, many of us have a tendency to think of the norms of our particular time as natural and inevitable. Take the relatively recent example provided by Ancient Greece, often considered to be the world's first democracy. There, a majority of the members of 'civil society' defended the system of slavery on which their society depended as both natural and right. Aristotle wrote in 350BC; 'It is clear that some men are by nature free and others are by nature slaves, and that for these latter, slavery is both expedient and right'. Anyone suggesting a return to slavery in modern Athens would be considered mad. Things change. What can seem fixed or inevitable often proves in the longer term to simply be a chapter in a far more interesting and surprising story. As Karl Marx said 'all that is solid melts into air'. The point is that there is really very little that is either 'natural' or 'inevitable' about the society in which we live or about the roles we assume. On the contrary society, and even our notions of who we are, are always in flux. Therefore the question becomes not whether change is possible, but how best we can influence the direction of its inevitable trajectory. To put it another way – how can we help to make the world a better place?

Artists certainly can't steer the change on our own – a fact that I'm sure that Max Roach would have acknowledged. There will be some moments of social upheaval when our artistic skills might seem to be of little use. If, for example, I were confronted with a fascist mob I would want to have something menacing to throw at them – not a Banksy canvas depicting someone throwing something. But artists are well placed to contribute to a culture from which progressive change is more likely to emerge. We can create art that starts to challenge commonly held assumptions. Our art can begin to perform the role of counterweight to the inherently conservative media moguls - whose ideas are too often parroted in workplaces, from barstools and around dinner tables. If we are to be effective in this role we have to be mindful not only of what our art says, but also of the context in which that art is shared with others. The Clash's 'White Riot' could be misconstrued as a racist song if overheard on one of the predominantly white estates where the National Front were seeking to recruit in 1978. But no one could misconstrue the Clash's politics when they performed the same song in front of Londoners of all races at the Rock Against Racism carnival held in Victoria Park that year.

The founders of Rock Against Racism (RAR) were very clear about the role that art should play in society and their words inspire me still. One of them, an East End physician called David Widgery, wrote of RAR:

'We aimed to rescue the energy of Russian revolutionary art, surrealism and rock and roll from the galleries, the advertising agencies and the record companies and use them again to change reality, as always had been intended. And have a party in the process.'¹

The achievements of RAR are, in my view, hugely significant. By the end of the 1970's the National Front were a bankrupt political force, due in part to the activities of the artists who contributed to the RAR events that took place across the UK. While reggae bands shared stages with punk bands, Rastas and punks in the audience shared beers, spliffs and experiences. For a generation of Britons, black and white unity became common sense.

So artists can make a difference. We can intervene into broader political debates in a way that others cannot. But the battles that artists helped to win in the past may well need to be fought again. Collapsing economies provide potentially fertile conditions for fascist lies. RAR's contemporary protégé 'Love Music Hate Racism' will have a vital role to play in the coming period, and all artists should consider how they might best get involved with this work.

For those of us who want to steer change in the direction of a better world, Rock Against Racism provides an inspiring example of what can be achieved. And there are many other examples. Famous among them the involvement of musicians in the campaign against the Vietnam War, the centrality of the revolutionary poster art during the uprisings in Paris 1968 and the poems and literature that inspired challenges to dictatorships across Latin America.

But what of that need to get the rent paid? Though numerous, these examples can seem like all too distant or fleeting highpoints in the lives of most artists. Art seldom exists in a state of enlightened purity, separate from the messy contradictions of the real world. As a consequence, progressively minded artists very often find themselves in rather paradoxical roles –as I discovered when I first toured South Africa in 1997 with the band Faithless. By 1997 the once-pariah apartheid state had its first black president –Mr Mandela. We were a multi-racial band from the UK whose very presence in that country implicitly celebrated this political transformation. However, the tour was only made financially viable by the very visible sponsorship from Camel cigarettes. It seemed that our role in a society so recently freed from the shackles of apartheid was to make sexy another method of killing people.

Of course there are occasions when artists create work that has not been commissioned by the rich nor sponsored by corporations. Such works can appear to be politically bold and innovative. But even in these works, with the economic constraints removed, the ideological constraints of conventional thinking remain. An example is provided by one of the most iconic artistic images of the last 12 months –the poster of president Obama produced by LA based artist Shepard Fairey. In his characteristic style, Fairey fused elements of Soviet propaganda posters with Warholesque pop sensibilities. Rendered in primary red, blues and cream, a suited Obama gazes stoically into middle distance. Beneath the image the capitalised words 'Hope', 'Progress' and 'Change' exclude any ambiguity in Fairey's intentions - this is Obama as icon, Obama as saviour, Obama as aspirational ideal. Mass-produced in unprecedented quantities as poster, sticker, key fob and

T-shirt, the image has undoubtedly played its small but significant part in Obama's campaign —a campaign that led to the decisive rejection by the American people of the war-mongering neo-cons and the election of America's first black president. For that I, and probably most of the world's population, would gladly shake Fairey's hand. But I am also mindful of the words of John Berger: 'The publicity image belongs to the moment...yet it never speaks of the moment.' The Obama image tells us nothing of the historical moment that elevated Obama from man to icon. Fairey has defined his role as artist not to uncover and explore the complexities of a moment, but to distil them into a singular political objective. Absent are the million dead in the Iraq war, the world economic meltdown and impending environmental catastrophe. Unacknowledged are the countless anti-racists and African-American heroes on whose shoulders Obama stands. Unseen are the millions of foot soldiers for change whose efforts elevated Obama to that position. Gone is Obama the ordinary man. Echoed instead are hundreds of years of art commissioned by ruling elites —art designed to persuade us that we, the common herd, need heroes and saviours to save us from ourselves.

And so it seems that the role of artists in civil life is complex and contradictory. Society subjects our art to economic and ideological constraints. But within those constraints we can and should thoughtfully define the role for ourselves. I'm not in the business of writing manifestos, but let me make the following suggestions. Artists should create art - and live our lives - with awareness that change is inevitable and that we are a part of that process of change. While we often have to use our art to do the bidding of others in the popularity contest that life is sometimes reduced to, we should return as often as we can to our own stories and those of the people around us. We should dare to depict these stories with honesty and care. Our art should explore the complexities and contradictions of our lives — not mask them. Though our art might be financed by the few, it should be made for and enjoyed by whoever cares to take an interest. We should reject the false division between 'high art' and 'popular culture' — to paraphrase the bluesman Big Bill Broonzy, all art is folk art, in the sense that it's all made by folks. And we should fight alongside other workers for a better world — a world organised to meet the needs of the many — not the greed of the few. In that world art will be appreciated and made by many more of us than capitalism allows. In that world art might truly blossom.

1. David Widgery 'Beating Time: Riot 'n' Race 'n' Rock 'n' Roll, London: Chatto & Windus, 1986 p.53.

