

Poetic Justice

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Justice Deferred

What is justice? Why has justice emerged today as a question of pressing concern? Is justice possible in today's globalized world? Can certain aspects of justice be applied equally to both stable societies and those undergoing a radical transformation? One way of connecting these questions is through observing that a cornerstone to the collective belief in a global system of values is the paradoxical idea that if there are many systems of justice in the world, than none can be absolute. Notions of right and wrong, degrees of difference between the two, and the appropriate societal response to infractions that invariably occur once these differences are agreed upon, are bound to vary widely from place to place. Even within a single society or cultural group, conflict may arise over the failure of one legal code to take into account the jurisdiction of a parallel legal code (states vs. countries, religious vs. secular law). When conflicts arise over actual cases, such differences, while present in other quarters of public life, tend to become exaggerated: what one society condemns, another celebrates. Even in cases where agreement has been reached that a serious crime was committed, some means of attaining justice (i.e., the death penalty) will strike certain observers as even more barbaric than the crime it redresses.

But if justice is an entirely relativistic concept, of what value is the struggle to achieve a universal definition of human rights? Do we stand by and quietly tolerate the abuse of women under religious law in certain Islamic countries, or the persecution of gays in nearly half the societies in the world? Do we ignore the continuing crime of child labor in dozens of pre-industrial societies, or the ongoing destruction of the environment in countries where anti-pollution laws might run counter to economic development? Should we abandon, in the name of cultural difference, the struggle against laws upholding capital difference if we truly believe that they violate basic principles of the sanctity of human life? Must we condone hatred and intolerance of one cultural group against another if such expressions are deemed central to their social identities?

Two events from recent history help underscore the distinctions between the ways that justice is meted out in different contexts. In the spring of 1992, during the initial stages of the siege of Sarajevo, two of the principal early bombing targets for Serb paramilitaries operating in the hills surrounding the city were the national library and the central post office. As one of his first decisive steps in the plan to partition the city into separate Serb and Muslim halves—a plan that was never carried out—Radovan Karadzic appears to have specifically conceived of the destruction of the most important symbols of Sarajevo's cosmopolitan past and present as a tool for demoralizing its citizens. Seeing these institutions in ruins—one a repository of Bosnia's rich history as a stronghold of religious tolerance, the other the center of present-day communications with the outside world—would, he hoped, instill a sense of hopelessness in all those who hoped to preserve and maintain the city's famously multiethnic character. Cutting the city off from its own past and present became the articulation of a conscious war strategy. With no institutions left to represent the open society envisioned by the anti-partitionists, religious and ethnic tolerance were transformed, literally overnight, from realities into illusions, with no more substance than the smoke rising from the destroyed buildings' wreckage.

In early April 2003, as US-led military forces took control of the Iraqi capital of Baghdad, armed cordons were placed around nearly all the major government ministries, in particular those controlling defense, information and the export of petroleum. The one glaring exception to this standard military practice was the National Museum, which was left entirely unguarded, and its outer walls and inner vaults were quickly breached by hordes of looters and professional art thieves. By the time the lack of protection was

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reported and corrected, the damage had already been done: thousands of artworks and artifacts, including some of the oldest surviving links to the invention of writing, had vanished, perhaps forever. Despite numerous efforts on the part of Pentagon spokespeople to minimize the effects of the looting, the immensity of the loss to the world's cultural heritage was soon revealed as nothing short of catastrophic. With the immediate conquest and occupation of the capital city as their priority, it hadn't occurred to US military leaders that the country whose leadership they had just vanquished possessed a genuine history, one whose cultural value for the rest of the world far outweighs the immediate mandate to control oil fields or quash pro-Saddam propaganda.

Although it may appear that by drawing a parallel between these two moments in recent history, an unfair comparison is being set up between the deliberate destruction of a nation's heritage, and neglect in the heat of battle by occupying forces, certain points of comparison bear pointing out. In both cases, the military action in question was strongly disapproved of by an overwhelming majority of the world's leaders and citizens. In both cases, the alleged threat represented by, on the one hand, the declaration of Bosnia-Herzegovina as an independent republic, and, on the other, Saddam Hussein's possession of weapons of mass destruction, appear to have been deliberately exaggerated in order to provoke a frightened and confused populace into supporting pre-emptive acts of war. While in both cases a state of relative peace is maintained by armed occupation, one important difference between the two situations is that the former is under the protection of UN forces widely viewed as a stabilizing influence, whereas the latter depends on the presence of the predominantly American and British occupying forces, who are seen by much of the populace as having failed in their efforts at stabilizing the country.

More substantive links exist nonetheless between the leveling of Sarajevo's National Library in 1992, and the looting of Baghdad's National Museum eleven years later. In both cases, the rush to war before other forms of diplomacy had been exhausted resulted in unforeseen consequences whose impact extended far beyond the stated goals of the war. In Bosnia, the attempt to extinguish the collective memory of a people resulted in a more deeply entrenched resistance to Serb ultra-nationalist forces, so that, in effect, the Milosevic-led military campaign lost that phase of the war even before it had begun in earnest. In Iraq the results are somewhat more complex, since the formation of an Iraqi governing council has recently taken place, even as organized resistance against the US-led occupation appears to be growing fiercer. At the precise moment the looting took place, however, certain motives of the US military effort were instantly but indelibly exposed for the entire world to see. Rather than pursuing a war of "liberation" as the invading forces claimed, the indifference of American occupiers to the Iraqi people's culture and history exposed the populace to something potentially worse than tyranny: unchecked anarchy. More pointedly, the dollars-and-cents calculations that made it necessary to throw a protective cordon around the Ministry of Oil—although it is debatable what of value was hidden inside its walls—contrasts dramatically with the fact that Iraq's historical role in the development of human civilization is far beyond monetary value.

In her influential study *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Stanford University Press, 1999) historian Mary Kaldor points out that whereas at the beginning of the 20th century the proportion of combatant to civilian casualties was 8:1, in the wars of the 1990s that rate has been almost exactly reversed. As the conflicts in Vietnam or, more recently, Bosnia and Rwanda confirm, when civilians are not killed indiscriminately through the application of overwhelming force, they are actually the military targets of choice. While this was not the case in either of the recent Afghanistan and Iraq wars, the fact that the number of civilian casualties in those two wars went virtually unreported in the American media

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reveals a disturbing bias against considering those deaths as having been suffered by actual human beings. This bias stands in stark opposition to how the same media treated the deaths of those caught in the World Trade Center bombings two years ago, following which *The New York Times* famously devoted hundreds of pages to carefully written individual profiles of each of the victims. Certainly there is nothing wrong in mourning one's dead. However, if one considers that many more Afghani citizens died in that conflict than in the WTC and Pentagon bombings combined, this fact might be weighed against the knowledge that not one of those deaths was publicly mourned, or even acknowledged, in the US media. In the recent Iraq war, no attempt was made by the invading forces to even estimate the numbers of dead, civilian or otherwise. The immediate explanations of this failure to grant these victims a minimum degree of humanity is that they were not "our" deaths, or that they died in the course of war, and not as the result of terrorist attacks. But these excuses beg the question of whether or not the decision to ignore deaths caused by one's own actions has a broader, propagandistic motive as well. Aren't all casualties on the "enemy" side, whether they are fighting against us or not, ignored for a strategic purpose, and isn't that purpose in part to further drive home the rhetorical divide between a 'them' and an 'us'? If, in fact, our motives in "liberating" Afghanistan and Iraq were what we claimed they are, wouldn't that imply some concern over the welfare of the people themselves? Yet Afghani and Iraqi citizens continue to die every day as a direct result of US policies in those countries.

Treating civilian deaths and the looting of archaeological treasures as comparable crimes might strike some readers as insensitive, but the point to be made is that even when civilian casualties in war are not as high as might be feared, humanity as a whole pays a different kind of cost. Just as vast numbers of Iraqis have still not recovered such basic necessities as water and electricity in the months since the combat phase of the war ended, so Americans have lost a great deal of their humanity in terms of the way they look at the world today, as well as the legitimacy, in the eyes of the rest of the world, of the so-called "war against terror." Recent polls show that a majority of Americans would continue to support the Iraq war even if no weapons of mass destruction were ever found, and before the war, a comparable majority believed that Saddam Hussein had been directly implicated in the September 11, 2001 attacks, despite the fact that no hard evidence supporting this claim has ever been produced. If a common thread connects the image of US troops standing by while the National Museum in Baghdad was looted, a general indifference in the US regarding deaths of non-Americans, and the American public's unquestioning support of militaristic action regardless of the supporting evidence, it is the ignorance that comes out of fear. Simply put, the exploitation of fear by political leaders has always proven to be one of the most effective tools for promoting war, particularly in the absence of an actual, verifiable threat.

At the core of the discussion of global injustice lies the paradoxical phenomenon of globalization, and the implicit parameters of Empire that are concealed behind it. To assert that a rapidly growing percentage of the world's commerce has come under the control of an ever-shrinking number of multi-national corporations is not an especially new or challenging insight. Nor is it a surprise that the point of origin for most of these mega-conglomerates is the US, which has frequently used its considerable military strength to intervene in situations where its business supremacy is challenged. In fact, what is generally referred to as the "free market" has increasingly become a situation in which larger countries and corporations acquire the assets of smaller ones, and in which public resources such as water and electricity are sold off to private concerns, often foreign corporations located thousands of miles away. Smaller or less economically stable nations, finding themselves unable to adapt quickly enough to the exigencies of the free market – a process known as "neo-liberalization" – are increasingly being forced to place control of

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their finances into the hands of the IMF and the World Bank, with the result that ever more drastic cuts in social services are having to be made in countries that are least prepared to deal with them.

To conclude from the above observations that globalization is one of the primary tools that the US employs to sustain its position as the undisputed global power in the world today is, in many ways, a gross oversimplification. On the one hand, this argument stems from the assumption that the priorities of globalization are the same as those of the US government, which is far from being the case. There are no political or geographical limits to the spread of the empire of capital, which by definition must always proceed towards a situation of unlimited growth. While at the moment it may seem self-evident to refer to the US and to the growing empire of capital as interchangeable, there is already strong evidence that the expansive dimension of globalization has begun to supercede the ability of a single country to contain its growth. To put it another way, while the political sovereignty of the US is invariably bound to the limits of its territory, the productive synergies of the multitude are what give Empire its legitimacy. Once those synergies shift to another location, the territorial integrity of Empire shifts with it. What this suggests is that there is inevitably a tipping point where the cost of innovation within the boundaries of one country must be spread outside of its borders, leading to potentially fatal double standards. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who develop this principle in their landmark 2000 study *Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2001) take as a point of historical comparison the expansion of European colonial powers at the time of the Enlightenment:

“On the one hand, Renaissance humanism initiated a revolutionary notion of human equality, of singularity and community, cooperation and multitude, that resonated with forces and desires extending horizontally across the globe, redoubled by the discovery of other populations and territories. On the other hand, however, the same counterrevolutionary power that sought to control the constituent and subversive forces within Europe also began to realize the possibility and necessity of subordinating other populations to European domination.” (*ibid*, p. 94)

In a more contemporary framework, we could say that US aspiration towards continuous global dominance invariably falls into conflict with the standards that it uses in determining how to assert its power in the world, and in what contexts. Certainly there is already a glaring hypocrisy between how the domestic standards for living in the US are achieved, and the ways in which the costs for these standards are passed on to the rest of the world. We may no longer have colonial power structures in place, but globalization has assumed the role of the conquering force, regardless of where the ultimate balance of global power will rest. Assuming that the economic hegemony of the US is already decreasing in the face of capital's footloose expansion to other, more fruitful territories, the justification for using military power in previously unimagined situations becomes increasingly grounded in spurious views of the world outside its borders.

For the balance of political and military power to shift definitively during our lifetime would entail costly mistakes by the US, in which a severe conflict, between the maintenance of a globalized financial power base and the imperial prerequisites of limitless expansion, is neglected until it is too late to correct. Arguably, there are already indications that America's duplicitous concealment from its citizens of the way it wields global power has deeply troubling domestic consequences. The rise, collapse and disgrace of Enron was one test case whose full effects may not be felt for years to come, but it was one in which national security was not, apparently, at stake. September 11 is another example of a form of retaliation by the other, not as an act of war, but as an act of desperate fury that cannot be contained. An even more compelling case centers on the arguments leading up to the most recent invasion and war in Iraq. When

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no substantive intelligence links could ever be found between Saddam Hussein's regime and al Qaeda, spurious connections were nevertheless invented and circulated freely in the media. On the other hand, completely verifiable links between Saudi Arabia and al Qaeda have been actively suppressed by the same administration, presumably because US oil connections with the Saudi kingdom would make the active pursuit of such leads politically awkward at best. At one end, a corrupt and repressive monarchy whose official ideology supports the violent overthrow of "infidel" states is left unchallenged, while at the other a petty dictatorship with no recent history of threats to the US is invaded and overthrown, all under the rubric of national security.

Faced with such a dire prognosis for global stability over the next few decades, the question of individual empowerment within a globalized world order has become paramount. To avoid having one's energy sapped by despair, one's critical intelligence ground down by nationalistic propaganda, and one's compassion undermined by xenophobia requires a constant vigilance and renewal of the purpose and intent of global citizenship. At one end, it is not difficult to identify examples of supra-nationalistic organizations, such as NGOs and other solidarity-based groups like Greenpeace, whose mandate consists precisely of working around or through the interests of individual states in order to articulate and serve a more universal sense of justice. At the other end, supra-national organizations like the World Court and, despite its recently diminished influence, the United Nations, operate within the framework of mutual agreement among their member nations. While such efforts point optimistically to a future political structure in which the safety and well-being of the global citizenry are not held hostage to the whims of one or two very powerful entities, their impact is limited by their ability to grab the attention and kindle the imaginations of those who do not prioritize the same goals that they seek to accomplish. In other words, we are still left with the problem of how to create a worldwide movement in which the evolution of human consciousness is directed in such a way as to enable multitudes of disenfranchised individuals to envision possibilities beyond what their societies have given them to work with. Such a development seems essential to address the problems of social injustice today, in particular to prevent those same individuals turning to solutions that are rooted in despair, or worse.

One World

What is the purpose of art within today's conflicted and fragmented societies? Can art's meanings have a significant impact beyond its self-defined community of supporters and practitioners? Does society's demonstrated need to protect and preserve art for future generations reveal a much deeper need to understand and share the workings of another's consciousness, and to experience firsthand the struggles of human consciousness to push beyond the restraints of given realities? Does the art of today, and by extension poetry, music and other creative forms, reflect more profound aspirations that extend beyond the realms of beauty, pleasure and affinities of taste? Can art provide a model for inter-cultural communication and exchange that can be applied, even indirectly, to situations of greater and more urgent political import? Are contemporary artists and their creations harbingers of an approaching age in which the need to move beyond the limited definitions of self, nation, gender, class and race essential to the survival of the human species as a whole?

While it may initially seem far-fetched to propose that the indicators for the broader transformation outlined above may be found in a practice that is traditionally associated with one of the most rarified of

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cultural elites, there are strong indications today that contemporary art has begun to shake off its hyper-specialized past and is recognizing the value of cultural efficacy. French critic and theorist Nicolas Bourriaud, for example, in his writings on "relational aesthetics," describes a movement of artistic attention away from the sphere of object-based contemplation, and outward towards the realm of inter-subjective communication. Such ideas follow in the wake of artistic practices developed more than ten years ago by artists such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Rirkrit Tiravanija, who began to develop working methodologies based on the interactions of individuals within groups. In their efforts to define art as a practice grounded above all else in social exchange, they set the stage for exploring alternative economies for art that were not based on strict market principles of scarcity and demand. Although over the course of a decade such practices have become absorbed into the same market apparatus that these artists set out to critique, they nevertheless laid the groundwork for a hybrid approach that has become pervasive in the work of artists all over the globe.

One of the central premises behind this exhibition is the notion of global citizenship. Each of us possesses a set of specific identities related to where we live, the work we do, our beliefs and desires, etcetera, but only one identity links every person on the planet: being human. This principle stands in stark contrast to the contemporaneous idea of globalization, which posits each subject's individuality exclusively in terms of his or her role within an expanding cycle of production and consumption. As a principle of identity, global citizenship proposes that each of us is intricately linked with each other, and that we have a shared responsibility for one another's well-being and happiness. Because global citizenship runs against the grain of nationalist frameworks of identity, it is at once one of the most promising and threatening forces at work in the world today. Its capacity as threat is embodied in the promise that our shared humanity is, in fact, a stronger tie than any artificial boundaries of nation or religion would suggest. To take the point one step further, it seems that the constant reiteration of national identity as the central fact of collective existence most frequently comes into play only when other competing principles –i.e., global citizenship– seem to impinge on its supremacy. Hence the promise of global citizenship, which holds that there is no 'them' or 'us' in the world, but rather a continuous and integrated flow of pure humanity throughout the world, united in its shared desire for peace, stability and communication. Of course, national identity is not the only, or even the primary, obstacle, to a collective goal of global citizenship. Much older constructs of inequality, such as gender, class and race, run deeper in the fabric of society and contribute much more to suffering and injustice in the world today. Nevertheless, it can be argued that if the principle of global citizenship is ever to be agreed upon as a universal goal, its most formidable foe in modern society is the principle of the nation-state. If we are ever to effectively address why class equality in Bolivia and gender equality in Saudi Arabia and racial equality in India are vital goals, we must first confront the fiction that these countries must be considered as separate and unequal entities.

The primary motivation behind choosing 'Poetic Justice' as the central premise for the 8th Istanbul Biennial was to be able to explore a range of issues that relate justice to art, using the notion of global citizenship as the basis for investigation. For many artists working in different corners of the world today, the potential for linking the global community together through art is a largely untapped promise, but one which has begun to see results. Even the unprecedented rise of the international biennial exhibition, along with reactionary critical efforts to dismiss its impact, demonstrates that there is a deeply felt need to experience multiple points of view through art. Transcending national biases that are inherently incapable of concealing their provincial and/or protectionist underpinnings, the biennial is itself a vehicle for defusing the idea that cultural identity serves a kind of predetermined artistic destiny. Not only are

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hybrid and transitional identities increasingly becoming the rule rather than exception, but interchanges between artists from very different cultural backgrounds simply do not occur by accident –they must be willed into existence through desire, or from a shared sense that something vital is missing. To return to the 1980s/early 1990s premise that a traveling exhibition of art made by artists from Japan, or the US, or Brazil can somehow transmit vital cultural information about those countries is to ignore the fact that the boundaries between these geographic entities is becoming more porous everyday. More to the point, true artistic exchange means adapting one's own identity in the face of outer challenges to the norms that such fixed identities imply. In order to open one's identity to such influences, one must begin by relinquishing the grip that national identity has on the individual imagination.

Artists are citizens first and foremost, and their capacity to analyze and transcend the limits of all assigned forms of identity –whether these are defined by gender, class, race or place of birth/residence– is intrinsically linked to questions of global justice and global citizenship. For many artists working today, the connection between their artwork and the phenomenon of global nomadism has become fundamental. Artists travel the world to research or develop their projects, or in order to participate in exhibitions like this one, or as a means of teaching or being part of artistic communities that are more vital than the ones they presently occupy. But the travel that artists undertake is not merely to sell or buy, or even to borrow, but rather to expand on their current base of knowledge and experience. Current artistic centers such as Berlin or New York are populated by thousands of artists from literally every corner of the world, who bring with them the ability to adapt to changing conditions, and to develop dialogues and deeper interactions with the inhabitants of the places they are visiting. Many artists today even base their artwork directly on the experience of travel –the practice of meeting and exchanging ideas with other people, the study of migratory and/or diasporic experiences, and the clashes that inevitably take place when one culture attempts to impose its point of view on another. Along with, or perhaps part of, these intercultural exchanges is a growing recognition that issues of injustice reach beyond the immediate framework of their circumstance, and can affect, albeit indirectly, the lives of other individuals thousands of miles away. Even when this work does not depend exclusively on the physical act of travel, it often makes use of such media of global exchange as the Internet, promoting those forms of investigation and interaction that are specifically intended to minimize the restraints of geographical and cultural distance.

In this and other ways, the artist has begun to function within the world as the ideal global citizen. This does not necessarily mean that she or he is the first to hit the ramparts when injustice is revealed, or even to take up social or political causes at all. On the contrary, the artist acts in much the same way as the scientific inventor or religious visionary: taking sheer potential and transforming it into something that is demonstrably real and can be shared among others. This creation of something from nothing is a very different activity than laboring to serve the interests of capital, or war, or the state, since the most significant artworks are valued as treasures by all humanity, not just the privileged few who are able to buy and sell them. In this sense, the artist's activities serve, first and foremost, the cause of the evolution of human consciousness, insofar as the next step in the growth of the human species must be, by definition, something that cannot be known beforehand. Obviously, such a broad and idealistic mission must be made within limits: artists cannot be held responsible for locating or describing that next stage anymore than any one person, or group of persons, should be. However, by making an initial movement forward, from the realm of the known into the unknown, each artist actively contributes to the next stage in our eventual transformation as a species. Moreover, by pointing towards evolution as the framework for their activities, rather than reverting to earlier models of existence, artists signal to the rest of society that

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not only is such progression possible, it is inescapable. With the multitude of powerful forces at work in the world today trying to push the consciousness of citizens in the opposite direction, and finding justification for their (mostly) repressive actions in the doctrines and revelations of long-buried forebearers, such a trajectory has become more vital to the progress of civilization than ever.

The potential of global citizenship, the importance of which underlies my choice of many artists and works for this exhibition, entails a recognition that the ideals of justice, like all other cultural values, exist in some instances as absolutes and in others as largely relativistic principles. Understanding and appreciating differences between cultures requires, above all, an ongoing examination of what it means to believe that the experiences of other peoples are valid and, further, that societies in the midst of radical transition require even greater degrees of understanding and forbearance while they ascertain how to deal with their own social and political needs. In the case of the artists participating in this biennial, for example, there is not an agreed-upon basis for determining what the appropriate subject matter of an artwork should be. On the contrary, the stylistic and thematic range of artists here is intended to embrace both the political and spiritual extremes of the art-making spectrum, as well as all the intermediary positions that are possible between these two points. In a great number of cases, there has actually been a consistent effort to embrace those approaches to art that attempt to refute the premise that what we call the political and the spiritual are really separate realms at all.

One point left undeveloped in the discussion above concerning the artist's role in the evolution of human consciousness, is the principle of empowerment. If the artistic act can be understood as representing the movement from the place of pure potential to pure actualization, is it possible to extend this discussion to include the individual's choices within the framework of his or her own daily existence? Or, to put it in slightly different terms, can the act of artistic creation be understood as a model for how each of us is able to take a certain degree of action within our individual lives and create change, even if it is only within the bounds of our own internal framework of looking at the world? Although many artists might feel nervous in the face of such a claim, there are few who would shy away from the premise that the overall purpose of their activity is to directly affect the thought processes of the viewer. The supposition being put forth here is that it is, in fact, only a tiny step from this idea to the principle of artistic creativity as the most vital demonstration available within our civilization of how an individual is anything but powerless, despite the appearance of seemingly insurmountable frameworks of power surrounding him or her.

Eventually, the crux of this discussion begins to revolve around the need to reconcile internal reflection and external action. For many centuries, from Aristotle to Spinoza, one of the primary tasks of Western philosophy was to articulate the nature of the pathway between the spiritual and the public aspects of human existence. Most people today would have little if any argument with the proposition that the knowledge and development of one's inner resources are essential to enjoying a fulfilled life. To the same degree, most of us also believe that, all other factors being equal, it is better to try and achieve a positive effect on the world and its co-inhabitants than not. However, these simple statements vastly underestimate the pernicious effect that the devaluation of the spiritual, in virtually all its manifestations, has had on Western societies. In far too many cases, the strictures and dogma of organized religion have fully subsumed the role of nurturing each individual's spiritual development, so that any alternatives to these systems are generally derided as New Age indulgences best confined to those with the time and inclination for cosmic self-exploration. As a result, anyone who does not feel their spiritual needs are being fully met through the practice of organized religion –and it is probably safe to assume that their numbers

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cannot be underestimated –is often at a corresponding loss to locate and explore other options. At the same time, one does not have to look far to discover compelling evidence of the collapse of spiritual values in the world's most industrialized countries, presumably because in those same places the values of materialism have been so dramatically exaggerated. When one has been indoctrinated with the belief that the sense of fulfillment in life is founded exclusively in a series of successful conquests, it is difficult to sustain the principle that simply being alive endows one with all the information required for experiencing existence itself as an unfolding adventure in human consciousness.

When it comes to connecting spiritual growth and external action, the present-day crisis actually appears more acute. The problem of empowerment cited above does not merely require a conviction that one's actions will achieve a kind of resonance within the world, but also that these actions are in keeping with one's most deeply held beliefs. For far too many people, daily life consists of a series of harsh reminders that whatever one's values may be, it is difficult, and at times impossible, to always act in accordance with them. We may fervently desire to help our fellow human beings, and even take concrete steps to do so, but at the end of the day too many of us realize that our ideals have been compromised along the way, or that, more precisely, we are all guilty of behavior that is inconsistent with our innermost beliefs. This dilemma is of particular significance when it comes to the role of the US in relation to the rest of the world, and the correspondingly urgent need for its people to better inform themselves about world history and international affairs. If the majority of citizens in the US sincerely believe that their country represents a beacon of freedom and opportunity to rest of the world, this is partly because the government goes to such great lengths to conceal the destructive impact of many of its policies. Perhaps more importantly, evidence of America's complicity in many of the most brutal and murderous regimes of the past century –readily available to anyone who cares to look below the surface– may simply present a far more disturbing reality than most Americans are willing to accept. And yet, it is also possible to sustain a more balanced analysis of the present-day situation, in which the US simultaneously promotes both great good and great evil, much in the way individuals whose relationship to the world and others is fraught by an ongoing turmoil over ethical values and how to apply them to real-life situations. In the wake of such a tangled reality, it has become increasingly important to remain vigilant to the nuances and implications of one's actions (both individually and collectively), and to constantly push against the accepted definitions of what one does and what is being done in one's name.

Whether we like it or not, the moral complexity of the world today presents us with direct and consequential challenges to our predetermined notions of identity, our definitions of the spiritual, our actions and their ethical implications, and our ability to create new thought-formations out of the remnants of an increasingly obsolete system. Hopefully, the works in this exhibition present a persuasive argument in support of the underlying hypothesis that directness and complexity are not mutually exclusive possibilities. To reconstitute oneself in the midst of embracing a world that is beyond any single individual's ability to comprehend it is an act of courage, but also of sustained belief in the great experiment represented by civilization itself. In the final analysis, the work of art is essential to this process, if only as a reminder that as we attempt to build a world that all of us can occupy on the same terms, we are re-creating ourselves along the way.