

# Various, Humane, Political

THE NEW SCHOOL

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**IN TERMS OF PUBLIC ART**, my college years were an experience of starvation, though this wasn't for lack of images. At the venerable school I attended, a large outdoor bronze statue of the founder stood, a sleek Edwardian omphalos, at the center of campus. Painted portraits of past school presidents and donors lined dining hall walls. Murals commemorating—celebrating?—the lives of students lost in wars framed the entrance to the main library.

All of this—I'll call it art—was part of the school's educational argument, one that asserted, environmentally, the earned power of institutional tradition, the justice of selective history. When I arrived, a hazy adolescent with little training in history and none at all in irony, I barely took in the bland visual diet. When I eventually did, I found it indigestible, acid on the tongue.

I was in school in the 1960s. The world was exploding. Some of us were waking up to the fact that the founder's statue was a victory banner planted on colonized soil. We were beginning to learn that presidents—of anything—were, by definition, a problem. We emphatically understood that the only thing standing between us and a present-day imperialist war was graduation day.

And how, I wondered even then, had I not noticed that to be nonwhite, nonmale, nonstraight (I was gay), and economically nonthriving was to be unrepresented in the public images around me? It's an interesting moment when you first fully register that the official version of reality you've been told to trust is not on your side.

Half a century earlier, a handful of New York teachers, some at Columbia University, came

to a similar conclusion from a different direction—that is, from the instructional side. In the immediate aftermath of World War I, an event that shattered Western ethical certainties and divided global epochs, they concluded that the education they had been giving their students was useless for progressive life and thought in 1919.

Judging major American universities to be, at least in the short term, unreformable, the splinter group established a school of its own on a new model. They exchanged the old Western classical curriculum for a focus on the still-new fields of political science and sociology. They de-emphasized grades and degrees in favor of making learning “for mature men and women” an end in itself. They located their New School for Social Research downtown, in Greenwich Village, a refuge for politically minded intellectuals, writers, and artists.

Given this location, it only made sense for The New School to eventually introduce the arts—approached, in a way familiar to us now, as a form of social practice—into the curriculum. And it made further sense that, in 1931, when the school opened its Joseph Urban-designed headquarters at 66 West 12th Street, contemporary art would be integral to the design, an aspect of the educational project that signified not earned tradition but its active overturning.

To that end, two painters—**Thomas Hart Benton** of the United States, and the Mexican-born **José Clemente Orozco**—were invited to create mural cycles within the building, the founding works in a series that has extended to the present. What do we learn, then, from the juxtapositions of

Facade, 66 West 12th Street, 2019.



these thirteen school-commissioned public artworks? To put it simply: We are reminded that politics changes history, and history changes art.

Actually, the Benton mural cycle *America Today* (1930–31) was originally only semipublic: It was installed in a boardroom, later repurposed as a classroom. (It's now in The Metropolitan Museum of Art.) In style, it's vividly theatrical. Politically, it's liberal-ordinary, an interlocking group of symbolic vignettes that project an image of the United States as a giant market-feeding machine. The take is pro-populist but also pro-capitalist, seeming to suggest that if, in the grand frenzy of production, some people—African Americans, say—lose out, well, that's just how it goes.

Orozco's mural project differs not only in its dour palette and uningratiatingly spiky style, but also in its contents. The cycle is in two parts, *Call to Revolution* and *Table of Universal Brotherhood* (1930–31), both still installed in their original settings, a former student cafeteria and adjoining lounge—though the rooms are used for different purposes now. Orozco doesn't pull any punches with his themes. He includes portraits of Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin. His *Table of Universal Brotherhood* depicts a proto-United Nations of ethnicities—African, Chinese, European, Indian, Mexican, Native American—sitting down together with an African American man at the head.

The muscular, can-do spirit of *America Today* felt mildly progressive in the upbeat 1920s and radically misguided once the Depression hit. Now, in the MAGA age, the cycle's vision of a nearly all-white, immigrant-free, largely rural nation could probably find an appreciative new audience, conservative beyond anything Benton might have imagined.

As for Orozco's paintings, during the red-baiting 1950s, right-wing voices called for the murals to be destroyed, as if their call to revolution might pass like a virus into the population. Even for sympathetic viewers, the work is flawed by its insistence on overt lessons: Some of Orozco's heroes proved to be villains; the ideology he advertised has, in some cases, triggered catastrophe. Yet the global consciousness of this art, and its unseating of white supremacy, aligns it with much that is positive in the American present, and with far more recent commissions of public art that likewise seek to render history into something viscerally, visually accessible.

**Kara Walker's** 2005 black-and-white mural, *Event Horizon*, painted on a high staircase wall between floors in the school's Arnhold Hall, is an evocation of the transatlantic slave trade and its aftermaths, with figures tumbling in free-fall into a pit like an intestinal tract. On the seventh floor of the University Center, in the library, stands **Alfredo Jaar's** *Searching for Africa* in LIFE (1996/2014), a photographic indictment, based on reproductions of more than 2,000 *LIFE* magazine covers, of racism through erasure. These twenty-first-century pieces are, in different ways, half-hidden. They don't ask that you seek them out. Rather, they find you as you pass from here to there. Both are about long-suppressed histories: Slavery was the nightmare behind the American dream; Africa was the continent the West tried to bury in darkness. In art, both histories push their way to the surface—in Walker's work as a visual explosion; in Jaar's work as a conceptual whisper.

Other earlier site-specific works in the Collection approach political import in comparably complex ways. The painter **Camilo Egas**, who founded and led the school's art program and hired star teachers—Stuart Davis, Lisette Model—contributed a mural-size oil painting in 1932. Titled *Ecuadorian Festival*, it depicts a folk celebration in the artist's home country. Far from being merely pleasurable, however, it's an agitated image, charged with compositional tensions that undercut an easily exoticized reading of its subject.

That a painting devoted to indigenous South American customs should appear at The New School in the early thirties was remarkable in itself—though this too spoke to the progressive aspirations of the Depression-era institution. It is all the more noteworthy that, in the very different political climate of 1961, another South American artist would come to work in the lobby of the Joseph Urban building. There the Uruguayan sculptor **Gonzalo Fonseca** completed a large-scale mosaic composed of symbols drawn from archaeological sources, primarily pre-Columbian, rendered in a geometric style by then familiar from modern abstract art. Not depicting scenes as Egas does, and lacking the explicit didacticism of Orozco or Benton, Fonseca's visual language is open-endedly transcultural.

Indeed, abstraction has consciousness-raising capacities of its own. Three benchlike geometric sculptures by **Martin Puryear**, installed in 1997 in

close proximity to the Fonseca mosaic, turn the courtyard between two New School buildings into a communal gathering space. Two highly colored wall paintings by **Sol LeWitt** destabilize the heights and depths of the spaces they occupy in Arnhold Hall. **Rita McBride's** extraordinary architectural sculpture *Bells and Whistles* (2009–14), a network of brass ducts, twists its way through five floors of the University Center. It feels vaguely sinister—are the ducts conveying some hidden matter, some essence, from floor to floor?—but also lends the building a sense of organic life.

Such mysterious architectural vitality appears in a different and even spookier way in **Brian Tolle's** 2006 installation *Threshold*. It consists of two fiberglass panels placed on a stretch of wall in Arnhold Hall. Illusionistically molded and painted, they suggest membranes gently rising and falling, as if the wall were breathing.

Does any of these abstract pieces qualify as “political” art? Technically, topically, no. Do they heighten our perception of our immediate surroundings, which happen to be public spaces in an institution of learning—an institution dedicated, from the start, to learning how to live in the political condition that is the Now? Yes.

And it is this Now, in all its multiplicity, that one might understand as the subject of a few more public pieces, all thoroughly planted in the present.

**Glenn Ligon's** 2015 commission, *For Comrades and Lovers*, is installed in the University Center. A wrap-around environment of phrases spelled out in lavender neon tubing, the work centers on language excerpted from Walt Whitman's poetry—nineteenth-century verse that speaks of radical democracy, social equality, and same-sex love. In two time-spanning lines, the poet states that there will “never be any more perfection than there is now. Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.” In a third, he promises to send “a few carols vibrating through the air” when he leaves this earth. The neon vibrates ever so slightly.

One might say that there is poetry without verse in a 2016 mural-size print by **Agnes Denes**, a New York artist now in her late eighties. It has a long title—*Pascal's Perfect Probability Pyramid & the People Paradox—The Predicament (PPPPPP)*—and takes the form of a curving pyramid composed of thousands of small, silhouetted humanlike figures. In an accompanying statement, the artist gives this composite image both positive and

negative spins: Without the cooperation of all the figures, the pyramid would fall; the fact that it hasn't implies that escape from its structure is impossible. In that paradox, one might see the double bind of democracy.

The placement of this mural in a university dining room means that at least some alert eyes will be returning to it and to the ideas it poses again and again. Denes addresses herself to these viewers, dedicating the work to “the refugees of the world, the homeless, misplaced and unwanted whose well-being depends on kindness and compassion. It is also a gift to the students. Read the figures, they are you.”

Who knows, maybe the public art I was seeing on my college campus all those years ago was beneficently intended too—though it struck me then, and strikes me now, that there was a different dynamic at work. I was being urged to subsume my identity into that of the school. Few institutions are entirely free of such presumptions—and indeed a sly, easy-to-miss work of institutional critique by the California-based artist **Dave Muller** nails the narcissism at the root of even the most humane academy. For the target under fire is The New School itself. In a series of modestly sized acrylic-on-paper paintings titled *Interpolations and Extrapolations*—created between 2002 and 2003 and expanded in 2008—the artist records the school's adventures in self-branding. This began with a change of name. “The New School for Social Research” was streamlined to “The New School,” period, and then to “The New School University.” These changes coincided with a number of logo redesigns intended to project various institutional personalities: formal or casual, tough or soft. Does this search for a marketable look imply insecurity or flexibility? Neurosis or health?

I'd say health. The school I attended had for centuries branded itself visually with the same faux-aristocratic crests and Latin moral maxims, with the result that learning felt like a marmoreal enterprise. The New School's collection of public art—various, humane, political—generates a very different atmosphere. Politics change history; history changes art. And art—if it's alert and alive and tuned in to whatever present produced it—changes people. Isn't change what education is for?