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Southern California Artists Challenge America

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After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, America experienced an outpouring of international sympathy. Political leaders and millions of people throughout the world expressed heartfelt grief for the great loss of life in the wake of the unspeakable horror at the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and in Pennsylvania.

Four years later, America has had its world standing and moral credibility substantially reduced. In striking contrast to the immediate aftermath of 9/11, it faces profound isolation and disrespect throughout the world. The increasingly protracted war in Iraq has been the major catalyst for massive international disapproval. Moreover, the arrogance of the George W. Bush administration in world affairs has alienated many of America's traditional allies and has precipitated widespread global demonstrations against its policies and priorities. Domestically, the Bush presidency has galvanized enormous opposition and has divided the nation more deeply than any time since the height of the equally unpopular war in Vietnam.

Dissent against President Bush and his retrograde socio-economic agenda has become a powerful force in contemporary American life. Among the most prominent of those commenting upon American policies have been members of the artistic community. Musicians, writers, filmmakers, actors, dancers, visual artists, and other artists continue a long-held practice of using their creative talents to call dramatic attention to the enormous gap between American ideals of freedom, justice, equality, and peace and American realities of racism, sexism, and international aggression. In 2004, for example, Michael Moore's film "Fahrenheit 9/11," which is highly critical of President Bush, has attracted large audiences in the United States and abroad. Likewise, major recording artists and groups including Bruce Springsteen, Jackson Browne, the Dixie Chicks, Pearl Jam and others have gone on the offensive in seeking to defeat Bush for re-election and in raising more fundamental problems of American injustice.

Despite the high stakes artists may face in offering up criticism, they are up for the protracted challenge. One such example is that of the Dixie Chicks, who hail from Texas, having their songs banned by particular U.S. radio stations as a result of Dixie Chicks lead singer Natalie Maines's comment

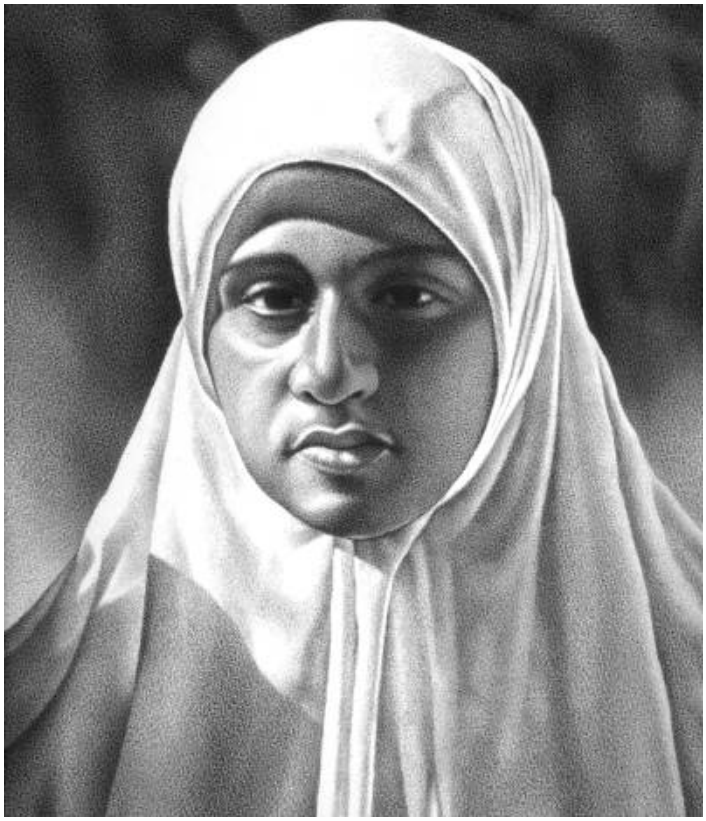
(deemed unpatriotic and disrespectful by some critics) made at a March 2003 London concert. To the concert-goers, Maines said that she was "ashamed the President of the United States was from Texas," as Maines perceived President Bush to be ignoring the majority of U.S. public opinion and alienating much of the world by advocating for (unilateral, if need be) war against Iraq. Although the Dixie Chicks faced limited censorship and disapproval, the band at the same time struck a resonant chord with the U.S. public as evidenced by their song "Travelin' Soldier" (with lyrics pertaining to a U.S. soldier who fought in Vietnam) rocketing to the number one position for Best Country Single on the Billboard Charts.

Visual artists also have been at the forefront of artistic social commentary and criticism. Reflecting a long tradition in American cultural history, painters, sculptors, printmakers, photographers, and other artists have critiqued several aspects of political and social life. Thousands of artists nationwide have been activists for social change, both in their work and in their personal lives as critical public citizens. Their works have received growing national and international attention, assuring people throughout the world that current political directions in America meet with substantial internal scrutiny and disapproval.

Southern California in recent years has been an especially fruitful location for visual social criticism. Hundreds of talented visual artists live and work in the region, joining their historical predecessors in creating exemplary work in every artistic medium. Like the giant figures of socially conscious art throughout history, scores of Southern California-based artists have refused to remain indifferent to the profound problems besetting the region, the nation, and the world. They have used their prodigious talents to offer critical commentary about major issues such as racism, sexism, class conflict, xenophobia, poverty, environmental degradation, war, political corruption, police misconduct, and a wide array of related themes and topics. Together, they have made a powerful contribution to the vast history of social commentary and criticism in American art.

Not surprisingly, the war in Iraq represents an especially potent focus for visual art criticism. Since active combat began in 2003, a plethora of oppositional artwork has appeared. Many pieces are adapted and reproduced as posters during mass protest marches and rallies. Some, for example, use visual elements from classic works of anti-war art such as Francisco Goya's "The Third of May, 1808," Kathe Kollwitz's "Never Again War," and Pablo Picasso's "Guernica." Others are specifically American in design and detail and contribute substantially to the burgeoning body of socially conscious visual art in the United States.

A key figure in Southern Californian socially conscious art is Los Angeles-based Mark Vallen, a renowned Chicano artist-activist whose works have addressed pressing social and political issues for more than three decades. In 2001, following the September 11 terrorist attack, he created a powerful pencil on paper drawing entitled "I Am Not The Enemy" (Figure 1). Responding to the widespread hate crimes and racial profiling of people who "look Arab" across America, Vallen's artwork is a sympathetic portrait of an Islamic woman who has become a symbol of American irrationality and xenophobia. Below the woman's portrait are the words spelled out in large, all upper case black letters, "I AM NOT THE ENEMY." The drawing pointedly reminds viewers that Muslims, Arabs, and others of Middle Eastern origin are human beings and *not* the enemy. Many have come to America to escape oppression and to gain economic and social opportunities like millions of immigrants before them. That they have been targeted as suspected terrorists--entirely without evidence--is a serious violation of the deepest values of the Bill of Rights and a scathing insult to historical American notions of liberty and justice.

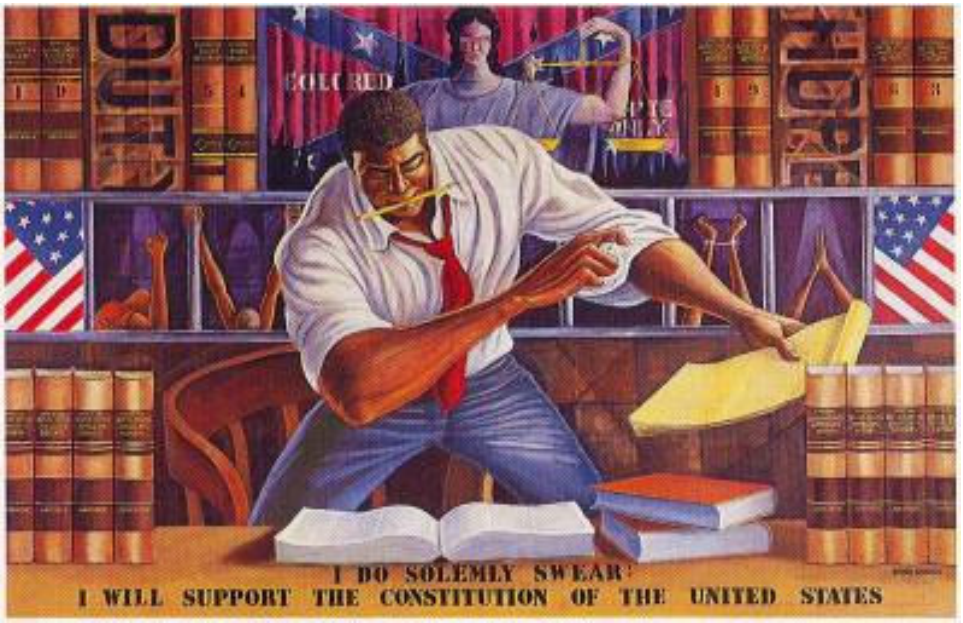


Vallen reproduced the drawing as a poster for wide public distribution as protests mounted after President Bush initiated the military actions in Iraq. Once again, "I Am Not The Enemy" brought a powerful message to large audiences: this war, conceived and masked as a defensive response to "weapons of mass destruction," is actually a modern equivalent of a crusade against the large Islamic population in the Middle East. Vallen's artwork

stands as an ideal example of contemporary artistic challenges to U.S. power in the international arena.

Similarly, many Southern Californian visual artists have focused on domestic social and political issues in their creative responses to American political and social inadequacies. Among the most important problems is the seemingly intractable racism that has pervaded American history for centuries. Some artists addressing racism employ deliberately stark and unsubtle imagery in their visual commentaries. Others are less overt while encouraging viewers to focus on the outstanding political, cultural, economic, and other contributions of racial and ethnic minorities in the United States.

Former professional football player and distinguished Los Angeles-based African-American artist Ernie Barnes has throughout his career focused upon highlighting the multifaceted achievements of African-Americans and the continuing barriers to their advancement. In his richly detailed neo-mannerist 1996 painting "The Advocate" (Figure 2), he juxtaposes a strong young African-American lawyer with images of a seemingly perpetual racist system of criminal justice. The lawyer himself



represents the more than 20,000 black legal professionals in America. Working assiduously on behalf of his people, the attorney is framed by law books, the statue of justice, and unambiguous language at the bottom referring to the United States Constitution, the basic legal document that theoretically provides, among other things, the equal protection of the law.

A closer analysis of the painting (now mass-produced in print form) reveals some additional details that reflect the continuing pattern of American racism. The law books in the upper part of the composition have the numbers "1954" to the left and "1963" to the right. These represent significant dates in the historic movement for civil rights. In 1954, the United States Supreme Court decided the landmark case of *Brown vs. Board of Education*, which outlawed racial segregation in schools and finally ended the practice of legal racial discrimination. In 1963, President John F. Kennedy promoted the comprehensive Civil Rights Act in Congress which his successor, President Lyndon Johnson, signed the following year.

The most striking and poignant details of the painting appear at the center of the composition, directly behind the young lawyer. Bordered by partial images of the U.S. flag, several black prisoners stand with upraised arms. Ernie Barnes's artistic message is entirely obvious: American ideals of racial justice, symbolized by the deliberately incomplete flag imagery, cannot be implemented when a high percentage of the African-American population remains incarcerated. "The Advocate" is a vivid reminder of the racial inequities that still exist in America.

Made by prisoners
in a California prison.

Another veteran Southern Californian artist, Sheila Pinkel, has also effectively used her critical visual work to augment public consciousness about the high incarceration rate both in America and in California. In her series "PIA" (Prison Industrial Authority), she created a ten-foot grid of photographs from the pages of the PIA catalog. This agency, based in a California maximum security prison, offers "high quality [inmate-made] products designed . . . with you in mind . .

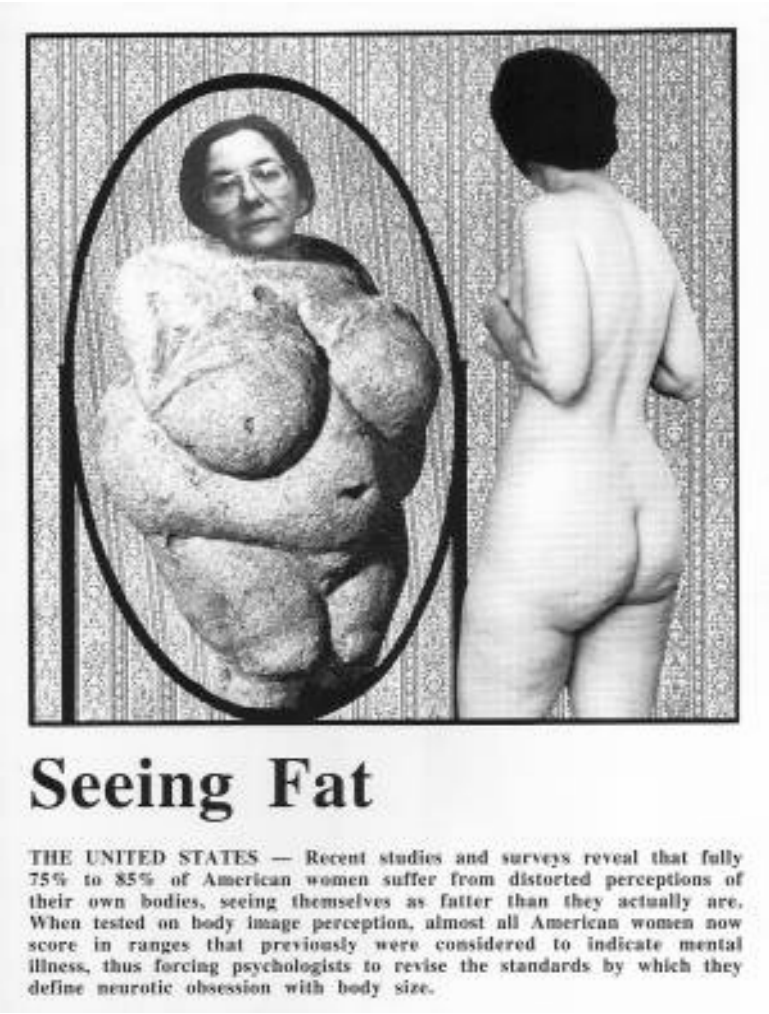
." The product line includes office systems, furniture, flags, clothing, soaps and detergents, and many other products, all manufactured by prisoners making $1.00 per hour.

Pinkel's individual photograph (Figure 3) depicting the American and California State flags with the caption "Made by prisoners in a California prison" underscores the seriousness of the present prison problem. Drawing on her training as a photographer, she skillfully juxtaposes the image and the text. Taken alone, the picture of the two flags is inoffensive; indeed, for millions of Americans (and Californians), such images can generate pride and respect. The caption, however, belies such a benign interpretation. It underscores the artist's point that far too much of America's (declining) prosperity depends on cheap prison labor. More fundamentally, it highlights the fact that more than 2 million people are in U.S. local, state, and federal penal institutions in the early 21st century, of which approximately 500,000 are incarcerated for nonviolent drug offenses. This figure reflects a profound failure to address the material, moral, and spiritual needs of all too many of the nation's residents, especially communities of color and the poor. Pinkel encourages her viewers to seriously reflect upon this reality and to mobilize to effect meaningful political and social change.

Visual artists have also critically addressed the persistence of sexism in American life. It is no exaggeration to note that millions of women exist as second-class citizens, despite the significant and admirable progress of the feminist movement for the past several decades. Women still receive lower pay than men and have much less access to high-level professional opportunities in virtually all fields. Furthermore, they are disproportionately subject to sexual harassment and are routinely degraded through repugnant representations, often as a mere collection of sexual body parts, in commercial advertisements.

Southern Californian artist Mariona Barkus has perceptively addressed some of the more persistent problems of sexism in much of her artwork during the past decade. Perhaps more dramatic than inferior pay scales and overt sexual aggression, the issue of body weight and image remains an emotionally volatile issue for women of all ages. In 1996, the artist produced a print entitled "Seeing Fat" (Figure 4).

Barkus skillfully positions a nude picture of herself in front of a mirrored image of the "Venus of Willendorf," the prehistoric statue of a corpulent woman. While Barkus clearly bears no resemblance whatsoever to this historic female figure, she expresses a profound difference between that objective reality and her subjective perceptions about her own body image. She knows perfectly well that she is not overweight; still, like many



American women, she believes that she is fatter than she should be. By superimposing her own face on top of the statue, she highlights the huge insecurity that pervades female consciousness in America.

"Seeing Fat" is a remarkable visual feminist critique because it cuts deeply to the social roots of female body image discontent and emotional distress. At any given moment, several million American women, whose body weight is perfectly normal and healthy, are dieting in order to meet socially constructed and perpetuated male standards of female beauty in terms of body shape and form. At the extreme end of this spectrum, hundreds of thousands or more women develop anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and other eating disorders such as binge eating in a frustrating attempt to be "thin and attractive." The cumulative economic, social, and psychological cost is enormous.

Mariona Barkus's artwork calls upon the viewer to consider the sources of this growing national (and increasingly international) problem. Her caption, which indicates that over 75% of American women suffer from distorted perceptions of their own bodies, serves as an indictment of deeply sexist American values. Advertising, mass media, education, peer pressure and other factors all combine to create and reinforce highly unrealistic ideal standards of female body image. This powerfully critical artwork dramatically resists these forces, seeking to persuade female and male viewers alike that women should take control over their own bodies and personal images. Like other contemporary feminist artists such as Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman, Barkus understands that all people benefit through gender equality and autonomy.

Environmental issues, too, have been a major focus of Southern Californian artists who challenge existing policies and practices. A key representative of this type of politico-environmental art was the late painter and muralist Eva Cockcroft. Widely known and respected until her death in 1999, Cockcroft created socially conscious murals throughout the state, nation, and the world. Her mural "The Chain Undone" (Figure 5) is a stern condemnation of American environmental policies, which has fostered the loss of many natural habitats in the United States and throughout the world for decades.

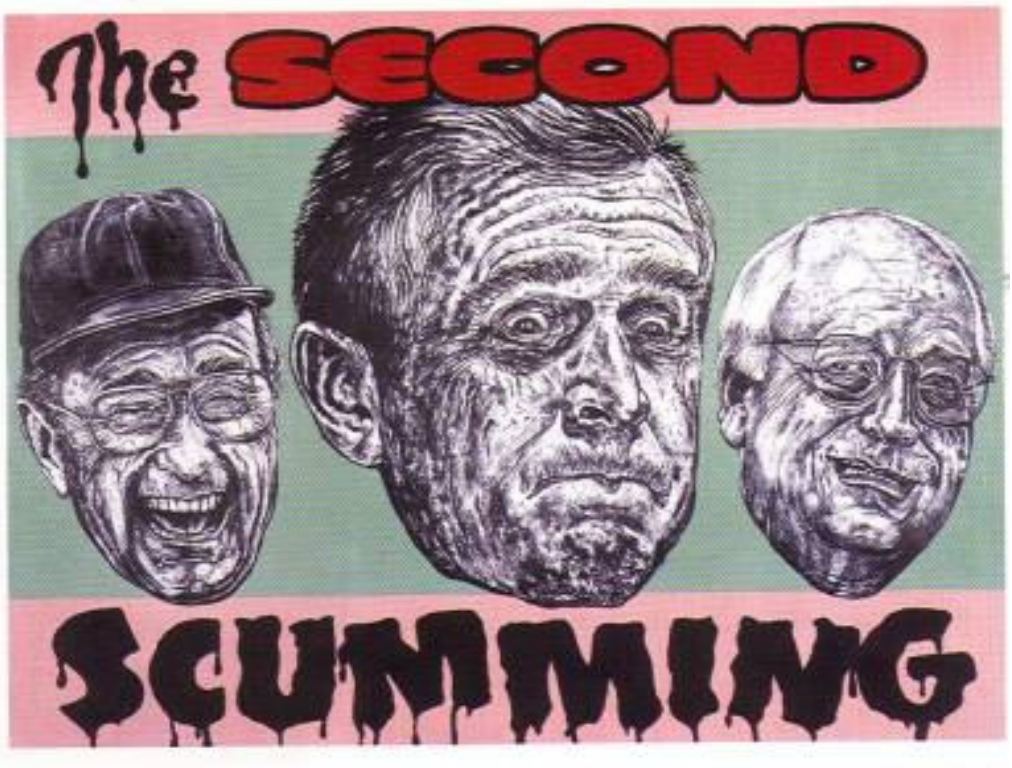
The Chain Undone, 1992, by Eva Cockcroft, Rancho Park
©1995 by the Social and Public Art Resource Center (43)

The theme of this large-scale acrylic mural in Los Angeles is the imminent destruction of wetlands in Southern California and elsewhere. Divided into three segments, this outdoor painting features in the central panel a vibrant, multicolored scene of birds and plant life. Cockcroft painted the end panels at both the right and left in black and white images of growing industrial development. Stark and frightening, the artist reveals how unregulated economic "development" causes pollution and death, seemingly with no end in sight to this environmental degradation. Ominously, in the panel at the right, a mechanical bird, signifying rapacious corporate greed, makes a further incursion into the center segment. The artist uses this detail to warn viewers that massive environmental destruction will continue unless concerned citizens mobilize collectively to resist the disastrous consequences.

Completed in 1992, "The Chain Undone" is even more relevant and more poignant in the early years of the new century. The Bush administration's environmental policies have intensified the assault on the natural environment. The President and his advisors have shown contempt for domestic and international environmental issues, as evidenced by their refusal to accept the Kyoto Protocol, their indifference to global warming, and their brazen encouragement of virtually all corporate incursion plans in previously untouched lands. This mural represents a quintessential challenge to America, following in the grand tradition of resistance art in U.S. art history.

Many visual artists choose to express their challenges with specific satirical treatments of major political figures. A well known "guerrilla" artist in the nation is Los Angeles resident Robbie Conal, whose critical posters have engaged and infuriated thousands of people since the late 1980s. Holding contemporary public figures up to visual ridicule, Conal's public artwork constitutes an imaginatively dynamic counterattack against conventional models of artistic creation and distribution. He posts his efforts clandestinely in public spaces, causing viewers to confront satirical imagery about American politicians as they travel daily on city streets. Conal attacks all political leaders but reserves special venom for the most conservative among them. His targets have included former President Ronald Reagan, former House of Representatives Speaker Newt Gingrich, Supreme Court Chief Justice William Rehnquist, former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, former Special Prosecutor Kenneth Starr, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, and other public figures in America. Calling his efforts "adversary portraiture," he uses his art to provide audiences with the opportunity to reflect on political issues in unusual places and circumstances.

In 2001, he produced and disseminated a poster entitled "The Second Scumming" (Figure 6), which can be interpreted as a play on Christianity's belief in the Second Coming of Christ. Brutally unsubtle, the poster features, from left to right, former President George H.W. Bush, his son, President George W. Bush, and Vice President Richard Cheney. The words "The" and "Scumming" drip sarcastically across the top and bottom of the composition respectively, conveying a vision of repulsion and disgust. Conal urges viewers to share his disgust toward the men who bear immense responsibility for American isolation throughout the world. The word "Second," painted in bright red, signifies that the second Bush presidency only exacerbates the repressive policies of his father's regime, which held



sway from January 1989 to January 1993.

The poster's most revealing features are the specific facial expressions of the political leaders themselves. The first Bush is shown in the background, smiling cheerfully watching his son and his chief subordinate reflect and extend the retrograde economic and military policies of his own administration. The center image of George W. Bush depicts him in the foreground as a vacuous, poorly educated and intellectually incurious tool of more malevolent persons and institutions in the background. The Vice

President's expression is most revealing; Cheney is shown with an enigmatic smirk, signifying that he is among the most important--and most dangerous--figures in the entire administration. This vision is widely shared among critics in America and throughout the world. Scholars and journalists alike have noted that Cheney, the former chief executive officer of the Halliburton Corporation, is the most influential vice president in U.S. history. He is widely believed to be among the primary advocates of the war in Iraq and environmentally dangerous policies at home. A review of his political record over the years lends credence to this perception. "The Second Scumming" is indicative of Conal's primary aim, which seeks to generate and solidify political opposition, using artistic satire to implement the ideals of critical discourse and dissent necessary to preserve any democratic society.

The artists mentioned in this text are all experienced practitioners of artistic social criticism, with decades of prolific work in their professional lives. Southern California has many politically oriented artists whose creative efforts are directed to challenging America. Muralists Judy Baca, Elliot Pinkney, Noni Olabisi, Richard Wyatt are among the many artists who continue to use public and private walls to communicate challenging messages about various features of American social and political life. Veteran Los Angeles Times cartoonist Paul Conrad and young comic strip artist Aaron McGruder use newspapers as forums for their own perceptive visual criticism. Anonymous graffiti artists, typically young persons from local African-American, Latino, Asian-American and other communities of color, also offer sharp and controversial critiques about politics and society. Cumulatively, their efforts remind the public that dissenting voices refuse to be silenced and that artistic social criticism will be relentless.