

Cornelia LAUF

MY DEMOCRACY IS NOT YOURS

The murder of a Russian ambassador in an art gallery in Ankara and the felling of Pope John Paul II by a meteor, at least as depicted by Maurizio Cattelan, are not too distant or disparate events. The former act - horrendous, frightening, ominous - is no more real than the latter and used the artificial calm of cultural space to explode the myth that those of us in this field are safe in our ivory towers. The latter occupies real space, and depicts real people to create real art in a mediate way (the artist's goal) that reached millions as well. By doing so, the latter work creates an even more lasting image, an eternal one, which will long outlive the very good photograph of the Russian ambassador's death, steeped as it also is, in thorough knowledge of sculpture and the figure.

This is the power of art and it is a power that those of us on the culture-producing front, must and can harness at a delicate moment in history.

Many of us and I speak for myself, have grown up in a West that has not seen war. Our parents and grandparents' generations did and I - a perpetual immigrant due to this war, on some level - know first-hand from family members, that those who endured famine and bombing, or the consequences of mass destruction of home and country, are irrevocably altered by these experiences.

My own family ranges from strong conservatives to assimilated Jews who hid in plain sight, from military generals to intellectuals who mysteriously disappeared in the mid-1940s, with labels such as "mental illness," as their final address. Dictatorship and the curtailment of democratic values directly influenced the course of events that made my parents leave a ruined post-war Germany and seek haven in the great United States of America.

Today, the shadow of a new and abusive Reich, with the most perilous politician on earth at its helm, afflicts the very country that has been a lighthouse worldwide for several hundred years, despite its own terrible record in the matter of First Nations, slavery, reckless industrial development and so on.

Long-lasting peace has brought about a certain complacency. Personally, I am not proposing a new political imagery, or that art must now embrace the political. Images of political assassinations older than David's *Death*

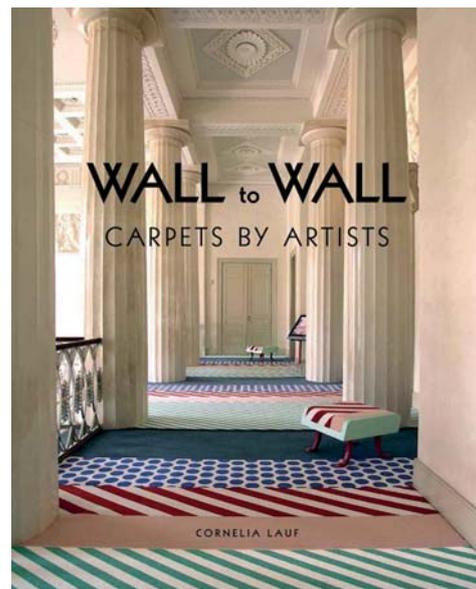
Wall to Wall Carpets by Artists

Wall to Wall: Carpets by Artists is curated by Dr. Cornelia Lauf and features work from a wide cross-section of contemporary artists and their weaving partners, taking as its point of departure a history of art, rather than a history of medium. The carpet will be used as a pedagogical device to show how artists can integrate deep philosophical and formal resolutions into the very nature of an object and its material.

Wall to Wall reflects a history of art in which the achievements of significant artists motivate paradigm shifts. Artists like Andy Warhol, Rosemarie Trockel, Chuck Close, and Heimo Zobernig are considered with respect to their abilities to work in a medium that is often at odds with the ethos of movements to which they have been ascribed. The exhibition holds that this contradiction is the space in which creative revolution happens.

Technique and production is also considered; the interchange between artist, producer, and artisan is of utmost importance. Wall to Wall considers the waning of artisanal traditions, presenting the artist's carpet as a compelling example of delegation in a post-Duchampian mode, indexing hand-made approaches for even the most hard-line conceptual artists.

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Paulina Ołowska
Oksza, 2014
Gobelin and Polyamide
78 3/4 x 52 3/8 x 10 5/8 inches
200 x 133 x 27 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York



Marcus Geiger at the *Wealth of Nations* exhibition, CSW, Warszawa, 1991. By courtesy of the artist.s

of *Marat*, date back earlier than the *Dying Gaul* of the National Archaeological Museums of Rome and are expressed in the first depictions of tyrannicide or war, from the dawn of artistic time. They do not captivate the imagination any better than a Japanese haiku, or Aesop's fables. Political art - and all culture-making is 'political' in a way - must engage the soul, just as beauty without mandate does.

Those of us curating, creating visual imagery, working with material culture, need to be asking ourselves what our conjunctions of images and constructions of meaning actually effect. We are witnessing a worldwide decline of so-called liberal values, in so-called 'first' nations, such as that of Donald Trump, not to speak of countries like Turkey, where harassment and silencing has been an inexorable and increasingly inescapable fact of cultural life.

We have been isolated in our self-congratulatory bubbles, used language that baffles and alienates many, used iconography that repelled more.

It seems I'll have an occasion to curate an exhibition in a Muslim country this year. Another exhibition might go to the Middle East. I've worked in Cairo and Istanbul, and in Prague, Krakow, and Warsaw, in moments of turbulence and not some danger, such as immediately just after the fall of the Iron Curtain. But in those moments, there seemed to be an opening and optimism in the air. I curated a work with the Viennese artist, Markus Geiger, in the year 1990. His idea was to cover a Polish tank with pink terrycloth, then a novel use of fabric indeed. Geiger and I cheerfully approached Polish military generals, with the indefatigable aid of the Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle's curator, Milada Slizinska. To our amazement and surprise, the gallery was successful in its requests and I was able to include a pink actual tank exhibited like so many bronze sculptures of fallen warriors, in the park outside the gallery.

In the climate of today, in many countries, including Poland, such a request might not be granted so easily. If I were to exhibit Persian prayer rugs in the Muslim country, as modified by Western artists - and I have assembled a small dossier - would I be potentially exposing the artists or myself to danger? And to whom am I speaking if I choose to organize an exhibition about the modification of a holy item by another culture? I once worked with a cross-dressing performance artist, Hunter Reynolds, on the enactment of an "O Party," in a show on Fluxus that Susan Hapgood and I curated at the New Museum and Hallwalls in New York. The construction of a political rally and creation of a political moment in a museum, was, as in the case of Geiger, a powerful experience.

The example of Paulina Olowaska is a very compelling one right now. Olowaska, as very few other artists, does not use her native Poland's vernacular culture in a derisive, ironic, or post-Pop way. She utilizes techniques, imagery, and materials that are a mournful homage to the Poland of her youth and a contemporary Poland, split between post-industrial and agrarian models, seeking universals and stability in a return to authorities which hark back to Cold War times. Olowaska's ability to conjure up the 1970s, at the same time as launching a critique on environmental desecration, her keen sense of social justice, her love of artisanal crafts that are dying like so many languages, makes for a splendid and variegated artistic practice. I'm a deep admirer of an artist who does not fear embroidery and textiles, ceramics, and bronze, while at the same time, fearlessly creating tableaux with paint and brush. Her decision to live consonant with the materials and themes she uses, is also compelling - another generation than one that may be quoting Indiana, but lives in L.A.

I particularly love her ceramics and weavings. The purple carpet in an exhibition on carpets I curated for the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland is one such example: it reminds the viewer of interior décor conventions of the 1970s, down to the color and is titled after an endangered wildflower, - while being knit out of industrial wastes, quite the contrary to its fuzzy and welcoming appearance. A kick in the pants of complacency, an affront on the idea of craft as a mute carrier of meaning. A work of art, a carpet, a wall textile, a brilliant statement.

I wonder if the media and communications behind Hillary Clinton's campaign or even behind the current resistance wave against Trump could not use the full power of contemporary art to their advantage. Clinton's most powerful message in the waning days of her candidacy gave Trump mileage even in her slogan "Love Trumps Hate," itself an unclear phrasing also interpretable as "(Please) Love Trump's Hate." Currently, the most powerful image circulating positively is one of millions of women demonstrating, but no single political symbol. has been created to unite those who resist the rapid build up of a potential world disaster and recent rallies consistently use weak colors, bad fonts, unclear verbiage, in order to galvanize. Typeface and design are important at this very moment, as well as positing values and practices that are convincing alternatives to fascism, autocracy and the abridgement of democratic values.

By inhabiting our own spaces in cultural with maximum *gravitas* and taking seriously the needs and concerns of people outside of our world, we can learn to harness the enormous potential of art, the only shaping device that gives a face to time.

Art must necessarily be created and curated to address this moment and it is our duty to take each moment, each occasion, to speak of universal truths and values, as best as we can. Shining so many lights is the only action possible, in a sea of darkness.

We are at a crossroads in art too and it is no coincidence that there is a rise in attention to decorative arts and that ancient Eastern media, such as the carpet, are rising in significance, during a waning of attention toward the incomprehensible, jargon-filled posturing of an intellectual elite.

It could be a good time to crystallize and convene and infiltrate the very structures that threaten us most.

These just a few thoughts on preserving our fragile and hard-won democracies, in this perilous moment, in so many places and ways.