

Book Review

Kill for Peace: American artists against the war. Matthew Israel. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2013. 252 pp. ISBN 978-0-294-4830-9 (pbk). \$21.90.

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Anti-war art made in the United States during the period of the Vietnam War (1964-74) has been given some attention by art historians and curators, but not enough according to Mathew Israel, author of *Kill for Peace*. There are three main reasons for this. First, the consensus among art critics has been that 'anti-war' artworks lack sophistication; second, the principles and practises of avant-garde art alienate it from social and political events of the day; and, third, because of the aesthetic proclivities of the avant-garde, the high-brow art establishment dismissed works that dealt with current events and issues, including the War. If these reasons hold true, then what is it that Israel can do in his book to give historical significance to this art form? He can expand the definition of anti-war art by moving it beyond the artwork itself – beyond the artefact; he does this by coining categories that when brought together offer a holistic understanding of the cultural context of anti-war art of the Vietnam War era.

In the first half of his book, Israel develops a holistic framework of interpretation by tracing the chronology of increasing US military engagement with Vietnam, the concomitant crescendo of protest against the War and of American artists' relationship with these events. He coins the phrase 'extra-aesthetic actions' to describe the initial stages of artistic involvement in protesting the war. The first meaningful action occurred in 1965 and was called the 'End Your Silence' campaign that culminated in a two-page advertisement signed by a number of well-known artists and placed in the New York Times. Other 'professional' groups such as prominent doctors and scientists had previously run similar ads so this action was not unprecedented.

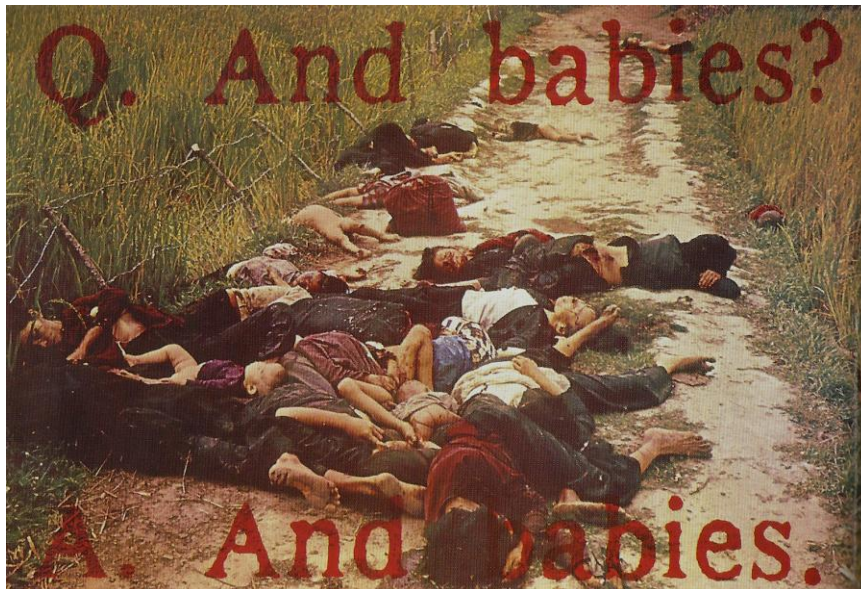
Along with 'actions' came 'collective aesthetic endeavours', the most notable being the 'Stop Escalation' campaign led by the Artistic Protest Committee (APC) of Los Angeles. Its aim was to close down the art industry altogether with the justification that art should not be appreciated and enjoyed in the US when a 'government of the people, by the people and for the people' is in the process of committing genocide, this time in Southeast Asia. Endeavours included covering displays and museum windows with white paper, holding mass rallies to disrupt the flow of connoisseurs and tourists in the art districts of Los Angeles, and making large-scale murals and quilts to which almost anyone could contribute. Israel argues that these 'actions' and 'endeavours' were the art world's initial forays into the 'anti-war' movement, an argument that counters the prevailing theory held by critics. They claim that works of art had failed to raise awareness of the injustice of the War, so artists then turned to extra-aesthetic and collective actions and endeavours.

Anti-war sentiment seeps into works of art for the first time in 1966. Los Angeles became the epicentre of this kind of artistic expression. Works such as the *Artist's Tower of Protest*, a communal, large-scale enterprise, drew local-media attention and caused some controversy but did not inspire national reflection. Marc Morrel's painterly defilement of patriotic symbols such as the Stars and Stripes and Statue of Liberty, however, did gain a wider audience but the appeal came from its notoriety.

A consensus among art historians studying the period has been that minimalism, a dominant trend in painting and sculpture during the 1960s and 70s, was influential in the anti-

war movement. Art works, they claim, inspired sensations reflecting the zeitgeist shaped by the War. Israel breaks from this critical interpretation by claiming that minimalism's essential concern for abstraction and objectivity in the form of stark geometric patterns, for mechanical processes and synthetic materials, and for de-personalization was incapable of visually communicating protestation. Same with Pop Art, but for different reasons: the visual play with the stuff of popular culture was intended by artists such as Warhol and Lichtenstein to be apolitical. Still, Israel coins the phrase 'benefit works' to represent contributions made by artists following these trends who donated works to exhibitions and forums to financially support the anti-war movement.

By 1967, collective aesthetic actions were in full stride. *Collage of Indignation* put together by 500 artists is the most significant artwork to emerge from such collective actions. That same year, individual artists began to incorporate 'direct evidence' into their artwork. Direct evidence is photographs depicting victims of violence, particularly Vietnamese women and children. Two years later, art pieces would appear with dead US soldiers. These works were especially caustic: since the US government had been successful in keeping such images and body counts off the TV screens, when they did appear in artworks viewers convulsed. The most memorable anti-war artwork, besides the *Tower*, is a montage called *Q: And Babies? And Babies.*, which was inspired by the My Lai Massacre and includes direct evidence.



Artists' Poster Committee of Art Workers' Coalition: Frazier Dougherty, Jon Hendricks, and Irving Petlin, *Q. And babies? A. And babies*, 1970. Photographer: R. L. Haeberle.

The historical moment also begot what Israel calls 'advanced memorials' made to counter-formalize government monuments and memorials which usually glorify war. Art installations were assembled with what appeared to be burial pits, dead bodies and wounded soldiers and were not made immortal like the marbled entities patronized in nation-states. Performance artists even staged advance memorials in public spaces of major cities across the US.

In 1970, artwork, actions and endeavours coalesced on a grand scale for the *New York Art Strike against Racism, War and Repression*. After this the artistic spirit of resistance dimmed, mainly because of Nixon's policy of 'Vietnamization' and promise of a gradual withdrawal of American troops. Nevertheless, the anti-war art of the era, that is, the compositions themselves, particularly the posters, live on in displays of protest against twenty-first century

wars fought by the US. In many works revisions have been made to fit the different circumstances and direct evidence consistently used by artists to protest the US effort to kill for peace in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In *To Kill for Peace*, Israel sets-up heuristic categories that help clear the way towards a thorough understanding of the artistic contribution to the anti-Vietnam war movement in the US. His set-up and analysis reveal the reciprocal relationships between the art object (its materiality, meaning, effect and form) and the social and political context of the era. Such a holistic perspective is a hallmark of the best in art criticism and historical scholarship. The book includes black and white photographs of all the studied works of art and several glossy coloured plates. Although the subject of the artworks in the photographs can be grim, the book is ideally illustrated. All in all, Israel has legitimized and splendidly reconstructed a moment in art history that continues to influence American art and dissent.