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AARON KRACH

Political, Conceptual and Public Artist

Aaron Krach is a political, conceptual and public artist as well as a lecturer at Parsons, Purchase, and Queens College. He's created work in response to modern issues such as the war in Afghanistan, a project that lasted 5 years, but also to elements of the "art world," specifically about collectors who snap up major works which then may never be seen again by the public. Krach's work ranges in scale from postage stamps to billboards and is united under an interest in staying current, dealing with today's stories and events, and creating a public response. As of now, he is repurposing and reframing found objects. During a studio visit, I saw elements of his next project, which involves uncanny duplicates of wildly diverse value.

As someone who had spent a lot of time creating art based on your interest in Afghanistan, do you consider yourself a political artist? How would you define being a political artist?

I consider myself a political artist for a couple reasons. To start, I am very politically engaged and follow political developments at home and internationally. I'm interested in understanding how power is shared, wielded, and affects people. Also growing up as a gay man in an extremely multi-racial neighborhood in Los Angeles, I knew that politics impacted my life in immediate ways.

I'm not sure I can totally define what a political artist is because there are various definitions, all of which are important as mine. For me, a political artist is someone who wants to change things. I want my work to engage with what's happening right now and potentially make a progressive change on three levels: the way the audience thinks, sees, and behaves. I'm not happy with work that just stays inert.

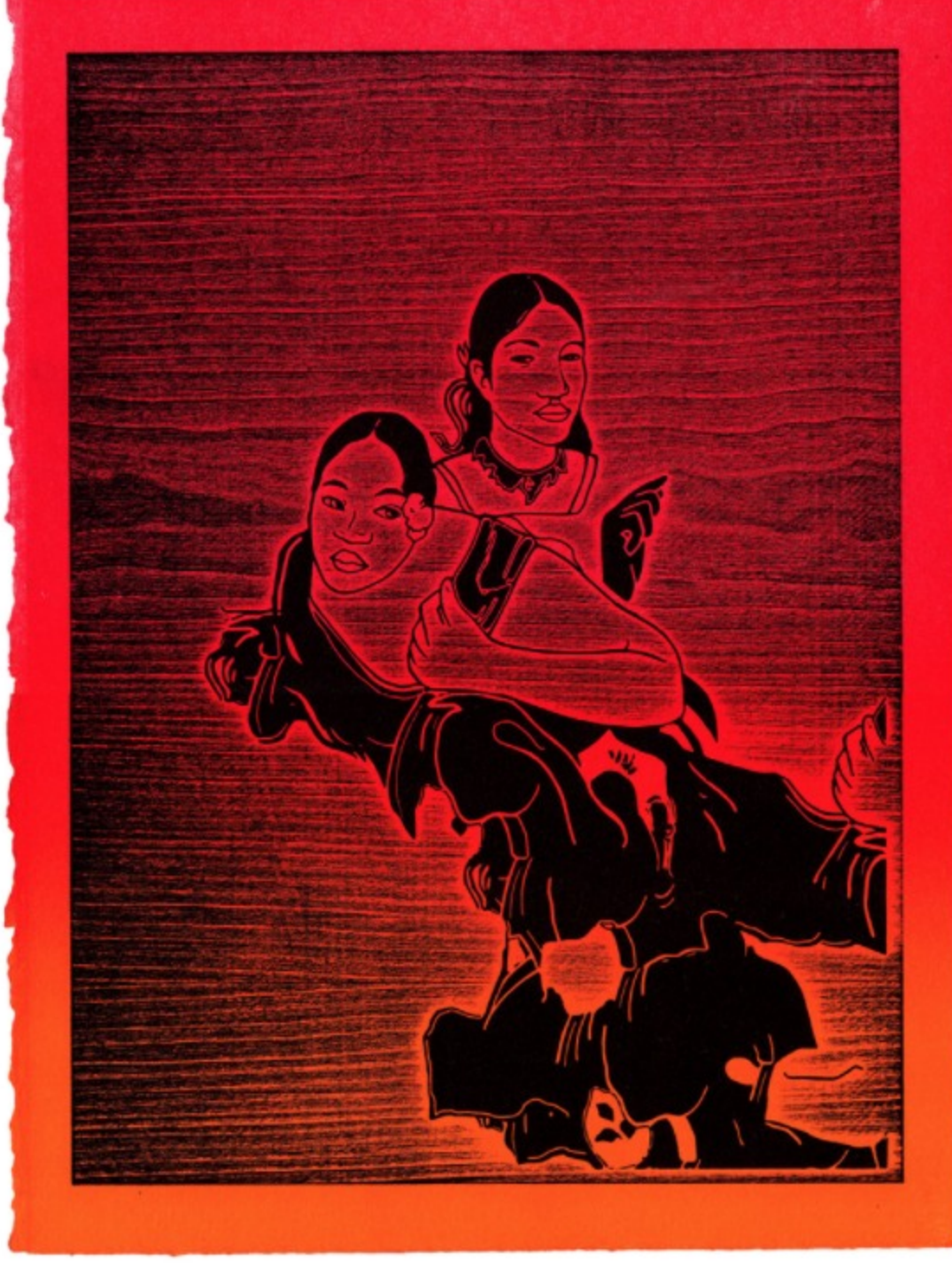
You've been working on the project in Afghanistan since 2011, what was the biggest take away from such a long project?

It was worth the dedication of time, and resources. Even though the project could have been completed faster, there was more to gain by committing more time. I've learned to not worry about the timeline but focus on what the project needs. There are some projects I can finish in a day and then there are some that need 5 years. I know I need to let the project determine the time.

Because the more I learned, the more I knew, and the more complicated the project became. Having so much to think about made the project easier because it was so rich. It was also harder because I had to grapple with some huge issues. That is not necessarily a very comfortable place to be in, but it is worth it.

How did you step away from it?

Luckily I'm restless, so there are always a few other ideas percolating in the brain. I would have some lulls where things would slow down, so I would jump over to another project to keep myself creatively satisfied. Then, slowly it came to a head. I maxed out. The situation changed, contacts moved away or stopped responding. As much as I turned away, the project wound down, as the situation on the ground over there has changed, it all changed together. It was hard to give up because you there's always more. I feel like you could spend your whole life on somethings. But there's other things I want to do.



Why are you leaving? Where are you going? Will you come back?
2015
Woodcut on paper
16 x 11.5 inches



You are a two time LMCC public art grant recipient. How do you think the public interacts with your art?

Good question. I love to go and watch people interact with my work or collect pictures of their interactions I find online. I was excited about those two grants and they gave me opportunities to do really big projects outside any traditional gallery setting. Each project was spread all over town, geographically speaking. I had very direct communication with new audience. One night, I remember going up to Washington Heights to take pictures. A couple of very unhappy people because quite angry at me for being in their way. I explained why I was there and they got even angrier--so I took off. That's the beauty of it, I suppose. Sometimes people stop and say "that's awesome," or sometimes people say "get the hell out."

What is the balance between being a teacher and also an artist? What do you learn from your students?

I had a lot of day jobs in magazine publishing: writing, editing, arts, culture, fashion. I loved it, but at a certain point the balance was off. So I made a big switch to teaching. Luckily, I love teaching and find it extremely inspiring. It gives me energy rather than takes it away so it has been a fruitful switch. I still don't have enough time but I get the summers and January as a really great breaks. But importantly, I have art in my life every day.

One specific thing I learn from my students is about how people think and interact with art. There's nothing I get more satisfaction out of than looking at art together. Showing them something they haven't seen before or haven't heard about opens a new conversation about that artist or piece and I learn new ways of thinking. Not to say it's all perfect, teaching definitely has its challenges and it takes a lot of time outside the classroom to make the hours inside worthwhile.

What are four pieces of practical advice you would give your students on how to be an artist in NYC?



Green on Blue: Colossal Monolith
2011-2016
collage, paint, cardboard
8 x 11

1. I would say DO it! There's a lot of fear that New York is too expensive, too hard or not cool, all money, too bourgeois and full of nonsense. That could all be true but it is still amazing with more opportunities than anywhere else.
2. Ditch your ego. Dig in. Stay confident. A lot of people will say no and you cannot take it personally.
3. Work really hard. I'm too often shocked by people who think they don't have to work as hard. Do something real everyday. Go the extra step.
4. This one might sound super cheesy, but enjoy it! Because it's really fun and being an artist is the best job in the world. If you don't enjoy it, you should go do something else.

Krach's 4th piece of advice prompted him to reminisce about the acts artists can do that most people wouldn't get to do. One of those acts was from his project in Afghanistan, where he reached out to a gay network in Afghanistan and asked people to contact him if they would be interested in sending him stones from Afghanistan.

It was a beautiful sign of humanity and generosity. To this day I am reminded and humbled by that because we are surrounded by horrible events. It's scary times, such horrible people saying horrible things and it makes you wonder what happened. Where did the anger come from, the violence come from, the

confidence to say these things to one another. I'm talking about how political campaign at home, and the horrible terrorist attacks abroad. It takes time to come up with ideas for art that adequately responds to current events; but I have some ideas for projects this fall that will engage the election.

How does the art of writing play into the art that you make?

Text appears a lot in my work, whether it's in photos of found text objects or a piece that I make. I am often thinking linguistically. I published my first novel long before I had much of an art career. I think a portion of my brain will also think about and work with words. On the other hand, my work is about making an argument and telling a story, which is where the organization of writing is echoed.

In your artist statement, you say you "work with people, books, rocks, text, vodka, and frogs to make books, sculptures, prints, and installations." How do you work with frogs?

Carefully! I'm interested in art that changes and is ephemeral, so my use of organic material or non-traditional art mediums is often so I can have that element of change over time. I was doing research for a piece about the director Pier Paolo Pasolini. I found that the hustler who killed Pasolini was nicknamed "Pino the Frog" because he was a small guy. I thought that it was so strange--I couldn't not use it. So I found a frog, a beautiful frog, I must say. The goal was to see if I could make this hustler--yes, I also hired a hustler--to do something good, creatively. The frog and the hustler, a young man who performed nude, comes back to the desire for elements that are organic, metabolic, and uncontrollable. I've always been attracted to artists who use elements like that, such as Dieter Roth, Alison Knowles, or Matthew Barney.

What started your interest in repurposing and manipulating found objects?

I think that the world is filled with amazing things, and sometimes I feel like there is no reason to make something new because there is some crazy, awesome stuff in the world. Like that cat toy you saw in my studio.

Look at that little boy outside right now. He's in a fire truck that his mom is pushing just across the street. How weird and cool is that? These objects are so ripe to be manipulated, arranged and rearranged, organized and disorganized, and deconstructed. To me, ready made objects are some of the most exciting stuff that's out there.

The artists I responded to at a young age were people like Haim Steinbach. It was the 80s. I was a kid. I had no idea what he was doing. But I knew it was something special.



Indestructible Artifact, #24 (Leap Year)
2016
screen printed magnets
3.5" x 4.25"

What role do you think the art world and the art community play and in what way do you think that they are each important?

I would separate those two. I have a much closer relationship with the art community: friends, contacts, artists, curators, writers. I think of them as my art community and as extremely important.

I don't know how I would describe my relationship with the art world. It's there--I'm a part of it--but it feels very small in some ways. Maybe that is because the art world that's in the media is so far away from my experience. I'm not dealing with those prices, collectors or institutions. My relationship with that world is more distant. My art community part is key. I couldn't do my art without community.

In your view, what does it mean to be a "conceptual artist" in 2016?

I like the term. It has a bad, elitist reputation, but it feels most genuine to what I am. I used to say that I was a sculptor, but I felt guilty saying that because I don't really sculpt. I do build a lot of things, but that is secondary to the concept. Then for a while I tried to nickname myself an emotional conceptualist because I thought what I was really working with was feelings. But it was a little too much effort. Now I'm back to conceptual artist. My work starts with the idea, and the project comes out of it whether it's a book, idea, or party.

Interviewed by Sarah Cho

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