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Art City Asks: Nicolas Lampert

By Nathaniel Stern, Art City contributor
Oct. 17, 2012



Nicolas Lampert is an artist who in many ways is an old fashioned radical. He addresses issues related to urban ecology and social justice, among other things, and tends to believe radical culture should challenge mainstream culture. His activism and his art are intertwined.

He works with art collectives and social justice movements, such as the Justseeds Artist Cooperative, a group of 25 political printmakers across North America, the Rain Forest Action Network and Iraq Veterans Against the War, among others.

He was commissioned to do a public art project at the Villard Avenue Public

Library with Paul Kjelland. The opening celebration, Lampert said, was more satisfying to him than having a show at MoMA might be.

"It was a consecration, the pure expression of community joy, and a celebration shared by hundreds of people united around a new public library," he said.

Lampert won a Mary L. Nohl Fellowship in 2011 and is part of the annual Nohl exhibition, the culminating event of the fellowship year. The exhibit is now on view at Inova and will be open for Gallery Night & Day. To read more about it, see [my arts season preview](#).

Lampert will [give a lecture](#) about his work at 7 p.m. tonight at UWM as part of the popular Artists Now! series. It will be held in the UWM Arts Center Lecture Hall, 2400 E. Kenwood Blvd.

Art City contributor Nathaniel Stern interviewed Lampert for this edition of [Art City Asks](#), an ongoing Q&A feature based on the Frieze magazine questionnaire:

Nathaniel Stern: What is art for?

Nicolas Lampert: To disturb the peace.

NS: What are you reading?

NL: Michelle Alexander's "The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness."

NS: What film has most influenced you?

NL: A recent film that I enjoyed immensely is the Ai Weiwei film "Never Sorry." It is a must see for all artists, and everyone else for that matter. Ai Weiwei is the definition of courage and portrays the key role that visual artists can play in society when they choose to confront the social and political issues that impact their communities.

NS: What do artists do?

NL: Most isolate themselves. The challenge of today's artists is to develop alternative art practices where we assert our essential position in the community, and society at large.

NS: Tell me about a failed piece you once made and what you learned from it.

NL: One epic failure on my part was a public art sign project that I did through the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art in 2010. The project involved putting up 20 plus text-based signs in various parts of the city. The museum for obvious reasons insisted that we get official permission from the city and during the hearing process the majority of the signs were rejected. The board that decided on the matter said the project violated "right-of-way" laws but it was pretty obvious that a few members of the board objected to the content of the signs. I should have pulled the plug on the entire project at that moment but I chose to show the five signs that were not rejected which resulted in a watered down version of the project. In hindsight I should have asked the museum to make the issue a free speech fight and a community discussion over the censorship of public art and ideas.

The irony was that the work foreshadowed events in Madison. The majority of the signs referenced famous labor slogans and the plan was to install many of them on light poles on State Street. They would have been up 10 months before and likely during Walker's attack on collective bargaining rights and would have captured the mood of the Wisconsin Uprising. The signs would have placed the museum in solidarity with events unfolding in the streets.

The lesson for me: comprising too much as an artist is a recipe for bad work and seeking official permission runs counter to my practice. Artists cannot and should not try to please everyone. They should fight for what they believe in.

NS: What images keep you company in your work space?

NL: A photograph of the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike by Ernest Withers keeps me company in my writing studio. A tremendous mess keeps me company in my art studios.

NS: What should change?

NL: Corporate dominance over the political process.

NS: What should stay the same?

NL: Love for family, friends, and the community.

NS: What do you wish you knew?

NL: I wish to know why people have bumper stickers claiming that Obama is a socialist. For one, he's not. He is a free market capitalist. Eugene Debs was a socialist. Frank Zeidler was a socialist. Jack London, and Howard Zinn were socialists. All were incredibly important Americans who contributed greatly to working class movements and culture. One cannot even call politicians in Ireland socialists and they provide free, or nearly free health care and education to their citizens from grade school through college. People can call Castro, Chavez, or Correa a socialist, but not Obama. In short, I wish to

know how people can believe things that are so far from reality.

NS: Who's your guilty pleasure artist -- why do you feel you shouldn't like them and why do you anyway?

NL: Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, and Richard Diebenkorn. I shouldn't like this work because it is not overtly political. That said, I like the work because beauty has its place.

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