

Designing for Terror: building security through culture

Biography:

Bernard Hoffert is a professor, head of the Department of Fine Arts, and Associate Dean for External Affairs in the Faculty of Art & Design at Monash University. His paintings, installations and presentations have been shown in major international art events, including the Second Asian Art Symposium, New Delhi, India; the Fourth Asia and Pacific Art Exhibition, Fukuoka, Japan; Seoul 600, Korea and adjunct exhibitions to the Sao Paolo and Venice Biennales. He is the author of four books, 35 catalogue essays and more than forty articles on art and art education, and he has published more than three hundred art reviews. He served as World President of the International Association of Art-UNESCO (the non government organization of UNESCO which represents art and artists) from 1992-5. He is an Honourary President of the IAA-UNESCO and of its Regional Council of the Asia Pacific and an executive member of the Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools. He is also a member of the national executive of the Australian Institute of Art Education.

Art and design have historically been linked with political unrest, as propagandist, as critic, as documenter. The huge emphasis on security in the post 911 political environment, has provided new opportunities for art and particularly design, to contribute to a secure world, in the process of supporting oppressed and potentially disenfranchised social groups. This paper argues that by integrating cultural support projects involving art and design into national security policy, governments can address the root causes of terrorism, rather than responding to the terror of its impact.

1. In his paper to the Fourteenth Nobel Symposium in Stockholm in 1969, Arthur Koestler wrote: 'From the dawn of consciousness to the middle of our century man had to live with the prospect of his death as an individual; since Hiroshima, mankind as a whole has to live with its extinction as a biological species....(This) has become a basic and permanent feature of the human condition'.¹ Koestler contends that with the coming of the atomic age, we have had to live with the prospect of total annihilation, a shift in consciousness which recognizes that it is now possible to destroy the whole of humankind. His paper goes on to discuss how this has been made manifest in subsequent culture. A similar shift in consciousness after the attacks of September 11, 2001, is suggested by American security analyst, Louis Pojman, particularly for the USA, with parallels throughout the world. He maintains that recognizing the vulnerability of the USA, the world's greatest military power, and thus the greater vulnerability of less powerful states, forces us to confront the illusion of security and recognize an era of global terrorism. The security of nations, large or small, can no longer be guaranteed; security has become an issue for everyone, everywhere.²

Terrorism is not a recent development. Although statistical information varies, the following figures from the Journal of International Affairs, give some idea of the scope of the problem in life and death terms.³ During the 1980s, 5,431 acts of international terrorism occurred, claiming 4,684 lives. In the 1990s a further 3,824 incidents took 2,468 lives. From 1970 to 1995, a total of 64,319 terrorist incidents were recorded. When state-sponsored terrorism is included, the figure becomes astronomical. It is estimated that governments killed 169 million of their own people between 1900 and 1987. Stalin's purges accounted for some 43 million deaths; Mao Tse Tung about 38 million and Hitler 21 million.⁴ But the events of 9/11 ushered in a new consciousness; terrorism can no longer be solely identified with wars, political ideology or particular geographic locations. Pojman characterizes terrorism as actions which "... employ horrific violence against unsuspecting civilians, as well as combatants, in order to inspire fear and create panic, which in turn will advance the terrorists' ...agenda".⁵ Such events potentially bring the security of any nation on earth into question. Pojman maintains that the history of world security can be divided into 'Before September 11 and After September 11'.

2. Response to terrorism has been immediate and direct. Governments around the world have implemented policies aimed at increased national security; massively increasing spending on defense. Much of the blame for terrorist activities is focused on cultural attitudes, such as religious dogma and extreme fundamentalist interpretations of belief. However, while security analysts acknowledge this as a major cause, a prior and more significant cause may be identified as social despair and a sense of hopelessness resulting from oppression, ignorance, poverty and injustice, perceived or actual, which results in a sense of disaffection; social groups feel culturally alienated and without hope. It is these social conditions which create the environment where fundamentalism can grow. ⁶ In March 2005, Kofi Anan, the Secretary General of the United Nations, announced a five point plan to combat terrorism and improve international security. First on the list of priorities was to dissuade disaffected groups from resorting to terrorism in an attempt to resolve their concerns. ⁷ The UN's recognition of this issue and the priority given to addressing it suggests it is increasingly regarded as a base cause of terrorist activity and a principle source of global insecurity.

3. In general, policies on national security have been strengthened in various ways; these include the build up of military capability through the increase of armaments and armed forces, attention to border security, refinement of intelligence gathering systems and introducing legislation, with often extreme penalties, for breaches of national security. While these might seem logical ways to address security issues, it is a response to the threat terrorism poses, rather than a process aimed at the prevention of it further developing. It responds to the fundamentalist context instead of dealing with the social environment which allows disaffection and the potential for recourse to terrorist acts. Any policy which deals with a comprehensive approach to the terror environment must develop strategies to combat both. In the Asia-Pacific regional context, as early as 1991, Joanne Crawford posited the need for a multidimensional approach to security issues, in response to a Ministerial Statement on Australian Regional Security.⁸ She proposed the need for development assistance policies to provide cultural support, suggesting focal areas as health

care, scientific and technological development and the development of a sustainable economy. Her argument suggested such measures were integral to security planning. While this contributed to the conceptual debate of the 90s, in the post 911 security environment, the potential for a non military related approach to security seems to have been forgotten. Perhaps it is time to reconsider the role of cultural programs as part of the security debate; this would provide a twofold approach to security, where immediate problems were combated through more established mechanisms and potential threats were addressed through cultural support. Addressing the base causes of terrorism is better than responding to the devastating impact of terror itself. Since 911, and the political events which flowed from it, the effects of terrorism have been only too evident. The prospect of reducing future security threats through integrating policies involving social and cultural support with more military based responses, should at least be considered in future policy.

4. In a threatening environment it is conceivable that cultural support might be considered as peripheral to the 'core business' of security, the notion of a band aid to stem a major blood flow. However the following examples show how small cultural contributions have resulted in disproportionately large benefits. These examples relate to groups which in various ways could be categorized as disaffected.

Some years ago a community of sculptors working in Burkina Faso had become impoverished, without access to a foundry to exercise the traditional bronze techniques they employed; as a result they were artistically alienated and economically destitute. A project was undertaken by the International Association of Art to design a small scale foundry which enabled these bronze castors to use their lost wax casting techniques to express their personal, social and cultural needs, develop their traditional art forms and to project these into the contemporary art context. A promotional video was also designed and produced to explain and advertise what they were doing; (this gave them a promotional tool to develop interest in their art beyond their normal audience as well as nationally and internationally). The result was spectacular; not only were the artists able to earn a living, but they did so by strengthening the bonds of their cultural heritage, expressing the legends of their past; their work became better known through promotion and the community of which they were part, grew both in cultural identity and prosperity.⁹

In the early 1990s an exhibition was held in Tehran to give identity to Iranian women artists. The exhibition was organized to highlight the cultural contribution made by women artists which was often ignored by the broader art world and received limited attention in any context. The Iranian art world had been dominated by male artists and the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art developed a project to address the imbalance. The exhibition was designed to create an opportunity for women, to raise the profile of what they were doing and to integrate them into the broader art world. Iranian women artists had seldom received recognition outside the country except when they had chosen to live and work abroad. This event attracted ex patriot artists giving extra attention to the considerable role of female artists generally and especially the significant role their work made to Iranian culture. A major publication accompanied the exhibition which catalogued the scope and style of the work.¹⁰

In 1988 an exhibition of photographs from Romania was held in various parts of Europe. The photographs had been smuggled out of Bucharest and showed the systematic removal of traditional Romanian villages under the Ceausescu regime. The destruction was total, including dwellings, public buildings, medieval churches, historic frescoes and art works, in an attempt to obliterate aspects of the past. The story told by former residents was that about three weeks before the event was to take place, villages were informed they should collect their possessions including animals and move their families elsewhere by a designated day. When the day arrived, large bulldozers came to the village, scooped out a huge pit on one side and progressively pushed the entire village into the hole. Everything disappeared from sight except the large mound of filler which was spread over the pit hiding the remnants of centuries from public view. The exhibition was small, but deeply moving, bringing information on events inside a closed and repressive society, from which it was difficult to gain information, to a then divided Europe. The exhibition caused massive concern throughout the intellectual community and support against the destruction was galvanized through the division of Art & Cultural Life in UNESCO. This exhibition was a mechanism through which public awareness was raised and was a contributing aspect to the fall of the Ceausescu regime in 1989. The exhibition was made possible by the design of a portable, light and easily assembled display unit which facilitated an exhibition being mounted in any location, without dependence on formal exhibition spaces or galleries. ¹¹

World Education, a non profit organization dedicated to projects for economic and social development, is currently undertaking a project aimed at restoring the status and art forms of the 'Living Treasures' of Cambodia, the cultural figures whose status and practice was destroyed under the Khmer Rouge regime and which Cambodian artists are now trying to restore. The program is reasserting traditional Khmer culture, reinforcing its forms and values and communicating these to a national and international audience. The Cambodian artists involved see this as an important reawakening of the historic identity of the nation. It links a new generation with their cultural foundations and recognizes the worth of the past, reestablishing the knowledge and prestige of Khmer culture both nationally and internationally.

There are several dimensions to the project; a typical example works with traditional puppet performers, redeveloping the historic puppet theatre, an integral dimension of Khmer cultural expression, providing ways it can access a broader Cambodian audience and take the theatre internationally. The project involves the design of new puppets which represent traditional characters; this will develop new construction techniques and materials which will preserve the puppets and make them more durable and less subject to the effects of transport and climate. It will involve designing new theatres, easily portable and more practical for transport over long distances; sets will be redesigned, extending the visual effect of the performances, exploring a new range of expressive elements which relate to contemporary society, while preserving the relevance of traditional culture. Already performances have been developed around contemporary issues such as AIDS.¹²

These examples demonstrate how a fairly minor design development can have a major impact on supporting an alienated social group. The outcomes are disproportionately large in relation to the scale of the support, which is the result of careful targeting of where and how cultural support programs should be applied.

5. Whether cultural support for disaffected groups is achieved through contributions to economic development, cultural identity, or social support, all help mitigate the potential for destructive political forces to take hold and exploit a situation. The examples referred to demonstrate ways in which visual culture can contribute to social and cultural preservation, and as a result, to broader cultural issues including security. Designers in particular are equipped to develop solutions to problems which can preserve cultural stability. Governments around the globe already contribute to cultural support through various aid programs. To invest further in such programs and target them not just to areas of need, but to areas relevant to future security issues, is a minor step. There are established mechanisms through which projects can be developed and funded. Internationally there are World Bank projects, UNESCO Participation Program funding, responsible for supporting the Burkina Faso project, UN World Heritage internships and many others. Individual governments provide mechanisms through which they make funding available for specific projects. In Australia, the Australian Youth Ambassadors for Development program was responsible for the World Education project in Cambodia.

Addressing security issues through the mechanisms suggested requires a shift in thinking, from solving the problem to removing the cause. Both dimensions are integral to a safe world, but an approach through cultural programs, allows artists and designers, professionals characterized by their creativity, to apply that creativity in the service of a secure world while assisting alienated social groups. For governments to broaden their security policies to embrace cultural support would seem a logical, as well as a necessary step, if both national and international security is to be addressed successfully in the short and longer term.

Notes

1. Koestler, Arthur. *The Urge to Self Destruction*, in *Heel of Achilles; essays 1968-1973*, Random House, 1975, p.11.
2. Pojman, Louis J. *The Moral Response to Terrorism and Cosmopolitanism*, in Sterba, James P. (ed) *Terrorism and International Justice*, OUP, 2003, p.135.
3. Ranstorp, M. *Terrorism in the Name of Religion*, *Journal of International Affairs*, 1996.
4. Rummel, R.J. *Death By Government*, Transaction Publishers, 1994, quoted in Pojman, op cit.
5. Pojman, L. op cit. p.135.
6. *ibid*, p.140.
7. Anan, Kofi. *The United Nations' 5 D's Plan to combat terrorism*, March 2005.
8. Crawford, Joanne *Multidimensional Security: a Contribution to the Conceptual Debate*, in Fry, G. (ed) *Australia's Regional Security*, Allen & Unwin, 1991.

9. UNESCO Professional Project Report, Barcelona, 1991.
10. Sohofi, M. Report on the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995.
11. Report, UNESCO European Regional Committee, 1989
12. AYAD sponsored project, 2005.