



ROAD TRIPPING THROUGH AMERICA

WORDS BY ROBBERT ROOS

The election is over, Biden won, Trump lost and collectively liberal citizens of the bigger cities let out a sigh of relief, celebrating with joy in the streets. On CNN commentator Vin Jones choked up. He became very emotional realizing how much this meant to him. Fighting back his tears, he said: “It’s easier to be a dad now. It’s easier to tell your kids character matters. The truth matters. (...) This is a vindication for a lot of people who have really suffered. ‘I can’t breathe.’ That wasn’t just George Floyd, that’s a lot of people that felt they couldn’t breathe.”

It is the same emotion that I encountered travelling through the United States in the summer of 2019 to research how artists position themselves in the social and political context in the age of Donald Trump: people collectively holding their breath. Anxiously waiting for 3 November 2020, when they would get the chance to vote Trump out. And they did, with key roles for cities such as Philadelphia, Atlanta and Detroit, where people of colour cast their crucial votes.

On the ground in those cities many artists and artist groups and coalitions actively engaged in getting people to vote and to be aware of social and humanitarian issues. Their grassroots work paid off.

American artists are often more explicitly political in their work than European artists. They play a larger role in societal discourse, especially since the age of Trump.



Sheila Pree Bright, Morgan Lumpkins



Dárece Walker, From Ferguson to Baltimore, 2015

Artists have used their leverage to support prisoners, revitalize neighbourhoods, organize workshops for disabled people, raise political awareness and help to get out the vote during elections. In Europe, it seems that artists are less engaged.

On 28 May 2019, I landed in New York to travel 12,500 kilometres around the country and see with my own eyes the importance of the Black Lives Matter movement, the impact of #MeToo, the continuous struggle by Native Americans for basic rights, and the worries of the LGBTQ+ community for their legal position under an increasingly conservative government that was packing courts with conservative judges like Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh in the Supreme Court. (These worries will only have been compounded by the confirmation of Amy Coney Barrett just over a week before the election.) I found a country sharply divided on social and political issues.

The road trip started in New York and took me to places like Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, Minneapolis, Kansas City, Denver, Salt Lake City, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Phoenix, Tucson, El Paso, Marfa, Houston, New Orleans, Jackson, Birmingham, Montgomery, Atlanta, Savannah and back to New York.

Segregation, gentrification and the disenfranchised position of minorities – let alone the violence they face – became a topic in many conversations with artists delving into social issues defining our times across the USA. Formal equality didn't come until civil rights laws were enacted in the 1960s. In northern cities with no history of plantations and slavery, cities were divided on racial lines. After the economic collapse of the mid-2000s, a city like Detroit went bankrupt affecting many people of colour in the inner city. In New Orleans the city is not yet post-Post Katrina, still feeling the effects after 15 years, especially in the Lower Ninth Ward. Diving into artists' lives meant diving into troubled histories in cities, past and present.

Excerpts from a travel diary.

NEW YORK CITY

Dárece Walker's studio is in the basement of an old warehouse in Brooklyn near subway station Broadway Junction. One wall shows a large piece with quick sketches of protest and violent encounters with police. "*Riots* is a piece from 2015," Walker explains. "A composition of images I found of the riots in Baltimore after Freddie Gray died of police violence."

He unrolls a second, similar piece on the floor. *From Baltimore to Ferguson*, also from 2015. "I want to compose a story in which I combine different elements. The aesthetics of 'hands up, don't shoot' is important to me. It was the rallying cry of the protests at the time. I wanted to grasp and show the intensity of what was happening. The mother holding her son is a *pietà*. There's the popular image of kids jumping on a police car, the flag upside down as a symbol of repression, the silhouette of a body in a coffin of someone killed in earlier police violence. As it's only a silhouette, any identity can be projected onto it. It also refers to Emmett Till, a 14-year-old boy lynched in 1955 as he supposedly ogled a white girl. At the time his mother decided to show his face in an open casket. So references go way back, for generations."

So what's it like to be an artist in the current political and social climate in the United States? "That's a loaded question," says Walker, "yet at the same time interesting. During the six years I've been living in New York the art world has changed. When I arrived the buzzword was 'zombie-formalism'. Everyone was obsessed by that kind of work. Six years onwards nobody uses those words anymore."



“Dealing with ‘being different’ in a space where there were no other people that looked like me, makes me want to learn about the treatment of people with the same physical looks as I have.”

“The way the cultural and social consciousness builds up is important. An artist like Mickalene Thomas opens doors and does things artists usually don’t do. Curate shows, showcase artists she knows. Possibilities open up. At the same time there’s the economic aspects that make it hard for artists to create a good environment to work in. We need to toil 40 hours to be able to pay our bills. One does notice curators are open to critical conversations. Art spaces are turning into educational spaces where people can encounter and acquaint themselves with different cultures and different nationalities, where dialogue takes place between audience and artist. The art world sees more and more educational spaces.

“When I grew up as a black kid in Colorado and Nebraska, I was an extreme minority. There were only a few coloured people around. Dealing with ‘being different’ in a space where there were no other people that looked like me, makes me want to learn about the treatment of people

with the same physical looks as I have. How people respond. A white woman clasping her bag or crossing to the other side of the road when I pass, while all I do is walk. It still happens every day. Also here in New York. Also at three-thirty in the afternoon. These are returning cultural inequalities, however small they might be. I’m developing instruments to deal with this in a confident manner. I’m not afraid, but alert. And I want to respond to it in my artistic endeavours.”

So do you see this as activist art? “I would say ‘yes,’” Walker says. “Because in the end it’s about being devalued or unequal in America. Promoting equality in a group can be seen as activist. I’ve watched closely the work of an artist like Emory Douglas of the Black Panthers, a very interesting black artist. Also, colour as a phenomenon in itself is important too. I do not use any colour. So this choice reinforces the history of black and white. There is less information, so you can concentrate on what is shown.”

Studio Ben Willis, Charlotte Street Foundation, Kansas City, photo: Robbert Roos



Emory Douglas, African-American solidarity with the oppressed People of the world, 1969, courtesy of the artist

CHICAGO

Along a desolate road on the South Side of Chicago is the nine-storey building filled with artists' ateliers called Mana Contemporary. One of those ateliers belongs to Jonas N. T. Becker, a photographer and video artist. "My work is about the landscape as a crossing of personal identities and political systems," he says. "Landscapes might look neutral but are actually packed with meaning. I made something called *Prodigal Sun*. It's about looking at the history of the American West and the way American identity is billed around 'going west'. At the same time it's about the history of American photography. How photographers like Ansel Adams or O'Sullivan created an imaginary 'West'. I drove straight west, shooting with my video camera directly into the sunlight, aiming for the myth called 'The West'. These images are shown in a continuous loop."

KANSAS CITY

In conservative Kansas City artist Ben Wills has created a surreal world of papers stuck to the walls of his atelier in an arts centre called Charlotte Street. "I write letters to inmates all across the country and at the end ask them to send me a paper plane," he explains. "So I received an enormous amount of letters in return for all these paper planes, which symbolize freedom and movement. I've got about 400 now and use them to build installations. At this moment they can be viewed in the old dilapidated Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, which has been out of use since 1971, and is currently used for art projects.

"A second project I'm working on is to ask prisoners to make drawings of their cells. Some are very rudimentary, others very detailed. What is interesting is the iconography in



Jonas Becker, *Prodigal Sun*, 2012, HD video, TRT: 2:20, looping



Dáirece Walker, *Made in the USA*, 2016, Kunsthal KAdE, Tell Me Your Story, 2020

their drawings. There's always a toilet with a sink. The cells are always uniformly rectangular. And more and more I see a mirror hidden in a cage-like structure. All these letters leaving prisons are of course vetted by staff. I mean, they could contain escape plans. So there's always a note in there saying contents were checked and my name is registered. I actually play chess with a guy by mail. The moves are of course written down with a letter-number combination, so prison guards started wondering if these might be codes we were sending each other, and I had to explain how chess is played. Once I had a letter from a warden saying: 'I don't care how chess is played. You will not receive codes.'

All of this started with me writing to friends in prison. They urged me to write to others as well, men not re-

ceiving any mail. The answers I received just showed how desperately they wanted to talk with someone, wanted to communicate with another human being. This just snowballed into these projects."

SALT LAKE CITY

Painter Jon McNaughton in Salt Lake City is a Mormon and a Republican. An outlier among modern artists and hard to find: a true Trump supporter. His paintings are realistic and often portray Trump. He made it onto Fox News and well-known Trump supporter Sean Hannity of Fox bought one of his paintings. He understands some might call these paintings propaganda, but doesn't see it that way himself. He doesn't work on anyone's orders and "paints what he likes to paint".

"I wasn't always a Trump supporter," McNaughton says. "I favoured Ted Cruz in 2016. I'm a Mormon and we Mormons like to be nice to one another. The thing about our culture is that we often judge people on the way they behave, on the part we can see from the outside. That isn't always a pretty side of our culture, but in some ways it's good. So many Mormons don't like Trump because of the way he behaves, the way he talks about women and such. But I don't want to choose a president for being a saint, but because he's good for the country."

"So then Trump got the nomination in 2016, not Ted Cruz. I listened and agreed with what Trump said, but thought first and foremost: is he going to deliver? Well, he did what he promised to do. Unfulfilled

promises are the result of weak Republicans stopping him. Conservatives are pro-American and love Trump. People that don't love Trump complain about his attitude or his views on immigration."

ATLANTA

East of Atlanta lives photographer Sheila Pree Bright. Our conversation immediately hits the crucial question: what's it like to be an artist in today's America? "I circle around the subject," Bright says. "I only discovered photography in my last year at university when I learned I could talk via my camera. The first subject I took on was the gangsta rap scene in Houston my brother introduced me to in the Nineties. Police violence was a topic for them back then too."

"By the time the Black Live Matters movement erupted in 2013, I wanted to connect it with our history. Atlanta is an important centre of the civil rights movement and cultivates what I would call the romantic side of this movement. So I started to visit the leaders of this movement. Many people don't know them. I photographed Dr. Roslyn [Pope] who was part of the Atlanta Student Movement in the Sixties. They did sit-ins at Black colleges like Morehouse, Clark, et cetera. At the same time I thought I had to follow events on the streets. So I visited Ferguson, Baltimore, Baton Rouge and DC. Everything happened so fast. Shooting after shooting."

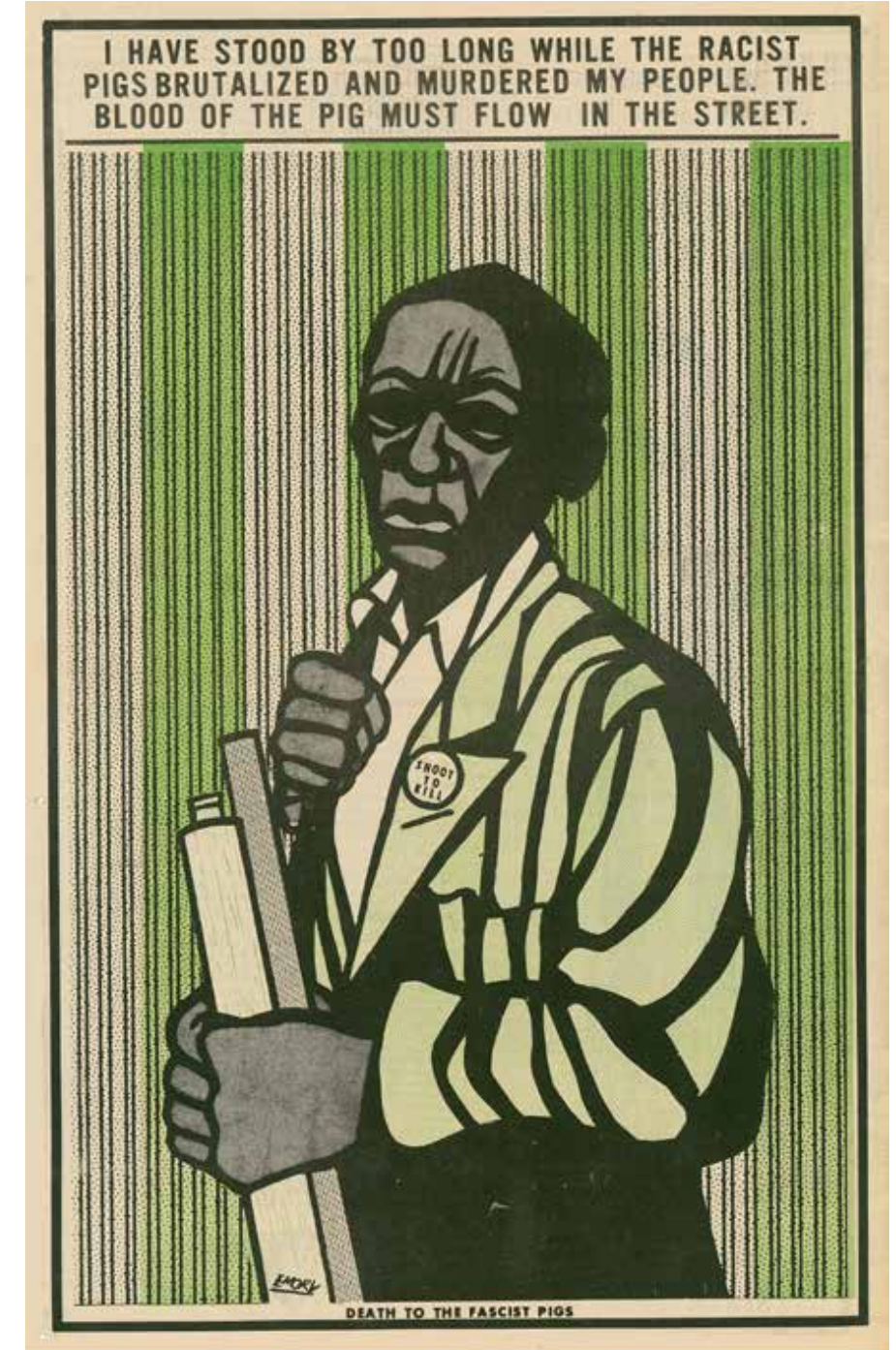
"To me diversity is a driving force. I want to show what is universal,

what we have in common, even though 'black bodies' are a main subject. Racism is a mental health issue. White people carry a certain trauma and fear: they don't want to be at the bottom of society. As Martin Luther King wrote: everyone wants to be first."

"So for the series *Young Americans* I did not want to portray just black people. It's about all of us. But we tend to seek refuge within our own tribes. We've got #MeToo. We've got Black Lives Matter. We've got the LGBTQ community. But we don't come together. There was friction in the BLM movement because they thought the LGBTQ community only wanted to discuss gender. Not everyone welcomed this subject. The same happened in the Sixties. Back then there were also gay activists. As Lionel King, one of the old leaders, said to me: 'We knew, but we couldn't put that issue in the foreground. We had to stay close to us in what we did. Why? Because we would have been nothing without the women. That's why a place like Spelman, the black female college, was so important. We needed them.' To honour that group of women I made a group portrait, based on a photograph by Richard Avedon dating from that period. Those two images are now in massive blow-ups on a wall around the corner from the courthouse in downtown Atlanta." /



Jon McNaughton, You Are Fake News, 2020



Emory Douglas, I have stood by too long, 1970, courtesy of the artist

These are excerpts from Robbert Roos' travelogue which are a part of the "This Is America | Art USA Today" exhibition showing at KAdE, Kunsthal in Amersfoort, The Netherlands until January 2021. kunsthalgade.nl

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