



## The Penland Line

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## SOCIAL SIGNALS: ISSUES FOR THE NINETIES

Connie Sedberry, Hunter Kariher and Board member Lloyd Herman all attended a Symposium organized by the Coalition of Creative Organizations, Inc. called "Social Signals". The full day event took place on September 21 in the Rubloff Auditorium of The Art Institute of Chicago. This first symposium brought together individuals who have unique perspectives on the art world to focus on our awareness of how our involvement in the arts and craft media can make a difference in our interactions with important contemporary social issues.

In answering the question "Can Art and Industry Rescue the Natural Environment?" John Makepeace, Artist Director of John Makepeace Ltd., England, spoke of how artists/designers are facing increasing pressure not to use certain processes and materials which we know are damaging to the environment. Wood is John's media and so he spoke predominantly of innovative timbering of wood crops whereby all the trees are used, not just the large ones which are cut for boards. For example, using sapling size trees to build structures (almost like a basket weave) is incredibly strong as well as aesthetically pleasing. This also lends itself to using on-site materials for building and design. He concluded that artists have a disproportional influence on public opinion, perhaps because they use visual impact rather than verbal. Thus if we are environmentally conscious in our choice of materials for our work we can send a very strong message.

### ART AND POLITICS

Another discussion which was very interesting was one on "Art and Politics: Strange Bedfellows," moderated by Diane Douglas, Director of the Bellevue Art Museum, Bellevue, WA. As we are all aware, public support for the arts has become a volatile issue.

Howard Menaker, Vice President of the American Craft Council and Washington, D.C. lobbyist, stressed the importance of getting involved in the education of politicians. They are not leaders, he reminded, but follow the direction mandated by their constituents. We have to let the law makers know about what art is, what craft is, that we have businesses and that we make a living. We must educate ourselves about the business of government. The federal government is increasingly intruding into our lives and oftentimes with federal funding comes the censorship of what we make or of what we say.

Randy McAusland, Deputy Chairman, Programs, National Endowment for the Arts, shed some light on the inner workings of the NEA. He too stressed the importance of finding ways to work within the system. The "anti-NEA groups are out there functioning on a grass roots level, but united, so that there is a huge underground publishing system sending weekly messages to members of Congress, conservative broadcasting companies, etc.

We must let go of our own "traditional values" of being independent "not in the mainstream artists," and work within this changing world, if we want to effectively challenge the politics of those like Jesse Helms.

Alton Miller, Member, Board of Directors, National Campaign for Freedom of Expression, reminded us that it is always easier to work *against* something than *for* something, as "attack" politics is much more effective. The majority still wants freedom of the arts but they hesitate when this relates to **Hustler** magazine, child pornography, etc. The chilling effect which comes with the threat of censorship is the worst part of what is going on now. We tend to "tone down", "be careful and well-behaved" and maybe put off doing the work which may raise eyebrows "till next year". That we all need to work together and follow the dreaded goat path for a while is crucial to ensuring freedom of expression.

### OUTSIDER ART

Carl Hammer, Owner and Director of the Carl Hammer Gallery in Chicago, moderated a lively panel discussion on "Outsider/Folk Art: High or Low Art?" Michael Hall, artist/critic/collector did a wonderful presentation which concluded that art is social therefore political, that we impose terms on art so it is culturally defined. Art may be considered "high art" during one century and cycle around to "low art" during the next.

Ronnie Hartfield, Executive Director, Museum Education, the Art Institute of Chicago, felt that we must approach "Outsider" art with humility; that we must not pretend to understand what it is all about. She reminded us that this form of artwork is sometimes called "other" art and one of the definitions of other is original. This outsider work comes from within the individual, not from the outside or worldly influences.

Dennis Adrian, Critic, Instructor, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, added to this line of thinking by saying that visual images create their own vocabulary which may be the basis of the "other's" language. He gave the analogy of seeing a piece in a museum, probably a museum of natural history or anthropology, but a piece that is unlabeled because no one really knows what it is or what it was used for but it is a piece that really grabs the attention and causes many to pause in admiration. As