

Roni Horn on politics in art



February 14, 2017 - Roni Horn is a renowned American visual artist and writer. Her body of work includes sculpture, drawing, photography and site-specific installations. She spends lots of time in Iceland, a place that's often featured prominently in her work.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2603 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Inspiration](#), [Independence](#), [Politics](#).

In your mind, what's the role of the artist when it comes to politics?

I've never felt that art was going to change the world that way. I'm not sure art changes the world, period. I know it affects us deeply, in our experience as individuals, but en masse? No, I don't think so. I think a lot of the certifiable political art of the past was either corrupt, like you have with the political Realists, or it was speaking to an audience that was already there. I don't see any point in taking politics in a context of aestheticization. It's a problem when you see it. Certain artists have done it with issues around pedophilia, things like this, and it's a problematic relationship because it's almost never truly conceptual. If it is truly conceptual, then you don't have any audience, it's so minimal.

So let's say, if you talk about some of the paintings that have been done around political topics, there's an aestheticization going on that instantly makes it: "Well, why are you adding a point of appeal to certain political subjects?" I'm not saying there's no place for politics in art, not at all. I think there are many successful political artists, but they would never say, "Oh, my artwork is political."

Politics in general, as most things in life, are about being in the right time and the right place. Even the great artists, whomever they may be for you, the quality of what they've done is a lot about the time and place they've done it. Only a third is about how brilliant or truly inventive they are. I don't think history educates people to that reality. I felt like art history was presented to me like, "One genius after another," with no context, no historical circumstance, nothing. It was just, "This guy is brilliant."



Water, Selected, 2003/07 24 glass columns, each holding approximately 53 gallons of water taken from unique glacial sources in Iceland 120 inches high x 12 inch diameter each Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Roni Horn.

And of course they're all guys, but that's another issue. Politics has a presence. I think my work has political content, but it's not something I've ever felt compelled to talk about. People tend to put my work down to a kind of formalism, but the question always being asked of me is, "Well, are you gay?" I don't think I need to be gay to do this work, but I'm sure whatever it is I am has had an influence on what this work is.

It's like, how could it not? I think all art is autobiographical, there's no question about that. You have to work from real knowledge; you have to work from your own experience and what you know. It's political if I say it is, or if you say it is. I'm not going to say it ain't there. It's really up to the viewer and what they put together out of that experience, it could be political.

Following Trump's election, the topic comes up more and more in relation to creative work.

It's very hard to not be political when you're living in an overpopulated world with an adrenaline line to social media. Politics is the organization of the social, so in that sense, yes, I think the political element is more prominent and more in your face everywhere you go. Whether the artist should be taking it up as like, "Everything we do needs to be political!"—I think is very bougie, to be honest. It's really dumbing down the arts.

Part of the art world is extremely sensitive—in this politically correct way—to the political values of the moment. Right now people need to be political no matter what, otherwise they're not going to be respected. I find

that problematic, because most of what artists have done that has political content is not very momentous, or adding anything to the scene.

The level of awareness to make a political statement as an artist in our time is so convoluted, so multifaceted, so endlessly complex. It's like, why bother? There isn't anything you could say now that doesn't have political content. In a politically correct world, it's like everything is us or them. Every fucking thing. Every time I look at my identity, it gets another fucking initial. It's like, "What is it? LGBT, blah, blah, blah, blah," and they keep adding to it... And the reality is, that's what's the world is, you don't need to keep adding these fucking initials, these acronyms. It already tells you that metaphor, the LGBT, blah blah, that already tells you there's a problem with the way we're addressing identity.

The problem is that we need to name it. Why do we need to name it? I don't need to name it. Can't I just be whatever the fuck I am? I can't, because it doesn't seem to work in this system, for many reasons. You can discuss that from the patriarchal point of view. It's not really that interesting, it's sort of old hat, but I think so much about politics is in the use of language. The use of language is at a critical point now. You can almost say language is over. I've been thinking that for a long time.



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When I started out it wasn't like this, art was about education. You'd be lucky if you sold something. I was one of those people who never thought I'd make a living. I didn't poo-poo it, but I just assumed I had to figure out

how to make a living otherwise. So I kept things very open, kept my options very open. What I see now are people playing to what the audience knows and wants. I think the art world is designing with that in mind, and any kind of meaningful interaction is over. Capitalism has utterly absorbed the system. It's not just the buyers, but the artists are also seduced, and the money's huge now.

When I went in, you'd be nuts if you wanted to make a living at this. When Damien Hirst said "I want to be the richest artist ever," I thought, "Jesus, that's not very ambitious, is it?" Because you couldn't make a living as an artist back when he said that.

You look at certain artists, let's talk about Jenny Holzer, who's an artist I really respect, but let's face the facts, you put "private property is crime," or whatever version of that she says, and you put it on a bench that goes for a quarter million dollars into some private park in somebody's private property—What is that? Where is the politics in that? It's negated instantly by the whole process, and in the reality of art being bought and sold. Playing at some political content is absurd.

I don't want to bash Jenny Holzer, because she's a great writer, and she's done a lot of beautiful work. But you need the money, and you make this object, and once somebody wants that object, the politics are at the mercy of this reality.

I just can't imagine that a highly political work will get bought and sold as very important. Was there a Jeff Koons that's really political? Or a Damien Hirst? I'm trying to think of the people who have really made it big in the market.

Did you have an opinion about the Art Strike? I thought it was strange—things are going to be cut anyway, so it felt like maybe it could have been a day of action versus a day of not doing anything.

I thought it was ridiculous; it was nonsense. They can close for a week, or a month, but they're not doing anything. Close your doors. What are you really shutting down? Nothing. People can't get in to see the show, but are they saying they weren't making phone calls or doing their deals? And don't talk to me about one day, that's meaningless. I don't want to be a part of it, that's just embarrassing. I'm not going on strike.



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Do you find it harder to make work under these newer, less ideal political conditions?

I don't have an answer for that. Since Trump, I've had to figure it out because it's so new, but I think that my need to make work is pathological, so it probably won't really affect it. It does get my feathers a little fluffed up, and I get a little upset. Right now, I'm going through a little bit of a desert, but that happens to me. I have probability on my side now. I know that I've worked through it before, I'll deal with it.

I don't know how much of it is being affected by somebody like Trump. I think that really isn't the issue for me. I could make an issue out of it and kind of block myself from being productive, but I don't really think that's the problem. I'm already so fucked just watching what's going on with nature, because I'm hard-wired to nature, but I know nature's over. And I don't know where to go with that. Like okay, artificial intelligence, the Moon, Mars? That's not an answer, that's an escape. People just have to destroy these things. You go to Mars, and then you destroy Mars. I don't know how to discuss this in any meaningful way, but I don't know how to survive it, either.

You've called Iceland your muse. Was part of the appeal the landscape and the ability to escape NYC? But also maybe the political situation there?

I started going to Iceland in 1975. I was 19 years old. There was nobody there. We're talking not even a quarter million people. I hitchhiked around and saw the whole periphery of the island, enough to see that I just was completely taken. The landscape, the geology, it just blew my mind. This landscape, which could be architecturally ordered, but in fact was geologically ordered, so it was like this beautiful ambiguity.

Then you've got culture which is not religious. You've got a lot of churches—there's a church everywhere—but no real strong affinity in terms of formal religion. I found that very appealing, and it comes out in their culture in the form of fairies, and all these different kinds of trolls and giants. If you stay in the landscape as I did, camping throughout Iceland for years, you're often in a position of awe. And the way to explain awe is fairies and trolls, so I understand where all that shit comes from. The awe thing is beyond language. It's about how you reconcile what you feel with this world. So I understand the Icelandic relationship to the spiritual world, and I respect it very much.

But you used to be able to get lost there. Lost in the sense that "All right, I'm going to figure this out or I'm fucked." Not like, you get on the phone, and you get somebody to help you out of the situation.

Iceland was where I went for 15 years, moving through life. Then the cell phone thing starts. I was very slow to pick up a cell phone. Because you can't be alone with a cell phone. With the global satellite positioning, you have no privacy, and everything is a public gesture.

So after a certain point I had trouble even imagining what the point of even going out there was. But still, in the back of my head right now as I talk to you, I am stopping in all the most beautiful places in Iceland because they just still feed me. If I told you what they were like, you wouldn't believe it. They're unbelievable. And there I am, and I've been in these places again and again, and I've dosed up on this throughout my life, as a way to survive.

Now if you go to those places there are too many people on the road and too much shit. But back then, I wouldn't see anybody for weeks. So this is really a radical difference. And most Icelanders never went to these places I'm talking about, because they never had cars. Most Icelanders had not seen the landscape that is their birthright. I tell this very truly, and I when hear what Icelanders talk about in terms of that landscape, and their willingness to write it off, it blows my mind.

What can I do with it? I may as well go back to New York, you know what I mean? Let's frack the shit out of this place, you know? It's tough. I love Iceland, nothing will ever change that, and the geology there is mind-blowing. But when I first started going there, the intent was of being alone as a woman. How many places in the

world can you go like that? In Iceland you could. And I did it, and I never felt a threat, not from any other human being at that time, all through the '70s and '80s. No exception. And I was on a motorcycle, even then, nothing. Now it's a different thing.

Do you think at this point, that you could find a place like that anywhere?

I don't know how to express it. There's this inherent violence within humanity, which seems to be so well appreciated and enjoyed by people. It's so desired. I'm not sure at all that there's a place now, including the Antarctic, that you could go and imagine that you wouldn't be raped, as a woman.

I will tell you a story I love. There was a hermit discovered in the middle of Southern Russia. This woman was the only survivor of her inheritance. Her family was one of many groups of families that were trying to escape Stalinism and religious intolerance and they wound up in this remote location. This woman didn't even know there was a second World War. Could you imagine being in a place where you had no information? She's illiterate, and now she's alone. All of her family is gone. She was the only one living in this area. Her group had all passed away. This journalist asked her, "What do you see as the difference between now and then? Is there a big difference?" And she said, "Well, back then, we had no salt." And I just thought... You dream about that. I don't know what's political now. You know, what is political? Trump? No. That's political, right there: "You had no salt."

Roni Horn recommends:

The Weather (anywhere)
Indigenous Architecture
Emily Dickinson
Iceland- especially the rocks, the views, and the wind
Old growth trees, especially cypress and olive
Poppies, in general

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Vocation

Visual Artist

Fact

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