

# STREET ARTISTS SPEAK UP

With the mainstream media growing more timid by the minute, artists with a conscience are going public in bold new ways

**A**re editorial cartoonists going the way of the dodo bird? Increasingly, yes. Newspaper mergers and subsequent downsizing have left many major dailies with no staff cartoonist. And, if the media consolidation doesn't get you, observers warn, the politically conservative post-September 11 climate just might.

Last year, Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist Art Spiegelman famously resigned from *The New Yorker* to protest what he viewed as the magazine's political cowardice in light of 9/11.

"From the time that the Twin Towers fell, it seems as if I've been living in internal exile, or like a political dissident confined to an island," he told the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*. "I no longer feel in harmony with American culture, especially now that the entire media has become conservative and tremendously timid."

In a world where mainstream editorial cartooning is on the downswing, where people who exercise their right to free speech are shunted into remote "protest zones," and where the FCC's Michael Powell sees a

greater threat in Janet Jackson's breast than in media monopolies, it's getting harder and harder to hear dissenting voices. To paraphrase the

Doobie Brothers, perhaps it's time we take our message to the streets.

After all, how else to puncture the cacophony of images and sounds (mostly corporate) we encounter every day? As the artists profiled in this section make clear, street art—an agitprop poster nailed to a store wall, an unexpected chalk message scraped into a sidewalk, a banner unfurled over a freeway—can reinvigorate the political arena.

"We need to use all the arts to bring it to the streets, to the schools, on the walls," artist Eric Drooker recently told the Oakland-based zine *Kitchen Sink*. "It's about who's going to win the propaganda war for the hearts and minds of the masses."

Stencils, stickers, and murals are not only about claiming turf or declaring "I was here," they're about building community. Think of the first American political cartoon—a 1754 Ben Franklin sketch titled "Join or Die" that depicted a snake severed into eight pieces, each representing a colony—or the Wobblies' use of pro-worker stickers (a.k.a. "silent agitators") in the 1920s, and you realize the power of the visual.

"When we make art in the studio, we assert our humanity," the labor muralist Mike Alewitz has said. "When we make art in public, we assert our existence as social beings." —*The Editors*

**CAFÉ UTNE:** Discuss political art in the Arts forum at [www.utne.com/cafe](http://www.utne.com/cafe)

## Miguel Luciano

Alongside bubble gum and toy vending machines in Newark, New Jersey's El Pueblo Meat Supermarket sits Miguel Luciano's art—a customized vending machine containing a bright plastic hen. The work, called *When Hens Pee*, is based on a Caribbean phrase used to shush children: "You can speak when hens pee."

"Since hens never pee, children are never supposed to speak, so it's like an early form of learned censorship or repression," Luciano told the zine *Clamor* (Jan./Feb. 2004).

Born in Puerto Rico, Luciano views his art as a way to speak to his community, both there and in and around New York City. His work is shown not only in galleries, but also in public spaces, in stores, and even on the sidewalk—engaging many who might never set foot in a gallery.



Put a quarter in Luciano's vending machine, and the hen lights up and lays an egg. Inside the egg is a message created by someone in the community.

Luciano asked folks from Newark to brainstorm ideas they felt they weren't allowed or encouraged to express in their daily lives and condense them into a picture or object that could fit inside an egg. Most of the eggs contain antiwar messages, like a button with a crossed-out picture of a bomb or a picture of a boy holding a gun with an American flag sticking out of it. The quarters are donated to a local social service agency and the Newark Museum to fund the acquisition of works by Puerto Rican artists.

What is wonderful about the vending machine, Luciano says, is that you literally have to buy into it. "In order to engage the work, you have to participate," he says. "By participating, you can enter the critique as well." —Amanda Luker

Luciano's urinating hen is a rejection of the Caribbean phrase used to silence children: "You can speak when hens pee."

For more info on some of the artists profiled here, see "Sane Voices During Insane Times," a section contributing writers Madeleine Baran and Amanda Luker pulled together recently in *Clamor* (Jan./Feb. 2004)