



Smithsonian American Art Museum

**Against Imperium:
American Artists in an Age of Global Conflict**

David McCarthy
Senior Postdoctoral Fellow
Rhodes College, Memphis

This book-length study seeks to document and theorize American art that pictured war—or considered its causes, justifications, and consequences—to reflect upon the United States’ experience as a world power. The study begins in 1936 with the antiwar activism and art of the American Artists’ Congress and will conclude with artists’ responses to the current conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Throughout this period, artists confronted the rise of fascism, the massive trauma of a world war, fear of nuclear annihilation, four decades of cold war strife, and the resurgence of United States interventionism in the years since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This same period witnessed the so-called triumph of American painting on an international stage, as well as the rise of postmodernism. Unfortunately, this narrowly defined modernism often left out those artists whose work directly addressed topical issues. Despite the postmodern emphasis on broadening the canon, activist art, particularly that concerning war since the 1970s, still remains largely unknown. Many of the artists in this study identified with the examples of Goya, Daumier, Grosz, and Picasso, thereby asserting a political and topical role for modernism. These artists also saw their work as inseparable from their lives as responsible citizens within a democracy. They found that through their art and activism they could provide information and perspective on armed conflict that did not coincide with official government or mainstream press pronouncements.

In its current state, the book is organized as follows: “Against War and Fascism,” “Return of the Hero,” “Wasteland,” “Vietnam,” “Third-World Interventions and Renewed Nuclear Threat,” and “After the Cold War.” Each chapter will include a heterogeneous mix of artists of different generations, working in diverse media and stylistic sensibilities. For instance, the chapter on nuclear wasteland will include the activism and art of Old Left artists, such as Philip Evergood, Rockwell Kent, and Anton Refregier, and the black humor of H. C. Westermann, Wally Hedrick, and Ed Kienholz.

My goal with the study is twofold. First, I hope to produce a more complex and nuanced reading of American art since the 1930s than is currently available. Focusing on one theme across seventy years will preclude thinking exclusively in terms of successive generations and movements. Second, I want to demonstrate the extent to which artists in this period believed passionately that their work was connected to their lives as moral and political beings, therefore revealing their commitment to the wellbeing of their country.