



ART HAZELWOOD

Visual artist, Independent curator | San Francisco, CA

How did bias against homeless people influence the choice to curate, Hobos to Street People?

The principle of the show is to draw parallels between the response to homelessness in the Great Depression and today. In the Depression bias against the economic migrants from the Dust Bowl that came to California led to attacks by organized vigilantes. Today, economic migrants from Central America are working in the fields and living in virtually identical conditions to the Okies and Arkies of the 1930s. And today the Minute Men, organized vigilante groups, are attacking them. In the cities the bias against homeless people is just as bad, cities pass laws to criminalize behavior. So now in many cities it is illegal to go to the park at night, it is illegal to sit on the street, it is illegal to sleep. Of course these laws are made specifically to target poor people and homeless people, to drive them out of neighborhoods, to contain them.

I wanted to draw attention to the invisibility of homeless people. Their criminalization and the violence against them are two sources of their invisibility. By focusing on artistic responses to homelessness, an antidote to their invisibility is presented. One way this is done is through the historical parallel. A 1937 photo by Dorothea Lange of a homeless family living in a car and working the fields next to a contemporary photo by David Bacon of indigenous families from Mexico living under tarps in the fields shatters the wall that hides the enormity of the current situation of homelessness.

Detail some of the feedback you received from viewers? How did the exhibit affect biases?

One common response from homeless people and homeless rights advocates [was] that the very fact of the show in a museum setting offered validation, and acknowledged that their issues weren't simply being swept out of sight. The show opened at the California Historical Society in San Francisco and tours museums, libraries and universities for the next three years. See: www.wrapphome.org/hobos.html

What were the limits of the show in changing biases against homeless people?

In general there are two responses that I encountered that I would categorize as unchanged by the show. One response [was] simply to deny the facts and say that in fact "those people want

to be homeless.” The second [was] to focus on a particularly annoying individual who is homeless, a drug addict perhaps. Both are ways for people to pretend that it won’t happen to them. Both are magical thinking. In the end acknowledging that in this society we are all vulnerable and that any of us may end up homeless is too hard for some people to accept.

What role does visual art play in changing perceptions?

Homelessness is an indicator of what is happening to society, of how vulnerable people are becoming, economically, socially, communally. I would say that art can make the wider connections between issues, art can break the mold of what is the proper category to think in. An example from the show would be a poster from the San Francisco Print Collective, a group of street artists. The poster shows a silhouetted figure holding a machine gun in front of a shopping cart and says, “How many people does it take to start a revolution. There are 15,000 homeless people in San Francisco.” This piece connects to a long history of poor people’s protests and suddenly turns the invisible passive homeless person into an active potential. Works from the Depression of bread riots did a similar thing: they connected poverty with just resistance.

What policy initiatives that utilize the arts could be enacted to eliminate bias?

I believe that the WPA Federal Arts Project that employed destitute artists in the Depression provides a great model, as did the CETA program in the 1970s. Artists identified with issues, they saw themselves as workers on a local level, not superstars competing with each other. It is the nature of community art to address community issues. It is the nature of speculative art markets to address the purchaser. Policy initiatives that want to eliminate bias need to be directed towards community programs, art centers, art in prisons, art in schools. Allowing artists the freedom to work and give something to the community will create art that is strong and give the community the space to address their moral sphere.

