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Op-Ed

## When art and politics collided in L.A.

**The Tower of Protest, being rebuilt as part of Pacific Standard Time, incited passion and vandalism for a few months in 1966.**

By Jon Wiener

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This week, a forgotten work of political art is being reconstructed on Sunset Boulevard. But it is unlikely that the new Tower of Protest, going up as part of the months-long, Southern California-wide Pacific Standard Time art initiative, will spark the kind of reaction it did during its first appearance in 1966.

The skirmishes back then began before the tower even existed. One day in January 1966, a group of artists announced their intention on a billboard-sized sign on Sunset near La Cienega Boulevard. "Stop War in Vietnam," it screamed in 3-foot-tall letters. "Artists' Protest Tower to Be Erected Here."

The very night the sign went up, vandals knocked it down. The artists put up a new one, which was knocked down again, and this time the attackers tried to burn it. A months-long battle had begun.

The original plan had been to hang antiwar paintings and graphics from the tower, but in the final work it stood alone, a four-story construction of geometric shapes by abstract sculptor Mark di Suvero. Around it, forming a U-shaped wall of art, were 418 2-foot-square panels by individual artists, placed four high. A huge sign declared, "Artists Protest Vietnam War."

Night after night, would-be saboteurs came hoping to destroy the Tower of Protest, some of them active-duty soldiers and Marines from nearby military bases. And night after night, the artists defended the structure, and the antiwar art that surrounded it, with their own security patrols. The security detail established its headquarters in a rented room in an apartment next door to the site, with a bathroom window overlooking the structure.

The structure, also known as the Artists' Peace Tower, was constructed with the help of L.A. artists Lloyd Hamrol and Judy Gerowitz (soon to be Judy Chicago), among others. The invitation to submit work — on 2-by-2-foot panels — was published in five languages, and all of the panels sent in were displayed. The artists who participated, according to Francis Frascina in his book "Art, Politics and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America," included some of the era's most famous names:

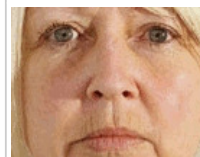
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Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Motherwell, Ad Reinhardt, Larry Rivers, Mark Rothko, Frank Stella, Claes Oldenburg, Leon Golub and Elaine de Kooning.

The tower was dedicated at noon on Feb. 26, 1966. Susan Sontag spoke. "We're here to bear witness to our sorrow and anxiety and revulsion at the American war on Vietnam," she said, noting that the installation was "addressed to other people, our fellow citizens who don't feel as we do — and some of them are here today."

For the time it existed, the tower was a focus of antiwar activity in Los Angeles. Judy Collins visited and sang. Ken Kesey, on the road in his bus, stopped by. Historian Mike Davis, then head of the Los Angeles office of Students for a Democratic Society, brought antiwar student leaders from around the country to visit.

The Peace Tower also became the focus of pro-war action. Cars of Marines and soldiers would arrive in the middle of the night. The L.A. Free Press, edited by Art Kunkin, reported on a night when more than 300 pro-war men confronted "15 or 20" guards. One of them, Jim Gallagher, was beaten by a sailor, but when sheriff's deputies arrived, they arrested Gallagher and assaulted him again. An ACLU attorney was quoted in the Free Press calling the arrest "an outrage" and a violation of Gallagher's 1st Amendment rights.

After three months, the owner of the empty lot on Sunset refused to extend the lease. The tower was dismantled and the individual panels auctioned off and dispersed. The project disappeared from public consciousness. Not until five years later, in 1971, when it made the cover of *Art in America*, was the tower featured in an art magazine.

Today's tower, organized by the Getty, LAXArt and the city of West Hollywood, will remain on Sunset Boulevard at the corner of Hilldale Avenue through March. It will include none of the original artists' panels, which haven't been displayed since 1966. Instead, more than 200 new panels will address a variety of issues, including the war in Afghanistan and the economic injustice highlighted by the Occupy Wall Street movement.

But political art today rarely stirs up the kind of sentiments that the tower did in 1966. These days, we have "street art" — but we don't have hundreds of people fighting in the streets over art. Instead of attacks by ideological opponents, "we expect attacks on the work — in the form of weather," says Glenn Phillips of the Getty Research Institute.

What made the Artists' Tower of Protest so potent in 1966 was not so much the art but rather the politics. It was the intensity of feeling about the war that made people care about the art — and fight. It was a time when political art mattered in a way that's hard to imagine today.

*Jon Wiener teaches U.S. history at UC Irvine and is a contributing editor at the Nation.*

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