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For Immediate Release
January 1988

The Museum of Modern Art

COMMITTED TO PRINT

January 31 - April 19, 1988

The artists portray the frailties of leaders and institutions, the fear of cultural differences, and the utter depths to which cruelty and barbarism can go. But in the final analysis it is not the specific issues or events that stand out. What we come away with is a shared sense of the human condition: rather than feeling set apart, we feel connected.

--Deborah Wye*

The first museum exhibition to explore social and political themes in American printed art from the sixties to the present opens at The Museum of Modern Art on January 31, 1988. Organized by Deborah Wye, associate curator, Department of Prints and Illustrated Books, COMMITTED TO PRINT examines prints and books by contemporary artists whose work is primarily in the fine art tradition of painting and sculpture, in contrast to that of the graphic arts poster or the political caricature.

The exhibition has been sponsored in part by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council on the Arts. The publication accompanying the exhibition has been made possible by the Samuel Rubin Foundation.

The exhibition includes 144 prints and thirty-six artist books by 108 individual artists and sixteen collectives. While all the represented artists live or have lived in America, their concerns are global. Drawn from all sections of the country, the major portion of the work illustrates activity on the East and West coasts (a complete list of artists is attached).

Organized by theme, the works in the exhibition focus on such categories as governments and leaders; race and culture; gender; nuclear power and

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ecology; war and revolution; and economics, class struggle, and the American Dream. Prints overlapping several categories or exploring universal themes are presented in an introductory section. Issues arising from abuse of power inform almost all the works under consideration.

The tradition of social and political printed art goes back to the fifteenth century. Works by such artists as Hieronymus Bosch and Lucas Cranach, and later, Francisco Goya, Honoré Daumier, Otto Dix, Käthe Kollwitz and others, created memorable printed images commenting on social injustice, government corruption, and war. Continuing this tradition, American realists such as George Bellows, Stuart Davis, and John Sloan did illustrations for the socialist magazine The Masses.

The exhibition includes later works by such artists as Jacob Lawrence, Jack Levine, and Ben Shahn, whose work of the thirties related to life during the Great Depression. From the forties to the early sixties, artists working with political and social subjects were not highly visible. By the late sixties and early seventies, a pluralism began to emerge that extended to art with discernible subject matter; many artists emphasized feminist, ethnic, and other social and political currents in their work.

The eighties have seen an increase in the prevalence of art about such issues. Some established artists--such as Vito Acconci, Robert Arneson, Jonathan Borofsky, and Bruce Nauman--who in the late sixties and early seventies were already working outside the abstract movements, have become more specifically political. Others, such as Robert Morris, have turned from abstraction to work of profound political ramifications. Still others, like Leon Golub and Nancy Spero, who worked in these modes for years in relative isolation, were by the mid-eighties receiving widespread attention.

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Most of the artists represented in the exhibition communicate their concerns in the formal language of modernism. Collage techniques, in which otherwise familiar imagery or text is arranged in startling juxtapositions, are frequently used. Flattened surface areas that push out onto the frontal plane lend immediacy to confrontational works. Isolated images on stark backgrounds set up iconic figure/ground relationships that turn subjects into symbols. In addition, expressionist gesture and distortion of the human figure occur frequently in works addressing the subjects of violence and oppression.

These artistic conventions are employed in conjunction with the most appropriate print mediums: the flatness of silkscreen, the directness of block printing, the bite of etching, and the freedom of lithography. The less traditional mediums of stencil and offset, often used in activist art because they are easy and inexpensive, are also employed.

COMMITTED TO PRINT is on view during the Museum's CONTEMPORARY ART IN CONTEXT program, a week-long series of special events, beginning February 29. Discussing their works in the COMMITTED TO PRINT galleries are artists Nancy Spero and Leon Golub (Tuesday, March 1, 12:30 p.m.) and Sue Coe and Faith Ringgold (Friday, March 4, 12:30 p.m.). Enrollment for these discussions is arranged through the Department of Education, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, NY 10019; 212/708-9795.

*PUBLICATION Committed to Print by Deborah Wye. Introduction; commentaries with each illustration; chronology of social, political, and art-activist events of the period; notes on the artists; bibliography. 120 pages. 134 black-and-white illustrations. Published by The Museum of Modern Art. Paperbound, \$12.50; available in the Museum Store.

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For further information or photographic materials, contact the Department of Public Information, 212/708-9750.