

Note 5

Interview with Alex Melamid

Nation Article: "Painting by Numbers" "Painting by Numbers: The Search for a People's Art" from The Nation, March 14, 1994, pp. 334-348.

Nation: How did the idea for this poll start?

Alex Melamid: It was a continuation of our works for the last number of years, which was to get in touch with the people of the United States of America: somehow to penetrate their brains, to understand their wishes--to be a real part of this society, of which we're partially part, partially not. For a couple of years we were working in Bayonne, New Jersey, visiting Bayonne, New Jersey, homes and talking to the Bayonne, New Jersey, people. And I realized there that people really want art, but they don't have it because we, the elite artists, we don't serve them. You know, there was only one store in Bayonne where people could buy pictures. It was owned by Arabs and they sold these Korean landscapes--really inferior, terrible art. I've been to many stores like this--there are millions of them in New York but only one in Bayonne, unfortunately--and it's interesting that most of the stores that sell art for people are owned by foreigners. There must be something to that, which is why we're working as foreigners too.

And people buy these terrible pictures, but do they like them, or is it just all they have? Maybe if we ask them, they will give the answer. Because we worked in this studio in Bayonet which was adjacent to a carpet warehouse. And people coming in there--you know, truck drivers, delivery men, people buying rugs--could see us working. And they would say, Listen, we want to buy this. One guy--a young guy-- said, "I will pay you \$1,000 for this picture." One thousand dollars--that's a lot! And it was not a kitschy painting. It was a normal, elite painting. So there was a scent of something, but we couldn't grasp it. There were not enough people.

N: So you had this thought that you needed science and scientific consumer research-

AM: I just was thinking about how this society works, and how the rulers in this society get in touch with the people, with real American people. How producers get in touch with consumers. In real life they take polls. Only recently I discovered that the President has his own pollsters, who work on polls every minute. It's a constant poll of the people. I understand the President very well, because he wants to know as much as me, I suppose, even more. But how to ask? Where are these people? It's a very clumsy tool, this poll, but there's no other tool.

N: But in political life the poll functions as a sort of escape from ever having to really understand what people want, what they think. You get their truncated opinion on things which then by virtue of Science is transformed into absolute opinion, and from there is exploited for whatever cynical purpose.

AM: Sure I understand, but whether it's the President or the artist, there's a border between us and the people. There are some channels for communication between the classes but very few, because socially people are almost totally separate. The rulers base their opinion on statistics, and for the simple people there are society columns, Vanity Fair. In fact, even the lower classes get most of their information from statistics, so polls are maybe one of the only means of communication between the upper classes and the lower classes. And what the poll tells, supposedly, is majority opinion. It might be

manipulated or there might be perversions, of course, but still this idea of what is majority opinion is very powerful. This populist idea is really important. And in art, we--my partner and I--were brought up with the idea that art belongs to the people, and believe me or not, I still believe in this. I truly believe that the people's art is better than artistocratic art, whatever it is.

N: And how do you respond to people who say the public just doesn't know enough about art to be an adequate judge? Because that's something we heard expressed even by some people who were involved in this poll.

AM: I think it's the wrong premise--which is still in fine arts and the visual arts, and not in almost any other art form--that we need some special historical knowledge in order to appreciate art and make art. Just look at music, all this great American music. People don't know notation and still they create fantastic music. But we ask the people who create art to know a lot about art. I don't think it's necessary; everyone knows about art enough, because we're surrounded. The decoration over here on the wall, all the architecture, reproductions in magazines--it's all over. Everyone knows enough about art now to use their own judgment. Even if we want to know more, it's the wrong premise. In the poll we have this question, How often do you go to museums? Maybe it's interesting, but as a measurement--if you go to the museums or don't go to the museums--it has nothing to do with our work here. A museum is an institution. You can believe in God without visiting churches. And that's very important: You don't know about religion, you don't know about how many times you go to church, but still you believe. In the poll we use the word "art" as little as possible, because this word rings the wrong bell. It scares people who think they don't know.

What we need is to create a real pop art, a real art of the people, like the music. Because classical music still lingers on--John Cage, something like this. But the country lives on the pop star. And the hip-hop, rock, that's the greatest thing in the world. We need to make art like these people. We have to learn how they work. That's what is an artist. I want to work like those kids from the ghetto. They know a lot about music--it's not that they don't know. But there is no special knowledge involved. It's true that everyone has a talent. You can pick up a kid from the ghetto--if he is talented, whatever, he can express himself, be a famous, great musician. So why not in art?

N: Do you think it has something to do with the concept of the artist as leader?

AM: That's a concept of the twentieth-century model, and very, very close to me, of course. According to one Russian philosopher--a very nice man, his name is Boris Groys, he now lives in Germany--he said that the only artist of Russia was Stalin, the real artist, the greatest artist on earth, supposedly. Because he could shape the nation. He could change the thing physically, not only in a picture, not only in an illusion, but in the goddamn reality. So he was the master. He was the artist. Because "artist" is understood as Artist, especially in the nineteenth century and in the first half of this century. Picasso always dreamt about this idea; he said we need a totalitarian state in art. He said we need the artist as a ruler--he meant leader, because this was the time of Stalin and Hitler-- and he wanted to create this power within himself, of course.

Now there is a different perception of what a leader is. The United States is a leader in leaders, because you've created a new type of leader, who doesn't give orders supposedly, but asks people. So that's the new idea of leadership: New leaders conduct polls. Picasso mimicked Stalin, so we try to mimic Clinton. It's a less powerful position, for sure.

N: Do you think there's some sense in which even the leaders are losing their grip?

AM: Yeah. We're in kind of a dead end, the whole society. There's a crisis of

ideas in art, which is felt by many, many people. Not only in art; in social thinking, in politics. That's one of the other things about this poll, one of the attempts to get out of this, by some maybe funny means - humor helps - because we really don't know where to go, and what our next step has to be. Artists now - I cannot speak for all, but I have talked to many artists who feel this way--we have lost even our belief that we are the minority which knows. We believed ten years ago, twenty years ago, that we knew the secret. Now we have lost this belief. We are a minority with no power and no belief, no faith. I feel myself, as an artist and as a citizen, just totally obsolete. I don't know why I am here, what I am doing. What is so good about me doing this, or any other artist? Looking down the SoHo galleries, or going to the museums, you see contemporary things, and you say, Why? O.K., it can be done this way or that way, or this way, or in splashes or smoothly, but why? What the hell is it about? That's why we wanted to ask people. For us-- from our point of view, my partner's and mine--it's a sincere thing to understand something, to change the course. Because the way we live we cannot live anymore. I'm not talking about myself, but I know many, many people, and I have never seen artists so desperate as they are now, in this society.

N: What do you think is the reason? Do you think it has anything to do with world historical developments?

AM: Well I do, but maybe it is just my age. I'm almost 50 and most people I know, most established artists, are of the same generation--can be younger, can be older, from maybe 35 to the 70s, because generations overlap--but it's the same historical generation. We were born with Stalin, with communism, and now communism is finished, so it's a time of big change. There is not this same feeling among people my son's age--he is 19--because they are starting over. Like every historical generation they are starting from scratch, and the whole of history will be their history. This is modernism. Everything that came previous you forget; it doesn't exist. My son doesn't care about Marxism or Stalin at all. It's old history. But that's the whole world for people of my age. It doesn't matter so much what you as an individual believed or what you thought, whether you were in Russia or the United States, still it's your history and now it's come to an end. And since we're in the majority, then it's the crisis of the whole structure. For most people who rule the cultural world it seems like the whole world is collapsing, and it is in a way, because if the power structure is collapsing then the whole world is collapsing.

Do you think people in the art world, some of them, will be horrified and upset by this poll, this referendum on art?

AM: Oh, sure, definitely. Because the art world exists on the belief that there's a real great art. I heard once [New York gallery owner] Mary Boone at some seminar say she chooses art because of the quality-- and when she sees really good art she makes her decision. I don't believe in this. What is quality, how should we define this quality? Of course she doesn't define, but she believes that there is something inside of the picture which can be qualified as a quality, which from my point of view you cannot say in the modern art. Modernism lived on the idea that art should be new. In the sixties the idea was that something which hasn't been said before, because it's said therefore it's good. There was a very strong idea of what is good and what is bad. And art was judged by this criterion, which is quite a good criterion. Now we're in postmodern times, so we say that we repeat ourselves, and this criterion just collapsed, so then what? Why this artist, not that artist? Why Schnabel is a good artist? Who can tell? I don't know. Can be good, can be bad, but there is no objective truth.

This is the crisis of modernism. Modern art used to reflect a radical way of thinking. It did this until World War II and then it gradually became more and more established. Eventually, the radical thinking was totally removed from this. People adapted to this, said O.K. let there be, say, triangles. But in

the beginning painting triangles was a huge statement, a daredevil act--for good or for worse that's a different story, but that's how it was. But now it's totally changed its meaning because it's just a bourgeois business. You produce pictures and you sell them. You keep the form--you can play with triangles endlessly--but the meaning is lost, so it's a perversion of the intention of modernism. And nobody cares. The same thing happened with academic painting and ancient history. Nobody believed in it anymore, nobody cared, but still they went on depicting these beautiful women, these mythological figures. But it was totally obsolete. It lost the common sense; it lost touch with the people. Modernism was the idea to get back to some sense. Now it is senseless, so we have to revise again. And even the idea that art irritates or angers the people, it's very nice because it captures the people. You have some communication; even negative communication is better than no communication at all.

N: Let's talk about who determines all this. You said at one point that in the Soviet Union one of the frustrations was that you could paint only what the commissars would let you paint--

AM: No, no, I could paint whatever I wanted. If I wanted to make a living, that's another story. But the commissars--in a way, the commissars painted something which at least officially got some response from the people. But me and my partner, being a part of the dissident life, we lived very strange lives, because we were totally remote from reality. Everything was happening indoors, small rooms; outdoors didn't exist at that time. I waited for people walking by. People--who are these people? And as I said, we were brought up believing art belongs to the people, so we were in a type of exile.

N: But do you think that in America it's not that dissimilar from the Soviet Union, only here the commissars are the collectors and curators?

AM: Yeah, sure. But you know, that's interesting. I just came back from Germany and was stunned by the difference between the European culture and the American culture. In America, the best which has been produced in culture came from the bottom of society. Like music--the greatest musicians of the twentieth century were illiterate; they couldn't read music. Just the opposite of what the good European art is. In Europe, basically the aristocrats--by blood before and now by spirit or by education--invent the culture, and then they impose this culture on the people. Here it always worked differently, except in fine arts, which is working the same way as it is in Europe. Still these aristocrats of spirit impose their ideas on people. That's why fine art is the least important cultural thing in America.

N: But now, according to the poll results, Americans seem to want realistic pictures--landscapes, people in groups, festive moods--so do you think there are parallels between this and socialist realism?

AM: No, the parallels are between modernism, late modernism, and socialist realism, of course. That's two sides of one coin. Both came of this idea of aristocrats, of people in power, imposing the culture on the people. A totally inhuman art. Modern art, and Pollack is the best example, is totally inhuman. Huge pictures for museums--now we call them museums; in Stalin times they were called palaces, but basically the same thing--which we rarely see and rarely visit. The sheer size of this painting, it's a totally inhuman scale. And there it can be typified. There's a machine which is called History of Art, which is a structure And artist fits in this only because he or she is needed for this structure. If for example the History of Art needs some parallel lines, there is an individual who makes parallel lines. And this individual fits into this machine which works by itself; it doesn't care about people or anything else, it just goes by itself.

N: What's the role of the collector?

AM: That's another part of why we started this project. I met many big collectors. Ninety-nine percent of them were either really stupid, illiterate

people or just vicious people. There were some exceptions, but really very few. And I was wondering, why do you need to be vicious and stupid to buy art? What--it's one of the requirements of the whole business? Or can you be smart and buy it? Because the smart people are true exceptions in this field. I know this quite well, because I've been quite many years in this system. I read about one of the greatest collectors of Russia, who collected first all these Impressionists, and early Picasso, Matisse, and he assembled the greatest collection ever. And he was an idiot! So maybe it is a requirement. But as far as I understand it, here in America there are several types of collectors. Some are just Collectors; they can collect watches or books or pipes, smoking pipes, or collect art. There's no difference; it's a passion and it has nothing to do with art. And the other big group who collects does it because it gives them a certain entrance to the social big events, museums. All of the museums in the United States exist only to serve these people. There's a secret life of the museums. These people, the rich people, the people in power, they build their castles, which are called museums. And the real life of the museum is not the time when the visitors are there; no, the real life starts when the museum closes its doors. Then these great people come in and they have their bar mitzvahs or wedding parties. It's just like the aristocrats and their castles. They let people in for a couple of hours, but it's not why the place exists. They pay money supporting the museum not to serve the people but for their own pleasure--to have this great building, chandeliers, nice company, good food . . .

N: Was this a surprise to you when you came from Russia?

AM: Yeah, because, you know, we had this image in Russia of America as a country of freedom, of course, where the majority rules--which in a way is true, because in the election, you can win by sheer majority. So if 20,000 more people voted for you, it means that you are the President. That's why we mimic this in the poll. We trust--it's interesting--we trust this people, we believe that this system, among existing systems, is the best political and social system. We trust these people to vote for the President. But we never trust them in their tastes, in their aesthetic judgment. And nobody can prove to me that the painting made from this poll is worse than Ross Bleckner's piece, for instance. There's no proof, in the whole world, of this. And I think that it's a better picture, because there was more effort put into this. So many people worked--I don't know, more than 1,001. We spent \$40,000! For the size of this picture it's quite expensive, I think.

N: But how do you think people who aren't part of this system express their aesthetic judgment?

AM: They do all the time. Americans are very downtoearth people, very concrete, and they know precisely what they like-- the design of their apartment, the color of the sink--they think about art. And that's a very legitimate way to think about that. I am a modernist artist, and I think even polishing your car, cutting the hedges, is a totally legitimate modernist action. But how to get people to talk about this? In the poll we didn't start out asking about museums and art with a capital A. We asked about color, size--real questions. We start with a common object and go into objects as art. The car as an art object. People like the car not because of its real ability but because it has a particular form. Maybe they don't understand that a car is art, but they buy on their aesthetic urge. They need to buy beauty. And, you know, it's mesmerizing, the shininess. Just visit the showrooms and see this incredible beauty--incredible!

We live in a consumer society, so art and money go together. You cannot separate them. But on another hand, this relation with money is not absolute. Poor people, they spend much more money for decoration purposes. People in ghettos, these young people, they spend an enormous amount of money for their dress. Percentwise, it's incredible; they care about the beauty of the thing,

much more than people with a bigger income. It's not true that richer people have more concern about the beauty of art. At one point in making this poll somebody said he thought there was this hierarchy of importance, that for rich people art came right after food, and for everyone else came first food, shelter, etc. etc. But it doesn't go like that. You cannot say simply first shelter, because people living in shelters decorate their walls, their desks. And I don't have any pictures on the walls of my house.

N: So do you think that consumer research is a valuable tool in arriving at a people's art?

AM: I just pick the tool which is here. But, you know, still there is something which is unknown to me, like statistics involved. It was 1,001 persons asked. It needs to be one more than one thousand, I don't know why, but supposedly science tells the pollsters this. But since I was always a very bad student in science I cannot judge this. Is it real science, or is it kind of science lite?

Maybe the poll is not the best way. Maybe we could try some different approach. But that's another story: if you need to have a real truth, or if you just align yourself with what is considered to be truth here, in this given moment, in this place. So we have this truth--science, medicine, polls--and we say, O.K., that's truth. We trust it. If we won't trust in polls, the whole world will collapse. So what to believe? We don't believe in God, and we don't believe in science, so what is left?

N: But there were some surprising results from this poll, yes?

AM: Actually, what shocked me was that it was not surprising. I thought there would be much more interesting--I mean, much different results. Because my small experience talking about art with the people of Bayonne gave me quite a different impression of what the people want. They couldn't exactly say what they want, but seeing artists working gave them ideas of what was possible. The problem is they don't have examples. Maybe they can't be asked, maybe language doesn't work. I was expecting great discoveries, a real vox populi, a high opening. But I think it was the fault of the poll, not the people. It's the fault of all polls. Maybe people have to be shown. Maybe we have to buy a van and go around the country working on art among people--van art. From Vanguard to Van Art.

N: But weren't you kind of surprised that people, regardless of class or race, all wanted pretty much the same thing?

AM: Yeah, that was another shock, because you remember that initially, the idea was to paint different pictures for people of different incomes, but we realized that there's no difference! The blue color diminishes with income and with education, but still the blue color is the majority in every group. And every group wants these landscapes, with soft curves, people fully clothed. That's what gives a good idea about this society, because it's really a united society. That's why this society is still alive. It's not breaking up like Russia, because in Russia they have several different consensuses. You lose that, so you lose everything.

N: What's interesting about the "most wanted" picture that came out of all of this is that it's very close to the classic nineteenth-century American painting, which is a landscape with people, showing harmony with nature, or the conquest of nature. What do you think that suggests?

AM: I think people want stability, culturally and traditionally. The modern art was a breakup with tradition, which became a new tradition, of course. And it's interesting, on one hand I can say that this society's demand to supply economics works really well, because you can buy landscapes. Maybe not good landscapes; that's the problem. There's nothing bad in landscapes per se. I don't know if we can imitate it now, but why landscape is lower than Abstract Expressionism? Mostly because landscape painting has been given up on by the elite, and people who want to make fame and money don't make landscapes, they

make abstract pictures.

N: Robert Hughes wrote that landscape "is to American painting what sex and psychoanalysis are to the American novel," that the quintessential American paintings are landscapes.

AM: So, now we know he was right.

N: But seriously where does the poll stop and artistic creativity begin? Is it a dialectical process-

AM: That's another question, very general, about freedom. What is freedom? Are we free? Are we worked by order, unconsciously to serve this market, to serve these people who like some pictures and don't like some other pictures? Of course we all work by orders. We're all commissioned. The old Marxist education of mine still tells me that there is no freedom in capitalist society. Communism was a desperate attempt to achieve this freedom. Marx said that we're going from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom--a breakthrough vision, from a totally unfree society to a real free society. It failed, of course; it hasn't been achieved. But still I understand these quests for freedom. That was the question of the Revolution, the Russian Revolution. Not only the Russian Revolution, but any revolution.

N: Then how much do you think the answers themselves in the poll are the result of a kind of unfreedom? The result of what people think they should say as opposed to what they really truly--

AM: Right. Maybe the people are not exposed to art, of course, and they know very little--and what they know, they tell us. So, as I said, it's not the final truth. All polls are big lies. According to Churchill, Winston Churchill, a statistic is the biggest lie, and it's true. A statistic doesn't say anything. But how else to find out? Of course, the best way is to make a revolution. That's ideal. I'm dreaming to organize a good, bloody revolution here in the United States. But that's much more difficult. It's much easier to raise \$40,000 and make a poll.

N: But who knows about the question of shame, how much shame may have played into it. Maybe all across America, many people who wanted nude figures were scared to say so.

AM: For sure they're scared. But that's what is art, what's alive about it. What we're scared of, our fears, are a legitimate part of our life. That's real truth. We shouldn't be ashamed of our shame. Our shame is us.

N: There's something else that's interesting. When people were asked what pictures they like, they described paintings that are within the realm of possibility of purchase from anyone. But once money is removed from the equation and they're asked what they would commission if money were no object, the biggest vote is for portraits of themselves, their children, etc.

AM: People want private relevance, not only historical relevance. Because art is so far away--in museums, in galleries-- how can they get close to it? Maybe if they can see their girlfriend in it, their families, their dog. The portrait is a search for personal identity in big art. It's not only big art, great art, but it's my art.

N: Throughout the whole process of this poll we've encountered people who thought it might be entirely a puton, an elaborate, expensive joke.

AM: Of course, don't forget, there is a truth in every joke. But this is a problem. The left throughout history is notorious for having no sense of humor. Jesus Christ never smiled. Do you know this? And Lenin--no jokes. You can't find any. Even Marx in all his great literary brilliance, there is no humor. Or there is a special kind of humor toward enemies--I call it derisionism. But that's it. That's as far as they could go. That was the problem: There was never cheerfulness in communism.

N: And in capitalism?

AM: I'll tell you this story. We did this huge commission for the lobby of the tallest building in L.A. And it was commissioned by the owner of this

building, who owns a lot of skyscrapers--he's a very, very rich man. And in the process for winning this commission, I told him a joke which we said once in Jersey City when we made pictures there for this small Catholic church: Listen, we are not Michelangelos, but Jersey City is not Rome. I repeated this joke to this guy and he liked it. So at the opening of this wall in L.A., a huge event, he said, Oh, these funny Russian guys, they said a really funny thing, and he repeated this, and of course the audience laughed. So in answer to him, I said, We're not Michelangelos, that's for sure, and L.A. not Rome, but you're not Medici.

You know, Medici, he was an aristocrat, a very vicious man. But still he was brought up in a certain culture, surrounded by certain pictures. I understand that, as Marx said, the rule of aristocracy had a good side to it. Even if you're idiot stupid, born stupid, still the culture in which you're surrounded for generations gives you some ability to judge. There was some method of inheriting the culture from generation to generation. And culture in a way made these people more genteel. Plus there were more channels for communication between the classes. This is romanticized in a way, but still there was less of a separation--all people had the same fleas, of course. But with the coming of the bourgeoisie, people who made their money yesterday, people of no culture, judge about everything, everything. There is no cultural chain. Of course, that is capitalism.

N: So now you have found your Medici with the poll?

AM: I think this poll just revealed what we're always working on. We'll always serve some people, or someone, maybe unconsciously. So let's do it consciously. Let's serve the people. Stop playing this game that we're freewheeling artists. We're not! We're slaves of the society. We have to find--we have to choose the masters. Unlike in Russia, we have this choice. Because Russian serfs didn't have any choice. The masters were given to them. But here we live in a free society; we can choose our masters. Maybe that's what freedom is--this is a new definition of freedom.

The old Romantic notion had this idea of a free spirit, the artist with a capital A; he's free, free of everything, and he imposes his will on the society. If we imagine the society as a pyramid the only one on top is Stalin, or the Artist; and only one, because these are some special souls, geniuses, the most brilliant people, who can achieve--who just jump from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom. The rest are slaves.

N: In the focus groups people were mixed as to whether they thought the artist was a genius or whether it's just a matter of having some extra talent.

AM: It's part of the disillusionment of our society, believe me. Hitler came as the last Romantic; he came at the end of German Romanticism, and he symbolized, he was, the German genius. But he didn't invent this. Since the eighteenth century, Germany lived in this belief that the real genius can exist in this world--so either it's Wagner or Nietzsche or Hitler. And Hitler killed this idea of real genius, because we don't believe in it anymore. So for art in the twentieth century it was Picasso, supposedly: a sheer genius, God, something which can be above everything. But getting older, he made these ridiculous paintings; so we are disillusioned. We say, O.K., so it's genius, but in the first part, not in the second part of life. If you divide your life in two parts, you are not genius anymore. Either you're genius, or you're not.

N: Don't you think, though, there's still something of a cult of personality to borrow a phrase out of Stalinism, around artists that eclipses their work? This funny thing happened during the focus groups, where you took part but didn't reveal you were this famous painter until partway through. Then at the end the people who knew stuff about art all asked you for your autograph, and the ones who didn't know anything about art didn't ask for an autograph.

AM: As I say, it's like remnants of this cult, this Romantic cult of genius, which is fading. But still people want to see--encourage their children to be

an artist. Still it exists somewhere. And in the focus groups, when they realized that I am an artist--"An artist!"--they were really excited. It was really nice to talk to the people. I liked this maybe the most of the whole project, because it was face to face.

N: What struck you most about talking to the people?

AM: It seemed to me that they were looking for words to express themselves--like me sometimes in English, it was foreign territory. You know, the upper classes treat the lower classes like children--It's too early, like, it's too early for sex. Talking to these people I understood that they were very passionate. They had hidden desires. But they don't have the words; they don't have very much field to experiment. There needs to be written, maybe, a book, a manual, like Joy of Sex: Joy of Art, and then More Joy of Art.

N: How would you rank these pictures you painted from the poll results in terms of the history of art?

AM: I am not in charge of this. I'm a follower of this tradition of Chekhov, Anton Chekhov, just to show. Chekhov said, I cannot judge; I can show. The artist, the writer, can only do one thing, to show their things, and let the people judge whether it's good, bad, negative or positive, and I totally agree with this. We have a very limited capacity. If I would have been as good an artist as Stalin, that's a different story. I could judge. But as much smaller artist, I can only show.

N: Do you think that the results of this poll dictated the picture you painted? Were there other pictures that could have been painted from this poll?

AM: I don't know--what really dictated it was that it was agony to paint. The hardest assignment I ever got. That was real, because I am not very good at this. We'll have to be trained in this blue landscape; we need some time. Because it was really hard. I couldn't expect this. I thought, ha! We'll do this picture, no problem. Uhuh. Uhuh. I was ashamed of myself. I said, I'm a professional artist, what do you mean, I can't paint a small blue landscape? It was repainted hundreds of times. I almost failed.

N: Was it intimidating to know that your painting was basically on commission from the entire American people?

AM: That's what the burden was, actually. It was the All American painting. Then it was a small painting, and all these specifications, these small people, and brushstrokes, brushstrokes!

N: Is this going to affect the way you paint in the future, and create?

AM: Well, you know, everything affects us. It's one of many works. Of course it will affect us. You know, we did this picture, the Jesus Christ of New Jersey, for the Holy Rosary Church in Jersey City, but it went almost unnoticed, because people don't believe that something can be done outside of SoHo, or this gallery environment or something. People do it, but everything which belongs to the gallery or museum is art; that which is outside is not art. It's kitsch, whatever. You know, I am very interested in this guy John Noble. He was not the greatest artist in the world, but he was quite a nice realist. He painted marine life, made etchings and drank in the bars of Bayonne. The biggest collector of his work was, still is, a bartender. He, Noble, was a drunk actually, but for me really interesting. Very romantic of course. He died in 1982, and until his death he lived serving the people of Bayonne and Staten Island, selling and bartering his work. So there's still hope that somewhere, there are some people, and some places, the real art is possible. Maybe big art, great art.

N: In the same way that when you were in the Soviet Union you were painting pictures that countered the official art, do you think that the poll and the pictures that came out of it are a kind of parallel to that in the United States--a counter to the official art of America?

AM: Definitely. That's a totally dissident art. Mostly, of course, because of the question, Who are the viewers? Who is the audience? Nobody asks this

question.

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