

# THE ARTIST AS CITIZEN

BY SARAH TRANUM

**A** revitalized course at SAIC challenges emerging artists to become actively engaged citizens. *The Art of Crossing the Street: Creativity and Community in the Twenty-first Century*, co-taught by Thomas Tresser and Lora Lode, raises issues of contemporary concern, from citizenship to censorship to the environment.

Censorship is not a new foe for artists. However, since the introduction of the Patriot Act, First Amendment rights have been threatened under the guise of national security. This leads to the question of the role of the artist in civic life, and Tresser goes as far as to encourage artists to run for public office.

Tresser's work revolves around connecting the creativity of the arts with the political process. "Artists have the skills, insight and creativity needed in politics but are underrepresented—in some cases completely non-existent—in government. Artists are sorely needed in civic life," said Tresser.

"When I have suggested to artists that they run for office, the response is that they don't have the necessary experience or know where to begin," Tresser continued. But when he runs through a list of skills, such as public speaking, organizing a group of staff and volunteers, and stretching a limited budget, he finds many artists already have what it takes to start a political campaign.

One hesitation for artists considering a political position can be the process itself. It is easy to equate politics to mudslinging, corporate lobbies and compromised ethics. These concepts are enough to make artists avoid politics entirely. But Tresser asserts that by increasing the number of artists and arts workers in politics, the dynamic can change. "We need more artists involved in the process to change it. The reason it is the way it is stems from the

same kind of people always being involved."

For many artists, however, the time involved in politics can be seen as taking away from their artistic pursuits. However, Tresser points out that the majority of political opportunities are part-time positions. He encourages artists to enter politics at all stages, but the easiest entry points are at the local level, like school boards and city and town councils, which usually require no more than a commitment of two or three hours per week.

"Young artists need role-models and need to see political leadership as an option. Where other disciplines are taught in environments where elected leadership is commonplace, this isn't so for artists," said Tresser.

*The Art of Crossing the Street* is one step towards transforming this scenario. The new SAIC student group, Creativity + Activism, is another opportunity for students to step out of their studios and question the larger social context of their work.

Tresser has followed the political evolution of the Christian Right over the past 20 years. It was during the early 1990s that fundamentalist leaders such as Pat Robertson actively sought like-minded candidates on the ballot in local elections around the country. Now these politicians are influencing policy at the state and federal levels. Tresser has learned a great deal from studying the Christian Right's ability to frame issues. He uses this understanding to aim for positive political change.

#### Detail

For more information about *The Art of Crossing the Street: Creativity and Community in the Twenty-first Century*, check out the blog at <http://crossingstreet.wordpress.com>. To learn about the Creativity + Activism student group, visit [www.saicactivism.blogspot.com](http://www.saicactivism.blogspot.com)

