Interview with Ann Telnaes

by
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Ann Telnaes is one of the most important political cartoonists of this era. In 2001, she became only the second woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Editorial Cartooning. Relying on sharp, elegant lines, noted use of positive and negative spaces, strong metaphor, evocative symbolism, biting satire, and pointed editorial commentary, Telnaes' editorial cartoons are distinctive both artistically and in the message they convey.

Never one to shy away from controversy, Telnaes' cartoons tackle some of the most important issues of the past decade and a half: gun violence, environmental destruction, family planning, racism, the separation of church and state, civil liberties. In 2001, she submitted a portfolio primarily consisting of cartoons concerning the 2000 presidential election to the selection committee for the Pulitzer Prize for Editorial Cartooning. Telnaes' selection as winner of that prize—the second woman, and one of very few freelance editorial cartoonists to win—is testimony to the quality and relevance of her work. In 2004, her editorial cartoons were shown in a solo exhibit in the Great Hall of the Library of Congress's Thomas Jefferson Building. That same year, Pomegranate Press published *Humor's Edge: Cartoons by Ann Telnaes*, a collection of her editorial cartoons and an interview with Telnaes conducted by Harry Katz, the head curator of the Prints and Photographs Division and curator of Popular and Applied Graphic Art at the Library of Congress.

Telnaes has been a thorn in the side of both the Bill Clinton and George W. Bush presidential administrations. In particular, her opposition to the Bush administration's foreign policy has been scathing. She has entitled an entire portfolio of her cartoons "The Bush Administration's Iraq Fantasyland." Her cartoons challenging the veracity of the administration's claims, the wisdom of their foreign policy strategy, and their public evasiveness (see, for example, Figure 1) have evoked her editorial page ire. Her cartoons, in turn, have spawned strong reactions by both her politician-subjects and by her readers.

Telnaes is a naturalized U.S. citizen, born in 1960 in Stockholm, Sweden, to Norwegian and German parents. Telnaes' father was an IBM executive; his work meant that the family would move often throughout Telnaes' childhood. By age 10, the family had settled in the United States. Telnaes graduated with a B.F.A. from the California Institute for the Arts, and then worked for several years as a designer for Walt Disney Imagineering.

It was while working at Disney in 1989 that Telnaes began cartooning. Upon hearing about the events at Tiananmen Square, Telnaes became so outraged that she drew her first political cartoon, though it was drawn not for publication but rather for personal satisfaction. She was similarly compelled in 1991, upon hearing Anita Hill's testimony during Clarence Thomas' Supreme Court confirmation hearing. That event propelled Telnaes to create a series of editorial cartoons, which she then submitted for publication to several newspapers. By 1992, Telnaes' cartoons were being published regularly, and she left her position to focus on cartooning full-time in 1993. The next year, North American/King Features Syndicate began distributing her work.

Telnaes remains a freelance editorial cartoonist—that is, she is not employed solely by one newspaper. Today, Telnaes' cartoons are distributed through Cartoonists and Writers Syndicate/New York Times Syndicate. Her work appears in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Le Monde*, and many other major newspapers. Her editorial cartoons also are widely available to many different audiences on the Internet, where web sites like slate.com and Courier International often publish her work. Until September, 2005, Telnaes also was one of the six women editorial cartoonists to contribute to *Six Chix*, a nationally syndicated comic strip where each woman does the strip one day a week, with the Sunday edition rotated among them.

I interviewed Ann Telnaes during the summer of 2006.

Q-Brigid Harrison: *So, can we start off talking about a day in the life of Ann Telnaes? How do start your day? What do you read? When do you draw?*

A-Ann Telnaes: I start off by reading a couple of newspapers (*Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal* or *Financial Times*), then I'll do a quick scan of the news online before going for a run or long walk with my dogs. Afterwards I'll turn on C-SPAN and/or listen to news on the radio (NPR, BBC). Throughout the day I'll read various news stories on the web and will occasionally turn on the cable news (usually to see how far they'll take their nonstop coverage on the latest missing bride or a plane with a stuck landing gear). When I think of possible ideas for a cartoon, I'll do a quick thumbnail sketch but won't generally start the final drawing until later in the day.

Q-BH: *Can you talk a bit about the process you go through in creating an editorial cartoon? Your cartoons obviously are the result of a lot of thought. They succinctly convey commentary, oftentimes in a single panel. Does your mind start with the art, or with the narrative?*

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Figure 1



Ann Telnaes' acerbic intellect, clean lines, and caustic criticism of the Bush administration is illustrated in this December 2005, cartoon depicting Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice tap-dancing around the issue of U.S. treatment of detainees, "enemy combatants," after inquiries from several European leaders. © 2006 Cartoonists and Writers Syndicate/New York Times Syndicate.

A-AT: I usually decide on a topic and then develop the visual imagery to illustrate my point of view on the subject. There are occasions where out of the blue I come up with something I feel is a strong visual; I'll then do a quick sketch of it and keep it in my files for possible use in a future piece.

Q-BH: *Let's talk a little bit about your background. Were you the kind of kid who drew constantly? Was your favorite toy the Crayola 124 pack? Were you into art as a child?*

A-AT: Yes, I've been drawing for as long as I can remember. I didn't seriously think of pursuing art as a career until I entered college and art school. Editorial cartooning wasn't even in my plans until I was about 30 years old, after working in the animation and design fields

Q-BH: *In 2001, you were awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Editorial Cartooning, only the second woman to receive the award. Can you tell us what that experience was like? Five years later, did it change your life?*

A-AT: Well, I think winning a Pulitzer mainly changes other people's perceptions of you and your work. Because I had absolutely no expectations of winning, I think everything happened so fast that I didn't have time to notice if it changed my life. I've said before, and I still believe, that one shouldn't be in this business for the prizes—you really have to have a true passion for editorial cartooning and believe in what you're doing. Even though I'm very pleased to have been awarded the Pulitzer, I'm quite aware of the role politics has in these awards, so I think it's really pointless to get too wrapped up in them. What I'm really striving for in my work is for it to stand on its own years from now so that other generations can look at my editorial cartoons and get a sense of what people were thinking and talking about.

In this sense, historical editorial cartoons are really comparable to art history. Studying art history is a wonderful way to learn about world history; through the artist's use of subject matter and technique the viewer gets a sense of the political and social climate of that time. Even how a piece of artwork is received by the public and critics tells you a great deal—the Impressionists were not well received when first introduced in the late 1800s; today there are long lines whenever there's an exhibition of their work. The political and public reaction to the Mapplethorpe photographs in 1989 clearly reflected the growing divide between social conservatism and homosexuality, especially on future political issues like gay marriage.

Q-BH: *Not unlike in political science, men tend to dominate in the field of editorial cartooning. I tend to think that in my discipline, it's the result of the nature of politics—historically girls weren't socialized to the political. Do you think that's also the cause of the relative scarcity of women editorial cartoonists?*

A-AT: I think that's part of it. By its nature, editorial cartooning is a strong, powerful art form and historically girls aren't encouraged to be aggressive. Animation was the same way while I was in the business—men made up the majority in the field and what little women there were, they tended to make up the "lower" tiers (inbetweeners, inkers).

Q-BH: *I also should note that political science is changing. At the meetings, women constitute a greater proportion of graduate students, so the field will change over time. Is a similar youth movement changing the world of editorial cartooning? Many senior women in my field have played a pivotal role in mentoring graduate students to change the "chilly climate." Is that happening among editorial cartoonists? Are there networks to mentor rising women editorial cartoonists?*

A-AT: It's changing a bit, but very slowly. More younger women cartoonists have been attending the AAEC conventions, but there are still only three nationally syndicated female editorial cartoonists: Signe Wilkinson, *Philadelphia Daily News*; Etta Hulme, *Fort Worth Star Telegraph*; and me. And Signe is the only one on staff at a major daily national newspaper (Etta is now part-time). I believe there are a couple of reasons for this—one has to do with the rapidly disappearing jobs in traditional print media in general. The men have been affected as well; several have lost staff positions during the past year and the newspapers have not replaced them, choosing instead to eliminate the position and either run syndicated work or none at all. Editorial cartooning is definitely going through a major change because of the decline in newspaper readership and the Internet. I do believe there will be more opportunities on the web, but editorial cartooning will have to change (as it already has with the increase in animated political cartoons).

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The other reason is gender related; although more and more women are now editors, the reality is that men are still in the majority. The fact that a male editor is usually doing the choosing does reflect upon what's getting published.

Q-BH: *Some of my favorites of your cartoons are based simply on a "women's take" on a situation—one that can be understood by men, but simply would not have been conceived by a man. For example, the House War Resolution (I will not cut and run, 6/18/06, Figure 2), or the Partial Birth Abortion signing (11/03/03, Figure 3). Some of your other cartoons talk about other feminist issues—you were among the first to talk about women living under the Taliban way before the Taliban was a household word, reproductive rights, equal pay, and so on. Can you talk a little bit about the role feminism plays in your work?*

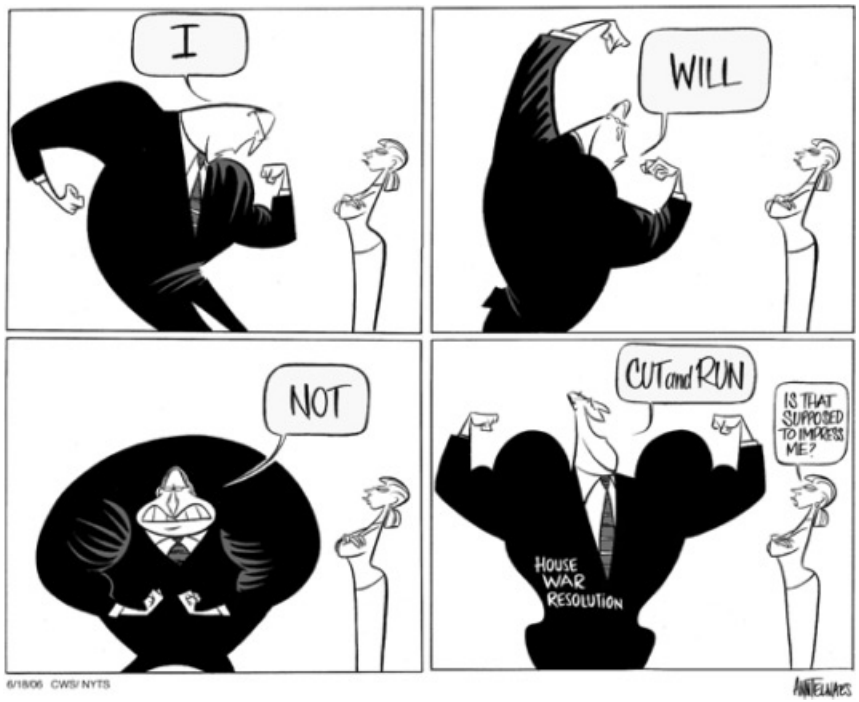
A-AT: I think people sometimes misunderstand when I talk about the value of having a woman's perspective in editorial cartooning. I'm not only talking about "woman's issues," like the ones you mentioned above—but about the value of having editorial cartoonists with different life experiences addressing all issues: war, civil liberties, religion in politics, etc.

I think the reason that there's so much of the same, both in approach and tone, in American editorial cartooning today is because of the lack of women and minorities in the profession.

Q-BH: *You have talked about some of the artists who have influenced your art—Ronald Searle, Robert Osborn, Gerald Scarfe. Like many others, when I see your cartoons, Al Hirschfeld immediately pops into mind. Your art is elegant, uncluttered. You rely on clean, strong lines, the black and white contrast is key. I can see that your art has evolved significantly in the past decade. Have there been any recent influences? How does this evolution happen? Do you see differences between your cartoons now and your earlier cartoons?*

A-AT: Like most American editorial cartoonists, I started off shading and cross hatching in the beginning as well. If you saw some of my earlier attempts you couldn't tell them apart from the work of other cartoonists. Once I realized that the key was to draw fast, I started to use a brush instead (which I had learned to use while working in the cartoon licensing business) and from then on my style just developed. My style wasn't something I planned—I think it's just a natural result of my design and animation training. While attending Cal Arts, I was fortunate to have a wonderful design teacher, Bill Moore. If you could survive his class (he was very intimidating, Moore didn't spare any feelings if he singled out your drawing as the day's Design Failure), you left art

Figure 2



While accessible to all, some of Telnaes' cartoons reflect a woman's perspective on current events. © 2006 Ann Telnaes.

Figure 3



Only the second woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Editorial Cartooning, Telnaes is one of very few female nationally syndicated cartoonists. Here, in a November 2003 cartoon, her pointed depiction demonstrates how a woman's analysis may differ from a man's, both in subject matter and perspective. © 2003 Ann Telnaes.

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school with a solid design and color sense. Line, rhythm, positive/negative spaces, pacing—it's all related, regardless of whether you're animating, drawing, or sculpting.

Q-BH: *Right now, your cartoons are distributed through Cartoonists and Writers Syndicate/New York Times Syndicate. Can you tell us how that process works? How do you know what editors want, what they will print?*

A-AT: After I complete an editorial cartoon, I'll save it as an electronic file and then email it to my syndicate, which checks for spelling and grammatical problems. They then send it on to my list of regular newspaper and Internet clients. Regular clients have the option of running whichever cartoons they choose but they pay regardless of whether they run the work or not. That's why I love the Internet—even if one of my cartoons might be a bit too much for most print editors, you can always access it on the web!

Figure 4



Not one to shy away from controversy, Telnaes regularly uses the hijab to symbolize the oppression of women in Islamic fundamental states. "It's meant as a criticism against the political and social forces which limit women's economic, reproductive, and human rights," Telnaes says. © 2003 Ann Telnaes.

Q-BH: *Can you discuss some of the symbolism we see in your art—the hijab, the grim reaper, pregnant women, fat people. You tend not to rely on "old stand-bys," but rather create new images to represent people or processes. How does an image become a symbol in your work?*

A-AT: I strive to come up with new and unique images—or to do a different take on an old standby. For example, the Pinocchio nose visual as a metaphor for lying. Instead of just drawing a long nose, I'll draw it as a Christian cross, as I did on Cardinal Bernard Francis Law when he stated he "did not recall" whether he had seen a letter accusing a priest of molesting a child (the letter showed Law's handwritten note, "Urgent, please follow through"). Law had authorized to transfer that priest even though he knew of the previous molestation accusations.

I felt the hijab is such a strong image for cartooning (see Figure 4); both in the graphic and metaphorical sense. Although it's a bit problematic in that people do interpret my depictions as a criticism also against women covering themselves out of religious convictions, it's meant as a criticism against the political and social forces which limit women's economic, reproductive, and human rights.

Q-BH: *In 2006, we saw the impact political cartooning can have with the fallout of the Danish cartoon controversy. Your critique of the Bush administration has been simply scathing. A lot of your recent work has focused on Bush foreign policy in general, the war in Iraq specifically, but also domestic surveillance. Can you talk about the repercussions of putting yourself out there—taking a stand? What kind of reaction does your work generate?*

A-AT: Oh sure, I've received some pretty strong reactions to my work—most editorial cartoonists have received plenty of nasty emails and phone calls. I don't really feel any real pressure, other than the occasional threat. We have it easy here; my colleagues overseas are the ones who really are putting themselves on the line. Cartoonists in Africa and Eastern Europe have been jailed, beaten, and even killed for their work. The Danish cartoon controversy has only solidified my already strong belief in the absolute right of free speech and the right to express oneself without fear of threats or intimidation.

Q-BH: *Where do you see yourself in 10 years? You've said that editorial cartooning isn't it for you. Can you identify something you'd like to do more? A different art form?*

A-AT: Well, I'll always use my art ability to communicate my point of view. Currently I'm experimenting in animation again—I'm really enjoying using my old animation training and combining it with political satire. We'll have to see where that takes me.

Where do I see myself in 10 years? Well, I just can't see doing the same old rectangular format printed (usually too small) on a newspaper page. Even though my originals are large compared to most editorial cartoonists (I draw on 19″ × 24″ paper), I've always felt constricted by the size—I find myself taping pieces of paper together. I'm looking forward to drawing larger in my currently under-construction studio.

BH: Well, thanks very much for doing this.

AT: You're welcome.

Ann Telnaes' cartoons can be seen regularly in many newspapers nationwide. Many also can be viewed at her website, www.anntelnaes.com.

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