

OPEN FORUM

To the president, I wish to say

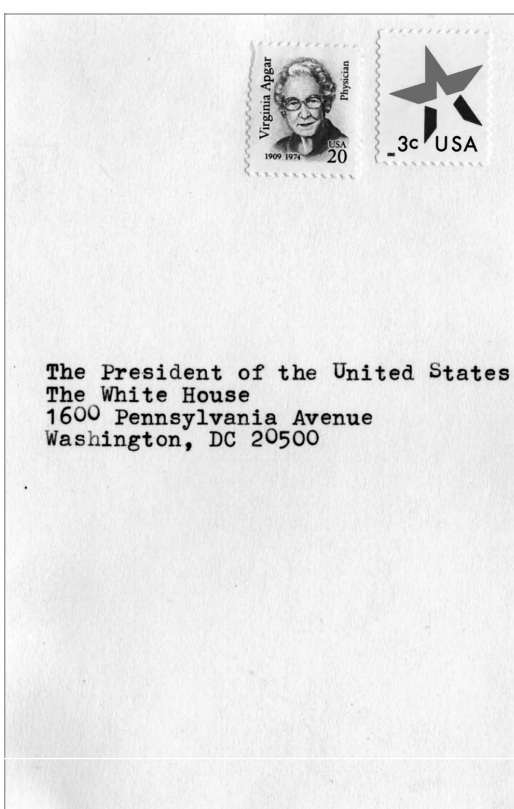
By Sheryl Oring

The public art project "I Wish to Say" grew out of my concern that not enough voices were being heard about the state of affairs in this country and my belief in the value of free expression guaranteed by our Constitution.

For this project, I set up a portable public office — complete with a vintage manual typewriter from the collection of my sculptural art installation "Writer's Block" — and engaged visitors in a discussion about politics. I posed the question, "If I were the president of the United States, what would you say to me?"

Each discussion resulted in a hand-typed postcard and a carbon copy — a sampling of which are displayed below. The cards were embossed with an official "I wish to say" seal, and the author could stamp them with additional comments to enhance their written messages. The original was addressed to the White House and given to the creator to send, while I kept the carbon copies for an archive of public opinion.

Today, typewriters such as the ones I used for the project have all but disappeared (replaced by the impersonality of the computer keyboard), or sit at the back of bookshelves, used only to fill out the occasional form. But typewriters seemed the appropriate tool for empowering people to express themselves, for giving a voice to those who are seldom heard. School teachers, students, job seekers, artists, retirees and



many more: We, the people of the United States of America.

The typewriter also plays a supporting role in this work as a symbol of the power of the written word and as a tool for the mass distribution of thoughts and ideas. In some parts of the world, typewriters have been banned as dangerous machines. Even today, they can arouse suspicion. (Try carrying several typewriters onto an airplane and you'll see what I mean.) Indeed, they were revolutionary in their time, changing the way we worked and thought. These writing machines continue to provide a means of spreading the word. Our words. Our voices. Our thoughts and ideas.

"I wish to say" was presented at the Canvas Gallery in San Francisco and at the Oakland Box Theater's A.R.T. Gallery earlier this month by the First Amendment Project (www.thefirstamendment.org) as part of a series of events leading up to an exhibition of "Writer's Block" (www.writers-block.org). "I wish to say" will be presented in other parts of the country later this year and will return to the Bay Area April 14-17.

If this project has inspired you and you are unable to attend an "I wish to say" event, I urge you to contact the president on your own (the address is shown on the card at left) with a message from your heart.

To schedule an "I wish to say" presentation, contact: The First Amendment Project, 1736 Franklin St., Ninth floor, Oakland, CA 94612, (510) 208-7744; slupien@thefirstamendment.org. Sheryl Oring (oring@writers-block.org) is an artist and writer who lives in New York City.

