

Feminist Art and the Political Imagination

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Activist and political art works, particularly feminist ones, are frequently either dismissed for their illegitimate combination of the aesthetic and the political, or embraced as chiefly political works. Flawed conceptions of politics and the imagination are responsible for that dismissal. An understanding of the imagination is developed that allows us to see how political work and political explorations may inform the artistic imagination.

INTRODUCTION

Feminist cultural production is often dismissed. Rarely considered “real” art or “aesthetically good,” mainstream critics single out feminist art work as evidence of the less than salutary effects of allowing group identity politics to interfere with or determine artistic goals and aspirations. I think this dismissal of feminist art is a mistake. The dismissal is due to misguided theories about the nature of art and the nature of politics, activist politics in particular.

These theories misunderstand not only feminist cultural production but all forms of specifically political cultural practice. Both the political and the artistic achievements and aspirations of such practice are misunderstood. In order to recognize that many works of feminist art are “art,” even good art, we need to correct those theories. I seek to do so by advancing a conception of the imagination¹ as simultaneously artistic and political. In order to do so, I will distinguish between reduced and rich conceptions of the nature of political activity, such that the imagination is neither seen as controlled by a predefined political agenda nor as floating disconnected from the political engagements and aspirations of those who create and respond to works of art. This will allow

me to defend the possibility and value of creating political and activist artworks in general, and feminist artworks in particular.

This essay will offer a presentation and critique of the misunderstandings I mention above; an enriched theory of the role and nature of the imagination in art and politics; and an analysis of works which, I will argue, are imaginative in this enriched sense. However, before I can begin those tasks, I need to say something about the view of art I am using. The analysis I offer reflects a functionalist understanding of the nature of art. However, while I operate with a functionalist understanding of the nature of art, much of what I argue in this paper does not depend upon the reader sharing my view. If a reader chooses to disagree with my rationale for using the term “art,” but agrees with my arguments about the role and nature of the imagination in the cultural practices I describe, I will be largely content.

A FUNCTIONALIST THEORY OF ART

Following Robert Stecker, I define artworks as those things (paintings, performances, installations, novels, etcetera) which “fulfill artistic² functions with excellence.” On Stecker’s account, works that fulfill artistic functions are characterized by beauty, grace, vibrancy, expressive power, and vividness in representation (2000, 51). While agreeing with Stecker’s basic account, my view attempts to move away from such a list of properties. In my view, works that fulfill artistic functions with excellence do so by causing us to linger in our appreciation, either (a) because of the interest we take in their sensuous properties; (b) because of the connections they lead us to make between emotions they provoke, ideas they suggest, and images they explore; or (c) both of the above.

If something is an artwork only when it functions in this way, then the intention by the individual or group who created the work to make art is neither sufficient nor necessary for qualifying it as an artwork. Those who make works may succeed in creating things that fulfill artistic functions with excellence without explicitly intending to do so, and those who do intend to do so may fail in their goal. However, very often the intention of the individual or group who created the work will help shape the context for our response to the putative artwork. This context includes other factors such as where the work is exhibited, what connections it appears to have to other things that have been recognized as art, and what information we are given about it. Because context draws our attention to certain features of the work, and obscures others, context can play an important role in influencing whether or not a work fulfills artistic functions with excellence.

Sometimes features of context can prevent us from responding to a work in a way that allows it to successfully fulfill its artistic functions. For instance, as many feminist art theorists have argued, when a work is also something that can

be used in daily life, and when it is created by a woman, many people do not pay the kind of attention to it that they pay to objects created by males that do not aim at other uses (Brand 2000, Lauter 1990). In other cases, knowledge that a work has been created by someone acknowledged as an artist, and presentation of a work in a context that is recognized as part of the artworld, encourages us to linger in our appreciation of it, to look for appealing sensuous properties and interesting connections between the ideas, emotions, and images the work provokes. Because context is so important in influencing the kind of attention we give to works, feminist practices and works will fail to successfully fulfill their artistic functions with respect to a particular audience whenever that audience does not engage attentively with the works because of their explicitly political dimension.

FEMINIST, ACTIVIST, AND POLITICAL ART

In this essay I seek to defend the possibility of making good feminist art, and further argue that many such good works have already been made. As the majority of contemporary feminist art theorists recognize, good feminist artworks will not be characterized by any particular stylistic approach (for example, see Rich 1990, de Lauretis 1990, Felski 1995, and Marcus 1992). My claim that specific works are feminist reflects their impact on me and my assessment that they have the potential to have a similar impact on others. I call artworks feminist if, in my judgment, they focus on sex and gender and work toward politically progressive change.³ Some expose gendered stereotypes and gendered expectations. Others envision alternatives to sexist social practices. Some are examples of what I will call “political art,” and others are examples of “activist art,” terms I will define in the section below.

There is often terminological confusion when it comes to the subjects of activist art and political art. Definitions differ, but as I use the terms, activist art and political art are both engaged with political issues, questions, and concerns. My terminological distinction is indebted to Lucy Lippard, who remarks that “‘Political’ art tends to be socially concerned and ‘activist’ art tends to be socially involved” (1984, 349).⁴ “Political art” is not a broader umbrella term, but instead designates art that explores political subject matter, but is not made in a way that involves political action. “Activist art” also explores political topics, but is distinguished from political art in its greater concern with the politics involved in both the creation and the reception of the art. Activist artists actively seek public participation in both areas, and generally do not make a sharp distinction between the process of creating a work and the product. Activist art is, therefore, political in two senses, while political art is political only in its subject matter. As we shall see, this makes activist art the more common target for those who oppose bringing political concerns to one’s art-making.

CONTEMPORARY ART CRITICAL APPROACHES TO
ACTIVIST ART AND POLITICAL ART

When it comes to combining art-making and political concerns, art critics and theorists tend to sort themselves into two different and quite distinct camps. The first camp believes that art and politics should not be combined in ways that involve artists making art about politics, artists working in their art toward political change, and artists working with activists in their art-making. The second camp finds these combinations of art and politics to be unproblematic, but its members' focus in their analysis and discussion of such works almost entirely on their activist features, paying little attention to the artistic dimension of the works or to the interaction of art and politics in a given work.

From Georg Lukaçs (1992) to bell hooks (1995), some art critics and theorists have argued against those who belong to the first camp. They claim that those who condemn activist art, and those who are opposed to connections between art and politics more generally,⁵ are motivated jointly by their opposition to the specific politics involved and their inability to see that maintenance of or complicity with the status quo is itself political. Diego Rivera claims that those who celebrate art for art's sake and decry political art either pretend to be apolitical or fail to realize their political complicity with the bourgeoisie (1992, 405–406). Lukaçs argues that “in bourgeois literary theory . . . a text is seen as displaying ‘tendency’ if its class basis and aim are hostile (in class terms) to the prevailing orientation” (1992, 395). Similarly, George Grosz and Wieland Herzfeld argue that those who condemn political art do not recognize that “at all times all art has a tendency, that only the character and clarity of this tendency have changed.” They continue to observe that the reproach that an art work has a political tendency is usually hostile to the particular political direction of that tendency (Grosz and Herzfeld 1992, 452). bell hooks observes that the dismissal of overtly political work is most likely to occur when that work is “created by individuals from marginalized groups (particularly people of color or folks from poor backgrounds.” (1995, 138).

This explanation is partly right. As an article by Robert Brustein, professor, theatre director, and longtime drama critic for *The New Republic*, illustrates, some critics clearly wish to condemn any intersection of art and social goals. He writes, “Culture is not designed to do the work of politics” (1995, 252). However, the specifics of Brustein's arguments make clear that he fears that, in the attempt to combine culture and politics, increased attention to African, Asian, and Hispanic cultures has minimized the importance of a European cultural heritage (1995, 253). While Brustein speaks generally of “culture,” he is most concerned to condemn specifically political art-making. His account of ways in which various contemporary artists merge art and politics reduces the politics of inclusion to the aim of raising minority self esteem (1995, 252).

Brustein is clearly opposed, therefore, to the specific political goals involved in the measures he condemns, and he sees them as threatening previous types of public and private funding practices for the arts. These funding practices were themselves tacitly influenced by unacknowledged social and political goals and assumptions, including an equation of European-influenced culture with culture *per se*.

Brustein attacks the combination of art and politics in the name of artistic freedom. However, this very combination may be required to permit artistic freedom. As bell hooks observes, "Ironically, those individuals who are most mired in perpetuating coercive hierarchies often see themselves as the sole champions of artistic freedom. To truly champion artistic freedom we must be committed to creating and sustaining an aesthetic culture where diverse artistic practices, standpoints, identities, and locations are nurtured, find support, affirmation and regard" (1995, 138–39). It is precisely these commitments that Brustein claims threaten artistic freedom. He fails to acknowledge that artistic freedom may need to be nurtured, and that political measures designed to sustain the kind of aesthetic culture hooks writes about are helping to achieve an artistic goal.

It may be tempting, therefore, to conclude that Brustein's politics suffice to account for his opposition to the notion that art may do the work of politics, and to conclude that other critics' opposition is similarly based. However, there are other significant reasons why Brustein, and critics generally, are opposed to conjunctions of art and politics. Their opposition is due primarily to two factors: their conception of politics (a conception I would argue is impoverished), and their understanding of the dynamics of artistic imagination.

With regards to the former, political groups are seen to require homogeneity and mindless obedience from the individuals who are their members. Brustein, for instance, focuses on interest group politics and observes that an interest group "must display a common front. And this often means suppressing the singularity of its individual members and denying what is shared with others" (1995, 256). Individuality is opposed by Brustein to mindless group-think, and only those artists who express their individuality are thought to be capable of making good artistic work. This idea of art as expressing "the consciousness of a single artist who 'sees' differently from his fellow men" is, however, problematic, as Estella Lauter and others have argued (1990, 21). Brustein not only makes this assumption but also goes on to accompany it with a view of politics whereby involvement with a group inevitably compromises one's individual artistic perspective. For Brustein, political art illegitimately requires the individual artist to subordinate his or her self and imaginative powers to the group cause. As a result, Brustein regards working with political groups as threatening and certainly never enriching the imaginative powers of the artist.

Donald Kuspit, professor and influential art critic, offers a more extreme version of this view, contrasting the artist with the guru. For Kuspit, the artist

addresses “his” audience as individuals. Gurus, by contrast, deal with groups, homogenous cult-like groups. Gurus speak in “simple platitudes” and present their teachings “in public to the masses” (1993b, 97, 16, 18). According to Kuspit, artists who work with groups are gurus, and they make propagandistic art. Kuspit’s examples of propagandistic art, which “enforce common experience, crowd mentality,” are chiefly feminist, including works by Judy Chicago, Barbara Kruger, Martha Rosler, and May Stevens (Kuspit 1993a, 263).

Feminist art is frequently singled out for this sort of criticism, and critics are eager to praise female artists in particular when the latter condemn feminist art. For instance, John Bentley Mays speaks approvingly of Jackie Winsor’s work: “She shrugs off the overtly feminist, propaganda art stylish in the last decade” as, and here he proceeds to quote the artist, “a very male-oriented thing, with its idea that somehow art has to be right or wrong. My interest goes in the other direction—towards the philosophy of the interior rather than the politics of the exterior” (1994, 114). Yet again, politics—in this case, feminist politics—are seen to be propagandistic rather than exploratory, and the politics are seen as opposed to the “philosophy of the interior.” This is rather ironic given the centrality to feminist thought of the notion that the personal is political.

In striking contrast, when activist artists describe their work, they often stress the danger of thinking of communities as unified, and the concomitant danger of thinking of individuals as belonging to only one community (Gomez-Peña 1994, 217–20; O’Grady 1992, 142; Tsang 1995). Not only do Brustein and Kuspit operate with a simplistic and reduced conception of politics and the relations between individuals and groups, but they also attribute these views to artists who have much more sophisticated conceptions of these issues.

The simplistic view, which understands politics and political groups to be opposed to the personal and the individual, has important consequences when it comes to understanding artists’ creative and imaginative powers. Partly as a result of this simplistic view, these powers are made the possessions of individual geniuses who have nothing to gain from collaborative work with communities. The artists’ personal visions are thought to require protection from the invasion of political groups or concerns. To some extent, this may be seen as a legacy of the Kantian notion of the inspired genius, through whom nature works, and whose activity is seen as radically opposed to rational or intentional activity (see Kant 1951). For Kant, and for those art critics and theorists who follow him on this point, artistic inspiration comes to individuals, not to groups, and individuals can only sully their original visions when seeking to make work that is either collaborative or informed by one’s politics. This is because Kant both locates genius in individuals, and regards genius as entirely distinct from purposeful pursuits, either of truth or of moral and political goals (1951, 151). A political artwork that reflects the view of an individual artist therefore fails on one count, and activist artwork that pursues political goals and involves a

collaborative or consultative process fails on two counts to correspond to this understanding of artistic inspiration.

For Kant, the genius is a product of nature: “Genius cannot describe or indicate scientifically how it brings about its products, but it gives the rule just as nature does. Hence the author of a product for which he is indebted to his genius does not know himself how he has come by his ideas; and he has not the power to devise the like at pleasure or in accordance with a plan, and to communicate it to others in precepts. . . . Hence it is probable that the word ‘genius’ is derived from genius, that peculiar guiding and guardian spirit given to a man at his birth, from whose suggestion these original ideas proceed” (1951, 151).

In this influential account of artistic genius, creativity and imaginative powers are endowed to individuals at birth, and cannot function in accordance with any rational or directed activity. Artists are considered, as in Plato’s *Ion* (1964), as conduits, whether for the gods, for a muse, or for the workings of a natural gift. In all cases, the source of inspiration is unavailable to reflective consciousness. While Kant himself argues that fine art requires the disciplining power of taste, art critics often seem to operate with a simplified version of Kant, according to which genius is irrational and yet sufficient for making great art. Moreover, even for Kant, taste is entirely separate from the determination to pursue either truth or moral and political goals. The conscious and rational activity of the activist, who seeks to collaborate with a community and to explore political alternatives, cannot coexist with artistic imagination when artistic genius is understood on this model. While this view of artistic inspiration would not condemn someone who created inspired artworks and also worked in collaboration with others on political projects, perhaps even projects making use of those artworks, it does condemn someone who brings either their collaborative or their political work into their art-making.

We must free ourselves from the model of the “lone wolf” artistic genius, and we must stop reducing politics to the bandying about of slogans. Instead we need to explore the potential relevance of activist organizing, work with communities, and political goals, experiences, and concerns to the artistic imagination. In this way we may also come to understand the relevance of imaginative powers to political work. Good activist art works need not convey messages or slogans, aim at conversion, or be propaganda. Instead they may be seen as attempts to initiate dialogue, or to imaginatively explore political alternatives. This is the case in many of the activist works I describe in the next section of this essay, including those of Suzanne Lacy, which are specifically feminist, and those of Carol Condé and Karl Beveridge, which are based on their activist within unions.

At the beginning of this section of the essay, I suggested there were two camps of art critics and theorists with sharply differing beliefs about the appropriateness of making art about politics, artists working in their art toward politi-

cal change, and artists working with activists in their art-making. The first camp is more numerous and more influential. The second camp, smaller in number and less mainstream, is eager to defend the relevance of politics and activism to the arts, but its members too often neglect the artistic dimension of activist art works, or insufficiently explore what it is to combine the sociopolitical and the artistic. They emphasize what activist art work has in common with nonartistic forms of activism, but pay little heed to what activist art has in common with other forms of art.

This minimization of the artistic dimension of activist artworks primarily takes one of two forms. The first approach assumes that the proper answer to the question, "But is it Art?" is: "What does it matter?" For an example of this strategy, see Nina Felshin (1995), who edited and introduced a book entitled *But is it Art?* (1995). Another common approach is to claim artistic credentials for the activist art based on some external authority's recognition of the work as art, as if this is enough to settle the matter, and the art features are not worthy of further discussion.

For example of the latter strategy, we can review Jan Avkigos's (1995) discussion of Group Material, an artists' collective that creates works and curates exhibits on specifically political topics ranging from electoral politics to AIDS activism. Avkigos observes that Group Material members all have an interest in making art (1995, 102) and have been recognized as artists by the Dia Foundation, an arts foundation (1995, 113), but she does not discuss what their artistic element involves (see Avkigos 1995). Similarly, Jan Cohen-Cruz claims of the activist theatre groups she describes that "AFP companies are by and large recognized nationally for their high artistic attainment," they "meet professional standards," and artists bring their skills to the collaboration with a community (1995, 135–36); but it is never made clear what those skills are. While I have already acknowledged, in my discussion of the role that context plays in our responses to artworks, that artistic institutions and personnel play a large part in assigning "art world status" to any work, not just political work, the problem is that claims about art world status need to be explained if an audience already largely unsympathetic to the combination of art and politics is to be able to recognize why the work is artistic. To do this, we need to do more than pay lip service to the artistic aims and achievements of activist and political works.

ENRICHED CONCEPT OF THE IMAGINATION

What we need, if we are to understand what it is to combine politics, activism, and art, is an enriched conception of the imagination. The imagination involves our capacity to think in detailed ways about states of affairs with which we are not immediately acquainted. We can imagine the past and the future,

and we can imagine as well states of affairs that may never or could never exist. Through our imaginations, we can explore both possibilities and impossibilities, and combine things not generally seen as coexisting. It is uncontroversial to maintain that artworks may imaginatively explore patterns, colors, shapes, the movement of bodies, and the interaction of a number of such elements. It should be uncontroversial, as well, to acknowledge that artworks may imaginatively explore moral and political ideas, and the emotional responses they engender. When artworks attempt to explore aspects of our moral and political lives, they may have both artistic and moral or political significance.

With such an enriched understanding of the nature of the imagination, activist and political art can be seen as neither servants of some predetermined political message or slogan nor as needing to be above or beyond politics in order to retain their art character. This will allow us to acknowledge that some political art is simplistic or condescending or propagandistic, without thereby dismissing all ways in which the political and the artistic may be combined. In particular, we will be able to see the ways in which activist and politically involved art may challenge assumptions of inevitability and unsettle perceptions of reality because of the ways in which political work and political explorations inform the artistic imagination. How the audience will respond to this challenge and this unsettling can never be confidently predicted. Nor can we be completely sure that the moral or political consequences will be ones of which we approve.

Because, as I have argued above, activist art work is seen to be even more infected by politics than less activist political art work, I will focus in the argument that follows on activist art work. My arguments, however, as I will indicate below, are intended to function as well to defend both political and activist art against the type of criticisms advanced by Kuspit and others. However, before we can explore the ways art and activism interact with one another within the activist artwork, we need a clearer understanding of the characteristics of such work. Although I will be arguing that the activism and the artistic elements are not neatly separable, in the interests of clarity I will begin by noting, first, features that activist art shares with nonartistic forms of activism, and, second, features that activist art shares with nonactivist art. It should become clear that good activist artworks are characterized by the imaginative way in which they pursue simultaneously political and artistic goals.

To help make this discussion more concrete, I will focus on several examples of activist art, in particular Suzanne Lacy and Carol Kumata's *Underground* (1993), Carol Condé and Karl Beveridge's *Pulp Fiction* (1993), and Peggy Diggs's *Domestic Violence Milkcarton Project* (1991–1992). Many of my examples involve artists who work, sometimes or always, with other artists. I am not in this essay concerned to focus on the distinction between artists who work collaboratively with other artists and those who do not. Accordingly, throughout the remainder

of the essay, I alternate between discussing “artist” in the singular and “artists” in the plural.

ACTIVIST ART: SOME EXAMPLES

Lacy and Kumata’s *Underground* (1993) was temporarily installed in Pittsburgh’s Point State Park. Several feet of railway track were laid. The tracks contained a poem, but to read the poem the spectator had to walk the tracks. Along the tracks were three wrecked cars. On the cars were a wide variety of materials relating to domestic violence: statistics, statements of victims, lists of what victims were able to take with them when they fled their homes. At the end of the track there was located a working phone booth. At the phone booth, the spectator/participant could record his or her own phone message, listen to messages made by others, or make a call and contact a coalition, organized for the project, of volunteers from the police, and the legal and medical professions, and of domestic violence survivors. As Jeff Kelley observes, the phone booth represents the “juncture between alienation and connection” (1995, 247). The audience for the work may be content to view the art work as a spectacle, or members of the audience may pick up the phone and connect with others.

Carol Condé and Karl Beveridge produced their photographic project, *Pulp Fiction* (1993), in collaboration with the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union. They produced ten images, with Condé and Beveridge solely responsible for the production of images. The union provided access to archival material and to workers’ stories about their experiences, and discussed workers’ attitudes toward environmental issues. The images explore apparent conflicts between job preservation and environmental preservation, and expose a history of management complicity with environmental degradation. They are somewhat kaleidoscopic, and combine staged photographic elements with historical images and text. The latter is often in the form of questions.

Peggy Diggs engaged in extensive research and consultation in creating her work, *Domestic Violence Milkcarton Project* (1991–1992), consulting with psychologists, other health-care workers, and victims of domestic violence. As a result, she realized that if her works were to reach those victims, she would have to use a “subtly subversive form of art distribution” (Phillips 1995, 295). She chose milk cartons because they are so commonly found in the home, and because no one expects to find a political work on a milk carton. She pursued several large dairies, worked with one, presenting four archetypes to the board, and included the phone number of the National Domestic Violence Hotline on the carton. The image selected by the dairy included an impressionistic rendering of a hand. The hand formed a semi-clenched fist, suggesting both a hand raised in anger and a hand raised in defense. The accompanying text read, “When You Argue at Home, Does It Always Get Out of Hand?”

THE ACTIVIST ELEMENT IN ACTIVIST ARTWORKS

As the above examples suggest, features that activist art share with nonartistic forms of activism revolve around the artists' concern with issues of public or community involvement in both the creation and the reception of the art. Since activist artists often work with a particular community, they need credibility in that community. It is important to observe, at this point, that the community in question is often a "community of interest." As defined by Condé and Beveridge, a community of interest is "one formed by people who share common beliefs, qualities or interests, even if they live in different parts of the country" (1995, 210). This differs from Brustein's (1995) conception of an interest group because sharing beliefs or interests is in no way taken to demand denying either individual differences within the group or other group affiliations some members of the group may have.

Artists who attempt to work with such a community will not be successful if they are seen as patronizing outsiders who drop in briefly to make an art work. William Cleveland makes this point about the activist art projects he describes in *Art in Other Places*: "The successful programs described in this book gained cooperation by acknowledging their intruder status and by learning the ropes before insinuating themselves into an institution's established routine" (1992, 7). When the artists fail to do so, they often encounter problems.

Activist artists, like other activists, need to demonstrate familiarity with the issues and problems with which they are concerned, and to this end they must often engage in sociological research. As mentioned above, previous to her work on the *Domestic Violence Milkcarton Project* (1991–1992), Peggy Diggs "not only read extensively, but also interviewed psychologists, therapists, and other health-care workers who work with victims subjected to violent behaviour" (Phillips 1995, 291). She also met a number of women who suffered domestic abuse and had extended consultations with two such women. The need to be familiar with issues, to do sociological research, and to confront a topic from a variety of perspectives are a common feature of the modus operandi of activist artists.

A background of political activism and/or familiarity with the community in question are also helpful in establishing credibility. Condé and Beveridge have an extensive history of involvement with the labor movement. Activist artists, like other activists, strive to be sensitive to their collaborators' needs and desires. Condé and Beveridge note that they strive to be open about their motives in working with the community and clear about what sorts of resources they hope the community will provide (Tuer 1995, 203–207). Like other activists, activist artists often need to engage in fundraising, sometimes collaboratively with the community. Diggs's work with major dairies is one example of this. They often need to coordinate events and to seek larger community or government partici-

pation in the events culminating in the display of the art. Activist artists are concerned with how and where and for whom their art is displayed. As Lippard observes, activist artists are concerned not only with “the formal mechanisms within art itself, but also how it will reach its context and audience and why” (1984, 343). The portability and reproducibility of Condé and Beveridge’s works, and their exhibition in workers’ union halls as well as in art galleries is one example of this concern in action, as is Diggs’s choice to display work on milk cartons. Activist artists, like other activists, often need a great deal of media savvy, and they engage in active media manipulation to help bring attention to their work and to create a more favorable funding environment. All of the above artists were keenly sensitive to issues of media representation of their work. Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz, in *In Mourning and in Rage* (1977), and Average Good Looks, in *Homophobia is Killing Us* (1991), are two extreme examples of media savvy. The artists held press conferences, and designed images with the knowledge that they would appear on television.

An important characteristic that activist artists share with the best of their nonartistic activist peers is their attempt to engage the audience for their work in a dialogue. As Paulo Freire observes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, people are not liberated from above, by lectures and slogans (Freire 1986, 58). Such an approach keeps them passive. Moreover, such slogans are generally only effective either if the people are already in agreement with them or if they are subject to the suasion of those with a great deal of power over them, although in some cases they may be helpful in bringing a taboo subject into the public realm. Instead, according to Freire, people are liberated when they come to engage in critical reflection and to participate in public dialogue.

ENGAGING THE AUDIENCE

Activist artists seek, through their art, to engage their audience on multiple levels. Their work is exploratory, simultaneously emotional, cognitive, and sensuous, and is therefore not as likely to lead the audience to an unreflective or knee-jerk political response as would a message, slogan, or item of propaganda. For example, Condé and Beveridge’s *Pulp Fiction* (1993) explored tensions in and asked questions about the relationship between the union movement and environmental activism. The art works did not assert the priority of one type of work over another, or suggest that the two are always easily combined. Similarly, Lacy’s *Inevitable Associations* (1976), in which she had herself professionally made over into an older-looking woman, while older women slowly entered the Biltmore Hotel and surrounded her, did not lecture but instead raised questions about both metaphors of aging women (the hotel was frequently described in the popular media as an aging woman) and the realities of aging. Of course the effect of such art works, compared to lectures and propaganda, is unpredictable,

but as Lippard observes, “Activist artists tend to see art as a mutually stimulating dialogue, rather than as a specialized lesson in beauty or ideology coming from the top down” (1984, 343). It can be very difficult to assess the impact of such works, but it is important to remember that the immediate impact, for example the increased number of phone calls to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, when Peggy Diggs’s work was available on milk cartons, is only part of what activist artists aim towards. The goals of sparking dialogue and debate are much more difficult to measure.⁶

Sabrina Mathews, an artist who has worked on community-based collaborative projects, gives a clear account of this important feature of activist art. Her account is worth quoting at length. She distinguishes amongst three types of artists: (1) artists who make “images which portray the parti-pris, the confidently held position”; (2) artists who express themselves in a visual language that “relies intensely on private symbolism”; and (3) activist artists. The latter, who “want their work to advance ideas and elicit a thoughtful response [,] must develop a creative process” that avoids the traps represented by the two other types of art. She continues: “In planning collaborative community projects, artists must consider carefully how a wide-ranging dialogue can be encouraged during the production and dissemination of the work. When an openness to response is maintained during the process of creation, the images will embody and encourage an ongoing conversation.” In order to do so, she notes, artists must avoid conventional representations of a problem or issue, and they must acknowledge the diversity of views within the collaborative community. They must beware of the dangers of “misunderstanding, assumption and impatience” (1995, 186)

Again and activist artists and those who respond to their works attest to the way in which activist artworks stimulate debate.⁷ They do not view the art works as vehicles for statements or slogans; instead, the audience responds to works whose subjects are presented as complex, and subject to multiple points of view. Njabulo S. Ndebele, for instance, remarks, “There is a difference between art that ‘sells’ ideas to people, and art whose ideas are embraced by the people, because they have been made to understand them through the evocation of lived experience in all its complexities. In the former case, the readers are anonymous buyers; in the latter they are equals in the quest for truth” (1984, 24). The artist Elizam Escobar similarly speaks of his artworks as provocations which stimulate and transform all participants involved. (1994, 52).

ARTISTIC FEATURES OF ACTIVIST ARTWORKS

Now that I have addressed the political agenda and methods of audience engagement characteristic of activist artworks, I can turn to an explicit consideration of their artistic elements. In my discussion, it should become clear that the

imaginative elements of these artworks involve the process in which they are created, their approach to their political subject matter, and their means of addressing this political subject matter within their art practice.

Successful works of political and activist art are imaginative, but the artists' imaginative powers are not limited to working with formal qualities. As Francis Sparshott puts it, we use our imaginative powers to "envisage a world that is interestingly different from our own, but also interestingly accessible from it" (1990, 7).⁸ What differentiates both political and activist artworks from their apolitical counterparts is that they engage imaginatively with political topics and that their creators explore how they are political subjects. As the activist artist collective Group Material explains, "We are interested in using aesthetics and visual culture to convey meaning and suggest alternative ways of imagining society" (1992, 124; see also *Border Art Workshop* 1992, 116). They are not using art as a means of conveying political slogans, but are instead using their imaginative powers to highlight particular and often harmful ways that people interact with one another and to raise the possibility of alternative forms of interaction that might be realizable as a consequence of various forms of political action.

Occasionally, however, there is slippage in the accounts of art critics or theorists sympathetic to activist art between descriptions of activist art works as complex entities that stimulate and provoke debate and claims that activist art works deliver messages. Felshin, for instance, does not clearly distinguish between the two (1995, 10–11). This is often the case, as it is with Felshin, when critics emphasize the activist and deemphasize the artistic elements of such works. This suggests that defenders of activist art may sometimes operate with overly simplistic notions of the role and nature of both art and politics, such that they, like those who attack the very possibility of making activist art, also find it hard to understand how art and politics can be combined. Felshin, for instance, goes so far as to express surprise at artists' ongoing ties with the art world (1995, 19).

In discussing the artistic features of my examples of activist artworks, I have made some references to the artists' intentions. This is because, as I argued earlier in my account of the functionalist nature of art, intentions are one element in the context of presentation of an artwork, and a work's context can draw our attention toward some features and obscure others. We therefore need to look at more than the perceptible features of objects in order to determine if they fulfill artistic functions with excellence. In order to determine this, one of the most important factors we need to know is how an audience responds to the work. Some of the factors that influence audience response are features of the work itself, and products of the artists' activity. These include: (a) the artists' continuing involvement with, albeit often in the form of critique, of the art world⁹—their art training, concern with artistic issues and debates, engagement

with and response to other art works; (b) the artists' manipulation of forms, not necessarily just the traditional media—for example, Mierle Laderman Ukeles's manipulation of traffic vehicles in *RE-SPECT* (1993) and Lacy's "composing with actions and events as well as with materials and spaces" throughout her work (Kelley 1995, 226); (c) a sensuous element to the art works; and (d) the degree to which the artists are innovative, creative, imaginative, and do not produce work that is routine, familiar, and expected. Of course different works will be regarded by different audiences as innovative in this way, just as different audiences will differentially recognize the extent of the artist's/artists' involvement with the artworld and the nature of their political ideas, as well as their involvement with a particular community.

One of the most important factors in determining whether or not the audience for a work is responding to it as a work of art is the audience's complexity of response. Full response to a work as a work of art requires engagement on both emotional and cognitive levels, a response to both forms and ideas. If an audience engages with a work by focusing only on its activist nature, and looks for a political message rather than seeking to engage with an exploration of political ideas, it may miss the artistic nature of the work. Looking for a message from a work is looking for an answer, engaging with a political artwork as an artwork involves receptivity to asking oneself questions and entertaining different potential answers to those questions. If the political nature of the work is either ignored or misunderstood, much of the art work's complexity is left out of the audience's response. As a result, the context in which the works are presented is even more crucial than with nonpolitical works in influencing the audience's response. Audiences must be encouraged to recognize the simultaneously artistic and political aspirations of the imaginative explorations carried out in political and activist artwork.

On my account, artists need not abandon concern with the artistic product because of concern with the process of making art with or for a community. I thus disagree with Felshin's characterization of activist art as "process- rather than object- or product-oriented." (1995, 10). The characterization rests on a false distinction between process and product. Activist artists as a rule do not share "conceptual art's contempt for the art object" (1995, 19). Instead they care equally for both the process of making art and the product produced, and they often see the process as itself part of the product. Moreover, it is precisely the artists' concern with their products that is often key to winning the support of the communities with which they seek to work. This is precisely what Henry Tsang observed of his work with the Chinese Cultural Centre in Vancouver (1995). Concern for the product can win over audience support both when the audience participates in making the work and when the artist seeks to address a particular audience who have not been involved in the process of making it. In the former case, the artist and the collaborative community may be drawn

together by a shared goal of making something worthwhile to be shared with others, and in the latter case an audience may be impressed by the care, attention, and skill the artists bring to their work.

HOW POLITICS INFORMS THE IMAGINATION

There are many different ways in which art and politics interact in the imagination of those who make and respond to works of art. I have already discussed in the pages above why activist art work, which imaginatively engages political issues and communities, may be an effective form of political activism. What I wish to discuss next is the way in which political and activist artists' imaginations may be stimulated and enriched by connection with a community, as well as by research into and reflection on political and social issues and experiences. In the pages that follow that argument, I will make it clear that I am not claiming that artists have to engage with the political realm in order to make imaginative art. I will also distinguish my claims about the potentially liberatory effects of making and responding to activist or political art from wider claims that are sometimes made about the liberatory effects of contact with all forms of art.

One of the areas in which politics and art influence one another is in the stimulation of the artists' imaginations. The artists' imaginations may be stimulated either as they develop a relationship with a new community or as they explore their preexisting ties to a social or political group with which they are already affiliated. In neither case will this involve the artists simply coming to adopt an already fixed univocal community standpoint, even when such a standpoint might exist. B. Ruby Rich, professor, film critic, and cultural theorist, makes a similar point when she argues that "Artists can produce work not solely in the splendid isolation of the individual ego (though it is there, surely that the spark of the work takes hold) but in the call-and-response connection that links each one to some sort of community, however literal or geographic, symbolic or delineated—that might be a community whence the force of the work might arise or be inspired, whereto the finished work might return" (1994, 238).

Many artists give accounts of the dynamics of art production, and the ways in which artistic imagination is shaped and potentially enriched by contact with a community (see, for example, Maxwell 1987, 70, and Sanchez 1991, 97). Of course, because an artist proceeds collaboratively or works with a collective does not guarantee that the collective will be accurately or adequately represented. Mistakes may be made, artists can be duped, and they may be patronizing or too humble. Samples may be skewed such that an artist may mistake contact with a particular subgroup of a community for connection with the broader and more diverse community to which that subgroup belongs. Nor must formal research into a problem and/or community collaboration be undertaken in

order to make politically informed art. The “research” may come more directly in the form of the artist’s life experience—for example, experiences of social constraints, membership in conflicting communities, or the complexities of family history.

Both Yong Soon Min’s *deColonization* (1991) and O’Grady’s *Miscegenated Family Album* (1980/88) are examples of artistically interesting politically informed works that did not arise out of specifically activist work with a particular community as part of the art-making process. Each work is complex. They engage their audience on multiple levels and do not preach but instead raise questions about political issues, with the aim of initiating a dialogue. Contrary to the views of Kuspit, Brustein, and other members of the first camp of art critics and theorists, these artists do not attempt to represent the views and aims of a homogeneous community. O’Grady, for instance, writes that she wants her work to be an example of differences within cultures. In her *Miscegenated Family Album* (1980/88), she employs diptychs to express the complexities of her cultural ties. In multiple images, she writes, “Much of the information occurs in the space between. . . . In my work ‘miscegenation,’ the pejorative legal word for the mixing of races, functions as a metaphor both for the mixed media I employ and for the difficulties and potentialities of cultural reconciliation” (1992, 142). Similarly, Min speaks of the “complex and delicate relationship between Korean and American ways of being, one that is constantly shifting and mutable” (1992, 141). The various elements in her installation—a poem, excerpts from an encyclopedia, a traditional Korean dress, snippets of communication and snapshots from her mother—interact with one another in a way that suggests the complexity of the interrelationship between colonizing and traditional visions of Korean identity among North American female Korean immigrants. These works, far from being about “minority self esteem” or the promotion of slogans, grow out of imaginative responses to intercultural experience. Neither was produced through formal collaboration with a particular community, although the artists are politically involved. Their art is therefore political rather than activist, and violates only one of the prohibitions advanced by the first camp against the involvement of politics in art-making. However, the fact that these artists address their identities as women and as ethnic minorities makes them particularly vulnerable to critics and theorists who think that these groups make demands on their adherents for unquestioning acceptance of some supposed party line.

As should be clear from my discussion of the artworks above, I am not claiming that all artists must work collaboratively in order to make good use of their imaginations in exploring political topics. Neither am I claiming that the artistic imagination has to focus on moral or political ideas to produce good art. I am instead making the narrower claim that collaborative work with communities, sociopolitical research, and reflection upon the political dimension of one’s life

can stimulate and enrich the artist's imagination. It is also the case that artists do stand to benefit from more thoughtful engagement with their work if they are involved in encouraging audience participation and if they attempt to make their work available—including making it available in locations outside of the gallery, and in locations whose hours and accessibility to public transportation make it possible for more people from more walks of life to see their work. Working to make one's art broadly available and encouraging communication with one's audience are practices which benefit all artists who wish to achieve broader appreciation for and understanding of their art work.

MORAL AND POLITICAL IMPACTS OF ARTISTIC IMAGINING

It is important to note that I am not arguing that artistic freedom is inherently liberating, or that to the extent that imagination involves "seeing differently" it will be politically or morally significant for its audience (Hospers 1982, 285–88; Harrison 1991). I do not wish to assume, as do so many artists and art theorists do, that art is morally or politically significant just because it subverts our habitual ways of thinking (see Nussbaum 1998). Cultural theorist and art critic bell hooks seems to me to make just such an exaggerated claim for the power of all art, arguing that art is important because it defamiliarizes, and that activating the imagination in decolonization can act as a catalyst for political transformation. She writes, "Regardless of subject matter, form, or content, whether art is overtly political or not, artistic work that emerges from an unfettered imagination affirms the primacy of art as that space of cultural production where we can find the deepest, most intimate understanding of what it means to be free" (1995, 38). Since freedom of this sort is politically important, she is clearly claiming that all art, both the political and the nonpolitical, is politically liberatory to the extent that it involves the unfettered imagination.

Barbara Hepworth, in her essay "Sculpture" (1992) goes one step further than hooks. While hooks claims that all subversion of habit, whether political or nonpolitical in its subject matter, is politically significant, Hepworth claims that it is especially the nonpolitical artwork that has this liberatory effect. She claims that artists rebel against the world because their sensibility reveals to them an alternative possible world. Apolitical art is privileged because "the language of color and form is universal and not one for a special class" and it gives "the same universal freedom to everyone" (1992, 377). Such claims are not limited to the visual arts. Lydia Goehr makes similar claims about formally innovative music. She argues that to the extent that music makes the familiar unfamiliar, it unsettles the status quo and "Such disturbances help motivate social change" (1994, 107). She continues, "As [Theodor] Adorno suggested, the less music blinks in the direction of society the more it represents it" (1994, 107).

While hooks claims equal power for nonpolitical and explicitly political art, and Hepworth and Goehr claim that nonpolitical art has more power to be liberatory than explicitly political art, Goehr actually underplays Adorno's view, which is representative of an even more extreme position. For Adorno (1982a), it is not that artworks gesture toward social and political problems the more they are politically significant. Instead, he claims that politically committed works are necessarily complicitous with oppression, and that only works which are apolitical in their subject matter can be liberatory (1982a). Alain Robbe-Grillet shares this extreme view and writes that an artist can demonstrate political commitment only in being fully aware of current formal problems (1992, 748).

Adorno, who influenced not only Goehr but also Kuspit and others in the first camp of art critics and theorists, held the view that any art that attempts to intervene in the sociopolitical arena, address political issues, or indeed to communicate any particular thought to an audience is necessarily debased to propaganda. Only art that eschews communication and engages in formal innovation is judged to unconsciously polemicize against its time (Adorno 1984, 7). He explicitly condemns not only works of art that advocate for specific forms of political change, but also works that seek to imaginatively explore alternatives to oppressive practices. For instance, he writes: "It is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives, but to resist by form alone the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men's heads" (Adorno 1982a, 304).

I hope that the arguments show why Adorno is wrong. To assume that formal innovation on its own will have a politically liberatory impact is naïve, as the successful incorporation of avant-garde stylistic techniques within advertising makes abundantly clear. To dismiss all overtly political art for complicity with the status quo is misguided in its conception of the isolated individual as the sole source of opposition to oppression. There is no justification for Adorno's conception of all political activity as corrupt save his distrust of all collectivities. Having argued against these claims at length elsewhere (see Mullin 2000), I will simply note here that Adorno, like Kuspit and others cited above, assumes a radical disjunction between the individual and the mass. There are no politically viable communities for Adorno, only the debased masses. For instance, he writes that: "Collective powers are liquidating an individuality past saving, but against them only individuals are capable of consciously representing the aims of collectivity" (1982b, 299). This leads Adorno to share the Kantian view that individual artistic inspiration can only be sullied by attempts to let one's imagination be inspired by contact with communities, just as he shares Kant's view that artists must not attempt to engage with political topics and ideas in their art-making. Because Adorno believes that art functions in order to spotlight alternatives to the status quo, his claims about the political failure

of politically committed cultural production lead him to view such work as also artistically failed. Kuspit, Goehr, and others in the first camp of critics have been influenced by his claim that straightforwardly political art fails both politically and artistically.

Clearly, I disagree with Adorno's outright dismissal of political art, the view that political art, like other political activity, lacks emancipatory potential. What, then, of the seemingly opposite claims made by hooks and others on behalf of the necessarily emancipatory effects of all art? While I sympathize with hooks's view, I find it overly optimistic. It also obscures the distinctive contribution that political and activist artworks can make. Let me at least briefly explain how.

Certain habits of mind are developed and encouraged both in making and appreciating art. These include habits of being exploratory and fanciful, and abilities to appreciate and generate novelty. However, while art encourages us to explore, to play, and to imagine alternatives, this exploration may be habitually limited to a certain arena. Thus, for example, some artists and those who appreciate their works may limit their imaginative playfulness to exploring the properties of the plane. The likelihood of such a limitation is due to an ability and tendency much encouraged in modern life, the habit of compartmentalizing experience (See James 1950, Horney 1945, and Turner 1987 for accounts of strong social pressure to compartmentalize experience, and detailed accounts of how this proceeds).

To use an analogy, many people develop habits of collegiality, respect, and commitment to others in their workplace, political party, or social circle that do not spill over to their other human relations, and that may make those other relations harsher because of sharp distinctions made between people "with me/in my circle" versus "outsiders/strangers/threats." Habits developed in one area of life are radically at odds with those exercised in another, compartmentalized area.

This is not to say that nonpolitically focused exercises of imaginative freedom cannot spill over in the ways that hooks, Hepworth, and the others claimed above. However, this spillover must be nurtured and encouraged. Instead, it is frequently discouraged by (1) a tendency to keep one's experiences of art sharply separated from other areas of one's life; (2) many critics' ban on or hostility toward overtly politically oriented art, which further encourages keeping one's artistic and imaginative life clearly distinct from one's social and political life; and (3) some critics' cheerful endorsement of the role of art as propaganda. This kind of endorsement of art as propaganda is actively opposed to the encouragement of imaginative political explorations, and to both individual and collective imaginative responses that do not subordinate individual concerns to a party line. All of these discourage, in their different ways, the application of our "liberated" imagination to political topics, ideas, and concerns. This is why

I find even the more moderate view of hooks overly optimistic. This is also why we need political and activist artworks that do engage imaginatively with political subjects in order to encourage us to be politically imaginative, rather than restricting our imaginative life to apolitical topics.

CONCLUSION

Given a proper understanding of the ways in which good activist and political artworks bring art and politics together, we are in a position to appreciate why such works, including feminist ones, are incorrectly equated with 'propaganda.' Both political and activist artists need not compromise artistic integrity to work toward political change or political integrity to achieve their artistic aims. Once we recognize that the imaginative exploration of political ideas may play an artistic as well as a political role, we are in a position to appreciate the offerings of political and activist artists. However, we must remember that these artworks will not always manage to provoke politically salutary ways of rethinking our ideas and our practices. This is not only for pragmatic reasons, for instance, because they fail to reach their audiences or are misunderstood, but also because of the very open-endedness of the imaginative process.

Good political and activist artworks are typically not good vehicles for bringing about predetermined forms of short term political change. Instead, in raising questions, engaging with subject matter that is rarely imaginatively explored in the public arena, and providing nondominant ways of thinking about political conflicts and social problems, they are in harmony with the type of political praxis that seeks to stimulate widespread critical interrogation of potentially oppressive practices and ideologies. An appreciation of the possibility and importance of imaginatively exploring a number of different political ideas, both on our own and together with other members of our communities, can lead us to a new understanding of how political and activist artworks can affect us. This new understanding should encourage us to encounter political and activist artworks in a way that involves our full attention. If we are willing to respond fully to these works, we will respond to them sensuously and also enter into an imaginative space in which we explore the ideas, emotions, and images they suggest. If we do so, we will have given political and activist cultural production an opportunity to excel both artistically and politically, by initiating the kind of questioning and exploration of alternatives that can lead to social and political change.

NOTES

1. There are many different uses of the term “imagination.” I use the term to indicate the creative faculty of the mind, in particular the capacity to create or entertain images and constellations of images and concepts. I am focusing, therefore, on the productive as opposed to reproductive imagination.

2. I prefer the term “artistic” to “aesthetic,” because the latter is sometimes interpreted in accordance with formalist emphasis on properties detectible by our senses alone, such as shape, color, texture, and tone.

3. To this extent I disagree with Peggy Brand’s claim that “at the very least, a characterization of feminist art includes an artist’s intention to portray a politically based ideology of gender representation and gender equality” (2000, 182). Although I think it unlikely that feminist art might be made without any such explicit intention, so long as the artwork did explore issues of sexual inequality and gender misrepresentation I would consider it feminist.

4. It is important to remember that the distinction between the two is a matter of degree. Moreover, activist art and political art are often assumed to be left-leaning or liberatory in their politics, but it is possible for artists to oppose the *status quo* in a right wing or reactionary direction, and to seek to collaborate with community groups who share those politics.

5. In this essay, in speaking of connections between art and politics, and arguments for and against such connections, I am concerned with claims that art needs to be above politics in order to preserve its artistic character. By this it is generally meant that artists, at least in their art making, should not be concerned with political subjects or attempt to achieve political objectives. What is much less in dispute, and not at issue in this essay, is the claim (which I regard as unproblematic) that art is political because everything is political. This latter claim would remind us that who gets to make and respond to art, what is recognized as art, and what is critically acclaimed will depend on sociopolitical factors such as gender, race, class, access to art-making supplies and arts institutions, government funding or private patronage, social support for art-making, suppositions about what kinds of individuals are or should be artists, and so on.

6. To this extent I agree with Willie van Peer’s (1995) argument that Jerome Stolnitz (1991) presents a caricature of the claim that art can influence society, and also with his point that Stolnitz does not look in the right places for the evidence necessary to assess this claim.

7. See Lippard’s (1991, 130) account of her encounter with Adrian Piper’s *Four Intruders Plus Alarm Systems* (1980). See Gretchen Bender and Barbara Kruger’s accounts of their works, *Aggressive Witness-Active Participant* (Bender 1990) and *Why are You Here?* (Kruger 1990). (See Bender 1991, 189; Kruger 1991, 228). Similar remarks are made in Tsang 1995 and Meyer 1995.

8. This is how Sparshott distinguishes the imagination from mere fancy, which is similarly imaginative, but not in a way that is accessible to or connected with the way things are in the world.

9. There is an important difference between critiquing the art world, in which case one is still involved with it, and abandoning or dismissing it.

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