

“Look at me and my oh-so-political art!”

Thoughts on art, activism, and the ingenuity of political art

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1. Nothing is indifferent, art even less so.

There is an ongoing struggle I run into when it comes to art practice, a constant pulling back and forth between the very different, but sometimes also very close practices of art-making and activism. Everything that we choose to do in our lives affects the society we live in in one way or another, either by replicating or reinforcing the political and social system by feeding into it, or by disrupting and going against it. Looking at the world in this way makes everything one does, even if it seems unimportant at first, a political act or stance taking in some way, because even if it isn't inherently political, it positions itself in some way in relation to (or against) the normative system. Nothing that anyone does is ever neutral, and to cite a vastly overused quote from Desmond Tutu “if you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor”¹. When the oppressor is read as the norm giving and rule making and enforcing system, every action that may or may not have a specific motive relates to this whole. It either adheres to these norms, thus (re)enforcing the status quo, or it rejects them. This is not to say that we need to be hyper-aware of every little thing we do, or that in day to day life it is not often the case that the things we do adhere to the status quo. A lot of the time they do and this isn't inherently a bad thing; challenging everything, at all times, is not only unrealistic and destructive on a personal level, but wouldn't always be particularly constructive on the grand scheme of things. But art isn't a byproduct of day to day life that just happens passively- it is something that a person specifically and actively goes out of their way to do.

Consequently, I think that it should be considered how it can (and does), both on a bigger scale and on a scale of the individual practice, artist, and work, relate to the current societal and political structures and issues. Because of my personal motivations towards life I would like to think that the way it connects is (and/or can be) beneficial towards political practice; thus ensues my search for and reflections on the political potential of art and how it relates to activism. Put more straight forwardly: How can art be political and subversive? How can it do this authentically so? Where is the political potential in art? Where is there room for improvement and where are things going very wrong? And finally, can art be activism?

These are not all questions that I intend to definitively answer, but these are the motivation and root of this paper. Ultimately, I am investigating what the point of art can be in this entire context, in a desperate attempt to find a purpose, if there even needs to be one, beyond the work or practice itself.

All of this could very well seem contradictory to the point I started out with about nothing being neutral, but there is a difference between everything affecting the world by default or specifically

making use of something's specifically unique role in society, which is something that I would claim art has, in a fruitful manner. And because everything affects society, it is important to realize how this can be utilized. Otherwise, the effect it has may end up being one that embodies a system that the artist stands against, thus having an outcome that goes against their ideals. This effect and the ensuing hypocrisy is something that can be found in art in instances where the artist has specific socio-politically beliefs and values (for instance anti-capitalist), but has a practice that does not support these ideals (by e.g. accepting and feeding into the market system). Thus, within that motivation, it is relevant to examine how art, specifically, can relate to political motives and how directly it can affect change and potentially be activism.

2. Art vs. Activism

When looking at how art relates to different political practices, it is safe to say that there is a lot of art and art practice that is, or declares to be, in one way or another socially engaged. A lot of the time this "political art", and I put this into quotes because I do not necessarily mean art that has a political impact, but rather art which is seen and labeled as such, revolves a lot around profiling oneself as an engaged artist. This art may be about some social issue, but often is "just replicating the known roles, occupying already defined spaces"², thus not actually challenging the norms or actively changing anything in any significant way. This kind of practice, one could claim, is more self-staging than much else. In part three of this text, I will get back to some examples of this type of political art, which is potentially more harmful than good.

Activism, in essence, always has a goal it aims to accomplish. Because of this, the form it takes follows the objective of what is trying to be achieved. If a simple message is meant to be brought across to a large public the type of action that is taken differs greatly than if it is about the pressing matter of a forest being cleared. One might call for a banner drop, the other could take a more direct form of action such as a blockade or rendering equipment unusable. Activism is strategic; the goal or problem is the focus and then it is decided what form makes sense, is effective, and is realistic, i.e. there are enough capacities for. It is not something that is done in and for itself as a practice, it is a praxis, kind of like a toolbox, consisting of different tactics that can be used in the name of a (social or political) motive.

In art, on the other hand, I would claim that if there is a "message" or a political statement, it is secondary to the form of the work. Art is foremost done for and in itself, as art; what form that takes depends on different factors, essentially coming down to the artist's vision. Unlike activism, there isn't a message that is supposed to be conveyed through any sort of medium; the first "message", or way that it is looked at, is as art. Something being art puts it into a context and creates a lens through which it is perceived, which often also takes it away from "the real world"

in a way. When something is in a museum, gallery, or an art context in general, it is viewed, judged, and perceived differently simply due to its being art. Even if it is about something very real, or very close to reality, which a lot of art is (because how could anything completely be about something that isn't close to reality?), it still carries with it a lot more than the content of the piece.

If there is a Hollywood movie about a war, the way that the viewers look at it is a lot different than if it were a documentary. With art and activism this is similar, even if in content they are both about the same thing. This is not to say that art is “fake” when compared to forms of activism, or to downgrade it in any way, but the role it plays and the way in which it is perceived is simply a different one.

Further, unlike in activism where a lot of the time (though most definitely not always) reaching a broad mass is desirable, when it comes to art the audience is usually prepared for it in the sense that they know that what they are looking at is art, and are often even looking at it with the specific intention of viewing art. According to George Dickie's tautological definition of art, the public, who are viewing the work of art “is a set of persons the members of which are prepared in some degree to understand an object [the artwork] which is presented to them”³. This is not the case in activism, which is most of the time unexpected or involuntary to the people who are confronted with it, who are not partaking or showing solidarity themselves.

Because art is (about) art, and activism is about making a point, one thing cannot be both at the same time. Of course the art that is art can also make a point, or be socially engaged, or have a political context or message of some sort that it thematizes, but I would argue that there is a difference between being *about* something and *being* the something or the thing that resists and disrupts it.

Thus, where activism is solely about the message or goal (which of course does not exclude it from being criticized for its form) art is a sense in itself. The first thing that makes something art is it being art, not it being about a specific something. Activism a means to an end.

3. “Political art” and “socially engaged artists”

This is where art which thematizes social or political issues comes in. I think it is easy to fall into the trap of making art about some terrible thing out of a privileged situation only because it sells or seems like the cool thing to do; making “political art” as a type of genre, not art that necessarily has a political effect or goal at heart. When this is the case I would not only say that it is not truly political, or at least not sincerely so, but also that it is appropriating other people's oppression for personal benefit and gain, which can be harmful to those affected and reproduces a system of exploitation. Of course it is also possible to be pro capitalist, neoliberalist, or a supporter of exploitative or anti-emancipatory politics that are racist, sexist, classist etc. but in this text I am

referring to a left understanding of social engagement, politics, and activism as I would claim that this is what most artists, at least to a certain extent, (claim to) have.

One piece I would like to briefly bring up in this context is George Segal's commissioned work *Gay Liberation* (1980), which stands across from the old Stonewall Inn in New York, where in 1969 the Stonewall riots, marking a major event in queer history and the fight for LGBTQIA+ rights, took place. The piece consists of four white figures out of bronze, two women and two men, depicting two homosexual couples innocently touching each other. On the one hand, this could be seen as a political piece commemorating an important place in history, but on the other there is much to be criticized and the question of how authentic to what it is presented to be arises. Because of reactions from the public, the piece was not actually placed at its final destination until 1992, by which time "[...] gentrification had priced most queers out of Greenwich village anyway; in the face of government indifference to AIDS deaths, gay communities everywhere had been obliged to educate themselves about safe sex and bury their own; and the Gay Pride marches that had enabled *Gay Liberation* to be cast in bronze were under attack as sell-outs to corporate interests."⁴ Further, the figures in the piece are all read as white, cisgender people, which has little to do with historical accuracy or commemorating those who were on the forefronts of the Stonewall riots: transgender women of color. In regards to all of this the piece seems more like a showcasing, for and by people unaffected by the issues that the queer community faced, of progressiveness. But how progressive, political, and actually supportive/helpful to the community is it really, when what's being shown and tolerated are homosexuals as close to heteronormativity as possible? What's being commemorated is not the actual people who fought at the riots, but a created version of queerness that's more tolerable and socially acceptable; white, cisgender, and family friendly.

The criticism of *Gay Liberation* was revived in 2015, when Miss Major, a black transgender woman who was at the Stonewall riots, criticized the white- and cis-washing of the riots, which the piece takes part in. In reaction to this two activists painted the figures with brown paint and put bras and wigs on them, making a point of the fact that the piece erases its history and commemorates the people who were actually at the struggle⁵.

What was the real goal of Segal's piece in this instance? Is this even relevant or is what's relevant the effect that it has? Can it claim to be authentic to whatever political statement it is meant to be making, if any?

The action taken by the activists is very straightforward, since activism is goal oriented; it makes the statement that it is intended to and that's it.

I am not saying that art cannot be political, or have a message, or that it can't possibly do so well, but there are other factors, and potential hypocrisies, that can be involved; people directly benefiting from it (financially), being able to present themselves in a positive spotlight, etc. Because of this any "political art" needs to be examined closely, and not just stamped off as being oh-so-progressive, and thus good and unable to do any harm. This is of course not to say that

activism and the form it takes should not and cannot ever be critiqued, but the points for this are different ones.

Of course, this piece and the events surrounding it are also just one example, but these questions can be applied to and examined in a lot of works. What I think is important here is to reflect on the authenticity of the politicalness of the art that one is looking at, and not just make assumptions that everything is as it presents itself, but this should be a given for pretty much everything, not just art.

4. Sometimes the personal is political regardless of intent

There has been, and always will be, art that is part of bigger social movements. Since art is part of culture it is only logical that it plays a role in every group or subculture and that people in that belong to these groups also make art.

One aspect of a lot of movements, when they center around marginalized or oppressed groups of people, is representation and visibility. This, in popular culture, could be diversity in race, gender, sexuality, ability, class etc. of the characters in a television series, or it could be more direct in not only being diverse, but by specifically claiming space for something that isn't the socially accepted norm- making a point of that in itself. The art world, much like the rest of our society (by this I am referring to what is considered "western" society, since I do not wish to speak on behalf of something that I do not experience) is dominated by white men^{6,7}, arguably straight and cisgender men at that. Because of this, something that does not abide by this standard, whether by content or creator, can be subversive even if it may not directly even be trying to be. By putting something in the spotlight that is not usually shown it demands attention, which not only helps normalize it over time, but also in itself highlights the fact that it is usually erased or oppressed. Further, it can help validate and legitimize people or specific sets of experiences.

For example, Duane Michals' work *Chance Meeting* (1970) consists of six photos which depict two men walking past each other and then both turning to look at the other; whether or not they see the other turning around is unclear. If the work had shown a man and a woman, there would most likely not be anything political about it, it is something of everyday life, desire, chance etc., but this is not the case. Since the people depicted are both men, the work automatically also gets placed into another context for not following the codes of heteronormativity. Interesting to point out along these lines is also that Michals himself has said: "I feel the political aspirations are impotent. They can never be seen. If they are, it will only be by a limited audience. If one is to act politically, one simply puts down the camera and goes out and does something"⁸, showing that he is not a believer in "political art", but presumably would rather, like I argue in point two of this text, agree that art and activism are two separate practices. At the same time, his art is automatically political, or at least put into this context, due to its deviation from the norm. This is of course just one example, but I think it makes the point that I am trying to make clear.

An art practice can be political without making a point of it, i.e. not being labeled or labeling

oneself as such. Some things, because they in themselves defy and challenge the norm to a point where they potentially become subversive, are inherently political. Simply through using visual codes that pertain to a certain group, or making identities or experiences visible, things that may for the artist just be a normal part of their life become politicized because they do not reproduce the given rules. Whether or not this is intended and used specifically, or whether it just automatically comes with the artist being true to themselves and their experience is irrelevant in its effect.

In a way, this boils down to the well-known notion of the personal being political, coming back to part one of this text. The widely used slogan “We’re here and we’re queer! Get used to it!” is a great example of this; sometimes just being something and making that visible is taking a stance. This, of course, is not to say that being actively politically engaged is in any way unnecessary, quite the contrary; in a world where some people’s realities and lives are marginalized to a point where claiming space for themselves is seen as political there is a lot we need to be fighting for.

5. Art practice as personal autonomy

As mentioned before, everything takes a stance in relation to existing power structures by either embodying or rejecting them. Without taking the art market and current valuing system into account, art has the potential to be inherently political, regardless of what it is about. Capitalism runs on people being exploited in order to create profit, being expandable as soon as they are not able to do so in an economically profitable way anymore, i.e. when they are too unproductive. Thus, being a productive member of society is a priority to keep the system running. Technically when not commodified, making art is something that is generative- taking up time, effort, etc., but (without looking towards the market) aimless, productivity-wise. This comes back in the very stereotypical question of “but how are you going to earn money after you finish studying?” or “what are you going to do with your life?” because what could anything be worth, if it doesn’t create profit? Making art is something that one does not do in order to survive, in a capitalistic sense, like working a nine to five job that only wears one down to make money, but something that initially, I would claim, one does for oneself out of self-motivation. Art is something that emphasizes the individual’s personal wants, needs, and free will without pertaining to a bigger, unified goal. From this standpoint, art could be anti-capitalist and ultimately a big middle finger to the system we live in, radicalism by personal freedom.

This of course, is not currently the case for a lot of art since the art world, with its market, reinforces and embodies the ideals of capitalism by commodifying art and having widely accepted neoliberalism; “[artists] replicate it’s structures and its values [...] this ultimately undermines any prospect for a radical or disruptive art”⁹. With its political potential, making art, out of pure self-motivation and against all norms telling us to be a productive, goal oriented, member of society, can be an act of resistance in a system that favors profit over people. The practice of making art can be a stance in itself when it is actively positioned against the system.

Artists can try to free their practice and work from these outside norms and rules, and make the activism in art for the art itself. If it is managed to free art from these constraints it can stand up in defiance and disrupt the status quo regardless of what it is about and how “socially engaged” it is or isn’t.

Sources

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⁴ *Art & Queer Culture* (2013), Catherine Lord & Richard Meyer, p. 31

⁵ "Anonymous Activists Just Painted The Stonewall Statues Brown For Miss Major", *autostraddle.com* (2015), Audrey
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⁹ *This is Not Art, Activism and Other 'Not-Art'* (2013), Alana Jelinek, p. 18