Art and the Struggle Towards Liberation: An Activist Art Historiography

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Introduction: Defining the Parameters

What is activist art? Can Courbet's Realist paintings where he depicted the plight of the commonfolk under the three-estate system, or Goya's *The Disasters of War* (1810-1820) that, albeit being commissioned by the King, displayed war's cruel brutality, be categorized as activist art? Is art that relays and/or embodies revolutionary ideals, whether they are directly about contemporary politics and social structure, such as El Lissitzky's *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*, or about more subtle issues, such as the methods of production for art, materialized in Duchamp's *Fountain*, necessarily also activist? Is all community art, also activist art, given that it is "a form of symbolic social action (that) implies further social action"?[1] If activist art is that which promotes powerful counternarratives that challenge hegemonic discourse, as *The Routledge* Companion *to Art and Activism in the 21st century* editors Shipley and Mey-Yen Mouriuchi suggest, can one not categorize all art that is created by marginalized artists as activist art? [2] What are the strategies that are unique to activist art which require a disparate categorization of the practice? Is activist art, which materialized as a distinct practice in the 1960s, still an effective methodology to engage with sociopolitical concerns and to bring about substantial change? These are some of the questions that drive this historiography, which, while keeping the answers open-ended, investigates the roots of the practice in different artistic and political movements. In doing so, it presents an anatomy of the discussions that have been taking place since the 1960s around activist art as it is practiced primarily in the North American context.

A conducive methodology that helps one define the characteristics of elusive phenomena such as activist art is to identify what it is not. In 1946 George Orwell

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[1]Eva Cockcroft, John Pitman and James Cockroft, *Towards a People's Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1977), 73.

[2] Lesley Shipley and Mey-Yen Moriuchi, eds. *The Routledge Companion to Art and Activism in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 2.

famously asserted that there can't be any literature that is free from political bias. "The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude," he warned.[3] Today, it is equally if not more so important to acknowledge that all art, even art that strives to be apolitical, cannot escape the confines of the political (that which relates to the social body). *L'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake) the conception of art as a disparate activity from the rest of social life, is a notion that emerged and became prominent with the rise of the bourgeoisie (who had both the disposable income and leisure time to engage with, enjoy, and patronize art in the newly established art galleries) in the nineteenth century, and despite the reign of the postmodern period, it remains prevalent to this day. As curator Will Bradley cautions in his introduction to *Art and Social Change: A Critical Reader*, this "guiding principle" of modern art which delineates art from life serves particular interests above others: "By positing art as somehow outside or above meaningful political engagement and also as dependent upon the perpetuation of existing economic conditions and social relationships, it serves conservative social and political forces, no matter how radical it might appear from a particular aesthetic standpoint."[4]

That all art is ineluctably political complicates the endeavour to establish the parameters of the practice that is called activist art, used to describe a diverse body of work that, according to Lucy Lippard, one of the first scholars to implement the term, share "the way style and aesthetic are deeply entwined in the social structures in which they operate."[5] Referred to also as new genre public, relational, social practice, participatory, interventionist, socially engaged, and dialogic art, activist art is a broad term used to describe works that utilize human participation as an artistic means to address issues of political and/or social injustice such as mass incarceration, racial

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[3] George Orwell, "Why I Write" *Gangrel* no.4 (Summer 1946), https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/why-i-write/.

[4] Will Bradley and Charles Esche, eds. *Art and Social Change: A Critical Reader* (London: Tate Publishing, 2007), 9-10.

[5] Lucy Lippard, "Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power," in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 344.

justice, gender equality, LGBTQIA+ rights, reproductive rights, climate emergency, war, and revolution, amongst other concerns.

Crucially, activist art does not stop at alluding to these issues but – in ways that will be explored in this essay –works as a catalyst to *activate* participants and audiences to implement tangible change.[6] This is why the Guerilla Girls's posters that demand an increase in the number of women artists in art institutions are championed as activist art when Jenny Holzer's similarly text-based visuals, such as *Inflammatory Essays* (1979-82), where she presents the inner thoughts of individuals from vastly different ends of the political spectrum, is typically not. Activist art is not only contrarian, as is political art, but goes beyond that by actively opposing a specific socio-politically relevant issue and offering "alternative images, metaphors, and information formed with humor, irony, outrage, and compassion."[7]

As a distinct methodology, a formal strategy that has activist goals, that is "community-oriented, visible, and focused on organizational activities (which) highlight issues of self-representation, empowerment, and community identity, as well as the process through which artist and participant interact with and influence one another,"[8] activist art often (although not necessarily always, as my case studies will demonstrate) takes place in public spaces. In *But is it Art?*: *The Spirit of Art and Activism* (1995), art historian and activist Nina Felshin curated essays by art theorists who investigated what constituted an activist artwork. In her introduction, she pointed out that all the practices discussed were "characterized by their innovative use of public space to address issues of sociopolitical and cultural significance, and to encourage community or public participation as a means of effecting social change."[9] For Lippard too, it is important that activist art takes place outdoors, on the streets, on billboards, store windows, because it

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[6] I will return to how it İs impossible to determine what is activated, and the origin of the activation because some affordances are given, some dances are made, for activist art to even be, later in my conclusion.

[7] Lucy Lippard, *Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1984), 349.

[8] Jennifer González and Adrienne Posner, "Facture for Change: US Activist Art since 1950," in *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, ed. Amelia Jones (Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 213.

[9] Nina Felshin, *But is it Art? The Spirit of Art and Activism* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 9-10.

is inherently people-oriented, anti-classist, and arguably Marxist.[10] These are the spaces where it can be seen (and participated in) by "people who wouldn't be caught dead in a museum, as well as those who would."[11]

Activist art practitioners use their artistic platforms in service of the struggle against oppressive structures at personal, systemic and institutional registers as they work both within and outside institutions. Artists and thinkers who work at the nexus of art and activism provide profound analyses of the unprecedented challenges humanity is currently facing, as well as the potential role that art may play in addressing these struggles. As art historian and activist Yates McKee contends, art contributes an "aesthetic dimension to activism that emphasizes the importance of the sensuous, embodied experiences of sight, sound, and touch in the staging of nongovernmental political claims and in the forging of movement imaginaries…"[12] Activist art, with its address to critical issues of humanity, and, in our mediatized visual culture, accessibility *and* producibility by broad publics, is an important practice that has the potential to move people to imagine and sample a future in which atrophied institutions of governance and regulation have evolved into functional and sustainable systems. As Angela Davis frequently emphasizes in her talks and interviews, this imagination is imperative to envision and create a future (and a present) without racial, economic, gender, class oppression and other discriminatory mechanisms.[13]

Historical Foundations; still defining activist art

Since it was first identified in the 1980s, critics, curators, and theorists have continuously debated, refined and modified the definition of activist art, while also

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[10] Marxist because it is anti-classist and people-oriented (and driven), and also because it is structurally and ideologically anti-institutional even when it operates within institutions. I will go into more detail on this later.

[11] Lippard, *Get the Message?*, 206, https://monoskop.org/images/8/88/Lippard_Lucy_Get_the_Message_A_Decade_Of_Art_For_Social_Change.pdf

[12] Yates McKee, *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition* (Verso: London, 2016),

[13] Angela Davis, *The Meaning of Freedom: And Other Difficult Dialogues* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2012), 66, 154-155. Angela Davis, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 67, 89, 113.

tracing the progression of historical events to accommodate the evolving ways in which art has functioned as a means of activism.[14] As González and Posner suggest, it is crucial to consider the historical context of activist art to effectively engage with the challenge of uniting art with sociopolitical struggle.[15] Political art is frequently linked to the emancipatory accomplishments of modernists, which the authors, following Lippard's lead, describe as the revolutionary cultural vanguard, who combatted the suppressive inclinations of a moralistic bourgeois society through their artistic practices.[16]

Modernist art, a term that covers a wide range of practices, is characterized by certain fundamental principles that The Tate Museum identifies as: "a rejection of history and conservative values (such as realistic depiction of subjects); innovation and experimentation with form (the shapes, colours and lines that make up the work) with a tendency to abstraction; and an emphasis on materials, techniques and processes."[17] In his germinal 1960 essay "Modernist Painting" formalist art historian Clement Greenberg, surveying artworks produced from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, observed a tendency towards self-reflection and self-critique that takes its roots in the philosophy

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[14] Lucy Lippard, Get the Message? *A Decade of Art for Social Change* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1984); Nina Felshin, ed. *But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995); Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 51–79; Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells* (London: Verso Books, 2012); Nicolas, Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002); Lieven de Cautre, Ruben De Roo and Karel Vanhaesebrouck, eds. *Art and Activism in the Age of Globalization* (Rotterdam: NAi, 2011); Tom Finkelpearl, *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2013); Grant Kester ed. *Activism and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community + Communication in Modern* Art (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, eds. *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985* (Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995); Yates McKee, *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition* (London: Verso, 2016); Craig J. Peariso, *Radical Theatrics: Put-ons, Politics, and the Sixties* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014); Nato Thompson, ed. *Living As Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011* (New York: Creative Time Books, 2012). Lesley Shipley and Mey-Yen Moriuchi, *The Routledge companion to art and activism in the twenty-first century* (New York: Routledge, 2023).

[15] González and Posner, "Facture for Change," 213.

[16] González and Posner: "Yet the terms "political" and "activist" are not synonymous. Lucy Lippard's distinction between these concepts proves instructive here. She suggests that 'political' art is often associated with the liberating achievements of modernists – the radical cultural elite – in their struggle against the repressive impulses of a puritanical bourgeois society." "Facture for Change," 212.
Since prior to the modernists, "the radical cultural elite," which I interpret as the avant-garde, was the Realists, I consider the paintings of Courbet etc. from late 19th century also as "political art."

[17] Tate Modern, "Modernism," https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/m/modernism

of Immanuel Kant. He explained that while pre-modernist artists were interested in creating representations that would be so realistic that they would transcend the two-dimensional quality of the canvas, modernist artists were not as interested in the illusionistic quality of painting but with experimenting with the flatness of the surface, thereby engaging the medium rather than attempting to conceal it. Whereas Old Masters treated any elements that constitute the medium of painting, such as the granulation of the pigment or the shape of the support which might detract from the experience of the artwork as an accurate representation of reality as a detrimental factor, Modernist artists regarded them in a playful and positive manner in order to accentuate the essential qualities of painting. Due to its critical self-reflexivity (the Self/ the body considering its positionality and relations to its social environment – the political body), and despite Greenberg's own commitment to the supposedly apolitical nature of modernist painting, I am operating under my initial proposal that modernist art is political (however not *necessarily* activist). I will develop my position throughout this historiography to contemplate whether a broader conceptualization of "activist art" might be beneficial to acknowledge and appraise fleeting moments of effected affect as a result of the encounter with the artwork, which arguably can trigger social change, that could otherwise remain unrecognized.

Modernist artists were often motivated by diverse, yet typically utopian and idealistic social and political agendas. Still, Lippard suggests that modernist endeavours gave rise to a collection of art creating methods that are characterized by them occasionally delving into social issues, sometimes being "concerned" with social issues, and typically expressing the artists' reflections through ironic critique. [18] On the other hand, activist art is a distinct cultural form characterized by its utilitarian and hybrid nature that emerged in the 1960s, when postmodernism was being formulated as a reaction to modernism. Modernism was driven by the ideals of the Enlightenment which postulated that "certain ultimate universal principles or truths such as those formulated by religion or science could be used to understand or explain reality."[19] Postmodernism

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[18] Lippard, *Get the Message*?, 313.

[19] Tate Modern, "Postmodernism," https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/postmodernism

rejected such assumptions, favouring individual experience and subjectivity over absolute realities and abstract principles. It emphasized instead lived experience and the complicated, layered meanings that are produced as a result, which are also tenets of activist art.

Posner and González nominate Ben Shahn, who worked for the CIO Political Action Committee and designed posters that aimed to emphasize the tension and inequality between the work force and the capital, as the artist who bridged the gap between the "political" art of the 40s and 50s (and of the modernists) and the "activist" art of the 60s. Shahn's posters included "somewhat romanticized" portraits of renowned figures in the struggle for social liberation such as Ghandi, Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King, as well as those of civil rights workers who were murdered by the KKK. Importantly, they had a specific demand from the audience; they urged the public to register to vote. Shahn's work, exemplified by *We Want Peace* (1946), offered "a model of art that is both explicitly political *and* accepted by mainstream institutions, is interested in the artist's personal liberation as well as the wide-scale enactment of social change, a general form of liberation that works within hegemonic social models."[20]

Activist art differs from political art not only in the methodologies it implements and the levels of engagement it requires but also its style.[21] In her 1984 book *Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change* Lippard differentiates activist art from earlier and concurrent forms of political art, namely Dada, Pop Art, and Punk, drawing attention to the difference between the ways in which they utilize mass media and popular culture. She observes that while Dada "incorporated" mass media through subversive juxtapositions of found images, Pop Art "elevated" popular culture to the status of fine art, and Punk and New Wave "imitated" the content and style of the "sleazier fringes" of mass media, activist art is "not interested in raising low culture to

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[20] González, "Facture," 215.

[21] González, "Facture," 213.

high fashion nor in bringing high culture to the masses."[22] Instead of operating on a dialectical construct that distinguishes high culture (of the few) from the masses (the many), activist art uses people as its medium to challenge the dichotomy itself that privileges the elite over the commonfolk.[23]

It can be argued that given the close, dialectic relationship between activism and dissent, the art historical as well as political avant-garde are necessarily predecessors of contemporary activist art.[24] Futurism, Dadaism, Russian Constructivism, Bauhaus, Pop Art, Punk, Conceptualism, Minimalism, Happenings, Fluxus and performance art are frequently included in activist art's lineage.[25] Institutional critique, artwork that targets museum and gallery practices also has had an immense impact on activist art. The Tate website relays that "[i]n the 1960s the art institution was often perceived as a place of 'cultural confinement' and thus something to attack aesthetically, politically and theoretically."[26] Although most often the institution that is the subject of critique are museums and galleries, one can extend the definition to encompass any institution, and the process of institutionalization, which to me represents being assimilated into a hegemonic structure. The overlaps between institutional art, exemplified by the conceptual work of Hans Haacke, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Lorraine O'Grady, Daniel Buren, and Martha Rosler from the 1970s and 1980s, and activist art is evident in their shared mission to critically analyze spaces and structures of power be them social, political, physical or economic. Indeed, institutional art often functions also as activist art, as evidenced in the works of the Guerilla Girls, The Yes Men, Wochenklausur, and Critical Art Ensemble whose works this historiography will discuss.[27]

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[22] Lippard, *Get the Message*?, 308.

[23] That people are the medium of activist art is my opinion. I will touch upon this point again later in this essay.

[24] Shipley and Moriuchi, eds. *The Routledge Companion to Art and Activism in the Twenty-First Century*, 10.

[25] Since I address these movements in my syllabus on avant-garde art since realism, I will not be discussing them in length here.

[26] Tate Modern, "Institutional Critique," https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/i/institutional-critique.

[27] Shipley and Moriuchi, *Routledge Companion*, 7.

Performance art, Minimalism, and Conceptualism, all of which also emerged in the 60s against Greenbergian formalism – out of the battle between the art object and ephemerality/presence– are formally disparate strategies that converge in interesting ways to shape the practice called activist art. Primarily sculptural, Minimalist artworks incorporated the dimension of space into their reception, which necessitated the presence of a body that perceives space through its temporal relationality to the artwork. Further, as "single, large scale, indivisible, non-illusionist, non-anthropomorphic" constructs, Minimalist sculptures "did not (could not) have meaning in themselves" but required the contribution of the viewer for their aesthetic contemplation.[28] It was these aspects that Michael Fried, in his 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood" critiqued as theatricality. Assessing Minimalist sculpture on a spectrum between works of art and mere objects, Fried deemed it to be the latter. He argued that artworks, unlike objects, have "presentness," or "grace" meaning that "at every moment, the work is wholly manifest" regardless of the presence of a viewer.[29] Fried also "rejected the politics implicit in art that reached beyond autonomous objects into the social and cultural conditions of the viewer's everyday life."[30]

Michael Fried was not the only critic of Minimalism. Performance art, particularly, feminist performance art, challenged the aesthetic assumption of Minimalists that art could be universal, or in other terms, "neutral and disinterested."[31] It instead emphasized embodied and individual experience, which is a critical consideration for anyone engaging with activism. While Conceptualism, using dematerialization as its primary strategy, favours ideas over the material, performance art promotes experience that is necessarily embodied, to produce ephemeral actions. Activist art, which is an activation of liberatory ideas that is (performatively) materialized in direct action and a

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[28] Christine Ross, "The Paradoxical Bodies of Contemporary Art," in *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945,* ed. Amelia Jones (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 384.

[29] Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 167.

[30] Gill Perry and Paul Wood, *Themes in Contemporary Art* (London: Yale University Press, 2004), 201.

[31] Jayne Wark, *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), 28.

practice that requires human participation, is an amalgamation of these trends.[32] Unlike its predecessors however, as curator and art critic Nato Thompson highlights, activist art is not an art movement of an -ism but a "'cultural practice,' indicating a new social order -ways of life that emphasize participation, challenge power, and span disciplines ranging from urban planning and community work to theater and the visual arts."[33] In this sense, contemporary activist art is closely related to the concept of the social sculpture proposed by Joseph Beuys, and, the theoretical and practical perspectives offered by the Situationist International.

Joseph Beuys was a member of the Fluxus movement, a loosely connected collective of international artists, musicians, and designers that formed in the 1960s (and are in existence today) who characteristically wanted to break down all the established norms of modernism in painting, sculpture, film and performance. Whereas Abstract Expressionism focused on emphasizing the individual artistic genius and material form, Fluxus artists' philosophy was to encourage the inclusion of the audience into the artwork, which could take any and all forms, to shift the focus of artistic practice from a spectatorial system to intervention and participation into everyday life. [34] "The common theme of their approach was to undermine the commercial value placed on art, to produce random, cheap, ephemeral, frequently comical artworks and events, and to break down the barrier between art forms, and between art and life." [35] Fluxus artists challenged the authority of art institutions and moved art outside of galleries, discovering new habitats in which art can flourish. An important mission of Fluxus was

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[32] This recalls Leo Steinberg's notion of kinaesthetic empathy, an approach offered by art historian Leo Steinberg who recommended to his students that they physically imitate the poses and postures of the subject matter of an artwork in order to develop, through embodiment, an understanding of the mental state of the person depicted. In the context of activist art, the audience is invited to become an enactor and, through their act of participating in the real and/or affectual zone of the artwork, become the subject matter (as well as the medium) of the work. They are also its interpreter, who in the process create alternative realities to ponder and exercise.

[33] Nato Thompson, *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011* (New York: Creative Time Books, 2012), 23.

[34] Karen van den Berg, Cara M. Jordan, and Philipp Kleinmichel, eds. *The Art of Direct Action: Social Sculpture and Beyond* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019), 33.

[35] Stephen Wilmer, "After Dada: Fluxus as a Nomadic Art Movement," *New Theatre Quarterly* 33, no.1 (February 2017): 59.

to “tend towards a collective spirit, anonymity and anti-individualism,” which, as I will demonstrate, are pillars of activist art. [36]

An important figure in Fluxus was Allan Kaprow, who introduced Happenings to the ouvre of artists who sought to create participatory events that redistributed authorship from the artist to the participants. Happenings came out as almost as “a new form of theater” that resembles collage, a technique that originated in the cubist explorations of Braque and Picasso as well as the ironic juxtapositions of Hannah Höch. Contrary to the common myth surrounding Happenings that they are completely spontaneous, unplanned and unrehearsed events, they were in fact structured events that were pre-planned, but not realized more than once. Strongly connected to action painting and junk sculpture, they were primarily and essentially visual and performative artworks which can include sound and dialogue but “have a nonverbal character.” Happenings are compartmentalized in that they are a culmination of episodic, fragmented events. They frequently involve “nonmatrixed performances” where the actors, who can be the artist and/or the audience, do not claim an artificial persona who is delivering a routine but partake in an action as they are.[37] The nonmatrixed performances contribute to the goal of authenticity, anonymity and collective spirit of Fluxus as well as breaking the barrier between life and art.

Beuys viewed his ouvre as an expansion of the artistic production of the 1960s and shared the Fluxus sensibility that “living art, anti-art, and a nonart reality (should) be grasped by all people, not only critics, dilettantes and professionals.”[38] He was also critical of Fluxus for “(holding) a mirror up to people without indicating how to change things.”[39] According to Karen van den Berg, an editor of *The Art of Direct Action*, Beuys believed that art was the only means with which to create substantial change and

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[36] Julia Robinson, “Maciunas as Producer: Performative Design in the Art of the 1960s,” *Grey Room* 33 (October 2008): 58.

[37] Michael Kirby, *Happenings: An Illustrated Anthology* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1965), 15-20.

[38] Van den Berg, Jordan, and Kleinmichel, eds. *The Art of Direct Action,* 85.

[39] Tom Finkelpearl, *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 21. In a sense, this criticism can be expanded to “political art” in favour of “activist art” which has a specific site and issue of intervention rather than being a vast gesture towards an issue that is necessarily political.

transformation in the world.[40] This perspective, which directly contradicts "modernist assumptions about art's necessary disengagement from 'the masses,'" painted Beuys's art as unique and innovative.[41] Beuys conceptualized art as a utilitarian activity, asserting that artistic production should be proportionate to the need for change in society, lest it be pointless, marking what van den Berg notes is a "decisive turning point" in art history.[42] Alongside the theorisations of Guy Debord and the Situationists International, this point was a precedent to the "social turn" described by Claire Bishop, and "educational turn" alluded to by Irit Rogoff.[43]

Bishop explains "social turn" as the inclination of artists "to produce dematerialized, antimarket, politically engaged projects that carry on the modernist call to blur art and life" from the 90s onwards.[44] Coinciding with the same period, according to Rogoff, is the educational turn which can be identified by the tendency towards conversation in artistic spaces – the changed role of art institutions specifically as platforms that enable people to engage in conversation.[45] Although Beuys himself never completely denounced object-based and spectatorial art, his notion of social sculpture paved the way to what is, in the expanded field of activist art, referred to as "socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, interventionist art, participatory art, collaborative art, contextual art and (...) social practice." [46] The best-known example of Beuys's social sculpture is the *7000 Oaks*

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[40] Van den Berg, Jordan, and Kleinmichel, *Direct Action,* 33.

[41] Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 20.

[42] Van den Berg, Jordan, and Kleinmichel, *Direct Action,* 32-33.

[43] I only briefly mention these turns here as I will delve deeper into these concepts throughout the essay.

[44] Claire Bishop, "Social Turn and its Discontents," *Artforum International* 44, no.6 (February 2006): 179.

[45] Rogoff proposes that these conversations are characterized by parrhesia, a term Foucault offered to describe free speech that is "a verbal activity in which the speaker expresses his personal relation to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself). In parrhesia, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy." Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (New York: Semiotext(e), 2001), 19-20. Irit Rogoff, "Turning," *e-flux Journal* iss. 00 (November 2008), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/00/68470/turning/

[46] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells*: *Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), 1.

project for which the artist proposed to plant 7000 trees across Kassel in Germany between 1982 and 1987. Beuys imagined the project as the first step of an ongoing effort of tree planting across different geographies that would ignite global societal and environmental change and transform human consciousness through direct action.[47]

Joseph Beuys and volunteers planting one of the first Oak trees at documenta 7 in Kassel, Germany (1982).Image from Stephens College.

A contemporary example of activist art that was explicitly inspired by Beuys's concept of social sculpture and direct action is the Grandhotel Cosmopolis, a public space that accommodates asylum seekers alongside German citizens and other travellers in the city of Augsburg where the migration rate is over %40.[48] Converted to a hotel from a home for the elderly in 2012, the space also includes artist studios and an exhibition space and against the backdrop of increasing xenophobia and racism locally

[47] Van den Berg, Jordan, and Kleinmichel, *Direct Action,* 85.

[48] Anna Frech, "The Grandhotel Cosmopolis Augsburg (Germany)" *OnCurating* iss. 25 (May 2015), https://www.on-curating.org/issue-25-reader/the-grandhotel-cosmopolis-augsburg-germany.html

and globally, “sees itself as a form of creative political protest.”[49] At the pointedly named Grandhotel Cosmopolis asylum seekers, guests, artists and activist engage in mutual activities such as cooking and gardening, creating necessary platforms for sociocultural exchange and building generative relationships.

It is not always easy to discern whether a project such as Grandhotel Cosmopolis is categorically grassroots activism or “activist art,” which speaks to how the two practices are inextricably linked, as it was for Beuys. The Situationists shared the same vision. Their goal was the “immediate participation in a passionate abundance of life, through the variation of fleeting moments resolutely arranged.”[50] The Situationist International was an artistic and political movement active in Europe from 1957 to 1972. Concerned with the increasing commodity fetishism in society, the members, who were principally writers and artists, and whose number never reached above seventy, sought to provide a radical critique of capitalist society and to contribute to the progress of a proletarian revolution by abolishing the distinction between art and life.[51]

This ambitious goal was inherited from the Dada and Surrealism movements, of which the Situationists were critical.[52] Indeed, in a public debate titled “Is Surrealism Dead or Alive?”, Guy Debord, who was the main animator of the Situationist International, declared that although it had politically radical foundations, Surrealism had become stagnant from the 1930s onwards due to its intense focus on the subconscious and overreliance on psychic automatism as a productive method. S.I. members sought to retain only the revolutionary and historical materialist characteristic of Surrealism alongside its emphasis on daily lived experience while dispensing with the myth and

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[49] Marielle Zill, “Creating Spaces for Encounter: The Grandhotel Cosmopolis – a ‘social sculpture’ in the heart of Augsburg, Germany” (master’s thesis, Utrecht University 2014), 4, https://studenttheses-uu-nl.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/handle/20.500.12932/17832.

[50] Guy Debord, “Theses on Cultural Revolution,” in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 61.

[51] Alastair Hemmens and Gabriel Zacarias, *The Situationist International: A Critical Handbook* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 3.

[52] Hemmens and Zacarias, *The Situationist International,* 27.

magic that had become associated with the movement.[53] Debord expressed that "(t)he situationist movement manifests itself simultaneously as an artistic avant-garde, as an experimental investigation of the free construction of daily life, and finally as a contribution to the theoretical and practical articulation of a new revolutionary contestation." [54] A brief analysis of the historical context of the movement is imperative to understand what and how this ambitious constellation contributed to the field of social movement activism as well as activist art.

Following the end of WWII, with peace and economic affluence on the horizon, Europe was gripped by an increasing trend of consumerism.[55] With the worldwide markets opening, Europeans of most social classes suddenly had access to commodities they hadn't been able to purchase before, such as televisions and radios that provided access to the increasing influence of mass media. The media, according to Guy Debord, who published *The Society of the Spectacle* in 1967, created a pseudo-need for more of the same for everyone, alienating the individual from their personal choices.[56] He argued that mass media numbed and stupefied workers, who mindlessly devoted the precious time they had remaining after the workday was finished to the spectacle, entrenching their position as the subject *of* capital rather than individual actors with individual preferences.[57]

Performance artist and theater professor Jon Erickson observes that "[i]t is difficult to speak of the SI as an 'art' movement, since it rejected the creation of autonomous art as a worthwhile revolutionary activity."[58] The two artistic strategies that SI engaged in,

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[53] Hemmens and Zacarias, *The Situationist International,* 31.

[54] Guy Debord, "The Situationists and the New Forms of Action in Politics or Art," in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, 159.

[55] Jon Erickson, "The Spectacle of the Anti-Spectacle: Happenings and the Situationist International." *Discourse* 14, no.2 (Spring 1992): 53.

[56] Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014), 20.

[57] Guy Debord, "Report on the Construction of Situations," https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/guy-debord-report-on-the-construction-of-situations, accessed 21 November 2023.

[58] Erickson, "The Spectacle," 45.

détournement (“diversion”), and dérive (“drift”), which are intricately linked to everyday activity, attest to the validity of his statement. Rooted in Dada’s anti-art collages and resembling deconstruction, détournement was a discursive methodology that involved subverting original material produced by mass media by physically manipulating them to reveal the underlying capitalist ideology and its detrimental effects on the human consciousness and wellbeing.[59]

“In a dérive one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there.”[60] Dérives differed from Surrealist strolls in that they were mindfully less chance-dependent.[61] Those who engaged in it acknowledged the “psychogeographical contours”, the limitations and obstructions, of the territory they traversed, “to contribute to a knowledge of the city in order to continuously alter its shape for the sake of its inhabitants.”[62] Even though the only audience to a dérive were those who engaged in the act themselves, these performances, as they are categorized by Erickson, were followed by an exchange of experiences amongst members who published their review, *Internationale situationniste,* to acquaint the public with their revolutionary practices and resulting insights.[63]

The literature produced by the S.I., particularly Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, was immensely impactful on especially the French youth whose occupation of universities was a major force in the mass strikes that took place in France in 1968, a year after the book was published. S.I.’s influence was not only contemporaneous. During the 1990s, when the anti-globalization movement was at its peak, a notable surge of Situationist influence occurred in Spain. The literature of Guy Debord and other

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[59] Erickson, “The Spectacle,” 46.

[60] Ken Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: The Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), 50.

[61] Erickson, “The Spectacle,” 47.

[62] Erickson, “The Spectacle,” 47.

[63] Erickson, “The Spectacle,” 45, 49-50.

Situationists were circulated widely, and as journalist Sergio C. Fanjul observes, they galvanized the autonomism and “okupation” movements which were thriving at this time. [64]

Contemporary activist art is a practice shaped and informed by the student movements, anti-war movements, civil rights movements, women’s rights movements, gay and lesbian movements, and the solidarity movements with anti-colonial national liberation struggles in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Australia, and the Americas that took place in the 1960s. Feminist and socialist theory and practice laid the foundations of contemporary activist art both in terms of form and content. As Lippard observes, the collective structures that are operational in activist art are imbricated with socialist and feminist practices and techniques, namely, consciousness raising, going around the circle with equal time for all speakers, and criticism/self-criticism, on which the Women’s Movement is based. These structures have evolved into three distinct models of interaction that socialism and feminism offer for art, which are also central to activist art. Lippard lists these models as: public and/or group ritual; consciousness raising and interaction through visual images, performances and environments; and anonymous, collaborative or collective art making.[65]

The emergence of activist art is inextricably linked to the emergence of performance art in the 60s. As Lippard asserts, “(t)he progressive artist’s move from social concern to social involvement is embedded in performance art’s own relatively short history.”[66] Performance art pioneers of the 1960s, including Lil Picard, Mike Kirby, Carolee Schneemann, Martha Rosler, Yvonne Rainer, and the Guerilla Art Action Group (GAAG), were directly influenced by political events and actions. Numerous highly impactful artworks were created collaboratively and occurred during large-scale protests against the Vietnam war. For example, in New York, the Art Workers' Coalition (a group

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[64] Fanjul, Sergio C. Fanjul, “Guy Debord, the French Marxist theorist who dissected the ‘Society of the Spectacle.’” *El Pais* (September 12, 2023), https://english.elpais.com/culture/2023-09-12/guy-debord-the-french-marxist-theorist-who-dissected-the-society-of-the-spectacle.html?event=regonetap&event_log=regonetap&prod=REGONETAP&o=regonetap

[65] Lippard, *Message*?, 153-154.

[66] Lucy Lippard, *Message*?, 314.

of 60 artists and activists) displayed banners with the names of thousands of Vietnamese and American dead, along with black body bags, resembling a funeral procession. This form of performative activism was employed also by individuals such as social activist Abbie Hoffman who burnt a five-dollar bill at the Financial Center in New York in front of cameras, as well as groups like the Youth International Party (Yippies), the Black Panthers, and the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA).[67] It targeted, and/or attracted the attention of mass media, and invited participation from the public.[68]

Deliberate "outrageousness" characterized many left-wing political activists in 1960s North America, who engaged in participatory actions such as burning draft cards or bras, and staging naked protests.[69] An example of such early activist action is Yayoi Kusama's series of happenings entitled *Anatomic Explosion on Wall Street* which incorporated the polka-dot covered naked bodies of the artist and participants. Each performance was accompanied by a series of manifestoes and press releases that expressed the artist's anti-capitalist political stance. One read:

"Burn Wall Street. Wall Street men must become farmers and fisherman. Wall Street men must stop all of this fake 'business.' OBLITERATE WALL STREET MEN WITH POLKA DOTS. OBLITERATE WALL STREET MEN WITH POLKA DOTS ON THEIR NAKED BODIES. BE IN … BE NAKED, NAKED, NAKED."[70]

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[67] Craig J. Peariso, *Radical Theatrics: Put-ons, Politics, and the Sixties* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 3-5,47.

[68] Felshin, *Is it?*, 18.

[69] Peariso, *Radical Theatrics*, 3-5.

[70] Actipedia, "Anatomic Explosion," https://actipedia.org/project/anatomic-explosion

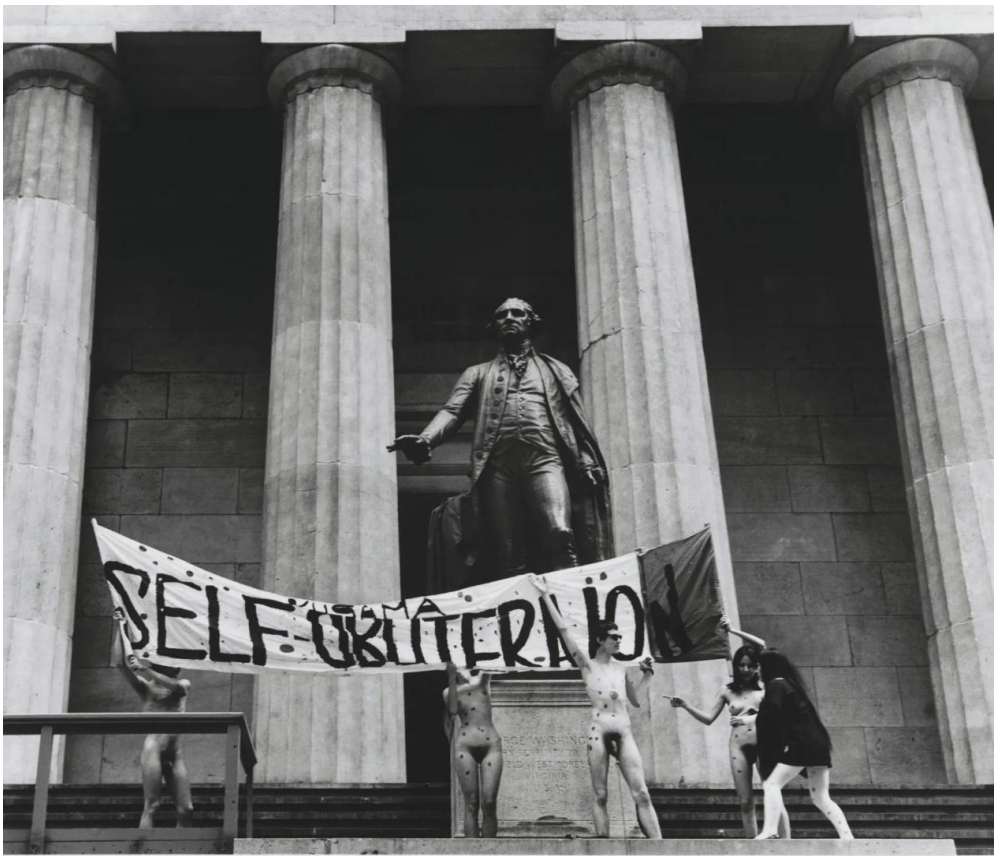

Figure 1Yayoi Kusama, Anatomic Explosion, New York, 1968.

Regrettably, such activist performances were frequently disregarded by art critics as being simplistic, sensationalist or disconnected from reality. Alternatively, they were criticized for utilizing techniques that were deemed foolish and unappealing to the wider population. In his book *Radical Theatrics*, Craig Peariso contends that the extravagant performances were not merely impulsive actions driven by the self-indulgent radicalism of artists and activists. Instead, he demonstrates that these responses were well thought-out artistic and political reactions to a weary cultural environment, in which a “putative tolerance” concealed a reluctance to confront thought-provoking concepts.[71]

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[71] Peariso, *Radical Theatrics*, 4.

Performative activist action and performance art that critiqued hegemonic oppressive systems and regimes were popular globally in the 1960s. As Frederick Jameson noted in “Periodizing the 1960s,” what characterized the period was not “some omnipresent and uniform shared style or way of thinking and acting, but rather the sharing of a common objective situation, to which a whole range of varied responses and creative innovations is then possible.”[72] Some other examples of activist artists developing collectives include Milan Knížák, a member of Fluxus and a pioneer of action art in Central and Eastern Europe, who formed the contemporary art group Aktual which put emphasis “on the liberation of human thinking and behaviour from the thrall to the mechanism of life controlled by the political power of the communist regime.”[73] In Japan, artists Genpei Akasegawa, Natsuyuki Nakanishi and Jiro Takamatsu founded Hi-Red Center which utilized the urban setting as their artistic medium, implementing interventions that prompted inquiries about centralized power and the individual's place in society. One of their most renowned works involved a pointed gesture where the artists diligently cleaned the streets of Tokyo during the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games, as a reaction to the government's insistence that the city should project a pristine image to the global audience.

[72] Frederick Jameson, “Periodizing the 60s,” Social Text no. 9/10 (Spring-Summer 1984): 178.

[73] National Gallery Prague, “Demonstration of One: Milan Knížák,” https://sbirky.ngprague.cz/en/dielo/CZE:NG.Nm_15-001

Left: "Movement to Promote the Cleanup of the Metropolitan Area," Hi Red Center, 1964. Photograph by Minoru Hirata. Right: Police patrol congratulating Hi Red Center. Photograph by Minoru Hirata.[74]

Performance and performative action were not the only means available to activists who wanted to increase the public's awareness of ongoing social justice problems. Ernest C. Withers's self-published photo essay entitled "Complete Photo Story of Till Murder Case,"(1955) which included the photographs depicting the atrocious torture and murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till, as well as the photographs of Till's body displayed in an open casket funeral upon his mother's request, published in several high circulating papers, were so impactful that they ignited the civil rights movement in the U.S. These photographs, alongside Charles Moore's 1963 images of the protestors in Birmingham being tortured by the police, "constituted one of the most thorough visual examinations of any social struggle in America."[75]

Photography's reproducibility, and ability to represent extreme acts of violence and cruelty effectively, untainted by sentimentality, as well as its effectual media presence inspired activists and artists alike to use similar documentary techniques. Art Workers' Coalition, for example, in protest of the Vietnam War, produced hundreds of lithographic posters taken from a photograph depicting the My Lai massacre where piles of dead

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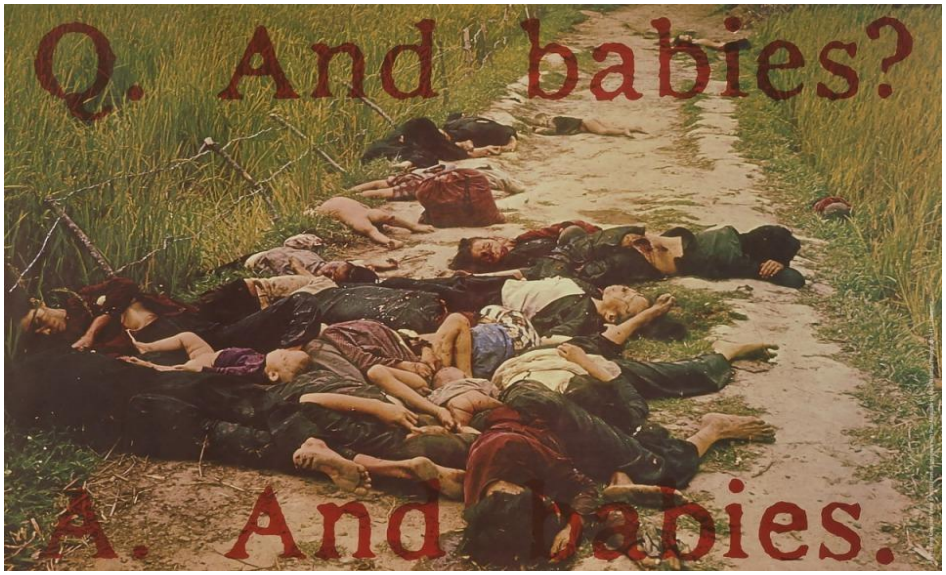
[74] Tate London, "Hi-Red Center," https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/h/hi-red-center

[75] González, "Facture," 216.

bodies, including that of women and infants, were visible. The words “Q. And babies? A: And babies,” taken from an interview with a soldier who murdered dozens of Vietnamese civilians, framed the lithographs. These posters were not only used in political protests in the streets but were also exhibited beside Picasso’s *Guernica* in the lobby of MoMA in New York.[76]



Art Workers' Coalition, Poster in Protest of Vietnam War, 1968.

Some of The Artists Protest Committee (APC)’s protests also took place inside the institutional space. For their “White Out” event, they convinced galleries on La Cienaga Boulevard to cover the paintings they exhibited with a white strip of paper to draw attention to the interconnectedness of racism and war, and to protest ongoing violence in the local and global society. The paper signified the artists’ resolution to withdraw from their role as the producer of art “for a society they deemed violent and threatening.”[77] Their perspective was similar to Dada artists, whose stance against systemic injustice was to refuse work and the traditional role of the patronized artist, attempting even to discard the concept of the artist altogether. To express their dissent,

[76] González, “Facture,” 218.

[77] González, “Facture,” 218.

APC generated posters that articulated reality as it is experienced by the individual, rather than as conveyed by the US foreign and domestic policies which ignored the blatant violence they executed on the world.

The Artists Protest Committee (APC), Peace Tower, 1965.

In 1965 APC brought together hundreds of artists to create what would become known as "the biggest collective artistic manifesto against the war in Vietnam."[78] The *Peace Tower*, a public anti-war sculpture embellished with 418 panels of paintings created by renown as well as emerging artists, including Mark Rothko, Elaine de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Judy Chicago, Roy Liechtenstein, Ad Reinhardt, Eva Hesse, Donald Judd, James Rosenquist, was built by Mark di Suvero, out of iron rods.

> "The panels […] were aesthetically diverse—some utilized abstract forms; others depicted figurative, well-known anti-war motifs, such as Alice Neel's skeleton surrounded by flames emblazoned »Stop the War«. They were installed

[78] Anti-fascist Year, "Artists' Tower of Protest," https://rokantyfaszystowski.org/en/artists-tower-of-protest/

> »democratically« that is to say, in no particular order. […] the wall's expansive visual logic accommodated a cacophony of styles, with panels featuring President Johnson's face, an appropriated fragment from Picasso's *Guernica*, a handwritten signature, and typewritten text pieces alongside more allusive geometric shapes and painted swaths of color. One panel shows a tic-tac-toe game that has resulted in a stalemate and suggests that in war, too, there are no winners. Arranged in a typically modernist grid, the squares, while they shared little formally, attained an overall, quilt like cohesion. Further, the varied designs were corralled together under the hand-lettered proclamation »Artists Protest the Vietnam War« and thus registered as responses to the war regardless of their content."[79]

Muralism (or wall paintings), one of the oldest existing forms of visual depiction, also has a long and important history of utility in revolutionary (be it political or categorically activist) art and practice. As public artworks and with their often-colossal size, they are an effective way to broadcast important messages to large numbers of people. Some of the most well-known examples of political murals come from Mexico, from "The Big Three:" Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros. A comparison between the murals of the trio, which were funded by the Mexican government during the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), and the murals of groups like Mujeres Muralistas, who were an independent activist group operational during the Chicano civil rights movement in the 60s, both of which created richly coloured murals "to celebrate the Latin American cultural tradition,"[80] raises critical questions about collective versus individual authorship (political/revolutionary or activist vs. participatory art), authority, and institutional power and more generally, about the nature of activism. As the reader will notice, this historiography focuses primarily on left activism, which, as

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[79] J. Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2009, 5-6. Anti-fascist Year, "Artists' Tower of Protest," https://rokantyfaszystowski.org/en/artists-tower-of-protest/

[80] Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft, *Toward a People's Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement*, 36.

Lippard also observes, is “where most activist art comes from.”[81] A question that is necessary to implore but likely impossible to satisfactorily answer is whether “activist art” is still “activist” when it serves the agenda of those in power, and when it is used to disseminate what I construe as socially unjust ideas, such as nationalism.[82]

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines “activism” (noun) as “a doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action especially in support of or in opposition to one side of a controversial issue” and “activist” (adjective) as “advocating or practicing activism: using or supporting strong actions in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue.” [83] Notably, while both definitions emphasize that activism involves robust support or opposition to a contested issue, they refrain from making a value judgement about these issues themselves. While this is perhaps expected from a universal dictionary, in my opinion, that value judgement about issues at hand is imperative when it comes to deciding whether or not an artwork or action is in fact activist. The etymological root of the word “activist” is the Latin *actus*, “a doing, a driving force, or an impulse.” In this sense, an activist artwork is one that drives its audience to accomplish something, one that activates them into action.[84] This leads to another complicated problem regarding *scale*.

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[81] Bradley and Esche, eds. *Art and Social Change: A Critical Reader*, 409.

[82] It should be noted that right wing extreme activism also does exist, whether the right is in power or not. I contend that right wing extreme activism is racism, xenophobia, sexism and other ills of the soul combined, most often barely disguised, as was in the ruthless murder of Heather Danielle Heyer in Charlottesville. Since for me activist art is identifiable as a social justice effort, and wishing and/or excusing harm done upon people and peoples just because they don’t fit an arbitrary and idealized image of whiteness and westernness is clearly not a position that reconciles with justice or morality – necessary components of social justice -, I did not find reason to focus my energy on incidents of right wing extreme activism. Although it is in itself a peculiar phenomenon that deserves investigation, this is beyond the scope of this paper.
I did not find a reason to include

[83] Merriam Webster Dictionary, “activism,” https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/activism

[84] “To activate” is to shift one’s position from inertia, which is the status quo that wants to maintain itself. While it could be in any direction, in my opinion, in a world that is currently experiencing a mass extinction and ongoing genocides, advocating for policies that would further divide and disconnect people and propagate the prioritization of the self at the expense of the other (the individualist worldview of the global north or west vs. collectivist worldview of the global south) is nothing but an exasperation of the status quo, therefore does not hold validity to claim the title “activism.”

Given the infinite possibilities of subjectivity, it is impossible to determine whether an artwork will activate an individual to enact or implement any sort of change, on any condition. It is also impossible to gauge the social significance and contestability of an issue upon which change is to be enacted by the individual. For example, as Dr. Arseli Dokumacı demonstrates in *Activist Affordances: How Disabled People Improvise More Habitable Worlds*, an elongated comb can be an activist affordance to a person living with rheumatoid arthritis, a debilitating disease that can cause pain when one raises their arms above a certain height. As Dokumacı points out, building on the theorisations of Elaine Scarry, such affordances originate from pain, which necessarily is felt alongside the wish for it to be gone. Scarry maintains that the "making" of the world is the consequence of a "dance of labour," made up of three consecutive steps. She asks us to imagine a man who notices that his pregnant wife is in pain, therefore builds (makes) a chair.

According to Scarry, the first step in the dance of labour which begets the chair is the man perceiving his wife's discomfort, which is accompanied by the wish to cease it. (Scarry founds this step on the premise that "due to its aversive nature, pain 'cannot be felt without being wished unfelt'").[85] The second step involves the man taking action to materialize his wish. What is in the man's consciousness, through body movements that in their methodology resemble a dance, is translated into a visible object that exists in the world. "As the dance emerges, the man's compassionate 'weight begone' enters the social world, now not just as an internal wish but in a tangible and expressive form."[86] The final step is the realization of the project: "an enduring and sharable reality in the form of an artifact, a chair." Thus is pain instrumental in the making of the world.

Dokumacı spots a missing step in Scarry's scenario, which is essential to this historiography and to the philosophy of activist art. The first step, she suggests, is not the man becoming conscious of his wife's pain, but the wife making her own dance of labour, such as rubbing her sore knees or holding her belly up with her arms, which

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[85] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 290.

[86] Ayseli Dokumacı, *Activist Affordances: How Disabled People Improvise More Habitable Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023), 107.

exists first to alert the man to the pain. Dokumacı's study demonstrates then that it is not the elongated comb by itself that offers the activist affordance but primarily the individual who struggles to brush her hair with a common comb, and invents her own dance to accommodate for the action, resulting in the invention. In the context of activist art, the first dance of labour is indicated by the society, and responded to by artists and activists who relate to the context, typically on a personal level.

Dokumacı shares the March 1990 protest of around sixty disability activists who convened in front of Capitol Hill in the US to urge the government to pass the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) that it had stalled. To protest the stalling at the House, activists "left their wheelchairs, crutches, and other mobility aids aside, and in accordance with a preplanned scenario, they 'began a 'crawl-up' of the eighty-three marble steps to the Capitol,' performing what the failure of the ADA would cost them." As a result, the bill that passed had the requisite to include ramps in buildings to-come. Dokumacı emphasizes that without the protest, which she identifies as the "dance of labor," the ramps would not have materialized.

On the smaller scale of the individual, however, given that different people are in different pain in different physical, mental and psychic places, whether the output of their pain is activist becomes a nonoperational question. Of course, this perspective completely voids the category "activist art," as it redistributes the verb "activate" to every material and action possible that is born out of a need, an activation. In fact, it also voids the term "art." In a world, as Scarry depicts, whose "making" is driven by humans' wish to eliminate pain, any and every act can be deemed not only activist but also art, or at the very least, artful. This is the condition that Beuys narrated in 1973:

"Only on condition of a radical widening of definitions will it be possible for art and activities related to art [to] provide evidence that art is now the only evolutionary-revolutionary power. Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the deathline: to dismantle in order to build 'A SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART'… EVERY HUMAN BEING IS AN ARTIST who – from his state of freedom – the position of freedom that he experiences at first-hand – learns to

determine the other positions of the TOTAL ART WORK OF THE FUTURE SOCIAL ORDER."[87]

While, as I have shown so far, the categories "art," "life," "activism," and "politics" are constitutively intertwined within the discourse of modern and contemporary art, in the literature "activist art" has existed as a separate entity from "political art" in art theory discourse since the 1980s.

A separate category

Despite its roots in the activist movements and various forms and genres of art of the 1960s, the 1980s is the key period when activist art "came into its own." [88] As prominent scholars in the field, Nomusa Makhubu and Carlos Garrido Castellano convey, "(o)ne might consider the genealogy of social practice art or socially-engaged art in general to have been more clearly defined in the 1980s and 1990s, following the advent of counter-hegemonic conceptual, artistic strategies such as dematerialization, performance, happenings and institutional critique in art during the 1960s and '70s in Europe and America."[89]

The 80s is the decade when numerous collective forums and projects for socially concerned and politically conscious artists were developing around the globe in response to the immense economic, political and cultural changes that were taking place such as the first contemporary global financial crisis, the global AIDS crisis and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa.[90] In the U.S., The Political Art Documentation and Distribution collective (PAD/D), initiated by Lippard and her artist colleagues, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), "an organization founded in

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[87] Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1979), 48.

[88] Nina Felshin, *But Is It?*, 22.

[89] Nomusa Makhubu and Carlos Garrido Castellano, "Creative Uprisings: Art, Social Movements and Mobilisation in Africa," *FIELD* iss. 17 (Winter 2021), https://field-journal.com/editorial/creative-uprisings-art-social-movements-and-mobilisation-in-africa

[90] Shipley and Moriuchi, *Routledge Companion*, 6.

1987 that made visual and performance art central to its political action campaigns,"[91] and Group Material (1979-1996), who created important exhibitions/interventions in New York galleries, were among the projects that utilized art in their activism.[92]

McKee relays that artists were fundamental to ACT UP, which emerged as an anarchist movement motivated to build self-empowerment on the part of people who live with AIDS. ACT UP conceived of culture to be essential to the twofold process of "empowering subjective transformation and targeted mobilization."[93] Artists' involvement in the coalition was not as mere designers or decorators, but as "as organizers and tacticians in their own right contributing to a movement culture of militant direct action and biopolitical grievance in the face of governmental neglect, cultural stigmatization, and corporate profiteering surrounding the AIDS crisis."[94] An important demonstration organized by ACT UP is their initiative protest at the Wall Street stock exchange in March 1987. Here, the group used a tactic called "the die-in", a theatrical model also utilized in the anti-nuclear movement of the 80s where protestors lay on the ground for a duration to publicly grieve for individuals who have died while simultaneously refusing to accept these deaths that appear to be unavoidable within the existing system.[95] Die-ins are contemporarily enacted by Extinction Rebellion to draw attention to not only human deaths, but the extinction of countless species under the status quo. The poster of Gran Fury, an activist artist collective that is an offshoot of ACT UP, which reads "With 42.000 Dead, Art Is Not Enough. Take Collective Direct Action to End the AIDS Crisis,"[96] accurately represents artists' understanding of the

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[91] Ibid.

[92] Ibid.

[93] McKee, *Strike Art*, 42.

[94] McKee, *Strike Art*, 41.

[95] McKee, *Strike Art*, 42-43

[96] McKee, *Strike Art*, 44.

limitations of art (especially “art for art’s sake”), the importance of social interventions, and the necessity for art to be in service of social justice efforts.

PAD/D’s initial objective, to create an archive of politically committed art, evolved into more active involvement and intervention into the political arena and institutional space within a year. What would become a grassroots movement began with the exhibition “Some British Art from the Left” from 1979, for which Lippard used printed postal invitations as an organization tool to make a call to artists.[97] This set into motion a new activist art collective whose mission statement in 1981 read: “Our goal is to provide artists with an organized relationship to society, to demonstrate the political effectiveness of image making, and to provide a framework within which progressive artists can discuss and develop alternatives to the mainstream art system.”[98] The collective didn’t just archive but create art, and exhibited at “politically sympathetic exhibition outlets (university galleries, labor unions, community centers, even church halls)…”[99] Their activities ranged from making portable political artworks for demonstrations as well as programming public events, publishing a newsletter and a calendar that marks radical cultural events that were taking place in New York City and establishing a monthly, public dialog series which addressed matters of tax evasion, abortion rights, Hispanic culture and struggle, civil liberties and domestic surveillance, and unauthorized art in public spaces among other social justice issues. [100] ,[101] Several members of PAD/D were also members of other recently formed activist collectives such as Carnival Knowledge, World War III Illustrated, and Group Material.

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[97] Gregory Sholette, “A Collectography of PAD/D, a 1980s Activist Art Collective, and Its Legacy in the Twenty-First Century Activist Art and Scholarship,” in *The Routledge Companion to Art and Activism in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Lesley Shipley and Mey-Yen Moriuchi (New York: Routledge, 2023), 21.

[98] Ibid.

[99] Sholette, “Collectography,” 24.

[100] Sholette, “Collectography,” 23.

[101] Sholette, “Collectography,” 24.

Group Material's philosophy was, in curator Brian Wallis's words, "an expanded notion of cultural activism" driven by a vision of critical public pedagogy.[102] The Group operated in multiple locations both within and outside of art institutions. Their series of exhibitions, staged "town hall meetings", and panels titled *Democracy* (1987-88), which was thematically divided into four sections that attended to the politics of: cultural engagement, education, electoral democracy and the AIDS crisis.[103] Martha Rosler's *If You Lived Here…* is a "town hall meeting" that demonstrates the Group's ambition for art to intervene into the social space. This was a "collaborative counter-exhibition" that took place in the Dia Center for Arts in 1989 in response to the gentrification of the city, which led to a housing crisis.[104] The exhibition was set up in a space that replicated the interior of a small apartment, complete with furniture. It brought together "photographs, videos, planning documents, architectural models, advertising propaganda, and activist campaign materials," all related to the crisis. This was a platform where activists and artists could unite under struggle and solidarity against rising neoliberalism and its many tentacles.

As evidenced by these examples, creating artworks in concert with the community was a central concern to these collaboratives.[105] Lippard and Felshin highlight the role of cooperation, lived experience and connection in artworks that are categorized as activist art; in Lippard's words, activist artists work "in collaboration with the people whose cause gives it reason to exist."[106] Art historian and critic David Deitcher named the 80s tendency towards collective assembly "social aesthetics," which would have persisting impact in the next decades,

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[102] McKee, *Strike Art*, 40.

[103] McKee, *Strike Art*, 40-41.

[104] Ibid.

[105] Shipley and Moriuchi, *Routledge Companion*, 7.

[106] Lippard, *Get The Message?*, 308.

including during the Arab Spring and the Occupy movements which I will discuss in the section on 21st century art.[107]

Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Maintenance Art*, an epitome of feminist performance, which was borne out of the question "after the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage?" illustrates how social aesthetics took prominence over the years. In 1971, Ukeles began the meticulous documentation, via texts and photographs, of the everyday activities she partook in such as clothing her baby and folding laundry, which she exhibited under the title *Private Performances of Personal Maintenance*. Moving from the private and personal sphere to that of the institution, Ukeles created her public maintenance performances between 1973-1974. For *Hatford Wash: Washing Tracks: Maintenance Inside* and *Outside* projects Ukeles cleaned the interior and exterior floors of Wadsworth Athenaeum (the only art institution that accepted to provide her space and time) with a mop and a scrub, calling her activities "floor painting," a slapstick iteration of Jackson Pollock's action paintings that cemented her role as an artist while mocking the patriarchal artist/genius model. Her actions importantly called attention to the absence of maintenance workers, whose labour Ukeles associated with the similarly unrecognized domestic labour of predominantly women, from the public consciousness.

The two other works that took place in the museum, *Transfer: The Maintenance of the Art Object*, and *In Keeping of the Keys: Maintenance as Security*, similarly commented on the hierarchical labour relations that exist within art institutions. For the former Ukeles selected the display case of a female mummy to clean, ceremonially acquiring the cleaning equipment from a janitor, stamping it as "maintenance art," and transferring it to a museum curator who through the act was appointed a menial job traditionally beyond the scope of his responsibilities. For the latter, the artist acquired keys that gave her access to

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[107] David Deitcher, "Social Aesthetics," in *Democracy: A Project by Group Material*, ed. Brian Wallis ((Bay Press and Dia Center for the Arts, 1990), 13-43.

every room in the museum, locking and unlocking them intermittently during public hours, intervening in the regular flow of movement within the building which recalls Linda Nochlin's commentary on art institutions' accessibility (or lack thereof) to women.[108]

The scope of Ukeles's interventions into the public sphere grew over the years. In 1978 she arranged to become a self-appointed, unsalaried artist-in-residence at the New York Sanitation Department (a position that she still occupies to this day). Building relationships with the workers during their rounds "Ukeles listened to garbage collectors' stories about being treated as if they were the garbage."[109] So was conceived *Touch Sanitation* (1979-1980), an eleven-month performance where Ukeles travelled the districts of the city and shook the hands of 8500 workers, thanking them "for keeping New York City alive."[110]

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Touch Sanitation Show: Part One, New York City, 1984.

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[108] Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," *ARTnews* 69, no. 9 (January 1971).

[109] Lacy, *Mapping*, 282.

[110] Lacy, *Mapping*, 82.

The project focused on class and gender relations and had the agenda to develop relationships for the purpose of enacting sociopolitical impact. It took place outside museums and galleries and engaged with local communities. In *Mapping the Terrain* artist Suzanne Lacy describes Ukeles's work (among an array of installations, performances and site-specific works including her own) as "new genre public art", a term she coined to describe "visual art that uses both traditional and non-traditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives."[111] This is a form of activist art that is similar to public art in that it takes place in public spaces, and further, requires a certain level of engagement, *activation*, from its audience. Central to new genre public art is not the traditional art object, but "the concepts of audience, relationship, communication, and political intention."[112]

Lacy outlines the sociopolitical conditions that gave rise to an interest in new forms of public art that experimented with both form and content. She identifies the main factor as the eighties conservative backlash to the social upheaval movements of the previous decades which attempted to censor women, queer and BIPOC artists, and delimit the achievements accomplished by women's rights movements, while also resulting in increased racial discrimination. She adds that increasing concerns about health and ecological crises during this period also ignited interest in new forms of public art.[113] It is not surprising, given how detrimental the conservative backlash was to the social fabric, that the art object that conventionally fills the space between an artist and "the perceiver of the work" is replaced in new genre public art with the relationship between the artist and the

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[111] Lacy, *Mapping*, 19.

[112] Lacy, *Mapping,* 28.

[113] Lacy, *Mapping,* 28-29.

audience becoming the artwork itself – a turn that we also see, though articulated in opposition to activist art, in the work of Nicholas Bourriaud in the 1990s).[114]

In 2024, Ukeles's maintenance art would likely not be considered the poster-child of activist art. This is because of the lack of specificity in the invitation these works extend to the audience and the participants. Although Ukeles's performance does call for a different, more respectful relationship between the workers and the public, it does not address the specific issues that disallow such relationships from becoming established, nor does it offer practical solutions to the identified problem. Activist artworks make a demand from their audience, that is, to enact (arguably, and/or embody)[115] change that will have significant positive impact on the social system. Art historian Grant Kester outlines the conditions and particularities of this demand by offering his theory of dialogic art and aesthetics that shaped socially engaged artworks created from 1980 onwards.

In *Conversation Pieces* Kester exemplifies feminist artist Suzanne Lacy's longest running performance structure, *The Oakland Projects* (1991-2001), a succession of installations, performances and political activism i.e. activist art, that engages with the youth of Oakland, consisting of eight critical works, as dialogic art and aesthetics. Among Lacy's projects is *The Roof is on Fire* (1993-1994), where over 200 students from public high schools participated in unscripted, unrehearsed and unedited but sculpted dialogues on "family, sexuality, drugs, culture, education, and the future" as they sat in a hundred cars that were parked on a rooftop while over 1000 Oakland residents moved around them and listened in. The conversations in *The Roof is on Fire* revealed that a major concern for the youth was conflicts with the police. *Youth, Cops, and Videotape* was thus conceived as "a series of six weekly dialogues" between 18 of the youth who

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[114] Lacy, *Mapping,* 35.

[115] This is an important point I will return to at the end of this essay.

collaborated on the initial project and 10 police officers. The consequent videotape was “used by the Oakland Police Department for training in community policing.”[116]

Suzanne Lacy, The Roof is on Fire, 1993-1994.

Kester describes dialogic practice, which recalls the “educational turn” identified by Rogoff, as “performative, process-based art that facilitates dialogue among diverse communities.”[117] Dialogic work “ involves the creative orchestration of collaborative encounters and conversations, well beyond the institutional confines of the gallery or museum.”[118] Rather than providing content, it constructs contexts in which conversations can occur.[119] Typical of dialogic art, Kester

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[116] Suzanne Lacy, “The Oakland Projects (1991-2001),” https://www.suzannelacy.com/the-oakland-projects/

[117] Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 1.

[118] Ibid.

[119] Kester, Conversation Pieces, 1.

observes that *The Roof is on Fire* generates "emphathetic insight" along three axes: between the artist and participants, between the participants themselves, which enhances solidarity, and between the participants and "other communities of viewers" who often see the work in various media after it is performed.[120]

Dialogical aesthetics differs from traditional aesthetics in two main ways. The first is about the way it is specified and specialized, focused on a specific aspect of a complicated problem, rather than making any claim for universality and objectivity; it is time and context specific, driven from and focused on generating and implementing situated knowledges, to borrow Donna Haraway's terminology.[121] The second difference between the conventional model of aesthetics and dialogical aesthetics is about the relationship between identity formation as a result of discursive experience. In the former model the viewer of an artwork is conceived to have improved their understanding of the world as a result of their encounter with the artwork. . Their capacity for discursive interaction is enhanced through the process of aesthetic perception as they become better equipped to participate in social discourse after viewing the work.[122] Contrarily in dialogical aesthetics "subjectivity is formed through discourse and intersubjective exchange itself."[123] Rather than merely a receiver of the insights offered by the artwork which exists in itself, the audience of dialogic aesthetics is inherently a co-

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[120] Kester, Conversation Pieces, 115.

[121] Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," Feminist Studies 14, no.3 (1988).

[122] This thinking aligns with feminist educator Jill Dolan's proposition that it is desire for an alternative mode of existence that materializes in an audience's presence and/or participation in live performances. She asserts: "Perhaps part of the desire to attend theatre and performance is to reach for something better, form new ideas about how to be and how to be with each other. I believe that theatre and performance can articulate a common future, one that's more just and equitable, one in which we can all participate more equally, with more chances to live fully and contribute to the making of culture." This evokes the consideration that performance art is a particularly potent form of activist art, since it foregrounds the artist's body as the medium and the resulting empathetic responses that can be triggered by proximity to the artist's body via direct or indirect spectatorship. This evokes yet another question, one about the role technology plays, as a distancing instrument, in a viewer's experience of an artwork, and the function of performance as archive. I bring up these questions also on the first two weeks of my course on contemporary performance art histories and practices.

[123] Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, eds. *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985* (Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 159.

author, partaking in the construction of different subjectivities in the act of participating in the aesthetic process.[124]

In *Activism and Oppositionality,* Grant Kester questions how activist artists can work with and through communities that have been marginalized and excluded from political debate, who have been reduced by the conservative coalition to being mere "signifiers of difference and moral depravity."[125] Kester proposes that instead of immanence and universality, which he identifies as hallmarks of traditional aesthetics, performativity and localism does and must take precedence in activist aesthetics.[126] Performativity is a term used in contemporary cultural criticism to characterize "a practice that is adaptive and improvisational rather than originary and fixed. Within this outlook the work of art is a discrete object than it is a process of dialogue, exchange, and even collaboration that responds to the changing conditions and needs of both viewer and maker."[127] Localism expresses the understanding that the shared dialogue that is created through the artistic endeavour is most effective when the artists are not privileged outsiders but rather, coparticipants who are directly involved in the problems of the community or constituency they work with.[128]

Kester exemplifies the 1994 project of the Austrian artist group Wochenklausur to demonstrate his position. Here, the group invited over 60 prominent members of activists, journalists, and politicians to convene with sex workers who are suffering from drug addiction, who live and work in Zurich under

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[124] Ibid.

[125] Grant Kester, ed. *Activism and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 15

[126] Performativity here is categorically different from (yet semantically linked to) how linguistic philosopher J.L. Austin uses the term. Long before Kester's use of the term, Austin had coined the word "performative" to describe sentences such as "I bet," "I take this man as my husband," "I promise to," where in their utterance, people perform acts.

[127] Kester, *Activism and Oppositionality*, 15.

[128] Ibid.

abject conditions, to take dozens of three-hour boat cruises on Lake Zurich. The individuals met to discuss the struggles of the sex workers, most of whom were practically houseless, and were vulnerable to exploitation by the clients and harassment by the police. As a result of the interactions a boarding house for sex workers who struggle with addiction was constructed.[129]

Wochenklausur's 8-week long project in Zürich, 1994.

During the boat trips, the participants had the opportunity to engage in open and attentive conversations, not as delegates or representatives with predetermined positions, but as individuals who shared a vast collective understanding of the topic. The external influences that could potentially bias their discussions were significantly minimized due to the requirement for self-reflective focus, and the ritualistic and isolated nature of the boat trip. Furthermore, the agreement they struck for addressing the social justice issue in Zurich was not meant to be a universally applicable solution to the "drug crisis," which appears to be an insurmountable problem when approached as such, but rather a practical

[129] Kocur and Leung, *Theory in Contemporary Art*, 154.

answer to a single aspect of the problem: the houselessness faced by sex workers.

Lacy's and Wochenklausur's activist art projects can be categorized under the umbrella term "participatory art" proposed by performance and visual art theorist Claire Bishop. Bishop observes that in similar form to the avant-garde in Europe around 1917 and the neo-avant-garde of 1968, and affected by the "fall of communism" in 1989, the 1990s witnessed and experienced a "social turn" which preoccupied artists with the potentials for collaboration and participation in their practice.[130] "...[R]egardless of geographical location, the hallmark of an artistic orientation towards the social in the 1990s has been a shared set of desires to overturn the traditional relationship between the art object, the artist and the audience."[131] Similar to dialogic art, in participatory art the audience, once thought of as the "beholder" or "viewer," is repositioned as an active participant or co-producer. The artist's role is no longer the producer of distinct, singular, portable and commodifiable objects, but she operates as the conductor of "situations*,"* similar to the situations of Situationist International and Kaprow's Happenings, in which the participants construct new subjectivities. The participatory artwork, characterized by collective authorship, is often an "ongoing or long-term *project* with an unclear beginning and end," which speaks to the notion that activism is an endless struggle.[132]

Interestingly, Bishop states that activist art does not "primarily involve people as the medium or material of the work" whereas participatory art does.[133] I would suggest that given that the goal of activist art is to activate *people*, and engage their involvement in social justice issues, people are necessarily the material of

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[130] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells* (London: Verso Books, 2012), 3.

[131] Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 2.

[132] Ibid.

[133] Bishop, Artificial Hells, 5.

activist art, in a way that extends beyond the physical, in situ, immediate, perhaps even collective, participation in the artwork.[134] They are also the material of "relational aesthetics," a term coined by curator Bourriaud who expounded on the concept in his eponymous book, first published in 1998. Here, Bourriaud proposes that artworks created from the 1990s onwards are not merely representational but are uniquely and characteristically "convivial, user-friendly artistic projects, festive, collective and participatory, exploring the varied potential in the relationship to the other,"[135] and thus require a different set of aesthetic criteria for their analyses and appreciation.[136] Bourriaud champions Rirkrit Tiravanija's works, specifically, *Untitled (Free/Still)* (1992/1995/2007/2011) where Tiravanija converted galleries into a lounge area where he cooked rice and curry and served it for free.[137] The title of the artwork referred both to the food being free, and, as curator Laura Hoptman suggests, the work's capacity to "literally free people to interact with contemporary art in a more sociable way."[138] Indeed, Rirkrit described the work as "a platform for people to interact with the work itself and with each other."[139]

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[134] I understand the need for categorization. As Bowker's book on categorization suggests, categorization has functionality, I am merely offering a philosophical perspective here.

[135] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002),.60-61.

[136] Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 7.

[137] In the reiterations of the piece in other locations a scaled model of the first gallery was installed.

[138] The Museum of Modern Art, " Rirkrit Tiravanija | Untitled (Free/Still)," Youtube video, 3:22, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xRx2s3FpSg

[139] Ibid.

Rirkrit Tiravanija, Untitled (Free/Still), Installation view, 303 Gallery, New York, 1995.

Similar to Happenings and Fluxus event scores such as Alison Knowles's "make a salad" that incorporate everyday activity into art to traverse the life/art boundary, and to Suzanne Lacy's project structures that facilitate critical communication between participants, *Untitled (Free/Still)* collapsed the distance between the audience and the artist through a simple, everyday gesture. It also evoked Situationist International's derive, the act of mindfully engaging in and apprehending a mundane activity that is deemed by an artist an artwork, following Duchamp's maxim that whatever the artist says is art, is art. Bourriaud describes projects such as Tiravanija's as "relational art," a term he uses to address artworks that are an "arena of exchange", a "social interstice", *an alternative mode of existing that can escape being swallowed by the preexisting structures of late capitalism*" (emphasis mine).[140]

[140] Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 16.

It is in this sense that Tiravanija's work is activist.[141] It actively constructs a counter-hegemonic (anti-capitalist) platform that subverts pre-existing material – in this case, economic – relationships, and allows people to experience a different mode of existence. That these relationships are convivial (which should be expected given that the subversion of negativity is positive) *is* the alternative mode of existing, where people care about each other (show goodwill through offering free food, it's almost Biblical – "love thy neighbour"). This arena of exchange can then be judged by aesthetic criteria which considers "the symbolic value of the world the work suggests, the coherence of its form, and the image of the human relations in it."[142]

An important point in this aesthetic judgement is to consider whether the values that are represented in the artwork can be "transposed into society."[143] According to Bourriaud, the relationships that result from the interactions of the viewers in relational art are "microtopias" that are *characterised* by their conviviality (convivialite).[144] Bourriaud thus differentiates relational art from the art of the previous generations by the *scale* of their utopic vision. Instead of aspiring towards grand and relatively unachievable humanistic goals, such as Ukeles's ambition to construct healthy class relationships (or likely, to abolish class distinctions altogether), he argues that relational art, and the microtopias it generates, strive to

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[141] It could be argued that due to the lack of specificity of its demand and its site of intervention *Untitled* is not categorically activist art. My argument here is that even if it is not "activist art," the work, because it has an insurgent function, is still an activist effort.

[142] Bourriaud, *Relational*, 17.

[143] Bourriaud, *Relational*, 18.

[144] This French word is the combination of two Latin words, *com* (with, together) and *vivere* (to live) and can be translated as living together/at the same time. Online Etymology Dictionary, "convivial," https://www.etymonline.com/word/convivial

intervene in the present day by embodying and modeling an alternative way of living.[145]

Bourriaud's perspective has been critiqued by Bishop who argued that "the quality of the relationships in 'relational aesthetics' are never examined or called into question," and by the fact of their existence are "assumed to be democratic and therefore good."[146] Building on the theorisations of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, who propose that conflict, passion and dissensus are indispensable elements of democracy, Bishop asserts that "the relations set up by relational aesthetics are not intrinsically democratic, as Bourriaud suggests, since they rest too comfortably within an ideal of subjectivity as whole and of community as immanent togetherness."[147]

Bishop comments that the lack of friction in the social fabric of the audience in Tiravanija's *Untitled (Free/Still)* (who come from a similar socioeconomic background and share similar interests) detracts from the work's potential to reflect and promote democracy as it is experienced politically. She explains that instead of convivial relationships the aesthetic criteria for artworks should be about whether they can contain antagonisms, which she deems to be structurally important to democracy and its materialization in artistic form. Bishop rests her critique on the shoulders of Mouffe and Laclau who she credits for positioning antagonism at the heart of democracy. I argue that, as stated above, while conflict, dissensus and passion are necessary if not inescapable for a pluralistic

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[145] One could also interpret Tiravanija's ambition in *Untitled* as to abolish the capitalist system, which clearly is another grand vision. If one were to accept that *Untitled* is activist art, this interpretation would void my previous proposal that Mierle Laderman Ukeles's public maintenance works are perhaps not the best examples of the practice. As Helena Rickett noted, Bourriad's exclusion of Ukeles's work (amongst other women artists) from his discussion of relational aesthetics raises questions regarding the author's own heterosexist perspective that if challenged, could generate fruitful discussions about the scalar spectrum of utopia versus. microtopia and more broadly, about revolution versus. reform. Helena Reckitt, "Forgotten Relations: Feminist Artists and Relational Aesthetics," in *Politics in a Glass: Case Feminism, Exhibition Cultures and Curatorial Transgressions*, Angela Dimitrakaki and Lara Perry, eds. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013.

[146] Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," 65.

[147] Bishop, "Antagonism," 67.

democracy, they translate as agonism rather than antagonism according to Mouffe (and Laclau). The distinction is clearly articulated by Mouffe in *Agonistics*, which was published after Bishop's review of Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*:

> What liberal democratic politics requires is that the others are not seen as enemies to be destroyed, but as adversaries whose ideas might be fought, even fiercely, but whose right to defend those ideas is not to be questioned. To put it another way, what is important is that conflict does not take the form of an 'antagonism' (struggle between enemies) but the form of an 'agonism' (struggle between adversaries.)[148]

The concept of agonism is driven from the Greek word *agon*, a term used in Athenian tragedy, to describe "a dramatic confrontation in which two characters present extended speeches of equal length, one after another, propounding fiercely opposed points of view."[149] According to Mouffe, the indispensable elements of contestation, conflict, passion and dissensus to agon facilitate the healthy and necessary expression of conflictual energies that without an outlet tend to result in "an explosion of antagonisms that can tear up the very basis of civility."[150]

Mouffe avoids using the terms "activist art" and "political art" altogether. She refuses categorizing the field of art and the field of politics as different concepts between which a relation will need to be established, asserting that there is an aesthetic dimension in the political and there is a political dimension in the aesthetic. Similar to Orwell, she suggests that "(o)ne cannot make a distinction between political art and non-political art, because every form of artistic practice either contributes to the reproduction of the given common sense – and in that sense is political- or contributes

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[148] Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics* (London: Verso, 2013), 7.

[149] Stephe Harrop, "Greek Tragedy, Agonistic Space, and Contemporary Performance," *New Theatre Quarterly* 34, no.2 (May 2018): 102.

[150] Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), 104.

to the deconstruction or critique of it."[151] Instead, Mouffe proposes the term "critical art" to describe a variety of artistic practices that aim to give a voice to what is silenced within the systems of power. She asks of critical art to bring about novel ways to questioning the dominant hegemony and asserts that artistic and cultural practices can play an important role in democracy in post-political societies, because they are privileged terrain for the construction of new subjectivities and the mobilization of affect. Art has the power to foster the proliferation of public spaces where dissensus can take place, "where everything that the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate can be brought to light and challenged."[152] These spaces, according to Mouffe, are an arena in which adversaries with incompatible and irreconcilable views can convene to partake in the agonistic struggle.[153]

Whether or not these spaces can coincide with the institutional space and keep their function as critical art; whether activist art can be institutionalized, has been a contested issue in activist circles. Practitioners of earlier forms of activist art that intersect with political art, such as Ben Shahn, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros shared a firm belief "in the basic and fundamental compatibility of art and social change via established political institutions."[154] They had faith that the space of the museums and galleries had revolutionary potential, as these spaces enabled their art to be visible and accessible to a vast number of people.

There are instances increasingly since the 1960s of institutions responding to activist efforts to address various problems, be them about the institution itself or what is transpiring outside its space. In 1970, in response to the bombing of Cambodia and the murder of student protesters, Robert Morris, Poppy Johnson of Guerilla Art Action Group and New York University's School of Visual Arts organized under the banner

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[151] Chantal Mouffe, Rosalyn Deutsche, Branden W. Joseph and Thomas Keenan, "Every Form of Art Has a Political Dimension," *Grey Room* no.2 (Winter 2001): 100.

[152] Chantal Mouffe, "Counter-Hegemonic Struggle and Agonistic Practices." https://www.diaphanes.net/titel/democratic-politics-in-the-age-of-post-fordism-2216

[153] Mouffe, "Every Form of Art Has a Political Dimension," 100; Mouffe, "Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces," *Art & Research* 1, no.2 (Summer 2007), 3.

[154] González 215.

Members of the New York Strike Against War, Racism, Fascism, Sexism, and Repression, to announce a day of strike and withdrawal. Sending out letters, they informed major art institutions in New York City about their direct action and requested that they close their doors. The Whitney Museum obliged whereas the MoMA remained open but charged no admission fee, and the Guggenheim Museum, which also remained open, removed all paintings from the walls. In an act of solidarity with the artists, hundreds of protestors gathered at the Metropolitan Museum to support the strike and to protest government and police brutality. The strike demonstrated the potency of art as a constituent of culture that can be utilized to convey a message, "both by its presence and by its absence." [155] It "positioned the visual arts as a social tool and the museum as a social forum to be wielded symbolically on behalf of concerned citizens – both artists and non-artists alike."[156]

The works of Hans Haacke, a pivotal artist in institutional critique, also brought attention to the complexities and problematics of the relationships between art, artists, sponsors, institutions, and the public. Haacke's practice "articulate[d] the role of major international corporations in supporting art institutions and exhibitions while simultaneously destroying the environment and collaborating with brutal, antidemocratic regimes like the apartheid government in South Africa."[157] *On Social Grease* (1975), a series of photoengraved magnesium plates mounted on aluminum, each exhibiting quotes from important art world figures alongside those from business executives that "display their opinions on the system of exchange between museums and businesses, speaking directly to the importance of the arts in business practices," exemplifies the

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[155] González, 219.

[156] González, 219.

[157] Gary Carrion-Murayari and Massimiliano Gioni, *Hans Haacke: All Connected* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2019), 1.

self-serving agendas of shareholders and sponsors that Haacke aimed to unveil to the attendees of the gallery. [158] [159]

Despite these examples, since activist art became a distinct category in the 80s some theorists, such as Negri and Hardt promoted a stark "exodus" strategy, claiming that political activism and institutional structure cannot reconcile and that the sense of "belonging" that the (presumably hostile, monolithic and hegemonic entity that is the institution is a detriment to activist efforts). Mouffe vehemently disagrees with Negri and Hardt, contending that such an approach prohibits artists from entering the space in which is it important that they "disarticulat[e] the constitutive elements" of the institution, "with the aim of establishing a different power configuration."[160]

Artist-activist Felix González-Torres has a similar view. He propounds that artists are responsible for disrupting power from within the art world:

> At this point I do not want to be outside the structures of power, I do not want to be the opposition, the alternative. Alternative to what? To power? No. I want to have power. It's effective in terms of change. I want to be like a virus that belongs to the institution. All the ideological apparatuses are, in other words, replicating themselves, because that's the way culture works. So if I function

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[158] "On Social Grease," University of Oregon, https://blogs.uoregon.edu/hanshaacke/2015/02/14/on-social-grease-1975/

[159] The question is, "is unveiling enough?". I have previously stated that Jennie Holzein's *Inflammatory Texts* are not typically considered activist art, even though it is unquestionably political. I explained that this is because the work does not suggest a solution to the problems that the work grapples with. Following the same principle, one could dismiss Haacke's work as not activist art, which in my opinion would be an unfair assessment of the artist's contributions to the activist struggle and his activist agenda. It must be acknowledged, however, that there is indeed a difference between Haacke's work and the contemporary work of the U.K. based activist group Liberate Tate which organizes performative in situ interventions to ban the sponsorship of fossil fuel companies from the museum. The comparison once again brings up the question of specificity, scale, and collaboration when considering whether an artwork is "activist art." The nuance demonstrates why theorists might have deemed it beneficial to establish it as a distinct category in the 80s.

[160] Chantal Mouffe, "Chantal Mouffe" *Artforum* (Summer 2010) https://www.artforum.com/features/chantal-mouffe-194635/

> as a virus, an imposter, an infiltrator, I will always replicate myself together with those institutions.[161]

The 1990s is a pivotal decade for comprehending the evolving connection between modern art, its institutions, and movements advocating for social justice. In this decade, critics and scholars increasingly started acknowledging activist art as a separate category, and art institutions began integrating activism into their exhibitions. An important example of such integration occurred during the 1993 Whitney Biennial when the then curator of film and video, John G. Hanhardt decided to exhibit the 1991 video taken by George Holliday of Los Angeles police officers brutalizing Rodney King. Hanhardt's inclusion of the Rodney King footage, which was never conceived as a work of art, in the Biennial opened the way to new interpretations of visual culture and media activism.[162] It also forewarned about the possibility of the assimilation of resurgent methodologies by hegemonic culture.

Addressing the co-option of revolutionary resurgences by mass media and culture, in *Seeing Power* Thompson explores the birth of countercultures and their assimilation by hegemonic power since the late 1940s, when televisions were first finding a permanent place for themselves in households. Thompson identifies the Situationists as the only group who had the capacity to (only to a certain extent), resist "a cultural economy that would ultimately contain the revolutionary spirit of the late 1960s."[163] Focusing on artists who "self-consciously operate at the intersection of art and politics," who create, in his terminology, "socially engaged art," Thompson identifies two important strands of artistic production that inform contemporary activist art: social aesthetics (adopted from David Deitcher), and tactical media. [164]

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[161] Joseph Kosuth and Felix González -Torres, "A Conversation," in *A. Reinhardt, J. Kosuth, F. González - Torres: Symptoms of Interference, Conditions of Possibility*, Exh. Cat., Clare Farrow, ed. (London: Camden Arts Center, 1994), 76.

[162] Shipley and Moriuchi, *Routledge Companion,* 8.

[163] Nato Thompson, *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2015), 15.

[164] Thompson, *Seeing Power*, 19-21.

Similar to Bourriaud, Bishop, and Rogoff, Thompson marks the mid-1990s as the period when art became "more social and interpersonal, and unafraid to be immaterial and immediate."[165] Socially engaged artists were inspired by the exalted sense of suspicion around mass culture and focused their projects instead on "the immediate, the personal, and at times, the political."[166] These artworks were driven by social aesthetics, which prioritizes interpersonal relationships that most often take place outside institutions such as galleries and museums. The principle of social aesthetics is that it functions as "a catalyst for civic activity" where "the [167]activating of the social (is) the art."[168] Thompson notes that the encounter between social aesthetics and the all-encompassing culture industry, instead of assimilating the former completely, generated a new strategy, that is the tactical media movement.

The radical, activist art collective Critical Art Ensemble (CAE), formed in 1987, which explores "the intersections between art, critical theory, technology, and political activism," is the first define "tactical media," as "an interventionist form of guerilla cultural production that would disturb specific political structures."[169] A term adopted from the vocabulary of theorist Michel de Certeau, tactical media involves "the use of any media that will engage a particular socio-political context in order to create molecular interventions and semiotic shocks that collectively could diminish the rising intensity of authoritarian culture."[170] CAE claimed that the "deterritorialized" structure of networked power had rendered traditional methods of direct action antiquated. They instead promoted direct

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[165] Thompson, *Seeing Power*, 20.

[166] Ibid.

[167] Deitcher's social aesthetics resonates with novelist, essayist, director, actor, playwright, and performance artist Darren O'Donnell's understanding of social interaction and civic engagement as an aesthetic, outlined in *Social Acupuncture: A guide to Suicide, Performance, and Utopia*.

[168] Ibid.

[169] Thompson, *Seeing Power*, 22; Critical Art Ensemble, http://critical-art.net/

[170] McKee, *Strike Art*, 51.

action through hacking the digital networks of corporate and governmental powers.

Similar to González-Torres and Mouffe, tactical media practitioners such as The Critical Art Ensemble, and The Yes Men, who have a more sympathetic approach to traditional, street-level activism, regardless construe the world as "a complicated field of power, in which artist-activists would intervene: one ha(s) to trespass to make meaning."[171] These collectives infiltrate public spaces and spaces of authority, utilizing whatever means are available to them that relates to their field of intervention as their artistic medium, rather than confine themselves into traditional materials and the space of the gallery or the museum.

The Yes Men's "laughtivist" practice, where they work with activist organizations and students to destroy brands, create "public illusions", work with impacted communities, disrupt events and to impersonate "nefarious entities," exemplifies how tactical media can be employed as a form of direct action.[172] Amongst the political interventions of The Yes Men are the fake websites and fake press releases such as StarbucksCares.com, which targets Starbuck's additional charge for non-dairy milk which disproportionately affects people of color. The Yes Men also appear in public in various personas such as Dr. Andreas Bichlbauer who represented the World Trade Organization in October 2000 at a conference on tariffs and trade to argue that siestas in Italy and Spain should be banned as they are responsible for unproductivity, and to advertise a website where people can sell their votes. His lecture, which was meant to critique the failures of democracy, was taken seriously and even celebrated.[173] In

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[171] Thompson, *Seeing Power*, 22.

[172] The Yes Men, "About Us," https://theyesmen.org/about/stuff

[173] Films for Action, "The Yes Men: Changing the World One Prank at a Time," 2004, https://www.filmsforaction.org/watch/the-yes-men/; The Yes Men, "End of the WTO," https://theyesmen.org/project/end-wto/behindthecurtain.
I have commented on the problem of ignorance and gullibility of the public in their encounters with satirical work in my dissertation proposal, in my discussion of *Couple in the Cage*. (didacticism vs. allegory) I wonder about the impact of the medium – How encounter with an artwork through various media and platforms (in the institutional space, or in person outside, or on T.V.) can influence an audience's reaction is a worthwhile consideration that I want to grapple with as I progress.

2004 the Yes Men, posing online as the company, went live on air as spokespeople for Dow Chemical, “publicly pledging massive reparations to victims of the 1984 Union Carbide pesticide plant disaster in India” which raised awareness to the crimes of the company and in turn was acknowledged as an important intervention by the locals of the impacted region.[174]

In the mid-1990s, the alternative globalization, or alterglobalization movement, which itself was a global movement that supports global interaction and cooperation while battling the strife caused by global capitalism, united activism and art under its banner.[175] Their slogan, “Another world is possible,” which emerged from one of the movement’s congregational platforms, the World Social Forum, demonstrated their mission: to dismantle neoliberalism which in the words of Margaret Thatcher claimed that “there is no alternative.”[176] Alterglobalization crystallized during the Battle of Seattle in 1999 yet, as McKee emphasizes “(t)he energies that animated Seattle flowed from the Global South,” particularly the Zapatista uprising of 1994.”[177]

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[174] Andreas Petrossiants, “The Yes Men,” *ArtForum*, https://www.artforum.com/events/the-yes-men-2-249526/

[175] Thompson, *Seeing Power*, 23.

[176] Nicholas Mirzoeff, “Afterword: Visual Activism,” *How to See the World: An Introduction to Images, from Self-Portraits to Selfies, Maps to Movies, and More* (London: Pelican Books, 2015).

[177] McKee, *Strike Art*, 50.

Portrait of Emiliano Zapata in a mural (Photo: Kethevane Gorjestani / Publicity)

The insurrection of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation was a response to the catastrophic impact of NAFTA on indigenous farmers and the broader concept of "humanity," a generalizing term that the group employed to challenge the "fourth world war" caused by neoliberalism.[178] The Zapatistas were pioneers in utilizing the internet, establishing a network of communication and solidarity that connected activists from the Global South with the radicals of the North who had contributed to the solidarity movements of the 1980s, labour activists, and progressive ecologists. The Zapatistas emphasized "post-vanguardist political forms, such as the local assembly rather than vertical party structure, and surreal poetics of revolution inflicted by a discourse of dreams, masks, and ancestral spirits…"[179] In this sense, their aesthetics was similar to the Surrealists', except it wasn't appropriated.

Anthropologist and future Occupy participant David Graeber named the principles that shaped the alternative globalization movement "New Anarchism," a philosophy that extended to the activist congregations of the 21st century. According to Graeber, the fundamental concept underlying New Anarchism is the

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[178] Ibid.

[179] Ibid.

practice of imaginative and innovative direct action that is autonomous, carried out without the authorization of any intermediary authority such as an art institution or a political party. This action not only challenges the existing governing system but also anticipates the creation of a new world through the action itself.[180]

Until the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, the eclectic alternative globalization movement and New Anarchism had built "a vast network of communities of resistance across the globe" that was "skeptical of the co-opting power of media, ready to unite across political and ideological differences in pursuit of common capitalist enemies, (…) aware of the problems of hierarchical organizing" and "had numerous analytic and social tools at the ready."[181] Unfortunately, the growing nationalistic sentiments after the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, which was a rupture in public consciousness, temporarily suppressed grassroots activist efforts if only for them to proliferate again in the following decades.

Contemporary Movements

In *The Art of Activism and the Activism of Art*, published in 2022, artist and activist Gregory Sholette argues that the 21st century witnessed a dissolution between the categories of art and activism. These two seemingly separate but overlapping realms progressively became indistinguishable, and the question of whether a socially engaged, participatory and collective project is "art" or not has become irrelevant.[182] Sholette asserts that "[w]ithout a question, the prevailing desire by artists to transform their practices into a form of highly focused protest is the most prominent – and in many ways the most perplexing – constituent of contemporary art today."[183] What defines the

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[180] David Graeber, "The New Anarchists," *New Left Review* iss. 13 (January/February, 2002), https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii13/articles/david-graeber-the-new-anarchists

[181] Thompson, *Seeing Power*, 23.

[182] Gregory Sholette, *The Art of Activism and the Activism of Art* (London: Lund Humphries, 2022), 10-13.

[183] Sholette, *The Art of Activism*, 12.

contemporary activist artist is their unwavering dedication to using “agitation and protest as an artistic medium”, rather than a singular or superficial focus on the representation of political and social injustice, which culminates into “a degree of militancy that makes artistic practice appear barely distinguishable from activism per se.”[184]

Artist Tania Bruguera’s “artivism,” or *Arte Útil*, a term that translates as “useful art” in Spanish that simultaneously portrays art as a tool or a device, exemplifies the type of contemporary activist art practice described by Sholette. *Arte Útil* involves the process of imagining, creating, developing and implementing a vision that provides an explicitly beneficial outcome for the people it serves. Bruguera asserts that *arte util* is “art because it is the elaboration of a proposal that does not yet exist in the real world and because it is made with the hope and belief that something may be done better, even when the conditions for it to happen may not be there.” [185] It is, as I alluded to in my introduction, that it reveals, captures, represents, ponders and/or suggests a way of living and being that is beyond current reality that makes *arte util*, and arguably, activist art, activist.

Bruguera’s works exemplify what philosopher Herbert Marcuse would describe as authentic or revolutionary art. In the words of critical theory scholar Douglas Kellner who compiled and edited Marcuse’s essays on art and liberation (amongst others), authentic or revolutionary art “transcends everyday life by virtue of its form, by its ability to produce another world which projects images of a better life and reveals the deficiencies and horrors of existing reality.”[186] In this sense, the term *Arte Útil* fulfils Marcuse’s conceptualization of revolutionary art as well as Grant Kester’s dialogic aesthetics. It is also closely aligned with my understanding of Bourriaud’s relational art where non-conventional relationships (convivial) are formed within the unique space offered by the artwork.

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[184] Sholette, *The Art of Activism*, 13.

[185] Tania Bruguera, “Reflexions on arte util,” https://taniabruguera.com/wp-content/uploads/reflexiones_sobre_el_arte_util_-_eng_1.pdf

[186] Herbert Marcuse, introduction to *Art and Liberation: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, edited by Douglas Kellner (London: Routledge, 2007), 29.

As a conceptual artist, Bruguera considers herself to be an initiator rather than an author. Similar to Suzanne Lacy's performative works, Bruguera's performances often do not necessitate the artist's physical presence.[187] To differentiate her work from traditional, modernist performance art where an audience is simultaneously reduced and elevated to the passive spectatorial position, Bruguera describes her pieces such as Tatlin's *Whisper 5* as *arte de conducta* (behaviour art) which "use(s) performance as a tool to develop engaged citizens."[188]

Tatlin's Whisper 5 took place in January 2008, at Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, where the visitors met with an unfamiliar sight when they encountered two trained policemen in their uniforms and on their horses, patrolling the gallery, giving directions to the audience using all the (including forceful) crowd control techniques for them to make arbitrary maneuvers in the space. The crowd took orders as if they were not in a performance, abiding by the policemen's orders as if they were forced to, as they are outside, in the "non-art" world. The authenticity of the experience was ensured by the instructions laid out by Tania Bruguera, who described *Whisper 5* as a small experience in power relations. [189] The work evoked Foucauldian theory as it mirrored the rootedness of power dynamics in our relationship with authority both as individuals and as crowds.[190] In fitting with the role Bruguera assigns to art, *Tatlin's Whisper 5*, as well as *Tatlin's Whisper 6*, which was a reimagination of the preceding work, urged their

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[187] Tania Bruguera and Tom Eccles, "Interview with Tania Bruguera," December 2015, https://taniabruguera.com/interview-with-tania-bruguera-3/

[188] Candice Amich, "When Doves Cry: Tania Bruguera's Untimely Practice," *The Drama Review* 66, no.2 (2022), 30.

[189] Bruguera clearly outlines "the materials that must be used (trained mounted police in uniform, no fewer than six crowd control techniques and so on) and describes what the institution cannot do. For example, as with its initial appearance, the performance must never be announced in advance. Also, the work can never appear solely as documentation. It can be represented by documentary material in the course of a lecture about the work or its concerns, but a clear distinction must be maintained between the work and its resulting images." Jonah Westerman, "Tania Bruguera Born 1968 *Tatlin's Whisper #5* 2008," Tate Modern, https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/performance-at-tate/perspectives/tania-bruguera

[190] Bourriaud identifies Foucault as "the primary source of inspiration for the artists and theorists of the 1990s." Nicolas Bourriaud, "Installation, Video, Actions: The Ascent of the Precarious Postmodern Era," in Valerio Terraroli, eds. *The Art of the 20th Century: 2000 and Beyond Contemporary Tendencies* (Milan: Skira Editore, 2009), 30.

participants to question the roles we prescribe to collectivity, community, communication, and systems of power.

Tatlin's *Whisper 6* was first performed at the Tenth Havana Biennale in 2009 and then in 2014 at the Turbine Hall in support of the artist who got arrested for her attempt to restage Biennale performance in Cuba's Revolutionary Plaza. The performances belonged to the audience; every individual was presented with the opportunity to have the microphone for free speech for the duration of a minute, with a white dove placed on their shoulders to simulate the dove that landed on Castro's shoulder during his first public speech to draw attention to the stark difference in who is given the space to speak, under what conditions, under various repressive regimes. Given the oppressive censorship around political expression (self-expression) in Cuba during the decade, the performance was a constructive intervention into the prevailing regime and its society.

As scholar Stephanie Schwartz observes, Bruguera's *arte util* and *arte de conducta* – art which functions as a space to sample alternative futures and/or the future from alternative perspectives, exemplified by the *Tatlin's Whisper* in its many iterations, are both site and time specific. Each performance is "developed around a local and familiar public image." [191] Performance art researcher Candice Amich also draws attention to the contextuality of Bruguera's art, quoting art historian Jose Luis Falconi who suggests that "political timing-specific work" such as hers is: "'an intervention in a specific place, with a specific history, because of specific political conditions"; "a temporary gesture that is only given or carried out in a specific time and place"; and a work "done so that a state or institution or large political body will act.'"[192] As I have demonstrated, these principles also apply to the broader category of activist art.

Out on the streets, in the turn of the century, the grassroots alternative globalization campaign was repressed as a result of the fortification of U.S. nationalism, the propaganda of which dominated the public scene. The "cultural

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[191] Stephanie Schwartz, "Is This What Democracy Looks Like? Tania Bruguera and the Politics of Performance," in *A Companion to Modern and Contemporary Latin American and Latina/o Art*, edited by Alejandro Anreus, Robin Adele Greeley, and Megan A. Sullivan (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022), 413.

[192] Amich, "When Doves Cry," 30.

politics" that converged art and activism faded, if only to be restored during the Occupy Wall Street movement, which itself was inspired by the collection of public square protests and consecutive alterations to the hegemonic structure called the Arab Spring where visual and media activism played a critical role in emancipatory struggles.[193] Art since the turn of the century played a significant role in promoting and supporting various social and political movements such as the so-called Arab Spring (2010), Occupy Wall Street (2011), Black Lives Matter (2013), Standing Rock #NoDAPL (2016), and Decolonize This Place (2016), among others.[194] Kim Charnley, who wrote a book on sociopolitical aesthetics, asserts that these movements were "inspired by the 'Arab Spring', but also drew upon imaginative organizational methods and media interventions that are part of the art activist tradition."[195] Thompson and Sholette also observe that, one of the common denominators of twenty-first century movements is the "creative and productive unity of art and activism,"[196] amongst "leaderless leadership and non-hierarchical organizing," which are characteristic of activist art practices.[197]

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[193] The flow is once again from the global south to the global north. I am interested in this. Is struggle an imperative condition of freedom? (not "emancipation," because it already has the implication: "emancipation from...") Must there be suffering for there to be resistance to it? How natural/naturalized is resistance? Suffering? What is the optimum that we can expect and strive towards? (This relates to Mouffe's and Bishop's assertion that adversarial positions are necessary for pluralistic democracy, as well as the tradition of agon in ancient Greek theater where there would be a figure separating from the chorus to speak directly to the audience, which in itself is an antagonistic act – must there always be someone or ones who stand in opposition to the crowd of consensus? Must the fourth wall be broken?)
The directionality of the resurgent flow (global south to global north) negates accelerationism: if it was advancement in capitalist conditions alone that triggered the revolution, we would expect the revolution to be led by the most "developed" countries - those that possess the infrastructure that upholds mechanisms that arguably facilitate human life. One could argue that life has become insufferable in countries *most affected* by capitalist growth therefore insurgence starts there, which would make a point for accelerationism, but I find it hard to understand how and why a revolutionary would argue that already disadvantaged people should suffer even more for there to be the emancipation of all.

[194] Shipley and Moriuchi, *Routledge Companion*, 8.

[195] Kim Charnley, "Art in the Brink: Bare Art and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy," in *Delirium and Resistance: Activist Art and the Crisis of Capitalism* by Gregory Sholette, edited by Kim Charnley (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 5.

[196]Thompson, *Seeing Power*, 26; Sholette, *Delirium and Resistance*, 26.

[197]Thompson, *Seeing Power*, 26; Sholette, *Delirium and Resistance*, 26.

In *Delirium and Resistance: Activist Art and the Crisis of Capitalism,* Sholette observes that during the global Occupy movement, and the subsequent movements it inspired, activists "rediscovered" the "art activist tactics of the 1970s and 1980s."[198] Artistic interventions during the movement ranged from "impromptu exhibitions and guerilla theater to conceptual statements in public spaces and online."[199] Artists' participation in the OWS movement encompassed institutional critique, as they questioned and challenged the art world's tendency to prioritize the interests of the wealthiest 1% of the society. Moreover, artists advocated for increased racial and social justice in the representation of artists and artworks, as well as the composition of staff and museum boards.[200]

Yates McKee in *Strike Art*, where he examines activist art during and since the movement, declares that "Occupy as a totality – rather than just this or that phenomena within it – can itself arguably be considered an artistic project in its own right, assuming we reimagine our sense of what art is or can be."[201] The activism for change in the institutional level initiated by OWS artists persists today through several ecological, decolonial and anti-racist initiatives including Change the Museum, Museums Are Not Neutral, Decolonize This Place, and Liberate Tate.[202]

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement is another crucial contemporary project, which originated in 2013 as a protest of the acquittal of the man who murdered 17 year-old Trayvon Martin out of "suspicion," and went viral with the Ferguson uprisings of 2014.[203] BLM works both within and outside of the system "to heal the past, reimagine the present, and invest in the future of Black lives

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[198] Sholette, Delirium and Resistance, 25.

[199] Shipley and Moriuchi, *Routledge Companion*, 9.

[200] Shipley and Moriuchi, *Routledge Companion*, 8-9.

[201] McKee, *Strike Art*, 27.

[202] Shipley and Moriuchi, *Routledge Companion*, 9.

[203] McKee, *Strike Art,* 185.

through policy change, investment in our communities, and a commitment to arts and culture."[204] The Black Youth Project 100's direct action that was announced online and planned as a detournement of museums in New York, titled the #BlackOut Tour, that drew attention to the racism and colonialism inherent in art institutions and their loots exemplifies BLM's institutional and ideological critique and interventions into the art world.

A Photoshopped image of the infamous racist monument of Roosevelt on his horse with an African American and a Native American individual walking on each side started making the rounds on social media in February 2015. Roosevelt's face, "heroic and imperial," had been covered with a black bar, suggesting he is a criminal. The bottom of the picture read "#Blackout Tour. Another hashtag, #Malcolm50, appeared on the upper right corner of the frame. The picture was meant to galvanize and advertise a direct action organized by groups of artists and activists from the Black Youth Project 100, scheduled on February 21, the 50th anniversary of Malcolm X's death, at the American Museum of Natural History, where the original sculpture is located.

On the day, a group of about forty persons, the most of whom were of color, convened at the museum's introductory gallery. There, facilitator Cheryl Brown, wearing a "I can't Breathe" t-shirt and a Palestinian keffiyeh, launched the #Blackout tour, taking the group on an ambling detournement of the museum which served as "both an archive of white supremacy and a platform for counter memorial witness bearing."[205]

A separate guide provided a brief overview of the exhibition at each location on the tour, such as the Hall of African Peoples. Following that, participants were left to explore the quiet, dimly lit space on their own. The only light coming from the dioramas depicting various landscapes was the uncanny glow of humanoid mannequins trapped in so-called "primitive" states, surrounded by real artwork,

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[204] Black Lives Matter, "Our History," https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/,

[205] McKee, *Strike Art*, 182.

jewelry, masks, and textiles that had been looted by colonial powers and put on display in the museum. Following the conclusion of every tour leg, a quote by Malcolm X was broadcast through the people's microphone, a popular Occupy-era medium, shattering the silence of the gallery. The tour ended with a poetic ritual that addressed the etymology of the words “roots” and “radical” at the Hall of North American Forests, following a stop at a special exhibition featuring a display on Hurricane Sandy entitled Nature's Fury: The Science of Natural Disasters. This exhibit, like the donor of the Museum, David Koch, “ignored the fact of climate change, let alone its uneven effects in terms of race and class.”[206]

The final event of the day was centered on the monument itself. The group tied a banner to the base of the sculpture that read “WHITE SUPREMACY KILLS,” alongside the names of those who have been murdered by the police. Another banner announced the tour’s affiliation with the broader movement, “BLACK LIVES MATTER.” Although the tour itself was not advertised as an artwork, it functioned as one; it offered an alternative narrative to that of the institution which, due to its colonial roots, has historically aligned itself with white supremacy, and, formally satisfied social aesthetics, which deemed civic gatherings where novelties are explored through interaction with each other an aesthetic and thus the tour, an artwork.[207]

The BLM Foundation concentrates on the intersection of art and activism for Black liberation across the diaspora and “the preservation and protection of Black creativity.”[208] Amongst the art projects listed on the BLM website is the community ecosystem called Freedom Nation, or Freedom Village, where everyone contributes what they can, developing their skills along the way, to live

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[206] McKee, Strike Art, 183.

[207] A precursor to BLM’s BlackOut Tour is the work of Fred Wilson, an important artist who revealed a different reality than the one relayed by the institution through his art. Wilson, since the late 1970s, have “mobilize(d) neglected objects within museum collections in order to highlight the racial biases and blind spots of Western cultural institutions.” Huey Copeland, “How You Look is How You Look: An Interview with Fred Wilson,” *Callaloo* 33, no.4 (Fall 2010): 1018.

[208] Black Lives Matter, “Our Work: Arts,” https://blacklivesmatter.com/our-work/pillar/arts/

self-sufficiently. The Village functions as a live classroom where the inhabitants practice and teach environmental literacy and development, experimenting with ways in which they can achieve the highest quality of life imaginable in an economic, quick and sustainable manner.

In 2022 BLM organized a music festival titled “The Joy Experience,” which over 50.000 individuals attended, that functioned as a creative global network production site for the movement, as well as “a refuge space, where healing thrives, laughter echoes, and the expressions of (participants’) unified identities form a bridge between generations.”[209] The attendees had the opportunity to experience true joy in the physical art installation designed as an adult playground by three notable black artists: “Mr. Legacy of LegacyHistoryPride, pierre bennu, a legendary multi-hyphenate artist based in Baltimore, Maryland and visual storyteller Eza Naylor.” [210] During the event participants addressed “disputes through peace-centered tactics.”[211] The festival provided the opportunity for the diverse attendees to exercise direct democracy.[212]

The rise of the BLM movement in late 2014 and early 2015 coincided with the increased momentum of the climate justice movement, known as "Blockadia," as described by activist journalist Naomi Klein. “Blockadia” describes a network of locations in the US and globally where radical direct actions are being carried out to disrupt the mechanisms of the fossil fuel industry.[213] These actions aim to create a new economy based on the concept of shared resources. In “Why #BlackLivesMatter Should Transform the Climate Debate” Naomi Klein draws

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[209] Black Lives Matter, “Shifting Culture Through the Joy Experience,” https://blacklivesmatter.com/shifting-culture-through-the-joy-experience/

[210] Black Lives Matter, “BLM & One Music Festival- The Joy Experience 2022,” https://blacklivesmatter.com/video/blm-one-music-festival-the-joy-experience-2022/

[211] Ibid.

[212] And it was a convivial space – yet I don’t think Bishop would critique it for not harboring enough antagonism. the question of leadership.

[213] Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 293-336; McKee, *Strike Art*, 186.

attention to the racial injustice of the climate crisis that disproportionally affects the Global South and people of colour.[214]

Celebrating the unification of BLM and the climate justice movement in 2014, Klein asserts that "the worst impacts of extreme weather follow racial lines with the same devastating precision as the decision about whether to employ lethal police force."[215] Further, she notes that two movements intersect and must unite with social justice efforts towards bettering the education industry that systemically fail BIPOC children, and the healthcare system that often neglects to care for the lives of people of color. As McKee puts it, BLM and the climate justice considered together "spell the dissolution of 'environmentalism' as a specialized realm of activism into a broader horizon of antiracist collective liberation of the sort evoked by the BlackOut Tour.""[216]

The "ecosex movement," a grassroots activist movement initiated by the artist couple Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle, is a project "where they aim to make the environmental movement more sexy, fun and diverse through art projects."[217] Ecosexuality is an art and life practice that was inspired by ecofeminism and the Fluxus movement, developed through the 2016 manifesto "as a particular lens for expanding queer ecofeminist inquiry into the power of sexual liberation for ecological liberation, which (the artists) do through the creative methodologies of performance."[218] Inspired by posthuman philosopher Donna Harraway's theorisations on ecosystems, Stephens and Sprinkle "see ecosex as a conceptual art practice and a way of thinking beyond individual

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[214] Naomi Klein, "Why #BlackLivesMatter Should Transform the Climate Debate," *The Nation* (December 12, 2014), https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/what-does-blacklivesmatter-have-do-climate-change/

[215] Ibid.

[216] Strike Art, 187.

[217] Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle, *SexEcology,* "Short Bios," http://sexecology.org/about-us/short-bios/

[218] Vanessa Raditz and Jess Martinez, Book Review of *Assuming the Ecosexual Position: The Earth as Lover* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 106.

identity, and even beyond human beings, to envision a larger system – an ecology of relationships."[219]

Between 2005 and 2011 Sprinkle and Stephens created their ecosexual project, the *Love Art Lab*, inspired by Linda Montano's *14 Years of Living Art*. *The Love Art Lab* was a seven-year project where each year was devoted to a chakra, color and a theme. Sprinkle and Stephens orchestrated each year at least one interactive performance art wedding to natural elements such as lakes and the moon (they married Earth in 2008 and Guillermo Gomez-Pena officiated their vows, which officially structured the ecosex framework), displayed the ephemera at art galleries, engaged in sexecology performances, organized walking tours that resembled SI's detournements, and conducted sex education and health workshops.[220] In the lab Sprinkle, Stephens and numerous national and international collaborators experimented with and promoted ways to "explore, generate and celebrate love" in response to "the violence of war, the anti-gay marriage movement, and our prevailing culture of greed."[221]

Imbuing environmental art with eroticism, Sprinkle and Stephens developed numerous works on the concept of ecosexuality throughout the 2010s and 2020s. In 2010 they presented their two-women theater piece, "Dirty Sexecology; 25 Ways to Make Love with the Earth" in Vienna, at Europe's oldest feminist theater, the Kosmos. In 2012 they performed *Dirt Bed* where they invited audience members to have a playful "orgy" with "lover earth."[222] Contemporarily the duo is delivering visiting artist lecture presentations, which are site-specific and

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[219] Ibid.

[220] Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle, "Green Wedding Invitation," https://loveartlab.ucsc.edu/2016/06/13/green-wedding-invitation/

[221] Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle, *The Love Laboratory*, https://loveartlab.ucsc.edu/

[222] Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 9.

interactive, and continuing exploring ecosexuality in film format.[223] Stephens and Sprinkle galvanized Occupy Bernal, in response to their neighbour losing their residences to foreclosure as a result of avaricious bank loans. Their protest "caught like wildfire," and structured itself around weekly tutorials, meetings and actions.

On their website, Sprinkle and Stephens observe that "the environmental activist movement can be very conservative and 'straight.'" Instead, they strive to build a movement where all people (including "drag queens, differently gendered folks, queers of all stripes and colors as well as heterosexuals, bisexuals and asexuals (ecoromantics)" are celebrated.[224] Despite the duo's ambition to be inclusive, their book *Assuming the Ecosexual Position: The Earth as Lover* was criticized by Vanessa Raditz and Jess Martinez, the directors of the documentary *Can't Stop Change: Queer Climate Stories from the Florida Frontlines* for not paying enough attention to decolonial and racial politics and for its ableism; for its lack of intersectionality.

Raditz's main criticism about the movement is the lack of an underlying political philosophy and strategy that addresses the impact of state violence in perpetuating environmental injustices and causing harm to BIPOC, queer and trans individuals.[225] To illustrate the critique that lacks in Sprinkle and Stephens's work, Raditz exemplifies the literature of queer women of color such as Sonya Renee Taylor's *The Body is Not an Apology* (2021), *Pleasure Activism* (2019) by adrienne maree brown, and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (2018), all of which "focus on the body, and disrupt the controlling ideologies of cisheteronormativity, ableism, and fatphobia in ways

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[223] It must be noted that Sprinkle and Stephens's ecosexuality has been critiqued for failing to incorporate and represent intersectional interests of BIPOC feminists and disability activists such as Vanessa Raditz, Jess Martinez and Kim Tallbear.

[224] Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle, "Gay Pride Parade," http://sexecology.org/activism/gay-pride-parade/

[225] Raditz and Martinez, Book Review of *Assuming the Ecosexual Position: The Earth as Lover* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 110.

that explicitly analyze the ongoing violences of colonialism and racial capitalism."[226]

Accelerating climate change disproportionately impacts queer people of color as well as queer people with disabilities.[227] In their "crip-of-color critique" Raditz and Martinez quote Kim TallBear, who Sprinkle and Stephens credit for influencing the ecosexual movement. TallBear describes disability as "the state-sanctioned disablement of racialized and impoverished communities via resource deprivation."[228] They authors point out that by neglecting to engage with broader sociopolitical frameworks that function interactively to propagate discrimination and hate, ecosexuality is falling short from establishing itself as a relatable solution for all people as it aspires to be.

Raditz and Martinez also express their doubt that a movement, created by two white women who habitually appropriate others' culture and not discuss the reasoning, excuse, or explanation behind it in a book about the project (other than referencing the original work by Linda Montana), would be accepted by individuals who value decolonial practices. [229] As Tallbear highlights:

There are occasional references in ecosex literature to Native American knowledges in ways that are what I would classify as "New Age," and I would advise caution around the appropriation of Native American knowledges and motifs to the ecosexual ceremonial and artistic repertoire.... There are no easy, literal translations between indigenous ontologies and ecosexuality, at least among the indigenous people I run

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[226] Raditz and Martinez, Book Review of *Assuming the Ecosexual Position*, 107.

[227] Ibid.

[228] Ibid. Kim Tallbear, "What's in Ecosexuality for an Indigenous Scholar of 'Nature'?," Indigenous STS, https://indigenoussts.com/whats-in-ecosexuality-for-an-indigenous-scholar-of-nature/

[229] Raditz and Martinez, Book Review of *Assuming the Ecosexual Position*, 107.

with. Rather, there are careful conversations with much careful thought to be had.[230]

The Indigenous-led struggle at Standing Rock exemplifies direct environmental action that gathers supporters from diverse backgrounds and different situated knowledges. The #NoDAPL movement began as a call from the members of the Standing Rock Indian Reservation and other Native American communities to organize an action to stop the development of Energy Transfer Partners' Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), "a pipeline that runs through ancient burial grounds and cultural heritage sites from western North Dakota to southern Illinois."[231] Similar to BLM, the internet was vital to the grassroots campaign which gained momentum on social media with the use of the hashtag #NoDAPL, leading to the creation of countless flyers, posters, banners, videos, street art, and artefacts which can be included under the banner "activist art."

The Mirror Shield Project was created by artist Cannupa Hanska Luger, who wanted to support the protection of the water that was at risk of destruction due to DAPL. Luger employed art as a means to deliver insightful social critique, a plea for self-reflection and a demand for action. He produced an instructional how-to video and shared it on social media, encouraging others to also make mirrored shields using readily available materials such as CDs. As a result, over a thousand mirrored shields were shipped to the Oceti Sakowin Camp near and were utilized by the Water Protectors in direct confrontations with authorities. Mirrored shields which "forces the oppressors to look at their own reflection, to recognize the implication of their aggression and the harm they are causing, and to remind them that there are human beings on both sides of the line" were used by other activist movements such as BLM.[232]

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[230] Tall Bear, "What's in Ecosexuality," June 29, 2012.

[231] Shipley and Moriuchi, *Routledge Companion*, 9.

[232] Shipley and Moriuchi, *Routledge Companion*, 10.

It could be argued that the social and political movements of the twenty first century are characterized by the important role online media activism played in them, a tradition that, as I discussed, dates back to the Zapatista uprising and took special prominence during "the aesthetic turn" in international political theory which found purchase especially in the 2000s, after 9/11, a highly visual event in itself, which demonstrated a rupture in representation. The event and its aftermath proved that visuality and representation had become central to societal and global power dynamics; it proved that the "inevitable difference between the represented and its representation is the very location of politics."[233] "Aesthetization" in the realm of politics is a "social trend which involves an increasing personal concern with visual displays and/or a growing role for public spectacle in everyday life; a process where a set of values defined by ethics and based on principles and truth is replaced with a set of values defined by aesthetics and based on feelings and appearances."[234] While aesthetization, as Walter Benjamin proposes, is closely associated with fascism (and nationalism), given the all-encompassing emphasis it assigns to the visual, and the widespread availability of media to create these visuals, it can also be used *for* liberatory efforts in social struggle.

Acknowledging the power of the media, activist theorists Nicholas Mirzoeff and Jack Halberstam propose shifting the focus of "media activism" from political and critical involvement with specific media and regulatory parties, such as the Federal Communications Comission, to a broader concept of "activism in all its forms as media and mediation."[235] Their conceptualization of media activism takes its cue from the decolonialization struggle including "the Standing Rock, the Decolonize the Curriculum movement in South Africa, and long histories of

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[233] Roland Bleiker, "The Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 30, no. 3 (2001): 510

[234] Oxford Reference, "Aesthetization," https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20111003134101161?p=emailAifkt3zCE1D/Y&d=/10.1093/oi/authority.20111003134101161

[235] Nicholas Mirzoeff and Jack Halberstam, "Decolonize Media: Tactics, Manifestos, Histories," *Critical Journal* 57, no.4 (Summer 2018), 121.

resistance in the Americas, Palestine, and elsewhere."[236] In their definition, decolonizing gestures such as the occupation of the American Museum of Natural History on Indigenous Day or football players sitting out the national anthem constitute media activism. Mirzoeff and Halberstram express that media activism also includes each moment someone speaks truth to power like millions of people did and continue to do in the context of the #MeToo movement, which, as the hashtag suggests, was disseminated over Twitter and Instagram.

Having experienced the Gezi Uprising (2013) in my hometown İstanbul in Türkiye, where communicating over platforms such as Telegram saved lives, and shares over Facebook helped the movement spread across the country, I think there is utility in having an online presence, even over mainstream media owned by self-serving, exploitative corporations such as Twitter and Facebook. An early 2012 study from Finland confirms my insight. It demonstrates that Facebook played a crucial role in disseminating information and facilitating the organization and coordination of a civil campaign that opposed urban building projects. Despite its significant restrictions in terms of providing an unbiased, democratic platform upon which to engage in democratic discussion, Facebook was utilized to cultivate and strengthen "emerging collective identities" and "to create consensus within the movement."[237]

Mirzoeff and Halberstam are less optimistic about the potentials of mainstream social media platforms. While they acknowledge that Facebook and Twitter were "right in the heart of decolonizing movements in Tunisia, Egypt, and the Arab Spring"[238] and thus they can have informal, revolutionary uses, they claim that in 2018, "all social media has been permanently and thoroughly (re)colonized and infiltrated."[239] Mirzoeff and Halberstam call for a new social

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[236] Mirzoeff and Halberstam, "Decolonize Media," 120.

[237] Boris Gladarev, and Markku Lonkila, "The Role of Social Networking Sites in Civic Activism in Russia and Finland," *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no.8 (October 2012): 1375.

[238] Mirzoeff, and Halberstam "Decolonize," 121.

[239] Ibid.

media that does not exploit peoples' "desire for recognition, celebrity, and exposure."[240] While they recognize "the potential of web media," they claim that media activists should refuse to engage with "the insidious market uses of Mark Zuckerberg's social media" and the like, which is admittedly impossible when using these platforms.[241]

Elsewhere, in his preface to *The Aesthetics of Global Protest: Visual Culture and Communication* Mirzoeff emphasizes that the billions of Snaps posted on Snapchat, or the countless hours of Youtube videos uploaded every minute, rather than being symptomatic of a "global narcissism," is a "response to the experience of rupture and the crisis of the representation principle, from politics, to mental heath and the possibilities of appearance." [242] In other words, "(w)hat people are trying to create are not just images but a just image of their situation."[243] This "visual activism" is interlinked with the creative process of online representation that most people in North America engage with on a daily basis.

In 1990, we could use visual culture to criticize and counter the way that we were depicted in art, film, and mass media. Today, we can actively use visual culture to create new self-images, new ways to see and be seen, and new ways to see the world. That is visual activism.[244] While Mirzoeff with Halberstam call for an alternative, independent social platform upon which to partake in visual activism (in the hidden corners of the internet, and/or "IRL,")[245] studies also demonstrate that mainstream online platforms

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[240] Mirzoeff and Halberstam, Decolonize, 122.

[241] Mirzoeff and Halberstam, 121.

[242] Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Preface: Devisualize," in *The Aesthetics of Global Protest: Visual Culture and Communication*, edited by Umut Korkut (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 12.

[243] Ibid.

[244] Mirzoeff, "Afterword: Visual Activism," 297.

[245] Mirzoeff and Halberstam, 122.

can and do contribute to social justice efforts, especially in the COVID and post-COVID era.

The Contemporary Moment

The social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in 2019 and spread to more than a hundred countries, has been compared to the effects of World War II.[246] Not only did the pandemic inflict colossal health, environmental, social and economic damage on a global scale, it also exposed the systemic injustices that certain groups of people for centuries have been acutely aware of. Literature confirmed "dramatic psychological and emotional effects, exacerbation of segregation and poverty, disruption in educational systems and formation of an information gap, as well as a declining trend of social capital among communities."[247]

The lockdowns during the pandemic banished activism from the streets, "rendering the traditional strategies of mass protests and demonstrations impossible."[248] Social mobilization efforts across the world predominantly had to shift to the virtual space. This was not novel to authoritarian countries. In countries such as Türkiye, Zimbabwe and Russia where the government is hostile towards activist movements (both online and on the streets), mainstream social media had already been playing an important role in shaping activist movements.[249] In their Foucauldian analysis of the interaction between social media and activism in African countries, Mutsvario and Rønning explore the

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[246] Hadi Alizadeh, Ayyoob Sharifi, Safiyeh Damanbagh, Hadi Nazarnia, Mohammad Nazarnia, "Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Social Sphere and Lessons for Crisis Management: A Literature Review," *Natural Hazards* 117, no.3: 2139.

[247] Ibid.

[248] Hove Baldwin and Dube Bekithemba, "What Now for the Zimbabwean Student Demonstrator? Online Activism and Its Challenges for University Students in a COVID-19 Lockdown," *International Journal of Higher Education* 11, no.2 (2022): 100.

[249] Baldwin and Bekithemba, "What Now for the Zimbabwean Student Demonstrator," 102; Bruce Mutsvario, Helge Rønning, "The Janus Face of Social Media and Democracy? Reflections on Africa," *Media Culture & Society* 42, no.3 (April 2020): 318.

"clear tension between how social media could, on the one hand, be applied to strengthen democratic discourse and allow for a wider range of voices, and how on the other hand, authoritarian as well as democratic states use these tools to control digital communication."[250] Despite its use (potential and realized) for surveillance and control by governments, its use for enticement and profit by major companies, and its limitations due to the lack of access to digital gadgets and infrastructure that permeates the world, social media can be the only option for people to engage in activism.

This was the case for most people who had access to the internet during the pandemic. The pandemic also witnessed increased hate crimes and discrimination against Asians globally due to the origins of the coronavirus in China. U.S. president Trump's hate speech, riddled with terminology like "foreign virus" "Chinese flu" served to exacerbate and legitimize this totalizing and ignorant racism and xenophobia that although targeted Asians specifically, affected all people of color. Nanditha Narayanamoorthy reports that one effective methodology that countered increased racism against Asian individuals was the self-representations of Asian-American women on the social media platform Instagram, which recentered their embodied experiences and narratives "in the hierarchies of racial privilege in the Global North."[251] Narayanamoorthy suggests that the practice of "vulnerable sharing" on mostly private and immensely visual platforms such as Instagram helped decolonialize the space by producing powerful images and stories of self-sovereignty for Asian women.[252]

Whether Instagram posts and Snapchat pictures can be art, or activist, or activist art, or are merely inconsequential if not detrimental attempts at self-glamourization, is an important, contested issue to consider in light of Narayanamoorthy's study and Dokumacı's theorizations on activist affordances.

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[250] Mutsvario and Rønning, "The Janus Face of Social Media and Democracy?," 322.

[251] Nanditha Narayanamoorthy, "Digital Resistance to Asian-American Hate during COVID-19: Study of Photography and Art on Instragram," *Imaginations: Journal of Cross Cultural Media Studies* 14, iss.1 (2023), 7.

[252] Narayanamoorthy, "Digital Resistance to Asian-American Hate," 8.

[253] The mere presence of some bodies in the social sphere (online and offline) where they have been traditionally invisibilized, demonized, and Othered by the ideological apparatus of white supremacy and patriarchy, can be a decolonizing, activist act in itself. To demonstrate my perspective, I want to investigate two descriptions of visual activism offered by Mirzoeff and T.J. Demos.

Whereas Mirzoeff describes visual activism as a multidisciplinary framework "concerned with visual events in which information, meaning, or pleasure is sought by the consumer in an interface with visual technology,"[254] T.J. Demos's definition is far more encompassing, and it relates to the question at hand. Demos describes visual activism as "politically directed practices of visuality aimed at catalyzing social, political and economic change."[255] Activism's visuality is interwoven with "the rehearsal, pedagogy, practice, and recording of collective direct action."[256] Demos suggests that in street-level activism, the performance of the demonstration itself takes priority, and visual, archival media such as photographs, texts, objects, videos, support the main act, the demonstration.[257]

One of the goals of this historiography is to address the ontological question of whether the demonstration itself, which Dokumacı describes as the dance of labor, or the resulting media is the "activist artwork." If we take the answer as "both," we would have to contend that the broad definition of visual activism accomplishes Beuys's vision of the social sculpture where everyone is an artist; therefore every curated instance of visuals (such as protests, *or* Instagram stories) are art and given that they are driven by the need of the publishing

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[253] Activist author Leanne Betasamosake Simpson asserts as well, in *The Winter We Danced* and in *As We Have Always Done* that, during the Idle No More movement in Canada, social media played a vital role, "in providing a vehicle to bypass Indigenous representations in the mainstream media and self-represent our interest, our voices, and our movement to the Canadian public directly."

[254] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 3

[255] T.J. Demos, "Between Rebel Creativity and Reification: For and Against Visual Activism," Journal of Visual Culture 15, no.1 (April 2016): 87.

[256] Demos, "Between Rebel Creativity and Reification," 87.

[257] Ibid.

individual, at the very least towards self-expression, activist (activating). But does *everyone* partake in activism? *Can* everyone partake in activism?

In my conceptualization of activism, the response to these questions is a tentative yes.[258] Do we not activate each other, in our spaces of appearance, be them on Instagram or in real life, simply by the act of sharing our selves? I am reminded of Roland Barthes's proposal that the *punctum* of an artwork; where it hits its audience, is indeterminable by the artist prior to the moment of reception. If activist art is only that which *aims* to galvanize, are we not gatekeeping what is considered activist, and what is considered art? If this is the case, what do we make of artworks that posthumously become "activist artworks" as a result of their use in political interventions?

Conclusion

The first section of this historiography considered, following a historical linearity, the different epistemic debates that revolved around activist art. Studying the art historical definition of "activist art," an art and life practice that originated in the 1960s and became a distinct category in the 1980s, I emphasized that the term is considered to be different from "political art," because unlike the latter, activist artworks propose a direct site of intervention and a call to action about the sociopolitical problem that they address. My discussion demonstrated that historical debates that attempted to refine the definition of activist art have been generative for deliberating on the nuances, possibilities and promises of different practices that have political aims, practices as vast as muralism, photography, sculpture, participatory art, socially engaged art, relational art, dialogic art, and more.

I devoted the second part of my historiography to a survey of the different ways artists, activist and non-art people are engaging with significant contemporary social justice issues that acutely affect people's lives such as

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[258] One that acknowledges certain limitations people might have that prohibit them from engaging in activism in the definition they see fit.

racism, colonialism, and the ecological crisis. The wide range of movements, artists, and artworks that I investigated alluded to the fact that the questions that lie at historical epistemological debates: “but is it art?” and “but is it activist,” have become bankrupt in the contemporary historical moment, a state of crisis where what is needed and remedial is an all-hands on deck approach to activism and social involvement. This approach ensures that activist efforts that would under a stricter sense of the term would be dismissed are acknowledged and valued, which would conceivably instill care, attention and deliberation to the microscopic moments of our lives. Thus can each partake in the avant-garde mission to dissolve the dialectical construction of art and life, and since the future is always in the making, become visionary revolutionaries on their own rights.

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