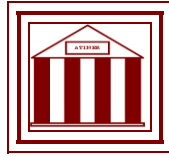


**Athens Institute for Education and Research
ATINER**



**ATINER's Conference Paper Series
ART2012-0072**

**Creative Activism as a Resolution of the
Problem of Political Art as Art**

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URL Conference Papers Series: www.atiner.gr/papers.htm

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ISSN **2241-2891**

3/08/2012

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ATINER started to publish this conference papers series in 2012. It includes only the papers submitted for publication after they were presented at one of the conferences organized by our Institute every year. The papers published in the series have not been refereed and are published as they were submitted by the author. The series serves two purposes. First, we want to disseminate the information as fast as possible. Second, by doing so, the authors can receive comments useful to revise their papers before they are considered for publication in one of ATINER's books, following our standard procedures of a blind review.

Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos
President
Athens Institute for Education and Research

This paper should be cited as follows:

Jury, Christopher (2012) "**Creative Activism as a Resolution of the Problem of Political Art as Art**" Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: ART2012-0072.

Creative Activism as a Resolution of the Problem of Political Art as Art

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Abstract

“Every battle we fight is a battle for the hearts and minds of other people.”
(George Monbiot 2001)

The Cold War and the rise of Neoliberal economic ideas have led to the dominance of a self-serving "*l'art pour l'art*", art for arts sake, conception of art that defines all art, including *Political Art*, as a vehicle exclusively for the expression of the inner psychology of the artist. Under this Cold war version of "*l'art pour l'art*" art must not have an instrumental purpose beyond the expressive and most definitely must not be politically didactic or polemical in form or content.

This is the problem of political art as art; i.e. that art, by definition and praxis (in a world determined by market forces), excludes the artist from the functional aspiration of bringing about political change, thus Political Art is reduced to an impotent contradiction in terms. But perhaps all is not lost? Perhaps Creative Activism can replace Political Art and resolve this problem of aesthetic legitimacy.

Creative Activism, is the purposeful use of cultural objects and creative processes to directly contribute to social, political and economic campaigns or movements and includes (but is not limited to) a range of creative disciplines including: music and song writing; cartoons; satire; posters; graphics (graffiti, flyers, badges, buttons, stickers etc); photomontage; video; social networking; dance; fringe theatre; film; performance art; street theatre and podcasting.

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Introduction:

As I completed the writing of this paper The Observer published a review of the film *iLL Manors*, written and directed by Ben Drew, aka 28 yr old rapper Plan B, which contained the following quote:

“iLL Manors is not a manifesto or a direct polemic, but, like many of the best protest art forms, it concentrates on capturing a mood – of desolation and anxiety. Rather than judging or preaching, it's more concerned with encouraging debate about the root of the problems it presents and demonstrating how they can have a domino effect on people's lives.”

(Observer 2012)

However, Ben Drew himself was quite clear about the didactic and polemical nature of his endeavour. He is quoted in the piece as saying:

"A lot of people outside this environment don't believe it exists, so in the film, rather than glamorise it, I'm trying to say to people this is the true, dark reality. This is what happens. It's not cool. No drug dealer really has the last laugh."

(Observer 2012)

Yet as we have seen the reviewer, who clearly liked the film, felt it necessary to reassure predominantly middle-class readers of The Observer that the film was not “not a manifesto or a direct polemic” and it did not judge or preach.

And yet controversy started when Drew said in a public statement:

"If you're born into a family that's had enough money to educate you properly, you're privileged; you're not better than anyone else, you're just lucky. Certain sectors of middle England, not all of them, but the ignorant ones, need to wake up and realise that and stop ridiculing the poor and the less fortunate."

(Observer 2012)

This overtly left wing political statement was criticised along the lines that it is not the place of an artist to make such statements. A response that allows those who disagree with Ben Drew's political perspective to divert attention away from the politically charged and controversial content of his work by focusing on whether or not it is legitimate to use 'artistic' artefacts to make such statements.

This example neatly illustrates the “problem of political art, as art” and illustrates how questions of aesthetic legitimacy divert the public discourse from the real world political and economic problems that works of political art are attempting to address.

Part II – Political Art As Art

“Power resides only where men believe it resides.... a shadow on the wall, yet shadows can kill. And oft times a very small man can cast a very large shadow.”

A Clash of Kings (Martin 2003)

For at least 200 hundred years there has been a fiercely fought academic and intellectual debate about whether or not 'art' has, or should have, a social function. On one side practitioners like Brecht (Brecht 2003) and Tolstoy (Tolstoy 1995) have argued that Art is by nature a form of public discourse whereby individuals express themselves personally using artistic forms and then share the resulting 'works of art' in a conscious attempt to influence

others, both emotionally and intellectually, and thus they identify 'art' as a doubly powerful¹ form of empathetic, inter-subjective communication. (Husserl 1977)

On the other side for the proponents of "*l'art pour l'art*", or art for arts sake, art is amply justified by itself, and for them it is aesthetically and philosophically illegitimate for 'art' to concern itself directly with politics, or indeed any other type of campaigning activity and when 'art' does this it stops being 'art' and becomes, propaganda.

During the Cold War and in response to the Soviet notion of art as a servant of the Revolution, a version of "l'art pour l'art", emerged as the dominant aesthetic theory in the Anglo/American arts world. The individualistic and psychological defining principles of this Cold War version of 'art for arts sake' chimed particularly well with the rise of Neoliberal economic and political theory in the Anglo/American world, which defined the individual as the only legitimate vessel of economic or moral value.

This alliance of aesthetic and economic individualism has meant that:

- 20th century egalitarian attempts to democratise the arts through public subsidy have been characterised in Neoliberal discourse as a paternalistic or patronising distortion of the market, and an unwarranted burden on the taxpayer. As a result in the UK at least, the project has been largely abandoned.
- Collective subsidy of the arts has been replaced by 'market forces' and/or corporate sponsorship, and as a result the subjective viewer has morphed into the rational consumer.

After 1979 the deregulation of the finance industry and privatisation of public assets also created an extremely wealthy elite who literally needed something to spend their money on. (How To Spend It - Financial Times 2012) Combined with the Neoliberal promotion of markets this has led inexorably to the commodification of art as a luxury item for these new super-rich. Instead of public collections of art as expressions of a shared democratic culture, super-rich individuals, most notably Charles Saatchi in the visual arts, have become the arbiters of taste and the drivers of the 'art market'. (Horowitz 2011)

The withdrawal of public subsidy means that the arts are no longer affordable for the vast majority and the dominance of commercial 'art markets' mean that the arts are reverting to their historical pre-industrial function of providing self-aggrandising entertainment for wealthy elites.

Part III - Why does it matter?

"A pamphlet is read once and thrown away. A song lives in the heart."

*Joe Hill. 1879-1915. Radical songwriter & trade unionists.
Framed for a murder he did not commit and executed in 1915*

Some would argue that in these times of political and economic crisis, such arcane, abstract arguments about politics and art are simply self-indulgent anachronisms and what is needed is some *real political action*.

But my argument here is that Creative Activism, *is* real political action.

The powerful have *always* used cultural artefacts to maintain and sustain their position. The

¹ Doubly powerful as opposed to theoretical political prose in the form of manifesto's, articles, tracts, pamphlets and books, that operate rationally in the realm of the intellect.

National Anthem is a song; the Union Jack and Britannia are graphic symbols; much of the poetry of Alfred Lord Tennyson is an explicit celebration of militarism and empire. These cultural artefacts still have huge political significance providing a unifying source of collective cultural identity that sustains widespread support for a particular distribution of political and economic power.¹

If dictators are to be toppled and democracy and freedom established then oppositional forces have to counteract the cultural rhetoric of the powerful with an oppositional cultural rhetoric.

“Today’s political topography includes signs and symbols, stories and spectacle, and an activist needs the creative weapons to fight on this terrain. But creativity in activism is also important for another reason: we have to be able to imagine a better world if we want to have any hope of changing this one.”

Stephen Duncombe² (Anon n.d.)

For all oppressed groups ‘power’ is as much an *idea* as it is a physical reality and in order for political and/or social change to take place a number of ideas have to be become widely accepted (i) That the current regime is illegitimate (ii) That there are legitimate, credible and desirable alternatives (iii) That the current regime is human and mutable – i.e. that change is possible.

These ideas have been labelled as *Oppositional Consciousness* (Chela Sandoval, 1991)(Mansbridge & Morris 2001) and Oppositional Consciousness is crucial to political change because without it individuals and groups will not undergo the hardships explicit in any fight for progressive social change - because they don’t believe change is possible or even desirable.

The posters, pamphlets, songs, graffiti, films and theatre associated with contemporary campaigns and movements for social change, are not simply a feel-good, side-show to the main business of political action, but an integral part of creating the oppositional consciousness without which change is not possible.

“Oppositional consciousness is manifested through the collective actions, symbols, and cultural artefacts constructed by a group.”

(Groch 1994)

It has often been argued that political art plays a vital part in creating the oppositional consciousness discussed above, and is a vital part of the public discourse and the process of progressive change, but this ignores how l’art pour l’art and neoliberalism have led the arts world to self-define as being distinct from and superior to popular culture and aimed primarily at an elite who can afford to buy access to it. (IFACCA 2009) If political art, as art, is generally only accessible to a wealthy, or relatively wealthy, elite, how can it legitimately claim to have a political influence on wider society?

It might be argued that although political art doesn’t reach a mass audience it does speak directly to the ruling elite and thus has far more influence than simple numbers would suggest, and is thus still worthwhile. However, ‘art’ produced for governing elites very rarely challenges the received ideas of that elite - and for very good reasons. For most of British

¹ This idea that cultural artefacts and institutions as much as economic and military ones constitute power is often called Cultural Hegemony and has been widely discussed in the work of Gramsci, Chomsky, Stuart Hall et al.(Gramsci 2011)(Hall 1997)(Chomsky & Herman 1995)

² Stephen Duncombe is an Associate Professor at the Gallatin School and the Department of Media, Culture and Communications of New York University where he teaches the history and politics of media.

history convicted traitors were at best hung, at worst horrifically tortured before being publicly disembowelled or worse. The idea of oppositional political art, as art, before the 19th Century was simply not credible; even in the 19th century and early 20th century oppositional creative activists had to remain anonymous or suffer dire consequences. (Vallance 2010)

The influence of L'art pour l'art and the Neoliberal market place have combined to create a situation where 'art' is created by the elite, for the elite and about the elite and as a *professional*¹ an artist is economically dependent upon their elite benefactors and it is therefore not in their interests to take an oppositional stance towards those benefactors.

In these circumstances how can political art, as art, contribute usefully to bringing about progressive political change?

I contend that it cannot but that all is not lost because the idea of political 'art' as part of the world of 'the arts' has been usurped by the idea of artistic creativity as direct activism; by the idea of creating cultural artefacts of opposition not as the personal psychological expression of the creator but as political psychological warfare.

Part IV: Creative Activism – A New Approach?

“Cultural activists are taking direct action against war, ecological destruction, injustice and capitalism, but they are also constantly asking how we can act directly against their social and psychological effects. Just as military empires have defined full spectrum domination, we have embraced the idea of full spectrum resistance. After all, who can really know what it is that really inspires an individual to care, or to turn away, to give up or to rise up?”

Jennifer Verson, Do It yourself: A Handbook For Changing Our World. (Collective 2007)

All over the world creative activists are taking part in campaigns and movements as part of the political struggles caused by the worst crisis of global corporate capitalism since the 1930's and the tidal wave of middle-eastern revolutions and political upheaval. The political song writing of Captain Ska and Grace Petrie in the UK (Captain Ska 2012) (Grace Petrie 2012); the anti-war Clowns of the Chicago NATO summit (Huffington Post 2012); the revolutionary graffiti and street art of Greece, Libya and Egypt (International Business Times 2012) and the posters and graphics of the Occupy movement (occuprint.org 2012), are just a few examples.

This explosion of creative activism is also being analysed, collated, recorded and celebrated in a number of online magazines and archives most notably: Actipedeia, an open-access, user-generated database of creative activism. (Actipedeia 2012); Masta Magazine an open platform for creativity, freedom and action (Masta Magazine 2012); Adbusters, “a global network of culture jammers and creatives working to change the way information flows, the way corporations wield power, and the way meaning is produced in our society” (Adbusters 2012); Znet (Znet 2012) and the Culture Jammers² encyclopaedia, Sniggle. (Sniggle.net 2012)

Universities and related institutions across the world are also developing programmes to both train activists and study the phenomenon of creative activism. These include: the Centre For

¹ The issue of professionalism undermining the activist potential of political art is perhaps worthy of a separate paper.

² Culture jamming, was a phrase first used in the mid '80's to denote a tactic to disrupt or subvert mainstream cultural institutions, including corporate advertising. Further information can be found at sniggle.net, “the Culture Jammers encyclopedia”. (Sniggle.net 2012)

Artistic Activism (CAA 2012); The Creative Visions Foundation (Creative Visions Foundation 2012); Platform London (Platform London 2012); Creative Activism: A Visual Campaigning Workshop (Sydney 2012); The Vio Activist Network (The Video Activist Network 2012); Coventry University (Coventry University 2012); The Centre For The Study Of Political Graphics (Center For The Study Of Political Graphics 2012); Tisch School of the Arts at NYU (Tisch at NYU 2012) and the University Of West Of England (UWE 2012);

Despite the inspiring creativity of this explosion of activism, the creative activists themselves, unlike political artists, do not need to engage with issues of aesthetic legitimacy because most of them do not claim to be ‘artists’, or to be creating ‘art’, they claim to be political activists creating propaganda in the service of specific causes. Works of Creative Activism are called ‘actions’ and are created to fulfil short-term instrumental objectives and to be displayed where they can most directly have political influence.

Perhaps the most useful analogy here is with mainstream commercial advertising. Advertising as a creative form is straightforwardly and crudely instrumental in that the aim of advertising is simply *to sell more stuff*. It may on occasion attempt to achieve this tangentially by for example building ‘brand identification’ through the use of advertisements that don’t refer directly to selling stuff, but even then the ultimate aim is..... *to sell more stuff*.

In the same way Creative Activism recognises that it has an entirely instrumental purpose; that it is as a form of psychological warfare using many of the same psychological techniques as commercial advertising to help create the social and political conditions for social change. Political ‘art’ on the other hand is, (by the definition currently widely accepted), entirely the other way round. The point of political ‘art’ is to express the interior existential psychology of the creator and political impact is only a secondary concern.

The conceptual link between the techniques of commercial advertising and creative activism has indeed been made explicit by *The Anti Advertising Agency* (The Anti-Advertising Agency 2012), who are a group of Culture Jammers directly using the techniques of commercial advertising and/or the subversive modification of actual adverts to oppose the interests of those who commission commercial advertising. Perhaps the most important of their actions was the 2008 collaboration with The Yes Men (The Yes Men 2012) when they jointly distributed over 80,000 copies of a replica of the New York Times in which it was announced the Iraq war had been ended. The purpose of this action was to show people an imagined alternative reality and thus expose the iniquities of the actual political reality.

For some the idea of creative activism as a sort of anti-advertising with straightforwardly instrumental objectives might raise the spectre of a sort of counter-corporatism where the interests of individuals are suppressed by dominant individuals or party machines.

While history warns us of the danger of oppressive revolutionary corporatism¹ the concepts of Creative Activism have developed through a self-consciously anarchist lens (People 2011) that rejects all forms of coercive hierarchical power. The Occupy movement that has been noted for its effective use of creative skills and artefacts (occuprint.org 2012), is also noted for its non-hierarchical, anarchist decision making processes. Contemporary Creative Activism exists within a non-hierarchical resistance movement that respects diversity of opinion and seeks to include divergence not narrowly focus in a specific ideology (Sunstein 2005). It is too early to tell whether this methodology will have any real impact, or whether it will become a dead-end like many previous utopian experiments, but it certainly means that

¹ Soviet style Democratic Centralism being the most obvious example with the most widely known and tragic consequences.

for today's contemporary activists the dangers of oppressive party corporatism are not an imminent threat

But perhaps the most enduring criticism of both political art and creative activism is that of 'preaching to the converted' and thus being ineffective in bringing about political change. The most obvious response is that almost all 'preaching' is, by the nature of things, preaching to the converted. Most people who attend churches, where preachers preach, tend to already be believers. Similarly the use of hegemonic cultural artefacts to maintain hierarchical power is also 'preaching to the converted'; those who enthusiastically sing the National Anthem or Rule Britannia are presumably not doing so as evangelicals seeking to convert revolting republicans?

In maintaining, reinforcing and developing oppositional political consciousness 'preaching to the converted' is a perfectly legitimate, indeed vital, part of the role of creative activism.¹ But creative activism also plays an important role in disseminating the oppositional perspective beyond the initial 'believers' and it is for this reason that creative activism is so important in the process of generating oppositional consciousness – because cultural artefacts of opposition are particularly inspirational.

This is not to say that rhetorical prose cannot be inspirational (Montefiore 2010) but great works of creative activism have the ability to encapsulate complicated political ideas with great economy, sometimes in a single image or line of lyrics, and to move people to laugh or cry or get angry enough to take action. The inspiration comes from the clarity of the communication but also from the fact that our fears, concerns and beliefs are shared with others – we are not alone in finding a political reality unjust and unacceptable.

Perhaps these same claims could be made for the efficacy of political art but I return again to the analogy with commercial advertising. The best of commercial advertising is undoubtedly persuasive and powerful and uses many of the same aesthetic techniques as the supposedly more elevated forms of 'art', but the effectiveness of commercial advertising is in large part due to the clarity of its mission – *to sell more stuff*. Contemporary Political Art is confused in its objectives and conceptual framework because of its classification as art, and as a result fails to deliver either as politics or art.

Part IV - Conclusion:

Since human beings moved into cities 10,000 years ago, professional art, as 'art'², has been an elite institution serving the interests and tastes of ruling elites.

For a brief period in the 20th Century radical democratic and egalitarian ideas gained ascendancy and so did the idea that 'art' should be available to all and serve as an expression of the freedom of democratic citizens in a free world.

The Cold War and the rise of Neoliberalism economic theory in the Anglo/American world led to the decline of egalitarianism as a guiding principle, the widespread withdrawal of public subsidy from the arts and the emergence of 19th Century levels of financial inequality and a corresponding concentration of power and influence in the hands of a super-rich ruling elite.

¹ And this is the arena in which even political 'art' can play a role. Works of political 'art' can and often do reinforce and encourage those who have already taken a leap of faith.

² As opposed to the simple non-professional human leisure or spiritual activities of painting, singing or performing.

As a result the arts have been forced to revert to their original role of bolstering and serving elite interests - those with the money have once again become the masters and the artists their servants.¹

Thus the egalitarian conception of oppositional 'political art' developed in the West after WWII has been undermined to the extent that it is no longer coherent in either the political or aesthetic arena. 'Art' of all kinds has become almost entirely irrelevant to most people, to the public discourse and most definitely to politics.

Despite this the crucial role of 'political art' in the history of progressive struggle are well known to contemporary activists and have informed contemporary theorists of opposition. But the current generation of activists have recognised the political irrelevance and impotence of the contemporary art world, and in response have reimagined 'political art' as creative activism.

By doing so they avoid the questions of aesthetic legitimacy that constantly undermine 'political art' and the accusations of irrelevance and self-justifying indulgence often aimed at those self-defining as political artists.

Creative Activism also provides a vital role in democratising creative activity itself; freeing it from the tyranny of the 'professional' system of training provided by drama schools, art schools and conservatoire's and freeing it from the stultifying influence of the expert critic and academic. Just like its nemesis commercial advertising, creative activism is concerned not with awards or critical approval but with results, in this case political results.

Along the way some of the work created can be and often is extraordinarily beautiful and emotionally powerful, and approaches the metaphysical qualities associated with art. Occasionally it can even attain the institutional status of 'art'. In the U.K. the street artist, Banksy, is perhaps the most pertinent example of this. (Banksy 2012) However, despite the content of his work, his chosen milieu of graffiti and his rigorous insistence on anonymity, which all emphasise the oppositional disposition of Banksy, the moment his work moved into the galleries all the issues around aesthetic illegitimacy, commercialisation and irrelevance appeared (Urban Dictionary 2012), which again emphasis how political art within the art world is rendered impotent by the values, institutions and structures of the art world.

In contrast creative activists do not need to justify themselves to the 'art' world as they are not creating 'art', they are directly addressing their fellow citizens as part of an egalitarian and democratic exchange of ideas that is motivated by a desire to bring about progressive political change, not to express the inner existential angst of themselves as artists.

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¹ It is true that in certain forms the commercial art market and a sensationalist tabloid press have colluded to create a number of artist celebrities (such as Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin) but the fame of these artists is as much based on their personal lives, as it is their vacuously 'shocking' work. Their fame is empty celebrity fame and is part of a diversionary entertainment industry and as such does represent an aesthetic threat let alone a political one.

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