

Since the global financial crash of 2008, artists have become increasingly engaged in a wide range of cultural activism targeted against capitalism, political authoritarianism, colonial legacies, gentrification, but also in opposition to their own exploitation. They have also absorbed and reflected forms of protest within their art practice itself. *The Art of Activism and the Activism of Art* maps, critiques, celebrates and historicises activist art, exploring its current urgency alongside the processes which have given rise to it. Gregory Sholette approaches his subject from the dual perspective of commentator (as scholar and writer) and insider (as activist artist), in order to propose that the narrowing gap separating forms of activist art from an aesthetics of protest is part of a broader paradigm shift constituted by the multiplying crises within contemporary capitalism and democratic governance across the globe.

Gregory Sholette is an artist, activist, writer and social practice professor at the City University of New York.

Sholette has focused all of his work, his teaching, his writing and his life, on confronting systems of power that, left unchecked, could destroy us all. Carrie Mae Weems

Our present situation calls for an analysis of the ambiguities that prevail in art activism – and Sholette’s is so acute that it should be distributed far and wide as a reminder of where we are. Slavoj Žižek

The rich chapters of this indispensable book demonstrate where serious art is taking place and how how it can inspire true change among other intellectual practices. Santiago Zabala

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THE ART OF ACTIVISM AND THE ACTIVISM OF ART
GREGORY SHOLETTE

LUND
HUMPHRIES

NEW DIRECTIONS IN CONTEMPORARY ART

The Art of Activism and the Activism of Art

Gregory Sholette

The Contemporary Artist as Activist: *This is Not Just a Test*

‘Maybe the Trojan Horse was the first activist artwork. Based in subversion on the one hand and empowerment on the other, activist art operates both within and beyond the beleaguered fortress that is high culture or the “art world”.’¹

Lucy R. Lippard

‘The artistic imagination continues to dream of historical agency.’²

Martha Rosler

‘Take the Quiz’, prompts the canny pop-up questionnaire on the Tate’s website (fig.21). ‘Which art collective do you belong to?’³ ‘Should you be in the *Black Audio Film Collective* ... or are you a *Hackney Flasher* at heart?’ The test refers to a pair of London-based artist groups from the 1970s and 1980s, one focused on the British African diaspora, the other on working women’s rights. More questions immediately follow: ‘Who makes up your collective? What is your mission all about? What inspires you?’ Click, click, click, and the platform’s algorithm reveals your innermost communal proclivities (somehow, I wound up belonging to a group of early-19th-century painters known as the Ancients who gathered at the home of the poet William Blake). Scrolling down, the page offers information about how to ‘start a movement’ and short biographies of other ‘radical art

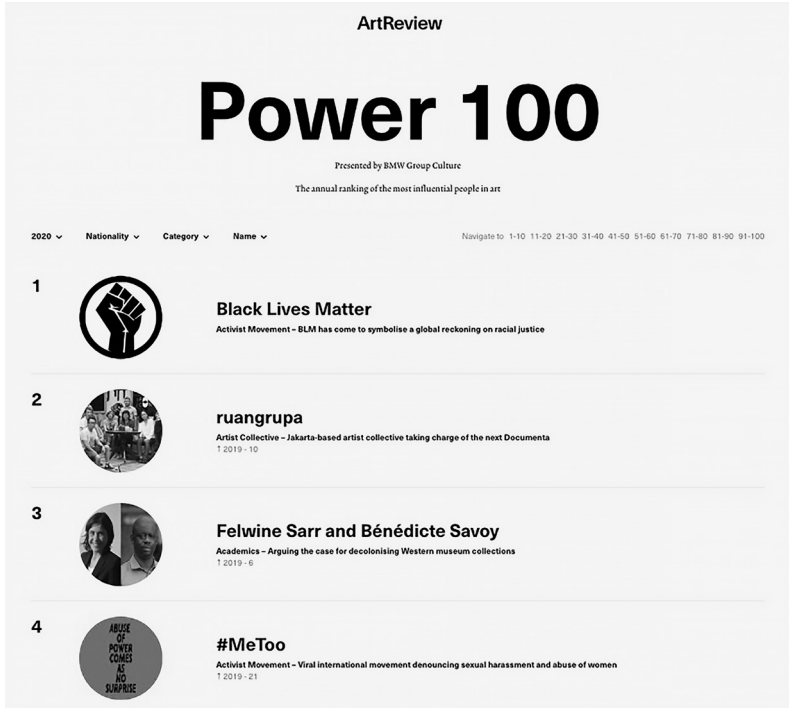


Fig.1 The most influential people in the 2020 annual art ranking by *ArtReview* magazine, online graphics. Screen shot @gsholette (Twitter), 3 December 2020

groups', as well as a large button that leads to a £5 membership deal for discounted tickets and 29 per cent off café items, all puckishly marketed under the brand name 'Tate Collective'.

The fact that an institutional pillar of contemporary global high culture such as the Tate is endorsing, however waggishly, collectives and activist art, signals a marked change towards overtly political and socialized practices. Once omitted from standard art historical accounts and museum collections, artistic activism and collectivism is now visible virtually everywhere in the art world and beyond. How should we understand this development? Consider that about one year after the Tate created this webpage, more than a hundred of the museum's employees staged a labor strike in protest of 'pandemic-related' job cuts. The ax was initially falling on half the workforce, but specifically the most precarious staff members, even as senior administrators continued earning six-figure salaries. The truth is that most, if not all, of the 'radical art groups' listed on the Tate's site would, if they were still around, be marching outside the museum on the picket line, thus hypothetically leaving the museum's webpage empty of content. The meaning, and possible consequences of these tensions, contradictions and historical forgetting, is one of several key themes that this brief book seeks to address.

ACTIVIST ART REDUX

We are witnessing today a surge of artistic activism unlike anything since the 1960s and 1970s. Recent museum interventions, exhibition boycotts, picket lines, occupations, mocking mimetic websites and staff unionization campaigns target unfair labor practices, institutional racism, colonial collections and financial ties between museum board members and weapons manufacturers, fossil fuel extractors, opioid producers and real estate speculators. Just as emphatic is the surge of artistic activism taking place 'outside' the art world's institutional boundaries, including performative street protests employing stencils, banners, graphics, puppets, protest pageantry and

makeshift counter-memorials in city streets. From Ferguson, Missouri, to London, Cali, Hong Kong, Kyiv, Moscow and Palestine, a spectacular protest aesthetic is present everywhere in plain sight. Meanwhile, monuments commemorating white supremacy and colonialism are defaced, demolished and tagged with the names of Black, brown and poor citizens murdered by the police and military. In São Paulo, an art group called Peripheral Revolution (Revolução Periférica) directly set alight a statue of Borba Gato, an 18th-century colonial exploiter of Brazil's land and people. In short, images of visual confrontation and creative dissent are impossible to avoid today; the very air seems electrified with what might be termed an art of activism, and its public facing appearance complements the activism of art taking place within the sphere of high culture.

On one level, activist art is a singular facet of the broader, accelerating field of socially engaged, collective and participatory art, a cultural phenomenon that also goes by such names as new genre, participatory, relational, dialogical aesthetics, and social practice art.⁴ In a little over a decade, all these modes have moved from the margins of the art world to a more central visibility. With this shift comes growing scrutiny and interest from younger artists, critics, theorists, historians and teachers, but also from NGOs, foundations and governmental policy makers, as well as a few commercial galleries and collectors. Without 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. Indeed, activist art is a far stranger phenomenon than it might at first appear.

What precisely defines the contemporary activist artist? As opposed to only representing politics or social injustice, the activist artist can be distinguished by an unyielding focus on agitation and protest as an artistic medium. Typically, these practitioners operate collectively, working with other artists, but also in collaboration with 'non-art' political activists, and on occasion they do manage to bring about a degree of positive societal change as we shall see. Sometimes this activist

engagement is carried out subtly, although more frequently, and especially recently, it employs a degree of militancy that makes artistic practice appear barely distinguishable from activism per se. It is this increasingly tenuous line – if a line still exists at all – between the practices of the artist as activist and the activist as such, that is another primary concern of this book. For if the indeterminate boundary between cultural practice and political activism has been breached, then the repercussions for both art and politics are significant. And if, as Martha Rosler proposes (see opening quote), the artistic imaginary has long dreamt of its own historical agency, then it seems that in the second decade of the 21st century, it is historical agency itself that now dreams of its own aesthetic incarnation.

THE ARTIST AS ACTIVIST, THEN AND NOW

As early as 1934, Walter Benjamin explicitly called upon all progressive writers, artists and intellectuals to produce their work tendentiously: by challenging traditional methods of reportage, photographic representation and audience reception, as well as by explicitly advocating for the proletarian struggle against fascism and in favor of the cause of socialism.⁵ Benjamin's frequently cited essay 'The Author as Producer' builds upon a long history in which artists were tasked with representing a changing roster of agendas: philosophical, religious, revolutionary and pro-state oriented. More than a hundred years before Benjamin wrote his treatise, the French philosopher Henri de Saint-Simon insisted that artists are the advanced forces of a new society, right alongside scientists and industrialists, arguing that this 'is the duty of artists, this is their mission.'⁶ On the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution, Vladimir Lenin determined that culture must serve the 'politically-conscious vanguard of the entire working class.'⁷ Thousands of years before either Lenin or Saint-Simon, Plato sought to expel artists and poets, including the beloved Homer, from the ideal Greek republic on charges of merely imitating reality. But those artists who honored the state's national heroes

could remain. And closer to our own time, the early 1980s New York-based artist collective Political Art Documentation /Distribution (PAD/D), to which I once belonged, flatly insisted that the group ‘cannot serve as a means of advancement within the art world structure of museums and galleries. Rather, we have to develop new forms of distribution economy as well as art.’ Our ultimate goal was to use our artistic skills to support radical and decolonial liberation movements around the world.⁸

This was certainly a tall order for a small collective of artists relatively marginalized from the cultural mainstream. Furthermore, PAD/D’s mission statement was printed on newsprint using inexpensive offset press technology and distributed by hand within art galleries, cafes and through the postal system. Crucially, the most recent wave of artistic activism is no longer limited to ink, paper and mail carriers, any more than it is restricted to fixed moments in real time or specific spaces of action. Thanks to the immediacy and fungibility of online, digital and cellular communications networks, political interventions can now migrate immediately into an electronic ether, sometimes even originating online as memes, tweets, BreadTube videos, fake museum websites all situated alongside comical 60-second TikTok housecat escapades and a plethora of visually alluring Instagram posts. Once this cyber-activist imagery is uploaded, a swarm of participants can re-edit and redistribute new versions that essentially over-write the original. In short, the medium of protest aesthetics has certainly expanded, but whether its objectives have changed is a question taken up in the chapters ahead.

OCCUPY NFTS, DON’T JUST MINT THEM

Redeploying, repurposing and reactivating imagery and other content is today central to contemporary art activism, which appears to draw upon a vast, almost spectral archive of available sources for its exposition. By contrast, the emergence of non-fungible tokens, or NFTs, introduces a seemingly baffling reversal of this repurposing aesthetic by freezing the infinite

reproducibility of the digital medium within a unique and un-hackable blockchain ledger that underwrites the work's provenance, originality and authorship. And yet this same encrypted guarantee subverts the radical interchangeability (fungibility) of the digital medium itself. Perhaps that is good news for some, including under-represented artists, and more power to them; however, with auction sales skyrocketing for NFTs, why is it that capitalist monetization always comes out on top at the end of the day? There is also this caveat, that artists Dread Scott and Hito Steyerl have recently used blockchain technology to generate critically engaging activist interventions that turn the NFT phenomenon on its head: Scott by 'auctioning off' a white person's enslaved image at Christie's in New York (fig.2), and Steyerl by turning the Royal Academy of Art in London into a blockchain piece, which she donated to the school's students in exchange for re-envisioning their institution as a communal cooperative.⁹

THE REVOLUTION THIS TIME

Speculations regarding emancipation through technological innovation will return in Chapter 8, but for now, it is inarguable that scores of younger artists today seek to challenge the political and economic shortcomings of the institutional art world, even if few directly interact with its global topography or benefit from its multi-billion-dollar marketplace, and fewer still know much about the backstory of activist art. Consider this personal anecdote from a little over a decade ago as one barometer for the speed and intensity of this shift. In 2008, the MIT journal *October* invited me and a large group of artists, theorists and writers to reflect on the cultural sector's tepid response to the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq under President George W. Bush, which UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan condemned as illegal.¹⁰ My contribution began with a negative historical comparison, pointing out that reactions by artists and academics to similarly atrocious public events were once far more direct and confrontational, decades earlier. I then rattled

✕

LOT 215
DREAD SCOTT (B. 1965)
White Male for Sale



White Male for Sale
token ID: 0
wallet address:
0xCf7cb1DF9652Ef870e705c89be37D4dBa5835897
smart contract address:
0xF8960db0F931154b6D234590fbCfF36aE7f8fE9A
non-fungible token, ERC-721
Conceived in 2021 and minted on 13 September 2021.

Estimate on Request

⊗ **Special notice**

Fig.2 Christie's auction page for Dread Scott's NFT project *White Male for Sale*, 1 October 2021

off examples, such as in 1970, when the Art Workers' Coalition and its faction Guerrilla Art Action Group staged a fake gun battle on the street in front of the Museum of Modern Art to protest against the war in Vietnam, or in the mid-1980s, when a broad coalition titled Artists' Call Against US Intervention in Central America organized an omnibus series of exhibitions and events that took place in alternative spaces as well as commercial galleries, with a poster designed by Claes Oldenburg to oppose a seemingly imminent invasion of El Salvador by the Reagan Administration. My essay concluded despairingly by insisting that activist art was a thing of the past: 'militant street theater, interventionist scholarship, activist curating, artists directly challenging their own well-being by denouncing museums and the art market ... all of this appears inconceivable today,' I wrote.¹¹

Nothing could be further from our current reality. Indeed, I would never have predicted that in 2020, the activist group Black Lives Matter (BLM) would be selected to top the annual ranking of 100 art world influencers by a leading industry journal, with the #MeToo movement close behind in fourth place (fig.1).¹² The perceived influence of BLM and #MeToo on high culture underscores the ascendancy of activist aesthetics within the mainstream art world. Likewise, the coveted Turner Prize was awarded in 2021 to the Belfast-based Array Collective who transformed an unlicensed Northern Ireland pub into 'a place to gather outside entrenched Sectarian divides.'¹³

I could also cite a few dozen books that have appeared in recent years, or are about to be published, that drive home the point, including studies of the socially-engaged practitioners Tania Bruguera, Zanele Muholi, Ai Weiwei, Pussy Riot, as well as the hilariously illustrated and drolly smart workbook by the Center for Art Activism entitled *The Art of Activism: Your All-Purpose Guide to Making the Impossible Possible*, from OR Books.¹⁴

Activist art has undergone such a rapid rise in stature that the curator Peter Weibel suggests it 'may be the first new art form of the twenty-first century', while cultural theorist Boris Groys insists that art activism is an entirely 'new phenomenon'.¹⁵

Contrarily, I will show that it is possible to construct a credible backstory for art activism, one that stretches back decades, if not centuries should we wish to consider the elaborate floats that Jacques-Louis David designed for public *fêtes* to rally support for the French Revolution in the 1790s, or Gustave Courbet's decisive role in the toppling of the Vendôme Column during the Paris Commune. Nonetheless, for reasons of practicality and conciseness, I concentrate in this short study on activist art from the 1960s to early 2022. Even so, examples are so numerous that the chapters to come offer merely a selection of this wildly branching genealogy. Furthermore, the book does not add up to anything resembling a proper linear art history, for any attempt to historicize art activism must recognize it is a phenomenon with no singular manifesto or specified aesthetic protocols, that gives rise to no official school or accepted canon. Neither is activist art systematically collected or exhibited, although a few specialized archival collections have significant holdings.¹⁶ It would be more accurate to suggest that whatever chronological record activist art offers, it appears at best to be a fragmented and boisterous reservoir of past interventions, experiments, repetitions and compromises, as well as minor victories and outright failures. I will refer to this alternately as a surplus or phantom archive whose accessibility calls for speculative processes of reclamation, repurposing and reactivation, as opposed to more customary art historical methods involving the formal, iconographic or biographical attributes of an artwork, movement or artist. To cite queer feminist theorist Tirza True Latimer, when it comes to subjects characterized by a pattern of historical invisibility and erasure, one must sometimes mobilize 'techniques frowned on by 'proper historians ...' by viewing 'gaps, absences, and apparitions as historically consequential.'¹⁷ Reading Latimer in conjunction with Antonio Gramsci's observation that history leaves behind an infinity of traces, but without providing an inventory, I would say that the archival terrain of this study is as real as it is indeterminate, but is always stretching towards a seemingly unattainable encounter with its own missing inventory.¹⁸

Think of this book, therefore, as akin to a particle accelerator: a device for uncovering and measuring concrete, material things that elude immediate detection, things that nevertheless remain indispensable to the very nature of reality, or in this instance, to the reality of contemporary art. Along with asking why activist art is gaining renewed visibility and whether it still remains distinct from non-art political activism, this accelerator apparatus also probes a certain dark matter creativity: the majority of imaginative and artistic labor that's long been closeted within mainstream art history. Like a shadow agency, this dark matter labor is made up of the many collectively generated projects, amateur practices and oppositional provocations typically relegated to the margins of the mainstream, even though its accumulated gravitational inertia paradoxically anchors the lofty summits of high culture.¹⁹ Which is why some of the case studies to follow seemingly violate my own description of activist art as direct and confrontational. Under certain geopolitical circumstances, engaged art practices can, like Lippard's Trojan Horse, transform what would be merely a charming street mural of flowers and butterflies, or certain banned colors, into an act of transgression in places such as Afghanistan, Syria, Egypt, Hong Kong, Belarus and Ukraine.

My hope for this concise introduction is that it will provide readers not only with select details about activist art's postwar backstory, but also offer one or more sets of criteria for critically interpreting this phenomenon, as well as perhaps even reactivating its promised social and political agency. And while activist art may appear unique to present day circumstances as Weibel and Groys propose, like all cultural phenomena it is shaped by previous events and practices, even when practitioners borrow unknowingly from, or repurpose, its archival resources. As historian of socially engaged art Larne Abse Gogarty puts it, 'older forms resonate and make new meaning in the present', thus offering a potentially dynamic, 'usable past'.²⁰ For this reason, as much as my account is descriptive, and hopefully

heuristic, it also seeks to accomplish something less conventional – let’s call it the summoning of that which haunts the very paradigm of the artist as activist, and the art of activism in its most contemporary manifestation. And what is summoned must be confronted; its stipulations and effects acknowledged, weighed and at times deferred to.

Consequently, over the course of this terse excursion, we catch glimpses of an uneven yet persistent oppositional agency *from below* that continuously struggles for visibility, if not self-realization, most often in response to oppressive social conditions; only to submerge once again out of sight, until it doesn’t, or until it won’t. And this is the circumstance that I believe we have arrived at today: the emergence of a vigorous protest aesthetic, unfolding in a permanently aestheticized state of reality, or perhaps more accurately, in a state of social and political *unreality* brought about by the ultra-spectacularized conditions of 21st-century capitalism. My study begins therefore, with the loose-knit group of writers, thinkers and artists who made up the influential activist alliance known as the Situationist International (SI) (1957–72). They were not the first to theorize a certain form of capitalist aestheticization engendered by consumerism and mass media, but the SI generated the most succinct and influential interpretation of this phenomenon, whose effect threads its way throughout my entire treatise.

One final note before proceeding: please know that I was a founding and active member of the groups Political Art Documentation/Distribution, REPOhistory and Gulf Labor Coalition, all collectives that in full disclosure I will discuss over the course of this book.