

Editors' Introduction: Art, Power, and Social Change

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THE FOLLOWING ESSAYS EXPLORE MANY DIMENSIONS OF THE ROLE OF ART IN PROCESSES of social change. Some address the power of art as a voice of dissent, as a tool for advancing social justice and democracy, as the core of a revolutionary strategy, and as a source of memory and future ways of knowing. Other essays warn about the art of power, such as government and art world censorship, the co-optive ability of capitalism, and the blinding force of Western rationalization.

We begin with a fascinating exchange between Mikkel Rasmussen and Simeon Hunter about the legacy of the Situationists, a mid-20th century art movement committed to total revolution. According to Rasmussen, “the Situationist International tried to create a territory where art and politics were merged and transformed from specialized activities into a kind of holistic mega-text in which historical rationality expressed itself.” The Situationists were extremely ambitious, impossibly ambitious in Rasmussen’s view. “Unable to free themselves from history,” he argues, the movement ultimately succumbed to capitalism’s “counter-revolution.” Hunter regards Rasmussen’s assessment as overly pessimistic, arguing that “the legacy of this movement is still active, still providing a highly useable model for a transformative analysis of and through the visual world from which it is derived.” The power of the Situationists, suggests Hunter, must be understood “at the level of the semantic instead of the programmatic.” He asserts that the contributions of the Situationists and the art practices they inspired have been overlooked by those who “deny the poetic voice that may connote [social] change through form.”

Yet, ironically, the focus on “form alone,” according to Deniz Tekiner, permitted formalist art criticism—which dominated the U.S. art world from the 1940s through the late 1960s—to “obscure the relationships of art to social contexts and the socially critical implications of art.” Tekiner’s essay explains how the formalist art criticism associated with Clement Greenberg “functioned symbiotically with art marketers” to “uphold conservative agendas” and to mask the progressive content intended by “many modern artists [who] construed their transcendental subjects as

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signifiers of freedom, and their art works as expressions of liberated imagination” during the stultifying conformism of postwar North America. Tekiner acknowledges that significant transformation of the art world since the 1960s has resulted in a greater “diffusion of power” and “freer expressions of the ideational contents of art works.” Still, significant obstacles continue to confront dissident artistic voices.

According to contributors Connie McNeely and Gordon Shockley, “in recent years, conservative politics and market approaches have dominated arts policymaking in the U.S., with the arts viewed and assessed through the lens of reactionary values and commercial dynamics that treat them as just one of a list of goods and services.” McNeely and Shockley examine the impact of the “excellence versus access debate” on arts policy—such as funding decisions by the National Endowment for the Arts—and ask, “What are the cultural and political implications of approaching the arts in terms of access, as opposed to excellence, and vice versa?” The authors contend that “although political rhetoric might posit goals of diversity and democratization, access to the arts is held moot without attendant ‘cultural capital’ for meaningful participation and consumption.”

While McNeely and Shockley demonstrate the power of the state (or capital) and the triumph of market forces in regulating arts policy at the institutional level in the United States, two essays in this volume explore the ways in which critical expressions and artistic displays of dissent have been used as democratizing tools in parts of Asia. William Farge’s essay, “The Politics of Culture and the Art of Dissent in Early Modern Japan,” explores the legacy of an important critic of the Japanese military government, Baba Bunkō, who confronted the centralized power of the state apparatus by strategically maneuvering between censorship laws through the public presentations of satirical literature. Farge notes that because these public expressions of opposition, saturated with elements of humor and satire, threatened the stability of the military government, the authorities responded with increased arts censorship, surveillance, and punishment of dissent. Farge then traces Bunkō’s influence in the subsequent cultural and political agitations in Japan and contends that, “Baba Bunkō, however, was the only person to pay the ultimate price for what were judged to be subversive lectures and writings about the injustices in government, the immorality and hypocrisy of specific government figures, and the corruption in the social, political, and religious institutions of his day.”

Just as Farge discusses the potential of art as a mechanism of cultural and political resistance, Ming-cheng Lo, Christopher Bettinger, and Yun Fan use an interpretive approach to examine the discursive elements of civil speech through an analysis of political cartoons in Honk Kong and Taiwan. Lo et al. ask, “How do histories of colonialism and resistance, if at all, shape the political-cultural repertoire of a society after institutional markers of democracy are more or less in place?” The authors then develop a notion of “cynical civic engagement” to explore the cynical humor present in cultural and colonial legacies. For Lo et al., cynical civic engagement is “the practice of resorting to arts of resistance as means of civil

expression, which facilitates a form of civic participation registered with criticisms of and disbelief in such participation.” The essays by Farge and Lo et al. highlight the ways in which arts are used to engage citizens in political systems, as well as to position many citizens in opposition to the existing hierarchical structures through satire and cynical humor.

Andreana Clay’s article continues the theme of linking art to political engagement and democratic participation, although her piece marks a transition to social justice issues in the United States. Drawing on ethnographic data from two youth empowerment organizations, Clay provides a persuasive analysis of the relationship between youth of color and hip-hop cultures concerning collective identity formations in what the author describes as a “post-civil rights era.” Situating her arguments in the context of a current backlash against civil rights gains, Clay asserts that hip-hop cultures function as mechanisms to organize community and motivate activism among youth of color, especially through the utilization of historical, personal, and social movement narratives. Clay writes, “Hip-hop culture becomes a tool that allows youth of color to transform their individual and organizational politics in their everyday lives. It is in these moments that hip-hop becomes the mechanism that these youth use to make sense of their political participation.”

Whereas Clay focuses on empowerment, meaning-making, identity formation, and social justice issues for youth of color within hip-hop cultures, Cynthia Miller explores the social justice potential for unsheltered homeless individuals to communicate the important aspects of their lives through photography. As Miller observes in the essay included here, a university and neighborhood group collaboration with homeless individuals that culminated in the “Images from the Streets” photography exhibition examines “the ways in which the photographers use the images they create as tools for exploring and communicating their experiences and identities, and creating a sense of belonging while living at the margins of the wider community.” Miller’s article emphasizes the creative potential for homeless individuals to express their worlds to a broader community through photography collaborations, as well as the concerted efforts made to build relationships between these individuals, students in university classrooms, and wider community groups.

Silvia Tandeciarz discusses photography and the preservation of social memory in the context of post-dictatorship Argentina. Tracing the use of photography by the Mothers of the Disappeared at Plaza de Mayo, Tandeciarz links state-issued identification photographs as proof of citizenship to artist Marcelo Brodsky’s work and “its efforts to complement contemporaneous memory narratives in Argentina.” Of Brodsky’s installations, which include the alteration of school photographs, Tandeciarz writes, “As the Mothers did with the ID photos, Brodsky takes an ordinary image associated with one of the disciplinary arms of the state (public school) and transforms it,” an action that “reminds us of the violence done to those denied the most basic human rights and the recognition of citizenship in a functioning democracy.” Tandeciarz argues that, like the Mothers who use images of the

disappeared as reminders of state violence, Brodsky uses images produced by the state to render “intelligible some of the damage done” and “begins to reconstruct a partial, collective history of affect modeled on his own experience of loss.”

While Tandeciarz argues that images and the production of counternarratives help in the process of resisting the state’s efforts to erase the histories of violence and dictatorship in Argentina, Ed McCaughan’s essay explores art, memory, and knowledge production through several examples of artists engaged in contemporary Mexican movements. Grounded in Gloria Anzaldúa’s provoking notion of subversive knowledges, or *conocimientos*, acquired in a state of *nepantla*, McCaughan explores the artistic places in-between rational thought and the liminal recovery of indigenous thought. Expanding the discussion of art and social movements beyond the notion of political art, McCaughan suggests that these artists imagine and execute the work in an “interdisciplinary pursuit of knowledge” and “engag[e] the public in a multisensorial and potentially spiritual encounter that re-illuminates the past and permits new ways of knowing.” Engaging scholars with the cultural dimensions of social movement theories, McCaughan’s discussion of these artists is “about the recovery and re-creation of social memory and historical systems of thought and knowledge within contemporary conditions.”

We conclude the issue with a manifesto-like essay by Mexican performance artist Maris Bustamante, who makes an impassioned case for the power of new, transdisciplinary, and visual ways of knowing the world. In general, she argues, “we do not see what we see,” but rather “what we have been made to see,” as a result of the compartmentalized, “rationalized” structures of Western European thought. Bustamante bases her faith in what she calls “new visualities” on her extensive experiences with “a growing community of artists and scientists [who] have been working together in Mexico and elsewhere to expand our understanding of reality beyond the limits imposed by our traditional disciplines.” She ends with a call for “accomplices” to use “demystifying humor” to carry out “the most eccentric actions” that will help to prepare us to confront “other truths” long hidden by the dominant modes of thought that serve to reproduce inequality and injustice.