

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Jamming the Works: Art, Politics and Activism

Introduction

by Linda Dittmar and Joseph Entin

***But what does it mean, exactly,
to describe a work of art as
"activist"?***

As we enter the second decade of the 21st century, art that aims to actively challenge the social order continues to spark controversy and encounter resistance. In one recent instance, the University of California at San Diego threatened to revoke the tenure of Ricardo Dominguez, a professor of visual art, who developed what he calls "transborder immigrant tools"—recycled cell phones loaded with GPS software that point border-crossers to caches of fresh water in the desert. Dominguez has called the phones, which feature an audio application that plays inspirational poetry to migrants, a "mobile Statue of Liberty." "I'm interested in how different forms of power respond to this," Dominguez explained to an *LA Times* reporter. "Our work has always been to bring to the foreground what artists can do using available low-end, new technologies that can have a wider encounter with society than just the limited landscape of the museum, the gallery and the scholarly paper."¹

Dominguez's cell-phone project stirs up the age-old debate about what is "art." Can a mass-produced, quotidian object like a cell phone really be art? Who exactly is the artist—the cell phone designers and manufacturers, the poets whose words are recorded on these machines, the phone users who activate them, or Dominguez himself? As

this example suggests, the idea makes the art, not the material object out of which the art was made. Marcel Duchamp's "readymades" made this point forcefully, as did other dada artists when they assembled the detritus of daily life into what they displayed as art (collages made of bus tickets, bits of string, and other odds and ends). Putting a signed urinal on view as an object of public aesthetic contemplation (Duchamp, *Fountain* 1917), pulverizing language in paroxysmal fury (Antonin Artaud's "Theater of Cruelty," anticipated by Alfred Jarry's inaugural use of "shit" on stage in *Ubu Roi* 1896), or inventing the empty label "dada" to describe their work, artists were responding to the Great War's gratuitous destruction of so many young lives but also, more broadly, dehumanization by industry and smug bourgeois proprieties. Here is cultural work that slams conventional notions of the unique beauty of the handcrafted object as "art"—work that is disruptive, irreverent, and transformative.

While the driving force behind this work was often anarchic rather than ideological, it proved to be the wellspring of a political art that is continuing to challenge the social order to this day. In this sense Dominguez's cell phones raise questions we already knew in other guises. Is Duchamp's cheap print of *Mona Lisa* plus mustache art

defaced or art? Is a dadaist “exquisite corpse” poem, made of unconnected lines, actually a poem? Is Basquiat’s use of graffiti in fact “art”? Does a Jackson Pollock canvas involve skill and expressive content or is it a haphazard mess? And what about Andy Warhol’s soup cans or Jasper Johns’ flags? What repeatedly emerges from such controversies is the fact that definitions of “art” are subjective, unstable, and often a function of commerce and muscle. While at issue are certainly questions of crafting and expression, at issue are also considerations of status, exhibition, and investment value as these interact with precedents—with preceding arguments and uses. Dominguez’s cell phones cite earlier debates around “readymades.” The Olivetti typewriter on display at New York’s Museum of Modern Art may be participating in a later and different conversation regarding applied design as “art,” but it also re-insinuates the ironies of Duchamp’s dada apotheosis of a ratty typewriter cover as “art”; in a flea market it is just junk. When Jerome Robbins incorporated the drawing of graffiti into a ballet he choreographed, “dirt” became “art.” Warhol’s *painting* of tomato soup cans at once gestures toward art and dismantles it; the cans’ lowly reference and mechanical reproduction confront bourgeois exclusivity with the banalities of lower-middle-and working-class life.

For us as radical teachers what is most important is less a work’s entitlement to the hallowed label of “art” than its social uses. At issue is the *making* and *use* of artifacts rather than their acquiring *Artforum’s* or *Art in America’s* seal of approval. In this respect we must register ways both the marketplace and public institutions have been working to control the circulation, funding and exhibition of controversial work. Recall Hitler’s and Stalin’s repression of the international modernist avant-garde, Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s arrest and trial on obscenity charges for selling Alan Ginsberg’s *Howl*, the National Endowment for the Arts’ scandals of the early 1990s, or Chinese artists’ imprisonment for making art that pointed at state corruption accountable for the death of many children trapped in shoddy school buildings during the 2008 earthquake in Schezuan.

Examples of art censored or suppressed abound. A tacky sculpture of the Ten Commandments (tablets) or a crudely made statue of Jesus can be erected obtrusively in public spaces while Andres Serrano’s visually mesmerizing and indeed reverent photograph, “Piss Christ” (1987), came under severe attack for bathing a plastic crucifix in the yellow glow of the body’s natural fluid. The film *Salt of the Earth* made in 1953 by members of The Hollywood Ten continued to be unavailable long after the House Un-American Activities Committee ceased to exist. The photographic work of sexual renegade Robert Mapplethorpe as well as Marlon Riggs’ film *Tongues Untied* (1990) led to right wing attacks on the National Endowment for the Arts. Isaac Julien’s homage to poet Langston Hughes, *Looking for Langston* (1989), and Todd Haynes’ film about late pop star Karen Carpenter, *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987), were both blocked from circulation by family members—*Langston* (now back in circulation) for its gay content; *Superstar* (bootleg at YouTube and elsewhere) for

linking anorexia to the hypocrisies of “family values.” Such examples remind us that what art is and does goes beyond both aesthetics and commerce. It is very much a matter of political power—disruptive, irreverent, and transformative.

While we may not be able to delineate the boundaries of what art is with any finality, we want to insist that, broadly conceived, artworks (in image, word, sound, gesture, etc.) are products of crafted rhetoric that moves one emotionally as well as informs. Of course art can move us in terrible directions. In fact, most ideologically driven art has been created, sponsored or adopted by persons and groups in power. Church officials, kings, presidents, and economic elites have all used art to authorize their power—from pyramids and cathedrals to heraldic weaponry, flags and skyscrapers; from portraits of celebrated rulers, altar pieces, monumental sculptures and historical paintings to displays of abstract art in corporate offices; from church and state pageants to theatre that merely sanctions business as usual. These and more serve to enhance, naturalize, or glorify claims to dominance. Perhaps no twentieth-century political group had as finely tuned a sense of art’s power to galvanize consent as Fascism, which turned to Leni Riefenstahl’s innovative film techniques to bolster its popular legitimacy and to neo-classical forms of public art and architecture (as did Napoleon) to fashion an imperial heritage for itself. Hitler, himself a painter, well understood the value of visual spectacle in consolidating national passions.

In the face of all that, it is heartening to remember that the arts of the powerful have always been countered by the arts of the powerless and their allies. The lavish church pageant met its counterpart in the village square; the overpriced canvas is challenged by the cheaply produced poster and graffiti; the canonic book is de-sanctified by the zine. The major progressive social movements of the twentieth century all fostered powerful artistic output to support their calls for justice. Even a cursory survey reminds us of the centrality of art to counter-hegemonic social projects. Think for instance of the importance of freedom songs to the Civil Rights movement, of mock-theatrics by second wave feminists and, even more so, the LGBT community at Pride parades, of the evolution of camp as a language of resistance to the values of straight society, of Teatro Campesino and community murals to the Chicano movement, of the guerilla graphics disseminated by Gran Fury and ACT-UP winning public support for AIDS research funding, of films such as *Winter Soldier* to the anti-Vietnam war and now Iraq movements.

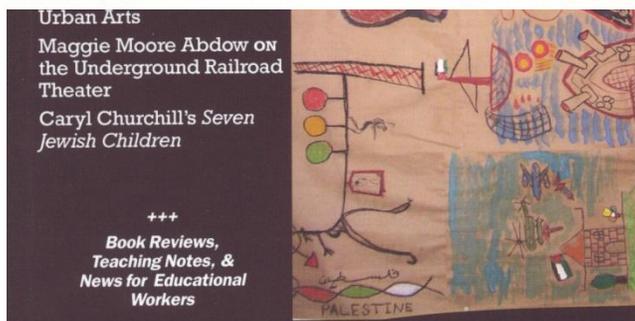
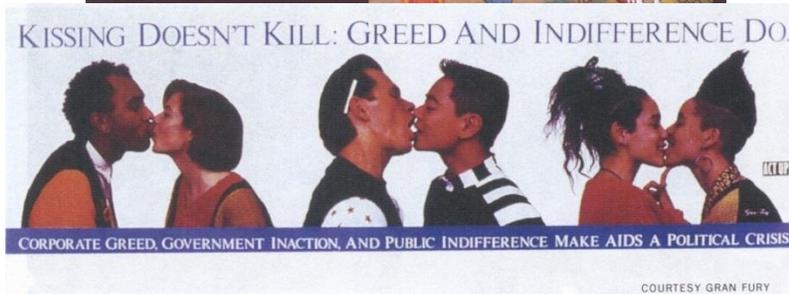
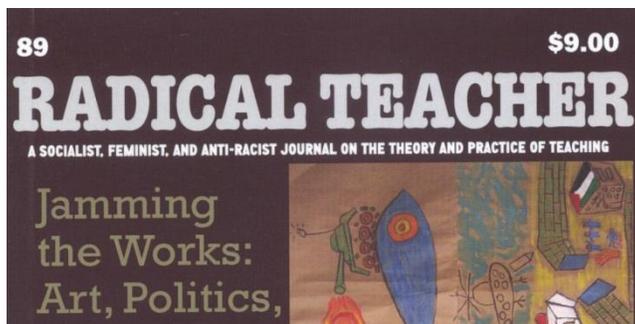
None of this is new. For many protest movements, past and present, social realist or avant-garde, art proved a powerful tool of social persuasion—the vehicle through which alternative values are broadcast.

A notable American example, one among many, is Clifford Odets' 1934 play about taxi drivers, *Waiting for Lefty*, which ends with a collective call to "STRIKE!" This is also the goal in Sergei Eisenstein's Soviet era films *Strike* (1924) and *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). While Odets' social realism and Eisenstein's formalism elicit different modes of response, their conviction that art should galvanize people and inspire revolutionary action joins them to many other political and artistic movements, from dada to Cultural Front dramatists, to Black Arts poets, to feminists like the Guerrilla Girls, and on to contemporary graphic and graffiti artists. What Maulana Karenga wrote about Black art in the 1960s applies to all: "[Black] art must expose the enemy, praise the people and support the revolution."² In a recent book on the art of protest, critic T.V. Reed notes that "the essence of [protest] movements entails [what political theorist Charles Tilly calls] 'repeated public displays' of alternative political and cultural values by a collection of people acting together outside officially sanctioned channels."³

But what does it mean, exactly, to describe a work of art as "activist"? Does Fernando Botero's painted Abu Graib series serve an activist function? Or Francisco Goya's paintings of the Horrors of War, or Otto Dix's equivalent work on the first World War, or Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*? Such objects are sometimes works of protest and at all times works of witness aimed at consciousness-raising, but doesn't activism imply a more energetic intervention that results in action? When costumed members of the San Francisco Mime Troupe march and mime at a demo, or First People tribes chant and drum on Thanksgiving Day in Plymouth in observance their Day of Mourning, is their performance more activist than a play by Bertolt Brecht performed at New York City's prestigious Lincoln Center or on a main stage in Dallas? Brecht, after all, hoped that the audience will emerge from the auditorium riled up enough to join the revolutionary masses.

The answer, at least in part, has to do with settings and audiences, but only in part. Performing in a park for no admission fee engages with society in a different way than performing in an elite venue, and it often engages a different segment of society as well. But "engagement" is a vague term that does not in itself earn the label "activism."

Mounting an exhibition of radical posters from the 1960s at a non-profit venue is different from exhibiting them in an art museum. Images of a Vietnamese woman wielding



a gun, of a Black Panthers' fist raised in defiance, or of migrant farm workers urging support for the grape boycott were used to invite direct involvement in targeted struggles of a specific moment in ways that neither the art museum nor the non-profit space can address. In this sense activist art has only a short life span. The posters once taped crudely on campus walls and office doors become objects of contemplation—of nostalgia



for those old enough to have used them, of diffuse inspiration for those who are in the struggle, and as art-history and cultural studies “texts” for generations to come.

The Bread and Puppet theater marketplace of “Cheap Art” insists on this transience with its sale of ephemeral artifacts marked by low production values and even lower monetary value. Arrayed on crude boards supported by rickety trestles, these devalued objects of exchange knock the notion of “art” off its pedestal. Meanwhile, alongside it, group members and volunteers distribute free bread, making life and art equally democratic—in essence, a human right. If we agree to define “activism” as a vigorous and even aggressive action in pursuit of political or social change, the Bread and Puppet example speaks to that. The posters mentioned earlier did so too at the time. Their job was to organize! While their particular focus has lost its immediacy since, the gesture has not.

In addressing the relation between art and activism we touch, then, on relations of immediacy and permanence, pleasure and social change, rhetoric and function, personal expression and purposeful joint action. At issue for us, writers and readers of *Radical Teacher*, is also the relation between art (in the broad sense of crafted expression) and education, in so far as the very notion of radical teaching is tied to engagement in social change. In this respect it may interest you, our readers, to know that our initial impetus for assembling the present cluster of articles came from British playwright Caryl Churchill’s putting her play, *Seven Jewish Children* (2009), in the public domain. Written in protest of Israel’s massive bombing of Gaza in 2008 and events that preceded it, the play is a powerful testimony to the horrifying effects of violence



on both Jews and Palestinians, seen through children’s eyes. Its repeated injunction of “Tell her,” placed at different historic moments, underscores ways experiential politics get harnessed through the teaching of children. Churchill’s decision to release this play from the requirements of copyright regulation in exchange for voluntary contributions to a related political fund

clearly mark her intention as activist. The emphasis is on the use of this play, not what profits it might bring in. (The play is included in this cluster, with a note attached regarding contributions. It was also put on YouTube by the *Guardian*.)

Though this emphasis on use speaks to the relation between art and activism, it does not answer definitively the question of what is “activism.” Churchill’s goal is two-fold—to raise awareness and stir engagement. Her play clearly aims to move her audience toward social action, even if that action is just making a financial donation to enable others to do the activist work she values. A more confrontational engagement happens in Coco Fusco’s and Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s *The Year of the White Bear and Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West* (1992-94), where the two artists inhabited a cage displayed in Madrid’s Columbus Plaza and then major museums of natural history and New York’s Whitney Museum. Dressed in an-all-too obvious pastiche of “primitive” attire, Fusco and Gómez-Peña constructed for visitors disconcerting viewing relations that reiterate earlier colonial discourses. The address to these visitors was simple: be aware of your racism, of your power and privileges, of your responsibilities for making the world what it is, and of the revolutionary power of “our” (the performers’) presence. That this artwork’s confrontational address presumes the necessity of change echoes Karenga’s formula for Black art: it exposes the enemy, praises the people, and supports radical change.

But does this in itself lay to rest the question of what is “activism”? As we go about our work, devising courses and debating pedagogies that aim to intervene in the social order—to expand our students’ understanding of the need for progressive social change and encourage them to

do something about it—the troubling questions that inevitably nag at us remain: “Are we going about our teaching, writing, art making, etc. the right way” and “Are we doing enough?” Such questions dog us precisely because they presuppose *results!* Seen this way, the dividing line between direct action, which is incontrovertibly activist (e.g. taking over a building), and activities that educate and agitate for such action (e.g., making a poster that critiques what that building represents) is not so clear. That is, the lines separating awareness, advocacy, and action are fuzzy.

One of the problems with engaged art is that it is not likely to “convert” non-believers. “Preaching to the choir” is an all too familiar jibe leveled at the limited usefulness of radical art, including the teaching and making of it in educational settings. In response we need to remember that this in itself does not make politically engaged art less valuable. The main collective value of this work is in building solidarity and stirring to action those who are already inclined this way, as evidenced so clearly in the inspirational role music played in the Civil Rights and other liberation movements. Tracking down cult queer films such as Jean Genet’s repeatedly censored *Un Chant d’Amour* (1950), Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* (1963), or Barbara Hammer’s *Dyketactics* (1974), helped galvanize a movement. Seeing the same revolutionary posters, again and again, on one’s friends’ apartment walls as well as one’s own, affirmed a community and a shared history of struggle. Living in a neighborhood distinguished by its unique graffiti and murals, one reads and rereads one’s communal “texts” daily.

This sense of community—of dialogue in a common “language”—is at the heart of the teaching and art-making that concern the articles assembled here, be they about neighbors attending a play where the performing youth mirror the audience to itself as a community (Abdow); an arts program that encourages agency in city youth (Hocking); performative communal engagement (Estrin); advanced art students responding with image and word to terrorism (Patten); or the liberatory practices of culture jamming (Frankenstein). Community is also at the heart of Caryl Churchill’s play, *Seven Jewish Children*, which spans decades of gratuitous pain, Jewish and Palestinian, at once lodged in and perpetrated by people whose sense of self is deeply aggrieved and damaged. Like all the projects described below, the most viable response to Churchill’s play is a constructive coming together—not merely the togetherness implied in “com-munity” but the joining of people in “-unity” for action.

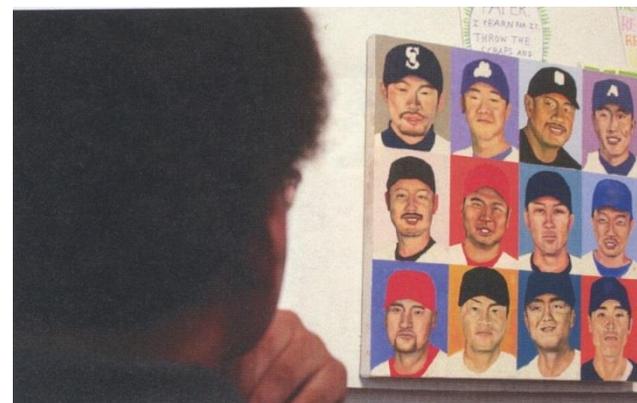
Though there is no single orthodoxy or party line joining these and other radical/activist art examples we could have included here (an article on music is forthcoming), collaboration is evident in all of them. Art always aims to liberate the imagination and alter the way we see the world and how we think about art, but for political artists and their audiences the need is also to bring people together in thought and action that go beyond individualized experience. While the counter-hegemonic practices of politically Left art obviously energize the dissent and activism of those who are already inclined to radical views

and actions, its often collaborative nature and public reiteration also touch people who are not necessarily part of the movement to begin with. As T.V. Reed notes in a quotation we include earlier, political dissent and action are

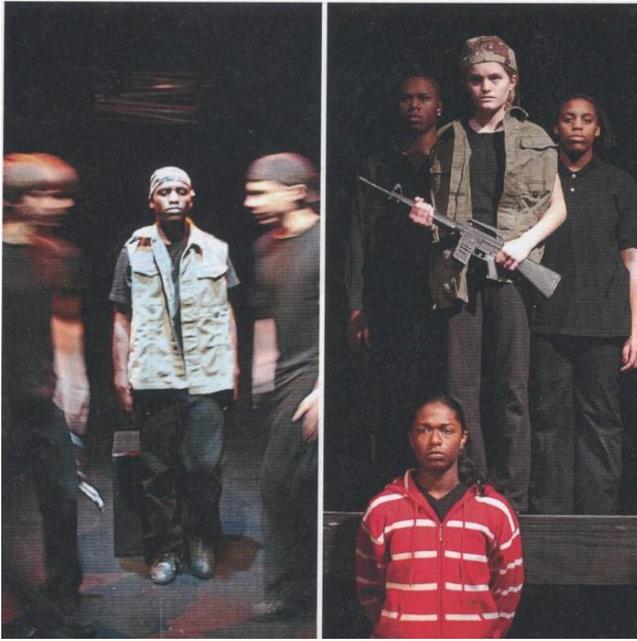


galvanized by repeated public displays of alternative political and cultural values. For the contributors to this cluster of *Radical Teacher* articles, as artists, teachers and writers, at issue are not some abstract notions of pure “art” and “activism” but the *uses* to which we can put “art,” broadly defined. Most immediately, these uses center on ways art, or indeed anything else we teach and do, intervenes in the political order to make visible new possibilities for change.

With special thanks to Deborah Bright (Rhode Island School of Design) for her substantive contributions to this



cluster.



Notes

¹ Dominguez is quoted in Richard Marosi, "UC San Diego Professor Who Studies Disobedience Gains Followers—and Investigators," *Los Angeles Times*, May 7, 2010, available at: <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/may/07/local/la-me-ucsd-professor-20100507-53>.

² Maulana Karenga, "Black Art: Mute Matter Given Force and Function," in Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, eds., *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997), 1974.

³ T.V. Reed, *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle*

The graphics used throughout this Introduction come from the original "Jamming the Works" cluster. Gran Fury appears on page 3, Photographs of Bread and Puppet by Donna Bister on page 4, New Urban Arts on page 5, and The Underground Railroad's Youth Program on page 6.



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(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xiv.