

An open letter to critics writing about political art

Last weekend Creative Time held their fourth annual summit on the current state of artistic activism. Over two days, scores of political artists from around the world gave short presentations and organized longer workshops. Hundreds of people participated.

The critical response, so far, has been underwhelming: few critics attended and those that did had little substantive to say. It would be easy to account for the overall silence and dismiss the surface commentary with some snarky criticism of our own about a bullshit art world with their head up their ass who can't recognize that something important is happening right in front of them. And while this may be self-righteously satisfying, it is not very helpful. We want to help.

How this event was – and wasn't – covered is indicative of the state of criticism when it comes to political art. The problem is not necessarily lazy criticism, but the fact that we don't have a developed vocabulary with which to understand, and criteria with which to evaluate, political art and activist artists. In an effort to develop a language and criteria with which artistic activism can be usefully criticized, we offer the following seven questions for the critic to consider:

1. Does it work?

Art about politics is not necessarily political art. The function of political art is to challenge and change the world. This should be obvious, but there is plenty of "political art" which uses social injustice and political struggle as mere subject matter: making these forces objects for contemplation and, perversely, appreciation. The point of political art is not to represent the world but to *act* within it.

Thus, the first question to ask of political art is: Does it Work? We don't mean: does it work aesthetically? but *does it work politically*. This entails asking more questions. Questions like: What does the artist want to achieve with their work?

What change do they see happening through their work? How will this change happen? Who is affected, what affect will the work have on them, and what actions will these people take?

We're not suggesting that there's one criterion of efficacy for political art, nor is there one goal that all political arts should move towards. What we are saying is that political artists, if they want to change the world, need to think about what they want their work to do. And critics, if they want to seriously interrogate and evaluate this work, have to both examine those political aims and ask whether the artist has succeeded.

It is hard to truly succeed as a political artist. Many times, an artist aims short and sets out to "intervene" and "raise awareness" about a social problem or political issue. This is the low hanging fruit of political art. Other work sets out to have a direct impact in a discernible way. Using art to defeat a pending policy, or elect a politician. This is more ambitious on the part of the artist, and easier – if not boring – for the critic of political art to judge. Much harder, much more ambitious, and therefore much more difficult to evaluate, is art that intends to change the very way we see, act and make sense of our world – including what we understand to be politics itself. It is hard to measure the long term total victory of a shift in the culture.

2. Who is the audience?

The art critic is the audience for most art, and therefore it's quite valid for the critic to write from his or her own perspective. The audience for political art is quite different. Political art, by its very name, has the "polis" as its audience and this constitutes a much broader demographic – one in which the art critic is confronted with readings of art radically different than their own.

As diverse as we'd like to imagine the audience for most art to be it draws from a very narrow population, one in which the art critic is at home. But when the audience is a wider public, the tried and true perspective of the veteran art critic comes up short. The critic of political art needs to place themselves in the minds of very different people. This takes humility. It may even require taking the

radical step of talking to the audience, asking them what they see, what they think. These are basic techniques of journalism and ethnography that an art critic may not be accustomed to.

3. What is the relevant tradition?

The tradition that serves conventional art criticism doesn't often work when it comes to political art. Drawing together art's historical and theoretical connections, while impressive to the writer's erudite readership, and possibly entertaining, is largely irrelevant. There are connections to be drawn, to be certain, but the valid ones here are more likely to be found in histories of social movements and textbooks in the fields of marketing, advertising, and public relations. Theories in human cognition and decision making, for example, are far more applicable, useful, and insightful into the work of the artistic activist than discussion of its relation to the newest aesthetic or Albers' color theory.

The training most critics have is not sufficient for fully understanding this work. Indeed, knowledge of sociology, community organizing, or rhetoric lends crucial insight into what political artists are doing, and whether they are doing it well.

You are not alone in your ignorance. We readily admit that many artists are in dire need of this knowledge as well.

4. What medium and why?

For art critics, medium is important. It situates the work within an historical canon, provides context and meaning, and a sense of continuity. For the artistic activist medium is important too, but as a means: the instrument through which one reaches the audience to effect change. Therefore, discussions about means are dependent on political considerations, such as who is the audience, how they are most effectively reached, and so on.

To privilege one medium over another in the absence of a discussion of efficacy is to miss the point. A good political artist's practice is promiscuous when it comes to medium. Critical Art Ensemble said it best with four words. The artistic activist works: "by any media necessary." A good critic, therefore, judges the

political artist on the mastery of the medium they choose for the task at hand.

5. What kind of mastery is required?

Fine artists are often rewarded for the degree of control and mastery over their medium. We valorize artists who can transform materials to fully express their vision without compromise.

Political art, however, is engaged in the world. The world is messy. It has a lot of moving parts. This material is impossible to fully control or master – and shouldn't be (unless you have fascist ambitions). Whereas compromise for the traditional artist means diluting their vision, compromise for the political artist is the very essence of democratic engagement.

The venue for the traditional artist is galleries and museums – controlled spaces where the art itself does not need to speak very loudly because all attention is focused on it. Political art has a dauntingly large venue: the street, the marketplace, the mass media. This is an out-of-control space where one competes with the cacophony rather than retreating into silence and solitude.

Political art, responding to this space, is often brash and loud. Subtlety is sometimes not its strong point. But we shouldn't fault a creative activist practice for what's inherently required of it. Indeed, it should be judged on how well it opens up a space, is read, and understood within this arena.

Some art lovers may be turned off by this focus on the practical and tactical, but for creative activists these concerns are *essential*. We are not, however, arguing that the informed art critic should simply be judging political art on how effective it is in communicating a message. Aesthetics matter — but they needn't be seen in opposition to efficacy. If one's goal is to affect change, form serves function. Art that succeeds aesthetically also has a better chance of succeeding politically. Beautiful art is art that people are drawn towards. The power of art lies in its ability to open up a space to ask questions rather than deliver answers. We think this makes for good politics too.

6. What am I missing?

The “art world” is truly a *world* all its own, with separate cultural spaces, communities, and languages. The detachment of fine arts from popular culture is the norm.

Alternatively, for creative activists, popular culture is their briar patch. Whereas in fine art, engaging in this terrain is read as pandering, ironic, “critical,” and at all times, *exceptional*, for political artists it is the rule. In order to reach everyday people one must speak in a language they understand. This can be interpreted as dumbing things down. It is not. In order to convey complex radical ideas in a vernacular largely developed for and oriented toward consumer sales and crass manipulation requires a great deal of intelligence and skill. And the better you do it, the more likely it is to be overlooked.

Within the fine art world to stand out and be noticed is a clear sign of success. In the practice of artistic activism you are more successful the more your art weaves into the fabric of popular culture – lost to the art world. The entire effort is shrouded in camouflage.

Critics are forgiven for passing over the best of this work in the past, but let’s all begin to look more carefully, ok?

7. What’s my role as a critic?

The relationship between artists and critics is often a fraught one. Critics can be lauded for how well they skillfully and cleverly demolish and denigrate artists’ work. This aligns with the dominate competitive logic of the commercial art world. This is the paradigm, in part, that political art is trying to change.

Despite this cannibalistic tendency, we all know that makers and critics live in symbiosis. This is especially true when the art operates in the broader society and the function of the work is not to be a unique and valuable object but to effect the world.

In this realm, the art critic is part of the team, with everyone working towards

the big win of a better world. Being a good team member for artists means making powerful work. Being a good team member for the critic means offering insightful, relevant, and instructive criticism.

Art critics raise questions. Questions are good. But questions for what purpose?

If you're a political artist, and you're primarily showing people how smart and clever you are, you're not producing good political work. The energy is misdirected. The same goes for critics. If you're writing primarily as a demonstration of how smart and clever you are, you have lost the soul of being a critic.

The critic might want to ask themselves, why am I writing this? Am I clarifying and illuminating the work? Am I instructing the artist and the audience so that better work is produced. Or am I "problematizing" as a demonstration of my prowess as a thinker. ("Problematizing" is too often used as a cheap substitute for understanding, analyzing and aiding.)

Being a critic, like being an artist, involves some degree of selflessness. There is a larger purpose. The critic, through their attention and analysis of the work, provides a helpful service.

Of course we all know this, but it's easy to get off track.

It's bigger than you and it's bigger than the art.

Modern art is rooted in the belief that the artists' individual expression is important. In turn, the individual critic's opinions about said artists and art are important. Think Pollock and Greenberg.

With political art a bigger game is being played. There are still individual artists and individual critics, but the stakes are not about the reputations of artists and critics. What's at stake is the transformation of the entire society. If this sounds grandiose, you may be in the wrong business.

We don't train people to be good political artists in our art schools. Most institutions are slow to adapt and are, at best, fighting the old myth of the lone genius artist expressing their vision *in spite* of society, rather than moving forward towards a world in which artists work collectively in an embedded engagement *with* society.

Call us optimists, but we assume anyone producing creative work to affect power is doing it from a sincere and passionate place. If it's not working, it's not because they don't care enough or aren't committed. It's because we haven't developed a critical tradition that helps artistic activists strengthen their work.

Political art needs help.

This is why we need you.

Because we're all in this together.

– Stephen Duncombe & Steve Lambert

Bios

Duncombe & Lambert are co-directors of the Center for Artistic Activism. The two have separate careers as an academic and an artist and work together training grass-roots activists to use arts and creativity in their practice. In 2009 at the Eyebeam Center for Art and Technology in New York City they helped organize The College of Tactical Culture. With funding from the Open Societies Foundations they co-created the School for Creative Activism in 2011.

They were participants in the 2012 Creative Time Summit.

Steve Lambert is an Assistant Professor of New Media at the State University of New York at Purchase. He was a Senior Fellow at New York's Eyebeam Center for Art and Technology from 2006–2010, and developed and leads artist professional development workshops for Creative Capital Foundation. Lambert's

work has been shown everywhere from museums to protest marches nationally and internationally, featured in over fourteen books, four documentary films, and is in the collections of The Sheldon Museum, the Progressive Insurance Company, and The Library of Congress. He speaks around the world on subjects including; creative activism, advertising and public space, and free and open source technology. Steve's projects and art works have won awards from Prix Ars Electronica, Rhizome/The New Museum, the Creative Work Fund, Adbusters Media Foundation, the California Arts Council, and others. Lambert has discussed his projects on NPR, the BBC, and CNN, and been featured in the *New York Times*, *Harper's*, *Newsweek* and others. He lives in Beacon, NY.

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. He is the author of *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* and *Notes From Underground: Zines and the Politics of Underground Culture*, and co-author of *The Bobbed Haired Bandit: Crime and Celebrity in 1920s New York*; the editor of the *Cultural Resistance Reader* and co-editor of *White Riot: Punk Rock and the Politics of Race*. He is the creator of the *Open Utopia*, an open-access, open-source, web-based edition of Thomas More's Utopia, and writes on the intersection of culture and politics for a range of scholarly and popular publications, from the cerebral, *The Nation*, to the more prurient, *Playboy*. Duncombe is a life-long political activist, co-founding a community based advocacy group in the Lower East Side of Manhattan and working as an organizer for the NYC chapter of the international direct action group, Reclaim the Streets. Duncombe is currently a Senior Research Fellow of Theatrum Mundi, an international consortium of artists, designers and scholars, and is working on a book on the art of propaganda during the New Deal.

Links:

- The Center for Artistic Activism: artisticactivism.org
- Steve Lambert: visitsteve.com
- Stephen Duncombe: stephenduncombe.com

