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Introduction: On "Artivism," or Art's Utility in Activism

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Abstract:

The papers in this section provide an in-depth view of artivism -- its dynamic tradition and its unrelenting adaptability to the technosocial space. Following a panel discussion at the New School's thirty-second Social Research conference, "The Fear of Art," Ricardo Dominguez and Stephen Duncombe collectively make a strong argument for art's utility in activism. The papers collectively argue that, like activists, artists with activist aims are obliged to examine the efficacy of their work in inspiring the change they imagine, and in doing so encourage artists and activists to collaborate. The papers invite them to move past the difficulties in separating affect from effect, to acknowledge that affect may translate to effect, and to engage with questions of how and if that occurs. To move an individual makes social change possible. They should not shy away from the affect of art but embrace and harness it.

Full text:

This feeling of power...to know that in Paris, the headquarters of intelligence, 500 people are sitting dead-quiet in an auditorium and are foolish enough to expose their brains to my power of suggestion. Some revolt! But many will go away with my spores in their gray matter. They will go home pregnant with the seed of my soul, and they will breed my brood.

-August Strindberg

the swedish playwright august strindberg had a flair for the provocative and an acute sense of art's potency. In his letter of July 14, 1894, Strindberg imagined his play invading the gray matter of the audience, impregnating their souls with his ideas. While the metaphor of infection may seem sinister in describing art's potency, Strindberg's underlying idea is not difficult to understand: the experience of art is transformative.

Art has the ability to change our minds-inspiring us to take on different perspectives and to reimagine our worlds. If we can agree that art's ability to change the individual psyche is profound and undeniable, why have we activists, who are in the business of changing the collective mind, shied away from employing art directly? We favor instead the prosaic tools of letters, press releases, and petitions. If Strindberg easily saw his work's influence on the individual mind, is it too far-fetched to imagine art's influence on the sociopolitical landscape? The papers that follow in this section invite us-activists and artists-to fearlessly evaluate art's utility in effectuating social and political change.

For human rights activists, a fresh perspective couldn't come at a riper time. Freedom of expression remains under threat, and despite our most valiant efforts, artists and writers continue to be targeted for expressing their views in both democratic and totalitarian societies. As activists for the silenced, we are routinely faced with the daunting question of whether our efforts are equal to the repression they target. Our best campaigns, lawsuits, and investigations can leave human rights abuses intact, abusers impervious, crimes unpunished.

If art can be viewed as a valid tool for change, the question then becomes: What is preventing practitioners from engaging it earlier and more often? Human rights and political activists' reticence toward art could be attributed to their lack of familiarity with the utility of art. It may also derive from a world in which social change is to be rigorously monitored, evaluated, measured, and reported upon. While activist artists are trained to evaluate the technical merits of their work, they are ambivalent at best about evaluating the social change, if any, their art inspires. This change cannot be reduced to outputs, percentages, or numbers of media hits.

The papers in this section provide an in-depth view of artivism-its dynamic tradition and its unrelenting adaptability to the technosocial space. Following a panel discussion at the New School's thirty-second Social

Research conference, "The Fear of Art," Ricardo Dominguez and Stephen Duncombe collectively make a strong argument for art's utility in activism.

A good starting point is Stephen Duncombe's paper, "Activist Art and the Fear of Efficacy," which introduces a set of possible metrics for evaluating the efficacy of activism. Far from offering a simple equation for evaluating activism's efficacy, Duncombe's article encourages artists to engage with the evaluative process. Understanding art's efficacy as a driver for social change is undeniably complex and wrought with confounding variables, but that difficulty shouldn't disrupt a useful, if not necessary, conversation.

In "Fearless Art in the Age of Fear: Electronic Disturbance Theater's Parrhesian Gestures," writer and activist Ricardo Dominguez revisits Michel Foucault's concept of parrhesia, or fearless speech, in the context of the Electronic Disturbance Theater 1.0/2.0's performative matrix. Anything but anonymous, the EDT 1.0/2.0 members perform acts of Electronic Civil Disobedience with radical transparency-providing their full names to government officials and using personal devices at virtual sit-ins. Without regard for their privacy or immunity from consequence, the work of these activist artists disturbs the technosocial spaces in clear view of authorities, and in doing so, perform a series of parrhesian gestures. The theme of art's utility is echoed in a discussion of the Transborder Immigrant Tool.

The papers collectively argue that, like activists, artists with activist aims are obliged to examine the efficacy of their work in inspiring the change they imagine, and in doing so encourage artists and activists to collaborate. The papers invite us to move past the difficulties in separating affect from effect, to acknowledge that affect may translate to effect, and to engage with questions of how and if that occurs.

To move an individual makes social change possible. We should not shy away from the affect of art but embrace and harness it.

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