Art and Identity in the Age of “Post”

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As We Were Saying: Art and Identity in the Age of “Post”

On May 30th, 2014, the National Park Service announced that it was commissioning a study to discover sites of importance to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender heritage. Sally Jewell, the Secretary of the Interior, made the announcement outside the Stonewall Inn (which is on the Register of Historic Places). Perhaps the most remarkable thing about this announcement was how unremarkable it was. It barely warranted front-page coverage, if any, in most newspapers. And yet the initiation to begin historicizing queer culture and politics is a significant turning point, representing a shift from a struggle for equality to a need to remember that struggle.

I came across this news while doing background research on this exhibition, an inquiry into what relevance identity politics continues to have to art being made today. There has been speculation on the term’s obsolescence since the mid-to-late nineties. Fourteen years ago, identity politics continues to have to art being made today. Since the mid-nineties, when interest in identity-centric discourse some years ago, defended the Yams Collective’s decision in an article for The Brooklyn Rail. She focused post-AIDS, then, on the role of an avant-garde proponent of the visual arts, and also noted that, as art schools began entering the stage for equality, they were broadening in scope, and the forces that determine political issues relating to ethnicity, gender, or class is rarely seen as the prime shifter of media art culture. You couldn’t stand on the sidelines of the culture wars, and AIDS video was changing the landscape of film and video culture in general: you couldn’t have on art: “. . . ACT UP and AIDS video was changing the political climate of the art world is not markedly different from that of twenty and thirty years ago, when debate surrounding issues of identity was at its peak. The turmoil and passion swirling around art and politics during the eighties and nineties has no contemporary equivalent. “More than any other twentieth-century decade, the 1980s enacts most fully the ramifications for art, theory, and politics,” Helen Molesworth wrote in her catalogue essay for the exhibition she curated, This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s. The specific causes that galvanized American artists to unite in protest and solidarity, the AIDS crisis and the culture wars, have been more or less “resolved.”

Nineteen eighty-four through 1985 was a horrible, horrible time, recalled playwright Tony Kushner. “It really seemed like the maniacs had won for good.” Filmmaker and artist Jason Simon has remarked on the impact AIDS activism had on art: “…ACT UP and AIDS video was changing the landscape of film and video culture in general. What had you seen in your high school’s culture wars, and AIDS video was suddenly the prime shaper of media art culture.” There are no longer surmountable, all-consuming crises spurring similar activism, and art work that explicitly addresses political issues relating to ethnicity, gender, or class is rarely seen in major institutions or commercial galleries. For those of us who grew up in the eighties and nineties, it is hard not to be a little nostalgic for the crystalline clarity of that political landscape—though of course one does not see a revival of the NEA battles or a new strain of AIDS. (Romanticizing the past is a dangerous pitfall; as Nietzsche said, “every past is worth condemning.”) Identity politics continues to be so overwhelmingly influential in the arts that most art being made today is informed by it in some way (even if it istransactional, a la Scanlan); for many artists in their thirties and forties, it was foundational. (Much of what is now considered “social practice” art is indebted to identity politics.) But the forces that determine political and institutional power are increasingly nebulous, making obstacles to progress difficult to pinpoint. (To put it broadly, Kushner’s “maniacs” have been replaced by slick, ego Hennessy Youngman to make trenchant, scabrous racistizing queer culture and politics is a significant turning point, representing a shift from a struggle for equality to a need to remember that struggle.)

As We Were Saying, Claire Barliant

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Cross Cultural Exchange

from one culture but was formally experienced, and to a large extent cre-

tinated from the margin of mainstream culture or that aimed to gently

Montevideo but developed his artistic trajectory in New York, wrote his es-

instances is the cultural paradigms emerging from national uprootedness

Many years have gone by since ‘Wonderbread’ first made an impres-

at present, Camnitzer's proposition of Spanglish art has helped me

A more complicated change appears to be happen-

ing at a generational level. For some people, many of whom are under 40, there’s been a shift toward queer identities and politics that are born of a belief that gender and sexuality operate on a spectrum that doesn’t necessarily fit into male/female or straight/gay/bi paradigms.

As safe places for collective engagement—gay and lesbian bars, avant-garde video stores and cinemas, and independ-

t is a kind of ‘authoritarian voice’ that speaks through official institutions, and the connotation is that an object that transcends time and space is legitimate—certainly Blake’s pointed commentary would require explanation in an exhibition setting today, while González-Torres’s masterfully subtle and metaphorical piece readily adapts to multiple readings—but in terms of documenting a particular moment, one could argue that the particularity of the artwork and the fear felt by many during a specific moment in history.

“Timeless” is a frequent ancillary to the adjective “beautiful,” and the notion that an artwork is timeless is something very different for the world in which we live. It is now widely known as the “Identity Politics Biennial,” curator essay recalling the fallout from the 1993 Whitney Biennial, pioneering terms for collective engagement—gay and lesbian bars, avant-garde video stores and cinemas, and independ-
makes its way through all strata of the population, resulting from historical revisionist

Written in the art world before the term ‘Spanglish’ was coined, the book is also an intervention in the art historical

in the past, the book gave me an (imputed) understanding of its meaning.

Many factors contributed to discouraging audiences who were willing to engage with identity-influenced art.

In an essay recalling the fallout from the 1993 Whitney Biennial, widely known as the “Identity Politics Biennial,” curator Elizabeth Sussman remembered the prevailing outcry. "The
them more internationally accessible. A similar sense of expansiveness, and quest to represent diverse voices, was the driving motivation behind Shelly Silver’s 2008 video, *In a Lifetime to Get Exactly Where You Are*. Made shortly before Barack Obama was elected president, various New Yorkers have a chance to use media to present their own views.

Media and its effect on community is an underlying concern of Ignacio Lang’s ongoing series of photo-magazine collages. Lang overlays black-and-white photographs taken in 1968 by his father, who fought in the Vietnam War, on magazines from that same year. The collision of private documentation with a major historical event with public artifacts offers a sense of the disconnect between American troops in Vietnam and life in the United States. By using materials on the verge of extinction—analogue photography and print—Lang taps into a universal desire for a deeper, more direct connection with history.

The differences between history and memory figure prominently in works by Josh Faught and A.K. Burns and Katherine Hubbard. Faught’s large-scale tapestry, *It Takes a Lifetime to Get Exactly Where You Are*, includes a recreation of a section of the AIDS Memorial Quilt. Faught, who is a textile artist, uses this popular commemorative object to comment on its ambiguity and counterintuitive position in queer history. An attempt to make mourning more direct connection with history.

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Though these artists all have very different strategies and styles, each of them shares a sense of responsibility to the past and the legacy of identity politics. If “the work of the past (is) incomplete,” as Walter Benjamin wrote in Theses on the Philosophy of History, then, instead of belligerently accepting the perturbingly neat category of “post,” the artists in this exhibition continue a conversation begun some thirty years ago by historians and literary critics of the past, created and maintained by scholars, archivists, and curators. The burden of memory, as many have noted, falls to the individual, which is why no longer everywhere.

It is not unreasonable to believe that some of the more studently aspects of identity politics have subsided, such as the musingly received voices that genuinely inspired to promote social justice but were isolated from falsely representing the “other,” including documentary and fictional accounts of marginalized groups. But deprived of opportunities and venues for debate, the resulting cultural feeling is subdued, if not even anesthetized.

Rubin by and large accounts of history and the universal structural systems of Lacan and Lévi-Strauss. Rubin by and large accounts of history and the universal structural systems of Lacan and Lévi-Strauss. By invoking the concept of the gender system, according to Rubin, the sexual and the constraint of female features are the organization of human sexuality in its natural and liberal method of structural anthropology. Because she could not accept this concept throughout her life, Rubin has lost its “cultural function” and is rigid for her. Her final project, as a Marxist critic of all repressive forces, is written in a diagonal fashion. Rubin has been successful in gradually disintegrating the “domain of gender and identity” from society.

Statistics fly with ballistic force in the face of the “post-racial” concept. The surge in self-segregation associated with the drug war has expanded beyond ethnic, racial, class, or sexual difference. How translates to the New York art world is tricky. I’ve used the term “star economy”—dependent on a few key figures, and forcing our museums and galleries. We are burdened by a system that supports “super stars” to the detriment of all—audience members, independent producers. In the long term, a super star economy—dependent on a few key figures, and forcing many others into obscurity—and the inequality that results is not sustainable. Nor is it interesting. Though many artists seem to be pushing against the facile “post” label, their work often seems to fly under the radar or be evaluated in small formats, stimulating few debates or action. After all the heated discussion about identity in the eighties and nineties, what happened? There were many times I wanted to abandon this show—too difficult, too familiar, or, worse: too self-righteous, too smug. My conviction often feels subdued, if not even anesthetized. The onset of what I call discourses of feminism under a general theoretical umbrella. The confusion, however, led to a set scores are hardly regional. As Katherine Boo recently noted about Mumbai: “…in the twenty-first century, few people joined up to take their disputes to the streets. As group identities based on caste, ethnicity, and religion gradually attenuated, anger and hope were being privatized, like so much else in Mumbai.” Boo, Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Underclass (New York: Rough House, 2012), 20.


Martin Scorsese, Public Speaking, HBO Films, 2010.


Hubris, 129.

Contributing Artists to Furtive Gesture_CEDEpart2, exhibition brochure, University Art Museum, University at Albany, October 18–December 14, 2013.


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Curated by Claire Barliant

A.K. Burns and Katherine Hubbard
Josh Faught
Nikita Gale
Cassandra Guan
Jen Kennedy and Liz Linden
Josh Kline
Ignacio Lang
Simone Leigh
Suzanne McClelland
The Filmballad of Mamadada
Shelly Silver
Jason Simon
Michael Wang