Art, politics and dissent

Aspects of the art left in sixties America

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Introduction: 'the politics of "otherness"'

By 1967, many of the contradictions and differences in the art world's responses to Vietnam, to Civil Rights and to the early stages of the women's movement became marked. For example, in New York Angry Arts Week (29 January to 8 February 1967) was a collective programme of cultural events and protest with roots in a variety of precedents including Dada, performance and happenings, and radical politicised theatre. The Collage of Indignation, one product of Angry Arts Week, resulted partly from the example of the 'Artists' Tower of Protest', in Los Angeles in early 1966. Participating artists such as Leon Golub, and critics such as Max Kozloff (also on the organising committee), published texts on the significance of The Collage of Indignation. These raise several issues about the role of 'art' and of 'art criticism' in relation to 'protest'. The Kozloff text, from The Nation, in particular, reveals the problems of addressing various constituencies within the world of 'art and culture'.

Such problems were in stark contrast to Michael Fried's 'Art and Objecthood', published a few months later, which is firmly entrenched in the preoccupations of a radically elite cultural community. His article appeared in Artforum, which, as we have seen, was a major player in the powerful world of art journals and during the summer of 1967 moved its base from Los Angeles to New York. The editor, Philip Leider, was both a participant in anti-war activities and a cultural elitist. From an Old Left perspective, cultural elitism was inconsistent with social and political protest or dissent, the struggle for equality. However, transformations in the 1940s and 1950s led many members of the political left to value the specialist products of high culture as a separable sphere of human activity. For such intellectuals no inconsistency was identified in being a cultural elitist while supporting the rights of workers and the marginalised and oppressed in society.

Correspondence between Leider and Greenberg at the time reveals Leider's desire to locate Artforum in the forefront of debates about the Land Art and early Conceptualism. Leider, under various pressures, rarely published articles which explicitly raised political issues or controversies.

This is not to say that articles such as Fried's 'Art and Objecthood' were not politicised, implicitly. The point is that Leider was an editor of a journal that in part represented his own contradictory responses to contemporary socio-political demands and pressures. These can be traced back to one aspect of the transformations of intellectuals in the 'Old Left' and their ambivalence toward the ideas, values and beliefs of the 'New Left'. Many of the former emphasised, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the 'achievements' of modernism within bourgeois culture as qualitative landmarks and signs of human liberation in contrast to capitalist 'kitsch' and the barbarism of Fascism and Stalinist Socialist Realism. Two texts that exemplify such transformations in various ways are Meyer Schapiro, 'The Liberating Quality of Avant-garde Art' (1957), and Clement Greenberg's 'Modernist Painting' (1961). Importantly, these texts and intellectuals were the product of a deep engagement with the cultural status and political life of New York and its leftist history.

The 1960s in the United States are a decade often described in terms of the divisions between, or the transformations in, the 'Old Left' and the 'New Left'. The 'Old Left' is characterised as having roots in the debates and struggles of the 1930s, centred on Trotskyism and Stalinism and the fight against Fascism. Central issues were the role of the Communist Party; debates about 'modernism' and 'realism'; the role of 'culture' as populist or avant-gardist; the effects of mass culture and capitalism; the relationship between socialism and comprehensibility. In contrast, the 1950s were marked by McCarthyism and the attacks on Communists, Marxists and socialists. It was also characterised by an aggressive economic, ideological and military involvement by the United States globally. For many members of the 'Old Left', the possibility of sustaining their beliefs and projects from the 1930s not only became practically difficult but also several shifted their views on 'culture and politics'. The latter meant privileging high culture and autonomous art as the last defensible enclaves of political activity and dissent – revolutionary aspirations having been bracketed by McCarthyism, a consumer boom and Cold War imperialism. The 'New Left', on the other hand, was associated with the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Port Huron Statement (written by student activist Tom Hayden) which was not allied to the political party traditions of the 'Old Left'. The 'New Left' was wedded less to Marxist analyses and more to a mix of notions and optimistic aspirations with a greater emphasis on the 'personal' or 'individualist'. Because of its broad-based appeal, politicians, the military, the press, industrial corporations were all hostile to the 'New Left', with the FBI mounting a campaign to undermine its effectiveness.

Was the adherence to the certainties of Modernist values an ideological product of McCarthyism and a bid for cultural power? Evidence in support of such a view may be gleaned from critics' persistent adherence
rooted in unquestioned assumptions. For example, the radicalism of Golub's views, as with most other texts of the period, still presupposes a male artist despite the numerous women who participated in the Collage Movement and in Angry Arts generally. Even radical texts and practices that sought active critique of the structures of power, permissibility and control lacked a consciousness about gender. Artists such as Schneemann testify to this lack, in for example Fluxus, as does Poppy Johnson, a core member of the Guerrilla Art Action Group which included Jon Hendricks and Jean Toche.\(^{102}\)

'The street'

'The street', though, was an important signifier in the political transformations of the late 1960s, with Civil Rights marches, mass anti-war demonstrations, the Yippies' 'Museum of the Streets' and Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theatre, whose huge political puppets and masks were at most rallies and demonstrations from 1964 to the autumn of 1967.\(^{103}\) Golub indexes the Collage to traditions of current oppositional practices by claiming that the artists strove to 'rough-up' their attitudes 'to spit, to let go' so that the whole work became a 'carrier of indignation harking back to street art, graffiti, burlesque, the carnival, the dance of death'.\(^{104}\) It was these aspects of practice that informed work shown at the Judson Gallery when run by Jon Hendricks, such as the '12 Evenings of Manipulations' in October 1967, followed by the Judson Publications Manifesto signed by Al Hansen, Jon Hendricks, Ralph Ortiz, Lil Picard and Jean Toche. The latter declared that they were 'concerned with the corruption of culture by profit. We believe the function of the artist is to subvert culture, since our culture is trivial.'\(^{105}\) In his 'Some Notes, 11 December, 1967', Hendricks locates the 'Manipulations' events of life such as the preoccupation with media rhetoric and image, the hypocrisies of law, order and justice in the 'American way' dominated by racism, poverty and self-protection. The events were characterised as an opposition both to apathy and to 'a condition of art that says pure/considered/constructed/classic. The destructionists are in opposition; they are a romantic movement. They are messy and aren't very polite. It would be kind of hard to show them at Castelli's this year. Not much to buy either. Maybe they are anti-American.'\(^{106}\)

Leo Castelli's Gallery was a main commercial venue establishing artistic careers and guaranteeing a trading provenance for collectors' investments. As we have seen, a boom in American domestic consumer durables was matched by one in high art at time when struggles for Civil Rights, crises of poverty and violence in Vietnam were at the forefront of many Americans' experiences. Structures of government and media denial, dis-\(\text{suasion and evasion made it hard to place basic questions of realism and statements of truth on a broad public agenda. It was a major aim of the Judson Publications Manifesto to give voice to artists who wished to 'shout fire when there is a fire; robbery when there is a robbery; murder when there is a murder; rape when there is a rape'. Further, the 'Judson Publications will attempt to serve the public for as long as the trivial culture of the establishment distracts us from the screams of crises'.}^{107}\)

The first of the twelve evenings\(^{108}\) was Ralph Ortiz's ' Destruction Room' and 'Brainwash', which was an attempt to produce a happening whereby participants became aware of their most destructive and aggressive urges. These were, Ortiz argued, turned into depersonalised war psychologies in an American civilisation dominated by a machine aesthetic. Participants were encouraged to realise their urges in the destruction of the contents of the room - furniture, china, bric-à-brac, clothing, pictures of loved and hated ones, magazines such as Reader's Digest, Life, Time and Playboy. For Ortiz, in the process we educate ourselves to these awesome forces and their awesome possibilities and personalize an aspect of ourselves long depersonalized'.\(^{109}\) This aim and the two parts of the event evoke Georges Bataille's analyses, in the 1930s, of the way that similar depersonalised processes underpinned Fascism. Accompanying Ortiz's text and images in the Manipulations publication was an 'explode this war in Vietnam bag' - reminiscent of sick bags - covered in media images and newspaper text of military action in Vietnam. Bici Hendricks used ice, and in the Judson publication included a small paper flag mounted on a tooth pick in a plastic bag with the instruction 'Defrost the American Flag'. In the same publication Al Hansen addressed newspaper obsessions with bizarre murders and disasters. In Malcolm Goldstein's State of the Nation, President Johnson's speech, a statement on Vietnam, was excerpted, spliced and looped on several tape machines around the room with the audience invited to participate and to transform by new editing, splicing new relations together, changing the speeds and volumes of machines.

In a development of her Snows, Carolee Schneemann produced an environmental work, entitled Ordeal, on the theme of Vietnam at the Judson Church on 29 August 1967. Two months later, on 19 October, her Divisions and Rubble, 'a destruction event', was the ninth in the evenings of Manipulations. This, too, was directly indexed to Vietnam and included photos from her film Viet-Flakes: 'An environment which people will have to destroy to enter it, to move in it: means of action altering action/actions of perception altering perception. An exposed process.'\(^{110}\) The room was a place where materials from previous manipulations could be incorporated: 'A discomfiting labyrinth, cubicles, closures all through it of paper or fabric which participants would have to first
cut and tear their way through. Grim, dark, and dirty.\(^{111}\) In stepping forward, spectator-participants activated a switch under the foot which started fans blowing on a suspended wire cage full of Vietnam atrocity photographs. As Schneemann notes, the space was very small, no money was available, found materials had to be used from the local Thompson and West 4th Street vicinity and there were few days to construct the environment. She used a rotten mattress, plastic garbage bags filled with leaves, old clothes, food containers, discarded toys and dirty papers, and collaged one wall with a huge torn image of LBJ and photos from Viet-Flies. Every such event has what Schneemann calls its ‘Star Stars’, activists with energy, presence, response and reaction:

Star of Divisions and Rubble happened to be Carol Grosberg (director of Angry Arts)\ldots self-involved she moved rags around, kicked open doors, knocked piles of leaves open, napped on the rotten mattress, rhythmically attacked ripped montage of LBJ with red paint, became immersed in a hacking structure of red and black stroked over walls, molding, windows, around into photo images. Her activity setting off impulses in others; rich confusion of actions.\(^{112}\)

Such practices were the antithesis of those valued by Michael Fried as represented by his ‘Art and Objecthood’ published in *Artforum* in June 1967. Significantly, though Schneemann’s work and the events of Angry Arts would appear to characterise the sensibility or mode of being that register their existence. Within his Modernist aesthetic, they did not even register as ‘art’ at all, not least because of their associations with the broader cultural values and activities of the New Left. As we have seen, a critic such as Kozloff also had major problems with work that undermined the traditions, conventions and evaluations of modernism in its various theoretical forms. In this he was in a similar position to radical critics and historians associated with the Old Left such as Meyer Schapiro and Harold Rosenberg.

In *The New Yorker* in 1968, Harold Rosenberg, rooted in the traditions of the Old Left, told a revealing story about a five-day conference of artists and intellectuals in Caracas in the autumn of 1967 under the auspices of the Inter-American Foundation for the Arts. The exchange of views centred on the definition of ‘living artistic problems’:\(^{116}\)

For some speakers from the New York art world, the issue for painting today is universal recognition of the revolutionary heights scaled by artists to whom the essential significance of painting lies in the shape (square, vertical or horizontal) of the canvas. For the Latin Americans, the issue was ‘Yankee imperialism’ – an artist, they felt, was obliged to indicate his resistance to existing conditions as a matter of professional honor. The aesthetics of this resistance ranged from art forms involving audience participation (designed to awaken the masses) to the Dada-related belief that in ‘post-modern’ art the artist’s ‘manifestation’ counted for more than the art object – a circumpect way of saying that art could go to the devil. In response, a New York painter asseverated that for him painting was bounded by the piece of material he was working on, and his companions, an art critic and a curator, nodded in assent and murmured the word ‘quality’\ldots\) The Latin Americans got the point that in New York artists feel themselves exempt from human history – a state of mind which confirmed their feelings about the ‘Yankees’ and which several confessed to envying. Perhaps the mistake of the New York aesthetes lay in going to a conference, since in the world of ‘quality’ there are no problems, ‘living’ or otherwise, to be debated.\(^{113}\)

Rosenberg was critical of New York aesthetes obsessed with the world of “quality”, but he was by no means an uncritical advocate of artists being concerned with ‘human history’. In the same article he was negative about ‘Angry Arts’ while more positive about *Protest and Hope*, an exhibition by forty-three artists at the New School Art Centre in autumn 1967.\(^{114}\) The latter he saw as an example of artists who ‘braved the issue of aesthetic quality versus politics’.\(^{115}\) Here resides one of the fundamental dilemmas for practitioners and critics steeped in particular conventions of high art and its validations, where notions of ‘aesthetic quality’ and the creative imaginative life had an ineffable value. These were partly rooted in both a commitment to particular modernist pursuits, including institutional manifestations, and a dislike of the implications of leftist attacks, particularly in the 1930s, on the uselessness of abstraction. For Rosenberg, ‘“Angry Arts”\ldots expressed the hopelessness of artists in regard to political art and their contempt for politics or their fear of it in that almost all the works were dashed off without regard for style or political standards, as if in a rush to return to the serious business of making paintings and sculptures’.\(^{116}\) Despite his later reservations, Rosenberg had been named as one of the ‘Supporters and Participants’ of Angry Arts (under ‘Painters and Sculptors’) and had participated in the second of the two panel discussions on ‘The War, The Artist, His Work’ during the week-long events.\(^{117}\)

In contrast to Angry Arts, Rosenberg regarded *Protest and Hope* as an adventure of the artistic intelligence analogous, in a way, to the opposite movement by abstract artists of the 1940's in cutting loose from politics after their discovery that what they had been trying to do under the goading of the left was in conflict with basic processes of the creative imagination.\(^{118}\) The latter phrase signals Rosenberg’s, and other intellectuals’, association in the 1930s with Trotskyism in the face of many leftist emphases on social realism. Many moves towards abstract art (Rosenberg has in mind the generation later labelled Abstract Expressionists) were implicitly or explicitly political. ‘Politics’ here is associated with parties,
groups and factions. For Rosenberg’s generation, such associations had been traumatised by the Popular Front, Stalinism and the dissipative and punitive effects of McCarthyism. Deeply suspicious of organisations and the persuasive possibilities of uncritical doctrine, many artists and critics of Rosenberg’s generation appealed to concepts of the individual as a source of ‘creative imagination’ other to capitalist production, mass communications, and commodity fetish. Such acts of dissent did not prevent emphases on ‘the aesthetic’ with dangers of authoritarian pronouncements, disputes about critical doctrines and aspect blindness about questions of power and politics. Rosenberg ends his article by observing that artists who try to renew art by its own means end up in a ‘blind alley’. For him, “Art today needs political consciousness in order to free itself from the frivolity of continual insurrections confined to art galleries and museums. The actions of society present a resistance against which modes of art can test their powers and reinstate the creation of images as a vocation of adult minds.”

The work that Rosenberg regarded as the ‘showpiece’ of Protest and Hope was George Segal’s The Execution, one of the fourteen works done expressly for the show. One of his series of ‘dramatic tableaux’ using white life-size plaster casts, it comprised a male figure hanging head down with a rope around both ankles from a bullet-scarred wall. Three other figures lay on grassed ground, apparently victims of ‘the execution’. Rosenberg refers to the figures’ eerie effect produced by their whiteness and to ‘a sense of quiet and timelessness, as if each work surrounded itself with a museum of its own’. These qualities, he believed, induced a mood of reflection – precisely the mood belonging to art and dissipated by the mass media. In this sense, the work was a contribution to political consciousness, despite the conventionality of the concept of people stood against the wall.

Rosenberg, like Kozloff, believed that art could produce a critical distance, an opportunity for thinking spectators to develop an awareness of experience and consciousness other to the world of mass media. He was, like many of his social group, committed to the conventional means and sites of art, the traditions of the Old Left’s belief in radical politicised modernism. He was also hostile to an avant garde predicated on avant gardeism. Unlike a younger generation of artists, which paralleled New Left politics, he could not entertain a destruction of conventional forms of art, or rather the established intellectual and institutional criteria for assessing their value. This itself may be regarded as a failure of political imagination or of consciousness, or the values and assumptions beginning to be scrutinised by the burgeoning art practices of dissent in 1967 were those central to power and gender critique.

Reading 1968: the Art Workers’ Coalition and the critique of museums

Rosenberg was not alone. Influential readings of art and theory since the 1960s have moved not only to single out a conventional canon and traditional critical categories but also to minimise a dialectical relationship between culture and politics. For example, Hal Foster opens his essay “The Return of the Real” thus:

In my reading of critical models in art and theory since 1960 I have stressed the minimalist genealogy of the neo-avant-garde. For the most part, artists and critics in this genealogy remained sceptical of realism and illusionism. In this way they continued the war of abstraction against representation by other means…… Even if realism and illusionism meant additional things in the 1970s and 1980s – the problematic pleasures of Hollywood cinema, for example, or the ideological blandishments of mass culture – they remained bad things.

A moral negativity towards notions of realism, variously defined, permeates many of the accounts of the 1960s and 1970s, although Pop Art, particularly Warhol and his legacy, is traced and referenced. Yet during the period there were significant instances and developments related to the period that were significant and developments related to the period that were significant. Such instances, especially those that emphasised a dialectical relationship between culture and politics, were actively discussed. For example, in 1971 Art in America published the first of a four-part series of articles by Therese Schwartz on ‘The Politicization of the Avant-Garde’. Schwartz was an artist and an editor of the radical bi-monthly newspaper, The New York Element. She had been active in many of the groups and manifestations discussed in her pioneering overview, including in the Art Workers’ Coalition (AWC).

The AWC was formed in 1969 as a result of a number of factors. Some of the artists had been participants in earlier anti-war activities such as the Artists’ Tower of Protest and The Collage of Indignation. Others became involved because of a growing concern with the rights of artists. These rights related both to the exhibition as an institutionalised system and to the definitions of ownership of an art work. In an early documentation of the first few months of the AWC, a specific moment of artists’ intervention at MoMA was identified as inaugurating the group. On 3 January 1969, the Greek sculptor Takis (Takis Vassilakis), based in Paris and with French nationality, entered the Museum to remove his Tele-Sculpture (1960) from the exhibition The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age. Although this particular work was in the Museum’s collection, it was exhibited without the artist’s wishes and despite his protestations. John Perreault describes the event in The Village Voice.

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Paik’s Soft Transformations with Philip Corner, Fred Lieberman, Charlotte Moorman, Yoko Ono, Thomas Schmit and Ken Warner.


111 Ibid.

112 Ibid.


116 Ibid.

117 The panel also included Robert Bly, Leon Golub, Maxwell Geismar and George Tabori. The discussion was held in Washington Square Methodist Church, near to the NYU Loeb student centre where The Collage of Indignation was on display.


119 Ibid., p. 170.

120 Others were Leonard Baskin, Our General; Charles Cajori, Pax Americana; Elaine de Kooning, Countdown; Rosalyn Drexler, Oh Say Can You See…; Red Grooms; Robert Rauschenberg, Umbrella; Ray Sanders, Smile; Ben Shahn, Goyaesca #2; Van Loen, The Victim; James Wine, Untitled Poster.


125 See John Perreault’s regular art column, ‘Whose Art?’, The Village Voice, 9 January 1969, 16-17.

126 Ibid.


128 See Hendricks and Toche, GGA: The Guerrilla Art Action Group. Hendricks was an active anti-Vietnam-War protestor with Quaker roots. In the late 1960s, he was closely connected with the Judson Gallery and has been curator of The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, for example see: Hendricks, Fluxus Codex (New York, The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, in association with Abrams, 1988); Clive Philpott and Jon Hendricks, Fluxus: Selections from the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection (New York, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1988).


130 Nafteh, Culture Making, pp. 61-2.


133 They were both brought nearer to Judd’s control when he eventually located himself and much of his work in Marfa, Texas.


136 Ibid., p. 37.

137 An earlier version of some of the arguments here can be found in my ‘The Politics of Representation’, chapter 2 of Wood, Frascina, Harris and Harrison, Modernism in Dispute, especially pp. 95–102.


139 Ibid., p. 317.


144 Ibid.


146 Lippard, A Different War: Vietnam in Art, p. 18.

147 Ibid.

148 Quoted by Lippard, A Different War, p. 20.

149 See Reise, ‘Greenberg and the Group: A Retrospective View’.


151 This notion is indebted to Raymond Williams’s distinction between Specializing, Alternative and Oppositional Social Formations in Culture (London, Fontana, 1981).