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Indirect Action: A Critique of Current Models of Political Art
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Statement

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Summary

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Last turn around, 2014, mixed media installation with screen prints

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Abstract

Indirect Action: A Critique of Current Models of Political Art

The current critical discourse surrounding the political in contemporary art is dominated by the notion that the efficacy of an artwork is narrowly defined through the lens of socially affirming audience participation. Yet there is evidence that suggests that artworks employing a direct, activist-style approach can result in a less than engaging aesthetic experience, and have limited political impact. There is a case to be made for art that is jarring and alienating but at the same time political. Art that evokes an unresolved political reality – that does not sacrifice aesthetics for ethics – leaves in its wake not an affirming social experience, but an unresolved tension that has critical effect. By invoking the theories of Jacques Rancière and Claire Bishop, and drawing on the practices of Thomas Hirschhorn and Mike Kelley, this thesis – both in its dissertation and studio outcomes – offers such an alternative form of political art. Motivated by the changing political imperatives of late capitalism, my practice operates indirectly and obliquely, often via the conduit of the political poster – an iconic mainstay of leftist campaigning. By presenting an unresolved engagement with the Australian political context, my practice opens a range of issues for consideration, allowing the order of the sensible to be challenged and re-imagined.

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Indirect Action: Questioning Models of Political Art

Introduction

Since 1989 there has been a steady development in contemporary artistic practice that has reconnected to an errant political conscience. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 marked the end of communism in the West and after an initial euphoric period, more sombre reflections on the demise of this social experiment developed. This marks a period of rethinking art's role in the utopian imagination.¹ The cynicism of the late 1980s and 1990s shifted and what emerged was a focus on a more sincere engagement with political imperatives.² The direct engagement with political issues that was considered too earnest during the cynical time of the Young British Artists has become the new standard for socially concerned artists. This politically focussed approach was slow to develop but has become one of the dominant modes of contemporary practice. The trend continues in 2014 with art critic and historian Boris Groys recently discussing a very direct political engagement which he terms "art activism", undertaken by artists who are not content to merely critique art institutions or the social and political structures which they as individuals function within. These artists and their audiences become directly engaged with education, environmental concerns and social activation.³ The dominance of this discourse has been established in key politically-themed exhibitions such as Documenta 11 curated by Okwui Enwezor,⁴ although it has developed outside of, and sometimes in opposition to, gallery and institutional contexts.

The dominant mode of practice to emerge from this renewed engagement with social concerns has been participatory art. This field of practice goes by a number of names including relational art, socially engaged art, interactive art, social practice, and collaborative or community-based art. Critical narratives surrounding

¹ Bishop, C. (2012). *Artificial Hells*. London, Verso, 3.

² Stallabrass, J. (2006). "Truth or Dare." *Financial Times*. 2014, from <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/0930c9a8-803d-11db-9096-0000779e2340.html#axzz3GNJh4T7y>.

³ Groys, B. (2014). "On Art Activism." *e-flux*. 2014, from <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/on-art-activism/>.

⁴ Mercer, K. (2002). "Documenta 11." *Frieze*. From http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/documenta_113/.

participatory art claim it responds to a need to 'activate' the alienated and passive consumers of late capitalist spectacular culture. Curator Nicolas Bourriaud's text, *Relational Aesthetics*, was an early attempt at identifying and responding to this return to collaborative political engagement. Bourriaud set out an interpretation of socially engaged practice that would influence the discourse developing around this emerging trend. The text received exhilarated responses from less than critical commentators that were followed by positive assertions concerning the social potential of this freshly identified artistic mode.⁵

Arguably, critical discourses around the political in contemporary practice narrowly define the efficacy of an artwork according to its facilitation of socially affirming audience participation,⁶ a concern that has been addressed by Jacques Rancière:

the idea that art has to give us more than a spectacle, more than something dedicated to the delight of passive spectators, because it has to act in favour of a society where everybody should be active. The 'critique of the spectacle' often remains the alpha and the omega of the 'politics of art'.⁷

The support which participatory art has enjoyed is being tempered slowly with more critical voices. Based in the United Kingdom (UK) art theorist Claire Bishop is one of the few who have challenged the social and aesthetic ambitions of participatory art by seeking to add a greater critical and historical depth to current discourse. Her commentary is inflected with concerns about the abandonment of critical aesthetic considerations when evaluating the success of a work of participatory art. Bishop fears that concerns over the deeper aesthetic considerations of a work of art are being replaced with a focus solely based on its narrowly conceived social impact. In discussing the urgency of this social project challenging the dominance of late capitalism, she states:

⁵ Bishop, C. (2004). "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics." *October* (110), 57.

⁶ *Ibid*, 65.

⁷ Rancière, J. (2006). "Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art." Retrieved 22 October, 2014, from <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/Rancière.html>.

... the urgency of this *social* task has led to a situation in which socially collaborative practices are all perceived to be equally important artistic gestures of resistance: there can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works of participatory art, because all are equally essential to the task of repairing the social bond.⁸

Jacques Rancière's philosophical and aesthetic thesis supports the notion that there is a considerable and enduring impact in political art that is oblique in its approach and not rendered hollow by a presumptive supposition. He argues against the type of visual art that seeks to pre-empt the viewer's interpretation of it.⁹ This is the logic of the explicator; instead of embodying an emancipatory potential, it disempowers the viewer. For Rancière, art must function as a zone where belief in the equality of intelligence is assumed. If an artist avoids a didactic and presumptive method of articulating their ideas, then the viewer is more inclined to envision the meaning of the work under their own terms.¹⁰ Rancière goes further in supporting the indirect approach to addressing political imperatives when he highlights the dissensual possibilities of art. He believes that art is predisposed to imagine new visions of our world that serve to rupture the order of the sensible or status quo. In this point, Rancière supports one of the key intuitions of my project – the power of the strange, alien and disturbing to challenge the way we understand the order of our world. An important factor in art's emancipatory potential is its ambiguous relationship with daily life, indicating that to be alien or in opposition to the day-to-day reality of existence is actually an asset in regard to the political possibilities of art. Art's power to disrupt the status quo lies in its ability to present the unexpected and dis-identified. realize

Rancière's notion of dissensus and its importance to art's critical effect underpins important theorisations of contemporary practice, most notably Claire Bishop's

⁸ Bishop, C. (2012). *Artificial Hells*. London, Verso, 13.

⁹ Rancière, J. (2009). *The Emancipated Spectator*. London, Verso, 25.

¹⁰ Tanke, J. J. (2001). *Jacques Rancière: An Introduction*. London, Continuum International Publishing Group, 90.

reading of participatory art. Since 2004, Bishop's writing on social practice has added historical and theoretical depth to this ubiquitous contemporary approach. She identifies a shift in the discourse around collaborative participatory projects that results in their evaluation solely in terms of demonstrable social outcomes. She indicates that the "idealised and euphoric"¹¹ view of political possibilities presented by affable participatory works demands further examination. The aims of these socially engaged projects might be laudable in their opposition to market forces and institutional practices, but Bishop asks how the aims of these projects differ from, for instance, government projects aiming to increase levels of social inclusion. Bishop ties the language of participatory art's discourse to governmental cultural policy and finds the parallels a cause for concern.¹²

For Bishop, Rancière's restoration of the critical understanding of aesthetics breaks down the binary terms used to analyse politicised art. Addressing this type of art in terms of aesthetics allows a subtler and more complex dialogue to develop around it.¹³ Rancière's structure allows Bishop to address one of the central goals of her 2012 book, *Artificial Hells*, that being:

to emphasise the aesthetic in the sense of *aisthesis*: an autonomous regime of experience that is not reducible to logic, reason or morality.¹⁴

Central to both writers' approach is the desire to engage with the complexities and paradoxes of contemporary political art and not have the experience presented reductively. They argue for and support the difficult range of responses elicited by indirect and conflicted political art.

In support of the ideas of Rancière and Bishop, I will discuss two artists whose oblique approach to political imperatives has been a source of inspiration for my studio production. Mike Kelley and Thomas Hirschhorn have overlapping concerns

¹¹ Bishop, C. (2004). "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics." *October* (110), 57.

¹² Bishop, C. (2012). *Artificial Hells*. London, Verso, 13.

¹³ *Ibid*, 18.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

and strategies that exemplify the enduring impact of an indirect engagement. Foremost are the conceptually bold and intellectually demanding strategies that the artists employ. They tackle complex and intractable issues without doubting the ability of their audience to respond to their ideas, an approach that embodies Rancière's notion of the presupposed equality of intelligence,¹⁵ an essential element in harnessing the emancipatory potential of art. Kelley and Hirschhorn are united in their ability to challenge their viewers with veiled approaches; the motivations for their art is never direct and is most often hidden behind an unexpected conceptual conceit. A sense of the absurd is an important element of both artists' approach, and their humour allows sometimes difficult subject matter to be addressed. Kelley's scathing wit ridicules the institutions of culture and commerce and their role in socialising us. Hirschhorn engages with the absurd to facilitate his idiosyncratic address of globalised politics and capital. His conceptual strategies are formed via seemingly unfeasible leaps of logic, in the service of his skewed analysis. I argue that the work of both artists addresses issues by breaking them apart and problematizing them further, often through their trademark misdirection of logical thought. Their works present problems and sustain the tension that is generated by the intractable issues they address.

My studio research embodies a unique approach to critical questions concerning collective political action and communication. Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, aided by the ascendancy of neo-conservative political power in the United States of America (US), Australia has been inexorably linked to the so-called war on terror. Since this time I have felt compelled to understand how resistant political forces were rendered impotent despite an active opposition to the invasion of Iraq and sizeable international protests. This disappointment has drawn me to an exploratory approach, seeking to test the strategies of resistant politics in a bid to understand them anew. This research may uncover strategies that are exhausted, or those that can be refined and adapted in the contemporary context. My response is unequivocally emotional and when harnessed is artistically productive.

¹⁵ Deranty, J.-P. (2010). Jacques Rancière - Key Concepts. Durham, Acumen, 96.

My works embody an indirect critique of collective art practices with a specific focus on subverting and calling into question a particular mode of political expression regarded as a mainstay of resistant communication – the political poster. In the age of social media, political graphics and their historical legacy occupy an awkward and indeterminate position. By channelling my concerns about oppositional politics in Australia through this near anachronistic medium, I find a resonance between the status of the medium and the questionable potency of the political sentiments the posters embody. My response is to engage in a sometimes mocking, sometimes destructive mode with the well-worn tools of resistant political strategies. The iconic posters of Australian group Redback Graphix are placed in new, absurd contexts in a series of drawings. Found images of community activism are besmirched and sullied, their messages obscured. Notions concerning the powerlessness of activists to gain traction are attacked and their weakness targeted out of the resentment born of their failure. These irrational assaults are not fair or warranted, and yet by challenging and breaking down these symbols of resistant political communication, I hope to create the possibility of them being seen anew. By recklessly attacking these institutions, I intend to present artworks that might allow a reconsideration of how we understand the *language* of resistance. Drawing attention to the weakened communication of oppositional politics aims to make the audience actively consider how these issues have been discussed in the past and how they will be engaged with in the future.

The medium, namely print, and the socio-cultural specificity of my studio practice give my thesis a unique focus. Whether addressing the seeming impotence of oppositional communication, the changing context around political activism, or the resistant possibilities of subculture, the conduit is the poster. My thematic focus is drawn almost exclusively from the viewpoint of resistant political communication within an Australian context. While the issues addressed can have a very global scope — the Iraq war, US political hegemony, subcultural symbols and language — the mode through which I engage with them is local.

My thesis begins with an overview of Marxist theorisations of the relationship between art and politics, as a context in which to consider the thought of Jacques Rancière and Claire Bishop who argue for a more substantial engagement with the contradictions and intricacies of contemporary political art. **Chapter One** outlines the terrain of the aesthetics/politics dialogue by reference to early and later Marxist thinkers, including Theodor Adorno and Boris Groys. It then goes on to outline Rancière's ideas in detail, and addresses the development of his broader philosophy relevant to my argument. I discuss his emergence from the influential Althusserian group and his subsequent rejection of elements of Marxist thought. Rancière's idiosyncratic exploration of Joseph Jacotot and his pedagogical insights will lead to a discussion of the emancipatory potential of the presumption of equality in intelligence, and its relationship to the perpetuation of disempowering hierarchies. Rancière's notion of the distribution of the sensible presents a model that maps and configures the way we perceive what is do-able, say-able and think-able in our understanding. An essential element of this notion is the idea of the police, who enforce the order of the sensible, and how they are connected to the notion of politics. Rancière's understanding of politics is very specific and refers to any force that opposes the order of the police by challenging what is conceivable within the order of the sensible. So politics becomes the space where those who are unseeable and unhearable become seeable and hearable. It is politics that opposes the consensus supported by the order of the police, and it does so by means of dissensus, that is, the process of politics as it disputes and rejects the police distribution of the sensible. This in turn is translated to the aesthetic realm, and Rancière's notions of the presumption of intellectual equality are extended to the audiences of art. For art to embody an emancipatory political potential it must be a proving ground for this equality.

Jacques Rancière's notion of dissensus and its relevance to political art practice underpins important theorisations of contemporary practice, most notably Claire Bishop's reading of participatory art. Since 2004, Bishop has employed Rancière's ideas to structure her insightful analysis of participatory art, and her arguments are central to my thesis. Critical narratives surrounding participatory art claim it responds to a need to 'activate' the alienated and passive consumers of late capitalist spectacular culture. The logic of the argument has led to more conventional art forms being seen as a passive reflection on the world, with the implication that these works are unethical when a more direct action on social and political imperatives is what is really needed. This had led to a kind of false binary understanding of contemporary audiences being split between active (and inherently politically activated) participants and a passive audience. The success or failure of an artwork is being judged, not on the aesthetic experience, but on the work's ethics. Bishop argues for participatory practice, and contemporary art in general, to be considered critically on its aesthetic merits and not solely on its goal for social inclusion. Bishop argues that participatory art should not be seen as an inherently superior medium to address social and political imperatives, but one that requires constant consideration and re-negotiation. A case needs to be made for the political impact of art that is indirect, draws attention to and maintains a disquieting political reality. Critiques of Bishop's argument from artists Liam Gillick and curator and author Grant Kester will be included in the discussion.

In **Chapter Two** I discuss the practices of Mike Kelley and Thomas Hirschhorn, two artists whose bold and intellectually demanding strategies tackle complex and intractable political concerns. These artists do not doubt the ability of their audience to respond to their ideas, an approach that embodies Rancière's notion of the presupposed equality of intelligence and its necessity in facilitating art's emancipatory potential. The recent death of Mike Kelley has drawn renewed attention to his already critically recognised body of work. His practice embodies a kind of punk resistance that employs humour and a biting wit. One of the keys to the enduring critical engagement of his practice is the fact that its motive remains elusive, ambivalent and ambiguous. His engagement with found imagery, which he

describes as a folk art of the working class, is the source of two connected projects I discuss. Kelley uses these oppositional messages in a way that unites workers across the institutional structures within which they are compartmentalised and separated. He explores notions of high and low art and the way a collective imagination can challenge institutional hierarchies. This examination of Kelley's interest in the formative influence of the institution is the focus of *Educational Complex* from 1995, a kind of perverted architectural model. Kelley casts his education, through primary school, high school, art school and graduate school, as a kind of institutional abuse — and the modernist teachings of Hans Hoffman as the most “scarring”. Ultimately the work uses Kelley's signature absurdity, twisted logic and humour to attack and smear institutional power. The unresolved and ongoing nature of these concerns stays with the viewer and creates an enduring, disquieting tension. This battle can be seen as a metaphor for Kelley's career. His practice is an expression of resistance and resentment towards the forces of socialisation and convention. Ultimately his low expectations of being a marginal, counter-cultural figure proved false and his work has been absorbed by the institutions he railed against. A discussion of Kelley's career will be used to engage with the ability of late capitalism to absorb oppositional political stance. Bishop has similar concerns for the oppositional power of participatory art, as it was used by the UK government to bolster community inclusion goals¹⁶ and similar forces of absorption engulfed the concerns of the Redback Graphix studio as it moved from a site of resistance to a design firm working with the government.

Thomas Hirschhorn's collages, video work, installations and public artworks have attracted attention due to their sizeable volume and their unique and elliptical approach to the political imperatives of a globalised world. The commitment of the artist to his political ideals is evident in his polemical tracts and the energy and commitment he brings to his imposing monuments and installations. Despite this engagement, his approach to social concerns seems far from logical, direct or reassuring, and he employs an unfeasibly naïve optimism to engage with his

¹⁶ Bishop, C. (2012). *Artificial Hells*. London, Verso, 13.

concerns. This commitment to scale, productivity and excess is employed by the artist with a view to inducing in his audience a reciprocal commitment of energy towards engaging with the work. Hirschhorn is also committed to working collaboratively with a range of audiences in public. He vehemently rejects the term 'participatory art' which he considers lazy, false and in the service of late capitalism. Participation, for Hirschhorn, means the intellectual engagement of his audience and collaborators, regardless of the context. While the artist embraces the complexity of contemporary life and its sometimes bleak realities, his work always expounds the optimism and emancipatory potential of political art while at the same time sustaining the productive and generative tension that embraces the reality of the intractable social realities with which he engages.

Chapter Three analyses the political motivations that have driven my pursuit of an indirect political expression devoid of the didacticism of an activist approach, or the closed and reassuring social engagement of some convivial participatory practice. My faith in the power of oppositional political positions was challenged by the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which occurred despite considerable public protests against it. I have since been engaged in exploratory approaches seeking to test and reconfigure the strategies of resistant politics. I have channelled my exploration through the problematic medium of the political poster, as I find a resonance between the status of the medium and the questionable potency of the political sentiments the posters present. To provide a context to my enquiry, I outline the role of political graphics in moments of social upheaval throughout the course of modernism. My studio output aims to challenge the political poster by engaging in a sometimes mocking, sometimes destructive challenge to the well-worn strategies of resistant politics. This facilitates a critique of issues that span but are not limited to: challenging an iconic Australian political poster collective through a series of drawings (*Redback Graphix drawings*, 2012), second-guessing the sincerity of community activism (*It's 5 o'clock somewhere...* 2011) and alluding to the end of an era by engaging with an activist poster collective on the decline (*Last time around*, 2014).

In my conclusion, I argue that there is a case to be made for the political efficacy of art that evokes a disquieting political reality. Contemporary practice that is indirect in its political engagement may have more political bite than issue-based, activist-inspired participatory art. Artworks employing this direct, activist-styled approach can result in a predictable aesthetic experience. I argue for a more complex understanding of political art that includes work that is indirect, jarring and alienating, leaving in its wake not an affirming social experience, but an expression of unresolved tension. I believe there is a greater political impact in art that is not rendered hollow by a didactic approach dominated by concerns of the work's ethics over its aesthetics.

Chapter 1

Developing the context for art and politics

As a way to contextualise Rancière's thoughts and Bishop's particular developments of them, it is useful to consider, if only briefly, the history of ideas regarding the relationship between aesthetics and politics in the Marxist tradition. The anthology, *Aesthetics and Politics*, presents an historical grounding by assembling a series of texts by and in regards to early Marxist theorists of the relationship between aesthetics and politics: Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. These influential thinkers form an important grounding in the political effect of art, and fill out a picture of the context that gave rise to the generation of philosophers from which Jacques Rancière emerged. This string of exchanges around political imperatives in literature and fine art occurred during a fertile time for Marxist critique in Germany from 1930 to the 1950s. The issues addressed have resonance today and this discussion provides a valuable grounding in the ways artists and writers engage leftist politics in relation to art's political effect.

The conversation begins with Bloch's texts defending Expressionism in literature as being politically committed and engaged. Bloch supports modernism and Expressionists, but his associate Lukács argues that these are embedded in the closed capitalist system. He argues that realism is objective, and therefore more productive politically, than the overly subjective nature of Expressionism. This discussion of realism unexpectedly provides a valuable discussion of the ways Lukács sees the effective possibilities of politically committed art.¹⁷

Brecht deploys the vigour and energy of an artist to deride Lukács' writings as overly focused on formalist concerns and undervaluing the social message of a work.¹⁸ Brecht's polemic against realism argues for the presumption of intelligence in an

¹⁷ Theodor Adorno, W. B., Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, Georg Lukacs (1990). *Aesthetics and Politics*. London, Verso, 57.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 76.

audience that he sees as easily able to comprehend formal devices such as montage and abstraction without diluting the work's political impact. His thoughts have the most relevance for the contemporary landscape in light of a political orthodoxy permeating some contemporary political practice. Brecht's arguments for a more complex mode of political address advocate for an indirect critique of the political status quo by estranging the audience from the everyday reality of bourgeois oppression to allow it to be seen anew – a notion that supports arguments made in this paper regarding the potential of an indirect political approach in the contemporary context. Valuable insights emerge in Fredric Jameson's conclusion as he identifies a paradox in the way the failure of post-Marxist attempts to reach beyond Marxism often leads to a return to pre-Marxist positions, best exemplified in the aesthetic conflict between realism and modernism.¹⁹

The post Soviet perspective of Boris Groys provides a unique voice in contemporary notions regarding the relationship between art and politics. Groys' publication *Art Power* (2008) seems to emerge from a parallel world. In some ways this is true, as Groys focuses on a post-modern examination of art, politics and capitalism from a post-Soviet context. Groys presents us with a refreshing take on the art world, not as a powerless and vulnerable institution, but as either commodity or propaganda. He sets the tone by discussing the pluralism of art and how any discourse is almost certainly doomed to failure or irrelevance.²⁰ His understanding of art as a form held in constant tension between opposing forces is one that is restated here in confluence with the ideas of Rancière. Groys' unique background gives him license to take on the accepted history of modernism and dialogues surrounding contemporary practice in refreshing new ways. He brings Soviet art, both official and unofficial, into a dialogue with a history in which it has been denied a part. One of Groys' key points is that contemporary art, when created for biennales and the contemporary art market, reinforces a political agenda and that art produced under the auspices of the market is just as tainted as the Socialist Realism produced under the Communist regime. Groys believes critical considerations of the market are

¹⁹ Ibid, 211.

²⁰ Groys, B. (2008). *Art Power*. London, MIT Press, 115.

valuable, but only if they admit new artworks to the carefully policed history of art. With this as a background, Groys argues convincingly for the relevance of museums in the face of the market and mass media, and that art *does* have autonomy to defend.

Groys takes on “privatisation” in social and artistic terms, as it gives him the chance to consider the evaporation of a utopian project and the ways the ideological void is being addressed by artists. The dismemberment of the Soviet state machinery for privatisation was violent and as artificial as the rise of the communist state nearly one hundred years ago. Groys feels that artists have a great opportunity to address the new context, however they bear the great burden of the collective weight of Russian art. This artistic privatisation is of course incomplete and ironically seems as dependent on commonality as it has ever been before. Groys sees it as much like western postmodernism where artists are free to pick over the ‘scrap-heap’ of discarded images and history to create a vision of their new reality. Groys identifies post-communist art as having passed the end of the history of utopianism and sees it running into the end of postmodern capitalism. Despite this, he sees artists as resigned to “cling(ing) to peaceful universalism as an idyllic utopia beyond any struggle.”²¹

It is sometimes difficult to establish which points Groys raises sincerely and those he raises as playful provocation; however, he always produces questions that are productive. This uncertainty is exacerbated by the feeling that he is, at times, working with vague timeframes and generalities, instead of anchoring his arguments to sharply defined issues or artists. *Art Power* is almost an artwork in itself, while constantly reminding us of his unlikely background. This intriguing post-modern, post-communist niche presents a valuable opportunity to focus on the uncertain paths open to art in a world where the experiment of collective living has been dismantled and capitalism has been substituted through an awkward and confronting process.

²¹ Groys, B. (2008). *Art Power*. London, MIT Press, 172.

Groys' provocations stand in some antinomy to contiguous theorisations of art and politics by those who champion participatory art and social practice. *Living as Form* (2012), by writer and curator Nato Thompson, presents a comprehensive survey of participatory art. This socially engaged practice typically uses groups of people as its medium as it aims to engage its participants in socially focussed projects. The text tracks the emergence of participatory art and considers where these artworks belong, as they have no real place in the art market and sit awkwardly within the institution. Thompson identifies the forms this work can take including gatherings, media manipulation, research and presentation, structural alternatives and modes of communication. His conception of what constitutes participatory art is one of the broadest committed to print. This discussion of form provides a helpful reference but does little to offer a deeper understanding of this approach. His questions around the issue of art blurring into life are important, and this is supported by the fact that some of the "works" discussed are not by artists but could originate from a non-profit organization, Non Government Organisation (NGO) or even be a spontaneous event with no planning or artists involved. But what is the purpose or benefit of considering these events as art? Thompson's interpretation of the term "participatory" diffuses attempts to clarify art's role in social change. For Thompson this is perhaps the aim, taking artists out of the studio and bringing art practice closer to politically engaged living.²²

A discussion of the rise of neoliberalism provides an important marker for Thompson as it does for a number of other artists and critics. His discussion of the rise of the neoliberal order identifies how its influence emphasises commercial interests and the private sector in social and political relations. The arrival of culture as commerce, the spectacle, as predicted in the 1940s by Frankfurt School philosophers Adorno and Horkheimer and named and elaborated on by Guy Debord, has led to an environment where artists are required to be media savvy in their approaches to political messages.²³ Thompson's examples of artists and activists using the media

²² Thompson, N. (2012). *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991- 2011*. London, MIT Press, 33.

²³ *Ibid*, 31.

spectacle are equally broad, citing the Zapatistas in Mexico, the Seattle globalisation protests and the *Yes Men's* insider pranks. His mention of the aims of the September 11 attackers as being carefully timed to coincide with a 24 hour media cycle are worth noting. He continues to expand the notion of how we consider participatory art by discussing parallels in the rise of reality television, McDonalds providing a kind of branded support to families in need of medical care and even some tactics of the right-wing political activists like the Tea Party. In light of this, he discusses the suspicion surrounding art that claims to be politically engaged, and the concern around the level to which an artwork is intertwined with the spectacle of advanced capitalism and its attendant careerism, self-promotion and selling out. In line with these concerns he identifies problems associated with Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* and its dependence on the institutional context and criticisms that these works are only reaching art-world insiders. He highlights this notion by comparing the approaches of artists popularly identified as purveyors of Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, with a truly engaged community activism by artists that may take years to attain their social and political goals. Thompson argues for an art more thoroughly integrated into life. He argues for an "unmooring of this work from the strict analysis of aesthetics" in critical considerations of this mode of practice. After discussing Duchamp's urinal being removed from the gallery and returned to the toilet, he muses: "For, as art enters life, the question that will motivate people far more than "What is art?" is the much more metaphysically relevant and pressing "What is life?"²⁴

This sentiment is broadly supported in a variety of ways by all of the writers that follow Thompson, bar Claire Bishop. Valuable insights are presented by Maria Lind, Teddy Cruz, Carol Becker and Brian Holmes. Cruz asks the question, how can art address social inequality directly and forcefully? He identifies a polarised social landscape in crisis and calls for an art more closely aligned to the everyday in addition to an emphasis on art as activism.²⁵ Becker draws our attention to issues connecting social media to changing notions of public and private space. She sees

²⁴ Ibid, 33.

²⁵ Ibid, 60.

artists as well positioned to colonise this new hybrid space and draw attention in a pedagogical way to the productive possibilities of social change. Holmes is inspired by the role of collective action via social media and public gathering in the 2011 revolution in Egypt . He identifies the elements that make up “eventwork” and how it can lead to more socially engaged ways of living.²⁶ This is a notion supported by Jackson who looks at how art workers give “public form to public life”.

All these approaches address important political and social contexts, the very issues that have been the motivator for my artistic practice over the last ten years. Their approaches and insights are valuable and have to some extent informed my concerns. Yet, these writers are united, with Thompson, in exemplifying an approach that considers the political effect of a project ahead of aesthetic considerations. In this anthology, this approach is challenged by only one writer, Claire Bishop, who argues for an approach that foregrounds a project’s success or failure on terms other than the political.

Bishop addresses similar concerns in her contribution to this volume “Participation and Spectacle: Where Are We Now?,” albeit with a greater critical distance from her subject than Thompson and his like-minded contributors. She questions the accepted modes of thinking about socially engaged art, urges caution regarding some inflated claims for the medium and contextualises the approach via precedents in modernism and beyond. This push to consider socially engaged art at a deeper critical and aesthetic level is important. The narrow focus on bringing art into a closer relationship with life is not at all new and needs to be challenged. She critiques the idea that spectacle is rooted in the passively visual and must be overcome by active audience participation. The assumption that an “active” audience is inherently politically engaged is shadowing the approach of curators such as Bourriaud and Thompson, and Bishop challenges this with the support of writers such as Jacques Rancière.²⁷ She presents us with a valuable review of the notion of the spectacle and lists the contemporary understanding of its evils, as

²⁶ Ibid, 68.

²⁷ Ibid, 35.

opposed to the original definition by Debord who sees it as a set of social relations under capitalism.²⁸ Contemporary critics are taken to task by Bishop, who reminds us that we may no longer be dominated by the spectacle and notes that this argument has been in circulation since the early 1980s. She argues that art has an unbreakable connection to the spectator, even if it is secondary in nature, despite participatory art claiming, impossibly, that this relationship has been expunged.²⁹ She dispels the notion that participatory art is compelled solely by the binary opposition of passive consumers of the spectacle being engaged by active participation in a social art form.

One of Bishop's most valuable tactics is to view participatory practice in a much broader timeframe. She proposes that the drive for active participation in art is an attempt to address alienation produced by *whatever* dominant social order is in place whether capitalism or totalitarianism. She sees the alienation being addressed not only via positive gestures of social contact, as is most often understood, but also via another mode, that being a cynical re-doubling of this alienation.

... participatory art aims to restore and realize a communal, collective space of shared social engagement. But this is achieved in different ways: either through a constructivist gesture of social impact, which refutes the injustice of the world by proposing an alternative, or through a nihilist redoubling of alienation, which negates the world's injustice and illogicality on its own terms. In both instances, the work seeks to forge a collective, co-authoring, participatory social body, but one does this affirmatively (through utopian realisation), the other indirectly (through negation of a negation).³⁰

Bishop points out that the first instances of this political involvement in the public sphere had no political alignment – as in Paris DADA – as it was, and still is, a strategy used by both the left and right. She goes on to note that the more complex modes of participatory art form a critique of the medium itself, rather than naively accepting

²⁸ Ibid, 38.

²⁹ Ibid, 38.

³⁰ Ibid, 36.

artistic inclusion as equalling political inclusion. The confrontational approach adopted by Christoph Schlingensiefel in *Please love Austria* (2000), for example, embodies a “negation of a negation” and had significant and lasting impact. Bishop argues for participatory art as an abrasive, perverse and disturbing media.

Bishop’s position resonates strongly with the intuitions and approach that has driven my research. A complex and indirect confrontation with the issues, “participatory” or not, is a more powerful mode of addressing political imperatives.

In her own book on participatory art, *Artificial Hells*, Bishop continues her consideration of participatory art and its history with a relentless criticality. Her most incisive commentary is reserved for the accepted wisdom surrounding the social and political aims of this lauded contemporary approach. Her key arguments are important for this paper and I wish to identify the most significant of these. Some critical narratives surrounding participatory art claim it responds to a need to “activate” the alienated and passive consumers of late capitalist spectacular culture. The logic of the argument has seen some more conventional forms being seen as a passive reflection on the world, with the implication that these works are unethical when a more direct action on social and political imperatives is what really matters. So even as participatory art pits itself against neoliberal capitalism, it is blind to the ways it mimics the very forms extolled by this contemporary force through devices such as collective project work, volunteer labour and organising and networking via social media.

Bishop continues her argument for participatory practice to be considered critically on its aesthetic merits and not solely on its goal for social inclusion. A strong motivator for Bishop came when she noticed the language of social inclusivity being adopted by conservative political forces, such as the UK-based New Labour as a criterion to help select art projects for funding. Bishop goes on to give examples of participatory art’s unwitting neoliberal tendencies revealed in projects such as Antony Gormley’s *One and Other* (2009). Individuals applied for a timeslot to perform whatever they wished on top of an empty plinth in central London. The

effect was likened by some critics to a real-life version of ubiquitous web-based, user-generated content such as YouTube or Twitter. So while socially inclusive, one is left feeling exposed to a shallow and pointless parade of egos presented as spectacle.

Bishop's criticisms are particularly illuminating. While clarifying the historical context for participatory art, Bishop, with the help of Jacques Rancière, argues for a more complex and disquieting socially engaged art.

Without finding a more nuanced language to address the artistic status of this work, we risk discussing these practices solely in positivist terms, that is, by focusing on demonstrable impact. One of the aims of this book, then, is to emphasise the aesthetic in the sense of aisthesis: an autonomous regime of experience that is not reducible to logic, reason or morality.³¹

Bishop argues that participatory art should not be seen as an inherently superior medium to address social and political imperatives, but one that requires constant consideration and re-negotiation. Her reliance on Jacques Rancière's insights to develop this convincing critique has taken me back to his writings. This chapter now focuses on Rancière, before further developing Bishop's analysis as a framework within which to understand my own practice.

Jacques Rancière: an introduction

Over the last twenty years, the thought of French-born Jacques Rancière has slowly been recognised not only for its influence on philosophy, but also on the visual arts. Rancière's unswerving commitment to equality informs his belief in the power of images to re-imagine the way we perceive the order of our world. His belief in the conjunction of art and politics, and in the egalitarian potential of the arts, has significantly informed my research.

³¹ Bishop, C. (2012). Artificial Hells. London, Verso, 8.

This thesis argues for the importance of a political art that is indirect, jarring and alienating, leaving in its wake not an affirming social experience, but an expression of unresolved tension. Rancière's philosophical and aesthetic theories support the notion that there is a considerable and enduring impact in political art that is indirect and not rendered hollow by a didactic or affirmative approach. Rancière argues against the model that visual art is prone to,³² that being the art that seeks to preempt the viewer's interpretation. Using examples of politically engaged collage and photography by Martha Rosler and Josephine Meckseper respectively, Rancière posits that artists cannot insist on dictating an unambiguous transmission of an idea. This is the disempowering logic of the explicator, a stratification of power that results in the stultification of the viewer. For Rancière, art must function as a "proving ground"³³ for the presumption of the equality of intelligence. If an artist avoids a didactic and presumptive method of articulating ideas, then the viewer is more inclined to envision the meaning of the work under their own terms.³⁴ So not only does Rancière challenge the notion of a didactic approach that may be embodied in works that employ a direct activist approach, he also argues for the power of an approach that aims to rupture our relationship to what we understand as our world. In this, Rancière corroborates one of the key intuitions of my project: the power of the strange, alien and disturbing to challenge the way we understand the order of our world. An important factor in art's revolutionary potential is its ambiguous relationship with daily life; to be somewhat alien or in opposition to the day-to-day reality of existence is actually an asset in regard to the political possibilities of art. Art's power to disrupt the status quo lies in its ability to present the unexpected and dis-identified. This re-evaluation of critical thought in the service of political potential in art provides the backbone of my argument.

Before engaging with Rancière's ideas in detail, it is useful to canvas the development of his broader philosophy relevant to my argument. I will begin by

³² Rancière, J. (2009). *The Emancipated Spectator*. London, Verso, 25.

³³ Rancière, J. (2007). "Art of the possible: Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey in conversation with Jacques Rancière." 2014, from <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/jacques-Rancière/articles/art-of-the-possible/>.

³⁴ Tanke, J. J. (2001). *Jacques Rancière: An Introduction*. London, Continuum International Publishing Group, 90.

discussing his emergence from the influential Althusserian group and his subsequent rejection of elements of Marxist thought. Rancière's idiosyncratic exploration of Joseph Jacotot and his pedagogical insights will lead to a discussion of the emancipatory potential of the presumption of equality intelligence and its relationship to the perpetuations of disempowering hierarchies. Rancière's notion of the distribution of the sensible reveals a model that maps and configures the way we perceive what is do-able, say-able and think-able in our understanding of our world. This is connected to his notions of the police, who enforce the order of the sensible and how they are related to the notion of politics. Rancière has a very specific notion of politics and it refers to any force that opposes the order of the police by challenging what is conceivable within the order of the sensible. So politics becomes the space where those who are unseeable and unhearable become seeable and hearable. It is politics that opposes the consensus supported by the order of the police and it does so by means of dissensus, that is, the process of politics as it disputes and rejects the police distribution of the sensible.

Early ruptures: May 1968

In 1965, at just 25 years of age, Rancière was a participant in the influential reading group on Marx's *Capital*, which took place at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris. The group, headed by philosopher Louis Althusser, was at the forefront of this influential circle of late 1960s Marxist thinking. One of Althusser's most significant contributions was the distinction between science and ideology; he proffered the notion that communist thinkers could see through the veil of ideology that clouds the view of history and society and subsequently the oppressive social order. The implication was that the working classes are the victims of these constructs and are therefore unable to see them. The working classes need to be led by the party intellectuals in realising the reality of their oppression and trust that they will be guided towards action that will free them from these constraints. For Rancière, this replicates the logic of structures of domination and social hierarchy. The workers are rendered powerless and the party intellectuals are those with the vision to propose

actions that emancipate. This denial of equality drove Rancière to break away from Althusserian thought.³⁵

The revolutionary discontents of 1968 were felt around the world, with the US involvement in the war in Vietnam fomenting student protests, while in France the repressive political climate and growing economic disparity aligned students and workers in resistance. Despite the fact the upheavals in Paris were swiftly suppressed and the state power re-established, they left a deep impression on those involved. The events of May 1968 significantly shifted Rancière's theoretical approach and his works from this point onwards are deeply informed by the ideal of equality, an aspect he saw as intrinsic to the movement. In writings emerging from this time, Rancière displayed his aforementioned disillusionment with Althusser and other Marxist thinkers. The optimism of the student movement, and the inability of the Althusserians to harness it, had crystallised his thought. This attitude was not unique to the young philosopher as he shared in a generation's despair at the failure of the leftist movement to gain the support needed to abolish social hierarchies. His initial post-1968 writing critical of Althusser in turn developed into criticism of the Marxist thought he had been immersed in, and directly addressed the stultifying pedagogical hierarchies within the leftist movement.

It was the perpetuation of domination that drew him to formulate his idiosyncratic analysis of the writings of Joseph Jacotot. In 1987, Rancière published *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, a text that explains and represents insights on the nature of pedagogy by Joseph Jacotot. After being banished from France during the Second Restoration of the Monarchy in 1815, Jacotot relocated to The Netherlands and became a lecturer in French. It was in this role that he devised a method to teach something he himself did not know. This came about when he was charged with teaching French to a class of Flemish-speaking students. His ignorance of Flemish presented a problem, but this conundrum was solved with an innovative solution. He procured for his students a bilingual version of François

³⁵ Deranty, J.-P. (2010). *Jacques Rancière – Key Concepts*. Durham, Acumen, 4.

Fénelon's esteemed *The Adventures of Telemachus* and enjoined them to teach themselves French by comparing the French language version of the story with the Flemish translation. To his surprise this audacious plan worked and his students were eventually able to write essays in French about Fénelon's novel.³⁶ The students had learned without the instruction of their teacher and this unique experiment revealed a truth that is often lost in the pedagogical relationship – that we do not learn by absorbing information explained by a teacher, but through exercising our own intellectual faculties. Jacotot began formulating a radical re-evaluation of teaching methods that was in opposition to traditional methods of teaching and to the authority they presumed. In his publication *Enseignement universel* (Universal education) (1823), he highlighted his views of a radical intellectual equality, drawing attention to a new role for the teacher as influencing the will of students, not a master imparting his knowledge to underlings.

Rancière's shadowing of Jacotot's text is focussed on the significance of the presumption of intellectual equality and the implications of this notion when applied more broadly. Primarily, it identified the fact that while the act of explanation was not required for learning, it does serve to fit students into their places in the social hierarchy as it stands; that is, it teaches them that they are ignorant and cannot escape their predicament through their own means. This fact serves to highlight the reinforcement of the existing hierarchical systems of inequality with the unsettling conclusion that the role of providers of explication is to instil and institutionalise the lesson of inequality. Students are disempowered through this system that instils in them the belief that not all intelligences are equal. This results in a condemnation of the educator's best intentions of imparting knowledge and serves to perpetuate the inequality; instead of emancipating students, it results in their stultification – by definition the loss of initiative through repetition.³⁷ This notion of subordinating one intelligence to another is the issue Rancière expands on, initially in reference to politics but later in the context of the arts.

³⁶ Ibid, 26.

³⁷ Ibid, 28.

At the core of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is one of Rancière's central tenets – his conception of politics as substantiation of the presumption of the equality of intelligences. The broader political implications of this text are significant. The first is the implication of expertise in regards to politics. If we follow the logic that dictates that the most accomplished scholars would make the finest teachers, those who are best acquainted with the workings of governance would make the best leaders. For Jacotot this logic is false; and in the same way the student is stultified by the teacher's lesson, we see the expert threaten the process of true democracy. The expert divides the population into those who know and are entitled to lead and those who are ignorant and must submit to being led. The stultification of the student/subject is the result of the explication of the expert, and this process and its reinforcing of hierarchies results in inequality. The second political implication follows from the example of the student's stultification and it can be considered its opposite – empowerment. The emancipator is a figure that aims only to make known the power the subject has at their disposal. In a sense their role is only to remove any obstacles that hinder the individual from accessing their own power. The third and final point asserts the equality of all intelligences, even if they cannot be measured as equal. Rancière concludes that the inability of even the best-intentioned emancipators to accept this equality has been at the root of failed progressive moments such as Paris 1968. This is due to the seemingly unshakable notion that a public must submit to a higher intelligence today so that they may be equal tomorrow when they will be emancipated. This is a false emancipation, and in reality results in stultification, hence the presumption of quality must be a *premise* of any emancipatory moment. The final point raised is that, for Rancière, democratic politics can only occur when political agency supports and verifies the equality of intelligence. All participants must find themselves empowered with the ability to discern how their lives can be made better.³⁸

³⁸ Rancière, J. (1991). *The ignorant schoolmaster: five lessons in intellectual emancipation*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 28.

The distribution of the sensible

Rancière's notion of the distribution of the sensible is central to his thought and also supports the concerns around indirect engagement with political expression. It is a way of understanding how we perceive the world around us, particularly what is possible within our understanding of that world. It is central to his thought and presents a way of framing art, politics and philosophy in reference to their ability to create and contest the world in its current state.

The distribution of the sensible refers to the unspoken laws that govern and configure distributions of bodies and voices and an implicit understanding of what they are capable of.³⁹ It defines a system that determines what is possible to hear, and to be said, what can be thought, done or created. Importantly, this system or distribution defines not only what is included within its partition but also what is excluded. An analysis of the original French term *partage du sensible* (translated as the partition of the sensible – that which can be sensed) allows a richer, multifaceted understanding. In the first instance, *partage* refers to a separation or a partitioning, but in its secondary sense it is best understood as something that was private becoming something common. It indicates that the world of the sensible is a common one shared by all, and that it consists of multiple partitioned zones and times. It is a shared place made up of differing apportionments demarcated separately. These lines of demarcation that split or connect political loyalty, social groups and aesthetic configurations have long been at the heart of Rancière's study.⁴⁰ These partitions are under constant pressure and contestation and, as such, they are always shifting and being re-arranged, thereby changing the understanding of the sensible.

Central to understanding the distribution of the sensible is the tension between a particular act of perception and the fact it relies on objects being recognised as something worth noticing at all. This tension is conveyed through the connected concept of dissensus, which is an opposition to the inequality of the distribution of

³⁹ Rancière, J. (2004). *The Politics of Aesthetics*. London, Continuum, 85.

⁴⁰ Deranty, J.-P. (2010). *Jacques Rancière – Key Concepts*. Durham, Acumen, 96.

the sensible and the subject's insensibility. It is a resistance to invisibility and inaudibility. For Rancière, true politics – as opposed to the politics of the police – occurs when groups or individuals, who cannot be sensed, challenge the dominant political order by demanding to be perceived. This action requires that the aesthetic of political order is disrupted and subtly shifted in order to recognize those who were insensible. This disruption to the order of the police is known as dissensus.⁴¹

In all of Rancière's thought there are multiple meanings to the various terms he employs. *Partage* is one such term and can refer to the sharing of something amongst all, the apportionment of goods and also the division of property. The term also refers to a 'partition of propriety'; that is, the criteria that determine the appropriate division and circulation of goods. Rancière describes this notion of the appropriate order of things as "the order of distributions of bodies into functions corresponding to their 'nature'".⁴² This understanding of allotment and correspondence is also referred to by Rancière as 'the police', and he sees it as an equally effective way of partitioning what is sensible. The boundary between what is sensible and what is not becomes evident when those who are unable to be sensed – that is, those who are not sanctioned by the dominant powers – demand to be heard:

Rancière's *partage du sensible* is thus the site of political contestation directed at the subjugating criteria that impart propriety, property and perception and that structure a society's common order.⁴³

The police and politics

Rancière's notion of politics and the police is an essential aspect of his theories and has specific meanings and roles in regard to the distribution of the sensible. By discussing politics with terms such as the distribution of the sensible, the order of the police and dissensus, Rancière aims to avoid the understanding of the political

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Rancière, J. (1999). Disagreement: politics and philosophy. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 101.

⁴³ Deranty, J.-P. (2010). Jacques Rancière – Key Concepts. Durham, Acumen, 96.

based on, for example, the structures and institutions that form what is known as politics in Western democracies. He wishes to avoid reducing the term 'politics' to being associated solely with the administration of state bureaucracies and their finances, thus freeing it up for other purposes he considers more urgent and useful.⁴⁴

Similarly the police should not be confused with the institutions of social order that enforce laws, nor should it be seen as an inherently oppositional critique of the police in their conventional form. In Rancière's thought, the police is not associated purely with repression and indeed he considers some form of police as inevitable:

Policing is not so much the "disciplining" of bodies as a rule governing their appearing, a configuration of *occupations* and the properties of the spaces where these occupations are distributed.⁴⁵

To that end, the broadest conception of what constitutes the police order is any stratified social system. Such systems are typical of the many such orders we negotiate in everyday life, and the order is an amalgamation of institutions, entities and economic frameworks that cuts across cultures, politics and economics. It extends to influencing the relationships we have with other people and objects, and in doing so creates a hierarchy. The police create, perpetuate and reinforce the hegemonic manifestation that orders the kinds of social participation that are available to individuals and groups within a society.⁴⁶

Rancière blames the weakness of the contemporary political context on the success of the police order in fostering the politics of consensus. The order of what is perceivable, as enforced by the police, obscures the voice of the *dēmos*, a term having a simultaneous double meaning in Rancière's lexicon; it means both "citizens"

⁴⁴ Tanke, J. J. (2001). *Jacques Rancière: An Introduction*. London, Continuum International Publishing Group, 43.

⁴⁵ Rancière, J. (1999). *Disagreement: politics and philosophy*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 29.

⁴⁶ Tanke, J. J. (2001). *Jacques Rancière: An Introduction*. London, Continuum International Publishing Group, 47.

(from the Greek *demos*) and a community divided due to a wrong. The consensus aims to avoid the political activation of the *dēmos* by keeping them invisible and irrelevant. The police order then is an *absence* of politics. So it is by controlling the field of vision, the ability to hear, and the possibilities of a body that the police control what is perceptible. Mechanisms supporting consensus might include the way contemporary issues are framed and contained by the mainstream media, the threat of personal insecurity, whether financial or existential, and controlling the kind of language used to discuss certain issues. All of these mechanisms limit political engagement simply by diminishing the likelihood of it being perceived as possible.⁴⁷

It is a particular distribution of the sensible that inhibits the emergence of politics. In short, much of what we might understand as politics, and the institutions supporting it, Rancière refers to as police, thereby allowing the term politics to be used in reference to voices that oppose the police and the politics of consensus. This conception of politics is quite specific and born of an urge to invest a new relevance in the term. Rancière states:

I now propose to reserve the name politics for an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing: whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration: that of the part of those who have no part.⁴⁸

Politics then becomes the zone where those who are unseeable and unhearable become seeable and hearable. It is politics that opposes the consensus supported by the order of the police and it does so by means of dissensus, that is, the process of politics as it disputes and rejects the police distribution of the sensible. It does so by assuming a place or by making visible the previously unseeable. It challenges and dismisses the police distribution of the sensible as supported by the police order and

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Rancière, J. (1999). *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 29.

presents a *vision* of another world.⁴⁹ Central to this concept is the presumption of equality, an important notion for all of Rancière's thought. In Rancière's view, dissensus is the act of assuming equality between all and facing the agents of the status quo on an equal footing, whether or not it is sanctioned by the police. Politics is the challenge of facing the order of the police with a notion that is alien, namely the expectation of equality.⁵⁰

The political possibilities of art

In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière carefully translated and re-presented Jacotot's ideas in a political context in harmony with the pedagogical model it revealed. This act of translation has been echoed in Rancière's adaptation of these ideas to the field of aesthetics and the political possibilities of art. Put simply, he has developed a series of insights based on applying the same ideas of a presupposed equality of intelligence to the viewers of art. A significant amount of Rancière's work over the last fifteen years has been devoted to the political implications of art and aesthetics. His viewpoint is a marked divergence from discourses around art today, in that his theories reject the notion that art is isolated from people's everyday lives. In addition, while his approach is deeply informed by history, it rejects the conventional understanding of modernism and postmodernism. By discussing his ideas and identifying how they lend support to the central tenets of this research, his valuable insight into considerations of the political potential for art will become clear.

A key philosophical strategy for Rancière is the extension of the ideas developed in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* in the service of reclaiming the notion of the spectacle and the spectator from the dominant Situationist view. In the key Situationist text, Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, the viewer is most often cast as a passive and powerless subject, in thrall to the spectacle.⁵¹ This idea still has considerable currency in contemporary discourse, however Rancière works to dispel this notion

⁴⁹ Tanke, J. J. (2001). *Jacques Rancière: An Introduction*. London, Continuum International Publishing Group, 62.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 64.

⁵¹ Debord, G. (1970). *Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit, Black and Red, 6.

and empowers the role of the viewer by highlighting their participation in an *active* process. Reading Jacotot, he asserts that thought precedes language and, as such, writing and speaking are *poetic* processes attempting to translate the ideas, feelings and emotions of the explainer.⁵² These poetic utterances then require the reader's active process of counter-translation. Those who receive the messages are activated by their engagement in the process of creating their own meaning. This relationship implies not only an intellectual equality between the sender and receiver, but attributes to the listener the ability to decode the poetic form into their own comprehension; that is, the viewer is involved in an active process, as opposed to the Situationist's' view of a passive audience.⁵³

This model of communication, premised on the notion of equality of intelligence, refutes the model of art as a stultifying lesson of the teacher, whose mode of explication perpetuates the subordinate disempowered position. The artist who approaches the audience as a body that requires enlightenment has presumed unequal intelligences and so creates a stratified relationship whereby the enlightened artist educates the ignorant viewer. This disempowers the audience and results in a perpetuation of inequality. This model highlights the important emphasis Rancière places on art and the experiences it engenders. He considers art an important "proving ground" for this presumption of equality:

No surface produces emancipation in and of itself. The problem is to define a way of looking that doesn't pre-empt the gaze of the spectator. It's true for spectacular installations, but it's also true for the photographs of blast furnaces or of warehouses and shipping containers that anticipate a new objective gaze as a product of objective framing against blank backgrounds ...

⁵² Rancière, J. (1991). The ignorant schoolmaster: five lessons in intellectual emancipation. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 60-67.

⁵³ Tanke, J. J. (2001). Jacques Rancière: An Introduction. London, Continuum International Publishing Group, 89.

Emancipation is the possibility of a spectator's gaze other than the one that was programmed.⁵⁴

In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière makes claims for the validity of a form of critique that some of his colleagues have argued is irrelevant. His approach also discusses the perpetuation of hierarchies inherent in the approach used by some artists who address political imperatives in their work. He concedes there is no dark reality to be revealed behind the triumph of consumer culture, of the spectacle; however, critique can still be employed with a result that may be vastly different to what may have been expected in the past.⁵⁵ He aims to debunk the vague Situationist assumptions that have birthed many well-intentioned artworks that set about to liberate us from our passive and blinded state under the influence of the spectacle. Rancière points out that the explicator-student model seems difficult for some artists to avoid, even those with emancipatory intentions, and that art is one of the *most* likely mediums to employ this disempowering voice to address its audience.⁵⁶ He uses the examples of artists Martha Rosler and Josephine Meckseper to discuss this tendency but also to reveal the perpetuation of a false logic at the heart of this approach.

Rosler's series of collages titled *Bringing the war home*, from the 1970s, depicts domestic interiors from magazines and advertising with disturbing media images of the war in Vietnam carefully superimposed. Rancière claims the logic of the images is that they create awareness that our domestic comfort is predicated on the destructive imperialist war and make us feel guilty about our complicity. In turn this stultifying lesson implies we are now aware of the injustice and our role in it, and so we can now go about changing it. However awareness does not always equate to

⁵⁴ Rancière, J. (2007). "Art of the possible: Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey in conversation with Jacques Rancière." 2014, from <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/jacques-Rancière/articles/art-of-the-possible/>.

⁵⁵ Rancière, J. (2009). *The Emancipated Spectator*. London, Verso, 25.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

action, and so the images also imply guilt about the reality we would rather not take steps to address.⁵⁷



Figure 1, Martha Rosler. *Balloons*, from the series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home*. 1967-72. Cut-and-pasted printed paper on board.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 27.

Meckseper's photograph, *Untitled*, 2004, is an image taken at a protest against the Iraq war. Protesters are seen in the background carrying placards while in the foreground is a garbage bin that is overflowing with rubbish. The image seems to juxtapose the notion of a foreign war and domestic consumption. Rancière's analysis of the image sees it as not aiming to support or encourage further activism against the war, but instead implicate the protestors in the cycle of consumption. The work highlights the homogeneity of the elements in the image and it is a trademark of Meckseper to connect the seemingly divergent notion of socially aware protestors and everyday consumption to the same reality. The garbage is the result of the consumption of the protestors, and the protestors themselves are a part of that same reality:

They are protesting against the war prosecuted by the empire of consumption that releases the bombs on Middle Eastern cities. But these bombs are a response to the destruction of the Twin Towers, which had itself been staged as the spectacle of the collapse of the empire of commodities and the spectacle. Thus the image seems to say to us: these demonstrators are there because they have consumed images of the collapse of the towers and the bombing in Iraq. And it is yet another spectacle they are offering us in the streets.⁵⁸

If this logic were extended to its conclusion, it would lead to the end of critique – and yet this does not happen. Instead the process of critique is turned in on itself and art and its gestures of resistance become a part of the regime of image and spectacular consumption:

In Josephine Meckseper, the display of images proves to be identical to the structure of a reality where everything is exhibited in the manner of a commodity display. But it is always a question of showing the spectator what she does not know how to see, and making her feel ashamed of what she

⁵⁸ Rancière, J. (2009). *The Emancipated Spectator*. London, Verso, 29.

does not want to see, even if it means that the critical system presents itself as a luxury commodity pertaining to the very logic it denounces.⁵⁹

This raises the prospect of the powerlessness of traditional leftist criticism, in that it has become a part of the system itself and any notions of subverting this system instead just become a part of the system that only serves to reinforce it. Rancière now sees Marxist critique of the consumer society as having shifted:

Forty years ago, it was supposed to denounce the machinery of social domination in order to equip those challenging it with new weapons. Today, it has become exactly the opposite: a disenchanting knowledge of the reign of the commodity and the spectacle, of the equivalence between everything and everything else and between everything and its image.⁶⁰

So Meckseper's clashing images aim to reveal a hidden truth of the kind that once may have provided insight, yet instead they reproduce the logic of the explicator. Her gestures reveal a principled political consciousness, but the mode of address is one where knowledge is relayed directly from the artist to the viewer. In this sense it short-circuits the poetic form of translation and counter-translation that is at the core of communication according to Jacotot. If an artist avoids this didactic method of articulating their ideas, then the viewer is more inclined to envision the meaning of the work under their own terms.⁶¹

For Rancière, artists cannot insist on dictating the unambiguous transmission of an idea without perpetuating the subordination of the viewer's intelligence. Rancière posits that it is not a lack of understanding of the status quo that maintains it, but instead the notion that we lack the power to change it. He believes art can change

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 32.

⁶¹ Tanke, J. J. (2001). *Jacques Rancière: An Introduction*. London, Continuum International Publishing Group, 90.

this impression but that it needs to avoid assimilating its message for the audience in advance, and instead work on more subtle and indirect modes of communication.⁶² In turn, these ideas have been used to critique presumptions concerning the political agency of audiences engaged in participatory art. These issues will be addressed below in the analysis of Claire Bishop and her re-framing of Nicolas Bourriaud's conception of relational aesthetics into the broader historical context of participatory art.

Jacotot's notion of the stultifying effect of the explicator supports the intuitions behind a series of drawings I developed over the course of this research. The Redback Graphix⁶³ drawings series is discussed in relation to my studio work in Chapter 3; however I will take this opportunity to frame the works in reference to Rancière's pedagogical analysis as a case study. This series of images is part of a broader critique of resistant political communication and the source material that inspired it is selected from the archive of Redback Graphix studio. The starting point of the drawings is text extracted from well-known posters produced by the studio in the 1980s and 1990s. Some text selected for inclusion, such as *No gods, no masters* is quite open and not overly proscriptive, while many others are the opposite. One such example is *The workplace is no place for racism*, from 1985, a worthy sentiment communicated in a stultifying fashion. Other works from the studio include *Use your brain! Use the train! Rail makes sense environmentally and economically*, from 1990, an idea expressed in a manner that I argue disempowers its audience. While the posters themselves were not designed for an art context, they were hand-made by artists and have subsequently been displayed repeatedly in art museum retrospective exhibitions such as "Multiplicity: Prints and Multiples from the Collections of MCA" and "The University of Wollongong at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, 2006" and "Volume One: MCA Collection", again at the

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Redback Graphix was a political poster collective active in Sydney from the late 1970s and into the 1980s. Its posters were highly visible in inner city Sydney and beyond and the studio provided a valuable model of political engagement for visual artists, designers and activists. See: Zagala, A., N. G. o. Australia, et al. (2008). *Redback Graphix*, National Gallery of Australia.

Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (MCA) in 2012.⁶⁴ In her 2008 book *Redback Graphix*, writer and researcher Anna Zagala discusses the way the posters were embraced in a fine art context:

The wide range of exhibitions that featured Redback posters – from commercial art shows to contemporary art spaces – both in Australia and abroad, reflects their broad appeal even within the art world. The Olympics Arts Festival (1984 in Los Angeles) situated the studio's work firmly within a contemporary art context. *Shocking Diversity*, an exhibition organised by the Print Council of Australia that toured nationally in 1987, showcased printmaking practices in Sydney and featured posters from several screen-printing workshops including Redback alongside artists such as Jeff Gibson and Elizabeth Rooney.⁶⁵

The posters are contextualised as an important example of Australian political art and it is under this understanding that I address them.

By displacing this text and presenting it in an ambiguous visual context, I aim to raise questions about this mode of address. Text is re-drawn and inserted into ill-designed and incongruous visual arrangements with puzzling imagery. This clashes with inconsistently rendered fonts that, upon initial consideration, make little sense. Spending time reconsidering this text extracted from these canonical Australian prints in an incongruous new setting provides an opportunity to re-consider how the original message with its emancipatory aims actually functions. For example, the message *The workplace is no place for racism*, I instinctively found prescriptive and disempowering and this motivated me to work with it creatively. It delivers its message with the presumption of not only its audience's intellectual inferiority, but also its racism.

⁶⁴ (2014). "Works by Redback Graphix." Retrieved 20 October, 2014, from <http://www.mca.com.au/collection/artist/redback-graphix/>.

⁶⁵ Zagala, A., N. G. o. Australia, et al. (2008). *Redback Graphix*, National Gallery of Australia, 62.

Rancière's thought corroborates my intuitions by identifying the stratification inherent in the message, and the closed nature of its communication. The poster and its message close down the possibilities of a broader field of comprehension by focusing narrowly on a proscribed message. Not only is the viewer subjugated to the stultifying message, the aesthetic experience of art is subjugated to the narrow possibilities of a proscriptive message. The aim of the series of drawings that employs these de-contextualised phrases and incongruous imagery is to introduce the possibility of a more open reading of the images' message. The works oppose the closed and stultifying reading of the original message and, instead, broaden available readings of the artwork and thereby have the viewer not only reconsider the way the message functions in its new context, but present a new order of sense that challenges the existing one. The original was created in 1985 and initially it seemed that over the passing years a shift in language had occurred around this issue, and that could account for the poster's jarring tone. However, an analysis of the message using the framework provided by *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* dispels this. The directive tone of the message clearly relies on the perpetuation of a hierarchy. The producers of the original work had delivered a stultifying lesson to the disempowered viewer. The work of the Redback Graphix studio is presented as a site of resistance in Australian art history but, following the logic of Rancière, it serves the order of the police instead.

In contrast, the artist who addresses their audience with a presumption of the equality of intelligence creates an exchange of ideas expressed poetically between equals. Such an artist is Thomas Hirschhorn, whose work is analysed in detail in the following chapter. Hirschhorn's public artwork, *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival (2009)*, for example, instead of creating a warm and affirmative social experience has a greater productive life as an artwork by creating and sustaining an irresolvable tension for the audience and participants. The surprising results of the artist's sometimes blunt incursions are an excellent example of the power of a previously unimagined vision of the world challenging the distribution of the sensible. Clearly the project can be thought of in terms of dissensus, whereby a previously unseeable

arrangement of the sensible challenges and re-shapes the order of the sensible as maintained by the order of the police.

Rancière's framework supports the emancipatory political potential of Hirschhorn's approach. The possibilities that emerge from his presumption of intellectual equality are in stark contrast to the at times proscriptive, even condescending, messages that emerged from the studios of Redback Graphix. By presenting a complex and multifaceted work, uncompromisingly driven by his artistic vision, Hirschhorn credits the audience and participants, regardless of their differing roles within the structure of the artwork, with an equality of intelligence.

There is a disparity between these projects and in comparison their differences are considerable. They are presented with the intention of giving life to Rancière's arguments through the work of artists and collectives that have significantly informed this research. The differences – posters from an art collective spanning a number of years, in some instances commissioned by state and federal governments or private groups (Redback Graphix) alongside a public artwork commissioned for the undertaking by a sole artist that aims to collaborate with a community (Hirschhorn) – are not as great as they may seem at first. Perhaps the most significant point of difference is that of intention. Redback Graphix is ostensibly a design studio⁶⁶ however it is often discussed as being a community artist collective. Compounding the ambiguity of their position is the way they have been canonised within Australian art history. These issues will be further explored in Chapter 3.

Dissensus and the political potential of indirect political engagement

For the purposes of this research it is important to ask what, in Rancière's conception of the political possibilities for art, is the role for the indirect approach to political subjects? Can art that positions itself ambiguously have a political effect and, if so, how is it different from more direct approaches? Addressing these

⁶⁶ Zagala, A., N. G. o. Australia, et al. (2008). Redback Graphix, National Gallery of Australia, 25.

questions will encompass a discussion of Rancière's ideas concerning art's political potential as dissensus.

Through the example derived from Jacotot, and the discussion of the distribution of the sensible, we see that Rancière's aesthetic regime holds the promise of life reconfigured in the way it can challenge and alter the distribution of the sensible. For Rancière it also embodies an inherent promise of equality in its mode of creating and understanding art. Art is naturally disposed to create visions of an order of sense previously unimagined, and because of this it can be understood in terms of dissensus.⁶⁷ Dissensus is the process whereby the distribution of the sensible is transformed by placing it in conflict with an opposing imagination of the world. It is important to bear in mind that art's autonomy is central to its importance in this understanding of art as dissensus. The power of art to form a reconfigured view of the distribution of the sensible is in part due to the fact it is removed from it:

The politics of art follows directly from the central tension of the aesthetic regime: that of holding in close relation art's autonomy and heteronomy. Indeed, the will to hold itself in a new and ambiguous relationship with life is what allows art to advance the promise of life reconfigured.⁶⁸

For this reason, art cannot be viewed as political in the same way as direct acts of resistance such as a strike. It is also important to note that art does not have to contain overt political messages or content to be political in Rancière's view, and as we have already seen in examples such as the posters of Redback Graphix or the photographs of Josephine Meckseper, art that seems to have an emancipatory intent may in fact be enforcing the order of the police.

So dissensus works on a number of levels, one of which sees art as a site of disruption of the seemingly self-evident order of the sensible. According to Rancière, art is predisposed to imagining a new vision of the world - that is, a new order of the

⁶⁷ Tanke, J. J. (2001). *Jacques Rancière: An Introduction*. London, Continuum International Publishing Group, 62.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 103.

sensible – that might shift how we perceive our shared world. An important factor in art as dissensus is its ambiguous relationship with daily life, indicating the fact that to be somewhat alien or in opposition to the day-to-day reality of existence is actually an asset in regard to the political (dissensual) possibilities of art – so much so that art’s power to disrupt the sensible lies in its ability to present the unexpected and dis-identified. This should not be confused with the forms of shock deployed in a typically postmodern strategy, as Rancière is referring to something broader. It is not just a matter of superficially altering our way of seeing things, but actually permanently altering how we perceive our reality.⁶⁹

In this aspect the irrational and sensual qualities of an artwork embody the promise of the dissensual by altering the everyday rational state of the mind and rendering it subordinate to the sensual. So these active experiences of the unexpected nature of art help us put aside the dominating rational state of the mind and break with our habitual visions of the distribution of the sensible. As Rancière explains, this new insight and the dissensual possibilities it represents are induced by the peculiarity of art’s presentation:

These are in fact affects that blur the false obviousness of strategic schemata; they are dispositions of the body and the mind where the eye does not know in advance what it sees and thought does not know in advance what it should make of it ... (It) also points to towards a different politics of the sensible – a politics based on the variation of distance, the resistance of the visible and the uncertainty of effects. Images change our gaze and the landscape of the possible if they are not anticipated by their meaning and do not anticipate their effects.⁷⁰

Furthermore, as discussed by Joseph J. Tanke, in Rancière’s thought, even the most isolated and obscure artwork harbours this political promise:

⁶⁹ Ibid, 105.

⁷⁰ Rancière, J. (2009). The Emancipated Spectator. London, Verso, 104.

Aesthetic works inaugurate a more indeterminate space-time where the meanings of sensible productions are not immediately apparent. They are an occasion for the breakdowns of the meanings and directions habitually given to sense. This suspension of the logic of cause and effect found within the aesthetic regime follows from the collapse of the representative regime's strict pairing of content and form, as well as its supposition that it can determine the effects of a presentation on its audience.⁷¹

Interestingly, Rancière points out that, even from within the confines of institutional spaces such as galleries and museums, this power of rupture is not diminished. In opposition to a persistent refrain championed by the Situationists, art does not have to strive to be enmeshed with daily life to have political potential.

The political discourse of participatory art: Claire Bishop

Rancière's notion of dissensus and its relevance to political art practice underpins important theorisations of contemporary practice, most notably Claire Bishop's reading of participatory art. Since 2004, Claire Bishop's writing on participatory art has added significant historical and theoretical depth to this prevalent mode of contemporary practice. In *Artificial Hells*, Bishop discusses the importance of Rancière to one of the central concerns of the book. She identifies a shift in the discourse around collaborative participatory projects that results in evaluating them solely in terms of demonstrable social outcomes. While the social aims of these inclusive projects may be laudable in their opposition to market forces and institutional practices, we are left asking how the aims of these artworks differ from, for instance, government projects aiming to increase levels of social inclusion. Bishop ties the language of participatory art's discourse to governmental cultural policy and finds the parallels a cause for concern:

...the urgency of this *social* task has led to a situation where socially collaborative practices are all perceived to be equally important *artistic*

⁷¹ Tanke, J. J. (2001). *Jacques Rancière: An Introduction*. London, Continuum International Publishing Group, 90.

gestures of resistance: there can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works of participatory art, because all are equally essential to the task of repairing the social bond ... I would argue that it is also crucial to discuss, analyse and compare this work critically *as art*, since this is the institutional field in which it is endorsed and disseminated, even while the category of art remains a persistent exclusion in debates about such projects.⁷²

Bishop acknowledges that it is Rancière's rehabilitation of the critical understanding of aesthetics that facilitates an opening-up of the discussion and breaks down some of the binary terms used to analyse this work. Discussing projects in terms of aesthetics allows a more nuanced dialogue to develop around politicised art, not dependent on reductionist discussion that focuses "solely in positivist terms, that is, by focusing on demonstrable impact"⁷³; instead they are read as art. This approach, revived by Rancière, allows Bishop to address one of the central goals of *Artificial Hells*, that being:

to emphasise the aesthetic in the sense of *aisthesis*: an autonomous regime of experience that is not reducible to logic, reason or morality.⁷⁴

At the heart of both writers' approach is a need to engage with the contradictions and complexities of contemporary political art and not have the experience presented reductively. Their approach embraces and supports the difficult range of responses elicited by indirect and conflicted political art.

Bishop has significantly contributed to the discourse surrounding participatory art over the last decade and is well recognised for adding much-needed historical and critical depth to the discourse around its claims concerning its political potential and that of art more generally. Her approach offers significant support to the intuitions that have driven my research, most notably because she is drawn to art that is

⁷² Bishop, C. (2012). *Artificial Hells*. London, Verso, 13.

⁷³ Ibid, 18.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

ambiguous, jarring or unsettling. In an interview from 2009 in response to a question regarding politically reassuring art, she unapologetically indicated she was uninterested in art that:

...tends to be worthy, but dull. I am more interested in socially engaged art activities that are perverse, indirect, or antagonistic – too singular, raw or idiosyncratic to be held up and instantiated as a ‘model’.⁷⁵

The support her approach has lent to the intuitions driving my project has been important. However, her input will not be viewed uncritically and this section of this chapter will examine some reservations around Bishop’s ideas and her strident response to the so-called congenial approach of some socially engaged practice.

In her 2004 article, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics”, Bishop lays the foundation for her critique of participatory art over the next decade. At the time the discourse surrounding the political in contemporary practice was dominated by the notion that the political agency of participatory art is defined solely by the audience’s participation. The “activation” of an audience through participation was seen as not only inherently political but also as socially affirming. The argument about participatory art’s novel and positive engagement with the social and the political had most effectively been made by Nicolas Bourriaud and his now renowned notion of relational aesthetics.

It is fair to say that Bishop built her name on critiquing Bourriaud’s concept of relational aesthetics by more fully articulating the political implications of this artistic mode. The surge of interest in participatory art has developed steadily since the publication of Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* in English in 2002, and has taken an intriguing trajectory. The text accompanied the exhibition *Traffic*, which Bourriaud curated in 1995, where he identified artists who employed participatory, collective and networked strategies in their practice. His observations are in sympathy with

⁷⁵ Barok, D. (2009). "On participatory art. Interview with Claire Bishop.", 1.

long-held concerns throughout modernism of the separation of art and life, an idea directly addressed by the Situationists, following the Surrealists, and their critique of the isolated and disempowering experience of spectacular culture. One of the characteristics Bourriaud identified was the move away from attempts at a global utopia to focus instead on a do-it-yourself approach, working towards the possibility of our here and now in the immediate surrounds: “today it is modelling possible universes”.⁷⁶ The group of artists whose practice inspired Bourriaud has been identified as working in an open ended and interactive process with each work seemingly in a constant state of becoming – a perpetual “work in progress”. The exhibition itself received a muted response, with *Frieze* magazine calling into question the political claims of the project, noting that the exhibiting artists and their immediate circle were the chief beneficiaries of the project.⁷⁷ However the text itself quickly gained traction in art discourse as it addressed new trends in a way that made them seem more accessible and appeared to capture a zeitgeist.

In “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics”, Bishop addresses what she sees as the shortcomings of Bourriaud’s text and takes issue with works whose nature she describes as “wilfully unstable”.⁷⁸ She raises concerns about how such works, and the institutions that present them, become more like a fashionably marketed social event in line with the economic strategy that has replaced goods or services with an experience. Using the work of Thai conceptual and installation artist Rirkrit Tiravanija as an example, Bishop further expands her critique of the text. Tiravanija has achieved significant international attention for his performance / installation works such as *Untitled (Still)*, 1992, where a gallery space is filled with portable chairs and tables and a makeshift kitchen. Gallery-goers are invited to sit down to a meal made by the artist and this interaction becomes the work. The emphasis is placed on the sense of communal conviviality shared by those who partake in the experience. After

⁷⁶ Bourriaud, N. (2002). *Relational Aesthetics*. France, Les presses du réel, 13.

⁷⁷ Carl Friedman as quoted in *Forgotten Relations: Feminist Art and Relational Aesthetics* by Helena Reckitt. Angela Dimitrakaki, L. P. (2013). *Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, Exhibition Cultures and Curatorial Transgressions*. London, Liverpool University Press, unpaginated.

⁷⁸ Bishop, C. (2004). "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics." *October*(110), 52.

the meal the gallery is abandoned, with cooking equipment and dirty dishes mouldering as evidence of what has occurred.

Bishop is drawn to question the acclaim heaped on the artist via reviews and articles that seem to be in harmony with the curator's assertions about the project. The project received exhilarated responses from less than critical commentators and assertions made about the convivial project's social impact compelled Bishop's critique. She felt that notions concerning the artist's cultural identity and cult of personality overwhelmed critical considerations of the event, and that issues such as the work's historical position and art historical precedents were barely acknowledged. As Bishop has highlighted, the sometimes "idealised and euphoric"⁷⁹ view of political possibilities presented by affable participatory works such as *Untitled (Still)*, 1992, demand further examination.

Bishop continues by addressing the approach of UK-based installation artist Liam Gillick whose work examines the production of social relationships through environment, usually ones developed with state or corporate control of the users in mind. He presents a range of architectural spaces that challenge and reveal the mechanisms of social control that inform these designs. Gillick has art historical precursors in minimal art and the architectural-scaled works of Bruce Nauman and Dan Graham. The allusions to state and corporate control of spaces are at the heart of the work, but Gillick sees his role as being an artist who improves these spaces, rather than challenging the institutions that create them. Gillick's gallery-based projects are supported by collaborations with corporations and public housing bodies that aim to improve the experiences of those who use their spaces. Bishop has interpreted his gallery-based works as experiments or proposals that are inherently open-ended – a claim Gillick disputes in his response to "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics" published in "October" in 2006.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Ibid, 57.

⁸⁰ Gillick, L. (2006). "Contingent Factors: A response to Claire Bishop's 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics'". *October* (115), 103.

The relationships that Gillick and Tiravanija forge in their participatory works are of a type that is central to Bourriaud's vision of relational art. Both artists insist that audience interaction is required to complete their artworks and, if no such interaction occurs, then the work remains unfinished. For Bourriaud, relational work activates its audience by involving its members in a social experience, and it is this experience that is foregrounded above other aspects of the work. An audience's relationship with images and non-participatory work is seen as passive, isolating and oriented solely towards the visual – criticism in line with the Situationist critiques of the spectacle and its passive audience.

Bishop argues against Bourriaud and claims that this mode of practice is not new, identifying precedents in Happenings, Fluxus instructions and performance art.⁸¹ She believes Bourriaud attributes to relational art an increased relevance based on this false assumption. For Bishop, Bourriaud's thesis is based on a misreading or misrepresentation of Umberto Eco's *The Open Work* from 1962, regarding the open potential of all artworks:

...it is Eco's contention that every work of art is potentially "open", since it may produce an unlimited range of possible readings; it is simply the achievement of contemporary art, music and literature that have foregrounded this fact. Bourriaud misinterprets these arguments by applying them to a specific type of work (those that require literal interaction) and thereby redirects the argument back to artistic intentionality rather than issues of reception.⁸²

This leads Bourriaud to claim that participatory art is inherently political and potentially emancipatory. In addition to this exaggerated claim, Bishop draws attention to the fact that while the interactions created in participatory art are foregrounded, the *quality* of these experiences are rarely examined. Bishop claims that for Bourriaud they seem to be enough in themselves, as all such interactions are

⁸¹ Bishop, C. (2004). "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics." *October*(110), 61.

⁸² *Ibid*, 62.

deemed democratic and so viewed as positive and empowering. For Bishop this approach ignores the *quality* of the relationships generated by the work and she seeks instead to address more thoroughly the nature of the relations produced by these interactions.

In aid of this Bishop addresses the practice of Tiravanija with a view to discuss contradictions in the nature of the social interactions his artwork produces. Bishop discusses these concerns in relation to Tiravanija's *untitled 1993 (flädlesuppe)* exhibited as part of *Backstage* (1993) curated by Barbara Steiner and Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen at Hamburger Kunstverein. The artwork was similar to ones discussed previously in that it included meals being provided for participants and consisted of a table with seating and industrial style shelving supporting cooking equipment. In this instance however the participants were fellow artists exhibiting in *Backstage* and the work was not operational during the exhibition itself.⁸³ Bishop posits that while *untitled 1993 (flädlesuppe)* is in the sociable style Tiravanija has become renown for, this work seems to produce an air of exclusivity, with the primary participants being drawn from the art world and its network of artists, curators and collectors.⁸⁴

Bishop argued more stridently for this reading of Tiravanija's practice in "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics" citing critic Jerry Saltz experience consisting of a variety of convivial exchanges with friends, colleagues and strangers over a number of evenings. Bishop claims that while Saltz's experience may be a pleasing social interaction and a professional opportunity, it is not inherently political or democratic and seems distant from the possibility of political emancipation.⁸⁵ In Gillick's response to the article he claims this is one of numerous examples of Bishop using the commentary of critics writing for mainstream news publications instead of the voice of the artist or scholarly articles from specialist publications to inform her

⁸³ Bishop, C. (2012). *Artificial Hells*. London, Verso, 209.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Bishop, C. (2004). "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics." *October* (110), 67.

position on Tiravanija. Gillick argues that this discussion of Tiravanija's work (and his own) has been wilfully misrepresented through Bishop's choice of critical sources.

Throughout the text Bishop extensively quotes museum guides, pamphlets and mainstream art criticism in relation to Tiravanija and me, as if these reflect our ideas and ideology, yet allows developed cultural theory and the words of the artists to speak for Sierra and Hirschhorn.⁸⁶

In continuing, Bishop sees the work of Gillick to be predominantly in support of the status quo, indicating she sees it as being in the service of improving social relations within the existing structure, functioning within the system and seeming to accept its power, and so abandoning any possibility of emancipation. Ultimately Gillick's project is seen as creating compromises and adjustments within existing orders, as opposed to imagining whole new worlds to re-orient the distribution of the sensible. For Bishop, despite claims made by Bourriaud, both artists seem to be complacent within existing institutional and political systems, prepared only to adapt and refine our entrenched roles.

Gillick disputes this characterisation and he repudiates her claims on a number of fronts. The artist maintains that Bishop misrepresents his practice and the structure and concepts that define it. His concerns include Bishop's characterisation of works such as his book *Erasmus is late* (1995) and its connection to a cluster of works exhibited in the early 1990s, including some of those addressed in "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics".⁸⁷ Gillick sees his work as clearly addressing specific propositions and so claims Bishop's characterisation of him working with abstractions such as 'compromise', 'context' and 'open-endedness' is inaccurate. Gillick claims Bishop's misunderstanding of the work is disingenuous and that her "bafflement" has no legitimacy, as she is aware of the supporting texts, titles of the

⁸⁶ Gillick, L. (2006). "Contingent Factors: A response to Claire Bishop's 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics'". *October* (115), 98.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 103.

works, wall texts and other forms of information.⁸⁸ The artist implies this apparent lack of understanding is wilful as it is at odds with Bishop's argument and so it is ignored.⁸⁹

Gillick raises important points in regard to the characterisation of his work however his frustration concerning this perceived injustice is something that colours his response to the article heavily. He makes a number of salient points worthy of consideration, however at times his response verges on a personal attack and as such his claims must be considered carefully. It seems Gillick's critiques have been taken on board by Bishop as during a discussion of Tiravanija's work in *Artificial Hells* she has removed the commentary concerning Jerry Saltz and rephrased her position somewhat. Regardless, Bishop continues to make her argument convincingly.⁹⁰

To contrast the models of participatory art presented in the work of Tiravanija and Gillick, Bishop turns to the work of Thomas Hirschhorn and Santiago Sierra, both of whom have had works included in Bourriaud-curated exhibitions but are excluded from his texts. Bishop frames their approach in terms of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's theory of democracy as antagonism. Bishop contrasts the participatory practice of Hirschhorn and Sierra to that of Tiravanija and Gillick in order to challenge Bourriaud's position on participatory art on a number of fronts. Bishop characterises the latter artists' work as embodying a reassuring sense of social cohesion, sometimes only functioning within the confines of the art world and its audience, while Hirschhorn and Sierra's practices are characterised by the discomfort of unresolved social realities. For Bishop systems of inequality be they economic, racial or class based, are the underlying frictions that give these works an unsettling and enduring power.

In the instance of Sierra, these tensions are brutally enacted in participatory art that evokes a deliberate and purposeful antipathy. The artist establishes rules that

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 104.

⁹⁰ Bishop, C. (2012). *Artificial Hells*. London, Verso, 209.

govern the relationship between himself, the audience and the participants in his works. His projects are the result of the artist paying individuals, often people who are unemployed or unable to work legally due to their residency status, to undertake laborious or meaningless tasks. Some of his more extreme works such as *160 cm line tattooed on four people*, (2000) or *Ten people paid to Masturbate*, (2000) have attracted considerable critical attention from the art world and mainstream media as being extreme and exploitative. These events often take place in a gallery or as part of a biennale and involve the paid participants executing the tasks set for them under the awkward gaze of the audience. Other works are presented solely as documentation, usually in the style of 1970s performance documentation, stark and grainy black and white photographs and sometimes video.

While Sierra's practice has emerged from the tradition and style of 1970s performance and conceptual art, it is further developed and complicated by the fact that the work is performed by others who are paid to participate. The performers are remunerated for the tiring, pointless, humiliating and sometimes scarring tasks they are required to undertake, and it is the foregrounding of the financial value of human labour, if not human dignity, that is most unsettling. It is the confronting nature of this exchange that gives the work its notoriety and grim power. The audience, instead of participating in a reassuring and socially uplifting experience, is perturbed not only by the actions of the performers but also by finding themselves directly implicated in the perpetuation of this exploitation.

Sierra does little to dispute his role in the perpetuation of this system. The artist is paid by art collectors, galleries and institutions to create an artwork that he pays others to perform. His critics point out that his work is a shallow and cynical charade that repeatedly plays out the exploitative core of capitalism, but the power of his work is in this enduring and unsettling friction. His deeper engagement with the vagaries of international labour markets is revealed in the international scope of his practice, and his projects have created a kind of register of labour prices and conditions in a variety of countries. In places with the greatest economic disparities it is often the most disadvantaged that make up the paid participants in his works. In

Person Remunerated for a Period of 360 Consecutive Hours, (2000) exhibited at P.S.1. Gallery in New York, an undocumented resident unable to work legally was employed by the artist. For the titular 360 consecutive hours, he was bricked into a gallery space with only a small opening through which to receive food. In contrast, for a project in Munich, a relatively affluent city in a county with less economic disparity, those available to perform the physically demanding tasks were out-of-work actors and bodybuilders who wanted a chance to display their strengths publicly. Bishop points out that the amounts the artist pays his participants create a financial record of the labour market in different countries.⁹¹

This exaggeration of the realities of capitalism in the artist's work is an *amplification* of the status quo and it is in this point that Bishop identifies an important differentiation.⁹² She suggests Sierra's dwelling on the status quo is *closed* in that it focuses on the institutions of capitalism i.e. labour markets, employment laws, hourly minimum wages, as opposed to the more open and broad social interactions employed by artists such as Tiravanija. It is this open-ended context embodied in the approach of Tiravanija and Gillick that she argues is part of the problem. For Bishop, the focussed nature of the institutional parameters Sierra addresses sharply defines a context – one that has unresolved tensions – and so it moves his problem into the "terrain of antagonism"⁹³ that allows for the possibilities of these boundaries changing:

It is important that Sierra's work did not achieve a harmonious reconciliation between (...) systems, but sustained the tension between them.⁹⁴

Thomas Hirschhorn's public artworks exude a similar sense of discomfort; however this is balanced by the promise of equality embodied in the new order of the sensible that the work posits. Works such as *Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival* (2009) and *Bataille Monument* (2002) force confrontations between unfamiliar worlds, with

⁹¹ Bishop, C. (2012). *Artificial Hells*. London, Verso, 223.

⁹² Bishop, C. (2004). "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics." *October* (110), 71.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 72.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 73.

contemporary art audiences required to visit the low-income residential areas where these works are located. This perceived clash promotes anxiety in some critical discourse regarding the possibility of communities being exploited by artists seen to have intellectual aspirations that are irrelevant to the communities they engage with. Bishop maintains that this creates a tension that serves to test contemporary art's self-perception that it is accepting of a wide range of social and political contexts.⁹⁵

Bishop credits Sierra and Hirschhorn's approach with denying the possibility of microtopias as imagined by Tiravanija and instead sustaining a tension that is generated in part by the introduction of collaborators and viewers from broad and diverse economic and cultural backgrounds. This tests a notion that is central to contemporary art and its audience, that being its acceptance of a broad range of social classes, cultural backgrounds and political orientations. The discomfort is evident in the critical reactions to Sierra's exploitation of paid participants and Hirschhorn's collision of contemporary art audiences and less privileged immigrant communities in Germany and the Netherlands.

During this discussion several critical responses to Bishop's writing have already been considered, particularly in regard to "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics." I would like to discuss some other more general criticisms of Bishop's thought in the form of a response to an article she wrote in 2006 titled "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents" from critic and author Grant Kester. This article is an earlier example of Bishop's ideas that focuses on a range of projects framed in the expanded field of relational practice. It makes arguments concerning the neglect of aesthetic considerations in participatory art projects in the face of the perceived urgency of the social task they address. In doing so she cites Kester as a champion of socially engaged art in relation to his text "Conversation Pieces: Community and conversation. In his published response to the article Kester claims that the mainstream art critic (presumably a reference to Bishop's earlier role as newspaper

⁹⁵ Ibid, 70.

art critic for the *Evening Standard*⁹⁶) typically has a general discomfort with politically engaged art. With no examples sited he characterises this discomfort with left-leaning artistic practice as a typical trait of critics in the post cold-war era. This signals a somewhat generalised approach to his criticism that is only reinforced by claims that Bishop dismisses activist art as “politically correct”.⁹⁷ An accusation he then seems to equate with “child abuse and clubbing baby seals”.⁹⁸

For Kester the issue central to his concerns around Bishop is best expressed best when he asserts the following:

For Bishop art can become legitimately “political” only indirectly, by exposing the limits and contradictions of political discourse itself (the violent exclusions implicit in democratic consensus, for example) from the quasi-detached perspective of the artist. In this view, artists who choose to work in alliance with specific collectives, social movements, or political struggles will inevitably be consigned to decorating floats for the annual May Day parade.⁹⁹

Ultimately the criticisms put forward by Kester in 2006 are only framed more defiantly by Bishop in “Artificial Hells”. They occupy polarised positions in relation to the politics of participatory practice. Bishop sees Kester’s emphasis on the possibilities for participatory arts to contribute to social enhancement is at the expense of supporting arts ability to act more subversively in destabilising shared values.

Despite these criticisms of “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics” and “The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents” Bishop’s arguments maintain their legitimacy and relevance. Despite some flaws, the strident approach of “Antagonism

⁹⁶ Gillick, L. (2006). "Contingent Factors: A response to Claire Bishop's 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics'". *October* (115), 95.

⁹⁷ Grant Kester, “Another Turn,” *Artforum* 44, No. 9 (May 2006): 22.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

and Relational Aesthetics” is something that stimulated a broader critical dialogue around this important strand of practice. In writing “Artificial Hells” it seems Bishop has taken on board these concerns and presents similar arguments in more refined manner. This moderation is important as it addresses many of the criticism raised by Gillick and Kester while also maintaining the original strengths of the arguments.

The scope of arguments presented in “Artificial Hells” have relevance beyond the realm of participatory art and art more broadly. Bishop’s argument that non-participatory art still succeeds in activating an art audience is central to my position regarding the power of indirect modes of political activation through art. Discourse surrounding participatory art claims this strategy has emerged as a means to ‘activate’ the alienated and passive consumers of late capitalist spectacular culture. The most strident arguments for participatory art argue that other modes of contemporary practices are merely passively reflecting upon the state of the world to the extent that they are unethical. They posit that participatory arts response to the social and political imperatives of our time is the only way to properly engage their publics. Yet even as participatory art is imagined to position itself against neoliberal capitalism, it may be blind to the ways it mimics them through collective project work, volunteer labour and social media networking. Bishop’s antipathy toward the unsubstantiated claims for participatory art’s political agency support the intuitions that have driven my research. Bishop maintains, following Rancière, that art that is jarring and alienating may well have greater political agency than “social practice” that ostensibly activates audiences. Art that evokes the tension embodied in complex political realities and leaves in its wake, not a self-contained affirming social experience, but an unresolved anxiety, may have a greater chance of evoking dissensus. This is not to say that reassuring and positive social experiences have less value, but that their impact and relevance demands reconsideration. In the next chapter, I undertake a close analysis of two artists whose practice to some extent embodies these principles of unresolved tension, of jarring and irrational provocations that arguably have more political effect — understood in Rancière’s sense of dissensus — than participatory art. These artists are Thomas Hirschhorn and

Mike Kelley, whose practices have provided a key context for the development of my own political art.

Chapter 2

Art and indirect engagement

This chapter analyses the work of two artists whose oblique approach to political subjectivity has long inspired my studio practice. Mike Kelley (US, 1954 – 2012) emerged in the late 1980s and, for some, epitomises the cynical and sarcastic tone of the transition into the 1990s, despite his sensibilities being heavily informed by oppositional subcultures of the late 1960s.¹⁰⁰ Thomas Hirschhorn (Switzerland, 1957) rose to prominence in the 1990s, gaining attention for his large-scale sculptures, monuments and immersive installations constructed with cheap, everyday materials such as cardboard, packing tape and photocopied images. The two have emerged from different moments in recent art history and yet have overlapping concerns that support and illuminate the central objectives of this project.

I will present key projects by Kelley and Hirschhorn with the intention of uncovering their indirect and conceptually layered engagement with their political subjects. The common ground that unites these artists represents a summation of concerns and strategies that are central to defining the enduring strength of an indirect engagement. Foremost are the conceptually bold and intellectually demanding strategies that the artists employ. They tackle complex and multilayered issues without second-guessing the ability of their audience to engage with their ideas. This tack is an embodiment of Rancière's notion of the presupposed equality of intelligence,¹⁰¹ an essential element in harnessing the dissensual potential of art as discussed in Chapter 1. Both artists are united in their will to challenge their audience with complex and veiled approaches; the motivation for their output is never direct and is most often hidden behind an unexpected conceptual conceit. The hinted at but rarely revealed motivations create a sense of intrigue that is at the core of the enduring appeal of this work. A sense of the absurd and an engagement with humour are vital to the success of both artists. While addressing sometimes grim realities, their humour breaks apart conventional ways of viewing. Kelley's humour is the most overt with a keen and biting wit set in opposition to all those who take

¹⁰⁰ Kelley, M. (1992). *Mike Kelley*. New York, A.R.T. Press, 54.

¹⁰¹ Deranty, J.P. (2010). *Jacques Rancière – Key Concepts*. Durham, Acumen, 96.

themselves too seriously, claim the moral high ground or abuse their power. Hirschhorn engages more with the absurd with his comically oversized, expansive creations and bizarre leaps of logic. I argue that their work addresses issues with the intention of breaking apart the ideas at stake by problematising the issues even further, often through their trademark misdirection of logical thought and the use of absurdity. The didacticism of an activist approach or the uplifting sense of affirming social inclusion are not hallmarks of these artists. Their works present problems and sustain the tension that is generated by the intractable issues that they address.

This discussion of Kelley's practice highlights his mischievous and oppositional engagement with the political. His ambivalent, layered and indirect approach to the issues that compel him has long resonated with my creative approach and informed my practice. The political and cultural imperatives that drive his practice dwell tantalisingly below the surface and these hidden motivations are rarely addressed directly. It is this ambiguity that gives his work a compelling resonance. His body of work is a site of resistance to convention and social mores, often framed in terms of class or subculture. He has addressed concerns of class and hierarchy in the workplace by redeploing found images that subvert and lampoon the stratification inherent in such institutions. He has also examined the notion of the power of the institution over the individual with absurd and overwrought scenarios that exploit pop psychology to attack the places that socialise and commodify us. I examine this notion of the institution's role in absorbing the oppositional stance of voices like Kelley's by absorbing them. By unpacking Kelley's approach we can gain insight into one of the central concerns of my research, namely the pursuit of political expression not rendered hollow by a direct engagement with political imperatives or a conventional sense of closure. Like Kelley's love of noise music and abrasive performance, his work is always *against*.

Thomas Hirschhorn has been increasingly recognised for his eccentric political work across a range of media. His collages, video art, installations and public artworks have attracted attention due to their sizable volume and their unique and elliptical approach to the social and political imperatives of a globalised world. The urgency of

the artist's need to address political imperatives is evident in his tracts and the energy and commitment he brings to his imposing monuments and installations. Despite this, his approach to his social and cultural issues seems far from logical, direct or reassuring. He employs conceptual premises that are motivated by a stubborn logic or an unfeasibly naïve optimism that he follows through with unwavering commitment. It is this commitment – to scale, to productivity, to excess – that he employs with a view to compelling in his audience a reciprocal commitment of energy towards engaging with the work. Hirschhorn is also committed to working collaboratively with a range of audiences in public. He vehemently rejects the term “participatory art” which he considers lazy, false and in the service of late capitalism. Participation for Hirschhorn means the intellectual engagement of his audience and collaborators, regardless of the context. While the artist embraces the complexity of contemporary life and its sometime bleak realities, his work always expounds the optimism and emancipatory potential of political art while at the same time sustaining the productive and generative tension that embraces the reality of the intractable social realities he engages.

Mike Kelley

Since Mike Kelley's tragic death in 2012 there has been renewed interest in his body of work. His influential cross-media practice encompassed performance, video, installation, painting and sound. In parallel, his engagement with experimental music is best represented by his role in founding the ground-breaking Detroit proto-punk band Destroy All Monsters in 1973 with fellow art students Jim Shaw, Niagara (Lynn Rovner) and filmmaker Cary Loren, and his later collaboration with Tony Oursler in the Poetics Project from 1977 to 1997. Later in his career, Kelley was a reluctant but committed writer who addressed the interpretation of his work and supported the practices of his peers and mentors.

I discuss Kelley's work in reference to two strands of his practice. The first focuses on his interest in challenging notions of class, taste and hierarchy through his interest in lowbrow humour. Kelley pits the world of office jokes and loading dock humour in a battle against the boss and the lofty aims of the high art world. His focus on equality

believes his adherence to his working class roots and their place in the world of fine art. The second section will examine Kelley's use of absurd twists of logic to raise questions regarding institutions and their role in socialising and shaping the outlook of those who pass through them.

When discussing Kelley, it is important to note that his own writing has had a significant influence on the way his art has been construed. His dissatisfaction with critical interpretation of his work led him to write extensively about the motivations behind his projects, particularly those after 1993. A collection of his essays and criticism titled *Foul Perfection* was published in 2003, quickly followed by *Minor Histories* in 2004 – a compilation of his artist statements, interviews and proposals. These interventions into his critical interpretation continued for the rest of his career and certainly helped the artist direct scholarship around his oeuvre. While his texts are invaluable, they have inflected the majority of writing about his practice and readers should be cognisant of the extent to which this information may have stunted a broader critical analysis of his work.¹⁰²

To ease into a discussion of Kelley's sometimes elusive politics, it may be helpful to start with his projects that more overtly address the political and social. The first works I discuss embody a strand of Kelley's practice that explores his working class roots and pits it against the rarefied world of contemporary art. Few discussions of the artist fail to mention his working class upbringing in suburban Detroit and the fact his father worked as a janitor at a local school and his mother was a cook in an auto factory. The cover of the artist's first comprehensive monograph was a photograph of him with mop and bucket, dressed as a janitor, his uniform personalised with the nametag "Kelley". The artist's seemingly cynical and ironic stance often obscures his political convictions that are based on a presumption of equality that is rarely acknowledged.

¹⁰² Pontégnie, A. (2009). Mike Kelley: Education Complex Onwards 1995-2008. W. C. A. Centre. Europe, JRP | Ringier, 5.

Kelley's egalitarian motivation is most often invoked by the artist's irreverent take on the highbrow aspirations of the art world. The first project I discuss embodies this approach. As the title suggests, *Proposal for the decoration of an island of conference rooms (with copy room) for an advertising agency designed by Frank Gehry*, 1992, was originally proposed to be a part of the Gehry-designed Chiat/Day office building in Venice, California, constructed in the late 1980s.¹⁰³ Unfortunately Kelley's part of the project was never realised as part of the finished building but instead found life as Kelley's contribution to the landmark exhibition *Helter Skelter: LA Art in the 1990s* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in 1992. The timing of the exhibition of the work is in itself an example of Kelley's resistance to dominating forces; in this instance the art market that had just begun to pay attention to him. The exhibition came hot on the heels of his first wave of recognition, predominantly for the works using hand-made stuffed toys. It would have been easy for Kelley to continue with this crowd-pleasing work, however he took this opportunity to instead display a work that was direct and clinically cold.¹⁰⁴

The project presents a grouping of five conference rooms and a photocopy room. The design of each space is very similar with stark white walls, grey carpet and a typical office ceiling constructed from modular insulating tiles and furnished with simple, commonly available office furniture. The walls are covered with floor-to-ceiling murals executed in black paint. The images are scaled-up reproductions of jokes and cartoons that were circulated via fax machine between office workers in the time before the internet became the primary distributor of office humour. These well-worn jokes, often concerning office life, were typically displayed around secretaries' desks, workers' cubicles or lunchrooms. These murals are applied throughout all the conference rooms with the only exception being the photocopy room. Its walls are left blank and the only furnishings present are cheap metal shelving for paper storage and the copy machines themselves. An important feature of the design is a series of windows linking each of the conference rooms. The small circular portals, with no glass, disrupt the usual expectation of a private conference

¹⁰³ Mike Kelley, J. C. W. (2004). *Mike Kelley, Minor Histories*. Cambridge, The MIT Press, 312.

¹⁰⁴ Harvey, D. (2003). Don't look back. *LA Weekly*. Los Angeles.

room in addition to allowing sight lines to the murals in the other rooms. In contrast there is one large picture window between the copy room and the adjacent conference room.



Figure 2.
Mike Kelley, *Proposal for the Decoration of an Island of Conference Rooms (with Copy Room) for an Advertising Agency Designed by Frank Gehry*, 1991. Installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1992.

Kelley's architectural interventions break down the usual expectations of privacy within a conference room, with one space being connected to the other. In a further disruption of expectations, the lowly copy room has been made a highly visible space. The large picture windows provide a clear view of the dull, undecorated workspace of lower-rung staff members whose job would entail repetitive and menial tasks. Under Kelley's proposal, this workspace would be in constant view of the conference room and all those within it. As the artist explains:

I proposed to deconstruct this space, to cut holes from one room to another, remove the ceiling, etc. But, unlike Gehry, my intention was not to reveal the

formal structure of the building, but to expose the hierarchy of the workplace.¹⁰⁵

Central to the work is Kelley's interest in the cartoons and the unique position they held within the culture of a working office. These images have disappeared since the advent of the internet and the decreasing use of the fax machine. The imagery and the context from which it emerges highlight a range of topics that is of recurring interest for Kelley. They should be familiar to people who spent time working in offices in the 1980s and 1990s, and while some have a direct reference to the frustrations of office working life or simple expressions of frustration and defiance, others consist of off-colour innuendos or scatological humour — a favourite of Kelley's. His work has always made use of humour and absurdity; the "lower" the gags the better. Some are simple bold text: "IF ASSHOLES COULD FLY, THIS PLACE WOULD BE AN AIRPORT!" or "THE FLOGGINGS WILL CONTINUE UNTIL MORALE IMPROVES" and "What part of NO don't you understand?". Others include cartoon imagery of a typical male boss pointing his finger, with the caption "WOULD YOU BE VERY UPSET IF I ASKED YOU TO TAKE YOUR SILLY ASS PROBLEM DOWN THE HALL?" or a grumpy looking vulture, framed with text reading "51% sweetheart – 49% bitch. Don't push your luck!". These gags project a bleak and resigned humour and yet they embody a form of resistance to the hierarchy of an office. They poke fun at the boss, complain about unreasonable work expectations or are just generally antisocial with their use of scatological humour.

The oppositional power of these images is not found solely in their content, but also in the manner they were collected and distributed. As Kelley points out:

Office cartoons interest me greatly in that they are circulated for the workers' own pleasure during company time, and at the company's expense.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Mike Kelley, J. C. W. (2004). *Mike Kelley, Minor Histories*. Cambridge, The MIT Press, 312.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 314.

The distribution and consumption of these images represents a small instance of resistance to the power structures present in the office work place. The usually private workplace tensions that the images embodied were made public, forcing these sentiments to the fore. Paul Schimmel discusses issues raised by Kelley in *Catholic Tastes*:

Kelley located these private sentiments “in a place where they were not supposed to be seen”. By enlarging interoffice jokes to the scale of public murals they were “made tasteless. It’s something that’s not meant to be seen by the public or the bosses and it is shoved in their face. So it makes a tension that is really there just overt”.¹⁰⁷

When reproducing the images at wall-sized scale, Kelley’s treatment highlighted the degradation of the images that takes place during replication and transmission; the nature of an image degraded by mechanical reproduction is central to the reading of the work. For *Proposal...* the source images, when scaled up, were carefully painted to mimic the noise and degradation that developed over the course of these images being copied repeatedly when sent from one fax to another. For Kelley it was important to maintain this visual noise resulting from repeated transmission, as it highlighted the fact that the images had been copied often and so must be popular.¹⁰⁸

The artist saw this imagery as a kind of folk art by working class people that embodied a relief from and a resistance to the hierarchy of the work place. The depth of his interest in it is reflected in a series of paintings called *Loading Dock Drawings*, 1985. The representation of the images in an art context is important to the political understanding of these paintings. These black and white works – on paper, no less – would perhaps be best described as drawings; however, the artist was at pains to present them at a large scale and describe them as *paintings*. The collection of images that was the inspiration for *Loading Dock Drawings* was found

¹⁰⁷ Sussman, E. (1993). *Mike Kelley, Catholic Tastes*. New York, Witney Museum of American Art, 216.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

by Kelley in the building maintenance area of Cal Arts, an institution where he studied and was employed as a lecturer:

Having benefitted from and drawn upon the thinking of his teachers at Cal Arts, where he was a student from 1976 to 1978, he was now drawing from the school's support staff the subject and the politics of his work. It seemed natural that Kelley, raised in working-class environs of Detroit, would express his solidarity with the blue-collar worker.¹⁰⁹

In exhibiting this new work set in his new place of work – the commercial gallery Metro Pictures that represented him at the time – Kelley purposefully framed it as art. The re-presentation of these images in a gallery context was not a simple act of presenting 'low' imagery in a fine art context, but the gesture of linking institutional spaces, the loading dock or office cubicle, and the rarefied world of art. Kelley antagonizes by presenting this lowbrow imagery, full scatological references and lame humour, but also makes a statement of solidarity with the worker.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 212.



YOU WANT IT WHEN?!

Figure 3

Mike Kelley, *Loading Dock Drawing*, 1985. Synthetic polymer on paper.

One of four parts, 1803 x 1067 mm

I highlight these somewhat obscure works, as my discovery of them was a formative influence that helped cement my commitment to contemporary art. It was a revelation to discover that this type of found imagery – that I recognised from the menial jobs that I held – were open for serious consideration. The implications they embodied became a clear statement regarding an egalitarian claim for the art world.

I worked full-time in low-paid roles for a retail chain and the dissatisfaction of my fellow workers and the tense relationship with management was palpable. Much of my early work focused on these tensions, personally motivated by the vulnerable nature of casual retail employees, a situation that has only become worse as time has passed, and the destructive cycle of production, consumption and waste that I was so evidently a part of. It was revealing that the notion that these curiously bad jokes and tired clichés, when recontextualised through art, created a narrative of resistance.

Kelley saw these images in many different workplaces across the world and felt they were a kind of art that connected workers across the seemingly isolated institutions to which they were beholden.¹¹⁰ The notion of art uniting an underclass through a shared visual language struck a chord with the artist. This revelation chimes with Rancière's idea that art is naturally disposed to imagining a new order of the sensible, leading to a shift in the order of the sensible. Kelley highlighting a shared visual language facilitates a new kind of unity amongst low-paid workers employed under the vulnerable conditions of late capitalism.

This is yet another example of the complex but productive relationship the working class Kelley had with the privileged social realm of contemporary art. Both *Proposal...* and *Loading Dock Drawings* have a clear message that challenges institutional power relations and hierarchies in the workplace; but, in parallel, this work and Kelley's approach aim to challenge the rarefied world of art. These works raise questions about institutional structures in addition to laying the groundwork for work that had Kelley's conception of the institution front and centre.

Educational Complex

In 1995 Kelley completed *Educational Complex*, a work that signalled an important new direction for the artist as it was his first major work since his early career retrospective, *Catholic Tastes*, at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1993. It

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

also marked a significant change of direction that saw Kelley drawing more directly on his biography for direction in his work, a strategy he would continue until his death.

For *Educational Complex*, Kelley created a grouping of architectural models based on his personal memory of every school and university he attended in his life. There was only one exception to this rule and that was the addition of a model of his childhood home. The structures vary significantly and range from modest buildings, such as a one-room kindergarten schoolhouse, to grander structures such as a graduate school. The models are collected under a glass case and are unified by a blank white finish that helps draw attention to some unexpected features of these models. In the development of this piece, the artist worked from his memory of the structures, starting by sketching a floor plan. Unsurprisingly, his memory failed in some instances and this left numerous gaps in the information, so much so that many of his drawings could not be translated into three-dimensional models. Using images for reference, he completed plans for the exterior of the buildings but left the interior sections he could not recall as voids. The voids, be they oval or amoeboid in shape, allow visual access to the interiors of the model buildings, giving a clearer picture of the institutions' structure. The result is a series of mysterious, amorphous holes throughout the models.¹¹¹ To explain this viewers are presented with a conceptual fiction and the reasoning behind this approach is a twist in logic typical of the artist.

¹¹¹ Pontégnie, A. (2009). Mike Kelley: Education Complex Onwards 1995-2008. W. C. A. Centre. Europe, JRP | Ringier, 21.

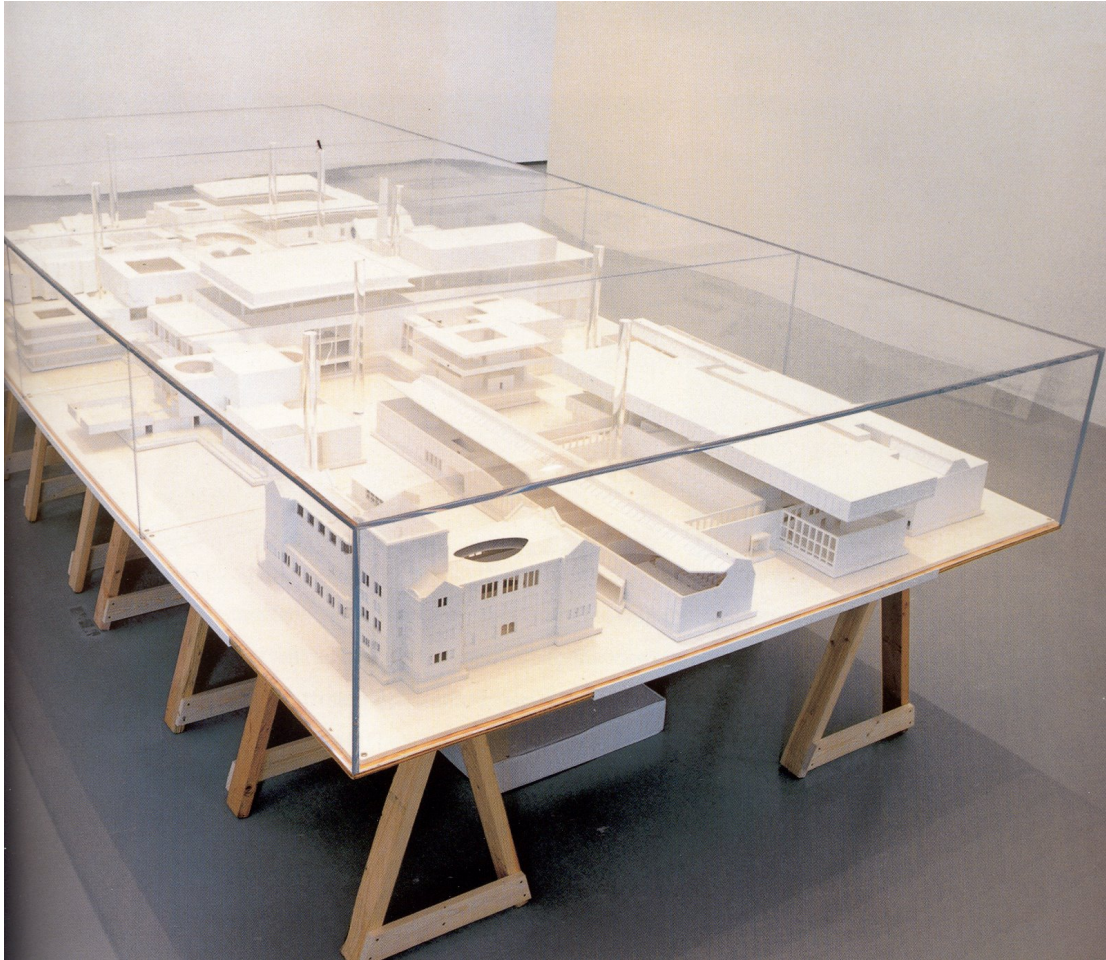


Figure 4.
Mike Kelley, *Educational Complex*, 1995. Acrylic, latex, foam core, fiberglass and wood. 122 x 975.5 x 91.5 cm

Kelley attributes his inability to recall some parts of the buildings as an indication that they were sites of abuse. The artist takes the opportunity to engage with the controversy that surrounds Repressed Memory Syndrome.¹¹² In short, the advocates of this syndrome believe that traumatic experiences of abuse, particularly in children, are completely submerged in the subconscious of the victim who has no conscious access to these memories. The results of repressing these traumatic experiences can range from paranoid or obsessive behaviour to cases of multiple personality disorder. Some therapists claim to be able to access these repressed memories via hypnosis, where the victim is able to reveal the hidden facts behind their abuse. The incredible popularity of this theory in the 1990s led to a kind of

¹¹² Ibid, 23.

hysteria surrounding it. Kelley points to the McMartin Preschool trial that started in 1983 when a parent, Judy Johnson, reported the sexual abuse of her child in the care of McMartins. What followed was a lengthy series of interviews conducted with hundreds of children who attended the school. Then there was the trial, which would become the most expensive in US history. In the end, no charges were brought against the school proprietors despite a wealth of bizarre stories from the children who were interviewed. It seems, during the interviews, parents and lawyers had asked a series of leading questions and recordings of the interviews reveal the process – if no stories of trauma were forthcoming, leading questions were repeated until something that indicated a disturbing childhood experience was recounted.

Kelley's coming out as a (fictional) victim of abuse can be seen in a similar light to the interviews conducted with the children of McMartin Preschool. In Kelley's previous stuffed toy work, he went to great pains to avoid a sympathetic audience reaction to the grubby and ragged handmade toys. In later works in this series, he presented toys as neutrally as possible, mimicking systems of scientific taxonomy (*Craft Morphology Flow Chart*, 1991) and even employing experts in documenting archaeological finds to draw them in a neutral and dispassionate manner (*Empathy Displacement: Humanoid Morphology (2nd and 3rd remove) #1 – 15*, 1991). He was in fact interested in interrogating craft and the burden of labour in works such as *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid*, 1987; however he completely abandoned any further projects that utilised what had become his signature style. It seems that no matter how the toys were presented, audiences could not avoid projecting stories of abuse onto them. In turn this became *his* story because, as Kelley notes, the understanding of an artist's oeuvre as a projection of their biography seems all-pervasive. He chose to respond in a typically perverse manner and instead assumed the role of the abused and presented "evidence" of this fictional trauma:

In utopian projects, moral and aesthetic dimensions are presented, often openly and dramatically, as mirrors of each other. Of course, my project is a perversion of such an attitude: I present an obviously dystopian architecture,

reflecting our true, chaotic social conditions, rather than some idealized dream of wholeness.¹¹³

This notion of institutionalised abuse has been expanded across numerous works in a variety of mediums for the *Missing Time, Towards a Utopian Arts Complex* exhibition in 1995 and subsequent bodies of work including *We communicate only through our shared dismissal of the pre-linguistic*, (1995), *Missing Time: Works on paper 1974 – 1976 reconsidered*, (1994) and *The Thirteen Seasons (Heavy on the Winter)*, (1994). The ideas discussed in relation to *Educational Complex* find a different expression in a series of paintings and also a number of re-worked multi-media images on paper from Kelley's time as a student. His return to his undergraduate work makes up part of his examination of repressed memory syndrome or, as its detractors have labelled it, false memory syndrome. This was yet another reaction to the audience reading meaning into Kelley's work through imagined biographical information. If there had been some trauma in his past, surely early works from his education would throw some light on this?¹¹⁴

Discussions surrounding Kelley's schooling reflect on his experience of the undergraduate art school at The University of Michigan. The school was primarily focused on the painting studio as it was considered the best place to make "serious artworks". A number of the lecturers had been tenured for decades, and Kelley's influential younger teachers such as conceptual artist Douglas Huebler had been taught by the same academics years earlier. The teachings encompassed an old-fashioned European academy mode with many of the lecturers being advocates of what Kelley considered quite reasonably to be an outmoded formal focus. The classes could be quite academic with exercises in colour theory, still life drawing and egg-tempura painting. Despite the strength at that time of the New York school of Abstract Expressionism, this mode was shunned. The dominant mode of

¹¹³ Ibid, 23.

¹¹⁴ Stals, J. L. (1997). Mike Kelley 1985-1996. M. d. A. C. d. Barcelona. Barcelona, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 106.

contemporary painting was deemed to be the Hans Hoffman styled “push pull”¹¹⁵ mode of image composition and construction. One element or daub of paint was laid down, then another in response to it and so on until, after a kind of compositional struggle, the image was revealed as successful or not:

The typical student painting was a gestural abstract formalist composition in the Hans Hoffman manner. That was “serious” painting. Painting arguments were still caught up in questions of composition and had not really gotten past the shock offered by Pop Art and Colour Field painting.¹¹⁶

It should be no surprise that the young artist had certain issues with this approach and was resisting it at every opportunity. It seems however that in the end, the formative influence of this approach was too much to resist and the artist felt he bore the burden of this training/abuse for the duration of his career. Could this be Kelley’s greatest trauma at the hands of conservative institutionalised forces? His sub-cultural focus and questioning of orthodoxy would undoubtedly ensure this to be so. Regardless he inserted representational elements into his works:

I liked the goopy, slightly disgusting surfaces of Abstract Expressionism and I thought such surfaces could be used to great advantage in combination with various kinds of more loaded images, images that didn’t lend themselves so easily to abstract equivalency. I started using low advertising images like the Hairy Who group did, and drew from my own knowledge of fringe popular culture...images of Patty Hearst, The Symbionese Liberation Army logo, Santo the Mexican Masked wrestler (and) William Burroughs.¹¹⁷

In fact these low-brow references squeezed into an image, that for Kelley represent an opposition to the teachings and techniques of modernism in an academic context, can be seen as a metaphor for his career. His practice is always seen as an expression

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 107.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 109.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 108.

of resistance to, and resentment of, the forces of socialisation and convention. In parallel with Kelley's incisive observations was the voice of the bratty adolescent, always resisting the process of socialisation. In the end, his expectation of being a marginal figure inspired by the counterculture and unacceptable to the mainstream was wrong. Kelley has become a part of the art world that he had resisted and has instead been absorbed by the institutions he railed against.

Kelley solely targets institutions he has experienced first hand through the course of his education and so includes references to his childhood home, kindergarten, university and graduate school. While some discussions focus on the artist's critical take on architecture as an embodiment of social order and authority, it should be made clear that it is not merely the nature of the institution in abstract that Kelley dissects. He is also keen to put quite specific targets, in the form of teachers and other authority figures, in the foreground of his absurd, abrasive and darkly humorous attacks. His conceptual gambit is to implicate the institutions and their staff in his own personal trauma. Kelley deploys this notion of institutional abuse to deeply subversive ends that serve to illustrate his concerns about the role these bodies take in the socialisation of children and young adults, from the broadest social norms such as gender roles, appropriate public behaviour and so on, to the more nuanced yet as rigidly controlled world of contemporary art. He employs the language of pop-psychology and amateur psychoanalysis against itself in his mockery of this rhetoric. This venomous and dirty-minded critique of social order, reeking of absurdity and sarcasm, is Kelley's most potent political tool.

Howard Singerman's thought concerning *Education Complex* provides a useful approach to Kelley's predicament and the power of the institution to absorb and diffuse voices of resistance. He uses the thought of Herbert Marcuse, one of the 1960s radicals most loved on campuses throughout the world during that optimistic time. Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* (1964) is a text pervaded with a deep anxiety about the effects industrial production will have on the human imagination. This repressive society has two arms of control: the "welfare state" made up of social and academic institutions, and the "warfare state" that enforces the logic produced by

the social institutions through the military and police. Singerman even goes as far as to suggest that the “*Complex*” of the work’s title refers to the military-industrial complex. Marcuse’s notion of “repressive desublimation” is used to analyse the role art and culture take on in our technologically advanced society. The oppositional power and freedom these realms held in the past has been subverted and absorbed. They have been enveloped within the structures of a more efficiently productive and rational society. The institutions of the “welfare state” serve not only to absorb and render harmless the power of oppositional thought, but also to manage the forces of resistance and effectively make institutions of higher learning harmless release valves for oppositional tendencies. These institutions also control opposition by the interpretation of older critical and subversive works. In Marcuse’s projection, political opposition and critical thought have been deprived of their function in a society that seems increasingly able to satisfy the needs of its population with false rewards.

There are a number of biographical details that support this institutionalisation of the artist; one in particular relates to a course that was available at Art Centre College of Design where Kelley was a lecturer until 2006. Singerman sites “Loving Ugly: Art Drawn to the Offensive, Repugnant, and Dark side of Life” as a prime example of the Marcuse’s notion of “repressive desublimation”.¹¹⁸ *Education Complex* can be seen as a bleak testament to the ability of the institution to absorb and defuse even the most critical voices. The notion that Kelley’s oppositional stance has been absorbed as a kind of tolerated acting-out, de-fanged and domesticated, has a sad resonance in the world of contemporary art and art education.

¹¹⁸ Singerman, H. (2008). "The *Educational Complex*: Mike Kelley's Cultural Studies." *October* (Fall), 61.

Thomas Hirschhorn

“To make art politically, not political art” – the making is political, not the art or its “conscience” -: this often-quoted maxim of Hirschhorn’s ... demands first and foremost that the artist cuts himself off from the ideological-political space of pre-constituted opinion.¹¹⁹

- Sebastien Egenhofer

Since the early 1990s, Swiss-born artist Thomas Hirschhorn has been increasingly recognised for his uncompromising work across a range of media. His collages, video art, installations and public artworks have attracted attention due to their overwhelming material volume and the artist’s idiosyncratic approach to the social and political imperatives of a globalised world. Hirschhorn’s desire to address political imperatives is self-evident, however his approach seems far from logical, direct or reassuring. I will argue that it is his eschewal of easy interpretation and closure that produces critical effects.

In this section I examine Hirschhorn’s unique approach by focusing on a number of key works including the *Ur-Collage* series from 2008; *Utopia, Utopia = One World, One War, One Army, One Dress*, an installation from 2002 and finally his public/participatory works in the form of *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival* from 2009. These works vary widely in scale and approach and yet are united by the artist’s commitment to the collage process. This medium is important to Hirschhorn as he sees it as being an accessible mode of production, requiring no special skills or expensive materials that is open to anyone.

¹¹⁹ Egenhofer, S. (2005). "Form and production in Thomas Hirschhorn." *Texte zur Kunst* (57): 196-200.

Ur Collage

The majority of Hirschhorn's output including installations, sculpture and public art can be considered a product of the collage process.¹²⁰ The accessible nature of collage is essential for Hirschhorn's egalitarian and 'democratic' approach to his art-making. His installations are made with cardboard, photocopies and packing tape, materials that are commonly available and very familiar. The artist wrote about his approach to collage in 2008 and claims that the medium is treated with suspicion:

Doing Collages means creating a New World with elements of the Existing World. Doing Collages is expressing the Agreement with the Existing World without approving it. This is Resistance...Doing Collages is based on this Agreement and this Non-Approval. That is the reason why often Collages are not taken seriously. That is the Reason why making Collages is suspicious and why doing Collages is considered unprofessional. But those are precisely the arguments that demonstrate the Resistance of the medium of Collages. Collages resist Facts, Collages resist Information and Collages resist Documents. Collages create a Truth of their own.¹²¹

In 2008, the artist produced a large series of collages titled *Ur-Collage* for exhibition and publication. The series is in some ways typical for the artist with the sheer volume of work produced being overwhelming, with upwards of 39 images reproduced in the catalogue. Where it differs from his typical approach is in its stripped down image composition with each image incorporating only two elements, the resultant images being the most elemental collages possible. The artist combines a double page spread from a fashion magazine with an image of a dead human body, usually drawn from photojournalism covering the war on terror and its horrifying human toll. The images of fashion are ubiquitous and they are typical of the desirable and desiring images of late capitalism. These beautiful images are sleekly

¹²⁰ Kulli, S. (2009). "Thomas Hirschhorn. On the occasion of the exhibition". Retrieved 29 January 2014, from http://www.susannakulli.ch/sites/default/files/Thomas%20Hirschhorn_Ur-Collage_a%20conversation%20with%20Sebastian%20Egenhofer_english%20and%20german.pdf.

¹²¹ Wren, J. (2009). Retrieved 2 October, 2014, from <http://radicalcut.blogspot.com.au/2009/02/thomas-hirschhorn-on-collage.html>.

presented in advertisements and fashion editorials, refined to impossible perfection using digital editing software. In contrast, the images of dead bodies are a highly disturbing documentation of the human toll wrought by the ongoing “War on Terror”. These images are sourced from the internet as they are generally excluded from mainstream media sources due to their political and human implications.



Figure 5.
Thomas Hirschhorn, *Ur-Collage*, 2008, Series: B-XXI, collage, 432 x 280 mm

Hirschhorn claims that placing these two images on the same plane is the most minimal collage that could be made.¹²² A unity between these seemingly clashing realities is broached, sometimes with a matching colour tone or a connecting line. The two elements maintain a tension that is typical of a collage’s aim to juxtapose, however they seem to become partially merged on the pictorial plane, confounding the traditional expectations of this approach. The repelling qualities of each element are never quite able to overpower the implication that the images are connected, both formally and conceptually. Hirschhorn subverts the expected clash of imagery

¹²² Hirschhorn, T. (2009). <<Ur-Collage>>. Z. Galerie Susanna Kulli. Zurich, unpaginated.

typical of a collage embodying a politically activist approach by connecting the paired images to the same reality.¹²³

The provocative ambiguity of these collages gives them their political impact. The pairing brings one kind of unseen reality – the destruction resulting from the war on terror – into collision with an oppressive image from a fantasy world born of capitalism. By uniting images in a single surface, Hirschhorn pointedly embraces the uncomfortable realities of contemporary life full of unresolved tensions. He proclaims his fascination with pornography and fashion images and, in turn, his compulsion to examine images of death. The *Ur-Collages*, in their formal flattening of the picture plane into a single connected reality, have little in common with, for example, the activist styled political collages of Martha Rosler. As Sebastian Egenhofer notes regarding *Ur-Collages*;

Contrary to natural expectation, no contrast between truth and falsehood is staged here and no dialectical rectification is initiated; the tension between the two pictures is derived rather from the slipstream of the lineament of their common surface.¹²⁴

The homogeneity of Hirschhorn's paired images is not "bringing the war home" as Martha Rosler did in the early 1970s, but instead seems to present us with a kind of wholeness that the artist sees as a political reality. Hence, the unexpectedly and enduringly troubling message of these works. We expect an overt message of resistance to be embodied in the medium of the collages, however the images united on a surface fail to present us with separate clashing realities. Instead we are left with Hirschhorn's unsettling vision of an irresolvable reality.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Sebastian Egenhofer in *What is political about Hirschhorn's Art?* Claire Bishop, S. E., Hal Foster, Manuel Joseph, Yasmil Raymond, Marcus Steinweg (2011). Thomas Hirschhorn. Establishing a critical corpus. Zurich, Swiss Federal Office of Culture, 112.

Utopia, Utopia = One World, One War, One Army, One Dress

... a collage is resistant; it escapes control, even the control of the one who made it. That is its resistant character. To make a collage always has something to do with headlessness... There is no technique more common throughout the world than the collage – almost everyone has done a collage sometime in their lives. This is the associative element of collage, that almost everyone, sometime in their lives, has tried to make an image of this world. A collage is something universal and it is an opening toward a non-exclusive public.

- Thomas Hirschhorn¹²⁵

Hirschhorn's installation, *Utopia, Utopia = One World, One War, One Army, One Dress*, 2005, is a typical example of the artist expanding his grounding in two-dimensional collage into immersive installation. By examining this work in detail we can begin to analyse the artist's approach to excess – excessive materials, excessive energy – and to understand the significance of this strategy. In addition *Utopia...* allows us to examine an important tactic of the artist, that being a “wrongheaded” approach to developing his ideas. An artistic strategy that employs the notion of the *bête*, the stupid or silly, as a mode of seeing. It is this device that facilitates the unexpected and indirect addressing of the social imperatives that compel Hirschhorn's work.

¹²⁵ Hirschhorn, T. (2009). *Ur-Collage*. Z. Galerie Susanna Kulli. Zurich, 3.



Figure 6.
 Thomas Hirschhorn, *UTOPIA, UTOPIA = ONE WORLD, ONE WAR, ONE ARMY, ONE DRESS*, 2005
 Installation detail

Utopia, Utopia = One World, One War, One Army, One Dress was first exhibited in 2005 at The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, and has also been shown at Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, in 2006. I was lucky enough to view the Boston exhibition at the tail end of a residency in Los Angeles at the Australia Council studio. In both instances, the work spanned several floors of the gallery with every available surface covered with an array of camouflaged objects and materials. Floors, walls, ceilings and staircases were covered in camouflage-patterns of many different types. Fashionable camouflage clothing for adults and children were displayed on the walls and mannequins were interspersed throughout the space creating an awkward human presence. The figures were usually unadorned, save for tumour-like lumps growing on their bodies fashioned with camouflage-patterned adhesive tape. This tape encrusted many surfaces and was used to create more swollen growths sprouting from a display of world globes.

Cheaply produced children's toys covered with camouflage were displayed in arrangements on table tops, sometimes at random, sometimes assembled in military formations that mimicked diorama displays. In other areas televisions played music videos that employed an aesthetic of militarism, a surprisingly large number of them promoting mainstream music acts. There were reading areas set up with camouflage covered couches and books on the historical development of particular styles of this ubiquitous military design. The sheer volume of the patterned materials and their very specific optical effect completely filled the viewer's field of vision and served to dazzle and disorient.

The only aesthetic counterpoint offered throughout the installation was strips of photocopied text, large and small, excerpted from an essay by philosopher Marcus Steinweg. Hirschhorn commissioned the essay as both an accompaniment to the exhibition and to be literally and materially included in the installation. These sentences and short passages of text were enlarged and collaged over many of the installation's surfaces. The phrases themselves were numerous, drawn from the entirety of the text and passages were rarely repeated. What did the texts say?

The exhibition exuded an unnerving sense of obsession, a grim insight into the normalisation of militarism in fashion, popular culture and the media. Viewers were confronted with the uncomfortable realisation that an aesthetic of militarism has been thoroughly integrated into the fabric of consumer culture. The overwhelming volume and variety of material that confronted the audience is a tool the artist uses to significant effect. This quality is essential for the artist and he has employed this aesthetic of excess in works that span his career, including *Jumbo Spoons and Big Cake*, 2000; *World Airport*, 2000; *Cavemanman*, 2002, and *Crystal of Resistance*, 2011. As he noted in the publication that accompanied the exhibition:

UTOPIA, UTOPIA = ONE WORLD, ONE WAR, ONE ARMY, ONE DRESS has to be big, exhaustive and exaggerated. It will be a large exhibition with reduced elements and enlarged elements. Making something big, enlarged, self-enlarged, does not mean it is important. But it gives a commitment to

something – that is why it is enlarged – and simultaneously – an enlargement makes it empty. The commitment and the emptiness remove the meaning. They suggest another meaning, a different meaning.¹²⁶

What is the significance of the excess of materials and energy for Hirschhorn? At first it seems an aping of the limitless production and ever increasing economies of scale emblematic of late capitalism. American art theorist Hal Foster has noted this strategy of excessive production and scale has a lineage to practitioners from Warhol and Oldenburg through to their predecessors, the Dadaists.¹²⁷

Hirschhorn's overproduction seems to be exaggerated by the disposable quality of his materials such as cardboard, packing tape, aluminium foil and plastic sheeting. As has been discussed earlier, these materials are considered democratic, as they are available to almost anyone, they are not expensive and require no special skills or techniques to work with. This excessive approach is opposed to the system of value that Hirschhorn sees embodied in the modernist maxim, 'less is more'. The artist sees this approach as a false one, supported by the forces of consumer culture, useful only for developing and maintaining the notion that art is for an elite. Hirschhorn makes the point that this stylishly minimal aesthetic is employed more and more often in art and consumer culture because it denotes exclusivity. The empty gallery space surrounding a single artwork – commodity serves only to heighten the aura and precious quality of the object. The artist elaborates:

I think entirely in terms of economics. That's why I'm interested in this concept: more is more, as an arithmetical fact, and as a political fact. More is a majority. Power is power. Violence is violence. I want to express that idea in my work as well. I don't accept the dictatorship on the isolated, the exclusive,

¹²⁶ Hirschhorn, T. (2005). *Thomas Hirschhorn. Utopia, Utopia = One World, One War, One Army, One Dress*. I. o. C. A. Boston. Boston, Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, 15.

¹²⁷ Hal Foster. Claire Bishop, S. E., Hal Foster, Manuel Joseph, Yasmil Raymond, Marcus Steinweg (2011). *Thomas Hirschhorn. Establishing a critical corpus*. Zurich, Swiss Federal Office of Culture, 176.

the fine, the superior, the elite. And that's why, when I show many, far too many, works, I'm making a political statement.¹²⁸

However, the artist's massive expenditure of materials and energy comes with strings attached, in that it obliges a generous response from the audience. Hal Foster has discussed the influence of George Bataille's notion of potlatch; in making this grand gesture the artist sets up a reciprocal expectation, that being the obligation for the audience to commit equal energy towards engaging with the work:

This motive is very important in my work...I want to make a lot, give a lot [...] I want to do that in order to challenge the other people, the viewers, to get equally involved, so that they also have to give.¹²⁹

Similarly, this expectation has implications for Hirschhorn's public projects that engage the audience directly in the production and performance of his work. This will be discussed later in this chapter.

The inspiration behind *Utopia*, *Utopia = One World, One War, One Army, One Dress* emerged from the artist's observation of the globalised fashion for wearing camouflage clothing. The artist saw a world where militarism has infiltrated every facet of contemporary society. We are willingly clothed in it, entertained by it and whether you are from the first or third world, you are implicated in its continued expansion. Despite this disturbing realisation the artist was not defeated by its dire implications; instead of dwelling on this dystopic vision negatively, Hirschhorn made an absurd leap in logic. Scanning the media, world markets, and street fashion across the globe, the artist sees a unifying sameness agreed upon by fashion-conscious young people, anti-globalism protesters, Palestinian children, performers in music videos and in fashion magazines. His contemplation of this trend draws Hirschhorn

¹²⁸ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, A. M. G., Carlos Basualdo (2004). *Thomas Hirschhorn*. London, Phaidon, 122.

¹²⁹ Claire Bishop, S. E., Hal Foster, Manuel Joseph, Yasmil Raymond, Marcus Steinweg (2011). *Thomas Hirschhorn. Establishing a critical corpus*. Zurich, Swiss Federal Office of Culture, 177.

to conclude in his muddleheaded style that we have achieved a kind of world unity. In the exhibition publication the artist claims that if you are prepared to wear camouflage clothing you are prepared to put yourself in the same situation as a soldier, who risks death at any moment. By wearing military clothing you are part of UTOPIA, the ONE WORLD ARMY, and this unsettling unity is translated into an unfeasible hope for the world:

...to wear the same dress is the dystopian act towards achieving utopia.¹³⁰

The illogical and hopelessly optimistic claim is spelled out in the title of the exhibition and this “headless” equation bombastically announces itself from collages that spawned the installation. Hirschhorn seems to hope that if repeated loudly and often enough it may start to be true. In the publication accompanying the exhibition, Pamela M. Lee posed the question:

What might this perverse history tell us about our contemporary situation, which, Hirschhorn is wont to show, culminates in the even more perverted equation between fashion, camouflage and utopia?”¹³¹

The grim nature of the artist’s obsession is embodied in objects such as mannequins sprouting cancerous military growths, children’s military clothing and the disturbing parallels brought forth by the raw juxtaposition of fashion imagery and photojournalism from the front lines of military conflicts. And yet, despite all evidence to the contrary, Hirschhorn casts the outlook as positive.

The artist’s unexpected inversion of logic produces a counter-intuitive take on political imperatives. To what end is this affected naiveté employed? Why is this headless way of working and thinking used to arrive at this conceptual premise?

¹³⁰ Hirschhorn, T. (2005). Thomas Hirschhorn. Utopia, Utopia = One World, One War, One Army, One Dress. I. o. C. A. Boston. Boston, Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, 11.

¹³¹ Ibid.

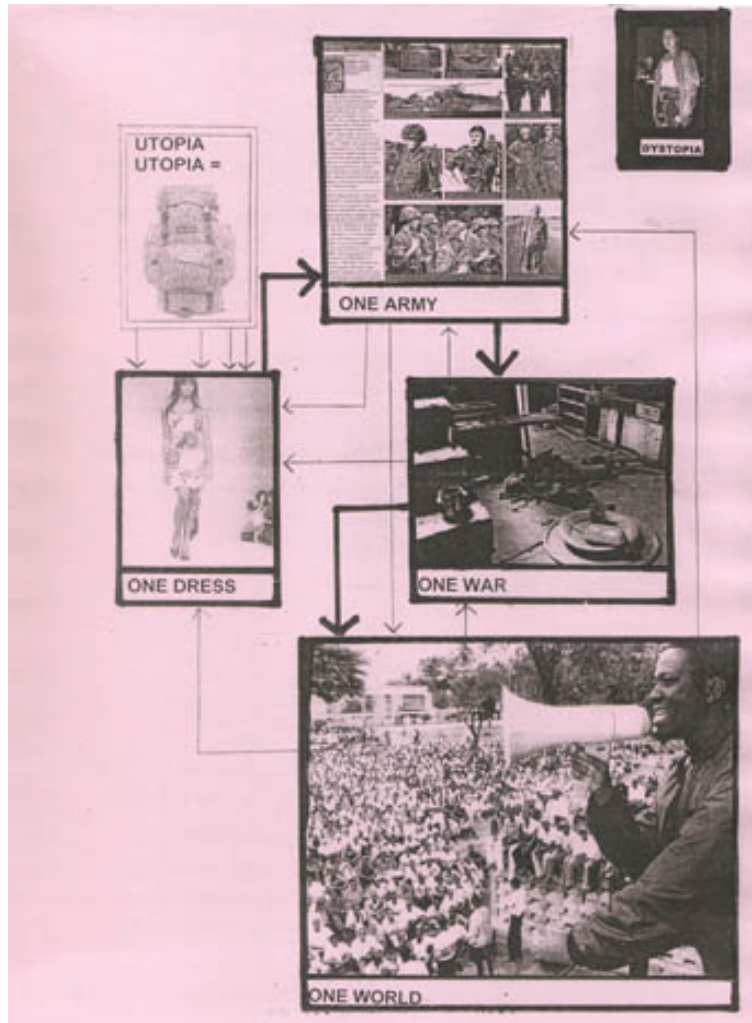


Figure 7.
 Thomas Hirschhorn, *Utopia, Utopia = One World, One War, One Army, One Dress*, 2005.
 Diagram extract from Swiss-Swiss Democracy Journal

Hal Foster has described Hirschhorn's *wrongheaded* approach as a strategy employing the notion of the *bête*, the stupid or silly, as a mode of seeing. It is the act of looking dumbly at the horror of the world. An important aspect of this approach is the *headless*, adapted by the artist from the thought of Georges Bataille. Foster elaborates:

In this light, looking dumb is a form of witnessing that has both ethical and political force ... Also implied here is a further aspect of the *bête*, which I will call after Eric Santer "the creaturely." ... The creaturely can be obscene...yet it can also point to cracks in the symbolic order at large, "fissures or caesuras in

the space of meaning,” which might become places of purchase where power can be resisted or at least re-imagined.¹³²

This ostensibly simple-minded way of looking has an ethical and political force behind it. The artist steers away from directly presenting this all-pervasive militarism in a predictably negative light and instead catches the viewer off-guard with his ostensibly misguided tack. By refusing to engage with the erroneous strategy of creating awareness of an issue and presuming that action will follow, an exhausted strategy as previously discussed by Rancière in “The Emancipated Spectator”, *Utopia...* leaves the audience with an ongoing puzzle. This conceptual conceit, paired with the demanding gesture the artist makes in the form of scale, forces the viewer to take an indirect path that demands an active engagement in the creation of the work’s meaning. The artist’s idiosyncratic tactic is in harmony with the approach Rancière argues for in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*:

...political art cannot work in the simple form of a meaningful spectacle that would lead to an ‘awareness’ of the state of the world. Suitable political art would ensure, at one and the same time, the production of a double effect: the readability of political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification.¹³³

The absurdity and audacity of Hirschhorn’s claim grates on the viewer. His twisted logic leaves the audience to contemplate this tension as an ongoing source of irritation. By this stage the audience is actively involved in engaging with the political imperatives that drive this work. Hirschhorn's faux naiveté, ambiguous political

¹³² Hal Foster. Claire Bishop, S. E., Hal Foster, Manuel Joseph, Yasmil Raymond, Marcus Steinweg (2011). *Thomas Hirschhorn. Establishing a critical corpus*. Zurich, Swiss Federal Office of Culture, 175.

¹³³ Rancière, J. (2004). *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*. London, Continuum, 63.

messages and ostensibly flawed logic are central to defining the unpredictability of his aesthetic and critical stance.¹³⁴

Hirschhorn's Public art

This final section will focus on Hirschhorn's public projects in which he engages members of a specific community to help him realize his work. Significantly, the artist rejects the term "participatory art" and instead prefers "Presence and Production" to describe his approach to working in public.¹³⁵ As we will see, Hirschhorn's *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival* (2009) convincingly embodies the kind of audience engagement discussed by curator Nicolas Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics* – so why has the curator omitted discussing the artist's work in one of his key publications?¹³⁶ The reason may be that Hirschhorn's complex practice is not easy to frame as politically affirming and instead leaves the audience with a sustained tension – a reflection of the irresolvable complexity of the fraught political landscape to which the artist responds. To further complicate Hirschhorn's position there have been critical debates about the messy and difficult questions regarding how he chooses to involve non art-world audiences in his public artworks. The artist engages in these debates personally and has addressed many issues raised through this discourse. To finish, I will discuss Hirschhorn's approach to *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival* in terms of Rancière's notion of the presumption of equality of intelligence, an essential aspect in assuring the dissensual potential for art, whereby a previously unseeable arrangement of the sensible challenges and re-shapes the order of the sensible as maintained by the order of the police.

¹³⁴ Hirschhorn, T. (2000). *Jumbo Spoons and Big Cake*, The Art Institute of Chicago. World Airport, The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago. T. A. I. o. Chicago. Chicago, The Art Institute of Chicago.

¹³⁵ Claire Bishop, S. E., Hal Foster, Manuel Joseph, Yasmin Raymond, Marcus Steinweg (2011). Thomas Hirschhorn. Establishing a critical corpus. Zurich, Swiss Federal Office of Culture, 10.

¹³⁶ Bishop, C. (2004). "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics." *October* (110), 55.



Figure 8,
Thomas Hirschhorn, view of the *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival*, 2009

In discussing *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival* we can see how Hirschhorn evokes an enduring sense of discontent, even when engaging and empowering a community in the production of his work. The project took place in Bijlmer, an outer suburb of Amsterdam, most famous for the crash of El Al Flight 1862 in October 1992 in which 43 people died. The area is dominated by a large quintessentially modern housing development. This estate, initially intended to house middle class city dwellers, never established itself as planned and is now inexpensive housing populated primarily by lower income families and recent immigrants. The area has been known for its high crime rates and is considered by many locals as a dangerous neighbourhood that is best avoided.

Ostensibly the project was a communal celebration of the formative Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza. While his influence and body of knowledge was celebrated, this notion of a tribute to Spinoza predominantly served to support a varied series of lecturers, workshops and performances. A newsletter was produced daily with information about Spinoza or other philosophers, upcoming events or any other information the artist felt relevant. The festival was housed in and around a

temporary structure that Hirschhorn and the residents constructed in a local park, close to an elevated railway and near a communal running track. The structure was dominated by a large-scale sculpture of a book, Spinoza's *Ethics*. The building housed a library and archive area that contained historical information about the plane crash of 1992, an internet facility, an illegal bar and a stage.

For the project to succeed, Hirschhorn needed the input and support of local people from Bijlmer in a variety of roles. Residents were paid for the time required to build the structure, coordinate the daily operations, perform in plays, tend the bar and assist the artist. As is typical of his public works, Hirschhorn himself remained on site, not just for the construction of the work, but for the duration of the project. *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival* also required the cooperation of the residents as an audience for daily lectures and occasional plays. The project ran for two months during summer and became a focus for the community over this time.

The project could not go ahead without the assistance of the residents and so could be described as a participatory work. However from the outset it should be noted the artist has a combative relationship with the notion of participatory art as understood through the lens of Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* and has weighed in on the discourse surrounding this label. As Claire Bishop notes:

Hirschhorn frequently asserts that he is not interested in "participation", "community art", or "relational aesthetics" as labels for his work, preferring the phrase "Presence and Production" to describe his approach to public art: "I want to work out an alternative to this lazy, lousy 'democratic' and demagogic term 'Participation.' I am not for 'Participative-art,' it's so stupid because every old painting makes you more participating than today's 'Participative-art,' because first of all real participation is the participation of thinking! Participation is only another word for 'Consumption'!"¹³⁷

¹³⁷ Claire Bishop, S. E., Hal Foster, Manuel Joseph, Yasmin Raymond, Marcus Steinweg (2011). Thomas Hirschhorn. Establishing a critical corpus. Zurich, Swiss Federal Office of Culture, 10.

The artist disputes some of the claims made by Bourriaud regarding the inherent political activation of participants and instead reflects on unthinking participation as something more passive than the dominant discourse supposes. Bishop has reflected on similar concerns supporting Hirschhorn's stance. She has noted that in the United Kingdom participatory art projects seem to be lacking the anti-authoritarian stance they may have once had:

Today participation is used by business as a tool for improving efficiency and workforce morale; it is all-pervasive in the mass media in the form of reality television; and it is a privileged medium for government funding agencies seeking to create the impression of social inclusion. Collaborative practices need to take this knot of conventions on board if they are to have critical bite.¹³⁸

Critical discussions have developed about the reasoning behind the artist's decision to situate *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival* in a low-income housing area. Revealing commentary has emerged from the art world about perceptions concerning the ability of these communities to intellectually engage with the content Hirschhorn is presenting. As discussed by Bishop, the discourse around this engagement with a specific audience reveals a zealous concern for the participants, especially those from marginalised communities. Were they exploited by the artist's high-minded ambitions for the work or did their participation empower them and their community?¹³⁹ Bishop conducted a series of interviews with the participants afterwards to gather some information about how the participants felt about being involved. She noted that, while commentary had emerged from the art world concerning the project and the response of visitors to the event, the voice of the participants had been absent from previous discussions, in particular Hirschhorn's well-known *Bataille Monument* (2002) as part of Documenta 11. She addresses the complexities of Hirschhorn's participatory works and notes that the experience they

¹³⁸ Roche, J. (2006). "Socially Engaged Art, Critics and Discontents: An Interview with Claire Bishop." Retrieved 29 March, 2014, from doublesession.net/indexhibitv070e/files/bishopinterview.doc.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 7.

present is unlike the warm and affirmative social exchange offered by artists like Tiravanija. Bishop posits that Hirschhorn's work gains more traction by creating and sustaining an irresolvable tension for the audience and participants:

The relations produced by (the) installation are marked by sensations of unease and discomfort rather than belonging, because the work acknowledges the impossibilities of a "microtopia" and instead *sustains* a tension among viewers, participants and context. An integral part of this tension is the introduction of collaborators from diverse economic backgrounds, which in turn serves to challenge contemporary art's self-perception as a domain that embraces other social and political structures.¹⁴⁰

The project has an inbuilt critique of the participatory mode and the impossibilities of the "microtopias" suggested by Bourriaud. Bishop highlights the strengths of Hirschhorn's indirect and ambiguous approach best when she notes:

...there is an overt contradiction between Hirschhorn's words and his methods: he makes claims for art as a powerful, autonomous, almost transcendent force of non-alienation, but through projects that spill into the complexity of social antagonism and deluge us with extra-artistic questions. Underlining this is a montage principle of co-existing incompatibilities: if Hirschhorn's gallery based installations juxtapose horrific images of violence with high culture and philosophy... and (at their best) throb with social pessimism and anger, his public projects juxtapose different social classes, races, and ages with a fearless defence of art and philosophy, and pulsate with eccentric optimism.¹⁴¹

Hirschhorn's approach denies the reassuring sense of closure characteristic of some modes of participatory art and in its place opens up the possibility of acknowledging the complexity of social relations. His approach is one that never second-guesses the

¹⁴⁰ Bishop, C. (2004). "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics." *October*(110): 70.

¹⁴¹ Bishop, C. (2012). *Artificial Hells*. London, Verso, 265.

ability of his audience to engage with his work. This presumption of the equality of intelligence creates an exchange of ideas expressed poetically between equals thereby allowing his art to function as dissensus.

As theorised by Rancière, this presumption is required before art can begin to reconfigure the order of the sensible world. I would like to briefly engage with this notion in relation to *Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival*. An insight into the responses residents of Bijlmer had to Hirschhorn's artwork were revealed in a series of interviews with participants conducted by Bishop. The information offered revealed the extent to which members of this marginalised community had been challenged by the experience and the complex responses that it had elicited. This quote from an interview with Raggae Monsels, a resident of Bijlmer recruited to help the artist in a variety of roles, illuminates the unexpected and complex nature of his experience:

Claire: We've talked about the play, what did you think of the lectures?

Raggae: It was kind of odd to have a lecture in the middle of this neighbourhood. To me, this neighbourhood has nothing to do with philosophy, nothing to do with art, nothing to do with thinking out of the box actually. So to have lectures here about a very serious subject, actually brought together several strange elements and it was new. That made it interesting.

Claire: Did people's reactions to the lectures change over the course of the festival?

Raggae: Yes they did. At first they were, "What's this?" and "I don't know what to do with the lecture, what can someone tell me about this place, and about Spinoza, and who is Spinoza, etc." At first people were quite sceptical....

Claire: And what do you think the ideas behind the lectures were?

Raggae: Thomas is the best person to tell you that! People started to appreciate that something new was being done in the Bijlmer. And for people

here this was a real first. Because doing a philosophical lecture in the Bijlmer is not done.¹⁴²

The sentiments expressed in this exchange are typical of the responses Bishop received and they are evidence of the complex impact of the project. One of the keys to the strength of the project is Hirschhorn proceeding boldly with the presumption of intellectual equality. He adheres to the primacy of the project's aesthetic considerations over those of the activist and applies his artistic vision in his typical headless style – that is, without patronising the audience by “adapting” the project to suit a community that some may perceive as less capable of accepting his strident vision. In support of this notion, curator Carlos Basualdo argues:

To demand it function as ‘social work’, to produce measurable effects that somehow coincide with preconceptions about what ‘good’ social or political activism should be, would be an attempt to analyse the work based on postulates that are foreign to Hirschhorn’s goals.¹⁴³

There is no compromise regarding the ostensibly incongruous clash of a festival celebrating a globally significant intellectual in the residence of the marginalised. The artist regularly states his interest in working with non-exclusive audiences, referring to those outside the contemporary art world. As Hirschhorn states, regarding presumptions about his collaborators and audience:

Universality is constitutive to Art. It’s something very important to me. One can say that Art is universal because it’s Art. If it is not universal it is not an Artwork, it’s something else....There are other words for Universality: The Real, The One World, the Other, Justice, Politics, Aesthetics, Truth, the “Non-exclusive Audience” and Equality. I believe – yes, believe - in Equality. And I believe that Art has the Power of transformation. The power to transform

¹⁴² Claire Bishop, S. E., Hal Foster, Manuel Joseph, Yasmin Raymond, Marcus Steinweg (2011). Thomas Hirschhorn. Establishing a critical corpus. Zurich, Swiss Federal Office of Culture, 29.

¹⁴³ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, A. M. G., Carlos Basualdo (2004). Thomas Hirschhorn. London, Phaidon, 97.

each human being, each one and equally without any distinction. I agree that equality is the foundation and the condition of Art.¹⁴⁴

This presumption facilitates an uncompromising engagement with the political possibilities of his projects. The surprising results of his sometimes-blunt incursions are an excellent example of the power of a previously unimagined vision of the world challenging the distribution of the sensible. Clearly the project can be thought of in terms of dissensus, whereby a previously unseeable arrangement of the sensible challenges and re-shapes the order of the sensible as maintained by the order of the police.

The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival is a potent example of the way Hirschhorn embodies the optimism and emancipatory potential of political art while at the same time sustaining the productive and generative tension that embraces the reality of the intractable social realities he engages. The artist avoids simplifying or smoothing away the complexity surrounding his engagement of communities such as those of the Bijlmer.

Both Kelley and Hirschhorn embody a bold and defiant approach to complex issues that has influenced my practice both conceptually and formally. In addition to their conceptual influences the formal aspects of their works have also left their mark on my practice. Kelley's representation of found images in conceptually loaded contexts is one of his most compelling strategies and his redeployment of faxed workers cartoons, particularly *Loading dock drawings*, have had a formative influence. His embrace of this so-called low subject matter in service of broader social critique expanded my understanding of the breadth of what could be engaged with through art. My analysis and reconfiguring of found poster images in *It's 5 o'clock somewhere...* and *Last time around* is one such example of this influence. His humour and embrace of the absurd is also reflected in the treatment these images received.

¹⁴⁴ Birrell, R. (2010). "The Headless Artist: An Interview with Thomas Hirschhorn on the Friendship Between Art and Philosophy, Precarious Theatre and the Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival." Retrieved 13 July, 2014, from <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v3n1/hirschhorn2.html>.

Kelley's comedic embrace of exaggerated notions of Freudian influenced pop psychology¹⁴⁵ compelled my embrace of an abject treatment of images as will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

The deep engagement with the political implications of collage and bold notions of excess that characterise the work of Thomas Hirschhorn have been important in forming my intuitions that drew me to work with found images and everyday materials. I have been naturally drawn to employ everyday materials in my work however Hirschhorn's notions of the democratic social implications¹⁴⁶ of these inexpensive and familiar objects gave this natural inclination a focus and social purpose. Hirschhorn's loaded use of excess and the rejection of the modernist mantra "less is more"¹⁴⁷ have also informed my approach. While I have rarely gone to the excesses Hirschhorn has become renown for, the commitment and boldness of this gesture has helped focus my approach to addressing space and rejecting notions of refinement. In the following chapter the conceptual and formal influence of these artists will be become clear in the discussion of my indirect and experimental engagement with the language of oppositional politics through medium of the political poster.

¹⁴⁵ Welchman, J. C. (2002). Mike Kelley. London, Phaidon Press Inc.

¹⁴⁶ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, A. M. G., Carlos Basualdo (2004). Thomas Hirschhorn. London, Phaidon, 15.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 122.

Chapter 3

Direct and indirect action: an introduction

Since 2004, my studio practice has been motivated by a conscious and unconscious need to test the relevance and validity of established oppositional political strategies. Political imperatives are the driving force behind my art and yet the works' finished form, be they drawings, screen-printed images or installation, present an ambiguous position. A sense of ambivalence pervades my treatment of political subjects and this somewhat open-ended and oblique engagement with the political is at the core of my practice.

Since the events surrounding the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the ascendancy of neo-conservative political power in the US and Australia, I have been compelled to understand how the political left was rendered impotent despite an active opposition to the invasion and sizeable international protests. Regardless, conservative political forces – with significant support from an “embedded” corporate media – forged ahead with their agenda and the invasion of Iraq went ahead. Conservative estimates from August 2013 claim the war has cost the lives of over 162,000 people, with civilian deaths estimated to be at almost 130,000 or 80% of this total.¹⁴⁸ The war is ongoing with US forces conducting bombing raids against the newly emerged threat of the so-called Islamic State (IS) and receiving Australian support in doing so.

The stated aim of the invasion was to find and destroy the “weapons of mass destruction” under the control of Saddam Hussein and to remove the repressive Iraqi leader from power. As was suspected by many before the invasion, and despite considerable efforts to locate them, Hussein’s regime possessed no weapons of mass destruction. The information that was used to justify the invasion was from one individual who falsely claimed to have seen the facilities used to manufacture chemical weapons. Rafid Ahmed Alwan al-Janabi has been described as a fantasist

¹⁴⁸ AFP (2012). "Iraq war death toll put at 162,000." *Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved 16 August, 2013, from <http://www.smh.com.au/world/iraq-war-death-toll-put-at-162000-20120103-1pioz.html>.

and his testimony discredited.¹⁴⁹ The question that remains is not why he created this story, but why the US was so impatient to act upon it. No leader has been held accountable for conducting this unjustified war. Recently former Australian Prime Minister John Howard, under whom Australian forces joined the US in the “coalition of the willing” to attack Iraq, has admitted being “embarrassed” by what he describes as a the failure of intelligence that indicated the presence of Saddam Hussein’s “weapons of mass destruction” and so provided a justification for war.¹⁵⁰ The current conflicts spanning Syria and Iraq are to a large extent the legacy of the decision of the US and its allies to go to war on the basis of discredited evidence.

The oppositional forces failed to stop the invasion, and my perhaps naïve belief in the power of the political left was badly shaken. This disappointment has left a considerable impression and has resulted in a series of exploratory approaches seeking to test and see anew the strategies of resistant politics. This research may uncover strategies that are exhausted, or those that can be refined and adapted in the contemporary context. My response is unequivocally emotional and it is these emotions I harness in my practice. It is a response that I find artistically productive. Despite the disappointments I have a continued belief in the ongoing strength of resistant political position and this is behind my need to evaluate thoroughly modes of political engagement.

The poster is a medium that I have chosen as a kind of conduit to engage with a range of issues. In most ways the internet and social media have recently surpassed it as a medium of dispersing information and while it would be easy to declare the political poster redundant, it persists.¹⁵¹ The resilience of the medium sees it occupying an awkward position as the powerful presence of social media can most easily distribute resistant political communication quickly to those who are most engaged, while a poster attached to a public wall seems to have a greatly diminished

¹⁴⁹ Martin Chuloy, H. P. (2011). "The Guardian." Retrieved 12 August, 2013, from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/feb/15/defector-admits-wmd-lies-iraq-war>.

¹⁵⁰ Bourke, L. (2014). John Howard “embarrassed” by failed WMD intelligence on Iraq. *Sydney Morning Herald*. Sydney, Fairfax Ltd.

¹⁵¹ Moore, C. (2011). *Propaganda Prints: A History of Art in the Service of Social and Political Change*. London, A+C Books.

potential to reach an audience. These issues will be discussed more fully later in this chapter. The contradictions surrounding the notion of the poster make it an ideal medium with which to address the uncertainties surrounding the shifting fortunes of oppositional politics.

As posters play such a central role in my inquiry, the first section of this chapter will outline their role in moments of political crisis and rupture throughout modernism. This will be followed by a detailed discussion of studio work relating to this project including the series of graphite drawings titled *Redback Graphix Drawings, 2012*, a series of screen-printed posters installed as part of a collaborative project with Carla Ceson called *It's 5 o'clock somewhere...*, 2011, a series of posters installed in conjunction with a series of musical performances labelled *Suburban Blight, 2013*, and finally a discussion of the installation *Last time around, 2014*.

The poster in oppositional politics

Over the last four years, my studio practice has channelled questions around political imperatives through the medium of the political poster. While my studio work is also manifested in sculpture and installation, screen-printed artworks modelled on the poster play a crucial role. Posters stand as a conduit with which to indirectly address political imperatives and the manner in which they are addressed. Allusions to the political poster become a conduit for revolutionary moments of the past, political aspirations failed or realised and a window into a possible future. This focus adds an extra layer of critique to my enquiry, as the medium itself is something of an anachronism. What is the relevance of the political poster in the age of social media? In parallel, the questions about the medium's relevance resonate with out-dated modes of communication of resistant political movements. To support my ideas around the political print and poster I will outline its historical significance and context. This survey will span the approaches to images of political engagement, be they indirect, activism and agitation throughout modernism.

Typically political posters are a very direct form of political address and even the most nuanced poster designs have a focused goal of raising awareness about an

issue or influencing opinion. My research and studio output is concerning indirect political expression and this may beg the question – why take inspiration from such a direct mode of communication? While I may employ images with clear and directly stated political positions, these are employed in parallel with other images that may or may not be contradictory or clashing. Ultimately my use of this found political imagery is a focussed way of presenting a plethora of varied political opinions via a medium that has its own set of strengths and shortcomings. One of my aims is to present a cacophony of text and other visual information in resonance with the overwhelming array of messages and opinion we are assaulted by on a daily basis. The contradictions that surround the political poster are in themselves compelling.

Posters, print media and collage have long been intrinsically linked to an oppositional political voice and I begin by providing an important historical context by presenting case studies of some of the most powerful examples of political communication and resistance. Of particular interest here will be the role posters have assumed in moments of political rupture throughout the course of modernism and beyond. Have these unique images been at the forefront of political turmoil or instead have they stood as historical markers for a moment of political rupture? By examining the most potent examples and successes of the medium from the modern period and beyond, we can identify the shifting status of the political posters today. What relevance can a printed image displayed in public have in the in the age of social media?

I first look at Dada artists and their response to the industrial scale violence of their age. Their distinct response to the devastating context of the First World War has significance resonance with this project. A surge of powerful political poster making emerged from the late 1960s in Europe and the US and I examine the example set by the Art Workers Coalition (AWC) in New York. Finally I look at the significance of Redback Graphix in the Australian context emerging in the 1970s and into the 1980s. In conclusion I attempt to assess where the political poster is positioned today. Throughout modernism and into the digital age the relevance of the poster has been under question. Social media is a formidable mobilising force in revolutionary

movements across the globe in recent years. Is there still a place for the political poster in this context? If these images are still relevant, how has their role changed in the shifting communication landscape?

Denying the rational

The Dada movement presents an example of a potent artistic movement that was motivated by an urgent political imperative and yet chose to address it with a unique conceptual mechanism that embodied an indirect approach. Dada artists employed anarchic thought and deed, a rejection of the “rational” thought processes that had led to the industrial scale devastation of WWI and the loss of over eight and a half million lives.¹⁵² The madness and immediacy of the war was embodied in the artistic approach and yet the direct acknowledgement of political realities was often avoided, as art historian Dietmar Elger described:

Dadaism was above all the expression of the particular attitude of mind with which international youth reacted to the social and political upheavals of the time. They formulated their opposition in anarchical, irrational, contradictory and literally “sense-less” actions, recitations and visual art works.¹⁵³

This idiosyncratic response to a compelling political context is one that has set an important precedent for my studio practice. Dada artists’ unique reaction to the political and personal disasters of their time lend their art a vitality that remains relevant to this day. Contemporary artists such as Thomas Hirschhorn continue the Dada artists’ approach of “making work politically as opposed to making political work”¹⁵⁴. The movement’s defiant tone saw the complete rejection of bourgeois art and aesthetic considerations, with the emphasis turning instead to defiance and an abrasive anti-art stance.

¹⁵² (2004). "WWI Casualties and deaths." The Great War and the shaping of the 20th Century. Retrieved 21 September, 2014, from http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/resources/casdeath_pop.html.

¹⁵³ Elger, D. (2006). Dadaism. Germany, Taschen.

¹⁵⁴ Hirschhorn, T. (2008). "Thomas Hirschhorn. Doing art politically: What does this mean?". Retrieved 24 October, 2014, from <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v3n1/fullap01.html>.

Dada spawned a wealth of printed ephemera in support of their exhibitions and ideas. The movement's graphics and collages were strongly influenced by Futurism and its approach to typography and graphic mayhem. The years immediately following the war saw a rich exchange between Futurism, Dada, de Stijl and Constructivism.¹⁵⁵ After the war a more overtly political Dada approach developed in Berlin, championed by the artist exiles that had returned.¹⁵⁶ Despite their divergent interests, there was a significant cross-pollination and in order to communicate these new ideas a number of journal titles emerged from within the Dada camp such as DADA, Club Dada, Der Dada, and Dada Almanach. In turn the exhibitions that helped define the movement needed posters to promote them and new Dada design styles were employed.

For the politically motivated Dadaists, the medium of collage embodied speed, efficiency and satirical possibilities that were too hard to ignore. The critical nature of collage was a powerful tool in the hands of the Dadaist and it allowed a deft appropriation of advertising and news images, and satirical and absurdist re-arrangement of newspaper headlines. Hanna Höch was an artist who used the power of collage to comment on not only the complexity of the modern world, but on the art movement of which she was a part.¹⁵⁷

Höch's complex collage, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada Through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany*, 1919 – 1920, is worth examining closely. It is a provocative and chaotic example of the power of an artwork that aims not only to antagonize but also to present a vision of a future that sees women's suffrage.¹⁵⁸ As the only woman in the Berlin Dada movement, the title itself – referring to the power of women with its reference to 'the kitchen knife' — has a defiant rebuke to the male dominated art movement on whose periphery she was kept.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵ Wrede, S. (1988). *The Modern Poster*. New York, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 21.

¹⁵⁶ Steven Heller, S. C. (1988). *Graphic style: from Victorian to post-modern*. London, H.N. Abrams, 169.

¹⁵⁷ Elger, D. (2006). *Dadaism*. Germany, Taschen, 44.

¹⁵⁸ Lanchner, C. (1996). *The Photomontages of Hannah Höch*. Germany, Walker Art Centre, 63.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

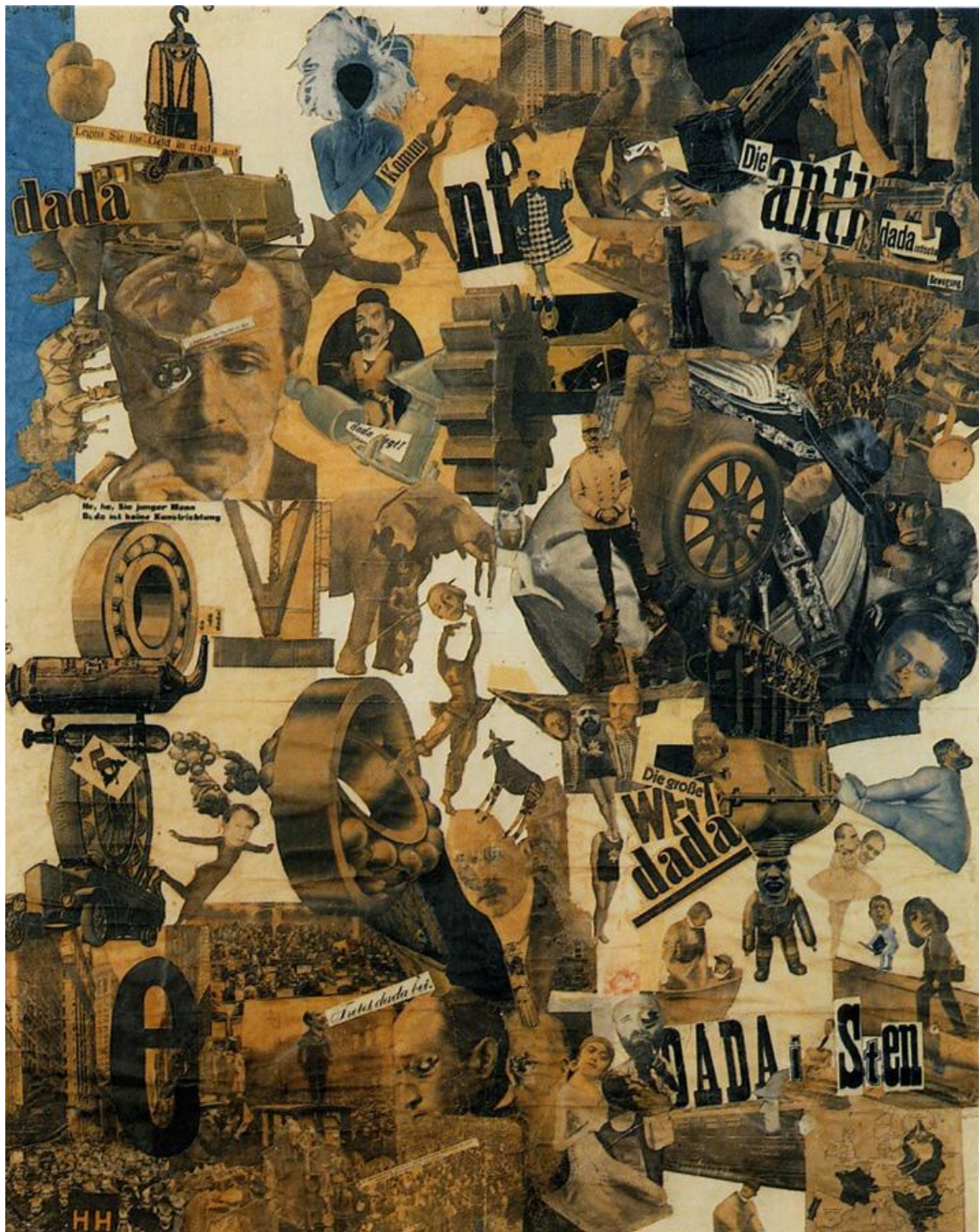


Figure 9.
Hannah Höch, *Cut with the Dada Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany*, 1919, collage of pasted papers, 90 x 144 cm

The collage is a bold clash of text and images and, at over one meter in height, is impressively large for a collage. Its theme and content is central to the concerns of Dada. Man and machine clash and intermesh in this chaotic and contradictory vision of the modern world. It is animated by machine parts, crowds on the streets and

texts exhorting people to join in Dada's agitation. Much of the imagery is drawn from the year of its production and in some ways plots out the changing political and social landscape of the Republic. Representatives of the old guard such as the Kaiser and Field Marshal Hindenberg are clustered in the upper right and labelled as the "anti-dada" with some recontextualised newspaper text. They are contrasted with representatives of the "new", including images of the first president of the new Weimar Republic, Friedrich Ebert.¹⁶⁰ In the lower right corner communist figures are complimented with images of Dada artists. These male figures are interspersed with images of active and dynamic female figures that activate the work on a formal and conceptual level. Finally in the bottom right corner of the work sits a map identifying European countries that were slated to give women the vote.¹⁶¹

It is a work born of an immersion in the revolutionary moment, that of post-Wilhelmine Germany. Its chaotic vision ponders the present but projects into the future.¹⁶² The work is atypical of Höch's latter images that presented a more considered and design-inspired approach to composition. It is however a definitive example of the way Dada artists embraced the irresolvable, complex and violent reality of their political and historical context.

Ruptures of the late 1960s

Political graphics assumed an important role in the uprisings of protest and resistance of the late 1960s. Energies behind this revolutionary agitation began emerging in Germany, Italy, the US and France. This groundswell of activity was the most pronounced it had been since the end of the First World War and was driven by a raft of issues that were dominated by the US involvement in the Vietnam War.

The worker and student uprising in Paris of May 1968 stands as a revolutionary moment deeply significant for France. Despite the fact it emerged late on a global scale, following upheavals in Italy, Germany and the US, it was the first time that

¹⁶⁰ Elger, D. (2006). *Dadaism*. Germany, Taschen, 44.

¹⁶¹ Lanchner, C. (1996). *The Photomontages of Hannah Höch*. Germany, Walker Art Centre, 25.

¹⁶² *Ibid*, 7.

student and worker action had occurred simultaneously.¹⁶³ The upheaval gained national significance after a harsh crackdown on long-running student protests by the police. This quickly led to a popular explosion of support with a significant number of workers occupying their own factories. The ongoing protests and the confrontations with police led to a nationwide strike of eleven million workers that brought the country to a near standstill and threatened to bring down the government of Charles de Gaulle.¹⁶⁴

In support of the uprisings the walls of the city became a place for communication, with the dominant medium being posters. On the 16th of May students and faculty at the Ecole des Beaux Arts (School of Fine Arts) commandeered the painting and lithography studio to establish the Atelier Populaire (The Popular Workshop). The first poster produced called for unity between students and the workers and this set the tone for the remainder of the occupation. Consistent with French leftist convictions, the workshop saw its role as being in service of the workers and an analysis of the studio's output counts 123 posters in service of the workers' cause compared to 23 addressing student issues.¹⁶⁵

The posters were produced collectively and personal authorship was rejected as bourgeois by the collective. The sole authorship of the mythical genius artist was seen as a device employed by the gallery system to help make artists more saleable. In contrast, the output of the Atelier Populaire was the result of a committee and individual posters went through a rigorous critiquing session, firstly for "political correctness" in regard to the relevance of the message. A secondary stage that addressed how effectively the design communicated its message was focused more on the aesthetics and poetics of the image.

¹⁶³ Seidman, M. (2004). *The Imaginary Revolution: Parisian Students and Workers in 1968*. New York, Berghahn Books, 169.

¹⁶⁴ Kugelberg, J. (2011). *Beauty Is in the Street: A Visual Record of the May '68 Paris Uprising*. London, Four Corners Books, 22.

¹⁶⁵ Seidman, M. (2004). *The Imaginary Revolution: Parisian Students and Workers in 1968*. New York, Berghahn Books, 178.



Figure 10
Documentation of the Atelier Populaire studio at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, 1968

Initially the posters were planned for display in art galleries around the city that supported the causes of the uprisings, however the plan was rejected and the posters were pasted to the walls around the city. This had a number of benefits including the fact it bypassed galleries that represented the commercial approach the Atelier Populaire deemed incompatible with their cause. Having the posters displayed publicly at all times made sense. With the strikes creating considerable disruption of the print-based news media, the posters took on an added significance as one of the few sources of printed information being available to the public:

The poster regained the significance that it had once achieved in the nineteenth century because strikes disrupted the daily production and distribution of other media, particularly newspapers and television, which were sometimes unfriendly to students.¹⁶⁶

The posters' eloquence is a result of the careful consideration of text combined with the warmth of even the most succinct imagery. Many of the images are strikingly

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 177.

relevant and one such poster is *SALAIRES LEGERS, CHARS LOURDS* (translation: Light Wages, Heavy Tanks). Like most posters produced by the Atelier Populaire it is a single colour image, this one printed in military olive drab. The two lines of text appear above and below an image of a tank, bristling with guns. The blocky text and imagery are rendered boldly and efficiently and yet seem to carry the warmth of the handmade with text being slightly wonky and subtly wavering in scale.

Not only did these elegant compositions serve to illuminate the stark issues that the uprising addressed, these single-colour images were also efficient to print and allowed a great number of the images to be reproduced, up to 2000 in one night.¹⁶⁷ While it was the lithography studios at the Ecole des Beaux Arts that were occupied, the vast majority of posters were in fact screen-printed. The lithography process was too slow and was quickly abandoned in favour of screen-printing that allowed a quick deployment of imagery using photosensitive stencil techniques. The artists learnt to swiftly clean the screen of one stencil and replace it with new imagery, ready for the next run of posters.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ Kugelberg, J. (2012). *Beauty Is in the Street: A Visual Record of the May '68 Paris Uprising*. London, Four Corners Books, 10.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

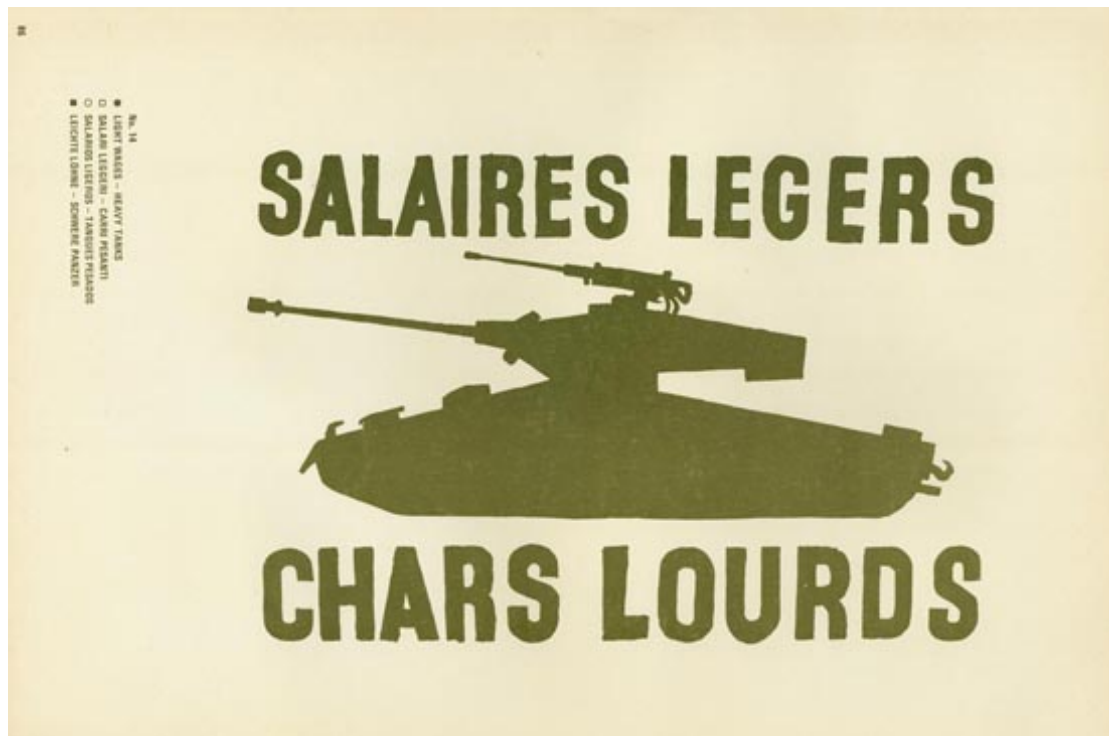


Figure 11.
Atelier Populaire, *Light Wages, Heavy Tanks*, 1968
Screen-print on paper

SALAIRES LEGERS, CHARS LOURDS, 1968 alludes to the fact that, along with poverty and unemployment, workers' wages were being driven down under the de Gaulle presidency. Despite this, military spending increased and the poster addresses perceptions that French leftists held in regard to de Gaulle's preoccupation with military and foreign affairs at the expense of domestic concerns.

The success of the poster campaign on the French public may be difficult to assess, but its place in the history of political graphics is undeniable. Reflecting on the significance of the posters and the student movement driving their production, Michael Seidman noted:

The most striking and enduring cultural legacy of May remains the posters produced by Parisian art students ... Most importantly, they were *ouvriériste*. The faith in the transformative might of the working class became the major theme of revolutionary art. The art of the revolution lends little support to

those who argue that May was fundamentally an individualist rebellion or a crisis of civilization.¹⁶⁹

While the issues addressed by the Atelier Populaire were broad in scope, their forum, the streets of Paris, was intensely focussed. In contrast, the majority of resistant political energy in the US during the late 1960s and early 1970s was centred on opposition to the Vietnam War and the conscription of young men. The US movement was widespread and dispersed with protests in cities throughout the whole country.

University campuses were popular venues for protests and were on a number of occasions met with brutal oppression. During a protest on 4 May 1970 at Kent State University, Ohio, four students were shot and killed and nine others badly injured when National Guard soldiers opened fire on students protesting a stepped-up US military campaign in Cambodia. There was a significant reaction to the killings as students across the country intensified their protests by instigating a national student strike. The strike affected 450 universities across the US and involved over four million students, and rattled the already tense Nixon administration.^{170 171}

The US anti-war movement generated an abundance of posters to support its cause. Student groups that produced and distributed protest posters included Student Mobilisation Committee to End the War in Vietnam, National Peace Action Coalition, and the Student Mobilisation Committee. Artists were active in many levels of the anti-war movement, with numerous well-known artists producing anti-war poster graphics including Jasper Johns, Richard Hamilton and Leon Golub.

¹⁶⁹ Seidman, M. (2004). *The Imaginary Revolution: Parisian Students and Workers in 1968*. New York, Berghahn Books, 177.

¹⁷⁰ Richard Nixon was elected the 37th President of the United States in 1969. His Presidency ended with his resignation in 1974. Retrieved 1 August, 2015, from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/1600/presidents/richardnixon>

¹⁷¹ "Kent State, May 1-4, 1970, timeline of events." Retrieved 25 April, 2014, from <http://www.may4.org/>.



Figure 12.
Richard Hamilton, *Kent State*, 1970
Serigraph on Paper



Figure 13.
Student Mobilisation Committee to End the War in Vietnam, *Talk is Cheap*, 1967
Offset lithograph on paper

The Art Workers Coalition (AWC)¹⁷² was a collective of artists and critics who banded together in opposition to the war but also sought a critical reconsideration of artists' work and the institutions they worked within. The central members included soon-to-be prominent art-world figures such as Carl Andre, Robert Morris, Lucy Lippard and Hans Haacke¹⁷³ amongst others. These artists, writers and critics also worked within the very art institutions they intended to reform. The group wanted to challenge the art system it viewed as riven with institutional racism and sexism, and they took aim at the narrow and exclusive exhibition policies of institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). In her article, "The Art Workers' Coalition: not a history", Lucy Lippard commented:

The most controversial aspect of the AWC amongst artists and establishment has been its so-called "politicization of art", a term usually used to cover the

¹⁷² The AWC was formed in 1969 and disbanded in 1971.

Bryan-Wilson, J. (2009). *Art Workers*. Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 1.

Black and women's programs as well as demands that museums speak out against racism war and repression.

On May 4th Hilton Kramer, of *The New York Times* left-handedly complimented us by saying that the Open Hearing proposed "albeit incoherently...a way of thinking about the production and consumption of works of art that would radically modify, if not actually displace, currently established practices with their heavy reliance on big money and false prestige". He had the vivid impression of a moral issue that wiser and more experienced minds have long been content to leave totally unexamined.¹⁷⁴

The AWC also had an agenda to draw attention to the complicity that art institutions had in regard to the ongoing war in Vietnam. In 1969 the AWC were involved in numerous protests including parades, vigils and performances with the aim of increasing pressure on art institutions to take a stronger position on the Vietnam War.¹⁷⁵ However, arguably their most enduring impact was with a single poster image produced in 1969 titled *Q. And Babies? A. And Babies.*¹⁷⁶

The AWC had begun to work on the production of a poster with the financial support of MoMA. The poster employed war photographer Ron Haerberle's photograph of the aftermath of the My Lai massacre of 16 March 1968 conducted by the US soldiers of Charlie Company, 11th Brigade. Three hundred unarmed civilians were killed and their village burned to the ground. The photograph depicts scattered and bloody bodies of South Vietnamese civilians, mostly women and children, in the aftermath of the attack. The strength of the image lies not only in its damning and grisly content, but also in the way it frames the victims. They are on a narrow path between two grassy fields, the photo is shot from a high angle allowing no space for any part of the sky, adding an important sense of claustrophobia. The event had recently come to the attention of the US media, and television journalist Mike Wallace had conducted an interview with a witness, army officer Paul Meadlo. It was

¹⁷⁴ Lippard, L. (1970). "The Art Workers' Coalition: not a history." *Studio International* (November).

¹⁷⁵ Bryan-Wilson, J. (2009). *Art Workers*. Los Angeles, University of California Press, 25.

¹⁷⁶ Volpato, E. (2012). "The Art Workers' Coalition." *MOUSSE CONTEMPORARY ART MAGAZINE* 10 September. Retrieved 26 April, 2014, from <http://moussemagazine.it/articolo.mm?id=609#top>.

from this interview that the *Q. And babies? A. And babies.* quote had emerged. The casual nature of the televised admission seemed to underscore the brutality of a war that many people felt US participation in was unjustified. This poster was printed in full colour with the titular exchange printed in transparent blood-red text over the scene of devastation.

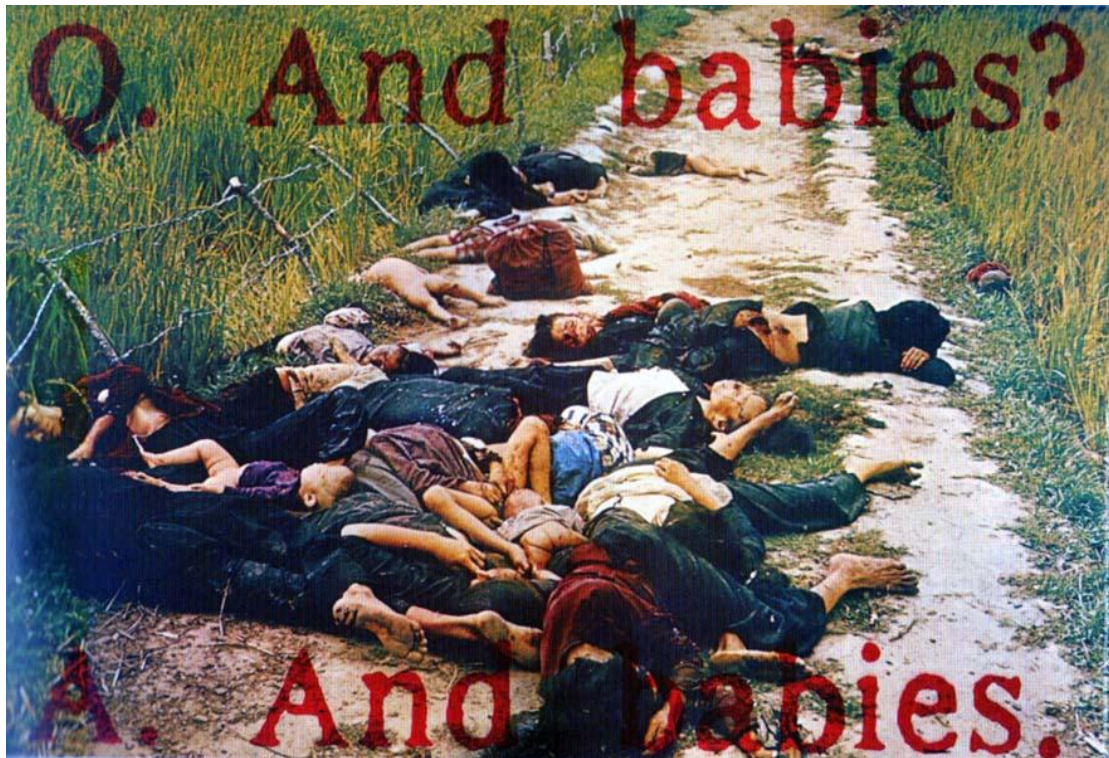


Figure 14.
Art Workers Coalition, *Q. And Babies? A. And Babies.*, 1970
Poster, offset lithograph, printed in colour, by Ronald L. Haeberle and Peter Brandt, Art Workers' Coalition.

The AWC went ahead with the printing of the poster despite the fact that MoMA withdrew all funding and involvement. Elena Volpato discussed the issue in her article on the AWC:

...New York's MoMA, which at first had agreed to fund production of the poster, but soon refused all involvement, due to an obvious ideological conflict between the beliefs of some trustees – firm supporters of the Vietnam war – and what the poster was denouncing. The reason the museum gave to avoid funding *And babies* spoke volumes: the poster was outside the

museum's "function". I think no statement could have sparked greater indignation in an artistic community that was striving to work by any means within the sphere of life and reality.¹⁷⁷

The printing was funded via the AWC's own efforts and the poster was then distributed publicly in New York city advertising spaces, at anti-war rallies and reproduced in magazines. Its most controversial manifestation saw multiple copies taken into MoMA galleries by AWC members where Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) was on display. The posters were paraded in front of Picasso's iconic work and the event was documented.¹⁷⁸

Q. And Babies? A. And Babies was just one public outcome of the AWC and it could be argued that other posters had a higher visibility or had a broader appeal. However few posters have so incisively highlighted the abuse of a power.

The Australian Political poster since the 1960's

In the late 1970s and into the 1980s Redback Graphix was an icon of political expression in Australia. Its political posters were highly visible in inner city Sydney and the studio provided a valuable model of political engagement for visual artists, designers and activists. The studio had its roots in the Earthworks Poster Collective that was established in 1971 by Colin Little and Vicky King. At this stage it is useful to consider how the international culture of political resistance had led to the creation of Earthworks Poster Collective and the broader production of political posters in Australia.

Posters and publications presenting political dissent have been present in Australia since the early years of colonisation. During the Great Depression linocut was the preferred medium of left-leaning artists and imagery was used to illustrate magazines such as *Masses* and *Workers Art* published by the Workers Art Clubs in

¹⁷⁷ Volpato, E. (2012). "The Art Workers' Coalition." MOUSSE CONTEMPORARY ART MAGAZINE 10 September. Retrieved 26 April, 2014, from <http://moussemagazine.it/articolo.mm?id=609#top>.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

the Sydney and Melbourne in the early 1930s.¹⁷⁹ In the post-war period opposition to the Menzies government's controversial cold war referendum attempting to ban the Australian Communist Party represented in linocut posters such as *No fascist powers for Menzies* (1945) by John Goodschall Johnson. Noel Counihan was a founding member of Melbourne Workers Art Club and continued producing his linocut images of dissent from the 1940s into the late 1960s when he contributed a large scale anti-Vietnam war poster for *The Broadsheet*, published in 1967.¹⁸⁰ In parallel with the *Atelier Populaire's* adoption of the medium in the late 1960s, the early 1970s saw the medium of screen-printing come to prominence as an efficient means of creating political posters in Australia. The motivation for this production was resistance to the Vietnam War developing in the UK and US. The prime motivation for this resistance was the perception of the unjust nature of the war and the Australian Government policy that saw young Australian fighting and dying in the US led occupation of Vietnam. One of the most prominent centres of poster production in Australia was in Sydney at the Third World Bookshop. Groups such as The Vietnam Action Committee and SCREW (The Society for Cultivating Rebellion Everywhere!!) held meeting and produced posters as part of campaigns organised out of the centre know as Resistance.¹⁸¹ Political activity was spread throughout major Australian cities during the early 1970s and political poster groups were formed in Adelaide with the Visual Arts Group of the Progressive Art Movement creating poster campaigns against foreign military bases and a women's poster groups addressing issues of equality via the Anarchist Feminist Poster Collective alongside others working independently. Feminist groups were emerging in Sydney with Harridan Screen Printers, Matilda Graphics, Lucifoil Poster and Women's Domestic Needlework Group and also in Melbourne with Bloody Good Graphics and Jill Posters. Elsewhere groups focussed on a range of political issues and were active in Brisbane at the University of Queensland, in Melbourne centres included Permanent Red, Breadline and Cockatoo and out of Fremantle in Western Australia emerged Praxis Poster Workshop.

¹⁷⁹ Butler, R. (1993). *Poster Art in Australia*, National Gallery of Australia, 45.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 45.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*, 46.

At this time however the most prominent and influential group was the Earthworks Poster Collective.¹⁸² Early works from the group were influenced by imagery from the UK and US counter culture, typical of the psychedelic poster styles employing saturated colours and drawing on imagery from Art Nouveau poster design and Eastern spirituality. In Australia this imagery was popularised by magazines such as OZ for whom renowned artist and poster maker Martin Sharp was the art director.¹⁸³

The studio printed posters for a wide range of social and cultural concerns and no single artist claimed authorship of the works that emerged. The collective was inspired by the important role posters had taken in political movements of recent times.

In Australia, poster makers were well aware of ways posters had been used overseas – for example, as political tools by the Chinese government; and as a form of resistance by French students of the *Atelier Populaire* in their revolt against the state in May 1968.¹⁸⁴

Towards the late 1970s the output had a more direct and forceful feel influenced by punk. Michael Callaghan joined Earthworks in 1976 and by 1979 the collective was disbanded. Callaghan was joined by former collective members Marie McMahon, Jan Mackay and Ray Young, and Redback Graphix was established in 1979 as a screen-printing studio in the Tin Sheds at Sydney University, NSW. Like Earthworks, the studio had a strong grounding in grass roots activism and the belief that individuals could make a difference in local and international political issues.¹⁸⁵ There was an early emphasis on working with issues that affected migrant workers employed at BHP steelworks in Wollongong. The poster text was often produced in dual languages and the studio designed works in response to industrial disputes, unemployment and local politics and community issues.¹⁸⁶ The grass roots political

¹⁸² Ibid, 47.

¹⁸³ Ibid, 44.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 48.

¹⁸⁵ Zagala, A., N. G. o. Australia, et al. (2008). *Redback Graphix*, National Gallery of Australia, 17.

¹⁸⁶ Butler, R. (1993). *Poster Art in Australia*, National Gallery of Australia, 50.

causes in the service of workers in the face of corporate and government power reflected similar issues that were of concern in the UK under Margaret Thatcher, whose leadership saw a significant loss of jobs in the mining industry.¹⁸⁷

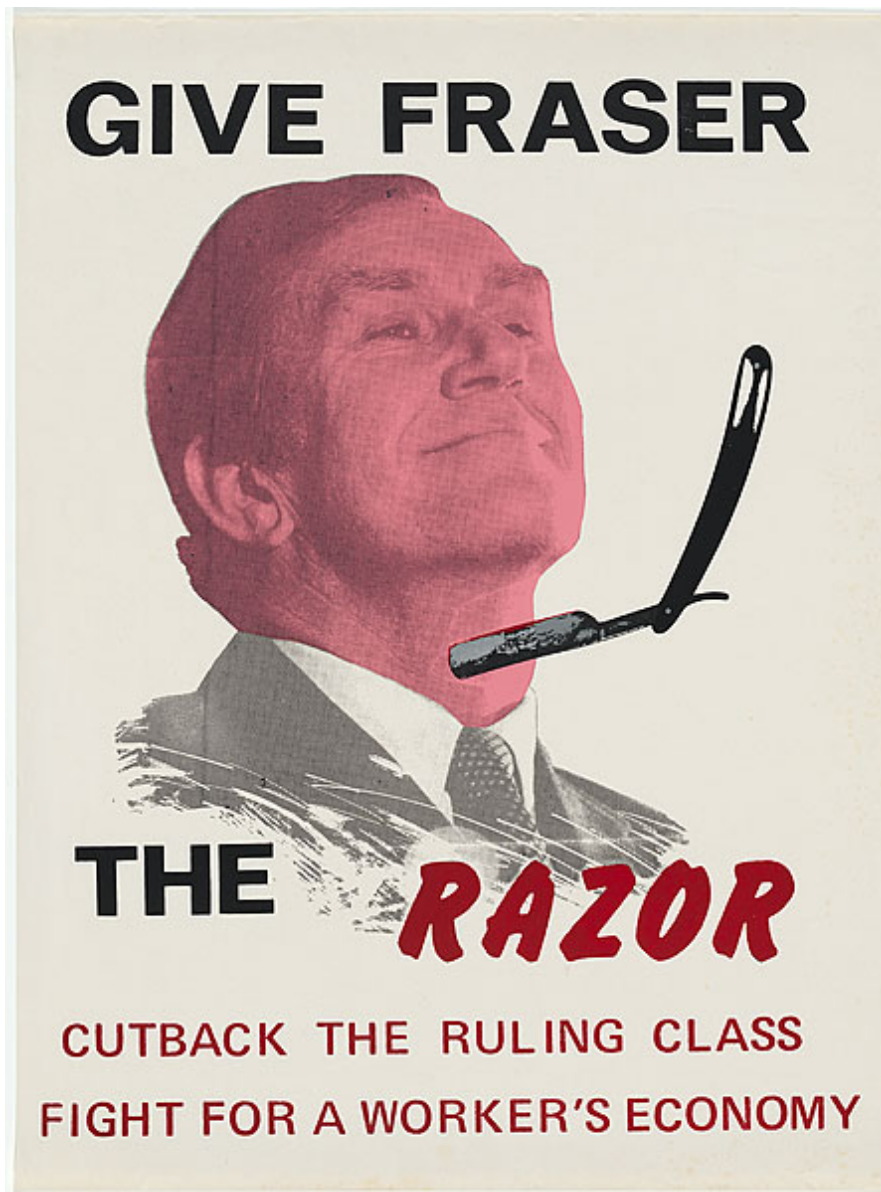


Figure 15.
Earthworks Poster Collective
Give Fraser the razor, 1977, ink; paper screen-print, printed in colour, from four stencils, 68.2 x 53.2 cm

Since the studio ceased operations in 1993 its prolific output has been collected, documented and included in exhibitions and retrospectives. The degree to which

¹⁸⁷ (2015). "The Thatcher effect: what changed and what stayed the same" Retrieved 7 November, 2015, from <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/apr/12/thatcher-britain>

Redback Graphix has been canonised is reflected in the fact that works continue to be exhibited in museums and galleries on a regular basis throughout Australia.¹⁸⁸ The National Gallery of Australia has a comprehensive Redback Graphix collection and in 2008 produced a book of works from the studio together with an essay by Anna Zagala.

The thorough institutional integration of Earthworks and Redback Graphix belies the radical and venomous nature of their messages and imagery, particularly in the early years. Images such as *Give Fraser the Razor, 1977*, depict then Prime Minister, Malcom Fraser with a razor poised to slice his throat. *Keep warm this winter - make trouble!!* from 1978 pictures two women armed respectively with a Molotov cocktail and a rock, set to attack an already burning church. The cheerily titled *Tomorrow's bacon!*, 1976 simply presents a close-cropped portrait of a portly Queensland police officer bracketed by the titular text. At a distance of thirty-seven years, these images feel fresh and incisive. A strong sense of humour and larrikinism is central to the success of many works and the key to their engaging quality and enduring appeal. The targets of their invective are still relevant, but their ongoing resonance hinges on more than this. In the Australian context it is rare to see resistant political sentiments so powerfully conveyed in public. They represent the early years of a project that would lead to the creation of a design service for a broad range of left-leaning causes and progressive public education campaigns.

Works from these years epitomize a 1980s design aesthetic – geometric shapes energised by fluorescent colours, eye activating patterning and a commercial “pop” aesthetic. Their commissions included a significant number of posters promoting government-sponsored public health messages. Perhaps the best-known work of this time is *Don't be shame be game, use condoms!*, 1987. The distribution of the poster was very broad and it was a fixture in student accommodation and group housing for a number of years. Other posters advocated for the use of public transport, healthy eating and raising awareness of racism in the workplace.

¹⁸⁸ (2014). "Works by Redback Graphix." Retrieved 20 October, 2014, from <http://www.mca.com.au/collection/artist/redback-graphix/>.



Michael Callaghan, Paul Cockram, Redback Graphix
Don't be shame be game, use condoms! [2nd version]1987,
Client NCAIDS, Canberra, silkscreen print, 51 x 76 cm

Redback Graphix did not emerge from a specific moment of political rupture and for this reason it may seem difficult to assess the impact of its output, however this is predominantly due to the sheer breadth of the issues it addressed. The studio holds a unique place in the history of Australian political activism and stands as an example

of what a commitment to activism and a will to work with a range of community groups, political collectives and institutions can achieve.

Throughout the 1980s the conservative political climate in the US and the UK served as fertile ground for the growth of resistant political movements. Both countries focused on sweeping economic reform including the privatisation of state assets and the deregulation of financial markets in addition to a heightened sense of confrontation with the Soviet Union. Leaders such as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher were deeply unpopular among socially conscious political groups and inspired an organised resistance around a range of issues.

In the art world there was an increased emphasis on feminist and humanist dialogue in art, with a particular focus on the aesthetic of political graphics. The media-conscious work of Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer and the Guerrilla Girls are examples of an abundance of imagery responding to conservative attitudes around gender and identity in the art world and society at large. In a parallel context emerged a group of activists dissatisfied with the US Government's approach to the increasing number of deaths of men, women and children from AIDS and HIV.

AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) was formed in March 1987 with the aim of being a body for political action in the fight against public and government inaction in the face of thousands of deaths from AIDS-related illnesses. The organisation responded to a growing sense of powerlessness in the face of a conservative and indifferent US government whose inaction on the crisis had left thousands dead and many more without access to life-saving medication. They saw government support of research into the disease progressing haltingly and vital legislation that would give many thousands access to medication being deferred. Their survival was at stake and it was this that led to their focus on direct political action.



Figure 17.

Avram Finklestein, Brian Howard, Oliver Johnston, Charles Kreloff, Chris Lione,
and Jorge Soccaras designers,
SILENCE = DEATH, 1987

The iconic images associated with the media-savvy collective were designed and displayed publicly well before ACT UP had officially formed. The Silence = Death image was designed by a collective consisting of Avram Finklestein, Brian Howard, Oliver Johnston, Charles Kreloff, Chris Lione and Jorge Soccaras. In interview with Maxine Wolfe she recalled the very real motivations of the activist-designers:

They were a whole group of men who needed to talk to each other and others about what the fuck were they going to do, being gay men in the age of AIDS?! Several of them were designers of various sorts – graphic designers – and they ended up deciding that they had to start doing wheat pasting on the streets, to get the message out to people: "Why aren't you doing something?" So they created the SILENCE=DEATH logo well before ACT UP ever existed, and they made posters before ACT UP ever existed, and the posters at the bottom said something like, "What's really happening in Washington? What's happening with Reagan and Bush and the Food and Drug

Administration? It ended with this statement: "Turn anger, fear, grief into action." Several of these graphic designers were at that first evening that Larry spoke.¹⁸⁹

They employed the pink triangle, a repressive symbol that originated from the era of the National Socialists in Germany, and had been reclaimed by activists in the seventies. The pink triangle pointing downward was used to mark homosexuals in Nazi concentration camps during World War II in the same manner as Jews were marked with a yellow Star of David. It singled out the wearer as being someone at the bottom of the camp pecking order and so subject to the most extreme humiliation and abuse. The Nazi metaphor was also used in other ways, as discussed by Raymond Smith:

In its manifesto, the Silence = Death Project drew parallels between the Nazi period and the AIDS crisis, declaring "silence about the oppression and annihilation of gay people, then and now, must be broken as a matter of our survival." The slogan thus protested both taboos around discussion of safer sex and the unwillingness of some to resist societal injustice and governmental indifference.¹⁹⁰

The bold designs were punctuated with white on black text that also included the slogans ACTION = LIFE and IGNORANCE = FEAR. The distinctive graphic style embodied in their posters, protest banners and t-shirts was an important part of ACT UP's powerful visual presence. There was a marketer's savvy behind the visual impact of the movement's imagery and the creative way it was deployed. Not only were the posters, t-shirts and protest banners well designed, memorable and confronting, they were also deployed strategically en masse to great effect.

¹⁸⁹ From an interview with Maxine Wolfe. Ed. Gordon Brent Ingram, A. M. B., and Yolanda Retter (1997). Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance. Seattle Washington, Bay Press

¹⁹⁰ Raymond A. Smith, a. K. E. G. (1998). "The Body. the complete HIV/AIDS resource." Retrieved 7 May, 2014, from <http://www.thebody.com/content/art14040.html>.



Figure 18.
ACT UP Women's protest, Washington DC, 1990.

A powerful example of this strategy, and the collective power and creativity of the organisation itself, is embodied in a public protest at Shea Stadium in the Spring of 1988, a major sporting venue for baseball in Queens, New York. ACT UP planned what they saw as an educational intervention aimed at the general public, not a typical approach for a group known for confrontational public protest and the occupation of both government and corporate offices. As Maxine Wolfe stated regarding the aims of this atypical action:

...we actually thought of this as a light-hearted but hard-hitting educational action because it would be in a place where no one would ever expect us to be.¹⁹¹

The stadium action took place on multiple fronts, with leaflets being distributed near entrances (supported by unofficially sympathetic owners) and announcements being

¹⁹¹ Sommella, L. (1997). "ACT UP Storytellings." Retrieved 10 October, 2014, from <http://www.actupny.org/diva/CBstory-shea.html>.

flashed up on the electric scoreboard – a perk available to groups who purchased multiple tickets. In the end activists and their supporters purchased over four hundred seats. At several stages of the game banners utilising the distinctive white text on black background were unfurled at strategic points in the game play.

The action was not cleared by the stadium administration and yet there was no conflict, in fact staff and security were supportive with some of them handing out leaflets for ACT UP at the start of game. The first of the sizable banners read "Don't balk at safe sex", the next was unfurled by a second group on the opposite side stated "AIDS kills women," and the third "Men! Use condoms." As Maxine Wolfe recalls:

And then, people from ACT UP got so into having these banners that people started swaying back and forth, up and down, and the visual effect was incredible because it was at night, totally dark, and the lighting from the ballpark totally reflected the white letters of the banners. An inning and a half later, we opened the next set of banners. They said, "Strike out AIDS," "No glove, no love," and the final one said "SILENCE=DEATH" and it had a huge triangle and ACT UP! This was on C-Span. We not only got to the twenty thousand people who were in the ballpark, but it was televised around the country and we gave out leaflets. We reached an incredible number of people in an audience that we'd otherwise never have been able to get to. Most of the people came from ACT UP, but many people from other groups got wind of it and thought it was the most exciting thing.¹⁹²

At their peak, ACT UP with their powerful graphics were a highly visible, well-recognised group of activists who were successful in raising awareness and eventually in influencing US government policy. The group has had divisions over time with some sections of the organisation splitting off to oversee clinical trials of life-saving AIDS drugs. They continue their work today.

¹⁹² Ibid.

Political print/posters in the age of New Media

Today, the Marxist fervour may have died down but flare-ups against capitalist forces persist. The question is, where is the political design? There was the odd hand-drawn poster at the UCL occupation in December but no organised design campaign to compare with '68. Perhaps graphics were a device that the students didn't need. With Twitter and Facebook and mobile phones to hand, the poster is a less exponential way of mobilising support. Which also suggests that protest today relies more on the telegraphic sound bite than the graphic image – an ironic conclusion given that ours is an age in thrall to pictures.¹⁹³

- Justin McGuirk in *The Guardian*, 2014

The political prints and posters discussed have been the historical crystallisation of art movements, formal collectives or loose groups of individuals all of whom responded to the imperatives of their historical moment. The images addressed, be they single artworks or political messages reproduced in multiples, are included here because their political effect has been considerable and they have become cultural and historical artefacts of their times. What is the role of political images in the age of social media and increasingly narrow and polarised news and editorial sources?

To imagine the political image, pasted to a wall in relative isolation, is of course false and the posters and artworks discussed so far reveal a complex interrelationship with news media and mass communication of the day. Source images incorporated into Hannah Höch's collage *Cut with the Dada Kitchen Knife...* were derived predominantly from *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* (Berlin Illustrated Newspaper), the

¹⁹³ McGuirk, J. (2011). "Beauty Is in the Street: the power of protest posters." Retrieved 23 April, 2014, from www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/may/23/beauty-in-street-posters-protest/print.

first weekly mass-market German news magazine.¹⁹⁴ The Atelier Populaire's messages had increased visibility as they stepped into a (Press) media vacuum created by the very strikes they promoted. The AWC's *Q. And babies?...* was a collaboration with photojournalist Ron Haerberle whose photograph of the massacred South Vietnamese civilians first appeared in the weekly general interest magazine *LIFE*.

The poster as a communication tool is still relevant. In support of this is the faith placed in it by paying advertisers. Posters advertising products, services and events plaster city streets, roadsides, tunnels and walls. At its most stark it must be acknowledged that there is still a place for the poster and the messages it can deliver, even if it is predominantly in an urban setting.

While the impact of social media on political events has been claimed as significant, it has also been overstated.¹⁹⁵ Evidence shows that the key to getting individuals involved in social movements is to form real life personal connections. The kind of social links forged via social media are weak and not always effective in motivating the groundswell of support a popular movement needs to be effective:

So far, the idea of Facebook Revolution has been a great example of wishful thinking by the digerati. In real life, the phenomenon hasn't held up. The uses of Twitter in Iran were particularly exaggerated, as the messages that caught the attention of outsiders were in English. In Egypt, a national strike beginning April 6, 2008 (hence the name of the April 6 Youth Movement) announced on Facebook was a failure — disorganised, unsure of its tactics,

¹⁹⁴ Lanchner, C. (1996). *The Photomontages of Hannah Höch*. Germany, Walker Art Centre, 25.

¹⁹⁵ Russell, A. (2011). "The Arab Spring. Extra-National Information Flows, Social Media and the 2011 Egyptian Uprising." Retrieved 10 October, 2014, from <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/viewArticle/93>.

quickly repressed once it stepped offline and into the streets...That's not to say that online communication isn't useful.¹⁹⁶

Historically the poster was an essential element in creating awareness and fostering the development of social movements. If the poster is no longer an essential element in a much larger series of networked events, then perhaps its role lies in being a kind of historic visual landmark or icon? While Shepard Fairey's image of Obama, known as the *Hope* poster from the 2008 election campaign, may have won few converts to the President's cause, it still stands as a kind of historical signpost and efficient graphic reminder of that time. More recent examples would also include the scant and/or distorted media coverage of the 2014 "March in March" rallies in major cities around Australia. Coverage from conservative news sources focused on the supposedly offensive signs and banners protestors carried and little else.¹⁹⁷ The protestors were cast as offensive radicals not worthy of being taken seriously when, in reality, the protests were made up of a broad cross-section of Australians.

¹⁹⁶ Rosenberg, T. (2011). "Friends in Revolution." Retrieved 24 April, 2014, from http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/07/12/friends-in-revolution/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0.

¹⁹⁷ (2014). "Media Watch." Retrieved 9 October, 2014, from <http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/s3970592.htm>.



Figure 19.
Image of a protest banner from March in March protests, Melbourne Australia, 2014.

Having established the critical context of the political poster throughout modernism, I will now turn to a discussion of my practice and its challenge to the predominantly optimistic project of political activism.

Studio research

The Redback Graphix series, 2012

Redback Graphix is an icon of political expression in Australia and its contributions provide a valuable model of political engagement for visual artists, designers and activists. As an Australian artist interested in political expression and print media, it is valuable to address the trajectory of Redback Graphix and its earlier incarnation as Earthworks Poster Collective.

Despite their laudable place in the history of Australian art and politics, I have conflicting feelings about the studio's output, especially those posters from the late

1980s. My initial reservations are based on the design of the posters. The works are the epitome of 1980s design with bright, flat colour, decorative patterns and a very “active” composition. The use of colour is at times gratuitous and the design is not as carefully considered as the multitude of colours demands. While the efficiency of design that added strength and power to works of the late 1970s and very early 1980s is not completely lost, overactive patterning and saturated colours overwhelm some works from the 1980s. My personal dislike of the design is subjective and yet the disdain I have for this aesthetic has drawn me to them. I struggle with an internal conflict between the validity of the sentiment, and the commitment to raise awareness of important social issues I unequivocally support, clashing significantly with the dated aesthetic and sometimes jarring language. I have often found this conflicting response paired with a perversely compelling visual language to be something that forces me to engage. Intimately this conflict is productive and compels me to critically engage with this contradiction.



Figure 20
Stuart Bailey, *Use your brain, use the train*, 2012
Graphite on paper, 71.5 x 52 cm

The phrasing of the text in some Redback Graphix posters is something that demands a response. The text can have an aggressive air of condescension, an example being *Use your brain, use the train*, from 1990. This important and worthy message aims to increase the use of public transport, however it is expressed in a manner that disempowers its audience. In Chapter 1 I discussed these posters in reference to Rancière's writing on Jacotot and noted that his thought supports my intuitions by identifying the stratification inherent in the message, and the closed nature of its communication. The poster and its message close down the possibilities of a broader

field of comprehension by focusing narrowly on a proscribed message using a disempowering language to deliver it.¹⁹⁸

To address these concerns productively, I decided to create a series of drawings based on text taken from a number of these posters. The first stage of my process is the selection of a poster that I feel strongly about, either positively or negatively. I then go about inserting this text within a new drawing that is unrelated to the text or design of the original poster. The clear and functional design of the Redback Graphix poster is abandoned and replaced with incongruous elements. Poorly rendered hip-hop style graffiti text is mixed with absurd portraits of Black Metal musicians. Sometimes irrelevant and lopsided graphic elements take centre stage. Distorted texts derived from the original posters are faintly rendered in graphite, sometimes exaggerating or diminishing the importance of their message. My intention is to confuse and complicate the original message by recontextualising the legible text within a new incongruous setting. It is important to give the audience an opportunity to understand that the text is drawn from Redback Graphix posters, and to facilitate this I include the Redback logo, a spider centred in a triangle, in some of the images. An Australian art audience is usually familiar with the studio and its output, due largely to the institutional support this work has enjoyed.¹⁹⁹

The images are intended to be incongruous enough to make the viewer pause and consider engaging with the easily “read” part of the images, that being the text. The confounding nature of the images is purposeful and my challenge is to make an image that is absurd enough to have viewers pause and consider why this message is presented in such an incongruous context. The stultifying nature of the original message has been dissolved. In its place is an image that demands reassessment and in turn aims to question an understanding of the *language* of the left. What did the message mean in its original context, and what does it mean now? Drawing attention to outmoded language of the left aims to make the audience actively

¹⁹⁸ Deranty, J.-P. (2010). *Jacques Rancière - Key Concepts*. Durham, Acumen, 26.

¹⁹⁹ (2014). "Works by Redback Graphix." Retrieved 20 October, 2014, from <http://www.mca.com.au/collection/artist/redback-graphix/>.

consider how these issues are discussed today and how they will be engaged with in the future.

Outlining the historical importance of Earthworks and Redback Graphix visual output and its political aims and intentions raises the question – why have I sought to obfuscate and question these models of left wing visual communication? Is this urge simply a reactionary urge to desecrate these institutions of Australian activism? This aspect of my practice is the most complex and perverse, and understanding these emotional responses to political messages is central to understanding my project. These inquiries are motivated by an interest in parallel concerns that are embedded in the paradoxical nature of the political poster – a medium in a state of transition - and the shifting mode of resistant political communication.

By reconfiguring the text of the poster in a jarring new context the original message has been called into question. The incongruous drawing demands that the viewer consider message anew and in doing so the order of the sensible is challenged and there is the possibility of a new order of the sensible emerging. The context that allowed this problematic message to be understood in its original form has been subverted and erased. Viewers considering the incongruous new image have their original understanding challenged and are able to approach a new understanding. This represents Rancière's notion of the dissensual possibilities of art, by challenging an existing conception of the sensible with a new order.²⁰⁰

It's 5 o'clock somewhere...

This body of work emerged from a project I undertook with Carla Ceson, staged at the Institute of Contemporary Art Newtown. The exhibition was the result of a loose collaboration that resulted in two intersecting bodies of work. Ceson began the process with painted wall-works and sculptural objects installed in the space. My poster-inspired images followed, and were pasted directly to the wall and floor in response to the placement of Ceson's wall works and sculptures. My works have

²⁰⁰ Tanke, J. J. (2001). Jacques Rancière: An Introduction. London, Continuum International Publishing Group, 62.

since been exhibited separately as they do not rely on the collaboration to sustain their conceptual premise.

These works emerged from a collection of found images that I encountered displayed in public spaces within a four-block radius of my home. Many of these images were posters that were photographed or peeled off walls and power poles, while others were collected from local sources such as free community newspapers. A number of these found posters and images could be described as typical of community activism, others as political expression relevant to local history or subcultures.

When I encountered the posters during my daily travels I was surprised at the impact these messages had on me. Despite the plethora of commercial advertising in poster form that cluttered the neighbourhood on construction hoardings, power poles and streetlights, these amateur images captured my attention and provoked my thoughts. This highlighted to me the power and relevance this medium continues to have, particularly at a community level. I found that I couldn't help but respond to the sincerity of a message displayed publicly in the very community it focused on. At the same time these images prompted me to think critically about the motivations behind them. Some posters seemed beyond reproach, the epitome of grass-roots community activists raising their voices against oppressive corporate forces. Upon further consideration they could be also be read as presenting a message in the tried and true mode of community resistance but in reality be protecting the interests of a select few community stakeholders. Were these ostensibly left wing messages of resistance actually in the service of aggressive self-interest?

I set out to drastically re-configure these posters by obscuring, defacing and complicating the source images, while still retaining the imagery and format of the original. I would effectively scramble, re-design and deface the source images to create a new screen-printed artwork that was a distortion of the original. My process emerged from the suspicions about these images, amplified by the overwhelming volume and breadth of political interests at stake and the demanding din of voices emanating from these images. My decision to attack and sully the posters was an

emotional one, and these feelings were expressed in a manner akin to a childish tantrum. The new poster-like artworks saw the found images defaced, degraded and obfuscated through the addition of a variety of very corporeal messes. They could be as simple as repetitive and frustrated scratched marks, designed to deface more than anything else. Others were sullied with a variety of messy smears and abject imagery derived from bodily fluids, most often mixed with ink, left to dry and then scanned digitally. The additions to the posters were infantile and embody a corporeal lashing out, such as repetitive scribbling, an infantile mess making. The disgust I felt at the failings of resistant political forces was manifested physically.

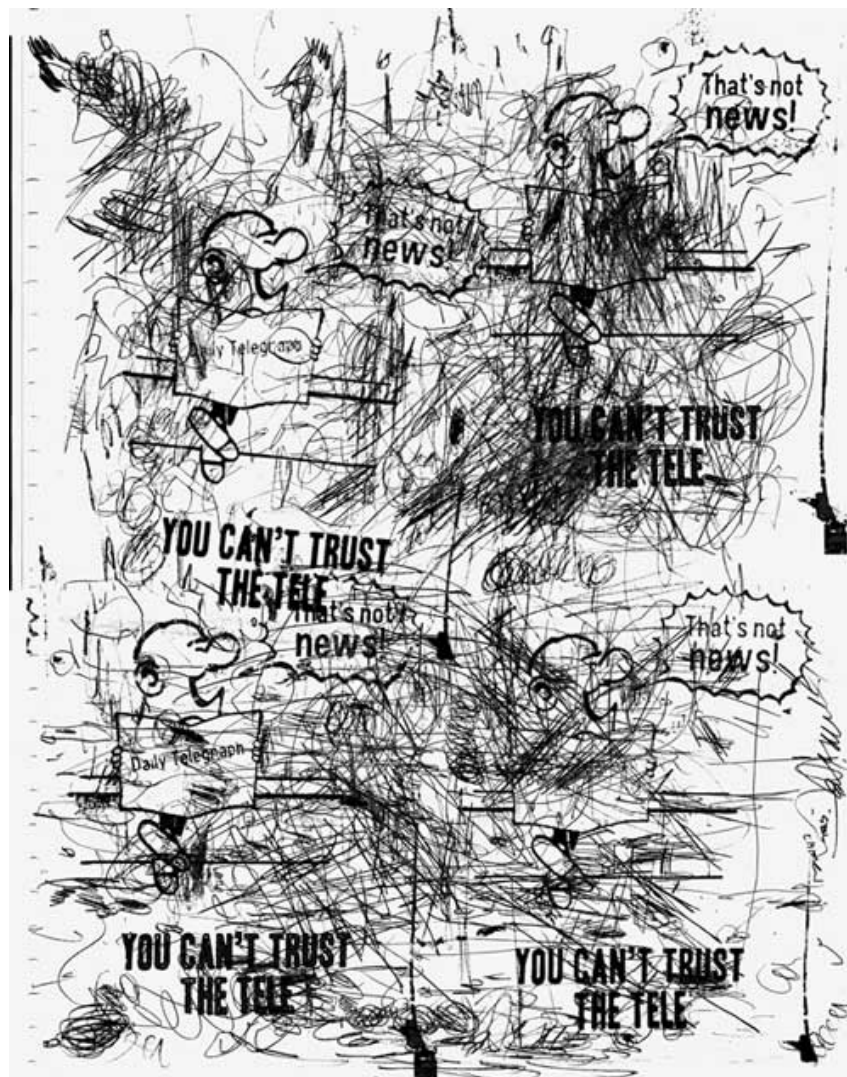


Figure 21.
Stuart Bailey, *You can't trust the tele*, 2011
screen-print on paper, 86 x 66 cm

The point of origin for my work *You can't trust the Tele*, 2011, is a found poster depicting a cartoon of a man sitting on a bench reading Sydney tabloid newspaper, *The Daily Telegraph*. The image is punctuated by the text, "That's not news! You can't trust the Tele." I found myself facing many questions about this mysterious poster that aims to question the credibility of the News Corp published tabloid. It has no information about the group or individuals responsible for the poster and the quality and large-format printing of the poster led me to think it was commercially produced, as it was the same size and print quality as a number of nearby commercial advertising posters.

The message is one that left an impression on me, not because I was unaware of the position, but because its direct criticism of the popular newspaper²⁰¹ in public seemed refreshing. The fact it was posted in a busy public thoroughfare, mixed in with the other everyday advertising and clutter, seemed reassuring. The concentration of media ownership in Australia haunts many issues that are played out in public life. The conservative bias of Rupert Murdoch's News Corp newspapers is well documented and its potential to influence political events is acknowledged. News Corp has the largest proportion of newspaper readership in Australia and one example of how this corporation has used its influence is in support of the Iraq war, with articles in support of the invasion of Iraq published consistently across all of the 175 News Corp papers.²⁰² Murdoch championed the war via his US media outlets and even had numerous private discussions with the then UK Prime Minister Tony Blair in the month leading up to the invasion of Iraq.²⁰³

However the questions surrounding the origin of this message are manifold and threaten to overwhelm the message itself. The simple design of the found poster

²⁰¹ In 2014 The Daily Telegraph has the second highest circulation of all Australian daily newspapers. Christensen, N. (2014). "ABCs: Newspapers continue print declines with mixed results on digital subscriptions." 2014, from <http://mumbrella.com.au/abcs-newspapers-continue-print-declines-mixed-results-digital-subscriptions-227088>.

²⁰² Manne, R. (2011). "Bad News: Murdoch's *Australian* and the Shaping of the Nation." *Quarterly Essay*(43), 16.

²⁰³ Manne, R. (2013). Why Rupert Murdoch can't be stopped: The political empire of the News Corp chairman. *The Monthly*. Melbourne.

hints at a grass roots organisation yet is printed professionally at a size that is consistent with many other advertising posters. The text itself gives no clues as to who may be responsible for its production, and online searches to establish its origin have also been fruitless. While there are many reasons to raise suspicion around the agenda of *The Daily Telegraph*, this found image raises just as many questions regarding its origins. It could have been distributed by any number of individuals and corporations who wish to discredit this newspaper and News Corp itself. The message could easily have been disseminated by their direct competitors. However the aforementioned suspicions surrounding a seemingly clear-cut resistant position colour the reception of this image. The ambiguity embodied in this found poster epitomises the sometimes confounding nature of contemporary political engagement. It seems there are no neutral grounds or mutually agreed facts on which to build a consensus, just polarised opinions espoused from biased viewpoints.²⁰⁴

These frustrations have drawn me to re-present this image as a screen-printed artwork. I attacked the original image through repetitive and violent scribbling. Patches of agitated scratching deface the image with lines that are mindlessly repetitive. The drawn marks serve to clutter and confuse the final image as much as they seem to be an attempt to hide and obscure something. The scrawled marks are the result of a primal, infantile response to frustrations that seem beyond the control of the ordinary person. The conflicting feelings around this image are perhaps the most galling – finding a message in public that resists the media dominance of a wealthy and manipulative figure is refreshing and encouraging. The frustrating flip side is the uncertainty of where the image came from and the slim possibility it is simply another manipulation of the consumer. And so this frustration is embodied in these new additions to the image – a disempowering reversion to a juvenile attempt at destruction.

²⁰⁴ Marcotte, A. (2014). "Why Conservatives Opt for Propaganda Over Reality." Retrieved 20 October, 2014, from <http://www.alternet.org/media/why-conservatives-opt-propaganda-over-reality>.

The immediacy of these emotional responses is however tempered by the references to reproduction and the nature of the multiple. The fact the image is a screen print introduces the first layer of removal from these expressive actions. The furious scribbling is present but has been layered into the same surface as the reproduction of the found image. While the marks are raw and expressive they must also be considered reproductions. In addition the found poster image has been multiplied four times and laid out in a rough grid, reminiscent of how posters may be pasted up in grids in public spaces. These self-conscious references remind the viewer that this work is not only about an artwork as an emotional response to political reality, but that political posters are on the very edge of redundancy as a medium and the myriad contradictions that surround them are an important part of the response.

This strategy is also at play in *Beware Woolies Mammoth*, 2011. This screen-printed image again layers found imagery with additional layered elements coming into play. The found imagery central to this work takes the form of an A4 sized colour photocopy found taped to a shopfront on Parramatta Road, Annandale. It was a reproduction of a charcoal and pastel drawing of a mammoth charging at the viewer with the aid of a shopping trolley. In the foreground of the poster, hand-drawn text warns, "BEWARE WOOLIES MAMMOTH COMING YOUR WAY". The purposefully designed image is engaging primarily due to the impact of the absurd but eye-catching imagery and the layout of the unique hand-drawn text. Based on the skill with which it is executed, it seems fair to assume the image was drawn by someone who was trained or worked in commercial design in a time before the dominance of computers and digital design software. My attention was captured by an idiosyncratically styled image designed by someone who worked in a time when the medium of the poster had a greater prominence. The fact the image was uniquely designed adds an authenticity that underscores its authority as a voice emerging from a community group.



Figure 22.
Stuart Bailey, *It's 5 o'clock somewhere...*, (*Beware Woolies Mammoth*), 2011
installation view

The message itself is one that I responded to and initially found heartening. Annandale has been slated as a possible location for the development of a new Woolworth's supermarket. Objections were raised by local residents citing traffic issues and the threat to the local "village" atmosphere, a village already well served by smaller, locally owned supermarkets. This is exacerbated by the fact that Woolworth supermarkets are widely perceived to be one half of a duopoly involving

anti-competitive behaviour.²⁰⁵ On the face of it, the issue is a classic call to action for community activists banding together to oppose a corporate development with limited appeal for many residents. However there are a number of other concerns that come into play in this instance, and again I find myself afflicted with a cynical suspicion of accepting at face value the righteousness of this resistant position.

Sydney homeowners are protective of the resale value of their property and many residents groups are organised based on the desire to protect their investments. These property owners and speculators in Annandale faced a serious threat to their investment if the neighbourhood were to become considerably busier and the village atmosphere eroded. While I have little sympathy for Woolworths' failed attempt at the development of a new supermarket, there are arguments that support their proposal. Woolworths' position as part of an Australia-wide supermarket duopoly is often blamed for rising food costs, but an equally critical eye can be cast on the supermarkets servicing Annandale, which in my experience seem to take their inner city positioning in an upper middle class suburb as an opportunity to charge higher than average prices. The proposed development was at a reasonable distance away from the village of Annandale in an area not well serviced by supermarkets, on Parramatta Rd, a famously ugly and crowded thoroughfare. Construction on the proposed site would not be affecting the village atmosphere or historic feel of Annandale in the least. And for a densely populated suburb, one has to travel a surprising distance to shop for daily necessities. In the end the council denied the application for development based primarily on the protests of residents and Woolworths did not challenge the decision.²⁰⁶

The notion that a campaign coordinated by well-off home owners and real estate investors to protect their property values could be dressed up in the "just" garb of community activism seems plausible. Again I find myself ruminating on the state of

²⁰⁵ Maiden, M. (2013). "Coles, Woolies could be facing some heartburn." The Sydney Morning Herald. Retrieved 16 August, 2013, from <http://www.smh.com.au/business/coles-woolies-could-be-facing-some-heartburn-20130214-2eg11.html>.

²⁰⁶ Fabricatorian, S. (2010). "Wooly mammoth slain." Retrieved 16 August, 2013, from <http://www.altmedia.net.au/wooly-mammoth-slain/29362>.

resistant social movements worldwide reflected in the microcosm of community political engagement. The notion of a principled system of resistance being exploited for individual financial gain has a resonance well beyond the community level. I find that a wary cynicism born of past disappointment makes me quick to dwell on the most cynical reading of the respective political positions. This demoralising perception fuels the kind of resigned disgust that I employ to besmirch these images.

The image, *Beware Woolies Mammoth*, bears the marks of this resentment. The original image has been reproduced and layered with a number of amorphous blobby shapes. The blobs are the result of bodily fluids being mixed with ink and allowed to dry. The fluids are collected in a range of ways, all of which are the result of physical expulsion from the body, be that through spitting or masturbation. The mixing of the inks and bodily fluid is an example of a kind of immature attack and a kind of a juvenile sully of the image and its message. The immediacy of the body fluids is distanced by the fact they are scanned digitally and incorporated into a new design for the poster that is screen-printed. The reason behind the “processing” of these bodily outputs through scanning and digital editing is to return this process to the medium associated with poster design. I wanted to publicly re-deploy the defaced images in a similar medium in which they came to me. While the images are created for a gallery context, it is important that the audience understands that these are derived from posters addressing a community.

Reinforcing this is the fact that these elements are repeated three times at different scales across the surface of the image. Viewers would be uncertain as to exactly what the blobs might be, but they are unambiguously abject, and when installed the wallpaper paste used to adhere the images to the wall is smeared and sometimes dirty. The way these blobs and smears intersect with the reproduction of the found image partially obscure it but, more significantly, break up the graphic clarity of the image. This addition of abstract elements to the image works against the structure and clarity of design and ironically, through careful compositional consideration, the marks break down the graphic unity of the found poster, and so too its message. Corrupting and sully of the design aspect of the works is important as it starts to move the poster away from the way we engage with design into the more open

analytic space of art. By introducing ambiguous elements and breaking down the graphic structure of an image that communicates directly, audiences are more likely to engage critically with the broader context of political communication.

This body of work produced for *It's 5 o'clock somewhere...* is the product of an emotional lashing out. It is the nature of a tantrum to be neither balanced nor fair and casts the artist as tired and emotional and irrational. This acting-up implies a level of immaturity but also kind of naiveté in the face of the compromised nature of contemporary political landscape. On the face of it this series could be seen as a facile and indulgent punk gesture, using bodily emissions to denigrate a venerable institution of community activism. However as discussed by Slavoj Žižek, this is a time of “disorientation of the Left”²⁰⁷ and the response seems counterintuitive yet possibly it is constructive in the face of the complex and compromised nature of contemporary politics. In parallel with Rancière’s notion of the dissensual potential of art, by interrogating and challenging these images within art’s autonomous realm it opens these images to reimagining their meaning. Their original position in the order of the sensible as maintained by the police has been challenged and reconfigured into a new vision of the sensible.

Suburban Blight series

The role of subcultures as a zone of social and political resistance is well established. While rarely seen as addressing political issues directly, subcultures typically position themselves against, or as a subset of, dominant social norms. The notion of musical subculture has been a subject I have engaged with a number of times in my practice. These subcultural groups are in some ways the epitome of an indirect political action, in that forming or being part of a subcultural group is usually a response motivated by social and political pressures. Subcultures see themselves as acting against a dominant social force, and yet their behaviour – wearing unusual clothing or speaking in subcultural dialect – is usually impenetrable to outsiders.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁷ Rancière, J. (2004). *The Politics of Aesthetics*, London, Continuum, 79.

²⁰⁸ Hebdige, D. (2003). *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London, Routledge.

In 2013 I developed a series of new works as a response to the curatorial premise of *Pigeon Auction* at Casula Powerhouse. This arts centre and gallery is based in Liverpool City, a part of the expansive western suburbs of Sydney. The exhibition aimed to expose the breadth of subcultures in Liverpool City, what they can tell us about the makeup of the area, and how these groups help to characterise aspects of the community that may otherwise remain hidden.²⁰⁹

My project was a response to my own formative experiences and engagement with subcultures. An important facet of my identity was formed in my teenage years via the discovery of skateboarding and its associated subculture. Skateboarding was much more than just a sport and it encompassed a particular musical focus and a related set of cultural attire. To my adolescent sensibilities it seemed like a unique and creative physical activity, the perfect form of resistance to the dominant sporting cultures of football and cricket, hunting and drinking that dominated the small country town I lived in. The groundwork was being laid for the emergence of street skating as the preeminent form of the sport in the mid to late 1980s. It involved a creative postmodern reimagining of the possibilities of the urban environment. Teenagers were taking to handrails, stairs and schoolyards in much the same way as the late 1970s practitioners had adapted to hills and empty swimming pools. The subculture has had a significant impact on the fashion, art and culture of the 1990s and into the 2000s with artists such as Spike Jones, Harmony Korine and Mark Gonzales emerging from the world of skateboard videos and making a significant contribution to the creative culture beyond the world of skateboarding.^{210 211}

Skateboarding embraced its own distinctive amalgam of subcultures, and the most thorough integration of the subcultures' values was embodied in the "skatepunk" aesthetic. The sport itself was an indispensable source of thrills and teenage risk-

²⁰⁹ Bailey, T. (2013). "Pigeon Auction." Retrieved 15 August, 2013, from <http://www.casulapowerhouse.com/exhibitions/pigeon-auction.aspx>.

²¹⁰ Spike Jonze. (2014). The Biography.com website. Retrieved Oct 22, 2014, from <http://www.biography.com/people/spike-jonze-9542284>.

²¹¹ Taubin, A. (1995). "Skating the edge with kids." Retrieved 27 October, 2014, from <http://www.harmony-korine.com/paper/int/hk/skating.html>.

taking, but its most valuable contribution to my artistic development was the way it opened the door to new music and art. The discovery of extreme music genres such as hard-core punk, speed metal, thrash metal, the emergent black metal and the harder to categorize avant-garde and “alternative” music was a powerful revelation. Discovering the political and musical punch of the Dead Kennedys was one of my early experiences with US punk, and it set a tone for the coming years. The Dead Kennedys combined politics, humour and an abrasive and purposely annoying approach to their music. This was the seed of insight that has spawned an engagement with music, art and politics that continues.

As a starting point for my project for *Pigeon Auction*, I began to research extreme music practitioners who were located in, or emerged from, the Liverpool City area. I planned to have these representatives of their subcultural niche perform live in the gallery space on a specially installed stage that would remain a part of the exhibition for the duration. My project involved an intersection of worlds that would be an experience for the gallery goers and the fans of these bands meeting in the gallery space as the bands performed live. The subculture inhabited by these musicians would be unfurled in full flight in the gallery and a space normally reserved for the relatively quiet contemplation of contemporary art would be overwhelmed with the sounds of extreme music. While this in itself could prove a confronting experience for either side of the performance – with gallery goers engulfed in noise, and extreme musicians playing in a space reserved for “high culture” –, it should at least expose one specialised group to another and thus help facilitate the aims of the exhibition, to enlighten audiences of the different groups as to the existence of the other and to gain a better understanding of the subterranean character of Liverpool City.

The posters were installed in relation to the stage that bands performed on only intermittently. For the purposes of the installation they marked out a space reserved for performance and as such set an expectant tone and a certain sense of anticipation. They implied that the empty stage would soon be covered in instruments, amplifiers, drums and the musicians themselves.

The three posters that were created for the installation were developed with a reference to recognised genres of music with well-defined, subculture-specific imagery and design tropes. I wanted to play with the graphic style of the extreme music genres that had had such a profound effect on me. Each poster was a celebration of the highly developed and richly codified aesthetic of each group. On first glance, the graphic style of the images resembled gig posters for a black metal music festival, a hard-core punk gig and finally a gig featuring experimental and abrasive acts inspired by more avant-garde acts like The Butthole Surfers, Sonic Youth, Lubricated Goat or Big Black.

I wanted to present these well-established genres so the vast majority of the viewers would probably be able to glean what underground musical genre they referenced, even if only in a broad sense such as “metal” or “punk”. The images exude a cultish, mysterious and ultimately romantic idealisation of subcultural identity and lifestyle. In stark contrast to the obscure quality that these genres pieces evoke, the text content of these posters was some of the most banal and common subject matter of everyday suburban life. I wanted to completely diffuse the excitement and power of these subcultural signifiers by having them confront the banal everyday reality of a suburban existence, far from the centre of these movements.



Figure 23.
Stuart Bailey, *Suburban Blight 1*, 2013
Photocopy on paper, 90 x 110 cm

Suburban Blight 1 exploits the now well-established and historicized genre of US hard-core punk that rose to prominence in the 1980s. It wallowed in a kind of suburban frustration and was a powerful and positive response to the conservative and stifling political environment typified by the presidency of Ronald Reagan.²¹² The poster inspired by this genre, instead of promoting hard-core punk bands playing at an upcoming gig, lists a number of high schools found within the Liverpool city area. Lurnea High School, All Saints Catholic Girls College, Casula High School and others jostle for prominence. The background image is a burning car and the space usually reserved for details of the gig venue, date and time instead detail student admission dates for 2014 and the NSW Government Schools website address.

²¹² Butz, K. (2012). *Grinding California: Culture and Corporeality in American Skate Punk*. New York, Transcript-Verlag, 81.

On one hand this bureaucratic information completely defuses and confounds the expectations of such an image. The banal content gives the image an unexpected twist that in one instance destroys the subcultural mystique and starts putting the everyday students and families of Liverpool City in the subcultural picture. The well worn styling of hard-core punk, and its associated alienation and resistance to the social mainstream, are rendered empty and are replaced with content that defies its subcultural niche. The subversion of this language draws attention to its redundancy as a form of social resistance; its accessibility to all robs it of its once powerful mark of otherness. The subversive power of these socially and politically resistant forms has had its power depleted by its thorough familiarity. The banality of Liverpool City high schools, suburb names and public transport serves to reinforce this. Stripped of all mystery and the appeal of obscurity, these subcultural genres are drained of cultural potency by a bleak humour.

Last time around

Taking the form of an installation, *Last time around*, 2014, presents an arrangement of sculptural objects consisting of a network of wires supported by festively decorated poles. Attached to this network of poles and lines is a varied collection of screen-printed images, as if hung up to dry. This work has emerged from a long-standing desire to present the screen-printed images I have been developing over the course of my research in a more complex and allusive manner. I have been driven to present the works not as separate images on a gallery wall, but as something that, due to their arrangement in space, allude to a loose assortment of partial works in progress.

The collection of images is an extension of an ongoing visual investigation into the found posters of community activism and small scale, grass roots political organisations. The approach is born from the process described in detail earlier in this chapter regarding works included in the exhibition *It's 5 o'clock somewhere...* The process is still focussed on using political posters found in Sydney's inner west as a starting point. These found images are scribbled on, besmirched with bodily

materials and obscured. The sentiment and graphic structure of the posters is attacked and broken down.

The most recent images have started to employ an almost decorative aesthetic, with colourful patterns being added to the repertoire of scrawled marks and smears discussed earlier. The patterning has an allusion to folk art, with cheery repeated designs adding an incongruously festive feel to the urgent political text. In some of the other elements in play they could almost read as psychedelic. This form of decoration has an awkward place in conventional understanding of political graphics, but it did feature in a number of Redback Graphix posters such as *When they close a pit* (1984) and *Undoing History* (1988). In this instance, however, the patterning is not in service of drawing attention to the poster and its carefully designed message; instead it joins the clutter and visual noise that serves to obscure and erode important information. This festive sense of decoration works almost like a camouflage, in the first instance to break up the strident graphic clarity of the found poster by disguising it even further under layers of visual noise and distractions. In the second instance it seems to break down the urgency of the serious political message contained within the original image. It seems to suggest the creator of the image has lost sight of the original goal and instead been carried away with a superfluous but enjoyable task of creating a pattern.

Ultimately in the installation context of *Last time around* posters become first and foremost objects. They float in space and are pegged or clipped loosely to the messy network of wires, supported by poles that seem on the verge of collapsing. Many of the images are incomplete or partial versions of finished works; some are misprinted, some not aligned correctly. They indicate that there may not be an ultimate version of each work, only a selection of partially printed versions. Some posters are not even hung up, but are collected in loose stacks in a corner. The sense of accumulation betrays the influence of Thomas Hirschhorn who permeates his installations with a sense of overproduction. The posters are pegged up in multiples and hang in clumps, superfluous collections of poles lie on the ground, and viewers are sometimes surrounded by printed images. However this inflection is moderated

by the sense of abandonment. Perhaps these images were produced during a more productive time in the history of this phantom collective. The arrangement of *Last time around* also recalls compelling documentation of the busy workshop of the Atelier Populaire at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in its late sixties heyday. Students activists fill the space and the walls are covered by a collection of posters that might be being critiqued or simply drying after being printed, waiting to be deployed in the streets. In contrast to these images of purpose and production *Last time around* is suffused by a quiet sense of abandonment that tempers the notion that this collective is in the peak of its production.



Figure 24.
Stuart Bailey, *Last turn around*, 2014
Detail, work in progress

The messy network of wires from which the posters hang is partially supported by a selection of decorated poles whose purpose seems hard to determine. The poles are painted in dull purple and blues with occasional brighter highlights. Some have beer bottle caps nailed to them in a manner that indicates they may have had a previous function as a makeshift musical instrument, the lagerphone. Painted drum sticks hanging off an extended armature support this notion. The poles themselves have spiralling lines painted along their lengths and seem to hint at some sort of self-

styled neo-pagan folk festival. The network of wires, the reams of posters and the makeshift feel to the work allude to an activist collective that may have seen brighter days. The posters hung up to dry or in storage, although far too diverse in their concerns to have emerged from a single studio, hint at a flurry of productive activity. It could be a place where awareness campaigns were planned, and poster designs printed. In any case the urgency and sense of purpose seems to have subsided. The mood of the installation is tired, rundown and possibly a little inebriated. Crooked wires are supported by poles leaning at awkward angles, and even the printed imagery has lost its urgency and focus. The poster designs themselves seem like the work of a group who may have been distracted by more everyday pleasures and distractions.

The installation is an ambiguous collection of objects and images and it is important to note it is not a representation of any existing place. It does however allude to an array of possibilities that may prompt the viewer's imagination. The work could be described as a kind of lament to the resistant collectives of a more optimistic time. The space implies a sense of discouragement leading to distraction and possible substance abuse. Those who were here became exhausted and it is time for some new energy.

Last time around is a poetic expression of concerns over the exhaustion of some strategies of oppositional politics. This approach echoes the thought of Rancière around the reconfiguration of the sensible through the process of dissensus.²¹³ By depicting this imagined collective in an idiosyncratic downward spiral it opens the possibility for audiences to imagine the implications. This field of potential has not been described, avoiding delivering a stultifying and disempowering message with proscriptive goals.

²¹³ Rancière, J. (1999). Disagreement: politics and philosophy. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 101.

Conclusion

As a politically engaged artist, the prominence of socially conscious practice at an extremely conservative moment in Australian politics is encouraging.²¹⁴ Art's political engagement provides a vital mode of expression with the potential to challenge the current dominance of neo-conservative discourse. There is an understandable sense of urgency behind the impetus to challenge this distribution of the sensible, both in the Australian context and internationally. This challenge to resistant politics within art is only the most recent instance of an ongoing focus on socially engaged practice that has developed globally since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. After the cynicism of the 1990s this socially engaged practice represented a reflection on the demise of the social experiment of collectivism.

The defining characteristic of this ostensibly new mode of practice is the participation of the audience as an essential element of the work.²¹⁵ The critical discourses that developed around participatory art highlight the need to directly involve the socially isolated and disengaged consumers of late capitalist spectacular culture. As an early attempt at responding to this return to collaborative political engagement, Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* is significant as it set out an interpretation of participatory art that influenced the discourse around this emerging trend. The response of some critics and curators to exponents of this approach was exultant.²¹⁶ This mode of practice, as identified by Bourriaud, significantly foregrounds the importance of the shared experiences of participants. This is contrasted with the exchange offered by other forms of art that are perceived as a passive engagement with the purely visual.²¹⁷

²¹⁴ In an excerpt from "A Letter To The Thing I Wish I'd Written" at the "People Of Letters" event at the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival Julian Burnside commented on the ongoing shift in the political climate: "We have a corrupt, hard right-wing Liberal government, led by self-seeking hypocrites. We have a weakened, right-wing Labor opposition."

Burnside, J. (2014). "Australia must never forget its shameful past." Retrieved 22 October, 2014, from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-10-17/burnside-people-of-letters/5027666>.

²¹⁵ Bishop, C. (2004). "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics." *October* (110), 61.

²¹⁶ *Ibid*, 57.

²¹⁷ *Ibid*.

The thought of Jacques Rancière offers an alternate understanding of a range of issues surrounding this discourse. His insights support the assertion made in this paper that art's critical effect can be effectively embodied in an indirect and dis-identified approach. Rancière has questioned the dominance of the oft-repeated notion that the critique of the spectacle and its insistence on activating the passive viewer is essential for addressing progressive political imperatives.²¹⁸ Through his reading of Jacotot, he asserts that thought precedes language and as such writing and speaking are poetic processes of translation that require the viewer's active process of counter-translation.²¹⁹ This relationship implies not only an intellectual equality between the sender and receiver, but attributes to the listener the ability to decode the poetic form into their own comprehension; that is, the viewer is involved in an active process, as opposed to the Situationist's view of the passive audience.²²⁰ Rancière argues that models that embody a proscriptive activist approach risk presenting a hollow and disempowering vision. An approach that employs the logic of the explicator, seeking to enlighten those who cannot learn for themselves, is at the expense of empowering their audience to engage with this idea on their own terms.²²¹ For Rancière art must function as a zone where the belief in the equality of intelligence is assumed. When this is achieved art harbours the potential to imagine new visions of our world that challenge the existing order of the sensible, allowing a new understanding of our world to be revealed.

Rancière goes further in supporting the indirect approach to addressing political imperatives, underpinning one of the key arguments of my project, that being the power of the strange, alien and disturbing to challenge the order of the sensible. An important factor in art's emancipatory potential is its ambiguous relationship with daily life, indicating the fact that to be alien or in opposition to the day to day reality of existence is actually an asset in regard to the political possibilities of art. Rancière

²¹⁸ Rancière, J. (2006). "Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art." Retrieved 22 October, 2014, from <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/Rancière.html>.

²¹⁹ Rancière, J. (1991). *The ignorant schoolmaster : five lessons in intellectual emancipation*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 60-67.

²²⁰ Tanke, J. J. (2001). *Jacques Rancière: An Introduction*. London, Continuum International Publishing Group, 89.

²²¹ Rancière, J. (2009). *The Emancipated Spectator*. London, Verso, 25.

is arguing for the importance of art's autonomy and posits that art's separation from the everyday is what facilitates its poetic strength - in opposition to the Situationist's' notion, relied on by the advocates of participatory art, that art and life need to become closer together. Art's power to disrupt the order of the sensible lies in its ability to present the unexpected and dis-identified.

Rancière's notion of dissensus and its importance to art's critical effect are foundational to Claire Bishop's critical reading of participatory art.

Bishop argues in support of art that evokes the tension of complex social realities and leaves in its wake not a self-contained and affirming social experience, but an unresolved anxiety that may have a greater chance of evoking dissensus.

Bishop's antipathy toward the unsubstantiated claims of participatory art's political agency underpins my own research. Bishop is critical of the emphasis on evaluating collaborative participatory projects solely in regard to their social outcomes as opposed to the quality of the experience, where the ethical considerations of a work override aesthetic considerations. Providing a major point of reference for my own thesis, Bishop expresses the desire to engage with more complex and disquieting approaches to participatory art. She advocates for the utilisation of a more confronting engagement with:

... the paradoxes that are repressed in everyday discourse ... to elicit perverse, disturbing, and pleasurable experiences that enlarge our capacity to imagine the world and our relations anew.²²²

Her analysis of the practice of Santiago Sierra and Thomas Hirschhorn exemplify this tendency and convincingly argue for the enduring resonance of their disquieting approach. Their works present problems and sustain the tension that is generated by these intractable issues. Their approach underscores an issue at the core of both Rancière's and Bishop's approach, namely the desire to engage with the complexities

²²² Thompson, N. (2012). Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991- 2011. London, MIT Press.

and paradoxes of contemporary political art and not have the experience foreclosed by focus on its positive social outcomes. Rancière and Bishop find the difficult range of responses elicited by indirect and conflicted political art to have a broader, more enduring political potential. I argue that the sense of urgency driving the discourse around participatory art and its need to activate its audience risks ignoring the relevance of aesthetic considerations in service of political imperatives. The critical engagement around the political in contemporary practice has subsequently been defined in reduced terms that narrowly define the efficacy of an artwork according to its facilitation of socially affirming audience participation.²²³ The desire to enmesh art with life risks risk sacrificing art's autonomy and its critical importance.²²⁴

Rancière and Bishop's theories find resonance in the practice of two artists whose oblique and layered approach to the political has deeply informed my studio production. Mike Kelley and Thomas Hirschhorn's conceptually bold and intellectually demanding artistic strategies serve as a testament to the enduring power of indirectly engaging political imperatives. The motivations behind their work are rarely addressed in a straightforward manner and are often hidden behind a conceptual structure that is layered. This approach enables a rich and complex engagement with their political subject matter that opens up a wealth of possible interpretations. These artists address issues without doubting the ability of their audience to engage with their ideas, an approach that embodies Rancière's notion of the presupposed equality of intelligence,²²⁵ an essential element in harnessing the emancipatory potential of art. These artists veil their approaches to social and political issues, breaking them apart and problematizing them further, often through their trademark misdirection of logical thought.

The will to engage with political content obliquely is consistent throughout my studio practice. My shaken faith in resistant political strategies has led to my addressing well-established models of left wing communication with a sense of

²²³ Ibid, 65.

²²⁴ Tanke, J. J. (2001). *Jacques Rancière: An Introduction*. London, Continuum International Publishing Group, 103.

²²⁵ Deranty, J.-P. (2010). *Jacques Rancière - Key Concepts*. Durham, Acumen, 96.

exploration. My practice calls into question the iconic mode of political expression regarded as a staple of oppositional communication – the political poster. This is a medium that finds itself in a precarious and near anachronistic position. In the age of social media, political graphics and their historical legacy occupy an awkward and indeterminate position, but by channelling my concerns about oppositional politics through these found images I create a resonance between the status of the medium and the questions around the political sentiments they give voice to. In engaging these images by mocking, obscuring and reconfiguring, I express my scepticism and anxieties about their relevance. The desecration of these images may seem reactionary, trite or immature, but the power of these posters reimaged through art lies in their ambiguity. By recklessly attacking and breaking down these institutions I intend to create art that facilitates a reconsideration of how we understand the language of resistance, and ask questions about why certain politically critical strategies have failed. By reconfiguring these posters, I open the images up to new ways of being understood. Drawing attention to the weakened communication of oppositional politics aims to make the audience actively consider how these issues have been discussed in the past and how they will be engaged with in the future. What may seem like a jarring and alienating attack upon worthy political sentiments in fact presents viewers with the potential to re-imagine this mode of communication. In this way my project can be thought of in terms of Rancière's notions of dissensus, whereby a previously unseeable arrangement of the sensible challenges and re-shapes the order of the sensible.

The socio-cultural specificity of my studio practice gives this thesis a unique focus. While the topics I address range across local and global context, all are in some way channelled through the notion of the political poster within an Australian context.

Suburban Blight, my work questioning the resistant political import of subcultural identity, is filtered through the cultural context of the Liverpool city area. The work took the form of genre specific posters that were inflected with an unexpectedly local quality as the graphic styles of hardcore punk, black metal and experimental alternative music were voided of their subcultural potency through references to public transport serving Liverpool, the names of local high schools or suburban

centres. In *Redback Graphix Drawings* the output of iconic Sydney based political poster collective Redback Graphix is recontextualised in a series of graphite drawings on paper. The text of the posters re-presented amongst jarring and nonsensical imagery in order to provoke new ways of considering their messages. In the installation *Last time around* a network of poles and wires support a collection of reconfigured images reminiscent of posters. The imagery is reconfigured arrangements of found posters that embody a range of community or grass roots political concerns. The sources are found images collected from a range of locations in Sydney's inner west over the course of several years. Their concerns are a kind of record of low level, ongoing community activist concerns. My thematic focus is exclusively that of resistant political communication emerging from Sydney. While the issues addressed can have broad, even global scope their mode of address is drawn from or directly references models of resistant political communication within a local context.

Arguably the political potential of participatory art has been narrowly defined and art that employs a direct approach can result in a less than effective aesthetic experience. My thesis proposes that a more complex and complete understanding of political art includes work that is indirect, jarring and alienating, work that leaves its audience with an disquieting and unresolved tension as a reflection of the complex and intractable issues it is motivated by. Art that is not dominated by ethics over aesthetics has greater political effect. Art that is not concerned to produce narrowly construed positive social outcomes has a greater disruptive potential, capable of producing dissensus through its lack of resolution, ambiguities and contradictions.

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Image List

File name	Title	Media	Dimensions
01_5oclock.jpg	<i>Beware Woolies Mammoth,</i> Install view	Screen print on paper	N/A
02_5oclock.jpg	<i>You can't trust the Tele,</i> Install view	Screen print on paper	N/A
03_5oclock.jpg	<i>You can't trust the Tele,</i> detail	Screen print on paper	N/A
04_5oclock.jpg	The Greens, Installation view,	Screen print on paper	N/A
05_5oclock.jpg	<i>Crash and Burn,</i> Installation view	Screen print on paper	N/A
06_RedbackGraphix.jpg	<i>Redback Graphix series I</i>	Graphite on paper	80 x 56 cm
07_RedbackGraphix.jpg	<i>Redback Graphix series II</i>	Graphite on paper	80 x 56 cm
08_SuburbanBlight.jpg	<i>Suburban Blight I</i>	Photocopy on paper	90 x 110 cm
09_SuburbanBlight.jpg	<i>Suburban Blight II</i>	Photocopy on paper	180 x 100 cm
10_SuburbanBlight.jpg	<i>Suburban Blight III</i>	Screen print on paper	65 x 85 cm
11_SuburbanBlight.jpg	<i>Suburban Blight,</i> Installation view	Photocopy and screen print on paper	N/A
12_SuburbanBlight.jpg	<i>Suburban Blight,</i> Performance documentation. 'Yes I'm Leaving' musical performance	N/A	N/A
13_LTR.jpg	<i>Last time around,</i> Work in progress installation view	Mixed media with screen printed posters on paper	Dimensions variable
14_LTR.jpg	<i>Last time around,</i> Work in progress installation view	Mixed media with screen printed posters on paper	Dimensions variable
15_LTR.jpg	<i>Last time around,</i> Work in progress installation view	Mixed media with screen printed posters on paper	Dimensions variable
16_LTR.jpg	<i>Last time around,</i> Work in progress installation view	Mixed media with screen printed posters on paper	Dimensions variable

17_LTR.jpg	<i>Last time around,</i> Work in progress installation view	Mixed media with screen printed posters on paper	Dimensions variable
18_LTR.jpg	<i>Last time around,</i> Work in progress installation view	Mixed media with screen printed posters on paper	Dimensions variable