

Simon Sheikh
**Positively
Trojan Horses
Revisited**

01/09

e-flux journal #9 — october 2009 Simon Sheikh
Positively Trojan Horses Revisited

Lucy Lippard's famous essay on activist art should need no introduction or art historical contextualization; what's more, "Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power," published in the seminal 1984 anthology *Art After Modernism*, represents but one entry point into a truly impressive body of work dedicated to the politics of art and representation from the 1960s up to today.¹ As such, the essay can be situated both in an ongoing debate – making it ripe for revisitation – and in the trajectory of Lippard's oeuvre as a whole. Indeed, the author of "Trojan Horses" has long grappled with the relationship between art and activism, both in terms of activist art and with regard to how the two categories inform each other as general forms of power and empowerment. Such efforts clearly animate the collection *Get the Message?: A Decade of Art for Social Change*, as well as her later, retrospective essay "Too Political? Forget It."²

"Trojan Horses" appeared at the height of the Reagan years in the U.S., a highly charged political period that saw a heavy backlash against progressive and feminist ideas in the so-called culture wars waged by the Right. Lippard reported from the trenches, not only providing context and arguments, but also offering contemporary examples of activist art and cultural resistance. My interest here lies less in retelling those stories – for that one doesn't need to look any further than the essay itself – than in focusing on Lippard's central argument. Yet it should be mentioned that one aspect of the examples is particularly striking now: the sheer number of engaged practices fusing art and activism in a decade most commonly understood in art historical terms as a postmodern, object-based, commodity-oriented and even apolitical decade – and often either derided or commended for those very features. However, as Lippard's survey and other sources point out, there is also another history, a counter-history. Moreover, the 1980s now appear to have witnessed a much larger movement of artistic activism than, say, the 1990s and its often heralded return to the social and political in art, not to mention our present decade . . .

Lippard's argument is not merely historical, though, but also offers something resembling ontology, or even "hauntology," and it does so from the outset, from its very title and its invocation of an example that is not so much historical as it is mythological: the Trojan Horse. Like the Trojan Horse, activist art enters hallowed halls where it does not properly belong by way of a disguise – by being an alluring aesthetic object, it pushes into the institution of art, both concretely and metaphorically. But unlike the Trojan Horse, activist art is not instrumental in the violent overthrow of a regime,

Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power

LUCY R. LIPPARD

Maybe the Trojan Horse was the first activist artwork. Based in sub-version on the one hand and empowerment on the other, activist art operates both within and beyond the beleaguered fortress that is high culture or the "art world." It is not a new art form so much as it is a massing of energies, suggesting new ways for artists to connect with the sources of energy in their own experience. Today, in 1984, there is a renewed sense of the power of culture to affect how people see the world around them. Activist art—sometimes called "the movement for cultural democracy"—then provides "a developing, shared consciousness whose impact we can't predict. . . . a kind of consensus in practice that is now at a stage of consciousness-raising and organizing."¹

Given the evolving, pragmatic nature of activist art, the following is less a survey or history than simply an attempt to place activist art in relation to the art world and to political organizing. The essay is divided into four parts: an argument for activist art; thoughts on the power of art; some of the sources of recent activist art; and some examples of various art strategies and practices from 1960 to the present. I want to make it clear that I don't think it's necessary for all artists to make activist art (although I would like to see every artist—like every other citizen—be politically informed and responsible). Activist art is simply the subject of this essay, which happens also to be the subject of most of my activities. I'm as happy as the next art type to be overtaken by sheer aesthetic pleasure and surprise. Though I remain partial to a culture that leads us not into the valley of thoughtlessness but to the moving of mountains, I'd be a hell of a cultural democrat if I didn't spend a lot of time and energy looking and thinking about all the other kinds of art. I only wish the process went both ways more often. Much activist art is innovative and expansive and the mainstream could learn from it, just as activists learn from the mainstream.

1. Arlene Goldbard and Don Adams, "From the Ground Up: Cultural Democracy as a National Movement," *Upfront*, no. 8 (Winter 1983-84): 6. Goldbard and Adams were for several years the prime movers of NAFNOC (Neighborhood Arts Programs National Organizing Committee), which has now been renamed the Alliance for Cultural Democracy; it is a national liaison between progressive community groups for all the arts. Goldbard and Adams' developing theory of cultural policy is invaluable; other articles by them are to be found in *Art in America* 70, no. 4 (April 1982): 21-25; *Fuse* 6, nos. 1-2 (May-June 1982): 11-16; and in all back issues of *Cultural Democracy*.

I. Argument

The movement for cultural democracy is a critique of the homogeneity of the corporate, dominant culture, which serves very few of us while affirming all of us. We use this culture making (or microwaving) down the multicultural, multi-cultural differences that are this country's greatest strength and its greatest hope for understanding and communicating with the rest of the world before we destroy it. Thus art reflecting lived experience in different continuities will differ. This is both an advantage and a disadvantage as the Black, Latin, and Asian art communities know well.

Cultural democracy is a right just like economic and political democracy: the right to make and to be exposed to the greatest diversity of expression. It is based on a view of the arts as communicative exchange. A true cultural democracy would encourage artists to speak for themselves and for their communities, and it would give all of us access to audiences both like and unlike ourselves. We have learned from Amílcar Cabral that self-expression is a prerequisite for self-empowerment. This doesn't mean that everyone has to make art any more than creating a politically aware populace means everyone has to become a politician. It means simply that the power of art is curtailed unless it is understood in the broadest sense and accepted as a possibility by everyone.

Activist art is confined to no particular style and is probably best defined in terms of its functions, which also cover a broad span. It does not, for the most part, limit itself to the traditional art media: it usually abandons frames and pedestals. It is an art that reaches out as well as in. To varying degrees it takes place simultaneously in the mainstream and outside of accepted art contexts. In practice, activist art might include teaching, publishing, broadcasting, filmmaking, or organizing—in or out of the art community. It often incorporates many different media within a single, long-term project. Most activist artists are trying to be synthesizers as well as catalysts, trying to combine social action, social theory, and the fine arts tradition, in a spirit of multiplicity and integration, rather than one of narrowing choices.

Activist art is not only "oppositional," although it is usually critical in some sense. As an art of contact, it is often hybrid, the product of different cultures communicating with each other. Activist artists do not expect, say, to change Ronald Reagan's values (if he has any), but to oppose his views of war and de-humanism by providing alternative images, metaphors, and information formed with humor, irony, outrage, and compassion, in order to make heard and seen those voices and faces hitherto invisible and powerless. Sometimes this is idealistic. Art is hardly a pragmatic vocation. Of course, each artist's motivation is different, but a deep frustration with the limited functions and outlets for art in Western culture and a sense of alienation from audiences is why most of us have become activists.

It all begins with that other idealism—the one we are fed in schools—about art being some exalted "gift" to society and artists being lone, superior geniuses, whooping it up in their ivory garrets. However, when students get out, they often find it is hard to give their "gifts" away: some succeed, some get bitter, and some try to de-mythologize the role of art and to change the system in which it operates. For those who need to see immediate results, a large check and/or instant fame, such a long haul is highly unsatisfying. But

Larry R. Lippard 342

rewards come precisely in the process of that engagement. Activist artists tend to see art as a mutually stimulating dialogue, rather than as a specialized lesson in beauty or ideology coming from the top down. It is unhealthy, though, to call these artists (either condescendingly or admiringly) "watchdogs" or "the consciences of the art world," as if their presence precluded the need for general or individual responsibility.

Activist art is, above all, process-oriented. It has to take into consideration not only the formal mechanisms within art itself, but also how it will reach its context and audience and why. For example, Suzanne Lacy's feminist dinner/organizing/performance/media events culminate in recognizable "art pieces," but in fact the real work includes the yearlong organizing and workshops that led up to it, as well as film and documentation that may follow. These considerations have led to a radically different approach to artmaking. Tactics, or strategies of communication and distribution, enter into the creative process, as do activities usually considered separate from it, such as community work, meetings, graphic design, poster-making. The most impressive contributions to current activist art are those that provide not only new images and new forms of communication (in the avant-garde tradition), but also delve down and move out into social life itself, through long-term activities.

A few more examples:

- Tim Rollins' ongoing work in collaboration with his learning-disabled high school students in the South Bronx, including objects as well as huge collage paintings, produced in class but derived from the students' experiences of the world.
- Mierle Ukeles' five-year involvement with the New York City Department of Sanitation, a project which includes exhibitions and public and private performances.
- Carnival Knowledge's ongoing collective work on feminism, reproductive rights, and sexuality, which takes the form of street bazaars, exhibitions, and other public events.
- Judy Baca's still-expanding mural, *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*, in which the history of Third World residents of California is painted, but also taught to local youth; it also incorporates "social work" with local teenage groups and provides economic support in beleaguered Chicano communities.
- Loraine Leeson and Peter Dunn's posters and inventive multiquad, changing photomontage billboards in East London, which have become not only part of the local landscape but of the local political scene, covering recent hospital closures, housing and labor issues, and gentrification.
- Public performance groups, such as the Waitresses, Mother Art, and Sisters of Survival (SOS) (all daughters of the Woman's Building in Los Angeles) which concentrate on specific issues, such as labor relations, nuclear disarmament, and the sexism inherent in the "kiss or career" choice.
- In Australia, Vivienne Binns and Annie Newmarch are professional, government-sponsored "community artists" who show in museums their own and collaborative artworks generated in rural and suburban

Trojan Horses 343

neighborhoods. Peter Kennedy's long-term work on Australian history centers on the governmental coup of November 11, 1975, and takes the form of elaborate embroidered banners and documentary film and video.

And so forth. Subjects and mediums are so varied that it is very difficult to generalize about activist art.

What these diverse works do share is the way style and aesthetic are deeply entwined in the social structures in which they operate. These artists often work in series—not autonomous series for exhibition, but ongoing sequences of learning, communication, integration, and then reforming from the responses of the chosen audience. When Jerry Kohn, for instance, became interested in racial and sexual stereotypes in the media in 1980, the way he made "studies" for eventual paintings was to work in the South Bronx with the Committee Against *Fort Apache* (a citywide coalition protesting the racist and sexist representations of Blacks, Hispanics, and women in the film)² and in Brooklyn with the Black United Front, then to organize a travelling group show on the subject. Sometimes the process goes the other way: Greg Shohet moved from making an aerobic artist's look on the way in which Githank "puts neighborhoods to rest," to working actively in the community with Political Art Documentation/Distribution's "Not for Sale" Project, against gentrification on New York's Lower East Side, while continuing to make "exhibitable" art on related issues.

Two frequent criticisms of activist art run as follows: "Art can't change anything, so if you care about politics you should be a politician instead of an artist." (This plays in tandem with another act called, "It's not art, it's sociology.") Next comes "Social change art is rendered useless when co-opted by exhibitions and sales within the mainstream art world."

Activist artists are not as naive as their critics. Few labor under the illusion that their art will change the world directly or immediately. Rudolf Barmak has pointed out that art may not be the best dialectic tool available, but it can be a powerful partner to the dialectic statement, speaking its own language (and, incidentally, speaking subversively into interstices where dialecticism and rhetoric can't pass). With the deepening and broadening of activist art practice in the United States during the past five years, this partnership is receiving more consideration from political groups as well as from the mainstream. It is also crucial to remember that grassroots activism begins at home. We tend to forget that organizing within the art community is also "effective." Artists alone can't change the world. Neither can anyone else, alone. But we can choose to be part of the world that is changing. There is no reason why visual art should not be able to reflect the social concerns of our day as naturally as novels, plays, and music.

As for co-optation, the more sophisticated activist artists become, the more they are able to make art that works on several levels. They can make

2. See Larry R. Lippard and Jerry Kohn, "Cashing a Wall Ticket (Activist Art and *Fort Apache: The Bronx*)," *Artforum* 20, no. 2 (October 1981): 64-73, for an account of this media campaign and its relationship to activist art.

Larry R. Lippard 344

II. Power

specific artworks for specific audiences and situations, or they can try to have their cake and eat it too, with one work affecting art audiences one way and general audiences another. They will try to do so without sacrificing complexity or aesthetic integrity, and without being assimilated into and manipulated by the dominant culture. Art that is not confined to a single context under the control of market and ruling-class taste is much harder to neutralize. And it is often quite effective when seen within the very contexts of power it criticizes. Beware of artists buying their gifts.

Because activist art is rarely taught in schools, there are few known models and it is important that the extant ones are made as visible as possible. For example, Carme Gondi and Karl Beveridge's color photomontage series, made after collaborative processes with unionized steel workers and auto workers in Canada, offer the high art audience technically brilliant and original art about unfamiliar lives and issues, while in the workplace the same works are organizing tools, reinforcing solidarity as well as telling mutually significant stories. Such works may not be for sale, or they may be sold and still remain in the public sector, in that they continue to exist in other contexts after they are "bought." And if the private establishment enjoys owning unflattering mirrors or thinks their ownership defies the political effect of the work, they are nonetheless supporting further opposition. Given capitalism, it's not a bad tradeoff.

The power of art is subversive rather than authoritarian, lying in its connection of the ability to make with the ability to see—and then in its power to make others see that they too can make something of what they see . . . and so on. Potentially powerful art is almost by definition oppositional—that work which worms its way out of the prescribed channels and is seen in a fresh light.

Despite art's public image of haughty powerlessness and humiliating manipulability, a growing number of activists in and out of the cultural sphere are beginning to confront its potential power. However, the culture that is potentially powerful is not necessarily the culture that those in cultural power think will or should be powerful. Power is generally interpreted as control—control over one's own and others' actions. The myth of culture's powerlessness stems from a misunderstanding of the basis of art's authority and authenticity. Art is suggestive. The motions it inspires are usually e-motions. In the art world, a powerful artist is one whose name can be used. Name, not art. ("I bought a Star," like "I bought a piece of Star," dangerously close to "I bought Starr.")

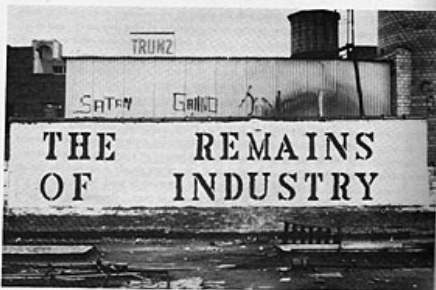
Or perhaps it's more accurate to say the power of the artist is separated from the power of the object. Once art objects had literal power—magical, political power—and the artist shared in this because s/he was needed by the community. (Who needs artists today? What for? Who decided the art object was to have such a limited function?)

If the first ingredient of art's power is its ability to communicate what is seen—from the light on an apple to the underlying causes of world hunger—the second is control over the social and intellectual contexts in which it is distributed and interpreted. The real power of culture is to join individual and

Trojan Horses 345



Christy Russo, *Making Visible During the Day Something Which is Nocturnal (Formerly Rat Patrol, 1978)*. Posters: offset printing on paper, each 6 x 10" (15.4 x 40.2 cm). Various sites in New York City



John Fekner, *The Remains of Industry*, from *Queensites*, 1981. Paint stenciled on brick wall, Trump Meat Factory, Greenpoint, New York

communal visions, to provide "examples" and "object lessons" as well as the pleasures of sensuous recognition. Ironically, those artists who try to convey their meanings directly are often accused of being propagandists, and their accessibility is thus limited to those not afraid of taking a stand. The ability to produce visions is important unless it's connected to a means of communication and distribution.

Political realism is usually labeled propaganda. Yet racism, sexism, and classism are not invisible in this society. The question of why they should be generally invisible in visual art is still a potato too hot to pick up. Because it is so embedded in context, activist art often eludes art critics who are neither the intended audience nor as knowledgeable about the issues and places as the artists themselves have become. The multiple, drawn-out forms can also be confusing because innovation in the international art world is understood as brand name, stylistic, and short-term, geared to the market's brief attention span. Conventionally, artists are not supposed to go so far beneath the surface as to provide changed attitudes; they are merely supposed to embellish, observe, and reflect the sites, sights, and systems of the status quo.

Artists have an unprecedented kind of control over their own production, but most lose it immediately in the post-production phase. They lose control not only of the object, but of its objective. When a work of art is out of the artist's hands it gets out of hand in several senses. Touch, or connection (described by some artists—not just women—as an unalloyed or parental connection) to a work, can be lost at this point. Like a child, the work is abandoned to an independent existence in a world that may transform it beyond recognition—framing it wrong, hanging it in bad light, mystifying it, stripping it of its ideology or, conversely, using it to prove other political points.³ At this stage, the artist surrenders the power of the object to the dealer, museum, or new owner, turning back to the studio, to new work over which s/he still has the illusion of control.

Some of those who insist that art is powerless feel that its power lies precisely in that powerlessness—that art escapes social pressures by being above it all or below it all. There's some truth in this, but it tends to encourage irresponsibility. Others see power as it is defined by the dominant culture—in terms of money, prestige, media coverage, and the possibility of telling people what to do—definitions that by definition exclude conventional notions of art, but not necessarily activist art.

It helps to look at those power struggles in which most artists become embroiled in spite of themselves. Ask yourself—who is more powerful? Is it the famous mainstream artist whose work is seen by thousands in museums and occasionally by millions in *Time* magazine, who enjoys all the symbols of power

3. The classic case is the use of abstract expressionism (the New York School) as a cold war weapon by the U.S. government, first documented by Max Kellie, "American Painting During the Cold War," *Artforum* 11, no. 9 (May 1973): 43-54; William Hungeman, "The Suppression of Art in the McCarthy Decade," *Artforum* 12, no. 2 (October 1973): 48-52; and Eva Cockorth, "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War," *Artforum* 12, no. 10 (June 1974): 39-41.

bestowed by the high art establishment (grants, sales, exhibitions, articles, awards)? Or is it the relatively unknown-in-those-circles artist (usually of conservative bent) whose constituency may be larger and who may be just as rich, but who is denied the validating touch of the "quality" wand by those in cultural power? Or is it the mass-media artist who reaches millions daily but whose name is unknown to those s/he is reaching? Or is it the militant feminist or socialist artist who has chosen invisibility in the art world in favor of a limited but self-determined visibility in the "real world" of community, schools, demonstrations, and other specific audiences? Or could it even be the humble "folk artist" and hobbyist whose audiences are their neighbors, whose art reflects audible voices and invisible lives within the small arenas where those voices are heard and those lives familiar?

III. Sources

Today's activist art is the product of both external and internal circumstances. Even though most art is not directly affected by the external social situation, most artists as people are. The government's domestic and foreign policies and consequent waves of bureaucratic funding and defunding have obviously affected the market, exhibiting, and educational structures within which all art operates. Internally, today's activist art is the product of three separate camps of artists which came together around 1980, at a time of increasing conservatism, economic crisis, and growing fear of World War III. These three camps had similar concerns but very different styles and contexts, and only sporadic intercommunication. They were: (1) experimental or avant-garde artists working in the mainstream or "high art" community; (2) progressive or so-called "political artists" working together or within political organizations, often simultaneously in and out of the mainstream art world; and (3) community artists working primarily outside the art world with grassroots groups.

Although this situation is paralleled to lesser degrees elsewhere in the United States and in other parts of the world, this essay focuses on my own local experience in New York City. That experience has often been fueled by networking with other parts of the country and the world (especially England and Australia, sources of some of our major activist art models). However, the entire history of this movement has yet to be written and, at the moment, would probably be limited to those areas where urban experience, political consciousness, and a fairly healthy art scene overlap.

For better or worse, it all starts in the mainstream, where more and less experimental artists have tended to identify directly with oppressed and rebellious people as artists, but not in their artwork. Mainstream or potentially mainstream artists are likely to be wary of group activity, which is often seen as weakening individual expression and damaging careers. Though there is little enthusiasm for, or knowledge about, art activism in this milieu, there is genuine, if occasional, support for good causes.

"Political" artists are inaccurately assumed to be exclusively creatures of the left, an though anarchy and establishmentarian neutrality were not also "political." (One succinct definition of a non-political artist: "It is just an-

other way of saying, 'My politics are someone else's.'")⁴ For present purposes, I'd describe a political artist as someone whose subjects and sometimes contexts reflect social issues, usually in the form of ironic criticism. Although "political" and "activist" artists are often the same people, "political" art tends to be socially concerned and "activist" art tends to be socially involved—not a value judgment so much as a personal choice. The former's work is a commentary or analysis, while the latter's art works within its context, with its audience. During the 1970s, "political" and "activist" artists, working with feminist groups or organized dissenting artists' groups (such as the Art Workers' Coalition, Artists Meeting for Cultural Change, the Anti-Imperialist Cultural Union) were traditionally alienated from the mainstream, though individual degrees of belligerence and isolation varied, depending on what kind of organizing was going on within the art world at any one time.

Community artists vary in degrees of politicization, and in the past have most often shunned and been shunned by the high art world. They work naturally in groups, most often as muralists, performers, teachers, or artists-in-residence in community centers. Some community art reflects its local situation, some stimulates active participation in its situation, some criticizes and mobilizes for change in that situation. Citizens Workshop was New York's best-known community art group in the 1970s, working primarily on organizing mural projects in neighborhoods throughout the city.

I could keep on drawing lines until I had a web that would provide a more accurate (if still more confusing) picture than the oversimplifications above. I've chosen categorization not to be divisive, but because it seems necessary to understand the three interrelated strands of current activist art. Increasingly, they overlap and are harder and harder to distinguish from each other. For example, are the youngish New Wave artists who run ABC No Rio—a chaotic and energetic storefront space on the Lower East Side—community artists, experimental artists, or political artists? Either one, or all three, depending on whether one looks at their style, their intent, their content, their effect.

Perhaps the general nature of these quasi-definitions will be clearer with a little internal history to back them up. Most of us were raised to see painting and sculpture as powerless to communicate except on specialized levels. They were separate not only from the rest of the world but from the rest of culture. Since the late fifties, however, the visual art world has been increasingly open to marriage (or at least affairs) with music, dance, theater, philosophy, fiction, and sometimes sociology and politics. During the last twenty years, there has been a gradual recognition that forcing artists to choose between rigidly defined mediums and rules, or between art world and "real" world, is a classic way of keeping everybody in their places. Divisiveness through division of labor—still reflected in remaining taboos against the interdisciplinary—is a vestige of early-sixties, Greenbergian formalism, in which a medium was classrophobically

4. Heloise Gosses, "Castration or Occupation?" *Signs* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1981): 51; quoted by Nancy Spero in interview with Kate Horsfield, "On Art and Artists: Nancy Spero," *Profile* 3, no. 1 (January 1983): 17.

understood to be "best" when most "refined"—or confined—to its defining characteristics; e.g., painting is a flat, decorated surface and that is all it can be.

Today's activist art has its roots in the later sixties, in rebellions against such simplistic views of art. It comes not so much from the raised fists and red stars of the "revolutionary" left as from the less consciously subversive reactions against the status quo that took place in the mainstream—primarily in minimal and conceptual art. These blunt and blatantly noncommunicative styles harbored a political awareness characteristic of the times, which even the isolated art world finally couldn't escape. "Fetishization" and "dematerialization" were two strategies minimalists and conceptualists used, respectively, to offset the mythification and commodification of artist and artwork. These strategies didn't work and didn't "get art out of the galleries," but they did set the stage for the TV generation's preference for information and analysis over monumental scale and originality.

In the late sixties, the Artists' and Writers' Protest, the Art Workers' Coalition (AWC), the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, and Women Artists in Revolution (WAR) brought together artists with very diverse aesthetics and varying degrees of success and political awareness to protest the Vietnam War and racism and sexism in the art world. Group actions, planned collectively by Blacks and whites, Europeans and Latin and North Americans, painters and sculptors, differed from the agitprop of the thirties and forties—the last major wave of political art in the U.S.—in their fusion of *clique* and sophistication. The anti-institutional street skits of the Guerrilla Art Action Group (GAAG) owed something to Fluxus and European pseudo-performance art; the manufacture of a Museum of Modern Art membership card overtly rubber-stamped with the AWC logo was inspired by conceptualism, the rhetorical demands made of the museums were written by artists who had shown in them.⁵ In addition, the general counterculture spawned within the art world a new swell of co-op galleries, small presses, artist-run exhibitions and publications, street-works, mail art, small video companies, and independent filmmaking, all of which enabled artists to continue to speak out and speak for themselves in the cooled-out sixties.

While few individual artists used their political experiences directly in their work (though several used their work in their experiences), everyone who participated learned a lot about how the art world runs, about the relationships between artists' power and institutional power, and about the interrelationships between cultural institutions and those controlling the world.⁶ By 1971-1972, those artists who had participated in the antiwar movement as an adventure or as a temporary necessity had dropped back into the mainstream. The Black

5. See my "The Art Workers' Coalition: Not a History," *Studio International* 130, no. 927 (November 1970): 171-174. This and a lot of related material is reprinted in my book, *Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1964).

6. Hans Haacke was one artist who did use this material in his work, and his art and his articles continue to explore, thoroughly and effectively, the innovative manipulations of the "contemporary industry." See his *Forming and Being Formed* (Hilafax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975), and "Working Conditions," *Artforum* 19, no. 10 (June 1981): 56-61.

Larry R. Lippard 330

Liberation movement, which had inspired student and feminist lawsuits, was back on simmer, and the women's movement had inherited the foster banner of rage and radical re-viewing process. Feminist art broadened and deepened the whole notion of "political art" by incorporating the element of the personal, autobiography, consciousness-raising, and social transformation, which led eventually to the still broader notion of "the political is personal"—i.e., an awareness of how local, national, and international events affect our individual lives.

By the mid-seventies, the issues of race, sex, and class, though hardly popular in the art world, had all made it "up" to West Broadway. When, in 1975, Artists Moving for Cultural Change (AMCC) was formed to protest the Whitney Museum's ironic Bicentennial offering (a Rockefeller's private collection), veterans of the antiwar movement were joined by a new generation who had been educated in the sixties by university radicals. Often less action-oriented than the AWC, but far more firmly based in political theory and media analysis, the AMCC became primarily a huge discussion group, several of its most eloquent members being conceptual artists who turned to the mass-reproductive mediums to convey their messages about the social roles of culture and its controllers. Like the AWC, the group's major contribution was consciousness-raising in the art community. Also important was the publication of *The Anti-Catalog*, which looked at the Rockefeller collection with a scholarly but revisionist eye. Some members of the AMCC were also involved in publishing *The Fax* and its successor, *Red Herring*—influential vehicles for more-or-less Marxist views of art and art production. Other members helped found *Horizon: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics* in 1976.

In 1977, the AMCC fell victim to internal and sometimes sectarian kicking. Several participants turned their backs entirely on the art world to join the Anti-Imperialist Cultural Union (AICU), headed by Amiri Baraka. In the AICU, avant-garde artists worked directly with (instead of about) Black people and "communities" on their own turf, in forms unlike those sanctioned or tolerated by the art world's forays into "outrage."⁷ In fact, over the last decade, a larger portion of the art world than is generally recognized has been struggling with its isolation. A practical theory of culture (sometimes touching on so-called "postmodernism") is slowly emerging from several angles. Visual art is only part of it, or, for one, it is part of it. The often cautious glumness of the sixties, coming on top of the underdeveloped rebellions of the sixties, provided more fertile soil for outgrowth than any of us realized at the time. In 1979-80, an impetus fueled partly from politics and partly from style began to come together in New York. It was happening elsewhere in North America, too, though we weren't then much mutually aware.

IV. From 1980 On . . .

By 1980, some veterans of AMCC, AICU, and the feminist movement, many now in their mid- to late thirties, began tentatively to reestablish contact with the peripheries of the art world through the multi-generational Political Art

7. Their publication, *Main Trend*, was a lively documentation of the conflicts involved in being "politically correct" and aesthetically ambitious.

Trojan Horses 331



(Top left) Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America advertisement, 1984; (Top right) Juan Sanchez, *Viva Puerto Rico Libre*, 1982. Oil and mixed media, 66 x 52" (162.7 x 132 cm). (Photo: Fred McDann) (Below) Group Material, *Time Line: U.S. Intervention in Central America*, 1984. Installation for Artists Call, at P.S. 1, Queens, New York, January 1984. (Photo: Andrew Moore)

Documentation/Distribution (PADD). At the same time, a mostly younger generation had begun to create a new style of dissent based on collaboration and a cross-cultural immersion in pop (and punk) culture. The mainstream's hostility toward art with any overt social focus began to break down as it became clear that new energy was not only desperately needed, but was already rumbling away in the subways, in the South Bronx, on the Lower East Side, and in the growing realization of what Reaganomics would do to the country—and to its artists. At the same time, those community cultural activists who had been making murals and working with the disenfranchised since the sixties, and who had been totally invisible in the art world, began to attract new attention via association with the graffitiists and a newly visible Latin culture. Despite the decline of organized activity in the Third World and feminist communities, their activist models were not forgotten. Groups like the Taller Boricua in the *barrios*, JAM in midtown (later downtown), AIR in Soho, and the Basement Workshop in Chinatown made Hispanic, Black, feminist, and Asian art available to those willing to go "out of their way."

A key factor in these developments, especially among the younger artists, was punk culture, imported from the British working class and Americanized into a middle-class rebellion retaining a vague need for social change. At the same time, a complex merger of "high" and "low" culture was taking place, arising from connections between art-school art, rock music and the club scene, murals, street theater, performance, documentary film, photography, and video, and feminist, racial liberation, and labor groups. A grassroots left cultural movement had been growing quietly from the plowed under mulch of sixties activism. It was catalyzed by the influx of belligerently disillusioned and/or idealistic young artists, well-trained and ambitious, but dissatisfied with the narrowness and elitism of the art world into which they were supposed to blend seamlessly, like their publicized predecessors.

Popular culture seems to many different kinds of artists the obvious way to understand how most people see the world. A more and less informed populism underlay the way advertising, rock and rap music, comics, and fashion infiltrated "high art" in the early eighties. A broader view of art's function led in turn to a broader rejection of the politics of liberal neutralism—the avoidance of social responsibility because in art "anything goes, and artists are powerless anyway, right?" This in turn led some to reject the socialized notion that you have to choose between art and social action, that anyone who wants art to be communicative and effective is either a seamy idealist, a lousy artist, or a dangerous red.⁸

Rejecting the private spaces of Soho and the slick pages of the trade magazines, many younger artists got together as Collaborative Projects (Colab); they held scruffy, open, theme shows in storefronts and derelict spaces, and published raw, grainy, newspaper "zines," possessing a new and chaotic aesthetic of display and independent distribution. Also in 1979-80,

8. Cf., Elton Kesser's *Idiotism in The New Orleans*, especially "A New on the New Orleans," *The New Orleans* 1, no. 1 (September 1982): 1-5; and "Turning back the clock: Art and politics in 1984," *The New Orleans* 2, no. 8 (April 1984): 68-73.

Trojan Horses 332

Fashion Moda was founded in the South Bronx—not as a community art center or an avant-garde alternate space (both of which it resembled), but as a “cultural concept” of exchange (which, among other contributions, helped graffiti enter the art world for the second time in a decade). Group Material, a young collective with more structured socialist politics, also opened a storefront—on East 13th Street—and developed a vivid exhibition technique combining didacticism and mass culture.

On New Year's Day 1980, a group from Cobi extralegally occupied an abandoned city-owned building on Delancy Street and held “The Real Estate Show,” a group exhibition about housing, property, real-estate development. This led to the creation of another storefront gallery—ABC No Rio on Rivington Street. PADD (which I work with) was formed in 1979 “to give artists an organized relationship to society,” to sustain left culture (which it continues to do via exhibitions), and to develop an Archive of Socially Concerned Art, plus public events, a monthly forum, and two publications—*Lifefront* and *Red Letter Days*. Gallery 345 opened during this period to show specifically “political” art, and the San Francisco Poster Brigade circulated nationally its wildly designed and heterogeneous “Anti-WW 3” show, with work from some fifty countries.

These shows, in which the individual works blended into the overall installation, became popular, and with them came a surge of overtly political content (often fairly anarchistic and unrefined). Cobi began this trend in 1979 with “The Manifesto Show,” rapidly followed by “The Sex and Death Show,” “The Day Show,” and “The Income and Wealth Show,” peaking in the extravagant “Times Square Show” in the summer of 1980. Group Material had the “Alienation” show, the “It’s a Gender” show, “Faccio/Faccio” (on fashion), and “Arroz con Mango,” a show of “favorite art possessions” from the residents on the gallery’s block. Contemporary Urban Cultural Documentation (CUD) specialized in topical (i.e., recent) archaeology, unearthing and reconstructing a Bronx courthouse, a fallout shelter, and a psychiatric hospital. PADD’s “Death and Taxes” show took place all over the city: in restaurants, telephone booths, and store windows, on walls, and at the IRS building. PADD also concentrates on demonstration art, and on the conception of political demonstrations as art.

Through such collective activities, many young, so-called “New Wave” artists reached out to their contemporaries in the ghettos, motivated less by political consciousness than by common emotional needs. In doing so, they brought downtown art to the South Bronx and vice versa; even more unprecedented, they sometimes succeeded in bringing downtown art audiences to the South Bronx (though in this case, not much vice versa). Fringe cross-class, cross-cultural alliances began to be formed, sometimes resulting in a new kind of art use—the former (or still active) graffiti writer welcomed into and partially transforming the world of downtown gutter-chic (and later, peripatetic-chic).

In the early 1980s, tentative coalitions also began to form among the regrouping leftist artists and the younger generations, within or through the efforts of PADD and Group Material. Initially, the more organized cultural left was wary of the “New Wave” as possibly exploitative, manipulative, chic, or

opportunistic, while the left itself was viewed by most younger artists as old-fashioned, moralistic, and rhetorical. Gradually, these prejudices were broken down on both sides. A renewed openness to the left to popular culture and elements of the avant-garde has coincided with a renewed (and no doubt temporary) openness in the mainstream to a certain degree of explicit political content. Added by the Reagan administration’s domestic and military antics, violence, fear, alienation, and survival have become universal topics, surfacing in innumerable different styles and mediums within the walls of the Trojan art establishment.

As more artists began to work directly in the public, as shows in the streets and in the subways, or works inside abandoned buildings became relatively common (following the graffitiists and community activists), a new, hybrid subcultural art was formed. Under the influences of music, politics, and Black and Hispanic culture, strange bedfellows met and mated. The East Village and the Lower East Side (Alphabetville and Looserville) were and are still the principal centers of activity. These rapidly changing communities of mixed economies and ethnicities, where artists have been at home for over a century, are now endangered by gentrification or “Sobrievation,” ironically brought on by the very phenomena discussed above. Similarly, “political art” is being gentrified by the high art world. Yet, as it becomes more respectable, it does not necessarily become less effective, in part because activist artists continue to straddle the barricade, offering models for further integration of art and social change.

Much activist work is collaborative or participatory and its meaning is directly derived from its use-value to a particular community. The needs of a community provide artists with both outlets and boundaries. While straddling the fence between mainstream and outreach is a way of avoiding co-optation, it’s not a comfortable position. Accessibility to “a broader audience” is a conscious if not often realized component of activist art. It takes years to develop formally effective ways to exchange powers with one’s chosen audience. As many have discovered, it is impossible just to drop into a “community” and make good activist art. The task is specialized (though not in the same ways high art is) and it demands discipline and dedication (as high art does). To be out of touch, unsyncretic, or unformed is disastrous (maybe this too, in a different arena, goes for high art).

The intricately structural quality that characterizes activist art results from the complexity of the position these artists find themselves in, fraught as it is with economic, aesthetic, and political contradictions. Community or political work can and often does restrict the artist’s own need to go further out, or further in, to experiment past the bounds of immediate necessity. The burnout rate among fine artists working with groups is high because the rewards for such activities are seen as entirely separate from the development of the art and are less likely to be appreciated by peers within the art world.

On the other hand, I have yet to see an artist who ventured out of the art world to work in unfamiliar contexts come back empty-handed. Such experience enriches any art. Leaving the safety of one’s home base—the context in which one was trained to act—one learns a great deal not only about the world,

but about oneself, one’s art and imagery, and their communicative effects. New symbols can emerge from these new experiences. An art that takes on activism as its driving force must emphasize clarity of meaning and communication. But this does not mean it has to be simplistic, which implies a condescending approach toward the audience. In addition, what may appear simple or stereotyped to one audience may be rich and meaningful to another that is more involved in specific issues.⁹

Since 1980, an increased number of connections have been made nationally and internationally (England, Canada, Australia, Cuba, and Nicaragua have played roles) between organized visual artists and socially concerned and/or involved cultural workers. The most recent and visible symptom has been Artists Call Against US Intervention in Central America—a uniquely broad-based and diverse campaign of cultural protest that began in January 1984, when Artists Call mobilized workers from all the arts, with thirty-one exhibitions and 1100 artists participating in New York City alone. Thousands more continue to take part in some thirty cities in the United States and Canada. Artists Call challenged the notion that artists were apolitical and ineffective. Aside from raising money and raising consciousness about the increasing militarization of Central America by the Reagan administration, it encouraged international solidarity among artists, set up an ongoing national network of socially conscious artists, and provided a model for other cultural and professional groups. Perhaps an important, Artists Call widened the spectrum of artists who learned about the Central American situation and who realized that such issues could be part of their art.¹⁰

Organizing and networking are crucial elements in activist art, despite the fact that they are not usually considered part of the creative process. Art grows from art as well as from the artists’ experiences of life, so providing an atmosphere of access to each other’s art and ideas is one of the major goals of cultural activism in the U.S. today. Art with political content is still covered only perfunctorily, if at all, in big museum or traveling exhibitions, in the mass media, and in the large-circulation trade magazines—where, if covered, it tends to be tucked into special sections or neutralized by writers who ignore or are ignorant of its content. At the same time, visual art has been similarly neglected in the left media, though that too seems to be changing somewhat. Because of such double prejudice, the number of newsletters and publications devoted to or including left culture has mushroomed.¹¹

9. Even Harold Rosenberg once wrote, “responding to political struggles can do much for art” (quoted by Jesse Ganshell, in “An Against Intervention,” *Art in America* 72, no. 5 [May 1984]: 15).

10. For further information on Artists Call, see *Art & Artists* 13, no. 4 (January 1984), special issue; *Art in America* 72, no. 5 (May 1984): 9-19; *High Performance*, no. 25 (1984): 8-14, all with major articles on it.

11. To list a few: *Cultural Correspondence*, *Art & Artists*, *Lifefront*, *Cultural Democracy*, and *Resist* (New York); *Community Minded and Left Curve* (San Francisco); *Fare and Inuit* (Toronto); *Aftersight* (Rochester); *911 Reports* (Seattle); *Red Bus* (Tallahassee); *Cultural Workers News* (Massachusetts); *Black and Army* (London); *Art Network* (Sydney) . . . not to mention film and literary magazines and all the artists’ publications with some

Experience in the alternative media has stylistically affected the art itself, as well as offering the possibility of reconstructing communications as political intervention. Imagery drawn from the (mostly bad) news of the day and from techniques or styles deriving from or commenting on the commercial media is ubiquitous across the aesthetic/political spectrum. This dependence (for both aesthetic and economic reasons) on mass-reproductive techniques coupled with the need to reconnect with “real life” has resulted in what I call the “journalization of art.” In the graphic arts and in painting it includes the grit and grain of the artist-as-reporter tradition, not coincidentally recalling much art from the 1930s, when the political situation here ominous parallels to today’s massive unemployment and looming war clouds. Documentary photography and film, comics, and illustrated books have also been resurrected as key tools for activism, even as their own conventions and clichés are subjected to increased scrutiny. The same modernist self-consciousness that encourages new uses of old radicalisms is evident in another branch of the journalization of art—that which either challenges or assumes the hypocrisy and subliminal messages of slick magazines, Hollywood films, and TV commercials. An overview of this phenomenon reveals some artists who are wholly concerned with media style, divorced from all but hermetic or ambiguous content. Others, who make up the more left-leaning, formalist, and ideologically aware branch of postmodernism, focus more on theories of representation and “visualism” of found images. (This interestingly recalls the mid- to late-sixties program of conceptual art which scorned the “hand-of-the-artist” and the introduction of “any more objects into the world.”) Others are populists or activists who see mass-culture techniques as ways to reach more people with both a narrative hook and a redemptive familiarity: keep the image, change the message.

The increased political sophistication of 1980s activist and “political” art, as compared to that of the 1960s, is due to the gradual development of a theory of left culture woven from the diverse threads mentioned here, a theory that reflects the attention being paid in 1984 to deconstruct as well as to confrontational politics. Nourished by the global climate of anger and anxiety, there is a growing acknowledgment on the left of the mythic and psychological components of ideology and art. Activist artists are still trying to communicate internal, communal, and worldwide fears about the future (not to mention the present) without making people to death with big bad Ronnie images. Communicating these fears makes us and others realize we are not alone in our search for an imagery that combines the ingredients of analysis, resistance, and hope. Between naïveté and experience, heavy commitment and downing consciousness, there has to be room for a lot of different things to happen.

The degree to which an activist art is integrated with the artist’s beliefs is crucial to its effectiveness. Much well-meaning progressive and activist art does not truly reflect the artist’s lived experience, and often the artist’s lived experi-

political context, such as *Red Life*, *High Performance*, *Wings*, *Bomb*, *Cover*, *Red Tape* and *Just Another Ankle* . . . Among them, they report on a multiplicity of events from music to performance to conferences to street actions, union work, demonstration, exhibitions, mail art, artists’ books, and so forth.

ence bears little resemblance to that of most other people. Work with tenant's organizations, feminist, radical, or solidarity groups, labor unions, or in the cultural task forces of the many small left parties, or with environmental, pacifist, and anti-nuclear groups offers ways to connect with those who are interested. Another option is to see the changing self as a symbol of social change, using personal histories (not necessarily one's own) to illuminate world events and larger visions. In this process local, ethnic, gender, and class identifications can augment individual obsessions. The extraordinary Afro-Brazilian film *Joni* shows the griot (storyteller, historian, shaman, artist) as the backbone of daily political consciousness in the community, the source of continuity through which power is maintained or lost.

I like to keep reminding myself that the root of the word "radical" is the word "root." Grassroots then means not only propagation—spreading the word—but is based on the fact that each blade of grass has its own roots. Power means "to be able"—the ability to act vigorously with "strength, authority, might, control, spirit, divinity." And the word "craft" comes from Middle English and means strength and power, which later became "skill." Neither the word "art" nor the word "culture" bear these belligerent connotations. Art originally meant "to join or fit together," and "culture" comes from cultivation and growth. An artist can function like a lazy gardener who cuts off the weeds as a temporary holding action. Or s/he can go under the surface to the causes. Social change can happen when you tear things up by the roots, or—to collage metaphors—when you go back to the roots and distinguish the weeds from the blossoms and vegetables . . . the Trojan horses from the four horses of the Apocalypse.

Portions of this essay have appeared previously in my columns in *The Village Voice*, in particular "Power/Control" (October 18, 1983). It also owes a good deal to dialogue with members of Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PADD), Hermes, and The Alliance for Cultural Democracy, especially my working partner, Jerry Kearns.

but works rather by subverting the very idea of an aesthetic object. Obviously, in (art) activist circles and beyond, the debate continues as to whether this subversion is merely a masquerade – a purely strategic universalism that pretends to be “art” in order to gain access – or whether we are dealing with a Janus-faced identity: at once activist *and* aesthetic. And then there is the possibility of activist art masquerading as a Janus!

Crucial to the idea of the Trojan Horse is the possibility of movement from the outside of a stronghold to the inside by means of artistic production. Indeed, for Lippard, the foremost characteristic of activist art is that it moves between art institutions and local, political communities and contexts – sometimes engaging so significantly in the latter that visibility in the former becomes secondary, irrelevant, even obsolete. Activist art, then, is not a genre, not an ism, but is rather an engagement in social issues and social change through a great variety of methods and mediums. It is pragmatic rather than idiomatic. Therefore, the question of whether or not it is art, and whether artistic production is a useful platform for political change, does not come up. Politics is seen in terms of how one acts in the situation one is in – a question of *how* one engages. Rather than maintaining a dichotomy between art and activism or between aesthetics and politics, another strategic, albeit tentative distinction is established between *political* art and *activist* art, between social concerns and commentary on the one hand, and community involvement and organizing on the other.

These two approaches are united by the concept of power: the power of art and the power of the people. As Lippard duly notes, no one can achieve change alone – not even famous artists. Change can only be realized as part of a movement, hence the focus on community building and consciousness-raising found in much art activism. But artists also have access to power through their framing and reframing of the visible and seemingly invisible, through subversion of rather than subservience to dominant discourses of visibility and representation. Furthermore, according to Lippard, artists have among producers a uniquely high degree of control over their production, if not their post-production and distribution. While there certainly are *employers* in the art world, in its wider context of cultural production, and in the knowledge economy, an initial control over the means of artistic production is taken for granted; and to whatever degree, and, crucially, to whom, this control is then relinquished – be it to institutions, collectors, collaborators, or communities – this

comprises a political decision paralleling those that govern the initial production of images themselves. In other words, the struggle today is not only over the production of images and ideas, but also over their dissemination and distribution, a struggle that cannot be endured alone, but always with, as well as against others: embedded *and* expanded.

×

08/09

e-flux journal #9 — october 2009 Simon Sheikh
Positively Trojan Horses Revisited

Simon Sheikh is a curator and critic. He is currently assistant professor of art theory and coordinator of the Critical Studies program at the Malmö Art Academy in Sweden. He was the director of the Overgaden Institute for Contemporary Art in Copenhagen from 1999 to 2002 and a curator at NIFCA, Helsinki, from 2003 to 2004. He was editor of the magazine *Øjeblikket* from 1996 to 2000 and a member of the project group GLOBE from 1993 to 2000.

09/09

1
Lucy R. Lippard, "Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power," in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984).

2
Lucy R. Lippard, *Get the Message?: A Decade of Art for Social Change* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1984); "Too Political? Forget It," in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine (New York: New York University Press, 1999).