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. 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.”

“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,
Maybe the Trojan Horse was the first activist artwork. Based in subversion 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 1980 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," Lippincott, no. 8 (Winter 1983-84): 6. Goldbard and Adams were for several years the prime movers of NAPMOC [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; June 6, nos. 1-2 (May-June 1982): 13-16; and in all back issues of Cultural Democracy.
There are several theories about the origins of art. One theory suggests that early humans created art as a means of communication, expressing their thoughts and emotions. Another theory proposes that art evolved as a way to attract mates or to gain social status. Yet another theory holds that art is a form of mental health, helping individuals cope with stress and anxiety. Whatever the reason, art has been a constant throughout human history.

Art is not just for the elite; it is accessible to everyone. Whether you are a professional artist or a casual painter, art can provide a sense of peace and relaxation. It can also be a way to express oneself, to tell a story, or to convey a message. Art can be found in a variety of forms, from paintings and sculptures to music and dance.

In conclusion, art is an essential part of human life. It provides us with a way to express ourselves, to connect with others, and to appreciate the beauty of the world around us.

References:

Figures:
1. A painting of the Mona Lisa.

Questions:
1. What is the purpose of art?
2. How has art evolved throughout history?
3. How does art provide a sense of peace and relaxation?

Answers:
1. The purpose of art is to express oneself, to connect with others, and to appreciate the beauty of the world.
2. Art has evolved from simple cave drawings to complex modern art forms.
3. Art can provide a sense of peace and relaxation by allowing the viewer to disconnect from the stresses of daily life and to focus on the beauty of the artwork.
The Remains of Industry

by John Fowles

The Arrow Editions

1998

The Arrow Editions

1998

3

Today's artist at work in the product of both internal and external circumstances. From the year's end, the artist who feels the need to reflect on the external structur...
.....
Fabric Mills was located in the South Bronx as an early community enterprise in an area poor-gate years ago. This is a remarkable tale: a tale of a "new deal" of the past that is worth remembering. But it cannot be told in a single voice: it is a tale of many voices, each with its own story to tell.

The story of the Fabric Mills begins with a group of women who banded together to create a cooperative business. They were determined to create an alternative to the factory system of production, which had oppressed them for so long. They opened a small shop and began making clothing in their homes, using their own skills and knowledge. As their business grew, they attracted other women who also wanted to work for themselves.

As the Fabric Mills expanded, it became a center for community organizing. Women from all walks of life came together to discuss their concerns and to plan for a better future. They worked to improve the working conditions in their own factory, and to demand better wages and benefits for all workers. They also engaged in broader political struggles, including the fight for civil rights and the struggle for workers' rights.

The Fabric Mills was not just a place of work, but a place of community. It was a place where women could come together to support one another, and to build power. It was a place where new ideas could be tested and new strategies developed. It was a place where women could learn to be leaders.

The Fabric Mills was an important part of the larger struggle for social justice. It was a symbol of the power of collective action. It was a reminder that when people come together to work towards a common goal, they can achieve great things.

As the Fabric Mills grew, it faced many challenges. There were times when the business was in danger of collapsing. But the women who ran the mill never gave up. They worked hard to keep the business going, and to make it stronger.

Despite the many difficulties they faced, the Fabric Mills continued to be a model of community organizing. It was a place where women could come together to build power, and to fight for a better future. It was a place where new ideas could be tested and new strategies developed. It was a place where women could learn to be leaders.

Today, the Fabric Mills is a symbol of the power of collective action. It is a reminder that when people come together to work towards a common goal, they can achieve great things.
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 João 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 dialogues with members of Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PADD), Heresies, and The Alliance for Cultural Democracy, especially my working partner, Jerry Kearns.

Lucy R. Lippard 358
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.
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.
