

Aphorisms on art and activism.

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Aphorisms On Art & Activism

Fine / High Art never has been innately “left wing” or “oppositional”; quite the opposite, in fact. We like to delude ourselves otherwise.

Fine Art practices are harmless bacteria in the gut of capital.

What does art have to say to activism meaningfully? Who has the privilege or time to pay attention to the musings of artists? Who even notices when artists speak, other than People Like Us?

Hashtag activism, Algorithm jockeying, treading the boards of struggle as a stage set, starbursts of cleverness before a closed audience, are self-gratifying narcissistic gestures, without consequence.

There’s no such thing as ‘radicalism’ in the visual arts. Like every other word that had power fifty years ago, it’s been hollowed out and put up for sale. ‘La Lutte Continue’ on a teatowel.

Let’s distinguish between Activism and Consciousness Raising. Consciousness Raising is useful, and can lead on to activism, but is not in itself Activism; Activism always raises consciousness, and must be consequential.

Activism cannot be done on behalf of others. Activism “on behalf of” another person or group is simply warming yourself in the glow of someone else’s misery.

If you class yourself as an “ally”, sit at the back, shut up, and work. Allies don’t push themselves to the front in support of someone else’s battle.

Solidarity is something lived not spoken. Turn your back on those who self-servingly speak the language of the commons, but who in practice, act in a ruthlessly individualist manner. Don’t look back.

Activism ought to be dangerous; not physically, necessarily, but certainly in terms of the challenges it poses, to ourselves and to others. Activism, like art, should never be comfortable, or easy, or shallow. If it is, it’s something else; decoration, posturing, mime.

Activism can only grow slowly and not always in the light. Meaningful activism is not possible without a deep understanding of structural and social relations; without a mixture of careful planning, patient discussion, failure, endless unrewarded work, reacting spontaneously to the unexpected. Activism, like art practice, should be lithe.

Like art practice, Activism is a merger of discovery, ideas, vision, drive, kindness, humour, mutual respect, tolerance of failure, solidarity and perseverance.

99% of activist lives end with beautiful social memories, with the deep reward of unbreakable friendship and solidarity with fellow travellers, but little to show politically. The other 1% are celebrated through commodification - incorporation in old age, or posthumously. Their commodification derives from political consequence.

In a hyper-visual age the de-coupling of activism from spectacle and re-building a broader sense of the commons and a collective political wisdom based on shared experience, is the most urgent task. Whether artists are a help or a hindrance here really is open to question.

See also: Conrad Atkinson, Bassiani Club, Tblisi, Rufina Bazlova, Kulturni Centar TEKSTIL, Shtip, Stuart Christie, KOOPERACIJA Skopje, Valie Export, Essex Girls' Liberation Front, Stano Filko, Anti-Fascist Action / the Independent Working Class Association, CLR James, Alexei Kuzmich, Ethel MacDonald, Nestor Makhno, Marina Naprushkina, Piotr Pavlenski, Stepan Petrichenko, Ales Pushkin, Walter Rodney, Lawrence Storione, Mare Tralla, Vovat Tsesler, Rada Vranješević