Art and Activism: Some Philosophical Issues in Artivism

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"Artivism" traces its roots to the Chicano Revolution in the 1960s and gained traction in the 1990s and early 2000s, but some claim that artivism is an old artistic preoccupation, tracing its origins in protest art earlier in the mid-1800s (Delacroix and Manet) and early 1900s in visual artworks depicting revolutions in history. The dearth of literature on the philosophical foundations of artivism attests to the infancy of this art movement. Artivism, simply put, is the use of art as a tool for social change. But if this is the case, the value of their art must be found in their ability to make their spectators *understand* what is happening in the world. If so, is authorial intention crucial in the interpretation of their works? Since these works are supposed to effect change in the spectator's behavior and change the world, how does one know that they have been effective in doing so? What happens when artivist creations fail at activism? Do they remain works of art? This paper aims to outline some philosophical issues involved in the Aesthetics of artivism, especially the issue of intentionalism, and proposes a cognitivist normative framework to effectively evaluate artivist works.

Keywords: Artivism, Intentionalism/Anti-intentionalism, Cognitivist Aesthetics, Æffect

Introduction

Art and activism have been comfortable bedfellows despite issues on comparable status, parity, commensurability, and even epistemic values each brings into the social or political arena (Simoniti). History is filled with works—literary, visual, performative—that took on, proudly or not, the label "political art," "protest art," or "activist art." While many associate the beginning of the "politicization of art" or the "aestheticization of politics" in the 1930s (Milohnic; Hazelwood), some trace it even earlier in the works of Delacroix, Daumier, Leutze, Goya, and Rivera—early to mid-19th century European painters whose works were sparked by 18th century revolutions (Richman-Abdou).

In recent times, however, "artistic activism" or "Artivism," seems to gain popularity, the label being appropriated by artists promoting various advocacies through their art. Being a call for change, many such artworks have probably been (carelessly) lumped together as "political-" or "socially engaged art." However, while "political art" refers to artworks that touch on subject matters that are political in nature, they do not require the audience to engage in political action. Activist art, on the other hand, involves not just the artist's exploration of political matters in the act of creating, but also the spectators' action to bring about a desired change (Mullin 191). While political art may remain an individual preoccupation, activist art is necessarily social.

Duncombe and Lambert show several advantages to doing artivism. Because art is generally emotive, activist art creates "resonant experiences that lead to measurable shifts in power," and "has been used throughout history." The current cultural and political landscape that expects people to take their opinions to the streets and enables them to digitally reach so many in so little time allows for non-traditional forms that surprise and therefore create new ways of doing things. Artivism can sustain the effort and afford a change that lasts through peaceful but persuasive means.

Artivism's success as a means of artistic engagement thus depends on what it claims to do and whether what it claims to do is done. Without a clear framework to anchor its engagement, artivism may lose the traction it is said to be gaining in recent years. As Duncombe and Harrybye put it, even though its practice gets more established as the years go by, "its

foundation is still a matter of faith rather than fact" (7). While the literature on political art abounds, the ones dealing directly with artivism are few and are still vague on questions regarding how it functions. This paper aims at a critical inquiry into the phenomenon of Artivism. It seeks to discover how artivism is currently understood, outline philosophical issues in evaluating artivist works, and raise the questions that future investigations must address. As such, it is undertaken as a work in normative aesthetics. Its pursuit is deemed significant because if artivism is more effective in moving people into action than conventional activism (Duncombe and Harrebye), it will be worthwhile to establish and defend it on more solid grounds. It is therefore beneficial to define its parameters (or lack thereof) and contribute to its growth and effectiveness by educating more artists to embrace this form of activism.

Artivism

The term "artivism" is said to have risen out of the "Encuentro" between the Chican@ artists and Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico in August 1997 (Williams; Flores), the artists being inspired by the latter's struggle for democracy and preservation of the identity of the indigenous groups in Mexico. The Chican@ artists sought to learn from and support Zapatismo through artistic activism. The term is now used to refer to artworks that fall outside the mainstream, "the street stuff" (Brody), intended to get people involved in a non-violent way to promote open dialogue (Williams). Artivism "…harnesses the critical imagination to design events and strategies that provoke new questions and new meaning in the pursuit of more respectful ways of being (Buckland 2011). It "turns words into action" (Hadjiosif), changes unsatisfactory conditions, educates, and creates culture (Deal and Nicholson) using creative expressions "to denounce, cultivate awareness, and motivate change in society" (Williams).

Artivist Eve Ensler reflects on the triggers for change. She rejects the "terror and violence "of revolutions, wars, and suppression even though these bring about the most immediate change. She contends that the change these bring is only a change of "one dominant force for another." Passion, on the other hand, tends to bring more meaningful, deeper, and lasting changes both in the individual and in the community. Between power and passion, however, she says there is a third option, "….Not aggression but fierceness. Not hurting but confronting. Not violating but disrupting. This passion has all the ingredients of activism but is charged with the wild creations of art" (Ensler).

The balance in the power-passion dichotomy that Ensler claims artivism achieves is articulated in the effect-affect or æffect character attributed to it. The goal of any activist project is to create change. Thus it is engaged in with a view to a desired *effect*. Art, on the other hand, presents a way of seeing the world and generally produces emotion in the spectator. In other words, it is *affective*.

> Activism moves the material world, while Art moves the heart, body, and soul. The scope of the former is social, while the latter is individual…[but] [t]he social is not some mere abstraction; society is composed of people, and change does not just happen. It happens because people make change. As such, the individual and the social are intertwined. (Duncombe 118)

> [P]eople don't soberly decide to change their minds and act accordingly. They are moved to do so by emotionally powerful stimuli. As such, when it comes to stimulating social change, affect and effect are not discreet ends…there is a causal relationship [between them]….We might think of this as Affective Effect, or…Effective Affect [encompassed] …in a new word, Æffect. (Duncombe 119)

Due to its goal of generating æffect, artivist works "take to the streets," and are no longer confined to galleries and museums. They are in public spaces, installed in parks, side streets, and malls; murals painted on walls or posters hung on street posts; songs sung or poems read in the streets or cafes; and short videos uploaded on YouTube. Their materials are sometimes too common as a quotation of everyday things that anyone can encounter in the regular flow of life. Parody or satire are typically employed through techniques like "culture jamming" and "subvertizing," thereby changing the meanings of well-known symbols and creating new ones (Funderburk). Artivist artworks are more than mere commentaries on the world's state of affairs. They are there to raise consciousness, confront, ask questions, and invite spectators to think, reflect, change themselves, and take further action. As Snyder comments, "…good artivism should inspire critical thinking and empathy" (Funderburk).

If works of this kind aim to æffect change, however, one has to assume that they are created with a particular *intention* in mind that forms or influences the meaning of the pieces. As works of art, their success will depend on whether this intention is fulfilled. The success of the artworks, therefore, lies in the change that the works inspire in spectators. But unless people *understand* the intention behind the works, they will not be able to discern what they mean. Furthermore, since activist artworks take non-traditional forms and are staged and displayed in more accessible spaces other than the museum, they seem more connected to particular contexts—not necessarily of the spatial sort, but of a cultural one. When this happens, how are these works to be evaluated? When they fail to fulfill the intention of the creators, do they fail as works of art as well or only as works of activism?

Intentionalism and Emotive Import in Artivism

W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley claim in "Intentional Fallacy," that the interpretation of a work of art must not depend on the original intention of the artist.[1] Intention, as the "…design or plan in the author's mind…has obvious affinities for the author's attitude toward his work…" (469) It is how the author planned their work to be perceived. However, the work takes on an independent life once released to the world. Its meaning or value must be divorced from its creator and what its creator intended its meaning to be. "The design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of the work…" (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946, 468.) In the broader sense, it means that when one considers and reflects on artworks, they have to look at the internal properties of the artworks to realize their meaning. One cannot appeal to the psychology or biography of the creators to capture what they intended their works to mean. The narrower sense, on the other hand, involves the "Identity Thesis" (Beardsley; Dickie and Wilson 234), which inquires whether the creator's intention is *identical* to the meaning of the work.

The intentionalism/anti-intentionalism debate is not clear-cut because the sides taken are not always mutually exclusive. Anti-intentionalists do not always deny the broader intentionalist view but only draw the line when it comes to the Identity Thesis. They do not deny that the creator intended for a work of art to mean something, but they deny that the creator's intention is necessary or the same as the meaning of the piece. Paul Ricoeur, for instance, commenting on Wimsatt and Beardsley's "intentional fallacy," insists that the "text's career escapes the finite horizon lived by its author. What the text means now matters more than what the author meant when he wrote it." However, he also warns against what he calls the "fallacy of absolute text" committed when one claims that the text is an "authorless entity." (Ricoeur 1977, 6) Without committing to either side or any position between the two extremes of the debate, this paper claims that the nature of activist art makes it difficult to escape intentionalist sentiments.

Artivist art could therefore be used as an argument against (some types of) "Intentional Fallacy." But as deliberately intentionalist, artivist work must also give up its ability to

transpose itself in different contexts and multiply its meanings. While the transference of data and images nowadays is "unimaginably fast," making them "almost culture-less" (ML), artivist art is evidently context-dependent, specifically on the socio-political context for which it is created. Its meaning, identified with the artist's intention, becomes singular. But perhaps, in activism, poignancy is more important than flexibility. But even so, this says more about the creator's intention for the work as a work on *activism.* What about the work as *art?* Ricoeurean interpretation of art shows, for instance, that art functions like a metaphor (Ivic) and may take on multiple contexts, and therefore, multiple meanings. Pegging the meaning of artivist works on the intention of the creator as an activist may diminish the richness of the work as art.

Apart from its seeming intentionalist leanings, artivist works also deny Wimsatt and Beardsley's "Affective Fallacy." In 1949 they claimed that in both intentional and affective fallacies, the art object disappears. In the former, the meaning is taken to be the author's intention, in the latter, the judgment of the artwork is made dependent on its "psychological effect" on the reader or spectator. Since artivism draws on the "affect" of art and the "effect" of activism to achieve its goal, it is quite absurd to deny this as the basis of the work's success. To prompt people to act, the work must *affect* them enough to do something about the situation presented to them by the work of art. If the spectator is not emotionally moved, effective action is not likely to follow. For activist art to be successful, it seems, the original intention of the creator *and* its emotive import must go hand in hand.

Cognitivist Aesthetics and Artivism

While an expressivist aesthetic framework—the theory that claims that art is expressive of emotion (Graham 47)—seems aligned with the required emotive import of artivist works, it might not be enough. Æffect is not merely about emotions, the "affect" part, but is perhaps more importantly about the "effect," the desired result.

The artist-activist wants to change the world by designing a work of art that will trigger an emotion in the spectator of her artwork, an emotion strong enough to prompt the spectator to act. But this requires a decision, and a decision requires *understanding*. In other words, the recipient of the intended meaning of the artwork has to understand what the artwork is intended to be about. She has to understand the intended meaning in the design or creation of the artivist. For example, if A.G. Saño's intended meaning in the creation of his dolphin murals does not reach the spectator, the spectator might enjoy the mural and think that dolphins are "cute." She might seek to enjoy being near dolphins and visit an aquarium or a dolphin shelter. But unless she understands that Saño presents endangered species in his murals because he wants to exhort people to stop rituals of dolphin mass-killing and to save the marine animals from extinction, then the desired result—cut on one's carbon footprint, save the dolphins, promote marine protection—cannot be achieved.

Aesthetic cognitivism is the claim that art, apart from giving pleasure, being preoccupied with the beautiful, or invoking emotions, can also teach us something. As such, art helps transform through understanding so that we experience a change in ourselves, our views and ways, and by extension, a change in our world. Aesthetic cognitivism shows that art may not only be able to "record, reveal, or otherwise track and transmit truths about the world" but may also enable a better understanding of the world and one's experiences in it (Gibson 1; Baumberger). Aesthetic cognitivism "says that the arts have the *capacity* to enhance our understanding of experience… It also holds that, when artworks do enrich our understanding of experience, this gives us reason to value them more highly than if they simply gave us pleasure or were beautiful to contemplate (Gordon 71).

One objection to a cognitivist aesthetic framework is the "no-belief" objection which claims that artworks come from the artist's imagination and, therefore, cannot say anything, much less communicate beliefs about the actual world (Baumberer 58). It questions how

something fictional can teach anything about the real world, for instance, the way Biology does. Art does not employ the methods of philosophical argumentation or scientific experimentation. Moreover, while there are many ways to teach a scientific concept, a work of art cannot be re-stated or re-formatted. It is unique in the coincidence of its form and content (Gibson 5-7; Graham 58-62).

In defense of cognitivism, therefore, proponents show how "[e]ven fictional works sometimes refer to actual objects and convey beliefs about them" (Baumberger 59). Novels, for instance, may narrate a fictional story but are set in real geographical places. Representational paintings are images of things in the actual world. The objection also does not hold when it comes to non-fictional works where activist art—closer to documentary forms than fiction—belongs. It is, after all, a message about real issues and a clamor for social change, often presented in public spaces, involving interaction with the public. Some works are also heavily textual, posing questions or discussing the issue at hand, mimicking cryptically, philosophical argumentations, like the *Guerrilla Girls'* "Dearest Art Collector" and Peggy Diggs' "Belief." Some, like Eliasson and Rosing's "Ice Watch," use actual objects involved in the issue at hand—chunks of ice from Greenland.

By calling attention to and creatively providing information about these urgent matters, activist art leads spectators to new understandings and even new beliefs that they would probably not experience had these works not been placed in front of them. Given this, however, the artivist work's success depends largely on the success of its cognitive function.

The Measures of Success

Does artivism work then? Do they change people's hearts and minds? Do they get them to act as intended? These would be the clearest evidence of the cognitive function of artivist art. But how do we know?

In 2018, Duncombe and Harrybye conducted an experiment on Queen Louise's Bridge in Copenhagen to compare the effectiveness of conventional and creative forms of activism. They campaigned about the harmful effects of raising cattle and demanded green taxes on meat production. Their goal was to get passersby to listen to a speech, sign campaigns, accept flyers, and chat with the researchers. They "performed" both the conventional activist forms (delivering speeches, approaching passersby to collect signatures, and distributing informative flyers) and the creative forms (rapping, donning cow costumes and "farting," and displaying installations of actual cow dung while distributing more interestingly formatted flyers). They found that the creative forms were more effective in getting what they wanted from the passersby. People were more intrigued; they stayed to chat with the observers and gave their signatures more readily when given the more creative show than when they were just called to listen to a soapbox speech or asked if they "had two minutes" to spare and sign a petition.

There are, admittedly, many limitations to the said experiment—the location, the culture of the Danes, the conventionality of the action they were after (listening to speeches, signing petitions, and accepting flyers), and even the environmental issue they raised. But what the Copenhagen experiment showed is evidence that metrics could be developed to measure the effectiveness of such creative campaigns. The same could be designed for other forms of artivism in different parts of the world.

However, while the experiment's results declare the success of the creative forms of *activism*, is it proper to say that the creative forms themselves as *art* are successful? Are the art forms used for activist purposes good art if they succeed as activism? If creative forms of activism fail to achieve the desired results, do they, *as artworks*, also fail? In other words, do their cognitive and aesthetic values coincide?

There is then more to unifying art and activism than the blending of the terms into "artivism." Is it even proper to speak of art as *art* when utilized for activism? Are there

compromises to be made as an artist slips into activism and an activist exchanges conventional methods for creative ones? These convolutions must be clarified if artivism is to lend itself to serious evaluation. Duncombe and Harrybye note that artists resist impact-testing of creative forms of activism as it compromises "creative mystery and artistic integrity" (8). Groys also says, "Art activists do want to be useful, to change the world, to make the world a better place—but at the same time, they do not want to cease being artists." Yet, measurements are necessary so artivist works are not rendered futile. On the other hand, if the artwork proves effective, what happens to it as a work of art when its job is done?

One might consider Goodman's revision of the question "What is art?" into "When is art?" (Goodman 67). If the art of the activist artwork is so tightly wound around its activist purpose, when the purpose is accomplished, perhaps it ceases being art. To salvage it, one might have to swing back to the claim of polysemy, thereby abandoning internationalist positions in regarding activist works of art. If the "leftover" art is severed from its activist purpose, it could take on different contexts and gain other meanings from what the creator intended it to be.

Conclusion: More to be done

It is noble to want to make the world a better place. Artivists are doing their part in at least trying to stop us from making things worse. The unconventionality of their works has indeed intrigued viewers, making their work effective even in the mere act of attracting viewers. However, as the foregoing has shown, there is more to be done to make the phenomenon of artivism gain a solid ground on which to stand and grow as a significant source of inspiration for change—to be fully what it intends to be.

Artivism has been shown to be inherently intentionalist, relying on the creator's intended meaning to push the utilization of the resulting artwork as a form of activism. As such, it relies on the understanding of the spectator for the uptake of its advocacy. But because artivism is directed at altering the real world and is not just creative wishful thinking, it has to subject itself to objectively measuring its effectivity. It intends, in the first place, to effect change. But when confronted by the question of its effectiveness, artivism reveals how loose the tie is between art and activism because questions of success or failure seem to disperse the two. Does successful artivism mean that it is good art? Does failed artivism mean the art is bad? Criteria for good and bad artivism have yet to be drawn to avoid double standards. Furthermore, even when the work succeeds in what it intends to do, and the issue it seeks to challenge is resolved, the question remains: what happens to the work as art? Utilized as a form of activism, what remains of its meaning when the activism is done? Does it remain or does it cease to be art? There is so much more to be done. But it should be a productive work in philosophical aesthetics.

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Note

[1] Although Wimsatt and Beardsley primarily wrote about the literary arts, the debate on intentionalism/anti-intentionalism extended to non-literary arts and is now generally asked about any work of art. Carroll argued, "…the intentional fallacy is a general theory of artistic interpretation, one that precludes the invocation of artistic intention whether the artwork in question is linguistic or nonlinguistic" (306).