

FEATURE

Activist art



Installation view of *The Schoolhouse and the Bus: Mobility, Pedagogy and Engagement*, part of Pablo Helguera's public art project, *The School of Panamerican Unrest* (2006). The installation was shown in 2018 at The 8th Floor, the New York art space established by the Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation

What can art do now?

In interviews published in a new book, **Shaun Leonardo, Brett Cook, Martha Wilson and Pablo Helguera** consider the contributions that artists can make to social justice in the post-Covid cultural landscape

PABLO HELGUERA. PHOTO: JULIA GALLARDO. COURTESY OF THE SHELLEY & DONALD RUBIN FOUNDATION

This discussion reflects on what art can best give to this moment. The artists Shaun Leonardo, Brett Cook, Martha Wilson and Pablo Helguera (the latter of whom is also a regular contributor to *The Art Newspaper*) question the seismic changes social justice movements in the United States have had on contemporary art. They also grapple with the enduring effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on artistic production and display, and on strategies of collective action.

How has social justice changed in relation to art over the last few decades? What is the effect of the cultural sector's increased interest in social justice?

SHAUN LEONARDO: I would argue that there is not an increased desire or an interest among art spaces in engaging with social justice issues, but rather an increased demand that art spaces do so. What artists and administrators, particularly Black and Brown individuals, wish to point out is the inherent hypocrisy of institutions that project, on the surface, democratic values of equal justice and inclusion, yet do not hold these same values as

necessary in their inner workings. In the day-to-day operations of such institutions, those contradictions of "what we want to see in the world" versus "who we are in the world" play out in often subtle – yet insidious – ways, with equity, care, and accountability taking a back seat to financial gain and the maintaining of hierarchical power.

MARTHA WILSON: The big difference in my view between art-making in the last 100 years and art-making in the last couple of decades is that artists are now engaged in both the protest and the solution. This may have started during the Aids crisis, when a well-dressed man handcuffed himself to a radiator in the Burroughs Wellcome building. After the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, which – to the outrage of legislators and religious leaders – took sexuality to be a legitimate subject of contemporary art, artists started to see surveillance and the police state as a new threat to freedom of expression. In 2004, Franklin Furnace supported an artist duo, Yuri Gitman and Joshua Kinberg, to produce *Bikes Against Bush*, which marked the convergence of the body and technology. Their *Magicbike* was a mobile WiFi hotspot that provided free internet access wherever it travelled. A custom-designed printing device mounted on the back of the bike printed spray-chalk text messages from web users onto the surface of the street, overlapping public art with techno-activism by creating a montage of the community wireless movement, bicycle culture, street demonstrations and contemporary art.

PABLO HELGUERA: Social justice has now taken the place that social practice had a decade ago. This is forcing arts organisations to grapple with supporting artistic practices that question the very structures of power upon which they are built.

BRETT COOK: Earlier in my professional career, social justice almost exclusively meant the integration of new bodies and forms of appearance, without cultural understanding, social responsibility or structural transformation. If art, and art institutions, had images that looked different from the hegemonic norm, or showcased "under-represented" communities, then they believed they were exemplifying social justice. Over the last few decades, popular definitions of social justice and its actions have evolved. Just as "white supremacy" and "defund the police" have moved from progressive margins to popular discourse, social justice in art has moved beyond obscure public panels to primary programming. With the broadening dialogue about social justice, the cultural sector is destined to exemplify this larger cultural literacy.

We are emerging into the understanding that social justice means structural change, where art's action requires more than to look right, but has to "be" right. Seph Rodney wrote about it well in *Hyperallergic* when he said, "We love representation, the power of signifying,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 10

FEATURE

Activist art

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9

and the incisiveness of well-argued critique. For us these tools are so robust that we come to imagine they are the demiurges of the world. They are not. And by themselves they won't effect structural change. Representation alone will not save us." We are still far from the place where institutions are concerned with being good as much as—if not more than—they and their publicity departments are interested in looking good. However, the challenge of having our actions align with our intentions is not just a challenge for art institutions, but a challenge for us all.

To what extent can art spaces and non-profits nurture artistic practices and operate as sites for organising and activism?

MW: In recent years, we have seen artists address stark social realities like police violence against Black and Brown bodies. Shaun's 2015 Franklin Furnace Fund performance, *Assembly Diversion Program*, took place in January 2017, when the artist and the organisation Recess launched a nine-month programme in a satellite space at 370 Schermerhorn Street [in Brooklyn, New York]. Diversion programmes present alternatives to incarceration and other adult sanctions for court-involved youth (who are treated as adults by the New York State Criminal Court). Recess partnered with Brooklyn Justice Initiatives to recruit participants at the court level to take part in arts programmes organised by Recess, which were designed and led by Shaun. When participants completed the programme, prosecutors could close and seal their cases. **SL:** It has always been, and remains, simple: artists need time and space. Alternative and non-profit art spaces can be sites of both



From left: Martha Wilson's *Beauty is in the Eye* (2014) and *THUMP* (2016), part of The 8th Floor's 2017 exhibition, *The Intersectional Self*; the show, which also featured artists including Catherine Opie, Genesis Breyer P-Orridge and Cindy Sherman, explored how ideas of femininity and masculinity have shifted

experimentation and care. What does it mean to partner with artists to build a more just and equitable creative community? At Recess, it is in our mission to welcome radical thinkers to imagine networks of community resilience and safety. It is with time for collective imagination, and space for a collective sense of belonging, that we are offered an environment in which we can visualise the necessary steps toward an abolitionist horizon. It is with space that artists can join organising efforts to respond to sociopolitical urgencies. It is with

"We are still far from the place where institutions are concerned with being good as much as they and their publicity departments are interested in looking good"

Martha Wilson

time that artists can commit to the longer work of narrative revision to impact culture. **PH:** The greatest opportunity and challenge for alternative spaces and non-profits is to create new frameworks of support and sustainability, that successfully model the principles and values of artists today. I believe that a business model dependent on tourists, or passive consumers of art, is no longer sustainable in the long term. Museums need to address the challenges they now face regarding the incompatibility of their role as archivists and custodians of art from the past, and their need to be actively engaged in supporting current and new dialogues. Alternative spaces and non-profits can model new behaviours that larger organisations can learn from.

BC: The most inspirational examples of alternate and non-profit spaces support artistic practices that also model social justice in terms of intention and action. The Laundromat Project warms my heart with the way they have opened their leadership structure to integrate artists from their programme history. The nurturing comes through personal relationships and reciprocity, versus a transactional relationship mandated out of the conventions of the non-profit art industrial complex. I am reminded of what [Ford Foundation president] Darren Walker said on *60 Minutes*: that philanthropy should not be solely about the donor, but instead how the recipient is scaffolded and how its mission should be focused on justice. I think the most inspirational spaces are trying to live with more responsibility in their ecosystem, addressing the conditions that sustain those relationships over time.

• This conversation, held in April 2021, is included in *An Incomplete Archive of Activist Art*, published by The Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation and Hirmer Verlag in 2022