



Well Mr. President, for the
I really wasn't up for the
policy on no-child-left-behind.
It took funding away from
schools that obviously needed
the funding. And funding went
into war that could have
been used for schools and
health care. Thanks for
listening to me. I hope

ACTIVATING DEMOCRACY

The “I Wish to Say” Project

★★★ EDITED *by* Sheryl Oring ★★★

ACTIVISM'S ART:

A (Very) Brief History of Social Practice and Artist Books

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Socially engaged art – trending now in art circles around the world – is generally understood to be art that creates a relationship with its audience, that aims to influence social policy and that is collaborative, participatory, and provocative. But socially engaged art has a history that goes back to a time before the word “artist” was coined. The Aboriginal people who stained the Djulirri rock complex in Australia; Aristophanes, whose ancient Greek comedies skewered gods and politicians alike; the scribes who illuminated medieval manuscripts – none of these people could have been more socially engaged.

A simple glance through Mr. Peabody’s Wayback Machine shows that art has always been collaborative and participatory. Consider the book: clay tablets and papyrus scrolls at the start, evolving into sheepskin, palm leaf, and paper pages. From the early Middle Ages to the earliest incunabula, books were the collective products of writers, printers, binders, paper-makers, tanners, chemists, and a host of others. Most dealt with business, philosophy, or religion. But sometimes they were provocative, acts of defiance, calls to action.

Around 1450, when Johannes Gutenberg’s printing press first enabled anyone who was literate to read the Bible, the religious establishment disapproved. Yet within about a decade artists were decorating printed devotionals in Rome and Germany with intricate woodcuts (Thompson 2000). These were the first illustrated books, church-commissioned tracts to enforce the laws and customs of the time.

Gutenberg’s system – efficient, effective, low-cost – spread rapidly through Europe and across the globe. Authors everywhere emerged, with many discovering individual as well as institutional voices. The life of the mind was profoundly transformed. Documents in a widening array of formats – books, booklets, broadsides, periodicals – covering an expanding catalog of contents – politics, history, etiquette, power, and humor among hundreds more subjects – appeared and spread. Early authors not only wrote: many also helped to design, print, bind, and distribute their works.

We may today consider some of what appeared at that time to be “social practice.” In 1517, for example, Martin Luther hand-penned what became known as his *Ninety-Five Theses*, protesting a variety of clerical abuses, especially the sale of indulgences (a kind of “Get Into Heaven” pass for the wealthy). Within two months, printed copies of the *Theses* had spread throughout Europe, triggering the Protestant Reformation, Europe’s centuries-long explosion of radicalism, nationalism, and sectarian fury. It is doubtful that there has ever been a single more powerful instrument of social provocation.

The Pamphleteers

Luther was hardly alone. Pamphleteers began publishing essays in the form of unbound booklets in the 1500s. Their pamphlets often had far-reaching effects, creating vital conversations between their authors and the public. Although many published anonymously (fearing retribution), the early pamphleteers included John Milton, Daniel Defoe, and Jonathan Swift.

Many a famous text first appeared in pamphlet form, including, in 1729, Swift’s *A Modest Proposal ... For Preventing the Children of Poor People From being a Burthen to Their Parents or Country; And for Making them Beneficial to the Publick* (Oliver 2010: 35) – in which he recommends the poor sell their children to the wealthy for food. Deadpan details like “A young healthy child well nursed, is, at a year old, a most delicious nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled” have made the phrase “*A Modest Proposal*” a synonym for satire.

On the U.S. side of the pond, Thomas Paine’s 1776 *cri de coeur*, *Common Sense* (Kaye 2006: 43) helped incite the American Revolution by explaining in clear, persuasive language the need for independence. A collaboration between Paine, founding father Benjamin Rush and printer Robert Bell, it appeared as an anonymous 48-page pamphlet, and was an immediate sensation, selling an incredible (for the era) 500,000 copies in its first year. It also included what we might today call a “performative” aspect, as it was read aloud in pubs, churches, and town halls. Washington even had it read to his troops.

Some provocations achieved their impact only in the course of time. Writer Mary Wollstonecraft’s twin pamphlets, *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), savaged the virtues of monarchy and hereditary privilege, and argued that women deserve the same fundamental rights as men, especially regarding education (Oliver 2010: 121).

The years leading to the violent eruption of the French revolution in 1789 were a breeding ground for incendiary, even scabrous, publications, many of them including cartoons. A genre known as *libelles* – political pamphlets or books slandering public figures – proliferated, especially in the run-up to the revolution. Mocking and subversive, they made a sport of thrashing the royals, with Marie Antoinette, Louis XVI’s Austrian-born wife, a particular symbol of all that was wrong with the ruling class. Graphically illustrated *libelles*, like *The Royal Dildo*, *The Royal Orgy*, and *The List of All the People with Whom the Queen Has Had Depraved Relations* (1792), accused Marie of adultery, lesbianism, pedophilia, public masturbation, bestiality, and treason.

In 1791, the feminist playwright Olympe de Gouges countered 1789’s *Declaration of the*

Rights of Man and the Citizen, a core statement of the French revolution, with her *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen*. “Woman is born free and lives equal to man in her rights,” de Gouges declared. She demanded full political rights for women, noting that since “woman has the right to mount the scaffold ... she must equally have the right to mount the rostrum.” But no one cared. De Gouges herself mounted the scaffold two years later, guillotined for attacking the revolutionary regime.

Eighteenth-century pamphleteers were provocative, collaborative, and socially engaged – deeply so. The best established high bars for both activism and impact. Many are the spiritual ancestors of *Charlie Hebdo*, the mercilessly satirical French weekly whose editors were slaughtered for their cartoons of the prophet Mohammed.

William Blake, the eighteenth-century poet, painter, and printmaker, was socially engaged in a different way. Considered the first “book artist,” he wrote, illustrated, printed, and bound his own books and also worked for others. His contemporaries thought him mad, even as his creativity was admired. His eccentricity, in fact, makes Blake hard to pin down. He loved the Bible but hated organized religion, sympathized with early feminists, supported the French revolution until its descent into terror, and developed a personal mythology that reinforced opinions of him as a mad visionary.

Visions of the Daughters of Albion, a 1793 book-length poem filled with Blake’s illustrations, condemned enforced chastity for women and marriage without love. Blake also defended the right of women to self-fulfillment. His watercolors for a version of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, left incomplete by his death in 1827, highlighted his belief that materialism had corrupted the world.

Birth of the Modern

Skipping ahead, we come to the rise of constructivism. Constructivism was an art and architectural philosophy that emerged in 1919 from Russian Futurism and the cauldron of the Russian revolution. It preached an art indistinguishable from social engagement, and preferably in the service of revolution. Constructivism’s angular, industrial, geometrically abstract style first expressed itself in three-dimensional works, but soon expanded to include books, posters, photography, film, and graphic and textile design.

Artists like Alexander Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, Solomon Telingater, and Anton Lavinsky designed books that proved to be major inspirations for radical designers in the West. Russian constructivism’s influence was vast. Its philosophy influenced the German Bauhaus and Dutch *De Stijl* movements, and spread throughout Europe and Latin America, inspiring generations of artists.

One of them was Franz Masereel, a Belgian who worked in France (Beronä 2003). Masereel created *Passionate Journey*, an unexpected bestseller in 1919, and several other “wordless novels” that told stories using caption-free woodcuts. Predecessors of today’s graphic novels, and widely imitated at the time, they employed dramatic black-and-white images, usually to express feelings of anxiety and fear in an atmosphere of social injustice. Masereel’s influence can still be seen in the work of artists like Art Spiegelman, author of *Maus*, and Alison Bechdel, author of *Fun Home*.

John Heartfield (née Herzfeld), a contemporary of Masereel, pioneered the use of pho-

tomontage as a medium of political protest (Selz et al. 1977: 7). He published biting anti-war, anti-Nazi montages on the cover of *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* or *AIZ* (*The Workers Pictorial Newspaper*) (1977: 27). Images like a swastika made from blood-drenched hatchets, a dove impaled on a bayonet, and Hitler as both a puppet and a butcher had a huge impact, and led Hitler to shut down *AIZ* in Berlin as soon as he came to power in 1933 (1977: 28).

Heartfield's brother, Wieland Herzfelde, founded a small but influential collective, Malik-Verlag, that published Heartfield's works as well as those of artists and writers like George Groz, Berthold Brecht, Kathe Kollwitz, Maxim Gorki, and George Bernard Shaw, among others. Books by the socially critical collective were censored, condemned in courtrooms, and used as fuel for Nazi book burnings. Founded in Berlin, Malik-Verlag moved to Prague after Hitler's ascent, then to London, and finally to New York.

After the war, artists struggled to make sense of the world around them. One important group, Fluxus, took off in Europe and the United States as an avant-garde movement devoted to the subversion of earlier art traditions. Fluxus's anti-art, Dada-influenced artists, composers, and designers were active in a broad spectrum of artistic pursuits, including books. Founder George Maciunas declared Fluxus a movement to "PROMOTE A REVOLUTIONARY FLOOD AND TIDE IN ART" that would "FUUSE the cadres of cultural, social & political revolutionaries into united front & action."

Maciunas and early members like Allison Knowles and Dick Higgins worked collaboratively on books and printed projects with Nam Jun Paik, Yoko Ono, John Cage, and dozens of other artists who would go on to become art world luminaries. The idea that artists could produce work in large numbers (including cheap, democratic multiples) gained currency in the 1960s, thanks in part to Fluxus.

Books produced by Fluxus artists coincided with an increasing ability to produce all sorts of printed matter more easily and inexpensively. Fluxus artists reveled in the publishing freedom conveyed by offset printing, Xerography, collage, 35mm photography, rubber stamps, and innovative forms of printmaking. A new world of do-it-yourself publishing morphed into a culture of chapbooks, alternative weeklies, zines, and other forms of down and dirty publishing. Socially engaged art by individuals and groups became commonplace.

Fluxus was also unusual because of the large number of participating women artists. However, feminism, a philosophy predicated on social engagement, did not gain a serious art-world foothold until 1973 when artist Judy Chicago, art historian Arlene Raven, and graphic designer Sheila Levrant de Bretteville established the Women's Building in Los Angeles as the first public center in the United States devoted to feminist art (Gaulke 2011: 11–17). The Women's Building nurtured such female-oriented art organizations as the Feminist Studio Workshop (its primary tenant) and the Women's Graphic Center.

A year later, Ann Kalmbach, Tatana Kellner, Anita Wetzel, and Barbara Leoff Burge founded the Women's Studio Workshop, a feminist-informed organization providing studio space and funding for artists' projects and books, which it publishes under the WSW imprint. Housed in Rosendale, New York, the Workshop continues to thrive, and publishes a number of artists

whose work takes on various social and political issues. New York artist Sharon Gilbert, for instance, focuses on nuclear and environmental issues in such works as *Poison America*, *Action Poses* and *Green: The Fragile*. Her work is simply produced, often on a Xerox machine, and small in scale, but with a raw, proto-punk, anti-design aesthetic in its typography and layout. *A Nuclear Atlas* (1982) still has the frantic avalanche of information Gilbert amassed to persuade readers of the urgency of her message.

Action Art

In the 1980s, artist books played a crucial role in the activist art that developed as a response to three overlapping trends: the rise of the Reagan era, the AIDS crisis, and gay rights.

Activist art collectives like Bullet Space, Collaborative Projects, Inc. (Colab), the Art Workers Coalition, Heresies, and Group Material seemed to be everywhere in the 1980s and 1990s. Their arsenals included a vast number of inexpensive, widely distributed artist books and multiples. The goal of the New York-based Political Art Documentation/Distribution Project, for example, was “to demonstrate the political effectiveness of image making, and to provide a framework within which progressive artists can discuss and develop alternatives to the mainstream art system” (Sholette n.d.). PAD/D and like-minded groups began meeting at the Printed Matter Artist Book Store in Manhattan, then at the nearby Franklin Furnace, a hub for avant-garde artists.

PAD/D projects emphasized public participation and performance. In 1981, *Death & Taxes* invited New York artists to produce public works protesting the use of federal taxes for the military instead of social programs. One responding artist was arrested for impaling a human dummy on the bayonet of a World War II memorial at an armory. The same year, *Image War on the Pentagon* consisted of dozens of cardboard picket signs actually used by demonstrators during a Washington, D.C., demonstration to protest budget cuts and U.S. involvement in El Salvador and Nicaragua (Sholette n.d.: 7).

By the mid-1980s, with AIDS a full-blown epidemic, the LGBT community was gaining unprecedented visibility, in part through its activist artists. The art collective Gran Fury launched its pivotal Silence=Death campaign amid a growing outpouring of socially engaged, gay-themed art and agitation. The AIDS Project Los Angeles published *Corpus*, an exceptionally beautiful art journal edited and designed by George Ayala, Jaime Cortez, and Pato Hebert. *Corpus* was filled with journalism, memoirs, art, and fiction by and for the HIV-afflicted, and was distributed free through service organizations, hormone clinics, prisons, libraries, universities, bars, clubs, PRIDE events, queer bookstores, drop-in centers, shelters, and at other AIDS-related locations.

The reaction against Reaganism and AIDS spawned a generation of artist provocateurs. One such, A.A. Bronson, created a series of provocative organizations, publications and installations while supporting the work of other artists and presses. An essayist and curator, Bronson co-founded the artists' groups General Idea and Group Material, and *FILE Magazine*. He presided over Printed Matter, and started the annual New York Book Fair, which hosts over 200 independent presses, booksellers, artists, and publishers from some twenty countries. Based now in

Berlin, Bronson remains a prolific artistic resource.

Ed Hutchins, another independent book artist, founded a craft fair called the Book Arts Jamboree. From a perch in Mt. Vernon, New York, Hutchins publishes ingenious entertainments through his independent Editions Press. His *Gay Myths*, written after the 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights, illustrates such so-called truisms as “You can pick us out! ... We all love opera! ... We hate straights!” with directness and humor, engaging both those who have and those who have not thought about gay issues. Thousands of copies have been distributed.

From her New York base, Clarissa Sligh’s *Reading Dick and Jane with Me* (1989) expressed the discomfort of African-American children learning to read using a national primer starring a White, blond-haired family. *Reading Dick and Jane* decoded what *Dick and Jane* was really communicating. Her *Wrongly Bodied* in 2009 was one of the first photographic artist books to tell the story of a transgender man. In *Wrongly Bodied Two* (2011), Sligh tells the stories of Jake, a twenty-first-century White woman transitioning from female to male, and Ellen Craft, a nineteenth-century Black woman who escapes slavery by passing as a White man.

With *Motherisms* (2014), Chicago-based artist Lise Halle Baggesson challenges the notion that motherhood and creative practice are incompatible. Baggesson argues that women are often summarily dismissed from the art world when they become mothers, creating “a mother-shaped hole in contemporary art.” Organized as letters to Baggesson’s mother, daughter, and sister, *Motherisms* proposes the radical notion that motherhood is the artistic practice that informs all others.

Artists – “antennae of the race,” as Ezra Pound (Pound and Fenollosa 1967) called them – have long labored to free audiences from the alienation of dominant ideologies. Today’s socially engaged artists rest on the shoulders of their cranky, artistic, book-making ancestors. They work in a chaotic arena vastly expanded by the Internet, DIY publishing, social media, the fragmentation of conventional publishing, a revival of printed artist books, and a variety of other still unsettled forces. Yet they persist.