

Gabriela Szczygiel 2009924

FA Studio, Site and Context

Research in context ADAD5003

Tutor: Gwenllian Beynon

Power of activist art - art that change the world?

List of figures:

Fig1. *Anarchy in the U.K.* fanzine, UK, 1976. Photo: Ray Stevenson. Design: Jamie Reid.
Source: *Punk: An Aesthetic*

Fig2. The Walls are Alive. (2002), www.crimethink.com

Fig.3 O'hara, Craig, *The philosophy of punk, more than noise*, Edinburg, AK Press, 1999 P.122

Fig.4 Ziggy Stardust/Photograph: Sipa Press/Rex Features,
<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2016/jun/21/ziggy-stardust-persona-therapy-david-bowie-oliver-james-mental-health>

Fig.5 Mierle Ukeles' *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance*. (1973), medium.com/notes-to-a-young-artist/mierle-laderman-ukeless-maintenance-art-performances

Bibliography:

1. O'hara, Craig, *The philosophy of punk, more than noise*, Edinburg, AK Press, 1999
2. Felshin, Nina, *But it is art? The spirit of art as Activism*, Seattle, 1955
3. Brookes, Victoria, *March, Geoffrey, David Bowie is*, London, V&A, Publishing, 2013
4. James, Olivier, *Upping Your Ziggy*, Routledge, 2019
5. Godfrey, Tony, *Conceptual Art*, London, Phaidon Press Limited, 1998
6. Debord, Guy, *Society of the Spectacle*, Black and Red, 1970
7. Josephson, Eri, Mary, *Man Alone in Modern Society*, New York, Dell Publishing, 1962
8. Anderson, Mark, *Positive force handout*, 1985
9. Ukeles, Mierle, *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* 1969

- 10.Lefebvre, Henri, The Production of Space, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers 1991
- 11.Krauss, Rosalind, The originality of the Avangarde and other Modernist Myths, Cambridge MIT Press,1986
- 12.Richter, Hans, Dada: Art and Anti-Art,H.N. Abrams,1965
- 13.Gestalten, visual culture, The art of protest, political art, and activism. The power and purpose of political art.
- 14 Days of war, Nights of love, crimethinc for beginners, Crimethinc,2001
- 15.Antliff Allan, Anarchy and Art-from the Paris Commune to the Fall of the Berlin Wall, Arsenal pulp press,2007
- 16.Kropotkin, Peter, An appeal to the young, Publisher William Reeve (1880)
- 17.Goldman, Emma, Anarchism, and other Essays, lulu.com,2017
- 18.Devall, Bill, Session, George Deep Ecology, Peregrine Smith Inc, U.S.1985
- 19.Morris, Brian, Purchase Graham, Deep Ecology&Anarchism,1997

Introduction

Exploring the world of art, my fascinations imperceptibly moved from the area impressionist painting and its representatives such as: Vincent van Gogh¹, and Edvard Munch^{2,3} who lived at the turn of the 19th and 20th century, into the area of activist art, grounded in the act of doing, addresses political and social issues⁴, which seems to have unfathomable power and unlimited possibilities. I do not underestimate the value of painting or traditional art, because that is not a purpose of that essay , I feel in heart that I resonate with the artists who have not reject aesthetics, but alternatively have challenged, subverted, pushed boundaries and used aesthetic as a medium to attract attention, followed by a philosophy of rejecting the mainstream and expectations of the system, those damage individuality and freedom of beliefs within people and generate most of issues on this planet. "I do not want art that points to a thing. I want art that is the thing"- using a word of Tania Bruguera, artist and activist from Cuba, whose work pivots around issues of power and control.^{5,6} Art is a life and life is an art.

"IF ANYTHING, ART IS ...ABOUT MORALS, ABOUT OUR BELIEF IN HUMANITY. WITHOUT THAT, THERE SIMPLY IS NO ART."

Ai Weiwei 7,8

In this essay, I would like to trace across the activity of artists and cultural movements whose powerful work profoundly changed the world by going far beyond the definitions of

activist art and entirely blurring the boundaries between life and art, I will look from a few very different perspectives starting from Punk subculture and art movement and its anarchist roots in historical context, some aspect of the artistic activity of David Bowie, ending on Mierle Laderman Ukeles, creator of maintenance activity concept, employing most common life routine as an art.

Following definition used by Nina Felshin in a book "But it is Art? The spirit of Art as Activism" we get idea what activism art is: Shaped as much by the real world as by the art world, activist art represents a confluence of the aesthetic, socio-political and technological impulses of the past 25 years or more that have attempted to challenge, explore, or blur the boundaries and hierarchies traditionally defining the culture as represented those in power.

What distinguishes activist art is that it focuses on the process and not on the object - the final product. Is usually located in a public place instead of art world venues. It takes the form of temporary intervention, performance, installation, employs media such as billboard, poster or newspaper inserts to deliver messages that subvert the usual intention of this commercial form.⁹



Fig1. *Anarchy in the U.K* (1976)

Now I would like to refer to the punk movement as a one that had much impact on modern society. Unaffected and unfiltered by any social restrictions, driven by refusal to sell out, desire to do it by itself, gender equality ethic, expressed by music, fashion, creative writing, and visual artworks. Punk visual art associated with punk subculture is based in part, on anti-conformist, and anti-art approach of Marcel Duchamp, called a father of conceptual art, and Dadaism.¹⁰ “When I discovered ready-mades, I thought to discourage aesthetics. In Neo-Dada they have taken my ready-mades and found aesthetic beauty in them. I threw the bottle-rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty.” (Marcel Duchamp 1962)¹¹

Punk philosophy is entirely rooted in theory of anarchist movement that, in Europe, began in 19th century with arts as integral part of it, as evidenced by Joseph Proudhon in 1860. Similarly, Peter Kropotkin emphasizes the importance of artist in the social revolution in his pamphlet “Appeal to the Young” (1880)¹²

“...If your heart really beats in unison with that of humanity, if like a true poet you have an ear for Life, then gazing out upon this sea of sorrow whose tide sweeps up around you, face to face with these people dying of hunger, in the presence of this many corpses piled up in these mines and these mutilated bodies lying in heaps on the barricades, in full view of the desperate battle which is being fought, amid the cries of pain from the conquered and the

orgies of the victors ,of heroism in conflict with cowardice , of noble determination face to face with contemptible cunning-you cannot remain neutral . You will come and take the side of the oppressed because you know that the beautiful, the sublime, the spirit of life itself are on the side of those who fight for light, for humanity, for justice!"^{13,14}

Strongly inspired by Kropotkin, American anarchist Emma Goldman (1900) in her essay: "Anarchism, what we really stand for?" critiques religion for oppressing us psychologically, capitalist economics for endangering our corporal well-being, and forms of government that shut down our freedom. She asserts that the purpose of anarchism is to liberate humanity from these tyrannies, and she predicts that in an anarchist social order, individuals will differentiate endlessly, according to their desires, tastes, and inclinations."¹⁵

As a political ideology most of punks are primarily anarchists and share a belief form around the anarchist principles of having no official government or rules and valuing individual freedom and responsibility.¹⁶

"All government is undesirable and unnecessary. There are no services provided by the state that the community could not provide itself. We do not need anyone telling us what to do, trying to run our lives, harassing us with taxes, rules, regulations, and living high on the hog off our labour" (Anarchist Youth Federation, Profane Existence#aug.1990,38).¹⁷

Profane existence is the largest of the anarchist Punk fanzine in North America and contains both music and politics reported from an anarchist perspective.

The European scene has had a larger amount of anarchist fanzines and bands, resulting in the European punks being more active politically. Creators and editors of this fanzines were influenced by the second wave of European Punk (1980-84) and bands such as Crass, Conflict and Discharge in Uk, MCD and dead Kennedys in America. They are changed many people in rebellious thinkers. ¹⁸

Continuators this philosophy to this day is CrimethInc., an international network of aspiring revolutionaries. For over twenty years they published news, analysis, book, journals, posters, videos, podcasts, and a wide range of other resources — all copyright free, produced and distributed by volunteer labor, without reliance on external funding or market trends. ¹⁹

organized gigs,demos,put out records, publish books and zines by themselves for non-profit.²¹

Above all mentioned punk ethic, arise environmental philosophy resembled to term Deep Ecology coined in 1971 by Norwegian philosophers Arne Naess and popularized later in Devall and Sessions's (1973) book Deep Ecology. In article written in MRR Joel Hippiycore specify the similarities between Punk environmental philosophy and ideas of "Deep Ecology."²²

"And if the animals could talk if the planets, the trees, the rivers, the mountains, and the oceans could cry out they protest, they too would demand an end to the destruction that greedy man and woman have caused. Self-preservation is our greatest instinct, yet we have been so misled, mis-informed, mis-educated, tricked and fooled by the profitters, that even caring mothers and fathers teach their children self-destruction and destruction of the planet, unconsciously every day from birth. It would seem that as world culture grows more intelligent and sophisticated, that civilization would come closer to providing for the needs of all people and solving social problems, but instead those who are in power have chosen the opposite direction, inflicting more hunger, more exploitation, more racism, more pollutions and a system of military dictatorship and dominance over all the world populations" (PEACE compilation LP, booklet, R Radical Records,1984) 23



Fig3.Peace compilation LP (1984)

Now let analyse shortly David Bowie, a genius individual with anarchist philosophy background, in “the aspect of change.” Being on the forefront of a revolution in freedom of individual expression, his influences in the performance,fashion,art,design and identity politics continues to shape contemporary culture in the broadest sense.²⁴

Changes is Bowie life story. All he ever does is change. That is why there is never an identifiable direction. He is everything all at once. Every song is a different side of Bowie and the world he sees. (New Musical Express, Albums: Bowie at his brilliant best, 29 January 1972)
25



Fig.4 Ziggy Stardust

“I have always collected personalities” said David Bowie, who by creating different performing personas show that we are not the same person all life and it is a part of change of life. We all have more than one person inside of us, different part and their origins must be identified, understood, accepted, and re-integrated as a wholeness to maintain emotional health. Creating different personalities paradoxically can be key to personal growth. Thru the persona of Ziggy Stardust Bowie was able to comfort himself and address his fears. (Olivier James, The Guardian,21jun,2016)²⁶

The way David Bowie used a power of creativity, fame, authenticity, body, and rock and roll music scene changed a life of millions around this planet, changed a world. “To appreciate Bowie was not just like his music or his shows or his looks, but also to enjoy the way he set himself up as a commercial image. How he was packaged was as much as aspect of his art as what the package contained” (Simon Frith in 1983)²⁷

To counterbalance I will introduce Mierle Laderman Ukeles, American performance artist, sculptor whose singular work astonishes ordinariness.

Ukeles expanded on Marcel Duchamp idea of ready-made but developed this idea from any found object as an art to any found action, habits, and everyday activities particularly those performed by women and working-class people ²⁸

It connects with the theory of social sculpture developed by the artist Joseph Beuys in the 1970s based on the concept that everything is art, that every aspect of life could be approached creatively and, as a result, everyone has the potential to be an artist”²⁹

Ukeles’s concept of activist art orchestrates the psychology of creativity with the practices of its production in space and involves the humanization of institutions, system, and spaces.

Every project, performance or installation is shaped and informed by an impressive synthesis of social, political, environmental, and feminist theory.

She oscillates in between personal-public, using personal experience. Personal is political.³⁰



Fig.5 Mierle Ukeles’ Washing/Tracks/Maintenance. (1973)

In performance *Hartford Wash: Washing, Tracks, Maintenance — Outside and Inside* Mierle Laderman Ukeles, armed with buckets of water and cleaning supplies, washing the staircase at the museum's entrance. Later that afternoon, she moved inside, using diapers in lieu of rags to scrub the marble floors on her hands and knees, buffing away visitors' footprints as they walked by.³¹

"Maintenance has to do survival, with continuity over time. You can create something in a second. But whether it is a person, a system, or a city, in order to keep it, you have to keep it going. I think that one thing we must do is value and learn from those who provide this service."³²

After she born a child in 1968 and like many women the tension of producing creative projects and responding to the unrelenting responsibilities of raising children led her to question the polarization of art life that made pleasure and productivity in either area so problematic.

As a culmination of the research, she wrote "Manifesto for Maintenance Art" "in 1969 artist, claim that care work *is* art because it involves creative; challenging; emotional work, just like making art does. She also challenges the domestic role of women and proclaims herself a "maintenance artist".³³

"I have the freedom to name maintenance as art. I can collide freedom into its supposed opposite and call that art. I name necessity art," stated artist.

Intensity and authenticity of her aesthetic practise raised questions about art, work, implied power, right and privilege.³⁴

Conclusion

The year 1968 also represented climax of the political crisis and institutional context of museums and galleries in which conceptual art appeared. It was singularly naked examples of capitalist machination and mystification (Tony Godfrey, Conceptual art)³⁵.

The spectator's alienation from and submission to the contemplated objects (which is the outcome of his unthinking activity) works like this: the more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more readily he recognizes his own needs in the images of need proposed by the dominant system, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. The spectacle's externality with respect to the acting subject is demonstrated by the fact that the individuals own gestures are no longer his own, but rather those of someone who represents them to him. The spectator feels at home nowhere, for the spectacle is everywhere. (Guy Debord, *The Society of the spectacle*, 1967)³⁶

Ukeles work perfectly reflect and react for those problems using institutions to protest against the institutionalization of art. To institutionalize anything is to kill the spirit of that thing, and a body without a spirit is dead.

The above essay was intended to prove that broadly understood activist art can change the world, save the spirit of art and the presented artists are a living example of this.

References:

1. Rainer Metzger, Ingo F. Walther, Van Gogh. The Complete Paintings, Tashen, 2022
2. Susie Hodge, Edvard Munch Masterpiece of Art, Flame tree illustrated, 2015
3. Jonathan Jones, The Guardian 23 Sep. 2015 Side by side, Edvard Munch and Vincent van Gogh scream the birth of expressionism., theguardian.com
4. Activist Art, Tate, tate.org.uk
5. www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/activist-art
6. Tania Bruguera born 1968 | Tate, www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/activist-art
7. The art of social change, Tate, www.tate.org.uk/art/art-social-change
8. Ai Weiwei, Lison Gallery, www.lisongallery.com
9. Nina Felshin, But is it art? The spirit of Art as Activism, Bay Press, 1995, p.10
10. Art diction, The Punk Art Movement, Alex Pisalo, 2020, <https://www.artdictionmagazine.com/the-punk-art-movement>
11. The art story, www.theartstory.org/artist/duchamp-marcel
- 12, 14, 15 Allan Antliff, Anarchy and Art-from the Paris Commune to the Fall of the Berlin Wall, Arsenal pulp press, 2007, academia.edu. p.11, p.12
13. Kropotkin, Peter, An appeal to the young, Publisher William Reeve (1880)
15. Goldman, Emma Anarchism, and other Essays, lulu.com, 2017
- 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24 O'hara, Craig, The philosophy of punk, more than noise, Edinburg, AK Press, 1999 p.71,
19. Crimethinc.com/about
- 24, 25, 27 Roackes, Victoria, March, Geoffrey, David Bowie is, London, V&A, Publishing, 2013 p.19, 235, 236.
26. The Guardian, Oliver James, 2016, Embrace you inner Ziggi Stardust, the power in personal therapy www.theguardian.com/science/2016/jun/21/ziggy-stardust-persona-therapy-david-bowie-oliver-james-mental-health
28. Art story, www.theartstory.org/artist/ukeles-mierle-laderman
29. Tate, social sculpture, www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/s/social-sculpture
- 30, 32, 33, 34 Felshin, Nina, But it is art? The spirit of art as Activism, Seattle, 1955 p.169, 171, 177

31.medium.com/notes-to-a-young-artist/mierle-laderman-ukeless-maintenance-art-performances

35,36. Godfrey, Tony, Conceptual Art, London, Phaidon Press Limited, 1998 p.188,192

.