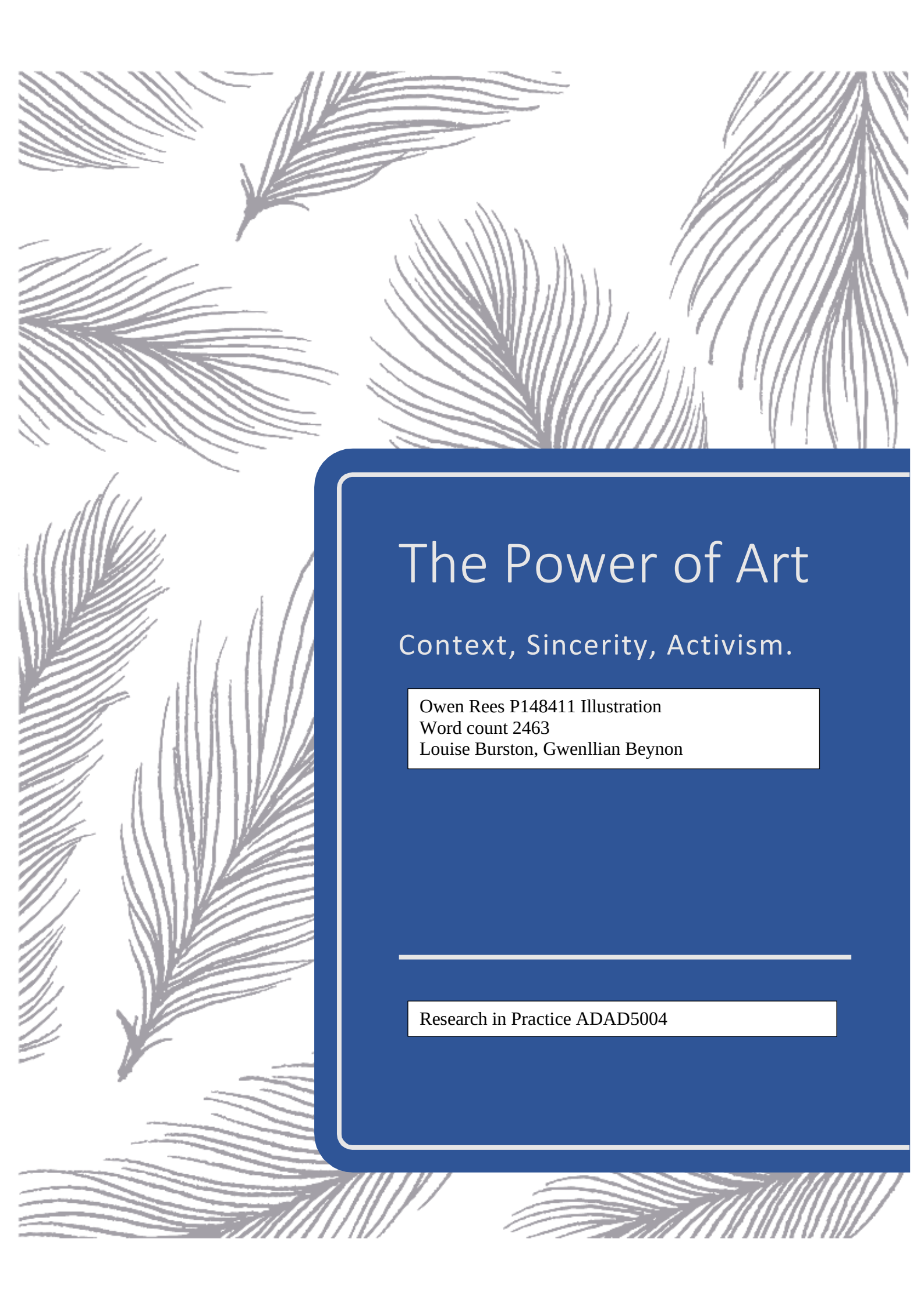




The Power of Art

Context, Sincerity, Activism.

Owen Rees P148411 Illustration
Word count 2463
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Research in Practice ADAD5004

The Power of Art

Influence through Context, Sincerity and Activism

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Art has always influenced people in many different ways throughout history. It not only has the power to influence us directly with our emotions as a viewer and challenge our thoughts, but also raises awareness around issues other than the mainstream political narrative. For the purposes of this essay the keywords Context, Sincerity and Activism, which are vehicles to create change in people and society, will be discussed.

Context

It is a widely held view that artists' experience of life often plays a fundamental role in the art that they create, and this is most commonly reflected and expressed in the context of their work Brieber et al. (2014) argue that the influence of a piece of art is not only affected by the context of the artist, but also where it was created geographically and culturally. This in turn plays a pivotal role in how the viewer interprets the work. This interpretation is also mirrored and influenced by the viewers' own context (Brieber et al.2014).

This essay now turns to Jamie Reid who is a good example of how context can influence an artist. According to Maguire (2010), Reid's work contains reoccurring themes of Druidism, social and political reform, a strong bond with the natural world, and an interest in alternative lifestyles. Jamie Reid was born in 1947 in Croydon Surrey (Tate, 2021). John and Nora Reid took Jamie and his brother to antinuclear protests from a young age "Both my parents have given me so much. The whole family is steeped in a kind of spiritual socialism" (Savage, 1987, cited in Maguire, 2010, p. 2). Reid's great uncle George Watson MacGregor Reid was a leader in the Druid Order of England at the beginning of the twentieth century (Maguire, 2010, p. 3). Reid went to school at John Ruskin School Croydon and studied art at Croydon College of art with Malcom McLaren (Tate, 2021). Reid took part in a sit-down protest at Croydon college of Art (Hunt, 2018). This period could be seen as the start of his activism in social and political reform.



Figure 1 - Jamie Reid - Learn from the Past, Live in the Present, Look to the Future (2011)

Steeped in his context, Reid's art has always been rebellious in nature. He relies heavily on symbols that have been present in his life and works. With McLaren and the Sex Pistols, his famous works defined the punk era (Robb, 2006). He has a history of rebellion against the political system (Punk Museum of Youth Culture, 2021). This agenda of rebellion against politics and power is evident in his piece *Learn from the Past, Live in the Present, Look to the Future - Figure 1* (2011). Here, the Queen who is immediately recognisable in black and white, is a reworking of Reid's previous artwork for the Sex Pistols 'God Save the Queen'. The image is torn and pasted down using collage, a style favoured by Reid and used in his previous works (Isis, 2010). The Queen's face is flanked either side of the image by cut outs of the financial global banks, the real power behind the figurehead of the Queen.

It can further be argued that he undermines the Queen's authority through the contrast of her defaced image alongside the rebellious Boudicca on a chariot going into battle. Boudicca was the queen of the Iceni tribe around 60-61 ad. (Somerset Fry, 1978). A true queen of Britain as opposed to the present monarch descended from German stock. The rearing horse at the head of a chariot may evoke the urgency that Reid so often states for change. This image of rebellion serves as a dual purpose – a vehicle of change for the common man, the environment and our future. It could be claimed that Reid's experience of going to Anti-nuclear protests with his parents clearly played a key role in the nurturing these ideals. (Savage, 1987, cited in Maguire, 2010, p. 2).

It is also worth considering the heavy Pagan influence in this piece. The title is reversed in the image (Figure1) and this works like a spell being wound as it states 'Look to the future, live in the Present and learn from the Past' around the edges of the piece. The image is split between light and Dark, night and day, Yin and Yang (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2021) with Reid's words "a time for magic" calling for change. This could be seen as further evidence of the rich Pagan traditions that played a key role in the context of his life. His reworking of the Pagan sigil for earth and fire has been used previously in Reid's work (Beyer, 2019). The sigil is also used as part of the branding on his web site (Reid, 2017). This draws the viewer back to historical elements in Reid's art.

Sincerity

Moving on now to consider sincerity. According to Tolstoy (1962) "the most important quality of any work of art for the viewer and artist is its sincerity. A true work of art expresses original thoughts and feelings." Sincerity in art could be explained as an open and honest expression of self by the artist. When an artist is sincere, this may create a hidden language that the viewer can relate to. When a sincere emotion is expressed in a piece of art, the viewer may be able to interpret it through their own experience, creating a deeper connection. This connection with the art may move the viewer to react to it and has the potential to influence change.

In respect to sincerity let us now turn to Jean-Michele Basquiat. It is almost certain that Basquiat's art has a power, as there is a sense of freedom in his painting style which is unique and easily recognisable, expressing himself openly, processing his thoughts and feelings in his art. There seems to be no pretence in his art, it could be seen as a direct representation of himself and his experience. His paintings are like a child's nightmare, as if to frighten the viewer and bring them closer to their emotions, they reveal a vulnerability, the inner workings of the artists mind (Millington, 2021). This sincerity of expression gives Basquiat a real freedom, he is being honest to his context, he evokes emotion in his artistic dialogue and

creates change for the viewer, divining a shared experience with the artist. Often you are confronted by the artist as you look at his work, he stares back at you through his art. Basquiat's style is raw and full of energy, the depictions of heads and bodies show a turmoil of thought and an inner war with his own body and the world that he inhabits. He appears to be sincere with his emotions and has no pretence about laying them bare in his artwork.

The power of his art may come from the way the pieces were created. There is vitality in the flowing movement of his mark making, his brush marks show an energy a dance charged with rhythm and movement as if the ritual ceremony of creating this brings this artist to a place of realizing his art (Tate, 2021). The way the backgrounds are built up in many layers, like the graffiti of the city walls, messages lost, as new ones are thrown out onto the consciousness of the passers-by and world. There is a mash up of cultural signifiers within Basquiat's art. The context of his life, a world full of symbols and signs: Billboards, tv branding, modern culture and religions. He rebrands these to create his own narrative on the external and internal world he is navigating through (Tate, 2021). Basquiat's art gives the impression that he is trying to find his place, in the world and in himself. His art could be a way of trying to make sense of the world as he experienced it, as a black man growing up on the streets of New York, far removed from his up bringing.



Figure 2 - (No Title/Fallen Angel by Jean-Michel Basquiat, 2020)

His painting known as 'Fallen Angel' Figure 2, is soaked with this energy. The composition of the piece and its disjointed chaos. The 'Fallen Angel' fractured and broken is a pure expression of that moment, Basquiat captures the energy held as he sincerely expresses

himself in an orgy of paint and form; his layers of paint work in his art could be seen as an exorcism of his inner demons on canvas. There is a sense of vulnerability as he honestly portrays his emotions in this painting, in many ways, the 'Fallen Angel' in the painting is black, looking down on the world as an outsider. The halo is like a transmitter pushing out the feelings of the artist and in return absorbing the viewers own reality of life into the broken body of the angel, who possibly is a representation of the artist as a black man and his culture.

The image looks like Basquiat is painting himself, it feels as if he expresses his inner self, the layers of the painting almost three dimensional, as the viewer spirals through the artists thoughts, emotions and expressions of self and experience in a rollercoaster ride of visual stimuli. Nothing is fixed. His work is emotional, energetic, and raw, a sincere picture of a black artist in 1970s America trying to make sense of himself and the world around him.

Activism

In the section that follows it will be shown how art gives artists a way of expressing themselves and to convey a message, be it personal or political and it influences those who see it (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2019). Whether it creates its objective and changes the viewers point of view to that of the artist it at least raises an awareness or dialog in the viewer and society as its effect ripples out into the public conscience like a pebble being thrown into a pond. "Activist art is a term used to describe art that is grounded in the act of 'doing' and addresses political or social issues" (Tate, 2021).

Bob and Roberta Smith, real name is Patrick Brill, is an artist and activist who can be seen to use his art to highlight the importance of art in society. Smith uses his art to influence people and politics, particularly the art education policy (Ball, 2020). A voice of the people for the people, creating and promoting the making of art to create change. Smith grew up in an artistic family, the son of artists Fredrick Brill and Diedre Borlase. His father was an art lecturer and head of art in The Chelsea School of Art between 1965-1979 (Tate, 2021). Creativity and art were a way of life in his family, and this may have him led to create his later art that argues everyone should have the opportunity to express themselves and learn about art. He empowers people through his events and workshops to be creative (Smith, 2021). Smith states in his work that art gives children a voice and makes people powerful and this is why his message is so important for society today (Wilson, 2016).

LETTER TO MICHAEL GOVE MP SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EDUCATION
 25 JULY 2011 IN MEMORY OF LUCIEN FREUD AND AMY WINEHOUSE WHO DIED THIS WEEK END
 DEAR MICHAEL GOVE ART IMAGES ARTIFACTS SONGS CULTURE ARE THE PRINCIPLE MEANS BY WHICH HUMAN BEINGS DEFINE
 THEMSELVES. MICHAEL A LOOK AT YOUR TIE AND SHIRT COMBINATION IN IMAGES OF YOU ONLINE INFORMS ME YOU ARE
 NOT A VISUALLY MINDED PERSON YOU DO NOT CARE HOW YOU LOOK. LOOK AROUND YOU WHAT DO YOU SEE?
 EVERYTHING IS MADE. EVERYTHING HAS BEEN FASHIONED BY HUMAN BEINGS WHO HAVE CONSIDERED ALL
 ASPECTS OF WHAT THEY HAVE MADE. IMAGE IS EVERYTHING: VISUAL WORTH COMMERCIAL VALUE
 MORAL VIRTUE AUTHORITY AND INTEGRITY. FROM BIRTH HUMAN BEINGS SEEK TO UNDERSTAND FIND THEIR PLACE
 IN SOCIETY AND CONTROL THEIR WORLDS THROUGH LOOKING AND UNDERSTANDING THE CHILD INTERPRETS
 THE WORLD. GIVE A CHILD A PIECE OF PAPER A BRUSH AND SOME COLOUR AND YOU PUT THEM IN CONTROL
 CHILDREN'S ART IS SO APPEALING BECAUSE THEY HAVE NO PROBLEM WITH BEING IN CONTROL OF IMAGES. AS SCHOOL
 PROGRESSES POOR TEACHING IN SOME SCHOOLS IMPRESSES ON THE CHILD THAT THEY ARE NOT IN CONTROL NOT
 ONLY ARE THEY NOT IN CONTROL BUT THEY ARE THE MOST INSIGNIFICANT COG IN A SYSTEM OF CONTROL IN WHICH THEY MAY
 NEVER PLAY AN IMPORTANT PART FROM GALILEO TO DARWIN FROM CARAVAGGIO TO AMY WINEHOUSE CREATIVITY IS
 REBELLION YOUR INITIATIVE AWARDS CONFORMITY AND WILL CAUSE STAGNATION THE REBELLIOUS CHILD THE ARTIST
 THE INNOVATOR THE INVENTOR THE ENGINEER THE ARCHITECT CLINGS ON TO THEIR PROWESS WITH PAPER DOES ART & MUSIC AT
 SCHOOL GOES TO ART SCHOOL OR STUDIES DESIGN AND CONTRIBUTES TO THE LIBRARY OF IMAGES AND FORMS THE RELATIONSHIP
 BETWEEN SHEETS OF BLANK PAPER PENCILS AND INNOVATION IS UNDENIABLE ART SHOULD BE THE CENTRE OF A
 NATIONAL CURRICULUM BASED ON CREATIVE THINKING PITY THE OBEYIENT CHILD IN A SYSTEM OF EDUCATION
 OBSESSED WITH VOCATIONAL SKILLS HE OR SHE CAVES IN THE CHILD WHO BECOMES INHIBITED IS INDUCTED INTO THE MEDIOCRE
 MAJORITY OF THE VISUALLY ILLITERATE OF WHICH YOU MICHAEL GOVE (IN YOUR ILL FITTING SHIRT AND UNMATCHED TIE) ARE A PART BUT EVEN
 THOSE WHO HAVE CREATIVITY BEATEN OUT OF THEM BY EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS OF THE TYPE YOU ADVOCATE NEED ENJOY AND
 CONSUME IMAGES EVERYTHING IS VISUAL: ART YES BUT ALSO DESIGN MONEY NUMBERS EVEN THE EBB AND FLOW
 OF COMMERCE HAS TO BE MADE VISUAL IN RECENT YEARS CHINA HAS OPENED 400 SCHOOLS OF ART AND DESIGN
 YOUR GOVERNMENT HAS WHITTLED BRITAIN'S ONCE DIVERSE VARIED CULTURE OF SCHOOLS OF ART TO JUST 12
 INSTITUTIONS THIS REDUCTION IS A DISASTER FOR BRITISH DESIGN BRITISH COMMERCE BRITISH ART AND BRITAIN'S
 ABILITY TO COMPETE IN THE WORLD
 TAKE ART OUT OF SCHOOLS AND YOU SHUT THE DOOR ON CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT AND EMASCULATE
 BRITISH CULTURE WHERE ARE OUR FUTURE DESIGNERS ARCHITECTS CRAFTSMEN WOMEN ENGINEERS TECHNICIANS SOFTWARE
 DESIGNERS AND MATHEMATICIANS GOING TO COME FROM IF NO ONE CAN DRAW? YOU SHOULD REALISE BRITAIN IS
 AMAZING IN CULTURAL VISUAL DEMOCRATIC MUSICAL DESIGN PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT AND LITERARY TERMS BRITAIN
 IS A GIANT ART IS NOW PART OF THE LANGUAGE OF FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY REPRESSIVE
 IDEOLOGICAL REGIMES RESTRICT ARTISTS YOU MUST REALISE THAT ART IS NOT A
 CHOICE MADE AT SECONDARY SCHOOL RATHER WE ARE ALL CULTURAL BEINGS TO REMOVE
 THE REQUIREMENT OF SCHOOLS TO TEACH ART TO KIDS AT PRIMARY LEVEL IS QUITE WRONG
 THE ITALIANS CRAM THEIR CHILDREN INTO MUSEUMS THEY SAY LOOK THIS IS ITALY THIS
 IS YOUR CULTURE YOU ARE ITALIAN HUMAN BEINGS HAVE CULTURE YOUR
 GOVERNMENT'S DESIRE TO MONETIZE THE EPISTEME WITH ITS ASSAULT ON THE
 ARTS AND HUMANITIES COUPLED WITH YOUR INCLINATION TO REMOVE ART
 FROM THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM IS DEEPLY CONCERNING YOUR REFORMS WILL
 CRIPPLE FUTURE BRITISH DESIGN IN ADVANCE OF YOUR REFORMS UNIVERSITIES
 OFFERING CERTIFICATES IN TEACHER TRAINING ARE WITHDRAWING THEIR COURSES IN ART AND DESIGN
 TEACHING THIS IS DISGRACEFUL YOU WILL BE OPPOSED BY ALL PEOPLE INTERESTED IN ART
 DESIGN FREE SPEECH FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY AND PROBABLY ALSO BY A FEW BANKERS
 AND INVESTORS INTERESTED IN BRITISH PRODUCTS AND EXPORTS WHO ARE
 CONCERNED ABOUT THE COLOUR OF THEIR MONEY YOU PREACH AUSTERITY AND DESPAIR
 GOVERNMENT NEEDS TO DEVELOPE A DISCOURSE OF HOPE AND CREATIVITY WHERE HUMAN BEINGS
 FEEL EMPOWERED TO USE THEIR INCENUITY TO GET THEMSELVES OUT OF THE CRISIS WE FACE
 THE LONDON RIOTS WERE A RESULT OF A YOUTH CULTURE THAT HAS HOPELESSNESS AND AUSTERITY
 FORCED UPON IT GOVERNMENT OFFERS YOUNG PEOPLE LITTLE TO LOOK FORWARD TO DESPAIR LACK OF
 OPPORTUNITY LACK OF HIGHER EDUCATION LACK OF JOBS YOU ARE REMOVING ALL THE LADDERS
 TO THE DISENFRANCHISED YOU NEED TO RETHINK THE ROLE OF CREATIVITY IN SOCIETY AND
 REALIZE INNOVATION COMES FROM OPTIMISM CREATIVITY RISK TAKING AND
 BOB AND ROBERTA SMITH **ART**

Figure 3-(DesignCurial, 2021)

His artwork 'Letter to Michael Gove' Figure 3- (2011) had the purpose of condemning and questioning the policies of the then Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove (2021) which were to push art to the back of educational curriculum and favour maths, English, and science (Delaney, 2015). Smith started the Art Party in 2013 as a form of activism, using art to give people a voice to promote the importance of art to the Government and question Gove's agenda (Wilson, 2016).



Figure 4-(Simpson, 2021)



Figure 5-(Tate, 2016)

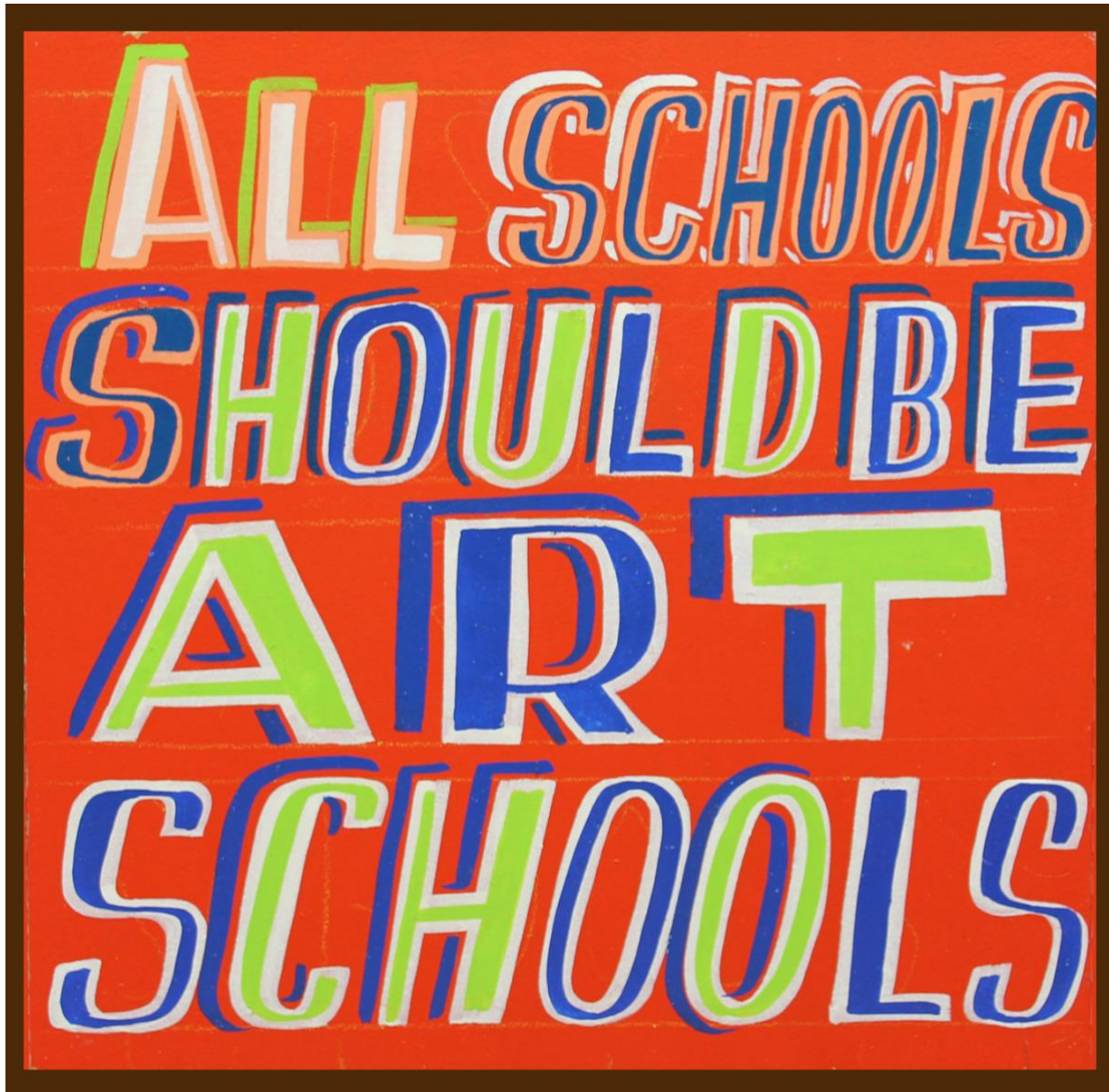


Figure 6-(The Essential School of Painting, 2021)

Smith's simple direct message is repeated by Smith in multiple pieces of art that he has created under the title 'All Schools Should be Art Schools' Figure 4,5,6 the message never getting lost or diluted. Its message is that art should be as important as core subjects in all schools.

Smith delivers his manifesto in simple yet powerful artworks, this form of art is effective in the realm of activism because it brings to mind the simple demands made by the public petitioning the powers that be through the use of placards and banners similar to those carried by protesters around the world throughout the centuries. Smith spent time in New York where he trained as a sign writer (Illuminate Productions, 2021). This may have influenced his art in his use of typography. The type of lettering in his art is similar to the early punk cut and paste style. At the time Smith was studying in London it was at the heart of the British Punk movement, a time of chaos in Britain with Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister (Punk Museum of Youth Culture, 2021). It could be argued that this has influenced his art and indeed his activism.

Discussion

If anything, art is... about morals, about our belief in humanity. Without that, there simply is no art. - Ai Weiwei (TATE, 2021).

This essay has set out through three key words, to discuss how art challenges people to explore emotions, themes, and ideas. The research has investigated how the context of these artists is not only vital to their art, but also very different and unique to each. Each artist in this essay could be viewed as non-conformist; they are often viewed as an outsider living on the fringes of society commenting on their experience of it. This can create change by giving the viewer a different perspective on their own lives. In addition, the creation of art can clearly be seen as a way of celebrating life and moving humanity forward through active change. As outlined, all chosen artists are sincere in their art, expressing themselves honestly in what they believe, offering a deeper connection with audiences, thus leading to greater change. This subliminal, emotional, and intellectual connection on an individual level has the power to lead to emotional, ideological, and societal change. This essay has highlighted an interest in the power of art to create change. Further exploration of how this change is achieved in different types of art will lead to the thesis question: Art as a change agent: How and why art creates change? In order to explore this question several areas will be analysed, namely iconic, cultural, and art based on propaganda. Other schools that will form the basis of the dissertation question will also be various art movements throughout history and finally the influence of art as a catalyst for change.

My research question is:

Art as a change agent: How and why art creates change?

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