



School: **Fine Art & Media**
BA Fine Art: **Studio Site and Context**
Level 5

Essay: **Origin and Application of Political Art**

Student Name: **David Phillips**
Student Number: **P152088/1551647**

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Module Leads: **Holly Slingsby, Alex Duncan, Gwen Beynon**

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Image Making

Task: *From the series of FINE ART MAKING research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.*

Background Note

I am a very politically orientated person and have been an engaged activist since I was 16, and an elected representative at various levels of responsibility for more than 35 years. I am conscious of the role that Art and the image has in political discourse as a significant deliverer of the 'message' and this is an important part of the fabric of my artistic practice.

It is often claimed that all 'Art' is always political. This is simplistic and unhelpful. In this essay, I examine the relationship between art and politics and their symbiotic relationship. With particular reference to the discipline of painting and the visual image, I seek to explain how Art is conceived, viewed and interpreted, and how it is used by and against political and social systems.

This is such a vast topic seek that I can only hope to define the landscape of Political Art and its role in societal change.

My essay is 2,642 words excluding section headings, image labels and all appendices. David Phillips

Essay: **Origin and Application of Political Art**

1. The artistic imperative and how Art is 'seen'.

Art has a significant role in the aesthetics of life, providing beauty and pleasure, with no necessarily apparent purpose other than adornment. As Goethe has it, "Es war doch so schön!" ('It was so beautiful') (Goethe. J. W.). Since improvements in printing, photography, and production from the 19th century onwards, which led to art becoming an obtainable and fetishised commodity, we all have art of some description in our lives.

But Art has been made for millennia, which suggests it is a necessary part of the human existence.

Early humans made many 'marks,' but the oldest 'art,' that which satisfies the sense of "purposeful...creation" (Tacon. P. (2021)), is currently considered to have been created at least 45,000 years ago (Fig.1) We cannot of course know the reason for its creation or its intended purpose, whether decorative or religious, but it was clearly intended to be 'viewed.'



Figure 1: Cave Art Leang Tedongnge, Sulawesi

Kandinsky said that, "Every work of art is a child of its time, while often it is the parent of our emotions. Thus, every cultural period creates art of its own, which can never be repeated again". (Kandinsky W. (1911))

Arts Practice has always been a process of change, reflecting advances in philosophy, perception, patronage, and technology (this word itself being re-imported into English in the 16th Century from the original Greek, as a useful collective noun for the significant improvements then taking place in mechanics and materials).

The aesthetic imperative that creates art arises from and is supported by a specific foundation and superstructure. When making art, artists make editorial choices (subject, medium and size). And those choices are unavoidably moulded by the socioeconomic culture and polity to which the artist belongs and can only provide work from a particular point of view – the artists'! From which it follows that virtually every image we see has an agenda.

This essentially Marxist view, that art is shaped by, and cannot be separated from, its socio-cultural-economic-political context, is disputed by Marcuse who, whilst accepting the immanence of those creative factors, argues that an artwork is autonomous, it stands apart from its context. Art transcends “its social determination and emancipates itself from the given universe of discourse and behaviour” (Marcuse, H. (1979). This was written almost 40 years ago and whilst I accept his general proposition, I cannot accept his absolutism. Yes, artwork should be taken for what it is, but what that ‘is’ is, must be considered in the ‘now.’ Hence the cognitive dissonances pointed to by the BLM movement. Because an artworks’ social value changes over time, objections to, or re-interpretations of, specific artworks’ social value on epistemic grounds, are always warranted. (Fig.2)



Figure 2: Colston Statue 'drowned'.

But that process of seeing and understanding also applies to the viewer. The artist makes images informed by their own experience and the viewer's reaction is mediated through the same determinant. Nature and nurture are both evident in the production, viewing and appreciation of art, but the latter is the more dominant.

Although the generality of social context is a major part of aesthetic nurture, there are other factors in play. For example, reinforcement and essentialisation.

Reinforcement, which Piper calls "pseudo-rationality" (Piper, A.M.S. (2013)), is the impression of rational consistency that we create to validate what we already believe, and which leads to the choice of newspaper or TV channel we choose: the Guardian/Channel4 or the Daily Mail/Fox; and who we tend to believe: conservatives being inhibited from accepting critical comments from the left even if true and vice versa. There are no 'alternative facts'.

This is compounded by 'Essentialisation' (Piper, A.M.S. (2013)); where we seek to explain and understand someone's persona - their motivations, outlook and abilities, by reference to their gender, social class, or ethnic origin, which of course often leads to sexism, xenophobia and racism. A simple example is the use of accents. Call centre complaints operators are often from the Northeast of England because it seems, we consider them kind and considerate; those dealing with mechanical issues are Scottish, because the Scots are seen as natural engineers. You rarely hear a Liverpool accent (criminals) or a Birmingham one (just don't like the accent).

Said describes this conatus in his study of Orientalism, saying that,

"(We) are to assume that if an Arab feels joy, if he is sad at the death of his child or parent, if he has a sense of the injustices of political tyranny, then those experiences are necessarily subordinate to the sheer, unadorned, and persistent fact of being an Arab. (Said. E, 1978))

2. What Political Art is and how it is used

In common with most other areas of human existence, art is strongly affected by politics, indeed each influences the other.

Art provides a universal language, cutting through and connecting cultures and generations, communicating truth not otherwise accessible and reinforcing a collective sense of community identity. Not always for the good, witness the large sectarian public murals in Belfast. (Fig.3)



Fig 3: Sectarian Murals Belfast,

It has been proposed that art can offer experiential insight (Gaut, B. M. (2007), Green, M. (2010) & Walton, K. (1990)). I am unconvinced. We can look out of the window and see that it is raining; if we have used the bathroom shower, we can deduce that rain is likely to be water and therefore wet, but we cannot know that rain is wet, without having stood in it. Art might depict the horrors and cruelty of war, of racism and so forth, it can show what it looked like – but never what it *felt* like.

Walter Benjamin proposes that we are not taught this universal language, but “gradually by habit” (Benjamin, W. (1935)), that is by apperception, the perception of one’s own mental processes. Berger observes that “...the way that we see, is affected by what we know.” (Berger, J. (1973))

Knowledge gained through Art – by seeing – is as valid as knowledge provided in words – hearing or reading. Art is not inferior. Art can teach – especially to the illiterate. A good example of this is the narrative provided to the uneducated peoples of the Middle Ages by stained-glass windows (Fig.4). Art provides a visually legible alternative that, in many cases, can be stronger and more easily assimilated and understood. However, art is not philosophically sterile.



Figure 4: Window Troyes Cathedral

Art is often seen as analogous to a mirror being held up to society, reflecting its pride, its heroes, its pleasures, and its torments. Bertolt Brecht, took the contrary view, stating, “Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it.” (Brecht, B).

States (particularly totalitarian ones) have always understood the political power of art in social control and conditioning (hence the proscription and prescription of non-conformist arts and culture). As witnessed in my own lifetime, in the USSR (& Putin’s Russia), Franco’s Spain, Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, Pol Pot’s Cambodia, and Communist China.

Indeed, it is difficult to find a state does not do this to some degree. For many years I was a commissioned Customs Officer and part of my responsibilities was to police a list of books banned by government decree to prevent their importation, and to seize and destroy any that were.

Although practised for centuries, the aestheticization of politics was only identified in the 20th century as being a key ingredient of totalitarian regimes. Benjamin wrote,

“Fascism attempts to organize the newly proletarianized masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate. [It] sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. The masses have a right to change property relations; Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property.” “The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. Communism responds by politicizing art.” (Benjamin W. 1935)

Thus, the aestheticization of politics (or the politization of art, they are different sides of the same coin), by providing the people with ‘spectacle’, distracts them from their own exploitation and subjugation and so strengthens the existing order.



Figure 5: We defend the Motherland

This 'unknown known' was understood by the Caesars, with their 'bread and circuses;' as it was by Thatcher and Blair with their wars in the Falklands and Iraq and is, in Putin's war on Ukraine (Fig. 5).

The creation of state Museums also fall into this provision of spectacle. These grand cultural institutions are, as they were intended to be, obvious places of grand power and glory, providing an opportunity to control the message, whilst giving a gracious nod towards the contrary with their appropriation of acceptable levels of dissent. This has not gone unnoticed. Donato argues that the "the set of objects (a) Museum displays is sustained only by the fiction that they somehow constitute a coherent representational universe" (Donato E.1998).

The consequence of this appropriation is that little attention is given to the crypto-political message inherent in an artworks production, dissemination, or display.

One of Ai Weiwei's most famous pieces, *Sunflower Seeds* (2010), consists of one hundred million small porcelain sculptures, designed to resemble sunflower seeds. The work was intended to represent the individual within a collective society and addresses themes of mass production, exploitation of labour and loss of individuality. However, the somewhat incongruous irony of this artwork being handmade by more than 1,600 Chinese porcelain craftsmen over a period of two years, is overlooked in the admiration accorded the work: no questions being asked about their working conditions or pay. Initially, viewers could touch, sit, and walk on the seeds as the artist presumably intended. That was until the seeds started getting stolen and fears of its 'deterioration' (meaning damage to its intrinsic value) led, in another ironical act, to the gallery cordoning off the work.

Banksy's stencilled public artworks and prints, criticise the capitalist consumerist society and social injustice and inequality. But his work also sells for significant sums.



Figure 6: Girl with a Balloon

A print of his stencilled picture *Girl with a Red Balloon* first produced in 2002, was sold at Sotheby's for £1.2 million and was immediately shredded (Fig.6). It was subsequently retitled *Love is in the Bin* and resold in its shredded state for £18.5 million.

This version was lent to the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, where it hangs alongside the gallery's Old Masters, achieving something rather more than irony.

Banksy (and Ai) may be politically subversive artists, but they are doing so in collusion with the art establishment/market of which they are so clearly part. And of course, there is the grand irony, that both politically subversive artists have a personal net worth of many £millions!

Picasso's *Guernica* (Fig.7) is perhaps the most famous political painting in the world. Its solitary display in the Prado in Madrid and the constant security that accompanies it, confirming its iconic status. But to my mind, this subsumes its original polemical message about the violence of war, the slaughter of innocent civilians and the human cost of conflict: a message still as relevant today.



Figure 7: Picasso's *Guernica*

I doubt that any of the spectators I recently saw, standing at the far wall of the gallery so they could fit the whole painting into the camera lens of their mobile phones, reflected for one minute on the message of the painting's scream of horror. They were just concerned to tick it off in their I-spy book of Famous Art.

In opposition to this appropriation and irony, the Resistanbul Committee of Socialist Realism sent a strong open letter to the Istanbul International Biennial in 2009,

"We have to stop pretending that the popularity of politically engaged art within the museums, magazines, and markets over the last few years has anything to do with really changing the world. We must stop pretending that taking risks in the space of art, pushing boundaries of form, and disobeying the conventions of culture, making art about politics, makes any difference. We must stop pretending that art is a free space, autonomous from webs of capital and power,"
(Resistanbul 2009)

Existentially, Art is immutably genetically recombined in the politics of its time; crypto-politically, as historian, archivist, propagandist and decorator; and ortho-politically as critic, dissenter and activist. And that both states are proof positive of the power of Art.

3. What Political Art should be.

As I have shown above, the claim that all art is political, is not wholly wrong but is a non-sequitur that defines politics more than it does art. In any event, acceptance of that proposition would necessarily connote that artists are always political actors, which is clearly not so. Some were (Malevich & Lissitsky), some were sometimes (Goya & Delacroix) and some never were (Sargent & Monet).

Art has the ability to simplify the communication of complex ideas and encourage others to think critically about the world around them. Political Art is artwork that, by intention, argues for societal change. It is not about changing art but changing society.

It should be recognised however, that this ability has not always been harnessed to the service of the righteous, Political Art having incited bigotry, and racism, and beaten the recruiting sergeant's drum (Fig.8).



Figure 8: Recruitment Posters Britain and Revolutionary Russia

Political Art does not have to be shocking, uncomfortable or explicit. It is acceptable to find pleasure in such work. Indeed, political artwork that engages the viewer may be more successful than the confrontational.

No artist sets out to bore their viewers, as they are conscious that the viewer is an “active participant in a collective performance” (Ranciere J 2009).

Boredom is no helpmeet to truth and understanding. A discourse that is unnecessarily difficult and opaque (vide most academic works of philosophy or philology), would be unlikely to influence anyone, as few would have the fortitude to endure it. Over-simplification would have the same result.

Political Art seeks to make you think; it may not be able to suggest what the future should be but can surely help us understand what it should not; to point us to the “road less travelled” (Frost 1916).

Lunn argues that this ‘priority of import’ also informed Adorno's stance on art and politics, who doubted,

“...both the effectiveness and the legitimacy of tendentious, agitative, or deliberately consciousness-raising art.” Adorno considered, “... the best art, and politically the most effective, so thoroughly works out its own internal contradictions that the hidden contradictions in society can no longer be ignored.” (Lunn E. 1982)

At its very least, Political Art remains a declaration that challenges socio-political concerns in order to raise public awareness and understanding, so that others can bring change. It is part of the debate rather than the sole instrument of action.

4. Conclusion

Political Art is a vast and complex topic which this essay can only skim.

I am really engaged by the aims of the AfK (Arbeitsrat für Kunst) [Labour Council for Art] in the Weimar Republic (Fig.9), whose manifesto called for Art to “no longer be the pleasure of a few but should bring joy and sustenance to the masses” (AfK 1918). Alternatively, “Art for the people and by the people,” or “Art for the many not the few (my glosses).”



Figure 9: Arbeitsrat für Kunst

It also called for Art to be demystified and made accessible (in all senses of that word) to the masses: that Art should not be restricted to exclusive galleries or spaces but freely available to all. It should require no gatekeepers.

I hope that I have explained why Art is what it is and why it should reflect and respond to the ordinary citizen as well as the elites. Why Political Art should not only be about tearing down, but also building up; using its transcendental power to recognise and celebrate both our difference and our commonality.

These maxims not only inform my practice but are an integral part of my political philosophy and action.

The more we strive to be better and do better, the greater chance we have to create a more equitable society, the more chance we have of success. This may be idealistic, but without hope we are lost. Yes, this is the pursuit of perfection, but why not? I too have a dream. (2,642)



Figure 10: Sorolla's And they still say fish is expensive

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Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.

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