Between Practice and Praxis: Why I Am Not an Artivist

Kerry Guinan

Not long after graduating from my BFA in 2014, I requested a meeting with an old Marxist tutor to discuss an identity crisis I had quickly developed out in the real world. "I feel," I confessed, naively, "that the artists don't respect my activism and the activists don't respect my art." "Kerry," he offered, simply, "it's not your fault that the left is split."

I am a visual artist, creating conceptual interventions that critique the relationship between art and capitalism. I am also a researcher, writing in the fields of critical theory and sociology to support the hypotheses of my practice. Motivating both of these roles is my communism, which manifests in praxis as grassroots organising, principally in struggles for housing and abortion rights. Here I reflect on the interaction of these various activities, with particular emphasis on why my art is not my activism, and why my activism not my art.

I am making this clarification in the context of art-activism, or—*artivism*—a new subset of contemporary art that merges practice and praxis to effect social change. Examples include Jeanne Van Heeswijk's *2Up2Down* (2010), which involved residents in Liverpool in the repurposing of a vacant block; Tania Brugeura's *Immigrant Movement International* (2010-ongoing), which saw the artist living among and aiding undocumented immigrants in Queens; and Gregory Kloehn's *Homeless Homes Project* (2011–ongoing), which provides mobile homeless shelters made from discarded materials. While there have always been outsider artistic practices motivated by social change, the novelty of these works is an artivism legitimized and promoted by the art institution, and consequently by museums, academies, NGOs, and political institutions. As an artist making politically charged work within these institutions, it can be tempting to situate my work within this artivist canon. However, my practice takes a slightly different approach. For while I am sympathetic to its intentions, I consider artivism to be exemplary of the depoliticization of art and the aestheticization of politics in the 21st century.

The politicization of art is, in Walter Benjamin's terms, an art subservient to its political history (Benjamin 1935, 26). Many twentieth-century art movements were politicized in this manner, being associated with political movements or organisations that provided a *raison d'être* (Groys 2014). Consider the relationship between revolutionary Russia and its avant-garde, surrealism and communism, or dada and anarchism. Indeed the 'social practice' end of today's artivism—that which valorizes civil participation in art as an end unto itself—has its roots in the radical community art movement in 1960s and 70s Britain, wherein artists rejected the art

institution to work on explicitly leftist community projects (Matarasso 2011). Politicized art therefore had a lot to say about the politics of art itself and tended to operate in spite of the art institution, finding enough validation in higher truth and principles, which were to fail by century's end.

A major factor in the depoliticization of art was the collapse of communism in 1989 and the subsequent 'end of ideology' consensus that caused artists to stop associating their work with any particular '–ism' and, by result, with political organisations and parties (Emmelhainz 2016). At the same time, the art institution began recuperating radical community art practices, eventually culminating in the architectural collective Assemble winning the 2015 Turner Prize for their work restoring houses in the working-class community of Toxeth, England. The depoliticization of artivism over the past three decades is thus twofold: not only has the discipline now largely split from political praxis, it has also entered the very artistic institutions it once politically rejected.[1] Indeed the art institution seems to have replaced the social movement as being the most reliable supporter, and most appropriate historical framework, for artivist practices. This is the split my tutor spoke of, the consequences of which are that many of today's artivists operate in a networked (not organized), individualized (the artist has more access to opportunities than the community), and disassociated (not a component of a broader political movement) sphere, which succeeds in being 'political' but is not politicized.[2]

Interestingly these same characteristics—networked, individualised, disassociated—may also be used to describe the aestheticization of contemporary politics. As an activist, my principles of praxis would stress the importance of collective empowerment, organization building, and winning political transformations. Praxis becomes aestheticized, again in Benjamin's understanding, when it relegates these political structures and principles to the experience of their aesthetic form. Yet such a characterization could apply to many of the twenty-first century's high-profile social movements, especially those

born of the internet, such as the Anti-Globalization Movement, Occupy, and MeToo. These movements have lacked the organizational structures, transformative principles, or political demands necessary to win concessions, but did enable an *experience* of political participation, not in a structured collective, but in a disassociated network of individuals. Their aesthetic dimension became the sole justification for the movements' existence: visibility was not just the means, but also the end. The spectacle of the crowd, of mass participation, is the desired change itself: 'I must be *seen*', these movements declare, but when the eyes are on me I don't know what I want, I do not have any demands. It is thus that practice and praxis have met at somewhat of an impasse, leading Yates McKee to write that Occupy may indeed represent "the end of socially-engaged art" (McKee 2016). Symbolic actions, individualized expressions of discontent, and performative politics are no longer the refuse of the artistic avant-garde—they are the keystones of contemporary political praxis. In the ensuing chaos, the distinct role of art is much less clear.

It is against this backdrop that I adopt the perhaps orthodox position that my practice cannot qualify as praxis or vice versa. Instead I approach each role with distinct criteria, incorporating research to evaluate how I might separately politicize practice and praxis. Artistically this has taken many forms, from running as a performative candidate in an Irish General Election (*Liberate Art* 2016), to purchasing the identity of a struggling gallery (*126 © Kerry Guinan* 2014), to an anti-gentrification intervention that resulted in a home visit from a Garda Síochána (the Irish police force) (*Presenting the Cultural Quarter* 2017). Such works could also be accused of aestheticizing politics and are at best ambivalent in their political relationship to the art institution. I place my work within the legacy of institutional critique, a conceptual art movement that criticizes the ideology of the art institution through the institution itself. For example, in 1974, Michael Asher, an American artist representative of the movement, removed a partition wall in a Los Angeles gallery, effectively bringing an office into the exhibition space

and critiquing the hidden bureaucracy of the art gallery. To critique something is, however, to continually reaffirm it, and my work occupies a difficult interstitial position that, on the one hand, antagonizes the art institution and, on the other, receives arts funding, exhibition, residency opportunities, and validation by the neoliberal academy.

While my right to critique the depoliticization of art is therefore questionable, I would argue its validity on the basis that my work has never aimed to effect social change, at least in a direct sense. Rather my practice is aimed at testing the boundaries of the aesthetic—precisely the political and material boundaries that prevent art from being a tool of social change. In *Liberate Art* (2016), for example, my radical election programme promising the 'liberation of art from class' was intended to fail, in order to illustrate the limitations of both contemporary art and liberal democracy. In *Presenting the Cultural Quarter* (2017), I highlighted how a contemporary art gallery with progressive public art, education, and outreach programmes is nevertheless implicated in local gentrification. And in *126 © Kerry Guinan* (2014), a small, independent, artist-run contemporary art gallery became reliant on my private sponsorship in order to meet their running costs.

If artivism understands social relations in the spirit of free will and agency in an 'arena of exchange,' whereby voluntary participation determines the process and outcome of the project, my work, in contrast, considers social relations in Marxist terms, as the invisible economic binds that determine the very limits of agency.[3] I am currently exploring this distinction through the development of a style called 'relational socialist realism,' an expanded form of social practice that involves participants as agents of the economy, rather than free will.[4] As an example, my current work, *Artists* (2019), comprises a series of blank, white canvases, which have been signed in the bottom right corner, not by myself, the artist, but by the factory workers involved in the canvas' production in the Dominican Republic. The aim is to politicize art once more but to do so honestly. For while the leftist paradigm has

been depoliticized in art, its capitalist politics are as organized and efficient as ever. The global art market, which determines the artistic trends that are taught in art schools and supported by art institutions, reduces art to its investment potential and remains entirely unregulated. Global companies, trading in arms, oil, and all manner of appalling commodities, sponsor the arts as a means of claiming moral capital. In countries that have undergone austerity after the 2008 recession, funding cuts to the arts have made such sponsorship all the more integral. This is what it means to be organized: to have laws, structures, and practices in place that facilitate your economic interests. My practice confronts this situation by repeatedly highlighting, in and through its institutions, that art is subservient to capitalism, and is therefore, covertly, always-already politicized.

Thus, while the surface of my work expresses a commitment to social change, its intra-narrative proclaims that art, in of itself, is not enough. This is why I proceed with 'art' and 'activism' separately, allowing the split to define the motive and methodology. I do of course contribute artistic skills to movements: making banners, designing leaflets, and printing t-shirts as is determined necessary and useful. This is, technically, a form of politicized art practice, but to declare it so, as an artist, carries the risk of recuperation by the art institution. For the most part, however, political organizing is tedious, bureaucratic, and unspectacular. It is the work of crafting strategies, agreeing principles, reaching out to affected communities, building their power and, perhaps most of all, keeping the administrative load ticking over. There is no reason why my work in social movements should be rewarded above any one else's and for this reason I endeavour at all times to keep my practice and praxis at arm's length from each other. This present exercise is an obvious and unique exception and so I can only hope that it is interpreted in the earnest manner in which it was intended.

Notes

1. The critique of the art institution was an implicit feature of the radical community art movement, according to Matarasso (2011).

2. For Chantal Mouffe "the political' refers to this dimension of antagonism which can take many forms and can emerge in diverse social relations," while "politics" refers to the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and to organize human coexistence" (see Mouffe 2016).

3. "Depending on the degree of participation required of the onlooker by the artist, along with the nature of the works and the models of sociability proposed and represented, an exhibition will give rise to a specific 'arena of exchange'" (Bourriaud 2002). For György Lukács (1971), social relations make up the "fundamental nature" of the commodity, despite its "phantom objectivity" and appearance of "autonomy."

4. *Relational aesthetics* is the name given by curator Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) to characterize art practices that treat the social element of art as their medium and form.

References

Benjamin, Walter. 1969. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books. Originally published 1935.

Bourriaud, Nicolas. 2002. *Relational Aesthetics*. Les Presses du Réel, France.

Emmelhainz, Irmgard. 2016. "Geopolitics and Contemporary Art, Part I: From Representation's Ruin to Salvaging the Real." *e-flux* 69 (January). https://www.e-flux.com/journal/69/60620/geopolitics-and-contemporary-art-part-i-from-representation-s-ruin-to-salvaging-the-real/.

Groys, Boris. 2014. "On Art Activism." *e-flux* 56 (June). https://www.e-flux.com/journal/56/60343/on-art-activism/.

Lukács, György. 1971. *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics.* Translated by Rodney Livingstone. London: Merlin Press Ltd. First published 1923.

Matarasso, François. 2011. "All in this Together: The Depoliticisation of Community Art in Britain, 1970-2011." In *Community, Art, Power: Essays from ICAF 2011*, edited by Eugen van Erven, 214-240. The Netherlands: International Community Arts Festival.

McKee, Yates. 2016. "Occupy and the End of Socially Engaged Art." *E-flux* 72 (Spring).

Mouffe, Chantal. 2016. "Democratic Politics and Conflict: An Agonistic Approach." *Politica Comun* 9. http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/pc.12322227.0009.011.