

Art and Protest

by Brian Hennigan

The evidence is right in front of us. You notice it serendipitously in the mundane – the writing on the back of a t-shirt before it turns and weaves through the crowd of protestors. You glimpse what it says, “artists are the social conscience of...” and then it slips away, and your eyes draw upward following arms attached to signs, posters broadcasting custom slogans of objection. Others have stenciled silhouettes of Chavez and King and Zapata, maybe to remind us of the tragic recurrence of it all while showing that it can, again, be overcome. Meanwhile, the iconic prints of Ernesto Yerena weave classic claims for human decency with stubborn stances on modern politics, highlighting the relative exceptionality of today’s argument for equality. The confluence of art and politics is, and has been, recognized for centuries. Protests confronting SB1070 over the past year once again proved this true in Phoenix. Posters, murals, paintings, and tagging (along with the less-discussed writing and music) cropped up to form a diverse articulation of political dismay. Together, these works of art were able to overcome the left’s typical cynicism toward Arizona politics and illustrated that, as John Steinbeck inimitably put in his classic protest novel, “repression only works to strengthen and knit the repressed.” The parallels of *The Grapes of Wrath* and today’s protest art are certainly remarkable, as they express issues with poverty, immigration and all of the social strife that accompany it. Likewise, one would be hard-pressed to differentiate between art and politics – where the art ends and the politics begins – in either case. In fact, it is clear that an attempt at dichotomization would be impossible. Here politics and art are one and the same. If the convergence of art and protest is undeniable and – in the greater scheme of things – striking and unique, we have to ask, “why, what are the psychological or social underpinnings of the artist’s proclivity toward political action?” In his study of political vanguardism, anarchist anthropologist David Graeber hesitantly, but I think correctly, came close to answering this question. He wrote, “The answer must have something to do with [Marx’s theory of] alienation.” Activists and artists, he noted, both experience the act of “first imagining things and then bringing them into being.” This unalienated production and creativity – the ability to determine the fruits of one’s own labor and to benefit from it, autonomously or collectively – positions both groups to envision and aspire for worlds with less alienated creation and social relations, not only within the arts or political movements, but everywhere.

Even if we take Graeber’s assessment as true, it definitely does not erase all ambiguity. Certainly art and protest can walk together, hand in hand. When it happens, we need not look far to see the brilliance of the relationship. At the same time, we know that not all art is political, nor most politics artistic. Strangely enough, both art and politics can be highly political and participatory, as seen through SB1070 protest described above, or, in converse, posed as pure spectacle for disinterested aesthetic experience (await November election coverage or visit an art museum).

Further, art may become depoliticized through commoditization, unable to escape or transcend its saturation in market demands of homogeneity for apolitical consumption. Many postmodern thinkers believe the recent trend of artistic professionalization (and resulting pacification), according to Marxist geographer David Harvey, has diminished the political stance of artists, society's "creative core." As such, he proposed that the political left must revitalize artistic hubs as "centers of political estrangement [to] mobilize the political and agitational powers of cultural producers." Harvey, and many others, understand such revitalization as a means to overcome the left's current inability to offer alternative, utopian visions for society – an endgame to inspire action, to overcome the impasse of "dreams that seem unrealizable and prospects that hardly seem to matter." Unfortunately, Harvey proposed little more direction of how to go about this revitalization.

Though I doubt that it holds all the answers, consulting the literature of urban geography and discussions of democratic space may provide some bearing. Since the earliest endeavors of republicanism, the importance of open space (whether metaphorical or physical) was apparent. Open space is not only a scene the Habermasian "public sphere" of collective citizen deliberation, but also the individualized representation. According to Lyn Lofland, public space is a "powerful medium of communication," particularly for groups "that cannot command significant private space," which make such spaces crucial for "the outcasts, the proletariat, the underclass." It would not be a stretch to include artists and political protestors within Lofland's list, as they are always struggling for an audience and continually excluded from private places (consider the politics of "graffiti" and "free speech zones").

In fact, numerous activist academics stress the importance of physical space and representation. "Social movements," Don Mitchell asserts, must "occupy and reconfigure material spaces in the city. Indeed, these movements are premised on the notion that democratic (and certainly revolutionary) politics are impossible without the simultaneous creation and control of material space... public democracy requires public visibility, public visibility requires material public spaces" (emphasis in original).

Considering the above discussion – the classic collusion between art and politics and the apparent necessity of material space for meaningful expression – perhaps leftist (or otherwise fringe) movements would do well to focus on intentionally creating/supporting open, inclusive places for art and politics as a means to revitalize "agitational" expression and political engagement, mobilization. In view of Conspire as a case study, we can see that such a convergence is not awkward, but rather a natural occurrence. Although initially established as a platform for local artists, it is also a place for political organizing and soapbox expression. It became evident that Conspire is an equally rare spatial oasis for artists as it is for activists and oppressed groups in general. Amidst increasingly sterilized urban landscapes (see Mill Avenue), commoditized art and homogenized political discussion, enclaves that purposefully uphold diversity, free expression and spontaneity will become principal spaces for artistic voice and political change. This seems apparent because, really, where else could that happen?