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# *But does it work in theory? A critique of masculinist writing on art and activism*

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## ICA Feminist visual activism 10 July 2018

One particularly notable aspect of much of the political activism of the last few years (say, since the global financial crisis of 2008) is how much of it is led by women. Not only in the rise of overtly feminist groups like

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Femen in Ukraine and France,

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Pussy Riot in Russia

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La Barbe in France,

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Gulabi Gang in India

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or Sisters Uncut in London, but also crucially

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#blacklivesmatter, which was established in the USA by queer black women. Much of this recent activist practice, has also been informed by artists;

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and institutions like the Victoria and Albert Museum (to give just one example) have responded with exhibitions like *Disobedient Objects* (2014–15) and by adding a pussy hat from the global women's marches of 2017 to its collection.

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Also in the artworld, there have been protests like this by WHEREISANAMENDIETA

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Amongst many artists that could be cited, Sethembile Mzezane in South Africa is involved in activist practices and make political interventions with their artworks

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And others like Tanja Ostoyic from the former Yugoslavia draws attention to the sexual politics of migration.

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As does the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera, amongst the many other political interventions she makes.

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However, the analysis of visual activism has been written mostly by men, mostly white, mostly based in America. Not surprisingly, much of this falls short of the analysis that an inclusive feminist politics might require. However, because it is from men who might be assumed in many respects to be allies, it is important to acknowledge the work and examine precisely where it is politically inadequate. The three that I am discussing today I have seen taken up by feminists as potentially useful.

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In 2014, an article by Sven Lütticken is published in a respected left-wing theoretical journal. If I pick this one out, not quite at random from many others I could mention, it is because its subject resonates with the subject of this symposium: cultural revolution, what it means, and what it takes to enact it.<sup>1</sup> The essay takes the term ‘cultural revolution’ first used by Lenin in 1923, picked up by Guy Debord in 1958, and by European avant-gardes in the 1960s as well as of course by Chairman Mao. Lütticken uses the concept for its possibility to disrupt the division of political art practices into what he describes as their two main camps: ‘genealogies of institutional critique on the one hand, and extra-institutional aesthetic activism on the other’ and instead to ‘probe the logic and contradictions of radical practice’ since the 1970s. Perfect.

Except... this is an article bristling with references and names, but the first reference to a woman is the invocation of Thatcherism on its eighth page. The first woman artist, writer, or activist mentioned is a passing reference to Martha Rosler on its tenth page. Hito Steyerl is later discussed, and is herself quoted as citing two further women (Susan Boyle and Hannah Arendt). Then Sharon Hayes and Andrea Fraser are discussed; and that is it: just six women among 47 men (or, if footnotes are included, seven women among 57 men). These namings are scaffolding for Lütticken’s question: ‘But where does the decline of old classes and the

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<sup>1</sup> Sven Lütticken, ‘Cultural Revolution: From Punk to the New Proletariat’, *New Left Review* n.87, May/June 2014, pp. 115-131

emergence of new classes or micropolitical class-like formations – perhaps on the basis of gender or race – leave class as a *project*, possessing historical agency?’ to which I want to pose a number of counter-questions: What has happened to feminism (as a project?) if an article exploring revolutions in culture and radical thinking can almost forget to include women? What has happened to sexual politics or the analysis of white privilege if discussions of gender and race are potentially to be reduced to the category of ‘micropolitics’? What has happened to radical thinking if it is now acceptable to be so blatantly sexist in print – is feminism ‘so last century’ for the academic left? Where is the feminist, activist, performative subject?



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In his long essay ‘Image, Space, Revolution’, W.J.T. Mitchell provides an iconographic response to the 2011 occupations of public spaces in the Arab Spring and in Occupy Wall Street.<sup>2</sup> In this essay, Mitchell name-checks 46 men to nine women. On his way to concluding that the empty public space is the best monument to revolutions and potential future democracy, he distinguishes between images produced directly for activist purposes on the one hand, and on the other hand, images, frequently in the form of documentary journalism, that are an often-potent by-product of activism. He also lays over these two forms their supposed differing functions of bringing joyousness and documenting violence. As iconic exemplars of each of these categories of imagery from 2011, Mitchell posits the image of a ballerina dancing on the bronze bull in Wall Street, New York, and the image of a woman in Tahrir Square, Cairo, being dragged by the military in such a manner that her clothes are stripped from her and her blue bra exposed. ‘The fact that both these iconic images are centrally focused on women is no accident,’ he argues,

for the whole tactic of nonviolence has an inherently feminine and feminist connotation, in striking contrast to the macho violence it elicits. (This is a tradition that goes back to *Lysistrata* and the restraint of male violence by women.) The

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<sup>2</sup> W.T.J. Mitchell. ‘Image, Space, Revolution’ in W.T.J. Mitchell, Bernard E. Harcourt, Michael Taussig, *Occupy: Three Essays in Disobedience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), pp. 93-130.

Ballerina does not try to kill the bull; she turns him into a support for her performance. The Woman with the Blue Brassiere does not fight back, but compels the police to play their part in the tableau of active nonviolence. [...] the Ballerina and the Woman with the Blue Brassiere are Performance Artists.

Are these two women therefore enacting a performance of resistance?

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Behind the representation of the ballerina's elegant, bare-footed attitude on the back of the massive charging bull are seen, though smoke, protesters with hoodies and gas masks. The whole image is evocative of Emma Goldman's declaration that she did not want to be part of a revolution that does not allow dancing. The ballerina image did not however come about as a photograph of a dancer making an actual performative action on the Wall Street bull sculpture during Occupy, but was a composite image created three months earlier, by the organization Adbusters in Vancouver, Canada, for their journal. It was the initial call to action, to which thousands of people were to respond.

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The woman with the blue bra was part of a demonstration in Tahrir Square, Cairo, Egypt, 17<sup>th</sup> December 2011. At the moment caught on video, the woman was trying to run from the Egyptian military (not, as Mitchell suggests, the police) who were swarming the area; they grabbed her, some beating a man and a woman who tried to help her, and others dragging her in such a way that her black abaya came undone and her jeans, naked stomach and bra were exposed. In distressing amateur footage, it can be seen that she is repeatedly dragged, kicked and beaten, her breasts stamped on, and she is possibly unconscious.

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A single frame taken from this footage was used for posters carried by Egyptian women in mass demonstrations against violence against women,

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and the image of a woman with a blue bra became emblematic of the event –

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and also of a blue bra by itself – was used in street art and other graphics for resistance.

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Mitchell surely cannot have seen the footage from Cairo but only the still image, or he could not have made his argument, compelling as it appears to be on the surface. There was no choice for this woman, massively outnumbered by the military. Her intention was to be part of the demonstration that day, not to make (even as passive resistance) the action (that was forced upon her) to camera (or rather, a phone, held by a chance observer). The ballerina too did not perform for camera for that particular image. The image violated copyright and both the Ballerina and the sculptor of the bull contacted Adbusters and asked that they stop using the image. Adbusters director, Kalle Lasn himself exposed the deeply romanticised approach that made appropriation of the dancer's image possible: 'The poster was a ballerina—an absolutely still ballerina—poised in a Zen-ish kind of way on top of this dynamic bull. [...] I felt like this ballerina stood for this deep demand that would change the world. There was some magic about it.'<sup>3</sup> Mitchell's reference to *Lysistrata* is both telling and apposite: *Lysistrata* is the woman in the eponymous comic play by Aristophanes (411BC) who organizes Greek women to go on a sex strike to persuade the men to stop fighting their wars. *Lysistrata*'s performance is as man-made and fictional as that of the ballerina on the bull, and both are as lacking in self-determination as the real exposure and beating of the woman in Cairo.

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While Mitchell distinguishes between images made for activist purposes, and images caught documentary-style of activism in progress, Boris Groys sets up other differences in his essay 'On Art Activism'.<sup>4</sup> In this essay he makes reference to 19 men and no women. He makes a distinction between designed objects – functional designed objects aestheticised to attract consumers and usage – and art objects aestheticized for collection and display in museums, becoming 'corpses' of no use. His prime concern is the issue of aestheticizing objects in the name of politics, a move that many have seen as depoliticisation in the service of aesthetics, or conversely, ignoring issues of artistic quality in the service of politics. Groys distinguishes between 'political design, [...] professional image-making' and 'artistic aestheticization

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2012/02/occupy-wall-street-201202>

<sup>4</sup> Groys, 'On Art Activism', in *In the Flow*, pp. 84-116.

[which] means the defunctionalization of the tool, the violent annulment of its practical applicability and efficiency.’ Since the French revolution, he says, ‘art has been understood as the defunctionalized and publicly exhibited corpse of past reality. This understanding of art has determined post-revolutionary art strategies until now.’ However, given that the aim of contemporary art (he argues) is not to display skills or make things better, but the opposite – to annul any notion of progress, to make functional things non-functional, to reduce rather than to expand – there is revolutionary potential for activist art. He concludes: ‘Using the lessons of modern and contemporary art, we are able to totally aestheticize the world, that is, to see it as being already a corpse. [...] Total aestheticization means that we see the present status quo as already dead, already abolished [...] Thus, [it does] not only does not preclude political action, it creates an ultimate horizon for successful political action if this action has a revolutionary perspective’.

Once again, this is on the surface an attractive argument. There are three major lacunae in Groys’s essay however, which at the least makes necessary a careful testing of this proposition. First is the lack of reference to any work by feminists, let alone women. Second is the lack of reference to art objects. He does mention, in brackets, the corpse of Lenin, still displayed by successive USSR and Russian leaders from Stalin to Putin as proof of the death of Leninism; and he discusses a lecture by Joseph Beuys. But the lack of grounding the arguments in activist works leads him to the third problem: passive ignorance of, or active ignoring of, decades of feminist activist art (amongst other activisms) at the outset of his essay when he says: ‘The phenomenon of art activism is central to our time because it is a new phenomenon, quite different from the phenomenon of critical art that became familiar to us in recent decades.’ His list of what artist activists do also ignores sexual politics and the patriarchy. ‘Art activists try to change living conditions in economically underdeveloped areas, raise ecological concerns, offer access to culture and education to the populations of poor countries and areas, attract attention to the plight of illegal immigrants, improve conditions for people working in art institutions. In other words, art activists react to the increasing collapse of the modern social state and try to substitute for social institutions and NGOs that for different reasons cannot or will not fulfill their role.’

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Lucy Lippard's distinction between activist art and political art.

'Although "political" and "activist" artists are often the same people, "political" art tends to be socially *concerned* and "activist" art tends to be socially *involved* – not a value judgment so much as a personal choice. The former's work is a commentary or analysis, while the latter's art works *within* its context, *with* its audience.'<sup>5</sup>



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Arendt: 'Truly political activities, acting and speaking, cannot be performed at all without the presence of others, without the public, without a space constituted by the many.'

'Action and politics [...] are the only things of which we could not even conceive without at least assuming that freedom exists' 'freedom, which only seldom – in times of crisis or revolution – becomes the direct aim of political action, is actually the reason that men live together in political organization at all. Without it, political life as such would be meaningless. The *raison d'être* of politics is freedom, and its field of existence is action.'

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Chantal Mouffe:

'What I call "the political" is the dimension of antagonism – the friend/enemy distinction. [...] This can emerge out of any kind of relation. [...] it's an ever-present possibility. What I call "politics", on the other hand, is the ensemble of discourses and practices, institutional or even artistic practices, that contribute to and reproduce a certain order.'<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Lucy Lippard, 'Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Politics at Play in Brian Wallis (ed.), *Art After Modernism: Re-thinking Representation* (New York: New Museum, 1984), p.349. Original emphases.

<sup>6</sup> Chantal Mouffe, in Chantal Mouffe, Rosalyn Deutsche, Brandon W. Joseph and Thomas Keenan, 'Every Form of Art Has a Political Dimension', *Grey Room* no. 2 (Winter 2001), pp 98-125; pp 99-100



Paul C Taylor.

“[my burden] will be to identify the themes that organise some of the problem spaces in the black aesthetic tradition. My organising thought [...] is that the recurring interrogation of these themes across time and space gives black aesthetics whatever unity it has, and all the unity it can responsibly aspire to have.”

“The idea of the aesthetic, like the idea of race, is a modern invention, which is to say that it emerges with, and as part of, the social formation that cultural theorists have taught us to refer to as “modernity” or “the modern”. The familiar elements of the social formation – liberal democracy, capitalism, nation-states, science as we know it, industrial economies, and gender relations as we know them – assumed forms we know during overlapping periods of time, along with and underwritten in some ways by ideologies of progress and autonomy. These familiar, widely praised elements emerged along with others – like the practices of European colonialism and anti-black racism – that the enthusiasts of the modern are less keen to insist upon.