

## INTRODUCTION

### A Proposition for Propaganda Art

Our century gives us a new chapter in propaganda as worldmaking; a chapter characterized by a media-saturated environment that is increasingly politicized. At the same time, the control of the means of communication have become democratized, creating an environment of competing worldviews that are increasingly citizen-led forms of propaganda (think: activists, meme-makers, cypherpunks, artists, hacktivists, youtubers, etc.) defying the state's monopolistic control of media in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In contemporary society, propaganda today takes place in a politicized society of competing ideas. These ideas do not emerge from state powers, nor do their adherents necessarily seek to claim that power. This is not to reduce the role of the state in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, but their propagandistic hold on citizens is weaker, and their power is diffused with the rise of multinational corporations and the inextricable complexities of globalization's forces.

While the tools of politics have become democraticized, the art world continues to maintain its century-old position of autonomy from state and politics.<sup>1</sup> This has at least been the art world's canonical understanding of itself and has had a tremendous influence on generations of artists who have refused to participate outside of the art sphere in order to preserve the autonomy of art. Nevertheless, there is a long history of artistic practices that have never divorced themselves from political spheres of life; artists, who like the avant-garde, sought to radicalize the art world but also recognized the relationship of art to the rest of the world. This paper examines those contemporary artists who remain thoroughly engaged with the political sphere of today. Their work often blurs the boundaries between art, politics, and activism. These are artists who engage in worldmaking through politically-instrumentalized art, or propaganda art. In its simplest terms, this paper examines the work of artists that make their art useful in order to activate political agency within society.

The literature on propaganda, its historical manifestations, as well as its aesthetics have been thoroughly documented. I have limited my own reflections on a collection of contemporary artistic practices that are using propaganda art to foster meaningful political agency in a rapidly-disenfranchising society. The contemporary form of artistic production makes it very difficult if not impossible to provide a stable classification of artistic practices; I can only describe a certain set of shared tactics or at least a "poetic matrix" (Medina, p.9) employed by artists. I have further limited myself to looking at lens-based practices and how lens-based artists can move into the political sphere without abandoning their technical craft. These practices provide examples immediately relevant to those artists who are concerned with the perceptible decline of democratic governance, the separation of power and politics, and the coherence of political projects within the Left. This paper comes from many hours of conversation and reflection trying to answer the slippery question of "how can my art make a meaningful difference in the world of today?" It attempts to offer an understanding of the artist's potential in participating in popular propaganda and as an agent of political change.

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<sup>1</sup> Since as early as the 1863 Salon des Refuses, artists have insisted on their independence from the state based on the absence of ideological restraint and public interference.

## Using the Term Propaganda

*“All art is propaganda. It is universally and inescapably propaganda; sometimes unconsciously, but often deliberately, propaganda.”* -Upton Sinclair, Mammonart

In order to describe a set of politically-instrumentalized practices a number of terms have been proposed. I prefer the term *propaganda art* as I understand propaganda to be political art aimed at generating (or propagating) a worldview for a general public. Our worldview, which is to say our perception of reality or our orientation of ourselves within the world, is often shaped and defended through political convictions. Propaganda can be understood as the enactment of a worldview, the identification with a certain reality, and, in the case of art, its affirmative depiction.

Propaganda is instrumentalized because it acts upon and can be *used* by political agents. In other words, it intervenes directly in the political sphere, often through activity outside of the autonomous artistic sphere. The word admittedly provokes a negative knee-jerk reaction, however I find it more honest than other terms. Other artists speak of 1:1, socially engaged, embedded, relational or useful art practices. However, these terms do not suggest a politics or the propagation of a worldview. In this sense, I use the term propaganda in its historically neutral sense.

The largest reservation against using the word is the common (mis)conception that propaganda is antithetical to a free-thinking and democratic society. When we consider art propaganda as the dissemination of a political stance through aesthetic means, it seems no more controversial than any political art or political rhetoric in society. Social activist Upton Sinclair famously proclaimed all art to be propaganda. In his PhD thesis, *Propaganda Art from the 20th to the 21st Century*, artist Jonas Staal outlines the origins and coherence of propaganda within democracy, and its relevance to contemporary art practices.<sup>2</sup>

Lastly, the term propaganda invites careful reflection: propaganda for what or for whom? Are the political beliefs embedded in my work worth propagating? Given the historical consequences of propaganda in manufacturing consent, what social or moral responsibilities do I take on through the propaganda I make? What kind of power do I encourage or enact through my work?

## ART AS POLITICS

### Art as Politics

*“There is never such a thing as an apolitical or inert artwork”* – Felix Gonzalez-Torres

Despite the art world’s claim to its autonomy we can still look at its political and economic ties to a globalized neoliberal framework in order to understand how art propaganda is possible today. Such an analysis requires understanding art as a sphere within society populated with individuals with their own political and economic self-interest. In his 9.5

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<sup>2</sup> Jonas Staal’s *Propaganda Art from the 20th to the 21st Century* (2017), provides a very thorough reading of the historical relationship between art and propaganda and is an essential reading for those interested in its larger historical context and contemporary practice that underpins this paper.

*Thesis on Art and Class*, Ben Davis looks at the art world as one dominated by “class” where the ruling class of visual arts is capitalistic (Davis, 2011). This class consists of ‘disenfranchised wealthy individuals (who have abdicated their roles as industrial and commerce managers to the bureaucracy of CEOs) [seeking] a certain civic identity through aesthetic “philanthropy.”’ (Medina, 20??, p.120). Because the ruling class defines its own interests through the art market, artists are obligated to serve their interests (Davis, 2011). At an organizational level, the art world is characterized by international biennales, art fairs, mega-shows and auctions, which balance spectacle with profit, sponsorship with advertising, and mass appeal with elite access. These in turn are often underwritten by banks arms traders, and...(Steyerl, in are you working too much, p.36). Trading theory for figures, Andrea Fraser’s *L’1% C’est Moi* charts the growth of the art market during the 2008 recession as it became a site of elitist speculation and a source of capital investment (Fraser, 2016). Hito Steyerl closely follows the politics of art noting that an unspoken taboo exists among artists who will not acknowledge the complicity of art and its institutions with the very same neoliberal values they attack through their work. While there is a long history of institutional critique led by artist like Hans Haacke, Michael Asher or Andrea Fraser [see Post-propaganda for canonical list], it has often remained as challenge to art’s institutions without stepping outside of the art sphere. Without considering how art functions within the world at large and its embedded relationship to society, artists will remain hindered in provided meaningful and effective political art. It will remain within the echo chambers of the art institution posturing as an ‘outsider’ doomed to alienate the non-initiated citizen (Chukhrov in working too much p.120).

The merging of the art sphere with the neoliberal sphere is not only a consequence of the all-encompassing nature of the neoliberal model. We can also look at how the democratization of artistic tools (the internet, software, YouTube art tutorials, cameras, etc.) has brought the non-artist to occupy the role of near-artist, or, at least, the creatively engaged worker. This was echoed in Steyerl’s performance-lecture *I Dreamed a Dream...*, where she describes a guerilla revolutionary pitching his own ‘art project’ (citation). At the same time, the artist is beginning to lose control over their means of production. Boris Groys describes the internet as a factory where both artists and workers are alienated from the tools they use, and the dichotomy between intellectual and manual work are eroded (see Hlavajova notes for citation). In this sense, artistic practices comes closer to that of the worker. It becomes harder to speak of true autonomy for the artist. On the other hand, this means the artist can now speak in solidarity and complicity with society at large. The contemporary artist, fully embedded in today’s society enters into a politicized arena arm-in-arm with the larger social class. This newfound solidarity is being described not only in the artist’s relationship to production (Steyerl, Groys, Davis) but also in terms of their economic precarity. Guy Standing speaks of a ‘precariat’ class not defined by its income level but rather by its insecurity (Standing, 20??). Slavoj Zizek had already given us the concept of the postindustrial proletariat consisting of intellectual labourers, working class, and outcasts, the latter of which usually includes artists (Chukhrov in are you working too much p.120). Perhaps it is with this precariat that a dangerous class can emerge, capable of providing revolutionary change. More importantly, perhaps it is this class that the artist can speak alongside. The artist conscious of his entanglement with society can align his practice with a precariat politics taking the position of “for us, by us”. And so the artist finds himself in the web of all things, complicit with capital and profit, in solidarity with social struggles

and driven by a sense of agoraphilia<sup>3</sup>. His work can be with and through popular movements, not as a separate observer but as a self-expressing cause.

### **Political Art is not Propaganda Art**

*The rigid frame of "Art" can take potentially powerful acts of subversion, dissent and rebellion out of context and turn them into hollow symbols of subversion, dissent and rebellion. Art can defang symbols. It's unfortunate when the most powerful thing about an exhibition is the rhetoric of the catalogue essay. – Marcus Westbury*

How is propaganda art different from the political art we see in galleries and museums today? After all, political art explicitly recognizes its political positions and often deploys a particular aesthetics for advancing a political thesis<sup>4</sup>. Political art is also a well-recognized genre within the art world with entire group shows and institutions dedicated to its exhibition. There is a key distinction, however, which allows us to separate the two, although admittedly with overlap. Propaganda art, as I have defined it, not only has a general public as its audience, but it is usable by political agents, be they the artists themselves or political agents of the public. This sits in contrast to the political art genre of the art world, whose public is *the spectator* of art's trinity, and whose political potential is often neutralized by virtue of its existence in the closed-off walls of the art gallery or the museum.

The usability of political art is numbed when, constrained to the art gallery, it's operation on the viewer is reduced to a 'preaching to the choir'. In fact, its very positioning as an art object restricts its relation to the viewer to the category of a mere art 'thing'. I do not mean to suggest that there is no political art that is not powerful or perhaps even transformable (if we are willing to believe that a transformative experience in the gallery is still possible). But it's *exclusive* position within the 'autonomous' sphere restricts not only its audience but also its usability, or propagative potential. We will see how propaganda art can certainly exist in the art gallery (and it should, as the art gallery remains one of the last remaining spaces for open critical dialogue). But it is also not enough if the intention is to step into the public sphere of political change. It is not enough if we want art to move beyond its control of a neoliberal art world.

### **The Well-Worn Road of Propaganda Art**

To speak of propaganda art as a form of art embedded in the politics of the social sphere is of course nothing new. Western art begins, at its earliest, establishing the ideals of Ancient Greece followed by its long period in the service of the Christian faith. Its modern history begins with the Enlightenment and the French Revolution when art's relationship to the ruling powers was reassembled in service of Popular and often Republican movements. Here, the ideological battlefield of art truly begins when artists like Antonio Perez Gisbert becomes the Republican-sponsored artist for Spain's Left while Casado del Alisal paints for the Right. The avant-garde movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century produced movements explicitly aligned with Left-wing propaganda including Constructivism in Bolshevik Russia, Berlin's

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<sup>3</sup> Piotr Piotrowski coined the term Global Agoraphilia in his Former West presentation (2013) to describe a "drive to enter the public space, the desire to participate in that space, and to shape public life".

<sup>4</sup> While the claim that all art is political sets up political art to be a tautology, we can still speak of political art as a genre within the visual arts marked by a common rhetoric, visual language and experience.

Dadaists in the Interwar period, as well as the very familiar Totalitarian art of Stalin's Socialist Realism, Hitler's Neo-Classicism and Mussolini's semi-official Futurism.

Of course, these art movements were not intrinsically Left or Right: Even the Nazi's deployed Constructivism in propaganda posters and Russian Futurists could be found among the Bolsheviks. This is an important point to make which we will later revisit: aesthetics themselves are not intrinsically left- or right-wing. There is no latent fascism within classical or neo-classical art in as much as popular art is not intrinsically emancipatory. On the other hand, we must be aware that any art, however divorced from politics of power, can be ultimately appropriated.<sup>5</sup> A painting by Jackson Pollock seems far removed from Cold War politics and yet Abstract Impressionism came to be the C.I.A.'s poster child as a symbol of democratic and creative freedom.

After WWII, propaganda became negatively associated with Nazism. It wasn't until 1968 that the art world witnessed a great revival in overtly ideological art with art posters and artworks - often anonymous - taken into the streets as forms of left-wing propaganda. Today it continues to grow dramatically in a post-9/11 world. Left-wing forms of art remain familiar in protest art, becoming ingrained with movements like the Occupy Movement or the Arab Spring. Alongside the many embedded art practices of today, propaganda art has expanded to include new media including computer and video games.

While propaganda art has a long tradition, it plays an increasingly important role in fostering political participation for artists. The history of propaganda art in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century showed us that it is not enough to stand alongside a particular ideology, given that ideologies were exploited as political vehicles. When we understand contemporary propaganda art to be performance + power, we can arrive at an art practice that allows for the rehearsal and enactment of political power; an art practice that practices political agency rather than ideology. The former is needed for a democratic society, where all individuals are political agents; the latter as a dogmatic reality of political beliefs excludes all other viewpoints.

## **NOW IS THE TIME**

**This section explores why now, more than ever, we should engage outside the art sphere with political sites of action, taking up new media channels that have recently opened, and contributing our own creative talents to foster political momentum.**

### **Creating Popular Propaganda Art**

*"Any claim that we represent a progressive social force while our activities are directly subsidized by the engines of inequality can only contribute to the justification of that inequality – the (not so) new legitimation function of art museums. The only "alternative" today is to recognize our participation in that economy and confront it in a direct and immediate way in all of our institutions, including museums, and galleries, and publications."*  
*Andrea Fraser [found in Staal]*

Overwhelmingly, contemporary developments in propaganda are discussed in relation to the rise of far-right and fascist movements (see BAK, see e-flux). Recent works have

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<sup>5</sup> Artist Rabih Mroue even went as far as to suggest that the fate of every artwork is to be appropriated by the authorities in power (Mroue, BAK, p.17)

deconstructed contemporary right-wing propaganda and its visual methods, including Staal's *Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective*; David Tschitschkan's destroyed work in Kiev, Adam Curtis' *Hypernormalization*, Angela Nagle's *Kill All Normies*, or Metahaven's *Possessed*. Few artists, however, actively turn their politics into propaganda, be it in support of emancipatory democracy, alternative economics or institutional building that can circulate outside of the art world. Some noteworthy examples include Staal's ongoing New World Summits that provides an "alternative parliament" for people and groups normally excluded from the democratic process. His work acts as an enactment through imaginative alternatives of what a democracy can be. Staal understands these forums as sites of the performance (the exercise and the aesthetics of) of power that allow marginalized groups to enact, rehearse and discuss an emancipatory politics.

Staal has also given us a very good definition for propaganda -and propaganda art - as performance + power (Staal, 2017). Performance can here be understood to have a double meaning: performance as understood within the arts as the staging/aesthetic representation of power, and performance as the exercise of power. He goes on to define three forms of popular propaganda art: Assemblism, Embedded Practice and Organizational Art. These artistic practices work to create "alternative realities constructed through the oppositional propaganda of popular mass movements and stateless peoples" (Staal, 2017, p220). Staal calls artists to engage in what I would call "useful worldmaking" as an art practice. Media artist Mark-David Hosale speaks of artistic practices that embody the enactment of future- or worldmaking as a kind of techne: worldmaking as techne (Hosale, Murrani, de Campo, 2018). We can imagine how the artistic techne can invest the subjects of our art with political agency through its unfolding process. In other words, we need not to arrive to a final object that becomes a political tool. To take up Staal's example, the New World Summit becomes a rehearsal space for disenfranchised groups to enact political agency while fostering group solidarity, discussion and public awareness. The artistic process itself can be a performance or dress-rehearsal for investing a self with power. This is how we can understand propaganda art to be a performance of power as well as a form of useful worldmaking.

### **The Power of the Image Today**

*It's not that we mistake photographs for reality; we prefer them to reality* – David Levi Strauss

For artists concerned with lens-based practices, we must turn our attention to the power of the images we make, and how images function in society. After all, any lens-based practice is first and foremost an image-making practice. Despite the historically recent invention of the photography camera and the film camera, their role in society has dramatically shifted in recent decades. While originally the photographic image was understood to capture an objective reality, whose surface was a faithful image of the world, the naiveté of this logic was challenged in the 1960s. Photography and film were ultimately deconstructed as mere representations of the world; a framed distortion of the world at best, and an outright manipulation by the image-maker at worst.

Art critic David Levi Strauss speaks about photography as providing the *semblance* of evidence rather than evidence itself (Strauss; *Between the Eyes*). His essay writings

document how photography is used to establish an ideology not by providing real images of a political claim, but speaking to an ideology through *staging* or insinuation. Similarly, Alain Badiou speaks of the need for the *semblance* of the passion for the real, where one's passion for the real<sup>6</sup> must be *staged* in a fiction or public theatre for it to be accepted as evidence of the real (Badiou, 2007). This is immediately tangible in how contemporary politics are often framed as an 'event' -not unlike an artistic happening – that exists in order to be photographed; in order to provide evidence of our passion.

The primacy of the image in our ontological understanding of reality and politics begins to emerge. Vilem Flusser goes as far as to claim that images have established themselves as the causes of events, rather than their illustration or documentation (Flusser; Lectures). For him, the turning point is the Romanian revolution which was in turn described by Jean Baudrillard as “the moment that the studio became the focal point of the revolution [...] everybody ran to the studio to appear on the screen at any price or into the street to be caught by cameras sometimes filming each other. The whole street became the extension of the studio, that is, an extension of the non-place of the event or of the virtual place of the event. The street itself became a virtual space” (Baudrillard 1993, 64). Where images were once illustrations to orient the individual in the world, the viewer now uses their world experience to orient themselves in the image; the image itself becomes the source of reality. Flusser argues that this brings about a peculiar situation where logical discourse or political consciousness (as a product of linear or written consciousness) are no longer helpful for our orientation, suggesting a post-history.

Another understanding of the contemporary image can be found in Boris Groys' comparison of the digital image to the Byzantine icon. The digital image is provided by data, which is invisible to us, and to which we entrust faith that it offers us a true representation of its content. A religious-like leap of faith is suggested in our relationship to the contemporary image heightening the mysticism and magic surrounding images. In this case, the image becomes the concrete reality and the world becomes its pretext. This would have once been called idolatry; perhaps we live in the age of endlessly permutating idols.

Images claim to reveal the world but in the act of limiting what they illustrate, they also hide it. This is exactly how propaganda operates: “propaganda art consists of what it makes visible and invisible at the same time: while it shows one thing, it conceals another” (Staal, 2017, p.251). Flusser identifies this as the inner dialectic of the image. When an image's ontology becomes the source of reality while also being a fabrication, what does that suggest for our understanding of the world? Giorgio Agamben extends this dialectic to the television: “...truth and falsity became indistinguishable from each other and the spectacle legitimize[s] itself solely through the spectacle. (Agamben, 200, p.83)

The significance of the image is a bit more ambiguous, however, than Flusser's thesis leads us to believe. We speak on one hand of its low-meaning and devalued position (Groys, *Going Public*) in an age of its endless reproduction through our screens (Steyerl, *Poor Image*; Benjamin, *Mechanical Reproduction*). On the other hand, the image's cultural primacy as

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<sup>6</sup> Alain Badiou speaks of the passion for the real as the zealous pursuit of “what is immediately practicable, here and now.” (Badiou, 2007, p.58`0

the source of authority (and distraction) is the driving force behind its ubiquity. I raise this point, only because it remains an open question whether as image-makers we devalue their quality through their relentless reproduction, or we elevate their meaning by multiplying them. Perhaps a historical example can be found in the fasces symbol in Italy under Mussolini, where the symbol became a material of reality appearing everywhere: on the screen, on the matchbox, on the breast of every shirt. In the context of these theoretical interpretations, images become their own source of political power. As image-makers, we are capable of producing political agency through our very medium. The increasing role of the image in defining our reality places even greater responsibility of image-makers, who are all quickly becoming worldmakers.

### **Now is the Time: The De-Monopolization of Manufacturing Consent**

The monopolization of mass media that has underpinned historical models of propaganda no longer holds true. While it would be a gross distortion to say that major news networks do not dominate media (need citation) the unprecedented opening up of media channels through online sources opens up unforeseen possibilities for the utopic dream of 'giving a voice to the people'. Social media's success in organizing the Arab Spring, the Occupy Movement, The Women's March, Black Lives Matter protests and many other public protests was originally taken to herald the advent of tech utopian dreams. It's subsequent role in fake news and Cambridge Analytica scandal has led Steyerl to diagnose our society as one ruled by technofascists on twitter and democracy reduced to mobs on mobile phones (Steyerl, 2017). While this is a very dramatic vision, she is right in observing that the promised freedom of the internet age did not manifest itself as the 90s internet community had envisioned. The internet has become the ultimate propaganda battleground. Algorithms filter our digital content fine-tuned to our individual tastes creating new realities. The internet has become a worldmaking machine able to provide a multi-verse deployed individually, paradoxically alienating us within our algorithm-selected reality.

Nevertheless, these are worlds that are fed by user content. Groys rightly pointed out that we are no longer in the age of the spectacle but rather, every individual has become a self-produced artist, constantly uploading and broadcasting through our media channels (Groys, e-flux). These channels can be compromised and threatened. We are experiencing a surge in the right-wing politics that owes much of its popularity to online forums, subversive meme-culture, and YouTube rants (Nagle, 2017). As a battleground, the internet is a terrain to conquer. Much of the defeat the Left has suffered online was tragically summed up by ContraPoint's Natalie Wynn Parrott: "In history, there are ages of reason and there are ages of spectacle, and it's important to know which you're in. Our America, our Internet, is not ancient Athens. It's Rome, and your problem is you think you're in the forum when really you're in the circus." Here, the spectacle is our preference for the image. The discursive rhetoric that has always been at the core of Left-wing politics is no longer seductive. Parrott herself does an excellent job of cloaking her rational and leftist discourse in elaborately self-produced videos that feature her in characters, costumes, post-internet art lighting and glam make-up. Her aim of course is to come for the show and stay for the politics.

Our newfound ability to broadcast ourselves is the artist's recourse to broadcasting a worldview. The propaganda of the internet does not have to be one of fake news. Imagine an army of artists spreading art propaganda online, or buying ad space that disseminates

their vision. Artist Constant Dullaart's online performance, *The Possibility of an Army*, created a digital army of thousands of fake Facebook accounts based on the real names of Hessian soldiers who fought in the American Revolution. While this online intervention was meant to highlight Facebook's commodification of identity and the vulnerability of social media, we can imagine this army-for-hire being put into action in the service of political agency, public service broadcasts, or any other worthy message filtered out of mainstream media. What is so salient about online channels is that represent a new site of struggle, one that requires us to reposition ourselves as we move toward sites of contested ground.

### **Sites of Struggle: Moving out of the Museum**

*We do not have to enter the Louvre or the castles, we have to enter people's houses, people's lives, this is where useful art is. We should not care for how many people are going to museums... We need to focus on the quality of the exchange between art and its audience.*  
– Tania Bruguera, *Introduction on Useful Art*

Precarity has been identified by Judith Butler and Guy Standing as the new site of political struggle; it is the defining condition that can bring about a 'class' solidarity organized to overcome it and is composed of Standing's so-called 'precariat'. The proletariat class of the last century is no longer revolutionary. Today, it is surprisingly conservative. Our goal should be to identify this (among others) as a possible site of political action. Its locations are online but also very physical. Both Butler and Staal discuss the significance of Assembly or Assemblism as the joining of bodies in public moving toward political cohesion (see Butler). Staal elaborates on Assembly by looking at public mass movements, including the Occupy Movement itself which brought the precariat, or the 99% together for the first time in contemporary history. The sites of struggle composed of assembled bodies suggest for the artist a new site of practice/performance where their energy can be focused. That in itself requires a re-evaluation of artwork as an autonomous art object.

We should not restrict ourselves to thinking of mass assemblies and demonstrations as the only site of action. As Judith Butler notes, "we have to consider as well that some forms of political assembly do not take place on the street or in the square, precisely because streets and squares do not exist or do not form the symbolic center of that political action." (Butler, *Performativity*, p.126) and may be found in temporary shelters for refugees, shantytowns of metropolises, or countryside camps of a *Zone a Defendre*.

### **Art as a Site of Creativity**

As artists we have much to contribute to sites of social and political struggle. We are trained in visualities, the subtleties of communication, a wide range of media, and of course resourcefulness. Art is itself an effective tool for intervening in media. We only have to look at recent advertising, window displays and experiential marketing to understand how much the marketing and advertising world has borrowed from art to deploy its effectiveness for itself. As artists we are capable of producing propaganda art for all channels and mediums be they print, digital, sculptural, performative, cinematic, etc.

We should also consider how the creative force of artists can be a significant source of new tactics in politics. The political arena is known to quickly blunt old tactics and favour the evolution of new and surprising forms. Social activist Saul Alinsky, famous for his spectacular

and disruptive tactics at community organization during the Civil Rights Movement, insisted on creative and constantly changing tactics to be used for particular scenarios (Alinsky, 1971). Every new problem or obstacle required a new treatment. This is not unlike art itself, that requires the artist to give life to well-worn topics with new form and expression. It is very much like the artistic process that constantly seeks new and unique methods and tools to advance an aesthetics.

When we consider the current state of Leftist movements, the urgency with which artists should engage in creative propaganda becomes all the more apparent. Propaganda art has been first and foremost dominated by the propaganda for The War on Terror. Its artistic forms are film and videogames, which have perpetuated a neo-orientalist world view. In my own work, *Aim Down Sights*, I explored how videogames, as a highly immersive form of media, expands the role of propaganda art by allowing the recreation and role-playing of terrorism and counter-terrorism through gaming, creating an embodied experience of the War on Terror's 'Us vs. Them' propagandist vision. I further explored the abstraction of the Middle East through drone footage as an example of neo-orientalism in my work *While gazing through a monitor*. Brian Michael Goss outlines how the dominant forms of propaganda we experience reinforce "the contemporary doctrine of neoliberalism, defined as a political project of mass privatization of public infrastructures (from schools to hospitals and transport) while simultaneously employing state subsidies to provide tax cuts for corporation and companies and securing elite interests through a massive security apparatus, one that excessively targets disenfranchised classes, peoples of color, and the poor" (Staal referencing: Goss, 2013, p.20)

Meanwhile, popular propaganda on the right often takes the forms of online memes, which circulate through social media and online forums, often deploying subversive, transgressive and ironic humour to attack the Left, particularly the culture of political correctness (Nagle, 2017). In response, the Left has made an unsuccessful attempt at their own mem-making, giving rise to the expression "the Left can't meme". I would argue this is because the Left has always deployed discursive tactics in advancing their politics. Discursivity, however, is poorly suited to the few-word structure and visual impact of a meme. When we look at most attempts at critical theory through a visuality, they often fall back on the discursive word. In contrast, the ideology of the alt-right that dominates Right-wing memes is based on how ideology itself functions: it is not entirely logical or coherent; and it relies heavily on emotion, image and symbols. This is why the experience of fascism has often been compared to a religious experience. I am not suggesting that artists should dedicate themselves to making memes. I do suggest however, that as artists committed to visual languages, we should take on the challenge of elaborating a critical theory or politics through image alone, even if this means leaving the familiar discursive discourse for debating.

### **The Instrumentalization of Art**

*...And this is precisely the pitfall of so many politically motivated art initiatives today: they remain squarely within the paradigm of spectatorship. – Stephen Wright, Toward A Lexicon of Usership, p.4*

Speaking of art's instrumentalization is always problematic, because it suggests jeopardizing the hard-won autonomy of the visual arts from political manipulation. However, I do not believe that the artists that engage in useful or instrumentalized art in any way jeopardize art's autonomy. It is simply unimaginable that the majority of artists will not continue to work within the art's neoliberal model of creating economic value through objecthood. If we return to my earlier thesis that the art world is dominated by a capitalist class that puts art to work in their interests, then there is little chance of art institutions losing the autonomy that gives this capitalist class the pretense of a progressive class. There is a tremendous advantage for artists using art's autonomy: the general belief that the arts enjoy a privileged independence has allowed artists to engage in politics, rhetoric and actions that provoke society - sometimes even illegally - in a way that simply cannot be done through other disciplines. While I have been critical of the complicity of art and its institutions with neoliberalism, it remains one of the final bastions of radical thought. We cannot forget that "despite the way art is entwined with the social structures of capitalism, contemporary art circuits are some of the only remaining spaces in which leftist thought still circulates as public discourse." (Medina, p.123). Postinstitutionalism, New Institutions, third-wave institutional critique providing the basis

## **LANGUAGES OF POWER: DEVELOPING AN AESTHETICS**

### **Aesthetic languages of power**

I want to consider how the aesthetic languages we use in our work can contribute to worldmaking. A well-known theory in verbal language, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, suggests our worldview is shaped by the structure of our verbal language. Variants of the hypothesis put forward a weak version that language influences our thought, with a strong version arguing that language determines our worldview. Can an aesthetic language have the same effect? In a landscape of so many visualities, we can emphatically say that we cannot speak of a deterministic aesthetic language. But perhaps we can construct one that can influence or prod. As a viewer, we can imagine images that stay with us, that work their way into our subconscious and forever influence the way we perceive a subject. Can we imagine an empowering aesthetic language? One which can plant the seeds of political action?

In the next section, we will explore how a language of aesthetics can be made useable through its persuasion, and how the artistic process itself can empower subjects with political agency. The final products we make as lens-based artists can themselves serve as open invitations to worldmaking, and offer an alternative future through a visual discourse.

### **NOTE: THE FOLLOWING ARE NOTES ON THE REMAINING TEXT**

Currently a repetition of historical mix of counterculture art as in extreme right futurists and extreme left dadists (Cramer, lecture DNL Infiltration).

### **-Revolutionary left imagery and its relevance**

Staal takes Butler's reference of the visual collage of tents, signs and banners as an aesthetic vocabulary (Staal, p.310). The aesthetics of popular propaganda are not created by artists ex nihilo: "It is not just artists who shape the popular mass movement, it is the popular mass movement and its own particular aesthetics that forms the artist just as much. This is a core feature of Assemblism: the artistic imaginary is part of the larger aesthetic and social

“collage” or “assemblage” through which the popular is performed and the composition of a people takes shape.” (Staal, p 184). Slogans and chants (like those of BLM) also form part of verbal aesthetics.

Not an Alternative takes up cordon tape and cement blocks and appropriates them as visual signifiers (Staal, p.323).

### **-Fascist imagery and its (possible) co-optation by left.**

Not unlike the right’s co-optation of transgressivity. Note Beyonce and her performance in stark contrast with Ai Weiwei’s staging.

-Zizek’s enjoyment of Rammstein

“Hitler’s strong preference for monumental art. Hitler and his chief ideologue, Alfred Rosenberg, preferred a neo-classical style which differed from ancient Hellenism in terms of heroic attitude. By the end of 1934, expressionistic art was ostracised altogether as degenerate. Official art now preferred human bodies shown in mythological settings” (Schmid pg 129). Nazi monumental art favoured the heroic Nordic ideal in contrast to southern European art which had a ‘softness’ (Schmid p130).

The ubiquitous littorio in Fascist Italy could be found even on matchboxes and reminded Italians that the Fascist party was more than a political party but a pervasive aspect of society (Schmid p.131).

Fascism showed that the use of art could be used to provide a visible surface to complex or theoretical ideologies difficult to unravel or swallow.

Schmid argues that “preference in fascist art for allegories. The fascist state was something which was not palpable – it had to be represented. Fascist institutions relied on their representation, because they had no functionalist legitimation.” (p137). Artists, similiarly exist powerless with the support of institutions whose funding depends on the constant shuffles of new governments; the predictable vacillation between conservative and liberal parties.

Groys analysis of the image as icon is not far from the function of fascist art: it places the world of image and symbol within the same realm as the everyday reality, where one prefigures the other and are not separate.

Fascist art itself does not tend toward a particular style (neo-classical, for instance) but can “adopt any artistic style which seemed efficient and powerful enough to fulfil the purpose of political propaganda and corporate design” (Schmid p. 139). There is not artwork which has fascistic tendencies, only artwork associated with fascism through historical implication.

Even so, such associations can be brought to an end. It would be unconvincing to argue that the sport-body-shaping of the Aryan man (a fairly novel social ideal) in Nazi Germany is meaningfully echoed in the body-building-obsessed culture of today. And much like that male ideal is borrowed from ancient Greece, most fascist aesthetics are also borrowed and drew their strength precisely from this pre-existing consensus (Mosse, p. 249). that Much of fascist propaganda, like advertising, works by , stirring up strong emotions, or agitating the spectator into a frenzy, through any means. Once agitated, the viewer is hit with the ideological message: [description of ad followed by message] / [description of propaganda followed by message]

Through this tactic, both fascist propaganda and advertising admit they cannot advance a discursive argument. There is an irrational component to their message which can must be processed by the viewer through emotional image. Even fascist speeches, seemingly a discursive form of argumentation, took the form of symbolic action (Mosse, p. 247).

**-other languages of power???**

### **LENS-BASED CASE STUDIES**

#### **-Example 1: Yael Bartana**

In Yael Bartana's film "...and Europe will be Stunned", Bartana uses utopian artistic language borrowed from Nazi and Zionist films to postulate a return of Polish Jews to Poland, going as far as exploring its practical possibility outside the film. Utopian artistic language

Location matters – in Russia people rejected Stalinistic visuals

Bartana as an Israeli draws from Zionist visuals as well (as an Israeli)

Utopic language in dystopic world (where everything is privatized)

Doesn't use actors – uses real people who use their own words. Some fictional characters (i.e. widow) but even they refer to historical details

Purposely ambiguous – never says what is wrong or right but provokes personal emotion.

She uses clichés with a different purpose

Second work "What if women ruled the world" posits an alternate timeline and stages a roundtable discussion of women leaders using real women leaders.

Note: Borges also works within this pseudo-historical language

#### **-Example 2:**

Probably look at Isuma in this section.

Isuma creates original Inuit content: films, videos, tv etc.

Work is structured as an archive of original Inuit life, as an inter-generational transmission of culture and as entertainment

Interesting to note how their films clearly unfold as instructions on cultural assets including igloo building, hunting, skinning animals, arctic survival etc.

The actors themselves are subjected to instruction

In the case of the Haida Gwaii film in progress, the actors themselves must learn Haida given that only 20 native speakers exist. The process of the film preserves Haida culture through its embodiment in native actors.

Other artists maybe: Jordi Colomer (populist, revolutionary language) or Andrea Bowers, Trans Liberation:

Political Beauty – Bridge video across Europe to Africa

#### **-Example 3: my own work, alas!**

### **CONCLUSION**

-what is at stake for political art as politically useable art

-new demands for solidarity across political and economic spectrum including development of the 'precarait' (Zizek, Davis, Chukrov)

-the jeopardizing of art's autonomy in exchange for power

-why propaganda and instrumentalization doesn't jeopardize art's autonomy, and how the art object will continue to exist in a neoliberal model (so breathe easy)

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