

Art Activism and Oppositionality

Essays From Afterimage

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In *Art Activism and Oppositionality*, Grant H. Kester presents an anthology of texts from the American magazine *AfterImage* roughly spanning the years between 1980 and 1994. *AfterImage* is a product of the Visual Studies Workshop Rochester, set up in the late '60s by Nathan and Joan Lyons as an "open-ended" space, a challenge to existing centres of practice and education. Since its inaugural issue in the early '70s, *AfterImage* has aimed to pose the same challenge to institutional hierarchies, widening the remit of art criticism and theoretical debate and engaging directly with context, community and issues of accountability. Not much criticism or theory can (or is even willing to) account for its stance or reveal its ideological bias, preferring to cloak itself with a detached, moralistic rhetoric. The "bias" that emerges in the pages of *AfterImage* is one that works against the grain of convention, focusing on structures and discourses of power and control embedded in the realms of culture and politics.

A key aim of the magazine was to present "informed criticism" on the media of photography and independent film and video. Providing coverage of these media in the '70s was one means of supporting the work of artists excluded from the apparatus of the mainstream art world. As these media expanded, so too did the cultural diversity of artists and groups who employed them and the interests of the magazine's diverse pool of writers converged around these new forms of practice.

The essays are sectioned under two headings, *The Politics of Patronage and Activism and Oppositionality*. This thematic division serves no more than a formal purpose since there are very distinct crossovers and references between the sections. Indeed, Kester concedes in his introduc-

tion, that having set up this division it was necessary to challenge it. It would have been more helpful if the essays were tagged with dates and issue numbers in which they first appeared.

In the opening essay *Enlightened Self-Interest: The Avant-Garde in the 80s*, Richard Bolton embarks on a critique of conservatism and the effect the economic and political environment of the time had on art practice. "Inevitably, those with power in a society will strive to create a culture that reflects their interests and aims." Power often goes hand in hand with wealth and Bolton alarmingly demonstrates how art and the fluctuations of the market confirm this equation. He makes apparent the stark contrasts in sales value between works produced by artists at different stages of their career. What emerges is a disturbing system of control where collectors can effect and change the status of the work (the value invested by audience and critic) by deliberately manipulating the market; and artists posing against dominant culture as the new Post-Modernist Avant-Garde come under attack. Bolton reveals how some artists, motivated by self-interest, collude with advertising corporations in a process which impedes the development of alternative readings and new audiences for art. Art is detached from daily life and its transgressive power is harnessed in the play between commodity culture and the leisure and lifestyle industries. He warns that "artists interested in social critique and change must consider and respond to the entire system that produces them and their work."

A number of texts in this anthology tackle the discourse of multiculturalism and the conflicting effects it had on cultural/political theory and practice. Arising in the early '80s in a climate of reactionary conservatism and fragmentation of the Left, "multiculturalism" became an adopted buzzword of artists, cultural institutions and arts organisations. Cross-referencing different perspectives and criticisms, the reader can easily deduce how this discourse functioned to camouflage both Left and Right wing reactionary agendas.

In *White Men Can't Programme: The Contradictions of Multiculturalism*, Darrell Moore asks "who benefits from multiculturalism?" and while asserting some of the positive results, concludes that it is all too easy for arts funders and government organisations to obscure their control over minority interests by adopting the liberal ethic of multiculturalism. Coco Fusco, in her review of two conferences, *Celebration of Black Cinema* (Boston '88) and *Sexism, Colonialism, Misrepresentation: A Corrective Film Series* (New York '88), takes a highly critical stance against the avant-garde's fascination and misconception of the Other. From her own perspective, she attacks the hierarchy of Eurocentric thought: psychoanalysis, feminism, post-colonial doctrine and western aesthetics in an attempt to expose the over-simplified terms of multiculturalism. "Western cultural institutions, such as the avant-garde have a history of rejuvenating themselves through the exploitation of disempowered peoples and cultures."

Identity politics has become another marker of '80s cultural practice and political activism. A simplistic bracketing of identities and subjectivities is disputed by Lorraine O'Grady in *Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity*. As an artist, she remains "wary of theory".

"Nature: culture, body: mind, sexuality: intellect, these binaries don't begin to cover what we sense about ourselves".

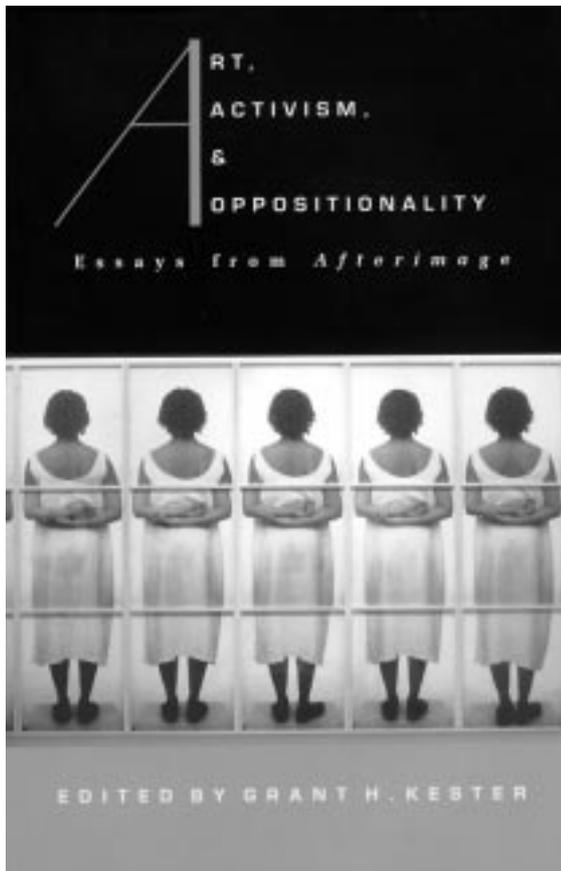
Some artists and media activists joined forces around these issues of identity, collaborating with community groups and educationalists. They produced works which challenged repressive legisla-

tion (e.g. *Proposition 6* in US, *Section 28* in UK) and stereotyping of gays, non-white peoples and the working class. Charles A. Wright's review of the 1993 Whitney Biennial looks at the controversy caused by the inclusion of new "issue-based" work. He is critical of the museum's curatorial strategy and claims that the exhibition "projects a mercenary gloss on issues of difference as its thematic impetus, incorporating 'others' in an effort to idealize an alleged egalitarianism".

The need to celebrate cultural diversity and to bond as minorities was diffused by specific demands from individual groupings to maintain autonomy, self-determination and political cogency. The dangers of overlooking the historic specificities of oppressions are starkly laid out in Ioannis Mookas' review of the video *Gay Rights, Special Rights*. Produced by a christian fundamentalist company principally for use by the Traditional Values Coalition, *Gay Rights, Special Rights* exploits the African-American fundamentalist voice in its attack on the gay and lesbian movement as a "fraudulent trespasser upon the hallowed ground of civil rights struggle." In this case, Mookas illustrates how effectively video operates as a propagandist tool for anyone in a position to access it.

In the mid '80s the proliferation of camcorder technologies multiplied the sites of cultural struggle and gave rise to a new video activism. Brian Goldfarb discusses the censorship of curricular video produced by artists and progressive educationalists dealing with AIDS and safe-sex issues. Patricia Zimmerman explores reproductive rights, focusing both on alternative and mainstream media; commercials, news stories, pro-choice activist video, right-to-life and experimental video. She praises groups like *Paper Tiger TV* and *Deep Dish Satellite* for their use of low-tech technologies in their struggle to de-centralize broadcast media: "The amateur camcorder could be retrieved from the private confines of the bourgeois nuclear family—the gulag where all amateur media technologies have been deposited to stunt their democratic potential." With her assertions concerning the representation of the female body and the imaging of the foetus, she raises important questions, echoed elsewhere in this anthology, about the formal qualities of an activist art. In this case, she criticizes political documentary theory and practice for its redemptive pose against the spectator, characterized as ignorant and passive.

In his introduction, Grant H. Kester elaborates a sound argument for the re-evaluation of the aesthetic in the context of an activist art practice. Moving away from the rigidity of aesthetic liberalism which confines the authenticity of art within the parameters of social disengagement, he reinstates the viewing subject, "not as an anonymously transcendent subject, but as the product of particular social, economic and geographic conditions", with the power to generate new meanings and definitions for art. Ann Cvetkovich's *Video, AIDS, and Activism* highlights the difficulties audiences confront in deciphering codes of aesthetic "quality" and related meaning in works which fuse different modes of cultural practice with political activism. She reviews Video Data Bank's compilation package *Video Against AIDS*, Act Up's *Diva-TV* and a number of other works produced in the late '80s/early '90s, considering the impact on a diverse range of viewers. What transpires is how information is mediated by form. In general, audiences viewed the experimental works as appealing to a more personal, non-activist sensibility. Recognizing the conventional, representational codes of documentary, viewers conflated these works with the "real" politics of



direct action.

These dilemmas of spectatorship and representation are historically sited in Michael Renov's study of *Newsreel* and its involvement in the construction of a political imaginary for the Left. *Newsreel*, born in the '60s, was a production and distribution collective whose mostly "un-authored" output included weekly news shorts, longer political documentary works and informational reels. Any re-conceptualization of standard film and TV practices was sacrificed to serve radical aims. A blurring "romanticism of the Barricades" prevailed across the spectrum of '60s cultural struggle. It fuelled audience solidarity and the revolutionary imagination in the spirit of the times but, in the long run, hindered the progression towards a broader understanding of the varied languages of oppression and how they interweave to form what we often blindly accept as "truth".

Audiences unaccustomed to film/ video works intent on exposing the stylistic conventions of Hollywood and the mainstream media have little chance of fully digesting that which appears, on first viewing, obscure, self-indulgent or superficial. As Patricia Thomson points out in *Video and Electoral Appeal*, artists too, in their choice of subject matter, succumb to the lure of mass media iconography. Hardly surprising, she concedes, given the ever-increasing sophistication of the tools and techniques of new politics. "In the process of critiquing the media campaign ... (video artists) watch politics on television like the rest of us". She laments the demise of the artist to "artist-as-spectator" as opposed to "producer-as-participant". This demise can perhaps be linked to the general erosion of the counterculture by the machinery of the Right throughout this period.

One manifestation of the Right's reactionary powers was the assault on the National Endowment for the Arts. The origins of the NEA are laid out in Kester's *Rhetorical Questions: The Alternative Arts Sector and the Imaginary Public*.

"At its inception, arguments in support of the Endowment, particularly those designed to persuade and cajole skeptical congresspeople, were founded not on a definition of art as a public good in and of itself, but on its potential usefulness within the matrix of state policy and ideology."

Focusing on the creative and political stagnation of the alternative/ artist-run space, he points to the striking similarities between what came to be known as the Professional Managerial Class and the artist/ administrator of this alternative sector: A strategic alignment with the disenfranchised (which saw artists posing as victims of the system) led this new hybrid being to adopt the mantle of the "cultural worker" and the moral rhetoric of the artist as transcendent subject.

"The experience of an artist whose work is rejected by the gallery system is simply not interchangeable with that of the poor or working class, whose relationship with the market economy has far more profound consequences".

At this point, the reader may shudder with recognition. The closed cycle of artist - arts administrator/ organiser - arts funder, clouded with indistinct and ever-changing definitions of 'professionalism' is all too familiar. With this new discourse fully embedded in the fabric of cultural exchange, Kester shows how alternative spaces sited more often in poorly developed areas, flourished with the onslaught of gentrification and posed a very real threat to the survival of communities falsely constructed as their 'public'. The needs of this "imaginary public" are renounced while the identity of the alternative artist remains cushioned by privilege and material wealth.

Echoing these sentiments, David Trend in *Cultural Struggle and Educational Activism* calls for a popularizing of the forms of cultural practice and the need for artists to "engage the institutions that utilize and reproduce state power". This essay and that by Mable Haddock and Chiquita Mullins, examining the Public Broadcasting System in the States are good examples of the 'rallying call' fea-

ture of much *AfterImage* writing. Not merely bemoaning systems of oppression, they advance concrete strategies for change.

Almost twenty years on, the ideas and contentions manifest in this book are still lingering beneath the surface of the latest 'post-isms'. Problems of race, class and sexuality are not resolved because politicians purport to be addressing them, if anything, they fester under this deception and erupt to no ones surprise but those duped by the language of the state reproduced in the media. (Witness the recent report on the murder of Stephen Lawrence and the attacks on the multicultural communities of Brixton and Brick Lane and the gay and lesbian community in Soho.) Neither are issues of context, audience or accountability resolved because artist-run-spaces or the 'alternative sector' have bigger international profiles or bigger budgets to develop programmes. Adrian Piper, interviewed in this anthology bluntly states: "If art isn't allowed to address and transform the conditions of real life, I don't see the point of it".

The discussion *Alternative, Mainstream, Mainstream Alternatives* in Variant 7 (Vol 2) touches on many points covered in this anthology and concern is expressed over the spectre of "historical amnesia" and the danger of repeating outdated arguments. To read *Art, Activism and Oppositionality* as both a historical document and a contemporary analysis may help redress these "crises" in understanding, forging a model for the development of art practice and critical thought that acknowledges the past as it looks forward to new challenges in the future.

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