

# “Political art” in New York City this summer

Clare Hurley  
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Three exhibits in New York City this summer— *Agitprop!* at the Brooklyn Museum, *Of The People* at the Smack Mellon gallery, and *Personal is Political is Personal* at the 440 Gallery—offered a sample of what seems to be a proliferation of politically themed artwork, ranging from concerns about the upcoming presidential elections to broader issues of social conditions in the United States.

Indeed, after decades in which very few galleries showed “political” artwork, it has become the thing to do. In addition to the three shows here under review, *For Freedoms* turned Jack Shainman Gallery into an artist-run super-PAC for a month; CRG Gallery presented *POTUS*, a solo exhibition of Brian Tolle’s ironical sculptural depictions of US presidents going back to George Washington; and a group show, *Art As Politics*, at the Touchstone Gallery in Washington DC till August 25, included the work of more than 90 artists. Some of the more established artists and artist-collaboratives in these shows have worked in a political vein throughout their careers, but many more are relatively new to the scene.

It is welcome that so many visual artists are registering an awareness of today’s unprecedented level of social upheaval and political crisis in their work. It is unfortunate that as of yet much of the artwork is so unsatisfying. Despite the relative strength of some individual pieces, taken as a whole the artwork in these shows was hampered by simplistic political conceptions, inadequate aesthetic qualities, or both. The limitations are not entirely the fault of the individual artists. The pervasiveness of identity politics combined with the generally subjective and individualistic orientation of many artists has produced unhappy results. Furthermore, there is a preponderance of gimmicks, performance pieces and “socially engaged” art practices, which often have little actual substance, and hardly any aesthetic component at all.

## *Agitprop!*

These qualities were particularly apparent in *Agitprop!* at the Brooklyn Museum (December 11, 2015–August 7, 2016), which as an institution has played a longstanding role in promoting the politics of race and gender, through its curation of shows such as Kehinde Wiley: *A New Republic*, among others. Organized by the staff of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, *Agitprop!* was installed in gallery spaces around that icon of feminist art, Judy Chicago’s 1979 *The Dinner Party*.

*Agitprop!* (short for Agitation-Propaganda, the term originally used for Soviet propaganda art), while including some work that sprang from the Russian Revolution, ran the gamut of radical protest movements of the 20th and 21st century, “from women’s suffrage and anti-lynching campaigns to contemporary demands for human rights, environmental advocacy, and protests against war, mass incarceration, and economic inequality.” Selected in three waves, with an initial group of 20 artists choosing a subsequent group, and then that group adding a third, the show came to include almost a hundred artists and collectives, and felt very much like a protest rally with everyone waving different placards. Groups

like Amnesty International, CODEPINK and Occupy Museums have in fact been active in political demonstrations. Not surprisingly, posters, banners, videos and installations were predominant, with the overarching political message that collective, grassroots “communities” of color, gender, ethnicity, nationality, etc., are advocating for social change by making their voices heard and pressuring the political establishment.

The political outlook of these groups was exemplified by a wall-sized display by MTOPP, the Movement to Protect the People. It was self-described as “a group of *women (tenants, homeowners, businesswomen)* led by Alicia Boyd who have organized, educated, investigated and **pushed back successfully** against rezoning of Crown Heights/Flatbush for the past two years.” Colorful graphics described how the “Black Population of Brooklyn has declined by about 60,000 since 2000, displaced by the Agents of Gentrification – shown as cogs in a wheel – who are Real Estate, Politicians (including supposedly pro-affordable housing Mayor Bill de Blasio), the Department of City Planning, Police, Non-profits, and *White Folks* ” (bold, but not bold italics, in the original).

The Brooklyn Museum itself was a target of MTOPP’s protests for hosting a forum for real estate developers last year and for what is seen as its role in the gentrification of the surrounding neighborhood. However, the fact that groups such as MTOPP can be easily co-opted was also shown when museum director Anne Pasternak let them stage an “Anti-gentrification and Displacement Forum” in the museum’s entrance plaza and then added their “community bulletin board” to the *Agitprop!* exhibit.

Influenced no doubt by the feminist slant of its organizers, even the more graphically interesting section of Soviet agitprop in this exhibition was chosen not so much because of its connection to the Russian Revolution but for championing women’s rights.

None of the contemporary pieces held much interest. “Like a Red Prison,” a 2013 video of Russian artist and activist group Pussy Riot jumping around wearing masks and screaming/singing on top of Russian oil tankers; and a performance still of artist Dread Scott (American, born 1965) being blasted with water cannons, from a video, *On the Impossibility of Freedom in a Country Founded on Slavery and Genocide*, (2014), give the idea.

The limitations of the exhibition’s organizers, perhaps due to historical ignorance or political obliviousness, are indicated by their inclusion of the work of photographer Tina Modotti (1896-1942) without further explanation or comment. Some of Modotti’s photographs of Mexican workers and peasants are noteworthy, but more must be said.

Modotti arrived in Mexico in 1922 with her lover, the photographer Edward Weston, and became active in the left-wing bohemian circle of the Mexican muralists, many of them in and around the Mexican Communist Party. From 1924-28, she photographed Diego Rivera at work on his murals at the Secretariat of Public Education in Mexico City. Modotti’s political affiliations ensnared her in the counterrevolutionary activities of the Stalinist gangsters. She was expelled from Mexico in 1930, traveling to Germany and then to Moscow. Her activities in Spain during the civil war, possibly as a Stalinist GPU agent, and her death in 1942 in a taxi on her way back from the poet Pablo Neruda’s home in

Mexico City, remain the subject of some speculation. She has been implicated in the crime of the 20th century, the assassination of Leon Trotsky, one of the greatest blows to the cause of social progress during this period.

### *Of the People*

*Of The People* at the Smack Mellon gallery (June 18-July 31, 2016), curated by Erin Donnelly, focused on the “of-the-moment political opinions shaping the 2016 presidential race in the United States.” Including video, drawing, photography, painting and sculpture, as well as socially engaged projects and site-specific installation, the artwork again displayed relatively simple content in conceptually elaborate forms.

So there was site-specific wallpaper, *Dark Money Damask* (2016) by Lauren Frances Adams, which inserted phrases about the influence of big money into the pattern of traditional colonial wallpaper. A large corrugated sheet of steel rigged with speakers and audio, *Line of Breath* (2016), by Isabella Cruz-Chong, referenced the wall to be built between the US and Mexico.

Other pieces took up issues of privacy and state surveillance.

It was noteworthy that a few of the pieces attempted to give voice to the experiences and political opinions of ordinary people. Sheryl Oring’s piece *I Wish to Say* dominated the gallery space with a double-sided, 30-foot-long array of index cards strung on wires. The cards had been typed out by a team of interns on manual typewriters in Bryant Square Park behind the main public library in Manhattan. Oring, dressed in a red-white-and-blue “campaign” outfit, asked people what they would like to say to either the current president or the 2016 presidential candidates. Over the course of her 12-year project, Oring has mailed thousands of such letters to political figures.

But it is a well-known fact that the answer one gets depends on the way one asks the question, and most of the cards, replete with typos and jams from the old typewriters, had the quality of “Dear Santa” letters. Some wished that Obama could be president forever, or that Michelle could take over for him. Others thanked Hillary for running, and a few were addressed positively to Trump. Most hoped the next president would do his/her best to run the country.

A set of four photographs from a larger series by Brittany M. Powell were somewhat more successful in giving a glimpse into the lives of people in debt. These large format photographs, taken of people in their somewhat cluttered but otherwise unexceptional homes, were accompanied by handwritten notes explaining how much each owed (as high as \$150K), mostly in student loans.

There is a trend in contemporary art to substitute literalism for realism. To that end, a back room of the gallery was transformed into a faux *Campaign Office* by Jeremy D. Olson, with desk, chairs and a podium where visitors could be filmed giving their own stump speeches made up of clips generated automatically from those of the major 2016 candidates. Gallery visitors could also make their own campaign buttons and register to vote!

While voicing criticism of aspects of the current state of the political system in the US—that it is dominated by moneyed interests and dishonest candidates, and is unrepresentative “of the people”—the Smack Mellon exhibit in the end came across as a political booster for the supposedly democratic two-party system it purports to criticize. Also, noticeably absent from the show, as from the election campaigns of the major candidates themselves, was any discussion of the ongoing and planned imperialist wars conducted by US imperialism.

### *Personal is Political is Personal*

Finally, a more modest show, *Personal is Political is Personal*, at 440 Gallery in Brooklyn (July 7-August 6, 2016) exhibited much of the same weaknesses as the Brooklyn Museum and Smack Mellon shows. It did, however, include some artwork with a glimmer of higher aesthetic caliber and potential. Curated by Sue Coe (b. 1951), a British printmaker and illustrator long known for the political outlook of her work, particularly its advocacy of animal rights, the exhibit takes its title from the 1970s feminist rallying phrase, with an added emphasis on the personal.

In Coe’s statement, “no issue is off limits: billionaires, gun control, abortion, LGBT rights, our food supply, clean water, animal rights, education—whatever moves you personally and politically—this is an exhibition to make your statement.” This highly subjective approach to politics is the stock-in-trade of radical movements going way back, and the core of the current fixation on racial, gender, and sexual identity. And of course, there *is* an issue off limits—class.

Like the Brooklyn Museum *Agitprop!* show, it feels like the exhibit included work protesting everything from AIDS to Zika. Even work that had some appeal on an artistic basis had to include one of the preferred issues. This, in Ibn Kendall’s arresting drawing of a black woman with her arms crossed, the averted and tentative expression of the sitter is overshadowed by the slogan “You Got Good Hair” (2013), thus becoming a commentary on “race, inclusion, beauty and judgement.”

Serious issues were raised: Ann Stoddard’s four-channel video installation, *home.land.security.* (2004), records the gallery visitor as he/she enters with interrogatory questions. Bethany Taylor’s medieval-style embroidered tapestries, with slogans in English and Latin (2105), suggest today’s military conflicts. But the artistic forms employed do little to advance our insight.

Here too the strongest work tended to be photographs, particularly Divine Williams’ *Youth of Ferguson* (2014) in which two kids holding handmade signs saying “Hands Up” and “Justice for Mike Brown” transfix the viewer with the intensity of their young eyes and for-the-camera smiles. Or a small photograph, *Subway Sleeper* (2013), by Max Alper, that shows what is an everyday sight—a homeless man sprawled on a bench—in a surprisingly intimate and tender light.

On the other end of the scale, an impressively large (38” x 76”) woodblock print, *Pieta III* (2015), by Nomi Silverman of a larger-than-life dead body was less explicitly related to the themes and yet stole the show for its technical accomplishment and subtlety.

It is to be hoped that more such work comes to the fore in subsequent “political” art exhibits.



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