

MACBA
Study Center

Exhibition
from July 10
to September 27
2009

On the margins of art. Creation and political engagement

The relation between artistic creativity and political engagement goes far back in time, but it reached an unusual degree of intensity in the last century. This intensity was spurred on, amongst other things, by the rapid and far-reaching social transformations in western society, including industrialisation, the development of communication media and the growth of a consumer society. Driven by these and other phenomena, the cultural world began to be troubled by numerous political concerns—both conservative and progressive—that ultimately found expression in the visual arts. Thanks to the immediacy and powerful impact of images, art provided an ideal vehicle for transmitting particular attitudes and ideological positions.



MUSEU
D'ART CONTEMPORANI
DE BARCELONA

On the margins of art.

Creation and political engagement



Mirtha Dermisache.

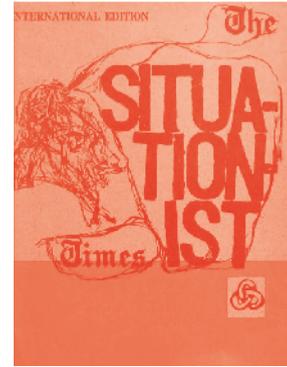
The relation between artistic creativity and political engagement goes far back in time, but it reached an unusual degree of intensity in the last century. This intensity was spurred on, amongst other things, by rapid and far-reaching social transformations in western society, including industrialisation, the development of communication media and the growth of a consumer society. Driven by these and other phenomena, the cultural world began to be troubled by numerous political concerns—both conservative and progressive—that ultimately found expression in the visual arts. Thanks to the immediacy and powerful impact of images, art provided an ideal vehicle for transmitting particular attitudes and ideological positions.

The links that join art and politics are as inextricable as those that connect the dissemination of political ideas and the printing press. The first known documents printed in the west—predating even the Gutenberg Bible—were political broadsheets. Through a selection of printed materials that weave together three narratives—i.e., the history of art, politics, and print—On the Margins of Art. Creation and Political Engagement illustrates the different ways in which art and politics came together during the second half of the 20th century through a selection of magazines, artist's books, posters, flyers and other printed matter.

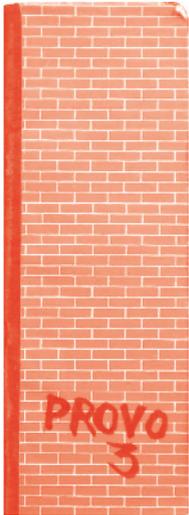
Most of the pieces selected for the show date to the period from 1960 to 1980, when artistic forms underwent particularly profound transformations. In an effort to become free from the tyranny exercised until then by the requirement that the art object should be unique and original, many artists attempted to find unlimited and inexpensive ways of distributing their works. To this end, the printing press was a perfect resource. It should not be forgotten, however, that many precedents exist for the inter-

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The Situationist
Times, no. 1, 1962

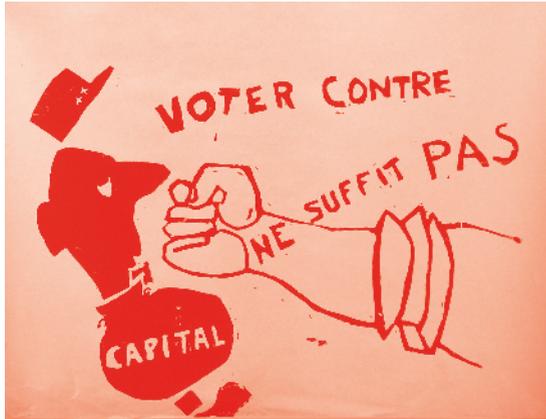


Martijn Ananar,
Janhuib Blans
y Auke Boersma.
Provo, no. 3, 1965

relation between art, political engagement and print dissemination; notably well known is, for example, that before the war period, for example, members of the Italian Futurist movement unfurled the banner of fascist ideals whilst, at the opposite end of the political spectrum, Dadaists and surrealists were united in their pacifist stance and protests against the injustices committed by the ruling classes. Establishing these historic precedents, On the Margins of Art begins chronologically with two surrealist tracts—single sheets of text that broadcast declarations of principles—dating to 1933 and 1936 respectively. The show then goes on to focus on the 1960s, a decade which saw the publication of numerous periodicals on artistic, political and cultural developments. These include Konkret, a radical left-wing publication which first began to circulate in German university circles in 1961. The editor-in-chief of Konkret, subtitled “independent cultural and political magazine”, was Ulrike Mainhoff, who left in 1969 to join the Rote Armee Fraktion. A few years later,

Provo, a Dutch movement that embodied an amalgam of Dada, anarchism and irony, launched a magazine of the same name (1965–1967), whose first issue, subtitled “Revo”, was confiscated by the police. For their part, the magazines Internationale Situationniste (1958–1969) and The Situationist Times (1962–1967) stand out amongst the many publications circulated by the Situationists to report on their intense theoretical and political activity, which was in stark contrast with the uses being made of the visual arts. Fine art's appropriation of popular culture aims to simplify art's messages and to reach broader audiences. Such appropriation is a constant strategy throughout the history of engaged art, as is clearly illustrated in the pamphlet Ten Days that Shook the University, jointly published by the Situationists and Strasbourg University students in 1967, during the preliminary demonstrations that led to the events of May'68.

Many fine artists were also members of the countless groups that rose up in protest in spring 1968. In or-



Voter contre [le] capital ne suffit pas, 1968

der to spread the demonstrators' messages, some artists designed the posters printed and distributed by the ateliers directed by Gérard Fromanger at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Most posters went unsigned, however, for the individual artists eschewed all protagonism so as to place all the emphasis on the content's collective message. These posters are characterised by their powerful visual impact and simple slogans, at times subtle and indirect—"Il faut du noir pour sortir du rouge", —on one by Degottex— at other times clear and forceful: "Voter contre [le] capital ne suffit pas."

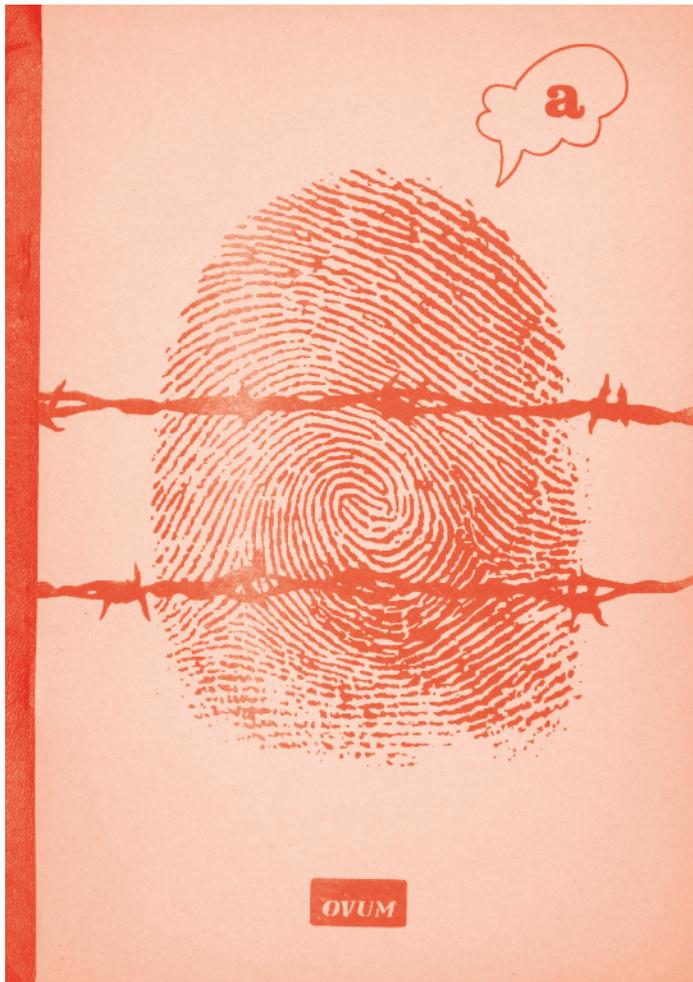
Similar ideas to those defended in May'68 were circulated again the following year at the festival held in Charlottenburg, Denmark, to commemorate the second centenary of the city's Royal Academy of Art. For the occasion, the historian Troels Andersen, who supported

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non-violent anarchist ideas, created the 200 Festival Bulletin, which was published daily from 8 to 18 June 1969 and featured contributions by many artists, including Herman de Vries, Marc Adrian and Tom Kugiers. In these bulletins, techniques such as collage, image manipulation and combinations of typed and handwritten texts were fully exploited in order to enforce the dual reading—semantic and visual—to which the printed page lends itself. Undoubtedly, the powerful influence of visual and concrete poetry can be found in this radically creative use of language, which is amongst the most important resources employed by visual artists seeking to transmit messages aimed at "awakening consciences". Although visual poetry has nearly always remained the domain of the few, —its habitually low print run restricts it to limited circulation—, its capacity to exploit and transcend linguistic conventions, combined with its innovative com-



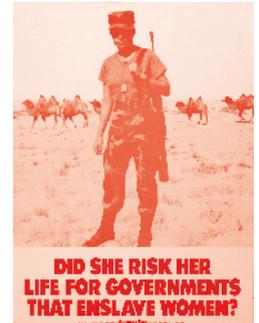
Jean Degottex.
Il faut du noir pour
sortir du rouge, 1968



Ovum, n. 1, ca. 1972

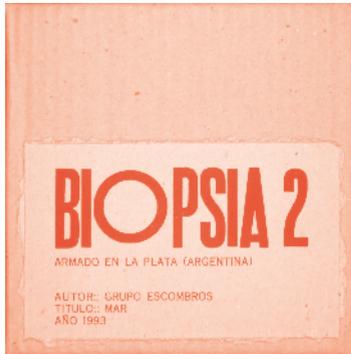
bination of word and image on the two-dimensional support of the page, informed the production of many politically -engaged movements and artistic groups throughout the 20th century. This exhibition includes several publications on the border between visual poetry and engaged art, among them the series of materials by the Textraction group published by the École Spéciale d'Architecture of Paris in 1972, and Ovum, a Uruguayan magazine published by Clemente Padín around the same time.

Many Latin-American artists built on these uses of language throughout the second half of the 20th century, particularly during the dictatorial periods in the 1960s and 70s, when they frequently fell victim to the aggressive policies of state repression. In such cases, however, the motivation behind this creative use of language was not only aesthetic, but, to a large extent, it arose out of the need to evade censorship as well as government control in order to put social protest messages into circulation. The slogan coined by Clemente Padín (s.d.) “Basta de corturas”-that is to say, “Stop Cortures”, instead of the correctly spelt but politically unfeasible “Stop Tortures”-, is an example of such ploys. Similar tactics can be found in much of Edgardo Antonio Vigo's vast output over the course of his life and in the mail art works that Vigo did so much to promote. For this exhibition, we have selected two magazine-boxes edited by Vigo: Biopsia 2, created by Grupo Escombros in 1993 with the slogan “Arroje aqui todo lo que corrompe” [“Throw in here everything that corrupts”] on a rubbish bag; and Biopsia 4 (1997), by Juan Carlos Romero, entitled “Memoria de



Guerrilla Girls.
Did She Risk Her Life
for Governments That
Enslave Women?

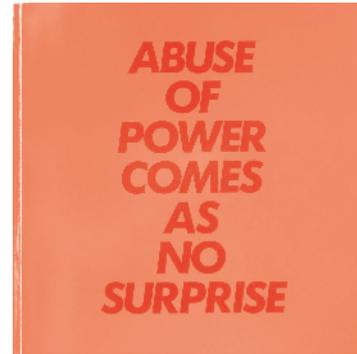
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Grupo Escombros y Edgardo Antonio Vigo (ed.). *Biopsia 2*, 1993

la materia” [“Memory of matter”], paying homage to the disappeared and other victims of the repressive Argentinian dictatorship.

Mass-distributed posters with striking slogans and plays on words, once again combined with powerful images, have also often been used by other groups and movements seeking to raise awareness about a range of different issues. Two particular cases in point are the Black Panthers, a black civil rights group active particularly in the 1960s and early-70s, and the Guerrilla Girls, who rose to fame in the 1980s, their members remaining anonymous in order to ensure that the focus of attention stay firmly set on their messages decrying



Jenny Holzer. *Abuse of Power Comes as No Surprise*, 1983

gender inequality. Protests about discrimination are not exclusive to groups that consider themselves minorities, but often have a lamentably general nature, responding to situations in which institutional or any other power becomes an instrument of domination. Take, for example, the poster designed by Klaus Staeck in 1975, with its image of a policeman beating a demonstrator symbolically framed and accompanied by the slogan “L’art d’aujourd’hui n’a pas lieu au musée” [“Today’s art is not taking place in museums”]. Jürgen Harten replicates a similar situation on the cover of his artist book *T.V. Folk-Dance: Tango of Violencia* (1977), featuring the struggle between two characters, one in uniform. Jenny Holzer, in turn, takes this reductive process even further, embodying her protest in the single phrase that occupies the entire cover of a 1983 book: *Abuse of Power Comes as No Surprise*.

L'art d'aujourd'hui n'a pas lieu au musée



Je/Nous art d'aujourd'hui musée d'Ixelles

71, rue Jean Van Volsen, 1050 Bruxelles
24.5.-13.7.1975
de 13 à 19h.30, samedi de 10 à 17h., dimanche de
10 à 13h. fermé le lundi

Klaus Staeck. L'art d'aujourd'hui
n'a pas lieu au musée, 1975

Yet political power and its
representatives are not the only
object of such protests: as the media
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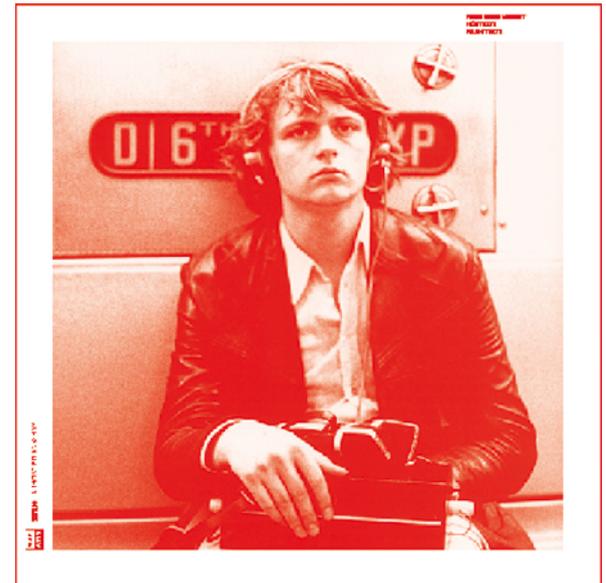
Many artists turn to subverting the symbolic systems on which power rests as a way of denouncing social injustices and inequalities. This often entails not only the manipulation of maps, as in Julio Plaza's book Poé/lítica (1977), but also the creative alteration of official documents and symbols. Alfredo Jaar's passport and maps (1992), Samara's dollar notes perforated by gunshots in Bang, bang, bang (s.d.), Cildo Meireles' counterfeit Brazilian cruzeiros, and the reconfiguration of the German flag proposed by K. P. Bremer in the poster Korrektur der Nationalfarben (1973) all provide examples of such graphic reinterpretation and critical appropriation. Yet political power and its representatives are not the only object of such protests: as the media became more and more powerful, artists reacted against this new hegemony with such works as Joan Rabascall's poster for the exhibition Villeparisis (1974), and the message by Richard Serra "You are consumed. You are the product of television" (1973). A similar stance is often taken against the art system itself; amongst other materials, Les Levine's poster No New Artists (1992)

As the media became more and more powerful, artists reacted against this new hegemony

and the message that provides the title to Jean Toche's book I Piss on the Arts (2001) persuasively illustrate such attitudes.

From the 1980s on, other social and political impulses found their reflection in art. Ecology, ethnic and national identity, the fight against Aids, gay and lesbian visibility and the exclusion of immigrants are also represented in the materials selected for this exhibition, which extends to the present with the inclusion of the violent protests against the Iraq War and the Guantanamo detention centre.

Taken together, the works selected to form part of this exhibition build up a landscape that clearly lies on the border between the territories of art and ideology, linking the spheres of thought, political activism and artistic creativity. The soundtrack chosen for the exhibition also explores the same theme: Campaign (1973), by the German artist Ferdinand Kriwet, is a sound collage that juxtaposes fragments from speeches by the candidates—Richard Nixon and John McGovern—at the 1972 American presidential election.



Ferdinand Kriwet. Campaign dins el disc de vinil Hörtexte. Radiotexte, 1972-1974

Opening hours
Weekdays and Saturdays
from 10 am to 8 pm
Sundays
from 10 am to 3 pm

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