

## **But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism / Culture in Action: A Public Art Program of Sculpture Chicago**

[Luke, Timothy W.](#) [Contemporary Sociology](#). Washington: [Sep 1996](#). Vol. 25, Iss. 5; pg. 681, 3 pgs

### **Abstract (Summary)**

Luke reviews "But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism" edited by Nina Felshin and "Culture in Action: A Public Art Program of Sculpture Chicago" by Mary Jane Jacob, Michael Brenson and Eva M. Olson.

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But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism, edited by Nina Felshin. Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1995. 416 pp. \$18.95 paper. ISBN: 0-941920-1. Culture in Action: A Public Art Program of Sculpture Chicago, by Mary Jane Jacob, Michael Brenson, and Eva M. Olson. Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1995. 144 pp. \$20.00 paper. ISBN: 0-941920-31-3. TIMOTHY W. LUKE Political Science

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University These volumes from Bay Press provide useful overviews of the aesthetic and social agendas behind the practices of activist or communitybased art as they have developed in the United States and Canada up through the mid- 1990s. The But Is It Art? collection of a dozen essays displays the considerable diversity of activist art practices, while the Jacob, Brenson, and Olson book focuses on a particular community art program staged by Sculpture Chicago during 1992 and 1993. Felshin allows each author to inspect a particular activist artist (Helen and Newton Harrison, Carole Conde, Karl Beveridge, Merle Ukeles, Suzanne Lacy, Peggy Diggs) or artwork group (Gran Fury, Group Material, American Festival Project, Guerrilla Girls, Women's Action Coalition) engaged in their site-specific, community-based, and socially engage projects. Activist art has many origins. It plays off conceptual art and popular political protest from the 1960s. It keys into "public service" media discourses from the 1970s and 1980s. And it attempts to mitigate definite ills (homelessness, domestic violence, ageism, industrial pollution, alienation, decaying neighborhoods) at a local level with aesthetic interventions. So instead of producing commodified "objects" for sale in galleries and/or display in museums, activist artists often create "experiences" for communal use. They invent rituals, produce block organizations, clean up neighborhoods, build parks, or design billboards all in response to specific community problems.

The authors of each chapter in Felshin's collection contextualize their particular studies of activist art with just enough art historical and biographical background to address the political intent of the activist art projects they review. Black-and-white photographs and graphics help to illustrate some of these art works, but such projects for the most part are incapable of being captured by any print illustrations. Felshin's introductory essay provides an adequate overview of activist art's development in the 1960s, but it also is excessively celebratory. Felshin sees activist art reshaping the art world with its insurgent practices up through the 1980s. Yet, as it is now gaining wider recognition by "becoming institutionalized in the 1990s" (p. 9), activist artists ironically are becoming much more conventional. Her celebration of activist art's growing institutional legitimacy ignores the serious backlash that has come with its acceptance outside of the art world, namely, the ability of a few activist artists to alienate some mass publics and antagonize high-profile enemies of public art funding. Indeed, it is surprising that a book that pretends to be such a cutting-edge document should lack a concluding section that speculates much more concretely and critically about how activist art has aggravated public animosities over government-funded art sponsorship and sparked community protests among those elements of "local communities" who are not targeted for activist artistic assistance and therefore see themselves disserved by public art.

Most activist art is either much more or far less than "art." Indeed, it may be art only inasmuch as artists do it, artistic materials may be used in doing it, or art status is attributed it. Beyond these traces of circumstantial evidence, activist art often is missing many key signs of conventional aesthetic legitimacy. Most of it cannot be easily bought or sold. Much of it will not be acquired for collections. Thus, the material manifestations of most activist art beyond the immediate communal experience are memorable only as historical souvenirs, political memorabilia, or civic knickknacks. Few, if any, of these projects, however, seem destined for canonization in tomorrow's college survey of "World Art." These contradictions show up even more glaringly in the Culture in Action volume. In witnessing the product of eight unusual community and artistic partnerships, which were "Culture in Action" by Sculpture Chicago, the project does break new ground. Its "artworks" created such outcomes as an ecological monitoring station, a neighborhood block party, sidewalk monuments to famous

women, a storefront hydroponics farm, a new variety of candy bar, and a tenant-led urban tenement rehab. Consequently, curator Mary Jane Jacob with Michael Brenson and Eva M. Olson are serious as they invite the reader "to discover nothing less than a redefinition of public art" in Sculpture Chicago's "Culture in Action" initiatives.

One must not reduce such activist art to some single meaning. Nonetheless, there is a troubling fact laced through many of these activist art projects, namely, that neoliberal public discourses from the Reagan and Thatcher years have so discredited the notion of "public goods" that such goods appear politically palatable as collective projects only if they become community-based artworks. Instead of some state agency using public funds to build a park, rebuild an inner-city neighborhood, or struggle against domestic violence in some openly bureaucratic manner, these interventions in the 1990s must be turned into juried art competitions, activist art projects, or performance art rituals in order to attract public and/or corporate support. And now, with a New Right-dominated congress in Washington, D.C., even these fairly marginal responses to contemporary social ills are being defunded by the state. Brenson acknowledges this difficult fact when he notes how modernist art no longer heals individual anomie or social alienation with images. Therefore, in the postmodernist condition, "building human and social infrastructure is a goal of community-based art" ( p. 29). Activist art is community based, but it mostly operates only at sites where communities are debased. The inspiration of "Culture in Action," as Brenson observes, is Joseph Beuys's social pedagogy, in which art should operate like a homeopathic therapy to cure racism, xenophobia, sexism, or injustice. Thus, activist artists, like social workers, community organizers, urban planners, or other professional-technical cadres devoted to social engineering, need debased communities in order to realize their vocational goals. Because gallery art no longer carries "the essence of art," Brenson sees many artists wanting to follow "Culture in Action" outside of high art worlds "into the lives of real people, real neighborhoods" ( pp. 20, 21 ). It is difficult, however, to judge how far these artists really go, since so much activist art is aimed at affecting the moral sensibilities of the same professional-technical classes who operate the bureaucratic technostructures of advanced corporate capitalism. The prime audience for the message politics of activist art is the symbol-analysts in city hall, corporate towers, or not-for-profit suites. It remains unclear how many others are moved by its works, especially given its strong undercurrents of didacticism. While arguing against avant garde modernism, Jacob, Brenson, and Olson see "Culture in Action" as challenging "institutional stereotypes, by building bridges between people pitted against one another, by empowering the kinds of audiences that do not feel comfortable in art museums, by underlining the richness of culture in the housing project and street . . . to develop the ability of art to respond directly to social situations and appeal to a sense of collective responsibility as a means to personal redemption and power" ( p. 21 ). These are noble aspirations. Yet one wonders how fully art can respond to many social situations, and why it might appeal to a sense of collective responsibility in the housing project and street. When this intervention takes the form of professional artists-usually not from the neighborhoodworking with corporate and nonprofit organization sponsorship-the monies for "Culture in Action" came from AT&T, Illinois Bell, American Airlines, LaSalle National Bank, U.S. Equities Realty, Inc., and Zenith Electronics Corporation, as well as the NEA, Rockefeller Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, and Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund-one might doubt whose personal redemption or empowerment is being served. By aestheticizing ordinary activity in everyday life or rebuilding community infrastructure as "art projects," artists can build careers, shock the galleries, and redeem themselves by giving the underclass (or all those who feel uncomfortable in art museums) "empowerment." Still, how revolutionary are artists engaged in helping communities fund neighborhood block parties, monumentalize women activists, or paint their ghetto apartments?

Because of today's postmodern sensibilities, activist art may appear anachronistic. Clinging to the illusion that artistic activism actually might represent some avant garde of enlightened justice even as they lampoon avant gardism, activist artists often pose as embodiments of a transgressive and oppositional consciousness. Yet just as the publicity attributes of public art belie its avant garde pretensions, most efforts to construct activist art as the leading edge of cultural transformation soon show how thoroughly absorbed into the mass media activist art actually is. Power elites are the primary patrons of activist art, not their persecutors. Activist art is not necessarily an autonomous, outsider, revolutionary gesture; it also can be another genre of pervasive commodification, professional careerism, and political cooptation. Thus, most public art activism is neither revolutionary nor revolution-making. Instead, it might just operate as another rotation in the aesthetic taste system or an alternative guise for social activism, once associated with the progressive welfare states, carried on by other means.

Public art, of course, should not be dismissed as totally ineffectual. In fact, its negative reception in some quarters suggests how truthful and effective it can be as an activist intervention. By showing how communities might organize or at least host many meaningful forms of collective action beyond those experienced as mass production or mass consumption, public art may reawaken the enjoyments of ritual, festival, carnival for contemporary society. In spite of their uncritical exposition of activist art, then, both of these books ably display the social significance of today's community-based activist artworks.