

# The Art of Being Ungovernable

---

We now come to a potential impasse in a project that has begun on the side of cognitive mapping, decolonial accounting, financial ambidexterity, and writerly experimentation. What is the function of art at the present time in all of this? Certainly, art is a site of political struggle, since the capacities of aesthetic practices may be directed toward political and ideological projects of any type. Despite the ubiquity of platitudinous assertions about art's insignificance to "real world" matters (amplified by the ways technoscientific forms of practice and knowledge are set against the arts in what appears to be a zero-sum game whose rules we didn't choose), the long-standing and enormous investment in the arts by ruling elites and states should quickly dispel such assertions and serve as clear evidence of the degree to which art does indeed matter. One need only think of the effects of, and investment in, imperialist and nationalist uses of art, which is brazenly displayed in US mass culture industries and evidenced in particular by the long-standing collaboration between Hollywood and the US military. The CIA's massive covert funding of cultural production of all types in its global war against the Left is another chilling reminder of the degree to which ruling classes do, in fact, know that art does have real and significant effects in the world.<sup>1</sup> In fact, art's profound social potential is precisely the reason that ruling elites continually work to capture and channel its capacities to shape social imaginaries and subjects.

We should wonder, then, what social functions are served by the pervasive commonsense notion that the arts don't matter to, and don't have an impact on, society at large. To begin with, it provides cover for the undeclared and largely unacknowledged uses of art by ruling classes as a tool of cultural hegemony and a means for accumulating moral and financial capital. Claims that the arts don't matter are also invoked by state and private institutions to ever more exclusively support areas of practice and knowledge production seen as having the greatest potential for capitalist accumulation. This is on blatant display in the United States

in attacks on state funding for the arts, occurring simultaneously with further consolidation of media in corporate hands.

Narratives that assert art's isolation from the social also provide cover for the continuation of elitist practices and cultures in the fine arts, as it then seems as if the idea of, or hope for, socializing the production and consumption of art is already foreclosed. To the degree that even seemingly apolitical art can be privatized and collateralized as a transferable store of wealth, its public exhibition is only complicated by the survival of institutions democratically accountable to their constituencies. Dismissing art's social relevance is also a strategy for attacking left culture writ large, especially when and where the arts are understood to foment cultures of the Left. This was the logic of earlier culture wars, which the Right is now eager to revive, espying an opportunity to disestablish the epistemic authority of the universities and media in favor of their own alternate system of think tanks and foundations.

We see arts funding being channeled into creative practices related to “new technologies,” “innovation,” and projects of “urban renewal” for the interests of real estate developers and investors. In addition to being a gross impoverishment of what the arts are and can do, bald-faced efforts to enfold the arts into market logics have been revealed for their complicity in generating crises, inequality, and displacement. Even a key apologist for the “creative class” thesis has now reversed course and warns of a “new urban crisis” that those of us who have long struggled in the trenches know is not new.<sup>2</sup> Recently, the Boyle Heights Alianza Anti Artwashing y Desplazamiento / Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement has demonstrated powerful collective resistance to the role that arts commerce is playing in the displacement of working-class and racialized people in Los Angeles.<sup>3</sup> Political analyses of the uses of the arts that are produced by this and other struggles for social and economic justice are of the greatest importance and urgency in the present, and they offer much-needed clarity in the face of corporate-minded arts boosterism, facile defenses of the arts as an unquestioned social good, and artists' own structural complicity with—and, sometimes, misplaced loyalty to—a system that ultimately delivers them into precarity and social atomization.

Let us consider, for a moment, how unstated presuppositions underlying debates about art's social relevance naturalize divisions between so-called high and low arts, their attendant hierarchies of value, and the very circumscribed recognition of certain cultural practices as art. We propose a thought experiment: what if, in one of these familiar debates about the value or meaning of art to social life in general, the art form under consideration were graffiti? This doesn't happen much these days (although in a different political moment it once did) because these debates are so often implicitly framed around bourgeois conceptions of art and their

deeply sedimented moral economies. An art of being ungovernable might do worse than beginning from the standpoint of the graffiti artist, whose work is always already policed in terms of not only its intrinsic illegality (in most municipalities) but also its fabled connection to criminal networks, as the Los Angeles Police Department informs the public in a helpful web page titled “Why Gang Graffiti is Dangerous”:

The purpose of gang graffiti is to glorify the gang. Gang graffiti is meant to create a sense of intimidation and may increase the sense of fear within a neighborhood. Gang members use graffiti to mark their territory or turf, declare their allegiance to the gang, advertise a gang’s status or power, and to challenge rivals. Graffiti is used to communicate messages between gangs using codes with common meaning.

Of greater concern is the inherent violence associated with gang graffiti. When a neighborhood is marked with graffiti indicating territorial dominance, the entire area and its inhabitants become targets for violence. Anyone in the street or in their home is fair game for drive-by attacks by rival gang members. A rival gang identifies everyone in a neighborhood as a potential threat. Consequently, innocent residents are often subjected to gang violence by the mere presence of graffiti in their neighborhood. [Click here for information on removing graffiti.](#)<sup>4</sup>

Clear echoes of “broken windows” ring through this police analysis of graffiti’s immoral economies. Decrypting gang signs for a concerned public, the LAPD closes with a “call to action” for a citizen brigade to “clean up” the city. The meaningfulness of graffiti, in the police imaginary, is the mirror image of high art’s meaningless codification. This is just one of the ways an analysis that centers questions of race, class, and power reconfigures the question of aesthetics. Visibilizing the “inherent violence” of graffiti, police English invisibilizes the inherent violence of the gentrification it calls for in and through the same gesture.<sup>5</sup> Such ideologies even operate within arts communities, as seen, for example, in the state’s functionalization of muralism for antigraffiti campaigns. The multiplicity of strategies deployed to prevent, erase, and delegitimize graffiti lays out in quite stark terms the reality and power of an autonomously produced countersymbolic communicative order and the forging of ungovernable meanings, which might be a reminder for guerilla cultural warriors of the great scope for their work at a time when capitalism loves to assert that all alternative and even ameliorative avenues for change are forever blocked.

All of this is to say that the ways that the relevance of the arts is constantly questioned and then defended become an insidious way for framing the overall perception of culture. If the Left accepts this framing, it is to our great peril, as it allows us to overlook all the ways in which artistic labor is already classified, hierarchized, and channeled, including

by institutions we may feel compelled to defend. It is ever more insidious because it plays quite effectively to the ways that bourgeois ideologies have already formatted the perception and tastes of professional intellectuals when it comes to recognizing art and situating its effects.

If, when put on the defensive by the Right's assaults on the arts, we expend our energies defending the relevance of the arts per se, or in fighting for limited forms of inclusion within established institutions and markets, we miss a crucial opportunity for a much needed political analysis of the art and institutions we are enjoined to defend. Likewise, if we valorize art's engagement with "the social," with the "real world," in an abstract sense, we may fail to specify the politics of that engagement (while allowing the continued obfuscation of the fact that art is never separate from the social world to begin with). The consolidation of social practice as a genre of contemporary art may very well be a symptom of this, even as it first emerged to correct it. The abstractions to which social practice art and the discourse on it lend themselves often allow for the bourgeois moralism and liberalism of practices that take this name to go uninterrogated. Furthermore, in many of its institutional incarnations, the historicization of social art effaces long and divergent histories of political art. Somewhat polemically, we could describe this as a kind of colonization of the idea of leftist art by imperatives of professionalization, institutional protocols, and liberal ideologies.

Let's be done with debates about art that are framed in ways that obfuscate and distract. Let us instead start from the understanding that the arts are always a site of political struggle, so we can strategize for our engagement in this struggle from and for the radical Left.

### **How Is the Political Struggle over the Arts Being Waged Now?**

While the representational politics of individual artworks are usually the focus of art criticism, this ultimately narrow approach to analyzing the politics of art does little to elucidate the social forces that shape the cultural politics of artwork by shaping what kind of work is produced, by whom, and for whom, as well as what attains visibility and is ascribed value. An examination of politics in and of the arts must grasp the fundamental connection between the cultural politics of artworks, on the one hand, and, on the other, the material conditions for art's production, circulation, and reception. These conditions are the most crucial battlefield where the political struggle over the arts is waged. Some examples:

- The reduction of art to commodity, for example, art as luxury product and/or service for the extremely rich or as a tool for money laundering and tax evasion.

- The undervaluing and invisibilization of artistic labor in general, including the ancillary work that artists and arts professionals often do in sustaining the publics that museums gather.
- The channeling of artistic labor by the institutions, markets, and power brokers that manage economies of value and therefore shape what is produced, what circulates, and how artistic labor is exploited, remunerated, and/or rendered invisible. Those forces determine the very terms around which hierarchies of artistic value are organized. While these economies in mass culture industries are blatantly commercial in character, predictably according value to work that reproduces bourgeois ideologies and their moral dramas, capitalist market logics shape elite cultural (and intellectual) production in a more surreptitious manner. This is seen in the mindless fetishization of the “new” and hollowed out notions of innovation, where the latest artistic or theoretical trend is presumed to be smarter, better, and more sophisticated, as if long-standing critiques of progressivist notions of historical development could be selectively suspended. It is also seen in the pursuit of brand-name recognition—be it of proper names, theoretical discourses, or artistic trends—to be cashed in for symbolic or financial capital, as well as in so many habitual and highly incentivized modes of “cornering the market” on what amount to boutique forms of cultural production.

In such a context, the possibilities for radical and critical art to flourish depend on building and supporting forms of production and distribution that are not dependent on those markets and institutions that would turn artworks into mute commodities, fetish objects for the elitist art critical and theory industries, or tools of governance.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to working toward creating and supporting alternate institutions and economies for the arts, we should push for a more politically trenchant and specific language to talk about the cultural politics of art in order to shift frameworks of analysis and hierarchies of value. Why don't we more readily talk about anticapitalist, antifascist, or anti-imperialist art, as either fact or aspiration? When it is talked about, it is often done so in a way that suggests that it is, or should remain, a wholly minor practice, whose artistic value is automatically suspect. Not unrelated to this is the systematic obfuscation of the history of radical Left art by art critics and educators—an omission that happens not only by *not* teaching it but also by simply excising the politics of movements and individual producers, including when it pertains to celebrated and canonized art. After all, before Frida Kahlo became an art and fashion icon, Pablo Neruda's poems were popularized, or Picasso was recognized as a modernist maestro, they were all resolute communists who manifested their politics in their art.

In our present context, we are most interested in using art as a

vehicle for working across and beyond disciplinary silos, an original and enduring mission of this journal. That is to say, we are not seeking to colonize the territory of art history or even that of the contemporary art journal. We hope this may serve as a ground-clearing gesture and open invitation to continue work begun in the pages of this journal. It also looks forward and projects future engagements with radical art and aesthetics under conditions of communicative capitalism that have brought the valorization of the aesthetic into the everyday—as the times and places of aesthetic experience that we treasure remain ephemeral, fugitive, under surveillance, and fleeing, with the cops in hot pursuit.

## Notes

This essay was written collaboratively as part of a book sprint. See “How This Text Was Written” (in this issue) for more information on the process.

1. See Rockhill, *Radical History*, chap. 7.
2. Florida, *New Urban Crisis*.
3. Boyle Heights Alianza Anti Artwashing y Desplazamiento, “Statement from Defend Boyle Heights and BHAAAD on PSSST Closing,” [alianzacontraartwashing.org/en/bhaaad/](http://alianzacontraartwashing.org/en/bhaaad/) (accessed 14 August 2017).
4. Los Angeles Police Department, “Why Gang Graffiti Is Dangerous,” [www.lapdonline.org/top\\_ten\\_most\\_wanted\\_gang\\_members/content\\_basic\\_view/23471](http://www.lapdonline.org/top_ten_most_wanted_gang_members/content_basic_view/23471) (accessed 14 August 2017).
5. On police English, see Gumbs, “Nobody Mean More.”
6. A recent and powerful example of this is the exhibition *State Goods: Art in the Era of Mass Incarceration*, cocurated by *Social Text* collective member Nicole Fleetwood and Walter Puryear.

## References

- Florida, Richard. 2017. *The New Urban Crisis: How Our Cities Are Increasing Inequality, Deepening Segregation, and Failing the Middle Class—And What We Can Do about It*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. 2014. “Nobody Mean More: Black Feminist Pedagogy and Solidarity.” In *The Imperial University: Academic Repression and Scholarly Dissent*, edited by Piya Chatterjee and Sunaina Mara, 237–60. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rockhill, Gabriel. 2014. *Radical History and the Politics of Art*. New York: Columbia University Press.