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INTRODUCTION

Instinctual revolt turns into political rebellion.

Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*

*Even the most realistic oeuvre [of art] constructs a reality of its own: its men and women, its objects, its landscape, its music reveals what remains unsaid, unseen, unheard in everyday life.*

Herbert Marcuse, “Art as Form of Reality”

*It is difficult to get the news from poems yet men die miserably everyday for lack of what is found there.*

William Carlos Williams, “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower”

We generally take for granted that the foundation on which American democracy rests is the interactive, and ever-evolving landscape of civil society—the social and civic associations of Alexis de Tocqueville’s (1835/2002) famous observations. But whether or not we agree with Robert Putnam (1994, 2000) that American civic associations have for decades been on the decline and that more and more Americans are “bowling alone,” we must confront the question of whether the public activity, debate, and inclusivity of our political and social organizations is enough to sustain the health of our system of democratic representative government, and the political culture it engenders. Do our associations harness a collective of truly independent and community-minded voices? Or is civil society’s sincerity and effectiveness threatened by the excessively individualistic emphasis in popular culture, and as a result of this, the largely conformist tendencies that underlie American democratic culture? Do our civil organizations encourage sincere democratic life? And if these interactions do manage to keep democracy alive in our public spaces, and in our public interactions and debates, do they allow us only short sporadic breaths, heavy with dust?
Some in America—usually those sitting to the left of the aisle—contend that true democracy—of, by, and for the people—has gone the way of free love and Marxist revolution. What remains is the subject of debate. Some say that all of our political institutions are democratic façades for domination by the powerful few; others go so far as to complain about the ineffectiveness of the Electoral College system, or of our voting booths. That the consistently challenging and interactive characteristic of democracy (beginning with our public spaces) is largely dormant in the United States, and that Americans themselves are generally, in this sense, dangerously publicly inactive, is a foundational assumption of this work. Regardless of the extent to which Americans feel alienated from the governing system, most would likely agree that a key issue with democracy in the United States is that it is not only far from working as a direct political mechanism (which is in part the intention of a representative democratic republic), but that it often lacks a sincere connection with the average citizen. It is not a logical stretch to conclude that a person who does not feel involved or needed by their government, or community, or larger society, will likely not wish to participate.

It is also an easy conclusion that in America one can be quite comfortable—politically, emotionally, and materially—and “free” without exerting much individual political will. The definition of citizenship in America today has devolved to mean little more than someone with the ability to vote for the offices of government. Citizens in the United States could, barring the occasional call to jury duty, theoretically never even leave their homes (in this sense, take no part in society) and all are still afforded the full protections of the U.S. Constitution. This “free rider” problem (Putnam, 1995, 2001), at work in many ways in American political culture beyond that of decreasing the apparent need or drive to vote, enables the “timid herd” mentality that is an inherent possibility in American life. Over time, this crisis of the “free rider” has become an abstract general truth in American public life. It is in this sense that we could argue that Ben Franklin was wrong when upon being asked, following the Constitutional Convention of 1787, whether Americans now had a monarchy or a republic, he famously replied, “[A] republic if you can keep it.” The implication of his words being that a republic is a system of governance that relies on civic engagement and participation on behalf of its citizens—on working to keep it—or else it will falter. Americans today have shown that the United States can remain a mostly free, cohesive, and politically safe country, regardless of political effort exerted by each individual citizen. This is clear just from observing a voter turnout, that on a good day (for presidential elections) hovers at around 50 percent.
INTRODUCTION

It is best to redefine the problem at hand. We must seek new solutions not to this lack of public participation, but to the lack of interest in public participation by the average American. We must seek ways, and provide the tools, to draw citizens from their individualistic tendencies into a more interested and dynamic public life. What we can call the sincerity of citizenship—or genuine belief in and involvement in—in any system, particularly a political system, which is by nature social and interactive, should not be undervalued or avoided because of the difficulty involved in attempting to define and evaluate elusive levels of “sincerity.” A society, seen as a machine with moving parts, is only a stale collection of those parts if the machine's movements fail to convey genuine meaning to the user. Still, we must be wary even when “meaning” is conveyed, because meaning in a post-Foucauldian (1991) and post-Baudrillardian (Baudrillard & Glaser, 1994) world—where even desires can be reproduced by the mechanisms of popular culture in a way that they become “hyperreal” simulations of their essence, or what we can call sincere or genuine meaning—can take on new forms. In the late twentieth century, Baudrillard wrote that in the world of simulation, reality disappears, and from its ashes rises the hyperreal. This conception of information [in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century] introduced the possibility that when concepts, meanings, and creative forms are co-opted by the ruling majority opinion, not only are they simplified and sterilized of both their natural emotional force and their uniqueness, but they may also actually cease to exist. It is this sort of invisible process that has enveloped public life, associations, and general notions of both local and universal community today.

Even when the movements of a machine convey “meaning,” it is difficult to say whether these meanings penetrate beyond diffusing concepts that are so much a part of American cultural identity that they are mindlessly inhaled rather than adequately digested. Today’s democracy in America is by all accounts more shallow and tepid than it could be. Despite the exceptions, democratic life in the United States today overwhelmingly yields to the power of popular opinion, rather than being inspired by a true collective of individual passions in deliberation. This popular opinion—whether one believes it is the product of manipulation by the forces of government, media, and big business, or simply the organic result of too many alienated citizens on autopilot—is a driver of American democracy and must not be ignored. Studies that have called attention to consistently poor voter turnout (as compared with much of the world), and to the free-rider problem, have failed to change the difficult situation. Americans, though self-conscious to take note of the lack of citizen involvement in political life (and its accompanying institutions), focus primarily on the inaction—the effect—rather than the cause of the
widespread dispassion. A redefinition of the problem would be valuable both to the discipline and to all those people who are cited as “at fault” in this.

The moderate and unquestioning tendencies of popular opinion have co-opted many facets of American public life, as can be seen in the dominance and ubiquity of “plastic” art in public life. During co-optation, alternatives, for example, creative approaches to status quo ideas and beliefs, are invisibly gobbled up by popular culture and spit out as commodities. The result is that these newly minted commodities that masquerade as genuine artistic expression appear as they once existed—as fresh ideas—but their sources of genuinely free thought have been sterilized. Thus, the meanings they disseminate become like laminated playing cards—forever in play, but unchanged in character or appearance—and, despite the many possible combinations of meaning that can be played, there are clear limits well within the bounds of infinity. This ability of people to live without having to create or even find meaning on their own, has the effect of alienating individuals from their own emotions and, ultimately, from aspects of public life and from the greater human community.

Although it is the catalyst for this study, the most important issue is not that American democracy and public life have suffered in expressions of enthusiasm, mutual trust, and inclusivity, owing ultimately to the lack of enthusiastic and consistent participation in the public sphere itself. Rather, the greater concern is that the very nature of American democracy breeds the dangers of a conformist and complacent possessive individualism, and so a solution should look to the future of democracy, as well as to its past. Although there is an important Puritan and civic republican tradition in American political thought, it is the legacies of the Lockean liberal individualism on which our democracy at least partially rests, that overwhelms our popular and political culture today. And it is this tendency that must be balanced with a force that enables us to access both our true individual beliefs, as well as the vital sense of universal unity that ultimately comes of such individual contemplation through the language and imagery of artistic experience.

The fields of public art, and socially interactive art, have become more prominent than ever in the last five years or so, as the production of public artworks, both large-scale and well-funded endeavors, as well as grassroots projects that often focus on performance and interactivity, has increased and gained more attention from the media and the art world. This is a fascinating field of study for at least two main reasons. One, because it liberates art out of a closed and regulated space, into the freedom of the outdoors, and two, because its placement makes art available to all members
of the public who happen to cross its path—in this way, it is inherently democratic. This work argues that there is an urgent need for greater support of public and social art projects and better access to these sources of funding. More art, and more interactive art, in public spaces would first individually, and ultimately collectively, revive and animate communal environments; create new relationships between individuals and the public; strengthen feelings of community; and foster the desire to participate in public life on the basis of new relationships both to the self and to the public. Individual experience with creativity and the arts has been shown to lead to higher rates of civic engagement, and to an increased interest in public life as well as an empowerment in one’s own personal life. Artistic experience, especially powerful and frequent experience, enables access to an inherent but latent spirit of community that exists within all individuals. This understanding of ourselves in others can then inspire a desire to participate in the public realm. This link demonstrates the utility of employing art as a tool to encourage political participation. According to the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) (2007), “By every measure, literary readers lead more robust lifestyles than nonreaders. These findings contradict commonly held assumptions that readers and arts participants are passive, isolated, or self absorbed.” The researchers concluded that “Americans who experience art or read literature are demonstrably more active in their communities than nonreaders and non participants. [...] Thus, literary reading and arts participation rates can be regarded as sound indicators of civic and community health” (NEA, 2007, p. 6).

Using the study’s findings, NEA chairman Dana Gioia looks to the psychological processes that take place within individuals who experience art that inspires them to community life and public action: “Something happens when an individual actively engages in the arts—be it reading a novel at home, attending a concert at a local church, or seeing a dance company perform at a college campus—that awakens both a heightened sense of identity and civic awareness. We must banish the stereotype that reading books or listening to music is passive behavior. Art is not escapism but an invitation to activism.” In December 2009, the NEA released its 2008 survey of Public Participation in the Arts and reported that even the “most educated” (arts activity and education are correlated) adults had been participating less since 2002, and that there are “persistent patterns of decline in participation for most art forms.” In this more recent study, Sunil Iyengar, director of Research and Analysis for the NEA, calls arts participation a “vital form of personal and social engagement” (NEA, 2009, p. 1).

Public art in the most formal sense is art that is commissioned and owned by the state, but when we speak of contemporary public art, we generally mean any form of artistic work—be it painting, music, or interactive
performance—that is intended for the public and social spaces in our lives. This presence of art in daily experience can help to reconceptualize the processes and meanings within a public space and can alert citizens to public concerns, as well as to shared individual fears and desires, through our creative instincts: “The public artist today engages issues of history, site, politics, class, and environment. These multiple visions may help to transform communities as they find common grounds” (Mitchell, 1992).

Hannah Arendt used the idea of the “public realm” to mean a public where members meet to discuss common political desires and ambitions. The concept of “the public” employed here speaks to this understanding, as well as to a more abstract public life that is felt in the spirit of individuals, regardless of whether or not they are physically participating in the political scene. I argue that this reinvigoration of the depth and sincerity of our public lives must first occur so that these new individual relationships to the public can ultimately lead to a more inspired and active political body. In this sense, I also employ a particular definition of the “political” that asserts that politics is not just seen in our laws and policies and elections, and in the decisions made in Washington, but rather, ‘political life’ here is used primarily to indicate the myriad of interactions, unwritten rules, and communications, which take place in public life.

Friedrich Schiller (1794/2004) argued that it is the important role of the (visionary) artist in society to seek meaning in life beyond the paternalism of the watered-down symbols of popular will: “But how does the artist secure himself against the corruptions of his time, which everywhere encircle him? By disdaining its opinion. Let him look upwards to his own dignity and to law, not downwards to fortune and to everyday needs” (p. 52). It is of key importance that the artistic experience as a social good is a bi-level process; first, the individual experiences art and gains access to the liberation and connective feelings (“look upwards to his own dignity” (p. 52)) that artistic action and contemplation provide, and, second, the newly experienced independent reflection and awareness of the individual empowers the individual’s relationship to his or her community, and to the greater society.

I will also endeavor to clarify a distinction between two approaches in art—what is referred to here as “plastic” or alternatively, conformist or mainstream art, and what I term “visionary” or transcendent (what I will later also call “rebellious,” after Camus) art. I assert that although all art has positive societal value, “visionary” art encourages important political possibilities by reawakening (through rearrangement) and engaging (through the critical thought that the rearrangement invites) a participant. This aims to be neither a simplistic nor elitist argument; rather, it is imperative to draw out this distinction in order to determine the extent
to which the motivations and goals, as well as the effects, of an artwork can inspire imagination, change, and action, within the individual, and ultimately, in society. The notion of “plastic” or conformist art encompasses two primary ideas. The first is that art becomes redundant, however alternative or avant-garde it may have once been, once it is unveiled into the public realm and has reached the desires of a critical mass. This desire in our supply-and-demand-run popular culture forces a repetition of the art that yields it diluted and drained of its original effect. Once it is repeated many times among individuals in society, it loses its ability to create a fresh arrangement of our environments and our beliefs and thus cannot be truly transformative. The second is that much of “plastic” art is created, from the start, with profit, not creative and political transformation, in mind. Other works of “mainstream” art, as mentioned, began as transformative works, ideas, and movements; but after passing through the filtering process of dissemination into popular consciousness, and because of overproduction, oversaturation, and overanalysis, they have lost or diminished their original power.

It is not that “mainstream” creativity is entirely undesirable, or that it cannot sometimes serve a positive purpose; such stark distinctions between that which is conformist or redundant, and that which seeks beyond, are difficult, and perhaps unnecessary, to make. Still, innovative, hardworking, forward-seeking, engaging, and interactive art must be celebrated and encouraged, as truly inspirational creativity is one of the main bloodlines of human development, of societal progress, and of healthy individuals.

I define visionary or transformative artistic creation, following Friedrich Nietzsche and Albert Camus, as art that seeks to disorder and rearrange previous conceptions, both of art and of life, through the dialectical union of emotion (“the irrational”), with reflection on those emotions (the “rational”). All art has the potential to create participatory empowered behavior, but visionary transformative art is the form of art where political progress can be best accessed and articulated. Camus (1951/1991) wrote that “rebellion is a preliminary to all civilizations” (p. 273). He defined rebellion first as an act of creation and concluded that “[w]ith rebellion, awareness is born” (p. 15). Much of “mainstream” art, despite its sometimes rehearsed rearrangements, fails to connect the viewers with questions that will engage them over time. Transformative art, especially public and social visionary art, is needed to seek out and materialize alternate possibilities for our individual lives, for our societies, and for the political systems by which they abide.

Public art can encourage participation in public life and is a key factor in the development of a “civil religion.” While that neither should be nor need be the ultimate goal in America, the American citizen is, in
general, lacking both a consistent need for, and access to, poetry, universal empathy, and true political desire, while hard work, pragmatism, and possessive individualism is encouraged at all levels of society. Despite the invigorating nature of our recent and historically significant presidential election in 2008 (an election is in itself an invigorating moment, yet one that occurs only every four years), we are still in a thinly veiled crisis and could use an injection of true civic interest in our society. Since the latter decades of the twentieth century, the status quo has advanced largely undisputed. Not since the upheavals of the 1960s have there been widespread efforts to create a truly new understanding of politics and a society with a new arrangement of values.

Personal artistic experience does not lead directly to institutional political participation. But it expands the limits of our conception of what is possible, both for ourselves and for our public lives and society. Artistic experience creates the desire for action through an expanded engagement with the world. Experiencing art draws people inward at first, to deeper reflection and self-knowledge, but then leads to greater participation in public life, which can ultimately lead to more democratic action (not necessarily in political institutions and processes, but in political change more widely understood). The approach in this work does not fault and discard the complacent “last men”; instead, it encourages everyone to expand their imaginative capabilities through art by promoting public and socially interactive art projects.

The Argument Further Explained

Psychologists have produced an abundance of studies on the mind processes that take place during artistic interaction to examine how it alters our psyches and why creativity makes us feel good. The existence of the fields of art therapy, community art programs, and art in public education advocacy programs attests to the importance of these processes. For the many children and adults who use these types of art programs, they serve often as lifesavers, usually in several different ways. It is generally understood that a creative outlet is vital to a balanced life. How many times have we heard stories of a bored Wall Street financial analyst who comes alive after he (often by chance) discovers pottery, photography, or the art of cooking? This situation is most often described as the need for release in an everyday life that may otherwise be patterned and controlled. In another common example, we have heard countless times of the young child or teenager who is neglected at home, or lives in a neglected community, and is able to find a new world and a new family in art and creativity. Accessible community art exhibits and classes,
school art programs, and spontaneous outdoor art performances, as well as art festivals in our neighborhoods, are all vital resources for a healthy life. Not only does creativity provide balance in a world dominated by reason and practical concerns, it can also serve as a distraction and escape from the difficult realities of life. Some have said that the creative blanket can keep us warm, just as drugs are often able to do—we can lose our inhibitions and forget our troubles and responsibilities, at least for a short while. While this may be true, the psychological fulfillment that comes from artistic engagement has far more important ramifications for the individual, and for society, than the momentary joy of forget that intoxication can pour over us.

Forget takes us away from the world around us, whereas artistic engagement brings us closer to it by providing the opportunity to interact with the world on our own terms. When we create or encounter art, we may momentarily breathe free from the needs of our daily lives and from accepted reality, as we are able to reimagine the way that we perceive the world around us. This is what makes art inherently political. It affords us the ability to wield power over that which we otherwise have little or no control. In the realm of art, we can see the world as we would like it to be, and we can show others new possibilities through art. The individual gets full control in this sense, as art is the realm of imagination and fantasy. The capacity to imagine individual change must precede a change in daily public reality.

To identify the specific nature of the positive political power of artistic experience is not an easy task. The relationship between art and democracy, and more generally, between art and public life, is important, though it is not usually direct. Like most relationships between experiences that are intrinsically subjective and ever changing, the correlation between experiencing art and experiencing increased public awareness and activity is difficult to simplify and cleanly categorize. Despite this relationship’s resistance to easy understanding, its existence must be nurtured, not ignored. We need to encourage our children, our communities, and our governments to reengage with art as a political and social necessity.

Again, I do not argue that when one experiences art one is then, as a direct result, encouraged to participate in the political system. Unfortunately, there is no easy formula for determining a direct route from individual experience to an inclination or desire to take an active part in the political process or in political change. Many theorists of American politics have picked away at this puzzle. Most have concluded that people are guided primarily by self-interest, and that therefore—if you subscribe to this belief about human nature—game theory adequately determines
that they will most likely become a part of the free-rider problem unless there are clear incentives, or rewards, for participation. Before trying to identify why or why not a person votes, it is likely useful to try to understand why or why not that person cares enough about society, and about their fellow citizen, to vote.

The real question for American politics, and for the study of political behavior in general, is how does one become more inclined to participate in public life? Besides offering external, tangible rewards for participating in the political system, it is difficult to determine why any person desires (or decides) to participate in our political institutions and processes. Ultimately, natural diversity among people, even concerning civic virtue, is the determinant for participation. In other words, some are naturally more inclined to care and others not. It may be more fruitful to examine why an individual becomes more interested and active in public (as opposed to the more specific “political”) life in general. Participating in public life is a necessary precursor to participation in the political system.

I argue that art, and public art, has a natural ability to motivate people in a variety of ways. In articulating our common emotions, as well as in rearranging our public spaces and public beliefs, art can consistently create something new. An experiment in art extracts moments and cross sections from the landscape of life around us. A work of art may emphasize or de-emphasize, or turn upside down, or show parts without their whole, or show the whole empty of some of its parts. This entirely new way of looking at ideas and feelings, which we already have some understanding of, can foster a reawakening of the everyday. Making mention of a poem by Rilke on art, Hannah Arendt (1998) writes, “In the case of art works, reification is more than mere transformation; it is transfiguration, a veritable metamorphosis in which it is as though the course of nature which wills that all fire burn to ashes is reverted and even dust can burst into flames” (p. 168). If we agree with Baudrillard (1994) that life in many ways has become a mere “simulation” of life, then it follows naturally that art can stimulate the simulation and, in creating something new (a new perception of reality), can reattach sincere meaning to the daily transactions that have become predictable. When life is rearranged, it loses order, if only temporarily. It is in this destruction that possibilities are born.

In artistic experience, we can access a true independence and freedom, because of our ability within art to rearrange everyday reality as we please. We can experience known ideas and feelings in new ways, as well as gain an increased sense of empathy through universal insight into individual thoughts and emotions. Through art, it is emotional vision (the realm of poetry) that is able to take precedence over the societal or “rational”
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