

## Activism through Art: How Culture has responded to Donald Trump

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No matter one's political views on social issues, everyone can admit that the past year had been an eventful one. It was a polarizing election riled up to a president that is dividing people. Many people have taken to whatever means they can to speak out against the current administration. From film and TV to fashion to paintings and sculpture, people are using these platforms to address concerns and fears. It is impossible to escape political discourse. Individuals are using whatever platform they can to comment on politics. Art inspires people and has the power to change beliefs. With the past election and current administration, political art is resonating more with people. It acts as a release of anger and fear or a refusal to go along with things, making art an important platform for those that feel the need to speak out and for those that do not have a voice.

The 2016 Presidential Election was different from any recent election. From the unexpected candidates to the polarizing effect politics had on the nation, this election stood apart from any other. The election had an unreal quality to it, from childish arguments at debates and the number of scandals that surfaced. It was a spectacle. After this extreme election, it is impossible for society to not react to it. Trump's prejudices and politics are things that many people are truly afraid of and Trump and his administration continues to make a spectacle. People need an outlet for fear and anger and so far art has played a huge part in that release.

Art responds to society and the culture surrounding it, so political art has always existed. Examples include Pablo Picasso's *Massacre of Korea*, Norman Rockwell's *The Problem We All Live With*, Diego Rivera's *Man at the Crossroads*, and anything by the Guerilla Girls. Artists

respond to and interpret the world around them, so art is continually shaped by politics. German philosopher and cultural critic, Walter Benjamin wrote “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in 1935. Benjamin wrote this essay during the Nazi regime to create an art theory that was “useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art” in mass culture, proposing that, in the age of mechanical reproduction, and the absence of traditional and ritualistic value, the production of art would be inherently based upon the praxis of politics (Scannell). Benjamin’s work shows that the ideas of political art have existed for decades.

High fashion is an industry that typically stays out of politics or designers make political statements in more subtle ways, but at the 2017 New York Fashion Week many designers put politics at the forefront of their collections. To begin, Fashion Week partnered with Planned Parenthood to raise awareness and support for the organization. NYFW handed out pink buttons that claim "Fashion Stands with Planned Parenthood." Designer Tracy Reese told the *New York Times*, that after participating in the Women’s March, she and her staff felt inspired: “The election has colored everything that we do. We wanted to use our voices, something that was new for a lot of us” (Safronova). Reese invited four poets to read at her show, only telling them that the poems should tell women’s stories. Similarly, Mara Hoffman invited the four organizers of the Women’s March to read the words of activist Angela Davis and poets Maya Angelou and Audre Lorde. Other designers included political messages in their collections through shirts that had phrases like “The Future is Female,” “I am an Immigrant,” and “People are People.” Many of the designers felt inspired by the Women’s March and other acts of protest and felt that it was their responsibility to use their platforms to contribute to political discourse.

In a previous essay, I examined the parallels between the Amazon series *Good Girl*

*Revolt* and the events and scandals of the 2016 election. The series fictionalized adaptation of Lynn Povich's book of the same name, which chronicles the 1970 sexual-discrimination lawsuit against *Newsweek* by Povich and forty-five other female staffers. The series follows three women researchers at the fictional *News of the Week* and shows their struggles with sexual discrimination and sexual harassment both in the office and in their personal lives. The show addresses issues such as sexual harassment, abortion, racism, and more. The show was released on October 28, 2016 and was people immediately noticed the similarities of the problems of 1970 and now. In their review of the show, *The Atlantic* said,

The show is sneakily focused on illuminating how so many of the issues plaguing women in 1969 haven't changed at all. The ongoing battles for equal pay, the lack of affordable childcare, the pervasive reality of sexual harassment: Take away the graphic-print minidresses and the omnipresent ashtrays, and you're left with a workplace drama that doesn't always feel all that anachronistic. (Gilbert)

The show was produced before many of the scandals that defined the election, but there were unavoidable connections between the show and scandals like Roger Ailes and Donald Trump's various sexual harassment accusations. Cast and crew of the show noted that they had no clue how timely and relevant the show would end up being. Dana Calvo, the creator and executive producer of *Good Girls Revolt*, said "You would think Amazon hired Donald Trump to promote the show" (Borden). The show was released shortly after the release of the *Access Hollywood* tape where Trump infamously uses the phrase "grab them by the pussy" and *Good Girl Revolt* features a lot of the "locker room talk" that dominated media towards the end of the election. Barely a month, after the show's release, Amazon announced that the show would not be

renewed for a second season despite the popularity of the show. The show was reported as having more viewers than any other Amazon original and having twice the audience as Amazon's *Transparent*, which is in its third season (Bowen). Cast, crew, fans, and the media immediately began connecting it to the election and Hillary Clinton's loss. Many thought that Clinton's loss would have created "a ready-made marketing opportunity for a show about women fighting for gender equality" (Cooper). The cancellation was made all the more problematic by the discovery that no women were involved with the decision to cancel the show. The show and its cancellation resonated with so many issues that were happening and helped to show just how little had changed since 1970.

*Saturday Night Live* has always thrived on drama of American politics, but this past year *SNL* has reached historically high ratings in their coverage of the election and Trump's administration. According to *Slate's Culture Gabfest* podcast, *SNL* and other forms of satire seem to matter more as satire and reality seem to have a stronger connection currently. The audience is assured by Trump's own tweets that he too is watching *SNL*. The fact that people know that Trump is watching and seems to very critical about Alec Baldwin's portrayal of him adds to the intrigue and importance of the satirical skits. *SNL* has been criticized for the mockery of Trump by people who question if mockery and satire is the way to appeal to Trump supporters. *Slate's Culture Gabfest* points out that the satire is not always funny but even the skits that fall flat still feel important to the audience. The podcasters suggest that it is not whether or not a skit is funny that matters, but more so that it releases a sort of "pent up rage" about the actions of Trump and his administration. In many ways, *SNL* acts as a coping mechanism for people who are upset and concerned about Trump.

In an *Entertainment Weekly* article that questions the how TV is going to change in the Trump age, many people suggest that the Trump age may produce more honest, mass appealing television shows. What has been termed the “Obama effect” saw increased representation and an increased number of roles for black actors. During the Obama administration, shows like *black-ish*, *Scandal*, *How to Get Away with Murder*, and *Empire* were created and became some of the most popular shows on TV. This has led people to wonder how Trump’s administration will affect TV. The election showed that there were large groups of people that feel disenfranchised and TV may respond to that and try to explain how and why both sides feel that way. “We need realistic stories about what’s going on in terms of racism, xenophobia, and homophobia, not agitprop shows telling people what to believe,” said Neal Baer (writer for *Law & Order: SVU*, *ER*). “We need stories that will show the complexities of why we are in the place we are in now” (Rice). There are some shows that are already trying to achieve this goal, including a comedy by the creator of *black-ish* about a politically divided, biracial married couple. The creator of the show hope that these kind of shows will help to start communication as a country.

This year’s award season has also been full of political discourse. Celebrities have made impassioned speeches, there have been heavily politicized performances, and even quiet, visual forms of protest. Award shows have always been political, especially the Academy Awards. In 1973, Marlon Brando sent Native American activist, Sacheen Littlefeather, in his place to reject the award. In response to jeering and applause, Littlefeather spoke out against the film industry’s treatment of Native Americans. After both the lack of diversity of the 2016 Oscars (#OscarsSoWhite) and the activism of this year’s Oscars, the history of actors using award shows at a political platform has been revisited. At the Oscars there were more subtle shows of support to complement the speeches and performances that outright challenged Trump and the prejudices

of the country. Emma Stone showed her support for Planned Parenthood by wearing a pin and many celebrities wore blue ribbons in support of the ACLU. One of the most talked about political speeches of the award season was Meryl Streep's at the Golden Globes that spoke out against Trump's treatment of disabled reporter, Serge Kovalski. Streep said, "And this instinct to humiliate, when it's modeled by someone in the public platform, by someone powerful, it filters down into everybody's life, because it kind of gives permission for other people to do the same thing." On the red carpet at the SAG Awards, in response to being asked why art is so important right now, Viola Davis said, "it is our job as artist to push the envelope and present ideas that people otherwise would not accept. And when you show it on screen, even if people are uncomfortable, it's in their heads, it's in their hearts, and they leave the theater different." Many other actors have commented on what art should be, especially in the current political climate. Some people have criticized the actors who have spoken against Trump and in support of various causes, questioning what right these people have to say these things, but these artists are using their platforms to address injustice and to support causes that need help now more than ever.

More traditional forms art have also been used to make a stand against Trump and to support the groups that are worried about the future. A significant piece of art that has appeared post-election is the "Fearless Girl" statue that stares down the Wall Street bull. The statue appeared on International Women's Day and immediately became a national headline. At the feet of the statue is a plaque that says "Know the power of women in leadership." While the statue was originally only slated to remain there for a month, but shortly after the installation people began demanding that the statue remain there permanently. After the enormous amount of support for the statue, New York's mayor announced that the "Fearless Girl" would remain in

the spot for a year. Some people have been against the statue staying in its current place; touting it as a publicity stunt. The artist of the Wall Street bull, Arturo Di Modica, was one of those people. He called it an “advertising trick” (Miller). The statue was installed by the State Street Global Advisors as an encouragement for diverse governing boards, but the statue means more than that to the public that has celebrated the “Fearless Girl” since her unveiling.

Political change and social upheaval like what our country is currently experiencing raise questions on the purpose of museums. Museums can react to the events happening in society or they can stay steadfast and unresponsive to political events. Opinions about this vary, but lately many museums have responded to Trump and the political maelstrom that is happening. Many museums and galleries were asked to close their doors in an act of protest on Inauguration Day. The organizers of this protest wanted museums to show that they were safe places for resistant thinking. But “in a spirit of community, inclusivity, and freedom of expression and in keeping with the museum’s founding belief that art can open peoples’ eyes and minds” the Guggenheim Museum remained open (Bowley). To complement their statement, the museum planted Yoko Ono’s “Wish Tree” in front of the building and invited visitors to write down their wishes for the future and hang them from the branches. The Guggenheim believes that when museums respond to events it should be in an artistic and subtle way, but many museums including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art have confronted issues straight on. The Davis Museum at Wellesley College staged a protest Trump’s immigration policies and the travel ban by removing or covering 120 works of art that were either created or donated by an immigrant (Bowley). Museums are choosing to be institutions of resistance. Rather than just letting the art speak or ignoring politics completely, museums are trying to show people what

would become of art and society if the racist and prejudicial events that they have protested come to pass.

It is not just modern works that are resonating with people but old ones as well. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Margaret Atwood discusses the renewed popularity of classic dystopian novels like her *A Handmaid's Tale* and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. While sales of Atwood's 1985 dystopian novel has risen on bestseller lists due to the upcoming TV series based on the novel, Atwood believes that the novel echoes many current issues and concerns in society. In the interview, Atwood said, "When it first came out it was viewed as being far-fetched. However, when I wrote it I was making sure I wasn't putting anything into it that human beings had not already done somewhere at some time" (Reuters). From everything to pro-choice debates to seeking an escape to Canada ties the novel and our real world together. Sales of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* spiked after Kellyanne Conway's use of the term, "alternative facts," which people have called "Orwellian" (Reuters). *Nineteen Eighty-Four* warns against government propaganda and historical revisionism, elements that are making this novel feel very timely to many readers. On April 4, 200 theaters across the United States simultaneously screen the film adaptation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in protest of Trump. In the novel, April 4 was the day that Winston begins rebelling. Organizers of this cinematic protest said that the screenings are "a stand against the 'simple truth that there are no such things as 'alternative facts'" and hope that it "initiate[s] a much-needed community conversation at a time when the existence of facts and basic human rights are under attack" (BBC). Works by Hannah Arendt, Sinclair Lewis, and John Steinbeck have also seen significant boosts in sales and popularity in the past year.

A form of writing that rose during the election and has continued after the inauguration are short stories that have been termed "Trump Fiction." After the election, *Slate* launched the

Trump Story Project inviting writers to create the dystopian future of Trump's America. The project addresses the concerns of many people who feel like they stumbled into an alternative universe after Election Day. Many of these stories, appear as forms of high satire, but some, including works discussing immigration, have frighteningly mirrored what has come to pass during Trump's brief time in office so far. *Slate* says that while think-pieces are important, but "fiction has a special power to clarify, galvanize, prophesy, and warn" (Winters).

Art, in all of its forms, is a medium for change and powerful platform for protest. Currently, many people feel scared and angry, so they need a source of release. Whether it comes in the form of outright protest of Trump and his policies, a celebration of the minorities that feel threatened, or an appeal to Trump supporters to share their side, but also to see the oppositions, these are things that people and society need right now. While people argue whether or not political art is important or whether it actually does something, it is creating discussion which is the ultimate goal of political art.

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