

## Critical Mass[es]: Reflections on the Flag Project as Activist Art

*Dipti Desai, Thu Bui and Lisa Di Filippo*

### **Abstract**

*This is a report on a peace project done at New York University, following the events of 9/11. The authors set their discussion into the framework of activist art and describe the social as well as artistic outcomes of their project.*

Immediately following September 11, 2001, a series of discussions and “teach-ins” were organized by an ad hoc group of NYU faculty, staff, and students. Each gathering addressed issues that were for the most part not dealt with by the media at the time, such as Islam and fundamentalism, labor, the meaning of an attack on the World Trade Center, war as a response, and media censorship. Dipti Desai, a professor in the Art Department, and Thi Bui, a graduate student in Art Education, became involved early on in the teach-ins. After three faculty-led teach-ins, the group decided to make the next one more student-centered, with a variety of forums for students to participate in the discussion and feel comfortable voicing their concerns, feelings, and experiences. We felt this was a perfect opportunity to engage students and the public through the visual arts in a dialogue about the role of art in a democratic society. Lisa DiFilippo, another graduate student in Art Education, joined us in planning this event. An on-site all day activist art project was agreed upon along with an hour-long workshop discussing the notion of activist art, its history, and the strategies activist artists employ.

### **Why activist art?**

In the planning stage, it was clear that this historical moment was significantly different from the sixties: a time that gave birth to teach-ins and when resistance and dissent took many different forms. There were lessons we had learned from the social movements in the sixties that could guide us in these different times. Influenced by the social movements of the sixties, activist artists seek to engage a wider audience by “taking to the streets”, to use Abbie Hoffman’s phrase. Taking art to the streets requires taking on the challenges of making public art. Public art, a relatively recent term, has a long history in the form of large memorial sculptures in public spaces, which for the most part represents a nationalist history commemorating heroes and significant events such as wars, what artist Judy Baca (1995) describes as the “cannon-in-the-park” (p. 131). Even in its contemporary incarnation, much public art or site-specif-

ic art since the 1960s, despite its democratic aspirations, simply expanded the museum walls into parks, streets, and plazas, keeping the modernist aesthetic canon in place. This conception of an extended public sphere for artworks often works hand in glove with the politics of urban development in many cities; serving the interests of developers, realtors and city officials (see Deutsche, 1988). Critic Jeff Kelly has also commented on this phenomenon: "What too many artists did was to parachute into a place and displace it with art. Site specificity was really more like an imposition of a kind of disembodied museum zone onto what had been very meaningful and present before that, which was the place" (quoted in Lacy, 1995, p. 24). Activist art or "new genre public art" (Lacy, 1995) is different from public art in that "place" or "location" closely aligned to the notion of community is central to the way artists work. This form of art is "not built on typology of materials, spaces, or artistic media, but rather on concepts of audience, relationship, communication, and political intention" (Lacy, 1995, p. 28). As a grassroots approach, activist art is a forum that opens public dialogue on issues of concern to people. Garoian (1999) and Kester (1989) argue that activist art should be based on performativity. The activist work of art from this perspective is "less a discrete object than it is a process of dialogue, exchange, and even collaboration that responds to the changing conditions and needs of both viewer and maker" (Kester, 1989, p. 15).

The current censorship of the media by the government required this kind of grassroots approach, if we were to empower individuals and communities to question and challenge the one-sided media broadcasts headlined everywhere as "America Under Attack". We drew inspiration and guidance from the grassroots movements initiated by African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Chicanos/as, Native-Americans, Women, Gays and Lesbians in the sixties in that the strategies we used were based on the understanding that social activism and art are inextricably linked. Freida High (1997) refers to this connection as "chiasmus" that is "art in politics/politics in art" (p. 120). The characteristics of activist art, which include focusing on process rather than product, engaging the public through direct participation, connecting to a wider audience, challenging the power structures through action, and empowering people to take social action (Felshin, 1995) seemed appropriate if we were to build a "war of position," to use Antonio Gramsci's (1971) term, with any hope of impacting U.S. foreign policy. Discussing the work of activist artists in her book *What is Art?* Nina Felshin (1995) states, "artists engage in an active *process* of representation, attempting at the very least to 'change the conversation,' to empower individuals and communities, and ultimately to stimulate social change." (p. 26). Through art, we hoped at the very least to change the conversations on "America Under Attack".

## Patriotism and Identity

In the days following the attack, United States hegemony as a superpower played out politically in the global arena. The media continued to present a one-sided story, and the nation as an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983) bound by freedom, liberty, and justice was reinforced by the display of U.S. flags, which



**Figure 1:** Spontaneous memorials on Broadway near the site of the World Trade Center.

rapidly appeared everywhere. To be “American”<sup>1</sup> was marked on one’s body in particular ways. Wearing the flag was a way to proclaim one’s patriotism. For Dipti, the first few days after the attack felt particularly unsafe as people on the streets and subways in New York read her East Indian body in anti-American ways. She became a walking target, like so many other South Asians. Constantly aware of performing difference, she caught herself (much to her horror) with the fleeting desire to pin the American flag on her bag in order to avoid being physically harmed. Given that certain ethnic groups had become targets for hate crimes, the flag for us became symbolic not only of patriotism but also violence and xenophobia. Immediately, it became very clear to us that patriotism was a significant issue that needed to be addressed.

What exactly is patriotism? Who is a patriot? Unquestioning nationalist pride left little room for individuals with transnational identities, such as Thi, whose perspective as both a Vietnamese refugee and a U.S. citizen, as well as a racial minority in the U.S., complicates the question of simple allegiance. We felt there needed to be choices beyond President Bush’s ultimatum to the people of the world – “If you’re not with us, you’re against us.” Contemplating on our experiences in New York City and thinking about the display of nationalism, which raised pressing questions about patriotism, identity, and war, Thi proposed a flag that would, in encouraging the need to ask these questions, subvert the American flag’s symbolic appropriation by pro-war enthusiasts. At the teach-in, participants would be invited to write out their thoughts and questions onto pieces of colored paper, which in combination created an image of an American flag more complex than the official U. S. flag constantly shown by the mainstream media. In writing and participating in the physical creation of the flag, the audience would become

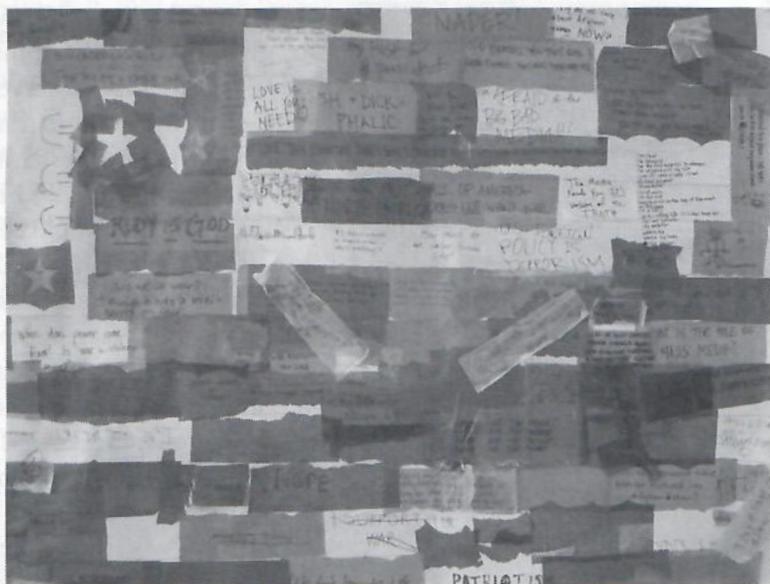


Figure 2: The flag in its current state.

the actors in an embodiment of the issues at hand. Our goal was to create “a serious forum where disagreement and debate could fruitfully go on so that a politics of marginalization didn’t occur” (Apple, 2002), and which would result in a visual representation of the complexities of public opinion and American identity.

### An Activist Art Project

The November 16, 2001, teach-in was called the NYU Day of Dialogue. It was prepared to serve hundreds, even thousands of NYU students. Workshops and small discussion circles on a wide range of topics had been organized as a direct response to the war in Afghanistan. The flag project was set up in the art room for people to participate in throughout the day, but a disappointingly low turnout to the entire event left the art room fairly empty. Most of the people who participated in the flag project were themselves organizers of the teach-in, although there were a few who were not involved. Lisa had gotten involved with the project intending to make students more aware of the issues at hand; however during the course of the day, she felt as though we were preaching to the converted.

It became apparent to us, as the morning came to a close that we needed to bring the project to a more public space. This posed a problem because a permit is required to set up an activity in Washington Square Park or on any city property. Our solution was to take the flag to the nearest open space on NYU property, which happened to be the plaza in front of the Stern



**Figure 3:** Students at Stern Plaza.

School of Business. We wanted to give everyone's opinion a voice, but as Lisa observed, we were seen by most of the students who passed by as merely an anti-war group. She had assumed students would be more open to an activist project, but found that Stern Plaza was quite conservative. In fact, before long a white male student began to yell at our small group, incidentally comprised entirely of women, and mostly women of color. He said that the silent majority of Americans were for war, and only a few minorities were trying to change their minds. In case this student was correct, Thi and Lisa tried writing

a few fake pro-war statements on the flag, in spite of their discomfort in doing so, to see if it would encourage anyone to participate. It didn't.

Clearly, one cannot be politically neutral in an activist role. The challenge, however, is to get people from all social positions and views to participate in an activist art project. Our attempt to be inclusive by including a few pro-war opinions failed to overcome the chilly response of students in front of the business school. This failure required us to be attentive to the ways our social position and location in history determine audience response (Alcoff, 1991; Frankenberg & Mani, 1996; Mani 1990). Furthermore, we learned first hand about the politics of space and how different spaces are over-determined by location (hooks, 1995). We found that the open space outside a school of business does not necessarily equate with a public space. Public spaces are not neutral. Who owns and controls spaces, whether public or private, shapes the environment in particular ways. Our audience outside the business school was obviously largely comprised of business students and faculty and a few others who used the space to reach other buildings. This location then, shaped the art project in that we were read as anti-war activists, even though there was no direct indication of our specific political affiliations or sentiments.

### **A Second Try**

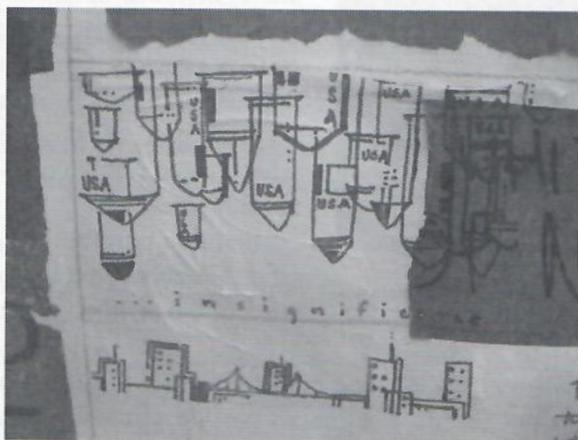
We did take some experience from that day. Remembering that con-

text is crucial to how people read and participate in an activist based art project, Thi reworked the project for the NYU Art Department's Open Studio on November 30, 2001. Feeling that something was needed to remind an art audience of the context of the flag, she made a video loop of the week's evening television news reports on the U.S. and Afghanistan, and played it as a TV installation without sound next to the flag. Instead of standing by the flag and personally inviting people to participate, as had been done at the teach-in, she posted instructions for people to read on their own. The instructions said,

This piece asks for your participation.

Write your thoughts on a piece of tissue paper.

Brush starch onto the flag.



**Figure 4:** Detail of the flag.

Brush your piece of paper onto the starched area.

This installation was much more successful. Many people watched the news loop, others read the instructions and added their comments to the flag. The open studio event was particularly well attended. The project had a more public atmosphere even though it happened indoors in a school building. Moreover, the event happened at night, with food and alcohol being served nearby, a live DJ and dance club-like video projections enlivening the room. In the dim light of that space, with the video projections on the wall echoing the glow of the television, the flag seemed to be more inviting for participation than it had been in the bright daylight on Stern Plaza.

For us, this project raised many questions about activist art, similar to the ones asked by art critics about public art, whether activist public art or not. What effect does activist art have on the public? Is it at all possible to determine the ways activist art changes social conditions? Or, is it simply another genre that artists can choose to use? For the artists in the project, the



**Figure 5:** Open studio event.

tension between controlling the aesthetic dimension of the project and leaving it completely to the public was palpable, given our choice to let the public shape the aesthetics. In our mind's eye, we had imagined a more painterly approach to handling the tissue paper that would create layers of images and words and meanings. Instead, the flag looked flat and didactic. Many artists involved in activist art do control the aesthetic dimension of their projects. For those artist who use ethnography or oral history as part of their process, what Foster (1999) calls "artist as ethnographers" the public participates only in the capacity of informants about the commu-

nity. Direct audience participation in the creation of the artwork is often minimal for many activist art projects.

Our difficulties with accessing a public audience illustrate the reality that "the public" is not simply what exists outside of the art world. The public sphere is a complicated concept that manifests itself in a myriad of ways, and one that the activist artist must try to understand in order to be effective. One of the issues that must be considered is the site-specificity of activist art. Our experience in front of the business school reminded us of Kelly's (1995) distinction between sites and places – site being the physical properties of a space, and places being the "reservoirs of human content" (p.142). Clearly the attitudes of people using that place were of equal if not greater importance than the physical openness of the plaza, which was what we had mistaken for a more "public" space than an indoor classroom. In considering the implications of a place, one can look at its history, and the way people who use it understand and experience the world, which will have an impact on how they will participate in an activist art project.

Another issue is the temporality of most activist art. Certain projects such as this remain only in memory. Kwon (1997) describes current forms of site-specific art as "discursive," in other words it does not necessarily incorporate a physical location. The site for artistic practice encompasses sociopolitical issues and problems, cultural debates or theoretical ideas or concepts,

and can have an activist dimension. "Discursive site-specific art may be interactive or process-driven, but they are "willfully temporary" (Meyers, 2000), with the only remains often being a photo-documentation of the artwork. War, however, rages on. The issues that we addressed are not concluded. The flag project continues to evolve in response to events as they unfold. Even as we question our ability to impact social change through activist art, we need to remember that "art constitutes one of the rare locations where acts of transcendence can take place and have a wide-ranging transformative impact" (hooks, 1995, p. 8).  
A detail of the flag.

## Notes

1. We use the term "American" in quotations here to bring attention to the wider implications of the hegemonic discourse which equates America with the U.S. and ignores the rest of the Americas – Canada, Central and South America. While inaccurate, this term does reflect the current state of U.S. hegemony, and given the context of this activist project in relation to patriotism, we decided to use it with tremendous reserve in the rest of this paper.

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Dipti Desai, Thi Bui and lisa DiFilippo work at New York University, Department of Art and Art Professions, and can be reached at [ddz5@nyu.edu](mailto:ddz5@nyu.edu).