



# TEAM *of* ART

## HOW ART INFLUENCED AND HAS BEEN INFLUENCED BY POLITICAL EVENTS?

### General Objective

The purpose of this practical sheet is to examine the relationship between art and political ideologies and events. To be more specific, this sheet aims at explaining how political thinking has influenced the arts, both in terms of style and subject, and in terms of moments of enhanced transformation in history. Moreover, how we will try to find out how the arts have impacted history and politics—defining art as a means of direct political action as well as the means to originate social change, sometimes in a quieter way.

In this practical sheet, you will:

- ✓ learn the difference between art and propaganda;
- ✓ get a more thorough understanding of art and its relationship to political history;
- ✓ explore unexpected ideas about pleasure, beauty, purpose, and process in the context of what is called a politically committed artistic practice.



## Themes to be analyzed

- Are concepts of beauty and pleasure fundamentally in conflict with art made for a political purpose?
- What is the relationship of artistic freedom to political commitment?
- Does an artist have to take a committed political stance?
- How do class, race, and gender can be related to political art?
- Are art and propaganda equally exclusive?

## What you'll need:

- ✓ A good internet connection in order to access Europeana and Google Art if you want to have a deep knowledge regarding the suggested artworks.
- ✓ Access probably from your library or from an online library/database to those central texts:
  - Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?* (1949) Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 3rd ed., 1988, [especially chapters 1-3].
  - Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art* (1898) (Penguin Classics). London and New York: Penguin, 2004.

## Challenges and issues

During a period of social change which is usually connected with a severe political and financial crisis, art and its representatives, the artists, express its political context. Nevertheless, this does not mean that all art is always and, in any chance, politically motivated, and of course not all artists are committed to create an artwork demonstrating a political situation, approving it or denying it. Moreover, not all political art is always created with the purpose to declare resistance, to protest to demand a change. Some political art is about maintaining the status quo. Art and architecture often demonstrate control and power, even if the iconography is not clearly polemical or the

opposite. Some powerful art is monumental and communicates its power through its scale and permanence, recommending a commitment to reflect the strength and omnipotence of the ruler or the state. Some powerful art is temporary, inflammable, and aimed to originate some kind of change or call for protest.

The challenges and the dilemmas faced both by the art community and the society in understanding the role of the artist in the world can be seen in different contexts, such as in important cultural institutions, or in museums which are places of power, and in the methods of exhibiting non-Western art in Western contexts which might be used to examine questions of colonialism and appropriation, etc. There are a series of examples and questions that one might think and set to themselves when trying to understand and define the relationship between art and political events, for example:

- Do we favor seeing Western art as political? (noting biases of ethnicity)
- What about art made by men? (noting biases of gender)
- How much have we learned about the relationship of art to either the political establishment or what might be called a politico-artistic resistance?

## Adaptation

The important part in any consideration of the relationship between art and politics is their historical trajectory and connectedness through different periods and eras. Nevertheless, it is correspondingly important to underline the aesthetic potential of art, as the core of its political engagement. Aesthetics, or more precisely "aesthetic regime"<sup>1</sup>, according to Jacques Rancière, is different from the so-called ethical and poetic regimes that previously defined art. Ethical regime of images as explained by Plato demotes artworks to inconsistent and fallacious representations, while poetic regime represents

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<sup>1</sup> Rancière J., (2004), *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p.23.

beauty and imitation as the artworks' main purposes. However, aesthetic regime as proposed by Rancière breaks the barriers imposed by these two regimes between artistic practices and social and political spheres, and invests and engages arts with politics, society and thought.

### Practical examples and inspiration

We will try to apply the aforementioned questions about art, politics and commitment to a selection of images from the late eighteenth to early twentieth centuries, focusing on questions of subject matter, style, historical context, site, materials, purpose, and audience. This part of the sheet is an amalgamation of lecture (historical and biographical material combined with formal analysis) and a targeted discussion of how the broad issues underlined and defined in part one might be applied to specific works of art. Students can be asked to apply the ideas outlined above to the artworks shown.

Approximately in an hour, this content area can be investigated through many objects and projects, including:

#### *Artistic intention vs. political appropriation*

Some artworks raise interesting ideas about the question of the political intentions of the artist. For example, Jean-François Millet's **The Gleaners** (1857) and his **Man with a Hoe** (1863) appear to celebrate the oppressed rural worker by raising him as a praiseworthy subject for art and painting him in a way that beautifies his body and the land. A comparison between **Millet's The Sower** (1850) and the **Sower with Setting Sun** (1888) by Vincent Van Gogh can give us a more concrete idea of the power of images of work. Yet, the use of the image for political purposes raises questions of obtruse political commitment. This subject is further analyzed in a comparison to the more clearly polemical treatment of the figures in Gustave Courbet's **The Stone Breakers** (1849), where the titular figures' poverty is brought to the fore. The pitiful state of the torn clothing and bent backs of the old man and young

boy are indicators of their unwell and poor existence, while they work to break large stones into smaller pieces of paving gravel. Both figures are turned away from the viewer, an arrangement that functions in multiple ways. On the one hand, it brings the viewer into the composition as we face the same direction as the man and boy. Despite the details of their clothing, though, we cannot distinguish their faces, and they are not recognized as individuals—they might stand for the masses, or even for “everyman.” Finally, the back-turned poses also demonstrate how the overall composition “squeezes” the figures: the canvas is too small for them—the man cannot stand up and stay within the frame—while at the same time the hill that rises behind them, leaving only a small corner of horizon line, constructs a narrow space within the canvas. They are imprisoned in the composition as they are imprisoned in their poverty.



The Gleaners - Jean-François Millet



Man with a Hoe - Jean-François Millet



The Sower - Jean-François Millet





Sower with Setting Sun-Vincent van Gogh



The Stonebreakers – Gustave Courbet

### *Political Content, Pretty Pictures*

The political content was often represented through pretty and beautified pictures, creating a misunderstanding regarded the sense of beauty on art

and its relationship with political events and their interpretation. For example, a focused and detailed study of Claude Monet's **Boulevard des Capucines** (1873) can be used here to discuss the results of Napoleon's renovation of the city, containing the benevolent introduction of light and air, of gardens and parcs—but also the more strategic removal of the stones and narrow passageways used to barricade the streets and constrain the movement of government troops during the French revolutions. Moody and deserted images taken at dawn to elude any human activity. Through these, nostalgia might be an impediment to a political reading. While it may be hard for us and the learners to see today, given the common view of Impressionism as an art of pretty pictures, the historical decoding of this work by Monet demonstrates otherwise. The painting was first shown in the studio of the photographer Nadar that overlooked the Boulevard—thereby inviting comparison between the painting and the real-time view. The exhibition was actually the first Impressionist exhibition—scheduled for 1871 but had to be rescheduled due to the Franco-Prussian War. Presenting the work outside of official exhibition venues was also seen a political move. It was in response to this exhibition that the descriptive term “Impressionism” was used as a form of derision, implying that the “little black tongue lickings” of paint could not be considered as a complete painting. In 1873, the Boulevard des Capucines was a site of glamour, frequented by Baudelaire's flâneur, and the well-dressed bourgeoisie—those out to see and be seen, with the new Paris Opera in the background. Yet, this was also a former site of revolutionary activity, as everyone viewing the painting then would have known. The “**Fusillade on the Boulevard des Capucines**” took place in 1848, and 36 people died in a battle between an angry mob and the police. But does his knowledge of all that make Monet a committed artist?





Boulevard des Capucines – Claude Monet

This section then moves on to consider other socially significant subjects, as in Edgar Degas's *Ironers* (1884) and *In a Café (Absinthe)* (1873). Does it matter that we find pleasure in these works? These works of ironers and drinkers had a great influence on Picasso, who painted a series of women ironing at the turn

of the century, concentrating on the underside of Paris. The political sympathies of these paintings can be used to introduce the political subject matter in other more experimental works by Picasso, such as his painting **Les Femmes d'Alger** (1907) and his Cubist collage **Still Life with Bottle of Suze** (1912). These artworks have been considered as a critique of colonialist brutalities in central Africa and an anarchist outcry against the Balkan War, though today our historical context inspires us to critique the inherent racism and sexism of Picasso's treatments. Questions of historical distance, authorship, and audience are significant here, as we seek to unpack questions of Picasso's commitment and our own. This subsection concludes with a discussion of the complex political iconography of Picasso's **Guernica** (1937) and its continued appropriation of traditional poses like Michelangelo's **Pietà** (1498–9), much like we saw earlier surrounding David's **Marat**.



Les repasseuses – Edgar Germain Hilaire Degas



*In a Café – Edgar Degas*



*Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.) - Pablo Picasso*





*Verre et bouteille de Suze - Pablo Picasso*



*Guernica - Pablo Picasso*



*Michelangelo's - Pietà*

### *Politicians and Activists*

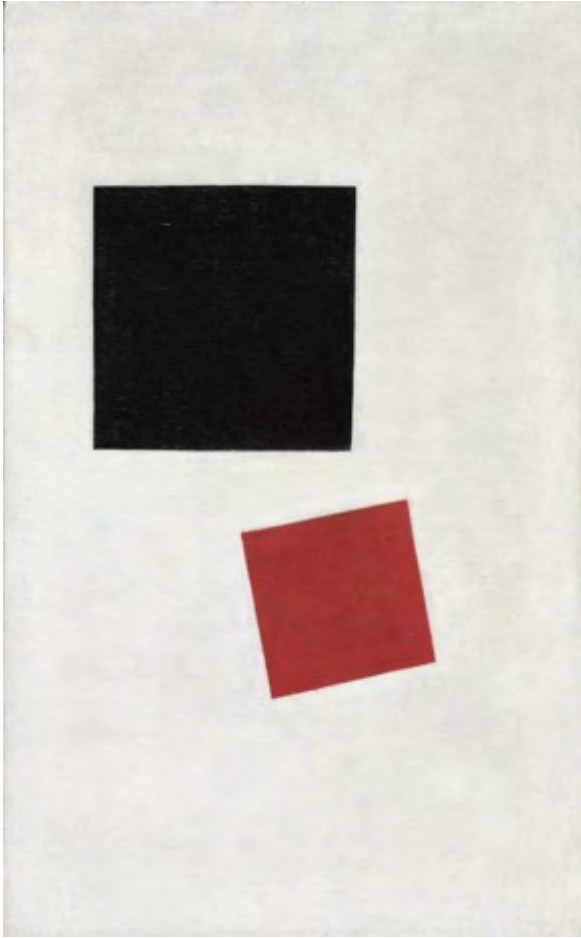
Several artists are often considered as activists, people who have a strong interest in social subjects. For example, Kazimir Malevich, whose images of peasants from the period before World War I underline his interest in the politics of serfdom, and the rebuttal of officially sanctioned art. Other works, like his designs for the absurdist play **Victory over the Sun** (1913) and his abstract painting **Red and Black Square** (1915), were considered as equally rebellious because of their radical formal properties and their challenge to official art. After the Russian Revolution, when Malevich was given a sanctioned position as an art teacher and cultural statesman by the Bolshevik government, his non-objectivity was put to direct, propagandistic, partisan political use. His designs for the "Committee on Rural Poverty" from 1918 are here compared with examples of painted trains, walls, and other forms of Bolshevik propaganda. To put Malevich into the context of artistic activism, political posters by his colleague El Lissitzky are also examined here, as is



Vladimir Tatlin's architectural project Monument to the Third International (1919–20)—including images of it being paraded through the streets of Leningrad.



Victory over the Sun – Kazimir Malevich



Black Square and Red Square – Kazimir Malevich

As a means of conclusion, the lecture considers a typical image of the political activist—the raised fist—in art. Yet, as a stand-in for the artists themselves, this political figure is more complex to decode. Three works by Käthe Kollwitz—***Outbreak*** (1903), ***Bread!*** (1904), and ***Never Again War!***

(1924)—are used to introduce the theme, which are then compared to Eugène Delacroix's painting *Liberty Leading the People* (1830). To conclude, a Situationist-designed poster of a raised fist from the Paris unrest of May 1968 (*La Lutte continue*) can be studied in the context of street graffiti and. The raised fist is a clear call to action—but are we sure that it always expresses the same thing, regardless of context or intended audience? Using an image and an event that students recognize, ask the students if they can bring together artistic agency and political actions. What kind of artwork does a committed artist of the twenty-first century represent?



Losbruch (Outbreak) - Käthe Kollwitz



Bread! - Käthe Kollwitz





Never Again War! - Käthe Kollwitz



Liberty Leading the People – Eugène Delacroix

### *Final activity*

This sheet contains an additional film screening of Ai Wei Wei: **Never Sorry** by director Alison Klayman about the titular Chinese dissident. The film explains





the multifaceted relationship between political imagery and political practice and accordingly between the artist and the state.

Following the film, some of the learners assigned to lead discussion can react as facilitators and facilitate a debate. They could also write a 300-to-500-word paper based on the following prompts:

- Ai Wei Wei is an artist that eliminates the limits of contemporary art making—even his actions on social media might be seen as a kind of political activism merged with performance art. But is this really visual art, or is it political spectacle? In fact, does our media-saturated world reflect the end of art as we know it? Or, does it necessitate a converted sense of our need for art—perhaps in differently mediated platforms?

## Additional resources

For additional background or follow-up information, the readings that follows are a combination of texts specifically geared towards art and politics. It is by no means meant to be exhaustive but will guide the user to both new and canonical texts that might prove useful.

- Antliff, Allan. *Anarchy and Art: From the Paris Commune to the fall of the Berlin Wall*. Vancouver: Arsenal, 2007.
- Baxandall, Lee and Stefan Morawski, eds. *Marx & Engels on Literature and Art: A Selection of Writings*. St. Louis: Telos Press, 1973.
- Beaumont, Matthew, ed. *As Radical as Reality Itself: Essays on Marxism and Art for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Oxford and New York: Peter Lang, 2007.
- Boime, Albert. *Art in an Age of Bonapartism, 1800–1815*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Boime, Albert. *Art in an Age of Civil Struggle, 1848–1871*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
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- Bradley, Will and Charles Esche, eds. *Art and Social Change: A Critical Reader*. London: Tate, 2007.
- Chave, Anna. “New Encounters with les Demoiselles d’Avignon: Gender, Race, and the Origins of Cubism.” *Art Bulletin*. v. 76, no. 4 (1994), 597–612.
- Clark, T. J. *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France, 1848–1851*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982.
- Clark, T. J. “The Conditions of Artistic Creation” (1974) in Eric Ferme. *Art History and Its Methods*. London: Phaidon. 1995. 245–253.
- Crow, Thomas. *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris*. Yale: Yale University Press, 1985.
- Egbert, Donald Drew. *Social Radicalism and the Arts in Western Europe*. New York: Knopf, 1970.
- *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932*. New York: Guggenheim/Rizzoli, 1992.

- Harrison, Charles, Paul Wood and Jason Gaiger, eds. *Art in Theory: 1815-1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.
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- Joffe, Dennis G. and Frederick H. White, eds. *Russian Avant-garde and Radical Modernism: An Introductory Reader*. Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2012).
- Kachurin, Pamela. *Making Modernism Soviet: The Russian Avant-Garde in the Early Soviet Era*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2013.
- Leighton, Patricia. *The Liberation of Painting: Modernism and Anarchism in Avant-Guerre Paris*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.
- Leighton, Patricia. *Re-Ordering the Universe: Picasso and Anarchism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).
- Leighton, Patricia. "The White Peril and l'art nègre: Picasso, Primitivism, and Anti-colonialism." *Art Bulletin*. v. 72, no. 4. December 1990. 609–630.
- Maynard, Solomon. *Marxism and Art: Essays Classic and Contemporary*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979.
- Rockhill, Gabriel. *Radical History and the Politics of Art*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.
- Schapiro, Meyer. *Modern Art, Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. New York: Braziller, 1978.
- Schapiro, Meyer. *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist and Society: Selected Papers*. New York: Braziller, 1994)
- Shapiro, Theda. *Painters and Politics: The European Avant-Garde and Society*. New York: Elsevier, 1976.