Aesthetic Investigations
Published on behalf of the Dutch Association of Aesthetics

Reviews

Review of Vid Simoniti, *Artists Remake the World: A Contemporary Manifesto* (2023), New Haven: Yale University Press

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With *Artists Remake the World: A Contemporary Manifesto* (2023), Vid Simoniti surveys recent exhibition-based contemporary art (most since 2016) that 'glimpse possibilities for repairing the world'.[1] This book promises to be of interest to artists, critics, and anyone interested or specialised in political art.

Simoniti's focus is on open-ended projects whose 'inconclusivity' he contrasts with journalism's objectivity.[2] This may explain why he ignores well-known victories such as C.A.T.P.C. and Renzo Martens' promoting plantation workers' artistic voices (since 2012), Cecylia Malik's successful river and forest actions (since 2009), Santiago Sierra's exposing inhumane work conditions(since 2000), Regina José Galindo's protesting femicide (since 1999), Doris Salcedo's lamentations of civic violence (since 1999), or the Guerrilla Girls' identifying artworld injustices (since 1985).

Rather than defend whether his examples count as art, Simoniti defers to institutional definitions of art.[3] That is, those projects exhibited in artworld contexts necessarily count as art. The downside of this approach is that it ignores the fact that not all exhibited objects begin/endure as art, let alone begin/endure as political art. He does, however, admit of a paradox regarding exhibition-based political art, that is, it can feel 'forbiddingly abstruse, experimental, hard to access, inward looking, even elitist.'[4] Of course, political art's accessibility largely depends on the curators' efforts to clarify the artwork's significance.

Simoniti's introduction describes his aim to demonstrate how 'through art, we momentarily *remake* the world as we know it.' By this he means that art can 'remake the logic of the public sphere in its very form, reminding us that there continues to exist another and more careful kind of thinking.'[5] He develops this argument over seven chapters. Although he bemoans 'wall label politicking', whereby artworks are framed as political even though their political potential eludes viewers, I found myself struggling to see how some of his examples count as political art. Works such as Joseph Beuys' *7000* Eichen, Agnes Denes' *Tree Mountain*, Anne-Marie Maes' *Intelligent Guerrilla Beehive* and other ecological artworks strike me as practical, not political, unless political art simply means thinking differently than before.[6] Rather than evoking 'uncomfortable truths the artist believes the society must face,'[7] these practical artworks propose strategies that are anything but 'inconclusive'. Moreover, the political valence of exhibited artworks also rests on the curator's imaginative interpretation. So long as that is the case, the book would have benefited from offering a definition of political art that covers the wide variety of potentially political works.

Although Simoniti never defines 'political art', he characterises three approaches: 'politics as *discourse*', 'politics as *action*,' and 'politics as the creation of a shared *manifest world*.'[8] His descriptions indicate that political art is transgressive, 'antagonistic', experimental, and/or troubling, thus confounding spectators' worldviews, a notion of political art he attributes to Theodor Adorno.[9] Political art lets people 'try on dispositions', ask new questions, and adopt different attitudes that elicit either policy changes or governmental reforms.[10] This is no less true of socially-engaged art practices that engender policy changes or conceptual art practices that invite visitors to adopt different attitudes regarding what counts as art. Unfortunately, Simoniti doesn't distinguish political art that is discursive from discursive artworks that are merely social; that is, they don't necessarily identify/expose disturbing ideas. Unfortunately, Simoniti doesn't distinguish political art that is discursive from discursive artworks that are merely social; that is, those works that don't necessarily identify/expose disturbing ideas.

Simoniti that 'socially-engaged art is less like an action and more like a folk poem: complex in its artistry but arising out of and for a special community'.[11] He thus treats socially-engaged practices that afford social opportunities such as Suzanne Lacy's *Between the Door and the Street* (2013) and Jorge Menno Barreto's *Restauro* (2016) on equal footing with those that welcome and encourage reform.[12] *Restauro* introduces agro-forestry's plausibility, but pop-up restaurants are too ephemeral to pack a political punch, unless some remarkable meal procures enduring memories. It should be noted that John Dewey's notion of art as experience is nowhere discussed here.

Politics as *discourse* entails evidence-gathering practices such as Joanna Moll's 19 125 postage-stamp-sized images of insects and micro-chips, Sadie Barnette's displaying her Black Panther father's 500-page FBI file, Ai Wei-

wei's floating a lotus comprised of 1 005 refugees' life jackets and his presenting 150 *straightened* rebar rods retrieved from an earthquake-destroyed school, Forensic Architecture's videos that unravel crime scenes, and Ebony Patterson's collaged portraits meant to restore dignity to victims of police violence. Although Simoniti champions such artworks, he worries that such artworks fail to *demand* change, even when spectators have visceral responses. Given these artists' refusal to make demands, it is contradictory to evaluate their artworks in terms of their impact, which bears comparison with investigative journalists, academic researchers, and NGOs charged with similar tasks.[13]

Despite Simoniti's original interest in inconclusivity, he ultimately champions politics as actions that aim for *systemic* change. Examples of artworks yielding 'practical, beneficial outcomes'[14] include those featured in Tania Bruguera's *Museum of Arte Útil* (since 2013) as well as Olafur Eliasson's handheld solar lamps whose sales have facilitated the distribution of nearly a million more to electricity deserts. Further, we read about Assemble's rejuvenating several 'derelict' buildings in Liverpool, Kateřina Šedá's synchronising an entire village's daily activities, and Marjetica Potrč's installing a 'dry toilet' in Venezuela. One category of works that Simoniti fails to mention are artist-initiated collective actions that boost participant wellbeing, actions that have prompted museums to regularly program artists to engage visitors in unusual activities. Moreover, collective actions initiate chain reactions such that participants/observers not only feel empowered to remake their world, but they gain confidence and skills as they recruit others to do so.

Simoniti writes, 'Political art appears in the gallery setting and in street protests, as anarchic participatory projects or as beautiful figurative paintings, and political views in art may be expressed forcefully, or enigmatically.[15] Although I agree with this claim, his failure to distinguish activist props from activist artworks leaves me wondering about the artistic status of political/activist expressions, such as Extinction Rebellion's performances/costumes/parade props, pink pussycat hats, singing, chanting, drumming, campsites, footballers taking a knee, or marching with protest signs exemplary of political activism .[16](65-70) A notable absence in Simoniti's book is 'Hope to Nope: Graphics and Politics 2008-2018', the infamous London Design Museum exhibition that was left one-third empty when 20 artists removed their artworks to protest the museum's renting its facility to an aerospace and defense company for a private drinks party.

Following Nelson Goodman, Simoniti claims artworks organise our experience of the world:

> They do so through *exemplification*: 'Serving as samples of, and thereby focusing attention upon, certain [...] shared or sharable forms, colors, feelings, such works induce reorganisation of our accustomed world in accordance with these features.'[17]

Additionally, 'By reorganising perception, art becomes relevant to politics in

a manner that separates it quite sharply both from overt political discussion and activism.'[18] Simoniti continues:

> Worldmaking through art involves making images that shape our cognitive habits: it is art's way of suggesting a pattern of thought about what appears *normal*, what appears *salient*, and how we are moved to *evaluate* and *explain* phenomena.[19]

Artistic examples of worldmaking include Maja Smrekar's familial relationship with wolves and dogs, Lina Iris Viktor's self-portraits as Ancient Greek priestess Libyan Sybil, Fernando Palma Rodríguez's uncanny automata modeled on Aztec myths, and Nick Cave's protective soundsuits (since 1991), originally made in response to Rodney King's death at the hands of the police.

At one point, Simoniti commends 'effective altruism', as if to suggest that ethical artists ought to land high-paying jobs and donate most of their income to 'maximally efficient' NGOs.[20] The critical reader must raise an eyebrow at this suggestion, given the contested stature of effective altruism, a movement that has been said to be neither altruistic, nor particularly effective outside of being a means to legitimise one's goal to out-earn others, treating every decision as transactional, and justifying one's obsessions with investments. Another contestable claim concerns Simoniti's proposal that ethical museums ought to support political movements.[21] At least in the US, non-profits are legally required to steer clear of political campaigns, and it is very possible that there are good reasons for them to do so.

Simoniti discusses art historian Larne Abse Gogarty's criticism that useful art 'resuscitates the life of citizens left behind by the capitalist machine, but thereby simply remakes them into workers and consumers. Instead of collaboration with the dominant politico-economic system, the implication seems to be that artists should decisively break with it.'[22] Truth be told, all art is useful to someone, first and foremost the artist, but also the gallerists, curators, critics, collectors, interior designers, and artists' heirs. Once we pretend that 'useful art' is somehow a distinct category, the only 'ethical option' is to stop making art altogether. He bizarrely distinguishes activist art from its '"useful art" cousin', since only the former is 'inherently connected to *anti-systemic* demands.'[23] But even if activist artists manage to evade artworld institutions, their art escapes neither 'utility' nor museum collections.

In discussing both the rise of post-internet art, as well as its tendency toward appropriating internet culture and self-exploitation/attention, Simoniti envisions a 'kind of utopian post-gender and post-racial society emerging from it' akin to Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch's flamboyant video installations.[24] He remarks that 'online cultural consumers are not passive. As the works at the [2016] Berlin Biennale revealed, internet producer-consumers ("prosumers' for short) became frenetically active, always searching, sharing, reacting, commenting, posting.'[25] For good, he holds visual artists to higher

standards than creatives whose output, whether internet memes, protest props/costumes, YouTube videos, actions, and texts bear resemblance to those of artists. He distinguishes artworks for their 'aesthetic experiences', such that spectators experience 'the joy of figuring out the purpose of each of the work's elements and how it all hangs together.'[26]

Finally, Simoniti turns to art focused on getting people to take climate change seriously. He distinguishes three dominant artistic approaches: 'artists trying to instil a sense of emergency in their audiences, create a sense of solidarity with non-human nature, or impress the audience with human ingenuity.'[27] He singles out Olafur Eliasson's *Ice Watch* for stimulating solidarity with melting ice, Christine and Margaret Wertheim's *Crochet Coral Reef* for encouraging 'cross-species empathy,'[28] Lisa Jackson's video *Biidaabon: First Light,* which envisions Toronto through Indigenous eyes as a place where humans and non-humans co-exist, Alberta Whittle's video installation whose six chapters focus on each month of the Caribbean hurricane interlaced with details of the transatlantic slave trade, and Maurice Mbikayi's photographic self-portrait of him as a 'techno-dandy' sited amidst a backdrop of digital detritus.

Simoniti concludes, 'When we think of art's relationship to political change, we therefore need not think of immediate impact, but rather of art envisioning the kind of cultural shift, the kind of future "worldmaking," which is necessary for better political relations to come into play'.[29] No doubt, 'artistic worldmaking in turn prepares the ground for the policy.'[30] He cites indoor smoking's disappearance as an example of behavioural change that forecasts the eventuality of fewer flights, vegetarian diets, eschewing fossil fuels, etc. Finally, he links art's role in political discourse to those philosophers who have 'treated rational deliberation as irredeemably corrupted by power relations,'[31] and thus 'sometimes invest art with much hope.'[32] 'Art, we might then suggest, enters precisely where deliberative democratic reason collides with its limitations.'[33] Ultimately, this book demonstrates that…

> Art is not necessarily better at getting us to "act," but it at least lets us meditate on difficulties of our political space by fixing our gaze on them, then letting them bubble underneath the surface of consciousness, employing irony, or double meaning, to keep them at least *in view*, without demeaning them with inadequacy and insincerity.[34]

We thus grasp his focus on inconclusivity, which insists that difficulties regarding our political space never stop bubbling up.

Simoniti's *Artists Remake the World* is a timely contribution to our understanding of an increasingly common form of artworks. Even those who only rarely visit contemporary art museums and/or galleries will have noticed how dramatically the priorities of contemporary artists have shifted from creating works that are merely contemplative to activities that are meant to (also)

have a positive impact on the world. *Artists Remake the World* will surely be of help in reorienting ourselves in this new art scene.

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ENDNOTES

1. Simoniti 2023, 12.
2. 46.
3. 17.
4. 2.
5. 126.
6. 131–136.
7. 54.
8. 103.
9. 163–164.
10. 85.
11. 76.
12. 55–56.
13. 63.
14. 57.
15. 4.
16. 65–70.
17. 84.
18. 84.
19. 85.
20. 61.
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26. 92.
27. 132.
28. 135.
29. 146.
30. 148.
31. 168.
32. 169.
33. 169.
34. 170.

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