CITIZENSHIP

A PRACTICE

OF SOCIETY

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Practicing Art, Practicing Citizenship

We Want Art to Do More, Better, Different
Since 2016, calls for access, accountability, equity, and transparency—calls for change—have resounded across the United States. They have been particularly audible within the country's cultural institutions. And of the voices that have risen in and around these institutions, artists' have echoed the loudest and the longest.[1]

Artists have often been vocal about politics, but their chorus became something closer to a cacophony in the past four years. On New York's High Line, two days before Election Day 2016, artists gathered to express their political views and visions in response to Zoe Leonard's *I want a president* (1992), a large print of which had been wheat-pasted at the south end of the elevated park. For Freedoms, the political action committee created by artists Eric Gottesman and Hank Willis Thomas earlier that year, has convened artist-led town hall meetings on topics such as immigration and gun control at more than two hundred cultural institutions across the country. In the January 2018 issue of *Artforum*, the photographer Nan Goldin revealed her addiction to OxyContin with a confessional essay and a series of photographs that implicated well-known cultural philanthropists the Sackler family, as well as museums that have received their support, in the opioid crisis. And for months leading up to the 2019 Whitney Biennial and again during its run, artists threatened to withdraw from the show if the Whitney did not sever ties with Warren Kanders, then vice chair of the museum's board, who owns the defense equipment manufacturing firm Safariland. The exhibition included a video by Forensic Architecture investigating Safariland's tear gas canisters.

The proliferation of gestures and works like these and the political climate from which they emerged led Carl Swanson to ask, in a 2017 *New York* magazine article, "Is Political Art the Only Art That Matters Now?"[2] In the three and a half years since the piece ran, the art world has answered with an emphatic yes. Works that aestheticize ideals of inclusion, narratives about marginalized groups or individuals, and activist movements have filled museums. Galleries have garnered attention for showing polemical works that, instead of alienating collectors, have launched the careers of artists with committedly political practices. Curators have competed for the chance to acquire and show radical works that their predecessors would have shied away from.

This emphasis on politics in art and the art world is no doubt a consequence of the powerlessness, disappointment, anger, and confusion that Americans have expressed in response to the seismic political and social upheaval of the past four years. Following the 2016 election, political scholars acknowledged that voter suppression and the Electoral College make voting

by Zoe Larkins

in some regions all but futile. Many citizens feel alienated from the elected officials who represent them and the political appointees who dictate policy. As a result, some have sought new ways to engage. Given art's track record as a vehicle for political expression and the hyper-visual nature of contemporary culture, it is little wonder that many have turned to art—making it, viewing it, showing it, buying it—as a means to demonstrate solidarity with or actively participate in political movements and social causes.

Citizen-Artists

As some have looked to art to "do more" in this moment, curators, critics, and artists have characterized the things art has "done" in terms of civic engagement with noticeable frequency.[3] More specifically, a number of exhibitions and critical texts have referred to artists as citizens and their work as citizenship. In 2016, Harvard University professor Sarah Lewis organized an exhibition, symposium, and special issue of *Aperture* magazine about the significance of photography in the struggle for civil rights in the United States, all titled *Vision and Justice: The Art of Citizenship*. The day after Election Day in 2016, *Art Practical* published a new issue titled *Art + Citizenship*. The Museum of Modern Art in New York organized a series of online exhibitions, programs, and essays as part of an initiative called "Citizens and Borders" that highlighted the work of immigrant artists. In 2019, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art opened *SOFT POWER*, an exhibition "about the ways in which artists deploy art to explore their roles as citizens and social actors."[4] Critic Chloe Wyma, in

[1] Because of the magnitude of the recent trend in political art making, and because of the national specificity of citizenship, this essay and the exhibition to which it relates focus on work made and/or shown in the United States. The title of this section refers to David Velasco, "Art's Uprisings: Activism Now," *Artforum*, May 2019, 196. Velasco, editor in chief of *Artforum*, began his introduction to a feature series with the statement, "WE WANT ART TO DO MORE."

[2] Carl Swanson, "Is Political Art the Only Art That Matters Now?" *New York*, April 2017, https://www.vulture.com/2017/04/is-political-art-the-only-art-that-matters-now.html.

[3] Recent descriptions of art as civic action range from impassioned statements like the Affirmation of Values cowritten by the Queens Museum staff to academic publications such as Johanna Burton, Shannon Jackson, and Dominic Willsdon, eds., *Public Servants: Art and the Crisis of the Common Good* (New York: New Museum; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).

[4] According to the museum's website: https://www.sfmoma.org/exhibition/soft-power/.

reviewing the 2019 Whitney Biennial in *Artforum*, referred to participants in the exhibition as "citizen-artists."[5]

Such projects invoked citizenship to address a variety of subjects. Some, like MoMA's "Citizens and Borders" and the Queens Museum's *Executive (Dis)Order: Art, Displacement, and the Ban*, responded to specific events, namely Executive Order 13780. Works made by the "citizen-artists" in the 2019 Whitney Biennial explored a range of civic issues, some topical and others more general: national defense, institutional politics, implicit bias, protest and free speech rights, and athletic competition. In contrast, Sarah Lewis's project at Harvard took a longer, more historical view, exploring the legacy of the correlation that Frederick Douglass recognized between visual—specifically photographic—representation and political representation in the fight for emancipation and universal suffrage.

This trend reflects the extent to which discussions of legal citizenship and the civil rights that it guarantees have shaped the US political landscape in the past four years. Politicians' anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies, the Supreme Court's controversial 2018 decision in the voting rights case Husted v. A. Philip Randolph Institute, and the 2020 census, among other things, have made citizenship a frequent and contested topic of discussion. As noted above, some recent projects cited citizenship in reaction to xenophobic actions and attitudes, attempting to reclaim the term as one that is broadly defined and inclusive. But in referring to Douglass, Lewis's project suggests that the connection between image making and citizenship is not specific to this moment. Which begs the question as to what exactly that connection is: What does art have to do with citizenship? What do we mean when we call artists citizens? What does it say about their works and practices? Does calling certain artists "citizens" distinguish them from other artists? And from those of us who are not artists?

What is a "citizen-artist"? What, for that matter, is a citizen—artist or otherwise?

Defining Citizenship

Citizenship is not, it turns out, much easier to define than "citizen-artist." Generally, it means membership in a political community. But there are countless political communities around the world, and in each one citizens have different privileges and duties. And in the context of the cosmopolitan contemporary art world, an artist's official belonging to a particular one of these nation-states is arguably irrelevant.

Addressing the conundrum of citizenship in an increasingly globalized world, the preeminent legal scholar Linda Bosniak wrote, "There is no objective definition of citizenship 'out there' to which we can refer to authoritatively resolve any uncertainties about citizenship's usage."[6] In the two decades since Bosniak made that assertion, globalization and digitization have only made the usages of citizenship more uncertain. And "in here," in the United States, we have never had a single, comprehensive, official description of citizenship. Many historians have recounted an observation made by Horace Binney, a lawyer tasked with studying citizenship as Congress prepared to write the Civil Rights Act of 1866: "The word citizen is found ten times at least in the Constitution of the United States, and no definition of it is given anywhere."[7]

Does calling certain artists "citizens" distinguish them from other artists? And from those of us who are not artists?

Binney's research contributed to what remains the primary definition of US citizenship: the Fourteenth Amendment. The amendment explains who gets to be a citizen and how, as well as, very

broadly, the rights to which citizens are entitled. But history has revealed the amendment's implicit imprecisions and exclusions. In the more than 150 years since it was ratified in 1868, individuals have sued and groups have campaigned for the expansion of US citizenship. For example, a US-born child of Chinese immigrants had to argue that he, too, qualified for the *jus soli*, or birthright, citizenship that children of European immigrants were granted without contest.[8] Others, like women and Black Americans, have fought for the explicit protection of particular rights, such as the right to vote and to be educated. As recent debates about immigration demonstrate, the Fourteenth Amendment is functional but flawed—a working outline more than an exact definition.

Citizenship: Legal Status, Rights, Political Activity, Identity, and Art

In an attempt to distill citizenship's many meanings from this history, Bosniak identified four types of citizenship: legal status, rights, political activity, and identity. Intended to clarify citizenship's significance and implications for twenty-first-century legal scholars and practicing lawyers, these categories also effectively describe the different ways in which art and citizenship relate.

Works like Alan Michelson's *Blanket Refusal* (2020), for example, deal with citizenship as a legal status. The work comprises two large blankets that are printed with the text of a letter that the chiefs of the Onondaga Nation sent to President Calvin Coolidge to protest the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924. The act made all Native Americans in the United States citizens and voided all prior treaties they held with the US government. Beneath the text of the letter (which Coolidge disregarded) run horizontal white and purple bands that recall the wampum belts the Onondaga made from clamshell beads to execute treaties.

Aram Han Sifuentes's *Official Unofficial Voting Station: Voting for All Who Legally Can't* (2020) also treats citizenship as a legal status, at the same time that it focuses on one of the primary rights that it affords: voting. The work highlights who in the United States

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[5] Chloe Wyma, "2019 Whitney Biennial," *Artforum*, September 2019, https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201907/2019-whitney-biennial-80511. This trend extended well beyond the contemporary art world. The US Pavilion at the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale, also presented at Expo Chicago that year, was titled *Dimensions of Citizenship*. Historical exhibitions, such as the Worcester Art Museum's *Picket Fence to Picket Line: Visions of American Citizenship* (2016), associated art with citizenship. Contemporary art-adjacent institutions, like the Brooklyn Academy of Music and the Aspen Institute, also convened artists to discuss their role as citizens.

[6] Linda Bosniak, "Citizenship Denationalized (The State of Citizenship Symposium)," *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 7, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 489, available at https://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1185&context=ijgls.

[7] Horace Binney quoted in Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018), 311.

[8] United States v. Wong Kim Ark, 169 US 649 (1898).

in the twenty-first century is not allowed to vote.[9] An installation that resembles a polling place, it creates an opportunity for all who encounter it to vote on the 2020 presidential candidates and a handful of other topical issues (such as whether to defund police forces nationwide) regardless of their age, nationality, or other factors. With hand-sewn voting booth curtains and banners, legible infographics printed in bright colors, and plenty of stickers and paper bracelets to take away, the installation is friendly and fun. It's a voting party, to which everyone's invited.

The Center for Urban Pedagogy, a nonprofit organization based in Brooklyn, works with community groups and students to research, demystify, and disseminate information about civic processes. In doing so, it illuminates many of the rights and related benefits of citizenship. It partners graphic designers with these organizations and students to create visual communication tools, such as brochures and posters, that share helpful data and tips. Projects have addressed topics ranging from the structure and operation of the US federal system to instructions on how to handle an encounter with Immigration and Customs Enforcement. As in Sifuentes's polling place, the emphasis here is on access and inclusion.

Yumi Janairo Roth's *Property Rights* (2020) exposes the complexities of property rights in the United States. Private property is a cornerstone of democratic societies. It was a prerequisite for citizenship in ancient Greece, and it was vitally important to the framers, who enshrined the right to own and protect private property in the US Constitution. Roth fabricated signs that resemble common street parking signs and printed each with a description of one of the principal rights associated with property—those identified in the "bundle of rights" philosophy that distinguishes the disparate ways in which multiple parties can own, access, and profit from property. Now the standard approach to adjudicating US property law, the bundle of rights theory took hold at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the federal government claimed ownership of huge swaths of land in the name of conservation, much of which it allows citizens to use for recreation, low-impact agriculture, and energy production. Roth installed the signs in the Roosevelt National Forest in Colorado, where this multi-party ownership and use is in effect.

Works like these clarify and question who qualifies for citizenship (the legal status) and explore the privileges that it guarantees (rights).

Regardless of their official affiliation with a particular nation, so-called citizen-artists are those who actively engage in civil society.

They create awareness of the institutions that serve, in part, to cultivate civic values, or critique how they fail to do so. At the same time, they expose the inherent exclusivity of citizenship and might foster empathy for those denied citizenship or particular rights associated with it.

But these works are also political activity and encourage or critique identity and solidarity, to invoke Bosniak's third and fourth terms. Bosniak explains the former as "active engagement in the life of the political community," and the latter as "the quality of belonging—the felt aspects of community membership."[10] It is these two characterizations that explain how art can manifest citizenship. Regardless of their official affiliation with a particular nation, so-called citizen-artists are those who actively engage

in civil society. They activate and sometimes agitate the communities, political or not, of which they are members or with which they feel solidarity. They encourage others' awareness of, engagement with, or feelings of allegiance to such communities. They expose and manipulate the forces that govern or influence them. And, often, they create entirely new forces—innovative methods of engaging with others, alternative approaches to activism, or different perspectives from which to consider an issue.

The Center for Urban Pedagogy's projects exemplify works that facilitate political action, and Sifuentes's *Official Unofficial Voting Station* orchestrates mock engagement. Another work that does so is Paul Ramirez Jonas's *Public Trust* (2016-), a forum in which individuals publicly state promises. Each promise giver participates in a pseudo-official rite and public performance. Promises made are recorded on pieces of paper that accumulate while the work is on view. Some are also displayed on a marquee, where they are posted along with "promises" excerpted from the news. The work calls attention to the emptiness of many promises made by public figures while cultivating a sense of commitment to promises given by participants.

In 2018, Adelita Husni-Bey prompted the Museum of Modern Art's Teen Council to envision a MoMA of the future and enact tableaux, captured in photographs, that demonstrate how the institution might function fifty years from now. She led the teens in the type of imaginative exercise that artists in various disciplines have used for decades as a radical political and aesthetic strategy; scholars have likewise recently begun to recognize the effectiveness of this method for group problem solving, community building, and political engagement. The teens reenvisioned the museum as a hybrid homeless shelter, school, communal hydroponic farm, and community art center catering to a large population affected by climate change and income inequality.

Other recent works take more direct, practical action. In 2017, Pope.L launched *Flint Water* at What Pipeline, an exhibition space in Detroit, to raise awareness about and funds to ameliorate the ongoing water contamination crisis in Flint, Michigan. Rather than depict the victims of the crisis or call for government action, Pope.L created a boutique that sold Flint water in editioned plastic bottles. Profits went directly to nonprofit organizations serving Flint residents affected by the crisis. In five months, the project raised $30,000.[11]

Shannon Finnegan has created several works that, like *Flint Water*, call attention to a problem—in this case disability access, specifically at cultural sites—and provide an immediate solution.

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[9] Infographics that the artist created for the installation reveal that in 2016, 28.6 percent of the US population (more than 92 million people) could not vote.

[10] Bosniak, "Citizenship Denationalized," 470, 479.

[11] According to the What Pipeline website: http://whatpipeline.com/exhibitions/37popel/1.html.

One such project is *Do you want us here or not* (2018-), a series of benches, chairs, and even a chaise lounge that are intended for installation in museums to be used by visitors. Each one is painted with text that calls out the physical discomfort of standing and walking to view art and invites the viewer to take a seat.

Goldin's aforementioned crusade against the Sackler family has effected real change, too. Since her photographs and essay ran in *Artforum*, she and her organization, PAIN (Prescription Addiction Intervention Now), have staged "die-in" protests at major cultural institutions in the United States, as well as in London and Paris. Several museums have announced that they will no longer accept donations from the Sacklers. In an article in *Artforum*, critic Christopher Glazek praised Goldin for directly influencing the lawsuits brought against Purdue Pharma in New York and Massachusetts.[12]

Like the political action that Bosniak describes, these projects directly engage with "the life of the political community." Other works examine specific communities—their members and what they stand for. Michelson's *Blanket Refusal*, for example, highlights the exclusion and then superficial inclusion of Native Americans in the US polity. Alexandra Bell's *Counternarratives* (2016-17) and Trevor Paglen's *Behold These Glorious Times!* (2017) also critique claims of (objective) inclusivity. Bell's large-scale prints reveal implicit racial bias in the layout and syntax of *New York Times* articles, challenging the paper's identity as an objective reporting outlet and, in turn, that of its subscribers as astute, critical readers. Paglen's video, a barrage of images excerpted from digital image-reading training sets, interrogates computer vision's theoretical objectivity. It suggests that artificial intelligence technology is as subjective and political as the humans who design it. As pervasive as digital image culture has become, the work implicates all viewers as members of the digital public sphere. Like Bell's work, it demonstrates the political power of images and the need for citizens to look at and circulate them with criticality.

The Institute of Sociometry (Peter Miles Bergman and Heather Link-Bergman) began placing leftist political zines in Little Free Libraries throughout their Denver neighborhood in 2017, introducing their political values to local lenders and borrowers. Eventually they installed a library of their own outside their home and filled it entirely with leftist zines. After casually observing their "branch" and its visitors for a brief period, they trained a closed-circuit video camera on it and began tracking user behavior. The installation that chronicles the project's evolution, *Leftist Leaflets in Little Libraries (LLiLL)* (2017-20), calls attention to the ways in which corporations exploit and manipulate individuals' participation in civil society and distinct communities within it, co-opting earnest gestures for profit.

Other works examine the symbols that define communities and express their values. In the wake of the 2016 election, the New York-based public art nonprofit Creative Time commissioned sixteen artists to design flags that represented issues of concern to them. The organization displayed the flags on rooftops in New York City and around the country. Rather than usurp the Stars and Stripes, the *Pledges of Allegiance* (2017-18) flags signify multiplicity and free expression. The *New York Times* organized a like-minded project in which they invited six artists to design adaptations to or replacements for Confederate monuments in the South.[13] These "monuments for a new era," as the newspaper referred to them, not only present alternative symbols to memorialize the Civil War, but demonstrate the multifarious nature of the United States and the objects and sites that tell its story.

In contrast to these works, which engage with familiar political processes or issues, Laura Shill's *Including Other in the Self* (2020) foregrounds an ostensibly apolitical action: conversation. The work invites two participants at a time to ask one another thirty-six questions that psychologist Arthur

Aron and his colleagues developed to produce a sense of "closeness" between two people.[14] Concerned with the increasing mediation of human connection by technology and the political polarization of the United States, Shill conceived of the project with the goal of fostering understanding and empathy among individuals. In fact, in creating a forum for conversation, *Including Other in the Self* asks viewers to participate in what many scholars assert is the original and most essential political action: discourse. Speech, in public, was the primary expression of citizenship in ancient Greece. Referencing Aristotle, the philosopher and political theorist Hannah Arendt called speech that which "makes man a political being."[15] *Including Other in the Self* emphasizes the importance of rhetorical exchange. Seemingly romantic in nature, the work is political in the most fundamental sense. It facilitates the truest expression of citizenship.

Practicing Art, Practicing Citizenship

The works described above, to quote a pioneer citizen-artist, Suzanne Lacy, are "prototypical laboratories for the enactment of public life."[16] Lacy's words recall the framers' belief that community and religious organizations would help individuals learn to be active participants, even leaders, in civic life. More clearly, they echo Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis's suggestion that states might function as "laboratories of democracy," test sites for progressive policies.[17] These works are experiments in civic engagement. They create scenarios in which viewers can learn and rehearse civic behaviors, such as voting and conversing. In this way, they encourage our "practice" of citizenship. The idea that citizenship is an ongoing exercise, much like an artistic practice, defines these works and the citizen-artists who make them.[18] Each work manifests an artist's practice of citizenship and incites viewers to cultivate a civic practice of their own.

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[12] Christopher Glazek, "On Nan Goldin and the Sacklers," *Artforum*, May 2019, 207.

[13] "Monuments for New Era," *New York Times*, August 12, 2018, SR4, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/10/opinion/charlottesville-confederate-monuments.html.

[14] Arthur Aron et al., "The Experimental Generation of Interpersonal Closeness: A Procedure and Some Preliminary Findings," *Personality and Psychology Bulletin* 23, no. 4 (April 1997): 363-77. Aron's study was popularized by Daniel Jones, "The 36 Questions That Lead to Love," *New York Times*, January 9, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/style/36-questions-that-lead-to-love.html.

[15] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 3.

[16] Suzanne Lacy, "Seeking an American Identity (Working Inward from the Margins)," 2001, available at https://www.animatingdemocracy.org/sites/default/files/documents/reading_room/seeking_an_american_idenity_lacy.pdf.

[17] New State Ice Co. v. Liebmann, 285 US 262, 285 (1932), Louis Brandeis dissenting opinion: "It is one of the happy incidents of the federal system that a single courageous state may, if its citizens choose, serve as a laboratory; and try novel social and economic experiments without risk to the rest of the country."

Describing citizenship in similar terms, Bosniak writes, "To characterize a set of social practices in the language of citizenship is to honor them with recognition as politically and socially consequential—as centrally constitutive and defining of our collective lives." She calls citizenship "a powerful term of appraisal, one which performs an enormous legitimizing function."[19] Thus, when we call artists citizens, we signal their work's importance—importance that transcends aesthetic merit and museum walls.

The idea that citizenship is an ongoing exercise, much like an artistic practice, defines these works and the citizen-artists who make them.

Citizen-artists *are* different from other artists, in that they make work that actually, actively engages in society. This also means that they are not categorically different from those of us who are not artists but simply citizens, officially or not. Citizen-artists use their skills, ingenuity, effort, and time to participate in, critique, and create political communities and to foster and interrogate the symbols, rites, and systems that inform our identity. While we non-artists might not choose to create an elaborate mock polling place or design and fabricate furniture for public institutions, we too can use our skills, ingenuity, effort, and time to take part in civic life. As many citizen-artists have recently demonstrated, we can do so not just by voting or serving on a jury, but also by looking critically, learning, talking, and truly listening.

[18] In an essay about the importance of public engagement and free speech, Wendy Brown encourages participation in society as a "practice," a phrase to which the title of this essay also refers: Wendy Brown, "The Big Picture: Defending Society," *Public Books*, October 9, 2017, https://www.publicbooks.org/the-big-picture-defending-society/.

[19] Bosniak, "Citizenship Denationalized," 489.