

BOOK REVIEW

Art Can Change the World: A Review of Nato Thompson's *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the 21st Century*

Nato Thompson, *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the 21st Century*.
Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2015. 176 pp. \$17.96

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This review of Nato Thompson's *Seeing Power*, I pull from the text to make clear how art might be used to tactically change our communities in a Trumpian world.

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In efforts to drive or make meaning of change in communities, many turn to art, and in this way artists often enter a liminal space between activism and artistic expression in the American public square. As Nato Thompson writes in the introduction to his book, *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the 21st Century*, the "potent merger of art and activism" can "transform people's understandings of politics," and even alter "their relationship with the world around them" (2015, vii). Art, in short, can change worlds.

Art, too, can calm us and our worlds when they, and we, are convulsed by change. However, Thompson's work will not calm us—it is designed as a call for us to champion change through art. Published in 2015, Thompson's text was not forced to contend with the Trump phenomenon and the change it portended for our collective and individual worlds; in other words, it is not a book intended to serve as a ballast, or a supplemental backbone from which we might draw strength in the closing, cruel, and divisive years of this decade. Instead, it is a toolkit with which we may effect change.

Donald J. Trump's ascendancy to the Presidency in 2016 produced an outpouring of academic essays, investigative articles, books, and explanatory and philosophical essays aimed at understanding this political phenomenon. Indeed, thousands of academics, artists, journalists, and pundits have taken a stab at Trump and the character of the times that produced him, trying to dig deep into and understand the method to his madness, the ethos behind his eccentricities, ethical, personal, political, and otherwise.

Yet, despite the disparate nature of all the efforts to understand Trump and what he means for the United States, many lines of inquiry lead to one conclusion: 2016 was about change. Through the deluge of academicians' theories, journalists' epic sagas of campaign corruption, media personalities' pursuit of "the truth" in the face of "fake news," the realities of the "yuge" social and political developments of 2016 are often understood through the refracting power of "change." Change, either regressive or progressive, is the windowpane through which we witness the day's events. Today, it is the lens through which we comprehend the hubbub and hullabaloo emanating from the Trump Administration.

Telling his readers early on about the frameworks from which his thinking and writing unfolds onto the page, Thompson identifies several ideas and thinkers that inform his work. More specifically, Thompson is interested in challenges to the systems of cultural production that carry the day—the "schools, museums, and organizations," the "physical spaces" into which acts of protest are interspersed (Thompson 2015, viii). In this way, activism through art can create "counter-institutions, alternative spaces, and collective environments," or "new spaces" essential to the creation and curation of "counter-hegemony," or what the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci called challenges to the systems and thoughts that dominate (Thompson 2015, viii).

Thompson identifies many Marxist frameworks as having influence on his thinking about art and activism, namely Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's concept of the "culture industry," or the dominant post-WWII global system of reproduction of American culture, as well as "homogenous and bland and consumer-friendly" communities ready to consume it (Thompson 2015, 7). Of equal importance is Guy Debord's "spectacle," or the complex system of capital, culture, and mass media that dominated the post-WWII world (Thompson 2015, 11). Thompson also invokes Pierre Bourdieu and his habitus (Thompson 2015, 84), Deleuze and Guattari's notion of "becoming" (Thompson 2015, 131), David Harvey (Thompson 2015, 149), and Michel de Certeau's conceptions of the "tactical" and the "strategic" (Thompson 2015, 152). Yet, one does not have to agree with these Marxist frameworks to agree with the formulas for community change pulsing through Thompson's work, the most prominent being that a blend of activism and art can effect real change in communities.

Returning to 2016, Trump's talking points produced just as many protests as they did written works attempting to account for his rise to power. Indeed, many of my colleagues and friends, particularly those in college, are angry. They're channeling their desire for change into letter writing campaigns, protests, phone banks, and many other tried-and-true tools in the change toolbox. These endeavors cannot transform things on their own. In fact, they cannot change much at all without sustained, community-driven commitments to change.

As Thompson states in *Seeing Power*, "simple protest chants and liberal catchphrases like "Yes we can!" [...] ring like the tedious drone of a weary, hollowed-out mass repeating itself" (Thompson 2015, 52). Protests often occur like small town parades scheduled months in advance; few care, cheering and chanting at the center of it all, some give a glance of interest, but most pass it by. To change a community in the age of Trump will require people to trade in their microphones (or put them away for a while) and take a seat in the amphitheater, to dull the sharp edges of their politics and party commitments to support good people who are willing to work for a better way forward. Protests, disjointed or organized, cannot by themselves lead to change: "Reclaiming an infrastructure," whether it is the White House, State Senate Chambers, or county Clerk of Courts positions, "requires more than poking holes—it calls for a long-term approach equipped with humility and patience" (Thompson 2015, 81).

One kind of 'long-term approach' to change is community art, and the 'good people' behind this approach are not solely activists, but artists, too. Thompson points to the Surrealists, Dadaists, and Lygia Clark—a few of "the heroes of art history and political history," to use his words—as examples of artists engaged in counter-hegemonic cultural production of "artworks that developed their collective power" (Thompson 2015, 103). Through listing other examples of artists who either currently are, or recently have, engaged in such artist-activism, Thompson's book serves as a reminder art can change worlds. Thompson tells his readers of the historical, social, and political achievements of artists, thereby directing their attention to the oft-forgotten reality that "when [art] works toward the production of self-empowerment in an infrastructure in the midst of transformation"—much like the social and political fabric, or 'infrastructure', in the face of Trump's election—art "can be truly radicalizing" (Thompson 2015, 125).

Artists like Caledonia Curry (known to many as Swoon), Grace Paley, and Joi Sears captured the limelight of late for this very reason, and that is just to name three of thousands of such artists that entered the public square—as many have done during Trump's time in the Oval Office. It is for this reason that *Seeing Power* has so much to offer those desirous of change in 2018. While an interesting work of art history and political thinking, Thompson's succinct book is better thought of as an inspiring guide to affect change through art. The call to public art and engagement in mind, power can be seen and sought, gleaned and fought, and, perhaps, communities can be changed.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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