

Art in America

“Agitprop!” at the Brooklyn Museum Waves of Dissent, Legacies of Change

By *Risa Puleo*
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View of the exhibition “Agitprop!” (Dyke Action Machine! posters in the background), 2015, at the Brooklyn Museum. Photo Jonathan Dorado.

The Brooklyn Museum’s “Agitprop!” (through Aug. 7) explores the many ways that artists directly address issues of public concern. A term originated in Soviet

Russia, “agitprop” is an amalgamation of the words “agitation” and “propaganda” —the desired effect of the medium’s politically charged messages. Opening last December, works will be added to “Agitprop!” twice in its nine-month run, once in February and again in April, to reflect how multiple generations of artists have tackled the same concerns over time. Organized by the museum’s Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, “Agitprop!” presents work by approximately 50 artists and collaborative groups in total that tackle reproductive rights, mass incarceration, war and imperialism, racial justice, economic equity, and issues of representation and visibility.

Graphics and film clips from 1930s Russia and Mexico, as well as photographs, drawings and prints documenting the actions of the NAACP, WPA and women suffragettes in the United States, offer historical counterpoints to a selection of works by international artists over the past 30 years, a period roughly corresponding to third-wave feminism. Artists in each “wave” of the exhibition choose their “successors”—the artists whose works will join the show in the following iterations. The first round comprises 20 participants. Dyke Action Machine! (DAM!), Otabenga Jones and Associates, and Coco Fusco, for example, carry on the legacies of LGTBI activism, black radicalism and post-colonialism, respectively, and will pass these torches to a new set of artists in the following versions of the exhibition.

In the first wave of “Agitprop,” two posters by Dyke Action Machine! (DAM!) duo Carrie Moyer and Sue Schaffner are wheat-pasted directly on the walls of the museum; they were originally presented in the streets of New York and San Francisco. Aligned with the AIDS and LGBTI activism of groups like ACT UP and Queer Nation, DAM! updated advertisements with lesbian content as a form of culture jamming. In response to Calvin Klein’s advertisements from 1992 that featured the then vocally homophobic Mark Wahlberg (who publicly apologized for his bigotry in 2014) in the brand’s underwear, DAM! recast the ad with lesbians to advocate for dyke visibility. Later in the ’90s, the collective addressed issues of gay assimilation into mainstream society through marriage and military service with the campaign *Lesbian Americans: Don’t Sell Out* (1998), featuring images of lesbians against the backdrop of the American flag, positioning them as the embodiment of the American revolutionary spirit.

DAM! chose LJ Roberts as the inheritor of their legacy for the second iteration of “Agitprop!,” opening Feb. 17. “We’re living in a time where there’s a huge premium put on ambiguity, because it’s market-friendly. There’s something really refreshing in how direct and explicit LJ’s work is in its message,” said DAM!’s Carrie Moyer. Roberts, who first saw DAM!’s work 16 years ago at age 20, will show *Sisters Are Doing It For Themselves* (2011). Part of a series of protest banners the artist created for street demonstrations, the work features an image culled from

Brooklyn's Lesbian Herstory Archives woven into the fabric of a blanket. For the third wave, opening Apr. 6, Roberts chose the 2016 edition of Play Smart Trading Cards, a series of baseball cards featuring the work of artists paired with condoms and lube in "Prevention Packs" that encourage safer sex practices. The series is distributed by Visual AIDS, an organization that raises awareness about HIV/AIDS through art, advocates for seropositive artists and preserves the legacy of those who have passed. Redubbed "pleasure packs" by Play Smart artist Jessica Whitbread, the 2016 edition features women artist-activists as creators, models and producers. Along with the artworks, the packs include Black Dragon gloves which can be made into dental dams. Cards will feature the work of Whitbread and Kia Labeija, as well as images of artist Beverly Bland Boydston III, Reina Gossett and Sarinya Srisakul in pin-up style portraits. Roberts said, "DAM! did so much work to increase the visibility of women who weren't airbrushed media ideas. I wanted to bring it back to the streets with the Play Smart Trading Cards. Women are still so absent from dialogue of HIV and AIDS. The packet centers on women and accommodates different sexualities, genders and physiques." DAM!'s Sue Schaffner contributes to the project as a photographer.

The link between Dyke Action Machine, LJ Roberts and the artists contributing to Visual AIDS's Play Smart Trading Cards is but one wave of momentum that moves through the exhibition. The Houston-based collective Otabenga Jones and Associates were inspired by the Black Panther's Free Breakfast program, which provided school children in Oakland a meal each morning from 1969 to 1975, to produce a takeaway printed with Panther recipes. Named for Ota Benga, the Mbuti man displayed in the monkey house of the Bronx Zoo in 1904 as a so-called anthropological "missing link," the artist collaborative works across mediums. Their multipronged initiative *The People's Plate*, organized for Houston communities through the Lawndale Art Center in 2014, included a mural, lunch boxes for school children and public programs aimed at teaching healthy eating habits and expanding food options for black children in urban environments. Otabenga Jones's project echoes others such as Nicole Caruth's With Food in Mind, an organization producing pop-up events in New York City that address childhood obesity and decreased arts education in low-income communities of color, and artist Simone Leigh's *Free People's Medical Clinic*, which reinstated the Black Panthers community healthcare initiative in the Weeksville neighborhood of Brooklyn last year.

Otabenga Jones and Associates considered the pamphlet medium and its historical link to Black Radical literature when they chose Shani Peters to exhibit in the second wave of "Agitprop!" In 2011, Peters distributed flyers with empowering messages—from figures such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X—in Harlem, the Bronx and Brooklyn. Flyers from Peters's project, entitled *We Promote Knowledge and Love*, will be available on

Feb. 17. In the third wave of the show the collective Weird Allan Kaprow will take the stage with their project *Karaoking the Museum*. Viewers can sing along with songs such as TLC's "Waterfalls" with new lyrics like "Don't go taking continents, I know that your gonna keep expanding and taking it all, but I think you're going too far," targeting imperialism in American landscape paintings such as the Albert Bierstadt work in the Brooklyn Museum's collection.

Coco Fusco is represented in the first wave by a series of etchings made in 2012 to commemorate the 20th anniversary of her collaborative performance with Guillermo Gomez-Peña, *Couple in the Cage: Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West* (1992). In the original performance, Fusco and Gomez-Peña enacted the ethnographic displays of natural history museums and human zoos in their roles as the primitive inhabitants of a newly "discovered" island. The etchings, made in the style of 19th-century political cartoons, illustrate the responses the performance elicited from audiences, which speak to the pervasive logic of colonial systems still in effect. Picking up on themes of imprisonment in the work, Fusco chose Laurie Jo Reynolds, best known for Tamms Ten Year, a grassroots advocacy project that helped shut down Chicago's Tamms Correctional Center in 2013.

For the show's second wave, Reynolds will exhibit five cards that tap into Adrian Piper's living legacy. Where Piper began handing out her *Calling Cards* (identifying herself as black and objecting to offensive remarks) in the mid-1980s to alert white Americans to their insidious displays of racism, Reynolds's *Calling Cards* (2009-ongoing) speak to issues of disclosure for those struggling with the stigmatization of sex offenses.

Reynolds selected artist Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, a co-founder of the Puerto Rican discursive cultural production hub Beta-Local, for the exhibition's third round. Muñoz will show her film *La cabeza mató a todos (The Head Killed Everybody)*, 2014, in which the artist and Michelle Nonó, an expert on the medicinal plants of Puerto Rico, perform an incantation and corresponding ritual to "destroy the war machine" and restore the island of Vieques, used as a training site by the U.S. Navy from 1941 to 2003. Employing a magic spell, Muñoz finds camaraderie with other projects that experiment with agency and activate the human will for change.

Together, the generational waves that flow through the Brooklyn Museum's "Agitprop!" suggest that there is no such thing as independent action, as the art world and the Western valuation of the individual artist-leader would have us believe. Instead, "Agitprop!" offers a model in which change is made through the concerted efforts of a group of people working together across places and over time.