

# The New York Times

ART & DESIGN | ART REVIEW

## The Art of Politics, in ‘Agitprop!’ at the Brooklyn Museum

By HOLLAND COTTER | DEC. 17, 2015



“Agitprop!” at the Brooklyn Museum includes this giant mural, “The People’s Plate,” by Otabenga Jones & Associates, at the Lawndale Art Center in Houston, part of a health education initiative. Credit: Otabenga Jones & Associates

Most art is political, whether it means to be or not. In “Agitprop!” at the Brooklyn Museum, politics is the whole point. Content is didactic; the creative part lies in how efficiently and effectively it’s delivered. Photography, prints and performance are favored media because they are, in different ways, portable, readily legible and easily reproducible. In general, monuments aside, political art isn’t made to last; it’s made to work. And it has to be ready to change as the news changes.

The Brooklyn show has change built in. It’s been conceived as an exhibition in progress, and at this point, early in its run, it looks like one, only half-there and thin. But there’s more on the way. Organized by the curatorial staff of the museum’s Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art — Saisha Grayson, Catherine J. Morris, Stephanie Weissberg and Jess Wilcox — it will gradually fill out in three successive, cumulative stages.



The first, up now, has both historical material and work by nearly two dozen contemporary artists. These artists will choose the participants for the next stage, which opens in February, and the February group will pick the artists for the third stage, coming in April. By that point, “Agitprop!” promises to be a crowded, multigenerational affair, bristling with ethical talking points — racial justice, ecological advocacy, gender equality — and showcasing an impulse to aesthetic activism that circles the globe.



Art from historic moments, like Soviet propaganda, is interspersed with more recent works devoted to social change. Credit Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

The historical work, which will be on view throughout, is in five distinct sections and looks back to the start of the 20th century when agitprop — “agit” for agitation, “prop” for propaganda — was developing as an art genre. The most familiar examples here are Russian posters campaigning for women’s rights. In the earliest, from 1917, the year of the October Revolution, a farmworker hoists a sheaf of wheat high above her head as if it were a dead weight she could finally throw off.

Most interesting are two films. One, “[Misery and Fortune of Woman](#),” made by Sergei Eisenstein, Grigory Alexandrov and Eduard Tisse in 1929, is basically a public-service announcement in the form of a full-length drama arguing for legalized abortion. The other, “The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty,” is a 1927 documentary pieced together from hundreds of found-film scraps by Esfir Shub. She alternates compare-and-contrast images of czarist life and peasant labor, and lingers, as if in appalled fascination, over extended shots of court processions, with male and female nobles dressed in [Tenniel](#)-worthy attire. The images originated as imperial propaganda; Shub turned them into class-war indictments.

During roughly the same years that women were staking a claim to power in a transformed Russia, their American counterparts were seeking the vote. A section of the show is devoted to the National Woman’s Party, and the suffrage campaign has its own processional images: parades of women costumed as allegorical Virtues and carrying banners with tweet-short slogans. “Standing together women shall take their lives in their own keeping” reads a banner in the show, with a punctuating follow-up on the other side: “Failure Is Impossible.”





The exhibition will gradually fill out in three successive, cumulative stages. CreditChang W. Lee/The New York Times

And at least some women were leading fully independent lives. Tina Modotti did. In 1913, still a teenager, she moved from Italy to San Francisco, and on to Mexico City. There, as a studio assistant and lover of Edward Weston, she learned photography and joined the Communist Party. Her Mexican still lifes, with cartridge belts and sickles piled on guitars, exploit the activist potential of visual beauty, though, disappointingly, the show offers no fresh insights into them, or into Modotti's heavily mythologized life.

More intriguing, because more obscure, is information about a genre of federally sponsored American theater called the Living Newspaper, which, for a few years in the 1930s, critically dramatized everyday social realities — joblessness, housing shortages, the inequities of capitalism — for a Depression-rattled popular audience. And a display of ephemera related to protests against a pandemic of racial lynching in the United States in the first half of the 20th century is of immediate pertinence to our present Black Lives Matter moment.

Black Lives Matter isn't scheduled to be part of the exhibition (my guess is this could change as the show expands and grows more fluid), but African-American political art certainly is. In a 2014 video, the mixed-race performance group called [Los Angeles Poverty Department \(LAPD\)](#) calls out the causes of homelessness in a raucous cabaret of the streets. And in photographs from the same year, we see the New York artist Dread Scott revisiting a textbook event. For a performance called ["On the Impossibility of Freedom in a Country Founded on Slavery and Genocide,"](#) he walks, arms raised, hands open, into the spray of high-pressure fire hoses, the same kind that police turned on civil rights demonstrators in Birmingham, Ala., in 1963.



American protests, including a Los Angeles Poverty Department video. Credit Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

A few artists in the exhibition — John Lennon and Yoko Ono, in videos of their peace-preaching bed-ins — are international stars. Others, like Mr. Scott, Martha Rosler, the Guerrilla Girls and the [AIDS collective Gran Fury](#), have a kind of classic status locally, as do the [Yes Men, whose fake Nov. 12, 2008](#), special edition of The New York Times, declaring the end of the war in Iraq, and the immediate return of troops, is here in all its brilliant counterfeit glory.

Of particular value is the presence of artists who are vital forces elsewhere, though not well known here. Since 1989, the [Sahmat Collective](#) has been a steady force in the struggle against political and religious violence in India. Formed after the killing of the communist street-theater performer [Safdar Hashmi](#), the group draws on art high and low to spread a message of sectarian harmony, including painting slogans on the auto-rickshaws — there's one parked in the gallery — that crowd South Asian cities.

Operating in a more solitary mode, the Chinese artist [Zhang Dali](#) has for decades played the role of urban ghost in Beijing, tagging and photographing countless old buildings as they come under the wrecking ball. Before, during and after the 2011 revolution in Egypt, the young graffiti artist who calls himself [Ganzeer](#) covered the walls of Cairo with pro-democracy texts and images until, subject to intense political heat, he had to leave the country.



He's well represented in the show, with a floor-to-ceiling wall of his black-and-white graphics — as is [Dyke Action Machine!](#) (Carrie Moyer and Sue Schaffner), which gets comparable space for its wheat-paste posters. But almost no one else is. From the small and underexplained examples of work by Luis Camnitzer or Coco Fusco or Cecilia Vicuña, you can barely understand what these important figures are up to. And it's likely that their visibility will be further diminished in the months ahead as more artists arrive and space grows scarcer.

On the other hand, maybe strategic crowding, with art and artists rubbing shoulders, is what's needed to generate the heat the exhibition now lacks. That, I think, was the plan. The museum would set the show up, make the initial choices, and then let go. After that, artists, with younger ones coming in toward the end, would take over as curators, move things around, break through the inevitably constricting politics of the institutional model.

It's a nice idea, and probably naïve, as even the mildest idealism tends to feel these days when the art world at large just wants to have fun, and the market can neutralize all.

Yet there are wild cards still in the deck. Some of the collectives scheduled to join the show — [Not an Alternative](#), [Occupy Museums](#) — are as much doers as makers, equally into actions and objects. (Both groups were involved in protests at the Louvre during the United Nations Climate Summit in Paris in the month.) Hopefully, with their appearance, the show will improve, loosen up, get voices going, generate action. But why wait? Opening the show to change could start now. That's agitprop's very purpose.

“Agitprop!” continues through Aug. 7 at the Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway; 718-638-5000, [brooklynmuseum.org](http://brooklynmuseum.org). Additions Feb. 17 and April 6.

A version of this review appears in print on December 18, 2015, on page C25 of the New York edition with the headline: Mixed Media, Undiluted Messages. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

