

Political and Didactic Art as a Feminist Strategy

Key Idea

The meaning of a work of art is always constructed in the mind of the viewer through processes of interpretation. However, artists can attempt to guide viewers' interpretations to focus on specific messages. This kind of art is called didactic art – meaning that the artist is trying to tell the viewer something specific using art as their means of communication. Artists do this through careful selection, arrangement and combination of conceptual and formal content in their artwork. Didactic art can be explicit and obvious, or implicit and subtle, and it can be in any media. An explicitly didactic artwork might include text that literally spells out a message. For example the phrase “Stop War!” included in an artwork would be explicitly didactic. Whereas an implicitly didactic artwork concerned with the same message might depict a scene of the aftermath of violent, destructive conflict. Both could be said to deliver the same anti-conflict message strongly, but in very different ways. In both cases the viewer is arguably intended to make a personal connection between themselves and what is being communicated through the artwork.

By communicating a message through art, the artist is hoping to influence the way a viewer might think or feel after viewing the artwork. The reach of politics extends everywhere – encompassing moral, ethical, social and environmental issues, amongst countless others. The relationship of art and politics is various, complex and entangled. When an artist wishes to communicate an important, even urgent, political message, they can use their specialised knowledge and skills as artists to draw attention to their chosen message through artwork in a unique way.

There are many reasons for choosing to make art to convey a message. An image or an object can tap into viewer's emotions by being inspiring, uplifting, entertaining or devastating. For instance, artworks depicting the violence and devastation of war can bring a sense of visceral reality and emotional involvement to a viewer who has never actually experienced conflict first-hand. These strong emotions then become associated with the message, provoking the viewer to feel more connected to the issue than they otherwise might.

Key Definitions

Politics: The total complex of relations between people living in society. Relations or conduct in a particular area of experience especially as seen or dealt with from a political point of view. e.g. feminist *politics*, or office *politics*.

Didactic: Something that is didactic is intended to teach people something, especially a moral lesson. Someone who is didactic tells people things rather than letting them find things out, or discussing things.

Exhibition Case Studies

Kelly Doley, *Things learnt about feminism #1-95* 2014

To make this artwork Kelly Doley spent time learning from a range of different individuals and community groups about what feminism meant to them. Out of these lessons Doley extracted important ideas and fragments of knowledge that she then translated into hand-drawn poster designs. What we see is a whole range of perspectives on feminism, some of which contradict one another. This is an excellent first work to see when visiting *Unfinished Business* at ACCA because it establishes a core idea behind the exhibition – there is no one definitive feminism, instead there are many different versions understood and practiced by different people.

Doley's use of bright fluorescent card and black marker creates high contrast images that grab the viewer's attention. This same technique is used by retailers to get attention for special offers and sales, in this sense the artwork has a very 'everyday', easily recognisable aesthetic. This reflects a grassroots approach to feminism that is intended to be 'democratic' and understood by all, not just those with specialised art knowledge.

This use of very immediate, analogue materials and techniques also fits into a feminist tradition of do-it-yourself art making. This approach is designed to allow anyone, regardless of their means and access to facilities, to make effective feminist artwork. From another perspective, the use of basic techniques and materials is a gesture of defiance towards historically male-dominated modes of fine art mastery that privileged technique and fine art materials – things that women, who were kept out of fine art academies, could not easily access.

Ali Gumillya Baker, *Racist texts* 2014-17

To create this artwork Ali Gumillya Baker visited secondhand book stores and opportunity shops to gather this collection of titles, all of which the artist has found to contain racist content. Looking at the towering book spines the viewer can see that some of the books are obviously racist, because their titles make direct reference to Indigenous Australians using derogatory terms such as 'native' or 'savage'. These terms are problematic and harmful because they arguably dehumanise their targets, labelling Indigenous people as objects or fauna, not deserving of respect. The scale of the work at ACCA – eight metres in height – is intentionally overwhelming. It metaphorically renders the problem of racist attitudes in Australia as colossal. Because many of the books look old, the work indicates that these attitudes have persisted throughout history. Significantly, we cannot open any of the volumes. This sophisticated gesture makes racism simultaneously present, through the symbolism of the books as objects, but denies it the opportunity for the books to do any more damage, since they can no longer be picked-up and read.

This artwork is not explicitly feminist, but it does engage feminism from an intersectional viewpoint. It makes the point that, historically, feminism failed women of colour because it did not seek to address or combat racism, only sexism. This artwork tells us that feminism is more complicated than sex and gender alone, and that this is still the case today.

Historical Touchpoints

- Lyndal Jones, *The Avoca Project* 2006-16
- Julie Gough, *The Trouble With Rolf* 1995

Questions

- If you made an artwork about an issue important to you, what would that issue be? And what would your artwork look like?
- Design a poster to communicate a political idea. Concentrate on colour as the art element that you will use to invest your issue with emotion. Carefully select three key colours that will enhance your message.
- Some people think important political issues should be discussed or written about in clear, didactic language, rather than in artworks, because the point of the message might be more likely to be missed in an artwork. What do you think? Argue three key points.

1 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/politics>

2 <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/didactic>

Images

- a. Kelly Doley, *Things learnt about feminism #1-95* 2014 (detail). *Unfinished Business: Perspectives on art and feminism* 2017, installation view, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne. Photograph: Andrew Curtis
- b. Ali Gumillya Baker, *Racist texts* 2014-17 (detail). *Unfinished Business: Perspectives on art and feminism* 2017, installation view, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne. Photograph: Andrew Curtis
- c. Julie Gough, *The Trouble With Rolf* 1995. Courtesy the artist

Acknowledgements

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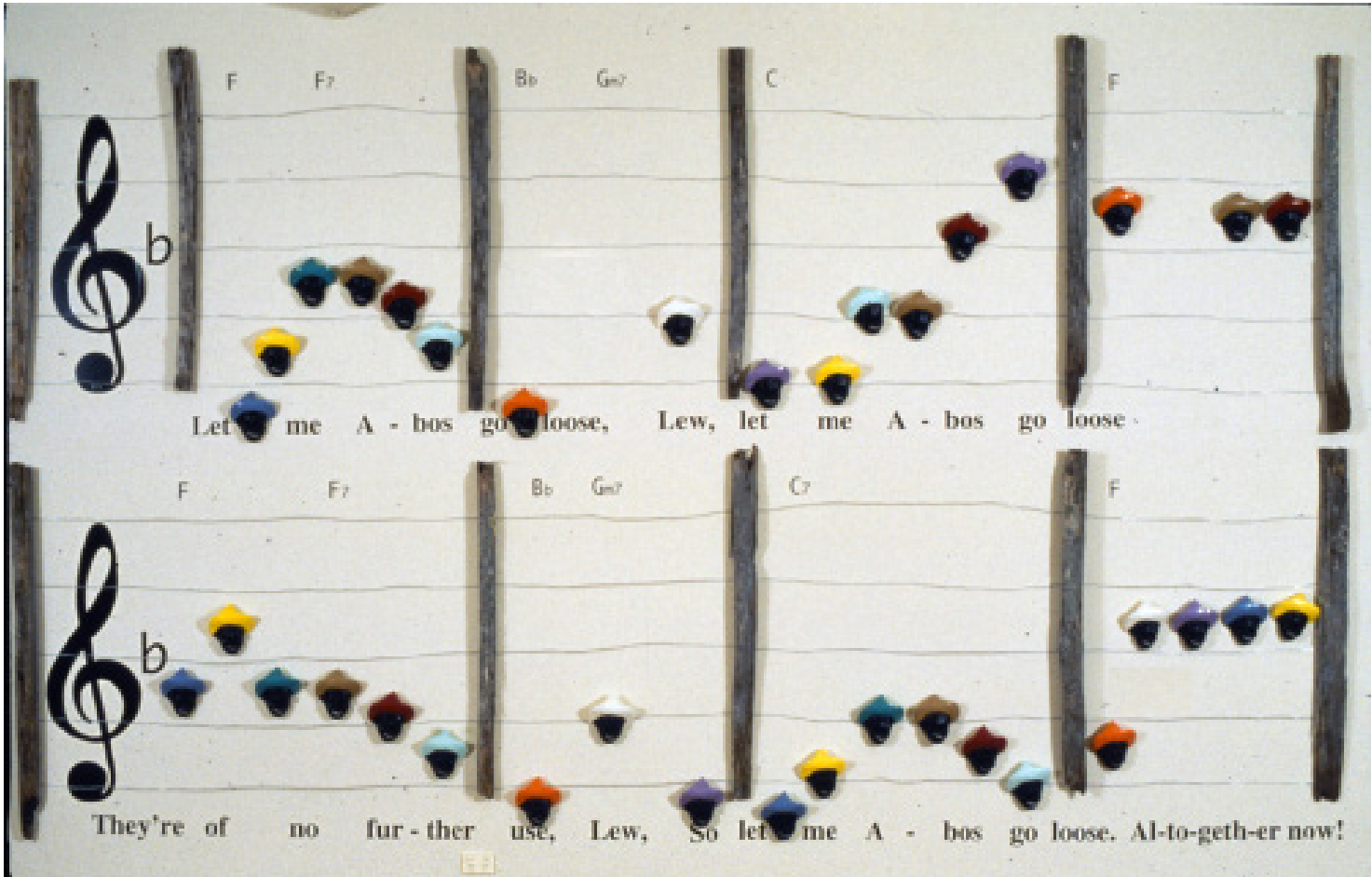
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