

“THE IDENTITY ARTIST AND THE IDENTITY CRITIC”

ARTFORUM

SUMMER 2016

THE PHRASE IDENTITY POLITICS is hard to approach directly because it is often put to use in contradictory ways. One is the really existing identity politics of, for example, the Hillary Clinton campaign. We are encouraged to vote for Clinton simply because she is a woman, as the writer Sydette Harry described in a 2015 essay for the *New Inquiry*: “The prospect of a woman presidential candidate is depoliticized into an overdue payment . . . something seen in 2008 as a sign of moral weakness in Black voters [i.e., voting for Obama because he is black] is considered a feminist rallying cry in white women voters for 2016.”

The tokenism of white cultural and political organizations is characteristic of this mode of identity politics. People who are not white men are seen as individualized carriers of a biopolitical surplus that has to be constantly washed away in the form of an inclusion that might as well be a disavowal. To perform as evidence of the institution’s purity, the identity artist has to exemplify a race/gender category, but as soon as she steps into the institution’s embrace, she becomes an example of universality. She is artificially cleansed of race/gender even as she is called on to represent it. Tokens are currency, and currency only exists insofar as it’s exchanged.

The limits of inclusion are clear, sometimes brutally so. At the University of Chicago, which, like many prestigious US institutions, produces world-renowned politically radical critical theory alongside other research, victims of violence in the city are unable to receive treatment at the university’s medical center: Wounded people die near medical help because the university until recently refused to reopen an adult trauma center that could save their lives. Intellectualized or aestheticized trauma is displayed for institutional, artistic, or academic validation, but physical and emotional trauma goes untreated, because it falls outside the bounds of institutional relevance. The pseudopolitics of art and academia are the pseudopolitics of identity, where exceptional individuals are supposed to magically carry or absolve the social and collective history of race.

The assumption seems to be that theories of race/gender are always autobiographical and drawn from singular experiences, while theories of class/labor can be abstract and universal, when not reduced to a fully reactionary bootstrap narrative of individual striving. There is an identity politics of class, too, which interprets it as a flatly individual and experiential category, a set of affects, vague anomies. This form of identity politics affords no materiality to history (which is a word for collective experience) beyond the narrow boundaries of the self.

This kind of identity politics is a really existing mechanism through which institutions attempt to publicly exonerate themselves of their role in the reproduction of domination.

Yet the phrase identity politics is also often an accusation leveled against the political or social-interpretative activities of racialized people. This criticism maintains the pseudopolitics outlined above—racialized individuals are still the magical bearers of race—but race is understood to be a private delusion lacking political meaning. For these critics, it is impossible for race/gender to be directly political, because both belong to a private sphere of bodies, which lies either outside the public sphere of capital or within a sticky interior.

Though identity critics are not exactly against policies that diversify labor or representation, neither are they likely to work to make their organizations, meetings, desires, lives, or theories inclusive of nonwhiteness, because they think of the problems of race/gender as qualitatively different from the problems of labor. They are obviously not racist, but not because they have listened to, thought about, or ever expected to be surprised by or to learn something from a person of color's perception of what race is or how it works. If the identity critic is a man, he is obviously not sexist, not because he has thought about it, but because he has not thought about it at all. The identity critic can miraculously transcend the operations of misogyny and whiteness without considering race/gender, which has always just stopped being real: Some new civic gain (freedom, the vote, a movie) has always just obliterated history.

The identity critics are mad at the identity artists because they think the identity artists are only ever capable of pseudopolitics. Ironically, it is the identity critics who maintain this pseudopolitics, with their weird mix of disbelief and blame. The identity critics suspect the identity artist of being opportunistic, of leveraging identity; meanwhile, many of them rest high on the plumped psychic pillow of being white, being cis, being a man. The identity critics complain that they are sad, too; that they have suffered, too; that they experience pain, too. Liberation is not (only) about freedom from personal pain, but they are incapable of understanding this, because all they see when they look at you is the open wound of their guilt, or fear.

Of course, no one seriously believes that the limp corporate strategy of diversity is a blow to the heart of capitalism. People demand to be included in existing institutions because they want to live well now, and not in a revolutionary afterlife. Similarly, struggles for higher wages are important without being automatically revolutionary: They are not aimed at a radical rupture, but form part of the continuing face-off between capital and labor. The huge questions of how we might wish to live together are always falling under the shadow of the questions of how to live now; the identity artist is not the only one whose attempts at survival collude with violence.

For the identity critics, reformist desires (such as demands for better pay) are acceptable as part of a radical struggle against capitalism when they occur among white men, but not when they are expressed by white women or racialized people in relation to race/gender. For these identity critics, the operation of whiteness (or racial equivalence—"We're all exactly the same") is not an object of critique but a baseline or default. They seem, in fact, to see the uninterrogated dominance of whiteness/masculinity as an important aspect of political struggle, because it offers an image of universality. In their condemnatory use of the phrase identity politics, identity is just a euphemism for not white, not cis, not male, not belonging here.

It is difficult to live the multiple valences projected onto you by identity champions and identity critics: both to be a miraculous body, capable of absolving white and misogynist institutions just by your presence, and to have this miraculous power ascribed to a narcissistic desire for difference. Although the identity artist is often praised or accused of being "very personal," the material of race/gender is not personal at all.

THE EVOCATION of the dismal histories and current realities of race/gender in an art context, like evocations of labor, is not often directly aimed at producing actual political effects. Art is a place to

think, even if it's also a place where that thought gets repackaged and commodified. Although some institutions are worse than others, I suspect that effective radical struggles have to be far more antagonistic and communal than is possible within the realm of contemporary art. Art is not conducive to collective struggle, although activists and political theorists are often invoked in the name of art, for reasons to do with its historical function as a space of permissible critique.

Equally, art is not a space of pure self-expression. It is a place where we can treat the self as historical and social material. The universality of race/gender does not lie in whiteness/masculinity as its apex or negation but in a universally shared entanglement in race/gender's problematics. Art can come close to the real structure of "identity," which also entails a kind of nonidentity with the self. The peculiarities of race/gender produce all sorts of doubling or layering effects: A woman is a person who consents to be troubled by her failures to be a woman, and blackness is something that I can't be and can't be without.

What the contemporary politics of identity makes painfully visible is the problem of establishing meaningful collectivity—without elision, domination, or uninflected hierarchy—against a capitalist class capable of extreme acts of violence and mass control. Collectivity might be the necessary first step toward making life bearable, but the production of that collectivity may be less cozy than strategies of inclusion, diversity, and universality suggest.

Hannah Black is an artist and writer based in Berlin.