

Artistic Exceptionalism and the Risks of Activist Art

I. Introduction

In 1980, the artist Adrian Piper presented a new installation entitled *Four Intruders plus Alarm Systems*. The artist intended this work to combat its audience's unwitting participation in racist and xenophobic ways of thinking. However, upon first display the work ran into a significant problem: not only did it not manage to unseat some of its audience's racist and xenophobic cognitive habits, it even encouraged their views. According to a recent account of activist art (Simoniti, 2018a.), when works like *Four Intruders* fail to bring about their intended impacts, both their political value and artistic value are thrown into question. But Piper pushed back against such charges, claiming that her audience were to blame for their responses and that, as an artist, she had special dispensation to pursue her political project through demanding, risky strategies – a privilege I will call 'artistic exceptionalism.'

Four Intruders poses a central question for activist art: is striving to change the world undermined when pursued through difficult and experimental artistic means? In this paper, I will consider why this is an important concern for activist art, and assess three different responses in relation to Piper's work. In section II, I present *Four Intruders* in more detail and say why I view it as an activist artwork. In section III, I survey claims that, due to the problems it encountered and Piper's response to them, *Four Intruders* is compromised both as activism and as art. These responses suggest that good activist art should take what I call a conciliatory stance, fitting itself to its audience's appreciative capacities. In section IV, I outline a competing position that claims activist artists have distinct reason to pursue their activism through challenging gestures of critical artistic exceptionalism. This leads to an

alternative steadfast stance, encouraging activist artists to utilize difficult, opaque, and open modes of communication to challenge the limitations of their audience's expectations.¹ In section V, I propose that both stances run into problems in trying to hold together activist art's political and artistic value. My claim is that a middle ground between these positions is both possible and preferable. My position, 'liberal conciliation', holds that activist artists can realize both political and artistic value if they are encouraged to pursue risky gestures of artistic exceptionalism whilst also taking care to test and mediate their audience's reception of their work.

Before continuing, a note on my methodology. I focus here only on one display of a particular artwork made 43 years ago. Naturally, there are many particularities of Piper's case that will not track other activist works made at other times. Targets of activism, audience sensitivities, and the scope of suitable strategies will change with context. My main aim is to bring out what I think is an unavoidable dilemma that arises when activist artists pursue both political and artistic value, and the ways this bears on appreciating something as activist art. I do not hold that this dilemma unavoidably produces the problems Piper encountered, or that all artists should encourage and mitigate risk in exactly the same way. I only hold that looking in detail at documentation of the premiere of *Four Intruders* serves to bring the general shape of the dilemma and its critical import into sharp focus.

II. *Four Intruders plus Alarm Systems*

Four Intruders invites viewers to enter a small, enclosed structure built within the exhibition

¹ One may note that the terms 'steadfast' and 'conciliation' are also the names given to two competing positions in the epistemology of disagreement. Though I use the same two terms, I do not intend my argument here to have any connection to this epistemological debate.

space. The interior is lit by four light-boxes, each screen printed with a different image of an anonymous black man staring straight at the viewer. From a concealed speaker the refrain of the upbeat, satirical funk song ‘Night People’ by *War* plays on loop, the lyrics listing a series of stereotypes of black men. Below each image is a set of headphones, each of which play one of four monologues, written and read by Piper, reporting a fictional audience member’s reaction to the artwork. One wearily states:

[I]t seems as though this piece is meant to shock me out of my composure, and it just doesn’t succeed in doing that, because what I’m looking for when I come into a gallery is an art experience. [...] I don’t think that it works as art, because I really couldn’t care less about racial problems when I come into a gallery.

Another attempts to assert their egalitarian worldview:

I personally don’t feel alienated from blacks at all. I feel that I have lots of good friends that are black, and ... and we understand each other very well. [...] Well, of ... of course, I... I wouldn’t... I wouldn’t advise my daughter to marry one, that’s true. But it’s not ... it’s not because I’m a racist. [...] It’s... it’s just because society makes it so difficult for an interracial couple.

A third enthuses:

I can really get into this – you know what I mean? I mean ‘cause see ... see I know what it’s like, you know. [...] I mean, I’ve been really down and out myself. I mean I can ... I can really understand black anger, because like, I’m angry too.

A final speaker bluntly asserts:

[T]o be quite honest, I ... I don’t like this. I’ve never had a black friend. I’ve said that

blacks are just angry, they're difficult to get along with. [...] They... they start out suspecting you from the very beginning. (Piper, 1996: 183-5)

This work brings attention to the overt and subtle racist and xenophobic attitudes held towards black men in post-Civil Rights America. By 1980, the legal enshrinement of segregation and widespread tolerance of overt racism and anti-black violence had been overturned. However, as contemporary commentators observed, anti-black attitudes persisted amongst the white population. Sociologists Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo (1988: 71-138) record that through the seventies and early eighties white Americans increasingly looked upon the principles that underly the removal of segregation favorably, but continued to be noncommittal about putting into place many policies to enact these principles and preferred to accept changes that would not affect them personally.² Art historian Bridget R. Cooks (2011: 105-108) tracks a similar disparity between liberal sentiment and non-overt anti-blackness in the artworld of the same period. Looking at responses to the celebratory exhibition *Two Centuries of Black Art* (1976-77), she notes that white critics struggled to view works that deal with issues of race as art rather than as social history. Critics held that “discrimination in the artworld is wrong, [but] they don't like exhibitions of the excluded.” (105)

Piper's work responds to this state of affairs in two ways. First, her work represents the way racist and xenophobic attitudes are often reliant on stereotypes that distort cognition, even when deployed by otherwise well-meaning white people.³ For example, three of the

² As many historians and sociologists point out, the issue of racial discrimination over this period cannot be charted by looking at attitudes alone. For a more structural account of racial oppression in this period, see Marable (1984: 168-200).

³ As well as being an artist Piper is also a philosopher herself. In her mature philosophical work, she develops a comprehensive theory of xenophobia and the cognitive mechanisms that sustain it, influenced broadly by Kantian epistemology and moral philosophy. The theories put forward there are surprisingly congruent with the perspective of *Four Intruders* (Piper, 2013 – especially ch. VII and ch. XI), but I will leave full elaboration of Piper's later philosophical views to one side here. See Costello, 2018 for a full elaboration of the connections

monologues state that the men pictured are angry or directly hostile to the viewer, when this is an emotional state that is hard to attribute based on the men's neutral or ambiguous expressions. A stereotype intervenes to distort their assessment of the perceptual evidence. But the humor in the work arises from the fact that such obvious errors are not only ignored by the monologists, but are in fact ballasted with baroque attempts at justification. Their ignorance is not passively sustained, but rather requires a lot of active legwork.⁴ By using and justifying stereotypes, the monologists prefer the comforting coherence of xenophobia and racism, rather than interrogating the limits of their commitments in order to gain novel empirical and moral knowledge about other people in their society.

But Piper wanted to do more than just represent the workings of xenophobia in contemporary American attitudes:

It's laudable to depict and analyze issues of racism. But my work really does not function in that way. I actually want to change people. I want my work to help people to stop being racist (whether they ask for that help or not). Just as movies and encounter groups can change people, so, maybe, can my art. (Berger, 1999: 80-81)

Actually changing people's attitudes is a longstanding commitment in Piper's art practice. Throughout the seventies, Piper had developed the concept of 'catalysis' to describe her own work. The catalytic artwork should:

induce a reaction or change in the viewer. The stronger the work, the stronger its impact and the more total (physiological, psychological, intellectual, etc.) the reaction

between Piper's mature philosophical position and her art practice.

⁴ It is worth pointing out that Piper's art and writing from this period are forerunners of many ideas found within social epistemology, developing a precise exemplification of what Charles Mills (2007) later called 'white ignorance' and what José Medina (2013) calls 'active ignorance.'

of the viewer. The strength of such a work is a function of the viewer's response to it. The work is a catalytic agent, in that it promotes a change in another entity (the viewer) without undergoing any permanent change itself. The value of the work may then be measured in terms of the strength of the change (32)

In her *Catalysis* series (1970-73) Piper pursued this by walking through public spaces in New York city covered variously in wet paint, or in clothes soaked in vinegar, eggs, milk, and cod liver oil, or with a bath towel stuffed in her mouth. The disruptive strangeness of her appearance changed the everyday patterns of attention of citizens on the street, producing instances of “uncategorized, undefined, non pragmatic human confrontation.” (42)

As Piper became more politicized through the late seventies, she began to make works that attempted to catalyze her audiences' political and moral convictions concerning current political events, racial prejudice, and the comfortable quietism on such matters in the US artworld.⁵ The key intent of *Four Intruders* is, at minimum, to change its audience by getting them to feel an uncomfortable distance between themselves and the mainstream xenophobic attitudes that persisted in American society and the artworld in 1980. Whereas they may usually see such xenophobia as unremarkable and may even unknowingly participate in its propagation, the frictions between the images, text, and music in the work push them to see such attitudes as strange, flawed, and worthy of ridicule. At maximum, Piper hoped that such a feeling of distance would motivate the audience towards a new, anti-racist stance, in which they do not try to block what they find uncomfortable and strange in others, but become “receptive and vulnerable to its effects on us, to discern its value for us, and indeed to rejoice in its intrinsic character and extrinsic ramifications for us.” (Piper, 1996: 245) It is important

⁵ See here the two works precede *Four Intruders*, *Art for the Art-World Surface Pattern* (1976) and *Aspects of the liberal Dilemma* (1978).

to recognize that Piper was clear that she “cannot describe what a correct response to racism would look like” (181). Rather, *Four Intruders* attempted to effect change by getting its audience to discover the exact implications of their discomfort for themselves.

It is in this sense that I think the set of Piper’s catalytic artworks that aim to alter their audience’s political convictions should be understood as a form of activist art. Activism covers a broad range of activities – from civil disobedience, to consciousness raising, to community building, to campaigning on social media. As I conceive it, what unites these activities as activism is their endeavor to bring about political or social change. My minimal account of activist art is then art that takes aim at some social or political ills and attempts to use its artistry to contribute to bringing about changes that help to redress these ills.⁶ *Four Intruders* is activist art insofar as it aims at a social and political ill – racial prejudice – and attempts not just to represent it, but to actually change its audiences’ participation in it. More specifically, it targets this issue by aiming to change personal attitudes (rather than systems or institutions). It does this by trying to unsettle damaging forms of ignorance and thereby productively alter its audience’s patterns of thinking about the other citizens that share their society.⁷

We now have a clear sense of Piper’s anti-racist, activist intentions. However, when *Four Intruders* was first shown, the audience reaction was divided:

The audience response to this piece was a revelation to me. ... From the perspective

⁶ Some scholars add the further condition that activist art is mainly art that i) exists outside of artworld institutions, and ii) allies itself with existing activist campaigns – see, Reed (2019). Though Piper herself has been involved in various activist projects (see, Bowles (2011: ch. 3.)), *Four Intruders* is firmly located within the conventions and institutions of the artworld. However, I do not think there is any conflict in extending the notion of activist art to such works – its position in artworld does not diminish the seriousness of its commitment to its projects for change, nor does it withhold activists beyond the artworld utilising its methods as tools within their own projects.

⁷ *Four Intruders* could even be seen as a forerunner of what Medina (2018) and Medina and Whitt (2021) have recently called ‘epistemic activism.’

of my experience (and, I venture to add, that of most blacks in this country) it was impossible to regard the content of the monologues as anything other than objects of ridicule, scrutiny, and self-examination. ... Wrong. While the black audience, and some members of the white audience, understood the devices immediately, others thanked me for expressing their views so eloquently, because they *did* have many black friends, but of course *wouldn't* recommend that their daughter marry one because society made it so difficult, and so on. (185, original emphasis)⁸

For a portion of *Four Intruders'* audience the work effected either no change, or the wrong change, making them feel more bolstered in their xenophobia.⁹ Rather than shake off this audience misunderstanding, Piper was moved to think about how she should respond:

This led me to a consideration of where the artist's responsibility for communicating the intended world view to her audience ends, and whether I should have cast the material even more broadly, so that misunderstanding of its implications would have been impossible ... I concluded that no artist with political concerns is required by a viewer's ignorance to make simplistic art, and that there is no excuse for the level of ignorance and insensitivity to racist behavior displayed by these remarks on the part of any adult American. After all, anyone who pleads ignorance of black American mores has only to pick up a copy of *Jet* or *Ebony* at his or her local supermarket check-out counter. Or call your local college's Afro-American Studies Department for a syllabus

⁸ It is important to note that whilst Piper recorded these audience responses in 1980, they were not published till 1995. As far as I can tell, the audience in 1980 were not made aware of what other portions of the audience said to Piper, or what Piper thought of these responses.

⁹ If the reader is worried that this is a kind of misunderstanding and this choice to not try to actively correct the audience are unique to Piper's work and audience attitudes in 1980, let me draw attention more recent contemporary anti-racist artwork which have generated similar audience and artist responses. Kara Walker's *A Subtlety* (2014), a monumental sugar sculpture of a stereotypical Black mammy with a lion body, was frequently used by white audiences as a prop in humorous and sexualising photo-ops (Watts, 2014). However, Walker and her collaborators decided not to censure such irreverent, racist response to the work, causing accusations of irresponsibility from some critics (Powers, 2014).

of introductory readings. (185-6)

Two options are floated here: broaden and simplify the work to fend off misunderstanding, which Piper rejects, or keep the work as it is, which Piper accepts. In the next two sections I want to reflect on this complex set of claims in order to assess what might justify Piper's argument, and how her eventual decision to not alter her work bears on its value as a work of activist art.

III. Audience Misunderstanding and Conciliation

Consider a critical response to *Four Intruders*. One could claim that the audience misunderstanding Piper encountered genuinely compromised the work's political *and* artistic value, and that her argument against altering her work cannot overcome this. A plausible basis for this line of thought is that, at its premiere, *Four Intruders* could not fully achieve its intended politically valuable changes due to the obstructive effects of the artist's chosen mode of communication. On a recent, leading view, to appreciate artistic value is to appreciate an artwork for how it achieves its constitutive functions (Gilmore, 2011; Carroll, 2016; 2021).

Though an artwork may have many possible functions it can serve, its constitutive functions are those it possesses in an essential manner, such that were it to lack those functions it would not be the artefact it is. According to proponents of this view, constitutive functions of artworks are fixed by the artist's intentions. Compare a painting by Mark Rothko and a perfect forgery of it. The functionalist can hold that, whilst being perceptually indiscernible, we value these works in different ways because they have different constitutive functions: the original is made by the artist to intentionally convey all manner of deep aesthetic and emotional effects, whilst the latter is made by the counterfeiter for financial gain. The original may make a lot of money at auction, and the forgery may have some aesthetic merit, and

both could be used to cover a damp patch on the wall, but these are simply passing functions of both works since they are unconnected to the maker's intentions.

Jonathan Gilmore argues that, in intending their works to have a particular function, artists set themselves a normative challenge: "To say an artifact or work of art has a function entails that it is *supposed to* serve that function." (Gilmore, 2011: 299) The functionalist evaluator is thus centrally interested in whether the artwork then manages to actually bring about its constitutive function via the particular means the artist uses – what Carroll calls the work's 'artistry' – and whether those functions are then valuable. Artworks can thus fail as art in two key ways. They could manage to bring about their constitutive functions through effective artistry, but the results lack any positive value – think here of a piece of racist propaganda art that, through manipulative artistry, convinces many to take up attitudes with no positive cognitive, moral, or political value. But they could also malfunction when they use artistic means that fail to actually bring about their constitutive intentions – think here of an artist who wants to convey genuinely cognitively valuable insights, but blocks this communication by using means that are too obscure or confusing.

Given Piper's activist, anti-racist intentions, *Four Intruders* could be said to have the constitutive function of combatting its audience's racism and xenophobia. She attempts to bring this about through her artistry, overlaying different conflicting materials that should confound the audience's acceptance of racist and xenophobic attitudes. If successful, this would be a politically valuable change in a society fractured by racism. However, in a functionalist vein, James Harold points out that for *Four Intruders* there "can be no question about what effects Piper *intends* her work to have; but it is reasonable to ask whether her artworks *actually do* change us in ways she hopes they do." (Harold, 2020: 88) Harold's worry is that too often

philosophers and critics simply flesh out the goodness of an artist's intentions and artistry, without then attending to the empirical study of actual audience responses.¹⁰ Vid Simoniti has also argued that an empiricist outlook is especially crucial for evaluating activist art. He focuses on the genre of socially engaged art, which attempts to actively correct social injustices by using means that are indistinguishable from those used in non-art activism. In doing so, socially engaged artists disregard the idea, central to many theories of artistic value, that 'artistry' refers to an artists' manipulation of recognizably artistic materials and techniques. Moreover, these artists aim not at autonomous aesthetic values, but rather at making measurable changes to society. Simoniti claims that these are no reasons to see the works as lacking artistic value, since such works can reasonably be defined and are regularly evaluated as art (Simoniti, 2018: 77-8). But due to their indifference to emphasizing their artistry, socially engaged artwork's artistic value hangs solely upon their production of "positive political, cognitive, or ethical impact." (76) Stated otherwise, they should be evaluated just as we would evaluate non-art activism. Simoniti leaves it open as to exactly what changes such art might aim at and how such changes might be 'measurable.' But, on a minimal interpretation, the claim is simply that some appropriate evidence is actually required to show that artist's noble intentions to change the world have been realized. What Simoniti brings into focus is that socially engaged activist art faces a particularly stark evaluative criterion: if purportedly activist artworks can't bring about the noble changes they aim at, then, no matter how interesting or unremarkable their artistry, we have decisive reason to claim that they are compromised both as political activism and as art. As Harold observes, without such evidence, our judgements of the work's value might just be hopeful speculation.

Though both Harold and Simoniti (2018b.) have written about *Four Intruders*, neither then

¹⁰ This worry has also been forcefully pursued in relation to our responses to art large by Gregory Currie (2013; 2020).

turn to applying their empiricist views to Piper's record of the actual audience misunderstanding she encountered. It seems to me that their views should lead to negative evaluation of the work. Clearly, Piper's work does not fit Simoniti's conception of socially engaged art, insofar as it uses traditional artistic media like photography, song, and dramatic monologue. But his stark evaluative criteria for activist art seem to track Piper's own constitutive intentions. Recall that "the value of the [catalytic] work may then be measured by the strength of the change [to the audience]." Applying this to Piper's anti-racist catalytic art, the value of such work hangs on its capacity to actually bring about its intended strong changes in its audience's attitudes surrounding stereotyping. However, the evidence Piper provides shows that these noble intentions did not completely come to fruition. Following Harold and Simoniti, the critic can reason that in light of evidence that Piper struggled to make the strong intended changes to the attitudes of the audience that held the racist and xenophobic views she was trying to target, the work's political, activist value is compromised.

Piper moves against this by noting that audience misunderstanding can be explained in two ways. One way is to focus on the faults of the artist and give ground to the critic. On this view, one could hold that Piper did not communicate her intentions with sufficient broadness or simplicity. If this is correct then, following the functionalist, the critic can hold that the work is also artistically compromised because audience misunderstanding can be explained by the opacity of Piper's artistry. If correct, then the work is compromised not only as activism, but also *as art*. The critic can thus motivate a policy for activist art I will call 'conciliation': if the activist artist intends to make politically valuable changes to their audience's attitudes, then they are under pressure to make sure their artistry is fit to their audience's appreciative and interpretive capacities. In Piper's case, her constitutive intentions would be best brought about by broadening and simplifying her work.

However, Piper objected to such a policy by pointing out a second way to explain audience misunderstanding: the audience were ill-equipped to properly engage with the work. Her audience latched on to only the parts of the monologues they already agreed with, entirely ignoring any of its obvious internal conflicts. More strongly, Piper claims that this audience came to the work ignorant of the irresponsible and blameworthy nature of their prejudicial ways of thinking. This stronger claim here is controversial given the live debate surrounding the blameworthiness of ignorance. I will not attempt to intervene in this debate and I will simply grant Piper this point.¹¹ Rather, I want to emphasize that this line of explanation shows us that there are many contingent sets of commitments and appreciative capacities that audiences bring to art which may limit their ability to identify its constitutive functions and artistry. Since it is unreasonable to expect an artist to make a work that could foresee all such contingencies, there must be some way to draw the line concerning the reasonable scope of the artist's responsibility for audience success. If an audience's own appreciative and moral limitations go well beyond those the artist expected to encounter, then we can say that in these cases faulty artistry doesn't explain the audience's misunderstanding, and hence its political and artistic value are left unrealized but also unscathed.

Whilst it is an unavoidable reality that artists encounter unpredictable and uncontrollable contingent audience responses, the critic may not be moved by this line of argument.

Observing the mere fact of audience contingency does not then justify refusing to change the artwork to mitigate misunderstandings that arise from these contingencies. As blameworthy as Piper might think this portion of her audience is for their own limitations, there is still an

¹¹ I will, however, still note that this notion is in fact very well supported. Defences of the idea that an agent can be responsible for their ignorance of their own prejudices are directly defended in Medina (2013: ch. 4) and Cassam (2019: ch. 6). For a more general defence, see Fitzpatrick (2008).

urgency for her to reach this particular constituency since this audience, if left unmoved, is likely to continue to contribute to the very harms she is constitutively intending to combat with her art. We might be able to usually brush off audience misunderstanding of difficult art such as Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, yet admit that failing to grasp this work doesn't necessarily lead to the audience having any negative impacts on the wider world. But when dealing with activist works that are attempting to correct urgent injustices we must be wary of the additional harms that may be brought about due to leaving certain audiences out in the cold.

The defender of Piper could instead claim that *Four Intruders*' political and artistic value can't be assessed looking merely at evidence of audience reactions. Rather the relevant evidence will be found in detailed, carefully reasoned critical reception.¹² Only responses that have actually taken the time to try and unpick the work rather than those that have just produced careless, cursory readings of it will provide a good test of the work's capacity to change attitudes. Activist artists, like other artists, should not just be motivated to conciliate to the lowest common denominator of audience response.

The strength of this argument will depend on how likely the activist artist thinks it is that the target audience whose attitudes they are trying to change are also the sufficiently critically receptive audience their artistry demands. If these two audiences are one and the same, then mere incorrect reaction from those outside the target audience may be reasonably screened out as critically irrelevant responses. But whilst it is reasonable to argue that the artist can expect certain critical skills of their audience, we should be wary that if the artist has genuinely misunderstood the sensitivity of their target audience and encounters only mere reaction from them, then they have reason to address these responses rather than disregard

¹² I thank a reviewer for this observation.

them. Making distinctions between audience reaction and reception doesn't outright block the pull of conciliation. Depending on their target, some activist artists will have to take reactions seriously.

However, even if Piper's arguments about the failings of her audience meet several objections, she has another line of defense that I think more precisely attempts to defend her particular artistic choices. I will now turn to assess this second approach and show how it opens up an alternative to the conciliatory stance.

IV. Artistic Exceptionalism and Steadfastness

Piper's second line of defense is that "no artist with political concerns is required by the viewer's ignorance to make simplistic art". Given the preceding argument, this claim should struggle since the urgency of Piper's political concerns motivates a conciliatory strategy like simplification. However, I think this would misread where the emphasis is falling in this assertion. It falls not on 'political concerns', but on 'artist.' The argument, as I read it, is that being an artist allows one to rebuff conciliation in a way that is consistent with having political concerns.

In her writings on *Four Intruders* Piper gives no further argument for this proposal. Yet I think, with some reconstruction, it can be argued that she is appealing to an idea that is common across the arts: artistic exceptionalism.¹³ I use this term to name the special privilege afforded to artists that exempts them from adhering to the norms that govern human social, political,

¹³ The term 'exceptionalism' is clearly highly loaded, bringing with it all manner of negative connotations that attend phrases like 'American exceptionalism'. As will become clear, these negative connotations are not unintended. Artistic exceptionalism is not a neutral or always positive stance to pursue.

moral, intellectual, and aesthetic life beyond the artworld, and enjoy immunity from the censure that attends such deviation in other domains of life. In art, we often actively encourage and support such protected play and experimentation. Though there are many plausible explanations of why we allow artists such privileges and immunities, I think a key reason is that referring to instances of artistic exceptionalism is crucial to explaining how artworks realize the values that they do in ways that can't be achieved in more normatively constrained domains. Stated otherwise, focusing on a work's deployment of its artistic exceptionalism helps to explain what makes it distinctly valuable *as art*.

It is important to note that I do not take it that this privilege is in any way constitutive to the concept of art or of being an artist. Rather it is a privilege that can be voluntarily taken up or relinquished by artists relative to their concerns. It is also important to note that I think artistic exceptionalism is not identical to traditional conceptions of artistic autonomy – roughly the idea that the chief duty of art is to allow us to experience aesthetic values that are outside of the ends-directed demands of other domains of life. Commonly, defenders of activist art are quick to show how it is incompatible with this latter idea.¹⁴ As I conceive it, artistic autonomy is only one particularly extreme employment of this privilege. I hold only that artistic exceptionalism licenses artists exempting themselves from certain norms that govern action in domains of life beyond art, but that this exemption does not entail or demand total detachment from real-world pressures or from the demands of activism.

Rather than appeal to artistic autonomy, I think Piper is appealing to what I will call critical artistic exceptionalism. This involves a *leveraged* experimentation with normative exemptions.

¹⁴ See Gaiger (2009). It is important to note that there are two important theorists who think that the idea of autonomy is crucial for understanding art's political potential: Theodore Adorno (see, Hulatt, (2013) for a critical overview) and Jacques Rancière (2004). I will not consider their views here, though I note that they may provide further lines of critique and support for my general argument.

Critical artists use deviation not to escape worldly concerns, but rather to analyze and intervene into the nature and problems inherent to the set of norms they are exempting themselves from. In more recent work, Simoniti (2021) has observed that much political art often does exactly this by pushing against the norms that govern communication in the sphere of politics. This view contrasts with his earlier approach to socially engaged art, but I will wait till the next section to draw out the stakes of this contrast. For now, it is enough to observe that since activist art is a subcategory of the larger category of political art, such a view opens up a very different way to understand Piper's decision to refuse conciliatory alteration. Using the example of the norms governing deliberative democracy forwarded by John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, Simoniti argues that such views propose that public discourse should best proceed via the 'objective style', in which deliberating agents should aim to act with civility towards each other, striving for impartial, orderly, and serious methods of communication, avoiding insincerity, self-contradiction, and inconsistency. This discursive style promotes democratic political values, helping diverse voices communicate on an even plane and promoting the epistemic clarity vital to collective decision making. The puzzle is that though many political artworks attempt to contribute to the betterment of democratic life, they do this by also exempting themselves from the normative pressure of the objective style. Political art often confronts audiences with opinions that the artist doesn't agree with, utilizes humor, irony, ambiguity, openness, and intentionally creates confusion and insecurity in its audiences. However, rather than downplay these puzzling exemptions and subscribe to the conciliatory pull of the objective style, Simoniti proposes a test which, if answered, can justify the political value of a gesture of artistic exceptionalism: "show that precisely *in those cases* where the objective style fails, artistic devices can help overcome epistemic obstacles." (Simoniti, 2021: 568, emphasis original) Moving this proposal to the more general terms of my account of artistic exceptionalism, the proponent of critical exceptionalism has to test

whether or not a purportedly critical artwork exempts itself from norms in order to reveal and overcome limitations inherent to the normative scheme from which they are departing.

Here are just three of the many ways *Four Intruders* successfully responds to this test. First, giving into conciliatory demands for broadness and simplicity when addressing political issues is not necessarily epistemically or politically beneficial if the issue one is dealing with is genuinely complex and nuanced. Plainly describing the phenomenon the artwork is trying to capture and instructing audiences how to achieve a solution to racism and xenophobia through a series of clear assertions may miss out the cognitive benefits of less direct, ambiguous forms of communication. As Zoë Cunliffe argues, the presence of ambiguity in narrative fictions “might attack our trust in the dominant stereotypes in the social imagination, or our certainty in seeing ourselves as dependable judges.” (Cunliffe, 2019: 172) Whilst the latter statement might sound like quite a negative outcome, Cunliffe argues that it is nothing of the sort, for “ambiguity in fiction can nurture traits or virtues such as open-mindedness and reflectiveness that act as correctives to epistemic injustice.” (172) By getting her audience to come to be unsure whether or not they agree with sentiments in the monologues and the song, Piper demands that they employ their own intellectual skills autonomously, weighing up different takes on the work for themselves and actively considering more possible ways of understanding their social world than they previously experienced. Plainly telling her audience what is wrong with xenophobia and racism would not afford her audiences such intellectual autonomy.

Second, refusing explicit description of the problems of racism and xenophobia helps to put the audience in the position to experience the detrimental nature of xenophobia in a first-hand way. An audience who both empathizes with one or more of the monologues whilst also

taking seriously the way other parts of the work push against the monologues' content learns first-hand what it is like to go through the cognitive dissonance and awkwardness of having their convictions pulled in multiple directions. They directly feel the emotional distress and embarrassment of realizing the details of their own complicity in creating such dissonance. Removing difficulty or humor from the work in favor of a more easily digestible and clear statement of Piper's position risks meaning that the audience does not need to go through the process of self-reflective inquiry for themselves, thus depriving them of autonomous experience of what it is like to actually become cognizant of the detrimental effects of their own xenophobia.

Third, by leaving the implications of the work open for her audience to explore, rather than instructing them on the best outcome, Piper avoids the vices of didacticism.¹⁵ In the case of fiction, Charles Repp points out that "An author who tells her readers too explicitly what lessons to draw from her story, as if the reader is too obtuse to draw the lesson for himself, may also come across as intellectually condescending." (273) Though Piper's rejection of instructing her failing audience may seem arrogant, one could claim that refusing to make the work overly didactic is actually a virtuous gesture of magnanimity. She places a high level of trust in her audience's level of maturity and cognitive skill that she hopes an adult American will be able to meet, rather than belittling or patronizing them. Were Piper to make the work less open, there is again a risk she would leave no space for them to take charge of their own navigation away from racism and xenophobia.

¹⁵ Those familiar with Piper's wider practice will note that the artist is not unwelcome to making openly didactic art. Works such as *Funk Lessons* (1972-74) and *Shiva Dances* (2004) use a lecture format to communicate to their audiences. However, I think there is room to see that these works are not viciously didactic, closing off audience autonomy. Both ultimately end in encouraging the audience to dance, proposing that the experiences the work is trying to convey can't solely be conveyed through lecturing.

Defending Piper's gestures of artistic exceptionalism in these ways help us to see how her steadfastness about her artistry is entirely consistent with realizing the political values she is pursuing. By making a work that is difficult, ambiguous, and open, Piper engages in strategies of activist intervention that are particularly nuanced and precise. In refusing to provide guidance on how features of the work are to be understood and interpreted, the artist increases the possibility for audience autonomy. But it also allows us to more clearly see the weaknesses of conciliation, for it allows us to see the nuance and precision that would be lost were Piper to simplify or broaden her work by removing its more challenging, ambiguous, or open aspects.

However, following my articulation of artistic exceptionalism, a point I want to emphasize is that we should expect the challenging, experimental, and open works that pass Simoniti's test to then also often open themselves up to the risk of audience misunderstanding. Asking an audience to alter or give up deeply held norms is often hermeneutically and epistemically challenging. The defender of critical exceptionalism has to admit that some audience misunderstanding is just the cost of certain nuanced and precise activist strategies. But we are now in a better position to defend this outcome from conciliation. First, as claimed above, the defender of Piper's work can argue that there may be comparatively greater costs that come from removing risky gestures of artistic exceptionalism. Second, we can also observe that risk and experimentation are beneficial for activism. Activist campaigns are slow and difficult processes, meeting all manner of novel external obstacles, trenchant opposition, and in-group fractures and crises in motivation along the way, and so inspiration and strategic innovation rather than persisting with best practices is often necessary. Activist artists have a unique liberty to try out all manner of novel and strange strategies without the censure that attends them in more normatively constrained areas of life. Steadfast activist art can thus serve a

distinct and valuable R&D role for activism at large, developing all manner of novel strategies that may help to overcome problems external and internal to activist causes.

Viewing *Four Intruders* in these ways motivates a steadfast line of argument against conciliation: using gestures of critical artistic exceptionalism to challenge an audience's expectations can be politically valuable, even if this leads to some measure of misunderstanding. Given the way Piper frames her second line of defense, it looks like she may agree with this stance. However, I think that, articulated thus, steadfastness risks going too far and misinterprets what conciliation could entail. Let me now show why this is so and propose an alternative position: liberal conciliation.

V. Liberal Conciliation

To motivate my position, consider an evident puzzle: I have framed two ways for activist artists to respond to audience misunderstanding and how these choices affect criticism. I have developed these in dialogue with Simoniti's two approaches to political art. As I have claimed, it seems that Simoniti's approaches should overlap since activist art is a particularly demanding subset of the wider category of political art. But it seems now like these two views can lead to opposite and incompatible artistic and critical stances. One view can lead to a conciliatory stance that recommends diminishing audience misunderstanding, whilst the other view can lead to a steadfast stance that is at peace with some measure of unresolved misunderstanding. The conciliatory stance attempts to respond to the evidence that shows that a critical constituency of Piper's audience did misunderstand the work and didn't experience any change in their attitudes. By contrast, the steadfast stance banks on the potential value of Piper's work for some future audience. The advocate of the conciliatory

stance can find steadfastness too much concerned with good intentions and too little concerned with reckoning with actual impact. The advocate of the steadfast stance can find conciliation too conservative in its approach to risk and innovation in activism. By the lights of steadfastness, the political and artistic value of Piper's work is evident. By the lights of conciliation its value seems to be compromised.

In his work thus far, Simoniti has not attempted to draw out how his two views of political art connect. Whilst I don't want to hold him accountable for developing an internally consistent, systematic theory of all political art, I think it is important and interesting to reflect on how it might be possible to bridge the fissure that opens up between the conciliatory and steadfast stances I have extrapolated from these arguments. To attempt this, I introduce my own proposal. An apt response to activist art's pursuit of genuine change by means of challenging gestures of artistic exceptionalism requires us to adopt an artistic and critical policy I call *liberal conciliation*.

At root, I have claimed that conciliation requires artists to actually impact their audience. To do so, they need to pay attention to the points where the risks they take do not make the impacts they intend to. But this doesn't imply that impacting audiences requires artists to then downplay challenge and risk to simply meet their audience's appreciative capacities. The advocate of liberal conciliation holds only that activist artists need to be open to altering their experiments when they encounter problems such as audience misunderstanding. But this can just as well involve a change to a different challenging gesture of artistic exceptionalism as it can simplification or broadening.¹⁶ The choice simply depends on which better brings about

¹⁶ Often this involves artists not necessarily altering their works, but making new works that can be compared with other works in their *oeuvre*. One example is, again, *Funk Lessons*, which could be seen to directly respond to the problems Four Intruders encountered by seeing what happens if the same issues of stereotyping are approached through direct conversation between artist and audience, allowing the artist to directly respond to

the impacts the artist is pursuing. What arguments in favor of critical exceptionalism help to show is that there is good reason to think that conservative rejection of artistic exceptionalism may not be as effective or efficient as it seems. Artists have good reason to mount critical experiment, so long as they don't let failing experiments lie without redress.

From the view of liberal conciliation, a fault of strong steadfast views which recommend no change in the face of audience misunderstanding is not their encouragement of artistic exceptionalism, but rather their tendency to see this privilege as licensing artistic solipsism, artists using their privilege to completely disregard audiences' needs and struggles for the sake of experimentation and play. Though it is easy within art criticism to praise the worthy potential of works with no regard to their effects on any actual audiences, liberal conciliation recommends that if activist artists clearly intend to help those who suffer from injustice then praising strategies that are indifferent to assessing whether the work actually changed its audience confounds understanding the work as activist art.

How then would the liberal conciliationist recommend an artist pursue both gestures of artistic exceptionalism that risk audience failure and genuine impact? One way to close the gap between strategic risk and audience uptake is just to suggest that activist artists need to be encouraged to spend more time than most getting to know their audience and testing different strategies to find the right balance of challenge and meeting the threshold of uptake they take to be sufficient to count as realizing their activist goals. On this view, liberal conciliation does not ask artists to be less experimental in the avant-garde, aesthetic sense, but

misunderstanding. Another example is Kara Walker's response to *A Subtlety* (see fn. 9). Rather than attempt to offer any guidance to her audience or correct their attitudes, the artist decided to secretly film the different ways the audience responded to the work, and to make a film entitled 'The Audience.' The film served the purpose of calling out the racist responses to *A Subtlety*, and contrasted them with more thoughtful audience responses. Neither of these artistic choices show a response that I would see as simplifying or broadening their approach to anti-racism.

simply more experimental in the scientific sense. Activist artists are under pressure to regularly check and revise the strategies pursued in their artworks.¹⁷

But there is another way to close the gap between allowing risk and ensuring uptake. Thus far, following Piper, I have focused solely on artists and audiences. But clearly the parties that help bring artworks into being, that disseminate them, and that keep them in circulation are far more numerous. Within the world of gallery-based contemporary art many other parties such as curators, gallery educators, and critics help to prime audiences to be up to the difficulties and risks of interesting artistic exceptionalism. It is conventional to surround artworks with framing materials such as wall texts and handouts that convey relevant contextual information, statements of artistic intent, and indications of how the work fits into the themes relevant across an artists' oeuvre. These supporting devices help an audience get into the right position to correctly interpret and appreciate difficult artworks by filling gaps in the background knowledge necessary to appropriately encounter challenging art. However, in doing so it is important to note that mediating parties don't often try to completely undo the risks of artistic exceptionalism. Rather, they try to provide a contextual frame for artworks that correctly conveys the nature of its challenges and openness for audiences with a range of different appreciative competencies. The best mediation frames works without then solving difficulties or closing down openness. It rather primes audiences to better appreciate just how the work is challenging them.

Mediation can of course fail: it can be too heavy-handed – for instance trying to just give audiences 'correct' interpretations of the work – or can be too obscure – framing works

¹⁷ This is a strategy that can be seen at work in the participatory works of Suzanne Lacy or Thomas Hirschhorn, who often formulate their plans for their pieces through much dialogue with those communities they are trying to make work for.

through confusing artworld jargon.¹⁸ But it is possible to see that there are many things a mediator could do to bring relevant features of a work into view that would productively constrain the judgements interpreters could form of *Four Intruders*, whilst still leaving them space to feel the effects of ambiguity and openness. Some options could include informing the audience that the artwork was made by a light-skinned black woman, informing them that the work is concerned with the themes of racism and xenophobia, or proposing that audiences direct their attention to both the text of the music and the monologues.

What actual mediation brings into view is that there are many possible ways of supporting audiences in feeling the effects of difficult activist artworks that do not require artists to downplay or compromise on artistic exceptionalism. The fact that Piper has never altered *Four Intruders* can be understood, from a liberal conciliationist view, as being partly justified by the increased critical and institutional mediation that has surrounded her work since 1980. Over time, audiences have become better primed to appreciate *Four Intruders*' epistemic and hermeneutic challenges. But this still leaves open the possibility that, if presented unsupported by such mediation, the work's challenges may well still be overwhelming for ill-equipped audiences.

VI. Conclusion

In this article, I have used an analysis of Piper's *Four Intruders plus Alarm Systems* to bring into focus the tension that can arise between activist artists' commitment to creating measurable change, and the risky gestures of artistic exceptionalism they use to pursue these intentions. I have formulated two responses to this tension – conciliation and steadfastness – both of which

¹⁸ Other failures in institutional responsibility which alter the ontology of a work of contemporary art and lead to audiences forming incorrect appreciative stances on works are documented and analysed in Irvin (2019).

attempt to square the artistic and political value of activist art. Through liberal conciliation I have attempted to propose the possibility of a middle ground between these positions, acknowledging the importance of challenging audiences through artistic experimentation whilst also acknowledging that such challenges must be carefully tested and mediated to improve chances of audience success. The evaluation of activist art thus requires as much close, empirical attention to the reactions of audiences as it does attention to the strategic novelties of exceptional artistry.¹⁹

¹⁹ I am grateful to Diarmuid Costello, Karen Simecek, Rossen Ventzislavov, audiences at Warwick and at the ESA, BSA, and ASA annual meetings for their comments, criticisms, and encouragement.

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