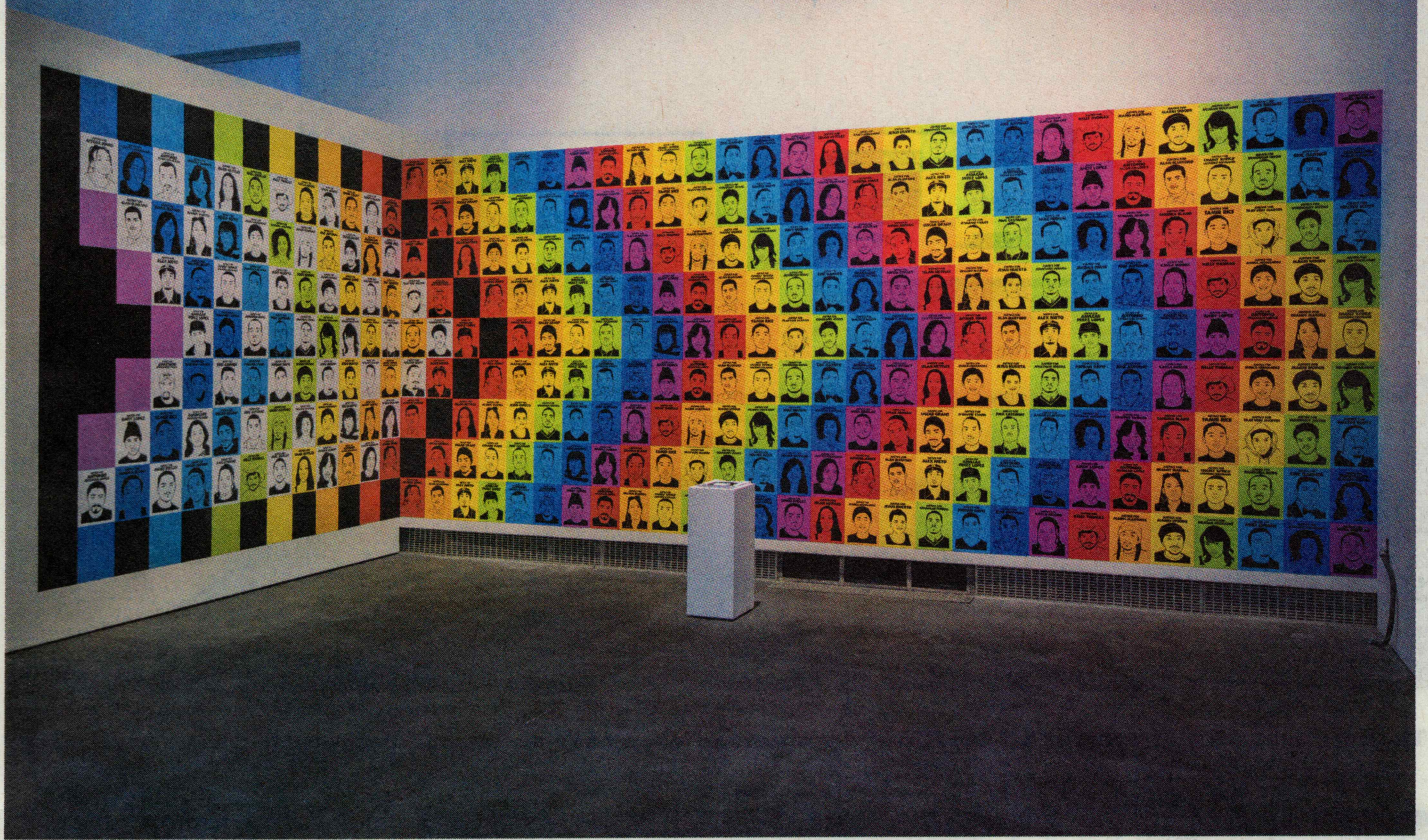




Photos by Charlie Villyard / Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

Oree Original's "Justice for Our Lives" arrays portraits of people killed by police in pulsing color.

Lines between art, activism blurred

Yerba Buena's 'Take This Hammer' exhibition is a call to action

By Charles Desmarais

"It is much more easy to have sympathy with suffering," Oscar Wilde wrote in 1891, "than it is to have sympathy with thought." The current exhibition at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts brims with righteous and legitimate calls upon our compassion. If that were the measure of significant art, we'd be done here.

Of course, we would all concur that well-meaning art is not necessarily good art, nor bad. The question raised by "Take This Hammer: Art + Media Activism From the Bay Area" is whether a show that bills itself not as art but as activism can be subject to critical evaluation at all.

We live in a time that has little patience for thoughtful analysis, much less for nuance or irony. "What *"Hammer"* continues on E2



"Google Google Apps Apps" by Persia and Daddies Plastik is a song-and-dance routine about gentrification, tech and race.

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Blurring lines between art, activism

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do we want?” “Whatever we want!” “When do we want it?” “Now!” To stand in front of such a crowd and call for calm deliberation would probably be useless, if not a little dangerous. And who would want to, if we are agreed on the intended ends?

So, let’s call this what it is: a call to action. It is a crisply professional effort by a knowledgeable and deeply committed guest curator, Christian L. Frock. (Frock has written freelance articles for this newspaper, and she held adjunct teaching positions at the San Francisco Art Institute when I was president there.)

Her brochure essay — laudably, in my view — makes no case for the artistic validity or quality of her exhibition and its contents, bypassing entirely the matter of art and art history. “Each of us possesses the potential to exert ... impact on the world we want to live in,” she writes in closing. “Start with whatever you care most about in the fierce urgency of now. Start here. Take this hammer.”

The San Francisco author Rebecca Solnit’s piece in the handout, consisting of about 2,000 words, uses the word “art” only once.

The works in the exhibition vary. The first piece encountered is the most entertaining (see, I’m avoiding using “best”), a 2013 video by the drag performer Persia with a group called Daddies\$ Plastik, “Google Google Apps Apps.” It’s a catchy song and kitschy dance routine about gentrification, tech and race, played out before animated Google Street Views.

Rommy Torrico shows “Until We Are All Free” (2015), a collection of protest standards — polite-looking silkscreened demands on banners with hummingbirds, borne on nicely matching blue poles. As with many of the works on view, it comes out of collective action, in this case involving participants from Culture-Strike and community organizers from Mobilize the Immigrant Vote and Black Alliance for Just Immigration.

Several projects make use of current design methods, such as Pitch Interactive’s “Out of Sight, Out of Mind — Immersive Data Visualization” (2016), which graphically charts drone attacks in Pakistan, and Stamen’s “Bay Area Melting Pot: A Region of Immigrants” (2016) showing American immigration patterns.

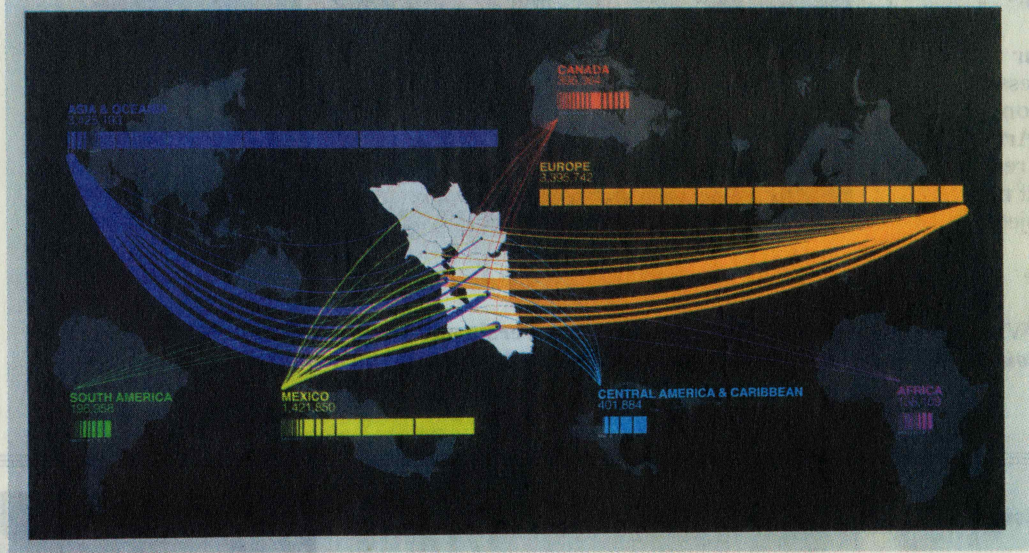
The whole affair is very dense, with extensive texts and thickly hung visuals throughout. The Bay Area Society for Art & Activism selected hours of video and “a new site-specific experimental timeline based on more than one hundred stories” of Bay Area activism. Oree Originol’s website “Justice for Our Lives” (2014-ongoing) makes available free portraits of people killed by the police, which may be used in creating posters and other products; here, they are arrayed in pulsing color. “The Guantanamo Bay Museum of Art and History,” a project conceived by Ian Alan Paul, proposes in careful, extensive



“The Guantanamo Bay Museum of Art and History” proposes an imagined future museum dedicated to the infamous prison.



Rommy Torrico’s “Until We Are All Free” is a collection of protest standards — polite-looking silkscreened demands on banners with hummingbirds.



Stamen’s “Bay Area Melting Pot: A Region of Immigrants” shows American immigration patterns.

detail an imagined future museum dedicated to the infamous prison camp in Cuba. No statement — not even regarding the weather — is without political implication, and some of the greatest historical works — think Goya, Daumier, Rivera — were made

to describe and analyze injustice. The intensely engaging works of such contemporary artists as the Guerrilla Girls, Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Mark Lombardi, Trevor Paglen and others examine the political as a primary subject of their art, looking at the

structures, interrelationships and language of influence and control. “Take This Hammer” is meant to perform a different function. Like Frock’s essay — like the title of the show itself, as she interprets it — most of the works are admonitions.

Take This Hammer: Art + Media Activism From the Bay Area: 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays-Sundays; 11 a.m.-8 p.m. Thursdays. Through Aug. 14. \$8-\$10. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 701 Mission St., S.F. (415) 978-2787. www.ybca.org.

They are slogans, variously effective in stirring emotion but allowing little room for argument or thought. They instruct the viewer, rather than deconstruct the condition. The author James Baldwin knew the difference between those two kinds of communication. The whole exhibition takes its title from a 1963 television documentary of the same name, which follows Baldwin on a startling tour through the African American neighborhoods of San Francisco. (It is available free online on YouTube, and it is brilliant.) Toward the end of the film, he puts his finger on the crux of the matter. “If one could crack that nut,” he puzzles aloud. “If one could try to find out — and this is something white people have to do, Negroes can’t do it — exactly what a Negro means to a white man. I don’t mean what he means in terms of signing petitions and, you know, marching with picket signs and all that jazz — I mean what he really means, you know — why are you afraid of him — that’s what it comes to.” Baldwin wanted to get to the essence, to the root of injustice. It’s not that he objected to “all that jazz,” but he knew the way would be much harder. See the show, by all means, but understand what you’re in for. Plan a lot of time. Expect to be lectured. Take this medicine.

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