

Exhibitions as political ‘demonstrations’: Artists International Association’s *For Liberty* exhibition, London 1943

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During World War Two, while the British government used exhibitions for propaganda purposes, anti-fascist Artists International Association (AIA) also recognised exhibitions’ potential as communication. Founded in London in 1933 the AIA had declared exhibitions - mounted in public spaces across Britain - a form of ‘demonstration’, a means through which to express solidarity and to raise urgent issues. AIA’s *For Liberty* exhibition, held in 1943 on a London bombsite, was one such ‘demonstration’. Mounted by a group including German émigré designer FHK Henrion, recently returned from British internment, the exhibition - amplifying the four freedoms of the UN Charter - asserted the importance of maintaining culture in a democracy. In this paper I analyse how AIA’s politics were enacted through *For Liberty*, considering how it provided a space for artists and designers on the left, many of them refugees, to work for a common cause. I discuss the democratic ideals contingent on choice of site and analyse its content, which drew visitors in to a sense of the common with ‘ethical immediacy’ (Rancière, 2012), its integration of graphics, text and image and AIA’s use of public space as site of ‘plural performativity’ (Butler, 2015).

Introduction

During World War Two the Ministry of Information - the British government’s propaganda department - used a form of easily reproducible information exhibitions, mounted in public spaces, to communicate information to home audiences and to send messages to allies and enemies abroad. At the same time, politically engaged groups such as the anti-fascist Artists International Association (AIA) used exhibitions as a form of ‘demonstration’, adopting the language of politics to raise urgent issues up the public agenda. In this paper I analyse how politics were enacted through the design of such exhibitions, by focusing, in particular, on one such ‘demonstration’: the exhibition *For Liberty*, which AIA mounted in London in 1943. I consider the exhibition’s site, its installation, content, integration of graphics, space, text and image.

Exhibitions in London's Blitzed West End

German bombs, which flattened several major department stores in September 1940, had also left the John Lewis building on Oxford Street a decimated shell. Walking up Oxford Street soon after the bombing, and passing John Lewis's, writer George Orwell had described seeing on the pavement 'a pile of plaster dress models, very pink and realistic, looking', he said, 'so like a pile of corpses that one could have mistaken them for that at a little distance' (Orwell, 2009)¹. Meanwhile, journalist Kingsley Martin remembered the remnants of John Lewis's, with its exposed concrete columns, as 'like the ruins of a Greek temple' (Martin, 1968).

This wartime Blitzing of London's West End, while causing devastating damage, also opened up novel opportunities for taking exhibitions to the people, on sites more publicly available than centrally placed, but dauntingly temple-like museums like the British Museum or National Gallery. Indeed, during the years between the 1940 raid that flattened the department store, and its rebuilding the popular John Lewis Oxford Street store site became a key place for holding public exhibitions: being centrally placed it could attract visitors going about their everyday lives. With its extensive basement, originally used as a staff canteen, then briefly as an early wartime air raid shelter, the site was well suited to housing major exhibitions. It was taken up by the government's wartime Ministry of Information for propaganda exhibitions including 'Britain's Aircraft', 'The Army Exhibition' and 'Victory Over Japan'. For Christmas 1942 it was also the site of the Ministry's 'Potato Pete's Fair', a public information event dressed up as celebration, which 'taught 100,000 Londoners 198 ways to cook potatoes' (Havinden, 1956). Alongside these official exhibitors, the leftist exhibiting group Artists International Association also took the site as location for its 1943 For Liberty exhibition, which is the focus of my paper here.

The AIA group was founded a decade earlier, in 1933, by artists including Clifford Rowe, Peggy Angus, James Boswell, Pearl Binder and Misha Black, to defeat fascism in all its manifestations, through artistic activity. The AIA articulated its aims and plan of future action in a statement of 1934, announcing that the network stood as 'The International Unity of Artists Against Imperialist War on the Soviet Union, Fascism and Colonial Oppression'. They would 'further these ends' in various ways including 'The spreading of propaganda by means of exhibitions' (Morris and Radford, 1983, p.11). Taking inspiration from the Soviet Union, where several founder members including James Holland and Pearl Binder had spent time, the AIA's professed policy was 'to forge a link between artist and public'. By doing this, they believed, they would 'realis[e] the evils of the dissociation of art from everyday life' (AIA, 1945). Exhibitions were a vehicle through which they would achieve this.

¹ Written by Orwell in 24th September, 1940.

Exhibitions as 'demonstrations'

AIA's particular conception of exhibitions is worthy of discussion here. The AIA had, from the outset, envisaged fighting fascism through exhibitionary activities, identifying themselves as a radical exhibiting society. Their organizational literature said 'Exhibitions have formed a large part of the activities of the AIA since its formation in 1933', and further clarified 'At first [exhibitions] were used primarily as **demonstrations**' (original emphasis, AIA Bulletin, 1944). The word 'demonstration' comes from the Latin 'to point out', and to 'make aware in a clear and public way'. This, according to the *Oxford Dictionary of Word Histories*, 'led in the mid nineteenth century to a connection with public protest' (Chantrell, 2002). By the 1930s, the decade AIA was founded, 'demonstration' was in common parlance to indicate political protest, often used to describe working people's 'demonstrations' of anger about poor conditions they were experiencing during the Depression. Taking up this political language, exhibitions as 'demonstrations' were key to the AIA's politically engaged vision. Indicating their vision of engaged audiences being animated by contact with culture, the AIA's exhibitionary vision of 'demonstrations' was as akin to active acts of protest – of people being drawn into enacting an issue - rather than of exhibitions as commercial 'displays', seen by inert audiences. Exhibitions, in the AIA's formulation, were therefore about making manifest and visible issues that were abstract, invisible or not seen and noticed². In this sense exhibitions-as-demonstrations acted as a form of agitprop, as embodied protests to raise the profile of a cause, rather than as displays to be consumed passively.

AIA's vision of exhibitions as politically active or even activist entities can be understood further in relation to Jacques Rancière's discussion of art's relationship with politics in his book *Dissensus*. Rancière states that 'art and politics are not distinct processes' but should be related, both 'forms of dissensus', 'processes that effect a suspension of the logic that institutes politics as the preserve of those born to rule, and art as that bound to the service of social function' (Rancière, 2012, p.3). In his essay 'The Paradoxes of Political Art' Rancière goes on to draw a distinction between two types of political art: that which relies on the 'representational mediation' of ideas through mimesis – so attempting to change people's behaviour by representation and, on the other hand, political art of the 'archi-ethical paradigm', where it is used to draw people in to 'directly embody the sense of the common', with what he describes as 'ethical immediacy' (Rancière, 2012. P145). *For Liberty* fitted with Rancière's latter category – focused, as it was, on drawing its viewers into a common set of ideas and values. It operated as a way of creating a community, just as much as it did in explaining something at a distance.

² Exhibitions therefore operated as montage in the way that art historian Matthew Teitelbaum has discussed it, as seeking 'not merely to represent the real but also to extend the idea of the real to something not yet seen', p.8.

Democratic exhibition sites?

The AIA held their exhibitions-as-demonstrations on sites that would, they hoped, attract a public unused to visiting art galleries, echoing the desire often expressed during the 1930s to take art beyond the studio and the art gallery. In doing so AIA members saw themselves as pioneers. 'Long before the creation of organisations like the Arts Council of Great Britain', AIA literature claimed, 'the AIA was organising travelling shows, exhibitions in unusual places such as Underground Stations, factory canteens and working men's settlements'. Their professed reason for this was a belief that 'art should come to the people and not be simply a form of luxury goods', that 'Artists have shown their readiness to perform a social function, and it is for the public to show a corresponding willingness to approach the work without prejudice' (AIA, 1945). Another AIA leaflet repeated this sentiment: '...it has always been our aim', it said, 'to make our exhibitions accessible to the widest possible public' (Full Employment, 1945).

The John Lewis Oxford Street site – as the choice for AIA's *For Liberty* exhibition in 1943³ - satisfactorily fulfilled this democratizing aim **[FIGURE 1]**. Being on a major thoroughfare, and with no admission charge to enter, it saw lots of passing interest from men and women working in the shops and offices nearby. 'Oxford St was teeming with service men on leave' graphic designer FHK Henrion, who created the overall installation of the exhibition for AIA, recalled. And, in keeping with this, a particular effort was made to design an entrance to attract people in. Approaching the exhibition from Oxford Street, a sign announced '*AIA For Liberty Exhibition: Paintings on War, Peace and Freedom*'. Henrion recalled: 'The Fire Brigade had painted the site in bright colours, like a Graham Sutherland painting, orange and blue, etc' (Hollis, 1986). To the exhibition's reviewers the striking entrance was particularly noteworthy. *Display* magazine's cover announced 'One-time display window of Lewis's, blitzed, battered and burned, is reborn to draw the crowds to A.I.A.'s exhibition "For Liberty". Girders and stanchions are painted red; wrecked walls a vivid yellow' (*Display* cover, April 1943). **[FIGURE 2]** *Display's* journalist continued 'I only wish it were possible to reproduce here in colour a view showing with what most praiseworthy ingenuity the blitzed and blasted remains of this store have been magnetized by resourceful sign craftsmen. The entrance to the exhibition is in Holles Street, and on the scarred wall above this there is a splotch of yellow with a red arrow pointing obliquely downwards. Girders and stanchions on the corner are painted red and the broken, blackened walls yellow' (*Display*, April 1943, p.5). Meanwhile, *Architectural Review* – echoing its editorial interest in the picturesque possibilities of bombing and reconstruction - called the blasted walls and bared girders 'thrilling' and achieving 'a picturesque unity'. It continued breathlessly: 'the eighteenth century squire had to build them specially; to us the enemy's bombing has given them, and here is a way to make them a positive part of the urban

³ *For Liberty* ran from 13th March to 10th April 1943.

scene' (Kallmann, p.100). The audacious suggestion that spaces Blitzed by the Nazis provided not a scar but a positive addition to the urban landscape was often repeated. 'German Bombs Provide Exhibition Site', the MOI declared in *For Liberty* publicity⁴. In being used as a focus through which to antagonize Adolf Hitler by presenting the Blitz as providing a novel opportunity for a perfectly placed exhibition space, the site was again being positioned politically.

Following the 1934 Hunger Marches, the 1936 Jarrow Crusade (where 200 workers had marched from Tyneside to London) and other workers' demonstrations during the economic Slump, the very act of gathering in public space caused British authorities anxiety (Pickard, 1982). This was something the AIA were strongly aware of, as satirized in drawings by AIA members James Holland (in his drawing '*Incitement to Disaffection*'), David Low '*A Slight Error*' and Edith Tudor-Hart's photograph '*Sedition*'; all of which captured police and members of the public in tension. AIA members had noted at various points that this was the official response to their public gatherings⁵. Philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler discusses the 'plural performativity' of gathering in public space. 'The gathering', Butler states, 'signifies in excess of what is said, and that mode of signification is a concerted bodily enactment, a plural form of performativity' (Butler, 2015, p.8). The siting of an exhibition such as *For Liberty* in public space immediately distinguished it from those exhibitions mounted in purpose-built galleries, contained within an established and identifiable set of institutional politics. Its role on a public bombsite was far more ambiguous and allowed for the public performance of the enactment of alliance and of citizenship.

At the colourful exhibition entrance, visitors saw *For Liberty's* recurrent symbol - the 'four feathered freedoms' (as *Display* described them) - a drawing by designer Henrion showing freedoms riding on the back of four doves (*Display*, p.5). These 'four freedoms' were those values set out in the United Nation's 1941 Atlantic Charter, as explained by US President Roosevelt, who had recently joined the allied war effort; they were the goals the allies would combine forces to achieve in the post-war world: 'Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Worship, Freedom from Want, Freedom from Fear'⁶. *Architectural Review* praised Henrion's doves as 'surrealism', but 'stripped of all that so often appeared to be bogus' (Kallmann, 1943).

⁴ In a caption on a British Official Photograph distributed by Ministry of Information of 'For Liberty', reverse side of photograph in Henrion collection, University of Brighton Design Archives. This was not the first time AIA had set about antagonizing Hitler through their exhibitions. They had sponsored a major 1938 'Exhibition of Twentieth Century German Art' at the New Burlington Galleries, mounted as a direct response to Hitler's notorious Degenerate Art exhibition of 1937. An AIA exhibition poster was headed 'Hitler Attacks London Art Exhibition' and quoted from Hitler's response to the London exhibition as 'impertinence', acting as a further provocation when it stated 'Why does Hitler expel artists? Because Fascism is afraid of those who think, of those who see truth, of those who speak the truth' (Morris and Radford, 1983, p.50).

⁵ For example, the press particularly noted police nervousness about public gatherings when Julian Trevelyan's painting of a public hoarding in central London with AIA in February 1939.

⁶ Henrion also designed publicity for the exhibition in the form of posters, letterheads and the catalogue.

Paintings on War, Peace and Freedom

From the politics of the exhibition's site, I turn now to consider the way that politics were enacted through the subject matter, installation and objects of *For Liberty*. Once inside, the exhibition contained 150 paintings (watercolours, drawings, prints) and a small number of sculptures, all work by AIA members. Painter Beryl Sinclair chaired the exhibition committee, with an illustrious advisory group including painters Oskar Kokoschka, Ethel Walker, Duncan Grant, Vanessa Bell and Augustus John; sculptors Henry Moore and Frank Dobson; graphic designer Edward McKnight Kauffer; cartoonist David Low and art historian Anthony Blunt who gained notoriety in Britain when, two decades later, he confessed to being a Soviet spy⁷. The exhibition's declared aim was to show 'that the function of art in wartime is not only to record what is happening and to give enjoyment and recreation but to stimulate and encourage by vividly representing what we are fighting for' (*AIA For Liberty*, p.2). This urge to represent abstract values was key. Although this was an art exhibition, the many works of art by notable artists were not significant in and of themselves but contributions to a message communicated through word, image and space – all these aspects working together, in *relay*, to use Roland Barthes' term (Barthes, 1977, p.41). In this context, the written presentation was as valuable as the visual one and the act of moving through space allowed the sequential aspects of the exhibition to be realised.

The central focus of *For Liberty* downstairs – in what had been the staff canteen - was the 'Four Freedoms Room' (exhibition Room 4), illustrating the four 'freedoms' or 'liberties' of The Atlantic Charter, again reinforced in a written list. In this room were twelve paintings including work by Augustus John and Oskar Kokoschka and a single sculpture by Betty Rea called '*New World*' – the sculpted heads of four children looking joyfully upwards created especially for this room ('Betty Rea', Henry Moore). AIA commissioned poet and leftist commentator Cecil Day-Lewis to write a poem linking the works together, creating a strong narrative for the show. One line was inscribed under each of the twelve paintings in the room. Day's poem opened with the statement: 'They cry for help, each cry is an open wound on the body of Freedom', continuing, '...Freedom lives wherever men meet to speak their minds in the open', which justified the very existence of *For Liberty*. The poem finished on an optimistic note: 'And our heirs shall unfold, like a cluster of apple-blossom, in a fine tomorrow' (*AIA For Liberty*). This was reinforced by the construction of frames for the twelve painted works that created a sequencing effect, as if each different image was the next frame in a film. Elsewhere, exhibition Room 3 announced itself as 'Paintings to a Theme' – with artists all producing work that reinforced one of three ideas: 'This will happen if we lose the war', 'This is what we are fighting for' or 'This is how we are fighting'.

⁷ See advisory group details at foot of *For Liberty* writing paper (Design Archives Henrion collection).

Through this installation, the exhibition both showed and told its message, with artists documenting the war and interpreting it too. As the exhibition's catalogue explained, the twelve paintings in the room showed 'that artists can formulate and express *ideas* as well as illustrate and interpret *fact*'. Key to this presentation was this collaborative act of painters, sculptors, designers and a writer combining forces, something that AIA stated was 'a new feature...which carries AIA policy a step further', with members 'working to a theme and arranging the works in such a way that they became part of a whole scheme and not separate units. We hope to develop this new technique in future' (original emphasis; AIA for Liberty, p.12). In this statement was an assertion of the power of exhibitions to create bonds between people and across type of creative work – art, design and literature – to work for a higher cause.

The exhibition's sponsor, leftist broadsheet newspaper *News Chronicle*, in its catalogue foreword stated the importance not only of winning the war but of guarding 'the future Britain against intellectual poverty', by supporting such exhibitions. 'Time will', they said, 'cement the alliance between newspaper and artist now being brought into being. It is an alliance with wide horizons and of incalculable power'. Further, they said 'Today, in this exhibition, the power is used to forge the weapons of mind and spirit essential for victory over Fascism. To-morrow, in peace, that power will be used to erect an enduring civilisation' (*AIA For Liberty*, p.5). This idea of exhibitions cementing alliances was key. In *News Chronicle's* rhetoric, the exhibition forged a bond between newspaper and artist, between members of the AIA network and between artists and the public. In this sense, *For Liberty* was about reinforcing the bonds of a like-minded community, rather than simply about explaining the progress of the war, which was the focus of government wartime exhibitions, held on the same site. *For Liberty* was about involving people in a network, it was an entreaty for the public to join them in a common set of ideas and values.

Significant to this act of imagined community-building was the fact that many of the artists who worked on the exhibition had arrived recently in Britain. *For Liberty* served to draw them together for mutual support and to make their existence manifest. Recent émigré designer from Germany FHK Henrion had only recently returned from internment on the Isle of Man before contributing to the exhibition, for example. *For Liberty* organizer Misha Black, who had arrived on an earlier wave of migration from Russia in 1912, was still 'Stateless' in the 1940s, having failed to become naturalized as a British citizen and Polish artist Felix Topolski, who painted a panel for *For Liberty* exhibited on the winding staircase, had arrived in 1935. Hungarian-born sculptor Peter Lambda, who had arrived in Britain in 1938, contributed an imposing portrait bust of Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin. A lack of a stylistic orthodoxy was clearly evident, with abstract works shown alongside what we might describe as socialist realist, another indication of the AIA's interest in messaging rather than style or artistic movement.

Perhaps the exhibition's most prominent contributor was eminent Expressionist painter Oskar Kokoschka, who had arrived in Britain as a refugee in 1938 but had received surprisingly little attention in Britain by 1943. Kokoschka knew as well as anyone of his generation, the power of exhibitions to unite, as well as to divide and even to shame people: several of his works had been included in the 1937 National Socialist *Degenerate Art* Exhibition in Munich. But since arriving in Britain Kokoschka had had a close involvement with the Free German League of Culture (FGLC) founded in London in December 1938, acting as President from 1939-1946 (Brinson, 2016, p.115). The FGLC used exhibitions both to raise the plight of refugees and as a form of mutual support for recent arrivals. In July 1941, Kokoschka had inaugurated the exhibition *Refugee Artists and their British Friends*, showing over a hundred works at the FGLC clubhouse in Hampstead, for the benefit of interned refugees (Brinson, 2010, p.63). He worked with photomontage artist John Heartfield to mount *Allies Inside Germany*, an exhibition in a bombed-out store on Regents Street in 1942. Kokoschka also contributed one of the twelve paintings taking up the 'Four Freedoms' theme for *For Liberty*. This work, entitled '*What we are fighting for*', was the last and probably the most bitterly critical of a series of paintings Kokoschka made between 1940 and 1943, attacking the behaviour of both allied and axis powers, depicting an emaciated corpse lying in the centre surrounded by a bloody scene of devastation.

The British press, particularly the right wing press, responded negatively to *For Liberty*, criticizing artists for producing propaganda for political or social aims (and in so doing drawing a distinction between this form of propaganda and that perceived to be produced by the government itself). However, in a 'London Commentary' column for *The Studio*, Jan Gordon praised *For Liberty* for the way AIA had created a constructive, 'practical' exhibition, which could 'suggest to artists ways in which they may develop their own possibilities' and which brought together paintings with a 'deliberately propagandist tendency', following specific themes (Gordon, 1943). In the AIA's own estimation, this was one of their most successful exhibitions, attracting 36,000 visitors in a month (*AIA Bulletin*, 1943).

Conclusion

In *For Liberty* the AIA used a bombed-out commercial site in London's West End as the space through which to develop its model of exhibition as political demonstration: showing forcibly the real threat to culture during wartime. Through this, AIA set about pioneering exhibitions as a form of cooperation across medium, a sound vehicle through which to build allegiances and, ultimately, to build a network, particularly for recent arrivals to Britain.

Image list

1. 'For Liberty' entrance from FHK Henrion Archive FHK/3/23, University of Brighton Design Archives, by courtesy of the Henrion estate. [Labelled Henrion018.tif]
2. 'For Liberty' entrance from FHK Henrion Archive FHK/3/23, University of Brighton Design Archives, by courtesy of the Henrion estate. [Labelled Henrion017.tif]

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