Introduction

[I]n Old Time Poets *were the Lights and Instructors of the World, and gave Laws to Men in their Conduct in their several Relations and Affairs of Life.*

—John Bulkey, American Puritan (1725)

I

On August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King stood before 250,000 Americans and proclaimed, "Let freedom ring!," urging citizens to "transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood." In his writings King envisioned a "beloved community" in which "mutual regard" and equality would replace racial hierarchy and distrust. In this community, argued King, cohesiveness would not hamper, but instead would enhance, individuality.

Three years earlier such a community had been symbolically created by eight musicians in a recording studio. If the result was not a "symphony" per se, Ornette Coleman and his fellow musicians nevertheless created music called "free jazz" that expressed some of the ideas about equality and freedom that were becoming prominent in the struggles of African Americans for justice. In particular, they explored the notion, central to both the civil rights movement and the emerging New Left, that a coherent, "harmonious" group can result

from the free interaction of equal individuals. "Free jazz" musicians hoped that the enactment of freedom in a musical context would educate people about, and thus contribute to, political freedom.

Drawing on such examples, this book argues that artworks can politically educate citizens and thus contribute to democracy. I take as my material writings and musical performances from the 1950s and 1960s, an era when Americans debated about the meaning and practice of democracy in intellectual journals, in novels and songs, and in the streets. I hope to clarify the variety of ways works of art can act as vehicles for political education and to suggest some limitations on their ability to do so.

From the nation's inception Americans have looked to the arts for political education. As early as 1795, the poet Timothy Dwight conveyed his wish to improve the country's "economical, political, and moral sentiments," arguing that poetry is uniquely suited to such a task because it is "more deeply felt and more lastingly remembered" than philosophy.[1] The impulse to use the arts for political change has come to the fore periodically in American history, often during times of crisis like the Depression.

Rarely in our history has the arts' political role seemed as central as in the 1950s and 1960s. Of course, on some level all artworks are "political" in that they are created by individuals or groups who exist in a particular society at a specific historical moment; to varying degrees such works will accept or reject that society's dominant values.[2] But the statement that all art is political obscures as much as it illuminates, because it ignores the extent to which a particular work is political in a narrower sense of the word. In this book I am interested in political art in this narrower sense—that is, in artworks that implicitly or explicitly comment on social and political arrangements. It is true that many works implicitly do this, but it would be difficult to argue that all works do so, or do so equally.

This book focuses on what I call "democratic artworks"—works that support democracy. In the fifties, many writers and critics argued that in the face of the totalitarian threat artworks, novels in particular, taught citizens values essential to liberal democracy. In the sixties, rock music with political lyrics was played at political demonstrations, "free-

dom songs" accompanied civil rights actions, and jazz performances musically enacted a vision of equality.

How exactly might works of art have contributed to politics in these two decades, and what does this tell us about art's capacity for political education? This book addresses these questions through case studies of important critics and artists in this twenty-year period: in the fifties, the New York Intellectuals, a group of writers and critics who took as their central concern literature's political role; in the sixties, jazz musicians and the singer-songwriter Bob Dylan. Although there have been many treatments of these figures, rarely have they been considered from the perspective of political theory, and never as a group. My purpose is to construct from a detailed examination of a variety of sources in the fifties and sixties—Lionel Trilling's essays in literary criticism, avant-garde jazz performances, Dylan's songs—a theoretical account of some of the means by which artworks educate for democracy.

My purpose is not exclusively theoretical, however. I also intend to call into question conservative attacks on political art and sixties art in particular. Conservatives contend that sixties art rejected reason in favor of an anarchic celebration of the irrational that undermines democracy.[3] In attacks on NEA grants to political artists and the analysis of art in terms of race and gender, they also make the larger claim that when an artwork serves political purposes, political ideas become reduced to clichés and the aesthetic quality of the work suffers.[4] Through my examination of art and criticism from the fifties and sixties I show that politically engaged artworks can embody complex political ideas and support democracy by educating citizens.

II

The key terms of this book—art, democracy, and political education—are themselves contested. What follows consists of a series of definitions appropriate for this study; I do not aim to contribute to the perennial debates about their "real" meaning.[5]

Art is a highly contested concept. Common, everyday understanding

excludes from the term objects that serve concrete functions. A photograph by Ansel Adams is "art" while a Chanel No. 5 advertisement is not; a beautifully designed chair falls under the rubric of "craft," but is not art per se.

Yet challenges to this conception of art have arisen as well. As we shall see, African American aesthetic theory and practice reject the separation of art from the rest of life that has been central to the European conception. Even within the European tradition some artworks from Duchamp's inverted umbrella stand onward have questioned the distinction between art and functional, everyday objects. Indeed, the period encompassed by this book produced many such works, from "happenings" and restaurants functioning as works of art to Warhol's paintings of Campbell's soup cans.[6] The incorporation of the arts in the political movements of the sixties called into question the idea that practical use, particularly political use, threatens the integrity of aesthetic endeavors.

Democracy is a concept with no accepted single definition. Indeed, rather than being one concept, it consists of a few core postulates and a number of related ideas, many of which are in tension with one another. Definitions of democracy give differing emphases to these competing ideas. To the extent that societies have emphasized various aspects of democracy, there are different kinds of democracies.

Certain core values stand at the center of all conceptions of democracy: popular control of government; respect for individuality; civil rights and liberties; and dialogue about ideas. More generally, democratic theory emphasizes the ability of citizens to actively shape themselves and their society through political action, to be subjects rather than objects. Beyond these central values, two models of democracy can be singled out: liberal and participatory.[7] Liberal democracy emphasizes individual rights. In classical liberal theory, these rights are mostly negative, in essence "the right to be left alone"; politics consists of the government's attempts to make sure that individuals and groups pursuing their self-interest compete fairly. Later liberal theorists deviate from this classical model. While stressing negative liberty, John Stuart Mill emphasizes the need for participation and solidarity,

at least by a certain portion of the population.[8] And while classical liberals tend to see individuals as driven by a single, unitary self-interest, more recent liberal theorists have stressed individuals' capacities for inner conflict and moral deliberation.[9] However, common to all of liberalism is the notion that everyday policy decisions should be made by leaders and elites rather than the citizenry as a body, and the belief that politics consists of the adjustment of private interests rather than the expression of a common interest.

Participatory democracy, as the name suggests, emphasizes citizen participation. From this perspective, it is not enough that people have the right to be involved in politics; in a true democracy citizens must take an active part in creating the conditions that control their lives. Dialogue should take place not only among elites or at election times, but among the vast body of citizens at many times during the year. Participatory democrats also emphasize the need for solidarity and community among citizens, often created by common culture and common values; for them, politics embodies the search for a public interest, however tentative, not just the clash among private interests.

Finally, another view of democracy comes from its critics. For these critics, from Plato to the present, democracy represents a radical leveling process that does not allow those who are meritorious to develop their talents and attain influence.[10] As Plato put it, democracy "dispenses 'equality' equally to equals and unequals alike."[11] From this perspective, democracy means the end of all standards of excellence, from aesthetics to morality. Defenders of democracy have sought in various ways to show that it is consistent with excellence and individuality.

Political education is the process by which citizens acquire the knowledge and sensibility necessary to participate in politics, including familiarity with politics or one's political system, the ability to think critically and imaginatively, and the capacity to consider the effects of one's actions on the public interest rather than just on one's private interest. Anything that encourages these abilities can be considered a source of political education—a book, a theory, an institution, or a practical experience. As opposed to the social science term

"political socialization," which stresses the passive absorption of values, political education emphasizes citizens' ability to shape the political system in which they participate.[12]

Thus, an important part of political education involves getting people to think critically about political practices and institutions. According to Sheldon Wolin, the political theorist as a political educator

> chang[es] the political perceptions of his readers. He wants to alter the accepted way of viewing politics, to change the familiar appearance of politics. As commentator, the theorist is engaged in the politics of perception.[13]

Wolin defines perception broadly to include "thinking, evaluating, intuiting and feeling."[14]

This change in perception has two aspects. First, political educators criticize society and politics, and even individual ways of being, often by exposing as conventional what appears to be natural. This denaturalization of the political order empowers human beings to take control of their collective existence. In the words of John Schaar: "Political theory constantly reminds us that the world we live in is a human construction, that we are creatures who in a significant degree choose and produce our own worlds."[15] Political educators also criticize society in the name of nature, as when the existence of "natural rights" is used to oppose social conventions or government power. Second, political education encourages people to envision alternatives to existing political and social arrangements, practices, and values. Although the political theory texts discussed by Wolin and Schaar have a small audience, more popularly accessible works can politically educate as well.

Because of its effect on perception, vision or imagination is central to political education. The engagement of the playful imagination allows us to see the familiar in new ways and to envision alternatives.[16] Wittgenstein made a similar point about the role of the imagination when he said that philosophy gives us "a new way of looking at things. As if you had invented a new way of painting, or, again, a new metre, or a new kind of song."[17]

III

If imagination is central to political education, then artworks are ideal teachers. Not that works of art are themselves political theory per se. They can rarely if ever convey ideas with the same depth or as systematically as, let's say, the *Republic.* Yet artworks can do something that works of philosophy or theory do only secondarily: engage the emotions. It is true that different art media, and different individual works, have varying degrees of emphasis on the emotions; however, as a general rule, the arts more directly reach the feelings than do works of philosophy or theory. This is not to say that Plato or Marx never causes readers joy, sorrow, and fear—each uses rhetoric and images to appeal to the emotions of readers—but only that such effects are secondary to presenting an intellectually persuasive argument.

It is because of their effect on the feelings that artworks have the ability to alter our values and perceptions more effectively than a political tract alone. (We shall see how the arts' effect on the emotions creates dangers as well.) Indeed, what is crucial for the artworks and critical theories chronicled in this book is the ability of the arts to connect thoughts and feelings, mind and body. Thus artworks at their best engage the whole individual, touching what might be called his or her "sensibility," a sense of self and world that encompasses both ideas and emotional (or even bodily) perceptions. In the words of Clifford Geertz,

> If there is a commonality [among all the arts in all the places that one finds them] it lies in the fact that certain activities everywhere seem specifically designed to demonstrate that ideas are visible, audible, and—one needs to make up a word here—tactible, that they can be cast in forms where the senses, and through the senses the emotions, can reflectively address them.[18]

Thus the playwright Amiri Baraka tells how bebop jazz changed him because it "suggested *another* mode of being. Another way of living. Another way of perceiving reality. . . ."[19] For Baraka, jazz encouraged values and ways of living different from those of mainstream America.

The political power of the arts rests upon this connection with

sensibility. Works of art can help individuals consider political issues while avoiding intellectualization, or the partitioning off of one's political ideas from the rest of one's life.[20] Democracy itself requires a particular kind of sensibility. This concept of a "democratic sensibility" assumes that democracy requires, in addition to formal mechanisms for popular control of government, a particular stance on the part of citizens toward themselves and other members of the polity. In relation to oneself, this attitude encompasses terms like thoughtfulness, critical thinking, and the acceptance of complexity; in relation to others, solidarity, tolerance, respect, and receptivity. Calling such an attitude or stance "sensibility" indicates a utilization of both thought and feeling. Having a democratic sensibility goes beyond holding a set of ideas; rather, citizens must allow such ideas to become part of their mode of perceiving and experiencing the world. (It is possible to treat someone respectfully out of an intellectual attitude of obligation or out of fear of punishment, but the results are likely to be less complete and not as lasting.)

An explanation of exactly how works of art encourage a democratic sensibility emerges in my case studies, but in general there are three modes of political education by works of art. First, some artworks allow people to more fully experience social and political conditions as they are. A more accurate view of social reality allows citizens, if circumstances are right, to bring about positive change. Second, works of art can create the experience of questioning oneself and society. At their best, democratic artworks create a sense of discomfort and inner conflict that leads to a reconsideration of previously held views. Such texts can promote the kind of inner dialogue that James Boyd White describes as "a perpetual interchange between the person that a text asks you to become and the other things you are."[21]

Finally, democratic artworks let citizens experience, in a preliminary and incomplete manner, ways of being appropriate to a new society, what Raymond Williams calls "emergent" "structures of feeling"—that is, new social "meanings and values as they are actually lived and felt."[22] Though citizens might easily dismiss perceptions of alternatives as fanciful or purely personal, artworks affirm their possibility by bringing them into material existence and making them public.

Artworks' educative role in the fifties and sixties varied depending upon the kind of democracy envisioned by artists and theorists as well as on the perceived threats to it. In the fifties, many intellectuals and politicians saw as their central task the preservation of liberal democracy against communism and mass culture. In their view, communism endangered liberty and diversity, while mass culture threatened the individuality and rationality necessary for responsible liberal citizenship.[23] Chapter 1 traces the New York Intellectuals' argument that in the face of such threats the arts, primarily literature, play an important role in preserving liberal democracy. In chapter 2 I discuss the view of the New York Intellectual Lionel Trilling that literature can encourage inner moral and political deliberation, strengthening citizens' judgment, individuality, and sense of tolerance for others.

By the sixties, liberalism itself was under attack from the other democratic tradition: participatory democracy. As I show in chapter 3, black and white activists saw the individualism, competitiveness, and inequality in liberal society as a threat to the solidarity, participation, and equality necessary for democracy. Activists sought to free individuals from established social roles that were rooted in liberal values and create an alternative community based on solidarity and mutual respect. In chapters 4 and 5 I elucidate the arts' contribution to participatory democracy in the sixties by examining several jazz and rock performances.[24] While jazz musicians constructed political narratives and created works that modeled an egalitarian community, Bob Dylan used folk music to unmask political deception and celebrate authenticity. Consistent with the counterculture's "politics of experience" Dylan's later rock songs employed surrealistic techniques to loosen the hold of the rational mind. Thus did artists and critics in the fifties and sixties shed light on how artworks can contribute to liberal and participatory democracy.

IV

A number of caveats and clarifications are in order here. The first concerns the book's central division between "the fifties" and "the sixties."

"Decade thinking" has obvious flaws: the world did not change at the stroke of midnight, January 1, 1960. It is possible to overstate the differences between the two decades, as have many commentators on both ends of the political spectrum. Art and art criticism in the fifties is sometimes seen as detached and apolitical, as opposed to the "political" art and criticism of the decade that followed. Depending upon the commentator's political perspective, this absence of politics is seen as positive or negative. Thus, in a book on the culture of the sixties, Morris Dickstein presents fifties writers and critics as escapists: "The literary intellectuals [of the fifties] . . . simply abandoned politics to pursue private myths and fantasies, to devote their work to the closet intensities of the isolated self or isolated personal relationships."[25] Conservatives, on the other hand, praise intellectuals of the fifties for their avoidance of ideology, painting the decade as a golden age when "[t]here was . . . a fairly simple division of writers, or at any rate only one division that mattered: good writers and bad."[26]

A more complex understanding of the relationship between the fifties and the sixties would need to take into account statements like the following by Lionel Trilling, the New York Intellectual par excellence:

> Literature in its relation to life is polemical. . . . I can't think of literature or any art without supposing that it has an axe to grind, that it is arguing or urging or bullying or tempting or seducing me into certain ways of being which have inevitable reference to ways of acting. That is, for me, . . . a work of literature, or of any art, has ultimately a moral and even a political relevance.[27]

Cultural and political activists of the sixties, whether they were aware of it or not, drew upon important intellectual currents from the 1950s.

Yet one must not overstate the continuities between the two decades, either. As Todd Gitlin puts it, "History rarely follows the decimal system as neatly as it did in 1960."[28] Although leading figures in both decades promoted "political" art, they had radically different understandings of the nature of politics, democratic politics in par-

ticular, and of art. We shall see that in the context of these two very different decades, political artworks embodied and evoked very different sensibilities.

Why, the reader may wonder, in moving from the fifties to the sixties do I shift from critics (the New York Intellectuals) to practitioners (jazz and rock musicians)? This shift has the disadvantage of asymmetry but, as far as the sixties are concerned, examining works of art themselves yields more insight into the ways art during that decade contributed to political education than looking at theory or criticism might. This is primarily because neither critics nor artists in the decade did a very good job of articulating theories about the political functions of the arts in the sixties. Sometimes art in the sixties was so obviously political, or tied to political movements, that criticism seemed less crucial.[29]

The change of focus from literature to music also requires some explanation. This shift does not imply that music was insignificant in the fifties and literature unimportant in the sixties, nor that literature always supports liberal democracy and music participatory democracy. Rather, my choices reflect the priorities of each decade. Though abstract expressionist painting was prominent in the 1950s, literature and literary criticism overwhelmingly predominated the pages of *Partisan Review,* the most important political and cultural journal of the decade. However, in the sixties the political art that was the most prominent took the form of music. While *Catch-22* and the novels of Vonnegut and Mailer helped create the culture of the sixties, literature did not become central to the daily life, and political life, of most young people the way music did.

More importantly, the shift in predominance from literature to music reflected changes in the nature of politics. Literature more easily supported the society of reflective liberal individuals envisioned by the New York Intellectuals, while music contributed to the participatory, experiential politics of the sixties in a way that literature could not. This difference between music and literature has much to do with the differences between sound and sight. Sound flows into and takes over spaces, penetrating listeners; visual objects are more easily held at a distance. Whereas sound tends to unite people by creating an encompassing

environment, a written text encourages individuality.[30] In addition, sounds often affect the body in a more forceful way than visual stimuli. Sound vibrations can be felt in the whole body, and beyond this music provokes bodily sensation and reaction (swaying, dancing) by its very nature. Sound can evoke a direct, "primitive" response, tapping into early, basic associations. After all, infants strongly react to sounds, whether a soothing voice or a loud noise, before they respond to visual stimuli.

Because of these differences between sound and sight, listening to music and reading are very different activities. Reading isolates the individual. It is true that if many people read the same book a kind of community is created, yet people at a concert become united in a more direct and emotional way than a community of readers.[31] Popular music in particular, often speaking as it does to everyday, personal concerns, has a particular ability to create emotional resonance among a group of people.[32]

Of course, a recording of music can function much like a written text, isolating the individual in his or her room or car, or even (with a Walkman) in his or her mind. It was a different experience to hear Bob Dylan at a coffeehouse or concert than on a stereo in suburbia. At the same time, listening to recorded music in the sixties was often (as it is now) a communal affair, with a stereo playing at a meeting or party.

Because of its communal nature and its effect on the body and even the unconscious, then, music was more suited to the participatory nature of politics in the sixties. It, more than literature, could help create the kind of emotional ties that sixties activists sought for themselves and society. Literature, on the other hand, was well suited for the society of reflective individuals envisioned by theorists of liberalism like Trilling.

It should be noted that my aim is not to try to prove that these works were successful in actually realizing their potential to politically educate. Rather, I try to illustrate artworks' resources for democratic political education. Individual artworks may or may not succeed in this task; much depends upon the preconceptions of the audience and the climate of the times.

I am also not attributing a single, fixed meaning to a work of art. "Cultural studies" theorists have shown how readers and listeners actively *use* works of art in a variety of ways, depending upon their values and lifestyles, sometimes even ignoring or contradicting parts of their overt content.[33] The enthusiastic response to Bob Dylan at a West Point concert in 1990 would seem to confirm such views.[34]

Yet artworks are not blank slates. Consumers' ability to use a work of art for their own purposes does not mean it has no meaning in itself.[35] Listeners focus on different facets of a work, often receiving different messages, but those different facets revolve around a core set of meanings that are "in" the work itself. The meaning of a work of art consists of an interaction between its content and its context. Theorists and activists in the fifties and sixties found in artworks meanings that could be used for political education in the context of the politics of their respective decades. This book makes explicit the connections between those works and the politics of their times.

My analysis of such connections does not rest on "reflection theory," the idea that works of art passively mirror other, presumably more primary, political and social processes.[36] Rather, both art and politics are part of a larger process, in which neither realm has priority. As Williams puts it, "If the art is part of the society, there is no solid whole, outside it, to which . . . we concede priority."[37] Another way of saying this is that since art is created by people whose thoughts and feelings are affected by their society and its political system, one would expect to see similar ideas and values expressed through culture and politics.[38]

Such a notion of a social whole does not imply that every part of it has equal influence; not all groups of people have the same ability to shape it.[39] Artworks in our society are commodities, produced, marketed, and sold by large corporations; this is particularly true of rock songs. Left critics of rock focus on its mass cultural status to denigrate its potential for political education. Other more sympathetic rock critics and fans distinguish between "authentic" rock and more "commercial" rock musicians who "sell out," drawing implicitly on Frankfurt School critiques of mass culture.[40]

Rather than denying rock's commercial status or using it to negate

any emancipatory potential, I would (with Simon Frith) notice the tension between rock's countercultural claims and its commercial reality. As Frith puts it, "Rock is a mass-produced music that carries a critique of its own means of production. . . ."[41] While acknowledging the corporate and economic power behind the production, distribution, and reception of artworks, I seek to shed light on the resources of such works for democratic political education.

While this book rejects reflection theory, neither does it focus on the intention of the artist. I am not claiming that the artists analyzed here would recognize or admit the politically educative function and methods I find in their works. The perspective and concerns of the artist and the analyst are often different. Although the intention of the artist influences the work's spectrum of possible significations, my emphasis is on the work's meaning in the context of its time, a meaning partly a function of the work itself and partly of its audience.

Finally, in choosing to focus on the New York Intellectuals, Dylan, and free jazz, I am not suggesting that they were the only important critics and artists, politically speaking, during the fifties and sixties. Nor am I implying that Dylan represents rock music as a whole during the sixties, although he was one of the most influential artists. Though there were many other musicians performing during the decade, my aim is not to present a representative sample, but to look at performances that illustrate a number of different ways artworks can act as vehicles for political education. I also wish to connect these performances with the political ideas of their times, showing how they might have contributed to the struggle for democracy in ways that theories alone could not have.

V

I have argued that what gives artworks a unique capacity for democratic political education is their engagement of the senses. Yet this engagement carries the potential to undermine democracy as well, encouraging the submergence of the individual into the collective at the expense of democratic values, or pulling citizens away from politics,

leaving the political realm to an elite. Ironically, artworks may undermine democracy precisely because of their ability to create shared experience. One thinks here of Hitler's use of aesthetics to create compliant masses, as can be seen in Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will.* For those opposed to democracy, the well-constructed artwork serves as a model for an orderly society, one free from the messiness and imperfections of popular rule. If art creates community, such communities can preserve (or even enhance) individuality, but they may also threaten it.

Art also may undermine democracy by drawing its audience away from politics. While artworks have the ability to connect politics with experience, experience can become an end in itself, an escape from public life. That is, while artworks can spur people to action, art and aesthetic experience can come to constitute a kind of substitute action, thought to be sufficient in itself. Here one is reminded of members of the sixties counterculture who described playing the guitar as a revolutionary act. One must differentiate between cultural action for its own sake and art that is more truly tied to politics.

Many have argued that popular culture encourages unthinking conformity and thus discourages political action. Diverse critics from Eliot to Adorno have argued that mass-market films, novels, songs, and television programs contain predigested, clichéd ideas that foreclose independent thought. Indeed, this book will look closely at the New York Intellectuals' version of this view in postwar America. Others reject this critique of "mass culture," emphasizing popular art's emancipatory potential.[42] However, even critics of the argument against mass culture recognize that while popular culture has the capacity to provoke thought and empower citizens, it also can reinforce conformity, passivity, and antipolitical consumerism. That is, popular culture's ability to reach millions of citizens gives it both the capacity to encourage democracy and to subvert it.

Applied to critics and artists of the fifties and sixties, these concerns raise two sets of questions. First, what can we learn about the relationship between art's ability to encourage democracy and its capacity to help create order and community destructive of individuality? Were the New York Intellectuals right to see mass culture as

totalitarian? Was the community called for by Dylan's folk and rock music democratic or one that submerged individuality? Did free jazz musicians' and Dylan's creation of new musical structures reflect and encourage democracy or hierarchy?

Second, what light do these artists and critics shed on the dual capacity of artworks to create political engagement and to draw citizens away from politics? Do the New York Intellectuals' writings on literature's evocation of experience help us understand the way artworks support political engagement? Did Dylan's music call for political action or serve as a diversion from politics? As part of popular culture, did it encourage unthinking conformity and clichéd thought as the New York Intellectuals predicted? So many resources for democratic education, yet so many paths away from democracy: such is my central theme in this examination of the arts' political role in the fifties and sixties.