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Artists as Activists: The Simulation of Politics and its Value[1*]

Abstract: Today we may witness the emergence of various forms of political activism as art. Based on a necessary distinction between political activism and political activism as art, the article highlights the symbolic economy that stabilizes the relation and structural difference between art activism and political activism. Insisting on the fact that political activism as art must be measured not only by its impact on the psycho-political atmosphere of our time, the author portends that the meaning of art activism appears in regard to its innovative function within the contemporary art world, which is the musealization and historization of political activism.

Keywords: Art Activism, Simulation, Symbolic Economy, Aesthetization, Trotsky, Breton, Occupy

While the relation of art and politics has been discussed *ad nauseam*, the value of the increasing prominence of political activism as art over the last decade seems to be not sufficiently understood. Indeed, we have seen politically and critically engaged artists and artist collectives creating discursive spaces for the discussion and reflection of the most advanced political philosophies and theories. We have seen artists establishing spaces for independent theoretical and cultural education, often for people from the social and economic margins, as well as the appropriation of streets and public spaces for critical art events, meant to oppose social, political, as well as ecological injustices. But why is such political activism rendered as art?

In fact, while the political and critical engagement of artists has been well known since modernity – one may think of artists like Wagner, Baudelaire, or Pissaro, to name but a few of the better known 19th-century artists engaged in political activism – their political and critical work was clearly not identical to their artistic production. That is to say, even if their artistic

[1*] The essay is a slightly revised version of a presentation given at a workshop at the History of Art Department at York University, which took place on June 5, 2013, under the title of *Creative Dissidence: A Workshop on Art and Activism*.

production was political, its aesthetic form differed from their political engagement. Yet, the tradition of the historical avant-gardes has also shown that modern art must be clearly understood as a political practice itself. For it is not only participation in a given political rebellion on the street, but also the attempt to devise a certain artistic lifestyle within the modern industrialized world that may and was already seen as political – one may think here the artists' refusal to work or the many examples of bohemian art scenes and artist communities since modernity, who sought to live less repressed lives, both intellectually as well as sensually and sexually.

In the same way it is clear that artistic production can be and was rendered similarly political on a poetical and aesthetic level. One may think here of those artists who, with regard to their utopian or speculative visions, picture how the world could be shaped differently, or who reflect on the way in which art affirmatively or critically depicts the shape of our prevailing world, not to mention those artistic productions that challenge the aesthetic canon, the normative taste of a society or certain class by aesthetic and sensual means.

These discussions about avant-garde art procedures and subversive bohemian life-styles are very well known to us not only from art history, but also because they have shaped the principal philosophical and theoretical discussions about the role and function of art and aesthetics since the 19th century. But what characterizes contemporary artistic activism in contrast to earlier avant-garde practices seems to be the fact that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish any longer between traditional political activism in the field of politics and similar operations in the name of art. Contemporary art activists such as the Cairo-based collective Mosireen, for example, which became famous for reporting about the Egyptian revolution, initiating not only highly politicized public viewings at Tahrir Square during the upheaval of July 2011, but also circulating new footage online to oppose institutionalized media and their coverage, do not only operate outside contemporary art institutions. Their activism is their art and their art is their political activism.

Yet, we should not mistake political activism as art for mere political activism and political activism in general as art, since there always remains an irreducible difference. While artists as political activists are often no longer distinguishable from traditional political activism, it is immediately evident that not all political activists who similarly operate mostly with aesthetic strategies, as Jacques Rancière and many others have amply shown, can or even want to be regarded as contemporary artists.[2] But if this is true, if there is such a fundamental difference, it indicates, I would argue, that political activism as art is the perfect artistic simulation of political activism.

Right at the beginning of his essay *The Precision of Simulacra,* Baudrillard refers to Borges's cartographers, who sought to produce a perfectly precise map of their empire.[3] But, as it turns out, the perfection of the map gradually replaced the real empire, which was, in turn, slowly "rotting like a carcass". The perfection of the map in this regard becomes a simulation, a simulation that

[2] Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press, 2004. Cf. Oliver Marchart, "The Groundless Ground of Identity: Nonidentitarian Movements and Democracy", in: Veronika Zink, Johanna Fernández, and Dannae Gallo González (eds.), *W(h)ither Identity? Locating the Self and Transforming the Social*, Trier, WVT, 2015; Oliver Marchart, *Die Prekarisierungsgesellschaft I: Prekäre Proteste. Politik und Ökonomie im Zeichen der Prekarisierung*, Bielefeld, Transcript, 2013; Gerald Raunig, "Here, There and Anywhere", 2004, http://www.republicart.net/disc/mundial/raunig05_de.htm, acc. March 19, 2015.

[3] Jean Baudrillard, "The Precission of Simulacra", *Simulacra and Simulation*, Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 1994, 1.

> is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory – precession of simulacra – that engenders the territory.[4]

Baudrillard's illustration of simulation as the perfection of a simulacrum may be seen as a perfect analogy to the understanding of the value and meaning of political activism as art today. For art activists are not only referencing politics to a certain degree of perfection, which makes it hard, if not impossible, to differentiate between political activism as art and traditional political activism, but also simulate political activism at a historical juncture where politics, as it was often argued, has come to an end, when "real" politics is rotting like a carcass. It is a simulation in this regard no longer of real politics, of a referential being, or a substance, but a generation of political models of real politics without origin or reality. In the wake of politics, artistic simulation of political activism is all that remains. And to simulate political activism in this regard does not mean therefore that there is a lack of political efficiency as many critics often assume, who appear to believe in a form of true and authentic political activism on the one hand and its failed aestheticized counterpart in the art world on the other.[5]

In fact, the artist as a political activist is neither more nor less successful, neither more nor less actual and authentic than any other political activist. In principle, the operations of activist artists have the same political effects as the actions of "authentic" political activists – if they are successful, they initiate and provoke a public and media discussion with their aesthetic means. The discussion initiated by collectives such as Mosireen in the tumultuous events on Tahrir Square, or by Sharon Hayes in demonstrations and marches in New York City, are not structurally different from those initiated by political organizations such as Attac and Occupy, who do not operate as artist activists. Yet, they all operate on the street, in public, and are eventually infused in other media – be it television, print media, the internet, or contemporary art museums – where their images and information begin to circulate. All of them operate with aesthetic and spectacular procedures, attracting the attention of mass media as well as the art world, manipulating its attention economies and, accordingly, producing more or less important effects on the psycho-political atmosphere of our time.[6] Objectively, it is impossible to prefer any of these procedures as more authentic or more effective than any other. But what then is the meaning and value of political activism as art?

On the one hand, it is relatively clear that, compared to the traditional "everyday" activist, the artist as political activist operates with a surplus of meaning and symbolic value. For, in contrast to the traditional activist, the artist as activist has first of all access to the symbolic economy of art and therefore to an exclusive social sphere that is based on the recognition of symbolic value. In a social world with an existing and developed art system, it is, as we know, one thing to draw a line and quite another to draw a line as a piece of art. While the line that everyone can draw is clearly profane, without any surplus of symbolic value, it is something

[4] Ibidem.

[5] As a sharp example of this kind of critique, see Jakob Schillinger, "7th Berlin Biennale", *Artforum.com*, https://artforum.com/inprint/issue=201206&id=31092, acc. March 19, 2015.

[6] A classic example of an early discussion of an activist art practice can already be found in Benjamin Buchloh's analysis of Hans Haacke's "investigative" art that transgresses the readymade procedures of pop art by instrumentalizing the museum into a medium that informs its visitors about political injustices. See: Benjamin Buchloh, "Hans Haacke: Memory and Instrumental Reason", in: *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2000, 203–241.

else to draw a line as art. Indeed, the activity of drawing such a line as art presupposes a developed art system, a general understanding of what art is, what it could be and what it shouldn't be. The social condition of the possibility of such a symbolic value has been discussed and analyzed in both the Hegelian tradition of investigating the phenomenon of symbolic recognition at the centre of the master-slave dialectic, as well as in the anthropological tradition of Marcel Mauss's analysis of gift exchange. And thus, under such conditions, it is clear that a line drawn as art can either be rejected or affirmed as valuable art, but whatever the art critics, curators, and the art market decide, the line is always already endowed with symbolic surplus. Insofar as it is drawn as art and hence in an attempt to be recognized and evaluated as art, the line symbolizes the difference from any other profane line that is drawn without such an intention. And the same is true of any artistic political activism. Structurally, it always already symbolizes this very difference that signifies the distance from any profane and traditional form of political activism that is interesting only in the field of politics and even if it depends on the use of aesthetic and medial strategies, it is judged only in regard to its political efficiency.

Here, by the way, it is simply irrelevant in this regard whether or not the political banners, the various costumes, and the political demands packaged in poetical phrases that signify the aesthetic scenes of today's protests and upheavals can also be considered art. Instead, one always asks in what way such activities allow making a certain political problem visible that, to the establishment, appears only as white noise. It never is judged or analyzed according to the inner logic and values of the extended field of contemporary art. Only if the practice of an artist as a political activist signifies the political aesthetics of activism recognizable as art, does one feel urged to ask how a certain line of art activism is valuable in an artistic sense. Thus, the specific function of art activism allows the contemporary viewer to compare the aesthetic strategies of political activism, the strategic use of images and information with all other images and forms that – like abstract painting, readymades, or land art – have historically already been accepted and understood as art. And it is precisely according to this comparison that the symbolic and cultural surplus that it becomes clear that the art activist operates at the same time also with an accumulation of a symbolic surplus that distinguishes his or her operations from other artists. For, while other contemporary artists may draw lines in the context of art, the artistic activist draws lines that have not only artistic meaning and value, but that also happen within the field of politics. And it is clearly to this extent that artistic political activism can and often is judged according to the same political criteria as the operations of traditional political activism. And the more effectively it exceeds the limitations of bourgeois art institutions, the more it situates itself in the real of the everyday-life world of politics, the more such an artistic practice also proves to be a real and authentic artistic design, not corrupted by the bourgeois art system like other artistic procedures within the prevailing institutions and art markets.

However, it is this excess of symbolic value that the artists as activists accumulate at a high price. It is precisely this excess of symbolic value that signifies artistic political activism as simulation, as something that is neither real authentic art, nor real or authentic political activism. To the very extent that these operations must be understood as simulations, one understands why contemporary viewers are often confused and sometimes responding with much critique, suspicion, and rejection. For, it is the fact that these operations are simulations that makes them vulnerable. On the one hand, artistic political activism provokes a critique of art as political activism that is based on a belief in a somewhat truthful and authentic political activism beyond the institutions of art, spectacle, and aesthetization and that rejects art as

political activism for political reasons. On the other hand, it is precisely this very inclusion of political activism into the realm of art that causes a different kind of confusion in regard to our understanding of artistic value in particular and the cultural value of contemporary art in general: even if most of images, forms, performances, happenings, and even exhibitions of social relations are potentially excepted today as art, political activism as art is often rejected. In particular, the many critiques of Artur Żmijewski's 2012 Berlin Biennial have shown that art as political activism is often considered a failure in terms of a true poetic art. However, as Boris Groys recently argued, this argument is easy to reject, because it simply tends to overlook that all aesthetic and artistic criteria that allow one objectively to distinguish between good and bad art on an aesthetic level have been deconstructed and abolished already in the trajectory of many generations of avant-garde practices.[7]

And yet, it is perhaps this vulnerability of art activism, the suspicion against its simulations that provokes such calls for a return to aesthetics, a return to judging even contemporary art by aesthetic criteria, as it is famously argued by philosophers such as Jacques Rancière and Juliane Rebentisch.[8] But this hopeful call for a re-installation of new aesthetic criteria seems to overlook the genealogy of modern art and its determination of an avant-garde logic that renders such a return not merely unlikely, but impossible.[9] We live at a time when the field of art has been irreversibly extended, when all objective criteria for judging good and bad art that used to guide the aesthetic judgement and taste of earlier societies have gone astray. The only remaining objective criterion that allows us to distinguish between art and all other contingent objects of the profane everyday world is tradition, for example, that of abstract painting, conceptual, pop, or political art. For one can always identify and ask in what artistic tradition an artwork was produced and exhibited and judge it accordingly.

Instead of criticizing the aestheticization of politics in the context of art on the basis of a false notion of authentic political action and instead of calling for a return to aesthetic criteria that have been historically overcome, it seems possible to discover the meaning and value of political activism as art. For, its meaning and value can be found precisely in its character as simulation. This is because the simulation of political activism by artists functions as a musealization of political activism. As with anything else that is musealized, be it an image, an object, or a stuffed animal, the musealization of any given object allows us to approach it from a distance, to reflect on its appearance and meaning, without being immediately affected. The dinosaurs, the Apollonian statues, the portraits of sacred martyrs have lost not only their function, but also their immediate power over us the moment they were musealized and the same holds true for the musealization of political activism. The musealization of political activism allows us to understand its methods, strategies, and historical contexts.

And in fact, it is this musealization of political activism that also allows us to understand the value of artistic simulations of political activism. As musealizations of political activism, it is possible and even necessary to compare the strategies of contemporary political activism, the carnivalesque aesthetics of protest, the use of image and form production in public space and media not only in regard to other art forms, but also to political activism in the realm of

[7] Boris Groys, "On Art Activism", *E-Flux Journal*, June 2014, http://www.e-flux.com/journal/on-art-activism, acc. March 19, 2015. See also Benjamin Buchloh, "Farewell to an Identity", *Artforum*, 2012.

[8] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, London–New Delhi–New York–Sydney, Bloomsbury Publishing, A&C Black, 2006; Juliane Rebentisch, "Über Die Allianz von Anti- und Erfahrungsästhetik", *Texte Zur Kunst*, 2011, No. 81, 112–115.

[9] For a theoretical description of this "logic of the avant-garde" and its genealogic development, see: Philipp Kleinmichel, *Im Namen der Kunst: Eine Genealogie der politischen Ästhetik*, Vienna, Passagen, 2014.

politics. For what is musealized here through artistic simulations is a historically relatively new form of political activism and organization. It differs from earlier political operations, from the insurrections of slaves and peasants in our ancient past and the Middle Ages, from the struggles between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, and the revolutionary attempts of the proletariat to overcome the bourgeoisie and its then-new nation states in modern times. All of these political uprisings and rebellions differ not only in regard to contemporary activism, but also in terms of their own organizational structure. While slave and peasant rebellions and insurrections were often spontaneous reactions to unbearable situations without any long-term political strategy, the so-called proletarian revolts were devised and planed by revolutionary professionals. And yet, despite these structural differences, it seems that these operations can be differentiated from contemporary forms of political activism, insofar as these earlier political struggles were all fought as struggles over sovereignty and power. They were lethal fights, fought to death, until one of the combatants died, and hence they would end either with the beheading of the revolutionary delinquent or with that of the sovereign. While this kind of fight for power to death was, as we know, still present in modern worker associations, anarchist terror groups, and communist parties at the end of the 19th and early 20th century – one could say that Stalinism and Maoism brought this fight to an extreme – it is absent in contemporary forms of Western political activism – death, as an effect of political struggle within the constraints of the Western world, is always an accident, a moment that is to be avoided at all events and on both sides, on the side of the state and its executive police force, as well as on the side of the activists.

Indeed, despite this fundamental difference, one might perhaps argue that both the modern and contemporary forms of political activism are designed and managed as something that Peter Sloterdijk has called rage banks.[10] They are designed and managed to accumulate the rage, frustration, and outrage stemming from the precarious being-there of the poor and exploited masses. The modern worker associations and revolutionary parties promised to invest that collected rage and outcry at all costs, to actively abolish the prevailing power structures and replace them with the fundamentally new structures of a new and unseen world. By contrast, contemporary post-modern political activism promises to invest that rage and frustration with social and cultural injustices not at all costs, but only in symbolic terms, as a form of aesthetic and symbolic resistance, neither attempting to take state power, nor willing to fight to death. In the modern struggle of political activists and the prevailing and institutionalized forms of power and control, death remains an accident that both sides, the very state Foucault called bio-political, as well as political activists try to avoid at all circumstances.[11]

Becoming visible for the first time in the struggles of 1968, these historically new movements of post-modern political activism began to appear in the late 1950s, taking more concrete forms in the 1970s, mostly in Europe, as the Situationist International, Autonomia, or Spontis. While all of these movements were no doubt political, active in the political field, they were not only highly influenced by the media and aesthetic strategies of the artistic avant-gardes, like Dadaists and Surrealists, but they were also, as I want to argue, in a certain sense their heirs. For what these different groups realized in their own particular way was a new form of political activism that was not only aiming to revolutionize the social world, but also the mind. Their appearance can be traced back to Breton and Trotsky's *Manifesto for an*

[10] Peter Sloterdijk, *Rage and Time: A Psychopolitical Investigation*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2013, 145.

[11] Michel Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, New York, Picador, 2003, 95.

Independent Revolutionary Art from 1938 that circulated first as a leaflet in Mexico and was then printed in Bulletin.[12] The manifesto is one of the earliest documents that, maybe for the very first time, conceptualized and foreshadowed a problematic situation, which later on led to the simulation of politics by political activism as art. Based on the belief that a true human culture can only be founded on the premise of an independent science and art that take into account the free play of the faculties of imagination, intuition, and individual singularity, Breton and Trotsky not only criticized fascism and liberal capitalist democracies, but also, and foremost, the bureaucratic Stalinist regime, which only instrumentalized artistic and scientific production. For if "for the better development of the forces of material production, the revolution must build a socialist regime with centralized control, to develop intellectual creation", they add, "an anarchist regime of individual liberty should from the first be established. No authority, no dictation, not the least trace of orders from above! Only on a base of friendly cooperation, without external constraints from the outside, will it be possible for scholars and artists to carry out their tasks, which will be more far-reaching than ever before in history."[13]

In order to oppose the existing political regimes, be it the still existing democracies, which are in agony, as they argue, or the fascist and Stalinist state apparatuses, the two "art-activists" called for founding an "International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art" in order to unite the "thousands on thousands of isolated thinkers and artists", who are "scattered throughout the world".[14] Not unlike today's attempts such as the "Artist Organisations International", which seeks to bring together representatives of various organizations founded by artists "whose work confronts today's crises in politics, economy, education, immigration and ecology",[15] it was Breton and Trotsky's belief "that aesthetic, philosophical and political tendencies of the most varied sort can find here a common ground".[16] The International Federation, as a virtual forerunner of so many art activists today, was also not only to be organized in a form similar to that of political parties, including "the organization of local and national congresses on a modest scale" as well as internationally, but also, artistic production itself was supposed to be revolutionary. "It should be clear by now", Breton and Trotsky note,

> that in defending freedom of thought we have no intention of justifying political indifference, and that it is far from our wish to revive a so-called pure art which generally serves the extremely impure ends of reaction. No, our conception of the role of art is too high to refuse it an influence on the fate of society. We believe that the supreme task of art in our epoch is to take part actively and consciously in the preparation of the revolution. But the artist cannot serve the struggle for freedom unless he subjectively assimilates its social content, unless he feels in his very nerves its meaning and drama and freely seeks to give his own inner world incarnation in his art.[17]

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[12] André Breton and Leo Trotsky, "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art", https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit_crit/works/rivera/manifesto.htm, acc. March 20, 2015.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] "Artist Organisations International", http://www.artistorganisationsinternational.org/, acc. March 20, 2015.

[16] André Breton and Leo Trotsky, "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art", https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit_crit/works/rivera/manifesto.htm, acc. March 20, 2015.

[17] Ibid.

What Breton and Trotsky had formulated in the late 1930s, mostly in opposition to the revolutionary communist parties of the Soviet type, became even more evident in the 1960s and 1970s, when it became clear to many critics that the communist parties had – either by stabilizing centralized political regimes in the Eastern part of Europe, or by taking part in developing a social market economy in Western Europe – failed to replace the fundamental structures of capitalism with new forms of social production and exchange, instead becoming an integral part of it, allowing only the belief in the illusion of political possibilities to keep the prevailing system running. It seemed to have simply reproduced the bureaucratic mechanisms and repressions in its own structural and organizational form – a fact that, for most critics, became especially apparent in the appearance of the real existing socialist states, but also in regard to the particular roles of the communist parties within the capitalist system.

Today, however, we are again living in a different period, in which the political and cultural situation has fundamentally changed. Not only has the Soviet Union and most of the other real existing communist states ceased to exist, but also most of the communist parties have either disappeared or become irrelevant. Furthermore, insofar as the increasing implementation of neoliberal politics since the 1980s has led not only to the collapse of the modern social state and its replacement by market structures, but we also live at a moment when political activism with its symbolic and media strategies that shaped political activism seems to have lost its power and it is at the historical juncture of that loss that we find ourselves now in the phase of its musealization. From the media events of the big upheavals and riots in Genoa and Seattle in the late 1990s to the worldwide demonstrations and organizations of the Occupy movement in this decade, we have, if we are not in denial, empirically learnt that symbolic revolts can neither shape nor even influence the political decision-making and neoliberal restructuring of the modern states in any way. In the historical context of our period – that is, clearly a period of restoration and reaction, in which not only new class divisions are reinstalled like an ancient disease of the social body that was already believed to be eradicated, but the democratic decision-making is increasingly undermined by new political casts – political activism appears to us as a simulation.

However, we should not be misled into criticizing simulation by artists all over the world; rather, we should seek to evaluate its social and historical function. If my argument holds true, it is the very function of this simulation to musealize symbolic activist actions and their aesthetics, thus underlining the fact that the political activism of the 20th century belongs no longer to our time, but to a period that has already ceased to exist. All the aestheticized and artistic procedures in theatres, art museums, and galleries inevitably point to the fact that these activist attempts are remnants of a historical past opening a new historical horizon for a new, yet unknown political activism adequate to the problems and conflicts of our time.