How Much Politics Can Art Take?

BAVO

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BAVO, a collaboration of architects / philosophers Gideon Boie and Matthies Pauwels, conducts research in the political realm of art, architecture and planning. According to them, art that aims to be politically relevant has reached an impasse. To break through this impasse, they call on artists to link radical artistic activism with radical political activism. Only then might art that engages with politics genuinely 'make a difference'.

In the early 1990s, Francis Fukuyama, in the context of his thesis of the end of history, was also able to announce, without much resistance, the end of 'all art that could be considered socially useful.[1] Recent history, however, contradicts him. The past decade has seen a genuine regeneration of socially engaged art. Instead of the end of history, we have undergone a resurgence of all kinds of movements that had seemed, after a long struggle and many human sacrifices, to have been vanquished. The many 'neo-movements' that dominate the present political climate, such as neoliberalism, neoconservatism, neotribalism and neoracism, attest to this.

A notable aspect of this revival of engagement in art is the shift in emphasis from classical art criteria such as meaning or form to criteria such as result, performativity or even utility value. For a growing group of artists, art has long ceased to be about what it says, represents or reflects, but is about what the work 'does', effects or generates in the social context in which it operates. The central question is how a particular artistic action 'makes a difference'. This 'making a difference' is interpreted in the most pragmatic of ways, out of the conviction that, given the urgency of often harrowing social injustices, there is no need for high art statements, preachy manifestos or sublime expressions of moral outrage. On the contrary, there is a perceived imperative to produce concrete interventions that immediately improve the fate of certain groups in society, that help them survive in their day-to-day existence or that break through a particular social impasse. Again, the emphasis here is not so much on symbolic expressions of sympathy or the visualization of a certain critique of the injustices in question: the point is to present solutions, create toolkits and do-it-yourself guides that allow disadvantaged social groups to better their situation. A hallmark of this form of engaged art is its no-nonsense attitude, its realism: if you are not striving for immediate improvement in the fate of the victims, you have no right as an artist to produce great art. In short, the slogan is 'less high art, more pragmatism please!'

Examples of such pragmatic art are legion. They can range from establishing an alternative hotel in a multicultural, disadvantaged neighbourhood in order to create employment for and empower local residents, to setting up a project through which children, in the midst of the neoliberal restructuring of their neighbourhood, are given the opportunity to design their own park facilities, to designing innovative outbuildings to alleviate space shortages in under-subsidized schools, to creating a collective monument for the residents of a neighbourhood who have to make way for a new project development.

Art, in these cases, is seen as a highly effective and innovative means to fulfil traditional activist tasks, comparable with creating an awareness, among disadvantaged social

groups, of the injustice to which they are subjected on a daily basis, harnessing their dissatisfaction, coming up with strategies to influence politicians, attracting the attention of the media, etcetera. Nevertheless, these artists often explicitly distance themselves from 'real' activists. They fault the latter for a lack of creativity or accuse them of favouring their own political interests or ideological preferences above the interests of the people. The shortcomings of the language of activism are often emphasized as well, as leading only to polarization and completely wrapped up in the bargaining game between the citizen and the political establishment. The reasoning is that it is better to realize a few small, modest goals than to aim too high and ultimately, after a long process, end up disappointed, with the population in question remaining empty-handed.

NGO Art

It is noble and necessary that artists undertake direct action against the often harrowing injustices peculiar to the present time. When it comes to gauge the effectiveness of these socially engaged practices in tackling the current malaise in a more fundamental sense, however, they are often found lacking. One of the reasons for this lies in the preoccupation with direct action, with wanting to immediately 'do what can be done within the realms of possibility'. Unlike traditional activism, these artists are not interested in initiating long-term political processes in which 'the impossible is demanded' and of which no one knows whether they will ultimately produce a concrete improvement for the social groups in question. They reason and operate like humanitarian organizations or NGOs: rather than addressing the larger, political issues, they focus on what they can do immediately within the limitations of the feasible, for instance relieving the urgent needs of an afflicted population (shelter, food, medicine, etcetera). Like humanitarian organizations, this NGO art' entails a measure of self-censorship. Humanitarian organizations deliberately avoid speaking out about political issues, for fear that the relief effort might be compromised, as the local authorities could refuse the organization access to the country for political reasons, for instance. If the motto of humanitarian organizations is 'first the victims, then politics', the motto of these artists is 'no politics please, only the victims'.

NGO art in fact is characterized by a denial of politics: it concerns itself, above everything else, with the practical feasibility of a given action. These artists deliberately avoid confrontations with authorities or investors, because this could compromise their ability to obtain the permits or funding they need to implement their actions. The question of what can be done here and now and how this can be achieved most efficiently is more important than exposing and combating more underlying structures – which is after all the essence of politics.

It is precisely this compulsion to achieve immediate results that prevents NGO artists from contesting the crisis in which the public now finds itself in a more fundamental way, and condemns them to political neutrality in order to realize their actions. This also makes them extremely vulnerable. Because they suppress any fundamental political critique in order to achieve their actions, these actions can be easily co-opted by the system as a sign that things are not so bad in the world after all. The NGO artist can easily be co-opted by the system, to give the victims of increasingly structural injustices the feeling that their voices still count. It is already standard practice for governmental authorities or market players to recruit artists or curators at an early stage in societal processes and in setting up artistic programmes, sometimes in interaction with the victims, that document the negative side-effects of the policy. In such cases, artists are manoeuvred into the same dubious position as that of the 'embedded' journalists in the Iraq war.

Making Art 'Political'

In addition, critics will rightly point out that we are dealing here with mediocre art, or worse still, with a form of activism that uses art or cultural instruments to achieve its aims. Despite the aversion of NGO artists toward traditional, political activism, it is difficult not to classify them as activists, albeit of a more humanitarian-pragmatic kind. Instead of offering fierce political resistance to the status quo, they concentrate on achieving 'small but real' improvements in people's lives.

Many will counter that the artist cannot forget that he is an artist before anything else, that art is his most important domain of action and expertise, and that this is therefore where his priorities must lie. If, on the contrary, you consider art an effective instrument to achieve political ends, it logically follows that it is difficult, if not impossible, for an artist to practise a personal, autonomous politics and not be co-opted into dubious government schemes or market operations. The flaw, in this view, lies in the NGO artists themselves and in the excessively literal, instrumental uses of art. If the artist wants to be politically engaged, the contention goes, he must do so within his own, artistic medium.

Thomas Hirschhorn, in the context of the work *Swiss Swiss Democracy*, famously said that he does not make political art: he 'make[s] art political'. As a protest against the shift to the right in the political climate of Switzerland, which he says has been effectively camouflaged by democratic processes, he occupied the Swiss cultural centre in Paris for eight weeks. Using all kinds of media – collages, a daily newspaper, philosophical lectures, theatre performances – he exposed the obscene underbelly of Swiss democracy.[2] This action was specifically directed towards a concrete political situation, and its political character is evident. Yet this action should not be seen as a form of activism, with the aim of organizing opposition to the rise of extreme-right ideology in Swiss politics. As Hirschhorn constantly emphasizes, his primary preoccupation as an artist is the form and not the politics. Of foremost importance to him is the two-part question of how you give shape to resistance and what its artistic quality is. Indeed, in public, Hirschhorn categorically refuses to discuss his political motivations or the social and political issues he broaches in his work. He is only willing to discuss his artistic choices and motivations – for instance the specific use of material and colour in the decoration of the space. Nevertheless, his work is clearly an indictment of a particular political development, and this is explicit in his work. He does not shy, for example, from including political pronouncements in his work or directing insults at politicians. However, he consistently insists that he is an artist first, that his intervention is primarily artistic. Only in this capacity can he be judged.

Isn't this ambiguous position the core of Jacques Rancière's view of the relationship between art and politics – a view that is steadily gaining in influence today? Rancière defines political art as, on the one hand, a politics of 'autonomy' (this is the struggle of artists to be recognized as practitioners of an autonomous discipline with the right to a distinct, independent place in society) and, on the other, a politics of 'heteronomy' (the struggle of art to, instead, fuse with social reality, to use society as material that can be organized according to artistic rules). Or as he puts it himself, 'a critical art is . . . a specific negotiation . . . [t]his negotiation must keep something of the tension that pushes aesthetic experience towards the reconfiguration of collective life and something of the tension that withdraws the power of aesthetic sensibility from the other spheres of experience.[3] In this way, a long-lasting struggle within modern art between various avant-gardes is ingeniously resolved – think, for instance, of the conflict between constructivists and formalists, or the continually recurring debate about whether art should leave the safe bounds of the museum and go out into the street or instead choose the museum as one of the last sanctuaries in society. Rancière's ingenuity lies in that he does not decide in favour of one of the two parties, but instead elevates the conflict or the tension between the two camps to the level of a solution in order to confront the vexed issue of the relationship

between art and politics.

Rancière's solution has strategic advantages. One could see it as a 'third way'. On the one hand, it enables the artist to intervene in political issues without compromise and to transcend the boundaries of art. This coincides with Rancière's artistic politics of heteronomy. Yet at the same time, this takes place in a way (through aesthetics) or from a place (an arts centre) that is outside politics. This is its autonomous dimension. Finding this grey zone – which Rancière calls the 'zone of indistinction of art and life' – thus has a dual advantage. On the one hand, it is difficult for the politicians involved to 'aestheticize away' the accusations expressed by the artist, dismiss them as 'merely art', as the opinion of just one eccentric artist: the political accusations are too direct for this. On the other hand, it denies politicians the opportunity to defuse the indictment in the usual way, with familiar political arguments: it is too artistic for that. This third way prevents the confrontation with the artist becoming a home match for the political establishment. It creates an alienation in politics, and that is undoubtedly its power.

Emphasis on the Artistic

It is tempting to see *Swiss Swiss Democracy* in terms of Rancière's concept of political art, balancing, as it were, on a tightrope between autonomy and heteronomy. However, Hirschhorn remains too much within the safe boundaries of art, that is to say, on the autonomy side of the tension arc. [4] In spite of all of Hirschhorn's rhetoric in the context of *Swiss Swiss Democracy* about artistic courage – he said, for instance, that 'an artist needs to be able to make a wild gesture, be courageous [5] – one might wonder how much courage it took to organize, in a cultural centre in Paris (albeit Switzerland's), an art event that explicitly does not want to define itself as political. Would it not have been more daring to act, on the contrary, in a more explicitly, deliberately political way and to devote attention, in addition to the artistic programme, to activist matters such as organizing opposition to the extreme right in Switzerland? Even when we evaluate Hirschhorn's 'making art political' using criteria such as those presented by Rancière, namely in terms of a tension-filled negotiation between autonomy and heteronomy, does his 'method' ultimately not come up short? Through the constant emphasis on the artistic character of the event – with the emphasis on non-participation, the rejection of any political-strategic calculation, etcetera – does the discussion about the tension between art and politics, between autonomy and heteronomy, not come out too much in favour of autonomy? In short, does Hirschhorn not stay on the safe side of the line between art and politics, instead of pushing this envelope, crossing the line or questioning it, which would have been a much 'wilder gesture'?

After all, Hirschhorn's constant emphasis on the artistic made it relatively easy for the political establishment to criticize his action as art (indeed as 'bad art') and dismiss it as a one-man action by an eccentric, media-obsessed artist. Had he anchored the action in a political movement, this would have been much more difficult already. Had the illusion simply been created that this action was merely the top of the iceberg of a widespread, popular resistance against the extreme right in Switzerland – a strategy that the Slovenian avant-garde group Laibach, for instance, successfully employed in 1980. communist Yugoslavia [6] – it could not have been so easily ignored or dismissed as 'harmless art'.

Hirschhorn's emphasis on the artistic character of his protest action meant that he primarily reached an art audience. This marked the whole action as 'preaching to the choir'. Nor did Hirschhorn push the envelope in terms of his audience. Christoph Schlingensiefs, for instance, as a form of resistance against the rise of the extreme right in Austria, organized a 'Big Brother' show in Vienna in 2000 with his action *Bitte liebt Österreich*. Because of its populist genre and its presence in the public space, he reached an audience that did *not* automatically identify 'the right' as the ultimate evil that must be eliminated.

Call to Artists

But is Rancière's sophisticated solution to the problem of the relationship between art and politics in terms of a tension of conflict between autonomous and heteronomous strategies not excessively marked by the trauma that art suffered in the twentieth century? Should his theory not be read against the backdrop of the now dominant view that art under communism and fascism got too close to politics, that with its political passion and enthusiasm it transgressed a critical line that led to the death of art? To maintain the tension between art and politics, between autonomy and heteronomy, could then be seen as a defence mechanism, to prevent its political enthusiasm leading to another catastrophe. When Rancière reproaches certain contemporary art practices such as relational art for no longer believing in a radical transformation of the status quo – he speaks here of a post-utopian condition – does this criticism not apply to Rancière himself? [7] Is his sophisticated definition of political art not equally motivated (as in the work of his great opponent, Jean-François Lyotard) by a defensive reaction to the various experimental hybrids of art and emancipatory, utopian politics in the twentieth century?

A crucial point, however, is that for Rancière the negotiation between autonomous and heteronomous trends has not always been the essence of political art. For him it is merely inherent to the current dominant regime of art. The definition of art is historically determined, which means that it is 'not politically neutral'. And the same holds for political art defined in terms of a tension between autonomy and heteronomy, the latter too is expressly not outside every discussion or outside history. It is not a dogma or set concept, nor a set prescription that can be absorbed or dissolved by the political establishment. It can therefore be questioned or found wanting because of its ineffectiveness to generate political effects through art.

An even more radical questioning of the established definitions of what art – especially in its relation to politics – is therefore more imperative than ever. We must once more experiment freely with new hybrids of art and politics.

Our analysis of the limitations of the positions of NGO art and of 'making art political' shows that what the one has too little of, the other has in excess. The anger, arrogance and outrage, as well as the radicalism, expressed by Hirschhorn's *Swiss Swiss Democracy* – which we judged to be too artistic – is exactly what the NGO artists censor. They try at all costs to avoid this 'aesthetics' of anger, this 'artistic' expression of outrage, in order to achieve the small artistic actions with which they hope to improve the lives of the victims of present-day neoliberalism. They refrain from expressing anger about the structural injustice done to these people in order to be able to anchor their actions in the existing order. In doing so they make themselves politically harmless. On the other hand, Hirschhorn's confrontational style generates little effect because he categorically rejects any anchoring of his actions in real, social, political processes – something the NGO artists are perhaps too good at, or too naïve about – in the name of the autonomy of art. This results in his actions being isolated and dismissed as 'merely art'.

To break out of this impasse, we argue that art should enter into alliances with radical social resistance movements (and therefore not with government authorities, developers, etcetera), with social movements that demand a radical transformation of the existing order. Art must take care not to be a cosmetic operation that merely assuages structural injustices temporarily for a specific group. This hot-wiring of radical artistic activism and radical political activism is still a relatively unexplored area today. We therefore want to issue the following call to socially engaged artists: 'Artists . . . one more effort to be really political!'

BAVO is an independent research firm focusing on the political dimension of art, architecture and planning. BAVO is a partnership between Gideon Boie and Matthias Pauwels; both studied architecture and philosophy. Recent publications include *Cultural Activism Today: The Art of Over-Identification* (2007) and *Urban Politics Now: Re-Imagining Democracy in the Neoliberal City* (2007). See www.bavo.biz.

Footnotes

1. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992), translated as *Het einde van de geschiedenis en de laatste mens* (Amsterdam: Olympos, 1999), 344.
2. The action took place from 4 December 2004 to 30 January 2005. The philosophical lectures were handled by Markus Steinweg; the theatre performances took place under the direction of Gwenaël Morin.
3. Jacques Rancière, 'The Politics of Aesthetics', see www.16beavergroup.org.
4. With this we expressly do not mean that artistic, aesthetic or formal aspects are entirely irrelevant to a political struggle. On the contrary, the aesthetic pleasure that a work like Hirschhorn's *Swiss Swiss Democracy* generates in the conception of powerful ways of ridiculing what one opposes or in the expression of anger of social or political abuses must be judged in a positive way. It is a valuable weapon in a political struggle. Activists often lack it. This can make the artist of inestimable value. However, art must be framed in a more generalized struggle with many more dimensions than just artistic quality!
5. The quotation continues: 'Art provides resistance. Art is neither active nor passive, art attacks – through my artistic work I will grapple with reality in all its complexity, massiveness and incomprehensibility . . . I will be brave, I will not be lulled into sleep, I will work on and be happy.'
6. See Alexei Monroe, *Interrogation Machine: Laibach and NSK* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).
7. See Jacques Rancière, *Le partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2000).

Tags

Activism, Architecture, Art Discourse, Public Space, Urban Space

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