

AESTHETICS RELATION BETWEEN ART, CULTURE, POLITICS Social Turn

This article deals with the problem of important social turn in the relationship between politics and art in the contemporary situation. In the postmodern sense, the relation between politics and art is assumed as performance or, in other words, as the representation of art and politics in the realm of cultural discourses and figures. The relations between art and politics in the contemporary sense may be assumed in terms of this triple definition, as: the transfer of politics into art, as the spectacularization of politics through art, and as a potential field of intervening critical, subversive practices in the global-transitional social processes of performing forms of life in the realm of expansive neoliberal capitalism and its global crisis.

Key words: relations of politics and art, social turn, cultural discourses, forms of life, cultural practices, representations of art and politics, transfer of politics into art, spectacularization of politics, global-transitional processes, neoliberal capitalism, global crisis, critical practices.

What Makes These Sculptures so Different? Grades of Abstraction

Zygmunt Bauman made the following almost tongue-in-cheek remark: contemporary 'workers' protests held in front of a MNC (multinational corporation) premises seem to be doomed to fail: protesters are confronted by a slightly dismayed official (a manager, administrator, coordinator, PR executive) who doesn't know exactly who should be given information regarding the protest. In other words, he/she knows that the message will be conveyed through an endless, intricate maze managing a global corporation topped by no individual or coherent team, but by abstract networks of hybrid governing and executive boards or 'decision-making platforms' connected to other bodies of management and funding. Indeed, this scheme of governance is incompatible with that of a personified owner and his way of running things in nineteenth century companies. In those times, workers' protests tended to personally address the factory owner or his direct representative, who resided in his villa inside the factory grounds or somewhere nearby.

Let's try to observe the matter from another angle. Let's take a look at two sculptures from two different periods and two different political systems: the monument (ArcelorMittal Orbit) raised for the 2012 Olympic Games in London and Lenin's statue at Kaluzhskaya Ploshchad in Moscow erected in 1985.

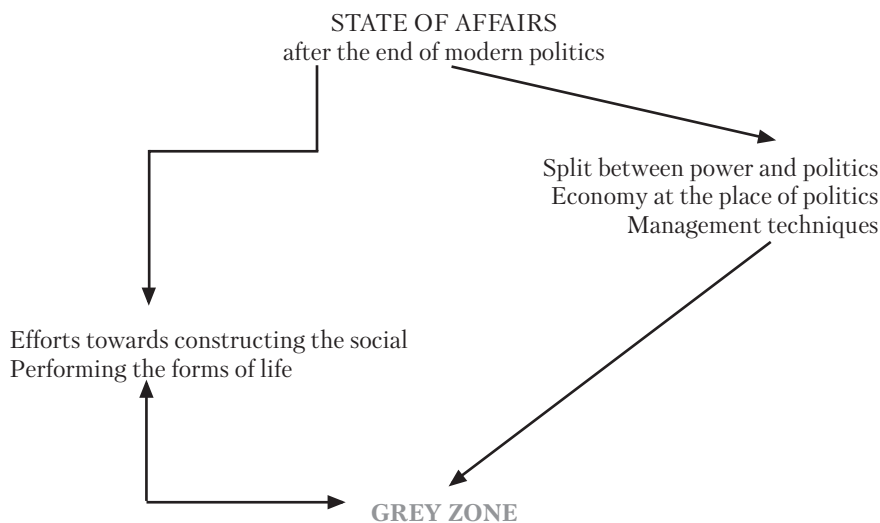
The former piece was designed by the postmodern sculptor Anish Kapoor with Cecil Balmond from the engineering group Arup and *Ushida Findlay Architects*. The latter was executed by the sculptors Lev Kerbel and *Vasily Dmitriyevich Fëdorov, in collaboration with architects* G. Makarevich and A. Samsonov. Both pieces came about at the peak of a crisis: the global financial crisis and the global real-socialist crisis, respectively. The former was funded by the British corporate system. The latter was funded by the Soviet state. One stands for the fluid, abstract order of neoliberal global power. The other stood

for the stability and matter-of-fact Soviet tradition of representing the revolutionary power of initiation. Both pieces are ‘political abstractions,’ stressing their assertiveness with monumentality and affirming ‘the power of corporate market capitalism’ and ‘the power of the workers’ revolution’ (respectively). The economic abstraction tends to be presented as an abstraction, namely, an abstract power. On the contrary, the political abstraction tends to be presented as a non-abstraction, i. e. as concrete power expressed by single or multiple personifications (a leader, leadership, people...).

The Crisis of Politics and the Return of the Political

What began with the postmodern and evolved in the times of global transition was a progression from the modern bureaucratic capitalist or socialist state which sets politics in relation to social conflicts (and even economic models of competition, domination, monopolies and global expansion of the market), towards a society wherein politics as technology of government departs from the real power. Politics becomes a mechanism of minimal corrections of the social conflicts conditioned by the real powers – which became increasingly abstract within the global systems of finance, production, exchange and consumption. For instance, the sociologist Richard Sennett asserts there has been a ‘divorce between power and authority’ in relation to politics. Furthermore, he concludes that ‘the crux of politics becomes marketing’ (which seems bad for political life) [1, 135].

The point of describing this rather complex scheme is to point to the *moment* following the divorce between power and politics in relation to contemporary art. In the neoliberal society of the postmodern and, subsequently, globalization era, politics assumed the character of a techno-managerial cultural practice (policy): it is now displaced from the domain of fundamental social issues towards individualized cultural (even artistic) actions in the realms of identity and representation of the ‘ordinary.’ A cynical conclusion might be that in times of globalization, everything – meaning culture and art – is politicized, except politics itself which is being de-politicized [2].



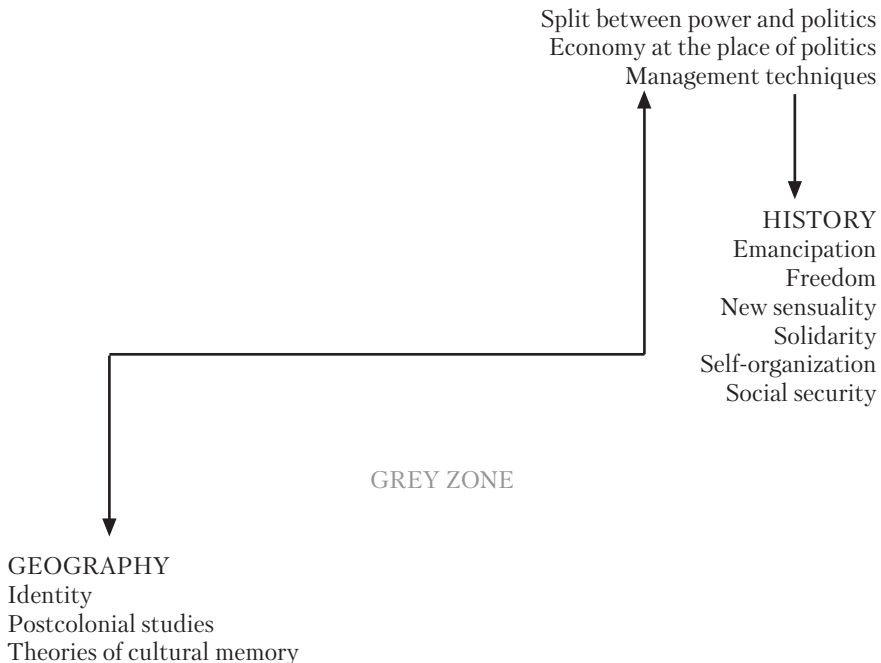
Appropriation of politics in arts and culture

I argue that we encounter two synchronous and antagonistic claims:

1. The claim that there has been a transfer of the *political of politics* and *politics of the political* outside the realm of politics — meaning, into the *contexts* of culture and arts. In other words, politics and the political are put into practice in the regimes of aesthetization of the art world and culture. Politics itself becomes a formalized technique of government (policies) in the name of the power which is no longer politics (meaning, a transparent social practice of responding to the ‘human condition’); and

2. The claim (quite opposite to the first) that social space, which no longer appears as political space (but as the space of the market), is again posited as a space of the construction of the social by means of art. This implies that the politicization of art again brings into play the ‘human condition’ as a specific condition of a desired sociality.

In both claims art is politicized or, more to the point, in both claims regimes of art and regimes of politics gain visibility by way of aesthetics. However, the former claim remains heavily determined by the de-politization of politics; the latter *conceives* art and culture as ‘ladders’ to escape from depoliticized preserves or spaces of apparent politicality to the realms of real sociality as politicality. This contradictory contemporary situation may be pictured by the following diagram:



This model demonstrates that the split between power and politics leads to the effects of split narratives of synchronic ‘geography’ and diachronic ‘history’ i. e. to replacing the canonical Western historical thought on culture and arts with a new canon of geographical reflection. This train of thought was anticipated by the notions

of contextualism, evolving from structuralism (partly post-structuralism) to cultural studies and their impact on 'postcolonial studies' *i. e.* 'geo-aesthetics' and 'theories of cultural memory'.

Modern history seemed complete with modern phenomenologies of emancipation, freedom, new sensuality, solidarity, self-organization and social security.

What both diagrams show is the supposition of a *grey zone* in the split between power and politics (and, analogously, between geography and history, *i. e.* between space and time), which is to be restructured.

The outlined theoretical issues have their instances in artistic practices.

Cultural memory appears as a poetical model with a 'distanced politicization' in relation to *contemporaneity*. With his *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* (2005) architect Peter Eisenman simultaneously points to the 'strategies of memory' (paying tribute to the victims) and cultural truce in the contemporaneity of new Europe. With the projects of The Atlas Group, Walid Raad reconstructs the memories of the traumatic Lebanon Civil War, expressing the 'unspeakable of the war' through the visibility of the archives indexing the ethical and political 'stains' of its witnesses and accomplices. With his project *Scarves and monuments* (2006) Igor Grubić disclosed testimonies of socialist Yugoslavia from the national contemporaneity.

Between the cultural memory of revolutions of modernism and the modern, homages to 1968 or expressions of yearning for a radical new 'sensitivity,' contemporary artistic practices referring to 'revolution as an event' are played out (in, for example, *Marina Naprushkina's* ironic installations, actions and workshops of the platform *Chto delat?*, the Iranian Islamic Revolution as featured by the group *Slavs & Tatars*, Jun Yang's or Ai Weiwei's parody of the relations between revolution and counter-revolution in the Chinese transition...).

Furthermore, activism and social participation (complicity, action) feature as movements from art into the realm of culture and, finally, via culture to situations of social antagonisms and conflicts, *i. e.* to the real political. As artistic practice, activism appears in quite specific situations when institutions of cultural, social or governmental work underachieve. The artist somehow becomes a social or cultural worker who operates in 'micro-cultures' (of sexual workers in the case of Tadej Pogačar or cultural symptoms of transition in the case of Nikola Džafu or every day politics Nika Radić). Escape from the micro-cultures into the 'restricted macro systems' is associated with the investigative work of the Critical Art Ensemble in the sphere of economic, production, market and political practices, like the global Internet or genetic engineering. The Belgrade movement *Žene u crnom* stepped out from the commonly feminist 'politics of difference' into an 'anti-war politics' common for critical political practice on a totalizing level.

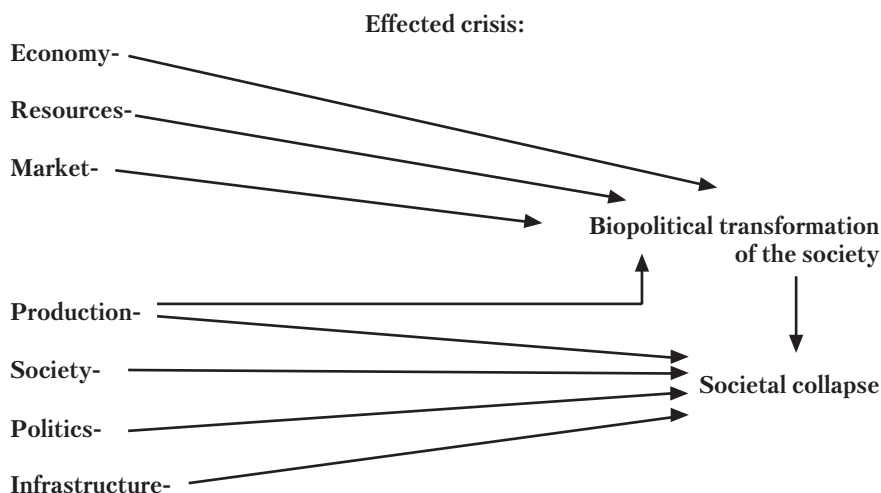
A radical turn from micro-politics to 'politicized sociality' may be entertained with political movements like Occupy Wall Street or the Egyptian revolution of 2011 and 2013 protests in Turkey. These phenomena did not come about with artistic intentions; however, aestheticization was part of their renewal of the common, *i. e.* social political resistance. The failure of these movements testifies to the vulnerability of 'self-organized resistance,' when exposed to the technologies of government which conceal the real centers of power.

One of the phenomena of the ‘politicization of art,’ approaching the models of modernist politicization (for example, realist art of the 19th and 20th centuries) is artists’ reaction to terrorism and the war against terrorism in the first decade of the 21st century [3]. This refers to the realist propaganda or anti-propaganda art dealing with September 11 (Thomas Ruff’s photos) or the war against terrorism as a form of global repression from a military superpower like the USA (Richard Serra’s *Stop Bush* billboard, Abdel-Karim Khalil’s sculptures or *Guy Gladwell’s* critical painting).

Economy and Biopolitics

On a street book stand in Belgrade I accidentally found a book titled *Theories of Collapse* [4], a selection of classical texts on the dialectics of social crises and collapses (Marx, Lenin, Cunow, Bernstein, Kautsky, Hilferding, Luxemburg, Bukharin, Sternberg, Grossman, Pollock, Dobb, Sweezy, Varga, Baran, Mattick, Amin, Mandel and Jacoby). The book contains elaborated typologies, analytical and polemical insights behind the causes of modern crises and fairly detailed chronologies of local and global crises from 1815 to the early 1980s when the book was published. Using additional sources, I’ve composed an approximate chronological sequence of major crises: 1815, 1825, 1836, 1847, 1857, 1866, 1873–1874, 1879, 1886, 1891–1895, 1899–1904, 1906–1908, 1919–1922, 1929–1932, 1973, 1981–1989, 1987, 1997, 2008–2013.

At the time, I was not interested in the reasons behind the crises, but in the frequency of their emergence. In the 19th century, crises broke out almost every ten years. The frequency of the crises did not change dramatically after the Second World War. Their permanence and abundance raised the question ‘what were all those crises about!?’ There may be plenty of answers to that question (the economy, resources, production, the market, society, politics...). I was interested in those that could be identified as political – and not all political crises, but specifically those that establish some relation between the derived forms of life affected by the crisis. In other words, merely superficial insight into statistical data shows that each crisis resulted in changes in the forms of life, from demography (settlement, migrations) to standards of living, social security or buying power, *i. e.* to free or limited choices in the ways one lives one’s everyday life. This insight stirred some vague intuitions which led me to conclude that, at all times, a crisis was an instrument or effect of the biopolitical disciplining of society. Crises I had personal experiences with – from the economic crises of self-management socialism (1960s, 1970s, 1980s) to the crises of transition in the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century – showed that ‘economic crises and collapses’ were used either by governments or government-detached bodies (secret services, banking and business corporations, tycoon alliances) in order to transform the effects of the crises (most often intentionally or randomly caused by *them*) into biopolitical instruments of surveillance and, furthermore, reshape the public and private daily lives of citizens. I propose the following scheme:



Non-revolutionary and non-reformist transformation of the capitalist society

A crisis taking place for a possibly 'objective' reason, brought about by the inner contradictions of capitalism, appears as a convenient 'resource' for performing discipline. Without a crisis *i. e.* 'state of emergency', this disciplining could not be imposed legitimately. This exceptional crisis situation permits the government to reclaim a share of its impact on society, permits the market to restructure the habits of the citizen-consumers and, finally, permits production to modify itself. It allows for passing from one stage to another without perceiving the crisis as a revolution or reform followed by all the consequences of revolutions and fundamental reforms. A crisis, therefore, may be identified as a situation which claims necessary economic renewal as an excuse for a biopolitical 'drill' of the population for the new conditions of consumption, exchange and production.

Examples of artistic representation (or, in recent times, the indexing) of the crisis as an instrument of biopolitics abound. The painter George Grosz witnessed the crisis of the Weimar Republic (*Grey Day*, 1921; *The Pillars of Society*, 1926). Joseph Beuys and, subsequently, Alfredo Jaar spotlighted the transfer of the 'symbols of political economy' into the realm of art – for instance, Beuys: 'Kunst = Kapital' (1979) and Jaar: 'Kultur = Kapital' (2012), followed by Jota Castro (*Mortgage*, 2009) or Melanie Gilligan (*Crisis in the Credit System*, 2008) etc.

Conclusion

Politics and art are current issues at the beginning of the new century.

The relation between politics and art is traditionally assumed as didactic: it implies that art transposes politics to a level of general knowledge or abstract stances on human relations in the particularities of 'real life'. The didactic function of art indeed means

that the purpose of art is propaganda. In art, politics claims presence — sensually/bodily displayed as active knowledge or a *cognitively packaged* experience of desired or desirable sociality. It becomes a trace or evidence of choice for an optimal form of life surpassing the critical distance towards life itself [5].

In the modern sense, the relation between politics and art is assumed as a *critical practice* — wherein art questions the didactic claims of hegemonic politics and its 'normative' performance of *forms of life* which comply with the apparatuses and discourses of real and fictional power. Adorno insisted that art should be analyzed as an element of wider social processes: "It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist" [6].

Politics posits art as an instrument of enframing and performing a social problem as a challenge to the normative order of power. Art posits politics as an instrument of spectacularization (becoming visible, audible) of a social problem which is concealed behind the normative order of power, administration, government...

In the postmodern sense, the relation between politics and art is assumed as performance or, in other words, as the representation of art and politics in the realm of cultural discourses and figures [7]. A Lyotardian critique of the *metanarrative* indicates that politics is being depoliticized, and art is being *de-articized* to the level of plural cultural production, exchange and consumption of arbitrary *floating* 'artifacts'. Politics and art are realms of articulation and re-articulation of the new form of depoliticized politics: that is, 'cultural policies'.

The relation between art and politics in the contemporary sense may be assumed in terms of this triple definition, as: (1) the transfer of politics into art, (2) the spectacularization of politics through art, and (3) a potential field of intervening critical, subversive, symptomatic practices in the global-transitional social processes of performing forms of life in the realm of expansive neoliberal capitalism and its global crisis.

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