

# 9. Appeal to a Political Art

Artists, One More  
Effort to Be Really  
Political

*Art that aims to be politically relevant has reached an impasse. To break through this impasse, we call on artists to link radical artistic activism with radical political activism. Only then might art that engages with politics genuinely make a difference.*

### **Less High Art, More Pragmatism Please!**

In the early 1990s, Francis Fukuyama was also able to announce, without much resistance, the end of 'all art that could be considered socially useful'.<sup>1</sup> The latter was part of his broader proclamation of the end of human history as a whole. As should be clear by now, developments during the first two decades of the end of history have damagingly proved Fukuyama wrong. The world has witnessed a resurgence of all kinds of disastrous phenomena that had seemed, after a long struggle and many human sacrifices, to have been vanquished for good. Think of the many 'neo-movements' that dominate the present political climate, like neo-liberalism, neo-conservatism, neo-tribalism, neo-racism and so on. But also with regards to committed art practices, Fukuyama predictions proved off the mark as there has been a genuine revival of socially committed art over the past two decades.

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 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'. And the latter 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 committed 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!'

We can offer some examples here from the Netherlands where over the last ten years there has been a real explosion of pragmatic art practices. The majority of the latter operate in the context of a

controversial large-scale urban restructuring operation, launched some ten years ago and spear-headed by governments, social housing corporations and real estate developers, that aims at tackling the many real and perceived problems of poor, immigrant neighbourhoods in the large Dutch cities. This restructuring operation mainly serves a neo-liberal and neo-conservative agenda, including for example the dismantling of huge chunks of the social housing stock, the targeting and de-concentration of people from foreign origin and the use of public money to attract high income groups and highly skilled professionals to live in these neighbourhoods. As one of the most heated social developments of the last decade, many artists in the Netherlands have proclaimed these areas as their privileged object or context. In line with what we have described previously about the utilitarian or pragmatic turn within committed art, artists focus their practices on trying to make a real difference. In a neighbourhood in the Hague, for instance, a hotel was created that rented out rooms in abandoned buildings up for demolition, both as a way to get tourists acquainted with the neighbourhood and to create employment for, and empower local residents. We can also think of some projects of the Dutch artist Jeanne van Heeswijk, who is somewhat a local notoriety in the Netherlands for her committed art practices. In a neighbourhood in Amsterdam, for instance, she set up a project through which children, in the midst of the restructuring of their neighbourhood, are given the opportunity to design their own park facilities and hereby develop some skills on the level of creative expression and collective decision-making. In a similar context in Rotterdam, she organized a contemporary art museum in a building marked for demolition. And in yet another area in the process of being restructured, she organized a series of popular cultural events aimed at creating awareness amongst the inhabitants about the valuable places and buildings in their neighbourhood with a view of saving them from demolition.

In all these instances, art is seen as a highly effective and innovative means to fulfil traditional activist tasks such as creating an awareness among disadvantaged social groups about the transformations that take place in their life-world, empowering them through developing skills and self-confidence, assisting them to seize social and economic opportunities, or drawing the attention of the general public to their precarious living conditions. 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 is 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 initiatives 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 no doubt noble and much-needed that artists undertake some direct action in the often harrowing social situations that continue to exist in our current societies – end of history or not. When it comes to gauging the effectiveness of these socially committed practices in tackling the problems at hand in a more fundamental sense, however, they are often found lacking. One of the reasons for this is precisely – and perhaps paradoxically – the preoccupation with direct action, with wanting to immediately ‘do what can be done within the realms of possibility’ and to offer instant relief or empowerment through a concrete project or intervention. 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 more like humanitarian organizations or NGOs: rather than addressing the larger, political issues, they focus on what they can do immediately for the affected individuals or groups within the limitations of the feasible. With these organisations they also share a high measure of self-censorship. It is a known fact that humanitarian organizations deliberately avoid tackling head-on controversial political issues for fear that the relief effort might be compromised – the local authorities could, for instance, refuse access to the country for political reasons. In a similar vein, also committed artists stay away from big problematic issues for fear of conflicts with powerful players that might endanger the necessary good will and material support for their initiatives. NGO art in fact is characterized by a denial of politics: 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 should be the essence of politics.

The compulsion to achieve immediate results not only condemns the committed artists to political neutrality, it also makes them extremely vulnerable for being co-opted politically. Because they suppress any fundamental political critique in order to achieve their actions, these actions can be easily abused by the system as a sign that things are not so bad in the world after all or to give the victims of structural social injustices the feeling that their voices still count. For instance, in the Netherlands, it is already standard practice in the operations of governmental authorities or market players to recruit artists or curators at an early stage to set up projects that deal with the predictable negative social effects. This often creates awkward situations in which artistic initiatives focused on offering support to the population groups affected by market or government operations are supported or sponsored by the main protagonists behind these operations. In such cases, artists are manoeuvred into a similar, questionable position as that of the embedded journalists in the Iraq war.

### Making Art 'Politically'

Art critics will no doubt 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 social aims. Despite the aversion of NGO artists toward traditional, political activism, they will argue that it is difficult *not* to classify them as activists, albeit of a more humanitarian-pragmatic kind, focused on achieving 'small but real' improvements in people's lives, rather than offering fierce political resistance to the status quo. Against this, it will be argued that the artist cannot forget that they are an artist before anything else, that art is their most important domain of action and expertise, and that this is therefore where their 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 committed, the contention goes, they can and must do so foremost and primarily within their own artistic medium.

Thomas Hirschhorn, in the context of his art installation *Swiss Swiss Democracy*, famously said that he does not make political art, but rather makes art *politically*. 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 in 2004 and 2005. Using all kinds of media – collages, a daily newspaper, philosophical lectures, theatre performances – he exposed the obscene, racist underbelly of Swiss democracy. Although this action was specifically directed toward a concrete political situation, it 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 its execution. He does not shy, for example, from including political pronouncements or directing insults at politicians. However, he consistently insists that he is an artist foremost, that his intervention is primarily artistic and that it is only in this capacity that he can be judged for his work.

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.<sup>2</sup>

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 and dismiss them as 'merely art' or the eccentric opinion of just one 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 – for this, it is too artistic. This third way thereby prevents the confrontation between the artist and the political establishment of becoming a home-match for the latter.

As tempting as it might be to see *Swiss Swiss Democracy* in terms of Rancière's concept of political art, balancing on a tightrope between autonomy and heteronomy, the action still remains too much within the safe boundaries of art, that is to say, on the autonomy side of the tension arc. In spite 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' – one might wonder how much courage it took to organize an art event that explicitly does not want to define itself as political in a cultural centre outside Switzerland.<sup>3</sup> 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? So even when we evaluate Hirschhorn's practice of making art in a political way by using criteria such as those presented by Rancière, his method ultimately comes 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, etc. – the negotiation between art and politics, between autonomy and heteronomy, comes out too much in favour of autonomy. With this, Hirschhorn ultimately stays 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'?<sup>4</sup>

### How Much Politics Can Art Take... and Vice Versa?

Our analysis of the limitations of the positions of NGO art and of making art in a political fashion revealed 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 such an aesthetic display of outrage in order to achieve the small artistic projects with which they hope to improve the lives of the victims of the current order. They refrain from expressing anger in order to be able to secure the support for these projects from the powerful players within this 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 connections of his actions to real, social, political processes – something the NGO artists are perhaps too good or too naive at – in the name of the autonomy of art. The latter made it relatively easy for the political establishment to criticize his action as 'bad art' and dismiss it as a one-man action by a media-obsessed artist.

To break out of this impasse and think of more potent ways to connect art and politics, we can start by noting how Rancière's solution to the problem of the relationship between art and politics in terms of a tension of conflict between autonomous and heteronomous tendencies is still too marked by the trauma that art suffered in the twentieth century. Despite his reproaches towards contemporary art practices, such as relational art, for being 'post-utopian' and no longer believing in a radical transformation of the status quo, his own theory as well should be read against the backdrop of the now dominant view that in the twentieth-century art came too close to politics, that with its radical political passion and enthusiasm it crossed a critical line that led to its annihilation.<sup>5</sup> Rancière's plea to maintain the tension between art and politics, between autonomy and heteronomy, can be seen as a defence mechanism, a way to prevent art's political enthusiasm from ever leading to another catastrophe. His theory of political art thus seems 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 despite its claims to the contrary.

In Rancière's defence, it can be argued that the negotiation between autonomous and heteronomous tendencies does not constitute for him the eternal formula of political art, but is merely inherent to art in the modern age (since the second half of the eighteenth century) or what he calls the aesthetic regime of art. The latter implies that the definition of political art in terms of a tension between autonomy and heteronomy is historically determined and, therefore, is not a fail-proof rule that can be applied by artists, art critics or even politicians. It can also always be questioned or found wanting because of its ineffectiveness to generate political effects in a specific historical situation, for instance, the current one. We should, moreover, never be inhibited to question the established definitions of what political art is or might be, as well as experiment freely with more hybrids of art and politics, specifically those that push art beyond itself and towards engagement with radical politics rather than in the opposite direction, such as in the case of Thomas Hirschhorn. We can think here of Terry Eagleton's stress on the historically determined character of the relation between art and revolutionary politics and, more precisely, the fact that some periods demand explicit political involvement as a precondition for the production of meaningful art.<sup>6</sup>

The latter doesn't necessarily mean that the artists should simply embed their activities in radical social movements or fully merge with the latter. In the case of Hirschhorn's *Swiss Swiss Democracy*, for instance, already the mere nurturing of the illusion that it didn't merely concern an artistic 'solo action' but was in fact the tip 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 1980s communist Yugoslavia – would have made the action much more effective politically and would have prevented it from being put aside easily by the right-wing politicians as an unfounded yet harmless art exhibition.<sup>7</sup>

The call towards artists to act in a more political or partisan way doesn't, therefore, necessarily lead to their disappearance in the sphere of politics. On the contrary, there is still plenty of manoeuvring space for them to develop their own specific tactics and practices of resistance or even to criticize and distance themselves from radical social movements. For example, we can think of another art action in the context of the resurgence of the extreme-right after the end of history. Shortly after the election victory of Jörg Haider in 2000, Christoph Schlingensiefel organized a Big Brother show in a container camp in front of the Viennese opera, in which asylum seekers had to curry favour with the Austrian people in order not to be voted out of the show and out of the country – the action was appropriately called 'Bitte liebt Österreich'. Although the participants were in fact actors, everything was done in such a way so as to make it indistinguishable from a genuine initiative supported by Haider's party. The latter soon distanced



themselves from the show by claiming that they would never treat asylum seekers in such an inhuman way – in stark contradiction to the aggressive discourse on foreigners that got them elected into power. However, one of the most successful results of Schlingensiefel's action was how it also managed to provoke the extreme left and more specifically, antifascist action groups which, at the end of the show, stormed the big brother house and freed its inhabitants. In this way, it exposed the internal contradictions of a movement who, while willing to resort to violence in relation to Schlingensiefel's fake camp for asylum seekers, are less brave when it comes to liberating the thousands of real foreigners locked away in Austrian detention centres and, as a rule, limit their engagement to inconsequential demonstrations or symbolic protest rallies.

Schlingensiefel's action thus shows how the hardwiring of radical artistic activism and radical political activism doesn't necessarily have to lead to a peaceful coalition between the two, on the contrary even, a high degree of tension or even competition can be highly productive, as well as an effective way to challenge establishing a radical political line. For this to happen, however, committed artists should again have the courage to transgress and stretch the limits of their discipline in the direction of radical politics. We therefore want to issue the following call to socially committed artists: 'Artists . . . one more effort to be really political!'

### Notes

1. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).
2. Jacques Rancière, 'The Politics of Aesthetics', see [www.16beavergroup.org/mtarchive/archives/001877.php](http://www.16beavergroup.org/mtarchive/archives/001877.php)
3. 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'. Hirschhorn pronounced these words at the opening of *Swiss Swiss Democracy*.
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 anger about 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. See Jacques Rancière, *Malaise dans l'esthétique* (Paris: Galilée, 2004).
6. See Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1976).
7. On this strategy of Laibach, see Alexei Monroe, *Interrogation Machine: Laibach and NSK*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).