Art under Austerity
Notes from the European Sinkhole

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Column – November 2, 2013

Both the artistic practice and the art theory that claims to address art's political significance will need to face the fact that the latter will remain a dead letter as long as a politics of universal emancipation fails us.

Perhaps the most salient of ironies regarding art's position within the European public sphere is the seemingly reverse correlation between the socio-cultural anorexia that results from austerity measures and the fact that contemporary art is saturated with political claims, as is contemporary art theory. Europe is ever more deeply curving onto itself, driven to disappear within itself, leaving nothing but the skeleton of national particularism and its subsequent politics: Europe as political and cultural sinkhole. We are thus faced with the peculiar condition of a "political turn" in the arts in response to a turn away from the founding rationale of political modernity – and art's inclusion within it. In other words: We are faced with political art in the absence of politics. "Political art" today echoes an aesthetic and political modernity that, in the wake of austerity, appears to be irreparably bankrupt.

We have moved from a celebration of art and culture as the central catalyst for economic and social revitalisation to the dismissal of any socio-economic relevance of art at a speed that has left many in the world of the arts and culture in a daze. Meanwhile, today's austerity politics reject the all-too Keynesian assumptions regarding the creative economy, whereby investing in arts and culture pays off economically in terms of tourism or gentrification. This vertigo translates a fundamental breach in the practice and conception of politics today, a breach that remains largely absent from today's heated debate on the political significance of art, which is persistently conceptualised in political modernity terms. With its dictum "the winner takes all", neoliberalism is anti-universalistic, anti-democratic and thus anti-modern (and some might add anti-bourgeois). Neoliberal politics is founded precisely on the *exclusion* of the common or universal, in fact, it ontologises the dissymmetry between exception (the winner) and the common (now negatively referred to as socio-economic debris); it equates all that falls under the law of value and economic competition, whereby the existence of the exception becomes the validation of that ontology. Its internal logic is therefore alien to the essentially still-modern conception of art's peculiar universalism and art's subsequent privileged relation to a politics of the universal. That is to say, the conceptualisation of the political significance of art results from two assertions that are intimately related to the universalist assumptions of political modernity. Firstly, art's liminality is seen as the key to its potential political role in so far as art remains exterior to the determinedness of the socio-economic everyday, art holds a privileged position as it addresses the universal. *Art is universal because it is exceptional*: the interference of politics in the art and cultural domain proceeds from this assumption of the universal, and, therefore, politically relevant, significance of art's exceptional status (and this was still very much at work in the rhetoric of the creative economy, where cultural production became *the* model for value production).

Secondly, the paradoxical logic of art's exceptional universalism is subsequently at work in the assertion of the "ontological proximity", or the *equivalence* of art and politics. What contemporary political art borrows from modernism and the avant-garde is the idea that form is political ("aesthetics is *also* politics"). But what it refutes is the modern political history that is its condition of possibility. As a result, the relation between art and politics is turned into an *ontological proximity*: art is supposedly always already political; its political force is an intrinsically aesthetic one ("aesthetics *is* politics"). This perhaps explains why, when it comes to contemporary "political art", the emphasis is still massively on "art" and not "politics": Political art appears to still be an investigation into the socio-political significance of art and its aesthetic devices; very rarely, however, do we encounter a definition of politics, apart from the intrinsic politics of the artwork. We are now witnessing a double tragedy: the practice and conceptualisation of a political art "without politics" (wherein art becomes a placeholder for politics) and the unilateral termination of the political contract that would sustain this practice and theory. It is this unbridgeable gap between the political-aesthetic rationale and that of contemporary politics that has become so visible in today's European austerity politics.

Both the artistic practice and the art theory that claims to address art's political significance will need to face the fact that the latter will remain a dead letter as long as a politics of universal emancipation (as embodied, most significantly, by 20th-century communism) fails us. Rather than taking the ontological equivalence between art and politics as a given, artistic practice and art theory should link art with the emerging idioms and prefigurations of this universal emancipation: to rethink art under the aegis of politics, without ontological safeguards.

The elephant in the already crowded room of contemporary political art might very well be that if we are still orbiting in both the domain of emancipatory politics and political art that has the former as its conditio sine qua non, around the void left by the communist movement (yet another sinkhole), then what is needed for any effective endorsement of political art is its suture with a movement as potent, complex and potentially catastrophic as communism (a political art that is neither agit prop, nor its a priori rejection). Therefore, we must, in particular, avoid the fallacies of aestheticising the current crisis (the fallout aesthetics of supposedly liberating precarisation, which is in fact confined to a specific stage of capitalist crises) and the reconfiguration of art as labour (since the real catastrophe here might well be the reconfiguration of labour not into new types of, intrinsically artistic, immaterial or cognitive labour but into servitude). Any type of investigation, be it purely theoretical or artistic, into art's significance within the European public sphere, must start with a lucid consideration of European austerity as inspired by the rationale of anti-modernity (especially when disguised as technocracy) and its manipulation of the liberal-populist consensus; such an investigation must be guided by its tethering with the politics of radical emancipation.

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Tags

Art Discourse, Public Domain

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