

Art is not enough

This phrase is usually referring to my conviction/my schibboleth that art must expose itself to other realities in order to matter, here it points to the idea of a practice that goes beyond art in order to become something else before it is called art again.

How can political and social issues become a matter of artistic or cultural practice? (from the invitation)

Simple, the artists must decide to do so. And here we're already in the thick of things. There is a lot of socially and politically engaged art out there but I often ask myself who is actually deciding on its content. How come that there was/is an abundance of art to be seen on the Obama Barak campaign in Europe while I did not perceive of much artistic reaction to the atrocities taking place in Palestine at about the same time?

We know that art isn't autonomous, it is responsive and it is interdependent on its social and political surroundings on many levels. But how far can that go, how much can this explain with regard to the topics chosen, the places of practice occupied, or the strategies applied? Who decides what art can be? Who wants a socially responsive but not a socially responsible art that sets its own agenda, or the other way around?

What I am trying to do within the coming pages or minutes is to detect socially responsible art could be or do. It is all still very fresh and uncooked thinking. And I must admit, I didn't get very far, but I still consider the attempt worthwhile to push art out of its complacency to get a sense for the limits of its own commitment, will and maybe even capacity to be part of something like social change. (Giving the unnamable a name and observe how it fights it.)

I will add pieces of observations and examples of discussions I led when I was researching the question of art and politics in Tel Aviv, Kosovo, Tokyo and Macedonia, this and last year. I start off with a bit of Adornian thinking about art's potential for self-awareness, which he deems rather depauperated:

1 Absolute freedom in art, always limited to a particular, comes into contradiction with the recurrent unfreedom of the whole, the world around us. In it the place of art became uncertain a good while ago. The autonomy art achieved, after having freed itself from cultic function and its images, was nourished by the idea of humanity. As society became an ever less human one (the horrors of the big wars, the perversity of genocide, atrocities based on the pretext of religious beliefs or the implementation of democracy (before that christianity) etc.) this autonomy was shattered. Art's autonomy remains irrevocable. All efforts to restore art by giving it a social function – of which art is itself uncertain and by which it expresses its own uncertainty – are doomed. Art has lost its naïveté and with it art gained a new kind of blindness. This blindness Adorno calls a naïveté of a second order: the uncertainty over what purpose art serves.

2 Adorno explains further why he feels that art is stuck and can't free itself: As a result of art's inevitable withdrawal from theology, from the unqualified claim of truth of salvation, a secularization without which art would never have developed, art is condemned to provide the world as it exists with a consolation that strengthens the spell from which the autonomy of art wants to free itself. (Meaning art said no to religion/cult as the all-powerful institution, its feeding breast, but somehow took over the function of the apologist, telling the world that it isn't all that bad; the price for the autonomy from religion is this inheritance of consolation). From there follows that art by virtue of rejection of the empirical world, which is an immanent law of art, sanctions the primacy of reality. (Whenever you say no, you say at least yes to the existence of the one that evoked the no. Art as critique in that sense always undermines its own position and accepts the reality outside of it as superior).

As art has turned again and again against the status quo, it certainly cannot be limited to the function of consolation or its opposite anymore. But it is to say that art hasn't emancipated itself from the role of the apologist or the acceptance of the outside reality as the real world that it merely reacts to. On

the other hand, I think the non-definitiveness in art (as the need to question its role again and again) is a crucial characteristic and I am not sure it must be looked at as a shortcoming. I feel that this alleged uncertainty could very well be a strategy of art against institutional infringement, whether it is a successful one or not, can't be decided hastily.

3 To call for a socially responsible (and not just responsive) art empowers art and burdens it. It potentially empowers art with the context and freedom of initiation and primary action. Socially responsible art is not political anymore, and it is not imitating politics or trying to fill its gaps but it is politics; art, when it is socially responsible embraces the two (art & politics). You cannot point to it and say this is art and this is politics, they are inseparable. They merge in the aesthetic choices of the artist.

On the other hand, the idea of a socially responsible art most likely burdens it with the need to react to all kinds of miseries or crises and the urge to legitimize its actions when it doesn't; it possibly burdens art with a (wanted or unwanted) political conscience. Art can become guilty.

In Japan the desire for social transformation was expressed in many discussions I had with young and mid-career artists. There is a notion of sadness if not emptiness that can be felt in the streets of Tokyo that is often translated into melancholy and fragility in the art. The art I've seen was with little exception metaphoric, highly skilled and luscious and stripped of an obvious references to a social reality that is dissatisfying. What was striking though was the often-encountered investment into an elaborate philosophy of life which would not translate necessarily graspable into their work but was immediately shared with me in our discussions (time). It shows in decisions regarding a purposefully anti-collective life-style: for instance by deciding to work at night only and to sleep during the day to break with the established idea of social integration, or choosing to cycle only while all others walk and use the public transport system. It seemed to me, that these artists train themselves in a soft opposition based on self-isolation not community. It is an almost silent resistance that is not detectable in their work or practice but plays out as a very private bodily experience. The societal drill, the idea of the river and not the water drop that counts is (not publicly but clandestinely) repudiated in a very intimate way.

On the other hand, one can observe how in Tokyo topics like climate change or sustainability are being imposed and pushed on the artists agenda by local art institutions that work internationally and are supported by the city government (Tokyo Wondersite in Tokyo, for instance).

Another example is the project Art & Development in Skopje, that is initiated by the Swiss Embassy there and seeks to foster the local cultural scene with a limited will to collaborate with local, non-profit arts organizations. I am a member of that board.

Both examples seem to have first and foremost one aspect in mind, to strengthen their institutions diplomatic or international network through art that deals not with local but global issues in order to be an apt instrument. Again, the question arises, who wants who needs socially responsive and who needs socially responsible art?

4 There are two obvious powers at stake that create the false image of autonomy in art in order to functionalize it or display it as socially non-responsive or even irresponsible – an economical one and a political one, an openly and constantly operating one, and one that only surfaces in moments of threat with a strategy that is as old as the bible. I am talking about the art market, on the one hand, and institutionalized political power, administrations, on the other.

The art market, commodification, asks for a politically emancipated product. When art becomes a product it must lock itself up within its own product-ness. The piece of work as product must be considered sovereign/non-responsive to any other reality than the market logic, the desire to possess and be possessed or be possessible – in order for the act of exchange to be viable. The market logic erases the potential for responsibility in art. In the jargon chosen, we could say, commodified art, any art that can be bought, necessarily surpasses a moment of irresponsibility towards its own production history, and enters a moment of fake autonomy or social detachment, otherwise it could not become

exchangeable for sth. else, money for instance.

The second example concerns a differently oppressive, socio-political context: I call this strategy the Jesus-effect. It is the act of translating the enigma of responsive, maybe even responsible art or cultural activity into irresponsible social action by means of political power.

We know the case of Steve Kurtz from Critical Art Ensemble (who tested bio gas and other acclaimed deadly terrorist weapons on real people to prove the governments tactics to hush the population into a state of fear; the FBI ransacked his home and took him in in 2004, as a result he lost his job, got socially isolated and financially ruined, 2008 the actions mentioned in the indictment could still not be proved true, a crime could not be stated). Another more recent case is the one of the young Russian activist, Artem Loskutov.

I read an excerpt from June 8 from <nettime>, a mailing lists for networked cultures, politics, and tactics :

On May 15, the young contemporary *artist Artem Loskutov was arrested* in his native Novosibirsk and charged with possession of a narcotic substance (marijuana) by the local branch of the Interior Ministry's notorious Center for Extremism Prevention (Center "E"). Loskutov and his supporters claim that the police planted the marijuana in his bag in order to incriminate him. As one of the organizers of the annual "Monstration" -- a flash mob street party in which young people march with absurdist, non-political slogans -- Loskutov had long been an objection of the Center's attentions. At a pre-trial custody hearing on May 20, it was revealed that the Center had been tapping the phones of Loskutov and his friends for the past six months. In April and on May Day itself, Loskutov had been summoned to the Center for "discussions," and his parents had been called and told that their son was a member of a dangerous sect.

(international art scene called upon to make some noise and a legal defense fund was founded by the artist group chtodelat)

Social responsibility is a painful thing for any administration desiring complete authority, and as a matter of fact every government does, democratic or not. When this pain sets in a sacrifice must be made and a victim must be found, while at the same time the state must make sure that it itself as well as all citizens are perceived as the damaged, or the saved ones, respectively. The concept of social responsibility and the will to act upon it, that is not against the law but also not protected by the law, must be rewritten as a threat to everyone. This can only be done convincingly so if there is a body that can be punished and shown before the public, otherwise the law is powerless. What follows are false accusations to get a handle on a person and to distract from an actual complex and deficient social and political reality under attack. Artem allegedly possessed drugs (no proof that it wasn't smuggled in his rucksack), Steve allegedly possessed illegal bio-chemicals to build terrorist weapons (could not be proved yet). In late June two Russian journalist were accused of having used "obscene language in public," thus "expressing sheer disrespect for society."

It is important to reinvent these individuals as singular, autonomous, malevolent agents, who act irresponsibly and irrationally, and not because they are invested in the possibility of social change.

Strategies of defamation are successful not because we believe in the righteousness of the system that executes them but because we are urged to witness its power at play. One could say the act of blatantly false accusation and humiliation is much more directed towards the public than the actual victim as an act of intimidation.

5 Social responsibility is not a human right. It hasn't found its entry into today's democratic contracts, it seems. It wasn't absorbed by Christian morality (here we speak of a duty to God, and one to your neighbor) nor activism (here we speak of solidarity). Responsibility is a highly innocent and a highly corrupt term, which can be claimed by everyone, while it is protected by no one. It is a strangely unfixed expression with an ethical indication but outside any conventional definition. It doesn't ask for specific organization, consensus or visibility. Which makes it subversive with regard to its potency to

address everyone, to protect everyone, to conspire with everyone, and unlike solidarity, to connect people who do not even share a common goal. Social responsibility is hard to detect, while it can outburst at any moment.

Responsibility is restricted by the politics of power (not the law): it is not for all and not for all to be practiced at all times or places. Which is to say, the right to feel responsible for s.o. or s.th. is granted to everyone but the execution of action according to it (by speech or physically) can and will be impeded by anyone more powerful if it collides with their interest.

When I did studio visits at Bezalel University last December, I encountered a group of individuals between 28 and 40 who were all without exception strangely caught up in their family histories marked by various war situations, and the feeling of debt and respect toward the tragedies of their relatives. This solidarity with an unnamable past and present seemed to distance them from something like a political critique. Their own history seemed too convoluted in order for them to find an entrance, a language for a social or political practices. Most art was highly intelligent and precise, controlled, mindful. It seemed again that art wasn't freed of its cultic functions, but was still a consoler, a place that tells us that things are not all that bad. One artist also confirmed my assumption that it was the decision of the institution to train global artists, a global language of art, which of course includes content as well as technique.

The question that is connected to this observation concerns the interdependence of distance (geographically and historically) and responsiveness, how far away do we have to be from somewhere or something in order to fight for or against it, work with it or just find it interesting? I have been talking to artists who were former soldiers in the Balkan war and stopped doing art during or after the war, and then there are all the Middle European artists who do work about conflicts in Serbia or Lebanon, or Americans who travel to Damascus or the African-European borders for their practice. Is the political always the other, and the "most remote other" these days, since we can move faster and further? Is art really so interested in the exotic, or is that someone else's interest that we might profit from or suffer under? And what distance or closeness does it take for art to come to an end as a social or political practice?

There was one exception at Bezalel, a young, gay man. His differing everyday experience of reality allowed for him to make that cut and reach further with his ambition of expression and action in the way he positioned himself and in the way he historicized his own biography. The open and subdued political and social aggression in his country resembled the physical situation he was in on a very personal level. He could not pretend. He had his own story to tell without the will to buy into the reproduction of a common sense or common non-sense. His private revolution helped him to establish a conscious and wordily political position that showed in the topics he chose.

6 Art tries to bridge the monument (sth that was) with sth that will be. The monument is the paradox figure that points to what art longs for and at the same time to what art resists: eternity and fixedness. Art is never immediate, it responds and it is ahead at the same time. French philosopher Jacques Rancière then says: Chaos has to become resisting form, and form must become resisting chaos, revolution has to become monument and monument revolution. In that sense the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze talks of "the monument that speaks to the future". The artist's work foresees an end that his work cannot provide yet, she or he has a future audience in mind, one that still is to come.

This is to say that every art is radically resulting from a specific time and at the same time it is beyond time. And one could further conclude, that the importance of all new practice lies in the beginning (that is where the political statement is being made) not how it ends, as all revolution will similarly freeze in motion at some point.

7 Art is art when it is not the product of its will to be art but when it is something else, says Rancière. (Volkgeist with Hegel, Medicine with Deleuze, art often first wanted to be sth. else, started off as sth else). The label art must come from the outside and not the artist. This is something Rancière feels strongly about, art should not try to fulfill its own prophecy. Art that is programmatic in how to bring about change will not succeed as it will have to fulfill the historical norms of its own discipline in order

to be received as such (naming or self-naming is always reactionary, pointing to the past and is therefore losing all potential for change). The definition of art is at every point indicated by what art once was, but it is legitimated only by what art became with regard to what it wanted to become. Art that successfully evokes social change will only be named art in the aftermath. (For now it just needs to know its desire not what it is.)

In this context I would like to mention the project or political ambition of the Kosovo artist Albert Heta. In a workshop that I had organized on the potential of "the concept of idiocy" for political action in today's society, Albert told us about his strategy to activate the artist scene in Prishtina in order for it to gain a voice in the social changes taking place in his hometown. Albert was sketching an art scene that risks to too smoothly blend into the Western ideals and the art market, jeopardizing its opportunity and maybe partly tradition of resistance. He urges them to be aware of their needs and desires as this is a moment of change they can be creative with. Before the European democratic demon of conformity fully flourishes, Albert is trying to stir this awareness by saying that "the minority is always right". This is a strategy of empowerment that is anti- or rather hyper-democratic giving back the power to the individual (or the potentially smallest group) in a supposedly equally respected pluralistic system, perverting on the other hand the democratic ideal of the majority's weight in decision-making. Albert's actions are often under the attack of not being art.

The political effect lies in this under-determination or semantic vagueness of what it is Albert is doing - which is not to be confused with indecisiveness of action. Art must not be afraid of not being art anymore.

Conclusion:

For art to claim social responsibility is quite a stretch. It does not imply a gain or loss with regard to its autonomy, but this self-assigned label could free it from or at least shifts its history of long-gone and new institutional dependencies with regard to its agenda and its strategies, and might place it levelheaded with other forces in our society that actually do decide on the fate of many. The critical alignment between art, politics, economy etc. is stronger than ever but art seems still to be the one discipline that has the therapeutic task to inspire the others, to add color and sensuality or exoticism, "the other way to look at things". Art must become irresponsible enough to call itself socially responsible.

Art that calls itself socially responsible and not just responsive will become a threat to many, a disappointment to others and a forceful collaborator for some. For art to burden itself with responsibility is a novelty. But maybe its time to unlearn that only art that is ignorant of what purpose it serves can be art.

Which reminds me of a story Vito Acconci told us the other day when he was in Lucerne about a note Jean-Paul Sartre had written about the writer Jean Genet. It's a glaring example of the power of naming. At some moment in his adolescent life someone had accused Genet to be a thief (stealing from other writers), and so he made it his essence and became one.

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