**Arrest: the Politics and Transcendence of Aesthetic Arrest Qua Protest**

Recently, given the fomenting protests following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery (amongst countless others), much discussion has erupted amongst contemporary artist-activists about the proper place for art and the aestheticization of politics. This is, of course, by no means a novel conversation. Historically, the aestheticization of politics has been disparaged perhaps most vocally by those such as Adorno and Horkheimer, but this critique has its most well-known roots in Plato. Plato’s critique is levelled at the theatre and poetry, particularly the habituation effects of its consumption; specifically, Plato saw that the tragedy embodied by those performers inhabiting the stage and the enraptured audiences who engaged at the level of emotions. Plato censured the putatively groundless feelings demonstrated by actors and their transposition, artificiality’s ripple effect.

Consider, for example, the actor performing the role of Achilles who extravagantly expresses grief without truly undergoing it. Audience members inhere towards an unmerited emotional hunger-cum-satisfaction for those putatively irrational feelings of loss by way of weeping and wailing. For Plato, such identification is devoid of proper evaluative grounding and, therefore, is corruptive. Plato’s critique can be considered an evaluation of the kind of rational emotional arrest that occurs through artificial emotional uptake. However, one could counter Plato’s position by noting how, regardless of whether these emotions are performed or the actors “truly” feel them, they may serve a political purpose and greater ends—bridging the audience together with performer/artist, allowing an “as if” simulative scenario.

This conversation is not merely one that lives in the annals of philosophy of art and aesthetics, as it highly pertains to the role of the artist during these protests and how not only ally-ship but meaningful and politically galvanized protest can be embodied by art without romanticizing the strife, violence, and severities that frame the systematic violence that occupies the heart of these protests. This point became particularly salient when, recently, a novelistic summation of George Chauvin’s murder of George Floyd was widely shared on Twitter, which used the language of prose to recall the event. This attempt at a literary recollection of Floyd’s murder deservingly attracted much critique. I here submit that to disparage the direct place that aesthetics plays beside politics writ large is reductive and that those artworks which engage in a kind of emotional “arrest” and project one into a simulative scenario—taking oneself “out of oneself”, so to speak—are able to avoid engaging in cheap romanization and can actuate a meaningful role, unspooling a field of subjectivity impersonally and anonymously deployed, blurring distance and linking common forms of experience under transcendent forms.

One such artist who achieves this rather effectively is Hank Willis Thomas. Thomas is a conceptual artist with a number of public artworks, primarily sculptures, which serve as metonyms pointing to politically-charged elements of history, focusing primarily on the politics of the present. In particular, Thomas’ sculptures deals with the black male body; stripped away of any extraneous content, such works often display bare hands, arms, or faces, cleavaged from the rest of the figure and displayed in grand proportion. Thomas has worked with ethnographers, anthropologists, and non-profit campaigns alike; both his photographs and public artworks have been pictured and shared considerably on social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram. Such was the case even prior to the current protests. This is mostly due to the public nature of the works and their being strategically placed at the border of various neighborhoods and in parks, a facet which simply cannot be separated from the political possibility of the commons and common action. In particular, I would like to draw our attention to one of Thomas’s sculptures, “Unity”, erected in 2019. This work, was commissioned as part of the ongoing reconstruction of Tillary Street in Downtown Brooklyn. “Unity” is a large-scale sculpture of a bronze arm, the index finger pointed upwards. The piece is cast on the Brooklyn-side of the Brooklyn Bridge, a prominent site for travelers between Manhattan and Brooklyn. This location, as of recently, has also become a route travailed by Black Lives Matter protestors and a gathering spot for many of the Brooklyn protests.

Although “Unity” predates the protests by a year, it has arguably only now come into its own and gained newfound prominence. The piece is often captured in photos of the protests that have been circulated by the press and it clearly wields a vigorous spirit, an aura. The finger, pointed upwards, signifies the appraisal of hope—signaling the heavens—and, given its recent relevance as the site of protestors’ conference, clearly exercising a *communizing affect*. “Unity,” in many ways, stunts the differences between those who have gathered under its overhang and performs a kind of subjective arrest—all those who have been “unified” are, in some sense, collectivized under the ethos of hope: a hope for programmatic political change—"defund the police and divest from the militarization of the police”—and a new, more egalitarian polis to come.

For Jacques Rancière, the task of *true politics*, opposed to the diffuse modalities of control-power, is in challenging appearance from within appearance itself, therein formalizing an operation of aesthesis that insists upon contesting itself as a locus of re-arrangement and dissensus. While “Unity” may perhaps be rather undecorated and bare, it is because it is unpretentious and accessible (in all meanings of the term) which makes it, alongside Thomas’ other public sculptures, an optimal political site for combatting consensual meaning (the status quo), as it prods open a competent space for dissensus by creating a gap in the symbolic order (of policy, of the police). The function of “Unity” is not a space of order wherein subjectivities are trumpeted, so as to makes every identity visibly: “Unity” is not a work that offers a transgender arm transposed beside a black arm, the limbs of a migrant worker gripping the others, forming a variegated unison. The work is all the more better, as a functional instrument and as a symbolic piece, for this elimination and arrest of difference. “Unity” does not tease out one historical trauma in an air of passionate reflection—this is not the specific arm of a specific person. Rather, it is of a teleological order, the Idea as spirit, with content conceived of abstractly, transcending the realm of the sensuous and the visible in its anonymity. It points towards becoming.

Why, then, have we chosen the term “arrest”? The concept of aesthetic arrest has long figured into the discourse of art’s purposiveness. Perhaps the best example to pluck from the study of aesthetics is Kant’s writing on sublimity in *The Critique of Judgment* (1790). Despite Kant’s emphasis on the transcendental conditions of aesthetic judgment, he sees the sublime in terms of *cultural critique*. Kant’s analysis of the transcendence-structure of the Dynamically Sublime describes a heroic mental disposition – the resistance, the “arrest”, to a superior power. This entails the transcendence of one’s attachment to life, offering courage in the face of danger. For Kant, such is the case even if the experience of sublimity does not actually determine the will (as in morality). Such aesthetically realized high-mindedness is, in principle, universally accessible, but as a practice it requires (a) “culture” of members who partake within it. Kant gives two examples of sublimity: the Dynamically Sublime and the Mathematical Sublime. Note that, it follows that as examples of a pure aesthetic judgment of the sublime (i.e., a judgment not mixed with teleological considerations) neither works of art nor natural objects whose concept implies a determinate purpose suffice for either category. For Kant, it is only “crude nature”, or “raw nature” [CPJ, 5:253] that provide an example for a pure judgment of the sublime, which conjoins “enjoyment” with “dread,” pleasure and pain. In the case of the Mathematically Sublime, we see judgement as it engages with the aesthetic estimation of magnitudes; examples are provided by and in nature where, vide the intuition, we see the implication of the “idea of the infinite” (e.g., great mountains, a large vista). In the case of the Dynamically Sublime, the “might” of nature is instead the focus—the aesthetic judgment of nature as a power (e.g., a flood or hurricane). With the Dynamically Sublime, the aesthete feels their resistance to nature both external (natural power) and internal (instinct of self-preservation), while being in a position of safety; with the Mathematical Sublime, the aesthete feels the inadequacy of their judgment by way of their own mortality, as the magnitude cannot be comprehended by intuition (necessitating estimation). In both cases, an *arrest* is performed upon the rational human judgment’s functional capacity.

Although Kant does not offer sublimity to artworks or objects, we can pluck from the descriptive condition framing sublimity the notion of the “arrest” as it deals with contemplative faculties and direct these towards conditions of the “arrest” of subjectivities that “Unity” deploys. But before we do, we must also resolve that, despite his own rule, Kant *does* break from his own categorical quarantine when he considers the Pyramids of Egypt and St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, remarking on how these two works illustrate the imagination sinking back into itself. With the Pyramids and St. Peter’s, Kant underscores how apprehension and comprehension interact in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude. Specifically in the example of the Pyramids, Kant responds to the writer Claude-Étienne Savary’s theory that in order to experience the full emotional effect of the Pyramids we must view them from neither too far away nor too close by; for Kant, it is precisely because of how, when we view these pyramids by way of close proximity our capacity is soon overwhelmed that they are sublime, or at the least that they deal with our judgments of magnitude. As Robert Doran remarks:

This pain of inadequation is not due to the reaching of the maximum (as in the Pyramids example), but rather to the extending of the maximum (“and, in the effort to extend it”…), which is then converted into an “emotionally moving satisfaction” in the exhaustion of the comprehending faculty – a failure and a success, a humiliation and an exaltation. The mental expansion is sublime precisely because it involves a transcendence of limits, which, … is here examined from the perspective of the imagination rather than that of reason (Doran, 2015: 235).

As Doran demonstrates, the Pyramids and St. Peter’s establish the *possibility* of (Mathematical) sublimity in architecture, as Kant chooses the types of artefacts that most closely recreate the three-dimensionality and scale of natural magnitude. These being religious objects further illustrates that it is as if Kant is proposing that the *intermixture* of the human and the divine in art is a mark of sublimity. Neither Thomas’ entire body of work nor “Unity”, considered by itself, is properly Kantian; similarly it is not proper to call these “sublime works” of art. But they do deal with orders of magnitude and contemplation, bringing an expansion of the imagination by offering novel possibility outside of trauma and outside of the exploitive schema that blackness is made a vehicle for. According to Afropessimist scholars such as Frank Wilderson III, blackness’ violent exploitation gives the shape of a particularly human ontological necessity to ritualize, compounded and stratified by civil society’s affilial formations; blackness and the destruction of black bodies gives a formula for unity and participation amongst all races (including black people who exercise racism amongst themselves):

It is absolutely necessary for Blacks to be castrated, raped, genitally mutilated and violated, beaten, shot, and maimed. And it is necessary for this to take place in the streets as well as in popular culture—as on TV and in the cinema. Blacks can even be genocided, but only up to a point! Because, unlike Indians, Blacks are not in possession of something exterior to themselves that civil society wants. Civil society does not want Black land as it wants Indian land, that it might distinguish the Nation from Turtle Island; it does not want Black consent, as it wants working- class consent, that it might distinguish a capitalist economic system from a socialist one, that it might extract surplus value and turn that value into profit. What civil society wants/needs from Black people is far more essential, far more fundamental than land and profits. What civil society needs from Black people is confirmation of Human existence. (Wilderson, 2020: 220)

“Unity” perhaps offers the possibility of a different model for ritual to reach towards, or an imagination that at the very least simulates divergence; as a dark, black outstretched arm, it identifies a new regime of civil society and, as an end, itself, identifies completely with blackness. Thus, “Unity” proffers the possibility for a different world outside of our own—art’s greatest imaginative pleasure. Moored by the protests, Thomas’ work has been given a purposive function and his public artworks, themselves, have turned into uniquely prosocial artefacts that have recently become instruments and externalizations of protest, of the spirit of protest that lives on and extends from generation to generation in humanist fashion. The upturned arm of “Unity” also provides an instantiation of *magnitudo monstrosa* given its towering poise, such that it lowers the divine down to the level of man, subordinating the heavens. As such, not only do Thomas’ works of art give rise to affects akin to those found in the experience of the sublime but they also turn away from the monstrous necessity of the sublime; as a result, “this elevation of the self in the resulting feeling of limitlessness and freedom from sensible constraint, which is seen by the mind as an index of its supersensible vocation” (Doran: 239) is made into something common. Such sculptural instruments ground a kind of possibility that reaches beyond those normative reasons that infect our preconceptions, and it is by way of intellectual “arrest.” Thomas’ politically charged work, especially with “Unity”, seeks to go beyond the maximum, beyond a limit, and give rise to the feeling of sublime *transcendence*, *an aesthetic* temporality, canvassing a beyond. This is, of course, all indexed by the forefinger pointing upwards. “Unity”, as an artwork, transcends its historical time, demonstrating the noumenal superiority of unalloyed reason by way of a constructed polis in the imagination, arresting, and stopping all that get in the way.

**Works Cited**

Robert Doran, *The Theory of the Sublime from Longinus to Kant* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright, 2020).