

**Radical History
&
the Politics of Art**

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Radical Art & Politics: No End in Sight

Introduction

Art & Politics in the Time of Radical History

Points of Departure

Reflections on art and politics commonly begin with an inquiry into the specific nature of these two entities, as well as into possible connections between them. This tends to lead to two logical possibilities, which serve as book ends to numerous middle ground and hybrid positions: either art and politics form completely autonomous spheres divided by an insurmountable barrier, or they constitute domains that do indeed influence one another through privileged points of interaction. These two extremes appear to be mutually exclusive insofar as they defend opposite conclusions regarding the possibility or impossibility of linking art and politics. However, it is important to recognize that they are founded on the same basic point of departure: the assumption that art and politics each have their own proper nature, and that there is a definitive and definable relationship between them. One of the central aims of this book is to critically examine the viability of this supposition by raising a series of questions concerning the precise status of the supposed entities called ‘art’ and ‘politics.’

Everything hinges, as we will see, on the starting point, in the double sense of the beginning point for reflections on art and politics, as well as the point of departure for the constitution of these entities themselves. It depends, in other words, on the historicity of these supposedly distinct elements, and the initial question raised by this work is: where did these entities come from? It is sometimes assumed—implicitly or not—that they have simply always existed. However, this is not at all self-evident. To take the most blatant case, there is abundant evidence that suggests that the modern European concept and practice of art are very far from being historical or cultural invariants. On the contrary, many have argued, as we will see, that these date from approximately the 18th century. Numerous authors have advanced analogous arguments regarding politics in the modern sense of the term. Even those who expand the time scale and assert, for instance, that politics has existed at least since the ancient Greeks, if not before, do not necessarily claim that politics has *always* existed. Such an affirmation would require grasping politics *sub specie aeternitatis* and proving that it existed prior to the historical emergence of the world as we currently know it. This ultimately includes—in the grand scheme of things—the historical appearance of sentient beings like *Homo sapiens*, as well as their practices and concepts. From the perspective of what we might call deep history, or the history that is not restricted by the anthropocentric time scale of traditional history, it is patently unclear how it could ever be truly proven that art and politics have indeed always existed.

If it is accepted, then, that these are dynamic entities that emerged in history—and certainly in deep history—at some point in time, there are at least two ways of conceiving of this dynamism. One consists in supposing that there is an invariant kernel at the heart of historical changes, which thereby correspond to so many different facets of the entity in question. Insofar as it remains a fixed reference point, this invariable essence is precisely what allows us to measure alterations and compare across time periods. However, if appearances can change with time, why must we presume that the core essence of phenomena cannot be transformed? If these did indeed appear in time, then

they must have undergone at least one major historical transformation. Therefore, they could, at least in principle, disappear or undergo other significant alterations at different points in time. This line of thought leads to the conclusion that art and politics are fully historical in the sense that they have no transhistorical or ahistorical essence.

To be sure, this brief account of one possible intellectual itinerary leading from ahistoricism to what I will call selective historicism, and finally to radical history or radical historicism does not purport to prove the superiority of a particular theoretical position. On the contrary, these prefatory remarks seek to succinctly elucidate some of the theoretical background for the decision to abandon the common sense point of departure in order to explore the consequences and implications of a radical historicist orientation. They also afford the occasion to begin introducing some of the key conceptual vocabulary that will guide us in the analyses that follow. Ahistoricism, to begin with, ignores or rejects the historical development of phenomena, whereas selective historicism recognizes the historicity of privileged entities or concepts, which more or less escape the flow of time. It selects—hence its name—what transcends historical transformation: the deep kernels of reality that allow us to measure change. Radical history, on the contrary, recognizes that everything is historical, including our most privileged practices, cherished concepts and venerated values. This does not mean in the least that all things are historically determined, which would lead to the position of reductive historicism (nor does it mean that everything is historical in the exact same sense). The adjective *radical* refers both to the dissolution of the supposedly natural objects of history and to the dynamic role of different forms of agency in history.

One of the central working hypotheses of this book is that radical history subverts the fundamental assumption that has undergirded much of the debate on art and politics: the idea that there are two distinct entities with a determinate relation. If what we call ‘art’ and ‘politics’ are recognized as variable socio-historical practices that have no essential nature or singular relation, then we need to entirely rework our understanding of these practices, beginning with the very questions that are raised. The classic, common sense trinity—what is art? what is politics? what is their relation?—becomes obsolete as soon as it is acknowledged that there is not a single, ontological answer to any of these questions. Radical history thereby opens a fundamentally different field of inquiry and introduces a unique gamut of questions by acknowledging that there is not, in fact, a firm starting point with clearly delimited entities whose unique relation can be definitively described. It begins, in other words, by recognizing that there is no absolute point of departure: we always start in the middle, so to speak, in a complex nexus of immanent, historically constituted notions and practices.

Conceptually, radical history undermines the belief in transcendent ideas, meaning transhistorical notions that purport to guarantee the true meaning of our terms. The critique of the illusion of transcendence and of the assumption that there is—or must be—a common property unifying the fundamental building blocks of thought does not, however, lead to the conclusion that we are trapped in a relativist vortex of theoretical nonsense. Defenders of radical historicism, in resisting relativist blackmail, recognize that there are indeed immanent notions, meaning operative concepts that circulate in the social world at a given point in time. In our day and age, for instance, there are widely accepted uses of terms like *art* and *politics*. They do not necessarily have precise definitions or rigorously determined semantic borders, but they function instead as

notions in struggle. They operate in a force field that is sometimes the site of interventionist concepts, which are *idées-forces* that attempt to reconfigure the given matrix of immanent conceptuality.

The theorization of radical history, as it is developed through the course of this book, functions as just such an intervention. It does not purport to describe the true nature of history or identify its invariable essence or structure. It is—and it recognizes itself as such—a situated and circumspect intervention into a field of struggle that seeks to operate a fundamental displacement. In terms of the vocabulary just introduced, it could be said that this is a displacement from a theory of transcendent ideas to an analytic of immanent practices. A theory, at least in the restricted sense of the term, begins with the presumed existence of natural objects of history or transcendent ideas (such as Art and Politics). An analytic, on the contrary, examines the differential relations between socially constituted practices as well as the historical formation of supposedly natural objects. It does not presume the existence of more or less fixed entities with a single, determinate relation. It acknowledges, in other words, that there is no absolute point of departure because we always ‘begin’ in a historically constituted immanent field of practice.

The Politics of Art, Social Agency & Radical History

In contesting the common point of departure for debates on art and politics, one of the primary objectives of this book is to open new vistas for rethinking artistic and political practices. This includes revisiting the basic methodological framework of the very question of art and politics, proposing a multidimensional theory of social agency and developing an alternative logic of history.

Regarding the methodological framework, to begin with, the common sense point of departure is based on the ontological illusion, or the unfounded assumption that there is a being or fixed nature behind phenomena such as art and politics. It is closely tied to the epistemic illusion, according to which it is possible to have *epistémé* or rigorous knowledge of these phenomena as well as their relation. This methodological framework lends itself to the establishment of fixed formulas: *this* art has *this* political consequence or implication. Such recipes are often structured by an undergirding binary normativity, according to which the artistic world is divided between authentic and inauthentic art, truly political and apolitical artwork, and so forth. Regardless of the specific terms that are used, it is generally a matter of opposing good and evil according to a strict dichotomy. This not only presupposes a heightened form of *epistémé*. It is also founded on a restrictive conception of political efficacy that aims at definitively distinguishing between successful and unsuccessful political art. Theorists thus regularly draw up balance sheets opposing, for instance, realism to avant-gardism, autonomous art to the culture industry, the aesthetic dimension to the affirmation of reality, and so forth. By isolating works of art in various ways from the complexity and variability of their social nexus, theorists often act as if there were only two possibilities: success or failure. Furthermore, the political valence of art is frequently situated in the artistic work itself. According to what I will call the talisman complex, it is assumed that the individual artwork is the bearer—or not—of a unique political force comparable to the magical powers of a talisman. Like the latter, a successful artistic object or practice is supposed to

be capable of directly provoking changes in the world via an obscure preternatural alchemy.

One of the core problems in contemporary debates on art and politics is the social epoché, meaning the tendency to bracket the intricate social relations at work in aesthetic and political practices. When the social sphere is taken into account, it is often reduced to a binary and determinist social logic in which it is assumed that there is a single determinate matrix that works of art react to (either by confirming or rejecting it). It is rare that theorists take into full consideration the social force field constituted out of the multiple sites and types of agency involved in the production, distribution and reception of aesthetic practices (and, for that matter, of political activities). Such a social epoché runs the risk, as we will see, of casting a long shadow over the social complex in which diverse dimensions of aesthetic and political practices overlap, entwine and sometimes merge. By setting aside to a greater or lesser extent the social world—and hence the political realm as it is commonly understood—the politics of art is largely reduced to the magical powers of talisman-like objects to more or less miraculously produce political consequences (or fail to do so).

In order to definitively part ways with the politics of the isolated aesthetic artifact, it is important to explore the intertwined relationship between these three heuristically distinct social dimensions of aesthetic practices—creation, circulation, interpretation—in order to chart out their social politicity, meaning the political dimensions that play themselves out in the historical struggles between various forms of social agency. The central framing question is thus no longer: “what is the privileged connection between art—and more precisely the individual aesthetic artifact—and politics?” It is also not its pessimistic inversion: “why is there no link between art and politics?” Instead, the attempt to think the social politicity of aesthetic practices raises the question: “how do diverse dimensions of the practices socially labeled as ‘aesthetic’ and ‘political’ cross, intertwine, interlace and at times become coextensive?”

The examination of the social politicity of aesthetic practices requires an alternative account of agency that recognizes its multiple types, tiers, ranges and sites. The politics of art is not the result of one privileged point of agency according, for instance, to the monocausal determinism inherent in the talisman complex. It is a battlefield of rival forces that are of various kinds, that operate at different levels of determinacy, that have specific ranges of efficacy, and that are anchored in concrete sites of agency. In fact, the expression ‘the politics of art’ might not even be appropriate insofar as it suggests that there is a politics inherent in art. Since political and aesthetic practices play themselves out in a veritable force field of agencies and are generally irreducible to the monolithic opposition between complete success and absolute failure, it is more appropriate to speak of the social struggles over the politicity of aesthetic practices.

These battles are not synchronic but are part of a larger historical dynamic. It is important, therefore, to develop this multidimensional account of social agency in conjunction with an alternative historical order. By historical order or logic, I mean a practical mode of intelligibility of history that is at one and the same time a way of understanding and of practicing history. The historical order proposed in the following pages takes into account three heuristically distinct dimensions of history: the vertical dimension of chronology, the horizontal dimension of geography and the stratigraphic

dimension of social practice. Such an approach allows us to chart out historical constellations in time, space and society, thereby avoiding the widespread problem of historical compression (which consists in reducing one or more of the dimensions of history to the others). It also leads to an alternative account of historical change in terms of phases and metastatic transformations. A phase, unlike an epoch or time period, is variably distributed through the three dimensions of history. It changes by metastatic transformations, which are variable rate alterations that morph in diverse ways through time, space and society.

This alternative logic of history and theory of agency provide for a very different account of aesthetic and political practices. In describing some of the specific conjunctural encounters between them, this book simultaneously seeks to intervene in the battlefields that it adumbrates. It mobilizes what I will call the dual position by detailing immanent fields of practice while also interceding in them in order to operate displacements through concrete points of leverage. Indeed, the descriptions provided are already specific forms of anchored intervention. Although I will insist on this regarding the interpretations of aesthetic practices, this is obviously also the case for the interpretations of theoretical works that are advanced: they are descriptive interventions that seek to leverage our understanding of these works in a particular direction (at times by heuristically relying on oppositional framing devices). In this light, the overall objective of this book is to leverage the debate on art and politics in the direction of a radically historicist analytic of aesthetic and political practices.

A Palimpsest of Radical History

In what follows, the claims advanced in the preceding sections will be drawn out of detailed historical explorations into the relationship between ‘artistic’ and ‘political’ practices. Divided into four sections composed of two chapters each, this book is organized as a series of layers whose superimposition seeks to produce the effect of a palimpsest. Early chapters will bleed through and become visible, in a different light, in later chapters, just as the latter will come to fill in lacunae in the opening sections. The juxtaposition of these different layers aims at creating a dense texture with multiple entrance points rather than a sequential or progressive narrative with a single beginning and a definite end.

Each tier can be read independently, but they ultimately infiltrate and inform one another. If the book is read from start to finish, the initial layer is composed of an outline of a radical historicist analytic of aesthetic and political practices, whose praxeological orientation stands in stark contrast to the quixotic search for the privileged link (or insurmountable dividing line) between art and politics. This chapter provides a sketch of the book’s basic conceptual armature and develops many of the theoretical strategies that are used throughout the work as a whole, and whose numerous implications are drawn out in subsequent chapters. The next stratum consists in an examination of three major positions on art and politics in the twentieth century—realism, formalism and commitment—through the study of the work of prominent figures in the Marxian tradition: Georg Lukács, Herbert Marcuse and Jean-Paul Sartre. This chapter combines an exegetical endeavor to rigorously present analytic positions found in certain of these authors’ key publications with a critical account of some of their shared shortcomings, which range from the ontological illusion and the talisman complex to binary

normativity, historical determinism and the social epoché. A clear juxtaposition thereby emerges between the radical historicist analytic of practice discussed in the first chapter and three of the important positions on art and politics found in the 20th century.

The second major plane of investigation concerns one of the central focal points for contemporary debates on art and politics: the status of the avant-garde and its relation to radical experiments in politics. Often considered to be one of the privileged historical moments of close encounter between art and politics, the avant-garde of the early 20th century shared the historical stage, in many ways, with the vanguard of the Russian revolution. Chapter three opens, therefore, by exploring the ‘end of illusions’ thesis and the widespread assumption, in the contemporary world, that the avant-garde and the revolutionary vanguard shared a common historical destiny, leading them both toward their eventual—but perhaps inevitable—failure. After briefly touching on the consequences of this thesis in contemporary critical theory, it undertakes a detailed investigation of the flagship publication by Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Unearthing its deep-seated idealism, it calls into question its conceptual reduction of the avant-garde to an undertaking whose objective is logically impossible: to destroy the concept of art while producing inorganic works of art. Chapter four mobilizes the alternative historical logic and theory of social agency developed in chapter one in order to foreground specific elements that problematize the nearly ubiquitous thesis on the failure of the avant-garde. These range from the diversity and variability of avant-garde practices (as well as of their social circulation and reception) to different understandings of social efficacy, the spread of the temporality of avant-garde production in the art world and what is arguably the triumph of the avant-garde in certain forms of architecture and design. The juxtaposition of these two chapters functions as an untimely invitation to reopen, in a new light, the supposedly closed question of the avant-garde encounters between art and politics.

Section three introduces a new level of analysis by turning to the important work of a contemporary thinker, Jacques Rancière, who has proposed a complete rethinking of the relation between aesthetics and politics, and who has significantly reconfigured the historical models for understanding their development. Chapter five meticulously outlines his position and situates it in relationship to the work of some of his illustrious predecessors, including Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. It highlights the specificity of what could be schematically referred to as his Copernican revolution insofar as he rejects the search for the privileged link between aesthetics and politics in favor of studying their consubstantiality as distributions of the sensible. Chapter six focuses on one of the fundamental contradictions that plagues Rancière’s apparently novel reopening of the question of art and politics: his affirmation of the consubstantiality of aesthetics and politics is curtailed by his incessant claims that art and politics proper never truly meet in any determined sense. By unpacking this contradiction, it argues that Rancière’s work is ultimately beset by many of the shortcomings highlighted in the work of his precursors. In contrast to his approach, and in line with the arguments advanced in the preceding sections, this chapter proposes to shift the nature of the debate from the politics of aesthetics to the social politicized nature of aesthetic practices.

The fourth and final layer of analysis marshals many of the arguments of the preceding sections in order to develop an account of social politicized nature. Chapter seven is an extended case study that seeks to demonstrate the relevancy of the conceptual

reconfiguration undertaken in the book as a whole. By concentrating on the extreme case of works of art that are purportedly apolitical—the paintings by the Abstract Expressionists—, it examines the social politicized nature of their work as it is bound up in the complex matrices of Cold War power politics. At the same time, it mobilizes the alternative logic of history and account of social agency developed in the preceding chapters in order to provide a specific account of the cultural battlefield of artistic and political practices. The concluding chapter serves as a final stratum that draws out the ultimate consequences from the ongoing critique of the ontological illusion and the talisman complex. It also expands the argument in favor of an examination of the social politicized nature inherent in the production, circulation and reception of works of art. It thereby provides a developed overview and synthetic re-articulation of many of the key themes of the book.

As so many layers in a dense palimpsest, these eight chapters illuminate one another through juxtaposition and reciprocal resonance. The overall objective is to marshal motley points of view in a manifold of diverse argumentative strata in order to open space for rethinking art and politics in terms of a radical historicist orientation, which recognizes the existence of multiple forms of social agency and provides a praxeological account of cultural activities. Instead of purporting to have discovered the true or authentic bridge between two ontological entities, or definitively concluding that there is no connection between them, this book examines and intervenes in the social force field of immanently constituted practices in order to try and displace the theoretical coordinates governing the debate on ‘art’ and ‘politics.’