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Special Issue – Arts, Ontology, and Politics

Arts and Politics: What Has Ontology Got to Do With It ?

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Abstract: Introduction to the Special Issue: Arts, Ontology, and Politics

The political meaning of artistic creation has never been so obvious as in contemporary times: activist interventions in the public sphere, postcolonial criticisms, and feminist art practices. . . . In this regard, documenta 15, in Summer 2022, was an exemplary event, as its organizers intended to make manifest art's intrinsic connection with political engagement to the extent that they credited the presumed antisemitic aspects of *People's Justice*, a banner installation originally created by the Indonesian artists' collective Taring Padi in 2002, with contributing to a broader, public, societal debate.¹

It would have been possible to publish an entire special issue in *Aesthetic Investigations* on the political and artistic debates provoked by documenta 15. And such a special issue would have to address a variety of themes and debates, such as the political framing of an artistic event in the public sphere, the role and function of curatorship, artistic activism, the transformation

of the artist's activity in a collective practice, the aesthetic experience of artistic activism, the accusation and education of the beholder's gaze, the question of responsibility in collective practices, the role of art subsidies in the organisation of the event, amongst others.

The current issue, as presented here, is not about documenta 15. In fact, it has its origin in the Summer school 'Arts, Ontology and Politics', organised at the University of Antwerp in August 2021. Most of the contributions were written long before the opening of the artistic event in Kassel. Yet, it is interesting to note that the central idea for this issue communicates directly with the dominantly political manifestations of artistic expression encountered at documenta 15.

The aim of this issue, as formulated in the wake of themes addressed during the Summer school, is to explore the social meanings and the critical potentialities of contemporary artistic creation and survey various theories that may justify contemporary artistic practices. The starting point for this reflection is the difficult tension today – that also became manifest in the debates around documenta 15 – between the subversive dimensions of artistic creation and the instrumentalising, moralising and/or controlling dimensions of political activism. The subversive dimension is intrinsic to art's autonomy, but it cannot account for art's social meaning. Political activism reclaims the social meaning of artistic creation, but it does so at the cost of art's autonomy. This puts the social and critical potentialities of artistic creation under pressure. What does it mean today to be subversive as a work of art? (How) is art still capable of critically contributing to a *(dis)sensus communis*? (How) can art reveal truth today? In what ways is art entangled in power relations and in what ways does it become a means of resistance to power relations?

These questions concern the relation between art and politics, but it is clear that their answers might be very different, not to say contradicting, according to whether they are given from the artist's point of view or from the activist's point of view. For this issue, however, we chose a supplementary perspective that aims to approach these questions from an ontological point of view. It is the philosopher's task to introduce and to elucidate the contribution of an ontological reflection to this debate. When Aristotle, considering the performing arts in his *Poetics*, defines mimesis as a representation of an action, he relates the artistic activity not only to the essence of human nature but also to the sense of the community and the meaning of the political. Since modernity, however, the reference to the Aristotelian concept of mimesis has lost its relevance. Hegel's thesis about the end of art is a reminder of its disappearance. For Hegel, the relevance of the arts is something of the past because the idea of freedom exceeds the logic of representation. But the end of representation in the aesthetics of modernity does not imply that art's ontological dimension disappear. It insists in the reflection on the being of the artwork, in the dialectics of the visible and the invisible, in the expression

of human nature, in the resistance of materiality, and in the experience of dissensus.

The articles in this issue present, as well as experiment in different ways with new approaches to an ontological understanding in relation to contemporary art. Some of them deal with literature, while others address the visual arts.

In the opening text, ‘The Disobedience of Seeing: Steyerl, Foucault, Butler’, Jan Bierhanzl articulates the ontology of the perceiving subject and their relationship to contemporary visual culture and its norms, starting from essays written by the contemporary visual artist Hito Steyerl. He wants to go beyond the political and ethical stances of Foucault’s theory of the interconnectedness of knowledge discourses and power relations by means of a reflection on Butler’s analysis of a disobedient act of seeing in photography. In her contribution ‘Engagement for Engagement’s Sake: An Ontological Rethinking of the Politics of Literature’, Aukje van Rooden develops, inspired by the social ontology of Jean-Luc Nancy, a relational ontology in order to be able to account for the political relevance of the so-called millennium generation of writers in the Netherlands. On the basis of that ontology, she proposes a new paradigm to rethink the relation between literature and politics, that breaks with the dominant Sartrean model of a *littérature engagée*. In ‘Dissolved Politics and Artistic Imagination. On Kristeva’s Revolution and Revolt’, Lenka Vojtíšková reconstitutes the relationship between experience and power in Julia Kristeva’s thought at the level of the psychic apparatus itself. She examines in what way Kristeva’s psychoanalytic approach connects literature to the subversive dimension of the subject’s experience and asks to what extent it can be said to create possibilities for social and political change.

Alexandra Van Laeken, in her contribution, ‘Democratising Conceptual Art: What About the Spectator?’, questions the hierarchical structure that she detects in theories of conceptual art. She points at some ontological presuppositions in these theories, about the artist as the creator of ideas and the artwork as the causal transmission of the artist’s idea. Drawing on the social philosophy of Jacques Rancière, she proposes a ‘democratic’ outlook on conceptual art in which the activity of the spectator is taken into account: both the artist and the spectator are actively creating, albeit not knowing the other’s position of knowledge. Lucie Chateau offers a different point of view in her paper, ‘On Purposefully Poor Images: Aesthetic Encounters with Alienation’. According to her, the meme production and circulation in some of Hito Steyerl’s imagery is related to the logics of digital capitalism and can be articulated within the framework of the classic ontological problem of alienation. Finally, in ‘Beyond Autonomy and Activism: “Poetic Understanding” as a Ground for Political Community’, Divya Nadkarni discusses the limits and problems of the autonomist and activist positions in understanding literature today, and proposes a third position that leads beyond

this oppositional structure. She develops this new position on the basis of an intersubjective pragmatist approach for which she relies on Hannah Arendt's phenomenology of political plurality, Édouard Glissant's concepts of relation and opacity and John Dewey's pragmatist theory of aesthetic experience. In this way, she is looking for a new concept of poetic understanding that can account for the transformative and emancipatory dynamics in the relation between readers and texts.

It is not an exaggeration to say that all of these contributions have a highly experimental, original and thought-provoking character. Obviously, the authors are searching for new ways to understand the communal, aesthetic, and political meaning of art today. However different their approaches may be and however manifold the references to modern and postmodern legacies in the field of philosophical aesthetics are, the debate they are engaging in reveals a direction of thought that imparts a few common features.

First of all, they all conceive the significance of art in terms of a social or intersubjective practice and/or interaction. In this regard, we could speak of the 'social turn in art theories'. Although such views may have been prompted by Nicolas Bourriaud's theory of relational aesthetics (1998), which viewed certain new artistic practices as social encounters, their ramifications are broader. The social turn is meant to overcome the unproductive opposition between a mere reduction of the meaning of art to its political relevance (the activist position) and a mere reduction of the meaning of art to its aesthetic experience (the autonomist position). Secondly, it is from this perspective on art as a social or intersubjective practice that the different contributions in this issue thematise the significance of art as disruptive, critical and/or transformative. For, as a social practice, art intervenes in a social field in which it is confronted with a dominant pregiven logic of perceiving (e.g., the norms and models of visual culture and literary fiction) and also with a multitude of interdependent and unequal interaction. The critical and transformative potentialities of art depend on art's capability to break through this logic, to make visible the interdependencies of perceiving and interacting, and to propose new ones. In this sense, it is not accidental that most contributors in this issue present art as a dis-sensual practice in the social field. Finally, in this way, we may discern in all contributions an educational and emancipatory dimension regarding art's significance, either as a transformative dynamic of social interactions or as a liberating experience from pregiven (frozen) forms of perceiving.

In other words, the contributions in this issue depart from a reflection on the ontology of the social, rather than one on the ontology of the artwork. This might be the way to leave behind the legacy of postmodernism, that has formulated the disruptive character of art on the basis of an ontology of the event, on the one hand, and on the other, the legacy of the dialectics of idealism, that has led to the thesis of the philosophical disenfranchisement of art. However, starting from an ontology of the social, contemporary theories of

art are facing new questions. What about the artwork: does it coincide with its social interactions (the work of art ‘is’ the social practice of a collective – of artists and of readers/participants)? It is not just that the artwork disappears in life, in shaping everydayness, as avant-gardists formulated it in the past, but it is the community itself that is constituted and shaped through the event of the artistic practice. Is there not a real risk that art is reduced here to a formative manifestation of a ‘we’ distinguished from a ‘them’, as became manifest when one member of ruangrupa contended during an interview: ‘Wenn ich was bedaure, dann nicht für uns, sondern für die Deutschen.’ (‘If I regret anything, it is not for us, but for the Germans’. See note 1)? And if this is the case, as seems inevitable, how is it still possible to relate a dis-sensual practice to a *sensus communis*? How do we avoid the case that the dis-sensual social practice of art leads to a manifold of differently shaped and designed communities of ‘we’, separated from others, which therefore misses the moment of reflection through which art leads beyond one’s own senses? The contributions to this issue do not directly address these kinds of questions, but they do express, each in their own way, some hesitations, some steps backward, some limitations – in which the beginning of an answer can be heard. To the extent that they do this, they point the way to a different future of the arts.

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NOTES

¹‘Ruangrupa sehen documenta nicht als gescheitert’, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 22 december 2022: ‘Drei Monate nach dem Ende der documenta in Kassel ziehen zwei Mitglieder des indonesischen Künstlerkollektivs ruangrupa eine überwiegend positive Bilanz. “Dass in der Öffentlichkeit vor allem über Antisemitismus

gestritten wurde, ist nichts, was ich bedaure – es ist wichtig,” sagte Reaz Afisina im Interview der Wochenzeitung *Die Zeit*. Sein Kollege Iswanto Hartono ergänzte: “Wenn ich was bedaure, dann nicht für uns, sondern für die Deutschen. Es ist Schade, dass für sie viele andere Themen der documenta in den Hintergrund geraten sind’.

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