

POLITICS, THE POLITICAL, AND ART

Two cases in our scene

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In general, we recognize that there is no single politics, but rather politics in the plural, as these are identified with the act of thinking, naming, and exercising power in the diverse circumstances in which they take place. On the other hand, *the political* exceeds its mere exercise to permeate political practices themselves with its conceptions. Thus, we could look to the still-valid Aristotelian pragmatic definition, according to which these refer to the "art of the possible," passing through the Platonic conception where the everyday can be considered political, or through the activist idealism highlighted by the French May of 1968, not to mention the bloody states of belligerence of all times or terrorism itself.

Giorgio Agamben¹, however, goes beyond those contingent examples linked to ways of doing politics, venturing that in the contemporary world, the political implies accepting the current triumph of the market economy over every aspect of social life, to the point that it models the vocation of contemporary democracies, fully impacting the specific political practices of most countries in the world. But Agamben goes further, demonstrating the gravity of this current phenomenon, as he considers that the human properly speaking requires its corresponding conception of the political to found itself, since the idea we develop of that condition is an index of the politics put into play while these, as if it were a Möbius strip, are inherent to the human condition.

I have very briefly outlined the distinctions between *the political* and *politics* in order to approach the place that art occupies between both concepts. Although through avant-garde manifests art had sought to self-enunciate not only as an aesthetic revolutionary but a social one, in 1999 Eric Hobsbawm² stated that the avant-gardes would not be protagonists of the 20th-century revolutions because these were carried out in the world of *Realpolitik* and as a result of the combination of technology and mass market, outside of what until then was known as art—that is, through cinema, television, radio, and advertising. In this way, the countercurrent in which those avant-gardes were immersed gradually led art into a process of encryption that increased as its levels of conceptual complexity rose, reaching its maximum isolation when it moved away from the notion of singularity in the face of the reductionist images of touted "common sense," due to the massive simplification of the viewpoints of a public increasingly colonized by the mass media and refractory

¹ Giorgio AGAMBEN. (2000) *Medios sin fin. Notas sobre la política*. Pre-Textos. Valencia.

² Eric HOBBSAWM, (1999). *A la zaga. Decadencia y fracaso de las vanguardias del siglo XX*. Translation by Gonzalo Pontón. Crítica. Barcelona, 2009.

to critical thinking. Thus, today art has become a reservoir for complex creative strategies and concepts whose qualities subject the public to frequent states of perplexity.

In this context, thinkers such as Arthur Danto³ have been encouraged to inquire about the new conditions in which post-avant-garde art takes place. According to him, the mere allusion to "artistic objects" presupposes a type of artifact that would not be such by alluding to the existence of pairs of opposites; that is, of objects called "artistic" in contraposition to others that are not. Thus, Danto modifies the question of art and tells us that, due to its growing operational complexity and the porosity of the borders between the everyday world and the art world, it no longer makes sense to try to define it, but rather to ask ourselves about the conditions of its existence. The demand is pertinent in a world already without gods in which art has also been de-divinized. In the contemporary artistic scene, anything can become art, but not in any circumstance. In effect, works of art are those objects that have acquired that status by being understood within a specific institutional framework called the "art world," whose protagonist is the artist—owner of a mature and coherent body of work—but also the viewing public, producers, museum directors, *marchands*, collectors, specialized critics, historians, academies, galleries, etc., all of whom not only make the artistic text speak but also produce critical thought, granting visibility and legitimation to objects recognized as "art."

One of the circumstances in which contemporary art emerges, contributing to the perplexity to which the public is subjected, responds to the place from where many of today's artistic expressions are enunciated: no longer museums or galleries, where the "suspension of disbelief" is an agreement as unavoidable as it is tacit, but the street. Thus, it blurs with the unfolding of daily life in which both politics and the political exert their undeniable influence. Therefore, I propose to review at this point the link between the concepts of "antagonism" and "democracy" proposed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Both political scientists tell us that conflict, division, and instability do not damage the democratic public sphere but, on the contrary, are necessary conditions for its existence⁴, assimilating antagonism to democracy; for them, a society of full rights is not one in which debate has disappeared, but one in which political borders constantly shift to one side or the other because conflict relationships are maintained instead of being erased.

Borders of art, two antagonistic examples in the political life of our scene

Case 1) The "Socorro Rosa" Action

³ Arthur DANTO. 1964. The Artworld. The Journal of Philosophy. 61. USA.

⁴ Ernesto LACLAU and Chantal MOUFFE. 1985. Hegemonía y estrategia socialista. Hacia una radicalización de la democracia. S XXI. Madrid.

During the March 8th mobilization that internationally celebrates women, an action was carried out in our city in front of the cathedral consisting of a parody of a young woman who, with the attributes of the Virgin Mary, aborted a baby. In a conservative and provincial society like ours, the scandal was not long in coming, and both diatribes and voices in its defense proliferated across social media. In the need to prevent the media execution of the young authors, the action of "Socorro Rosa" (the name of the feminist collective) was placed in the category of art. Indeed, perhaps in the hope of protecting it from the massive aggression of the community, many granted it the status of performance, as if art *per se* were a territory where anything goes, where everything is possible and, consequently, could become a place of automatic absolution for any type of human endeavor. Why can't this political action in the street environment be considered "art"? Let's see:

"The new artistic medium will be much more direct, because it will occur in the body itself," said Oskar Schlemmer in 1916, an architect and later choreographer and teacher at the Bauhaus. The "Socorro Rosa" action occurred in the body, which makes it visually indistinguishable from many artistic performances, such as those framed within the Viennese Actionism of the 1960s, a movement in which violence and the grotesque were its structural categories aimed at challenging the moral conventions of a conservative society. Like the Viennese artists, and to feed the confusion, the members of our local collective have been stigmatized by various religious associations as well as the community in general, having to take refuge outside our province. The temptation to compare is great since the "artifact" and its context present an evident "family resemblance." However, only the performances of Viennese Actionism can be considered art; not so the action of "Socorro Rosa," because the context proper to each grants them a different status. Effectively, we said that to see something as art requires something we cannot dismiss: an artistic theory, a knowledge of art history, an "art world." This quality applies to the Viennese, but not to the "Socorro Rosa" action, whose aims were strictly political. I might be told that the "art world" does not have a narrow sense and no particular institution-person is fundamental to producing art, but an artist invariably produces their work inserted in that world, beginning with the fact that they recognize themselves as such. In contrast, "Socorro Rosa" is a feminist collective that provides information and support for women wishing to terminate their pregnancy. Thus, I believe that in the effort to introduce the action of the aborting virgin into the field of art, its "family resemblance" is abused—not only with the works of the Viennese but with the performances frequently presented in powerful Argentine street protests by professional artists who, in a mature and well-founded way, make this medium their material and support.

Case 2) The Bicentennial Black Balloons, by the poet Alejandro Gil

The choice of the yellow balloon as the distinctive emblem of the **Alianza Cambiemos** during the 2015 electoral campaign is curious. The balloon alludes to revelry (*jolgorio*), while the color yellow suggests joy (*alegría*). I carefully avoid equating revelry with a party (*fiesta*) and joy with happiness (*felicidad*), for these latter concepts, though often taken as synonyms, possess notable differences from the former. In effect, both party and happiness imply deeper and more complex notions. A party, for example, involves many forms of sociability that are not necessarily joyful. Its motive might be a wedding or Carnival, but so too were the spectacles of public torture during the 16th century or the pogrom incursions into Jewish neighborhoods in pre-revolutionary Russia. A party is something organized that intentionally seeks to suspend everyday life, intensifying life for a short time to foster the fleeting, the lack of control, the blurring of borders, mockery, and the staging of otherness, all of which usually lead to a state of illusory enthusiasm, uncontrolled frenzy, and cathartic joy.

Happiness, on the other hand, is not organized. It is a state of mind perhaps as ephemeral as mere joy, but with connotations that are also deep and complex. While joy happens regardless of social classes or peoples, happiness is a goal shared by all humanity but highly conditioned as a cultural and individual fact; as Lacan asserts, it is linked to the fulfillment of a childhood desire, whatever its nature, and fulfilling that dream (should it manifest) does not necessarily have to do with laughing.

Due to my own limitations, I cannot delve too deeply into concepts as dense as *party* and *happiness*, but I can understand that they differ from *revelry* and *joy* because, like anyone, I notice that while the latter can be part of the former, individually they are characterized by superficiality, instability, and the ephemeral. I mean, a party can awaken joy and revelry, but it can also be grave and solemn, just like happiness itself, in which case it excludes them.

Let us return to the semantic connotations of the yellow balloon with which the Alianza Cambiemos accompanied its campaign acts and the celebration of its victory in the 2015 elections. I believe Cambiemos never thought that the yellow balloon also entails the melancholic image of the end of a party. A balloon's destiny is to pop, and although it may provoke the momentary laughter of bystanders, this becomes a hangover as the balloon loses its luminous turgidity, mutating into a grotesque flap (I am thinking of the ends of the parties attended at night by Marcello Rubini, the social chronicler of Federico Fellini's *La dolce vita*, or those of Jep Gambardella, the restless protagonist of Paolo Sorrentino's *La grande bellezza*).

In my view, having briefly defined the symbolic dimension of yellow balloons, it is much easier to talk about the black ones because, in a gesture that is a theft without a crime, Alejandro Gil appropriates the former, changing their color to trigger their productivity in a completely opposite

sense. Indeed, to challenge Cambiemos, this artist necessarily had to reveal them as signifiers of something: of the joy and revelry that would fall upon Argentines as they voted for that alliance; but also of ahistoricism, of lack of memory, of the absence of content and critical thought. Thus, only through certain operations (appropriation, translation, interpretation, but above all, reinterpretation) are Alejandro's black balloons possible as a formal counterpart to an apology for the vacuous, the indeterminate, and the mellifluous. The black balloons signify mourning, negation, and the rejection of joy without content, while recording the existence of an Other who, though standing to the side, does not stop observing what is truly happening. The black balloon is much more than the mere recording of a difference. As long as Cambiemos governs, in Tucumán or anywhere in the world, the black balloon will be an eye that watches and a mouth that denounces.

After months of preparation, the collective 1000 Gestalten ("1,000 Figures") called for an impressive creative protest that has gone around the world. Covered in clay, hundreds of people from all sectors participated for more than two hours in a critique of the G-20 summit, demanding more humanity and commitment to politics. The performers, smeared and walking like automatons, alluded to a world that has lost faith in solidarity and in which the individual only works for their own progress. Toward the end of the action, they removed the gray covering and colors reappeared as a way to symbolically free themselves from the rigid structures with which the West governs.

"We cannot expect change to come from the powerful; that is why it is necessary for both politicians and society to act responsibly," said the collective's spokesperson. "Our action shows that many people do not want nor tolerate the destructive effects of capitalism because, finally, what saves us is not our bank account balance, but the person who reaches out their hand." He continues, "for this work, we have managed to mobilize broad sectors of civil society. Through donations, we raised more than 20,000 euros for production costs, and behind the performance itself, there were nearly 1,000 volunteers involved, many of whom were participating in an artistic project for the first time. The interested parties who signed up came from more than 85 cities in Europe and collaborated as performers or assistants."⁵

Images of the performance spread throughout the world, as did those of the fierce repression of dissidents in another nearly simultaneous protest. The curious thing is that both street actions spoke of the same thing. It is just that facts happen, and in doing so, they manifest their contingent dimension in which values are expelled. Indeed, according to Wittgenstein, values are outside of facts and, according to their subjectivity, are granted to them by those who witness them. Thus, the aesthetic dimension of one of the two street protests acted as a "protective casing," generating an empathy that was denied to the other.

⁵ <https://1000gestalten.de/>

On June 7th and 8th, Hamburg witnessed the role of art with its capacity to act where the right to speak is denied, because there are things, such as ethics or the very meaning of life, that cannot be described. But they are shown.

Thus, the need to introduce the action of the Tucuman feminist collective into the art world reveals the paradox that it is not done for aesthetic purposes, but to justify it politically. Indeed, in the face of the overwhelming of the right to expression that the system itself endorses, art has been sought as an escape valve, bribing the system with expressions from that world to make the "Socorro Rosa" action more "acceptable." At this point, a new problem arises because, in performing the exercise of separating artifacts that are works of art from those that are not, it becomes evident that the collective's action had political rather than aesthetic aims, stripping bare the vulnerability of its members who remain excluded from the symbolic protection granted by their belonging to the community. It should be highlighted then that although everything is useful, not everything goes in art. It is not a refuge to justify any human production that does not come from its specific context; therefore, the media execution of which the members of that collective were victims must not be fought with the argument of art, but with that of democracy. Let us return at this point to the "Socorro Rosa" protest at hand. I believe that in the context of our current democracy, the task of the political is to make the effort to construct arguments in its defense—not from art but, as I expressed, from politics itself—for the right to expression in dissent is also part of the difference that articulates it. Instead of clinging to democracy's main strength, which implies vindicating coexistence with the antagonistic, we grant "art" status to a political action as if it were a "refuge," while tolerating its low intensity without denouncing the already institutionalized scandal of exposing the members of "Socorro Rosa" to violence so that anyone can point them out and persecute them without this—as Giorgio Agamben warns⁶—constituting any crime.

⁶ Giorgio AGAMBEN, 1998. *Homo sacer. El poder soberano y la nuda vida*. Pre-Textos. Valencia.