

The Wide Revolution: reflections on the history of political art

Dave Beech

Politics ebbs and flows in the history of art. Restricting ourselves initially to the narrow dimension of the politics of art expressed in the subject matter of artworks and the content of art's discourses, there is an evident rise and fall of politics in art that is registered in the familiar quantitative idiom, in which it appears that there is *more* politics in one period of art history and *less* politics in another. It is at the extremities of such waves, presumably, that this 'less' and 'more' obtain absolute values, and we can hear arguments that politics in art is now *obsolete* or the autonomy of art from political struggle has now become *impossible*.

There is nothing naïve about acknowledging that politics and art come together and drift apart according to the fashions and 'turns' of art and its discourses, but there is also a structural condition for art that has a more long-lasting political character. In this second sense, art is political regardless of whether it is "political art", "activist art", socially engaged art or none of the above. However, it is also evident that the recognition of the institutional or infrastructural politics of art itself wanes in the consciousness of artists, curators and critics at certain periods and is revived at others. What's more, there is a broad range of opinions based on the assumption that art is immanently political. At one end of the spectrum, art is regarded as a special activity that resists the existing society simply by being art or being aesthetic. At the other end, art is complicit in power and privilege through its economic, institutional, social and material institutions.

One variant of the understanding of art as immanently political argues that art's autonomy is itself a political accomplishment insofar as it is secured and safeguarded by a constellation of economic, normative, pedagogical and civic measures. Also, despite the sophisticated conceptual scaffolding that supports art's normative autonomy, it has not been too difficult for critical theorists to devise ingenious traps, to reinsert all manner of artworks that shy away from politics back into the political map. For instance, Julian Stallabrass observes that apolitical artists produce the interior decor for the super-rich, and the Guerrilla Girls treat all art as a super carrier of the racial and gender inequities that prevail in society, not only through the values crystallised in artworks themselves, but also in the way that works are collected, circulated, displayed and taught. As a result, art has never been able to separate itself completely from politics.

And yet, at the same time, it seems to me, the history of art has also been characterised by a guarded relationship to politics. What I have in mind here, are the numerous ways in which political art, propaganda and Socialist Realism have been deemed to be philistine and didactic in contrast with the nuanced approach of "doing art politically", or the critical depth of institutional critique and so on and so forth. The depiction of politics in the content of artworks, and the practices of "commitment" and "tendentiousness", can seem unsatisfactory in comparison with the intricate destabilisation of contested meanings, direct social engagement and boycotting art's compromised institutions. So, paradoxically, there are some grounds for political art to be rejected by modernism and the avant-garde (and their postmodern and contemporary legacies) not as being too political, but not political enough.

One way of reading this sequence of political conceptions of art is to slot them into a progressive narrative that allows us to perceive today's politics of art as superior to the naive conceptions of

political art in the past. Another is to regard each political conception of art as representative of, or appropriate to, say, a liberal, anarchist, feminist, queer, postcolonial, indigenous or postcapitalist struggle. Accordingly, we might find ourselves advocating on behalf of one kind of political art over another, believing that it is more radical, more militant, more inclusive or more emancipatory than the others. It feels like there is something inescapable about this rivalry of political positions within art, especially in that moment when we forge a new politics of art out of the ruins of an existing variant of political art or from the critique of another.

However, I want to suggest a different way of thinking about the range of political programmes in art.

The modern history of art is characterised by the tendency to commit to one conception of the politics of art, or one set of techniques for politicising art, and therefore to reject all others. Early twentieth century manifestos are built on this binary logic of 'bless' and 'blast' in which, on the one hand, the old must die for the new to be born, but also, on the other hand, 'our' way is the true way and all other styles, techniques and methods must be rejected. Such confrontations include the debates on realism and naturalism, socialist realism and modernism, Brechtian Epic Theatre and the Aristotelian drama, avant-garde and kitsch, making political art and making art politically, and, more recently, interactive versus participatory art, conviviality versus antagonism, and the contrast between the critique of existing society and "being the change you want to see".

I want to reconfigure these rival politics in art as a spectrum of resistances, rebellions, critiques and revolutionary projects, that pursue the transformation of one or some (but never all) dimensions of oppression, prejudice and exploitation. While it is true that the realist picturing of politics lacks something palpable that is exemplified in "being the change you want to see", I want to say that activist art of this kind lacks something at which the realist picturing of politics excels. Or, to generalise the point, I will claim that that each specific politics of art entails both an addition and a subtraction of the politics of art as a whole. So, rather than treating them as rival versions of *the* politics of art (in the singular and with the implication that one is the correct line to take), I think it is more promising to treat each variant of the politics of art as a dimension of a multi-dimensional cultural and political struggle.

I am attempting to articulate something like the necessity of solidarities between a range of political movements and a range of artistic strategies allied to them as the basis for a contemporary political theory of art. This is necessary partly because no single movement can overcome the world system by itself, but also because the world system has tessellated the exploitation and oppression of women, people of colour, the indigenous, LGBTQ+ communities and the working class. Rather than choose between one political project and another or one form of political art over all others, therefore, I am suggesting we conceive of radical social transformation as necessarily taking place across multiple connected dimensions of social reality. Each political project, in this conception, corresponds to a part of the social totality, connected by the real shared conditions of that social totality.

This breadth of political projects within a multi-dimensional and multi-layered network of critique, resistance, dispute, subversion, rebellion, reform and revolution, I will call the *wide revolution*, adapting Raymond Williams's concept of the 'long revolution'. The long revolution is the revolution of culture as distinct from the punctual revolution of politics which seizes the state. The wide revolution is the distributed network of emancipatory struggles of every scale across the diverse terrain of culture and politics. What unifies these struggles, at least in principle, is that they oppose the tessellated

dominant world order. Solidarity between struggles is not a given, though, but must be built and maintained through mutual recognition and shared projects. One of the obstacles to such solidarity is the perception that the most immediate problem for any given emancipatory struggle is its own recent history or the misrecognitions of its key aims and values by other emancipatory struggles. It is vital, therefore, that emancipatory struggles continue to be understood as counter-tendencies even when they, in some respects at least, have accrued some power, property and privilege, in order to sustain themselves through the development of what Alan Sears calls “infrastructures of dissent”.

Art participates in the wide revolution and can do so largely as a result of the infrastructures of dissent that have built up around it. However, art, I want to say, is never the source of its own politics. In the absence of broader transformative social action, the critical artwork, artist, curator or project is not the political agent that she sometimes appears to be in art theory and art history. It is true that some artists are, and have been, political leaders of various kinds, but the danger of such examples (combined with the overstatement of the charisma and social significance of the artist) is that it seems preferable for artists rather than masses of people to bring about social change. I want to suggest, instead, that political art, in all its variety, derives its political status primarily from its solidarity with actual social movements, and therefore that the politics of political art must be realized through collective action.

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