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Aesthetic Exception within the Politics of the Impasse

Interview with Tony Fisher

Tony Fisher is Professor of Theatre, Politics, and Aesthetics at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in London. He has a long-standing interest in the relationship between the arts, theatre in particular, and politics and political power, both historically and in contemporary socio-political contexts. He presents this relationship as a complex and intricate interdependence, often characterised by conflict, ambiguity, and dead ends. An important theme for him is democracy and the role of art in its reflection and realisation.

> *On your website, you start your professional portrait by referring to your childhood and the experience of Thatcherism. Why did you have the need to mention this primary experience? How did this embodied knowledge determine your professional career?*

I am very wary of answering this kind of question, not least because I'm of that generation who were warned by their teachers not to fall foul of the "intentional fallacy" involved in attributing the meaning of a text, or a body of work, to an origin located in the hermeneutics of the biographical subject!

It was primarily written out of an institutional obligation to Central, since the instruction had been to "write something 'personal' about oneself", to give the institution a "human face". So, I cannot complain. It is also true that Thatcherism provided the background context at a formative time for me, when I became aware of the world of politics, and of what was at stake in it. The world that existed beyond the circle of my immediate family and friends, and secondary school, was rather abrasively broken open by the new politics, which particularly affected the city and region where I grew up – the Northeast of England in the late 1970s and early 1980s – and so inevitably politics intruded into the domain of everyday life. Primarily, it took the form of a direct assault on traditional forms of working-class culture that were very much rooted in the social fabric of the Northeast, with its historical industries such as shipbuilding, steelworks, and coal mining. But it was also a matter of direct lived experience in which the influence of the state, quite immediately and assertively, impacted families, since it was a period that saw a massive rise in unemployment. Many peers in the school I went to had parents who were flung onto the "dole"; it produced an atmosphere of seething rage, frustration, and despair that at times was manifested as overt and brutal violence.

It was also a period of exceptional socio-political turbulence, with industrial action on an immense scale. But it was also a time that was infused with a sense of existential crisis, particularly in relation to Thatcher's war on the mining community, which was very much the vanguard of the British working class at the time. I mean "war" in a literal sense because she described the miners, or the National Union of Mineworkers [NUM] at least,

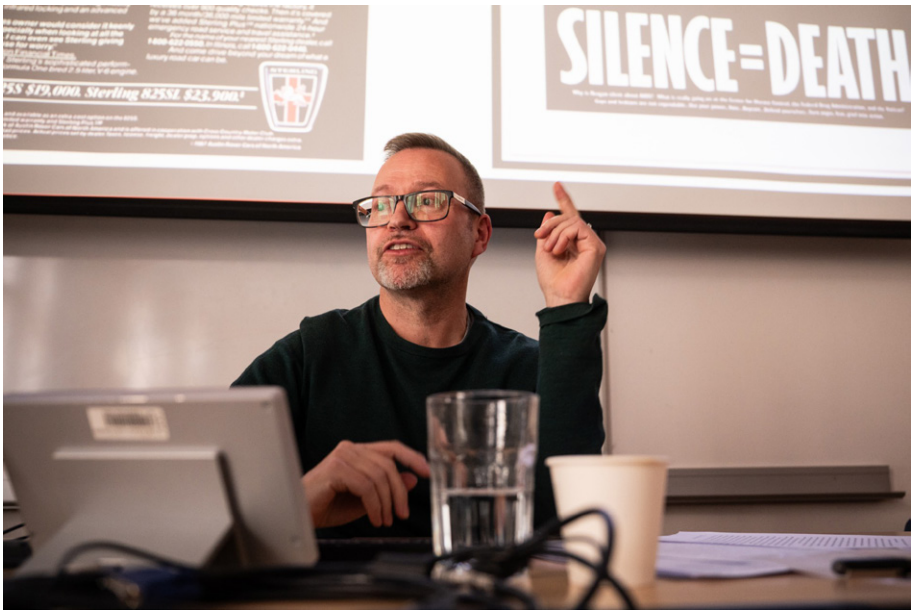
as the "enemy within". This culminated in the "Battle of Orgreave" in 1984,[1] which was later the subject of a staged re-enactment by the artist Jeremy Deller,[2] using many of the original participants, drawn from the ranks of both striking miners and the police. It was, in fact, existential for both the miners and the government, since only one side could win, while the other side would be definitively vanquished. Looking back, it's extraordinary how close the miners came to toppling the Thatcher government. At one point it really was touch and go as to the outcome. But as we now know, the government prevailed – Thatcher prevailed. With the defeat of the NUM, Thatcher was able to usher in the end of union power as a social force for class organisation whose effects persist to this day in the UK.

What this meant for anyone growing up in Newcastle at the time was that they could hardly have anything but an abiding and unmovable hatred for Conservative governments. What we came to realise is that we had ringside seats in the Northeast to the spectacle of what the cultural theorist Stuart Hall described in 1979 as "The Great Moving Right Show" (Hall 2017). Of course, I only discovered Hall much later. Now, for me personally, the period also led to several consequences. First, I flirted with various art scenes – music, visual art, and later film – as a way of escaping the drudgery that so many of my friends experienced as they were sucked into meaningless jobs, or simply signed on each week for unemployment benefits. I set my sights on leaving the Northeast, which I did by moving to London to pursue a career in art.

That didn't really happen, however, as events took a different course; in fact, they led me to New York, where I lived for a couple of years working as an artist's assistant for Vito Acconci and Dan Graham, and where I came across contemporary theatre for the first time in the form of the Wooster Group. In any case, what was inculcated in me, throughout that period of my twenties and early thirties, hanging out with very stimulating and informed people in both New York and London, was an interest in ideas, where art in some form could be seen to embody those ideas, could perhaps even extend them to audiences in ways that might challenge them, and could also produce some kind of effect – well, if not exactly an effect in a directly "causal sense", at least have some kind of influence on the social world beyond the work itself. So, in this sense, you can say that an interest in politics, forged at the time of my youth, persisted as an interest in art as a medium of political and social change, but, most of all, it developed as a consciousness that, in those critical ideas that underpinned contemporary art practices, an alternative way of conceiving society was somehow being prefigured.

1 Editor's note: The "Battle of Orgreave" occurred on 18 June 1984 and involved a confrontation between the police and striking miners outside the coking plant at Orgreave in South Yorkshire. A later report by the Independent Police Complaints Commission accepted that the police used excessive force against the miners, in addition to giving false statements at the time to explain their actions, which depicted the miners as the aggressors, thus justifying the brutal assault on the picket line.

2 Artangel. n.d. "The Battle of Orgreave". Accessed 11 June 2024, https://www.artangel.org.uk/artwork/the-battle-of-orgreave/#:~:text=The%20violent%20confrontation%20between%20police,in%20the%201984%20Miners'%20Strike.



Tony Fisher giving a talk at the "Territories of Art" conference, Prague, November 2023. Photo René Volfík.

What was at that time the relationship between politics and art that you observed and experienced?

The first direct relation between politics and art that I experienced was through music, and in particular the period of the "new wave" or "post-punk" in the late 1970s. I was interested in bands that emerged out of the ferment of 1976/77 but had taken a somewhat experimental angle on punk rock, producing a wide range of sonic alternatives to mainstream music at the time. I took those experiments as being somehow "political" in their own right, although a number of those bands – such as the Gang of Four, the Fall, and the Pop Group, all of whom I followed – were also adept at writing rather acerbic lyrics that perfectly captured the sense of frustration that accompanied Thatcher's social revolution, and for which they also provided a kind of countervailing soundtrack. Later, in New York, I encountered bands such as Sonic Youth, who also showed that the "politics" of noise, if you like, could offer a powerful intervention in the space of standardisation that Adorno famously described in relation to the function of music in the culture industries (Adorno 2002).

Regarding visual art, the first encounter with an explicitly political work of art was an exhibition of Hans Haacke's paintings, I think at the Tate – I can't remember exactly when it was, but Thatcher was still in power, and so it was certainly bold work for the Tate to exhibit in the 1980s. As I recall, it included a portrait of Thatcher, whom Haacke had painted rather satirically as a kind of sovereign. Also in the same show was Haacke's painting of Ronald Reagan, which had a red carpet rolled out before it that extended into the gallery

space (Taylor 2016). The allegorical dimension of both works suggested an indictment of the art world in its proximity to political power, and thus the critique the paintings seemed to offer struck a chord with me, but also perhaps too conveniently since it was obvious where the viewer should place their sympathy. I have a degree of wariness relating to explicitly political works of art, but, at the same time, I am willing to accept they have their place, and that far be it from me to dictate to artists how they should use their work to convey political messages. I am very aware of how critical commentators on art tend to be led by their predispositions – Bourdieu might say by their "taste", by their "habitus" – to assign value to some works and to deny value to others simply because they are more or less explicit about their political affiliations. I try to bracket out my own taste, or at least I try to become as aware of it as I can be when making such judgements, so as not to make them pre-emptive.

Can you see parallels with the current era?

This is a very difficult question for me to answer. Perhaps I can begin by asking whether it would be permissible to say that the current era in some sense belongs to the era inaugurated by figures such as Thatcher and Reagan – as well as politicians outside the West such as Indira Gandhi in India and Pinochet in Chile – and that we have, as it were, not left that era, at least not entirely. This is to say that our time perhaps also represents a distinct phase of that era in which we are experiencing the terminal state of the globalised system of "market knows best" economics, following the financial crash of 2008–2010 – in short, the terminal state of what was first set in motion during the crises of the 1970s. Whether we define it, as many do, as the era or epoch of neoliberalism – of a certain kind of liberal governmentality in which financial markets rose to prominence, displacing the traditional economic forces, once rooted in the "real" of production – or whether we see it as an era of globalisation and neocolonialism, as resource extraction and expropriation in the periphery, which it most certainly also was and still is, the fact is that this period has entered its "end game". So there are indeed parallels but also significant conjunctural differences.

I propose the following as a way of understanding our predicament: that we live within the "difference" that distinguishes the end from the beginning of an epoch. The problems we confront, on a global scale, are being addressed by political leaders who are unable to break free from the "old" playbook. I have previously described this as the politics of the impasse. The danger of the impasse, which defines for me the present conjuncture, is not that we have reached an impasse, nor is it the fact of the impasse as such, but that we fail to heed the lessons of such a politics; indeed, that we fail to recognise its political and social meaning. I wrote an article on the theme of "the theatre of the impasse" in relation to a very interesting performance by the Greek company, the Blitz Theatre Group, called "Late Night". In this production, the audience is presented with an image of Europe ravaged by internal conflict, economic

breakdown, and a peripheral war that ebbs and flows but is never won – a war of attrition on Europe's borders but also a perpetual "stasis" within.

That production perfectly captured the sense of impasse and what we can learn about politics once we have accepted the condition or state of the impasse; it leads to a new kind of emphasis on sociality, but it is also a form whose practical fragility consists in something that might be termed a "radical politics of love". Such a politics cannot be said to possess its object insofar as love constitutes a limit condition on individuals within an existential community, rather than representing its consummation in the mythic fullness of communitarian being – the kind of fullness that would offer only illusory satisfactions of narcissistic copulation, amounting to the consumption of its object and the violent erasure of difference. We are bound together by ties of elective affinity, an affinity which bears within itself the condition of the human community in times of strife, war, and terror. I would call this "affinity-for-the-other", rather than *Mitsein*, in Heidegger's terms, from which no political or ethical sense can be derived. It is from that affinity towards others, by contrast, that we draw not merely solace or consolation but our strength.

The second lesson from "Late Night" is that while we may hope and wait for political leadership – for the appearance of the leader who will transport us to the promised land – no such leader exists. For sure, some demagogues have presented themselves as possessing the answer to all the problems we face, but they deceive us as well as themselves. We can understand the problem of political leadership today in reference to the theory of the sovereign decision, as developed by the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt.[3]

For Schmitt, the sovereign is the one who possesses the power to enact emergency powers in the event of a serious political crisis that threatens the integrity of the state: in short, the power of the sovereign is revealed through the power to suspend the constitution and impose a state of emergency in its place. This power of decision in the Schmittian sense, however, is no longer feasible, or at least, I believe, the decisionistic basis of politics no longer functions as it once was seen to. The exception is now permanent, only this time it dispossesses the would-be sovereign of the power to declare it. Recall Bush's ill-advised announcement that the Iraq war had ended: what we discover here is precisely the illusory basis of the powers of political declaration. It reveals itself to be no more than an empty performative, an act of infelicitous speech. Something is declared, but reality at some fundamental level remains immune to or unmoved by the declaration.

This theatre of the impasse is by no means new. It is present in Shakespeare, for example, at another time of great uncertainty and political decadence, during the Baroque period. It is captured in Lear and the figure of the fool, but also

3 Schmitt's definition was as follows: "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception". See Schmitt 2005, 5.

in Hamlet's indecision. For that matter, it permeates great literary inventions such as Joyce's *Ulysses*, with its talk of "endlessnessnessness..." (Joyce 2000, 355), in the aftermath of the First World War, as much as it can be found in Beckett's plays in the aftermath of the second. There is, then, a lesson that is by no means unique to be drawn from art, but which has unique salience for our time. What I suggest we can understand from this period in which we are living is the need to prepare ourselves for a new kind of political disposition. It is to understand that the necessity we face is that of discovering or forging a new form of sociality that no longer relies on sovereign decision for its politics, and which is prepared to attune itself to the period into which we are inexorably being driven by events we can no longer control – into the sociality of the impasse.

> *I wonder if one can indeed talk about an impasse, if there is a way out – in the form of a radical reconfiguration of the social, for instance. Isn't it more appropriate to talk about a liminal state – a state that disallows us to return to past scenarios and that does not yet clearly offer a form of a new social structure?*

This idea of a liminal state, as you describe it, defines what we can understand by being in the state of the impasse. It is exactly in this sense that the term was used by Lauren Berlant in her book *Cruel Optimism* from 2011. The impasse, according to this understanding, impresses upon society the necessity for a radical reconfiguration of politics, a radical democracy predicated on a form of equality that the impasse itself imposes. The emergence of such a form would not see the end of the impasse as such but the emergence of a community capable of inhabiting it. However, there is more: the sociality of the impasse already implies a politics "attuned to" a state of interdependence the character of which has never been seen before. Let me state the reason for this bluntly: the global situation is one of environmental systems breakdown that cannot be resolved according to the terms of the general economic and political settlement that presently holds sway.

On the contrary, that settlement is precisely the status quo in action: its "solutions" are predicated on powers of decision that are revealed to be no more than the stage-managed optics of a system desperately seeking to restore our faith in the waning power of leaders – to solve the matters we confront by issuing a declaration here, signing up to a treaty there, and so on. To the extent that they are designed to fundamentally preserve the current balance of interests – and just look at the number of polluters who attend the COP summits – their "solutions" cannot be said to be solutions to anything (Monbiot 2023). At the same time, the environmental conditions that sustain our way of "worlding" are changing rapidly, on a planetary scale, and in such a way as to either compel planetary cooperation or risk seeing a complete systems breakdown. Even in the best scenario, the "world" will never be the same again, which is what I mean by attunement to the impasse. The "crisis" we confront cannot be resolved; at best, its effects can be mitigated

through behavioural changes. There can be no doubt that we have changed the conditions of planetary existence for good. The planetary is now something that appears before us as something we must adapt to collectively and existentially as a species. For this reason, the politics of the impasse is the politics of reimagining human possibilities as being fundamentally limited by the nonhuman world, which is not simply "there" at our disposal, and in a very real sense may not be there at all, at least not in the way that we have previously assumed.

> *Philosophy often oscillates between giving answers to difficult questions and questioning the fixed answers. Can we do something else in art and philosophy in relationship to the real than answering or questioning it? Is a playful generation of questions (or maybe potentialities) an activity of creating a platform, playground, or minimalistic resources for leaving the impasse?*

I think this is exactly how we should be thinking about the relation of philosophy and art, that is to say, as a relation in which philosophy no longer seeks to decide the matter of art on behalf of art but rather enters into a genuine form of collaboration, suspending its function as a "dispositif" of knowledge, in order to think in, through, and with artistic practices. Art offers a space in which practices create new possibilities of being, and can do so, more often than not, without any assistance from philosophy (or philosophers). In my last book, *The Aesthetic Exception* (2023), I tried to articulate this kind of understanding of art as an activity that employs the space of play – a simulacral space (albeit understanding this word in a different way to that of Baudrillard) in which art practices experiment with what might be called "prefigurative" realities: these are virtual "realities" but which contain moments of real utopian possibility. That might sound like a contradiction in terms, but understood in the form of a simulated possibility, art discovers the "real" of that which is "yet-to-come", that is, what should be understood by a utopian prefiguration. Although one cannot, strictly speaking, exit the state of impasse, one can nonetheless experiment with new critical configurations of the sensible. One can understand how to inhabit it better, how to coexist within its limits, in short, one can learn how to live according to the conditions of the impasse without stagnating, or simply becoming lost, which is the great risk: art and philosophy provide the means to conduct such necessary experiments.

> *Do you think images carry a different political message or charge than other forms of artistic expression?*

It depends on what you mean by an "image". I understand your question to be concerned with a differentiation between visual images, as may be found in the visual arts, and perhaps verbal formats, such as theatre; however, I'm not convinced that this distinction gets fully to the heart of the matter. Maybe this is because I don't see the problem of the image in the same way. My approach would be to first make a distinction between the image as it appears in the

domain of mediated meanings – or what semioticians call "messages" – and the image grasped in the sense of the production of new ideas, and new affects, which occurs through the collision of apparent incommensurables. The latter for me is the articulation of elements of the given world in surprising juxtapositions, such that a new concept or idea is produced, and a different truth alluded to. An image – if it is genuinely an "image" – always involves the framing of discrete elements of a given language, whether visual or verbal, but through a decomposition of its customary meaning. Nothing new here, of course, since it is essentially an understanding of this struggle for meaning, with and against "sense", that is at the root of those techniques of defamiliarisation that were developed by the historical avant-garde, and which can also be found in radical cinema, from Eisenstein to Godard and onwards.

There is a degree of scepticism today around such an approach which is perhaps well founded. It is that the world of mediated imagery is now thoroughly inescapable: simulacra (in the "bad" Baudrillardian sense; see Baudrillard 2004) suffuse the world in the form of advertisements, whose ability to excite desire – an economy of the libido – raises the drives to the level of visibility, such that it renders the psychoanalytic distinction between consciousness and the unconscious meaningless, or little more than another simulacrum. In such a context, what use is ideology critique? Everything circulates freely in a nebulous world where symptoms, complexes, and neuroses are encouraged and constantly fed and cultivated. "Own your psychopathology – it's your brand" is the motto of our times. The libidinal economy here becomes an affect economy maintained in a state of perpetual excitation.

It is also clear that the world of lifestyle influencers serves, as pastors once did for the Church, as exemplars for a culture of permanent self-scrutiny and self-promotion, whose constant imperative is to enact forms of governmentality, as Foucault would say, in which subjects "will" compliance upon themselves (Foucault 2008, 14–21). The subject, whether aware of it or not, is permanently tuned in to Silicon Valley; with them, as we know, "rent" becomes the natural medium of existence, a mediatic miasma that stifles the air we breathe but whose presence is not seen because it constitutes the very conditions of visibility for any image whatsoever. The "inauratic" image is a natural medium for platform capital and perfectly attuned to the subject for whom montage or "self-splicing" is a lifestyle choice, reproduced by the auto-affective viewing habits of today's consumers of media: the system of image dysfunction is fine as long as people keep tuned in to the platform that feeds their ego ideal.

The consequence of this is the effective superseding of the power once invested in the image as a mode of critical intervention, let alone spiritual redemption. Does the image today even bear the weight of a "meaning" at all, or is it simply concerned with the production of subliminal "sense", which it reproduces, without determinable referent, and thus precisely as a pure libidinal economy?

If this is the case, then producing an image whose meaning can disrupt the "sense", in the "common sense" established by the order of the mediatic image, becomes a tall order indeed. Now, while I recognise that there is a great deal here to worry about, I am not so convinced that the power of art is entirely vitiated by the situation described above. The risk of such an analysis is well known: it produces and then imposes the very totality it is attempting to diagnose; it is the counsel of postmodern despair. I would like to suggest, at least, that while we can specify certain trends that are indeed profoundly worrying, politically, culturally, socially, personally, and so on, such as the banalisation of the world through AI, the "gap" between reality as imaged and the reality of the image, so to speak, remains a source of opportunity for artists to exploit. What we discover, on this basis, is that an essential possibility remains available to the artist for disrupting the frame of the image; there is always a space for the "glitch" to occur. So I'm not prepared to concede that artistic expression is now merely a function of the mediatic society we live in, and I am prepared to defend the claim that art names that "space" in which ideas and techniques that defy the logic of the mainstream media with its simulations can be experimentally produced. In this sense, and to answer your question directly, all forms of art are concerned in one way or another with the production of "images", whether directly or indirectly, because all forms of art must contend with the closure of the very space of meaning that constitutes the "sense" of the image under present conditions of production.

> *If art can say something about the social world, what is/what can/what should be the result or effect of this narrative/expression?*

In my work, I have tried to complicate the conception we have of the efficacy of art when it comes to the form of intervention that certain works make within situations of a social or political character. I have described this previously as the "efficacy debate", which I explain as a dispute that arises between those who assert that art can produce real political change in the world and those who argue the opposite. This is perhaps best articulated by Adorno when he claimed that the real political works of his time were those that eschewed politics – by which he had in mind the theatre of Beckett rather than Brecht. For Adorno, the autonomous work demands a philosophical interpretation. Here, he understood philosophy to represent the sphere of autonomous thought that is somehow independent of instrumental constraints – it produces itself as free, uncoerced discourse, if you like.

Now, my attempt to describe the efficacy debate in these terms led some people to assume that I opted for one side of the debate against the other (and that I subscribed roughly to an Adornian position that advocates for some kind of "negative freedom", which his philosophy recognised in autonomous art-works alone). That's not, in fact, what I intended or meant. I do not dispute the possibility that works of art can indeed have direct political effects. However, I would rather describe the context of such effects differently, and specifically in terms of how they produce or develop, within those who engage with them,

Tony Fisher and Alice Koubová in discussion at the "Territories of Art" conference, Prague, November 2023. Photo René Volfík.

what might be better understood as political affects or attunements – or, to use the word I previously invoked, "affinities". Although the thinking of Jacques Rancière has been important to me over the past few years, I do not subscribe to his conception of the aesthetic as "dissensus" per se, where art is in any case subordinated to an "aesthetic regime" that somehow contains within it the essentially democratic power of reconfiguring bodies, on a plane of virtual if not actual equality. I think that overstates the case for the power of the aesthetic, on the one hand, while understating the power of actual works to constitute real dissensual reconfigurations of the "sensible", to put it in his terms, on the other.

However, those who affirm the political efficacy of art as though it were a straightforward matter of a political intention yielding a determinate result seem to occupy a rather credulous position to me. What I have questioned, at any rate, is whether the term "effect" is the best way of understanding a politically or socially attuned work of art. So, for me, the question is somewhat different: what are the underpinning conditions that must be "in play" for a work of art to be capable of activating a political affect?

And in terms of what can be said specifically of a work's "effect", then I think one has to be able to separate conceptions that rely on strict causality, or the immediacy of the social relation, as found in relational aesthetics. What I suggest as a better way of describing the phenomenology of the political and social effect of art is to see it in terms of precisely the virtual possibilities any work possesses that can only be partially realised, and often in ways that defy or even radically surpass their producer's expectations.

Your texts contain many emphases on disruption or non-homogeneity: you actively work with terms such as crisis, failure, impasse, antagonism, disorder, absence of authority, the abject... Is there a common intuition behind all these terms and their negative connotations?

It is true to say there is an emphasis on the power of the negative in my work (although, strictly speaking, I would say it is a "non-power" that is in play whenever one encounters negation). I think it remains a political necessity in the context of our culture of affirmation (Marcuse 2009). I agree with Marcuse's claim that our "affirmative culture" contains within itself a mechanism of affirmation that is constantly in operation, which we scarcely notice, and whose function is to "segregate" into discrete realms two distinct forms of value, two entirely different "worlds" that are nonetheless paradoxically connected. These are either the economic values of the world of commerce and work, by which we are bound to forms of material unhappiness and in which, at best, we discover only the partial fulfilment of "human needs", or there is the value invested in the sphere of culture, which appears to us as a separate spiritual world of art and beauty that we exalt, insofar as it fulfils a consoling function. The latter contains the promise of an inalienable fulfilment, absolution, or satisfaction that the former cannot possibly realise, under present conditions. Thus, art cannot appear within the world of affirmative culture except in the form of an indictment of a system that is predicated on material dispossession and the real immiseration of experience. Beneath the play of cultural forms, then, the play of social antagonisms is always discernible; beneath the appearances of order, the real derangements of a disorderly system; beneath the opportune display of political authority, the impotence of decision in the face of a real impasse.

How do you relate to the communicative turn in theatre?

The communicative turn describes a reconfiguration of critical and artistic practices that has been underway for at least the past quarter of a century, in which a new disposition of the arts becomes thinkable: the common denominator beneath a number of trends, bound one way or another to the discovery of the dimension of performance. It is something we can observe – not just in theatre but across all forms of art practices.

For me, the term assumes a key function in my own thinking as it enables a differentiation to be established between two critical systems through which art has been evaluated. On the one hand, we find the great hermeneutic system: the well-oiled machine of interpretation that has been dominant since the Romantic period, in which art, in all its apparent inscrutability, is subject to the philosophical procedure of its decipherment. It is a system predicated on the object-character of the artwork, but only insofar as the exemplary object of art could be characterised in opposition to its commodity form. The work of art presented itself as an object whose "spiritual" value appeared to raise it above the world of ordinary things of use, whose value is merely

"mundane". This meant that the hermeneutics of art interpreted the human as somehow broken, incomplete, or alienated; in doing so, it also discovered, in the work of art, the "promise" of making whole that which the mundane world of production had torn asunder.

On the other hand, I argue that art practices (at least the most radical practices) have – since the 1960s – increasingly rejected such a hermeneutics. They have become suspicious of the power of the artwork to withstand commodification and have rejected the idea that philosophy can somehow adjudicate or decide the "truth" of art, as it were, from the perspective of sharing a secret complicity with the autonomous work of art (as is the case in Adorno). The communicative turn, then, can be understood, partially, in terms of advances in critical thought that themselves behaved in highly critical ways towards hermeneutics (particularly the hermeneutics of the subject).

Now, quite separate from this, artists also undertook a process of reevaluating the relation of art to the production of meaning, which increasingly turned art away from the "object" as a locus of meaning and towards performance, as a site in which one finds the dispersal of meaning in the form of the event (rather than its concentration in the reified form of the object), as well as a turn that embraced the situation of the audience as part of the event. One can think here of the achievement of Fluxus and, relatedly, of performance art – Kaprow's Happenings, for instance, or environmental theatre.

The communicative turn also – and I'm aware this might seem heterodox to say – survives the critique of communications itself (and it certainly should not be conflated with communications in its narrowest sense). I'm thinking of the forms of critique that are found in the critical thinkers of media, in figures as widely distinct as Marshall McLuhan, Roland Barthes, and Stuart Hall. The communicative turn is not reducible to a semiotics of productive meanings and their predictable points of reception; rather, it becomes absorbed into new forms and questions concerned with the "performativity" and "relationality" of a form of semiosis opened up by the spaces of art and performance. The fact that a space for "communing" superseded systems of communicable messages that the communicative turn was initially interested in deconstructing tells us also that the communicative turn ushers in the displacement of the idea of art as a system of "channels" and "relays" through which meaning is sent, deciphered, and received, or even withheld as in "difficult" works of art. Instead, the communicative turn opens up, first, an entire dimension of social ontology that art discovers within itself, for instance with its emphasis on relationality but also, as a consequence, its environmentalism – let's call this its "phatic" dimension, since it conspicuously extends its "greetings" to the audience while at the same time enabling something quite different to emerge, under its wings – an epistemological concern, in which art becomes the site for the collective, critical interrogation of structures of knowledge and their modes of dissemination.

What both these aspects of the communicative turn announce is the end of the idea of the autonomous work of art, as valorised in the form of the autonomous object. This rejection of the conception of "aesthetic autonomy" by no means entails, as some have argued, that art is now "heteronomous". Full heteronomy is simply not available to the work of art, however one construes it; on the contrary, heteronomy would indicate the disappearance of the phenomenon of art. What the art of the communicative turn does, instead, is discover within the very space it occupies the paradoxical power of artistic autonomy as a relation to the heteronomous world of which it is an "excepted" part.

> *In your latest book, entitled* Aesthetic Exception*, you define the position of art towards politics. Can you summarise what this aesthetic exception means in the relational sense of the word?*

The aesthetic exception really defines the paradoxical appearance of the work of art in a social milieu predicated on relationality. It's important to understand what this means not just theoretically but within a broader historical frame of reference. As I see it, the work of art, under the paradigm of the aesthetic exception, is conceived initially in the form resolutely opposed to the world of social relations and productive forces. Now, to grasp this in terms of what we might call a genealogy of the exception requires that we first recall the radical transformation of art under the conditions of an emergent modernity. The aesthetic exception names the appearance of a unique dispositif of art – or "regimen" if you like – in which artworks are conceived solely in relation to their function as "art", an event that first announces itself during the Baroque period. One might think of the paintings of Caravaggio, for example, and his dramatic use of chiaroscuro, whose intense effect, like a photon burst, causes the painting to fall back in upon itself, to implode. As with dying stars, his paintings disperse energy outwards with unprecedented violence, even as they collapse into an entropic state. Art undergoes an "inward" turn in the face of a world that has become difficult. For me, this is the true meaning of "aesthetic autonomy" in its application to art: it signifies the radical non-relationality of the work of art, which becomes a precondition for its entrance into the space of the aesthetic exception. What the aesthetic exception demands of art is that it discard every external norm that formerly applied to it; on the contrary, aesthetics names the novel space, excepted from the form of necessity imposed by productive relations, in which the norms of art are to be authentically discovered. These norms must be wholly and solely determined in relation to the aesthetic qualities of the objects of art. But, ultimately, the very attempt to determine the norms of art on an immanent basis will lead to the question of the social destiny of art and the political meaning of its newfound autonomy.

It is precisely this rupture within the search for the aesthetic norm that the aesthetic exception paradoxically enables – an event of rupture that occurred in the early twentieth century. With the emergence of the

avant-garde the dispositif of the aesthetic exception entered a period of profound crisis. It is a crisis that precisely revealed the paradoxical nature of the aesthetic exception: in seeking to identify the norm of art on the basis of something immanent to art, what became apparent was that there is no such norm; this is something that art discovers for itself, particularly in the aftermath of the First World War. The radical advances made by the avant-garde in these crucial years exposed "art" to the powerful new sentiment of "anti-art". The avant-garde – Dada above all – sought a revolution in art's relation to its own dispositif, which in practice led it to attempt what I call the crossing of the threshold of the exception – to cross the exception in order to transcend the exception, to marry art with life, which required nothing less than cancelling out the "exceptional" distinction that aesthetics bestows on works of art. Think for instance of Duchamp's Readymades, and you will see that the aesthetic exception, conceived as the dispositif of art, is exactly what artists during this period attempted to surpass. That they were ultimately unsuccessful in their attempt should not detract from what they did achieve, nor does it lessen the profound implications of what they discovered: that art possesses the power to suspend the norm of art for the sake of discovering a different norm; it is this fact that leads art into a phase of extraordinary invention and experimentation with political and social forms of critique.

> *How does it relate to phenomena such as social exclusion, snobbism, social transition, transgression of everydayness, criticality, solidarity, play?*

Well, it has everything to do with them. The aesthetic exception indeed bestowed an exceptional status on the objects of art, and continues to do so, even under present conditions in which the regimen of the aesthetic exception has been tested to near destruction, and not least by the blatant absorption of art into the system of market values, as assets and fungibles – as "investment" opportunities. Still, so long as our society is structured around the commodity form, then art will always serve the purposes and needs of affirmative culture. By definition, such a culture is predicated on elitism of taste and disposition, as Bourdieu pointed out, which goes hand in hand with the privileging of cultural capital and the downgrading of the cultures of everydayness. For that reason, radical art practices must retain a fidelity to the early avant-garde insistence that the space of art must be transgressed, and that a democratic disposition essentially determines the progressive nature of its interventions. That art has opened up the world of art to democratic and critical possibilities is no mere quirk of history but the result of actual democratic and critical arts practices. That the world of art is still essentially determined by the aesthetic exception is a paradox that we must constantly contend with, since exclusivity and exclusion are part and parcel of its social logics.

When you talk about political art, you find it important to distinguish politics as governance, or even administration, and politics in the sense of the political space of democratic contest. The former tends to maintain stability; the latter is defined by the agon. In which of these two regimes is political art meaningful and powerful (or powerful as a non-power)?

I make the distinction between politics and government in the first place out of analytic necessity. The reason is that too often politics and government are conflated with each other, leading to misconceptions about the role or function of art under what are, in fact, quite distinct arrangements of power. To differentiate these terms has allowed me to pursue two separate but related lines of enquiry.

The first looks at how art enters into what I call the processes of governmentalisation, following Foucault's work on governmentality. This phenomenon occurs wherever artworks serve the function of promoting what I term a "deontic power", that is, government by way of moral prescription rather than by employing sovereign force or coercive state forces. One finds an example of this in Schiller's essay on the role of the theatre, in which he imagines that not only will the "soft power" of the stage serve a moral "purpose" in support of good and orderly government but, in an atheistic age, theatre will be able to replace the pastoral role once held by the Church. To the Church Fathers, such an idea would be anathema, yet Schiller's proposal is entirely consistent with what they advocated through their anti-theatricalism. This notion that art is able to tame the unruliness of the demos and inculcate moral values in them – to avert bad forms of conduct and steer the mob to an appreciation of virtuous forms of conduct – has a very long history in the essentially patrician discourse on the stage, which emerges in the early modern period. Its distant cousins can be found in forms of art that are as disparate as the socialist realism of the Soviet era and the socially engaged theatre of today, where art is conceived as a panacea for social ills. It takes root in what I describe as the sociologisation of art, in which art serves the purpose of improving social cohesion. This form of art may be less obviously "moralistic" in its temperament, but it nonetheless serves the same governmental function: to better adjust individuals in terms of their personal conduct through a correction of their attitudes and dispositions towards society and economy.

The second line looks at art in terms of practices that have a very different orientation towards social power. This is art that enters the fray of democratic struggle and thus is entirely defined by the "agon" – and it is this agonistic quality that distinguishes politics fundamentally from the art of government. Agonistic politics is disruptive of the given social order, or some aspect of it; thus, agonistic art can only be defined in terms of its noncompliance. For this reason, such art practices can easily become synonymous with what is today termed "artivism". In contrast to the function of deontic art, which aims at producing a *sensus communis*, the agonist form of art opens the space of reception as a *dissensus communis*, exposing the real differential of interests

and conflictual struggles that circulate beneath affirmative cultures and the appearance of consensus.

Now, what distinguishes these two forms of art can also be understood via their relation to power. In the case of governmentally sanctioned art, the power of concession and authorisation flows directly from the institution of art to its exemplars, and insofar as the institution is representative of the aims of government, then the art it licenses belongs to the network of power relations by which government constitutes itself in practice. Art in this context is no different from government since it comes to embody the practice of governmentality itself. By contrast, the form of art that seeks to disrupt the status quo cannot be said to receive any sanction from government but rather derives from a form of power that possesses no authorisation, no "legitimacy". It possesses a form of power that is derived from the space of negation itself: thus, I describe it as a non-power. This does not mean that it cannot exert an influence, or produce potentially transformative political "affects", but rather that it is a power that can authorise nothing but its own appearance and which derives from a source that cannot be said to have been legitimated. For this reason, it can only appear in the form of contestation. Another way to put this is to say that, as a non-power, the agonistic force of politically assertive artworks opens what Arendt calls a "space of appearance" (Arendt 1998, 199) by "cloning" the only thing that can legitimate its appearance – the *force of law in the name of an injustice*. That the force of law is here "cloned" means that it possesses no actual force; hence, it remains no more nor less than an appearance of a non-power, asserted in the name of a truth that is to be rallied to.

> *You give four basic tests of the non-linear and non-authoritative relationship between art and politics. Can you explain them briefly and give examples?*
> *a. articulation of the social status quo*
> *b. the temporal, historical, and contextual conjuncture*
> *c. the prefiguration of the future*
> *d. the activation of* bios politikos*/the political standpoints of the spectators.*

Yes, this is in response to an alternative way of conceiving the political character of art outside of the reductive terms implied by the efficacy debate. Instead, I propose four ways of understanding the political conditions of a work of art – four "tests".

The first invokes, as you say, a relation to the status quo in which the work of art exposes something contradictory within it. Here, the work of art becomes political to the extent that it is able to "articulate" itself critically in relation to the social ensemble of which it is a part, or, more precisely put, it must be able to assert itself on the terrain of articulation in which a certain configuration of the elements of the social ensemble are already in play, whether these are seen as economic, social, political, cultural, or – as is more likely – some

combination of them. A work of art is, then, an event that discloses or breaks open what otherwise appears as a common-sense linkage between these elements, and it does so in such a way as to reveal their problematic nature. Let me offer the example of a work that I saw in an exhibition in London by Imani Jacqueline Brown, called *What Remains at the End of the Earth?* (2022). In the piece, Brown exposes the historical nexus of relations that exist in her home state of Louisiana between the environmental degradation of wetlands, linked to the extensive mapping of the oil industry in the state, and the sites of burial for Louisiana's enslaved peoples from the African continent. The piece draws not simply a parallel between two forms of extractive industry but reveals their inner connection. It does this through a process of articulating contemporary and historical sources together, to create a picture of what I would term the "conjuncture", which brings me to the second test for the political work of art.

This test relates directly to the first in that, in articulating itself in such a way as to expose some form of contradiction, art becomes "conjunctural" in the Gramscian sense of the term. What I mean by this is that it produces its "effect" only to the extent that it alights on the immediate plane of political struggle, that is, it appears within the space of those contradictions that reveal the "real" antagonisms at play within them, between real interests that are opposed, or in conflict, however displaced, condensed, or suppressed they may appear to be. Intervening in what Stuart Hall calls the "life" of the social formation, the work of art acts metonymically: it concentrates the whole struggle through the presentation of the part that is emblematic of the whole. The work of art can be seen, and this is certainly the case in Brown's art, in this regard, as an event that opens an "adjunctive" space in which a conjunctural understanding of the situation can be rendered, clarified, or asserted. What we understand in this particular example is provided by the insight it sheds on the ongoing activities of the fossil fuel industry, which are presented as the political terrain for a focalised struggle for environmental and racial forms of justice. There is no political struggle, in other words, that cannot identify the particularity of the terrain of struggle in terms of the present disposition of forces that are in play upon it, and in Brown's piece it is this particularity that is indeed examined in immense detail through a process of intricate contemporary and historical mapping techniques.

The third condition concerns the horizon of politics. In simple terms: no work of art can be said to be political that does not contain an immanent or virtual horizon in which a new politics is presented in the prefigurative form of a simulation. Even in the most utopian of artworks, that horizon assumes a determinate or material form that indicates the possibility of its virtual existence, if not its actual existence, and even if only in the form of a negation. Once again, I would say, in the example of *What Remains at the End of the Earth?*, the work activates a process of political thought in which we discover the image of the magnolia tree as an incipient indicator for a horizon of planetary replenishment and historical reparation. The magnolia tree,

which is planted in commemoration of the victims of the slave trade, is also able to detoxify the polluted ground in which it grows.

The final condition is that the work of art is political only if it is able to activate the political life of the spectator, or, to borrow from Hannah Arendt and her reading of Aristotle, their *bios politikos*. Art consists in the opening of a space of human dignity that is simply not available for the majority of people and, for most of the time, beyond it. This is what Arendt meant in refence to the life of the human conceived as *animal laborens* – where productive existence is in fact equal to a reduced human life. Only in releasing the *bios politikos* of the spectator is it possible to place them in a context where life expands to encompass what is otherwise denied to them: their political being, which is for Aristotle the very definition of the human. In relation to this final test, I am not able to speak authoritatively on the example I have given. I would say, however, that these tests that I have proposed offer a method for a deep analysis – conjunctural analysis, if you like – rather than the superficial appraisal of the political effect of any given work of art.

They are an invitation to go further into the meaning of the work and its context, and to discover in the process what it means to think politically through art, about a determinate political situation that is nonetheless capable of implicating the viewer within its particularised form.

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