

# The Artistic Function

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The idea of public art, of art in the public sphere or in the public interest, has been discussed intensely over the past decades. Art has left its accustomed place in art institutions and moved into the open. Not just outdoors into nature, like Land Art, or in urban space, in order to furnish facades or urban squares with fountains and sculptures, but into the open space of the *political public sphere*. That public sphere (in a political sense) has more to do with the *freedom* to act politically—it has more to do with forms of political action than with the space of urban traffic zones. In other words, art practices have emerged for which it is more important to be connected to political practices than to art institutions themselves. That, in turn, necessarily has effects on our concept of the public sphere—and on our concept of the institution as well. We are faced with the question: What about public art is public? And, *in extenso*, what about political art is political? This fundamental question is rarely raised and, in my view, almost never answered adequately. The same must be said when it comes to answering the question (when it is asked at all) of the artist's and, as I would like to add, the curator's task in producing political art. In fact, the roles of "curator" and "artist" often become blurred in this kind of political art practice. If we begin not with the individual, empirical individual but with the *function* that is fulfilled by certain activities, we may come closer to an answer. In this presentation I would like above all to raise the question of the *artistic function*. And I would like to defend the following thesis: the artistic function lies in the *organization of a public sphere*.

This answer is trivial only as long as we believe that an exhibition or an exhibition space is already a "public sphere" simply because it is accessible to "the public." Universal access is, however, only a minimal criterion, and even that criterion is not always met. Our normal use of the phrase *public sphere* frequently blinds us to its true meaning. For example, the mass media are considered "public spheres," even though hardly any ordinary people have access to them, apart from call-in shows and the newspaper pages reserved for letters to the editor. In fact, the discussion lacks any sufficient criterion by which the public sphere in a meaningful sense can be described. For it is not accessibility alone that turns a space into a public sphere. It is not the simple fact that one is admitted into an exhibition after paying a small fee. As we know well, a lot of people can stand around in a room and stare at the walls without a public sphere emerging from that.

A public sphere results if and only if a debate breaks out among those standing around. By a debate we must not understand a discourse "free of domination", guided by reason and aiming at an ultimate consensus, as Habermas describes it; rather, a debate takes place in the medium of *conflict*. Only at the moment when a conflict breaks out does the public sphere emerge, with the breakdown of a consensus that is otherwise always silently presumed.

The essential criterion for a public sphere that can be considered a true *political* sphere—and not just a simulation of a public sphere—is thus, to borrow a term from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *antagonism*.<sup>1</sup>

If therefore the artistic function consists in the organization of a public sphere, then we might conclude that it too must consist in the organization of an antagonism. Yet by assuming this we will be encountering a first problem. For antagonism, in the strict sense of the term, is something that cannot be “organized” at all. The antagonism that ultimately generates a public sphere may break out anywhere at any time, but it cannot simply be organized. A look at ordinary “politics” attests to this fact. Different to what one is tempted to think, politics is by no means the best terrain for conflict. On the contrary, institutionalized politics is generally dominated by consensus, mutual agreement, administrative bargaining, and a mere exhibition fight between functional elites of the state that have joined to form parties that are scarcely distinguishable. Politics consists of well-coordinated, sedimented, institutionalized rituals that are not normally shaken by any conflict, precisely because (pseudo) conflict is itself a fixed and predictable element of this ritual. And yet, unforeseen by anyone, a real conflict can suddenly break out. Revolutions are the most obvious example, but the emergence of new political actors (as in the revolts of 1968, the social movements of the ‘70s and ‘80s, or today’s global justice movement) can provoke a conflict. In reality, therefore, conflict is neither the privilege of a single social subsystem (like that of “politics”) nor can it be narrowed down to any one system. The antagonism—as a feature of the *political* (and not simply of *politics*) and hence of the public—can emerge in any social system or field, even in the field of art, which then becomes political and “opens up” into a public sphere.<sup>2</sup>

It is, however, impossible to “organize” the antagonism *as such* if it is precisely the antagonism that disturbs and cuts through every existing institution and every “organization.” That leaves us with two possibilities: either we abandon the thesis that the function of the artist and the curator consists in *organizing* the public or we cling to it because we nevertheless consider it necessary. In that case, however, the first thing one has to recognize is that the organization of the public sphere is a paradoxical, an impossible task. Consequently the artistic function—consisting in the organization of the public sphere—consists in *organizing the impossible*. “Curating” too, in the widest sense of producing a real public sphere in the field of art means *organizing the impossible*. This assertion can be understood in a variety of ways. One variant is that a truly political sphere cannot be produced *within* the field of art. The reason is that an antagonism always oversteps boundaries between social fields. A conflict that breaks out in the art world alone will revolve exclusively around artistic questions. In this case, the resulting public sphere would ultimately be only a public sphere of *art*—for

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<sup>1</sup> See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London, Verso, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> It is necessary to add immediately that not every insistence on the seemingly impossible, not every counterpolitics or counterhegemonic effort is in itself emancipatory, but every *emancipatory* effort necessarily attempts the (seemingly) impossible.

example, a specialist public sphere of art criticism that would move entirely within the parameters of the art world and would interest no one else.

The other, more optimal variant (which does not, however, preclude the first variant) would be the following: the impossible element that is organized by the artistic function is the political element, and politics itself, in the sense of a genuine realization of the political, is *always* a praxis that aims at the impossible—namely, at whatever the hegemonic discourse defines in a given situation as impossible. Artistic or curatorial practice that becomes, or wants to become, political practice must therefore set the same challenges as political practice. Not in the sense of institutionalized politics but in the sense of emancipatory *counterpolitics*, which of course always insists on the necessity of the (supposedly) impossible, that is, of what has been declared impossible by the hegemonic formation.<sup>3</sup> In the construction of this *counter*, in the construction of a *counterhegemony*, lies the true potential for antagonism. In other words, an antagonism can never be compelled by organization, but it is always possible to construct a *counterposition* to the dominant position. It is from such counterposition that an antagonism can then arise.

To be a little more specific, from the perspective of a *political art practice*, this has consequences not only for our understanding of the artistic function but also for the function of exhibitions and art institutions. But let's stick to the question of organization for another moment. What would, from a political perspective, correspond precisely to the model for the figure of "the artist" in terms of the artistic function? One answer can be found in the work of Antonio Gramsci, the original inventor or developer of hegemony theory. The figure of the "artist" in this sense would then correspond precisely to the figure that Gramsci called the "organic intellectual." Organic intellectuals give "homogeneity and an awareness" to a hegemonic function. Gramsci describes it by reference to the hegemonic rise of the bourgeoisie: "the capitalist entrepreneur creates alongside himself the industrial technician, the specialist in political economy, the organizers of a new culture, of a new legal system, etc."<sup>4</sup> All these organic intellectuals are thus not intellectuals in the traditional sense—sitting in the café and discussing the news of the day—but rather essentially *organizers* of hegemony. They *organize* the hegemony of the bourgeoisie; they represent the cement in the hegemonic bloc, whereas the "traditional intellectuals," Gramsci's opposed term, have largely lost this function and thus imagine themselves to be "freely floating" and nonpartisan.

But not only the maintenance of the *hegemonic bloc* but also a *counterhegemonic effort* demands the labor of organized intellectuals. Gramsci, one of the cofounders of the Italian Communist Party, saw this as the true path for the proletariat to dissolve the bourgeoisie: not by storming the Winter Palace just once but through protracted and arduous building up, the arduous organization of a counterhegemony in everyday life. The point is to develop a "new stratum of intellectuals": "The mode of being of the new intellectual can no

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<sup>3</sup> Antonio Gramsci, "Intellectuals and Education," translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, in *An Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916–1935*, edited by David Forgacs, New York, Schocken, 1988, p. 301.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 321.

longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, 'permanent persuader' and not just a simple orator."<sup>5</sup> Therein lies the real distinction from the figure of the traditional intellectual and hence of the traditional artist and the traditional curator. They are *traditional* in Gramsci's sense because they have survived themselves. And that affects not only the empirical social group but also its true *function* (Gramsci himself spoke of the "intellectual function"): both in the classical sense of curating as the *cura* (care) for the collection and the modern, post-Szeemannian sense of the individual genius curator in the art world are "traditional" and not "organic" activities.

As *organic* intellectuals, by contrast, the artist's and the curator's true standpoint is in contexts *outside* the field of art. They are actively organizing within social and political contexts *beyond* the art institution, and they connect them to the field of art. That means that the artistic as well as the curatorial function is essentially *collective*. Organizing is a collective activity. One cannot establish a political counterstandpoint, a counterhegemony, on one's own—that would be the illusion of the traditional (great) intellectual. Rather, organization can only be part of a broader collective political project. Even if the emancipatory element may be more modest today than in Gramsci's days, it will never be a solely individual effort but always a collective one. In short, an "organic intellectual" rarely, indeed *never*, appears alone. And from this follows that, however much it might seem to contradict common sense at first glance, the artistic as well as the curatorial subject (the subject of the artistic and the curatorial function) is *not an individual* but rather a *collective*. Art and Curating is a collective activity.

Of course, in the end it is still an open question which master—that is, which hegemonic formation—organic intellectuals serve. It is by no means always necessary that they serve emancipatory politics. The curatorial function — if we stick for a moment with the curator — can also serve the hegemonic formation of post-Fordism. For example, Beatrice von Bismarck notes in reference to Yann Moulier Boutang that today's curatorial practice is closely related to the tasks of efficient management. The curatorial tasks of organization and communication are roughly comparable "to those of book or music publishers, of content managers or archivists, and hence of professions that, as 'increasingly intellectualized abstract work,' correspond to the definition of immaterial work."<sup>6</sup> But the "curatorial" organization of a political public sphere differs fundamentally from the organization of one's own economic exploitation. What is the difference? In a word: it is not about ex-ploitation but rather about ex-position.

That means that when it comes to organizing a political sphere the curatorial function is not primarily a function of the economy of the art field (which is in turn part of the general economy). A forum in the political sense should not be confused with a bazaar in the economic sense. Although the two can overlap in reality, they should be strictly distinguished in terms of their *function*. The political function of a public sphere is absolutely at

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<sup>5</sup> Beatrice von Bismarck, "Kuratorisches Handeln," in Marion von Osten, *Norm der Abweichung*, Vienna, Springer, 2003, p. 87.

<sup>6</sup> Jérôme Sans, "Exhibition or Ex/position?" in Carin Kuoni, *Words of Wisdom: A Curator's Vade Mecum on Contemporary Art*, New York, Independent Curators International, 2001, p. 146.

cross-purposes both with the institutional function of museums or galleries (as ideological state apparatuses) and with the economic function of the art world as a marketplace for commodities (so-called works of art) and services (of creative individuals). The only place in this dilemma where the curatorial function, while not directly producing the political sphere, at least appears to make it easier, challenge it, or even make it possible, can only be the exhibition. But not in the traditional understanding of what happens in a normal exhibition space. An exhibition in the usual sense—that is, artistic works or actions within the local or institutional framework of the art field—is never in itself a public sphere. Even some performance in urban space is not in and by itself public art in the political sense. For an exhibition to become a public sphere, something must be added: a *position*.

Jérôme Sans seized on one part of this political aspect of the exhibition when he distinguished between “exhibition” and “ex/position.” According to Sans, the French word *ex/position* alludes to the aspect of the ex-position as a *positioning* and commitment: “An exhibition is a place for debate, not just a public display. The French word for it, *exposition*, connotes taking a position, a theoretical position; it is a mutual commitment on the part of all those participating in it.” As a practice of exposition, the curatorial function is a form of taking a position, of consciously *taking up* a position. But of course not just any position will do, not even a purely theoretical one, as Sans suggests; it must be an antagonistic position coupled with political and collective practices. From this perspective, the inflationary use of the term “artistic position” observed recently is almost an improper use and at the very least a depoliticization of the word “position.” This is particularly true when “position” is used to describe the work of artists who most certainly do not *take up* a position. One doesn’t simply have a political position; it has to be taken up. What the art field understands as a “position,” by contrast, is the difference between particular artists’ names, now ossified into mere labels or trademarks, and other artists’ names, equally ossified into labels or trademarks. The logic is differential because the point is to distinguish something from other “positions” in the field of art. It is not “equivalential,” as antagonistic logic is. That is to say, it is not at all about *joining* a political chain of equivalence (a coalition, a collective, a movement—that is to say, a counterhegemonic effort) that constructs its equivalence only as a construction of an external antagonism. At the moment of antagonism, the competitive struggle for differential “positions” disappears and makes room for the solidarity among all who unite against a common enemy.

The way the term “artistic position” is used in the field of art follows the logic of the market, not the logic of politics. Artists’ names are understood as labels in the marketplace for art. The term “position” is merely a euphemism for this trademark logic. That is what makes it so disagreeable. No one would ever be so pretentious as to describe the corporate identities of MacDonalds or Burger King or Kentucky Fried Chicken as “positions”—as “fast-food positions,” say. Political concepts are used loosely in the field of art, not least because they can be converted into the capital of radical chic. But political practice is not a question

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<sup>7</sup> On this, see Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (see note 1).

of whether a particular artistic or curatorial praxis calls itself political or acts as if it were—but rather one of genuine function. This political function of art, I have argued, consists in the paradoxical attempt to organize a public space. More specifically, it consists in marking a counterposition as an element of a broader attempt to produce a counterhegemony.

Only as an *ex/position* does an exhibition become a public sphere. As such, it then automatically counteracts the logic of the institution. As an *ex/position*, an exhibition necessarily has a deinstitutionalizing effect, because the true task of institutions consists in the suppressing or at least domestication of conflicts, which are supposed to be accommodated to regulated processes and procedures. The publicness of antagonism always has something disruptive in relation to the logic of the institution and the dominant ideology: it interrupts regulated processes, responsibilities, and hierarchies. The forms of action that have been demanded by institutions under post-Fordist conditions—like teamwork, creativity, and “participatory management”—are dissolved and they reaggregate to form new solidarities both inside and outside the institution. Indeed, every genuine antagonism breaches the walls of the institution.

One might therefore say: the exhibition (*ex/position*) leads to an *opening of the institution*. That is to say, the *ex/position*, which is nothing other than the breach in the walls of the institution, leads into the open space of the public sphere. As *ex/position* it is a *positioning*: a form of taking position. And as *ex/position* it leads out of the institutions of art and the field of art—and into political practice. The artistic as well as curatorial function, understood as the organization of a public sphere, thus consists not least in the political opening of the institution of which it appears to be part. Or, to put in the words of Leonard Cohen,

There is a crack in everything,  
That's how the light gets in.