

BOOK REVIEW: Oliver Marchart, *Conflictual Aesthetics*

Art under the Lens of Political Theory: Oliver Marchart and the Aesthetics of Explicitly Political Art

Lilian Kroth



Political theory meeting art doesn't necessarily culminate in a declaration of the arts always and everywhere being political – it can be quite the opposite. In his recent book, Oliver Marchart bundles texts on theatre, dance, public art, curatorial concepts and biennials for a project that fragmentally tries to understand a history of political art. *Conflictual Aesthetics* reads not only like a stocktaking of artistic activist practices, but also as a handbook – in its most positive sense – for the question 'what makes art explicitly political'. *Conflictual Aesthetics* is not a phenomenology of the conflictual or an analysis of political emotions, it is an aesthetics of the sublime of the streets and the public spaces and whose main concern is less high art than the aesthetics of slapstick (p 188). Even though it therefore becomes unapproachable to any politicality on more subtle levels, and struggles with bridging the space of the political and the space of arts beyond the analogical, the achievement of this is a refreshing and clarifying trial to refrain from an overall inflationary use of the term 'political art'.

Following Marchart's earlier projects like *Post-foundational Political Thought* (2007), *Conflictual Aesthetics* is based on the political event, reverberating the 'political difference' in French left-Heideggerian philosophy. The author calls the crossing of the line of politics towards the political the 'Davidian moment', when artists start to 'use their skills in the service of a common good' (p 16). This goes back to the revolutionary art of 1789 in France and Jacques-Louis David, who became a member of the Jacobins and a political deputy under Robespierre. On the one hand, this unleashes artistic activism from a fashionable 'turn' of recent developments in the art field as being, according to Marchart, rather a 'perennial turn' (p 41), although this remains attached to an aesthetics and politics that has

been criticised for its ‘exceptionality’.¹ On the other, it traces the activity of arts becoming political back to a politicality emerging during the time of the French revolution. This crossing encompasses a variety of contemporary artist groups working with socially engaged art, participatory art, public art and institutional critique and relates them to ‘the’ event in European history. Through writing art history from the ‘Davidian moment’ on, he traces a seemingly francocentric line in the work of the Guerrilla Girls, Gran Fury, Group Material, Tucumán Arde, Dada, etc.

Marchart alludes to a virulent theoretical–practical paradox of the relationship between the political in artistic practices in questioning its ‘primordial politicality’, in a seemingly similar movement of declaring the private as political, which then in turn confronts the lack of a need of politicality beyond private actions. In Marchart’s picture, it is Jacques Rancière who provides the ‘philosophical legitimacy’ within the field of arts, as in Rancière’s conception of the distribution of the sensible there seems to be no need for explicitly political art anymore. ‘Although Rancière’s theory is widely read as a new approach to political aesthetics, it is actually antipolitical, as it provides the art field with ideological arguments against any explicit politicization’ (p 14). The lesson to be learnt from activist practices who have witnessed a ‘return of real politics’ within the art field seems to be temptingly simple: ‘Art is political when it is political. It is not when it is not.’ (p 14)

By taking propaganda, in a more general and neutral meaning, into account, Marchart necessarily takes a distance from a range of twentieth century philosophers who have ascribed propaganda only to fascist politics. In Walter Benjamin’s conception, politicisation and aestheticisation are not symmetrical crossings between arts and politics, but are, rather, asymmetrically connected to left- and right-wing politics.² Marchart attempts to go back to ‘propaganda’ as a technical term, which since the *Propaganda Fide* of 1622 has been eager to disseminate the ‘correct view of reality’ rather than to conceal it, which is why Marchart distinguishes it generally from the aim to manipulate (p 31). That might be one of the outstanding aims of his book: to reclaim ‘propaganda’ in a non-right way for political art, with which he enters, self-evidently, unstable grounds. The necessary precondition for propaganda is, as Marchart writes, successful agitation: ‘If propaganda is, in essence, about connecting people with the correct view of reality, then agitation is about *disconnecting* them from doxa’ (p 34). He traces the concept of agitation back to the Greek ‘protrepis’: ‘the method of disrupting ideological and dogmatic opinion through strategies of surprise, shock, dissuasion, and estrangement, with the intention of bringing to the fore facts, information, analysis, and critique’ (p 35). The difference to what Marchart declares as individualistic provocation and annoyance seems to be, again, marked more by social-

1 For this criticism, see Emily Apter’s *Unexceptional Politics: On Obstruction, Impasse, and the Impolitic*, Verso, New York, 2017

2 See Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 2008, pp 41–42

political criteria – of collectivity – than by qualities or nuances of expression. Marchart leaves the sensuality in which agitation may take place decidedly unexplored – and by that he successfully refrains from depicting what this conflictuality feels like on an affective level. Marchart pursues less a phenomenology of the conflictual than an ontological ontology of the conflictual. ‘Being touched by antagonism’ means to be agitated by the ‘asubjective and anobjective’ force of the political, and to be out of one’s bodily and mental comfort zone – may it be sleepless, nervous or hysterical (p 39). The book does not focus on what makes these agitations political per se, but rather on what makes them political *through* the power of organising, through bringing them into the public and turning them into politics, through ‘transubstantiation’ (p 41). At the end of the book, we discover some religious connotations again, when Marchart takes Derrida’s ‘...to come’ for the ‘prophecy’ of the time loops of artistic preenactments (pp 181–186).

The politics of theatre and dance are both entangled in the question of the site and its communality between the artistic, the social and the public. The artwork on a gallery wall will have trouble to make trouble, in Marchart’s sense – or, as it seems throughout the book, needs a further antagonisation beyond the work itself. Marchart’s conflictual aesthetics seems to be most inclined to the performative arts – or let’s say the performative aspects of artistic practices, which, through the backdoor, may enter a variety of primarily non-performative work as well. Whereas theatre struggles for the right to speak (and to be heard), dance seems to have the potentiality to bridge the micro-and macro politics of bodies – as the singular plural or as a collective body. Dancing becomes interesting as a part of protest, not only as supplement to a particular suffering and remedy (p 79) but also as a structural component of political acting. For this, Marchart connects dance and Hannah Arendt’s concept of political acting, and clarifies how dance’s ‘fun’ and Arendt’s ‘public happiness’ may relate to each other. The passage towards politics demands a conflictuality, which forces ‘everyone to position themselves on this or the other side of a political antagonism’ (p 95). As emphasised repeatedly, this needs ‘organisation’, but is not to be achieved only through intention. Performances like those by Public Movement (www.publicmovement.org/about) show how an artistic performance can develop into a political event, not least through the circumstances of re-enactment. Their *How Long is Now?* in their *Summer 2011* performances was, according to Marchart, not an ‘artistic reenactment of a political event’, but a ‘political reenactment of an artistic event’ (p 95). Whether it is a pre-enactment of the political event or an ‘*artistic anticipation of a political event to come*’, as Marchart describes it in the later chapter ‘time loops’ (p 177) can neither be intended nor decided before – which is nonetheless no excuse for not *trying* to make it happen. It is, so to say, a ‘warm-up for some future event’ (p 182). It won’t be antagonism itself, to be performed or preformed: ‘For if art – at some future point – is supposed to turn into politics, one has to pre-enact not antagonism ... but the structural features of political

action. This means to act, as it were, in a political mode even though the moment of the political might not have occurred yet.’ (p 178)

Biennials are of specific interest for Marchart, as they play – albeit as institutions of the art field – the game of international politics, faced with geopolitical differences and decolonial aims. The process of globalisation is not considered to be reducible to the expansion of the West, but entails its decentralisation. The ‘struggle for hegemony ... for a specific legitimate yet imaginary cartography of our world’, is not exhaustively fought out by politics and the economy. On the contrary, as Marchart claims, the art field ‘plays a crucial, and perhaps even cutting-edge role’ (p 156). ‘More than any other institution in the art field, biennials mediate the local, national, and transnational. In this context, biennials can also be called “hegemonic machines” that link the local and the global within the field of symbolic struggles for legitimation’ (p 156). That makes them examples of phenomena of what there have been attempts to capture as ‘glocalisation’. Despite criticism that the biennial format would bring the glamour of the global to the lure of the local (see Simon Sheikh),³ Marchart draws a counter-image, emphasising that biennials contribute, rather, to the decentralisation of the West (p 157). By doing so, he shifts the meaning of the ‘global’. The global doesn’t seem to be identified with the aesthetics and the hegemony of a well-established West celebrating its absorption of internationality; rather, the global, in Marchart’s sense, seems to be an actual power entailing dominance and expansion exercised from a centre. And what and where that centre is, is necessarily open in the first place. This leads him to an insightful comment, and furthermore to a ‘change of perspective’ regarding the relation between centre and the province: provincialism is not what we find besides or beyond the – oftentimes Western – centres, but what considers itself with an unshakable belief to be the centre, mistakenly. And, he adds, ‘hardly any city in the world is more provincial than New York’ (p 165). Marchart’s claims about the significance of the periphery and the provinciality of the centre burst with strength and clarity. Consequently, the only question that arises from this is when we might stop calling the West a centre.

Marchart’s lens is obviously that of conflictuality (p 179): ‘With a view toward the political event-to-come, artistic practice in the mode of pre-enactment has to be collective, organized, strategic, embodied, and conflict oriented. And if there is no conflict occurring, then you have to look for trouble. You have to see where the hidden lines of latent conflicts run, and you have to try to (re)activate them by reenacting their future reenactment. You’ll have to construct a time loop.’ (p 181) Somehow, naturally, next to the term antagonism, conflict is the one used very generously. Its origin in Marchart’s standing within the field of political theory is obvious, but for the arts field there is still the need of clarification or

3 Marchart refers to Simon Sheikh, ‘Mark of Distinction, Vectors of Possibility: Questions for the Biennial’, in ‘The Art Biennial as a Global Phenomenon’, special issue of *Open: Cahier on Art and the Public Domain*, no 16, 2009, p 73

delimitation concerning the contemporary forms of moralisation and criminalisation that have become virulent. What about the conflictual and antagonising effects that lead to criminalisation within the arts? Without necessarily going back into European history of the last century, do we witness the ‘culture wars’ being fought out in the arts field resembling criminalisation rather than politicisation, as Joshua Decter points out?⁴

Conflictual Aesthetics seems to be both a theoretical and practical intervention. Marchart delivers criteria that not only serve to classify whether works of art are explicitly political but also an instructive mode for politicisation. On the one hand, Marchart responds, in a captivating sharp critique, to a blurriness of the concept of the political in the fields of the arts and its consequences in terms of political impact and unrealistic self-understanding. On the other, the term ‘explicit political art’ may provoke a conception of ‘implicitly political art’. Is implicitly political art simply not political at all? The trouble of non-performative art being able to make trouble indicates a certain inclination towards specific media – namely theatre, dance, performance and curating. In the end, political art seems to abandon the subtle, for the price of being explicit, simplified and conflictual.

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Lilian Kroth is currently working on her PhD project on Michel Serres at the University of Cambridge. Prior to that, she studied philosophy at the University of Vienna and drawing at the University of Fine Arts Vienna. Her research interests, which also inform her artistic practice, are political philosophy, aesthetics and the philosophy of science and space.

4 See Joshua Decter, ‘Politics Burned a Hole in My Heart’, in *What about Activism?*, Steven Henry Madoff, ed, 2019, p 27