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ART AND THE POLITICS OF TIME-AS-SUBSTANCE

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What unites both classical realism and modernism is a resistance to, and downgrading of, political topicality in art. Both abjure the idea of art chasing the political vicissitudes of the moment in order to secure popularity, clarity of effect or didactic purpose. Indeed, both positions certainly concur on one thing: political topicality invariably leads to the sins of propaganda, moral righteousness and a paucity of affect. In Georg Lukács, for instance, the primary test of the good or successful realist novel is the complex distance it takes from a coarse naturalism and “the petty commonplace superficial truth of everyday life”; this is based, as is well known, on a rejection of literary characterization as the ‘mouthpiece of the Zeitgeist’ (following Marx’s literary reflections). The intellectual physiognomy of character should

...go beyond the correct observation of everyday life. Profound knowledge of life is never confined to the observation of the commonplace. It consists rather in the invention of such characters and situations as are wholly impossible in everyday life.

In other words, the compelling realist work instantiates the vivid and distinctive exception to the naturalist everyday and taken-for-granted. Similarly in modernist artistic theory it is the transmutation of the naturalistic sign (August Strindberg’s theory of the modernist image and Clement Greenberg’s theory of painterly modernism) that defines modernist painting’s exclusion from the world of everyday appearance and daily cognitive verities. The modernist painting must produce a dishabitation from ‘mere’ descriptive or appellative content. Of course, we know in actuality what all these positions end up producing: an inert classicism, on the one hand, and a modernist teleology of painterly form, on the other, that, in their respective ways, both fundamentally misunderstand and bypass the great technical and cognitive revolution of art and the avant-garde in the first two decades of the twentieth century, reflected in Lukács’ and Greenberg’s adventitious judgements on the avant-garde itself; Lukács preferring Maxim Gorky to James Joyce, and painterly figuration to photographic montage (John Heartfield), and Greenberg, demoting Constructivism, Dada and Surrealism to the level of ‘anti-art’, without any thought to questions of art and praxis, and the problem of art as ‘intellection’ (or ‘abstraction’ in Hegel’s philosophical sense), rather than ‘sensuousness’ per se. Yet, this shared antipathy on the part of a classicizing modernism and realism to the question of topicality and the everyday does point to a fundamental and recurring problem: what is the time of the
artwork? In what ways and to what ends is the artwork impactful, when it is released into the world and the circuits of reception?

What classical realism and modernism share is a sense that topicality – or everyday political relevance – is always temporally self-defeating, insofar as the would-be effectivity or empathic qualities of such works are always ‘after-the-fact’ given that a work’s political content never coincides with its projected or ideal audience, and, therefore, is simply an empty signifier of political commitment, rather than an actual and transformative intervention within a political process. Indeed, because the gap between ‘political effect’ and ‘political process’ is so great, claims to ‘political relevance’ are just hubris – particularly when such belatedness soon turns into the ‘political past’ and to the evocations of history. Moreover, as Greenberg and Lukács intimate, this constant dissipation of art’s political effect produces an internal pressure on the part of realist artists confronted with the iniquities and concerns of the moment, to trade in the clichés of struggle and resistance in order to secure a life for the image beyond fast-fading topicality, leading to all kinds of crude cognitive short cuts. Today this presumed ontological gap between ‘political content’ and ‘political effect’ is most famously pursued by Michael Fried and Jacques Rancière, in their respective adaptation of Roland Barthes’ late modernist notion of the ‘pensive’ spectator, who speaks for the ‘freedom’ of the spectator through his or her resistance to the entreaties of the artwork’s political disclosures and therefore to the would-be instrumentalizing production of the viewer as a subject of political truth. (This model is very much based on Barthes’ dislike of the declarative documentary image holding the spectator to ‘cognitive ransom’ – particularly the atrocity picture; Camera Lucida (1982) is his theoretical destruction of this ‘ransom’). For Rancière the freedom of the spectator (his or her emancipation) is premised on the intuitivistic assumption that people know all about the realities of global capitalism and therefore don’t need to be reminded of them; political art or a partisan politics of art, for Rancière, is a kind of pleonasm. But if Fried and Rancière recognize the limitations of art’s ‘political effect’, this limitation is turned, as in Greenberg, into a structural misapprehension of the purposefulness and critical horizons of art’s political function, by allowing the ontological gap between political content and political effect to stand in for art’s political value as such. As a result this position may legitimately define the limitations of the political effects and effectivity of art, but it does so without examining what this gap allows art to do politically.

The key issue, therefore, is how much the activist position and its ‘pensive’ critics both produce a reduction of the political. Once the political effects of art are predicated on a model of immediacy, instantaneity or transparency, naturally, it is no surprise that art is unable to live up to these criteria in any consistent sense, for each and every artwork ‘arrives late’ in some sense, that is, arrives athwart the demands and requirements of direct action, given these requirements and demands necessarily shift and move on. Of course, under certain circumstances this belatedness does in fact break down, narrowing the gap between the cognitive disruptions of the artwork and its possible connection to the political process. We see this most obviously in the revolutionary or pre-revolutionary moment, or during a period of state crisis (as during May 1968 in Paris or recently in the events preceding, and after, the demonstrations in Tahrir Square in Cairo in 2012), in which the quickly devised and distributed artwork responds to the demands and contingencies of direct action, by taking an ideological lead – the poster, street theatre or documentary film. But overall, this is rare, driven as it is by the requirement of art under these conditions to embed itself without ambiguity in the political process in order to meet the political ‘situation’ head on. Hence, this state of exception is not the situation for most art, most of the time. To assume otherwise – as a number of activist artists willingly do – is to produce and reproduce the cognitive short cuts, instrumentalities and hubristic ambitions that
the critics of art’s ‘political effectiveness’ repeatedly decry. Indeed, on this basis, to derive art’s political function wholly from this state of exception – that is from a sense of the continuous and chronic crisis of capitalism – is to permanently assert that the time of the artwork is *always* grounded in the heat of revolutionary time or activist time and any other time – pensive-time or contemplative-time, the time of the long-view – diminishes the active relation between artwork and political process. This is why the activist time of the artwork is driven by the need of the artist to meet the daily demands of the political process; in fact, to find a secure point of identity with it, for not to do so is to fail the demands of the political process itself. Consequently the outcome of this is art’s relationship to politics has no interest in being ‘out of time’, for this abandons art to what no politics of art can possibly contemplate without courting ‘ineffectualness’: temporal delay or invisibility. Precisely because art is able to produce extra-artistic use-values, it must act on these possibilities at all times, in time, and assume a directly transformative role for itself in everyday experience.

If this has an air of desperation and hysteria, this is because the relationship between art and politics in these terms produces a positivistic inflation of art as praxis. In other words, in assuming there can be no special dispensation for art praxis as opposed to political praxis, art must always drive to align itself directly with the political process, be cognate with it, on the basis that the political slogan shouted on the street or printed on a leaflet and the image and text produced for a publication or for use on a march share a symbolic language. As such, the drive on art’s part for an immediate relevance and functionality suffers from a fundamental temporal impatience, that fails to relativize both the temporality of art and political praxis, as a necessary condition of the emancipatory capacities of art and the production of an emancipatory politics of time. This is why this kind of openness to temporal compression derives from an activist indifference to the atemporal labours of art itself, to the fact that the job of art under capitalism is not just to return a picture of capitalism to capitalism, but to make the free labour of art a space of resistance to the temporal pressures of the value-form (a pressure which politics itself is unable to escape).

There is another kind of temporal functionality at stake for art, therefore, under these conditions. The true functionality of art’s emancipatory force lies not in its daily symbolic and political contestation with capitalist reality – as part of a counter-hegemonic struggle it can’t possibly win – but in its non-identitary value, those long-range strategies of negation and counter-imaginary disaffirmation, that refuse or step outside of the historical reifications and temporal compressions of the capitalist value-form and capitalist work-time itself, and that point to a time beyond the production of value. Competing politically on value’s terms, therefore, by constantly traversing the intensity of the moment and capitalism’s production of the everyday, weakens the very thing that art and revolutionary politics are able to share: a withdrawal from the centripetal pressures of the moment and ‘relevance’ in order to produce use-values that are not at the behest of instrumental or capitalized reason, of transparency and immediacy. Thus stepping aside, stepping back from, withdrawing, disappearing, finding the renewal of speech in silence, is not the temporality of artistic quietism or political muteness, but a space where the work of non-identitary production can be done. For it is in this space that the extensity and expanded research conditions of art as the negation of capitalist temporality (compression, repetition, foreclosure; the dead time of commodity-time) can be produced and secured. Winning the ‘open-time’ of research-time for art, then, is crucial in enabling art to produce a range of critical and non-compliant use-values that generate a complex normativity for praxis. And this has been the fundamental epistemological and ontological drive of the avant-garde in the twentieth century down to today, through the conjunction of general social technique (post-medium specificity) and art’s participation in the collective intellect.
The avant-garde is not a succession of non-painterly styles, but, rather, a struggle over art’s emancipatory place in the division of labour. Thus the appropriation of time – of research time – as a centrifugal and extended time is where art makes its emancipatory and cognitive stand in a culture where the instant judgement-at-glance, the instant political intervention, and means-end accounting and effectivity prevail. Hence art praxis and political praxis cohere not under the exigencies of the political process as such, but under the critical space of the research programme as the laboratory and political crucible of art’s negation of the value-form. The temporal compression of art praxis into the moment and intensity of the activist confrontation, then, is not actually the problem here: art praxis, at some points and under certain conditions, needs to open itself up to these forms of spontaneity in order to drive art and politics together – for maximum clarity of effect. Activist praxis is certainly correct on this. But, under the day-to-day operations of capitalist culture this compression is a manifestation of how the political use-values of art are easily confined to a weak and enfeebled concept of art praxis as representation. By ‘beginning and ending’ in direct political action the actionist model fails to see how complex normativity in art actually derives from the productive gap between the temporality of art praxis and the temporality of political praxis. Art praxis functions as political praxis not on the basis of its emancipatory identity with direct action, but on the basis of its emancipatory withdrawal from the logic of the commodity’s temporal compression and acceleration. In other words if art’s time is a time that is ‘out of joint’ with the calendrical time of value-form, it is also out of time with the assumption that the best way to confront the compression and acceleration of this calendrical time is by operating in its (linear and centripetal) space.

Hence art praxis-as-research practice is the name I give here to the antipodal form of this calendrical logic; that is, it seeks to produce a temporal space of production and reception for the artwork that require the kind of affective and cognitive skills on the part of the artist and spectator, that negates both the compressive space of the capitalist sensorium and its compressive activist counter-force: a centrifugal space in which the artist, artwork and spectator (and other future spectators) are part of an unfolding and dispersed process, whose counter-hegemonic content is built and shaped by those who participate in the production and reception of the work and its extension into other research contexts. This is not counter-hegemony as a model of activist disclosure, but as a form of Bildung; of art as a space of re-functioned subjectivization; of political self-transformation as a condition of a collective process of learning. ‘We don’t need life as a work of art, or the work of art as life. We need a total reassessment of what art can give us and how it becomes part of our everyday life’, as Chto Delat put it. As such this centrifugal space for art is by definition a post-medium one; a space in which the concept of the ‘art in the expanded field’ loses its morphological and sculptural characteristics as ‘installation art’, to become the technical transformation of the conditions of art’s temporal and spatial possibilities as such, as was the readymade before it.

The time of the research programme and the centrifugal conditions of art’s post-medium condition – its dispersed production and reception – is the time of art’s reception, then, pulled out of its familiar compressed ‘judgement at a glance’. Post-1960s neo-avant-garde art and film, of course, drew on this as the defining principle of its anti-spectacularity (as in Andy Warhol and Bruce Nauman). But today such formal extensity cannot in and of itself secure the living time of an anti-calendrical temporality. Six-hour marathon films or videos of repetitive gestures or movements, or mundane events – the spectacle ‘slowed down’ so to speak – have become a pathologized and aestheticized (and as such an interminable) antipode to temporal impatience, cognitive compression and judgement at a glance. This is why my understanding of centrifugality in the contemporary post-medium artwork, with its disparate constellations of meaning,
cognitive discursiveness, has little in common with the mere extension of the artwork’s duration; centrifugality is not simply the negation of instantaneousness. Rather, as the space of Bildung, it is where art-praxis as research is both enacted and made legible as time-as-substance, that is, the space where the cognitive particularities of art are given palpable form and therefore made amenable to those who are willing to give over their time to the ‘distracted’ and ‘incomplete’ character of the process. ‘Giving over time’, accordingly, is an active force here and not a masochistic act of perseverance in the face of the extreme durational forms of early neo-avant-garde work. It is a ‘learning space’ in which the production of a counter-subjectification is the outcome of the beholder’s affective investment in the centrifugal and distracted conditions of the work’s reception.

The intersection of praxis-as-research in production and centrifugality-as-beholder research in reception, therefore, defines a kind of readerly ideal horizon of art’s temporality in a cultural context where compression and speed are fused to the instantaneousness of aesthetic judgement, and where the fast cut and the cognitive switch within network culture weaken thinking and judgement at a distance. The issue, therefore, of art’s living temporality, is crucially a question of the artist’s or group of artists, enacting in a discursive and ‘unfinished’ form, the extended temporal conditions of praxis-as-research. For it is precisely through this unfinished exchange between the research immanent to the work, and the (undecided) research interests of the beholder/participant, that the temporality of the artwork can secure a working space of resistance and noncompliance with the prevailing commodity-time and as such, in turn, contribute to the production of a politics of time-as-substance. Non-compliance or temporal obstinacy becomes, therefore, not a matter of masochistic perseverance, or contemplative embeddedness, but of cognitive extensity, in which the time of the artwork is the time of its extension by the beholder/participant into living social relations. This is a temporal situatedness, then, that avoids the epistemological trap of defining the time of the artwork simply through its singular confrontation with the time of compression. Art’s relationship to Bildung, consequently, is closer to primitive cadre building in which artists, beholder/participants and future beholder/participants (as artists or non-artists) participate in an extended community of producers and users in which the time of art’s production, and the time of its reception, establish an emancipatory connection. Situatedness, in these terms, provides the extended material conditions for the temporal life of art praxis-as-research.

Where and how art praxis situates itself in relation to political praxis and the political process is therefore crucial. In pursuing the temporal conditions of the research programme under the routine conditions of capitalist reproduction, art is necessarily both behind and in advance of the political process. This is because there has to be a gap or fissure between the time of art’s production and reception and the actualities of the production of art as a mode of political engagement in order for art to do its non-identitary and negative work. Otherwise the praxis of art is indistinguishable from the compressive means-end rationale of non-aesthetic reason and therefore from the language of determinate ‘results’: the neo-liberal language of accountability and activist impatience alike. Consequently, reason in art is the cognitive, representational and praxiological work art does on those conditions and structures of foreclosure and compression, as the constitutive means by which art is sustained as an open-ended and speculative research programme.

The asymmetry between the ‘time’ of art praxis and the ‘time’ of political praxis is an emancipatory one, then, insofar as it registers art’s fundamental place within the critique and displacement of time of the value-form as the time of measure. Capitalism must always restore time-as-measure (value) at the same as it destroys, time-as-substance (the interrelationship of past-present-future; time as cooperation). Indeed, capitalism kills time as a condition of
reifying time-as-measure. But the very fact that time-as-measure has to restore itself reveals how uncertain and contested time-as-measure actually is. It can never permanently enforce its conditions of reproduction, given that the real subsumption of living labour is never permanently secure. This is because the time of production is the time of cooperation – and not machinic linearity – the time-of-measure is always under threat. In fact, one of the fundamental contradictions of the present period is that capital’s attack on the mass, factory-based labour militancy of the 1970s, through the neo-liberal reorganization and disaggregation of the labour force, is that it released new forms of collectivity and exchange at the point of production, which workers in the new service and cognitive sectors have willingly taken advantage of. Now, this does mean that time-as-measure is being destroyed ‘from within’, as some post-operaist thinking presupposes.¹³ Capital’s analytic instruments are constantly being renewed and refined across the new service sector in order to deal with living labour’s (relative) erosion of time-as-measure released under the new conditions of production.¹⁴ But nevertheless, time-as-cooperation as time-as-substance is the obstinate and immanent force that makes a politics of time indivisible from any revolutionary post-capitalist perspective. Art praxis-as-research, therefore, is the self-conscious manifestation of this time-as-substance. But this is not because today’s avant-garde has a coherent ‘politics of time’ or claims to operate in solidarity with the organized working-class. Rather, the expansion of art praxis-as-research is the consequence of art’s transformed place within the intellectual division of labour. Under neo-liberalism’s pressure to transform the free labour of art into abstract labour, on the one hand, and the dissolution of art into actionism or aestheticist compliance, on the other, reflection on time-as-substance has become crucial to the survival of art’s (socialized) autonomy. The ‘politics of time’ immanent to living labour’s resistance to time-as-measure necessarily converges with art’s resistance to the cultural and political forces of temporal compression. This is why the fundamental struggle for any politics of art today is not the struggle for representation or praxis alone, but for the radical untimeliness or atemporality of art’s conditions of production and reception as such.

Notes

2 Georg Lukács, ibid., p. 100.
5 Lukács, op. cit., and Greenberg, op. cit.

