

FEINART Public Lecture, 5th March

The Problems and Horizons of Socially Engaged Art Today

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At the start of the training programme for FEINART (the Future of European Independent Art Spaces in a Period of Socially Engaged Art) I thought this lecture would be the perfect opportunity to provide a theoretical conspectus of socially engaged art now. This would allow us, I hope, to address a range of problems and issues that face socially engaged art today, and, as such, in many ways, reflect the critical complexities of FEINART as a research training programme. In doing this we will review the social, political and cultural formation of socially engaged art.

But in pursuing this I want to avoid some of the usual art theory byways and points of reference.

This evening I want to focus on two areas in particular: the relationship between socially engaged art and theatre and dramaturgy, and more broadly – philosophically - the relationship between democracy, the in-common, and freedom.

Socially engaged art in its current forms has largely been with us since the mid-1990s, as post-conceptualism migrated in the early 1990s, through its expansion of the installation-form, into a reassessment of live-work or performance as an artistic research paradigm. This involved an excavation and refunctioning of the histories of performance and post-object art, as the basis for a model of social interaction that valued the discursive, dialogic and conversational aspects of conceptual art production, but placed these linguistic processes at the service of social exchange and action. This model of social exchange and action, as in Suzanne Lacy's, *New Genre Public Art*,¹ focused on the collaboration with non-artistic participants, as the basis for work on a particular set of social or political issues that affected a given group or community. The needs and interests of the participants, would shape the

¹ Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Bay Press, Seattle, Washington, 1996

content and outcome of the project. Similarly - but from a more directly functionalist position - the innovative US-based group Haha, as part of the exhibition, *Culture in Action* in 1993, (*Flood*) established a hydroponic allotment to grow bacteria-free green vegetables for AIDS/HIV sufferers.² This was accompanied by educational activities and discussions on the AIDS/HIV crisis.

Crudely we might say, these two forms of practice represent two key critical-theoretic forms of the 'social turn' in art since the mid-1990s: work that seeks to learn from and with, a given group of non-artistic participants, in the pursuit of research into, and action on, a pre-given problem or question, that is, not determined by the expectations of the artist or artists involved; and work which adopts the notion of social engagement as a localized problem-solving intervention by artists in conversation with a group or community, who direct the outcome of the intervention. The former, essentially, invokes some loose notion of direct democracy as a way of establishing a new social mandate for art: the integration of the artist, his or her materials, and the site of the work, into a simultaneous process of production and reception with its audience, as a democratic erosion of the distinction between making and doing; and the latter, a notion of socially engaged art as a utilitarian action and form of advocacy based on alliance with a group or community. Indeed, Haha's practice set down a marker for the speculative non-art function of socially engaged art for the next 25 years: namely, the split between art-praxis as politics and art praxis as *political praxis* itself. Socially engaged art, becomes, not so much art as collaborative practice, or activist art, but a form of political activism *pursued by artists*.

These are not the only two socially engaged forms of note, but they do represent, across their multiple adaptations and revisions by many others, what is decisive, politically, formally, and culturally about the rise of socially engaged art practices over the last 25 years: the abandonment of object-making as a focus for aesthetic self-actualization, in favour of temporary, interrogative, research-based, socially interactive, extra-artistic collaborations, with groups and communities that have little or no professional relationship to art. Where

² Haha, *With Love from Haha: Essays and Notes on a Collective Practice*, edited by Wendy Jacob, Laurie Palmer, and John Ploof, WhiteWalls, Chicago, 2008

the artist-produced object stood as the focus for aesthetic judgement (even during the high-water mark of the museum-based installation art in the late 1980s and early 1990s), here it is relegated (if it appears at all) to one small material component of an extended field or ensemble of events, interactions and processes, that privilege audience immersion in a fluid, extended and indeed, unbounded cognitive field. In this sense, aesthetic judgement, is exchanged for a shared process of learning and discursive assimilation, in which the apprehension of the work in extended time for those directly involved as participants and participant-viewers, is never finished.

Why this extensive shift in production and reception though? Why this refunctioning of the dematerialized art object well beyond the notion of art as idea? For, remarkably, socially engaged art's spatial and interactive extension of the experience of art is not confined solely to expanding the constellational form of post-conceptual installation to include live action and dialogue, as if its primary concern was to animate the installation-form as performance. Rather, by breaking formally and politically with the dominant market nexus of contemporary practice - studio/gallery/sales – as the fundamental condition of its critical challenge, it opens up art again to its modern non-art legacy - to social dramaturgy and to praxis - in ways that radically re-orient the skills, horizons, materials and affective attachments of the artist. Indeed, the refusal of the official modes and sites of art's production and reception provides a whole new framework of training and knowledge for the artist external to artistic craft, aesthetic judgement, and the wretched approbations of collectors.

But if the political shifts inside post-conceptualism during the late 1980s do not alone explain these changes, neither does the notion that socially engaged art is merely a refunctioning of the social dynamic of the constructivism of the historic Russian avant-garde. Socially engaged certainly draws on this legacy, necessarily so, but we might also say it confronts a range of problems particular to itself, and as such has had to find new resources to negotiate an unprecedented set of social and political conditions in which art and the artist have found themselves : that is, a financialized capitalism, which, from the 1980s to the new millennium, has destroyed the economic prospects of most artists, hyper-inflated the asset status of art to a point of oppressive and comical wealth accumulation for those who, so-called, 'invest in art', and, in turn, weakened the social base of artists in the interests of this general

entrepreneurial production of the art object as aesthetic 'dry goods'. In the 1990s and early millennium the extensive re-financialization of art as an asset class, enmeshed artists - still notionally attached to the market - in an anxious pursuit of gallery endorsement and approval. We might say, consequently, that socially engaged art, is a collective and systematic resistance to the neoliberal containment of the social use values of art and to the democratic hollowing out of culture and the public sphere.

To say, therefore, that socially engaged art turns to social dramaturgy and to social praxis in order to open up a new space for social use values in defiance of this hollowing out, is to recognize that socially engaged art sees in social dramaturgy and social praxis a way, not just of arresting the cultural claustrophobia and anxiety of the age, but of the establishment of a new, or new/old, way of thinking about the production of art directly in relation to its audience. So, when I talk about theatre and dramaturgy playing its part in the social turn of contemporary art, I'm not talking about any old theatre and any old dramaturgy, as if art, forced into a narrow aesthetic and formal corner, wanted simply to 'meet its audience' and was happy to renew its relationship to performance. On the contrary, socially engaged art in its discursive, dialogic and praxiological forms, has since the mid-1990s extended and re-adapted what the post-literary radical theatre of the 1970s initiated, but was unable to develop consistently, as a consequence of the rapid ideological falling away and public support for new (counter-cultural) modes of theatre in the 1980s, given the generalized attack on public funding for the arts in Europe, North America and South America. That is, socially engaged art brings into focus again the productive notion, in this non-dramatic theatre, of art in the wide sense as a space for collective and social research in situ with others, or what I've called in my previous writing on socially engaged art, a commitment to *Bildung* (communities of self-learning).

One theatre figure that stands out in this process of reengagement and reassessment with the new social theatre and a commitment to *Bildung* is the dramaturge Augusto Boal (who died in 2009). Boal has, in fact, now become one of the named precursors of socially engaged

art (Pablo Helguera, Claire Bishop)³, given his focus on collective practice and non-theatrical modes of staging, in particular his non-theatrical interventionism, 'Invisible Theatre', in which anonymous actors and non-actors intervene into, and destabilize a given social situation, as a reflection on power and hidden injustices (evident, for example, recently in fictional form, in Lar von Trier's adaptation of Boal in his film *The Idiots* [1999] and in Chto Delat's filmed choral performance from 2011 *Das Lehrstück vom Un-Einverständnis (The Lesson on Disconsent)*, in which actors dressed as police disrupted the performance. Here I am less interested in the specific details of Boal's dramaturgy, than his epistemology of socialized theatre more broadly, and his genealogy of the crisis of theatre that he developed in the 1960s, and published in *The Theatre of the Oppressed* (1974). For it is in the shift to a new kind of participatory theatre that he announces in this writing, that we can see why socially engaged art makes the moves that it does, albeit, under a very different set of conditions to the crisis of democracy and the public sphere in (pre-neoliberal and colonial) Brazil and Peru, out of which he developed his theatre.

In his 2000 introduction to the *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Boal provides a brief analysis of the history of theatre from the Greeks to the modern period, in the form of a succession of decisive splits between illusion and actuality, actor and character, the individual and the collective. My words here, are an expanded extrapolation of his arguments.

Early Greek theatre on stage in Delos and Athens (7th century BCE) presented a compact version of the wild, ecstatic, ritualized, fertility field dancing and processions, known as the dithyramb. Performed by boys and young men these performances became part of an urban cult of the God Dionysus in a which a Chorus would dance and sing in dedication to the festive spirit of the God. This led, in turn, to a call and answer dialogue between the Chorus and an individual singer, whose visual and auditory autonomy on stage eventually became key to the transition of theatre out of dance and ritual into drama and into its dominant form, tragedy: that is, the emergence of a protagonist, who speaks, or more precisely asserts himself and externalizes his feelings. In the myth of Greek dramatic origins, this shift to the protagonist

³ Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook*, Jorge Pinto Books, New York, 2011, and Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London and New York, 2012

and dialogue was supposedly propelled into public view and acclaim by the choreographer and singer, Thespis, who, in one recorded performance in front of the Athenian statesman Solon (c630-558 BCE), in c520 BCE, spontaneously went 'off-script', contradicting the Chorus, and expressing his own views much to the displeasure of Solon, who saw immediately the emotive power and public influence such direct speech might have on spectators. Aristotle famously responded to this development (200 hundred years later) by emphasizing, how this tension between protagonist and Chorus, introduced the idea of *Empathia* onto the stage: instead of the singing of the Chorus and the ritualized fellowship of the dancers creating a harmonious accord between the spectator and the performance – the pleasure taken from a drifting of consciousness – the words of the protagonist interrupted the thoughts of the spectator.⁴ The spectator now focused his attention on the thoughts and actions of the protagonist, attaching his emotions to those created by the actor. In other words, the focused detachment of speech from the Chorus, produced an emotional connection between actor and spectator that made the spectator susceptible to the influence of what was being said, even though the words were being spoken by an actor. Aristotle, though, was no defender of Thespis. He realised, like Solon, that as a public forum, theatre, if it wasn't to give authority to those without the right of authority, needed to attach its newly found freedom in speech to the exemplary lives and travails of those who best know the meaning of freedom and the value of speech: the aristocracy. Questioning, limiting, challenging and harnessing this power of direct speech and unauthorized advocacy, therefore, has been central to the conflicts over the public function of the theatre from its early modern inception to the early 20th century: for state, local authorities, offices of the law, financial backers, the release of the protagonist from the Chorus (or dominant ideology) had to find some recognisable and negotiable way back into the space of the Chorus, so to speak, and social stability - the play should not spill its discontent into the world: Shakespeare's theatre contained the spirited voices of the 'rabble' but it was not, and could never be, a theatre of the rabble; John Gay's *Beggar's Opera* (1728) was an unprecedented satire on Georgian corruption and a sympathetic account of the criminal demi-monde, but the escape from disenchantment and poverty were, in the end, for Gay and other playwrights of the period, best served, if possible, by a good marriage; theatre, was the place for the merry clash of 'low' and 'high' and the luck of the hero's or

⁴ Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated by Anthony Kenny, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013

heroine's 'daring do'; in Henrik Ibsen's late enlightenment theatre of reason, the detachment of women's speech from that of men - invariably their husbands - is accompanied by women's humiliation; in *Hedda Gabler* (1891), for example, Hedda's resistance to the tyranny of a bad marriage and domestic oppression, turns into a tragic submission to avoidable shame.

But for Bertolt Brecht, the first systematic critic of the long history of theatre's Aristotelian deference to tragedy or the comedic reconciliation of men and women to their fate – of a cheerful making do, as the way of the world - the struggle for unauthorized speech should not be left to a comfortable complicity between the play's author and the conservative expectation of the audience. Indeed, the charm of the emotional bond between the actor and the audience, that Aristotle thought so powerful, and therefore in need of responsible direction, should be broken, stripped out, changing passive sympathy (and tears) for a sense of active involvement in the issues presented by the play. And the best way for the author and actors to achieve this is to step back from the collusion between acting and characterization. That is, the actor should disabuse the audience of their solemn and melancholy investment in the would-be theatrical integrity of the performance on stage, by stepping out of character (singing songs, introducing asides, changing voice, switching parts without emotional investment in one particular character). As Boal says:

The actor is no longer hidden behind the Mask [the Mask of Ancient Greek theatre]; he emerges and reveals himself beside it, openly contradicts it, and enters into conflict with it. What Thespis had done with the Chorus, Brecht now did with the Protagonist through the *Verfremdungs*.⁵

Fate, the transformation of the failure of politics into tragic enclosure, the pacification of the audience as wistful sympathisers, the fictive self-sufficiency of the play, were breached. But for Boal, Brecht failed to take the next step: the dismantling of the fourth wall and the upending of the dominance of the actors' and playwright's control over the audience itself. For, in the end, for Boal, Brecht defended his privileges as Poet, and his role as conduit of creative Truth, failing to release the collaborative potential of the audience into the theatrical experience. Thus, what the politics of the theatre needed was not just the dismantling of

⁵ Augusto Boal, 'Preface to the 2000 Edition', *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Pluto Press, London, 2008, pxix-xx

characterization as the bearer of truth, and the construction of the spectator as the sceptical interrogator of words, things and persons, but the liberation of the audience.

Should actors and characters go on dominating the stage their domain, while I sit in the audience? I think not. I think we could go much further: we need to invade! The audience mustn't just liberate its Critical Conscience, but its body too. It needs to invade the stage and transform the images that are shown there.⁶

The Spect-Actor, as Boal calls this liberated spectator, is given, thereby, unprecedented responsibilities and agency: he or she enters the theatrical space not just as a potential co-producer, but as a social protagonist in alliance with the actors, author or dramaturge, effecting both how and what the theatrical experience incorporates and encompasses, and the social reach of theatre beyond its bourgeois centres of power, influence and competence. For, indeed, what Boal means here specifically by the Spect-Actor, is someone who has no professional understanding or involvement in culture, who comes to theatre as excluded from its authority, and yet has everything to gain by their involvement. This incorporation of the culturally excluded defines, crucially, what Boal was to designate as the three models of a popular protagonist theatre: *Simultaneous dramaturgy* ("the spectators 'write' simultaneously with the acting of the actors"); *Image theatre* ("the spectators intervene directly 'speaking' through images made with the actors' bodies"); and *Forum Theatre* ("the spectators intervene directly in the dramatic action and act").⁷ The spectators are still guided by the dramaturge and actors, but under the proviso that they can change anything in the text and presentation, and, as such, are able to shape the outcome of the production through taking on the responsibility of co-creator; indeed, the Spect-Actors 'write' and 'rewrite' the text which the actors then perform; and, in some instances, the Spect-Actors take on the responsibility of acting themselves.

This model of collaboration had a profound influence on a post-literary theatre in the late 1960s and 1970s, pushing theatre into the enviable position of a privileged form within the counterculture, insofar, as its new actionist, collaborative and pedagogic identity, enabled it

⁶ Boal, *ibid*, pxx

⁷ Boal, *ibid*, p102

- of all artistic forms - to appear to come closest to what Aristotle designated as the most important of all the arts: politics.

Politics is the sovereign art for Aristotle precisely because it is able to incorporate both the major and minor arts and sciences into its broader theoretical engagement with power, thus enabling politics to reflect critically on all the fields of action of the arts and sciences.⁸ However, the political privileging of post-literary collaborative theatre of the 1970s, developed a very different understanding of theatre's relationship to the idea of political sovereignty. Theatre intersects with the sovereignty of politics, not because theatre presents us with a focused framework to assess the consequences of individual actions, conflict, and the passion of commitments, but, rather, because, it provides a space of shared learning, in which actors, authors and audience, are able, through a process of collaboration, to create a politics - or a vision of politics – that is projective and transformative, directly aligning, what is seen, and felt, and conceptualized by spectators and actors alike on stage with the possibility of political action outside of the place of performance. The sovereignty of politics in the new theatre, lay, therefore, in theatre's capacity for something greater than the representation of the drama and conflicts of politics and political advocacy; sovereignty lay, in the active control of the production by those involved in various political struggles over the creative process, enabling their (subaltern and non-professional) voices to shape the character and form of the performance.

Moving beyond Brecht's critique of Aristotelian drama this Boalian dramaturgy, then, produces a new sense of political sovereignty in theatre: a space of intersubjective and intra-subjective experimentation in which the intersection of many unauthorized voices, transforms given expectations, identities and relations as a living and urgent reflection on the future forms of the political. In short, Boalian theatre's radical Aristotelian de-Aristotelianism, becomes an experimental and open-ended space for new forms of democratic speech, challenging, deconstructing and reversing, the means by which the experimental forms of politics in theatre are invariably closed off by what we might call traditional literary theatre's

⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*, translated by Ernest Barker, revised with an Introduction and Notes by R.F. Stalley, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995

management of hubris, inasmuch, as in traditional literary theatre the cost of the radical protagonist's transgression of boundaries has to be re-assimilated into the greater rationality and order of external authority if political reason and democracy are to be restored. Indeed, the political sovereignty of this conservative theatre is the political sovereignty of the *unillusioned*; and is no stranger to the left as it is to liberals and the right.

It is no surprise, consequently, that socially engaged art in the mid-1990s emerges from this history. For this history offers the visual arts, given the chronic fetishization of the art object under financial capitalism in the 1980s, a renewed space for its own long-standing engagement with the extension of form into participatory practice.

But if this reconnection with participation and collaboration allowed art to reconnect with debates on the theatre and 'art in the expanded field' the shift to socially engaged art was not a dialogue with theatre as such. What socially engaged art takes from Boal is not expressly the crisis of theatre as a bourgeois public form, but the crisis of the relationship between artistic production and its audience as a result of the market's repression of the meaning and reach of art within a narrow range of social use values. And, consequently, if art is to find a space beyond these constraints, it has to divert its energies into forms that bypass the nexus of studio/galley/sales, where the repression of art's social use values is secured and maintained. Hence it is mistaken to assume – as some advocates of socially engaged art do themselves – that social engaged art is principally a renewed manifestation of art's links to political activism. In a trivial sense, this is true; socially engaged art's participatory forms, establish a mandate for art's involvement in political change. But like Boal's theatre, it is also, in its most ambitious forms, an experimental intersubjective space, in which making and doing, are conditioned by the indeterminacies and contingencies of group learning across skill sets, that defines in the end a very different understanding of making and doing in art: one, in short, that is first and foremost not conditioned by the authority of those who exercise cultural power over those who have little, or no, access to such power.

As such through its broader commitment to self-learning (*Bildung*), socially engaged art's philosophical concerns, are far deeper and wide-ranging than the renewed commitment to an 'activist politics' in art. This is because socially engaged art operates on an additional front

to the question of direct political action: that is, it operates precisely through its substantive connection to questions of autonomy and freedom. If socially engaged art functions within a Boalian and post-Brechtian field of action, it does so, also attached to art's late modern critique of the notion of artistic subjectivity as the fount of free will and free expression. Collaboration and participation, in other words, are not simply a functional widening of the field of art's political action, but a deepening of the late modern critique of the association of freedom with individual self-actualization and self-expression, that art in particular, under the bourgeois nexus of studio/gallery/sales, has since the middle of the 19th century secured for itself. Indeed, the thought of freedom in and through art historically has been overwhelmingly subordinated under capitalist democracy to an ontology of subjectivity, and, continues, to play its conservative part, in these terms, in the widespread reaction to socially engaged art as bureaucratic and instrumental. But if freedom is not a thing ascribable to the power of appearing to oneself as the sovereign subject of one's action, then, appearing to oneself as an artist as the sovereign subject of one's own artistic self-actualization is no less problematic. As Jean-Luc Nancy argues in *The Experience of Freedom* (1988):

it is no longer a question of winning or defending the freedom of man, or human freedoms, as if these were goods that one could secure as possessions or property, and whose essential virtue would be to allow human beings to be what they are...Instead it is a question of offering human beings a freedom [a moment of liberation]....In all movements of liberation, as in all vested institutions of freedom, it is precisely this transcendence which still has to be freed.⁹

In this sense the attachment of freedom to the sovereign self-actualization of the self – through art - can only deny, the unnamed possibility and potentiality of freedom, given that freedom is the unforeseeable and ongoing encounter between the self and others. Freedom is the specific encounter of the self with itself *outside* of itself; and as such, is always in a state of instauration (renewal) or inauguration as the basis of its encounter with the world. I quote Nancy again:

⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom*, translated by Bridget McDonald, with an introduction by Peter Fenves, Stanford, Stanford University Press, p13

Freedom is properly the mode of the discrete and insistent existence of others in my existence, as originary for my existence. But at the same time, it is also the mode of the other existence insisting in my identity and constituting (or deconstituting) it as *this* identity: for relation is also...relation to “me,” and it is also in relation to “me” that “I” am free, or that “I” is free.¹⁰

In other words, if freedom is constituted in finite form, through both relation and the critique of relation (the disidentification of the self from relation), freedom is formed neither from the resources of the self nor from those of the (institutional and judicial) in-common alone. That is, if singularity is in, and of itself, a plural derived from the in-common, nevertheless, the in-common is not thereby the means by which freedom for all is secured. For singularity can only reside in the renewed commitment to test or challenge the in-common in the name of a justice of the singular-plural not circumscribed by the prevailing idea of the in-common. The in-common then is anterior to the self, but not as a first condition. It is rather, that shared space from out of which the singular plural emerges to secure the making and renewal of the in-common as a free community of the incommensurable. Accordingly, the in-common is not an internal rule or stable measure of community, or an external unity or regulative ideal imposed on singularity, but the emergent space in which the free incommensurability of singularities is experienced by all as being-in-common.

This ideal understanding of freedom as a free community of incommensurable singularities has defined the ambitions of a range of work that has been produced under the name of socially engaged art since the beginning of the millennium, even if Nancy is rarely singled out as a theoretical ally of Boal. This is because there is a sense in which socially engaged art, philosophically at least, provides not just the space for the integration of art into community, but an unprecedented reflection on the capitalist limits of the in-common, and as such the ways in which neoliberalism, or mature capitalism, deprives us of our capacity to design the life we want. And this requires, in the spirit of Nancy and Boal, if we are to establish a clearer sense of the political in socially engaged art, to move beyond the commonplace notion of socially engaged art as ‘community building’, to see what properly defines social engaged art’s historical shift beyond the nexus of studio/gallery/sales: precisely, the development of

¹⁰ Ibid, p69

Bildung as a series of experiments in the dismantling and reconstruction of democracy itself. As such, unauthorized speech, in these terms, becomes, the collaborative, discursive and dialogic material of a contingent making and remaking of the relationship between freedom and direct democracy, in an interactive, but self-contained form.

One of the platitudes of the late Cold war and early neoliberalism, was that there can be no democracy without capitalism: market justice balances social justice, insofar as market justice is a fairer mechanism for the distribution of values. Today, financial capitalism, constrained by the vicious circle of growing technological competitiveness/the increasing expulsion of living labour from the system/and reduced investment opportunities in production, sees democracy and the discretionary interference of politics on the free operations of the market as essentially coercive and intrusive. In fact, one of the political functions of neoliberalism has been to protect market justice from social justice, on the grounds that social justice is illicitly normative, whereas market justice is held to be rational and neutral.¹¹ Hence in a world in which social justice is considered, from the perspective of the performance of markets, to create 'moral hazards' for capital, financialization has successfully strengthened the notion that the only true evaluation of your standing as a citizen is your performance as an employee. It is no surprise, therefore, that financialization has hollowed out people's relationship to, and understanding of, democracy, for the monetization of an increasing number of transactions and relations has further weakened the scope of social justice to affect people's participation and faith in social transformation. In fact, financialization, politically, is increasingly micro-intrusive. As financial markets grow and expand into formally non-market sectors and services, these multiple forms of financial extraction, extend the predatory disposition of financial rationalization to everyone.¹²

Thus, if the sovereignty of politics and the sovereignty of theatre as a political space are united in socially engaged art, it is nevertheless socially engaged art's privileged, relationship to the philosophical critique of the subject through the critique of authorship, that lifts the

¹¹ See Wolfgang Streeck, *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*, translated by Patrick Camiller, Verso, London and New York, 2014, and Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi, *Capitalism: A Conversation*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2018

¹² See, Costas Lapavistas, *Profiting Without Producing: How Finance Exploits Us All*, Verso, London and New York, 2013

experimental form of socially engaged art's critique of democracy beyond the political in art as 'direct action'. This is why, although, socially engaged art clearly encompasses and re-functions political activism and 'community building' through art, it's the making and re-making of the intersubjective and intra-subjective space of praxis, that, overall, represents what is distinctive about the constructive and critical potentiality of socially engaged art in the long run. This demonstrates above all else a residual and powerful commitment to the question of autonomy in art, even if socially engaged art is operating at the very edges of the experience of art as political praxis, and as such at the edge of autonomy. In other words, defending the sovereignty of politics in art requires, at the same time, acknowledging the limits of the political in art, as the very condition of art as a 'thinking of', and a 'thinking with', singularity, politically.

Thus, subsumed under the mandate of experimentation in socially engaged art is the same problem that Boal's post-Brechtian dissociation between art-praxis and art *as* social praxis was confronted with as the anti-colonial context of his participatory theatre were swept away by state repression in the late 1970s. If the ideal state of theatre is action, why not pursue action alone? Why *art* as action? As Boal says: "The practice of these theatrical forms, creates a sort of uneasy sense of incompleteness that seeks fulfilment through real actions."¹³ This is why in Boal's later writing he talked of theatrical experimentation as a process of rehearsal, a trying out of alternate forms, implying, that the possibility of action and the new relationships establishes produced theatrically, is, in the end, linked principally to the political future and those political forces that will follow. This subjunctive understanding of the political form of theatre – the production of a state of affairs that has not yet occurred¹⁴ - is, in fact, what sustains the necessary fictive condition of art praxis as political praxis in socially engaged art, in contradistinction to, the assumption that in order for art praxis and socially engaged art to do their jobs properly they have to *become* political praxis in order to respond effectively to present conditions. Interestingly, even someone as committed to art political praxis as political praxis, as Oliver Marchart, insists on the importance of the subjunctive. In his, *Conflictual Aesthetics: Artistic Activism and the Public Sphere* (2019), he

¹³ Augusto Boal, op cit, p120

¹⁴ For a discussion of the subjunctive in relation to political aesthetics, see Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review*, New Left Books, London, 1979, pp218-219

talks of the, “difficult problem of how art can relate to political activism”¹⁵ and, as such, defends the need for socially engaged art to re-temporalize itself as a *pre-enactment* of the future. Artistic pre-enactment critically extrapolates from contemporary political realities to an “image of our social or political future,” he says.¹⁶

Art practices, in an entirely experimental way, may therefore pre-enact political ones – even though they will never be fully identical with political practices (because they would cease to be art). However, if we wish to increase the chances of artistic practice in the moment of future conflict, artists would be well advised not to imprison themselves within the spontaneous ideology of the art field.¹⁷

But for Marchart pre-enactment is not a rehearsal of, or for, the future, in Boal’s sense. Because art political praxis cannot predict the conditions and reality of any future event, which are indeterminate, the artwork as pre-enactment cannot therefore act as a guide to the future, in any specific sense. Yet, nevertheless, he calls for pre-enactment as a kind of practical intervention in which artistic experimentations function as “training sessions that provide us with the necessary skills necessary to engage in the real thing.”¹⁸ - a training for the future. Which is an odd way to resolve the question of experimentation and political praxis in art and ‘how art can relate to the problems of political activism.’ Practical political skills, imaginary resources and critical concepts are developed from within the realm of art. Which, in a sense returns the problem art and political praxis to its beginnings: art political praxis and political praxis are reconnected and realigned, but, now, from within the sphere of art itself. So again, we are faced with the same question: why art as art political praxis, and not just straightforwardly politics as *political praxis*? To produce a range of political skills and strategies from within art seems, politically impractical.

All the same, what Marchart appears to be arguing - which I agree with – is that socially engaged art - socially engaged art that produces intersubjective, intrasubjective and dialogic experiments on the crisis of politics and democracy – needs to operate, in the *here and now*,

¹⁵ Oliver Marchart, *Conflictual Aesthetics: Artistic Activism and the Public Sphere*, Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2019, p176

¹⁶ Ibid, p177

¹⁷ Ibid, p178

¹⁸ Ibid, p182

as opposed to collapsing the fictive and imaginary resources of art into the utopic. The subjunctive, is futural, connected to the imaginary, certainly, but it is not utopian, that is, it remains as art in the domain of practical struggle and everyday problem solving.

To summarize then: the key issue that faces socially engaged art in the present period is how to address the sovereignty of politics and the sovereignty of politics in post-Brechtian theatre and dramaturgy from within this gap in art and theatre between art political praxis and political praxis. In other words, the gap between art praxis as political praxis and political praxis, as such, is neither something that can be ignored in the hope that art not praxis will prevail, nor prematurely closed down in the name of art's direct political efficacy and the exit from art. Indeed, the gap, between art political praxis and political praxis is where art, in fact, produces its social autonomy, that is, where it produces the active space in which the self and other, singularity and the in-common free themselves – under the name of experimentation - from determinate identities and reified outcomes. In this sense, art's subjunctive and futural resources actually opens up a space for real politics external to art, but without assuming that what art does in this case has no real transformative relationship to the political. On the contrary, art produces its critical and imaginary resources – non-dominative modes of relation, attention and self-affection – directly from its socially limited field of operation. Thus, by closing the gap between art political praxis and political praxis, art political praxis, in a reversal of the conventional expectation, in fact, loses its connection to reality, insofar as, the active convergence of art with what passes as the everyday and political reason, loses its capacity for critical distance, and as such weakens its subjunctive and imaginary link to the future.

