

Politics and Aesthetics in the Arts

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Contesting the arts: politics and aesthetics

SALIM KEMAL AND IVAN GASKELL

On June 30, 1939 the Fischer Gallery, Lucerne, Switzerland conducted an event that brought together art, aesthetics, and politics in a particularly acute manner. This was the principal auction of so-called “degenerate art”: 126 paintings recently removed from German art museums under Nazi auspices. The actions of all involved resulted from political and aesthetic judgments on both politics and art. The politics of Nazism and Fascism – that is, of those who caused the works of art to be consigned – has often been described as having a constitutive aesthetic dimension; while those who made bids did so after having made political judgments about the probity of their actions, as well as aesthetic judgments about the works offered.

Nearly sixty years later, members of the US legislature fiercely attacked the National Endowment for the Arts in the wake of several controversial art exhibitions. In consequence, its funding was severely curtailed, and its terms of operation altered. Those attacking the NEA did so in part on ideological grounds (believing that the arts should not be publicly funded), and partly on ethical grounds (believing that the arts should not attack American values, iconically represented by the flag, nor condone gay or lesbian eroticism). All of these criteria led to political judgments expressed in the political forum centered on Congress. But they also involved aesthetic judgments which in turn affect the terms according to which the NEA itself is able to make aesthetic judgments.

This juxtaposition of the Nazi attacks on so-called “degenerate art” and Congressional attacks on the NEA and art it has funded is, of course, far from original, and is blunt rather than subtle. Yet, whether warranted or not, most importantly in this context this juxtaposition is itself political. As a political statement, it stems from

anger. Anger is so prevalent, whether explicitly or implicitly, whenever politics, aesthetics, and the arts are discussed together that it is almost always implicitly a fourth concept. It is a topic to which we will return.

The three concepts explicitly in play – politics, aesthetics, and the arts – interact with one another on many occasions, and not only, as in the instances cited above, when tensions run high. That those occasions are so many and varied is due to the elasticity of the concept of politics. Politics has long outgrown matters of government. Now it covers the mechanisms by which relations among variously – often differentially – empowered individuals and groups are conducted. Any relationship among humans, or between humans and other entities (such as “the environment”) can be said to have a politics. In the cases of both the Nazi auction and the diminution of the NEA mentioned above, not only is there a politics of art, but also a politics of race, and of sex and sexual preference. We can speak of this development as a politicization of discourse. Its sustaining premise is that every relationship is a power relationship. Therefore any relationship among humans that purports to be principally mediated by, or sustained by, a shared interest in the arts, for instance, is *ipso facto* a power relationship. In this case, aesthetic and political judgments may become indistinguishable.

Politics comes in many shades, and not only of opinion. Its tonal range is immense, from the black-and-white of the politics of nations, classes, and parties, to the subtle grays of loosely defined interest groups. There is the passive politics discernible initially only to the analyst, and the active politics of the aggrieved. When we speak of the politics of art and the art of politics we speak of two quite distinct things. When we speak of the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics we also speak of two quite distinct things. This variety is hugely extended when we bear in mind the oceanic breadth of issues that politics can comprehend. How, then, are we to chart a course through such vast and often stormy seas? Our contributors offer a diversity of case studies as islands in this ocean, each with its own unique geography, where various currents meet. The same current may swirl past different islands, but no two occupy the same reach of ocean.

To discuss these issues, the chapters that follow are divided informally into three successive groups, though there are interconnections and overlaps between all of them. To set out the progress of these chapters briefly, before providing some more detail about each:

recent new historicist writings have argued for a particular relation between politics, understood as the state, and aesthetics, referring especially to drama.¹ At the same time, recently critical theory has maintained that some strains of contemporary philosophical writing have introduced a particular kind of politics by letting aesthetic issues inform philosophical discussion.² Working within the background of these writings, the first two chapters, by Louis Montrose and J. M. Bernstein, question a number of assumed connections between aesthetics and politics, suggesting that these are more complicated and nuanced than people have supposed. The following four chapters, by Anthony Pagden, Neil McWilliam, David Carroll, and Daniel Cottom, take up the understanding of politics by examining issues of identity and alterity, concerning strategies of dealing with the self and the Other, whether in terms of ethnicity, class, or subject. They implicitly operate in a context of a well-established understanding of politics that encompasses issues of nation, colonialization, class, and gender. Pagden discusses the ways in which colonialism dealt with the Other, in this case some influential French thinking about the New World. Carroll, McWilliam, and Cottom then look at the political formation of the aesthetic community itself in nation, class, and subject. The assumption of unity usual to the “nation” is disrupted by the classes and subjectivity that constitute that nation. To the considerations in the three preceding chapters, Cottom’s discussion adds a recognition of the important element of an affective relation – anger – toward the questionable unities of state, nationhood, class, and culture. The final two chapters – by Peter de Bolla and Michael Kelly – offer accounts of confrontations with works of art, often of an irreducibly visual character. They explain the construction of the aesthetic community further by specifying the political nature of the objects that modernism reveres for perceived qualities such as unity and disinterestedness.

Let us look at some of the issues and arguments in more detail. The section on conceptual interactions begins with a chapter by Louis Montrose, “‘From the stage to the state’: politics, form, and performance in the Elizabethan theatre.” Writing against the background of new historicist conceptions of the politics of state and stage, Montrose demonstrates how art and its institutions – here the newly emergent professional theatre – may or may not be implicated in the exercise of political authority in the narrow sense. He takes issue with arguments that would tie Elizabethan theatrical practices

to those of the Elizabethan state, and that in turn would tie Elizabethan theatricality to political absolutism. He notes that both the theatre's proponents and antagonists acknowledged the power of plays to effect moral changes in audiences for both good and evil. He pays particular attention to the equivocal role played by the Lord Chamberlain's Men (William Shakespeare's company) in the conspiracy of the Earl of Essex in 1601 by means of a performance of *Richard II* procured by the conspirators. He links this with a development of "personation" that gave importance to human agency in the shaping of affairs at the expense of divine providence. He discerns ambiguity, rather than straightforward ideology, in the relationship between theatre and state. The court and the theatre cannot be taken to have been symbolic or ideological equivalents: neither could the theatre fully sustain the mystique of the court, nor subvert it. So even in a relationship between political and art institutions that would seem to be theoretically simple in comparison with other relationships involving our three terms – politics, aesthetics, and the arts – matters turn out to be far more complex and equivocal than earlier commentators have suspected, or theoreticians might necessarily suspect.

In "Republican beauty, sublime democracy: civic humanism in Gadamer and Rawls", J. M. Bernstein examines terms of judgment in politics and the arts. He diagnoses that category confusions between the two result from an unsatisfactory resolution of ambiguities in Kant's conception of the aesthetic. He argues that Hans Georg Gadamer, relying on Kant, erroneously seeks to validate a grammatical connection so as to politicize, or "ethicize," the aesthetic; and he proposes that John Rawls does much the same in the other direction in constituting his notion of political liberalism, thus aestheticizing the political. Bernstein's motive, though, is not to chastise philosophical impropriety, but to draw attention to formal constraints and their breaching. These constraints matter, he contends, only insofar as they prohibit the realization of desires (here the desires signified by the miscegenation of the political and the aesthetic) which are themselves, in his account, powerful elements of cultural modernity.

These first two chapters define certain boundaries to interactions among our core concepts of politics, aesthetics, and the arts, in both historically pragmatic and contrastingly theoretical terms. The second group of chapters advances the discussion of politics into the realm of the constitution of alterities and selves, in part by turning to

the formation of judgments. The exercise of judgment is both political and aesthetic. In his chapter, "Travelers, colonizers, and the aesthetics of self-conception: Denis Diderot on the perils of detachment," Anthony Pagden argues that even in the midst of imperial and colonial adventurism, some thinkers claimed that the commerce deriving from it blunted collective aesthetic sensibilities. For Diderot, the experience of travel, as well as settling, among people who were radically different from one's own had a decivilizing effect. In such cases – most spectacularly in that of the European penetration of the Americas – a diminution of moral sensibility followed from an inability to respond aesthetically to the conditions of alterity. Commerce ensured that this dulling effect should be returned from the deracinated colonists to their originating culture, leading to a decrease in its ability to foster an imaginative response to the new and the strange, and an inability properly to exercise a capacity for wonder. In Pagden's description of Diderot's critique of European expansion, politics and aesthetics are mutually dependent in the confrontation with alterity. Aesthetics is implicitly the barometer of politics, and the fraying of aesthetic judgment the consequence of imperial politics.

In the second of our chapters devoted to cultural alterity, "The aesthetics of nationalism and the limits of culture," David Carroll broaches the subject of nationalism. He contends that in recent analyses which examine the imaginary rather than the material constituents of nationalism, the aesthetic element – found mostly in the work of those poets and historians who define national identities – has been largely ignored. He holds that literary concepts of nationalism – though mutually or internally inconsistent – can nonetheless be instrumental in constituting a national mythology. Further, he argues that an imaginary process of fabrication is integral to all forms of community. He analyzes the internal contradictions of nations: how accession by enculturation (such as acquiring linguistic proficiency) invariably exists in tension with exclusion by racism, for instance. Although criteria of accession and exclusion may be aesthetic, they are simultaneously political. Following Homi K. Bhabha and Jean-Luc Nancy, Carroll seeks to locate this tension internally, by identifying alterity as being within communities. Thus the image of a people is the repression of the alterity that actually constitutes it. Therefore that image is invariably fractured, incomplete, or deferred. In these circumstances, Carroll points to the work of Edouard Glissant on the poetics of creolization, and the vital

instability of cultures constantly affecting each other as a pertinent aesthetics of culture.

David Carroll directs our attention towards internal contradictions in terms of national definition, demonstrating how a politics of nationhood can prompt a revision of aesthetic categorization, which then in turn could presumably modify perceptions of power relationships, insofar as they are conceived of aesthetically. While Carroll considers definitions of nationhood, Neil McWilliam, in his chapter, "Peripheral visions: class, cultural aspiration, and the artisan community in mid-nineteenth-century France," looks at internal divisions within a polity in terms of class. He examines the position of artisans who experimented with the possibilities of class permeability by aspiring to produce high-culture artifacts, and explores how art might provide the means of social redefinition. On the one hand, this was coupled with a tendency on the part of apologists to ascribe a moral vigor to the popular classes, uncorrupted by waste and privilege. On the other, conservatives insisted on cultural control as a means of maintaining deference for established hierarchies. This case study demonstrates how complex internal maneuverings for political advantage within a nation or polity can be articulated by means of competition for the definition and control of the arts. This is the case even when two major sets of protagonists share a fundamental conception of the responsibility of artists: in McWilliam's study both conservatives and artisan radicals believed that artists bore a responsibility for the moral well-being of the nation. Both shared a belief that art provided the moral instruction necessary for political responsibility, leaving the fundamental paradigm unchallenged.

If, in McWilliam's account, culturally ambitious artisans were in fundamental agreement with, even if at a disadvantage to, the bourgeoisie, true alterity lay in the emergence of the wage laborer whose artistic and social paradigms were quite distinct, and whose concerns were historically bound to eclipse those of the artisans. In this case the axes of alterity are almost exclusively between males, and seem to rescind any appeal to emotion. Yet, as we remarked earlier, wherever judgment is necessarily exercised – as in politics and aesthetics – it can be contested, giving rise, at times, to anger. Using examples from feminist scholarship, among others, Daniel Cottom recharges anger in relation to criticism with political urgency in his chapter, "The war of tradition: Virginia Woolf and the temper of criticism." He seeks a politics of anger beyond definitions

that would confine anger to either a lack of self-mastery – reputedly female – or the irony of angry counsel against anger, or as a force of self-revelation “that breaks through regulating forms to reveal a hidden, inward, disruptive truth.” Cottom observes that anger in texts (including, implicitly, his own) can go underground and therefore be difficult to locate, not necessarily declaring itself. He contends that emotions belong to our social beings, and therefore that our consideration of anger can be removed from a connection with neurosis to an association with cognition, rhetoric, and politics. Thus the slippery truth of anger invigorates a political perception of culture that cannot be confined to academic discourse, but must employ “fighting words” in contested domains of social action. These have involved the internal alterities in the US addressed by the civil rights and antiwar movements, feminism, and gay and lesbian rights and AIDS activism. Cottom’s comments take on a particular urgency in the light of Paul Jay’s effective exposure of the compromises of the academic regime in his discussion of the compromises of deconstruction.³ Cottom’s trenchant chapter offers an institutional critique of the academy, leaving the dispassionate reader wondering whether its forms and traditions can accommodate debate in terms adequate to the political task he adumbrates. Although Cottom’s observations are predominantly about criticism and its temper, they might well be extended to art production in these and other areas where aesthetics interleaves a politics of anger. These four chapters have therefore addressed aspects of alterity under the broad headings of colonialism, national and class identity, and the politics of subjects, their emotions and gender. The final group of chapters echoes some of the themes already touched on, but concentrates on the issues of confrontation with the irreducible art object.

In “The discomfort of strangeness and beauty: art, politics, and aesthetics,” Peter de Bolla deals with what he conceives as a basic evasion in our discussions of art: “that distinct area *of experience* that is called in the post-Kantian tradition affective response.” Proposing that to regard art as no more than representations of ideologies allows its trivial politicization, he seeks to identify the peculiarly aesthetic aspects of the work in its relation to the affective response. He points out that Kantian aesthetic judgment is not purely subjective, but is also compelled by objects themselves. He explores the possibility that, as he puts it, “something is known to us in aesthetic experience which is not available to us as knowledge in

other forms of experience.” He then approaches a work of art with this conception of the sublime as a form of knowing in mind, his chosen example being the paintings of Barnett Newman. He concludes from a description of a confrontation with such a painting that “the worldliness of the political must always remain adjacent to the timeliness of the aesthetic.”

If Peter de Bolla approaches the encounter with the art object in a redefined Kantian manner, in “The political autonomy of contemporary art: the case of the 1993 Whitney Biennial,” Michael Kelly calls attention to a philosopher who he sees as Kant’s late modern counterpart, Theodor Adorno; for it was Adorno who famously asked how is art possible in the wake of an ethical and political outrage as extreme as Nazi genocide. Kelly offers observations on Adorno’s exposition of the relationship between art and politics which suggests that each needs the other to define itself. He does so in the context of a detailed examination of the 1993 Whitney Biennial exhibition and the critical reactions it elicited, many of them politically based. That this particular contemporary art exhibition should have served as a focus for debate about the relationship between art and politics is well known, occurring as it did at a crucial time in the public debate (or so-called “culture wars”) about politics and the arts in the US that saw the acknowledgment of symbols of culture as weapons on a battlefield. Kelly uses the occasion to render an account of confronting art itself, but also to describe various terms of encounter in that particular political and critical climate. He argues that theoretical accounts from Kant to Lyotard of the relationship between aesthetics and politics are not relevant to contemporary art, and that a recognition of the political autonomy of art, grounded in contemporary art practice, can allow us to redefine the issues, looking to contemporary art itself – rather than theory – for guidance.

The willingness of theorists to look attentively at the arts as untranslatable phenomena with their own dynamics that can contribute uniquely to human knowledge – whether through the exercise of judgment, or recognition that “the artwork is a knowing” (to cite de Bolla’s epigraph) – marks an advance on an earlier state of affairs in which discursive reductionism obtained. Thinking along these lines, in which the aesthetic is revitalized to deal with the irreducibility of the artwork and our experience of it, in turn obliges us to reconceive the political in relation to art and human cultural activity as a whole, including politics more narrowly defined.

Contesting the arts: politics and aesthetics

Analyses of the dynamic between our three core terms – politics, aesthetics, and the arts – have never been more at odds, but, as the chapters that follow demonstrate, existing suppositions about their relationship to one another have never been more contested, nor more fragile.

Perhaps one conclusion to be drawn from a voyage around this far-flung archipelago of politics and aesthetics is an acknowledgment of the politicization of discourse in the late twentieth century. The contributions to this book show that such a politicization, to be successful in sustaining intellectual attention, can never be reductive. Rather, it must incorporate modificatory terms and criteria – such as those of aesthetics – if it is to address complex questions raised by the arts and other forms of discourse in a suitably complex manner. Politics – however broadly defined – cannot alone offer adequate explanations of human creativity and communication. But then neither can aesthetics; and their necessary symbiosis is itself complex, calling for examination that most likely will undermine some of our most cherished assumptions – cherished because they are not disinterestedly academic, but affectively embroiled suppositions and convictions about self and Other. In this mental and social territory, anger will never be far beneath the surface, for, as the seventeenth-century historian and divine Thomas Fuller observed, “Anger is one of the sinews of the soul.”⁴ We must learn to harness it both effectively and justly.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Stephen J. Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988).
- 2 See especially Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourses of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), which identifies numerous aesthetic currents in contemporary philosophy, and a counterargument in N. Kompridis, *Crisis and Transformation: The Aesthetic Critique of Modernity from Hegel to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
- 3 Paul Jay, “Bridging the Gap: The Position of Politics in Deconstruction,” *Cultural Critique* (Fall 1992), 47–74. Jay tests various competing notions of deconstruction’s relationship to politics by offering his own analysis of Jacques Derrida’s essay, “The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils” (*Diacritics*, 13.3 (1983), 3–20). As Jay notes, “deconstruction has been largely responsible for helping us to see how the

assumptions, principles, and aims of academic institutions are structured and delimited by the languages and terms they employ and the philosophical assumptions that guarantee and legitimate them.” Some would say that anyone acting on this awareness might be said to be acting politically, yet the action that would seem to be called for by deconstruction to undermine instrumentality would seem to be an endless deferral of action other than deconstructive analysis itself, which thereby constitutes a kind of political *mis en abîme*. In response, Jay describes Derrida’s formulation of the “double gesture” to achieve a balance between critique on the one hand, and the grounds of its own validity on the other, to evade sterilization. This in itself, then, becomes the perceptible political position of deconstruction: that is, it is amenable to other political agendas for its use, in Jay’s words, is “ultimately dictated by the politics of each critic who draws on it as well as by something inherent in deconstruction itself.”

- 4 Thomas Fuller, *The Holy State and the Profane State* (London, 1642), book 2, ch. 8, “Of Anger.”