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ABSTRACT

Aesthetics and politics are intertwined in our everyday encounters and even nonverbal encounters are negotiations of meanings, values, and means of representation. The aesthetic political negotiation of urban encounters is politics beyond consensus and dissensus: an open-ended process of altered perception. Perception of difference, a feeling of safety, and a form of distanciation are required for the political potential to be actualized. This article begins by discussing urban encounters and the notion of politics. Politics takes place in the public sphere and is actualized in political negotiations, which in ephemeral encounters take the form of pondering, or hermeneutic understanding and judgment. The second section discusses the prerequisites: safety, distance, and difference. Two points are made. Firstly, the political encounter contains a practical-ethical demand for effort in our everyday life. Secondly, training aesthetic sensibility assists in this pursuit. This article is an example of an approach of inquiry that can be called political aesthetics.

INTRODUCTION

One lunch break, returning from the campus cafeteria in central Helsinki, I passed a pile of electric scooters partly blocking the sidewalk. I looked at them lying on the ground in a quite unnerving, messy heap, and raised an eyebrow. I turned my eyes back to where I was heading, met the eyes of a person coming from the opposite direction, saw them see my reaction and the eyebrow that I had raised. The face I saw was somewhat amused, a bit questioning—as if asking "aren't you over-reacting a little?" The other person then looked at the pile and made an almost blank face that to this day remains indecipherable.

This article is about our everyday urban encounters such as the one described above. I argue that urban encounters can be situations of aesthetic political negotiation. Behind my usage of the term "political aesthetics" is the idea that aesthetic and political judgment determine each other reciprocally and intertwine in our interpretive perception. Put shortly, by political aesthetics, I refer to a point of view of research that has at its centre (1) conversation that (2) challenges and negotiates partitions and hierarchies of (3) interpretative and evaluative perception, and its (4) relevance to decisions concerning our life in common.

The article has two parts. The first focuses on urban encounters and their political potential, and the second discusses the prerequisites for the potential to be actualized. The argument goes thus: urban encounters are relatively anonymous, ephemeral, and often nonverbal situations of face-to-face communication between human agents and take place in urban space. This space is characterized by the presence of strangers and a concentration of perceptible differences. In urban encounters, a feeling of safety is required for an engaged but distanced perception of difference, i.e. an openness towards otherness that is a prerequisite for an inclusive public sphere. Within this sphere, political negotiation in the form of judgments and hermeneutic understanding of meanings, values, and means of representation takes place. I propose that this article is an example of applying a political aesthetics viewpoint to different everyday situations and phenomena.

It all—aesthetics and politics, meanings and experiences, life and being human—comes down to one feature: difference. Difference in the sense that things change and the world is in flux, and in the sense that people are different: we have (and are) a plurality of perspectives, each with a unique appearance and fusion of traditions. So, at the core of this paper is difference,

difference in a dynamic and productive sense, as a space for self-distanciation and learning. It does not refer to any idea of static differences responsible for stereotypes, but difference that enables change and seeing otherwise. Finally, at the core of this paper is an open attitude towards difference and the negotiations it makes possible.[1]

1. POLITICAL AESTHETICS AND URBAN ENCOUNTERS

The situation described at the beginning of the introduction was an example of what is meant by an urban encounter in this paper. Encounters are researched in several fields, but the concept remains under-theorized.[2] Helen F. Wilson's conclusion from her extensive meta-research on how encounters have been studied in geography is that "encounters are meetings where difference is somehow noteworthy."[3]

In relation to the study of encounters, this paper is a typical one. Here are some common qualities and views Wilson discovered, and that can also be found in this paper to some degree: (1) there is, perhaps, a disproportionate interest in ephemeral encounters, in the fleeting.[4] (2) There is an emphasis on the multi-sensorily experienced affective qualities and somatic dimensions of encounters—in this paper, exhibited by the focus on the atmosphere of trust or the feeling of safety.[5] (3) Encounters happen at borders, and create and dissolve them. Consequently, there is a widely recognized potential for learning and politics in encounters: encounters enable the negotiation of new articulations of power. (4) Relatedly, the accumulation of effects of encounters is recognized in the literature, and through multiple encounters, our values and behaviour can change in time. There is potential for altered understanding and learning. (5) Lastly, a concern can be found as to what is the macro-level impact of these micro-level encounters and how the scaling up happens.[6]

The body of work that could be labelled "urban encounters" stems from post-colonial studies. It focuses on social difference: how it is created and negotiated in the encounters. The urban chance encounters with different social classes or ethnicities in streets, parks, and public transport have been at its core.[7]

By "urban encounters" I denote everyday situations of face-to-face interaction between human agents who are strangers to each other. Furthermore, and this must be emphasized, the focus is on what could be described as minimal encounters, i.e. the most common urban situations that last barely some seconds, where the communication is likely to remain nonverbal: an exchange of

looks, slight corrections of walking trajectories, micro-expressions and, perhaps involuntary bodily gestures and mediated messages through clothes.

Clearly, we should not expect much from a single encounter in respect of altered understanding, well-structured debate, or clarity in the subject matter, argument, or response. The effects and importance come from scaling-up, from repetition and variation, from the temporalities involved, the slow soaking in or random and rare instantly transformative moments made possible by the sheer quantity of encounters. Rather than singular situations, urban encounters and their potential should be considered in relation to the everyday urban life and the recurring daily contact with strangers.

THE POLITICAL AESTHETICS OF URBAN ENCOUNTERS

The political is something fundamental, an existential—that is, a defining—dimension of human life, and, like the social, as Chantal Mouffe writes, "a necessary dimension of any societal life." For Mouffe, the political is inherently conflictual, and the conflictuality thus resides on the ontological (as opposed to the ontic) level.[8] From the opposing end to Mouffe on the spectrum of politics-as-antagonism and politics-as-action-in-concert, Hannah Arendt positions plurality as the main principle and prerequisite of politics, "of all political life."[9] The political is born out of difference that defines humanity, the difference of circumstances, of bodies and viewpoints, the difference that makes anyone other to anyone else. The difference, plurality, does not necessarily imply conflict—even though it often does.

Bart Van Leeuwen compares agonism and cosmopolitanism as dispositions towards cultural differences in daily urban life. Both of the opposite views see it as important for the public sphere, or the "civil modus," to register differences in encounters in multicultural cities. The cosmopolitan form welcomes the encounter with difference enthusiastically and as a chance to learn. For the agonistic form, "the acknowledgement of difference ought to be present in daily encounters not so much in order to enrich one's horizon, as to engage in passionate but civil debate concerning stereotypes, value systems and ways of life."[10] In my understanding of political negotiation, agonism and cosmopolitanism are equally important dimensions of the encounter. In other words, my conception of politics encompasses both dissensus and consensus, antagonism and cooperation.

Like the agonistic disposition, I appreciate the negotiatory dimension of our encounters. Equally, in line with the cosmopolitan form, I adhere to seeing something else than conflict taking place in encounters with difference. It is the openness to otherness, and the in-between of one's former beliefs and what is to come, a space of learning, forming, and transforming that defines the political as an existential. Any political act of, say, demanding equality, needs to be received and understood by others. Often, it is about understanding something that was not understood before.

For politics, I initially give three prerequisites: (1) politics takes place in the public sphere. The public sphere is further defined by—even identical to—inclusivity and an attitude of critical openness. (2) Politics is actualized in political negotiations (3) that have to do with our life in common. The third point summons Jacque Rancière's conception of politics.

When discussing Mouffe, Arendt, and Rancière in the same article, one risks a confusion of terms. To clarify, I use the words "politics" and "the political" throughout the paper as referring to the informal public sphere and civic negotiations in contrast to (what Rancière calls) "the police," and to "institutional politics" in the sense of politics as professional politicking, parliamentary and legislative work, party politics, etc.

Put shortly, for Rancière, politics is located where the police process meets the process of equality. Police or policing means the law, the norms, the administration. It is "the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution."[11] The police is the reigning system of hierarchies of valuations and meanings that operates on the level of knowability and perceivability—what can be seen, what is treated as understandable. [12] Politics is in Rancière's definition always something that questions and breaks the existing partition of the sensible, the constitution of the *aisthêsis,* the police order.[13]

It is on the level of preconceptions and pre-reflective interpretation that Rancièrian police order functions and is questioned in politics or in the politics of aesthetics. Indeed, for Rancière "[p]olitics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time."[14] Eventually, however, Rancière's politics means disclosing created inequality and the obfuscated equality of every human being, and as such, it is rare and, arguably, getting rarer.[15]

Let us widen Rancière's "exceptionalist" conception of politics then.[16] Politics belongs to our everyday. It is part and a possibility of our daily encounters. Margus Vihalem uses the term "common sensorium" in his Rancière-informed proposition for political aesthetics that is a discourse with our everyday interpretative perception at its centre. The common sensorium is the always already interpreted constitution of the *aisthêsis* understood in its Rancièrian double meaning of "perceiving and partaking," but with a shift of focus to the politics of aesthetics of our everyday environment and daily life. In Vihalem's approach, "it is through the realm of the everyday, through its most basic perceptions, experiences and events that politics operates as aesthetics." For Vihalem, any perceivable act or choice, for example walking, would be political for it contributes to or alters the common sensorium.[17] I would not go so far since I maintain that politics takes place in negotiations in the public sphere. However, I agree with Vihalem on the point that any perceivable act or choice has political potential, i.e., has potential to become a statement, an instigating impulse, or otherwise an active part of a negotiation.

Now, returning to my third prerequisite, that political negotiations are about our life in common: it seems that everything relates to our common sensorium, either by altering perceivable things or by altering how things are perceived. Hence, this is not a real prerequisite. Politics takes place in negotiations within a public sphere.

It should be clear that, since I focus on nonverbal communication of ephemeral duration, my conception of the public sphere is something set apart from the institutions of state governance and legislation. Rather, it is about being a citizen in a society, or in a transnational, globalizing world. The public sphere means interacting with other people in a way characterized by inclusivity, distance from the self and one's own needs, and by acknowledgement, or experiencing, of diversity.[18] They are prerequisites for any conversation to be political and are also found in Arendt's conception of the public sphere.

The public sphere is one of three Arendtian spheres of human life, the others being the private and its expansion, the social sphere. The social is akin to the private sphere but on a wider scale: it is the mass society of labourers and consumers and, as such, it is antinomical to politics. The Arendtian public sphere is reserved for the ephemeral human activities requiring the presence of others: speech, action, and a later addition, judgment.[19] For Arendt, the public sphere is dependent on the shared space of

appearance, i.e. reality constituted by multiple perspectives.[20] Above all, public life is about the mutual opportunity for people to be seen and heard in their particularity, as "who" they are, and gains its significance from the uniqueness of every single viewpoint.[21]

"Wherever people gather together, it is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever." That is to say that walkable cities where people inevitably constantly interact, and other structures that bring strangers together, are the "most important prerequisite" for a sustained public sphere.[22] In the contemporary world, the Arendtian public sphere is not bound by any specific location in the city. It is defined only by absolute inclusiveness.[23]

Like Rancière, Arendt is an exceptionalist. Politics is rare and getting rarer because of the expansion of the social sphere through "the emergence of mass society." Instead of political action, there is only conformist social behaviour.[24] Ariella Azoulay, while stressing the inclusivity principle of the public sphere, argues against Arendt's view of society as a non-political expansion of the private sphere: where there are people, there can be a relational space of politics.[25] Herein lies the challenge for urban communities, namely, to treat everyone in urban space as a citizen, a participant in the public democratic process, as an agent with a voice and a viewpoint. It is also to carry in one's daily life the comportment of moral cosmopolitanism: to treat everyone across the national borders as subject to the same human rights— to make urban space genuinely public.[26]

To reiterate the difference and relation between urban space and the public sphere: the public sphere is an inclusive mode of encounter, a mutual attitude of critical openness that can be actualized in urban space. Urban space is the space of everyday life and experience that can be or can become a supporting context for the public sphere.[27] Now, the public sphere denotes inclusivity and urbanity connotes plurality and difference. To explore this further I shall use an example to illustrate what is meant by political negotiation within the urban public sphere occurring in minimal urban encounters.

A person passes me by wearing a jacket on which is stitched a patch with the anarchist symbol of a circled "A." The first actualization of the encounter's political potential is when I do not recognize the symbol but start wondering what it means. I may ask its meaning or nonverbally communicate puzzlement. In any case, a longer hermeneutic process begins, during which I come to

understand its meaning and thus anarchism as an ideology. I learn such a perspective exists and this in itself alters my understanding of the world and myself by enlarging the group of possible partitions of the real.

No political potential is actualized if I recognize the anarchist "A" on the jacket but take it as self-evident, too familiar, or as a cliché that no longer registers as a message. This is one level where difference is required: to wake us up, to engage us.

If I recognize the anarchist "A" and become cognitively engaged, there are at least three dimensions I might think about. The first is the same I already discussed: I might try to understand the meaning of the symbol. Even though I recognized it, it stands for a whole system of thought with multiple strands—and no matter what the symbol, the work of understanding is never finished. It is only useful to have some sort of preconception to get started. The dialogical process of hermeneutic understanding is endless.

The second dimension is the evaluation of the message. The premises and consequences, credibility and ethics. The evaluation happens in some context and it is always a judgment of a particular case. We do not abstractly and objectively judge anarchism in these encounters but from the entangled webs of everyday life, the environment, the whole perceptual situation. I might evaluate the valuations and value hierarchies of anarchism in relation to how I experience contemporary society and the city. Here also, difference is required, and this is the Arendtian multitude of viewpoints, which is eventually the same difference that is the ground of hermeneutic understanding: to evaluate, or rather, to pass a political judgment, is not purely subjective but requires critical perspective-taking, acknowledging the plurality of positions and human faiths.

The third dimension is the pondering of the act. This might involve judgment or understanding or both. When I see the patch, I may judge or try to understand the particular representational situation, its context, or the sign vessel. Not the "what" or "why" but the "how." In this case, I might consider the act of sewing a patch with a symbol to one's clothes, or its appropriateness to some context, etiquette, or some middle-class sense of tact or taste. Through the encounter, I might come to question and evaluate the context and middle-class sensibilities themselves. Or, I might realize that wearing a patch or a pin is a strategy not only for young people. I might realize that it is a real option even for myself. Just as well, I might judge it to be not effective

or appropriate for everyone. This is political negotiation of the media, and its ways and forms of negotiation. This meta-negotiation has consequences for whose voice is heard, who can participate in public political discussion, and how inclusive the public sphere is.

In any of the cases, I may react perceivably, nod, grunt or smile. I may look perplexed or just visibly stare at the symbol. The other person may notice this and begin considering my actions. Most of the encounters do not get to this point and are called minimal for a reason. The patch owner has, however, participated in the dialogue already by wearing the patch and by being accommodating enough for me to see it. If the person was aggressively closed from interaction, my focus would more likely be on the hostility and the negative atmosphere rather than on ideology and representation.

This last observation extends the notion of an interactive encounter. It can also be between an individual and a crowd of people, e.g., protesters—demonstrations taking place daily in larger cities. In addition, as was the case with the electric scooters, anything can become the subject matter of an urban encounter between two people: the demonstration, a perceivable thing or quality in the environment, a witnessed friendly or hostile interaction, or any act from tearing down statues to spitting on the street.[28]

In sum, I argue that the political potential of encounters is actualized as pondering, comprising judgment and hermeneutic understanding, and both involving an active stance towards one's preconceptions. Next, I will specify and contextualize my usage of these concepts.

HERMENEUTIC UNDERSTANDING AND
JUDGMENT IN URBAN ENCOUNTERS

For Henrik Kaare Nielsen, the type of judgment relevant to grounding a political community would be a composed entity that unfolds in political practice and is "constituted by a rationally and factually qualified ability of estimation in respect to the *content dimension* of political matters, including the reflection of both conflicts of interests and common concerns."[29] This echoes the Habermasian public sphere of rational debate.[30] The urban public sphere, however, is not Habermasian. Rather, it is a public sphere of aesthetics, impressions and nonverbal negotiations woven into the unremarkable everyday life taking place amid strangers in urban space.[31] Indeed, the Arendtian concept of public sphere, relating to appearance, perception, and senses

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rather than to structured discourse and rationality, is aesthetic and finds its basis in Kant's judgment of taste.[32] Hence, it is back to Arendt we shall turn—and to Cecilia Sjöholm's interpretation of Arendt's political aesthetics. She frames the Arendtian judgment as the encroachment of others.[33]

Sjöholm points out that, for Arendt, judgment does not so much denote an actual act of judging something but instead "being able to perceive it at all." Arendt expands the framework of thinking politics to everyday life through the concept of judgment in her lectures on Kant. For us, navigating the political and social spheres and the natural and built environment in our daily life, the *episteme,* the knowing of facts, is not as important or useful as judgment. We base our decisions of behaviour on judgment. The peculiarity of judgment is that, by always pertaining to particularity and not to universality or general law, "it introduces the idea that social and political engagement negotiates another form of shared knowledge." Judgment, as it involves *sensus communis,* implies that one does not judge from the position of subjective likings and interests. Judging means taking the viewpoint of others, the perspective of the community. In this sense of sharedness—the shared and communicable perception of the common sensorium—the sensus communis is also the experience of realness. This social nature of judgment is pervasive; judgment never takes place in isolation. In the Arendtian judgment with the accompanying enlarged thought, we are always encroached upon by others, always affected by others to the point that Sjöholm describes it as a form of submission. And it is the aesthetic judgment that "defines the social nature of embodied subjectivity; the way we are affected or disaffected, the way we conceive of ourselves and of others, and the way we take part in or disavow social contexts."[34]

In judgment, the viewpoint of others is taken imaginatively and critically, not merely empathetically.[35] The Arendtian judgment necessitates a capacity to imaginatively appropriate a perspective of "a different social position–another gender, culture, or ethnic group". It involves stepping out of the self. It is critical and involves what Sjöholm calls reflective flexibility or "re-flexibility": a readiness to be transformed. This re-flexibility does not involve transcending differences but allowing an experience of them to affect our experience of the real. That is also to say that we do not actually imagine all the possible viewpoints. "Rather, the existence of other viewpoints is something that informs our perspective in such a way that we become disturbed and moved,

perhaps pushed from a position that we hitherto have held to be comfortable." Finally, in order not to be overwhelmed—emotionally or otherwise—by the other's position, judgment requires distanciation from the very situation we are engaged in.[36]

Judgment and prejudice are negatively connected. Prejudices in the sense of preconceptions are primordial for the functioning of our daily life and through them we belong—to a certain place, to a certain community. Our interpretative perception, the pre-reflective "seeing as," is enabled and guided by preconceptions pertaining to our particular historical and cultural horizon, to a certain fusion of traditions. Arendt's view of prejudice is negative rather than neutral. This is because, as Sjöholm writes, "[i]t may well falsify reality at an everyday level and make us avoid experience, new knowledge, and judgment proper."[37] Still, to maintain the possibility of communication and our role and responsibilities as citizens, we can distantiate ourselves only partly from the community and its preconceptions. We have to accept the difficult task of simultaneously being part of and apart from our tradition or community.[38]

Judgment is demanding. It requires stepping out of self but also forces us to take this direction, to become open to altered understanding, to learning, seeing otherwise.[39] Judgment is potentially transformative. The Arendtian judgment as it is construed here comes close to hermeneutic understanding. Indeed, in Arendt's politics, understanding and judgment are not separate.[40]

The Gadamerian hermeneutic understanding is an ethical disposition. The cumulative and transformative hermeneutic understanding is dialogical, always a conversation; it requires difference and a space of in-betweenness, i.e., distance from ourselves, granted by the other. Contrary to the pre-reflective interpretative "seeing as" that is guided by our tradition, our preconceptions, hermeneutic understanding is a directed activity, in which the other's voice is strengthened. Embedded in this reciprocity of understanding is the idea that we need each other; it is always about mutual human growth encompassed by genuine care for the other's understanding—and thus directed not to oneself but to our life in common.[41]

The type of "I–Thou" relationship that characterizes hermeneutic understanding is a certain attitude which, in return, is learned through hermeneutic understanding. The hermeneutic attitude of openness that is required from both interlocutors consists of (1) encountering the other empathetically as an equal, as another subject, (2) at least some minimal amount of respect

towards the other that translates into a willingness to participate in dialogue, and (3) a readiness to question one's preconceptions, i.e. acceptance that the other may change the way we perceive—understand—the world and ourselves.[42]

In urban space, in city streets, encompassed by the mutual critical-reflexive attitude of openness amplified by the unknowability of the other's background, hermeneutic encounters are instances of the inclusive public sphere. In ephemeral urban encounters, meta-understanding is more likely than a conclusive understanding of some subject matter. This means understanding what understanding requires and learning to appreciate and maintain the hermeneutic attitude. The negotiation of the values and meanings also often takes place on a meta-level: "It is about expanding the field of perceived possibilities of what and how we even can discuss, what we possibly can value and how it can show and be communicated."[43]

A final addition to discussing judgment: in the political negotiation of urban encounters, the self-distanced viewpoint of the community is important and applies also to the evaluative side of judgment. We evaluate things incessantly, and when operating according to the attitude of openness and the critical perspective-taking of the "enlarged thought," we also evaluate the basis of evaluation. We understand the multiplicity of hierarchies, register something of the police order, the societal circumstances creating and upholding the hierarchies, and come to judge them.

In the introduction of this article, I presented an argument that for urban encounters to actualize their political potential, three things are required: a feeling of safety, distance, and difference. Now that I have explained what is meant by the claim that passing encounters can be political, let us turn to these prerequisites—beginning with the feeling of safety.

2. FROM THE FEELING OF SAFETY TO DIFFERENCE AND AESTHETIC SENSIBILITY

Safety is a traditional subject in urban studies. Jane Jacobs, for example, begins *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* with this theme right after the introduction. For Jane Jacobs, the safety of city streets and the feeling of safety—in their effects largely the same—are key prerequisites for a functioning city. A high level of usage at any time of the day is needed for a street to be safe for strangers using it. There must be offices and homes, stores, bars and cafés, a diversity of uses and users, and eyes on the street, that is, people with interest in the area like residents, shopkeepers

and a restaurant's regulars looking out from windows. Jacobs also demands "a clear demarcation between what is public space and what is private space."[44] Jan Gehl might oppose the last point, for he argues for soft edges—gradual and blurred lines between public and private. In other respects, concerning what makes a street safe, Gehl agrees with Jacobs. For him, pedestrians' feeling of safety is the key to a functioning city.[45]

Urban space is defined by the presence of strangers.[46] Other people are also one of the main attractions of cities.[47] Richard Sennett distinguishes between two types of strangers: the stranger as an alien and the stranger as an unknown. The first one is the case of cities with segregation by, for example, race or language. This stranger as an outsider prevails where people have assumed social identities on which a perceptual order marking "who belongs and who does not" is based. On the other hand, the stranger as an unknown can dominate "the perceptions of people who are unclear about their own identities, losing traditional images of themselves, or belonging to a new social group that as yet has no clear label."[48] A contemporary example of the latter is cities with a large number of self-employed people, the creative classes and workers of the platform economy of food deliveries, etc., all still searching for their place in society.

The urban encounter, where it is political, is with the stranger as an unknown. This demands openness, setting aside the rule book of social identities, and being present in the situation. Here difference operates productively in the ways described in the previous chapter. But it is the stranger as an alien by which we often operate. According to Sara Ahmed, it is not about failing to recognize a person but producing the figure of a strange stranger in these very encounters by recognizing them as someone who does not belong. Prejudices and discrimination are at play when some are deemed strangers more easily than others.[49] As I wrote in relation to Wilson's finds, as well as being dissolved, borders and social difference are created in encounters.

Elijah Anderson, when discussing urban encounters from the viewpoint of the consequences of prejudices against young black males, makes it clear that our perception is conditioned by the context and by our prejudices, so that the eyes on the streets are not unbiased: "The time of day, the season of the year, the neighborhood's social history—events of the past thirty years or of the past few days—all affect the meaning this black man has for the residents who watch and informally guard the streets and public spaces."[50]

Here is an example of a failed encounter. I was leaving my study at the university late one evening. The doors leading out to the courtyard were already locked—as were the gates separating the courtyard from the rest of the city. Simultaneously with me, someone else was making their way out at the other end of the corridor. The person left the building from another door, so that for me to exit the court I had to walk towards them. They began to make rapid glances behind their back at me. I walked determinedly but tried to smile and jingled my keys in my hand to signify that I am not a threat, that I belong. Their walking turned to running; they ran towards the gate still making panicked glances. After I reached the gate and opened it with my keys, I looked around to see if they were still running, if I could calm them, or if I had just misunderstood the situation. The person was quite far away, catching their breath in the safety of other street users and looking at the gate, at me, when I located them.

No matter what the actual reason for the other's terror, with my experience of similar (non-) encounters, I explain the other's reaction by my brownish skin colour and my black beard. This is only one culturally conditioned position and side of the encounter. Still, the fear and prejudices I have encountered have conditioned me to, for example, always have keys in my hand beforehand, using them to pre-emptively calm everyone down, to produce a clear image of my intentions and to neutralize my presence.[51] Fear, often born out of socially learned racial prejudices, also limits the movement of the feared.

A feeling of safety is a prerequisite for the encounter to be political. Without it, there is no inclusivity, thus no public sphere. This was not inclusive, considering all the prejudices and mechanisms affecting the dynamics of this situation.[52] This was not a political encounter but a situation that enforces the existing police order; an enactment of a visual order relating to citizenship, belonging, malevolence and violence, in which some register as strangers and threats more easily than others; a visual order that creates and upholds inequality. This was not an instantiation of the Arendtian public sphere for there was no critical-empathetic understanding, judgment, or "enlarged thought" acknowledging the plurality of viewpoints and backgrounds; and the defining feature was not the participants' appearing as themselves but as social identities. It was an instinctual reaction to stereotypes; there was no distanciation from the self. Both of us were nailed to our skins by fear, my appearance was shut behind the social identities of a criminal and an outsider, not only of a stranger but of a

strange stranger, a monstrous other. And I saw the other mainly as an embodiment of fear; an affect-cum-flesh that bled into the environment creating an absurd and suffocating atmosphere.

What was not lacking in the previous example though, was the perception of difference, but it was in the register of "strangers as aliens" rather than in the productive "strangers as unknown." Indeed, there are researchers sceptical about the potential of encounters being the foundation of life in the urban multiculture or a route to "politics of living with diversity based on engagement and negotiation."[53] Sennett, for example, comparing his experience of Greenwich Village with Jacobs's description from twenty years back and observing growth in drug usage and the number of homeless, notes that there great social differences and diversity lead to indifference rather than interaction.[54] Sophie Watson, on the other hand, studying forms of sociality in traditional market-places, acknowledges minimal encounters, such as glances or gazes, as having the potentiality to negotiate difference and to sustain the public sphere. She finds empirical evidence to support her argument that even sharing the same space with different others can participate in challenging the racist strategies of othering.[55] The acknowledgement of encounters as situations of learning was also listed above, among Wilson's finds of the common characteristics of encounter studies. Likewise, according to Gehl "[t]he city is seen as serving a democratic function where people encounter social diversity and gain a greater understanding of each other by sharing the same city space."[56]

Social diversity, however, is not enough. What is needed is an open attitude towards difference. In addition to supporting urban infrastructure, we need lifelong education, formal and informal, on human rights and empathy, while taking critical perspective. We also need education on the importance of openness, on how to encounter others openly.

One dimension of this training is aesthetic education and the education of aesthetic sensibility. As the political pertains to sensory perception, Sjöholm locates aesthetic sensibility as underlying all forms of political reflection; even judgment is a function of sensibility.[57] In the same vein, Carsten Friberg puts aesthetic education—namely training the perceptual capacity of discrimination and the sensorial cognition—to the core of his suggestion for political aesthetics.[58] Our interpretation of ourselves and the world derives from our socially conditioned and trained perception. In addition, Katya Mandoki, writing on terrorism and aesthetic education, notes that since art education

and beauty can be used and abused to incite violence, it is the "sensibility to or aesthesis for others," i.e. the openness towards otherness, that should be emphasized in aesthetic education.[59] In relation to the social nature of our formation, Friberg gives a task to political aesthetics: "being strongly influenced is not the same as saying we are determined. An essential step to take here is to become aware of the mechanisms of the influences we are subject to."[60] This same awareness—judgment—is required for resisting terrorist brainwashing but is also needed in urban encounters. It involves an awareness of the contingency and negotiability of perceptual orders put forth by the other, and an awareness of one's own socially learned preconceptions.

Openness is made possible by trust among strangers and the form of distance that the feeling of safety enables. Openness can also be communicated, and an atmosphere of trust created by small gestures. [61] The aesthetic dimensions of our behaviour and body language affect the ethical character of deeds, as Yuriko Saito has noted. In addition to what we do, it matters how we do it. The aesthetic factors of our facial expressions, body movements, and how we handle objects matter. [62] For example, when we make room or open a door for someone, our body language should make it clear that this action is no trouble.[63] If we want to, we can quite effortlessly influence the atmosphere of our encounters. Thus conceived, social aesthetics necessarily leads to an "activist"-oriented aesthetics.[64] That is, instead of disinterested spectators making aesthetic judgments, we are active agents taking part in creating social situations.[65] We can, and we should, pay attention to how we do it.

The distance granted by an atmosphere of trust or the communicated openness required for political negotiations is a small one—a sort of tranquillity of mind, an absence of threat or stressful co-ordinational tasks: no open manholes, heavy rain or ridiculously aggressive wind, no zigzagging in cross-currents of crowds or vehicles. No active survival but dwelling in the region of excess where there is time for curiosity and imagination, listening to oneself and others. A kind of distance is necessary, but it must be an engaged form of distance. We cannot remain untouched by the other's circumstances or be blind to our own participation and responsibility in encounters. We need a feeling of safety to not stay safely at a distance.[66]

CONCLUSION

From the case of the circled "A" of anarchism, we learned that when the meaning, the message, the medium, or the context come under consideration, i.e., become objects of thinking, the situation is potentially political. To ponder comprises evaluation or judgment, as well as hermeneutic understanding. There is no need to come to any solution or reach a consensus and it does not matter whether the encounter is between adversaries or allies. The political potential of the encounter is actualized not when people agree or disagree or take action in cooperation or against the other. What matters is that the other is heard and their message considered.

The aesthetic political negotiation of urban encounters described in this paper is a third option between aiming for consensus and being adversaries. Within the inclusive public sphere, political negotiation is characterized by critical-reflexive perspective-taking and an openness towards otherness. It contains partial questioning of preconceptions, stopping to think or paying attention, taking the viewpoint of the community, and being present in and for the situation, and for the other. It can make us see something our preconceptions have hidden or discover new ways of participating in the public sphere and forming a common world. The encounter is a negotiation of meanings and values, of hierarchies and perceptual and conceptual partitions, a negotiation of the real, of the partition of the sensible, and of means of negotiation and representation. It is politics beyond consensus and dissensus: an open-ended process of altered perception, of distance from the self, instigated by difference.[67] The engaged but distanced perception of difference requires trust and a feeling of safety. The difference from self implies dependence on others. In the end, as an acknowledgement of human plurality and our dependence on it, the negotiation implies moral cosmopolitanism, an ethical disposition towards the borderless "we."

This article is not only positive-descriptive but also normative. By describing a valuable phenomenon often left unactualized in our daily life, I urge more attention to be paid to it not only philosophically but also in practice, in our encounters. We can actively pay attention to others and we can actively reorganize the common sensorium or make our values perceptible by communicative acts.

1   I thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing out a need for clarification in the usage of the term "difference." In addition, although writing about difference evokes Derrida's *différance* in many readers' minds, this paper does not actively relate to Derrida's thought. See Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982).

2   Anniken Førde, "Enhancing Urban Encounters: The Transformative Powers of Creative Integration Initiatives," *Urban Planning* 4, no. 1 (January 2019): 45, https://doi.org/10.17645/up.v4i1.1713.

3   Helen F. Wilson, "On Geography and Encounter: Bodies, Borders, and Difference," *Progress in Human Geography* 41, no. 4 (August 2017): 464, https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132516645958.

4   Wilson, "On Geography and Encounter," 462. See also, Peter Dirksmeier and Ilse Helbrecht, "Everyday Urban Encounters as Stratification Practices: Analysing Affects in Micro-Situations of Power Struggles," *City* 19, no. 4 (July 2015): 486, https://doi.org/10.1080/1360481 3.2015.1051734. The tendency is shifting in current empirical research.

5   Wilson, "On Geography and Encounter," 459. Affectual encounters engaging different senses have been studied for example in geographies of tourism. See Chris Gibson, "Geographies of Tourism: (Un)Ethical Encounters," *Progress in Human Geography* 34, no. 4 (August 2010): 521–27, https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132509348688.

6   Wilson, "On Geography and Encounter," 457, 460–463. See also J.D. Dewsbury and David Bissell, "Habit Geographies: The Perilous Zones in the Life of the Individual," *Cultural Geographies* 22, no. 1 (January 2015): 23, https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474014561172. J. D. Dewsbury and David Bissell propose that the ephemeral is sutured to the long-term and the structural by habit. By studying the dynamics of habit formation in relation to encounters, we can better understand, for example, the temporal dimensions of discrimination and "endemic forms of inequality."

7   Wilson, "On Geography and Encounter," 453–454.

8   Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), 17.

9   Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 8–9.

10 Bart van Leeuwen, "Dealing with Urban Diversity: Promises and Challenges of City Life for Intercultural Citizenship," *Political Theory* 38, no. 5 (October 2010): 637–38, https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591710372869.

11 Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 28.

12 Rancière, *Disagreement*, 29.

13 Rancière, *Disagreement;* 26, 29.

14 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London; New York: Continuum, 2018), 8.

15 Rancière, *Disagreement*; 17, 139.

16 Facundo Vega, "Where Are We When We Litigiously Judge? Politics and Aesthetics in Hannah Arendt and Jacques Rancière," *Journal for Cultural Research* 22, no. 4 (October 2018): 377, https://doi.org/10.1080/147975 85.2018.1598061.

17 Margus Vihalem, "Everyday Aesthetics and Jacques Rancière: Reconfiguring the Common Field of Aesthetics and Politics," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 10, no. 1 (January 2018): 2, 6–10, https://doi.org/10.1080/20004 214.2018.1506209.

18 Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986), 87. Sennett defines public behaviour thus: "'Public' behavior is a matter, first, of action at a distance from the self, from its immediate history, circumstances, and needs; second, this action involves the experiencing of diversity."

19 Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). See also Arendt, *The Human Condition*.

20 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 199.

21 Ibid., 57. Karin Fry, "The Role of Aesthetics in the Politics of Hannah Arendt," *Philosophy Today* 45 (2001): 46, https://doi.org/10.5840/philtoday200145Supplement6.

22 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 199–201.

23 Cecilia Sjöholm, *Doing Aesthetics with Arendt: How to See Things* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 7.

24 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 40–41.

25 Ariella Azoulay, "Getting Rid of the Distinction between the Aesthetic and the Political," *Theory, Culture & Society* 27, no. 7–8 (December 2010): 254–57, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276410384750.

26 See Bart van Leeuwen, "If We Are *Flâneurs*, Can We Be Cosmopolitans?" *Urban Studies* 56, no. 2 (February 2019), https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098017724120 & van Leeuwen, "Dealing with Urban Diversity."

27 I thank the anonymous referee for suggesting this clarification, and the clear way they formulated the distinction: "Urban space as an overall framing concept for the unfolding of differences in general, and public sphere as a concept for a specific, reflective and inclusive modality of interaction and negotiating differences in urban space."

28 In 2020, simultaneously with the corona pandemic, there have been mass protests against police violence, racism and discrimination in the US and other countries. The Black Lives Matter movement has had global support and visibility. In the US and several European countries, statues of persons of note with racist background or ties to the slave trade, have been decapitated, torn down, or taken down by authorities.

29 Henrik Kaare Nielsen, "Aesthetic Judgement and Political Judgement," *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 23, no. 43 (November 2012): 15, https://doi.org/10.7146/nja.v23i43.7494.

30 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger, reprinted (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008).

31 See e.g. Sophie Watson, "The Magic of the Marketplace: Sociality in a Neglected Public Space," *Urban Studies* 46, no. 8 (July 2009): 1582, https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098009105506.

32 Sjöholm, *Doing Aesthetics with Arendt,* 73.

33 See also Jim Josefson, *Hannah Arendt's Aesthetic Politics: Freedom and the Beautiful* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 145. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-18692-0. Josefson frames the Arendtian judgment as making phenomena understandable for others i.e. communicable.

34 Sjöholm, *Doing Aesthetics with Arendt*; 72-75, 79, 84–89, 100.

35 Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 43.

36 Sjöholm, *Doing Aesthetics with Arendt*, 86–89.

37 Ibid., 87–88. See also Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 43.

38 Kimberley Curtis, *Our Sense of the Real: Aesthetic Experience and Arendtian Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 123.

39 Josefson, *Hannah Arendt's Aesthetic Politics*, 142.

40 See Jakub Novák, "Understanding and Judging History: Hannah Arendt and Philosophical Hermeneutics," *Meta* II, no. 2 (2010): 481–504.

41 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd rev. ed. (London; New York: Continuum, 2004). Monica Vilhauer, *Gadamer's Ethics of Play: Hermeneutics and the Other* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2010), 76–77, 83. Nicholas Davey, *Unquiet Understanding: Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 16.

42 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 355. See also Hans-Herbert Kögler, "Hermeneutic Cosmopolitanism, or: Toward a Cosmopolitan Public Sphere" in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Cosmopolitanism*, ed. Maria Rovisco and Magdalena Nowicka (Burlington: Ashgate, 2011).

43 Henrik Pathirane, "Philosophical Hermeneutics and Urban Encounters," *Open Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (September 2020): 484, 486, 489–490, https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2020-0136.

44 Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Modern Library, 1993), chapter 2 and 43–44.

45 Jan Gehl, *Cities for People* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2010), 97–99.

46 Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, 128.

47 Gehl, *Cities for People*, 148.

48 Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, 60.

49 Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000); 3, 30–32.

50 Elijah Anderson, *Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 188.

51 Ibid., 167, for ways that strangeness is made safe or neutralized in encounters.

52 For discrimination and campus encounters, see Johan Andersson, Joanna Sadgrove, and Gill Valentine, "Consuming Campus: Geographies of Encounter at a British University," *Social & Cultural Geography* 13, no. 5 (August 2012): 509, 512, https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2012.700725.

53 Dan Swanton, "Urban Encounters: Performance and Making Urban Worlds," *Journal of Urban Cultural Studies* 5, no. 2 (June 2018): 4, https://doi.org/10.1386/jucs.5.2.229_1. See also Gill Valentine, "Living with Difference: Reflections on Geographies of Encounter," *Progress in Human Geography* 32, no. 3 (June 2008): 323–37, https://doi.org/10.1177/0309133308089372.

54 Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), 357–358.

55 Watson, "The Magic of the Marketplace," 1581–1582, 1589–1590.

56 Gehl, *Cities for People*, 109.

57 Sjöholm, *Doing Aesthetics with Arendt*, x.

58 Carsten Friberg, "Political Aesthetics: A Philosophical Reflection," *Popular Inquiry* 4, no. 1 (2019), 9–11.

59 Katya Mandoki, "Letters on the Aesthetic Deformation of Man," *Contemporary Aesthetics* Special Volume 7 (2019).

60 Friberg, "Political Aesthetics," 20.

61 Concerning first impressions and atmospheres, see Tonino Griffero, *Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces*, trans. Sarah de Sanctis (Burlington: Ashgate, 2014), 29–30. See also Elisabetta di Stefano, "The Power of the Gift: A Perspective of Political Aesthetics," *Popular Inquiry* 4, no. 1 (2019). In a recent proposal for a field of study of political aesthetics, Elisabetta di Stefano frames it as cooperative creation and negotiation of atmospheres.

62 Yuriko Saito, "The Ethical Dimension of Aesthetic Engagement," *Espes* Vol 6, no. 2 (2017), 179.

63 Yuriko Saito, "Body Aesthetics and the Cultivation of Moral Virtues," in *Body Aesthetics*, ed. Sherri Irvin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 225–42. See also Garcia Chambers, "The Aesthetics of Social Situations: Encounters and Sensibilities of the Everyday Life in Japan," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 18 (2020), section 2, https://contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=895.

64 For social aesthetics, see also Arnold Berleant, "On Getting along Beautifully: Ideas for Social Aesthetics," in *Aesthetics in the Human Environment*, ed. Pauline von Bonsdorf and Arto Haapala (Lahti: IIAA, 1999), 12–29. Arnold Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010), chapter eleven.

65 Saito, "Body Aesthetics," 237.

66 See Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 157.

67 See Richard Sennett, *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012); 14, 19. The open-endedness is not unlike the Bakhtinian dialogics Sennett calls for in our encounters.