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Malik, Suhail

On the conditions of politics

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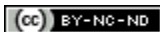
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'ON THE CONDITIONS OF POLITICS' – SERPENTINE CONFERENCE

28 JUNE 2007, CONWAY HALL

- I won't speak about 'the conditions of politics' because I don't know what these are today - because of what America now is. Instead, I want to address the conditions of art and politics, whether and how art can be political or have a bearing on politics – even as a refuge from politics as it may be quickly and commonly understood: as being to do with the state or, more generally, the field of power.
- For the sake of speed, we can characterise two dominant conventional ways to think about what and how art and politics intersect or affect one another. One is through their identification, the other is through their separation.
 - Art identified with politics is the orientation or pre-conviction of activist or engaged art-practice. Such art speaks to a given and local set of socio-political or socio-economic power operations, representations and actions. This is what is often understood by 'political art' – art that does politics, in the name of a referenced and pre-established sociopolitical urgency, for justice.
 - Art separated from politics is the side of a kind of an at best abstracted, at worst self-indulgent practice which dissociates from, if it does not disavow, any recognizable claims to established power, to the shapes and overt representations thereby presented. This is the orientation of autonomous art production. Such art claims a politicality precisely because of the distance it takes from power (often reduced to a notion of representation or instrumentality). It is 'political' despite this extraction from power because this autonomy opens up another kind of social-experiential-common production that is not dictated and organised in terms of established power relations and its circumscribed limits and possibilities, but is 'free-er' to think other, new possibilities proscribed or inhibited by the social relations of power

- Despite their complete divergence both engaged or autonomous art assume that they know what politics is, that politics meaning power is known (perhaps a known known to use Rumsfeld's finely-tuned epistemological categories).
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- It is this bifurcated – perhaps even antagonistic - yet shared set of assumptions of how art and power can be political that determines the current fate of the politics of art. These terms set the conditions for configuring the relations of art and politics and have set the horizon of what we still understand critical art to be. How art stands with or against the existing formations of power can on this basis be schematically formulated as follows:
 - art with power – the currently strong if brittle art-market and the institutional-media plaudits with which it is now symbiotically enmeshed which, in service to the spectacle, supposedly shuns 'political art' (or so 'political art' would like to continue to believe);
 - art against power – 'social practices' that continue to decry art's marketization in favour of a complexly utopian notion of social or public communality on the other side of or below commoditized relations (this kind of work achieving the recent nadir of 'relational practices').
 - Accepting these terms and positions that critical art assumes for itself, we then have this reduced formulation:
 - art with power is against political art
 - art against power is with political art
 - To be clear: these formulations cut across and underpin the ideological assumptions of both engaged and autonomous practices in the current formation. 'Political art' is today either engaged or autonomous or, the theoretical-critical lessons having been learnt, perhaps even both. Whichever (or, like, whatever), political art is set against

the majoritarian, statist, or normative requirements or demands that 'power' is assumed to enforce and establish.

- This is now the formulation of critical art practices in general, which have thus overcome the bifurcation or dichotomy of engagement versus autonomy.
- Whichever route it takes, critical art is against power whether it is politically engaged or whether it holds itself off from power. It assumes the formulation 'if you are not with us [those in power], you are against us' - negatively mirroring another similar pronouncement made in late 2001.

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- What is remarkable here and needs to be better understood is this now strange condition: namely, the dissociation of politics – or, at least, art's claims to (be able to) be political - from power. The question here is how to think politics or politicality without power since power is conventionally and exactly politics' concern.
- What can be immediately noted is that this is a subtractive relationship: art accedes to its politicality because of its subtraction from power. And this is autonomy redux – but with this caveat: it is not an autonomy from politics – which is exactly what it claims - but from power.
- This condition is akin to what Ranciere calls the aesthetic regime in which art contests the police order (established conventions, state or normative ordering) by generating new forms of what he calls the redistribution of the sensible, the sensible being what is in common for living bodies. Ranciere does not however entirely extricate the politics of aesthetics from power – which is a complaint sometimes levelled against him – since for him the aesthetic regime is political only insofar as it re-configures the police order (power). Aesthetic regime art only arrives as such when the subtraction from power – power minus power, if we can put it this way – leads to a non-zero result.

- A politics subtracted of all power gives rise, in another orientation, to the advocacy of 'potentiality' that is so current right now through the influence of Giorgio Agamben. Potentiality is realized in the extraction or absencing from any actualization or concrete determination of power. In this way, potentialities speak to the subtraction of power which does result in zero power, a passivity or resistance that is irreducible to the structurations, operations and mobilizations of anything that is determined as politics on the condition of power. [And as power extirpated from power, potentiality can not give rise to a political theory but only to a theoretical politics, a fiction of politics.]
- We can leave these theoretical articulations to their own work for now. The key point here is that the notion of critique or politics that seeks to dissociate itself from power - in a kind of aesthetic autonomy redux - is a cultural politics that necessarily severs itself from power-politics. And, recognising that dominant power in the richer countries is now oriented towards private wealth accumulation, and that all countries are faced with such accumulation as a condition for their own economic survival, we can for the sake of time designate power-politics today as the field of political economy, meaning here the politics of economic systems.
- That is, the cultural politics that gains its advantage and voice from its retraction from power - the operational condition of what we today understand as critical art - is an abdication from political economy.
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- We know this condition very well: it's the commonly expressed futility and impossibility of art or other kinds of cultural practice doing anything today that sensibly and effectively political - insofar as politics is conceived in terms of power or, if you prefer, socio-economic force.

- Furthermore, autonomy cuts both ways: the claims made to political aesthetics or cultural politics serves to stabilize if it does not re-inforce an operation of political economy which can only be understood by cultural politics to be autonomous to it.
- That is, art's autonomy (be it an autonomy redux) is no less the autonomy of power from art – a condition to which Ranciere at least presents a challenge in his formulation of the aesthetic regime. As such, moreover, critical art and power are each sustained in their mutual autonomy, no matter how completely interwoven or overlaid they otherwise are.
- Understood as political economy, we know this condition – the condition of art's politicality - very well and very immediately. It is the condition whereby the politics claimed by critical art serves up the redemptive fantasy of a liberal political order in a neutralized mode; neutralized because it can not contest the dominating powers of political economy, and because through this very claim of criticality art in fact services and provides an alibi for such domination. Such a service is provided not least in how political economy most urgently insists in art today: that is, in how critical art supports and provides sustenance for the handsomely-burgeoning art market.