

Avantgardistic demands to politics – political demands to the avant-garde

Is art just to be considered as "advanced entertainment" or is it possible to detect a political potential in and through art? From the historical avant-garde, through the neoavant-garde and up to, what can be labeled as the current "avant-garde", the political dimension has always been of immense importance, for both artists and critics. Through analysis of various case examples, including theater, sculpture, painting, performance and film, we want to examine and discuss how the political content is expressed in avant-garde art works. Are their political statements articulated explicitly through their content or does it lie implicit in the artworks form? Is it the social impact, that enables us to distinguish art as political? Does "pure" art exist – can art be nonpolitical at all? We do not attempt to reach an explanatory definition of political art, but seek to discuss the political latency and expressions in these artworks.

Avant-garde art has often been understood and framed by its criticality as well as by its ideas of suspending the distinction between art and life. In as far as we can talk about an avantgardistic art based on this assumption, it might be useful to look into possibilities and limitations of critical potential in art, as well as to investigate further whether this criticism is predicated upon the aesthetic autonomy which the avantgarde seeks to overcome. What are the demands to content and form when art wants to speak critically, and what influence on a transformation of society can we expect that art can bring?

New structures in society involve new forms of criticism. Historical reflection and awareness as fundamental issues in avantgardistic tradition thus become determinant in respect to how we at any time recognize political potential in art. Is there at all any political potential left for aesthetic practices today?

Signhild Linderoth

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Political potential in the performance "Hush little Baby".

"Hush little Baby" was directed by Ditte Maria Bjerg at theatre Camp X in 2009. In reference to this panel, the performance can be seen as literally integrating art and life on stage.

"Hush little Baby" combines a fictional story about a danish middle-class couple with the real stories of five former Filipino Au Pairs. The couple (performed by Danish actors) engage one Filipino Au Pair after another (all performed by a Korea-born danish actress). During the play the authentic Au Pairs one by one speak directly to the audience as they tell their personal story and show their private photos from the journey from the Philippines to Denmark. Other fragments, such as playing with balloons, offering fresh fruit and singing a community song, allow interaction between the audience and the Au Pairs. As an epilogue the Au Pairs entertain with karaoke singing.

Bringing a particular group of people into the limelight, involves certain questions concerning the relationship between art, life and politics. It has been argued that it is just a desperate attempt to make theatre interesting, that cynically transforms vulnerable human beings into art. Is it so? Are the actual political questions weakened by this transformation? Is the aesthetics of the play weakened by the participation of the Au Pairs? Or is the concept really a win-win situation for both art and politics? Is it of importance, and possible at all, to make a distinction between art and politics in a postmodern society?

Introducing "real people" on stage should be seen as a tendency within the postdramatic theatre where a clear connection to reality is given priority. In the historical avant-garde theatre the use of documentary, speaking directly to the audience, a strong connection to a topical political issue, a mixture of high and low culture and a fragmentary form are typical symptoms of a will to interact with audience and society. The postdramatic theatre, including this certain performance, can thus be seen as a development of classical avantgardistic strategies. A new dynamics emerges as current circumstances in politics and culture meet the legacy of the avant-garde.

In this paper the political potential of the performance is studied. On which levels can political ambitions be found and how are they expressed? Performativity as a socio-philosophical and an artistic term is introduced in the study. Camp X as a experimenting international theatre, but also as an institution, is taken into account along with the historicizing perspective.

Cæcilie Østerby Sørensen

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The political and the aesthetic in *The Fall* by Peter Whitehead

New York – 1968 – *The Fall* – a two and a half hours filmcollage, documenting among other things, anti- and pro Vietnam war manifestations, poetry readings, a fashionshoot of a peace-sign dress, performance-art, a french model looking indifferently at television, Robert Kennedy joking before a public speech, one of the first Marilyn Monroe portraits in digital material, and the student-occupation of Columbia University.

The movie is an extension of the field of sensing and an examination of where the political material and potential is embedded: in the everyday life, in the political action, manifesting on the street, in the artistic action or in the power of an image – in "The Fall" itself?

The avant-garde experimental movie by british filmmaker Peter Whitehead is presenting a multi-semantic portrait of an important short periode in western history, and is based upon one of the basic understandings of the late 1960s: that the political is merged with the personal. It is a playfull exploration of how the senses work together with the mind in a continuously aesthetic-intellectual understanding of the movie.

In my paper I will regard the movie as reflecting the conceptions of avant-garde and history, myth, the personal and the political. *The Fall* is to be used as a pool of opportunity to an examination and re-thinking of these notions, with the help of basic avant-garde theories on the one hand, and on the other, the ongoing reconsideration and discussion of the traditional view of politics and art.

Can the collage-like form and inorganic nature of the movie be understood as a proposition of a new form of community?

I consider art as operating in the aesthetic field with the faculty of the senses offering a possible experience of reflexion, and I understand avant-garde art, with its experimenting forms, as an extension of the field of the senses – the political as an integrated part of the aesthetic is the other basic understanding for my analysis of the movie.

Beuys: Political artist and myth

The German artist Joseph Beuys (1921-86) has often been acclaimed to be one of the most influential art-figures of the twentieth century. His impressive legacy includes performances, sculptures, graphic art, installations and art theory. The adoration of Beuys, by both artists and critics has today reached almost mythical proportion. An example of this becomes evident through the way that post exhibitions have focused on displaying Beuys “relics”, in their representation of the artist. Beuys himself played an important part in the creation of this artist myth. His charismatic physical appearance with the characteristic felt hat (he never took of), the west and the ironic smile are integral component in this mythological conception. As were his often eccentric and provocative self staging in the media and the public debate.

The social and political concern was always at the centre of Beuys artistic practices. One of Beuys most significant theoretical concepts, were the idea of art as a *Sozial skulptur* (or Social Plastik). In the *Sozial skulptur*, society as a whole was to be regarded as one great work of art, to which each person can contribute creatively. For Beuys Art was the only way to revolutionize society. A society he repeatedly criticized of its economic and environmental exploitation.

Through an analysis of Beuys performance (or *aktion* as he preferred) *Coyote – I like America and America likes me* (1974), in which he lived together with a wild Coyote for 7 days, I want to examine and discuss the political potential expressed through this work. How does this correspond with Beuys’ theoretical framework, with its social and political orientation? I want to discuss if his mythical appearance and our conception of this affects the perception of the work. Can the creation of the artist myth be an obstacle in our interpretation of the artwork? And can the artist perceived as myth take part in a recuperation and neutralization of the political potential inherent in his work?

Tone Bonnén.

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Attitudes to political potential in art in Eks-Skolen in the 1960'ies

How does art regain an importance in society? Can art play a role in a social transformation? – in what form?

Just as they are relevant today, these questions about the relation between art and society were central for the work and investigations of Eks-Skolen in Denmark in the 1960ies.

In a plurality of ways of exploring and expanding the traditional practices and field of art, echoing the classical avantgardistic claim of fusion of art and life, the members of Eks-Skolen all aimed to reintegrate art as a meaningful position in society. In a time of political radicalization, the activities of Eks-Skolen were increasingly directed towards a higher degree of engagement in political questions. Political content was expressed both directly and indirectly through content and form in their work, but with varied weight and approaches given to political ideas among the different members. For some the practice of art was eventually put to an end whereas to other members art was held on to as a meaningful activity.

The ends of art framing the activities of Eks-Skolen and the different levels of critique mirrored in their work were reflected in a contemporary discussion about the role of art and its' relation to a social and political reality, that I want to bring forward. In this debate different positions on the degree of which art should engage in political issues were unfolded, having the question of whether art can maintain its relevance in a politically radicalized reality as a crucial turning point.

The positions in this discussion and in the work of Eks-Skolen as regards to the relation between art and politics might be interesting and relevant as arguments in similar current discussions where questions of political potential in and through art remains unsolved.