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‘Engaged theatre’ is a term that has caused a great deal of heated discussion in Poland in recent years, and a number of ferocious disputes. The question of theatre’s political and social mission has not only provoked a clear division among artists, it has also caused a clear demarcation among critics, theatre scholars and, first and foremost, audiences.

[...]

The fundamental question can be formulated thus: Can art simultaneously be politically engaged and remain serious art (whatever those two terms mean)? Can it retain its ‘artistic value’ while entering the space of political discourse? Can political effectiveness and aesthetic subtlety be combined, or does the creation of art with a socio-political dimension automatically rule out the making of ‘true art’?

The Polish debate between engagement and autonomy is dominated by a type of response to these questions that I would call the ‘all or nothing’ principle. Either political art is the black sheep of the artistic family, a poor relative of true art, or, on the contrary, it is the crowning achievement of art and thus every other form of art becomes illusory, naive and untrue. This principle also applies to the very definition of art: either it is a discourse of absolute exceptionality and a chance to transcend ‘ideological orders’, or it constitutes a completely historical, socially conditioned practice of class distinction. Applying this principle consistently, we are constantly forced to choose: either aesthetics or politics. Maintaining this logic seems very restrictive. Neither taking on political subjects nor avoiding them should automatically entail exclusion from the world of true art. Furthermore, presence in the field of art should not automatically fill us with fear of ‘ideologies’ lying in wait on the other side of the wall of aesthetic refinement. In other words, the field of art and the field of politics are partly overlapping, to use a geometrical metaphor. They have parts in common, but each also has elements foreign to the other.

So if we are to continue speaking of art almost exclusively from the point of view of engagement and its social dimension, this does not mean that this point of view covers all important questions related to art. Politics is not the only issue for art, though it is a legitimate dimension, and an interesting one. This should be understood, in the end, by those

who believe that all forms of politics in art are a betrayal of art's ideals and by those who wish, based on the obvious fact of the social sources of art, to immediately draw the conclusion that only engaged art is in line with its true calling. So does the truth, as usual, lie somewhere in the middle? Definitely not, because it is simply impossible to define such a middle. That shared space of aesthetics and politics is no kind of a golden mean, but is a space of certain specifically defined properties.

A difficult word: politics

I would like to point out yet another non-trivial conceptual problem related to discussions around political art. In disputes between its supporters and opponents, each side uses a completely different understanding of politics. The method of understanding politics predetermines the definition and evaluation of terms such as 'engaged art' or 'political art'. In discussions that are currently on-going, we can distinguish three particular meanings of politics and, it follows, three models of the relationship between art and politics that result from them.

Determined opponents of engaged art most often understand politics very narrowly, and relate it mainly to the ever-more boring, ever-more banal life of various political groups and their professional representatives – to the parliamentary-media spectacle of partisan struggle and marketing battles, that is, which have come to dominate almost completely the common image of what politics is. From this point of view, politics is a strange symbiosis of two completely disproportionate spheres. On one hand, there exists the political 'pure appearance', woven from various precisely crafted messages that present fictitious demands, arguments and goals. On the other hand, under this surface of appearances is hidden a pure power game. On top, a festival of empty gestures and slick marketing operations; deeper down, a cynical, calculated game that seeks power and influence. Such a narrow understanding of politics must in fact lead to the conclusion that it doesn't make a great deal of sense to produce theatre productions about subjects constantly dealt with by television and mass-circulation press. These would only be reproductions of a show that has already been blown out of all proportion to reality. Thus, the defenders of apoliticality say, it's best to keep one's distance from politics, a sphere that compromises or makes a laughingstock of all who attempt to get involved with it. For in it there is nothing that is not subjected to the game of calculation, strategy and struggle. Opponents of engagement state that politics is a sphere deeply alienated from everyday life – our real problems, which are worth talking about and arguing about, never come into contact with this sphere. As a result, art should keep its distance from politics, taking care that its message remains divorced from current and specific problems. It should address great themes of existence and concern itself with refining forms of discourse.

Such a narrow understanding of political art, though, leads to serious problems, which, I believe, weaken the position of the defenders of apoliticality who deploy these arguments, in a fundamental way. First, the sphere of existence as something that radically, irrevocably sets itself in opposition to the political as such seems, in the end, a sphere that's rather abstract. It's not delineated by any social discourses or practices;

it occurs exclusively in the field of intimate individual experience. Even this – as we've known for a long time, after all – isn't completely divorced from political categories. Existence protected at all costs from politics doesn't take place in a defined place and time; it doesn't connect with discourse that functions around us; it doesn't interact with social conditions and practices. A problem that's frequently posed when the primacy of art's existential dimension is defended is the attempt to highlight the inviolability of the individual dimension of life. We can confront this particular defence of individuality, nevertheless, using Hegel's arguments against empiricism¹ and asking: What is this individuality that has yet to be confronted with everyday life – with material, social and political life – and hasn't received additional definition there? An individuality imposed from above in this way and protected in the narrow fields of intimacy is an individuality that's purely theoretical and abstract. We see that defenders of the existential dimension of art thus risk great limitation in a field of experience that's so important to them. The existential individuality they defend may lead to the individuality of some general philosophical system at times, to replicable, generalized truths on the subject of life. However, doesn't true individuality arise in precisely the place where it must intersect with various experiences and languages, practices and discourses?

[...]

Still, politics can be understood completely differently, and that's how advocates of engaged art most often wish to understand it. To them, politics can be defined as the sphere of tension between holistic worldviews and visions of social life. It constitutes an area of discussion concerning what kind of community we want, what kind of public life we want, what we believe to be acceptable and under which conditions, and what we reject or try to eradicate. Insofar as the narrow understanding of politics points most often to the concept of media spectacle – the feigned game of interests – this other understanding of politics is strongly connected to date with the category of representation. In a political dispute, the question is one of the representation of real interests of defined social groups, presenting their positions and demands, discussing social problems and arguing for concrete solutions. Increasingly frequent calls for a serious debate, a factual discussion in the realm of media spectacle is undoubtedly an expression of nostalgia for politics understood in precisely that way. Within that framework, traditional divisions into left, right, centre, liberalism, communitarianism, socialism, etc., don't lose their power, unrestricted by rules in the never-ending popularity contest and instead reflecting visions that exist in society of public life, of ways of understanding community, the freedom of the individual, the role of the state, and so forth. Politics understood in this way, in other words, is a place that's very important and that's open to all who're interested in the fate of the society they live in.

1 See even the beginning of the chapter 'Sense-Certainty: Or the "This" and "Meaning"', in Part 1, 'Consciousness', of Georg Wilhelm Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 216-238, <https://libcom.org/library/phenomenology-spirit-gwf-hegel>, [accessed: 11 February 2015].

There's no reason why art should take its leave of politics thus understood. But before we ask how its presence in this sphere could look, there's another important distinction we must draw. Art's political engagement can be understood in two ways: as the formulation of a message with political content, or as artists – public figures, by definition – taking positions on political issues. An artist taking part in political debate and presenting opinions there does not need to create art on social themes simultaneously. The reverse is also true: in taking up such themes in her work, an artist can simultaneously distance herself from public statements. In Poland, if we're faced with domination by a narrow, limited understanding of politics, it's first and foremost because artists (and intellectuals and journalists, to a great degree), in accepting such an understanding, have given up the possibility of influencing the social life that creates their tasks and competences. Simply put, politics was able to become 'art for art's sake' because those who had a chance to disseminate a different understanding of it and make it healthier and more useful have withdrawn from it. The isolation of politics from daily life, the separation of so-called real problems, is also a result of the intelligentsia's collective withdrawal from participation in social life.

In any case, it's also worth recalling a third way of understanding politics. This is most often connected with replacing the concept of politics as a certain type of social practice with a more general concept of the political. The political is a symbolic sphere in which basic stipulations are made that later wield overpowering influence on daily life and politics in both of its previously outlined meanings. The question here is neither media spectacle nor the real dispute, but a general condition of speaking about political issues and deciding what is and what is not political. The sphere of the political is a sphere of silent, often subconscious assumptions and conclusions that apply to basic categories used by serious debaters and by populist blusterers. The issue here isn't of taking positions within the framework of a given dispute, but of settling what positions exist at all, what the dispute concerns, how it's defined and what languages are available to us to describe it.

Let's now attempt to assign names to these three methods of understanding the political. We'll call media-based politicking 'parapolitics', as it attempts to seduce us with the image of social action and, simultaneously, to constantly discourage our participation in public life. Its stakes are not political ideas, but small games for the purpose of attaining or maintaining power. The second way of understanding social action we'll simply call politics, as the traditional sense has been preserved in it, full of responsible concern. And we'll use metapolitics to refer to the general inquiry into the conceptual framework and conditions of the functioning of politics, research into the symbolic sphere of the political. Each of the three categories – parapolitics, politics and metapolitics – contains different values, aims at different targets and uses different means. Each has its own dynamic. Each imagines the relationship between politics and the field of art differently. Which best meets today's challenges? Let's look more closely at how the 'aesthetics of politics' looks within the framework of each of these formations.

The Challenge of Post-politicisation

The narrow understanding of politics as parapolitics leads to something I will call 'post-political art'. Post-political art constitutes not so much a positive response to the media spectacle of politicking as an allergic, defensive reaction to politics in general. It doesn't lead to the creation of *political fictions*, spectacles caught up in following tactical manoeuvrings and cabinet reshuffles. Most often it takes the form of moral exhortation, an ethical memento directed against all forms of politics. Post-political art is torn between the desire to speak out on public affairs – and in disgust at the rules of politics – and the fear of becoming infected by viruses whirling in the political world. It is dominated by three basic procedures.

The first – the most banal and least interesting – consists of laughing at politics, the ritual exposure of the stupidity of those engaged in it, along with the ridiculousness and naiveté of the public following twists and turns in their fates. This procedure is based on the logic of a vicious circle, because it attempts to prove its most basic and essential assumption. Disgust at power games and aversion to the parapolitical spectacle require one to continually demonstrate and testify that politics is nothing other than empty politicking. No one in their right mind and possessed of a shred of moral principle would ever step into this Augean stable.

The second procedure of post-political art is turning from social problems toward general human problems, moral or existential, thus stripping the former of their political clarity. [...] The third procedure is also related to the transfer of political questions into the moral sphere. It is done now, however, with the help of the figure of politics as the great moral Evil. From the post-political point of view, it's obvious that we live in the days of the 'twilight of ideology', the 'end of great narratives', the 'death of utopias', etc. Politics function in this sphere exclusively as the spectre of totalitarian terror, of dangerous utopias and language-usurping authorities. This is why post-political art constantly feeds us images of suffering caused by politics, assuring us at the same time that our happiness can only be guaranteed by keeping away from ideologies and by simple openness to our fellow humans. The core of this line of thinking is, of course, the assumption that in post-political times conflicts have evaporated from social life, and the theory of 'keeping away from ideology' can't become an ideology. The disastrous effect of this procedure is that it renders discussion on the subject of engaged art impossible, because each attempt to bring the topic up sets in motion the scaremongering mechanism with its threat of totalitarianism, calling to mind the compromised nature of totalitarian propaganda. If this strategy is combined with criticism of politics as parapolitics, we receive an exceedingly regrettable image: we complain about politics and simultaneously torpedo all attempts to change its current form. We retain the moral right to criticism, and don't have to make any effort to change existing conditions. Here the sloth and narcissism of the intellectual elite in Poland finds its full expression: wanting to generate symbolic capital on the cheap without getting too involved in symbolic order.

Toward an Engaging Art

Let's concentrate on the two remaining concepts of politics, on the visions of engagement they offer us, and on how they regulate the question of the autonomy of art. It seems that if the discussion of engaged art contains any potential today, it can only be unleashed by analysing mutual links between these two concepts and the ideas that appear in each. In general terms, these two broad conceptions of politics – as a conflict of world views and as the sphere of general conditions in social life – lead to the formation of two concepts of art: 'engaged art' and 'engaging art'. Let's attempt to show their differences, and their mutual links.

The dispute over the relationship between art and politics has a long tradition, undoubtedly, reaching to the very beginnings of modernity. Political art, in a certain sense, was created by writers including Pascal, Wolter, Kleist and Mickiewicz. Engaged art in the more narrow sense, though, is a concept created by Jean-Paul Sartre around the mid-20th century. I'd also like to name him patron of what I call engaged art, as distinct from engaging art.

Engaged art wants to break from the ideal of 'art for art's sake', first and foremost. It calls for the artist to abandon the isolated tower in which he sits brooding, settling accounts with himself, or seeking new forms of artistic expression. Art can't be an end in itself but it should become a tool to some degree, a means in achieving an end that stands outside its sphere. This conviction lies at the foundation of Sartre's distinction between poetry and prose. In poetry, words are not symbols but things; they don't create meanings, they don't construct statements, but draw attention to their opacity and ambiguity. In prose, on the other hand, words mean certain external things, sentences refer to something beyond themselves, they possess content and a message. Thus prose, in Sartre's opinion, is called into fuller, more effective participation in social life. It enables something that for the philosopher remains the highest calling of art: building human freedom.

Sartre also showed the apparent contrast between existence and concrete social, historical and political conditions. For him each statement – including artistic statements, arises in a defined situation – which is conditioned both historically and politically. Therefore whoever wants to speak about the existential situation of humanity must take into account this conditionality, which doesn't immediately sentence him to cultivating politics in art by other means.

Engaged art is related to a project of full, direct participation in the social space. This concerns both the works and the person of the artist – as in the case of Sartre himself. Creator and work are indivisible, and must take responsibility to an equal degree for the public sphere. Engaged art is known in French as *l'art engagé*, which calls to mind the phrase *se mettre en gage*: to become a hostage, to submit to external demands and conditions. In Sartre's theory, similar to the case of other projects of engaged art, one must abandon autonomy in favour of participation and independence in favour of responsibility.

Thus engaged art is obliged to enter the political discourse – there's

no way of getting off lightly, no safety valve. It should break from the situation in which, as Sartre describes it, 'the primary duty of the writer is to create scandal, and his inalienable right is to escape its consequences'. The purpose of the strategy thus understood is to regain art's influence in people's decisions, their world views and moral stances, and its participation in the common working out of the social project. To cause real effects in the real world, art should thus give up its autonomy and dissolve in the unpredictable current of social life. Only in showing actual people in actual situations can artistic activity discover the way in which the freedom of individuals or collectives is formed. The vision of engaged art thus crosses the boundary dividing artistic practices from other social practices, effecting a full, responsible integration of art with the public space. This entails the artist speaking out on important political and social questions, but also the creation of messages that will respond to the current situation, problems and tensions.

The project of engaged art as thus understood must be distinguished from what I call 'engaging art'. What's the difference? Engaging art is founded on the assumption of the postwar avant-garde according to which there exists a structural homology between the fields of art and of politics.² This means that whenever an artistic revolution is carried out, it also causes political effects, though their dynamics differ from the results planned by engaged art. Revolutionizing artistic language is a transformation, a deconstruction or reconfiguration of the general space of perception, speaking and thinking, thus it can implement changes in the general conditions of social life. If we utilize the general conception of the politic as the sphere of conditions for the emergence of particular political figures, subjects and opinions, then each revolution in the sphere of perception, each reformulation of the pathways of our thinking, seeing, hearing and speaking, has a deep political dimension.

Insofar as engaged art is a declaration on the subject of disputes already laid out in the field of politics, engaging art has thus far attempted to imagine new lines of division, allowing positions to be taken that until now have appeared impossible. It doesn't respond to political demands or problems, but creates new questions and formulates previously unknown demands.

Engaging art, in contrast to engaged art, doesn't treat the space of communication as a transparent sphere that allows itself to be described without resistance. On the contrary, because entanglement in existing languages of power is a threat to it, it must constantly be on the lookout to recognize and pre-empt attempts at unequivocal appropriation. Simple engagement in the public debate is subject to the risk of recognition that art's status and definition are something obvious, something that doesn't require another round of thinking through and revolutionizing. The political mission of art meanwhile, is also the ceaseless questioning of the borders of art, its languages, categories and tools. If this is the case, art must still be 'art for art's sake' in a certain particular sense, it must still to some small degree be concerned with itself, and must not

2 On this subject, particularly in consideration of historical analyses, see Benoît Denis, *Littérature et engagement. De Pascal à Sartre* (Paris: Seuil, 2000).

forget about itself in the fervour of political interventions.

The patron of engaging art can certainly be named: Roland Barthes, who in the earlier, 'political' phase of his career often used categories of 'the morality of form'.³ According to Barthes, the choice of convention, language and style in and of itself is a political choice, even if it is an element of work that may seem exclusively formal. Art can be political only in its own sphere, remaining to a certain degree autonomous. Only then will it retain its capability to invent, to create new political languages and to draw out new dividing lines.

Engaging art's project assumes that in the space of the political, art should be an active party. The question is not so much political art as it is – in Jacques Rancière's view – the politics of art, a politics that art carries out in its own way and on its own account.⁴ Such a politics must be a work of artistic effort, not the result of pressure from external forces, which seek to manage meaning within the field of art. This doesn't mean art's lack of dependence on political influences, but rather a reversal of the vector of those influences.

The demands of engaging art require that there exists in it a moment that is in a sense 'apolitical', or better 'transpolitical'. The point isn't the kind of apoliticality demanded by opponents of any rapprochement between art and politics. This is rather a stage that's necessary for the politics of art to be effective, thus to truly be politics. To clarify the necessity of this apolitical moment in engaging art, Alain Badiou's distinction between negation, destruction and subtraction⁵ may prove useful.

Negation, according to Badiou, has two sides, is composed of two distinct gestures. For it to be possible for something new to appear – in the field of art, as in politics – it's necessary to negate the current state of affairs. If we negate something, we are in some sense dialectically connected with this something nevertheless – we accept the fact that in building our position, we build it in opposition to this something. This is precisely the point of taking a position on an issue: we select one world – view over another, accepting the postulates of one in order to oppose the postulates of the other. We don't transform the situation itself; we only make a choice within its framework. Thus the question of whether this is truly a free choice arises. Can we say we have free choice if we don't also choose what kind of choice we have? If we don't choose 'what there is to choose from'? Proper negation, constituting the first step that brings us toward the appearance of something new, should thus depend on the negation of a given choice as a whole. This is the basis for something Badiou calls destruction, meaning the negative side of negation, as he sometimes says.

In a gesture of destruction, the point is to move outside of established

3 Roland Barthes, *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), p. 19..

4 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: A&C Black, 2006).

5 Alain Badiou, *Destruction, negation, subtraction – on Pasolini*, <http://www.lacan.com/badpas.htm>, [accessed: 4 February 2015], later page numbers given according to the print edition. Cf. also Badiou, 'Conférence sur la soustraction', *Conditions* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), pp. 179–196.

positions, to question not so much one available position, but the actual set of positions. We don't choose between A and B; we try to show that our possibilities in a given situation aren't limited to a choice between A and B. To show that another arrangement of coordinates is possible, in which other points of view will be available, we must step outside of a given situation and the language that dominates within it. It's precisely the moment of destruction that I call – after Badiou – the transpolitical moment in the strategy of engaging art. Of necessity, in stepping outside a given situation, I abandon the political positions that exist inside it; I break from languages attributed to them, in search of something completely new. At that time, for a moment I find myself in a state of suspension, I discover a sort of no man's land in which the new political lines of division have yet to be drawn, and in which the old ones have ceased to apply.

Here arises the need for a second, affirmative step of negation, which Badiou calls subtraction. Without this next phase, we remain dialectically connected with the situation we are attempting to move beyond. However, we will not accept but reject its guidelines, continuing to shape our identity in opposition to prevailing languages. Meanwhile, the issue is to speak with a completely new language. Novelty is based on the inability to reduce it to a given situation in which it appears. It must be based on the negation of that which already exists, but must go beyond this level of negation to find a point of view that is completely inaccessible for earlier positions, slipping from the grasp of prevailing languages. As Badiou writes: 'the very essence of a novelty implies negation, but must affirm its identity apart from the negativity of negation'⁶.

Let us use an example from the field of theatre. For Jerzy Grotowski to be able to make his breakthrough discoveries in theatrical praxis, he had to negate the model he had built for constructing a performance, working with actors, building dramaturgy. Nevertheless, negation alone would not have sufficed to create something truly new. It was necessary to invent a new language of theatre, a new scenic intensity, which earlier had been literally 'unthinkable'. 'Poor theatre' would not have been anything if it had been required to derive its prestige from the negation of anything. The situation is similar with the example that Badiou uses. Schönberg, creating the language of twelve-tone music at the beginning of the 20th century, had to perform a great destruction of tonal music. However, this would not have been enough to achieve his goal if it were not for the following step of subtraction, meaning the construction of musical language from the very beginning.

The contributions of Grotowski and Schönberg to the history of modern art does not depend on their ability to negate prevailing traditions, but on their creation of languages that were in a certain sense 'ambivalent' toward those traditions, reaching as far as they did beyond the traditions' laws. This ambivalence can only be achieved thanks to the affirmative side of negation – precisely what Badiou calls subtraction in ending his deliberation: 'Negation is always, in its concrete action – political or artistic – suspended between destruction and subtraction. That

6 Badiou, p. 1

the very essence of negation is destruction has been the fundamental idea of the last century. The fundamental idea of the beginning century must be that the very essence of negation is subtraction.⁷

Thus, the politics of theatre depends on the success of two steps. First, a gesture of destruction is needed, to negate existing artistic languages and practices. In this, political categories and positions used up to this point are suspended, as is the method of describing the politics of art itself. The step of subtraction, which follows, is based on the construction of a new language, a new idea of art, but it is also an attempt to find a new type of relationship between art and the social space. In this sense, the affirmative part of negation – subtraction – is a return to politics; more precisely, less a return than a rediscovery of politics, on new grounds. Is it possible to imagine a more socially significant role for art than this very type of reconfiguration?

Let us now return to the subject of the concept of engagement and autonomy, and see how they can be understood in this new light. Both engaged art and engaging art, in the forms sketched out above, have their weak points, if we treat them completely consistently. To be concise, engaged art can take place entirely without negation, while engaging art can fully immerse itself only in its negative side, i.e. in destruction. Let us attempt to develop this thought, as unbinding this knot is essential for discovering the correct relationship between these two formations. And from this relationship – as I believe – there may be born that which, after Rancière, we called the politics of art.

The requirement of participation that forms the core of the concept of engaged art contains the risk that giving up autonomy will lead to a final blurring of art and politics. Then art may be completely indistinguishable from politics, responding precisely to divisions that exist within it, and losing in this way the ability to invent. Acknowledging that art should be a means for building freedom, one can thus end up making of it a weapon in the fight for power. In that case, it no longer has the power to control its messages and guard its ideals. But engaging art also has its negative consequences. The most important is the threat that in pursuit of invention it will lose the effectiveness of this invention. In wanting to constantly devise new languages and new forms, it immerses itself in a mechanical, repetitive and predictable destruction of everything, simply for the prestige of destruction. This is the case in many fields of contemporary art, which have identified the critical moment exclusively with the negative side of negation. In the end, they continue repeating the same strategies; not only do they cease to invent anything new (lacking the strength of subtraction), but at bottom their destructive power is also weakened.

These two visions of political art – one that gives up autonomy in favour of participation, and one that maintains autonomy in the name of its own novelty – are thus irreconcilable but also, paradoxically, inseparable. Each, to achieve its requirements and goals, must appeal to principles and logic that apply in the other. True engaged art must also

7 Badiou, p. 2.

be engaging; otherwise it becomes indistinguishable from languages of politics, and secondary to them. It also loses the possibility of successfully fighting for its ideals. True engaging art, meanwhile, must also in part be engaged art. Otherwise it will remain permanently detached from social space and lose the real possibility of reconfiguring it, becoming a destructive art for art's sake.

To strengthen this argument, let us appeal to the words of a forgotten French poet, a true political rabble-rouser, Charles Peguy. In one essay collection, *Notre jeunesse*, Peguy introduced a very useful distinction between mysticism and politics, which in the context of our deliberations seems even more interesting:

Everything begins from a certain defined mysticism of its own, and everything ends with politics. It is not important what kind of politics is victorious and comes to dominate the other kinds of politics. What is important is that in every order, in every system MYSTICISM MUST NOT BE SWALLOWED UP BY THE POLITICS TO WHICH IT HAS GIVEN BIRTH.⁸

This quotation reveals the entire paradox we have been discussing. Engaged art cannot forget the mysticism – ideals, goals and imaginings – that gave its beginning and constantly give it anew. To remember this, it must have the possibility of appreciating the difference between that mysticism and the practice of political struggle. Supporters of engaged art must be reminded of Peguy's words that 'it is certainly important whether the republicans or the royalists win, but it is incomparably less important than whether the republicans remain republicans, whether the republicans will continue to be republicans'⁹. Art should fight for its autonomy precisely in order to defend politics, in the name of the mysticism that gives birth to politics, from detachment from its own roots. In order to ensure the constant reconfiguration of that, which in general we call politics. It is necessary nevertheless to recall that mysticism should in reality – as Peguy writes – give birth to politics. Otherwise it will remain simply mysticism in the most common and contemptible sense, a ceaseless sublimation of every little shift and every little destruction in the prevailing languages, a sanctifying of transgression. Ultimately it is not insignificant, after all, whether the republicans or the royalists win.

Thus, neither engaged art nor engaging art can appear in its pure state, untainted by its opposite. Perhaps it is thus necessary to treat these two concepts as a sort of ideal type, which in specific artistic activities are blended together and can even co-exist with forms of post-political art. Speaking of the dialectic connection of engaged art and engaging art, we discover one of the deepest contradictions not only in the political dimension of art, but in contemporary political discourse as a whole. For in them two contradictory requirements exist, on an equal footing. On one hand, we have the requirement of participation in political life, speaking out and taking an active position in on-going disputes. On the other, we have the requirement of examining the general logic of social

8 Charles Peguy, *Notre jeunesse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1933), pp. 27–28.

9 Peguy, p. 28.

life, finding gaps and places of potential emancipation in dominant political languages. Thus we simultaneously hear the demand of being a part and encompassing the whole, of taking positions and the possibility of freely expressing oneself on the subject of the rules of their construction, of making choices and settling what kind of choices we have at all. How can politics support this contradiction? The answer lies in the contemporary search for a new language of universalism. It would not be based anymore on the universalization of a fragmentary vision, the recognition of its simple dominance over others, but on maintaining the paradoxical coherence between taking a particular position and the possibility of defining the whole of the social field. The concept of universalism developed by thinkers including Badiou and Ernesto Laclau¹⁰ is meant to serve precisely this purpose: the creation of a language of universal partiality, which takes a defined position and is simultaneously capable of going beyond it and creating a language 'for everyone'.

How can we resolve this contradiction in the field of art? How are we to understand the word 'resolve' here? Perhaps we are not speaking of resolution, but of a certain type of connection, a game. As director René Pollesch states in one of his conversations with Carl Hegemann: 'emancipation does not mean the removal of contradictions, but a free, non-instrumentalised game of contradictions'¹¹. This is precisely the basis of art's political mission. Whether or not it wants to, it must face up to its contradictions then not so much resolve them as play them out in its own way. This means, first and foremost, that there is no sense in setting up a simple opposition between engagement and autonomy, because these are elements that build the fundamental contradiction within which modern art develops. Here we are not dealing with a situation of choice; what counts is contradiction reinvigorating art and giving it the proper dynamic.

If the politics of art is to be congruent with the double gesture of destruction and subtraction, it must be a certain type of operation at the intersection of engaged art and engaging art: less a choice between one option and the other than a transgression of their contradiction. It seems, however, that these two paths do not play roles of equal significance in this operation. Here, engaging art has the deciding significance. Thanks to this art, the step is taken beyond prevailing languages and ready forms of understanding engagement. From it can also arise the proper formula for the return or rediscovery of politicality. This is why engaging art should sublimate engaged art, in the Hegelian sense – transgress its current shape, retaining its closeness to political practice. As with the case of every dialectic sublation, the question is the dismantling of permanent opposition between the concrete and the abstract. Engaged art is immersed in tensions and transformations of the public sphere. Its advantage is its closeness to political activity in and of itself. However,

10 Cf. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Redwood City, California: Stanford University Press, 2003); Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, (London: Verso, 2000).

11 'Neues und gebrauchtes Theater. Ein Gespräch zwischen Carl Hegemann und René Pollesch', *Gnade. Überschreibung und Zurechtweisung* (Berlin: Volksbühne und Alexander Verlag, 2005), p. 83.

when understood dogmatically and too literally, it quickly loses these advantages. It becomes not only indistinguishable from politics in the narrow sense, but in the end loses the ability to reflect on its own practice, and ceases to be effective politics. Saying that art can be the conduct of politics by other means does not resolve anything, as the most important question, which we will discuss, concerns the means that art has at its disposal. Their choice changes not only the form but the very goals of artistic activity, especially in relation to politics in the narrow sense. The abstract or general moment always remains on the side of what, in the first order, we call engaging art. Here the question is mainly its ability to abstract from existing practices and languages. It places almost unlimited possibilities at our disposal. However, they remain in the sphere of imaginations and projects. To become reality – for them to provide the beginning of authentic novelty – they must come into contact with the real dimension of political and social life. This is why referring to engaged art is still essential, even if we recognize its form as insufficient.

Performing the operation we have referred to here as sublation allows us to retain that which is valuable in both moments. Referring to engaged art allows a ‘latching on to reality’. This latching on is necessary, however, only in order to actually transform the opening situation thanks to the innovative possibilities of engaging art. Why then do we want to continue referring to the result of this operation by the name of one of the earlier stages? For two reasons. First, in the gesture of sublation, in the very connection of being engaged and engaging, an active and unusually innovative power is needed, the power of invention and that which Badiou called full negation. Though we are passing the earlier stage of engaging art, what we are concerned with is still its power and its capabilities. Only it is essential to make its gestures into actions in real space. It is worth noting the rather peculiar circumstance that it is only at this stage that it becomes clear what this reality actually is. It is not the context of disputes and opposition in which art that longed to be directly engaged was submerged. Nor is it the sphere of self-driving invention. Reality – which in this moment takes on meanings close to the Lacanian real – is a contradiction, an impasse of that context, that situation. It is only now, moving beyond the situation with the help of negation, that we recognise what constituted its real impossibility, where the unresolvable tensions were found, which could not be expounded upon using the language of earlier disputes and opposition. Referring to the earlier examples, one can say that only knowing Art as the vehicle of Grotowski can we orient ourselves to where the inviolable boundaries of Western dramatic theatre lie.

The second reason we still insist on retaining the name of engaging art to describe an effect of sublation of the earlier opposition of being engaged and engaging, is that only now, on this level, can engaging art be truly engaging. It can create a framework for activity that is full of invention and is fully immersed simultaneously in concrete society. Earlier, its power was purely destructive, but now it is equipped with the proper tools for the difficult and precise work of subtraction.

Engaging art in this new meaning – no longer a contradiction of engagement, but in a certain specific relationship to it – may show us a new

perspective on the politics of art. Thanks to such a sublation, engaged art is freed from its limitations. It moves beyond available languages, seeking a new place for itself. Engaging art, meanwhile – precisely in reference to engaged art – can still operate both actively and affirmatively. It is not destined to repetitiveness of the destruction of the coordinates of the existing situation. This mutual game between engaged and engaging, passive and active, can – I believe – create a fully open relationship between art and politics.

The necessity for a strictly negative moment, referred to by Badiou as destruction, in creating a new artistic practice also commands us to look in a new way at what we called post-political art. This phenomenon must constitute significantly more than just a negative example of how aesthetics blends with politics. It should be a constant point of departure for the politics of art that we are discussing, fill the role of its still present opponent/comrade who helps build its own identity in a gesture of both negation and subtraction. It is in post-political art that this no man's land is most clearly revealed, which arises as a result of the negation of choice that already now exists. In this art we can see freely roaming destruction, which has not been made complete by the step of subtraction.

[...]

Post-political theatre is also capable of clearly showing something that can be called 'the emergence of the political' in the theatre. This emergence does not only signify a coincidental 'entangling' in the political context of something thought up beyond this context, but first and foremost the emergence of something as a political problem as well as the emergence of a new context, which can have political significance.

In conclusion, let us call engaging theatre a theatre attempting to take advantage of both the power of destruction and the inventiveness of subtraction, wanting to be simultaneously a discovering, artistic seeking and to successfully operate on the symbolic space, a theatre invigorated by the contradiction between participation and invention, between politics and the mysticism that stands at its source. This theatre sublates the opposition of engagement and engaging for a new type of engaging art, which engages precisely because it contains within itself all that is needed of the formulas and ideas of engaged art, while not ceasing to differ from it. Here is born the mutual dependence between political effectiveness and artistic refinement, taking positions and the need to reflect on conditions of existence of art and conditions of acting in politics.

Translated by Nathaniel Espino

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