



tertium datur

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The editorial revisits the gap between individual revolutions in art and the collective revolution on the streets as it evolved in the 1960s. Nowadays, with capitalist market relations as the final winner of history, this gap is intensified as a tension between pure and predominantly individualist aesthetics on the one hand and political, globally geared aesthetics on the other. Hence it seems that we have never freed ourselves from the either-or logic that was typical of the Cold-War era. This editorial argues in favor of a third solution.



At the very beginning of his *Notizbücher*, in a passage about Jean Tinguely's performance in the streets of Paris (13 May 1960), German political author Peter Weiss (1916–1982) stated that, "The revolution of art is the revolution of individual artists. Revolutions in lives of common people in the streets have been never achieved." (1) The ambition that emerges from this gap between individual revolutions in art and the collective revolution on the streets reflects a wider tension between inherited understanding of politics, and of revolution in particular, and the new political and aesthetic sensibility as it evolved in the 1960s. The tension can be illustrated with yet another, perhaps more telling example: In 1968, Jean-Paul Sartre, a renowned representative of the older generation of intellectuals, interviewed Daniel Cohn-Bendit as a proponent of the 1968 student revolt. Whereas Sartre still argued in terms of an either-or ("Either compromises with the demands of modern time or revolution" (2)), Cohn-Bendit insisted on another, radically new type of revolution that was expected to do away with this binary and its possible deadlocks. For him, the main political desire consisted not of making decisions – between compromise and revolution, social conformity and destruction – but of being able to "enjoy without inhibitions." (3) By contrast, Peter Weiss had an ambivalent or at least kaleidoscopic view of the 1960s cultural revolution in general and a rather negative opinion of Cohn-Bendit in particular – something which he sketchily noted down as follows:

The anarchist nihilist who wants to destroy everything (art is rubbish) but who is unable to offer alternatives. A completely frustrated individual. – First the old anarchists, then the future ones. The question: what do you want instead – no answer. French "revolutionaries." (Cohn-Bendit) (4)

Weiss was straightforward when it came to art acting in service of emancipation and collective politics. In contrast to both bourgeois and anarchist understandings of the freedom of art and aesthetics, he insisted on the use, or uses, of art and literature for progressive, emancipatory causes. Yet in the Cold-War era, this was cumbersome because the choices seemed to be limited to an 'either-or' or a 'here vs. there' logic. That is why the answers to the typically modern dilemma of 'free art vs. political coercion' had to again and again be specified with regard to particular politics and particular means.

Judging from contemporary discussions over the relationship between aesthetics and politics, we seem to have never abandoned this bipolar world order. The global TINA ideology, in fact, long upheld the belief that there was no alternative to the bad opposition of 'capitalist warmongering vs. authoritarian socialism,' with capitalism emerging as

the lesser evil. Back in the Cold-War era, embracing capitalism – for many but not all – also meant a promise of liberation from acuminated friend-and-foe relations on the international left, which perpetuated war-like antagonisms not only against capitalist countries but also against the ‘enemies within.’ At all events, Manichaeic constellations did not result in a dialectical synthesis of thesis (capitalism) and antithesis (socialism); instead, they precipitated a rebuttal of politics altogether, thus “throw[ing] the baby out with the bathwater,”⁽⁵⁾ as Arendt used to say. In politics proper – understood in the traditional vein as the realm reserved specifically for politicians (and political parties, movements, states, legislative frameworks) – this enabled an acceleration of interest-led global relations and the final surge of capitalism as the only prevalent mode of production. Simultaneously, in the realm of aesthetics an accompanying slowdown of progressive ideas occurred, which has been epitomized in the positively connoted and yet very slippery notion of ‘the political.’ Which brings me back to cultural production, the outset of this editorial, and the main point of my interest.



the list can be extended to include the kindred spirits of Frantz Fanon, Assia Djebar, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Amílcar Cabral, Lu Xun, Okwui Enwezor, and by Kojin Karatani's arguments developed in his study *Transcritique*.

‘The political’ can be considered as a historical heir to the 1960s idea of prefigurative politics, even of cultural revolution. Notwithstanding the differences in understanding this “purposively blurry notsion,”⁽⁶⁾ ‘the political’ was unambiguously considered to be the long-awaited conceptual antipode to inherited ‘politics.’⁽⁷⁾ In contemporary political theory, with post-foundational theory as a kind of ringleader, ‘politics’ implies a rather conventional understanding of the business of politicians and political parties, movements, states, and legislative frameworks. By way of contrast, ‘the political’ presents a challenge to the established order, its interruption, and perhaps even a break with it.⁽⁸⁾ Itself anarchic, it suspends the symbolic economy of institutionalized, archaic, authoritarian, prescriptive, paternalist, and pedagogic politics (implying both the politics of state and of revolution). Here, it is essential to remark that ‘the political’ draws its revolutionary potential not from the traditional arena of organized politics but first and foremost from aesthetics.

Throughout the 1990s and in the first decade of the new millennium, when responsibility for the course of the world was confined to the allegedly non-partial laws of the global market, increasing investments in the revolutionary power of delimited aesthetics (encompassing not only arts but also ways of life) propelled the creativity sphere into a literal “stand-in for an absent politics.”⁽⁹⁾ This meant that the hopes for challenging rampant neoliberalism were first and foremost placed in

artistic practices, which additionally diminished the visibility of organized resistances. Concomitantly, what complicated this scene switching from politics towards aesthetics was the consensus among art theoreticians that, in capitalism, “the redistribution of the sensible is overwhelmingly constrained by capital”; consequently, “critique in and through art (the ‘empty space’) cannot but be immanent and local.”⁽¹⁰⁾ “The result is” – and here one can adopt Blair Taylor’s claim regarding the political failure of neo-anarchism – “an aestheticization of politics wherein taste and cultural preference become a cipher and shorthand for politics.”⁽¹¹⁾

A down-to-earth observer of strategies, by means of which, on the one hand, ‘aesthetic activists’ aim to fix the ecological apocalypse we are living through, while on the other, global elites submit evidentially limited systemic solutions, will say that the incapacity of the world regime to adapt to the pressing circumstances will once again attest its tenacity. Undoubtedly, this insight might be belated. The very fact that we seem to have partly surpassed the illusion according to which delimited aesthetics was believed to be the appropriate replacement of and only viable successor to organized politics does not have the power to redeem us from the catastrophe.



tertium datur allows us to think of autonomous cultural production not in place of but alongside political activism: Art is political not because it serves as a placeholder for politics but because it is empowered by transformative politics without, however, renouncing the right to its own specificity of the aesthetic. Thus, it leaves political aims to politics (e.g., an eight-hour workday or a ban on plastic) and simultaneously deals with the contemporary world on its own terms.

Moreover, if this insight might suggest a new turn in continued historical swinging back and forth between politics and aesthetics, aesthetics and politics, it still does not add much to the discussion. That is to say, binary conceptualizations of aesthetics and politics, with politics imposing radical systemic changes without considering the needs, expectations, and adaptability of society that is expected to follow, and then with aesthetics coming in place of failed politics, do not bring us any further. We are all familiar with the slogans from 20th-century aesthetic discussions, ranging from Walter Benjamin’s famous two last sentences in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* (1935)⁽¹²⁾ to Theodor W. Adorno’s dimmed version of commitment,⁽¹³⁾ to the inflationary usage of postmodern keywords such as ‘politics of representation,’ ‘politics of desire,’ and ‘politics of translation,’

and, finally, to more recent claims that, due to the fact that “artistic critique has become an important element of capitalist productivity,” it is “the production of subjectivity” that becomes the central field of ideological and hence also of political antagonism.⁽¹⁴⁾ It is plainly visible that the “rhetoric of aestheticism,”⁽¹⁵⁾ epitomized in the belief that aesthetics contains the whole truth about politics, has to be abandoned in favor of a more straightforward role of cultural production in the development of globally transformative politics. Yet this claim too is not unprecedented: faced with what he, as a distinguished intellectual and critic regarded as both an “ecological” as well as “a more general crisis of the social, political and existential,” Félix Guattari called for “the mobilisation of minds, sensibilities and wills.”⁽¹⁶⁾ According to Guattari, aesthetic revolutions prove to be insufficient as long as they are not aligned with an overall “refoundation of political praxis”⁽¹⁷⁾ and a recomposing of social, biological, and economic affiliations across most diverse axes of the global consubstantiality of human kind, all living nature, and geological fundamentals. Compared to Guattari, who insisted on an unrelenting renunciation of not only party politics but also of state formations (and in this matter misleadingly referred to Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin), Chantal Mouffe, another prominent theoretician of the relationship of aesthetics and politics, proposed a more conventional but to a certain extent probably more conceivable convergence of transformative aesthetic practices and party politics. Notwithstanding the limitations of her own rendering of the Gramscian ‘war of positions,’ we cannot but warrant the claim that “linkage with traditional forms of political intervention like parties and trade-unions cannot be avoided. It would be a serious mistake to believe that artistic activism could, on its own, bring about the end of neo-liberal hegemony.”⁽¹⁸⁾

Claims such as these may have been timely reactions to the 1990s’ liberal upgrading of aesthetics as the final resort of political action. However, related discussions over the proper relationship between aesthetics and organized politics accompanied the avantgardes from their historical beginnings up to their (re-)invention in the 1950s and 1960s. Throughout these discussions, we discover yet another tradition of political aesthetics: an aesthetics that maintains art’s specific freedoms and autonomy but nevertheless upholds its unmistakable ideological alliance with transformative – and that is to say, organized – politics, notwithstanding its apparent failures (“Fehler”) and mishaps (“mißglückte Versuche”).⁽¹⁹⁾ Having become a victim of epistemic violence⁽²⁰⁾ itself, the legacy of this tradition was dimmed, with its heirs cowed and even ostracized. And it is precisely this legacy that *Philosophy World Democracy* aims to bring to the forefront of contemporary aesthetic and social discussions and also to discuss in the context of new political art that stands by its age-old promise of *Weltveränderung*. Its prominent representatives were, to name but just a few, Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács, British art critic Alick West, Yugoslav art historian Oto Bihalji-Merin, the aforementioned Peter Weiss, and many others.⁽²¹⁾ If these intellectuals grew out of European urban scenes that between the World Wars and in the Cold-War era represented vibrant emigré and

supranational contact zones of aesthetics and politics, the list can be extended to include the kindred spirits of Frantz Fanon, Assia Djebar, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Amílcar Cabral, Lu Xun, Okwui Enwezor, and by Kojin Karatani's arguments developed in his study *Transcritique*.(22)

What this legacy offers us today is the forgotten but immensely powerful intellectual stance of *tertium datur* that enables us to maneuver between the Scylla of understanding artworks as tools or illustrations of social and political forces on the one hand, and the Charybdis of the belief in their pure and autonomous existence on the other. Specifically, *tertium datur* allows us to think of autonomous cultural production not in place of but alongside political activism: Art is political not because it serves as a placeholder for politics but because it is empowered by transformative politics without, however, renouncing the right to its own specificity of the aesthetic. Thus, it leaves political aims to politics (e.g., an eight-hour workday or a ban on plastic) and simultaneously deals with the contemporary world on its own terms. I contend that this understanding of the relationship between politics and aesthetics helps us to circumvent the problems of political substitutionalism that beset political aesthetics throughout the whole of the 20th century.(23)

In sharp contrast to what is nowadays marked as the politics of art, literature, and film, *tertium datur* is expressively political inasmuch as it unambiguously acts in support of political views, movements, and even parties and regimes. Simultaneously, it does this without violating its own self-appointed rights and purposes. It is precisely this kind of cultural production that falls out of the scope of contemporary discourses in aesthetics. Its tacit, even purloined history and its contemporary existences testify to an utterly political and simultaneously decidedly dissensual cultural agency that waits for its consideration.

NOTES

1. Weiss, *Notizbücher. Erster Band* 10.
2. Sartre, "Die Phantasie an die Macht" 265.
3. Cohn-Bendit, *Linksradikalismus* 134.
4. Weiss, *Notizbücher. Zweiter Band* 613. Italics mine.
5. Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* 97.
6. Hebekus, Matala de Mazza, and Koschorke, eds., *Das Politische* 13.
7. However, the terminology is not always used consistently. In Claude Lefort's perspective, *the political* (*le politique*) corresponds to the understanding of politics-as-regime or politics-as-rule, whereas *politics* (*la politique*) is synonymous with the conflictual understanding of the term (cf. Ingram, "The Politics of Claude Lefort's Political" 35). This is similar to Jacques Rancière's terminology, where politics-as-regime is named *police* (*la police*) and its conflictual counterpart is also named *politics* (*la politique*; Rancière, *Disagreement* 21-42). In German-

speaking debates, the opposition is reversed: whereas *die Politik (la politique)* refers to politics-as-rule, *das Politische (le politique)* presents a challenge to it (cf. Bröckling and Feustel, "Einleitung" 8).

8. Cf. Bedorf and Röttgers, *Das Politische und die Politik*; Esch-van Kan, Schulte, and Packard, "Politics and Aesthetics: Introduction"; Mersch, "The Political and the Violent"; Marchart, "Politics and the Political."
9. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art* 269.
10. Roberts, *Revolutionary time and the avant-garde* 224.
11. Taylor, "From alterglobalization to Occupy Wall Street" 737.
12. "Such is the aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by fascism. Communism replies by politicizing art." Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility."
13. "Even in the most sublimated work of art there is a hidden 'it should be otherwise.'" Adorno, "Commitment" 194.
14. Mouffe, "Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces."
15. Härtle, "Das Elend des Ästhetizismus (und einige seiner Stärken)" 192.
16. Guattari, *Chaosmosis* 119.
17. Ibid. 120.
18. Mouffe, "Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces."
19. Weiss, *Notizbücher. Zweiter Band* 595.
20. As a term often used in post-colonial theory, epistemic violence reemerged in the paradigm shift articulated by Miranda Fricker in 2007 and developed by José Medina. Whereas it is well applicable to epistemological exclusion and muting of persons and collectives on the grounds of race, gender, national or ethnic identity, it has been rarely used for epistemological muting of anti-capitalist viewpoints that thwart the questions of identity and belonging altogether (especially when articulated against socialist backgrounds).
21. German religious scholar Klaus Heinrich may be a case in point. Cf. his study *tertium datur*.
22. Thanks to Gal Kirn, Wolfram Ette, Jernej Habjan, Sebastian Schuller, and Galin Tihanov for their help with these references.
23. Cf. Roberts, *Revolutionary time and the avant-garde*.

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