

Between Creativity and Criminality: On the liminal zones of Art and Political Action

Pascal Gielen

Prof. Sociology of Art & Cultural Politics ARIA - Antwerp University

pascal.gielen@uantwerpen.be

Reimagining Utopias

Those who have been scouring biennales and arts festivals over the past decade have been treated to a veritable feast of political discussions and social debates. Sometimes art is hardly the topic anymore, but rather globalism, neoliberalism, precarity or ecology, to name but a few. This political discourse is mostly limited to the discursive space, which in addition hardly moves beyond the borders of the parish of the already converted. Words and actions are still very far apart here, which means that true political activism does not materialize. However, this takes nothing away from the fact that the professional art world is increasingly taking a political role upon itself. The time-space that is skimmed on in education seems to be shifting to biennales and theatres. Adding to that the thinning of the critical debate, the cutbacks on research journalism and the commodification of the writing and speaking space in mainstream media, it seems sometimes that art institutions are among the few remaining places of refuge for public debate and critical political analyses.

And there is more than just room for debate. After proclaiming 'the end of history' (Fukuyama, 1992), advocating the end of ideological differences and *de facto* the end of democracy, the idea of utopia as a possible political project was also buried. The intellectual and especially academic/scientific taboo on

Actualmente, um crescente número de artistas aproxima-se novamente do compromisso político. Nas bienais e festivais de arte assistimos a mais do que simples aproximações à teoria política radical: os artisticamente comprometidos estão cada vez mais a arregaçar as mangas, a sujar as mãos na construção do espaço cívico, em emendar os erros pós-coloniais, ou pelo menos a desafiar a política neoliberal. Neste artigo, será feita uma diferenciação analítica entre espaços públicos, civis, cívicos e comuns com o objectivo de entender melhor como as intervenções artísticas podem e são mediadoras em acções políticas na actualidade. O ponto de partida teórico é o de que a acção cívica ocorre geralmente no abismo entre a legalidade e a ilegalidade e entre a criatividade e a criminalidade. Na área cinzenta entre o que é permitido ou não, ou até o que é proibido, cidadãos dão início àquilo que ainda não foi pensado por qualquer governo ou

estado e para o qual não existem mercados interessados. As acções cívicas e os espaços comuns dizem sobretudo respeito a domínios não regulados, áreas que ainda não foram abrangidas pela lei. É por isso que uma acção cívica é sempre uma iniciativa arriscada, na qual alguém arrisca o pescoço e o seu próprio posicionamento social, político e, como artista, artístico. Com base na investigação realizada para a European Culture Foundation, são descritas as diferentes etapas de uma cadeia cívica e, com vários exemplos, é analisado o papel específico da arte e das intervenções artísticas no domínio político.

utopian thinking erodes the humus soil of both the political and the civil space, especially that of the *social imagination*. The current dominance of ‘realism’ and pragmatism in politics (Fisher, 2009) as well as in philosophy deprives politics of chances for developing a long-term vision. Nowadays, any visionary project with an eye on an ideal society invariably runs aground on the Realpolitik of budget policies. Politics has become policy, and governing seems to become more and more a matter of bookkeeping. This corners the imagination, or rather: sends it into exile to the exclusive domain of fiction. Only within the walls of a cinema, a theatre, a museum, or in the pages of a novel is there still room to dream of a possibly different world. There, one can still freely speculate about a possible future society.

Perhaps the boom in fantasy and science fiction movies in popular culture need therefore not surprise us. The first genre is a rosy escape from reality, while in the second genre utopia becomes dystopia (Berardi, 2015). Both genres have in common that they create an image of a truly post-political society at the end of history. Whereas in fantasy movies all power relations have been depoliticized—as they are dissolved in supernatural and magical, but also highly moral decisions about good and evil—the world of science fiction tends to presents us with societies that are at the mercy of terror, totalitarian regimes, dehumanized camp-like situations controlled by machines, or natural disasters of apocalyptic proportions. Convincing stories about possibly different, utopian worlds are however few and far between. Our future is either transcendental or catastrophic. This popular field of the imaginary doesn’t seem to offer many other flavours. The contrast with the boom in political and social commitment in that other segment of the imaginary domain of fiction could hardly be sharper. From the heterotopic project of Michelangelo Pistoletto to the activist architecture of Recetas Urbanas, from the political art of Jonas Staal and

Oliver Ressler to the economic, postcolonial interventions by Renzo Martens, or the utopian but also highly concrete gestures of Thomas Hirschhorn – they are all concerned with imagining a possibly different world. Admittedly, many of them are reluctant to use the word ‘utopia’, almost always stressing the direct relation their work has to the real world. Pistoletto, for example, does not just imagine *The Third Paradise* (2010) but also laid the foundation for a real functioning organization Cittadellarte. Likewise, *Recetas Urbanas* is building real homes and schools that meet an acute social demand, and Renzo Martens is really rolling up his sleeves in Congo to build a museum and to transform the art exchange chain between the north and the south. In short, we see here a real praxis where actions are suited to words. Perhaps this is why these artists are reluctant to call their practices ‘utopian’. Nevertheless, it can hardly be denied that in their quest they are hoping for a possibly different, indeed, *better* world. And although, alas, this is often only observed by the few in the professional art world, their actions nevertheless demonstrate the will to break out of this confinement. Driven by their imagination they frequently jump into the gap between legality and illegality, creativity and criminality. It is precisely this imaginary potency that gives them the possibility to go further than debates about politics and civil activism. Not only are artists capable of presenting an imagined world, their skills allow them to make us also actually experience that world. Perhaps this is where their extra political potency lies.

As will explained later, the civil space is an undecided grey zone, fallow land on which civil actions and political activism mostly settle only temporarily. However, this undecided space also provides the necessary opening that sets a civil movement into motion and keeps it going. Especially here something has to happen because no one has seen it yet or no one cares about it. And this brings us to the importance of art or, more broadly, the imaginary. In order to see what no one else has seen yet, artists can deploy their powers of imagination—powers that are being smothered in today’s Realpolitik. But, to understand better which strategies artists can follow, it is useful to make a more analytical distinction of the different realms in which political activism takes shape.

Between Creativity and Criminality

It is in the gaping gulf between legality and illegality, between creativity and criminality that the civil space sees the light of day. In the grey area between what is allowed and not or not yet allowed, civilians engage in political actions to initiate that of which a government or state has not yet thought (or does not want to think of) and for which there are no interested markets. For the record: civil action does not coincide with criminal behaviour. Civil actions simply concern non-regulated domains, areas not yet covered by law. However, within a democracy, at the end of the day it is the legislative and judicial powers that decide whether to categorize the issue at hand as legal

or illegal. At the moment of the actual action itself this is still undecided: will this practice be tolerated, embraced, or even passed into law, or rather not? Civilians who invoke their civil rights, are in other words still uncertain about where they will end up, how they will be judged. This is why a political action is mostly a risky undertaking in which one sticks one's neck out and risks one's own social position.

Civil and Civic Spaces

Because of this undecided nature of the space in which the civil action takes place, it seems wise to distinguish between the terms 'civil' and 'civic'. Although both concepts are often used interchangeably in everyday usage, 'civic' mainly refers to the government, which has 'civic tasks' or sets these well-defined civic tasks to persons or delegates them to places and institutions. In other words, political actions in the civic place are already regulated (by law or otherwise) whereas those in the civil space still lay open. Or, to paraphrase Michel de Certeau's analytical distinction between place and space: the civic place is a place that is established or has taken root in policies, education programmes, regulations or laws. By contrast, the civil space, in the Certeausian sense, is a space that remains fluid; a realm where positions still have to be taken up or created (Certeau, 1980).

Governments or authorities who wish to regulate civil space by, for example, guaranteeing a public square in a city, or public cultural infrastructures such as (national) museums and theaters, are transforming the civil space into a civic place. Likewise, the civil movement that demands a better legal framework for a certain issue, is paradoxically promoting the elimination of its own reason for existence. It is no coincidence that civil movements, including independent subcultures and squatters often evaporate once a government supports them. The movement comes to a standstill as it becomes rooted in a civic law or a civic infrastructure.

Why both the true civil action and the civil space find themselves in between illegality and legality is perhaps better understood by looking at the problem of - modern or (post)revolutionary - politics. As Hannah Arendt states in *On Revolution*: '... those who get together to constitute a new government are themselves unconstitutional, that is, they have no authority to do what they have set out to achieve. The vicious circle in legislating is present not in ordinary law making, but in laying down the fundamental law, the law of the land or the constitution which, from then on, is supposed to incarnate the "higher law" from which all laws ultimately derive their authority.' (Arendt, 183-84, 1990).

So, the constitutive power and the constitutive body are always outside of the constitution, since they precede it. They are therefore neither legal nor illegal, which immediately presents the problem of authority within modern democracies: of whom is it accepted that they place themselves outside, or rather above the law, precisely in order to establish that law? Civil space relates

to civic place in a similar ambivalent manner. The former precedes the latter, running the risk of never, ever being recognized or legalized and thus of remaining permanently in the sphere of illegality.

Civil and Public Spaces

Like the advocated difference between 'civic' and 'civil', also the terms 'public' and 'civil' are best kept apart rather than have them coincide. Here too, a distinction may be productive. The civil space often requires collective initiatives and organizations. People have to make an effort, organize something or simply 'do' something in order to shape a civil space. By contrast, public space is the space we can enter freely, that is or should be accessible to anyone. It's the space of public opinion where people can make their more or less idiosyncratic voice be heard, freely, and preferably with good arguments, like in the media, in public debate or in the time-honoured salon conversations (Habermas, 1989). We can articulate the relationship between these concepts as follows: whereas the public space is a space for the free exchange of thoughts, opinions, ideas, and people, the civil domain provides the framework for organizing these thoughts, opinions, ideas, and people. Within the latter space, an opinion or idea is expressed in a public action or in the form of an organization. The earlier mentioned political debates at biennials and art festivals belong in that sense to the public space, but they need civil initiatives to organize that space for debate. In other words, civil space needs the public domain. After all, the second constitutes the utterly vital source of inspiration for the first. Public space provides, as it were, both new ideas and new people (new citizens) but they can only claim and obtain their place in society through self-organization in the civil domain. Vice versa this also implies that public space is reliant on civil space, as the latter makes the public domain possible by organizing it or claiming a place for it; for example by enforcing the freedom of speech by legal means, but also by founding organizations and institutions such as newspapers or other platforms, for that purpose. Simply put, public space is all about the free word, while in the civil domain the action takes centre stage, such as in the mentioned activities of Martens or Recetas Urbanas. The interaction between both constitutes a *praxis*, where the action is suited to the word but also where actions can and may be put into words.

Commons

Before going deeper into the role of art in political activism, there is a last distinction that should be made clear: the realm of the commons. The concept of the commons has won much attention in cultural and political debates the last decade and it gained prominence both in recent philosophy (Hardt and Negri, 2009) and in law research (Lessig, 2004). According to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, guaranteeing a commons is necessary to safeguard future cultural production. These philosophers have described the commons as a

category that transcends the classic contrast between public property (guaranteed by the state) and private property. In the area of culture, Negri and Hardt mention knowledge, language, codes, information and affects as belonging to the commons. This shared and freely accessible communality is necessary to keep the economy running in the long term, to regain the balance in the ecological system, and to keep our sociopolitical fabric dynamic (Hardt and Negri, 2009: viii). Also economical studies stressed already in the early 1990's the importance of the regulation of (free) access to the commons (fe. see Ostrom, 1990). For this reason the commons is defined here as the space where in fact the access to public and private goods and services is discussed and regulated. And, as well known, a lot of political debate and activism revolves around this issue: who, how many people and under which conditions can people get access to debates in public space, to civil and civic services (f.e. public libraries, museums, education, social security) often first claimed by civil actions and later on organized by cultural grass root initiatives in civil space or taken over by governments in the defined civic space.

In summary, the relationship between the differentiated spaces can be described as followed: in public space ideas and proposals (f.e. alternative forms of (sub)cultural expressions) can be articulated and discussed which can be worked-out and organized in civil space, or they can be taken over by a government in civic place or by the market in the private sphere (f.e. the construction of and support for cultural infrastructure). But the discussion and regulation about the access to those services is a matter of the commons (f.e. who and how many people can participate, or discussions about what needs to be guaranteed by a government and what can be done by the private sector). Political activism takes place in all those spheres, and art can play different roles in it. To understand better what kind of forms artistic initiatives can take in those different spheres, they will be related to the different phases in a 'civil chain of political activism', which was developed in earlier research (Gielen and Lijster, 2016).

The Civil Chain

Civil action is born from emotion, argues the Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells (2015). Although such actions always imply the hopeful expectation that something in society can be improved, this initial emotion is often of a negative nature, fed by fear, discomfort or irritation. The reasons for this can be manifold. An individual may feel threatened by beggars or by drug dealers hanging around in the neighbourhood. But they can also feel ill at ease because there are too many policemen, soldiers or security cameras in the streets. Employees may feel intimidated by their boss or colleagues and may also experience stress because of a too heavy workload. In short, feelings of annoyance, frustration or injustice can have many causes. And, as may be evident from this range of examples, certainly not every negative emotional experience leads to civil action and political activism.

Discomfort can be channelled in many ways. Those who choose therapy or decide to hire a lawyer opt for a private and individual solution to their problem. Indeed, communication with a therapist or lawyer has little to do with public action or political claims. In order to 'enter' civil society we need to specifically address a collective and generate public support. The initial emotion must be recognized as a shared emotion or irritation. Civil action is only possible if we take our personal discomfort out of the private sphere, when we 'de-privatize' the subject matter. However, such a step towards civil space requires an important skill: the ability of (self)rationalization. This is required to articulate an initial intuition or basic emotion. It is the cognitive competence of analyzing one's own feelings and perhaps point out possible causes. Rationalization, and especially self-rationalization, therefore precedes communication, although the causes of certain emotions might be further clarified in dialogue with others.

And, further, after the processes of rationalization, communication and de-privatization, the skill of organization is required in order to set the civil action in motion and, if necessary, keep it going in the long run. For instance, one must organize oneself in order to write an opinion piece, but also encourage others to do the same. Protesting in the streets or rolling up our sleeves to clean the neighbourhood requires at least a modicum of (self)organization.

Balancing between Emotion and Rationalization

What is important here is that those processes of self-rationalization and of self-organization can temper the initial emotion that triggered them in the first place. For instance, having to find one's way through a maze of legal rules, being obliged to study political procedures, or having to follow the long and winding road through bureaucratic institutions in order to arrive at the right form of (self-)organization can make one lose the energy to go on. Both processes therefore require that we literally rationalize that initial emotion, to distance ourselves from it and in a sense 'bureaucratize' it (all forms of organization presuppose setting up a minimum number of rules and procedures and sticking to them). In themselves such processes are not dramatic and even necessary to initiate civil action. However, this points to the fact that the basic emotion as mentioned determines the 'drive' or the energy of the civil undertaking. Or, in an analogy by Castells (2015): it is an initial fear converted into anger that defines the engine of civil action. It is the steam that powers civil initiatives with a civil mission. This also means that political action derives its basic energy from very direct, mundane and mostly local human experience. The chances of success and continuance of every civil initiative therefore depend on finding the right balance between rationalizing and organizing on the one hand and keeping up the energy that is obtained from a basic emotion on the other hand. This balance is all the more urgent the more organizations 'scale up' their activities, for instance from a local to a regional or from the national to the transnational level. Each step up the ladder demands more

rationalization and organization, and thereby one risks evaporating the initial drive and emotion, as well losing track of the local problems that started it all.

Commoning

When political activists want to reach structural change they need to act on a more abstract systemic level (f.e. to change the 'neoliberal' organization of society, work and life; or to safeguard the welfare state; or to reduce our ecological footprint). Political activism needs to deal often with this tension between on the one hand 'local' emotions and reasons to act and on the other hand global issues and political mechanisms. The latter are often articulated in the described public space where both, visionary ideas and utopias, as well as new ideologies can be discussed in a quite abstract way. However, ideas alone cannot produce real social change. This takes actions or acts. Citizens take initiatives to build, for example, alternative social formations and forms of self-organization in the defined civil space. Self-organization, however, is again usually initiated locally and may therefore become stranded in localism or what Nick Snricek and Alex Williams (2015) call 'folk politics'. In this case, social or ecological problems are addressed for a relatively small and primarily closed community but do not build systemic change. In order to make political activism effective it needs to organize structural change. For this reason alternative social, ecological, political, economic,... models must be distributed and shared, and at that moment the described common space comes in. Alternative economies and forms of self-organization must demonstrate their effectiveness to others if political activism wants to generate structural effects. This necessitates the preferably free or very cheap sharing of information and knowledge, of materials and logistics, but also of business models and new solidarity structures. Political activism dealing with fundamental and deep embedded problems should also influence institutional bodies to have any effect. It are exactly processes of sharing, or *commoning* which force governments into an alternative legislative organization, as for example, the Creative Commons licence or the Bologna Regulation for the Care and Regeneration of Urban Commons show.¹ It is only when actions take place on this political and legislative level that sustainable reform may actually take place and the current social, ecological or economic problems can be addressed in a sustainable way.

From the above we may conclude that artists who get involved in political activism can be situated in a chain of successive, distinctive operations. And that such activities will continuously have to take into account all the previous stages in the chain in order not to alienate itself from its own source of energy. Analytically, this succession of processes – which is called the civil chain – looks like this: (1) emotion – (2) (self-)rationalization – (3) communication – (4) de-privatization (or going public), (5) (self-)organization, and, finally, (6) 'commoning'.

Converting Emotions

By using the civil chain as an analytical tool to analyse the artistic involvement in political activism, it's finally possible to detect at least three transitions in which art can play a crucial role. The first one takes place at the emotional level. An initially negative feeling must be converted into a sense of positive energy, of simple enthusiasm to 'get cracking' or at least of not resigning oneself to the situation. Castells gives, as already mentioned, the example of fear that must be 'positively' converted into outrage and hope (2015: 247-248). By 'positively' we mean that outrage and hope lead to action. However negative the results of bursts of outrage may be, they always indicate an accumulation of energy. Through outrage, the paralyzing effect of fear changes from passive to active. Feelings of discomfort, irritation, insecurity, injustice and the like often result in defeatism or resignation. Especially when people feel they are alone in their efforts, they tend to resign themselves to the situation. Only when a sometimes hard to pinpoint 'spark' turns negative energy into positive energy does political action become an option.

Artists or collectives such as Renzo Martens or Têtes de L'Art often mention this defeatism when they arrive at the spot in Congo, a suburb or a local community. Sometimes citizens undertook already several steps in civil actions but failed to succeed. In other situations they undertake nothing because they can see the bigger political and economic picture in which their local problems seemed unresolvable, or they just don't know where to start. Artists have tools in their hands to shift those feelings of defeatism. The most effective one here seems simple 'doing'. Renzo Martens activated with his Institute for Human Activities local citizens on a Unilever plantation to make their own chocolate art works and even to build a white cube on the spot. By engaging people in creative processes, stimulating and coaching them in realizing concrete things citizens get a kind of positive energy and drive because they are involved in an interactive process with a positive outcome such as a creative work, a theatre performance or an exhibition. By taking, for example, a closer look at the activities of Les Têtes de l'Art in Marseille we can see the same mechanisms at work. It is precisely a simple act of making art together with others or 'doing things' that plays an important part. Drive is not so much communicated in words, and energy rarely comes from a well-articulated view in a debate, a newspaper or scientific report. Rather, they emerge from the activities that are organized, the artistic interventions that are staged and the actions that are undertaken. Just like the transference of emotions can take place subconsciously and non-verbally through mirror neurons, the drive and energy are primarily communicated through the actions themselves. Artistic activities generate a 'mimetic effect', which spurs others into action. Artistic interventions and performances in public space can point out the social issues within a group, neighbourhood or square. Cultural civil actions not only bring to light what is not visible, but also make manifest how the surroundings, a space or a neighbourhood may be experienced differently.

In this respect, artistic activities differ from other civil actions such as protests, opinion pieces or petitions. Whereas such civil actions are generally limited to social criticism, the artistic civil action has an extra element: an alternative experience. For a little while the artists provide an often quite modest, but possibly different, sometimes utopic world, which in most cases generates positive energy. Les Têtes de l'Art illustrates this quite literally with their initiatives named Place à l'Art (2007), a sort of 'fair' where people in the neighbourhood can together engage in all sorts of artistic activities, producing a very positive social dynamics in places where before drug dealers and other petty criminals created an unsafe social environment. The outrage over an unsafe environment is immediately 'compensated' for with a positive alternative. At the emotional level, especially artistic interventions provide opportunities for converting negative feelings into a positive energy. Conversely, for some it might be precisely this alternative experience that makes them understand that their living conditions or precarious social environment are far from ideal. Crucial in this is that it is 'through' the artistic process or the work of art itself that participants are given an experience of alternative possibilities. A project of Les Têtes de l'Art in Bel Horizon, a degraded building in the centre of Marseille, illustrates this energizing shift very well. After a request of an inhabitant of this high-rise flat, Les Têtes de l'Art organized a collective work of several months. A group of adults and children from the tower block worked together on a script and collectively produced a fictional video about a problematic situation that affected all inhabitants. The fiction involved children and adults of the tower block as actors. The artistic vector allowed for alternative representations to the negative image attached to the place and encouraged the meeting of inhabitants in the tower. After this fiction, a second project consisted in realizing five short films about the wishes of inhabitants about the rehabilitation of the tower. At that moment a rather classic community art project resulted in political claims and activism.

The Bel Horizon (2010) case is just one of many actions that demonstrate how an artistic experience works within civil action. What we can observe here is how (negative) criticism of a certain situation goes hand in hand with theatrical action that generates a rather positive experience of an alternative situation. This positive experience in turn evokes new criticism and civil action. Or, as mentioned before: the artistic activity itself is what is keeping the energy alive. If such a positive experience does no longer or not yet exist in the social reality, this actually provides artists with an interesting tool to create this experience all the same, especially in a fictional setting. A play or film creates a distance from the world we actually live in and precisely thereby generates the context for an alternative world. It is this experience that can make participants reflect on their real social reality. For them art generates – in the words of Niklas Luhmann (1997) – a 'second order observation': from the artistic, imaginary or fictional 'second order' experience they can better observe how

they live and experience their own everyday 'first order' reality. In the cases of Place à l'Art and Bel Horizon we see how this experience then encourages people to intervene in real life or at least long for and demand a different reality.

Expression

A second necessary transition in the civil chain is to be found on the level of communication, as only through communication a transformation can take place from the individual to the collective level. We can, for example, test whether we really feel what we feel by consulting a therapist, in the sense that we can check whether such a professional recognizes our feelings as also occurring in others or is familiar with them from the scientific literature. It is only in that confirmation that an individual problem can become a collective one, in the sense that others share our supposedly individual feeling. In the same sense city dwellers can have a chat with their neighbours about street litter. This is also communication in which a basic experience is shared and tested. Only if a neighbour confirms that: 'Yes, you're right, there is a lot of litter here these days', the feeling of discomfort is collectivized and the possibility of action emerges.

So, without collectivization there is no civil or political action at all. And, as underlined above with the work of Les Têtes de l'Art, artistic skills such as play and imagination are sufficient tools to express and communicate personal fears or suppressed feelings. The modes of expression which are available in the arts makes it also possible to use alternatives for words or analytical concepts to reflect on and communicate about sometimes very complex situations. One of the reasons for this is that artists can use aesthetic tools as aesthesis in which much more senses can be activated beyond the discursive realm of words and concepts. Singing, dancing, performing or making visuals and films are just other ways of communication which can be used to express and to 'de-individualize' unclear feelings or complex social and political issues. We just can point at the use of subversive performances by *Pussy Riot* in Russia, the guerrilla architecture of *Recetas Urbanas* in Spain, or the use of giants by the *Hart boven Hard* movement in Belgium to realize the important role of aesthetic tools to express and to communicate in different ways. A striking example of how to express controversial political issues by artistic means is probably the project *Ausländer Raus* ('Foreigners Out') by the Austrian artist Christoph Schlingensiefel (2002). He had twelve asylum seekers stay in a sea container in the centre of Vienna and had the public decide who was to be extradited through *Big Brother*-like voting rounds. Naturally, this performance led to much controversy but it also made sensitive people for the immigrant and refugee problems in a completely different way than in classical opinion pieces or political debates. This shows again that artistic tools and fiction can play an important part in making invisible feelings and private opinions visible and in creating a communal space in which political discussion and activism can arise.

Performance

The artistic examples of collectivization by expression also illustrate that de-individualization in itself is not enough to speak of civil action and to get to political activism. To do so requires yet another transition, from the private to the public sphere. As indicated earlier, feelings and issues can be shared and therefore collectivized in both the private and the public sphere. For example, as long as the employee suffering from stress only discusses the problem with a therapist or only collectivizes it in a self-help group, we cannot speak of a civil action. Only when this worker articulates the initial feeling or syndrome in social terms does it acquire civil value. This means that, say, stress is no longer only explained as a mental condition but is recognized as a structural problem too. Stress is then not only about the irritated nerves of individual employees or about the annoying personal character of their boss, but also about, for instance, high work pressure, about increasingly precarious working conditions such as flexible project labour, or about the decrease in long-term employment contracts and job security. In other words, in the transition from the private to the public sphere a personal issue (being a stress-sensitive person) is not only translated into a collective problem (a stressful environment, stressful working conditions), but the cause of the problem of discomfort is then also located in broader social phenomena. This is why the transformation from the private to the public sphere implies the politicization of the initial feeling. If 'the political' stands for openly shaping our living together (Rancière, 2012), this translation is an appeal to the political to articulate and address the issue.

So, to transform from the private to the public sphere one needs to be 'performative', and it are again artists who are very well trained to perform. The concept of performativity is understood here in the spirit of Judith Butler (1993). Far more than being simply a reference to or a representation of reality, the artistic expression can be an act in itself that gives form to the social reality. One needs to organize oneself in an alternative way, and one can convince others to share this way of organizing just by performing it. For the sake of the latter the importance of the mentioned process of commoning comes back into the picture. How this works concrete can be illustrated very well by the operations of the Spanish architect collective Recetas Urbanas. They build houses, schools and community centres wherever associations and communities deem them necessary with legal permission or not. So, Recetas Urbanas does not cater to the free market, or to governments, but rather to citizens who feel a civil need. In response to their requests, Recetas offers strategies to occupy public spaces to create places of agony in which the opportunity for action, appropriation, occupation and use of a city is given back to the citizens through architectural interventions and actual buildings. Their building projects transit often between legality and illegality, playing with the established order to re-articulate laws and urban regulations to compose new social and economic exchanges around their very pragmatic constructing activities. In

those performative acts they disarticulate at the same time existing discourses and praxis by offering visionary urban projects in which citizens become the initiators of actions, appropriations and occupations as responses to their collective needs and common necessities. Rather than a withdrawal, Recetas Urbanas provides citizens with the tools to engage, with the authorities and dispute their power from within. And those articulations and alternative social compositions do not stay at the level of the local spot or community. Recetas went beyond such folk politics by the mentioned process of commoning, by building a huge national and even European network (The Group for the Reuse and Redistribution of Resources) of exchange of knowledge, (building) materials, and practices. In this network, for example, legal precedents established in one city are communicated and used to fight for the same civil rights in another city. So, the network is not only used to exchange information, but also to develop political strategies and juridical practices.

Recetas Urbanas not just experiments with forms of resistance and political activism, but also performs effective strategies and practices in civil space. Those are used furthermore as testing grounds that enunciate political discourses in order to activate possible ways of civil governance. By exploring legal systems, alternative economic exchange practices and by finding broader public support, they experiment with processes of commoning which are very necessary to make political activism effective on a higher abstract and structural level.

Crossing Borders

To conclude it can be stated that although the institutional space for the imagination of theatres, museums and biennales may serve as a productive kitchen for political debate, artists can only be really constituting a civil space if they bet on the liminal zones between art and political action. Only when they venture outside of the assigned civic place by crossing the border of the museum and go beyond the public domain of words and ideas, they will have the chance to arrive in the hazardous civil space of effective political activism. This space is hazardous because here artists step outside their acknowledged civic role, thus risking their very status as an artist. Just like those spraying graffiti on walls or trains, they run the risk of being criminalized, or at least not being recognized anymore by their peers in the professional art world. It is only just before the checkpoint of legality and civic regulated spaces that artists sketch the contours of real political activism, in peril of never being acknowledged as artists again. This means also that artist will not build civil space by just making political art inside the foreseen civic or market structures of museums, theatres, biennials or art fairs. They can only realize this by making their art political, that means by reposition their art and by reorganizing themselves and the original art institutions in society.

Now that the result of elections in the USA and Turkey made the familiar liberal representative democracy shaking on its foundations, the need for

political activism has become clearer than ever. It only adds to the pressure on artists to cross the borders of the familiar artistic biotopes. If we wake up tomorrow in a dystopia without a civil domain, we will find ourselves in a space without freedom and without autonomous art. It therefore looks as if artists have no choice but to hazard the jump into the unknown, outside the white walls of the museum into political activism, if only to safeguard their own space of imagination in the museum.

Notes

¹ Bologna Regulation for the Care and Regeneration of Urban Commons; Regulation at <http://www.comune.bologna.it/media/files/bolognaregulation.pdf> ; context via https://wiki.p2pfoundation.net/Bologna_Regulation_for_the_Care_and_Regeneration_of_Urban_Commons

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