

## Unlike Minds: the Sleeping Artist and Other Modes of Resistance

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Stéphane Hessel, the German-born French diplomat and co-author of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, voiced a rally cry to France at the age of 93 with his pamphlet *Time for Outrage! (Indignez-Vous!)*, 2010.<sup>1</sup> The piece was originally written as a speech commemorating France's resistance to Hitler's occupation during the Second World War. For Hessel – a former resistance fighter and survivor of two Nazi concentration camps – the main struggle of the 21st century is not against political tyrants, but against 'the international dictatorship of the financial markets'. His indignation was spurred by the growing gap between the world's rich and poor, the crumbling of the welfare system, restrictions on the freedom of the Press, the unjustified political influence of the financial sector, the unfair treatment of illegal immigrants and the oppression of the Palestinians in Israel. Also voicing grave concern for the environmental crisis, he advocated peaceful, non-violent insurrection. His pamphlet urges us to be indignant, not indifferent – to take a stand and show outrage at times when we can no longer feel proud of the society we live in.<sup>2</sup> Speaking out and showing anger makes a political difference. Hessel's key message is that injustice should not be tolerated in any form.

But social injustice and inequality show no sign of abating. The political climate is more volatile than ever: The Arab Spring failed to bring democracy to North Africa, the crisis in Ukraine is breeding fear among Russia's neighbouring states, and Isis is gaining power and ground. Equality is far from a given: rape remains a widespread problem around the world, female genital mutilation persists, and sex slavery and trafficking are rife, even in the West.

How do contemporary artists deal with such injustices? What strategies can they employ to voice their indignation and mount a resistance?

Art is a complicit part of our consumerist, market-controlled society – which makes it doubly important to ask ourselves why and on what terms art is produced today. We are living in the age of the spectacle: the merit of all things is measured by their visibility. How visible, then, are political and social issues in the art of our time? This is one of the salient issues raised by the 'Demonstrating Minds' exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma.

<sup>1</sup> Hessel's (1917–2013) pamphlet was translated into many languages immediately after it was first published in French. It sold millions of copies and is cited as inspiration for various global protest movements including *Occupy Wall Street*. [https://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stéphane\\_Hessel](https://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stéphane_Hessel).

<sup>2</sup> Stéphane Hessel, *Time for Outrage!* Charles Glass Books, London, 2011.



Jari Silomäki, *I Walk Hundreds – and Thousands – of Steps on Tiananmen Square* (from the series “We are the Revolution”, After Joseph Beuys’), 2013, pigment print, 77cm x 65cm, Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma  
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Petri Virtanen

The connection between art and politics is by no means clear-cut. Boris Groys, whose essay 'The Fate of Art in the Age of Terror' (2005) appears in the exhibition catalogue, has expressed scepticism regarding the influence of art activism. In his article 'On Art Activism' (2014), he questions whether art as an arena for political protest and activism has any real power to enact social change. Do politics and art lose their edge when politics is aestheticised and art is politicised? Groys argues that art cannot be used as a medium of genuine political protest, because the use of art for political action necessarily aestheticises the action, turning it into a spectacle, which thus neutralises its practical effect.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the 'art' component of art activism is often seen as the main reason why this activism fails on the pragmatic level of social and political impact.

Groys proceeds to analyse the difference between two distinct forms of aestheticisation. In the domain of design, the aestheticisation of a designed object involves an attempt to make it more seductive and appealing to the user. Artistic aestheticisation meanwhile refers to the defunctionalisation of the object, the annulment of its practical applicability, or what might be termed as the object's transformation into 'art for art's sake'. When an object is aestheticised and made non-existent for all practical purposes, it effectively becomes a corpse. Groys sees contemporary art activism as the heir of these two contradictory traditions of aestheticisation. Art activism politicises art, or uses art as a tool in the political struggles of our time. But, at the same time, art activism cannot escape a much more radical legacy related to the aestheticisation of politics, which invariably blocks action and undermines the power of politics to change or improve the world. Art activism produces nothing more than a spectacle doomed to exist as a corpse, and the aestheticisation of politics robs political action of its power.<sup>4</sup>

Art's power to provoke change is an issue raised by many artists in the 'Demonstrating Minds' exhibition. Some of them address universally valid questions related to power relations (Cristina Lucas and Amal Kenawy), political systems (Kader Attia, Sylvie Blocher and Clara Ianni) or the tyranny of financial institutions and market forces (Vadim Fishkin, Rainer Ganahl and Mika Rottenberg); some in turn focus on topical political issues such as illegal immigration (Tanja Boukal), the impact of the war in Ukraine (R.E.P and Tanja Muravskaja) or contemporary modes of politicisation (Lise Harlev and Tom Molloy). It is impossible, however, to name any common denominator in the approaches chosen by these various artists.

Rather than engaging in outright activism, many artists choose a stance of ironic or parodic musing on society or a revisitation of earlier works in art history, some veering in the direction of anarchism, such as Jonathan Meese with his Declaration of the Dictatorship of Art, or Mladen Stilinović with his symbolic refusal to work. In today's hectic-paced world, the simple gesture of refusing to work is a potent form of protest. Stilinović's claim that an artist is at his best while asleep seems an extreme form of passive resistance in this age of quantifiable performance.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed it might be more fruitful to contemplate the 'Demonstrating Minds' exhibition in the light of an aesthetic theory that departs radically from Groys. The philosopher Jacques Rancière sees politics as an arena in which an unrecognised party – the 'part of no part' – struggles for equal recognition in the established order. Politics is thus fundamentally a battle over what society deems as permissible to see, show and share as part of the public domain. In Rancière's thinking, politics is aesthetics: it concerns what is relegated to visibility and invisibility.<sup>6</sup> Differences of opinion essentially concern what is accepted as 'common to the community'.

In *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, Rancière attempts to show that nothing is in and of itself political, but rather politics is a particular type of event that emerges when

3 Boris Groys, *On Art Activism*, 2014. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/on-art-activism/>.

4 Ibid.

5 The best-known literary example of refusal to function as a member of society is Herman Melville's short story *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* (1853), in which the main protagonist starves to death upon refusing to do anything, even eat.

6 Heikki Kujansivu, 'Badiou, Rancière ja kuvataiteen poliittisuus', *Niin & Näin* 3 /2007, 29.

the order of invisibility is contested.<sup>7</sup> He contemplates what he calls ‘the distribution of the sensible’, or the way in which our social system establishes what is shared and what is exclusive. Politics is manifest in the processes and structures that apportion parts and positions based on the distribution of spaces, times and forms of activity. We share certain things in common, yet the system determines in what ways various individuals have a part in this distribution, whether as men, women, workers, the unemployed, the socially excluded or the well-to-do. What we share also divides us. How we share the common domain depends upon who is authorised to speak and act – who is visible and who is invisible. Power relations are defined in relation to the private and public domain, yet it is always the public, visible components that define what is common to the community. This ‘distribution of the sensible’ is upheld by what Rancière calls the ‘police order’, which sorts groups between the visible and the invisible, those that can speak and those that cannot, the public and the private.<sup>8</sup>

Contrariwise, politics is inherently antagonistic – it poses a challenge to the incumbent order. This antagonism can be articulated also by remembering and reinterpreting. Many of the artists in ‘Demonstrating Minds’ cite canonical, politically engaged works of art from past decades. Goshka Macuga reinterprets the historical complicity between military machinery and power politics in her multi-layered revisitation of Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica*. Cristina Lucas bases her video *La Liberté Raisonnée* on the famed painting by Eugène Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People (La Liberté guidant le peuple, 1830)*. In Lucas’s video, however, the children of the revolution literally slaughter their mother. In the series “‘We Are the Revolution’ After Joseph Beuys”, Jari Silomäki mimics Joseph Beuys’s famous striding pose as he wanders through landscapes of 20th-century political carnage. The legacy of Karl Marx is also revisited and reinterpreted in many works in the exhibition.<sup>9</sup>

Adapting the political thinking of Rancière, we might conclude that art is truly political only when it gives visibility to clashes and differences of opinion *vis-à-vis* the consensus, or the power regime that decides what is relegated to visibility and invisibility.

Two further questions arise in relation to Rancière and Groys. First, do contemporary artists express positions of dissent that are irreconcilable within the present ‘distribution of the sensible’, and could the contentious issues raised by artists actually alter that distribution in pragmatic terms? And, secondly, does political activism inevitably become diluted when it enters the domain of art?

For Rancière, equality is the be-all and end-all of politics, where the ‘part of no part’ manifests the pervasive existence of inequality and injustice. In the ‘police order’, the ‘part of no part’ is invisible, mute and non-existent. The artists in this exhibition propose new avenues of influence by giving a voice to the disenfranchised and by unmasking the fundamentally absurd nature of existing arenas of political action. The politicism of contemporary art consists of its aspiration to give a voice to the voiceless and to show, inscribe and make visible the ‘part of no part’ which has hitherto been relegated to invisibility.

‘Demonstrating Minds’ does not document any particular political conflict or event; rather it takes a critical look at universal power mechanisms and the conflicting stances that artists take against the prevailing consensus. The works in the exhibition make visible the ‘part of no part’ within the ‘distribution of the sensible’. Rather than reaffirm the consensus, they provoke dissensus. It is up to the viewer to decide their own stance on the new order they propose.

7 Jacques Rancière, *La Méésentente. Politique et Philosophie*. Galilée, 1995 (*Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, translation by Julie Rose, University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

8 Jussi Tiihonen, ‘Osattomien politiikka’, *Yhteiskuntapolitiikka* 75 (2010): 5.

9 It is interesting to note that Marx and his 19th-century critique of capitalism is in fashion again. Marx’s *Das Kapital* was recited aloud at the 2015 Venice Biennale.