
Where (not) to go? The general intellect between the precarious and resistance

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Abstract

This text presents a series of cultural and socio-political discourses referring to Jacques Rancière's notion of participation in democratic regimes, which is usually reduced to a question of filling spaces left empty by power. In this sense, the possibilities and limits for the shifting place of art practices are examined. Where can they possibly exceed traditional boundaries and break through institutional terms, transforming everything into a politics of life by producing both: affect and an effect?

Keywords

engaged art practices, protest movement, precariousness, general intellect, immaterial workers.

1. Introduction:

Art that is intentionally produced for institutions, such as museums, occupies a privileged space of politicization, closely related to neoliberal processes. It tends to decrease the effects of neoliberalism, but also takes part in new economic and geopolitical distribution of power. Culture, in general, is employed in order to restore economically destroyed spheres, to promote educational strategies, and to design social spaces. By being used in daily politics as mechanisms of intervention and renovation, contemporary art supports the stabilization of neoliberal strategies by occupying real-life spaces.

The use of freelancers, precarious cultural workers coming from non-profit organizations as representatives of a prospective market for the so-called "creators of culture" also became a trend. Political strategies have stretched their way out through the domain of diverse "cultural options." But culturalization is not only the transmission of political questions into cultural ones. Culturalization tends to become an ideological education for the masses or the subjects of the capitalist order. And the prefix "cultural" is just the neoliberal form of a new social literacy — new expertise or the ones who "know-how-to-do it."

The effort to be critical in the field of cultural production remains untruthful, and it only emerges as an aesthetic of administration, shifting between the market, state, and freelance activism. This kind of critique shows no capacity to abandon its comfortable position, which sets it off from the formal articulation of the needs of "class cultural workers." It does not intervene in real-life activity. Instead, it is the negotiable middle class's interpretation, which only makes a distinction between the conscious bourgeois and the consumer of spectacular kitsch. Critical stance appears as a trademark for the enlightened citizen.

2.

The recent Macedonian government-organized project *Skopje 2014* and the rebellious acts in the arts and protest movements in response to it serve as the case study to examine the possibilities and limits of the shifting place of art practices beyond the institutional. What happened in Macedonia just a few years ago in 2009 was unreasonable and shocking. The government announced large-scale developments for the city center, including a complex of buildings and monuments built in inappropriate public spaces, without consulting professional opinion, without a broader examination of the subject of urbanity or civic involvement. In the government's nationalistic censuring of the past, it replaced the modernist facades of buildings with baroque and neo-classicist designs – obsolete historical styles that never existed in the history of architecture in Macedonia. An enormous amount of public money was spent on covering modernistic architecture with inauthentic facades. Public space was packed full with numerous sculptures and monuments of disputable heroes from the national pantheon, a newly built triumph arch, and a 22-meter-high bronze statue of Alexander the Great in the main square, which purportedly attests to the antique patrimony of Macedonian people. The project itself reflects the nationalistic, authoritarian regime, populism, and hegemony of the right-wing ruling party. Even though dissatisfaction, especially among intellectuals, had been rising, most people actually approved, or even more incredible, liked the project.

Architecture students initiated the first protest activities. Since then, linked to the protest actions on the level of similar politics, many art projects constituted social activism. Artists actualizing these kinds of projects were dealing with an attempt to intervene in the public sphere in order to actualize or resolve urgent questions in society, in all of its complexity. The results from these kinds of actions were exhibited mostly within the frames of the institutional gallery space.

Starting from the premise of Claire Bishop (2012) that “contemporary capitalism produces passive subjects with very little agency or empowerment,” participatory art then “seek[s] to stimulate the public and turn them away from the passive, private consumption of spectacle in favor of creating a shared space for collective social engagement through constructive or symbolic gestures that have social impact and create new alternatives.” But, set in gallery space, artworks or projects dealing with activist practices or protest groups are questionable. The projects remain based on re-enactment, and audiences witness the transformation of the effects from the real only as a performance – or art. And, although the languages of struggle, protest, and subversion were extremely dominant in art debates in the last several years, this does not necessarily result in effectiveness in terms of disobedience: these kinds of projects often simulate real social activism with the resonance of implications within the art system itself, but with no real consequences. Gaining knowledge about reality demands a certain distance, achieved through an imposed passivity. So, consequently, the intellectuals who were not confident enough to sabotage and act in a radical way in the system that they criticize, take the voice of the weak and marginalized showing real fascination with their object of study.

Generally speaking, the contradictions of the intellectual stratum can be explained through the contradiction between theory and practice. Intellectuals are a contradictory class, as such. The extreme division in their position is based on the fact that, although they have admission to the establishment of the society through knowledge and the leisure to imagine and rethink the possibilities through art, they do not possess political or economic power. And, although closely introduced to the ruling class of society – through their action and in their lifestyle – they do not conform to them. On the contrary, they often tend to act from the margins, in space close to neither the upper class nor the working class. And here another problem arises in their engagement in the field of art activism: the common understanding that they can also serve within capitalism and, moreover, make a profit from labor stripped of rights. Artists who use their life as material for their work often exploit the marginalized subjects. The examples are artistic and curatorial activist practices that tend to give a voice to those who are silenced in the hegemonic system. So, the question is: Is there a model for an engagement that refers to their act politically more than unaffectedly aesthetically?

The problem, according to Groy (2009), is not that the political sphere of the arts has already become aestheticized. Groy interprets the artistic process of art activism as something that often cedes its territory to a political sphere, that has no need of an artist (as an expert in this field with appropriate education), or the term art as such. When art becomes political, it is forced to make the unpleasant discovery that politics has already become art and that it has already situated itself in the aesthetic field. There is no better example for Groy than the representation of terror itself, which constitutes an image-production machine: the terrorist, Groy (2008: 122-126) argues, consciously and artistically stages events that produce his own easily recognizable aesthetics, with no need of an artist to represent them in mediation. Images of the defeated and humiliated also bypass the need for an artist. Therefore, Groy suggests that the point is not that art should conquer the territory of politics. Instead, it needs to find its way into a territory that is now being conquered by political and economic forces. Consequently, artists dealing with engaged practices, just as curators who became the new critics, unsatisfied with their position, are “forced” to enter public activism or the masses. Mostly, the links between the arts and the protest movements were widely recognized because of the initiating role of the artists from the very beginning, which leads to the old questions about the borders between art and activism expressed in Nato Thompson’s phrase “far beyond the arts.”

3.

Despite the entertaining appearance of their images on social media, the initial rebellious movements in Skopje in 2016 escalated into a mass protest called the Colorful Revolution. It mobilized thousands of people who vented their anger by throwing paint on the monuments – symbols of the government’s oppression and hegemony. “This isn’t just a case of protestors writing their anger on walls. In Skopje, the walls themselves are part of the problem,” announced the media. And although peaceful in its nature, the movement covered all of the government institutions and Skopje 2014 monuments in multicolor paint.

So, the questions arise: If there is an aesthetics of protest, do we have serial images produced at once as its representation? Does the protest that is being organized around short sequences of images do what Hito Steyerl would call “editing”? Articulation of protest is being held on two levels: the language of the protest or verbalization and visualization; and the same combination of concepts that are shaping the structure of the internal organization of the protest, actually two different types of combining different elements: on the level of symbols and on the level of political powers. What kind of political meaning can come out of this type of articulation?

As argued by historian and art theoretician Nebojša Vilić (2016), after coloring the objects of Skopje 2014, which highlighted their absurdity, the protesters’ interventions on facades and on the streets took a new course. First, the image turns into text, the painting to writing. The initial intensive colors poured on the facades, were replaced with more pleasant and enjoyable pastel colors. Thus, the Colorful Revolution of radical, rebellious red and black became pleasant to watch: pink, turquoise, and violet soft as if they were the consensual compromise between colors from the palette. The protests became a kind of consensual compromise between protesters and police; as the protesters’ palette of colors softened, the police began to stay indifferent to the act of painting. It is difficult not to notice that the number of protests rapidly increased. The difference toward protests movements from the past and the so called Colorful Revolution, concerning the design and performative elements, taken as a form from arts, is also noticeable, just as the number of people who were involved in it.

Still, being based on the values of liberal democracy, the Colorful Revolution did not dissolve important obstacles. It did not possess the strength for the mass mobilization of different segments of society: one of the conditions for significant political change. Its failure was because of the unequal social groups support, as a represents of the ruling party and its opposition. Hence, the voters of the ruling party (as the counter-protestors in the Colorful

Revolution) are recognized as the most oppressed social stratum in society, the poor and the workers. On the other hand, the protestors, mainly followers of the opposition, who do not identify themselves as workers, marched from the relatively comfortable position of economic security. They emerged as representatives of citizenship. The Colorful Revolution failed to avoid the elitist moment. Mostly through social media, it started to emphasize young and fancy figures with their branded appearances as a counterpoint to the poor and unattractive counter-protesters. As Nebojša Vilić points out, although initially pro-leftist, the Colorful Revolution identified mainly through the concept of citizenship as compromised and consensual social category, was not able to tap into the radical and dissensual oppressed and underprivileged classes. In addition, although there were no elements of authorship identified through the coloring as an artistic act, the statement written on the newly built triumph gate “Macedonia: The art of citizens” confronts the main revolutionary goal, since the art does not include the collective, but the artist/individual as such.

The protest, in political and social terms, was an effort to reconfirm democracy. However, at the same time, it failed to extend its limits as a social act of resistance on behalf of the citizenship represented by precarious workers, or the general intellect. The protest movement failed because it did not reach beyond the borders of the general intellect. The “general intellect,” in Maurizio Lazzarato’s (2004) terms, is a representation of a social stratum of immaterial workers whose presence is set upon the old modernist presumption: that it is always necessary to draw the line between invention and work, creativity and routine. The protest means “the reactivation of the social body. But the energy coming from protest must be transferred into the real place of production: not just the urban territory, but the bio-financial global network and real life relations.” (Özengi and Tan, 2014)

The intellectuals established a zone where breaks occurred in social reality. As freethinkers, they are the most democratic strata but also the leaders (although not in commanding positions) in the most authoritarian spheres, like education and expert governance. They embody society’s contradictions between the consolidation and exploitation, between solidarity and the division of labor, or between the intellectual and the material labor. On the opposite, those excluded from the privilege of leisure or liberal education, in constant urge to gain the attributes of intellectual contradictions, exist also. In today’s society, this division slowly disappears with the fact that there are more and more possibilities (starting with education again) for everyone to become an intellectual. Meanwhile, the utopia is realized in the opposite sense, when the intellectuals turn into the “immaterial workers.”

4.

Hence, the question: Should the “general intellect” be defined through the terms of the most operative form of production under capitalism or is it more important to give consideration of less pragmatic meaning that cannot be reduced to knowledge and qualifications? Will the general intellect ever be in the position to be the avant-garde of protest? Even though precarious, this social stratum still owns its means of production: the general intellect, which is on its own. The general intellect and its embodiment in the immaterial worker, must take up a more avant-gardist position, namely on the side of the oppressed based on its isolation from this same intellectual instrumentalization. In addition, it is finally time for artists, critics, and scholars to stop lecturing and learn how to stand in someone else’s shoes. What we need is to critically re-examine the materiality of a world facing ongoing modification, and to join the marginalized in the process of producing an applicable theory that unifies the essential critique with a new form of practice. As Chantal Mouffe (2007) explained: “Today artists cannot pretend anymore to constitute an avant-garde offering a radical critique, but this is not a reason to proclaim that their political role has ended. They still can play an important role in the hegemonic struggle by subverting the dominant hegemony and by contributing to the construction of new subjectivities. In fact, this has always been their role and it is only the modernist illusion of the privileged position of

the artist that has made us believe otherwise. Once this illusion is abandoned, jointly with the revolutionary conception of politics accompanying it, we can see that critical artistic practices represent an important dimension of democratic politics." This does not mean, though, as she declares, "that they could alone realize the transformations needed for the establishment of a new hegemony. A radical democratic politics calls for the articulation of different levels of struggles so as to create a chain of equivalence among them."

In order for art to transform into life, it must accept the idea of equality, in Rancière's terms, as he puts it in the *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*: the equality of all subjects, freed from the hierarchies of knowledge, the idea of the equality of intelligence itself. As he declares, emancipation can't be expected from forms of art that presuppose the passivity of the viewer or those that want to make viewers active at all costs with the help of gadgets borrowed from advertising. The practice of art is emancipated and emancipating when it renounces the authority of the imposed message, the target audience, or, when, in other words, it stops wanting to emancipate us (Rancière et al., 2007).

The most radical way in which art can represent a form of social critique is to start to question and transform meaning and the function of the art system itself. We have already become subordinated to a hegemonic idea of what art is and what it does if we agree upon the questions: In what way can art contribute to hegemonic repression; or, what is the way that it can be used in order to give voice to the silenced and oppressed? As Bishop has pointed out, such questions are hegemonic in themselves, as long as they presuppose what art is and what it can do. Ideology is in the question, not in the answer.



Fig. 1 - Our art is free slogan. "Colorful Revolution" protest movement in 2016 against governmental "Skopje 2014" project. Photo: Vanco Dzambaski.



Fig. 2 - Protesters coloring the monument Prometheus which was part of the governmental project "Skopje 2014". Photo: Vanco Dzambaski (2016).



Fig. 3 - "Colorful Revolution" protest movement in Skopje against the government politics. Protesters in front of the Ministry of Justice of Republic of Macedonia (2016). Photo: Vanco Dzambaski.



Fig. 4 - Art to the citizens, graphite written at the recently built Triumph Arc in Skopje as part of the governmental project "Skopje 2014" (2016). Photo: Vanco Dzambaski.

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