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AESTHETICS AND POLITICS AFTER THE AVANT-GARDE

Imre Szemán

*Art and Revolution: Transversal
Activism in the Long Twentieth
Century* by Gerald Raunig. Trans.
Aileen Derieg. Los Angeles:
Semiotext(e), 2007. Pp. 320.
\$17.95 paper.

One of the defining features of art during the period of modernity—the period, that is, when the concept of “art” with which we largely continue to operate came into focus—is its immediate relationship to the political. This relationship is twofold. The autonomy granted to the aesthetic in philosophical texts and social practices alike transformed art into a space of unique critical reflection not only on the traumas of modern social and political life but also on its own problems and incapacities. However, this power came with a built-in limit. Even while consecrated as the deepest expression of the human, the practice of art was defined through its very autonomy as having little real bearing on the direction of social life. This first, limited politics generated what has since come to be the clearest expression of art’s relationship to politics: the desire of successive avant-gardes to undo art’s autonomy by transforming life into art and art into life—a form of political and social revolution by means other than barricades and palace putsches. The melancholic reflections of the late Frankfurt School, the laments of Guy Debord against the society of the spectacle, and current anxieties about the unapologetic transformation of art and culture into new economic forces (whether explained through theories of creativity or exemplified by the weedlike growth of contemporary art museums worldwide), all share a single conclusion: if revolution ever was

possible through the transformative powers of art, that moment is now over once and for all. What remains of art and politics seems to be on the order of the meek interventions of Nicholas Bourriaud's "relational aesthetics," in which avant-gardist desires give way to the creation of "social interstices" or "constructed situations" whose aim is to enable individuals to think about new kinds of social exchange in a self-developmental fashion. A visit to the gallery becomes a trip to the candy store or the lunch counter: stuff your pockets full of candies courtesy of Félix Gonzalez-Torres or get a meal cooked by Rirkrit Tiravanija, and you'll be all the better for it.

Viennese art theorist Gerald Raunig's fascinating *Art and Revolution* proposes a different way of thinking about the relationship between art and politics than suggested by this now familiar history of avant-garde exhaustion. His interest is not in probing (either theoretically or historically) the vicissitudes of the folding of life into art or vice versa, but in exploring practices and moments "in which transitions, overlaps and concatenations of art and revolution become possible for a limited time, but without synthesis and identification" (17–18). "Concatenation" is a key term in Raunig's genealogy of art and revolution over the long twentieth century, which stretches from the Paris Commune to the protests against the G8 summit in Genoa in 2001. The "and"

linking art and revolution points to their ongoing connection in a historical series or chain of events—repeated encounters, each time on different terms and on a unique terrain. It is in this sense that art and revolution are concatenated: interconnected and interdependent, yet finally not reducible to each other in the social field they occupy or the specific force they exert. It might seem as if revolution would of necessity form the dominant pole in this relation of distinct modes of transversal activism. For Raunig, however, contemporary forms of activism make clear what has been true all along: "it is not only activist art that docks into a political movement, but political activism also increasingly makes use of specific methods, skills and techniques that have been conceived and tested in art production and media work" (263). *Art and Revolution* offers an account of the brief history of this complex relationship in order to give substance to the politics of forms of art activism that have been too quickly dismissed for being either too artistic or not revolutionary enough in their aims. Through a series of historical and theoretical case studies, Raunig pursues answers to a single, important question: "Instead of the promises of salvation from an art that saves life, how can revolutionary becoming occur in a situation of the mutual overlapping of art and revolution that is limited in space and time?" (204).

In answering this question, much depends on the demands one makes

on the concept of "revolution." Raunig's use of the concept finds its origins in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as well as in Antonio Negri's concept of constituent power. In the opening two chapters, Raunig challenges the traditional idea of revolution as constituted by a radical break or rupture that produces the conditions for the constitution of new society *after* the revolutionary event in a phase- or stagelike series of shifts and developments. Echoing many contemporary thinkers, he insists on the need to understand revolution as "an uncompleted and uncompletable, molecular process" (26) that does not imagine its activity with a view toward some final end (the taking of the state) or the achievement of some final radical emancipation from power. Instead, this activity of revolution is transversal—nonlinear, moving always across a middle, immanent plane—and characterized by forms of insurrection "that makes singular images and statements appear beyond representation, thus allowing the world to happen and opening up possibilities of connection and concatenation" (59). The constituent element of this concept of revolution lies in forms of political activity in which the problem of political representation gives way to action and participation—Negri's notion of a *pouvoir constituant*, which ceaselessly constitutes itself instead of fixing its energies in the set rules of political power (represented most commonly

by state constitutions, the *pouvoir constitué*).

This is in some ways familiar turf, popularized by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude* (2004), and by translations of Negri and the writings of the Italian autonomists over the past decade. What makes Raunig's book especially compelling and original are the connections that he draws between modes of political practice that operate today in what Hardt and Negri describe as the amorphous "non-place of exploitation" and forms of art practice and activism, as well as the historical account he presents of a developing relation between the two. For anyone interested in art, politics, and revolution, reading Raunig's passage through significant movements of their concatenation throughout the long twentieth century provides for absorbing reading. His chapter on the commune as a model revolutionary machine is at times too celebratory of it as an example of constituent power realized; at the same time, his reading of Marx on the commune highlights the latter's affinity with immanent understandings of revolution—a Marx very different from the one we tend to imagine. In the short chapter on Gustave Courbet, Raunig convincingly shows how art and revolution escaped each other during the commune, in contrast to the often heroic treatments of the artist offered up by T. J. Clark, Kristin Ross, and others. His account of Kurt

Hiller and the German “Activists” introduces us to the aesthetic and political debates of a group that deserves to be more widely discussed while also providing a sharp reading of Walter Benjamin’s “The Author as Producer” and an analysis of the limits of vanguardism. Raunig’s chapters on the Viennese Action Group in the late 1960s and on the more recent activities of Volxtheater Favoriten and nomadic movements of the Publix-TheatreCaravan similarly open up worlds of political and art activism that are far too little known to English-language audiences, despite their resonance with activist activities elsewhere and the productive examples of contemporary revolutionary action they offer. In addition to the drama of the overall argument, there are nuggets of critical insight scattered throughout.

One of Raunig’s aims is to change our ideas of what counts as revolutionary politics (artistic activism) *and* what counts as art (activist art). The dynamic driving the book is a reading of the long twentieth century through an idea of transversality, which comes very late in the game. This is productive in all kinds of ways. Even as he rehearses the paradoxes, problems, and limits that emerge out of various intersections of art and politics—including Russian Futurism and Constructivism, Lettrism and the Situationists—we find ourselves on new ground: the last century not as a succession of moments of avant-garde failure but

as a sequence of missed opportunities. With the exception of the chapter on recent art activism based in Vienna, what the book offers are in fact lessons in what happens when art machines and revolutionary machines *fail* to concatenate. This is not necessarily a problem: such failures are built into the immanent model of revolution that Raunig describes. Any concatenation of art and politics is of necessity limited in both time and space: success ultimately leads to failure, but a failure that is true to the politics he describes here. What is more problematic is the developmental logic that one cannot help but read into this narrative of missed opportunities—a logic that cuts against some of his theoretical and political commitments. It seems that just as ever greater possibilities for art activism and activist art come into focus, 9/11 appears to interrupt an otherwise progressive flow forward of art and revolutionary linkages. What is at work here is a historiographical problem that is difficult to solve. The molecular revolutionary processes he explores do away with the political paradox of waiting for the revolution to come before we act to make the new social come into being—which means, of course, that it will never come. In drawing lessons from history to learn how to engage in these molecular processes and thus enable concatenations of art and politics, one must make choices about which moments to highlight. The ones

Raunig chooses—1848, 1870, 1917, 1968, and 2001—come drenched in expectation in a way that sometimes works against the nonlinear, point-to-point alternative history of the past century he hopes to provide.

One of the big unanswered questions that emerged for me from this book was: why art? Raunig describes the structure and function of revolutionary machines in detail in the opening chapters of his book. Against the reality of the actual existing world, the necessity of creating through political practice the kind of social relations that are desired could not be clearer. However, the specific role played by those diverse practices called art—here spanning the range from painting to theater, literary essays to manifestos—in the practice called revolution is far less clear. Do art and revolutionary politics share the same aims over the long twentieth century? Do they have to be thought of together now that the techniques of art are used in activism and artists themselves have become key players in many political movements? Though there may not be clear answers to these questions, this much is certain: *Art and Revolution* is a superb guide for exploring a critical relationship that is increasingly on everyone's mind at the beginning of the new century.

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