



CAN ART PROMOTE RIGHTS? A CASE FOR AESTHETIC ACTIVISM IN THE EU

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In this study, I elaborate a notion of *aesthetic activism* based on Jacques Rancière's conception of "politics as aesthetics." I contrast aesthetic activism with the more traditional forms of political activism and of social movements. Rather than addressing the current legal and regulatory situation of a specific set of civil or human rights, this study is intended as a general intervention into the realm of political activism itself. Hence, the range of discussed examples of aesthetic activism covers several rights which are especially important in the European context: the right of asylum, the right of protection of whistleblowers in the European Union, reproductive rights etc. I argue that aesthetic activism might be more effective in current political and medial environment and, also, that it is exceptionally suited to address European issues, target European Institutions and the budding pan-European public sphere.

Keywords: art, aesthetics, political activism, citizen rights, Europe, EU

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Può l'arte promuovere i diritti? Alcuni argomenti a favore del attivismo estetico nella UE

Daniel Tkatch *

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Questo lavoro esplora la nozione di 'attivismo estetico' a partire dalla concezione della 'politica come estetica' del filosofo francese Jacques Rancière, distinguendo l'attivismo di questa natura da più tradizionali forme di attivismo politico e movimentista. Più che concentrarsi sugli aspetti di natura legale dei diritti umani e civili, il lavoro intende essere esso stesso un intervento su questa forma di attivismo. Pertanto, gli esempi discussi si concentrano su alcuni esempi di attivismo estetico a difesa di diritti particolarmente rilevanti nel contesto europeo: il diritto di asilo, il diritto alla protezione dei 'whistleblowers' (le cosiddette 'sentinelle civiche') in Europa, i diritti di libertà riproduttiva etc. Il lavoro difende l'attivismo estetico come strumento efficace di intervento nell'attuale contesto politico e mediatico e, inoltre, che tale attivismo sia particolarmente congeniale nel tematizzare le questioni europee, focalizzare le istituzioni europee rilevanti, e nel contribuire alla creazione di una sfera pubblica pan-europea.

Parole chiave: arte, estetica, attivismo politico, diritti dei cittadini, Europa, EU

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*Sous les pavés, la plage.*¹

¹ “Under the cobblestones – the beach” (a slogan of the 1968 protests).

1. Introduction

In June 2015, a German group of activists and artists called The Centre for Political Beauty (*Zentrum Für Politische Schönheit*, CPB), went public with a shocking announcement. They transported to Berlin the body of a Syrian female refugee – a woman that had died in the Mediterranean on her way to the Italian shore. The group arranged for a funeral in a local cemetery and published the photos of the ceremony.² In the publication, the CPB announced their intention to exhume further bodies from their ad-hoc graves in the south of Europe – primary affected by the flows of refugees – and bury them too in the German capital. As a part of the same campaign, the CPB also published an Ikea-like do-it-yourself construction manual with components, tools, and instructions on how to erect a dummy burial-site in the public space. Subsequently, hundreds of such “graves” with crosses reading “borders kill” emerged in the following days across Europe and also on the lawn of the German Bundestag’s during the demonstration organized there, among others, also by the CPB. Photos of these symbolic graves were trending in social media for several weeks.³

The CPB’s campaign, to which the group has given the dramatic title ‘The Dead Are Coming’ (*Die Toten Kommen*), evidently joined other protests against the negligence on the part of the governments – here the German government – to find a comprehensive solution for the plight of refugees drowning in their thousands on Europe’s external borders.⁴ Formally, however, this campaign stood conspicuously apart from the rest. In order to raise a visibility of a burning political issue, it used artistic forms, borrowed from theatrical performance and conceptual art, and turned them into attention-grabbing medial dramatisations. This strategy has become CPB’s stylistically recognisable trait. On its website, the CPB argues that “art must hurt, provoke and rise in revolt” and defines its sphere of action as “political performance art – an expanded approach to theatre”, as “aggressive humanism.”⁵

² Cf. Melissa Eddy, “Migrant’s Funeral in Berlin Highlights Europe’s Refugee Crisis”, *The New York Times* (June 16, 2015, accessed: July 10, 2015), <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/17/world/europe/migrants-funeral-in-berlin-highlights-europes-refugee-crisis.html>.

³ Cf. the Twitter account of Centre for Political Beauty (CPB), e.g. <https://twitter.com/politicalbeauty/status/612254440423321600>.

⁴ Cf. Gerald Raunig, “Singers, Cynics, Molecular Mice: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Activism”, *Theory, Culture & Society* 31 (2014), pp. 67–80, here 32.

⁵ Zentrum for politische Schönheit, ‘Aggressiver Humanismus: Von der Unfähigkeit der Demokratie, große Menschenrechtler hervorzubringen’, *Medium* (July 9, 2014, accessed on July 10, 2015), <https://medium.com/@politicalbeauty/aggressiver-humanismus-3d091f8732a3#.qk3dfs2na>.



Illustration 1 - "The Dead Are Coming" ([Kurier.at](http://kurier.at), 22.06.2015)

In the following, I will be using the notion *aesthetic activism* to describe campaigns that advance progressive political causes by means of art in a similar way. This type of activism has proved effective in attracting media attention, stirring up public debates, and, eventually, pushing towards action the political decision-makers. On the other hand, it also raised a considerable amount of controversy and faced fierce critique from both the more conservative circles and – less obviously so – also from the left-leaning and progressive activist groups. I thus address the controversy raised by aesthetic activism and analyse the main arguments against narrowing the distance between artistic and political action (Section 2). Later, I also claim that there is more to aesthetic activism than simply an efficient use of artistic means to produce shock, controversy, and medial attention. Discussing the limits of the rationalist approach of the more traditional forms of political activism, social movements etc. (Section 3), I argue that most the defining feature of aesthetic activism lies in its very ability to shift the existing framework of categories, definitions, and perceptions that fundamentally define our societal and political realities and claim that without that aesthetico-political shift no significant politico-legislative change might be possible. Jacques Rancière's work has greatly contributed to the rethinking of art's emancipatory potential and been an effective intervention against strict theoretical and practical separations between artistic and political realms.⁶ Hence, I discuss Rancière's conception of "politics as aesthetics" as aesthetic activism's theoretical basis (Section 4).⁷

The established art-scene has been increasingly focused on artistic activity as an arena and a medium for activism – political, social, economic, environmental etc.⁸ Here, however, I will focus less on the political role that the art-world defines for itself and approach the issue primarily from the direction of political agency. I will use Rancière's theoretical framework as a way of elaborating the aesthetico-political mechanisms of the proposed notion and its most characteristic properties: the ambiguity its objects and acts produces (Section 5), the differences between normative and aesthetic approaches in politics (Section 6), and aesthetics as a basic for

⁶ Nikos Papastergiadis and Charles Esche, "Assemblies in Art and Politics: An Interview with Jacques Rancière", *Theory, Culture & Society* 31 (2014), pp. 27-41, 27.

⁷ I exclude the use of artistic forms by right-leaning political activism from the term *aesthetic activism*. I do not mean to claim that such use is the exclusive prerogative of the the Left. Argueing, as Rancière would, that it would not be "aesthetic," lies outside the intended scope of this paper. Here, I siplly underline the need for more aesthetic activism of the progressive sort. And the use of art in right-leaning political action would only make this need more urgent.

⁸ Boris Groys, 'On Art Activism', *e-flux* 56 (2014, accessed: July 10, 2015), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/on-art-activism/>.

the emerging forms of political life (Section 7). The leading questions of these sections are the following: What is the role of art in political action? Can artistic activity take the form of political activism and vice versa? Given that we have long entered an age in which institutionalised politics increasingly becomes just one spectacle among others, can this form of activism sometimes be more effective than the more traditional forms of progressive, left-leaning activism such as civil disobedience, protests, community building, political campaigning? In my selection of examples from the great variety of aesthetic campaigns, I focus primarily on those campaigns that address pertinently European issues (see Table 1).

campaign	organisation	period of activity	issue/s at stake
‘The Dead Are Coming’	The Centre for Political Beauty	2015	migration
‘Anything to say?’	Davide Dormino	2015 (ongoing)	protection of whistleblowers
‘First Fall of the European Wall’	The Centre for Political Beauty	2014-2015	migration
the on-ship abortion clinic	Women on Waves	2001 (ongoing)	women rights
Dow’s hoax statement on BBC	The Yes Men	2002-2005	corporate responsibility for the environment

Table 1- Examples of aesthetic activism

Finally, in Section 8, I take a specifically European perspective and make a case for more aesthetic activism in Europe arguing it to be particularly suitable to address transnational – and in this case European – issues. Migration is but one topic that is typically transnational. The dramatic discrepancy between member states (in the issue of whistleblowers’ protection, women rights and many others) – has also made clear the need for a unified, i.e. EU-level and EU-wide, solution. Therefore, addressing such issues by means of political activism should be most effective, when done directly at that level. Considering the impact such activism has had in several European countries (and also in the US), it only seems desirable to initiate more such campaigns also on the EU-level, i.e. targeting directly the most appropriate level of decision- and policy-making at the European Institutions: the European Parliament (EP), the European Commission (EC) and the European Council (EuCo) in Brussels and Strasbourg, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) in Luxembourg etc. Furthermore, art as a form of communication can make a significant contribution to the development of the, still budding, pan-European public sphere. Art’s — and especially visual art’s — relative independence from linguistic and national constraints makes it a very efficient medium of political communication directly to that sphere.

However, it should be once again stressed that this case study does not aspire to directly address the existing legal and institutional policies and frameworks of the EU or suggest concrete ways in which these should be changed. Instead, it is targeted, above all else, at activists, non-profit organisation, social movements and other agents of civil society engaged

with inherently-European political issues. As such, it assumes a certain meta-level and focuses on the formal aspects of activism and political campaigning on inherently European issues and hopes to make these more efficient in promoting positive developments of the very policies and frameworks.

2. Artists-activists under critique

Despite its media-success or, maybe, precisely because of it, the CPB's campaign 'The Dead Are Coming' has come across some very severe critique. Even more surprising, however, was the denunciation of the campaign's strategies from the left side of the political spectrum, which one would, after all, intuitively expect to support any social and political engagement for the rights of refugees and migrants. This wide-spread denunciation is well exemplified by the article published in the left-leaning German daily newspaper *Die Tageszeitung (taz)*. In his article, the newspaper's editor for social movements, Martin Kaul deprecates the CPB as "the Ikea of social movement" and describes its founder Philipp Ruch as "a successful entrepreneur of political art."⁹ While generally supporting the aims of the campaign, Kaul appears to categorically disagree with its form. He writes:

Unlike political protests of grassroots activist groups that always attach great importance to defining their "target groups", to formulate an "campaign consensus" and to articulate their "needs". There is no place for such standards at the Centre for Political Beauty. Its protest activism is PR-oriented, planned from above, precisely positioned. There is no time for too many contradictions.¹⁰

Thus contrasting the CPB's campaigning approach with that of more traditional and community-based activist groups, Kaul describes it as undemocratic or even authoritarian, mass-oriented, cheap, commercial, marketing-like etc. People that joined the Centre's protests are belittled as "protest consumers" that readily snap away the CPB's "protest products."¹¹ Yet, Kaul's most bitter allegation is that, in its campaign, the CPB from the very outset places itself "on the side of the moral winners" and, hence, opportunistically puts its own PR-success above the actual needs and demands that it purports to address. It is blamed to "make politics with refugees' dead bodies,"¹² implying, however, that CPB is engaged in protest primarily for the sake of own publicity profit.

Kaul admits that CPB's campaigns had been extraordinarily effective in terms of attracting medial attention and provoking wide public willingness to engage in acts of civil disobedience. The more traditional social movements have been failing to achieve that despite the dramatic nature of the recent burning issues. Hence, Kaul's derogatory rhetoric could perhaps be dismissed as a sign of a somewhat grudging resentment. However, whether or not one agrees

⁹ Martin Kaul, 'Köttbullar und Schönheit', *taz.de* (July 2, 2015, accessed: 08.06.2015), <https://www.taz.de/1/archiv/digitaz/artikel/?ressort=me&dig=2015%2F07%2F02%2Fa0004&cHash=a809a46ab6d1bf2cd173825c3426f364> [the original in German, my translation].

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

with Kaul's derogatory comparison of CPB's concept to self-centred profit-maximization through marketing and mass production, some of his more arguments against the political use of artistic practices cannot be dismissed as lightly and should therefore be analysed in more detail. Doing that, one can, I believe, also clarify what is at stake in the use of those practices in political activism and elaborate the criteria of success beyond the mere achievement of medial attention.

Arguments against hybridisation of art and politics are usually separated into two main categories: the one is concerned primarily with the autonomy of art, the other – with the autonomy of politics. Both of these concerns have a long tradition. The first set of concerns is linked to the potentially detrimental effect on art, when it becomes politicized and subjugated by the domain of politics. Naturally, the arguments against political use of art come primarily from artists. The concern is that art's autonomy and its essential ambiguity cannot be maintained given concrete and explicit goals and agendas of traditional political actors. Art's autonomy would be endangered, if artists shifted from simply referring to politico-economic and social conditions seen as external to art to utilising art in order to change these conditions. The idea of 'art for art's sake' is incompatible with artistic activity for the sake of something else. Whether it is about changing living conditions of economically underdeveloped areas, protesting against climate change, or addressing the calamity of plight of refugees, moral and normative aspects of political action seem to undermine the very thing that makes art what it is, to replace the criteria of specific artistic quality.¹³ Quite evidently, this is not Kaul's main concern, whose critique, in my opinion, is related primarily to the second set, i.e. to arguments against the detrimental effects that art's aestheticization and spectacularity can have on politics.

Several authors argued that aestheticizing politics dangerously redirects the attention from its practical aspects, needs, and messages toward its aesthetic form, turning it primarily into a spellbinding spectacle.¹⁴ The most vivid historical example is the aestheticization of politics in Nazi Germany. National Socialists infamously invested a great deal in aesthetic representation of the power of the state and the nation by using a variety of means: the infamous black SS-uniforms, nightly torches parades etc. For Walter Benjamin, such aestheticization of politics in the very epitome of fascism.¹⁵

Contemporary critics might also point to the increasing political aestheticization in the contemporary Western liberal democracies, which renders politics entertaining and consumable. Election campaigns, public appearance of politicians, but also the political discourse itself is increasingly managed by spin-doctors. These *de facto* designers or "aestheticians" are concerned primarily, if not exclusively, with the form and not the content. The maintenance of the political client's media-image often comes at the price of obfuscating concrete policies and their implications. Similar arguments are often used against right-wing populism. Surprisingly, they are also present in Kaul's adamant rejection of CPB's activist strategy: he criticises both its alleged authoritarian nature and its spectacularity, its obsession with appearances, PR, and

¹³ Cf. Groys, 'On Art Activism'.

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, Guy Debord, Theodor A. Adorno among others.

¹⁵ Cf. Groys, 'On Art Activism'. One can also think about the links between the fascists and the Futurism movement in Italy in the first half of the 20th century.

media-image. Further increasing the aesthetic ambiguity of the political realm is thus perceived as a dangerous continuation of populist and commercialization trends in contemporary politics.

Hence, according to Kaul, political activism should still be based on traditional “standards”: on transparently defined target groups and political adversaries rather than on artistic ambiguity, on rationality of explicitly-stated political demands rather than on aesthetic appearances, on democratically-defined campaign-consensus rather than on artistic vision of the few etc. I do not intend to undermine the importance of the Left’s established standards and strategies of political activism; I would only like to point out the continually changing environment in which contemporary politics is played out. The very fact, that conventional and institutionalized politics has largely adopted aesthetic forms that are spread by mass-media, should at least raise the question, whether progressive political activism can and should provide an appropriate answer in that domain as well.

Against Kaul, I will argue in favour of a closer integration of artistic practices forms into contemporary political activism by pointing to some of the potential advantages of such integration. Artistic ambiguity is able to bypass crude and often barren static distributions of roles: ally-versus-foe polarisations created by traditional forms of activism or a static and essentially condescending superposition of helpless victims and their “saviours” of humanitarianism and advocacy activism. Artistic forms can work more efficiently against political apathy that is spreading in the general population and break through its psychological barriers of denial and rationalisation. Finally, the relative ease, with which artistic forms cross linguistic and national barriers, makes their role exceptionally crucial in the increasingly globalized and transnational political contexts of today.

3. Limits of reason

Artistic forms have a particular advantage over the merely 'rational', knowledge-based, and ambiguity-opposing approach of more traditional activism. Francis Bacon famously claimed that "knowledge itself is power." Yet, at the time of writing this paper, more than two years have passed since Edward Snowden's revelations; yet little has improved in the matters of global surveillance. Considering some of the recent developments one could say that, in some way, the situation has even gotten worse in that regard.¹⁶ In some countries, intelligence communities enjoy more excessive powers than they used to in pre-Snowden times. This somewhat surprising development reveals, in my opinion, the increasingly shrinking role of knowledge and rationality in the contemporary politics. Knowledge alone no longer seems powerful enough to promote political change. According to Slavoj Žižek, the contemporary ideological predicament can no longer be described in terms of Christ's known formula: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."¹⁷ The lack of political reforms can no longer be attributed simply to ignorance or to masses' being ill-informed about the actual state of affairs. It is also not a matter of naivety expressed by the well-known phrase from Karl Marx's *Capital*: "they do not know it, but they are doing it."¹⁸ Instead, as Žižek puts it, our predicament can best be described by the following logic: "We know very well what we are doing, but still, we keep doing it."¹⁹ In other words, there is a more fundamental difficulty to translate knowledge into political action.

Hence, our times could be well described by Peter Sloterdijk's idea of "cynical reason."²⁰ According to him,

to act against better knowledge is today the global situation in the superstructure; it knows itself to be without illusions and yet to have been dragged down by the "power of things."²¹

The complexity of the currently pertinent political affairs is undoubtedly increased by the effects of globalization. In the contemporary media-landscape, information-overload seems to augment traditional censorship and secrecy. Nowadays, it seems that almost any political issue tends to turn into a medial storm of opinions and counter-opinions which, nevertheless, fails to promote critical reflection, as the storm itself interferes with imagination and, thus, stands in the way to forming new perspectives and creative solutions. The overwhelmed majority seems to sink into political passivity, if not apathy, leaving tasks to experts and opinions to pundits.

¹⁶ The further legislative legitimization and entrenchment of state surveillance in France could serve as an example. Cf. e.g. the editorial published by the *New York Times* (31.03.2015, accessed: 18.09.2015) on the new surveillance bills in France <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/01/opinion/the-french-surveillance-state.html>.

¹⁷ Cf. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London, New York: Verso, 1989), pp. 28-30.

¹⁸ Cf. *ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 5-6.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Notwithstanding that, conventional forms of activism and of social movement, which Kaul's critique sets off against the artistic strategies of the CPB, still bet on the ideals of the Enlightenment – reason, rationality, knowledge. They insist on reaching campaign consensus, clearly defining interest groups and political demands, identifying political adversary (the state, the bankers, the NSA, the EU institutions etc.), at whom these demands will be addressed. Given the fundamentally changed political and medial environment, the result of this traditional approach often remains limited to a crude demonisation of the adversary creating a situation of a largely barren polarization, which might indeed function as an efficient outlet for anger and frustration but nevertheless cannot lead to any substantive and durable political change. To be sure, the existing configurations of power relations allow for a temporary demonstrations of demands and needs. However, more often than not, they hit the walls of economic and/or paradigmatic 'necessities' or 'impossibilities' – Sloterdijk's "power of things" – and quickly discarded as fanciful fantasies.

This is precisely why, in my opinion, artistic practice can – and should – play a important complementary role alongside traditional forms of activism due to its ability to avoid the flooded argumentation channels and to poignantly address the very coordinates of a situation. Davide Dormino's life-size bronze sculpture "Anything to say? A monument to courage"²² can serve a good example in this regard (see Illustration 2). The sculpture was revealed on Alexanderplatz in Berlin on May 1, 2015. Later, it has travelled to other places in Europe (Dresden in Germany, followed by Switzerland and Italy). It depicts the figures of Edward Snowden, Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning standing on three chairs arranged in a row. There is also an additional, fourth and empty chair inviting people to stand on it.

Providing an immediate symbolic expression to the idea "courage is contagious," Dormino's sculpture puts the viewer in a position to consider the possibility of their own contribution to the revelation of wrongdoing. It also raises the question of possible hardships linked with abandoning the comfort zone symbolized by the sitting position and standing up of the chair – becoming visible and, thus, potentially threatened and judged. Furthermore, the choice of a classical sculptural material, bronze, alludes to the idea that the three figures are the true heroes of our times and worthy of a monument.

One can see that Dormino's politically motivated artwork engages with the very forms – both perceptual and conceptual – with which one apprehends the political issue at hand. Therefore, it can avoid the path of polarisation usually employed by traditional progressive activism. It does not stubbornly attacks the existing, visible, well-defined state of affairs. Instead, it seeks to symbolically redefine the very coordinates of the situation, to elaborate an entirely new perspective, to shed new light on the issue, to avoid the usual distribution of interests and agents, to redraw their links and configurations. Additionally, in contrast to rationalistic approaches, it does not allow an easy apathetic disengagement. Thus, it is perhaps the only way to fight off the "compassion fatigue" of contemporary news consumers. It is also a way break the very fact that pertinent issues remain bound to a clearly defined place in the daily life: e.g. the fixed time slot of news programmes 8 to 8:30 PM – and not a minute longer. As a

²² Davide Dormino, 'Anything to say? A monument to courage' (accessed: July 10, 2015) <http://davidedormino.com/2015/05/27/anything-to-say-a-monument-to-courage/>.



Illustration 2 - "Anything to say?" (Davide Dormino, <http://anythingtosay.com/content/>)

result, it can reach its audiences more effectively and provoke a wider range of reaction and engagement. When placed in Berlin's High Street frequented by both locals and tourists, Dormino's sculpture interrupts the familiar flow of affairs – shopping – by raising an issue out of its usual context.

Form matters. More often than not, true political changes are preceded not by a rational definition of demands and identification of political adversaries but by an (aesthetic) creation of new perspectives on the issue. In the following section, I thus use Jacques Rancière's writings in order to theoretically substantiate the outlined strengths of the aesthetic activism such as exemplified by Davide Dormino and the Centre for Political Beauty.

4. Aesthetic activism and its dissensual acts

Rancière's "politics as aesthetics" is perhaps one of the most far-reaching attempts to intertwine the two fields. According to him, politics is always a matter of aesthetics, insofar as it is "a matter of appearances."²³ New forms of artistic expression surpass the given limits of what is communicable; similarly, politics is the appearance of hitherto invisible, inaudible social groups on the political stage. The link between aesthetic innovation and political emancipation is thus more than a simple analogy: both aesthetics and politics are structured around a common mechanism. For Rancière, "politics is aesthetics in that it makes visible what had been excluded from a perceptual field, and in that it makes audible what used to be inaudible."²⁴ For example, emancipation of women is best described in terms of their gradual appearance on the political stage, on which, one could say, they were hitherto invisible. Rancière thus conceptualises not so much a potential synergy between the political and artistic fields of action but an overlapping field, in which the two are practically indistinguishable. He claims that "whether the quest is for art alone or for emancipation through art, the stage is the same."²⁵ Nevertheless, what will avail us here is primarily his claim that politics is always already aesthetic and only to a lesser extent the reciprocal claim that art is always political. What is then the mechanism of Rancière's aesthetico-political making-visible and making-audible?

First, it is clear that it is not based on representation – a concept Rancière leaves behind. In particular, he disposes of the usual political – and aesthetic – representation *qua* 'standing for' somebody or something. What is at stake for a typical Rancièrian artist-activist is not representing somebody or somebody's demands. The reason is the following one. For Rancière, representation stands in fundamental contradiction with the principle of equality, as it obfuscates the simple (political) equality of anyone with anyone else. This is true not only as a known weakness of representative democracy; it is also true, he would claim, for political advocacy itself. Let's take an example of an elected politician that represents her electorate. Even if her representation is entirely conscientious, the very representative structure clearly and necessarily puts her higher on the scale of power and visibility, i.e. above anyone who voted for her. However, when an activist advocating the rights of a particular group, he too, first of all, places himself above anyone whom he thus attempts to represent. For Rancière, this, more often than not, a further propagation of a structural and symbolic inequality. It is in this very sense that international humanitarian organisations can often be said to perpetuate or even maintain the very same inequality – say of wealth – that they are declaredly trying to alleviate by representing poor societies in richer countries. What is thus stabilized is the distinction between the wealth here and the poverty over there. For many rich societies, this is an affordable price to pay – both economically and emotionally so – to keep poverty at an agreeable distance.

²³ Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 74.

²⁴ Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2003),

²⁵ Jacques Rancière, 'The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes', in *The Sublime*, ed. by Simon Morley (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2010), pp. 67-69, 67.

That, which traditional representationalism cannot abolish and often perpetuates, Rancière calls “the distribution of the sensible.”²⁶ It should be understood as an aesthetico-political distribution of assigned roles and places. Representation that remains in the framework of any such given distribution simply conserves the inequality inherent to that distribution. Instead of representing something or somebody, aesthetic activism can be said to *do* something.²⁷ Its opts for the effective ambiguity of staging which “subverts the normal coordinates of what’s art, what’s politics, what’s ethics, what’s personal commitment, and what’s collective action.”²⁸ What is being thus staged is simply equality.

And again, this can only be done by aesthetic (or aesthetico-political) means, as any given situation of social relations with its specific distribution of the sensible – including the one of representation – defines a limited set of things expressible and subjects visible or audible, while necessarily rendering the rest less so. The only possibility to escape that representationalist logic is what Rancière calls aesthetic *dissensus*, which Joseph J. Tanke described as “the process of transforming the sensible by placing it in conflict with a rival conception of the world.”²⁹ However, a Rancièrian dissensual strategy differs from that of traditionally consensus-based polarising political activism in that it does not aim at “a construction of a new collective identity but disidentification and the manifestation of the equality underlying every social relation.”³⁰ In other words, activists, can rarely help the poor, the refugees etc. by representing them in massive consensual demonstrations, protests etc. Instead, they should stage their equality with the rest of us in local dissensual manner.

Evidently, aesthetic or artistic activity is uniquely adapted for this task. A stage created by an aesthetically dissensual act is, perhaps, the only space, in which the current inequalities and contradictions can clearly come to light, and, thus, the only space for imagining alternative futures. Another campaign by the CPB might serve a good example to concretize Rancière’s somewhat abstract terminology.

²⁶ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 12.

²⁷ Cf. Carrie Lambert-Beatty, ‘Twelve Miles: Boundaries of the New Art/Activism’, *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 33 (2008), pp. 309-327, 318.

²⁸ Papastergiadis and Esche, “Assemblies in Art and Politics”, 34.

²⁹ Joseph J. Tanke, *Jacques Rancière: An Introduction*, London & New York: Continuum (2011), 103.

³⁰ Kenis and Mathijs, “Climate Change and Post-Politics: Repoliticizing the Present by Imagining the Future?”, *Geoforum* 52 (2014), 150. This places Rancière’s theory apart from other post-structuralist thinkers like Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau.



Illustration 3: “The First Fall of the European Wall” (The Centre for Political Beauty, <http://www.politicalbeauty.com/wall.html>)

Any visitor to the German government-quarters in Berlin would notice the white crosses, prominently placed along the river Spree to commemorate the lives that were lost in an attempt to cross from East to West the border that divided the city during the Cold War period. Concurrently with the celebrations of the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 2014, the CPB has removed several of these crosses, transported them to the EU’s increasingly impenetrable and militarised external border, i.e. to the place where walls still exist today and even are continuously built and reinforced. The CPB also published photos of contemporary refugees posing with these name-bearing crosses.³¹ Additionally, and as if in reaction to Ronald Reagan’s famous appeal “Tear down this wall!” of his 1987 Berlin speech, the CPB had made arrangements for a large group of activists and journalists to travel to the southern borders armed with bolt cutters and electric angle grinders in a declared attempt to tear down this wall as well.³²

The campaign thus made visible the political hypocrisy of the celebrations and the obfuscated equality between the commemorated victims of the Berlin Wall and the mounting death-toll of contemporary refugees at the “European Wall.” The CPB’s artistic strategy can thus be seen as a typically Rancièrian enactment of aesthetic dissensus that upholds the principle of equality – in this case the symbolic equality between defectors from East-German and today’s refugees. Moreover, such an aesthetic staging of equality often has, in my opinion,

³¹ Philip Oltermann, “Art Group Removes Berlin Wall Memorial in Border Protest”, *The Guardian* (November 3, 2014, accessed: July 15, 2015), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/03/berlin-wall-memorial-border-protest>.

³² The CPB, ‘The victims at the EU’s borders’ (accessed: July 10, 2015), <http://www.politicalbeauty.com/wall.html>.

more political efficacy than any rational putting forward of demands, regardless of how legitimate these demands are.

5. The political force of aesthetic ambiguity

Recent programmes of the major international art exhibitions such as Venice Biennale, documenta or Berlin Biennial often reflect an observable trend of politicization of the art scene or, at the very least, an increasing entanglement between art and political activism. This is but another reason to clarify an important distinction of the roles that art can be given in political activism. There is, on the one hand, the conventional and representational utilization of art in order to draw attention to political issues (e.g. artistic projects that involve artworks made by migrants or refugees, festivals, common activities etc.³³) and, on the other hand, the direct utilization of aesthetic forms in order to target the basic categories of our perception of the political issue at hand (staging the equality of past defectors and contemporary refugees, the ethical equivalence of walls and borders – past and present etc.). Even though it is not always possible to draw a very sharp line between the two approaches, the distinction should nevertheless be made conceptually. After all, only the latter approach seems to draw the above-mentioned and, in my opinion, unjust critique from the traditional progressive activism.

Lucy Lippard's distinction between 'political art' and 'activist art' is one way to make the above distinction. According to her, political art is socially 'concerned' and art activism tends to be socially 'involved.' While the former usually offers an analysis or a commentary to a political issue, the latter artworks engage directly within its context and with its agents.³⁴ However, in my opinion, neither of the two terms adequately describes the type of activism I put forward here, due to the essentially ambiguous status of the objects produced by aesthetic activism.³⁵ According to Rancière, "the object of an aesthetic experience is 'aesthetic', in so far as it is not – or at least not only – art."³⁶ In other words, the characteristic ambiguity of the aesthetico-political object makes it difficult to clearly identify it as an artwork. Thus, while traditional political activism often utilises artworks and artistic performances, the "objects" that art produces in its 'aesthetic regime' are, first and foremost, contested objects, which marks and identifies their very political moment. Let us now consider another example.

³³ Similar to the projects "Taste of Home" in which locals and migrants cook together and get to know each other and each other's cultures in a culinary way. Cf. Yermi Brenner, 'Refugees in Croatia cook their way into inclusion', *Al Jazeera* (July 1, 2015: accessed: July 10, 2015) <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/06/refugees-croatia-food-syria-nigeria-150624102007686.html>.

³⁴ Lucy Lippard, "Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power", *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum, 1984), pp. 341–358, 349.

³⁵ Lambert-Beatty too argues for abandoning the category 'activist art.' She writes that while "it has been legitimating, theorizing, and promoting politically engaged practice, [it] now somewhat obscures the nature of many of the most productive and provocative practices at the crossing of its terms. These projects do not hybridize art and activism so much they as they tactically play on their ambiguous separation" (Lambert-Beatty, 'Twelve Miles', 316).

³⁶ Jacques Rancière, 'The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes: Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy', *New Left Review* 14 (2002), pp. 133-151, 135.

Woman On Waves is a pro-choice non-profit organisation founded by a Dutch physician and artist Rebecca Gomperts in 1999. Her first action was arguably the most audacious example of feminist activism ever enacted. Her organisation turned a shipping container into a fully functioning abortion clinic. The container was then installed aboard a Dutch ship which sailed to countries, where women have limited or no possibility to undergo a legal and safe abortion. The plan was to sail there, dock, take aboard local women, and sail back into the international waters, where the doctors would be able to legally offer both advice and treatment – including abortion. In 2001, the ship of Woman On Waves has been requested stop on their way to Ireland. The home port authorities have declared their inspection certificate null and void reasoning that it did not allow for a medical facility on board the ship. The activists then declared that this is not a clinic but a work of art and have been allowed to continue their journey.³⁷

What is then the status of Woman On Waves' container-clinic? On the one hand, it was recognised by Venice Biennale which exhibited the campaign as a work of art. This was a clear seal of legitimation by one of the most respected authorities in the art-world. On the other hand, by providing abortion where it is forbidden, it actively and subversively engages in a politically charged issue of women's right to have control over their bodies – a right that still is not equally available, not even throughout Europe. Rancière's commentators Nikos Papastergiadis and Charles Esche would probably summarise the dual nature the Women On Waves as follows:

The making of those kinds of actions could be interpreted in both ways: first, we are doing something to help people to transgress the law and, at the same time, we are creating a public stage on which this is presented.³⁸

In contrast, Women On Waves' aesthetic activism could also be interpreted along the lines of Carrie Lambert-Beatty's neither-nor approach:

Woman On Waves is not art, nor is it not-art: rather it tacks between art and politics in much the same way it moves between actual human rights mission and media-political campaign, legality and piracy, fact and myth.³⁹

³⁷ Cf. Lambert-Beatty, 'Twelve Miles', 322. In June 2015, the NGO launched an additional campaign. They delivered abortion pills across the border from German to Poland using a drone (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/24/abortion-drone-border-poland-germany-women-on-waves>).

³⁸ Papastergiadis and Esche, 'Assemblies in Art and Politics', 34.

³⁹ Lambert-Beatty, 'Twelve Miles', 316.



Illustration 4 - Women On Waves' ship clinic (Women On Waves website, <http://www.womenonwaves.org/>)

Either way, one can see that the very aesthetico-political force of the campaign lies precisely in its ambiguity. Aesthetically (but also politically), it creates a floating stage on which the issue of women's rights gains a dramatical visibility. While, politically (but also aesthetically), it takes the matter into its own hands and offers a concrete solution, even if even limited to just a few cases. For Rancière this ambiguity between art and non-art is an essential aspect of art in its aesthetic regime – the very fundamental structural paradox at the heart of such art. And, it is also the very thing that makes art political. On the one hand art utilised an autonomous – perhaps even apolitical – space, i.e. space free from the pressures of the “real” regulated world. However, art also does not accept that this space is to be declared entirely separated from the real political realities. Hence, occupying that ambiguous grey zone between art and non-art, politics and non-politics, aesthetic activism too can be surprisingly effective – e.g. in influencing public opinion. A survey by the Polish government showed a rise of 12 percent in the public support for legalizing abortion in Poland in 2003, which it linked to Women On Waves visit to Poland.⁴⁰

One might question, however, the implications of this ambiguity: Which criteria would prevent Venice Biennale to consider, say, smuggling of illicit substances across national borders or gambling onboard casinos floating in international waters as a work of art? Obviously, artistic practices cannot lay down normative criteria or determine governance policies. In other words, artistic activity cannot substitute forms of power – the government, the judiciary etc. But, according to Rancière, neither can politics. What affiliates art with authentic – i.e. emancipatory – politics and what differentiates the two from the institutionalised so-called politics is their ability to create dramatic demonstrations of existent inequalities which result from the current distribution of such criteria and policies or, in Rancière's terms, from the current distribution of the sensible. The only thinkable criterion for a Rancièrian aesthetic activism is equality. Relentlessly staging that equality, i.e. making it visible and re-distributing the sensible towards a greater equality, can be seen as the task of aesthetic activism. Only when that basic equality is

⁴⁰ Cf. Lambert-Beatty, 'Twelve Miles', 318.

staged and, thus, made-visible in a concrete case, can it be properly assessed according normatively, ethically, or legally.

6. Ethical claims are not political (enough)

The structurally essential ambiguity between art and politics does not, however, mean that the two should be entirely conflated. It is perhaps the very fact, that the relation between them is ambiguous and allows a degree of tension, that keeps both effective. The established international art scene seems to have accepted this, not so – the traditional progressive political activism which, at least according to Kaul, seems to demand a strict categorical separation.

In fact, Rancière too warns against a complete fusing of art and politics. For him, they “become one and the same thing only when they vanish together into ethical indistinction.”⁴¹ For example, when art is used to fool the observer into believing something, it stops being political and makes a shift towards the production of ethical imperatives. Again, political art is political only in so far as it is a tool of dissension against any given distribution of the sensible. It necessarily presents an ambiguity, essentially pluralist and leaves a space for an autonomous decision and position-taking on the part of the observer. This might be the very reason why Rancière has remained sceptical towards the campaigns of the US-based Jacques Servin and Igor Vamos, as well as their network of supporters, also known as The Yes Men.⁴² One of their projects will constitute our next – even if negative, or, at least, contested – example of aesthetic activism.

Since their first appearance in 2000, The Yes Men have gained a great deal of publicity operating at the crossing of artistic performance and political activism. They have been exposing the wrongdoings of global players (corporations, international organizations, powerful individuals etc.) by creating websites, press releases and public events which constitute subtle and revealing parodies. They utilize the tactics of hoax, mischief somewhat similar to the CPB though much less dramatic and austere. The parody employed by the group is so subtle that it often manages to get invitations to participate in official events organised by governments and industry or give interviews in major media outlets. In 2004, the group managed to get air time on BBC World Service, which they convinced to be representatives of Dow Chemical. The breaking news announced that Dow admits its responsibility in the infamous Bhopal disaster (1984), in which over half a million people were exposed to toxic chemicals due to a gas leak at a chemical plant. Dow’s later denial of any connection with the BBC report put the company in

⁴¹ Jacques Rancière, Statement on the Occasion of the Panel Discussion: ‘Artists and Cultural Producers as Political Subjects. Opposition, Intervention, Participation, Emancipation in Times of Neoliberal Globalisation’, Berlin (January 16, 2005, accessed: July 15, 2015), <http://klartext.uqbar-ev.de/dokupdfs/RanciereStatementEN.pdf>. It should be stated that it remains questionable whether Rancière would recognise the mentioned examples as art corresponding to his own conception of politics as aesthetics. In any case, while giving some criteria to evaluate existing projects, it is difficult, or perhaps even categorically impossible, to use Rancière’s conception in order to deduce any concrete guidelines for aesthetic activism. Perhaps, it would even contradict its own rationale.

⁴² Cf. *ibid.*



Illustration 5 - The Yes Men as representatives of Dow Chemical on BBC (*The Yes Men* <http://theyesmen.org/hijinks/bbcbhopal>)

an awkward position, which, among others, had a negative influence on the price of their stock.⁴³

Gerald Raunig rejects Rancière’s expressed scepticism towards The Yes Men and a few other artists-activists explaining it as Rancière’s subscription to “the old and familiar schema [which] consists of positing an opposition between content-focused ‘political’ art and formalistic ‘autonomous’ art” and to “the ubiquitous imperative of ambiguity in the art field,” which explicitly excludes ‘political art’ as too unambiguous.⁴⁴ In my opinion, however, Rancière’s scepticism is not based exclusively on lack of ambiguity. It is true, The Yes Men’s attacks and pranks addressed at a clearly defined adversary (George W. Bush, Dow Chemical, World Trade Organization, ExxonMobil, Milton Friedman, BP, Shell etc.) seems to reduce the dynamic character of aesthetic ambiguity. However, it is primarily their inability to redraw the established basic coordinates of a conflict – the audiences and the victims with which it identifies here vs. the culprits over there – that Rancière would find aesthetically and politically inefficient. One can say, that The Yes Men choose easy targets – nobody in their right mind thought Dow were innocent – and that their approach simply reproduces and perpetuates the existing ethical conflict rather than engaging in its aesthetico-political making-visible and re-distribution of roles and places.

Nevertheless, one could also agree with Raunig that activists like The Yes Men do “contribute to organizing different forms, different spaces of expression.”⁴⁵ Rancière does seem to overhastily deny their aesthetic status simply due to a “suspicion of ideology,” i.e. of a too clear message. According to Raunig, “there are dissensual situations where artists have to take a

⁴³ Cf. Lambert-Beatty, ‘Twelve Miles’, 318.

⁴⁴ Gerald Raunig, ‘Singers, Cynics, Molecular Mice: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Activism’, in *Theory, Culture, Society* 31 (7/8) (2014), pp. 67-80, 68.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

stance, produce a singular truth against the truth of identity as well as against the relativism of ambiguity in the art field.”⁴⁶ In my opinion too, the discussed aesthetic campaigns demonstrate that not every more or less apparent truth claim or political message – ‘all women have right to abortion’ etc. – would necessarily undermine their otherwise truly Rancièrian aesthetico-political impact: staging of equality and making visible. At least, it does not do so to the same detrimental extent as would a merely representational reproduction of roles and places and particularly so a clearly judgemental one. Avoiding the latter is the most basic lesson, that all types of political activism – not only those that explicitly utilise artistic practices – could learn from Rancière.

7. “Aesthetic communities”: New forms of political life

Sometimes, even an act that has no artistic ambitions whatsoever can become political insofar as it involves an aesthetic component. Rancière often quotes the renowned Rosa Parks incident.⁴⁷ Her decision to occupy a seat reserved for whites on a segregated bus in Montgomery of 1955 was, first of all, a private, singular act of disobeying the distribution of places based on skin colour. However, we should now be able to see that it was due to its aesthetic effect, i.e. due its making-visible of the (in)equality between whites and blacks, that it could consequently trigger wide and ultimately politically successful public events and protests. Parks act of civil disobedience was an aesthetically dissensual act, a transgression of aesthetic distribution of roles and places in the name of equality, which very so often is also factually illegal and needs to overcome a fear of possible consequences to the person involved.

In the first decades of the 21st century, with the appearance of various *Occupy* or *Indignados* movements, a relatively new form of activism qua political organisation can be observed. The main feature of these movements – occupations of university campuses, parks and central public squares – is in itself not entirely new. It had also accompanied the revolutions of the so-called Arab Spring (demonstrations and tents in Tahrir Square in Cairo Egypt, day-long sit-ins at the Kasbah Square in Tunis etc.). Similar protests also took place in the US, Turkey, Greece, Spain (*Acampadas* in the Puerta del Sol in Madrid) and Israel (raising tents in the Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv).⁴⁸ The ability to occupy public places, to interrupt the normal flow of life in the urban space, or to formulate a consensual articulation of their needs as a demands directed at adversary target groups – all criteria established by above-mentioned Kaul’s critique of CPB – have not constituted, in my opinion, the most innovative result of these movements. If several of these movements were ultimately successful, it was, I claim, due to their aesthetic aspects well summarised by Michel Foucault definition of art as “capable of giving a form to existence which breaks with every other form.”⁴⁹ Isn’t this radical break with established forms of (political) existence and the appearance on the political stage of new forms quite exactly the

⁴⁶ Ibid., 69.

⁴⁷ Cf. Jacques Rancière, ‘Insistances démocratiques entretien avec Miguel Abensour, Jean-Luc Nancy & Jacques Rancière’, *Vacarme*, 48 (2009, accessed: June 30, 2015) <http://www.vacarme.org/article1772.html>.

⁴⁸ Cf. Raunig, ‘Singers, Cynics, Molecular Mice’, 74.

⁴⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 187.

kind of Rancièrian aesthetico-political redistribution of the sensible? In other words, even though these movements did not see themselves primarily as artistic projects, their very political efficacy can be described through aesthetic means: they invented a new ‘form of existence’, producing a certain new ‘aesthetics of existence’ – new forms of individual and collective subjectivation, new forms of living together as ‘work of beauty.’⁵⁰ Significantly, this community is an aesthetic community and, as such, a dissensual one also in itself and not only as an opposition to somebody or something which, in my opinion, would be the result of Kaul’s recommendations.

One can make this more concrete with an example. At least one aspect of the Occupy Wall Street movement has an especially Rancièrian character – its polivocality. This interesting aesthetic novelty has developed partially by accident and out of necessity. Police forbade speakers to use microphones, megaphones, and other audio-amplifiers. And, at some point, protesters started to repeat the speeches in chorus phrase after phrase. The chorus had a purely practical aspect – it enabled a mass of people gathered in an open-air situation to actually follow the speech. However, it did not simply degenerate into a consensual and parroting affirmation of the speakers. Instead, a polyvocal and differentiated situation emerged. Some people accompanied their repetition with hand-signs – either agreeing or disagreeing – while others sat with their back to the speaker to enable the speech to reach further out. Occupy’s polivocality is in itself a new political phenomenon *qua* appearance, as it changes the established distribution of roles and places and underlined the equality of speakers and their audiences which did not necessarily mean the collective sameness of their messages and demands. Would it not, hence, be a fair claim that the Spanish *Podemos* movement is an example of a new political movement that owes its success to the similar, small but politically fruitful, breakthroughs of an aesthetico-political nature achieved by *Indignados*? And has the attempted revolution in Egypt not come full circle also as a result of a lack of changes in the basic distribution of roles and places, of aesthetic appearances that would change entire perspectives – a requirement for a true about political change?

Even institutionalised politics often demonstrates aesthetic aspects. The decision of the European Parliament to nominate candidates for the presidency of the European Commission during the European parliamentary elections of May 2014 may serve as an example of an aesthetico-political act. Because this decision had no basis in the European treaties, several media outlets called it a bluff. But was this bluff not what, in Rancièr’s terms, could be described as an aesthetic act of re-distribution of the sensible? After all, it had eventually led to a situation, in which the voters cast their vote not only for the party but also for the candidate it put forward. And, as a result, it became politically impossible for the European Council to ignore that and appoint a different candidate. Arguably, this has given the position of the current President of the Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker a more democratic foundation. Curiously, however, what institutionalised politics has long been implementing is late to become widely utilised by bottom-up progressive political movements, who treat aesthetic strategies of groups like the CPB with suspicion sometimes bordering on hostility. Focused on overly rationalistic approach, the former seem to fail to notice the virtually limitless potential of aesthetic acts to

⁵⁰ Cf. Raunig, ‘Singers, Cynics, Molecular Mice’, 75.

create new situations, new distributions of the sensible and, thus, also of the possible. The challenging of the current political status quo can rarely bypass creating new perspectives on it. Moreover, the actual putting in place of frameworks (legislative etc.) as a stable and lasting solution often follows as a direct and almost automatic result out of a previously changed perspective which dissolves the conceptual hurdles to change.

8. Aesthetic activism and the pan-European public sphere

Finally, it should also be said in favour of aesthetic activism that several of its characteristics make it very well suited for addressing inherently pan-European issues and for doing so directly on pan-European political stage. That notwithstanding, as of now, it is difficult to think of any such campaign that have ever been underway on the EU-level.

The CPB's campaign *The Dead Are Coming*, for example, has proven quite effective in targeting the German government, pushing it to rethink Germany's policies towards refugees and migrants. Would it not be thus safe to assume that a similar campaign on the EU-level could create a significant leverage of pressure on the European Institutions, which could in turn push them towards the urgently needed comprehensive and just pan-European migration policy. Furthermore, migration is but one contested political issue, the very nature of which makes the European Institutions the most suitable addressees of political activism. It is also in the realm of civil rights (abortion rights, protection of whistleblowers etc.), that the EU is the only instance able to implement a more coherent enforcement than any single member state and to fill up the gaps between different member states' regulations.

Additionally, at the moment, almost every EU-critical voice, regardless of whether it is coming from the right or left side of the political spectrum, is all too quickly discredited as populism or Euroscepticism. Under these circumstances, the above-discussed inherent ambiguity of aesthetic activism and its ability to organize unconventional forms and spaces of expression and distribution of ideas might make it a suitable tool, cut out for addressing critical issues without running the danger of being too easily subverted or banished from the public domain by the ruling ideologies.⁵¹ Aesthetic activism might thus provide the European unification project with the much needed tool for democratic self-criticism without playing into the hands of true Eurosceptics that seek to undermine this project.

Much has been said about the democratic deficit of the EU and the need of a proper pan-European public sphere which, apart from the changes required institutionally, is of the most important conditions for a functioning pan-European democracy. However, a pan-European *demos* cannot be created by mere "Europeanisation" of national media in which European contents are still served primarily from national perspectives. And while several cross-border medial cooperation projects are in place, a truly pan-European perspective can only be provided by medial spheres which are directly and formally pan-European from the very outset. Art's ability to draw on a shared European heritage and thus transcend linguistic and national borders gives artistic practice – the language of aesthetic activism – a an effective leverage in addressing public opinion on the pan-European scale, to raise issues that concern Europeans *qua*

⁵¹ Cf. Raunig, 'Singers, Cynics, Molecular Mice', 78.

Europeans. Accordingly, aesthetic activism seems to constitute the principal means by which the European *demos* may finally appear on the EU's political stage.

9. Conclusions

Politics is often defined as the “art of the possible”.⁵² Arguably, the current political predicament of the EU becomes increasingly associated with a technocratic and legalistic rationality and, thus, a seemingly unchallengeable “politics” of the necessary rather than that of possible. Hence, it appears to be high time to revive the seemingly lost political possibility among others by aesthetic means.

I have argued that aesthetic activism can withstand the critique from the more traditional approaches to political activism. Its specific use of artistic practice avoids the disadvantages of representation. Despite its departure from a clear definition of agency, of target groups, and of clearly articulated set of demands – or maybe precisely due to this departure – aesthetic activism can have a very real, often measurable effects. Its targets only one group, that is ‘absolutely everyone.’ It does so, however, not by means of raising universalist claims but by operating transversally.⁵³ Its only, indirect, and abstract “demand” is equality which it, nevertheless, stages in relation very concrete circumstances. Whether it makes the cause, that it militates for, actually and directly possible – the way Women On Waves’ provided safe abortion for a few individuals – or just makes us believe, even if for a second, that it could be possible, aesthetic activism leaves us with a significantly different situation. It enabled us to perceive the existing predicament more clearly, while, at the same time, creating a concrete and, thus, politically significant vision of a better world – bringing it a step closer to become reality. One could say, that only effective appearances of that sort create the possibility for formulating new demands. By capturing public attention while simultaneously avoiding the traps of information-overload, it can not only have a significant effect on polarized and fluctuating public opinion but change entire perspectives in a much more subtle manner. Its appearances are political, because they often give rise or stage to an (aesthetic) community, i.e. significantly different ways of living together. Finally, I argued that aesthetic activism can greatly contribute to the promotion of civil rights on the EU-level in particular and generally facilitate the creation of the pan-European public sphere, and, thus, strengthen the Europe-wide democracy.

This study does not advocate for aesthetic activism to entirely replace more traditional forms of activism. Instead, it puts forward a recommendation for all organizations involved in political activism to join forces with aesthetic activists and, perhaps, to consider the artistic practices developed by them as a complementary form of action in own campaigns. Specifically, I believe, that progressive political activists should stop avoiding the essential and constructive ambiguity of the aesthetic activism and engage with it. In other words, along with Rancière, I advocate an increasing convergence between the narrowly artistic and narrowly political forms of activism. Due to the nature of the subject, one cannot provide any practical recommendations or a set of guidelines. There can be no rules for the creation of a specific aesthetico-political

⁵² The phrase is attributed to Otto von Bismarck in conversation in 1867.

⁵³ Cf. Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 284; Raunig, ‘Singers, Cynics, Molecular Mice’, 77.

stage for any concrete issue. Nevertheless, the above-discussed cases of aesthetic activism can serve as good examples of how aesthetic ambiguity can and should be used politically.

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