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Aesthetic Engagement: Art into Politics

Jale Erzen



Panel on Aesthetic Engagement - Krakow, 27.07.2.13

This paper is in three parts: first I will compare aesthetic and practical perception; second I will articulate ideas about the image and its engaging power; this will lead my argument to the investigation of how art and images can be effective in the symbolic ordering of our social relations.

1. Aesthetic and practical perception

We can claim that all perception is aesthetic, actively involving a sensory response through which the imagination constructs meaning. Today, however, both media transmissions and the industrial and mechanical forms imposed on the environment inevitably create an uninvolved practical perception that abandons its objects as soon as a functional interpretation results that causes immediate action. Many spaces, such as offices, coffee shops, supermarkets, shopping centers, airports, etc., are designed in a mechanical way where space is rendered shallow and the sense of place is negated.^[1] In such places and under such conditions aesthetic perception and engagement are excluded to give way to operational behavior.



Pierre Vivant, traffic tree light sculpture

An example is the traffic light, a sign on the perception of which a practical response is given. Of course, traffic lights can also become aesthetic through artistic articulation, as seen in the above artwork. Practical perception consumes its object and does not leave any option for seeing or interpreting symbols. Aesthetic perception, on the other hand, is open ended, leading to changing interpretations and the creation of symbols; it abandons itself to the different and myriad interpretations and meanings afforded by a mental commitment to the object.

Engagement is an attraction that mentally and often emotionally commits the subject to the object without limitation of time or space. Looking at a work of art, reading a book involves us beyond time and space; we assume a kinship with an author from centuries past or from an unknown place. Engagement is total abandonment through the senses to the object without critical judgments or analyses; one is involved with the whole. Life could be seen as a total engagement: engaging with the world, with others, with society. Life is possible first through aesthetic engagement, through sharing the expressions of the world as our senses become involved with the objects of perception. According to Arnold Berleant, who has for many years developed a philosophy of engaged aesthetics, "Aesthetic engagement is not based on the demands of a logical structure or a philosophical system. It therefore rejects aesthetic experience and the presence of aesthetic value throughout human activity."[\[2\]](#) However, it may be that an engaged and emotionally charged relationship to the world is mostly possible today in the arts.

Yet with the exception of mass media images, art images and images transmitted through the social media have a forceful effect in creating new spaces of solidarity, new concepts of the self and the other, new urban environments and social spaces. The visual image, more than any kind of sensory form, gives one immediate credibility of the real. Therefore, today, no matter how much one discredits media transmissions, television, films, videos and photography are effective tools in conditioning our relationship to the world.

There are images that are seen, those that are revelations of the invisible, images in blindness, dream images, images created in

the vast realm of art, and images of social or political references that pave the way to the solidarity of resistance. Aesthetics, as the investigation into the meaning of form rather than that of content or narration, emerges as a discipline and a regime of thought with the Enlightenment. It is especially with Hegel that aesthetics begins to designate thinking related to art.

Representation in whatever way it is understood, either as the mental image that is created in perception, as in the explanation of Kant, or as an interpretation, description, or created image of the thing seen or experienced, as Rancière claims, involves a relationship between knowledge and action.[3] However, as the discourse on art and on the image becomes intensified, at the same time as Hegel proposes, in the modern age the spirit is disconnected from art and, for that matter, from the image.

Giorgio Agamben claims, in line with Hegel's reasoning, that images or artworks today do not engage us any more as they used to before the medieval era. According to Agamben, involvement today with an image or with art is simply critical and inquisitive.[4] However, I will not dwell on this controversy.

2. The image and its engaging power

When we confront an image there is always a kind of shock at the first encounter. Seeing, confronting an image, especially images with the painterly touch, refuse any narrative explanation and lead to a silence. Adorno has written that all real experience is accompanied by a shudder. An image creates a kind of total empowerment, as in confronting a work of art. Rancière explains that all great works of art give us a certain shock when thought becomes paralyzed. He goes on to say that although we always read an image with thought, the moment we are hit by the image we can no longer think, calculate, or assess. We are engaged totally. Aesthetic engagement at first creates a kind of incapacity, whereas in practical perception we are led to immediate practice, a way out of engagement.[5] According to Lyotard, the force of the image (of art) makes us powerless: the subject is disarmed by the sensible, which hits the naked soul confronted by the power of the 'other.' For him it is like the striking of the sublime, which elevates pathos and is irreducible to logos.[6] The power of art, then, is the immediate identity of the contradictions of logos and pathos (thought and passion). In Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, these are symbolized by the trance represented by Dionysus coupled with the discipline and order of Apollo. It is a process where the trance is then followed by the perception of intelligible order and form: This shift from one state to the other is typical of aesthetic engagement, which does not forsake its object but becomes open to continuous interpretations and sensory states. The symbol can never be consumed; it is open to myriad interpretations.

According to George Didi-Huberman, "there is no innocent gaze before the one that we place on an image...a knowledge precedes all approaches, all reception of images;...but something strange happens the moment our knowledge...is shattered...when the image appears." [7] "With the appearance of the image all our language is questioned... and suspended. Facing the strangeness of the image our language becomes enriched with new combinations and our thought with new categories." [8] According to him, this incapacity before the image has to do with the wider anthropological, historical, and political dimension of images. Even in front of familiar images, there are breaks that emerge

suddenly and put us in a state of bewilderment. As the image emerges in our consciousness, it opens a break in our thinking and we enter a museum of empty words; it is impossible to find words for this experience. According to Didi-Huberman, the image is only worth as much as it can change our thinking.^[9] Even when we see the same image, we look at it through a new time dimension and a new space dimension. On the other hand, images of the media do not emerge; they bombard us.

Until now I have talked about the perception and involvement of the person who looks, of the spectator with the image or with the art work. The involvement and perception of the artist with the work of art is almost Dionysian, without any recourse to distancing and critical judgment.



Image 1 (Drawing by Jale N. Erzen - 1985 mixed media)



Image 2 (Drawing by Jale N. Erzen - 2005, mixed media)

In Agamben's words:

“To look at a work of art, therefore, means to be hurled out into a more original time: it means ecstasy in the epochal opening of rhythm, which gives and holds back. Only by starting from this situation of man's relationship with the work of art is it possible to comprehend how this relationship – if it is authentic – is also for man the highest engagement, that is, the engagement that keeps him in the truth and grants to his dwelling on earth its original

status. In the experience of the work of art, man stands in the truth, that is, in the origin that has revealed itself to him in the poetic act. In this engagement, in this being hurled-out-into the *ἐποχή* of rhythm, artists and spectators recover their essential solidarity and their common ground."[\[10\]](#)

3. How art/images can be effective in the symbolic ordering of our social relations

Art becomes work when it is shared with another person. Sharing is also engagement in the most basic sense. In articulating the relationship between art and politics, Jacop Lund refers to Bernard Stiegler's claim that the "[artist's] work is originally engaged in the question of the sensibility of the other. The political question is, in essence, the question of the relation to the other in a common or shared sensing..."[\[11\]](#) "The political is aesthetic in that it has to do with the symbolic ordering of social relations and our coexistence."[\[12\]](#) "Perception, sensation, feeling and taste are not only individual but at the same time social phenomena."[\[13\]](#) As Lund claims, "Art is directly associated with engaging members of a society in common symbols and in common experiences afforded by cultural expressions, i.e., sounds, and cultural activities....Politics is the art of securing the unity of the city, the polis, in its desire for a common future....a political community is thus – in agreement with the Kantian idea of *sensus communis*, i.e. our shared ability to have feelings in common."[\[14\]](#)

According to Rancière, artistic 'means' are the 'means' of participating in the configuration of a specific milieu.[\[15\]](#) On the other hand, a large part of the world population has been turned into passive consumers (even of symbols) through global culture industries. For many people today aesthetic engagement is seldom possible; global culture industries subject people to alienating aesthetic conditionings through media imagery and through exposing people to spaces and phenomena devoid of meaning. "Politically active art changes the conditions of what we see and we speak about; it challenges the borders between the visible and the invisible... [I]t is thus through art that the world can be articulated in new ways."[\[16\]](#) In this relation, a lot of contemporary art that diverts people from established canons of commercially viable art through its dissonance has contributed to political awareness. "Art's relative autonomy and difference from everyday life...makes it possible for dissonant art to openly show the tensions, contradictions and aporias of the capitalist system."[\[17\]](#)

I believe that because digital imagery can be shared on such a large scale, it also has great engaging power, as we have witnessed in the spreading of political uprisings of the last several years. Images of activist dynamics, images of how city spaces are turned into interactive communal areas, have had an immense power of engaging people.



All political uprisings involve people mentally and ideologically, not only through concepts, but aesthetically through a sensory engagement that is triggered by images and sounds that are interpreted as symbols and stimulate one into direct response. The image engages us personally, both as a symbol that appears within our own private mental space and as something that connects us to the world. Recent political actions have created their own ways of belonging to the city and claiming urban spaces.



Through these images we identify with the actors and engage in a common cause.

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Endnotes

[1] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (New York: Verso Books, 1995).

[2] Arnold Berleant, "What is Aesthetic Engagement?" Introduction to the panel on Aesthetic Engagement at the International Congress of Aesthetics in Krakow, Poland, July 2013 and Introduction to this symposium.

[3] Jacques Rancière *L'Inconscient esthétique*, (Paris: Galilée, 2001), p. 22.

[4] Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content* (L'uomo senza contenuto) (Italy: Quodlibet, 1994).

[5] Jacques Rancière, (2001), pp. 63-78.

[6] Jean Francois Lyotard in Rancière (2001), p.76.

[7] Georges Didi-Huberman, 'La Condition des Images,' *L'expérience des images*, trans. Jale Erzen (Paris: İna Editions, 2011), p. 83. ("Il n'y a pas d'innocence du regard qui préexisterait à ce regard là que je pose sur cette image ci....Il y a un savoir qui préexiste à toute approche, à toute réception des images. Mais il se passe quelque chose d'intéressant lorsque notre savoir...est mis en pièces...qui commence avec l'instant même où l'image apparaît.")


[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 84-85 (L'Apparition d'une image...tout notre langage qui est...remis en question, interloqué, suspendu...devant l'étrangeté de l'image, notre langage s'enrichisse de nouvelles combinaisons et notre pensée de nouvelles catégories....).

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 87.

[10] Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, p. 63.

[11] Jacob Lund, "Artistic Re-Appropriation and Reconfiguration of the Medium's Milieu," *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, no's 44-45, (2012-2013), 117.

[12] *Ibid.*, 117.



[13] *Loc. cit.*

[14] *Loc. cit.*

[15] Rancière in Lund, p. 118.

[16] Lund, p. 118.

[17] Gene Ray, "Adorno, Brecht and Debord: Three Models for Resisting the Capitalist Art System," *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, nos. 44-45 (2012-2013), 85.
