

'And, and, and...': Art, Politics, Theory and their multiple Ambiguities

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Abstract:

In her book Anja Kangiesser focuses on anti-capitalist art-activist practices from the Berlin Dadaists to the recent actions revolving around issues of precarisation of life and labour, privatisation, migration, and commercialisation of higher education. Her focus is neither the specific aesthetics of such political actions, nor the political potential of their artistic approaches; rather she focuses on how such practices transverse traditionally firmly set categories of art and politics, performer and audience, activist and non-activist, in order to engage them in an active play with and against each other towards unforeseen political and artistic effects. And while the chosen theoretical framework for thinking the transversal between arts and politics remains entirely in place without being significantly rethought or reformulated, it is questionable how much her writing manages to entertain the stated tension of this transversal. Yet this ambiguity, as the author makes clear, might be constitutive for transversality itself.

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"This task is not one that necessitates the end of activism, or a reduction of art to 'an appendage of politics'. (Zepke 2008) /.../ It wants to tease out other ways of talking about and transforming politics in everyday contexts to make it less scary and more fun, and most importantly, more caring, convivial and generous. /.../ By finding the moments of excitement and potential in these experiments, in their failures and resonances, the task is to explore the spaces of dialogue and refusal that are both affirmations of worlds within the present and negations of capitalist forms of life." (Kangiesser, xiii)

With these words Anja Kangiesser explains the broad aim of her research on instances of anti-capitalist art-activist practices from the Berlin Dadaists to the recent activities against the neo-liberalisation of higher education by Mainz Akademie. What she aims at is neither the analysis of the aesthetics of certain political practices, nor merely the questioning of the political potential of art practices. Her focus is rather the way such practices transverse traditionally fixed categories of art and politics, performer and audience, activist and non-activist, in order to engage them in an active play with and against each other in the pursuit of unforeseen political and artistic effects. Her book aims at somehow prolonging the echo of such practices as well: through attention to their weaknesses and shortcomings as well as their achievements, it aims at bringing into discursive emergence the kind of concrete, material (however difficult to measure) effects these practices had on the lives and subjectivities of everyone involved and on the shifts in public discourse around the topics tackled. To put it another way: she looks at where and how such practices actively contribute to the 'experimenting with politics' and 'the making of worlds' (that is, other worlds within/against/beyond the present capitalist one).

Towards this aim she deploys a well selected philosophical framework, theories of art and politics mostly deriving from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. These theories try to rethink the implications of Deleuze and Guattari's joint and separate work for thinking an immanentist, affective approach to artistic and political practice; this stands in contrast to theoretical frameworks prevalent also on the Marxist left, revolving around questions of representation, ideology and structural change. However, while being richly theoretically infor-

med, the empirical focus on several instances of art-activist practices, their historical and geographical context and the discourses weaving around them directs the book more towards the field of cultural studies or cultural geography than political philosophy or aesthetics. More concretely: while putting the concepts of 'transversality' and 'the performative encounter' to full use in scrutinizing these practices, the book does little to creatively rethink its own theoretical background or to enable its art-activist material to inflect back on the concepts which it encounters.

This does not mean that Kangiesser's work remains a mere application of philosophy to artistic/political practice or the usage of such practices to demonstrate the contemporary validity of certain theoretical frameworks. It rather comes out of an explicit willingness to address not only the political potential of these practices but also their fragilities and failures, without disqualifying them for this reason. For instance, by thinking how, in spite of their explicit aims, the Berlin Dadaists or the Situationist International reinstated a vanguardist conception of the division between artist and audience, activist and non-activist, Kangiesser opens questions on the method and organisation of radical democratic processes and on the (too often unquestioned) validity of audience participation for political purposes in art. The examples abound. The 'temporary commons' engendered by the Umsonst (against the progressive precarisation of life under late capitalism) prove to be a way of mobilizing common (anti-capitalist) sentiment and desire beyond ideological divisions, even though such commons remain fragile, temporary, perhaps only very mildly threatening. The strategy of 'subversive affirmation' (of the State and corporate world) deployed by The Transnational Republic and Schleusen.net, in order to escape victimizing discourse on anti-migration policy, remains utterly ambivalent towards what it 'attacks': explicitly affirming state and capitalist structures while simultaneously (and ironically) mocking them.

This ambivalence is well captured in the theoretical framework deployed by Kangiesser, especially in the concept (or rather the 'movement') of 'the transversal': Deleuze and Guattari's 'logic of the and' which links entities and subjectivities, without synthetically resolving their tension, without agreeing on their 'peaceful coexistence', and without erasing their difference. While this might indeed turn out to be a fruitful way of looking at art-activist practices, which explicitly work at/with the boundary of art and non-art, political activism and non-activism, performing and participating, it remains an open question how much it is possible to entertain this productive tension in their analysis. This ambiguity seems to be a prevalent trait of Kangiesser's book: while explicitly wanting to entertain these several tensions, in the end it seems to be geared more towards the analysis of the political effects of such practices. It aims at analysing their artistic methods (such as humour, irony, play, performance, subversive affirmation, mimicry etc.) in view of how they work towards such political effects (being less interested in their aesthetic repercussions).

These effects are undoubtedly fruitful, however ambiguous: while not representing big breaks or systemic changes, they help open the space of 'hope' that, against all neoliberal odds, 'another world is possible' (to deploy the famous alter-globalist slogan). Furthermore, in line

with an immanentist approach to politics, they effectively reorganize public discourse and collective desires, engendering new modes of subjectivation, 'living' this other world already while bringing it into existence. "Whether or not there was a real effectiveness hardly matters; certain kinds of action and concentration represents a break with the habitual social processes." (Guattari in Kangiesser, 131) And whether such a break, in face of its lack of tangible political effect on a bigger scale, is something we should be content with, remains in the end an ambiguous issue.

It is indeed hard to tackle the ambiguity of the success of a transversal analysis of transversal practices without reinstating again the same divisions this analysis and these practices aim at transversing, i.e. the division between politics and aesthetics (and the present review is of course no exception to that). However, our attitude towards ambiguity as an outcome should perhaps itself remain ambiguous, pointing out not only its fragilities, but also its potential fruitfulness. The fragilities of the analysed practices enable ever new articulations of important questions of participation, mobility, representation, opposition; and similarly the unresolved ambiguities of Kangiesser's book enable a continuation of the process of thinking about the ambiguity of 'the transversal' (of art and politics but also ambiguity as a mode of thought and action more generally). Any unequivocal judgement on the book or the practices would entail violating the (Deleuze-Guattarian) theoretical framework of the book and the spirit of these practices; this 'judgement' is thus to remain itself – utterly ambiguous.