Adjectives in Search of Nouns: On 'Political Art'[1]

Joost de Bloois, University of Amsterdam, April 14th 2012, De Appel Boys' School.

I cannot promise to be as exciting and militant as the VOINA collective, therefore, since this is the first event in a series on 'political art', I will introduce you to what I think are the main issues raised by the very idea, of 'political art' today (at least we can agree on the fact that VOINA makes what can be described as 'political art'). I will address the issues concerning the conception of 'political art' today in a fairly disorderly way, since these issues form a constellation of problems perhaps rather than a series of axioms. I do of course think that some ways of negotiating these problems are more productive than others, but I certainly don't claim to hold any key of sorts. Nonetheless, I am convinced that what is at stake in the nexus between politics and contemporary art, more than ever, is the very possibility of engaging in what we obstinately call 'art'.

First of all, we can hardly overlook the revival of 'political art' over the past decade. By this I mean not that politics was absent from art in say the nineties, but rather that we now see a political art that writes both Politics and Art with capital letters.
We see a massive renewed interest in political issues among artists: shortly after the turn of the century, we heard words again that we thought had disappeared from our vocabulary: revolution, communism, insurrection, anarchy etc. In fact, today, such notions seem to constitute the lion's part of any catalogue index. I will get back at least some of the reasons for this dramatic shift towards politics, but for now, we can guess some of them: historically, the absence of any global alternative, however flawed, for neoliberal capitalism has effectively subsumed every aspect of life under the rule of value (as Alain Badiou only half jokingly said: we need another Stalin to scare the rich...); and art has always had a rather ambiguous and tormented relation

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[1] This text was read at De Appel Boys' School on April 14th 2012 following an intervention by VOINA; it has not been modified. Some of the ideas presented will appear in OPEN issue 23 and the forthcoming catalogue of the *Our Work is Never Over* exhibition at Matadero Madrid, 2012.

with the law of value. Institutionally, the intertwining of art and theory (or art and research), up to the point of making the two almost indistinguishable, has coupled artistic practice with critical theory that is now massively political. That is to say: in contemporary artistic practice, as well as art theory, 'politics' now seems to operate freely, as Politics-with-a-capital-P rather than as, say, 'sexual politics' or 'identity' politics (by the way: I am not suggesting in any way that sexual politics isn't 'real' politics; I just find the vanishing of the adjective here remarkable). Crucially, this generalization of the notion of politics (this vanishing of the adjective) goes hand-in-hand with a generalization of the notion of 'art': the conceptual abstraction or purification of 'politics' implies the conceptual abstraction or purification of 'art' (obviously, this tendency echoes the 60's and 70's more than it does the 80's or 90's). It seems as if the 'mediating third' (a mediator such a sexuality or identity) in the nexus between art and politics has vanished: politics and art now directly operate on one another, seem to mutually support and define one another and both now coalesce directly into 'political art'.

Obviously, the term 'political art' is anything but self-evident. So, before addressing the complexities of 'political art' today, let's attempt to clarify: firstly, we are not talking about 'protest art' here, or propaganda. Not that protest art or propaganda are not political (in terms of content they obviously are), and I don't want to discard them all too lightly either (if anything, we need more propaganda). Yet, what is central to the discussions on political art is, on the one hand, not so much content (the representation or imagination of politics), but a *structural affinity* between art and politics; as we will see, this not the same as a privileged relation between art and politics. On the other hand, 'political art' addresses or investigates art as part of today's relations of production (which today are often referred to in fairly interchangeable terms: cognitive capitalism, immaterial labour, creative industries, the experience economy, etc). This is the issue that is raised by Walter Benjamin in his famous text 'The Author as Producer'. For Benjamin, the pivotal question is not so much the traditional Marxist question 'where does the artist stand *on* the relations of production?', but rather: 'where does the artist stand *in* the relations of production?'. According to Benjamin the artist, or the intellectual worker as he calls it, should see a

way *to organize the process of production by himself*. Benjamin writes: 'The more he is able to orient his activity toward this task, the more correct the political tendency, and by necessity the higher the technical quality of his work will be. And in addition: the more exactly he knows his position in the process of production, the less he will be tempted by the idea of passing for an 'intellectual'.' So on the one hand, we might consider art to share certain characteristics with politics, and on the other hand, as part of the larger process of production, art might operate politically (again, as Walter Benjamin, rightly says, this by no means places art in the privileged position of the intellectual vanguard).

Already, what these shorthand definitions of 'political art' show is that the correlation between art and politics raises fundamental questions about both art and politics, about their definitions and potential. That is to say that what is at stake in the notion of 'political art' is the *possibility of both art and politics*: as we just saw, art is not simply a *medium* for politics (if it is, then usually both art and politics are already pre-defined, as well as the relation between them, which immediately becomes a hierarchical relation to the expense of art). 'Political art' is not necessarily a matter of political affiliations, of art's relation to party politics etc. As Jacques Rancière's notion of the 'aesthetic regime' demonstrates: the very definition of modern art entails that *art carries political promise*. That is to say: for Rancière modern art no longer operates under the aegis of formal or technical perfection; what is at stake in modern art for Rancière is not so much *modes of doing* but *modes of being*: art institutes types of time and space and frames people within this time and space; art constitutes specific forms of sensitory apprehension of the world and therefore of alternative of modes of being in the world. Now this precisely, according to Rancière, where aesthetics and politics meet: politics, in Rancière, is not merely the exercise of power, but rather *the configuration of a specific space*; that is to say: politics makes things (and people, and places, and relations) visible and obscures others. Politics is all about what Rancière now famously calls the 'distribution of the sensible.' If this is indeed the case, then art can be seen as a *re*distribution of the sensible, as an intervention in the distribution of the sensible. So in Rancière's idea of the 'aesthetic regime', we see a collapse of the opposition between art as pure form and the, say propagandistic,

politization of art. At the same time, we see the extension of the idea of politics beyond politics as profoundly statist (if politics is about the distribution of the sensible, than politics is not reducible to the state form, nor to the status quo). Art becomes political precisely because it carries at least the promise of a redistribution of the sensible, of a new community that no longer coincides with the state form (this perspective explains why the history of art in the 20th century is primarily the history of art's relation to politics; throughout the 20th century art has willingly placed its destiny in the hands of politics: from futurism to the Russian avant-garde to Situationism to the institutional critique of Conceptual Art; the struggle over the definition of art went hand-in-hand with the struggle over the definition, and in fact the very possibility, of politics). In that sense, politics for Rancière is always 'metapolitics': the overcoming of state politics. So even if Rancière's notion of the 'aesthetic regime' is certainly not immune to critique, it does show quite convincingly that modern art and modern politics are engaged in a sort of mutual becoming. Now, what is crucial to grasp (for tonight and for this project as a whole) is that, yes, there is a *relation of resemblance* between art and politics, but that does not necessarily imply a *relation of equivalence*. If the definition and potential of art and politics is intimately related, there subsists a crucial *tension* between the two. As Rancière says: the aesthetic regime of art is in fact founded on a paradox: (modern) art is art in so far as it is always already *something other than art* (the promise of a new politics, of new modes of being, of new communities etc). For Rancière this paradox, or this tension, historically has lead to different artistic strategies: for 20th century avant-garde practices such as Situationism the ultimate aim of art is to be superseded into politics (here, art *effectively* becomes something other than art; the tension we just mentioned is neutralized by the conflation of the artistic avant garde and the political avant garde); for institutional critique, it is, schizophrenically, *qua politics* that art critically reflects on itself *qua art*; for relational aesthetics, art becomes an Ersatz or placeholder for politics by staging new forms of being-together as artistic practice etc. All of these examples, at least from Rancières perspective, are ways of negotiating an inescapable tension in contemporary art: art is art in so far as it is always already *something other than art*. To this I would like to add another fundamental paradox of (political) art, formulated by art theorist Marina Vishmidt,

namely that: if art wants to be *effective* politically, than it must, in the last instance, maintain a certain distance in relation to politics. Art can be politically effective, also in Rancière's eyes, only if does not fully coincide with politics: ultimately, art needs to maintain a distance to be recognizable as a critical voice, to intervene, critically and effectively, in the political domain from the exterior domain of art. In her work Vishmidt offers many examples of the complexities of this paradoxical position: the Russian Proletkult initiative staged performances in factories that were supposed to act as a kind of double-edged sword: on the one hand, artistic interventions in factories aimed at changing the workplace (the very notion of work, the relations between workers, the factory as a social space etc); on the other hand, taking art into the factory and outside of art's traditional enclaves, also implied a profound metamorphosis of artistic practice. However, as Vishmidt shows, this double-edged position caused numerous and irresolvable tensions and conflicts: either the initiatives merely blended into the industrial environment (and therefore lost both their artistic and political effectiveness), or they maintained their critical distance and were met by resistance on the part of the workers (precisely because they affirmed the traditional division of labour and were seen as either a welcome or unwelcome break from everyday labour or bossy outside interventions showing the workers how their work is to be done). So, if the history of modern art is foremost the history of the political significance of art, if our definition of what counts as 'art' implies art's intrinsic political nature, if art and politics are engaged in a mutual becoming then this entails a quasi-impossible position of both *proximity and distance*. (As we will see, I think that the significance of political art today precisely lies in what I would to call this *zone of indistinction* between art and politics).

As I said earlier, I think that today we are witnessing how the mutual becoming of art and politics is addressed again in capital letters: Art-with-capital-A and Politics-with-capital-A. To be clear: I am referring here, obviously, to the conceptualization of the correlation between art and politics *within contemporary artistic practice and discourse*. To an unfortunately large extent 'political art' is first and foremost an infra-aesthetic problem: political art very rarely is operative, let alone effective, outside of the narrow sphere of art. Contemporary political practice (in particular its

parliamentary variety) is not necessarily concerned by art, or anything conceptualized in the sphere of art. Quite on the contrary, we might say that today's political consensus, which in this country at least might be called liberal-populist, is characterized by an ostentatious disregard for art (if anything, in particular in the Dutch context, art seems to have gained a 'negative cultural capital'). So, and I think this crucial, the fact that defining contemporary art entails defining the structural affinity between art and politics *does not imply the equivalence between art and current political practice* (precisely, we are talking about potential, anti-statist politics). One of the prevailing myths in contemporary art is that art and politics are somehow *on a par* since both are in the businesses of designing things (or both are in the business of imagining ways of being-together). As Jacques Rancière, whose work often serves as a reference for justifying such correspondances, reminds us: there is a *relation of resemblance* between art and politics that is not a *relation of equivalence*. I would argue that in and by itself art is always part of the status quo, just as any segment of society is always already part of the status quo as long as it is not actively politicized; in this sense, art does not have an ontological privilege or proximity in relation to politics. It seems to me that much of at least the discourse that surrounds contemporary political art remains stuck in a rather tedious narrative of good news/ bad news in which, as the critic Jan Verwoert writes, the good news is invariably that "The inherent theatricality of politics put us [artists, intellectuals and cultural producers] in a position of power" and the bad news is invariably that, in truth, "the potential of art to make a sense that would politicize the crowds is minute and negligible". The latter point that Verwoert rightly makes is vital: art is always already part of a political context, and the relation between art and this context (this hegemony or consensus) is profoundly dissymmetrical. It is obvious that art rarely has the upper hand in political decision-making; art's de facto dependence on political consensus became painfully clear in the past year when, in the Netherlands, that consensus made a seismic shift from social-democratic to liberal-populist (and exposed the profound complicity between contemporary art and social-democracy in this country).

In fact this might be a good moment to underline not the structural affinity between art and politics, but also its dissimilarities. As we have seen, modern politics entails

the construction of modes-of-being and modes-of-perceiving, of modes of being-present-in-the-world so to say (a short-hand notion here may be that of *forms-of-life*: modern politics is a forms of *anthropogenesis*). This construction of forms-of-life, at least in today's dominant political mode, entails (collective) organization, duration and critical mass. It seems to me that contemporary art, in its current dominant form at least, is structurally incapable of all of these things: the still dominant exhibition format, the hugely influential aesthetic format of event-based art, and, crucially, the romantic-libertarian subjectivity that determines artistic modes of being seem to cripple a politics of the long run and the organisation of a sustainable collective. The exhibition format (even if this format is extended into the documenta or the bienale) is by definition short-lived, as is event-based art (which ranges from the guerilla intervention to the spectacular stagings of festival and public art); the romantic-libertarian subjectivity leaves little room for collective organisation. This effectively condemns 'political art' to *interventionism* and subsequent interventionist aesthetics, that is as spectacular as it is limited, and that is, politically speaking, highly problematic. To give but one example: in the work of Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn we see effectively how the structural characteristics of contemporary political art all come together: Hirschhorn creates event-based art that perfectly fits the bienale/ festival format (a telling example is his Bijlmer Spinoza Festival that was held in what is probably Amsterdam's most notorious housing estate, the Bijlmer three years ago); for the time of the festival, Hirschhorn's work claims to intervene in the socio-political sphere, with a predilection for the destitute parts of that socio-political sphere, and does so with the assorting aesthetics of the make-shift, the transitory, the precarious. In Hirschhorn's case, this constitutes a very slippery slope indeed on which social destitution or precarity becomes aestheticized (social waste is Hirschhorn's preferred material) and the artist, as a kind of deus ex machina, intervenes within the socio-political context with nothing but his good intentions and artistic affections (in the case of the Bijlmer Spinoza Festival this lead merely to re-enacting existing social divides, and despite of his in situ presence a remarkable absence of any sense of the complexities of the site and its history and therefore its political intricacies, in which the Spinoza Festival became immediately and inevitably absorbed). Hirschhorn's case demonstrates why contemporary political art, *at least in*

so far at it conforms itself to the available infrastructure, aesthetic formats and artistic subjectivity, is rarely effectively political: what the Bijlmer Spinoza Festival did (for example by involving the Creole Surinamese population of the area and ignoring the fact that, literally, the festival took place in the shadow of one of Amsterdam's largest mosques) was to organize the already organized (not even re-distributing the sensible, but repeating its current distribution). In conforming itself to the available infrastructure, aesthetic formats and artistic subjectivity (which, as I argued, leaves us with little else than an interventionist tactics), his type of political art *fails to engage in any kind of unexpected alliance* - and only these are effective politically. So I believe that Hirschhorn's work is a good example of the dissymmetry between political art as an infra-aesthetic problem and a form of artistic practice on the one hand and, on the other hand, how that translates (or rather: *not translates*) into a form of *constituent* political practice (it does not call anything new into being: no new collectivity). I am certainly not arguing that contemporary political art is doomed to fail hopelessly, but I do believe that if it wants to have any political significance (outside of the 'artistic sphere'), it needs to address its mode of organization, its aesthetic formats and its available subjectivities. I believe that if we want to hold on to the modern idea of a structural affinity between art and politics (of their mutual becoming), it is vital not to consider that affinity as a kind of shared ontology, as a given fact. Rather, it is from the irresolvable tension between the two that we should proceed: art may pour into politics, art can be *politicized* precisely because art involves modes of organization, because it must institute modes of being; there I see, again, the zone of indistinction between art and politics: art constitutes forms-of-life and these forms-of-life can be politicized. I am borrowing the notion of form-of-life primarily from Giorgio Agamben and its rethinking by the Tiqqun collective: the emphasis in form-of-life is precisely on 'form': how do we *incline* our lives? The notion of form-of-life does not refer to the capitalist idea of 'life style', of the shaping of life as *individual* life, usually and paradoxically by purchasing generic attributes (whatever: designer glasses, an Apple laptop and black clothing for intellectuals), nor does it refer to the idea of life-as-a-work-of-art (life as 'general performance', as Sven Lutticken calls it, which as it happens perfectly fits an economic model that demands permanent adaptability, mobility and self-promotion), but rather to the singular ‘how’

of our being in a situation, as Tiqqun call it. The form-of-life is thus fundamentally relational. For Tiqqun, and I tend to agree with them, the million dollar political question is how to ignite, the game between forms-of-life; *how to politicize the dynamics between forms of being*. So, the emphasis on the form-of-life and its politicization is crucial in a socio-political context in which the mediators between state power (which at this point is indistinguishable from global corporate and financial capitalism) and individual lives are rapidly vanishing. Traditional forms of collective bargaining (such as unions), the infrastructure of civil society (of which the art world has been a vital part) and collective shelters against economic war (such as the welfare state) are being dismantled. Therefore, any constituent political potential is no longer to be located in these forms of mediation, but in the direct politicization of forms-of-life (arguably, to a very large extend, this will be part of fairly dark socio-political scenarios: the unraveling of the social fabric, growing nepotism and new forms of social inequality; think Greece, think parts of the global metropolis including this city). The true political antagonism is thus that between the reductive, statist ontology (in our world, that of neoliberal capitalism and its exploitative modes of being) and the multiplicity of forms-of-life. Art constitutes forms of life, modes of being-together, than can act politically (this is the zone of indistinction between art and politics). As the American anthropologist David Graeber says: 'artists and those drawn to them have created enclaves where it has been possible to experiment with forms of work, exchange and production radically different from those promoted by capital [...] these have been spaces where people can experiment with radically different, less alienated forms of life'. This, I think, is precisely what VOINA does: *they use a form-of-life, they use their collectively constituted artistic subjectivity, as a political operator, as a constituent political force*. This form-of-life is what can be politicized. In fact, the game VOINA plays is fairly complex: in part, they endorse an artistic identity that is historically defined and institutionally embedded (for example tonight in De Appel); VOINA makes use of this tradition and the available institutional infrastructure to create a political subject that however is not limited by this history and these institutions. For me, the political significance of VOINA does not primarily lie in the spectacular content of their performances (the shoplifting priest, the orgy in the zoological museum, the infamous penis in the face of the secret

police: these remain spectacular interventions, albeit extremely courageous interventions), but rather I would like to argue that it is as a form-of-life that VOINA turns artistic subjectivity into a political operator. They move within the zone of indistinction between art and politics and their mutual becoming: they are neither a political fringe group nor an artist collective that operates solely within the infrastructure of contemporary art, but a collectively constituted form-of-life that *as such* becomes politicized. (Of course you could historicize this and perhaps see similarities with Russian anarchism and nihilism; but then again: precisely the politics of forms-of-life, of their multiplicity and of the absence of a hierarchy or structuring principle that would hold them together is not unlike certain forms of anarchism).

As I said, VOINA could be an example of artistic practice that moves within this zone of indistinction, and I think this notion is valuable because it allows us to escape what Jan Verwoert called the good news/bad news narrative, that is to say: the choice between either the fallacy of art's unmediated political significance or the alternative fallacy of art's complete ideological subjection and de facto impotence. Just as the myth of art's real equivalence with politics leads contemporary art into an impasse (when it turns that, in practice, the affection is rather unilateral), I think that obsessing with art's embeddedness in its historical political situation is equally unproductive. As we will see, the fact that art today is an integral part of the neo-liberal economy does not necessarily make it impotent politically, although it makes it's political significance so much harder to negotiate. I think we should avoid both the fallacy of art's supposed autonomy and the fallacy of art's subjection to ideology (as Ernesto Laclau says: if you assume that capitalism or ideology are these kinds of perpetual mobiles than all you have left is political nihilism in the pejorative sense of the word, you can only wait for the apocalypse; in fact: what we have is a continuous struggle and conflict over the meaning and identities; in this sense, as we will see, art is never purely inside or outside its political context: rather, it performs a delicate balancing act: it is sometimes forced to align with the context, sometimes finds ways of affecting it, yet always locally and temporarily - but then again, there are only local and temporary political acts). The fact that 'political art' is, in the first place, as we saw, an infra-aesthetic problem, and the added fact that there is a profound

dissymmetry between art's political radius and impact and its immediate political context *does not mean* that there cannot be, and even less so that there should no be any overlap or practical affinity between art's conceptualization of politics and other ways of imagining politics and political praxis. On the contrary, I would like to argue once more that the stakes of 'political art' are set in the *zone of indistinction between art and political practice*. It is not a matter of dismissing 'political art' as merely an aesthetic affair (to be opposed to 'real politics'), nor is it a matter of, inversely, considering 'political art' as a conceptualization or imagining of something to 'put into practice' in the domain of, again, 'real politics'. It is the dynamics between proximity and distance that makes for political art: political art first and foremost signifies the potential *politization* of art (*the political is an adjective in search of a noun*). And what can be politicized is not so much content or art's complicity with spectacle but art as a potential for constituting forms-of-life. To paraphrase, and extend, Walter Benjamin: the issue is not how the artist relates *to* the multiplicity of forms-of-life but *in* it. So the issue concerning political art is *not*: absolute autonomy versus absolute heteronomy: the purity-cum-universality of art versus the impurity of the market (whatever: Damien Hirst versus VOINA). The issue is: how to make art pour into or border onto other forms-of-life? This is not to be confused with the social democrat's dream of 'socially relevant art', neither with a desire for the dialectical supersession [Aufhebung] of art, the end of division of labour etc (in any case, the end of the division of labour only makes sense as the end of capitalist social relations and not as the end of different practices and passions), nor should it be confused with the immediate passage from art to revolutionary politics. Rather, 'political art' refers here to art as a domain that allows for the constitution of modes of being, that as such - that is to say: as modes of presence in the world, as ways of experiencing life - can be potentially politicized and that thus, to quote Tiqqun, become part of the 'fruitful tissue of existence where each community would be a fold in the reappropriated Common'. *This* political art would abandon the dead end of a politics of inclusion (that to a large extent seems to be the cause of the demise of the occupy-movement): the politics of 'all aboard' that either, ironically, ends up inventing new forms and measures for exclusion (and thus replicating state reason) or erases politics altogether (and replaces it by a therapeutics of sorts). The issue, on the contrary, is to get rid of

the inside/outside dichotomy, which is constitutive of state reason, altogether: a politics of forms of life proceeds from what we might call a sectarian reason: a politics that proceeds from multiplicity. It is this 'sectarian reason' that is expressed by the Tiqqun collective. For *Tiqqun*, as is the case for Toni Negri and many other contemporary political theorists, the primal scene of modern politics is Hobbes' *Leviathan*. *Tiqqun* reminds us that the stage on which the modern state appears, is that of *civil war*. For the authors, the state is grafted upon the civil war that both historically and ontologically precedes it. *Tiqqun* refuses the statist containment of civil war and expresses a fondness of the wars of religion: it celebrates sects and schisms as entirely *ethical*; that is to say, as communes rooted in forms-of-life: as shared penchants or a shared taste for forms of (collective) being (rather than theological pressure groups). In *Tiqqun*, this genealogy of the state is grafted upon the French anthropologist Pierre Clastres' onto-anthropological claim of 'primitive' civil war as mankind's original resistance to stasis. In the work of Clastres, the perpetual state of conflict in [for example in native Brazilian societies], precisely takes the opposite route to Western state formation: perpetual civil war positively prevents any party from gaining the upper hand that might lead to the formation of a static social hierarchy. In *Tiqqun*, Clastres' original fable is transposed to the primal scene of Western politics. Hence, the explicit claims to sectarianism: what lies at the heart of sectarianism is a 'discordant ethics' (of civil war). Civil war thus involves tracing faultlines in the seemingly undifferentiated world of the neo-liberal Empire. This offensive consists not so much of a frontal attack, but rather of the construction of a new collective ethos – that ultimately amounts to the construction of a mode of life in which 'war' has its place; that is to say, in the sense that Clastres gives it: as a permanent force directed against stasis itself, as the, offensive, endorsement of permanently being-in-crisis. It is this civil war that has to be assumed as the 'original fact' of sociogenesis. This assumption is not a return to Rousseauist state of primitive (albeit strangely discordant) bliss, but 'civil war' here rather signifies the continuous positive elaboration of forms-of-life. What is at war in *Tiqqun* are not so much recognizable social fractions, but irreconcilable modes of being in the world. At the very heart of the politics sketched in *Tiqqun (*and related texts such as *The Coming Insurrection)* we therefore find the immediate nexus between the onto-

anthropological and the political (the political precisely as anthropogenesis). Although the authors of these texts lecture (post-)autonomists such as Negri on their erroneous use of the term 'bio-politics', the political practice presented here is thoroughly bio-political insofar as it rooted in the form-of-life. Sectarian politics thus becomes the bio-political par excellence. In *Tiqqun* and *The Coming Insurrection*, this results in a vehement anti-voluntarism and anti-vanguardism favoring what they call a 'subjectless revolt' that would proceed from a myriad of transversal connections rather than being initiated by any privileged center or group.

Now, from the perspective I just sketched, I would like to be at bit less abstract perhaps and provide a critical reading of some of the current assumptions of political art. I would like to argue that the emphasis on the form-of-life allows to negotiate or bypass certain impasses that result directly from the modern notion of 'political art' as the mutual becoming of art and politics. For me these impasses, as we have seen earlier, revolve around the alleged equivalence between art and politics. As Deleuze and Guattari say: 'becoming' is not coinciding, morphing two into one, but implies at the same time proximity and distance: it is this tension that much of contemporary political art seeks to neutralize, much to its demise. Often this tension is neutralized by turning art into an Ersatz or placeholder for politics (as we have seen with Vishmidt's example of the Proletkult movement: to function as a political catalyst, art needs to remain an exceptional activity or meta-activity within everyday life; this position can all too easily be translated as an avant-garde position wherein art holds the key of prefiguring the politics to come; the exceptional position, and subjectivities, of art slip into that of the *specialist* of utopian politics). In a similar vain the tension neutralized in what we might call the pedagogical fallacy: art, especially by means of the exhibition format (the biennale in particular) and by recourse to interventionist aesthetics, as a kind of privileged occasion for 'raising awareness'. I speak of a fallacy here because such strategies immediately lead to questions of demographics that are as predictable as they are circular: obviously, the people who attend biennales (or for that matter: the people who are affected by political art) are the sort of people that go to biennales to see political art that raises awareness etc. As I argued earlier, 'political art' initially is an infra-aesthetic problem:

in the case of the pedagogical fallacy it remains an infra-aesthetic problem. If 'political art' wants to effectively *politicize*, if we want to raise the issue of art as a potential constituent political force, than we need to address it from a different angle altogether.

The artist and art historian Victor Burgin shows how, if art seeks to escape the pedagogical fallacy, it risks running into yet another fallacy: that of replicating populism (as a 'genre' as Burgin calls it). For Burgin much of today's political art tragically replicates the very liberal-populist consensus it claims to challenge. More often than not 'political art' constitutes a conventionally sentimental appeal to a consensual understanding of what it is to do good (for example: restoring the social fabric that has been torn apart by neoliberalism, questioning social exclusion, fighting poverty etc); more often than not contemporary 'political art' uses consensual aesthetics (such as new media or the documentary, usually claiming to undermine the highbrow/lowbrow distinction); and more often than not, through its explicit engagement, it raises the question 'is it art?' which precisely has become such a commonplace that the public will recognize the work as art. Like populism such 'political art', Burgin argues, with its desire to 'do something' the government neglects to do, with its appeals demands to improve living conditions, with its laments on the alienation from the political process, and with its use of 'transparant', anti-elitist media in fact replicates many of the characteristics of liberal-populism.

I largely agree with Burgin's analysis of how populism comes to bite political in the tail: The privatization of the commons, the replacement of the labouring subject by the ‘hardworking’ individual, national and local politics becoming more and more a depository for populist resentment (that is: precisely these levels of policy-making art has to deal with): all of these developments cannot be merely rejected as obstacles on the path to radical self-organization, but need to effectively be taken into account in any critical assessment of ‘political art’ today. Even more worryingly, it seems that the relative ease with which a certain philosophical lexicon of radical democracy has been picked up by the art world obscures its socio-political situatedness and, consequently, political radius rather than enlightens it. It appears as if the rhetoric of *demos* and *event* is projected unto the segment of the art world that is not entirely market-driven, and that therefore is closely associated with government policies, and

that is now championed as the locus of radical democracy. Event-based and relational art that previously acted as the restorer of the social tissue or as spearhead of the creative economy is now wishfully turned into a model for radical emancipatory politics. In reality, however, it is precisely this type of artistic practice that is now under liberal-populist fire and threatens to loose its central place in government policies; a precarious situation that invalidates the radical claims made at the very moment these are uttered.

So once more, we see a how 'political art' ends up replicating the current socio-political context (in which it does not find itself necessarily at the winning end...). To give a recent example: the e-flux Time/Bank project (in The Netherlands the Time/Bank project was hosted by institutions such as Stroom in The Hague and NAIM in Maastricht, and consisted of a modern-day version of the idea of 'time vouchers' as an alternative for existing currencies; and obviously, in a context of planetary financial crisis, we can see why such an initiative would make sense today).
Intriguingly, the Time/Bank project blends several pivotal concerns in contemporary political art: first of all, it taps into the current renewed interest in 'autonomy'; however, it does so by literalizing 'autonomy' as autarchy and thus it seems to resonate with philosophies of sustainability. I would argue that such a literal interpretation of autonomy amounts to little more than the aesthetization of autarchy. Put differently, a project such as Time/Bank risks fetishizing 'informality' and the 'grey economy'. While implicitly tapping into (post-situationist) imagery of the artist as trickster, in reality it aestheticizes the informal economy that is an intrinsic part of the neoliberal economic regime. It seems dangerously close to the sentimentalism of austerity (that is a peculiar inversion of the rags-to-riches narrative, but no less serves the socio-economic status quo) that sustains today's neoliberal restructuring of the welfare state; or worse, it replicates the neoliberal celebration of the entrepreneurial (often non-Western) poor. Just like these phantasms strengthen the existing economic and political hierarchies, the informal circuit proposed by initiatives such as Time/Bank strengthen the existing hierarchies of the art market. The rationale that seems implied in projects such as Time/Bank leads these into a inescapable impasse: they strengthen, or even absolutize, the very (social, political, institutional and economic)

context they agitate against or at least try to respond to. Practically, this leads to the fact that, under the guise of autonomy or self-legislation, such projects merely expand and institutionalize even further practices of free labour in state-sponsored institutions that already thrive upon such practices, and that, in order to survive neoliberal and populist attacks, are forced to have recourse to such schemes even more (in fact, this ties in with the obvious critique that any attempt at an alternative currency, if effective, can only end up replicating the existing monetary system and the economic laws that support it). We may ask ourselves whether projects such as Time/Bank, in practice, do not facilitate neoliberal attempts to leave art, as previously one of the essential segments of the common good or commons, into the hands of charity and maeceni.

Fundamentally, such initiatives obscure any significant inquiry into the purpose of (political) artistic practice today, within a neoliberal political economy, within the realities of the creative economy, cognitive capitalism, immaterial labour and so forth (if they do, it is foremost negatively). Perhaps most of all, they thus obscure the complexities of the relation between art and politics today. They run up against art's de facto role within (or symbiosis with) neoliberal capitalism as long as they assume the possibility of an *unmediated transition from the micro-cosm of the (artistic) community to the macro-cosm of 'society'*. We may call this the 'tilt shift' effect of political art. The micro-cosm of the artistic event is projected onto the macro-cosm of society (leaving us models for models for models…). Exactly *how* this transition operates remains unexplained.

I would like to argue that explaining this transition is crucial given the highly ambiguous role art, and culture at large, plays in today's economic regime, that the sociologists Boltanski and Chiapello call 'the new spirit of capitalism'. To be brief (and this by now a well known narative:) the center of gravity of Western economies has moved towards the immaterial and the cognitive; see, for example, the dominance of the financial markets, the dominance of speculation over production (the same goes for the 'informal economy' that consists not just of, say, sweat shops but also of 'personalized services', care work such as child care and prostitution, as well as loan sharks). In this new economy that thrives upon cognitive and emotional exploitation of our communicative and creative skills, total flexibility and permanent mobilization,

the artist serves as the new Stakhanov (the name of the model worker in the Soviet Union). As Richard Florida infamously argued: today, the model for our working environment is no longer Henry Ford's factory, but Andy Warhol's factory. What has long been the privilege of art – communication, creativity, collaboration – has moved to the forefront of the economy. In a sense, the logic of abstraction that is at the root of both art and labour, *has come back to haunt art*. Today, art has in fact been superseded in the process of labour's further abstraction into the domain of the creative and the cognitive; after having fuelled the creative industries, art is now in the process of *dissolving* into the creative economy. The precarious working conditions of the art world, the precarious status of the artist have been appropriated by the new spirit of capitalism, and is now, in a sense, being turned against art: *art can no longer claim its exceptional status* (whereas, as we have seen, art's political significance to a large extend would depend on that exceptional status). If art wants to survive, other than as fuel for the international art market, other than as investment object for the super rich, it has to take into account its own dissolution into these economic models. If not, the bitter irony will be that the avant-garde idea of the end of art will merely accomplished *on behalf of art*.

As Dutch art critic Jorinde Seijdel writes in her book on the prevalence of 'amateurism' in today's art world: throughout the 20th century, the history of art's autonomy has foremost been the history of art's increasing *professionalisation.* Practically speaking, art's 'autonomy' (and thus its political radius) resulted from a fundamental operation of exchange: art shrugged off its direct, precarious, ideological dependency on higher powers, by confining itself to the ever proliferating framework of the institutions of the bourgeois state (art schools, museums, art education, etc). In our contemporary neoliberal context, however, 'professionalisation' has been given a meaning that seems fundamentally at odds with still current notions of autonomy. Firstly, the increasing demand for direct valorization of art's institutions (disguised as the urge to 'professionalize'). Secondly, the ever growing symbiosis between art and the market, or rather: art and the very basic tenets of the economy. Over the past decades these two forms of professionalisation have grown ever closer. On the one hand, we see a veritable boom of professional training programs such as MFA's,

curatorial programs and, most of all, the double helix of 'art and research'. This so-called 'educational turn' in the art world cannot be seen apart from the increasing economization of knowledge work. It drags the art world into academic institutions which now operate under the premises of the Bologna treaty that precisely reorganizes higher education along the lines of neoliberal political economy. On the other hand, we witness how art has become inextricably bound up with dominant modes of capital accumulation; in recent decades of art theory, this has been extensively documented, most notably in post-operaist and post-autonomist theory. The shift from Fordism to post-Fordism, from material to immaterial labour, has turned art from a relative anomaly into *the* model for contemporary capital accumulation. As we have just seen the artist now functions as the new flexible, precarious superworker: the artist, often simultaneously fulfills her role as creative worker, as the eternal intern 'who has nothing to offer but her free labour' as Hito Steyerl calls it, and as the *homo debtor*, the indebted subject who perpetually invests in her own 'human capital'. Equally, the valorization of art seems to perfectly fit the now dominant mode of capital accumulation, since it *operates through speculation* (at least in the most prominent part of the artistic economy). Furthermore, the modus operandi for the valorization of art largely is that of of today's capitalism: it operates through derived capital accumulation such as city branding or the never-ending circus of biennials and festivals. Crucially, art has become largely indistinguishable from the 'creative industries' (design, fashion, media etc), now championed by Dutch government policies, and therefore of other designer and luxury goods. As German art theorist Isabelle Graw argues, in this context, even Pierre Bourdieu's concept of art's 'relative autonomy' is too optimistic. Rather, we should speak of the 'relative heteronomy' of art today:

"Autonomy is no longer the dominant structural characteristic of the field of art. Considering the dominance of the economic system within society, it is necessary to shift the emphasis toward a definition of the artistic field as 'relatively heteronomous'. In concrete terms, this means that the external constraints are placed in the foreground".

The creative economy (and its synonyms such as ‘cognitive capitalism’ or ‘immaterial labour’) has not so much shifted art towards the center of capital accumulation, but rather *appropriated its modus operandi*: art is effectively superseded by the creative economy and is now exiled at its outer margins. *Art qua art* is at best a niche among others. ‘Art’ is but one of the many composite private/public circuits that constitute neoliberal society (and that have come to replace ‘the social fabric’). Consequently, it is doubtful whether art, as such, is powerful enough to change its own exorbitant position under neoliberalism in any significant way. Let alone that it may claim its, politically vanguardist, ‘exceptional universalism’. Again, this is not to say that art cannot, and even less: should not act politically; however, in our current context, we will have to be very specific about art’s political radius (and where to put the emphasis in the notion of ‘political art’).

Rather than assuming the equivalence between art and politics, I would argue that 'Political art' refers to an adjective in search of a noun, and vice versa: it refers to a *process a politization*, which is a very precarious process indeed (and the chances of a missed encounter between adjectives and nouns here are legion). Art may pour into politics, art can be *politicized* precisely because art involves modes of organization, because it must institute modes of being; there I see, again, the zone of indistinction between art and politics: art constitutes forms-of-life and these forms-of-life can be politicized. The fact that, with Rancière and others, we might say that there is a structural affinity between modern art and politics, does not mean that 'affinity' presuposes a privileged relation (and even less an ontological equivalence): affinities or inclinations need to be actualized. The fact that, as we have just seen, art today taps directly into the economy, and into the power relations on which it is founded, on the one hand highlights the zone of indistinction between art and politics, but on the other hand also exposes the profound ambivalence that this entails. If anything 'political art' today should be aware of the fact that anything it does or says can and will be used against it.

Now, to end on a happy note: where does this leave the issue of art and humor? As you might have guessed by now, I am no theorist of humor - I leave that to Simon Critchely - but I would argue that humor, in itself is not necessarily political. I do not believe, for example, that humor is necessarily liberating: humor can be oppressive, cynical, hurtful, degrading etc (yes, fascists have a sense of humor too). Neither do I believe that humor is necessarily critical: as long as it is not part of any broader political offensive, satire for example remains perfectly harmless. However, humor can pour into the political, just as art can pour into the political as it enters the zone of indistinction. It is in this sense that VOINA, for example, uses humor as a political tool: humor becomes political when it performs the same type of delicate balancing act between proximity and distance that art performs when it is politicized. This is where we may situate the structural affinity between art and humor and their mutual political significance. It is through this tension that laughter is charged politically (what echoes is the zone of indistinction may perhaps foremost be laughter). I would like to end with a quote from Toni Negri and Michael Hardt's latest book *Commonwealth* that, and this is no coincidence, ends with laughter:

'in the face of [the] arrogance of power, the most adequate response, rather than lamenting our poor lot and wallowing in melancholy, is laughter. [...] [I]n the struggles against capitalist exploitation, the rule of property, and the destroyers of the common through public and private control, we will suffer terribly, but still we laugh with joy. They will be buried by laughter.'