

The Body in Contemporary Art in the Paradigm of Political Thinking from Left to Right

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Abstract: *The relationship of contemporary art with political thought is a special one, that is different from the paradigms up to modernism, where the political gesture begins to be appropriate. Avant-garde artists are consolidating the integration of political thought into artistic discourse.*

The artistic gesture is constructed considering certain typologies that bring it closer to the doctrinal left or right. In contemporary art, the structure of conceptual construction of the artistic subject, especially for a good part of what we could call "the new conceptualism", has a strong political and doctrinal value. The comparative analysis in this paper aims to analyse the way politics (in the sense of political thinking) influences and generates both topics and approaches in the area of contemporary art.

Key-words: *contemporary art; political thinking; engaged art; protest*

1. Introduction

The relationship of contemporary art to political thought is a special one, different from the paradigms up to modernism, where the political gesture begins to be appropriated. The artists of the avant-garde reinforce the integration of political thought into artistic discourse. The artistic gesture is constructed according to certain typologies, which bring it closer to a left-wing or right-wing political doctrine.

This analysis refers to contemporary Western art, not to the art of countries that are under oppressive political regimes – in that governmental art systems works by other means and according to other conditionings that we are used to.

The orientation towards one side or the other of the political spectrum is largely linked to the movement of funding resources, the succession of political parties in power that can be right or left wing orientated, but also it depends to the rhetoric of the moment - substantially influenced by cultural manifestations, associated with socio-political movements - such as the student protests of 1968, the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989), the "Occupy" movement (2011), the "Black Lives Matter" movement (2019-2020), etc.

2. The notion of political spectrum and contemporary art

In order to draw the guidelines of what a left or right shift in contemporary art would mean and to clarify the concepts, a brief review of the general defining terms is necessary. „Political spectrum” encompasses political beliefs and ideologies between liberalism on the left and conservatism on the right. The extreme left is represented by anarchism and the extreme right is represented by fascism². Between the two poles are the other political doctrines, which converge towards the two directions. From left to right we have anarchism, communism, socialism, liberalism, conservatism, monarchism, Nazism, fascism.

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² <https://www.dictionary.com/e/politics/political-spectrum/>

What is of interest, from the perspective of the analysis of means and manifestations of political orientation in contemporary art, are the system of values, which reflect a leftward or rightward orientation of artistic discourse.

In general, the two systems of thought (right-wing or left-wing) imply the vision of the state intervention in economy and in trade, the concepts promoted regarding the structure of social relations, the cultural discourse promoted, the stance towards religion, minority rights and national values.

The left has a predilection for progressivism and counterculture, while the right has a traditionalist, morality-based discourse. For the left, culture is a battleground, while the right takes it out of the realm of political discourse but applies criteria of judgement that question principles of ethics and morality. An important role is played by the attitude towards religion and minority rights. The left downplays the function of religion and promotes the separation of religion from the state, while the right supports religious values. The Left demands extra-protection for minorities, while the Right starts from the principle that 'we are all equal'.

Structurally, in contemporary culture we can recognize the orientation to the right or to the left, depending on the construction of the artistic discourse. The shaping of the discourse is based either on the artist's positioning in relation to a political event, or on the assumption of a (usually critical) position in relation to the fundamental values on which political thought is structured.

A fundamental observation is that left-wing discourse is notable for its articulate presence and right-wing discourse for its absence of public expression. Leftists take up issues of rights and freedoms in concrete terms and have a critical attitude towards the socio-political environment. For the others, "right-wing" is more a matter of a positioning that derives from the construction of the artwork rather than from the obvious discursive manner. This rightward positioning of cultural orientation is not quite exact, and we will use it only for the symmetry of the analysis, as we did not encounter a representative self-identification of internationally recognized artists as right-wing sympathizers.

In short, we have two types of language, which are in opposition. Culture with a left-wing political discourse that promotes an extrovert, serious discourse with "serious" themes, while the right discourse has an introvert structure, the only really known reality is the personal, but with a natural tendency towards entertainment. The left-wing artist is militant, playing the role of a character in misery, or empathising to the point of identification with the underprivileged; he wants to generate a cohesive force within groups, he wants to claim for himself the status of "hero" or, at least, spokesman for a movement. The 'right-wing' artist behaves like a public figure, like a trendsetter, he identifies more with a Hollywood-type culture; his cultural products have the valence of 'singularity'/ 'uniqueness', and the artist claims for himself the status of 'star'.

The relationship with the art object, its elaboration and definition, is negotiated and structured differently according to the political view of its creator. For the leftist, the discourse is more important than the form, minimal resources are used; for the right-wing orientated, artistic actions/objects have high production costs/or have a sense of grandiosity/ or have a kind of 'glitz'. Left-wing art is art that needs a narrative structure to support it (texts, explanations, clarifications, knowledge of context), in opposition we have a art that is self-representing itself, that relies on the reaction of surprise/ of the viewer.

There is a state of opposition between the left-wing and the right-wing cultural areas. We have a critical reaction to "craftsmen" or artists who prefer to ignore the "real" problems of society, doubled by an attitude of defensive of the group that share the same views to any criticism that may arise against some of them. On the other side there is an attitude of ignoring

"leftists", of artists that are egocentric, and do not take a stand if they are criticised or have weak positions.

Financial resources in the left area depend on funding programmes, and generally on third parties covering production and exposure costs. For the opposite pole there is a tacit acceptance that in art there is an intrinsic purpose to make money as well, and the sources of funding come from the sale of artworks or one's own image.

Being on the side of cultural left or right has a lot to do with a political rhetoric that is voluntarily or involuntarily assumed (in the sense of interpreting everything as political). This conceptual distinction could be fundamentally questioned by those who strongly advocate the idea that artists, those in the liberal professions and intellectuals in general can only be left-wing, while right-wing orientations are the prerogative of those that are involved in 'pragmatic' occupations (working in finance, agriculture, energy, real estate, corporate leadership positions)³.

In U.S. academia, and in Western Europe as well, there is a push for cultural studies, as a curricular area that intersects with body art theory and practice, to be placed on the left spectrum of political thought.

Theorists reason that it is the left that fundamentally accepts that there are unjust hierarchies in the world and is concerned to take the side of people and communities who are at the bottom of these hierarchies⁴. Eastern European countries that have experienced repressive communist systems are to some extent 'blamed' for the lack of left-wing political affiliation in the field of cultural studies⁵, but this is changing due the pressure to standardise artistic concepts and practice worldwide.

The artists' approach to communist doctrine has an interesting post-World War II history. Pablo Picasso is perhaps one of the most powerful figures. Picasso joined the Communist Party in 1944 and made a substantial donation to the French Communist Party. The great artist had a utopian devotion that was exempt from the real experience of Communism. Somehow, the discrepancy between East and West is summed up by this example of exchange of arguments. In 1956, after the suppression of the Budapest revolution, Czesław Miłosz wrote an open letter to Picasso, in which he said: 'No one can know what the consequences of a categorical protest on your part would have been... If your support helped the terror, your indignation would have mattered too⁶'. After the Prague Spring, in 1968, Picasso writes a statement for *Look Magazine*, which he eventually declines to publish, and declares: "I no longer understand the politics of the Left and I do not wish to discuss it. I decided a long time ago that if I wanted to face such problems, I should have changed my profession and gone into politics. But, of course, that's impossible."⁷

An example of radical left-wing assumption is the American artist Dread Scott (who claims to be a communist), who became famous for his participatory installation *What Is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag* (1989), which involved the use of the U.S. flag (the flag is trampled by the participants in the happening). His work generated number of reactions in the political world, including one from then-President George H. W. Bush and other politicians,

³ This split is based on contribution stakes in the election campaigns of democracies or Republicans in the United States, where campaign funds are allowed to be raised, and donations are public, see <https://qz.com/work/1442379/your-job-is-a-good-indicator-of-your-politics-data-show/>.

⁴ Gilbert B. Rodman. 2015. *Why cultural studies?* .Wiley Blackwell. p 165.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁶ Alex Danchev. 2010. Picasso's politics. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/may/08/pablo-picasso-politics-exhibition-tate>

⁷ *Ibid.*

resulting in a bill introduced by Senator Bob Dole, a World War II veteran⁸, denouncing, among other things, the display of the U.S. flag on the ground⁹.

After the stances taken by the exhibition that included Scott's work, there followed a long series of events that revolutionised the artistic discourse to some extent.

In October 1989, take place the law *sues United States v. Eichman* (a group that includes Dread Scott), to invalidate the law that banned the display of the flag on the ground. Favourable legal precedent is set by *Texas v. Johnson*. The source of the litigation was a 1984 protest in Dallas where Gregory Lee "Joey" Johnson, a member of the Young Communist Brigade USA, burned the US flag. As a result of his act, a federal trial ensued, in which Johnson was convicted and later acquitted. For the final ruling, the State of Texas appeals to the US Supreme Court, which decides that the use of the US flag in a protest gesture cannot be prohibited, even if it involves burning, because that would violate the right to free speech¹⁰.

In connection with the lawsuit, future US President Joe Biden, then a US senator, made statements about the case and spoke out against the inappropriate use of the US flag. Asked by a reporter what would happen if the state lost the case, Biden replied that he would introduce a content-neutral amendment himself. This amendment will be in opposition to President Bush Sr.'s amendment (introduced by Senator Bob Dole) which limits certain types of speech¹¹, as the right to free speech is guaranteed by the US Constitution. Another question asked by a reporter to Biden was whether he thinks that the destruction of flags in Eastern Europe by cutting down parts of them is content neutral. Biden's response was: „That's their business. They can make whatever decision they want about their flag; they can even burn an American flag across the border, it's not the policy of this government to protest”¹².

Dread Scott's work *What Is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag* is a demonstration of the role of art in shaping the construction of political ideas.

Reflecting the political thinking of the artist is a matter of language structure.

The "Ghenie case", if we can call like that, and of the group coagulated around the Plan B gallery in Cluj is an interesting case study. The political subject has a shifts from the intrinsic discourse about the direct experience of communism to a focus on the structural composition of the image. Such is the "Stalin's Tomb" series, the images of the Ceausescu couple, to the more recent portrait of Trump - included in the exhibition at Palazzo Cini in Venice during the 2019 Biennale. About the "Trump" series, Ghenie states: *Art must be more important than the subject. In 20 years or 200 years, I don't want these Trumps to be seen as Trump. Painting is a medium practiced by many but kept alive by few [...] I'm not interested in Trump as the bad guy. For me, his face has become an archetype.*

In a ranking of the most important works of art made after 2010 done by ARTnews, there are two works in which, as in Ghenie's work, the political figure is used in an illustrative sense. Position 12 out of 20 is occupied by Eric Fischl's work, *Late America*, 2016, which features a silhouette of a staffer who could be Trump, and 5th place goes to a rather mannered portrait of First Lady Michelle Obama - Amy Sherald, *First Lady Michelle Obama*, 2018 .

⁸ William E. Schmidt. March 19, 1989. Disputed Hihibit of Flag is Ended, The New York Times. available at the <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/03/17/us/disputed-exhibit-of-flag-is-ended.h>.

⁹ See https://www.dreadscott.net/portfolio_page/what-is-the-proper-way-to-display-a-us-flag/ at length

¹⁰ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Texas-v-Johnson>.

¹¹ *** Flag Burning Cases [declarații de presă], disponibil la <https://www.c-span.org/video/?12245-1/flag-burning-cases>.

¹² *Ibid.*

3. Assuming political positioning. Protest and contemporary art

Supporters of a political cause often generate the springs for imposing a new imagology. Opposed political groups create conflicting or opposing models¹³, and protest becomes a way of taking up political ideas.

Metaphorically speaking, art 'embodies' ideas of right and wrong and gives emotional resources to political actions by generating stereotypical images. Protest, analysed as a means of expression, is a large-scale performative medium. It takes place in public spaces in order to influence public opinion by occupying and exploiting the power of such places. Public space can be occupied in ways that challenge authority and claiming freedom of expression. It reinforces a sense of group identity and claims power to act on behalf of an interest.

There were several waves of famous protests in the post-war period: the African-American protests in the 1950s, the anti-war protests in the 1960s and 1970s, the protests of the mothers' group Las Madres de la Plaza de la Mayo in Argentina in the late 1970s, the anti-nuclear protests, the protests for gay and lesbian rights, the environmentalist protests in the 1980s, the protests from Tiananmen Square and from Berlin Wall, and the anti-globalization protests in the late 1990s. Recent we can include the Arab Spring protests, after the first decade of the new millennium, the "Occupy" protests that began in the US and continued around the world, the "99%" and "Black Lives Matters" movements.

Recent contemporary activism has been brought to the forefront of artistic discourse thanks to the "Occupy" movement that began in the United States in September 2011, when, with the help of the Internet and new media, a campaign was launched to occupy Wall Street, a New York street known for the multitude of financial institutions based there.

Several thousand supporters, mostly young people, responded to organizers call to gather in Zuccotti Park, the heart of New York's financial district, to protest corporate influence over politics and social and economic inequality. The demonstrators wanted to end the relationship built between corporations and politics through corporate donations for the political campaigns.

They demanded that the system should work in the interests of citizens. The tools they proposed were civil disobedience, the creation of a culture based on community and mutual aid, fundamental changes in the current system of socio-economic and political thinking. The members of the movement wanted to unite others in joint actions in public spaces, in parks and online¹⁴.

The New York events had an impact on the art world. In an article on the BBC's official website, the very idea of a substantial change in the content of contemporary art, due to the Occupy movement¹⁵, is questioned. It is asked if the protests of Occupy movement coincide with the decline of contemporary art, art understood as ownership or heritage of 'white-walled' galleries. Journalist Paul Mason, the author of the article, reports on the performance group The Illuminators, who project slogans onto buildings as they drive through the city in a car with a projector on the roof. They are responsible for the now iconic "99%" sign, also known as "the bat signal". Mark Read, artist and multimedia studies professor and leader of the group, said: "The bat signal is very simple, big and easy to read. It is culturally legible. It's a call to arms

¹³ Murray Edelman. 1995. *From Art to Politics: How Artistic Creations Shape Political Concepts*. University of Chicago Press, pp. 5-11.

¹⁴ <http://www.occupytogether.org/aboutoccupy/#background>.

¹⁵ Paul Mason. 30.04.2012. *Does Occupy signal the death of contemporary art?*, "BBC News Magazine". available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-17872666>.

and a call for help, but instead of a psychopathic millionaire superhero like Bruce Wayne, it represents us - the 99% come to save themselves. We are our own superhero."¹⁶.

Reactions of support came from Brooklyn "GWAF" ("graduates without a future") movement, but also from many artistic categories: writers, actors. Theatre critic Cristina Modreanu, who had direct contact with the emergence of the Occupy events in New York, reports that from the very beginning there was an intrinsic performative dimension to the movement¹⁷. Shortly afterwards, in October of the same year, the group The Civilians put on theatrical performances on the theme of the Occupy Wall Street movement, based on interviews with protesters¹⁸. The performers take to the streets and, as the police appear, they themselves play the role of policemen, turning New York into a space for a "culture war"¹⁹.

Some protesters, after being dispersed by police, appeared undercover in a performance project by artist Zoe Beloff, *Days of the Commune*, which involved protesters and New York passers-by rehearsing, in full costume, a Brecht play about 1871 – the seizure of Paris by the working class.

London and New York based artist and curator Christopher Kulendran Thomas said: "Occupy signals the limits to which what we call contemporary art has reached. The motivation is that Occupy art does not really work as contemporary art. If you judge it in terms of contemporary art, it's bad art because it's not open to interpretation." "It uncritically uses the language of advertising to communicate it goes where contemporary art can't go - because contemporary art is useless in situations of political emergency." There are "these common themes - a rejection of commercialism, a return to non-ironic figurative painting, an emphasis on large-scale communication, subversive collaboration with mass imagery and, above all, the emergence of art with a social purpose"²⁰.

Two years after "Occupy", the protests in Istanbul's Taksim Square have also generated forms of social involvement and political engagement of artists. Emblematic was the performance by Erdem Gündüz. The artist stood in front of water jets by the police for eight hours. His action generated social cohesion, and others across the country followed. Gündüz's act of civil disobedience quickly became known on social media, and he was nicknamed Adam Duran ("standing man"). In another action, artist Mine Dost appeared in just a bikini and sneakers at the demonstration. Similar acts took place at the International Performance Festival (IPA) Istanbul. Roi Vaara, dressed in a suit, with a banner on which was written "Follow me", started marching towards Taksim, very slowly, without saying anything. His action was independent, not part of an actual protest²¹.

In the case of the Black Lives Matter protests, a movement whose popularity grew in 2019-2020 and which targeted racial discrimination. In addition to the street movements themselves, a "battle of the statues" has also emerged - see the case of the toppling of the statue of Edward Colston (slave trader). Later, a sculpture by of a black activist with a raised fist was placed on the bare plinth of Colston statue but removed by Bristol City Council for lack of

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Cristina Modreanu. 2014. *Modreanu, Cristina, Utopii performative: artiști radicali ai scenei americane în secolul 21*. București: Editura Humanitas, p. 116 -117.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 124-125.

¹⁹ ****Newsnight film on Occupy art* [video], available on <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-17872666>

²⁰ Paul Mason, *op.cit.*

²¹ ***Performance art becomes a vehicle for protest, "Hürriyet Daily News". 30.07.2013. available at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/performance-art-becomes-a-vehicle-for-protest.aspx?pageID=238&nID=51633&NewsCatID=384>

permission²². In the cultural world arises a new debate whether the movement is having a tangible effect or whether it remains a cultural "trend", as with Occupy. What is certain is that the visual nomenclature of recognisable signs has been enriched by a new one: the raised hand with a clenched fist has become a "trademark" for protests demanding the rights of black people.

4. Conclusions

An interesting case study for the left versus right opposition relationship was the positioning towards the Brexit²³, which divided the UK cultural milieu. In one article, a British writer asked the question that gives the title: *Why are there so few right-leaning artists?*²⁴. A survey of the Creative Industries Federation (UK) found that only 4% of its members supported Brexit, and held right-wing beliefs. In contrast, in response to the above-mentioned article, there is another article entitled *Why there is no good right-wing art*²⁵, which argues for not treating membership of one side or the other of the political spectrum so bluntly. Valuable art is valuable in itself, and good artists inherently resist to easy categorisation.

It also proclaims the end of the political spectrum. The Western world, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, revolves around what is centre-right, centre-left. The new paradigm would be one of consensus between those who are perpetual bystanders and those who wield the lion's share of political, economic and cultural power²⁶.

An interesting opinion, which comes as a conclusion on the relationship between art and active protest (as a form of expression of political ideas), has the American sociologist James M. Jasper, who deals with the moral values of civic movements. The author notes that some people are more morally creative than others, but their creativity, like that of artists, is about showing us the way in expressing our own visions and actions, not creating new ones for others. The problem arises when moralists come to power, at which point they cease to be moralists. Strategy replaces persuasion and example. Just as many artists lose their connections to common artistic traditions so that no one understands their work, so many protesters and revolutionaries ignore or abandon their connections to other people - with far more devastating consequences than for the artist. James M. Jasper believes that, sociologically speaking, the best works of art lie at the frontier between knowing and not knowing, expanding the horizons of what we can recognize. When artists ignore the familiar altogether and try to start from scratch, they lose their potential audience. They can get to the point of losing connection with "the matrix of our everyday thoughts and fantasies", just as with extremist revolutionary protesters. Like a priestly caste, members of both of these categories come to believe that only their actions can save the rest of us²⁷.

²² *** 16.07.2020. *Black Lives Matter: Protester statue removed in Bristol*. Available on <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-53427731>

²³ The left was campaigning for Britain to remain in the EU, and the right wanted to break away from the European Union.

²⁴ Helen Dale. February 23, 2018. "Why are there so few right-leaning artists?". Available at the <https://reaction.life/right-leaning-artists/>.

²⁵ Alastair Benn. February 27, 2018. "Why there is no good right-wing art". Available at <https://reaction.life/no-good-right-wing-art/>.

²⁶ Damon Linker. February 22, 2019. "The end of the political spectrum". Available at <https://theweek.com/articles/824949/end-political-spectrum/>.

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