

Rationale: *Art Practice as Political Play*

"Art has to do with fiction: The general context of art is ultimately also a fictional one. And it is only because this context is fictional or, rather, utopian, that it liberates art and artist from any servitude to reality—which is ultimately always a servitude to existing power structure..."

Boris Groys, *History Becomes Form: Moscow Conceptualism* (14)

"To be a work means to set up a world."

Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art* (170)

My colloquium seeks to explore art practice as political play. A loaded construction of terms, "art practice as political play" immediately provokes several questions, including: Why art *practice*? Not just art or Art? Why the political association? What sort of politics am I working with here? What do I mean by "play"? Why is art practice related to it? What does this construction cover, and most pressingly, what does it *do*? What *can* it do?

To begin tackling these questions, I will start with the most macroscopic. By constructing a politics of artistic practice, I am necessarily dealing in a particular sort of politics. My studies have focused on seminal theories of power. For the purposes of my booklist, these include works by Aristotle, Althusser, Buck-Morss, Debord, Descartes, Machiavelli, Marx, and Plato. All of these thinkers, especially in the works I have selected for this study, theorize on power structures that govern everyday life, most often in unseen but ideologically persistent formations. Whether or not they approve of these power structures is often debatable (although largely they do not), but I am interested specifically in what sort of an environment this postulates for everyday life. Thus while Machiavelli provides a metaphor for modern power in his idealized Prince, Buck-Morss speaks on definitions of aesthetics (and anaesthetics) that govern the way we experience

the world around us.¹ Undeniably, Marx plays a central role in my study for his own theory and for his influence on others—Althusser's ISA's, Debord's spectacle, Buck-Morss' phantasmagoria most notably. Plato and Aristotle not only present an ancient (albeit Western) political discourse, but they also bring in the question of aesthetic theory.² Namely, I am interested in what these thinkers, both ancient and modern, consider to be the invisible processes of control that affect people's daily lives in persistent ways. This is politics at its most base level—the condition of unseen powers that necessarily organizes a base relationship between the subject and the world around her/him/them/it. This relationship is always a politically charged one, and anything that elucidates, complicates, or transforms that relationship is thus also politically significant.

Political play is an encounter of the subject and these politics. It is a concept I have derived on my own, although it draws from many sources—most notably De Certeau and Gadamer (by way of Heidegger). Play could denote many things anthropologically or philosophically, but here I am interested in it as a political strategy, and I want to define it in a specific way. In the dictionary, play as a noun is defined as such: "the space in or through which a mechanism can or does move," "scope or freedom to act or operate," and "light and constantly changing movement." All of these ideas are essential components of my own definition. Political play is that which opens up space in the everyday politics of the subject, inserting itself into gaps of meaning or creating new definitions of experience, what De Certeau calls "cross-cuts, fragments, cracks and lucky hits in the framework of a system" (De Certeau 38). The concept of play is exciting to me because it is multifarious, omnivorous, and messy. It eschews binary definitions of agency or power for a practice that is constantly changing, dynamic, adaptable, quick, and curious. De Certeau, speaking on *tactics* (which would easily fall into my conception

¹ This "we" rests on potentially problematic generalizations of whom these classical theories apply to, a problem the theories themselves encounter in terms of audience. I hope to tackle this issue with the work of contemporary thinkers such as Haraway and Shohat and Stam, but for my purposes here I wish to use a common "we" in a mode of shared empowerment.

² The lineage of aesthetic theory is not my primary focus in this study, but it is an implicated part of my thinking on art practice vis-à-vis politics. The Cartesian model of mind vs. body and sensory perception is similarly implicated (especially in light of Buck-Morss), and for that reason, I have included a portion of Descartes' *Discourse on the Method*.

of play here) versus oppressive *strategies* in *The Practice of Everyday Life* writes that tactics present a "relationship of forces that is the starting point for an intellectual creativity as persistent as it is subtle, tireless, ready for every opportunity, scattered over a terrain of the dominant order and foreign to the rules laid down and imposed by a rationality founded on established rights and property" (De Certeau 38). Play thus presents a method of subversion with a remarkably creative, quick-witted, and adaptable sensibility, a method that slips through cracks of dominating systems of control. De Certeau continues: "Things *extra* and *other* (details and excesses coming from elsewhere) insert themselves into the accepted framework, the imposed order. One thus has the very relationship between spatial practices and the constructed order. The surface of this order is everywhere punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts, and leaks of meaning: it is a sieve-order" (De Certeau 107). Methodologies of this "punching and tearing," this *play*, can be found in the majority of works on my booklist (Benjamin, Bennett, Beuys, Duchamp, Galileo, Haraway, Kukai/Kobo-Daishi, Minh-Ha, Shakespeare, and Shohat and Stam). While Benjamin's assertion that "a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye—only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man" (Benjamin, section XIII) represents the recontextualizing play of the camera, Haraway's situated knowledges and Minh-Ha's call for difference present other models of political play—sensibilities that move within, around, and through existing power structures, leaving politically pregnant *sieve-orders* in their wake.

With this in mind, let us turn to art. The idea of political play is by no means particular to "fine" art or art history, although that is where my interest lies. It is a lens applicable (and perhaps more easily applicable) to many other areas of interest, including but not limited to semiotics, cinema, literature, gender studies—De Certeau's play relates to consumption, while Minh-Ha's relates to gender. Political play could speak to anthropological arguments of liminality and the carnivalesque, the alternate realities of dystopian science fiction, and the postmodern construction of reality television. Although some of these examples may stretch the concept thinner than others, I wish to keep

political play a malleable and open-ended tool—in short, I do not intend to isolate it with art historical examples but keep it purposefully playful.

With that said, I see exciting possibilities when considering art through the lens of political play. I have devoted a good portion of my studies to art history, and thus I cull most of my examples from this discipline. My focus is largely 20th century and contemporary art, where a trajectory of play—a constant reevaluation and challenge to accepted artistic conventions—has been a major, if not the primary, trope of artistic practice.³ Although art history is far from immune to social and economic conditions, as social or Marxist histories of art detail, it also protects its own ideological power structure, a structure I am both wary of and intrigued by. Existing in a frame (art history) within a frame (the more slippery powers at large), how can and how does art play? And how can art-objects, often treated as mere aesthetic building blocks, be animated into an active state of political play?

Herein lies my distinction between art and art practice. Art practice is the interpretation of art as a process of continuous play and a manifestation of active ideas. Political play happens in this practice, not the art; it happens in the creation, interpretation, and experience of the work, rather than in the physical object. Thinking of art this way reactivates its political potential, for "as soon as this active life-process is described, history ceases to be a collection of dead facts...there real, positive science begins" (Marx 57-8). What I interpret as the "positive science" of art practice thrives on De Certeau's "ellipses, drifts, and leaks of meaning," and seeks to invent new and different realities of meaning. Thus while art-objects are important, they should be interpreted as markers of active practice, rather than aesthetic treasures.

The physical art-object is certainly not useless—it remains a symbolic manifestation and provocation of play. The bottlerack Duchamp deemed a readymade still sits in a museum somewhere, a manifestation of an idea (an idea that has since been

³ The concept of political play in 20th century art necessarily comes up against theories of modernity and avant-gardism. I included Habermas (and momentarily, Peter Bürger) for this reason, but these are of course drops in the (often stormy) ocean of this theory. Still, I do not wish to present political play as a romanticized recoding of avant-garde practice, but rather a political strategy that can apply to past, present, and future.

deemed a catalyst for Modern Art!) that commodities could be art, that a redefinition unto itself could be art. This idea was indeed revolutionary, and it still provokes. It plays with binary definitions and the very meaning we attribute to the objects around us. Still, it is not the actual readymade which does this, but the active *idea*.

It is important to note that 20th century art history now favors this interpretation—it crowns the conceptual merit of the idea over the object—citing a strain of thinking from the 1960s that currently is the crux of academic art history. The story it tells can be interpreted as a model of continuous play: artists pushing systems of meaning to their limits (often using explicitly political or theoretical models), with examples as varied as the breakdown of mimesis in Cubism, the self-referentiality of institutional critique and the fictocritical projects of the present day. Thus art history almost miraculously cannibalizes itself while also continuing to play with its established discourse. As mentioned earlier, I seek to explore the examples of this art historical model while also being critical of it. In many ways, especially politically, I seek to extricate art practice from the canon of art history, but I must also be cognisant of its undeniable influence (it is, after all, how I have been taught!). Thus my conception of art practice seeks to be within and outside this insular historical model, operating politically and playfully at the same time.

In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger's writes simply that art "is the becoming and happening of truth" (183). My argument is related to this—there is certainly an optimistic glint to it—but I am not seeking to elucidate a kind of truthiness of art. Rather, the aim of my study is to take the emphasis off the before and after and place it instead on the *becoming* and *happening*. In this becoming and happening, there is art practice, there is political play, and there are indeed the exciting and unknown possibilities of those momentary *truths*.