

BOOKS

The Art of Civil Action: Political Space and Cultural Dissent

The Art of Civil Action is a book that locates itself in an ideal social space between private life and the state that is conceived as being not only independent of the state but also the source of a new inventory of demands for governments. The editors' (Philipp Dietachmair and Pascal Gielen) conception of civil society is a rejuvenation of the Habermasian concept of the public sphere with the emphasis shifted from 'communicative action' to action (or activism) pure and simple. Despite the archaic tone of the term 'civil society', here it signifies a politics that is absent or marginal to both identity politics and the politics of systems.

Arguably, art is exemplary of this neither-nor social space of the civil insofar as the aesthetic is characterised normatively as being both subjective and universal or private and public. However, Dietachmair and Gielen do not attempt to theorise art in any general sense through the concept of civil society but instead restrict themselves to the task of tracing contemporary art's contribution to a map of 'a new global landscape of civil society'. Without claiming that art or culture is integral to self-organised communities and their struggles, this collection organises itself around art's proximity to the politics of the Zapatistas, Occupy, the Umbrella Movement, Teatro Valle and the Refugees Welcome movement.

While other writers are charting the structures of colonial necropolitics and platform capitalism, these editors plot the counter-tendencies that have sprung up in Latin America, Russia, Spain, Hong Kong, Canada, Amsterdam, Rome, Croatia, Macedonia, Belgium, Poland and numerous other places. One of the aims of this book, therefore, is to articulate the condition of 'transnational public spheres' in which 'cultural organisations can be a platform' that link local cultural embeddedness to global themes, issues and trends. The book stresses what is caught by the word 'can' in this phrase and therefore reads like a vindication of certain minority practices.

'Viewing things from a planetary perspective rather than a purely European one, it is difficult to subscribe fully to the assumptions of the editors of this volume,' writes Yudhishtir Raj Isar, professor of cultural policy studies at the American University of Paris. Civil society, he

points out, is quite different in those regions of the global South where it was 'aggressively promoted, during the 1990s, notably by the US governmental and non-State actors alike, not just as a legitimate sector of governance – which it is to be sure – but also as a front for neo-liberal anti-Stalinist positions, often dominated by western transnational NGOs or loose coalitions of interests pursuing their own agendas'.

Max Haiven, an author and activist based in Canada, rereads the politics of the civil through the prism of 'an unfinished genocide' of indigenous peoples that has been carried out, at least in part, through the 'expansion of settler-colonial civil society'. The civil cannot be entirely extricated from the binary of civilisation and savagery that undergirds the rationale for colonial modernity. And, of course, these difficulties are not rectified by supplementing the civil with art or culture.

Traces of the authority carried by art can be detected in some of the kindest gestures of civil cultural activism. Rimini Protokoll, a theatre company based in Berlin, for instance, expresses its political purpose, in part, through the attempt 'to give a voice to the people that are not the most prominent or canonical voices to be heard'. And it seems likely that the efficacy of art for the promotion of 'civil action' is dependent on art's social status as civilising, or as Igor Stokfiszewski puts it in this volume, on 'a belief in the transformative power of everyone's self-expression'.

Most of the case studies in the book are grounded in the specific negotiations of regional and national conditions. Llorenç Bonet focuses on the limitations and opportunities for architecture in Seville, Ilya Budraitkis teases out the changing circumstances of cultural production in Vladimir Putin's Russia, Milena Dragićević Šešić discusses the situation of culture in the former Yugoslavia with Borka Pavićević, and Hakan Topal reports on 'an especially depressing political period' for art and activism in contemporary Turkey.

An exception to the general rule, Andrew Barnett's analysis of organisations in the UK 'does not emphasise political activism and the power of the arts to mobilise campaigns and achieve political change,' and consistently sacrifices geographical specificity in the hope that arts organisations in the UK might 'have ripple effects elsewhere'. Acknowledging that his conceptual framework derives from the UK, he says: 'I do not believe it limits us to an Anglo-Saxon enclave.'

The global scale of the book is commendable even if the material it assembles falls short of

that ambition. The editors are right to point to 'an impressive diversity of civic action' within 'the vast landscape of global civil action', and they are also right to admit that their volume remains 'quite limited in scope' and that 'there remains a lot to be done on the civil terrain'. There is very little, here, that might constitute what could be called a transnational civil society, but the book certainly aspires towards a concept of civil society that exceeds the boundaries of the nation state and its governmental apparatus.

The editors' model of transnational civil action is the Gezi Park demonstrations in Istanbul, which they describe as 'a civil action that addressed a seemingly very local ecological question of protecting a small downtown park' that 'turned into a great symbol of cultural dissent against the general politics of the state', including 'solidarity demonstrations in several parks of New York'. The significance of these events, for them, is that the spread of the demonstration indicates a 'new transnational context' in which 'it is no longer obvious where to locate the public sphere' because 'the "public" is no longer identical to the civil population of a certain nation state'.

Although the editors argue that civil action results from 'the civil chain' – a sequence that begins with an 'emotion' that prompts '(self-) rationalisation' and 'communication' resulting in '(self-)organisation' – their concept of social action stresses 'the semiotic process' and 'processing of assigning meaning'. Reminiscent, perhaps, of the core observation of cultural studies, which softened the distinction between political practices and symbolic resistance, art and culture do not have to be grafted onto the political processes of civil action by the contributors to *The Art of Civil Action* because the civil is conceived as a largely semiotic enterprise.

This collection of reports from Russia, Poland, Turkey, Germany, Spain and the former Yugoslavia, as well as the contextualisation and reflection on them, resituates the well-documented overlap between contemporary art and activism not as a type of artwork or a class of artists but as a form of collective self-organisation. As such, the book is a substantial contribution to the growing literature on art and politics. ■

The Art of Civil Action: Political Space and Cultural Dissent, Philipp Dietachmair, Pascal Gielen eds, Valiz, 2017, 352pp, pb, £20, 978 9 492095 39 8.

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