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APPEARANCES OF THE POLITICAL ANTHOLOGY

**ON ARRIVING:  
INTRODUCTION  
TO THE APPEARANCES  
OF THE POLITICAL ANTHOLOGY**

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# ON ARRIVING: INTRODUCTION TO THE APPEARANCES OF THE POLITICAL ANTHOLOGY

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Appearances of the political. A deliciously ambiguous phrase. Just the right kind of provocative: multifaceted, open, ripe with double readings and, most importantly, in desperate need of clarification. It's just the kind of conceptual wrapper that we might look for in any call for participation: inherently cross-disciplinary and fraught with tension—just open enough, just evocative enough, to entice any variety of discussants. What is meant by appearances? Is it a matter of aesthetics—a querying of the sensorial limits of politics? Or does “appearances” reference the advent of a given political situation—it's very arrival and the machinations of its manifestation? Then there is the political itself. What could, or should, we mean by “the political”? Do we limit ourselves to discourses on neoliberal strategies, the failing welfare-state, or the crisis of democracy? Is this a matter for the political sciences alone? Or, is it a call to indict the political sciences themselves as concerning that which merely *appears* to be political? Whatever the case, there is an imperative here: a call to reevaluate our understanding of politics, to begin once again where we must always begin: with the appearances of things, with their arrival.

In the spirit of analysing appearances, it is my job here to reflect on the advent of this special issue, and to, if possible, provide some context for its contents. To do so, it is perhaps best to begin with the basics. Appearances of the Political, after which this special issue is named, was a moniker for a kind of study group that hosted a series of symposia from 2016–2018. With participants joining from a wide collection of countries, including India, the United Kingdom, the United States, Italy, France, Germany, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Sweden, Albania, Ireland, Brazil, Poland, Lithuania, and Slovakia, this diverse group of researchers, practitioners, and thinkers would meet biannually to read, reflect, and discuss the forms in which the political appears. The aim of the symposia was to bring a wide variety of

disciplines into dialog with each other in an effort to question the presumptions inherent in their treatment of the political, and to investigate the experience of the political in contemporary democracies. At a time where the political seems to be present in an ever increasing plurality of forms—via media, social networking platforms, and 24-hour news networks—while simultaneously seeming to be emptied of political content, through the transformation of political discourses into easy and non-committal opinions, the question of the very possibility of the political becomes paramount.

The motivation of the study circle was located in experiences of how the political is made present, in how these forms are developing and transforming, and in the consequences of these forms of appearance. Alongside traditional discourses of political agency, emancipation, and technocratic framing, there was, within this small study group, an on-going emphasis on recent discourses on the everyday. Yuriko Saito, Michel De Certeau, and Ben Highmore were brought in to compliment Peter Sloterdijk, Giorgio Agamben, and Jacques Rancière. This was, in part, due to the fact that the “Appearances of the Political” study circle grew out of the work of a previous Nordic Summer University study group, “Heterologies of the Everyday” (2013–2015), to which it owed its conceptual horizons. This earlier study circle had sought to probe the nature of the everyday through the exploration of phenomenological, aesthetic, and cultural theories. It was in this context, and through an analysis of the role and relevance of aesthetics in our everyday life—that is, the acknowledgment that aesthetics affects not only our decisions about what to buy or how to dress, but also structures our very mood, colours our interpretations, and frames our perspectives—that the ethos of the “Appearances of the Political” circle would be cast: if, as Rancière claims, the common sensory fabric which defines our way of being together is determined through a constant negotiation of possible modes of perception, of what is visible and invisible, sayable and unsayable, then it is precisely at this vector of negotiation that we would locate the “place and stakes of politics as a form of experience.”<sup>1</sup> These notions would lead the newly formed “Appearances” study circle to begin with the broadest possible notion of the political, querying the political in all aspects of life. Thus, in seminars, contributors were invited to focus not only on the more visible power structures of institutions, legislation, and media, but to also bring to bear the overlooked, ignored, or traditionally apolitical aspects of everyday life. This could be anything from the politics of household chores to an investigation of how, and which, children feel empowered to occupy any given street with games of tag or football.

The material presented in these symposia was incredibly diverse and well suited to the open format of the Nordic Summer University network of which it was a part. Established in

1950, the Nordic Summer University has been an independent, migratory academic institution.<sup>2</sup> Having no concrete campus, and eschewing hierarchical governing bodies, the NSU is radically democratic in every aspect of its organization, which is completely handled by its participants. The lack of a situated campus, and the commitment to a migratory practice, where each symposium was held in a different Nordic or Baltic country, facilitated a cross-cultural exchange that only grew as the circle traveled. Beginning in the Latvian capital city of Riga in the winter of 2016, the study circle traveled north to the small Finnish town of Orivesi, later that summer. In 2017, we retired from a cold winter in the historic university city of Wrocław, Poland, to the Latvian seaside at Saulkrasti in the summer. We had the privilege of calling Copenhagen, Denmark home for a short time in the winter of 2018, before seeking out the sea one final time in Fårö, Sweden. Each time that the seminar moved, our little group would grow. We formed new bonds, met new scholars, and encountered new ideas. We broke bread, shared dormitories, and gave considerable care to the ideas presented. Sometimes these were pre-planned, a presentation on one's research, or a group discussion on a previously agreed upon text, such as *Nanopolitics Handbook*, by the nanopolitics group. But sometimes they were improvised performances, as with Minna Heikinaho's call to a relational engagement—entitled “The body relates with other and begin to speak: The author is not required”—in which participants were invited to continually negotiate with each other and with the space as they either followed or led a stroll through Riga. Although this group shared a unifying question, we had no predetermined path towards addressing it. As such, our explorations would evolve organically, through our questing. Often the thematic would repeat, and always it would overlap, but together we would find a way forward, towards the political. The themes of these meetings would come to be:

1. Identifying the Political
2. Appearances of the Political in 20th Century Culture
3. Aesthetics, Politics, and Material Culture
4. Action and Activism
5. Political Arts and Aesthetics in the Everyday
6. The Politics of Memory in Art

To get a better sense of the schematic we were affecting to draft with these seminars, and thus to better situate the contents of this special issue which builds upon the ideas and challenges that were leveled there, let us make a quick summary of our conversations.

Our circle's first official foray into the always disorientating territory of the political—a symposium at the University of Latvia, Riga, aptly entitled *Identifying the Political*—was, per-

haps, revealing in its methodological implications: a heuristic practice in setting out those theoretical horizons that might frame our investigations precisely in order to rethink, and delimit, those frameworks. It was crucial to make explicit our understanding of key concepts, and to share, from the perspective of our varied academic and cultural backgrounds, different challenges to those conceptions if we were to collaborate effectively over the next three years. Presentations at this first meeting often began in seemingly familiar territory, for instance by analysing contemporary political discourse and rhetoric, as with Nils S. Konstantinovs' presentation "Catchers in the Rye: The Politics of Childhood. Constructing Image of a Child in Latvian Political Discourse," or by focusing on media and mediations, as with Henrik Juel's "A Study in the Rhetoric of the TV-camera—How powerful political figures are being presented on TV and video." But even these seemingly straightforward analyses of the vocabulary of current politics inaugurated a debate on the role of cultural approaches in political analysis and gave way to nuanced discussions and impasses as we began to shift our gaze towards the often overlooked. Corinna Casi, for instance, highlighted the unseen politics at play in the classification of the "natural" and the picturesque, which included not only the privileging of a certain notion of beauty but also the elevation of the so-called "higher" senses of sight and sound over other sensory elements like touch and smell.

While our first symposium had invited participants to debate the means by which the political might be identified, often resulting in the presentation of discipline-specific critical reflexes, our second symposium sought to carry the discussion forward by exploring historical examples from the 20th century of how the political has appeared, both intentionally and unintentionally. By looking to historical examples, we hoped to begin to outline a topography of our communal notions of the political. Whether it was the explicit political motivations of a cultural movement, as with '70s punk music and fashion, where an ideology of antagonism manifests in the back and forth play of consensus/dissensus, or the unrecognised appearances of political ideologies in city planning, the aim of this symposium was to utilize the common platform of history to examine the political. Eret Talviste's work on "Affect and Nationalism: The Singing Revolution in Estonia between 1988 and 1991," for instance, examined an affective illusion of ethnic ties at root in the Estonian republic identity and raised questions about the legacy and dangers of such a deep-rooted emphasis on difference and exclusion.

Given the prominence of aesthetics as a conceptual framework within the presentations in our previous sessions, we opted to address it directly in our third symposium, "Aesthetics, politics, and material culture." We invited participants to consider the materiality of politics. Not merely the costumes of politicians, the pageantry of elections, or the symbols of congeniality that

are meant to make a candidate relatable, but the normative thrust of those objects that inhabit our everyday life: Public restrooms require purchases, benches are being removed from shopping malls, CCTVs monitor hallways and enforce behaviour on buses. Carsten Friberg's presentation, "Piano Lessons and the Drill: Reflection on the Aesthetics of Education," took this even further. He reminded us that education is the true agenda of aesthetics—that historically, having a young woman play the piano taught her the desired bodily posture of a young woman in society—that the body and mind are united in an education and made receptive through aesthetics. From pianos and an arguably historical "education," Rosita Vaičiule returned us to contemporary mediations through a look at "Media Ecology," leading a conversation on how media and technology influence human perception, understanding, feeling, and value. These conversations were complimented by many other presentations on art, graffiti, monuments and national landscapes, each underlying the educational and normative thrusts of the aesthetic at work.

In our summer session of 2017, discussions moved from the politics of invisible structures to the space of active contention and intentional disruption. Understanding the political as the ways and means of organizing and administrating our environment, we invited participants to consider "Action and Activism" in relation to our ongoing discussions of the political. These presentations included discussions of resistance, the fight for representation, and even the role of ideology in activism. Interestingly, while conversations did return to familiar and sympathetic political theories—for instance that of Rancière, who locates the essence of politics in interrupting the current distribution of possibilities by giving access to those who have no part, visibility, or voice, in the current community—they returned with a new criticality. Steve Maher's analysis of the politics of language in his presentation "A New Idiginiety—Constructed Language in Resistance to Cultural Homogeneity," for instance, examined the ways that language structures our lives, affects our cognition, and houses cultural experiences, while making a case for constructed languages as a form of resistance to the encroaching dominion of a "international" english. Instead of a return to established critical reflexes, conversations evinced a multitude of registers of the political in constant crossings.

To complicate these inquiries, and to take up a thread of the previous circle, we moved from activism as such to "Political Art and Aesthetics in the Everyday." Insofar as these two disciplines, art and everyday aesthetics, share an imperative as well as an overlapping history—think Alan Kaprow, the happenings of the '60s, relational aesthetics, and the history of both modern literature and performance art—we invited participants to consider this relation itself as a phenomenon to examine. Does the move towards social practice art on the one hand and everyday aesthetics on the other, share a horizon of politics? These conversations would go on

to highlight the proximity which contemporary art shares with everyday life and the impossibility of fundamentally differentiating their forms or even their tactics of resistance. Gian Luigi Biagini's presentation/praxis, "Disturbanism," highlighted the blurring of these lines by means of an intervention aimed at triggering a line of flight. Biagini sought to inaugurate an event that not only contested the established spacial politics but also de-actualized time from its functional spatialisation. While some participants found the intervention to be an abrasive and unwelcome event, it must be admitted that Biagini succeeded in inciting a passionate debate on the limits of antagonism, the importance of consent, and art cum life cum activism.

In our final symposium, we focused on the politics of memory. What is the medium of cultural memory? What is it that turns some media (and not others) into powerful houses for the storage and dissemination of collective images (and imaginings) of the past? By examining how ideas about the past have been conveyed, disputed, silenced and negotiated through the politicization of art and the aestheticization of politics, we hoped to uncover and question the presuppositions regarding our own cultural memories. Picking up this thread, Anete Vanaga's presentation of "The Monument of Peter the Great as an Example of 'Agonistic Pluralism'," examined the monuments that would prove essential in the articulation of a Latvian national identity. Along with legitimating the burgeoning government, the monuments had the effect of subordinating the Russian speaking Latvians, and instigating a constituting distinction between an "us" and "them." In exploring the function of antagonistic pluralism to the health and constitution of modern democracies through the analysis of an artistic representation of a historic political figurehead, we found ourselves coming full circle: analysing the appearance of the political in the everyday in order to reconsider the political itself.

This marked the final session and our symposium came to a close with as many questions as we had answers. Indeed, we had not yet, to anyone's satisfaction, identified the nature of the political, nor had we even reached a consensus on what exactly the "appearances of the political" meant. But, we had established a kind of practice, a method of thinking together, along different registers and alongside different disciplines. We had explored different ways of being together, and contesting each other. And we had advened, in the end, a praxis towards the political even if we could never quite define what that was.

## **Contents**

The "Appearances of the Political" study circle officially ended in 2018, though many of its members are still very active in the network of scholars that was established during the course of the circle. Indeed, despite the conclusion of our research group, many of us have continued

to develop and expand on the ideas that were discussed there. This special issue returns us to the clearing of those investigations. The aim of this publication is not to sum up the findings of our thought experiments, nor even to represent the work of the circle. Rather, it is merely to carry them forward. To expand on them. To continue to complicate our thinking and to continue to do so together. The articles that follow all share this aim. They each approach the political through its appearances—both in terms of its arrival as well as its aesthetic character.

In “Political Aesthetics: A Philosophical Reflection,” for instance, Carsten Friberg analyses the appearance of political elements and structures in everyday life through the lens of an aesthetic education. Following Alexander Baumgarten, aesthetics here is taken as an active process of sensorial cognition. Rather than limiting aesthetics to an object- or art-orientated notion, Friberg acknowledges the influences exercised on us by people and the environment: historical forms, cultural factors and changes in human existence are experienced aesthetically. How we relate to and are subject to such influences exercised on us (both consciously and unconsciously) have consequences for our relation to the world. The political significance and implications of this are illustrated through examples which explore, amongst other things, our perception of privacy, gender, and our wants and desires. Friberg relates this concept of aesthetics to an understanding of education where *how* we perceive is perhaps more fundamental than *what* we perceive. Drawing on a range of philosophical and theoretical traditions, Friberg suggests that aesthetics is a key discipline for characterizing the training of our perception and for the importance of becoming aware of elements of power embedded in this training of our perception—which he calls political aesthetics.

In the article, “War Monuments as Vehicles of Memory and Activators of Social Actions,” Tomasz Ferenc calls attention to the dormant power of war monuments by showcasing several occurrences where their controversial nature has empowered social activity. Placed in our shared landscape, war monuments, as material artefacts, not only capture collective memory but they also function for collective memory transformation. Forming thus an experienced continuity in time, war monuments manifest the politics of memory, an appearance that Ferenc also sees as a powerful tool in developing the culture of un-war. Ferenc analyses the war memorials of Hamburg and their storied histories as controversial and contested sites in order to examine the contemporary function of monuments, the rise of anti-monuments, and the challenge in destroying the existing ideologies of war-monuments.

Meanwhile, in “Synthesizing Solutions: An exploration of the modern relevance of socialist design principles through the medium of plastics,” Aniruddha Gupte examines the ideology behind plastic production in the former Communist German Democratic Republic in an effort to consider an alternative approach for contemporary plastics production, one that embraces last-



ing durability and reuse instead of single-use products and strategies of planned obsolescence. The question here is whether socialist design ideologies of the past are viable choices for sustainable design now. To answer this, Gupte analyses our contemporary relationship to plastic in contrast to that of the socialist republic and the politics inherent in these relationships, including ideological, economical, and aesthetic. Looking at the design philosophy of the GDR, Gupte draws parallels to the strategies that contemporary researchers highlight as necessary to improving the lifespan of products, and draws optimism from the rapidly changing means of production in terms of 3D printers, collaborative production, and the spread of information.

Finally, in her article, “The Power of the Gift: A Perspective of Political Aesthetics,” Elisabetta Di Stefano examines the relationship among individuals in a public space as the site of political potentiality. To do this, she examines Marcel Mauss’ concept of the gift, and its philosophical implications in relation to artistic practices that engage people to come together in shared activity and conviviality. The gift, she argues, is at root in relational art. It retrieves the platonic meaning of care for others and becomes an instrument of co-operation and social cohesion. In this way, these art forms open up the possibility of encountering other traditions, perspectives, and ideas. As a result, these art forms produce transformations and generate new communities. Thus, Stefano claims, the concept of the gift becomes a key element of what she calls political aesthetics. Here, Stefano weaves together relational notions of aesthetics found in Gernot Böhme’s articulation of atmospheres, Alexander Baumgarten’s emphasis on sensitive knowledge and aesthetics as education, and Nicolas Bourriaud’s emphasis on the participatory nature of art together in order to link up with the Aristotelian idea that relationships, among people, and things, are the foundation of politics.

*The editors would like to thank everyone who contributed to making the Appearances of the Political study circle a warm, welcoming, and stimulating place to challenge ourselves and each other. We’d especially like to thank Max Ryytänen and Carsten Friberg for initiating these conversations and relationships and the Nordic Summer University for hosting them. We’d also like to thank the co-organizers, Laine Kristberga, Noora Korpelainen, and Raine Aiava.*

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1 See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 13.

2 Nordic Summer University (accessed May 31, 2019), <http://nordic.university>.