POPULAR INQUIRY

The Journal of Kitsch, Camp and Mass Culture

Volume 1 / 2019

Noora-Helena Korpelainen, Olivia Glasser, and Emily Aiava (Eds.):
APPEARANCES OF THE POLITICAL ANTHOLOGY

THE POWER OF THE GIFT: A PERSPECTIVE OF POLITICAL AESTHETICS

Elisabetta Di Stefano

University of Palermo, elisabetta.distefano@unipa.it

THE POWER OF THE GIFT: A PERSPECTIVE OF POLITICAL AESTHETICS

Elisabetta Di Stefano

> It is evident that the city belongs to the class of things that exist by nature, and that man is by nature a political animal. [. . .] For if the individual is not self-sufficient when he is isolated he will stand in the same relation to the whole as other parts do to their wholes. The man who is isolated, who is unable to share in the benefits of political association, or has no need to share because he is already self-sufficient, is no part of the city, and must therefore be either a beast or a god. There is therefore a natural impulse in all men towards an association of this sort.[1]

1. Introduction

Guided by this Aristotelian premise, I would like to dwell on the relevance of a relationship among individuals as the foundation of a civil society and the building of a political space. According to the Greek philosopher, each individual is not self-sufficient when he is isolated. In the same way that a part works in relation to the whole organism, so each individual interacts with others, sharing in the benefits of a political association. Following the Aristotelian perspective, the relationship among people acquires a political value in reference to the Greek word *polis* (city). Consequently, the adjective "political" indicates an idea wider than usually acknowledged and may refer to space, objects, and overall relationships among people. According to the natural model originally advocated by Aristotle, the urban space acquires a political value because it turns into a place for sharing and cooperation. When speaking about urban space, I'm not referring to measurable, physical space, but rather to a perceived, emotional space. Both natural and man-made environments can be said to lift or oppress people; they can be cold, bright, cheerful, or sober and convey a repelling or welcoming atmosphere. As Gernot Böhme has pointed out,

the primary content of the sensed are not things and their properties (shape, colour, etc.), but rather the relationships between things themselves and with the perceiving subject. The German philosopher uses the words "atmospheric space" to express these relationships, and this idea is a fundamental element of a "new aesthetics," one which he has proposed in making reference to the etymological meaning of *aisthesis* (perception).[2]

Following both the perspectives of Aristotle and Böhme, I will bring forward the relevance of a relationship among individuals in a public space and show how relationships acquire a political and aesthetic value. To do this, I will use the notion of the gift, as since very early in history, political and commercial relationships among populations were set forth by the exchange of gifts. After pointing out the anthropological concept of the gift and its importance in everyday life, I will dwell on how relational art worked with the concept of the gift to create a social environment in which people come together to participate in a shared activity. Finally, I will try to demonstrate how the concept of the gift becomes a key element of political aesthetics, here understood differently to that proposed by Crispin Sartwell.[3]

2. The Concept of the Gift and Its Political Value

Starting with Marcel Mauss' important essay *Essai sur le don* (1923–24), the practice of gifting has been the object of ethno-anthropological studies as the inceptive moment of social systems in archaic cultures, where gifting was used to establish relationships. According to Mauss, a soul (*hau*) lies in the gifted objects, which binds them to the giver. In virtue of this soul, every object tends to return to the giver in the form of other gifts, thus establishing an obligation between receiving and reciprocating.[4] For this reason a gift has not only a material value, of an aesthetic and economical kind, but it acquires a performative value. It is this spirit which makes sure that the object does not lie inert, but triggers an exchange and establishes a bond.

This logic can also be detected in our daily life, even if in different ways to those pointed out by Marcel Mauss. In archaic societies gift-giving was used to make political alliances, and still is today; when rulers of countries meet, they exchange gifts to provide a symbolic evidence to their agreements. However, in our contemporary society shaped by frenetic rhythms, where time is a precious and rare asset, to spontaneously give one's time to others becomes the greatest gift. Following this perspective, Jacques T. Godbout finds the spirit of the gift in social services offered by volunteers (e.g. helping groups such as the young, elderly, or poor people) which often make up for the shortcomings of public and political institutions.[5] This is why Alain Caillé claims that "the paradigm of the gift" is a foundation of our contemporary society, and goes on to define what he calls a "bond value," the social relationship produced by gifting

goods and services through volunteering activities. According to him, this bond value can be added to classical economy values, that is to say, to use value (connected to our needs and satisfaction) and exchange value (e.g. goods and services one can buy).[6]

The idea that a gift can be a way to overcome shortcomings originates from Plato's dialogue *The Statesman*.[7] According to the myth narrated by Plato, there was a time when the gods decided not to take care of man anymore, or provide them with any guidance or support. So the gods left man alone without any protection, means, or resources to live among ferocious beasts, to the peril of his life. However, before abandoning him, they gave him fire, arts, and education so as to allow man to take care of himself autonomously.[8] In Plato's definition, politics is the art of taking care of mankind, and originates from a gift.[9] It comes from the gods' compassionate action in response to man's weaknesses. Following Plato, we can give a political value to the gift when taken as a form of service spontaneously offered to a community. In this regard, the idea of the political emerges as care for others and as the space for relational and social construction.

In addition to fire, the gods, in the Platonic myth, gave men the arts, considered to be an educational and political tool. Of course, the Greek philosopher referred here to an ancient and wide notion of art, including most importantly what we would today categorize as crafts and was understood as having the ability to improve life. During the 18th century, a modern system of fine arts was born, further developed by the Romantic philosophers (Sulzer, Hegel, Schelling);[10] here the arts were understood as providing pleasure and contemplation. Pragmatic goals were extraneous to the eighteenth century system of art, but they can sometimes be present in contemporary artistic projects based on bodily movement and co-participation between actor and audience. Consequently, here it could be useful to analyse some of these art forms, especially those focusing on the concept of the gift, in order to understand how they can acquire a political meaning.

3. Performing Arts Based on the Concept of the Gift and Celebration

The concept of the gift has inspired several artistic events, which hybridize aesthetics and anthropology. In Western culture a gift belongs to an extraordinary time of celebration. For this reason, the idea of celebration could be considered as another interpretative tool with which to analyse some performances involving people in a collective and shared action. Focusing on the presented anthropological notions, I will analyse how these artistic practices are able to trigger a transformation or, better to say, a new perception of the performed space or the performers involved in it. Doing so, they can acquire a political value.

These artistic experimentations, based on the concept of the gift, are connected to what Nicolas Bourriaud has defined as "relational aesthetics."[11] They do not hinge upon the work of art traditionally understood as an expression of creativity or as a material product, but rather on an event taking place "here and now." As Bourriaud highlighted, relational art launched a new connection between a work of art and its audience, in which the viewer becomes an actor themselves. Consequently, a work of art is no longer an end in itself (that is, the production of a discrete object) but is rather a means to an end, this being understood as an event ensuing from the co-participation between the author and the audience.

Some of these artistic interventions take over a space of the web, often placing themselves beyond the institutional borders of the art world. One could here refer to Net Art and its theory and practice as an activity based on sharing. Open-source software and browsers have been especially made to enable co-participated works. It is not by chance that people have used the term "gift-economy" to talk about the internet and new forms of technology revolving around free sharing and collective creativity.[12] Using similar dynamics, site-specific performances which seek to provoke an emotional and bodily involvement of the viewer can draw in not only those who are interested in participating, but also the random passer-by. As a consequence, bystanders often cannot remain passive but are driven to act, and in so doing experience a transformation. There is of course the question of to what extent passers-by can become involved unexpectedly in art-works and to what degree this relies on their possession of "cultural capital."[13]

The German scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte has highlighted the transformative power of performance by focusing on some key concepts such as body experience, the exchange of roles between actors and spectators, the idea of "event" and its ritual meaning. In her opinion, the concept of performance should be taken as a "social play," always produced differently, entailing the interaction between performers and audience. According to Fischer-Lichte, the aesthetic experience is a "threshold" experience. It is able to transform those who are involved in it through bodily movement and multisensorial stimulation in an emotional space. To emphasise the liminal condition of such an experience the German scholar describes it as an "infection," a word that refers to a transitional stage between health and illness.[14] We could compare this "threshold" experience to the liminal state that, according to the ethnographer Arnold van Gennep, qualifies the "rites of passage."[15] These rites function by ritually marking the transition from one group or social state to another (e.g. a marital status or a hierarchical position). Like in a rite of passage, the transformation that happens in a performance is not a physical metamorphosis. The goal of these events is "[. . .] not necessarily to generate 'Change' with a

capital C, but to create unexpected situations, building unforeseen relations, unconventional and unprecedented associations and communities."[16]

Fischer-Lichte's theoretical lens is useful to explain how some artistic events that engage the audience in a collective action transform the space or the people themselves. One could refer to the work by the Belgian artist, Francis Alÿs, *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002), in which he engaged about 500 people in Lima to move a sand dune with a shovel.[17] This performance could be seen as a waste of labor because the work lacked real value or goal in a pragmatic sense. However, it had a symbolic meaning. Recalling Jesus Christ's words,[18] the title (*When Faith Moves Mountains*) bestows value on the power of a collective action, able to provoke an unexpected change. In this performance not only actors but participants offer their work as a gift, becoming the cornerstone of the artwork. Similarly, some of Félix González-Torres' artistic installations—on which I will dwell later—include an element of a gift or focus on a collective action that provoke an unexpected event. Doing so, they break from routine and entail the sharing of joy and freedom, according to an idea of a celebration.

Before continuing with these artistic examples I will first attempt to clarify this anthropological idea of celebration. Each celebration qualifies as a complex phenomenon in terms of characteristics and types (e.g. religious, secular, urban, rural, private, etc.) Consequently, attempts to provide a definition of the celebration fail to fully account for its semantic richness. However, Sigmund Freud remarks that the essence of celebration is connected to the "violation of a prohibition."[19] Excess is part of the very nature of celebration and a joyful mood stems from the possibility to do what is normally forbidden. In this regard, celebration corresponds to a moment which, although circumscribed, subverts the rules and, hence, acquires a transformative power. On the one hand, celebration negates everyday life because it is an alteration of regular activities, on the other hand, it reaffirms it, giving new energy to ordinary practices. Celebration is a communitarian experience, producing an enhancement of vital energy, the effects of which extend to normal society. For all these reasons, beside the notion of a gift, the idea of celebration could be another interpretative tool to understand some contemporary art projects of a relational and interactive kind, which find their distinctive features in the violation of what is sacred—here understood as a distant and untouchable work of art.

By producing a mixture of the sacred and profane, some art installations sway between the "high" dimension of art and the "low" dimension of entertainment. One could refer here to works by González-Torres, in which spectators can take away sheets of paper or sweets as a souvenir or a gift. According to Bourriaud, "González-Torres' art thus gives pride of place to the negotiation and construction of a cohabitation."[20] It is probably no coincidence that, after working

for some time on the notion of a gift, in 1993 González-Torres devised an installation reproducing the atmosphere of a dancing party. In *Untitled (Arena)* he created an emotional space, surrounded by lights, where people were invited to listen to music with headphones and dance. Encouraging strangers to share a place and enjoy themselves together, this installation produced new relationships among people. As González-Torres pointed out, he takes something banal (printed paper, sweets) and creates "from it something out of the ordinary," thus giving an "ordinary object and situation a new meaning."[21] Taking in to account my earlier discussions on the idea of a gift or a dance, works such as Untitled (Placebo) and Untitled (Arena) thus no longer deal with the everyday but with celebration.

The idea of celebration is also connected to some *Video and Sensitive Environments* works of the Italian group Studio Azzurro. Based on improvisation and interaction, these sometimes take place in multi-sensorial environments, where sound, light, images, and bodies mix together. Body movement and active participation of the audience are key to the development of a collective aesthetic experience. An example is *Tables, Why Do These Hands Touch Me?* (1995). In this interactive installation images are projected onto wooden tables in order to attract the viewer in to touching their surfaces. On touching them the images produce visual and audio reactions (e.g. the flame of a candle goes out; a sleeping woman turns over moaning). Consequently, the viewers are amused by these surprising reactions to their contact. Art is thus rescued from a traditional exchange system based on the exposition, purchasing, and collecting of art—and is redistributed among communities as a public resource to be shared and enjoyed freely. This is the reason why, according to Paolo Rosa (one member of the Studio Azzurro), these practices can be understood as a dona(c)tion (e.g. as gift giving).[22]

Rirkrit Tiravanija's works can also be found within the atmosphere of celebrations and gifts. As Roger Sansi points out, his "first shows basically consisted in cooking meals for the people who visited the gallery. The aim was to bring people together, participating in a meal."[23] Sharing a meal is a social—and also ritual—experience. "For Tiravanija, 'it is not what you see that is important but what takes place between people.' Or in other words, his aim is to *do* something with art beyond the art object itself."[24] Consequently, the artist becomes a "creator of atmosphere" instead of actual objects. His goal is to produce an emotional space and provide situations of exchange. In this way, art becomes a medium in which the daily sharing of a meal is transfigured into an extraordinary experience.

Unlike the previous examples situated in exhibition spaces, I will finally refer to some participatory events which took place in a popular and marginal area called Danisinni, in Palermo (Italy) during the itinerant biennial festival of contemporary art, *Manifesta 12*, in 2018.

One example is the X=Danisinni project, in which artists were asked to try and capture the soul of the Danisinni area in dialogue with the locals. At first looked upon with suspicion, the artists were warmly welcomed by the residents once they got to know each other, leading to their direct involvement in performances. At first looked upon with suspicion, the artists were warmly welcomed by the residents once they got to know each other. Among the artistic installations of the *X=Danisinni* project I can mention the interactive installation, *Fishing Arancine*, which was hosted by a local tavern, where visitors could insert a coin into a slot machine to win a free *arancina* made by the owner, Cocò. This reminds us of fun and play, similar to the idea of a gift.

Another participatory project in *Manifesta 12*, developed in collaboration with the Teatro Massimo, brought to the stage a short version of Carlo Donizetti's *Elisir d'amore*, the choral parts of which were performed by some women from the Danisinni quarter after months of rehearsal with professional singers. The performance produced a great emotional impact, as it took place in an unusual "atmospheric space"—according to Böhme's theory of atmospheres—full of contrasting sensorial stimuli. The stage in question was not the prestigious Teatro Massimo, nor any public area, but the so-called Vegetable Garden of the Danisinni. The audience, made up of the locals and some visitors, saw the opera surrounded by vegetable patches and animal farms, filling the air with pastoral scents. Nevertheless, the success of this artistic operation is not necessarily linked to the final result of the show, but rather to the process, in other words the rehearsal period when the residents, artists and professional opera singers worked together, and developed an unprecedented aesthetic experience.

Triggering new experiences of a relational and sensitive kind, these artistic practices could acquire a political value. Like Roger Sansi points out, the adjective "political" must not be understood "[. . .] just in the sense of 'denouncing' or 'representing' social and political issues through visual media, film or photography."[25] The goal of these works is "to produce events with the participation of people from different backgrounds, who may have a stake or something to say about these very issues, from immigrants to elderly people to international scholars."[26] In virtue of the exchanging of gifts and the co-participation of actors and audience, these art forms open up the possibility of encountering and sharing with other cultures, traditions, styles of life, producing new relationships and creating the bond value that Alain Caillé talked about.[27] As a result, these art forms produce a transformation, generating new alliances and communities and promoting inclusion. Doing so, they step into the realm of political aesthetics.

The expression "political aesthetics" has not yet received a clear definition. While choosing it for the title of one of his essays, Crispin Sartwell provided the following interpretation: "[. . .] all politics is aesthetic; at their heart political ideologies, systems, and constitutions

are aesthetic systems, multimedia artistic environments."[28] Such a definition, however, shows some weaknesses, inasmuch as it interprets aesthetics as the romantic tradition did, in other words as "[. . .] a subdiscipline of philosophy that is concerned [. . .] with four main questions (as well as many ancillary ones): the nature of art; aesthetic values, especially beauty and sublimity; standards of taste and aesthetic assessment; and mimesis or representation."[29] However, we could give a different meaning to the name of this field of studies if we retrieve the aesthetics' origins in the 18th century when this discipline was founded by Alexander Baumgarten as the science of sensitive knowledge. Doing so, we can focus on the key role of sensibility and its cognitive and educational value. Investigating the appearances of the political in an emotional space, we can give a new basis to political aesthetics.

Within this framework, the gift retrieves the platonic meaning of care for others and becomes an instrument of co-operation and social cohesion, in line with the previously presented anthropological interpretations (Caillé-Godbout). Taking into account the inefficiency of contemporary democracies and the political system, often distant from the real needs of its citizens, the spirit of the gift provides the possibility to enhance social values in an attempt to create a better world.

4. Conclusive Remarks

Following the idea of the political, understood as a result of a relationship among individuals (Aristotle), and as the art of taking care of mankind (Plato), and following the idea of aesthetics as a theory of perception (Baumgarten), political aesthetics should, as a field of studies, focus on some transformations happening in an atmospheric space (Böhme) that is emotional and relational. It should study how people can produce and perceive a transformation at the same time and how a collaboration among people can change the world, or at least, their relation to the world. Within this theoretical framework, the anthropological concept of the gift acquires evidence, inasmuch as in everyday life the notion of the gift tries to overcome the shortcomings of political institutions through a voluntary social service, thus producing a bond value. However, performing arts can also produce the same value when based on the exchange of a gift. Like a celebration, they provide a break from ordinary life and open us up to encountering and sharing with others. These performances are able to unveil the hidden realities of existing relationships as well as political and social issues (labor, social relationships, immigration, ecology, gender roles, racism, etc.). Doing so, they can help to imagine new social structures, more inclusive and open to the culture of friendship.

1 Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Ernest Barker, introduction and notes by R. F. Stalley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 1253a: 10–11.

2 Gernot Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics," *Thesis eleven*, no. 36 (August 1, 1993): 114: "The new resulting aesthetics is concerned with the relation between environmental qualities and human states. This 'and', this in-between, by means of which environmental qualities and states are related, is atmosphere." According to Böhme, the idea of atmosphere is the basis of a 'new aesthetics' understood as a theory of perception: "The new aesthetics is thus as regards the producers a general theory of aesthetic work, understood as the production of atmospheres. As regards reception it is a theory of perception in the full sense of the term, in which perception is understood as the experience of the presence of persons, objects and environments." (Ibid., 116.) https://doi.org/10.1177/072551369303600107.

3 Crispin Sartwell, *Political Aesthetics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2010).

4 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, 2nd ed., trans. W. D. Halls and foreword by Mary Douglas (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 3. "In Scandinavian civilization, and in a good number of others, exchanges and contracts take place in the form of presents; in theory these are voluntary, in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily." (Ibid.)

5 Jacques T. Godbout (en collaboration avec Alain Caillé), *L'Esprit du don* (Montréal–Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 1992).

6 Alain Caillé, *Anthropologie du don*: *Le Tiers paradigme* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2000).

7 Plato, *Politics* 274 bcd.

8 Plato, *Politics* 274 bcd.

9 Plato, *Politics* 276c.

10 Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts: A study in the History of Aesthetics," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, part 1, vol. 12, no. 4 (October 1951), 496–527; *Journal of the History of Ideas*, part 2, vol. 13, no. 1 (January 1952), 17–46.

11 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Presses du réel, 1998).

12 Richard Barbrook, "The High-Tech Gift Economy" (1998) in *Readme! filtered by Nettime: ASCII Culture and the Revenge of Knowledge*, ed. Josephine Bosma et al. (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Autonomedia, 1999).

13 Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital" (1983), in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education,* ed. John G. Richardson, (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1986).

14 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, trans. Saskya Iris Jain (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).

15 Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960).

16 Roger Sansi, *Art, Anthropology and the Gift* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 2.

17 *When Faith Moves Mountains* was performed on the occasion of the third edition of the Ibero-American Biennial of Lima and it acquired a strong political connotation, due to the totalitarian repression of President Alberto Fujimori.

18 Mark 11:22–24.

19 Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (London and New York: Routledge, 1919).

20 Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 56–57.

21 See Tim Rollins, "Felix González-Torres (interview)," in *Between Artists: Twelve Contemporary American Artists Interview Twelve Contemporary American Artists,* ed. L. Barnes, M. Barosh, W.S. Bartman, and R. Sappington (Los Angeles: ART Press, 1996), 92, quoted by Roger Sansi, *Art, Anthropology and the Gift*, 9.

22 Andrea Balzola and Paolo Rosa, *L'arte fuori di sé* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2011), 153.

23 Sansi, *Art, Anthropology and the Gift*, 9–10.

24 Sansi, *Art, Anthropology and the Gift,* 10, emphasis in the original.

25 Sansi, *Art, Anthropology and the Gift*, 2.

26 Sansi, *Art, Anthropology and the Gift*, 2.

27 Caillé, *Anthropologie du don*.

28 Sartwell, *Political Aesthetics*, 1. "The political 'content' of an ideology can be understood in large measure actually to be—to be identical with—its formal and stylistic aspects. It's not that a political ideology or movement gets tricked out in a manipulative set of symbols or design tropes; it's that an ideology is an aesthetic system, and this is what moves or fails to move people, attracts their loyalty or repugnance, moves them to act or to apathy. But the political function of the arts—including various crafts and design practices—is not merely a matter of manipulation and affect: the aesthetic expressions of a regime or of the resistance to a regime are central also to the cognitive content and concrete effects of political systems." (Ibid.)

29 Sartwell, *Political Aesthetics*, 4–5.