WHEN THE ARTWORK KNOWS MORE THAN WE DO: ON POLITICAL ART AND THE POWER OF IMAGES

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Los Filántropos, 2026, óleo sobre lienzo, 180 x 123 cm por Renaud Suanez. Encargado por Prytanee LLC Art Gallery, una galería creada por la artista Núria Güell para su nuevo proyecto Arte Político Degenerado. Conexión Epstein-Lang, Bienal de Lyon, 2026.

> That the totality of artistic practice does not end up in the arms of culture, this is the task to which our time entrusts us.
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> **Núria Güell**

Why is it so difficult today to define political art [1] at a moment when almost anything can be presented as political and, at the same time, so few practices seem capable of altering the conditions of the common?

Unlike other regimes, neoliberalism does not need to censor criticism if it can incorporate it into its own circuits and turn it into discourse, style or cultural value. Laura Trafí-Prats describes this process by embodying it in the character from the washing-up liquid advertisement, 'Don Limpio': a system capable of absorbing dissent and, without apparent effort, wiping away any stain that might disturb its surface [2]. It is a logic that we now recognise in the various forms of washing, through which institutions and companies incorporate the languages of critique in order to neutralise their transformative power. Thus, difference is put on display, transgression is programmed and conflict becomes legible within institutions that administer it without necessarily altering their own conditions of operation. Art can continue to appear radical while simultaneously losing part of its capacity to produce political friction.

This is why, for decades, neoliberalism has succeeded in imposing not only an economic model but also a kind of closure of the imagination: the feeling that there is no alternative. And the cultural field has quickly learned to survive within that defeat. Critique has become curatorial language, transgression a commodity, and radicalism a style perfectly manageable by museums, markets and institutions.

This does not mean, however, that cultural institutions are homogeneous spaces or completely functional to the neoliberal order. They have also been transformed by the demands of social movements and feminist, anti-racist, decolonial and LGTBIQ+ collectives, which have questioned their programmes, collections, forms of representation and their own labour structures. The problem is that these transformations tend to take place partially and contradictorily. Although every institution is a social and historical construction, the result of conflicts, negotiations and relations of force, it often ends up forgetting the contingent nature of its own formation and presenting itself as a stable and necessary structure. This is where institutional rigidity and conservatism emerge: not so much from an abstract inability to change, but because any profound transformation may call established hierarchies, privileges and forms of authority into question. This is why certain demands find a place in institutional programming or discourse, while material conditions and mechanisms of legitimisation remain virtually intact.

And while these institutions remain sites of dispute, negotiating how far they are willing to transform themselves and how far they prefer to preserve their inertia, the political context outside them has become increasingly violent and saturated. We are witnessing the incessant circulation of images of death, war and genocide, while migration is depicted by capitalist and far-right discourses as a threat, invasion and disorder. In this context, the fundamental question concerns how to intervene in a visual regime capable of normalising genocide, managing fear and rendering certain lives expendable.

Today, in the face of the advance of new authoritarian and fascist forms, the question of political art once again acquires a radical urgency. But it is not enough to fill artworks with the right slogans or to represent the conflicts taking place beyond them. The question is more brutal: what can art do when political imagination is being captured, blocked and sedated? What forms can break the feeling that this present is the only one possible? What images, languages and processes can keep open and sharpened what power

seeks to close down? Because, if history shows us anything, it is that artistic practice acquires a particular power precisely when the 'established order' attempts to reduce the field of possibility. If art is to have a political function, perhaps it begins there: not by representing resistance, but by becoming one of its sites.

For me, political art is that which modifies the conditions from which a society can imagine itself, recognise its conflicts and conceive different possibilities for organising common life.
Even so, I find it difficult to think about political art without first pausing over the political dimension of images. Not only because much of our experience of the world is mediated by them, but because images participate in the construction of that reality, in our collective imaginaries and in the processes through which we constitute ourselves as subjects.
From here, I am interested in reclaiming images as a place from which to think about the world. A place that continues to generate a certain mistrust, precisely because images have been and continue to be used to construct discourses, justify hegemonies, produce identifications or establish particular ways of understanding reality. But the fact that an image participates in an ideological order does not mean that it can be completely reduced to that order.

This seems fundamental to me. If images are places for thought, it is because not everything in them can be reduced to lies, manipulation or illusion. Even those that obey a particular social, political or economic order can, in some way, expose it. They can reveal something of the reality of which they bear witness and, at the same time, show the symptoms that call that very reality into question.

Images are also material bodies. They exist. They endure. They circulate. They pass through different periods and are looked at, used and related to in different ways. In this sense, their force does not simply consist in the fact that their meaning remains open, but in the fact that, as existing material bodies, they persist, transform themselves and affect us in their becoming. They continue always to be there and, in doing so, enter into new relations with other bodies, other times, other discourses and other ways of looking.

An image produced under particular conditions can survive those conditions. It can move away from the place assigned to it and be viewed from another time. Aby Warburg thought this persistence through the concept of Nachleben, the survival of forms, gestures and affects that traverse periods and reappear in new configurations. For Walter Benjamin too, the past does not simply remain deposited in images, waiting to be recovered; it becomes legible when it enters into a particular constellation with the present. This is why I am interested in thinking about the political power of the image through its materiality and a certain capacity for resistance. Not because images are politically resistant by nature, nor because they contain a hidden truth that we have to discover, but because their material existence makes it impossible to reduce them completely to the discourse that sought to appropriate them. Something remains there that persists and can enter into relation in another way.

The ungovernability of images is today a source of inspiration, as well as a field of research that continues to nourish emancipatory projects, grassroots movements and artistic practices seeking to foster networks of affect, desire and transformation that escape what has been established. These are exercises that seek to restore a degree of hope, joy and optimism in the face of the apocalyptic imaginary constantly imposed upon us.

The category 'political art' has served to designate an art that seeks to intervene in reality, denounce particular situations, awaken consciences or make conflicts and relations of power visible. There is in these practices a desire to convince, to denounce or to provoke a taking of a position.

This is a conception of political art closely linked to the ideological sphere. The artwork makes a situation visible, proposes an interpretation and, at the same time, seeks to politically activate the viewer. But, unlike propaganda, art can preserve a space of

agency for the person looking. There may be an intention to denounce and yet not completely determine what should be thought.

I am interested in this idea because it allows us to recognise the historical importance of committed art without automatically identifying the political with the explicit articulation of a message. Art that denounces violence, injustice or inequality can be political, but the political dimension of art probably does not end there. As other texts on this blog have already suggested, there is also a problem in the relationship between message and form: not every committed artwork is necessarily interesting in formal terms, nor does the soundness of a political position in itself guarantee the power of an artwork.

In this sense, my engagement with Núria Güell's work has allowed me to think about the concept differently. What I have learned from her practice is the possibility of a political art whose commitment lies not only in the artist's prior ideological position, but also in a commitment to the artistic object itself and to the process it sets in motion. The research, relationships, displacements and consequences generated by that process form part of the artwork before it takes on a specific exhibition format. The display, the way in which all of this will ultimately be shared, shown or put into circulation, comes afterwards.

The artistic object becomes the place from which to explore a question, activate a desire to know, or even not to know, and sustain an investigation without fully anticipating its results. Taking this question seriously means accepting that the process may exceed our initial intentions and lead us towards unforeseen places.

This difference seems important to me. If the answer is completely decided before the artwork begins, art risks functioning merely as an illustration of a political position or an exercise in unmasking. By contrast, when the commitment is to the question, even to what the question leaves unsaid, the artistic process can become a form of radical research. The artist acts, bringing bodies, institutions, norms, discourses and people into relation, and through this assemblage sets in motion an imaginative machinery capable of producing knowledge beyond established frameworks.

Artistic practice belongs to whoever works on it. The idea of creation as an 'immanent brilliant idea' has already been dismantled as an interested construction. To imagine, experiment and create is a matter of touch, matter and relation. Grasping the world is always a matter of the body, of putting the body into it. In this sense, it is significant how Núria Güell speaks of the people with whom she works: not as collaborators, but as accomplices. The difference is not minor. Complicity implies that those who participate in the process do not occupy an external or merely instrumental position; they are there because something of what is at stake also affects, addresses or moves them. The artwork is thus constructed through a shared, though not necessarily symmetrical, involvement between bodies, interests, desires and risks.

The political emerges, then, in what the artwork makes it possible to imagine and think. Perhaps this is why I am interested in restoring or expanding the concept of political art. Not in order to abandon denunciatory art or explicitly committed art, but to understand that the politics of art entails a taking of a position, a commitment and a risk that do not lie in the realm of what is predetermined (subject, ideology, will, intention), but in the place of what is to come (object, openness, contingency, desire). The artwork is not here a passive support for meanings decided in advance. Its materiality intervenes, resists, diverts and participates in producing what may come to be imagined and thought. The artistic object is what carries both the artist and the viewers along. The object actively participates in this construction of meaning, and only by attending to its agency can we move through the spectre of an exhausted reality and a saturated sensibility, increasingly impoverished in fantasies capable of opening other horizons of possibility.

Perhaps the political art I want to evoke here refers to a practice understood as imaginative research, committed to refusing to accept that what we see exhausts what exists. An art capable of challenging even the desires and intuitions of the person who initiates it, of

allowing itself to be affected by what it encounters, and of recognising in matter, bodies and relationships not mere means, but allies in the production of other possibilities.

In the face of the modes of production that organise and regulate our lives, artistic practices can experiment with different forms of relation, perception and existence. Not because they stand outside those structures, but because they can provisionally open spaces in which to experiment with other ways of doing and being together; something close to what Foucault called the 'arts of existence': practices through which life itself can become a field of elaboration, transformation and invention.

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[1] Political art can be described as an artistic category defined less by a particular visual style than by its critical, ideological or social intention. It uses art to question relations of power, denounce injustices, represent social conflicts or intervene in public debates. This category has served, particularly since the twentieth century, to identify an art explicitly linked to the political commitment of those who produce it.

[2] The text 'De la cultura feminista en la institución arte', written by Laura Trafí-Prats and published in 2012 in volume 7 of the *Desacuerdos* collection, analyses the tensions and relationships between feminist cultural practices and the structures of art institutions in Spain.

Júlia Lull Sanz is a lecturer, researcher and curator specialising in image theory and visual culture. She holds a PhD in Art History from the University of Barcelona (Cum Laude) and is a lecturer in the Department of Humanities at Pompeu Fabra University, where she researches and teaches aesthetics, visual culture and the relationship between art and politics. Her work explores processes of subjectivation and the relationship between image, body and desire from a perspective that brings together aesthetics, psychoanalysis and new materialisms, with particular attention to the capacity of images to produce social imaginaries, forms of collective resistance and critical methodologies for visual analysis.
She is the author of *Ar(t)queología de una resistencia. La primera imagen de mujer* (Ediciones Bellaterra, 2024) and *La histeria del arte. Cuerpos, síntomas y resistencia de las imágenes* (Tirant lo Blanch, 2025), which was nominated for the ACCA Awards for Best Research Essay, as well as more than fifteen specialised articles and book chapters. Alongside her academic work, she has developed a number of curatorial projects at institutions including the CCCB, the National Archaeological Museum and the LGTBI Centre of Barcelona, focusing on memory, the body, dissidence and the politics of representation. Since 2012, she has been part of the coordinating team of FemArt and is the artistic director of UIIal. Festival de Fotografia Incisiva de Barcelona, platforms through which she brings together artistic creation, research, pedagogy and engagement with social movements.
Alongside her academic and curatorial career, she has specialised in mediation projects through art, visual culture and critical pedagogy, developed across numerous heritage and arts institutions. Her work in this field incorporates a transfeminist perspective and promotes collective forms of thinking, learning and creation.

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