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BOOK REVIEW

Aesthetics and Radical Politics

GRINDON, Gavin. 2008.
Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008. pp. 1–138.
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A comprehensive summary of papers contained in this book can be found in its Introduction (pp. xii–xv), and I have nothing new to add to that excellent overview. I will focus instead on some issues that can be derived from discussions made in some (or most) of the articles in the book – for example, why are the activities of certain radical socio-political movements considered as "aesthetics", and do we simply approach them from the aesthetic perspective or consider them as "artworks".

Even though this book is a collection of papers from a conference, it is not wrong to look for (or insist on) a unifying characteristic that binds it into a coherent whole. This unifying feature is often provided in the title of the book or conference. Yet this title can be read in two ways. Someone who believes there is no unifying feature in the book could interpret *Aesthetic and Radical Politics* as a simple conjunction of "aesthetics" and "radical politics" – i.e. they can be seen as two unrelated issues that happen to be discussed in the same work (or the same conference). But this is highly unlikely; no one would bring together two unrelated themes in a single conference or book. And so one must somehow relate these two key concepts in the title – and this relation could itself be the binding characteristic in the book. The fact that there must be some strong relation between "aesthetics" and "radical politics" can be found in Grindon's introduction (p. vii):

> Within the realm of aesthetics, the situation is particularly that – as the case studies presented by the articles in this volume demonstrate – this movement (of critical young scholars) often seeks to aestheticise politics, or rather, to treat the aesthetic as a directly political terrain …

From Grindon's claim (above) as well as papers in the book, it is still not clear how these young scholars seek to "aestheticise politics". The confusion here lies in the difference between considering an activity as "art" or simply viewing it from the aesthetic perspective. Any object or activity can be approached from the aesthetic perspective, but this does not make it an art object or art activity. We

can admire the aesthetic beauty of the Space Shuttle, or a football match, without at the same time treating these things as works of art in the strict sense. On the other hand, a clear-cut case of art (e.g. Michelangelo's *David*, or an activity performed by a conceptual artist) will demand that we adopt an aesthetic approach when criticising or commenting on it – which we need not do in relation to the Space Shuttle or football match. As to those who "seek to aestheticise politics" (see quotation above) it is often unclear whether they choose only to approach such activities from the aesthetic perspective (in the same way that we can approach a gymnastics display from the aesthetic angle), or consider them as clear-cut cases of art (or art-activity).

If we treat all the activities described in *Aesthetics and Radical Politics* as art (or art activity), then we will face the problem that some of those activities (e.g. the Hamburg Umsonst activism described by Kanngeiser, or the Soma experiments described by Goia, or the discussion on anarchism in Gordon's work, etc.) are either not art per se, or have yet to be accepted by the artworld as "art" (I employ the word "artworld" in the same manner as Arthur Danto). I will elaborate on this a little later. On the other hand, if we regard this book as simply employing the aesthetic approach to viewing and discussing certain socio-political activities, then it must explain why it employs this approach to both activities that are clearly not art as well as those which are clear-cut cases of art or art activity (e.g. novelist Alexander Trocchi's *Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds*, p. 70–71, or even Joseph Beuy's action "How to explain pictures to a dead hare" which at least was conducted in an art context, i.e. a gallery in New York, see p. 46) – or at least the artworld would have no difficulty accepting these as art. If the aim is to show that the aesthetic approach can be employed for viewing radical socio-political activities, then incorporating clear cases of art activity will serve no purpose, as they are meant to be appreciated from the aesthetic angle anyway.

One must now say that this book cannot be (simply) an attempt to view certain radical political activities from the aesthetic perspective. The fact that both clear cases of art (e.g. Trocchi's works) as well as questionable cases (e.g. the Hamburg Umsonst activism) are packaged in the same book already suggests that they are (both) meant to be seen as belonging to the same category – the category of "art". In other words, it may be argued that this book (*Aesthetics and Radical Politics*) wants to be seen as one of the agents which, acting on behalf of the artworld, attempts to confer on those political activities (mentioned in the book) the status of candidates for artistic appreciation. In short, this book is an accepted agent (representing the artworld) for legitimising these activities as art (or art activities).

If this interpretation is correct, then I must stress that the attempt of this book (as well as several books that could have made a similar attempt in the past) is not

sufficient to guarantee the status of "artwork" being conferred on these activities. The weakness of the institutional theory of art (as proposed by aestheticians like Danto and Dickie) is its failure to note that sometimes even attempts by agents representing the artworld may not adequately or successfully confer the status of "art" on certain objects or activities. One important feature of art or art activity (note that I call it an important feature rather than a necessary or sufficient condition!) is that the maker intends it to be viewed or appreciated as art – an intention that is absent in many or most radical political activism. Take the case of the Hamburg Umsonst activists (described in Kanngeiser's paper) whose intention was strictly social and political in nature. Kanngeiser has elegantly phrased their intention(s) in the following question: "why should we be denied 'luxuries' just because we don't have the financial resources required to take part?" (p. 6). The slogans of the Umsonst activists also make their intention clear – "everything for everyone", and for free too (see pp. 10 and 12). The intention of the participants is political, social, and economic in nature: to enable poorer segments of society an equal opportunity to enjoy expensive and exclusive facilities–swimming pools, exclusive supermarkets, and other such luxuries (see the introduction, p. xiii). Like the anti-capitalist "Occupy Wall Street" international movement in 2011, the Hamburg Umsonst activists never had intentions or goals that were aesthetic in nature. This is different from the 'ready-mades' of Marcel Duchamp, which were eventually conferred the status of art because the Dadaist's anti-art activity was (intended to be) related to the issue of art – or at least these objects were presented in an art context such as the art museum, etc. The same can be said of Joseph Beuys' innovative actions (p. 46) – but this is not the case with the activities of the Hamburg Umsonst or the "Occupy Wall Street" movements. It is also not the case with the soma exercises (described in Jorge Goia's paper, p. 56–61). The declared aim of soma anarchist therapy is to help participants develop skills for horizontal relationships, in order to resist vertical relationships based on domination by others in everyday life (see pp. 58 and 61). Despite Goia's insistence that soma is a form of "life art", its aim is essentially social and political in nature; and the fact that it was carried out in the conference does not imply it operated within the art context (the conference is an arena for academic discussion and exchange of ideas). Hence, most elements in the artworld will be reluctant to call these exercises art activities.

But what if the artist has declared his intention to have his social (or political) action considered as art? Indeed, unlike the Hamburg Umsonst activists, some radical art movements do proclaim their intention to "aestheticise politics" (a point that was stressed by Grindon in the quotation above). In their paper, Ekstrand and Wallmon (pp. 42–55) stressed that art has taken on a political role, and the works and expressed beliefs of Joseph Beuys were described in the paper to support this point. Beuys believed that art must play the role of transforming society by challenging established values and entrenched habits. Art takes on a

political role or function when it employs creativity to challenge (and break free from) established rules, repressive authorities, and the senile social welfare system (see p. 45 ff). In this use of creativity to transform society, everyone is an artist (p. 50). Indeed Beuys sees society as "one great artistic whole" (p. 45), and the ultimate aim is to make everyone an artist who employs his creativity to bring about the necessary transformation and contribute to the total artwork of the future social order. This simply means that it is less difficult to confer the status of art on Beuys' works (or social actions) than the activities of the Berlin or Hamburg Umsonst activists. Beuys was still operating within the context of art because: (i) many of his social actions (for transforming society) were presented in art galleries, a good example is the action "How do you explain pictures to a dead hare" which was conducted in a New York gallery (p. 46); and (ii) Beuys has explicitly stated that his political actions are art, or aesthetic in nature (i.e. they are meant to be seen as art-activities). This makes his social actions very different from movements like the Hamburg Umsonst activities which have aims that are purely socio-political in nature. But since Beuys considers all socio-political activities to transform society as art, would he not accept the Hamburg Umsonst activism as art? My reply is yes, he would – but there is still a firm distinction between Beuys' beliefs and what the artworld accepts as works of art. The fact that the artworld was ready to accept Beuys' social actions as art (largely because, unlike the Hamburg Umsonst activists, he still operates within the art context) does not imply that it must agree with all his aesthetic beliefs.

It is true Kanngeiser compares certain tactics employed by the Umsonst activists to those of the Situationists (p. 10), but a few similarities do not mean the two activities must be classified in the same manner. Besides, the early phase of Situationist International (SI) was focused on art exhibitions (such as "Industrial Painting" in Turin in 1958, and other such exhibitions in prestigious galleries in 1959) before they branched into political protest activities. Their political actions could have been conducted within the context of art (like Beuys' social actions) which makes it possible for the artworld to accept them as art. Otherwise, it is not impossible for one to accept the early works of SI as art, while rejecting the political actions they engaged in later as non-art (even though they may both stem from SI) – for while the early works were presented as artworks (or at least they were presented in the art context), the political activities that emerge later were not.

The social actions of Beuys raise a serious question: could art activities have dual functions? Could they function both as art-activities as well as political protest actions at the same time? The answer to this question is related to the issue of *autonomy* of art (or *autonomy of the artwork*). Roger Scruton describes autonomy to mean that "we appreciate art not as a means to some end, but as an end in itself" (Scruton, Roger. 1974. *Art and Imagination*, 18. London: Methuen & Co.

Ltd.). He goes on to assert that, "Even if there are examples of works of art– buildings, martial music and jars – that have characteristic functions, in treating them as works of art we do not judge them as means to the fulfillment of these functions" (ibid, p. 18). In fact it is this (treating the art object as independent of its other functions) that distinguishes the aesthetic attitude from the practical, moral, scientific, or political attitudes. Kanngeiser treated the Hamburg Umsonst activists almost primarily from the political and social angles, with little or no attention to the aesthetic perspective. This was because the Umsonst activities were motivated principally by social, economic, and political aims (without any aesthetic role or function to play) – the requirement for art autonomy must therefore rule them out as art. The social actions of Beuys are more complicated. While the artist has declared them as art, they nevertheless still serve the socio-political role (explicitly stated by Beuys) of challenging social norms to transform society. If challenging social norms to transform society is their primary function, would they also have an aesthetic function (and art autonomy guarantees that in judging these social actions as art, we focus only on their aesthetic merits and do not see them as a means to fulfill their socio-political function)? Unfortunately, Beuys would probable say that transforming society is also the aesthetic function of his social actions (after all, transforming society would for him be the main objective of art!). By conflating the political functions of these social actions with the aesthetic, Beuys has effectively destroyed the distinction between the aesthetic and other perspectives (e.g. political or moral perspectives). By considering everyone as an artist, and every action to transform society (or the status-quo) as art, he has literally eliminated the distinction between art and non-art. But there is still a difference between Beuys' view and what the artworld considers as art – it is still possible to judge his social actions from a truly aesthetic perspective (e.g. there was beauty in the way the ideas were expressed, etc.) without its socio-political motive of transforming society. In the same way that we need not necessarily judge an artwork by the artist's (or maker's) criteria, we may choose to assess Beuys' social actions in ways that are different from his prescriptions.

Aesthetics and Radical Politics is certainly a legitimate agent (representing the artworld) for conferring the status of art on certain novel and radical political activities. The views expressed here by certain scholars on the relation between certain activities and aesthetics can be viewed as another attempt to craft an aesthetic theory (or attitude) that can include all the activities described in these papers. However, I must stress here that not all attempts to legitimise certain activities (or objects) as art will be successful. Many elements in the artworld will probably challenge the Berlin and Hamburg Umsonst activities, or the Soma exercises, as art – largely because they were not presented in the context of art (and their objectives are not aesthetic in nature, nor consistent with their presentation as works of art).