

Arts and Politics: A French–American Perspective

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This volume stems from meetings and intellectual exchanges between French and American sociologists and political scientists who have confronted the outcomes of their research on the relationships between art and politics in historically and geographically diverse situations.¹ Following a well-established academic division of labor, especially in France, mobilization, collective action, activism, and politicization are explored by political scientists with their tools and their approaches, while sociologists closely examine with their own instruments the trajectories of artists, creation processes, and social beliefs in the “gift” or “genius” of some and the influence artworks may have on audiences. At the intersection of these two research areas, the connection of artists to politics and social movements, their possible specific forms of protest and engagement, and their aspirations to speaking publicly about social and civic questions receive less attention. However, in diverse and numerous configurations, artists have claimed the legitimacy to intervene in politics, in person, or through their productions. Musicians involved in the American social movements of the 1960s or French writers and filmmakers active during the May 1968 crisis are typical illustrations. More recently, the civic and charitable engagement of music or movie celebrities, as well as the existing links between Hip Hop and political contestation on behalf of socially underprivileged groups, have attracted attention (Garofalo 1992; Meyer and Gamson 1995; Teillet 2003; Faure and Garcia 2005; Van Zoonen 2005). Philosophers and art historians, for their part, have been more

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inclined to conceptualize in normative terms the mission that artists attribute to themselves and are assigned by other actors in the *city*. In a different, nonprescriptive, perspective, we meant to open a space of discussion regarding the relations between artists and politics in a number of empirical situations, varying in time and space: the USA and France here are our privileged fields of investigation.

Our collective perspective is rooted in a double specificity. On the one hand, the originality of our approaches lies in our primary focus on the way in which artists relate to politics and politicization. The coherence of this interrogation is not just a façade: despite the heterogeneity of phenomenal forms taken by the artistic practices explored here, our diverse case studies lean on a shared conceptual foundation: understanding artistic worlds as spaces of activity which have historically become relatively autonomous, *vis-à-vis* the political sphere especially, and which respond to largely specific “rules of the game.” The various art fields do not only constitute places of interaction and interdependence endowed their own dynamics; they are also inhabited by processes of specialization, professionalization, and institutionalization; they have their own hierarchies and their particular judgment authorities (Bourdieu 1996; Becker 1984, in different perspectives). The (direct) political influence on these art spheres has consequently become progressively less tenable and less justifiable; it can be denounced in terms of unacceptable censure (Balasinski 2006). Understanding the modes of artists’ politicization involves paying attention to the rationales, codes, and norms of artistic spaces as they exist and structure the engagement of creators at different moments in history. The contributors to this volume thus primarily attempt to analyze relationships *between* social spheres rather than internal mechanisms organizing specialized artistic games.

In the following articles, the diachronic dimension always remains important. Analyzing the changing interrelations linking these universes and the political field often starts by clarifying the historical transformations at place in the art worlds themselves. By closely examining the new and older forms of confrontations and transactions between art worlds and politics, we question the transformations of the social place of artists, their conditions of public engagement, and the connection between the politicization of artists (and their work) and the proclaimed contemporary “crisis of political legitimacy.” The different lights that the various contributions to this special issue project on the relations between artistic and political spaces can thus complement each other and together provide understanding of a global picture.

On the other hand, as we said earlier, our intention here is clearly comparative. If the confrontation between French and American contexts seems both relevant and scientifically valuable to us, it is because these two societies—despite all the differences which have characterized the construction of the artistic and political spaces in the two countries over the course of time—share significantly similar structuring modes. We are dealing with differentiated social systems made of specialized spaces of activity, tending to self-reference and closeness (Bourdieu 1996; Luhmann 2000; Alexander et al. 2004): this homology of the fundamental organization of social activities provides a solid basis for comparison. In order to be seriously carried through, our project must be firmly rooted in the empirical. In addition to research confronting artists’ mobilizations and the political uses of art in France and the USA, the contributions examine the specificities of the practices in one of the two countries or the circulation of works or creators between them. Indeed, social actors proclaim in numerous contexts the transnational dimension of their action or even their presence in several national spaces or in forums exceeding state borders, especially through the use of electronic media and their lack of explicit geographic localization (Meyrowitz 1986).

The comparative undertaking at once comprises understanding the constants identified between the French and American field sites and explaining the differences between observable phenomena. Among these constants, three mechanisms are easily perceived.

These are, first of all, the historical processes leading to the constitution of artistic specialties which detach themselves from the direct influence of politics, distancing themselves from a political universe which is also becoming professionalized and organizes itself according to its own stakes, principals, and hierarchies. Secondly, the “art world” is internally divided into subspaces ruled according to partially specific norms and logics—and artistic activities are not only differentiated in more and more technicized professional milieus, but also unequally valorized according to both aesthetic and economic criteria, as the division between “fine arts” and “popular arts” illustrates. The third constant is the link between the position occupied within an artistic space and the modes of politicization seen as acceptable and doable by the creators: artistic “marginality,” to put it briefly, goes hand in hand with more explicit forms of engagement, mixing activist logics and aesthetic dimensions, whereas the occupation of more established positions and the search for institutional artistic consecration result in a distancing from political or civic stakes, at least in the creation of works, and in the presentation of a strict professionalism. These logics of specialization and autonomization contribute to reinforcing the frontier separating artists from amateurs and the realm of the “profane.” They also contradict a vision of art as “a common experience,” which can be deplored from normative and civic standpoints.²

The observable variations opposing French and American configurations are obviously numerous. The relations between the artists and the state, which have to do not only with the varying degrees of autonomization of the art worlds, but also with different conceptions and organization of politics, remain heterogeneous. Roughly sketched, they may be presented as follows: American artists often share a vision of politics in terms of a fear of censure and control, while in France state institutions are rather the figure guaranteeing freedom of creation and protection against the laws of the market. The strength and the legitimacy of commercial logics to (partially) govern artistic spaces are thus also understood in different ways on both sides (even if things depend to a considerable degree on the artistic specialty under scrutiny here: many American visual and graphic artists could complain of the lack of attention given to their work in their country and describe France as a better place from this point of view). The two societies are also different as regards the representations and social legitimacy of what is labeled as “high culture,” by contrast with what is socially classified as “popular arts.” This observation brings up a series of extremely intertwined mechanisms. The opposition between professional and purely artistic excellence and recognition, on one hand, and economic success, on the other, is probably less salient in the USA than in France. The relations to popularity and fame are also different today: French observers are sometimes tempted by incomprehension or even social contempt towards the position taking of American celebrities, perceived as “ridiculous” or labeled as “populist drift.” This effect of incongruity precisely reveals certain differences in representation and must be analyzed as such.³ It also unveils the importance of the involvement of media actors, the analysis of which is central. The diverse ways in which artists relate to collectives, groups, and social movements (with which French artists tend to identify more readily while the individualization of the artist’s role seems to be more important in the USA) also need to be considered, in order to thoroughly explore the many forms of the artistic critique of politics (Eyerman and Jamison 1998; Traïni 2008).

² For example, see Dewey’s (1934) critique of the effects of closure of professionalized art worlds and markets and, more recently, Shusterman’s (1992) attempt to revalorize popular art and a more pragmatic relation to aesthetics.

³ Marx thus turns L. Bonaparte’s ridicule into a subject of analysis; see Marx (1997) and Grignon and Passeron (1989).

Thus, relying on a conception of artistic worlds as spaces of interdependence organized around the production of specific cultural goods and pervaded by dynamics of specialization, we have outlined the common theoretical ground on which to place the comparison of configurations in which artists have faced political actors in different historical times in France and in the USA. The differences in “situations” and the changing state of power relations are not to be seen as obstacles to the examination of practices but are rather a variable with measurable effects since these societies share certain structural frames. The historical forms of autonomization of the various artistic spheres and their modes of organization and internal functioning obviously vary according to the society in question. These variations produce diverse modes of perception differing, without being radically incommunicable, from one society to another: the ways of defining oneself as a professional artist, constructing trajectories and success models, conceiving the civic dimension of an artist’s role, and articulating political and aesthetic identities are never entirely similar. These discrepancies make up what one may call *cultures*, in the most pertinent sense that one could attribute to the term. These cultures have not only nothing to do with a hypothetical “natural spirit of the people” but are characterized by two salient elements: they are in constant transformation and they are (and are becoming more and more) specialized cultures and socially differentiated (here appropriate to the artistic spaces).

This is not to deny the possible existence of shared social representations in a larger sense (in a country, a region, or even on a continent), historically produced and maintained (especially politically): indeed, the legitimacy of individualism and the individualization of activism seem more established in the USA than in France; these perceptions feed different conceptions of citizenship, just as the definition of the private sphere in the two countries is differently outlined. Lamont and Thévenot (2000) have thus contrasted the French and American “cultural repertoires of evaluation” through a comparative approach, in a different perspective. For these authors, the most significant evaluative criteria in the USA refer to arguments attached to economic performance in market terms (including what concerns cultural or aesthetic value judgments), while in France the recourse to “civic” criteria (referring to an ideal of social solidarity, reductive of inequalities) is more manifest. These observations do not contradict the hypothesis of a movement of cultural specialization according to cognitive frames which are largely produced through the logics of a determined subspace—an art world in this case. These specific cultures combine in practice with more general social representations, shared by French and/or Americans, regarding for instance the legitimacy and efficiency of political engagement and the “right forms” of collective action. In “societies of individuals” in which personal choices supposedly determine destinies and which largely devalue political engagement and ideologies, and moreover in artistic spheres valuing the notions of irreducibly personal giftedness and talent, highly individualized modes of political commitment are not surprising. This is also why overtly political organizations have a hard time mobilizing artists for all kinds of causes; and this is particularly manifest in the American context (Flacks 1988; Lichterman 1996; Eliasoph 1998).

The guiding thread of this volume is tied around the contradictions that the autonomization of artistic spaces generates for “activist artists:” they are stuck in a double bind, increasingly difficult to reconcile, of political positioning and artistic recognition. The contributors nevertheless orient their questioning in different directions according to three general axes.

The first section captures artistic practices caught in the torment of change and political tensions, in wartime configurations or powerful social movements. The first half of the twentieth century was unprecedented in its conflicts, but also the moment of the development of a debate on the writer’s moral responsibility taking place in France as in the USA, albeit in different forms (Gisèle Sapiro). The meanings and stakes attached to the “political

responsibility” of artists defined in this way—sometimes claimed, sometimes rejected by the creators—transformed through the course of time and partially circulate between French and American arenas of action. Similar questions of articulation between artistic productions and their political uses appear in the relation that different American social movements have maintained with their musical performances and creations (William Roy). We see thus that songs and hymns are not simple resources or tools, produced according to their own logics and instrumentalized more or less precisely to mobilizing ends. They are inscribed in systems of social relations formed and activated during the course of the protest movement. The social movements “do culture,” in this perspective. The variable place and efficiency social movements have given to music are more closely examined in the case of American movements of the 1930s and the 1960s.

The definition of what is “art,” strung between aesthetic and political rationales, is analyzed in the second section, far from situations of war and crisis, and once again in French and American contexts. Vera Zolberg first untangles the threads of complex innovation mechanisms: the art worlds appear at once as configurations of domination (and of inclusion/exclusion) according to specifically aesthetic norms and as vulnerable to the intrusion of commercial and political logics. Some porosity between these heterogeneous mechanisms exists: artists manage to convert certain types of know-how, of mutuality networks, and of identity properties into political weapons; inversely, innovation in the art worlds tends to come from outsider positions and from the importation of heterodox (and heteronomous) resources. In the same vein, Serge Proust observes the strong dependence on the political world and the state bureaucracy which characterizes the field of French contemporary theater. This relationship is particularly illuminated by the analysis of the recent mobilizations of part-time workers in art and entertainment industries (*intermittents du spectacle*) for the defense of their professional status. The strength and persistence of such a movement of artists are not specifically French per se: they echo the movement of American screenwriters which lastingly affected the movie world in Fall and Winter 2007. However, the exploration of the demands French artists have directed to the state and their proximity to the wheels of bureaucracy enable the investigation of certain particularities in the relations to culture in the two countries. Museums can be thought of as the archetypal place in which “what is art” is publicly instituted. Confronting exhibitions held in the *Musée de l’Europe* in Brussels, on the one hand, and in “New World” museums inspired by innovative museographic trends from the USA, on the other hand, Christine Cadot reveals contrasting ways of shaping political identities and “spirits” designed to transcend national borders (“the spirit of Europe,” notably) in artistic forms, and of staging them for the public. Through such museographic projects, political logics and aesthetic stakes are once again confronted: the resistance of art professionals towards too direct political influence becomes apparent.

The third section of this issue deals with the engagement of French and American artists through their works—with various degrees of success in the eyes of the protagonists. From the investigations presented here springs what contemporary artists often experience as a practical quasi-impossibility to manage the classification of their pieces as “political art” and their own labeling as “activist artists.” The comparison between France and the USA leads us to confirm that the experience of an agonistic tension between politicized identity and artistic self-definition is common to the two countries and appears both times as particularly salient in the film industries. Within these spaces, the category of fiction film is the most difficult to associate with the politically engaged uses that artists attempt to make of their work, whether that be in the USA, on the occasion of the mobilizations against the war in Iraq (Violaine Roussel), or in France with films dealing with social questions, often gathered under the denomination of *cinéma social* (Audrey Mariette). The protagonists largely refer to fiction as an “inappropriate

genre” with respect to the possibilities of combining activist intentions and chances of success in the profession. At the same time, these artists have recourse to a multitude of daily arrangements, including in terms of inventiveness in aesthetic forms, in order to make this double positioning of engagement and professional self-affirmation tenable. The contrast with theatrical presentation is here striking and instructive (Bleuwenn Lechaux). The performances by *Billionaires for Bush* and *Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping* belong to activist theater in which the political message, albeit formulated in a humorous and ironic way, is explicitly and immediately grasped by (often already converted) audiences. However, even in that case, the force of autonomous artistic logic makes itself felt: for the artists hoping for serious recognition in their art world, the identification as “engaged artist” and the political coloration of works remain sources of disqualification. The exploration of these various situations and experiences sheds light on the functioning of artistic spaces in the two countries, their historical transformations and their relations to political fields, and the mechanisms of interdependence and circulation which can arise between scenes inscribed in different national systems.

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