Acts, affects, calls

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Acts, affects, calls

Engin Isin [1] 26 February 2014

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What art accomplishes in performing politics is to govern (placing beings into play with one another) bodies through affects. This is to realize that building broader coalitions and involving more people will require calling them forth not merely with arguments (life is no argument) but also through affects.

On 15 April 2011, citizens of San Lorenzo were taking over Cinema Palazzo. On 2 June 2011, Roman citizens were taking over Teatro Valle, one of the oldest theatres in Europe. On 4 February 2012, Pisan citizens had already occupied Teatro Rosa.

Yet, it has proved difficult to tease out their resonant qualities. Were they carnivalesque or grotesque? Were they revolutionary or reformist? Were they movements or happenings? These questions will haunt anyone keen to understand these occupations. It is tempting, as it often is in the face of the unknown, to interpret these events within the horizons of the known repertoires of political action such as dissent, protest, resistance, and even revolution.
It is also possible to interpret them as ‘acts’ in the sense of disrupting or arresting a course of events without knowing what direction these events would take from that moment onward, but nonetheless being convinced that the existing course of events has become intolerable both symbolically and materially.

To me a notable aspect of these acts and the basic starting point for understanding is that they both draw attention to demand for redress of injustices arising from austerity. Yes, but is there a way to describe these acts that is theoretically broad enough to capture something enduring about them yet analytically specific enough to respect their peculiarities? To put it another way, how does one distinguish something new being brought into being from something that already has the qualities we know about.

These were the admittedly mundane and perhaps unimaginative questions that occurred to me as I listened to a series of stimulating and creative presentations by activists on 26-28 September in Teatro Valle. These presentations featured not only Teatro Valle Occupato and Nuovo Cinema Palazzo activists but also other activists from Naples, Milan, Zagreb, and Pisa. It featured activists working collectively as well as individually.

Take, for example, the Macao occupation in Milan. It begins in a theoretical and political course made by a group of art workers, working with other social movements in the city to form a network of movements in Italy working on the theme of culture as a commons. On 5 May 2012 hundreds of activists occupy Torre Galfa, an empty skyscraper in the centre of the city, to symbolize property speculation. A series of creative and inventive artistic productions follow. After the evacuation, the occupiers become a ‘collective’ and continue their organizing in an empty slaughterhouse through workgroups and assemblies. Eventually, this takes shape as a ‘New Centre of Arts, Culture and Research’.
Or, consider Teatro Valle Occupato in Rome, which I mentioned in the beginning. Unsurprisingly, when activists first occupied the theatre they apparently did not know that it would last more than two years let alone that the occupation would eventually lead to the setting up of an institution, the Teatro Valle Bene Comune Foundation, as an autonomous citizens’ theatre. All together more than a dozen such acts were presented to us over three days.

If I were to single out the singular most important quality of all the acts presented (demonstrations, protests, occupations, marches, performances), it would be that art was central to them. But art not understood as artifacts but art as performed, staged, enacted, in short, performative art.

In a rather nontrivial way, each act was an act of art itself. To be sure, each produced artifacts (posters, still and moving images, songs, posters, and symbols) but these are somehow woven into the fabric of the site of the act and become its constituent elements. Art was the language of these acts, or, perhaps more poignantly, these acts themselves become what we might call, arteffects — art that lives through its effects rather than its objects. This is what I found most intriguing (to put it rather mildly to hide my massive excitement) and promising about these acts becoming arteffects themselves.

But why was art the constitutive means by which these acts were expressed? That to me is an important question for the following reason. It was not long ago that such occupations in European cities and perhaps elsewhere would have expressed ‘truths’ through pamphlets, declarations, slogans, manifestos as arguments. These truths as arguments would then be put forward as the ‘reasons’ for action. These ‘truths’ are still expressed as the ‘reasons’ for acts, but increasingly a much more subtle, ambiguous, ambivalent, and above all an open, expressionism is overtaking these acts. The more philosopher-kings attempt to usurp these acts as from within already known repertoires, the more subtle their expressions are becoming.

I am encouraged by the possibilities that these open-ended and experimental acts are staged or enacted as expressions that sharply bring out the contradictions, injustices, anomalies, paradoxes, oppressions, and inequalities of the way in which we govern ourselves, states and societies - without knowing the direction they individually or collectively steer these events towards. What appear to me to be the significant quality of these acts is that they work through affects.

So a broader question would be: how do such governing affects produce the subject of affects? If we distinguish between psychoanalytic and philosophical theories of affect, we can consider the former focusing on emotional states (Stein 1999) and the latter being mostly concerned with affects as embodied states (Deleuze 1988). As emotional states, affects such as fear, anxiety, joy, or pleasure are mostly located in the psyche as always-already existing mental phenomena. By contrast, as embodied states, affects are transmitted through the body and considered as contingent and changing phenomena. We can remember here Spinoza who understood affects as embodied states in flux ranging from the most basic to the sophisticated: drives (eating, sleeping), appetites (desire, will), emotions (anxiety, pleasure), and feelings (fear, joy, disgust, love, hatred). Spinoza thought these embodied states were produced by practices of the body (Damasio 2004).
It seems to me that these acts function in a way that transmits affects to elicit a response from our bodies. It’s a kind of call, a summon, or interpellation that mobilizes bodies toward kindling political imaginaries.

Rather than addressing their audience with reason, arguments, and truth, they issue a call already from an effective space of truth. Perhaps what these political acts are ushering in more than new forms, are new ways of performing politics. This is not an argument concerning reason versus emotion. Such debates come and go just like debates on nature versus nurture. Rather, there is no fundamental difference between reason and emotion: each elicits responses from the body.

If reasons have their logic so do affects. The crucial thing here is that these acts mobilize people by deploying strategies – practical orientations toward what people sense and figure as workable – of affect such as irony, allegory, aporia, symbolism and rupture. These words though will hardly capture how each of these affects was creatively put into play in these acts.

To put it differently, what art accomplishes in performing politics is to govern (placing beings into play with one another) bodies through affects. I think that activist-citizens have practically developed this insight realizing that building broader coalitions and involving more people will require calling them forth not merely with arguments (life is no argument) but also through affects.

These were some of the thoughts that crossed my mind as I listened to the presentations by activists. Let me conclude, however, with a note of caution or perhaps a warning. Activist citizens are not alone in discovering government by affects. After all, this is what the advertising industry effectively does: people respond to calls when buying something or electing somebody not only because an argument is presented to them but also because they are exposed to its persistent, affective, and provocative calls. The pervasive effect of the advertising industry in contemporary social and political life is largely due to its success in doing so.
We may well remember that the very first occupy act was summoned by or called forth by Adbusters, an ironic and iconic outfit that deconstructs the advertising industry. The kind of acts presented at Teatro Valle can be a direct challenge to the advertising industry and what it represents and produces. Yet, they are also implicated in the very strategies and technologies of affect that produce docile bodies as well. Being reflexive about the origins and developments of the new means by which politics is performed must be seen as absolutely essential to such politics.

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