The Political in and of Art

Thomas Keenan in conversation with Carin Kuoni

CARIN KUONI Looking over the projects that map this field, three sets of questions arise. The first concerns changing notions of political space and political organizing. The second looks at ideas around human rights and the relationship between aesthetic and judicial or ethical languages or conventions. A third line of inquiry examines the possibilities of understanding a situation that is not ours at all. This is a question of communication, global exchange, but also teaching: how and what can we learn from any one of these projects?

Let's start with topic number one. The projects featured in this publication advance social justice through aesthetic interventions or projects, and were selected for three reasons: they show long-term impact, boldness (meaning fierce innovation), and they show artistic excellence. Each one interacts with a community—real, virtual, or imaginary—and in so doing implies a certain understanding of politics or the political. Could you comment on some of these implied definitions of "the political"?

THOMAS KEENAN Before we talk about specifics, it's important to pay attention to the overall enterprise you've been engaged in here. I found the artists and projects collected here remarkably diverse and plural and incredibly invigorating. Even inspiring, which is not a word I use very often. It represents an amazing range of different ways in which people and collectives are mobilizing artistic strategies to think about political questions. Such a good sign at a moment when it seems like political space is shrinking and the forces of order are winning more than their fair share.

Your gesture in gathering these projects together itself facilitates a pluralizing and opening up of what counts in and as politics. And maybe art, too! Both of those categories do not emerge from this undertaking unscathed. That itself is an essential political and artistic move, to explode and fragment and diversify these categories. You've captured, and effectively endorsed, a real moment of multiplicity in the ways political activity or engagement or identity can be imagined and practiced through the arts.

More specifically, I think we can identify a number of approaches to the political that are in play across many of the projects here. One significant group of them takes existing social or political institutions more or less as givens and then imagines—and puts into practice—challenges to and new claims on them that will make them more responsive. A number of projects deal with citizenship, for instance, citizenship understood in a relatively conventional way, which is fine, and they carry along with them a host of related terms: civil rights, access to information, democratic participation, the ability to protest, and so on. Senegalese artist Issa Samb's *Laboratoire Agit'art* (pp. 164–69) or Rabat's DABATEATR (pp. 92–97), with its insistence on theatrical *citoyenneté*, stands out, and likewise Bibliothèques Sans Frontières (pp. 72–77). There is no fundamental challenge to institutions posed by their projects, even in a place that is as fundamentally challenged itself as Haiti after the earthquake of 2010. They simply ask what it means to be a Haitian citizen at a moment when many of the possibilities for civic life in Haiti have, both for political and environmental reasons, collapsed. The basic building blocks of institutional citizenship need to be repaired, rebuilt, and rethought. So the powerful work conducted here consists of renovating these institutions.

CK Then let me ask, Tom, how artistic interventions contribute to these existing institutions and go beyond simply empowering them or reaffirming their importance? How does the library or Pathshala, Shahidul Alam's photography school in Bangladesh (pp. 54–59), advance our understanding of these institutions in ways that a straightforward support by an NGO initiative does not or cannot?

TK In many of these cases, artists are able to mobilize resources or invent strategies and interventions that NGOs are not sufficiently empowered or imaginative enough to come up with. Libraries Without Borders mimics an NGO strategy and has an NGO name (maybe *the* NGO name!), but it has access to resources, entry points, and modes of organizing its audience that many NGOs could only dream of. Similarly, there are a

number of projects—Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti's *Campus in Camps* (pp. 118–23), Pathshala, or Chto Delat (pp. 86–91)—that do what they call teaching, in what they often call schools, but do it in a way that is simultaneously re-imagining what education might be, sometimes in quite unusual forms. Etcétera (pp. 98–105), for instance, speaks of "de-education." By and large, these projects accept a certain notion of what a school is, a place for the transfer or collaborative production of knowledge. *Campus in Camps* involves lots of experienced teachers, and yet the students don't imagine themselves as passive recipients of knowledge but rather as full-fledged "participants," as they call themselves. And they are participants who do things, make spaces, intervene in concrete ways in their communities—and in so doing take active charge of re-imagining what it is to be a refugee and to live in a camp. Maybe that's one of the differences that approaching these questions in terms of art can make.

CK Mobilizing resources through the imaginative or the imaginary is of course also the essence of Theaster Gates's *Dorchester Projects* (p. 182ff). It, too, shows an ability to connect systems that are not necessarily logically or traditionally aligned and ties them together, so that their constituents act as leverage on each other.

TK That's exactly right. And while I'm not an art historian, this seems like a relatively novel phenomenon, namely that in many cases artists have access to transformative resources and ideas that might previously have been the monopoly of either governments or more conventionally defined civic activists.

So some of the projects intervene in or create civic institutions, like schools and libraries, in the name of expanding access to, and the meanings of, citizenship. Sanja Iveković's *Women's House* (pp. 130–35), for instance, not only makes claims on behalf of a marginalized or excluded community but builds an entire institution around them, opens up a space for taking action rather than just receiving help. (And the model—the practice—seems to have spread far from its origins in Croatia.) Cape Town's Gugulective (pp. 106–11) and Mosireen's book

room (pp. 148–53) does something like this, too. Others look toward the margins of citizenship, to those in exile or living as refugees—and *Campus in Camps*, given the unusual status of Palestinian refugees, does some of both—and to the pathways and displacements of people on the move. Migration, especially across the Mediterranean, is not exactly an institution, but it is a highly regulated and codified set of practices.

CK Is this how you would read a project such as Take to the Sea (pp. 176–81)?

TK Yes, and I would also add *Our Land, Our People* (pp. 160–63), which shows such an insane daring, in terms of the size and scope of the project...

CK ... and a real commitment to the physical or material.

TK Then there are some difficult projects that refuse easy categorization, because we've never really been there before. For instance, when the artistic intervention has the power of pulling an issue or a category or an identity out of a certain kind of political invisibility and demanding recognition for it. Amy Balkin's *Public Smog* (pp. 66–71) does this: making a claim on behalf of something which might not have been thought of as a political entity or political unit, or which wasn't recognized as such.

CK Amar Kanwar's *The Sovereign Forest* (pp. 136–41) falls into that category as well, no? His proposition to introduce poetics as evidence in legal proceedings is revolutionary.

TK Yes and no. Here we are halfway between the first and second categories we discussed. His series of questions is remarkably eloquent, with its focus on situations in which evidence could be useful but goes completely unrecognized. On the one hand, it is a classic legal, political, institutional question that has been around for as long as courts themselves: how can I introduce evidence or persuade a tribunal that a crime has been committed? And that has often given rise to a related question: how can I tinker, even just slightly, with the boundaries of what's admissible, so that other things can appear and perform differently? Kanwar is documenting, producing, presenting, and looking for evidence, even while he protests against the institutional restrictions that render the evidence—and the crimes it chronicles—(almost) invisible. Here the artistic endeavor can speak in different ways from conventional legal practices and can make new sorts of claims on judges and audiences—first of all, the claim to make claims.

CK Here, then, a transition is made between the hypothetical "what if" and the actual action, from the symbol or gesture to the specific application.

TK Exactly. Kanwar's forest really takes us to the limits of the political, or at least the juridical—it forces us to confront those limits, which are themselves a matter of politics. In a very different way, Karen Andreassian's *Ontological Walkscapes* (pp. 60–65) does something similar. Going for a walk becomes a political activity—sort of. When the police can't tell the difference between political and ordinary walkers, we have a chance to learn something about politics, and to do something new. I was reminded of Asef Bayat's great book *Life as Politics* (2013), in which he uncovers the political dimensions of some basic attempts at survival or what he calls "quiet encroachment"—building a house or a shanty, appearing in a park, speaking out loud in public—even while he reminds us that it's somehow not exactly right to call them political because they testify to an almost complete collapse of political possibilities. They are practices in which agency is rebuilt from the ground up through what he calls, in a nice formulation for our purposes, "the art of presence."

CK Giuseppe Campuzano's *Museo Travesti del Perú* (pp. 78–85) reminds me of this approach, the only museum of transvestite culture in Peru, which Campuzano would carry on his own body. The insides of his coat were lined with pockets and folds, each

bearing artifacts about transvestite life in Peru, and he could choose or not choose to open the coat, whenever a moment arose that he felt was safe or appropriate or necessary. This idea of an intimate personal space is not necessarily associated with definitions of a public museum, not unlike the quotidian nature of Andreassian's everyday walks that don't get read as "political."

TK That's correct, a very delicate project. To define the agents there, I believe he used the phrase "subjects which refuse classification," which is very different from the typical claim of identity that points to and tries to compensate for exclusion (the gay marriage struggle in the U.S. and elsewhere would be more typical). Campuzano's project is about holding on to a certain kind of refusal of identification or recognition, for good political reasons. The damage he does, in the piece *DNI (De Natura Incertus)*, to his own identity document would exemplify this practice of what he calls "transformative post-identity" or "travesty."

CK Tom, would you comment on these systems of citizen classification and how language gets either adapted or subverted? I'm thinking of Ai Weiwei's blog (pp. 48–53) as well as the *Office for Anti-Propaganda* by Marina Naprushkina (pp. 154–59), and Hans Haacke's *To the Population* (pp. 112–17). Interference Archive (pp. 124–29) also focuses on the rhetorics of political discourse, albeit in a less cynical, ironic way. Mosireen, too, adapts a certain language of media newscast and dissemination that speaks to the aesthetics or forms of political dialogue.

TK That is possibly one hallmark of the artistic interventions assembled here, a certain confidence about their capacity to do new kinds of work with existing political languages. There are not a whole lot of artists inventing brand new languages here. Almost everyone here works with a set of terminological and stylistic givens. The question then is, how much or how little do I need to, or can I, modify or reshape those discourses to enable them to do something that they aren't currently doing? And sometimes, this becomes an immediate intervention.

CK Exactly, when it becomes a performance or a theater or a play, for instance.

TK Right. So, for instance, you know that there are certain things that you have to do if you want to show up in the media, and there are negotiations and compromises that come from participating in and making use of that language. How far can I take it and still get away with it? How much do I have to give before I sacrifice the gesture that I want to make? This conflict or trade-off becomes clear in the projects based around evidence or documentation or archiving, such as *more more more . . . future* by Faustin Linyekula (pp. 142–47) or *Park Fiction* by Christoph Schäfer (pp. 170–75). These are cases of testing the limits of what such a discourse can sustain, how to work it or bend it to get something said.

CK I'd like to probe more deeply the relationship between strategies of NGOs and human rights organizations versus what artists do. Social justice, human rights, and similar ethical standards find legal expressions and a legal framework in constitutions, best-practices documents, or declarations endorsed by NGOs or other national or international conventions. In your opinion, how can legal vocabularies and relations intersect with artistic approaches to ethical notions of human rights? Where are the crossing points that are mutually beneficial, appropriate, and productive?

TK The first thing to say is that the intersection between these fields, to which many of these projects point, is in itself a noteworthy fact. Why should there be a necessary affinity or resemblance between the work of artists and the work of NGOs? There are two factors at work. On the one hand, the form of the NGO is becoming more and more inescapable for a certain kind of activist work. Michel Feher and others documented this nicely in *Nongovernmental Politics* (2007) a few years ago. The NGO functions either as a citizen movement that offers an alternative to engagement with the state, or as a device for putting pressure on the state to fulfill its responsibilities. Either way, the NGO

does seem to be an increasingly common denominator of a great deal of political and ethical action, including artistic projects. On the other hand, it seems as though NGOs are themselves increasingly open to working with, or copying from, artistic interventions. The American Civil Liberties Union recently had an "artist-in-residence." Whoever thought that artists would be embedded at the heart of civil rights organizations, artists as such, not just as bearers of useful toolkits?

So it's an interesting sign of the times, for better and for worse, the cross-pollination between the arts and NGOs. To some extent, these artistic strategies, vocabularies, or rhetorics are being instrumentalized by NGOs for more or less traditional purposes, such as storytelling, documentation, visualization, and the presentation of evidence. But it's significant that we see, more and more, that NGOs are willing to embrace more experimental alternative aesthetic strategies. A relevant example here would be *Dear Obama*, Marcus Bleasdale's short film about Joseph Kony and Lord's Resistance Army commissioned by Human Rights Watch. Survivors of Lord's Resistance Army attacks address the camera, and the president, directly (it might remind you of a Spike Lee film) in order to make a claim about human rights. Aesthetic strategies are increasingly playing a role in NGO work, just as NGO structures are increasingly evident in aesthetic projects. The work coming out of the Forensic Architecture teams at Goldsmiths in London makes this powerfully clear as well.

CK Recently, the notion of post-democracy has emerged to describe Western democracies that are fully functional in all intents and purposes—they have free elections and free speech, provide for systems of representation, have independent media—and yet, the citizenry does not recognize itself in the state anymore and therefore engages increasingly in interest-focused actions, locally or globally. Is an NGO actually a political space? Can we differentiate more precisely between the state—which I, as a person of a certain age and experience, associate with democracy—and an NGO, or do we need to begin thinking of NGOs as the primary spaces for political representation?

TK I would be wary of a blanket answer here. It seems to me that sometimes NGOs can make up for political vacuums, that they can provide an alternative when people feel insufficiently or simply not represented by political institutions. NGOs can sometimes function as a perfectly fine substitute for states or governments. When the state is not going to build a school, an NGO will, and the kids will go to school. Emergency humanitarian relief, especially of the *Sans Frontières* variety, would be another obvious example. At the same time, though, this supplement can let the state off the hook, or displace it altogether. In that way, NGOs can serve as a form of privatization and sometimes de-politicization. Sometimes, however, those turns to an alternative can have the effect of widening the sphere of politics, so that other spheres of political debate or engagement can open up that do not belong to the state. That doesn't make them any less political. In those cases, NGOs pose a challenge to the state's monopoly on politics, often with interesting effects. The phrase post-democracy captures something of that ambiguity: at once the expansion of democratic potential and discourses, but also the shrinking or displacement of democracy by something else.

CK You've mentioned above your reluctance to make "blanket" or very general statements. I would now like to move onto the third section about understanding, teaching, and learning from projects that are removed from us in different ways—geographically, culturally, politically. How can we as educators overcome these obstacles of distance? What is the potential of true understanding through the means of communications available to us, whether it is this book, online communication, or teaching? Many of the projects in the book are very difficult to describe to those who have not experienced them firsthand. We have included at least two perspectives for each project, the artist and the individual who selected the work, in order to give a richer sense of the work. What other tools can we use as teachers or educators to introduce people to a work and a context that they are not familiar with? How can ethical standards be shared globally, and in fact, can they?

TK None of the actors or agents or artists in the book seem to have any interest in remaining purely local. Almost everybody wants to be talking to a broader audience, claiming a stage bigger than the one that they are physically occupying.

CK Very interesting indeed.

TK Everybody seems to have a multiple audiences in mind, and none of the projects are shy or absent or pensively local.

CK So they are not only presented to, but already conceived for, both a local and global context?

TK Yes, I think most of these projects, even when they have a clear set of local goals, imagine that they are unfolding in a situation where the local cannot stay just local. Even if somebody's political causes are local ones and have local solutions, others see them as resources in their own local struggles. The possibility of dissemination, replication, translation, and alliance seems built into pretty much everything here. Here you see people who have very precise targets of intervention and a lot of tactical thinking, and a desire to relate those targets and tactics to other ones.

This familiarity or a feeling of relative ease with operating at the global level does not lead to projects calling for world revolution (although I'm sure that that dream is not entirely absent here). There is a kind of modesty and specificity about many of the projects, but also a compelling public or civic orientation. The art wants to be seen, heard, and responded to. Almost everyone is focused on a public address, oriented toward an audience, and more precisely toward a transformative engagement with an audience. DABATEATR speaks of "an audience that thinks and reacts, and does not leave the representation without carrying its marks." That phrase, which is so rich, serves for me as pretty much the best summary of the most powerful aspirations in this collection.