

A POLITICAL LIFE

ARENDTIAN AESTHETICS AND OPEN SYSTEMS

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Since the 1990s, artists have broken ground by producing works that are “open systems.” That is, they are incomplete, participatory, and elastic. In this paper, I will argue that open systems exemplify Hannah Arendt’s conception of *vita activa*, in contrast to art’s traditional role as inspiring *vita contemplativa*. Since they do not explicitly affirm or refute political policies, such works are generally not considered “political” art. However, they accommodate Arendt’s notion of the political life, since they incorporate process, durability, pluralities of spectators, and unpredictability. Furthermore, because they do not resemble what ordinarily passes for art, reflective judgment is required to engage them, and to determine whether they are art.

Echoing Diotima’s interest in immortality, Arendt links beauty to durability. Open systems are particularly durable because we remember them as a public experiences that include participants and spectators. Such performative and pleasurable worldly *actions* entail aesthetic engagements that are very much in line with Arendt’s description of the political life.

CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT

In the sphere of fabrication itself, there is only one kind of object to which the unending chain of means and ends does not apply, and this

is the work of art, the most useless and, at the same time, the most durable thing human hands can produce . . . It is the reification that occurs in writing something down, painting an image, composing a piece of music, etc. which actually *makes* the thought a reality; and in order to produce these thought things, which we usually call art works, the same workmanship is required that through the primordial instrument of human hands builds the other, less durable and more useful things of the human artifice. (Arendt 2000, 177–78)

In a 1964 interview with Gunter Gaus, Hannah Arendt described herself as a political theorist, who though trained as a philosopher had “said good-bye to philosophy once and for all.” In identifying the tension between philosophy and politics, she differentiated man as a thinking being from man as an acting being, and she identified with the latter. She found that, because philosophers cannot be neutral or objective with regards to politics, they share a certain enmity toward politics, and she sought to avoid that response. Not surprisingly, she named Kant as an exception, because he understood this enmity to lie in the nature of the subject itself. In *The Critique of Judgement*, experience precedes reflective judgement, thus affirming a place for each subject’s particular experiences. Kant, too, was a man of action.

Kant’s aesthetic judgment of taste, which is a normative but non-prescriptive process, makes room for Arendt’s notions of worldliness and unpredictability. Critics have decried Arendt’s political theory for its anti-rationalism, political existentialism and “aestheticization of politics,” yet much can be learned from her clear commitment to equality, and the way she trusted and perhaps even idealized humanity (Curtis 1999, 18). She wrote, “Only action and speech relate specifically to this fact that to live always means to live among men, among those who are my equals. Hence, when I insert myself into the world, it is a world where others are already present” (Arendt 2000, 179). Given her interest in freedom, active engagement, critical thinking, and anti-instrumentalism, it is perhaps not surprising that Arendt found inspiration in Kant’s conception of aesthetic judgment as requiring only communicative sociability, the object’s purposeless purposiveness, and the spectator’s free play of imagination and understanding.

I am interested here in Arendt’s aesthetics of the political life in relation to recent art that unwittingly fosters an engaged and open conception of the political. The works in question are not necessarily conscious of their political capacity. Rather, their presence assumes that spectators are

equals, and facilitates an active life, what Arendt described as the *vita activa*, as opposed to the *vita contemplativa*, the contemplative life. An active life, which requires a public space, entails active judgment, and shared discussions, and is the lynchpin of a political life. Such a weak conception of political art suggests that any object that achieves its status as art by inspiring a public discussion of its attributes and relevance is political. By contrast, any work that closes down discussion, despite its political aspirations, is not effectively political.

POLITICAL LIFE VS. THE SOCIAL REALM

The Greeks' juxtaposition of the social and the political deeply influenced Arendt. For the Greeks, "[t]o be political, to live in a *polis*, meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence" (Arendt 2000, 184). Arendt was hugely critical of the dominance of the social realm, which she believed represented a "terrible kind of deformation" (Curtis 1999, 81), because the human experience associated with action has been reduced to the activities of making and fabricating. She wrote, "The social realm, where the life process has established its own public domain, has let loose an unnatural growth, so to speak, of the natural" (Arendt 2000, 47). This unnatural growth is fostered when reproduction, production and consumption *unnaturally* "crowd and prevail over all other possible practical concerns" (Curtis 1999, 82). As Curtis argues, "the practical consequences of world alienation is that the dream of abundance becomes the guiding force of collective life . . . our highest practical purpose" (83). The social realm is therefore inherently utilitarian, as "society is the form in which the act of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance" (Arendt 2000, 46). Critical of this relatively recent development, Arendt writes, "The futility of public admiration, which daily is consumed in ever greater quantities . . . is such that monetary reward, one of the most futile things there is, can become more objective and more real" (204).

For Arendt, the social realm is unworldly and man has little "world-building capacity in either the objective or intersubjective sense" (83). Moreover, the stability of human relatedness depends upon a world of stable things that transcend individual mortality. "The specific capacity of humans to distinguish themselves through word and deed and thus to build and experience a distinctive common world is eroded and undermined" (83). When display, exhibitions, and articles initiate public discussions that

aren't motivated by the dream of abundance, these formats must be considered political, not social.

That truly political events are relegated to the social demonstrates society's conscious negation of the political. For example, the fact that we tend to categorize public activities as social reveals the ongoing tension between the worldly political's agonistic subjectivity and confrontational disposition, and the unworldly social's dream of abundance and ephemeral elevation of life for life's sake. We therefore might recognize the political impact of all displays or 'showings' that enable something private to appear in the world. We therefore ought to accept the political significance of public spaces like museums, as opposed to more hidden spaces like alternative spaces or commercial galleries. Most important, we should realize the political nature of newspaper criticism that provokes public discussions.

ARENDT'S AESTHETIC ACCOUNT OF THE POLITICAL LIFE: TEN AESTHETIC ASPECTS

Though Arendt clearly admired art's durability, she did not emphasize the relationships between political theory and aesthetics. Nonetheless, Kimberley Curtis focuses on the "ethical content of Arendt's aesthetic account of political life," which has caused "such unease among (Arendt's) contemporary critics" (Curtis 1999, 17). In the *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt hints at her political theory's aesthetic framework. Regarding the need to transform, deprivatize, and deindividualize the greatest forces of intimate life into a shape fit for public appearance, she notes that "[t]he most current of such transformations occurs in storytelling and generally in artistic transposition of individual experiences" (Arendt 2000, 199). I find that aspects of Arendt's political theory that invoke an aesthetic account include her emphasis on action, worldliness, appearance, durability, unpredictability, the passion for distinction, process, plurality, natality, and trust. Here are some ways these are described by Arendt:

1) Action: "This insertion is not forced upon us through necessity like labor and it is not prompted by wants and desires like work. . . . To act . . . means to take initiative, to begin, as the Greek word: *arkhein* indicates, or to set something into motion, which is the original meaning of the Latin *agere*" (Arendt 2000, 179).

2) Worldliness: "Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered

around them know they see sameness and utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear” (204).

3) Appearance: “Each time we talk about things that can be experienced only in privacy or intimacy, we bring them out into a sphere where they will assume a kind of reality which, their intensity notwithstanding, they never could have had before” (199).

4) Durability: “It is this durability that gives the things of the world their relative independence from men who produced and use them, their ‘objectivity’ that makes them withstand, ‘stand against’ and endure at least for a time the voracious needs and wants of their living users” (173).

5) Unpredictability: “In acting, in contradistinction to working, it is indeed true that we can never really know what we are doing” (180).

6) The Passion for Distinction: “[O]nly man can express otherness and individuality, only he can distinguish himself and communicate himself, and not merely something . . . since in action the being of the doer is somehow intensified, delight necessarily follows” (178–9).

7) Process: “Since we always act into a web of relationships, the consequences of each deed are boundless, every action touches off not only a reaction but a chain reaction, every process is the cause of unpredictable new processes” (180).

8) Plurality: “Being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position” (204).

9) Natality: “[T]he human world is constantly invaded by strangers, newcomers whose actions and reactions cannot be foreseen by those who are already there and are going to leave in a short while. If therefore, by starting natural processes, we have begun to act into nature, we have manifestly begun to carry our own unpredictability into that realm which we used to think of as ruled by inexorable laws” (294).

10) Trust: “[T]his venture is only possible when there is trust in people. A trust—which is difficult to formulate but fundamental—in what is human in all people” (21).

Idiosyncratic Pleasures

What makes Arendt’s account aesthetic is not her emphasis on the performative aspect of action as a process, but on the idiosyncratic pleasures one gains from experiencing otherwise private thoughts. This is the activity of reflective judgment, which she adapts from Kant’s *Critique of*

Judgement and his understanding of the significance of imagination. Curtis adds, “when, propelled by thinking itself, we return to the world of appearances conditioned to feel pleasure in the plurality of meanings that dialogue engenders, our attentiveness to the world of particulars is enhanced, and with this our sense of reality may be intensified” (Curtis 1999, 61). Every human activity therefore invites aesthetic pleasure or displeasure, and awaits transcendence, and public actions are particularly potent ventures:

One exposes oneself to the light of the public, as a person. I know that in every action the person is expressed as in no other human activity. Speaking is also a form of action. That is one venture, the other is: we start something. We weave our strand into a network of relations. What comes of it we never know . . . That is what is meant by a venture. (Arendt 2000, 21)

Things must first appear to be judged, and this process of judging is inordinately exciting. For Arendt, judging presupposes the presence of others. In *Lectures on Kant*, she writes, “Impartiality is obtained by taking the viewpoints of others in account; impartiality is not the result of some higher standpoint that would then actually settle the dispute by being altogether above the melee” (Arendt 1982, 42). Like Kant, she considered imagination to be an integral component of existence and judgment. She admonished, “Without repeating life in imagination, you can never be fully alive, lack of imagination prevents people from existing” (Arendt 1955, 97).

Arendt’s prioritizing of appearance, privileging of shared experiences, and interest in judgment grant pleasure a tangibility akin to an aesthetic experience. She astutely placed the insult of oblivion (a kind of invisibility or placelessness) as prior to the prescriptive notion of social injustice. As Curtis remarks,

Excluded from the place where we appear to others and they to us, the play of arousal, the provocation between those who see and those who are seen, remains largely dormant. That aesthetic-existential urge to make our presence felt—the urge Arendt theorized as an active response to being perceived—is thwarted, the passion to excel is unawakened. And with this comes suffering that is crippling. (Curtis 1999, 68)

But spectators who identify with a work of literature, music, or art can transcend their sense of oblivion. “One generally appreciates a particular work of art because one relates to its content or the work inspires curios-

ity” (Spaid 2000). Arendt’s valuing the experience of oblivion over the abstract category of social injustice further links her political theory to an aesthetic site, where appearance and pleasure co-exist, since reality is manifested in a shared public experience that entails judgment.

Open Systems

Recent avant-garde works that qualify as open systems demonstrate a particularly political dimension. Not only do they incorporate aspects Arendt considered crucial to the political life, but they require public appearance and critical discussion to exist as art. In thermodynamics, an open system is irreversible, that is, it is a system in which the “transfer of matter between system and surroundings can occur” (Levine 1978, 2). This concept resonates with Arendt’s description of an action’s irreversibility. “Action processes are not only unpredictable, they are also irreversible; there is no author or maker who can undo, destroy, what he has done if he does not like it or when the consequences prove to be disastrous” (Arendt 2000, 181). Works of art that are open systems remain incomplete and require viewer participation, and they therefore engender elasticity. Imagine an intriguing game board with gorgeous objects. Since no rules are available for playing the game, the spectators must invent the game, decide the game’s goal and manifest the game’s conclusion. Since an irreversible work must be incomplete, there is no finality to it. Neither the process nor the end goal is fixed, so the work of art remains in a state of mobility or constant flux. Unlike works that are merely interactive, the incompleteness of open systems lends art unpredictability and variability.

In an essay accompanying a 1995 exhibition of open works, I wrote: “By respecting one’s desire to project oneself onto the work, the artist trusts the viewer’s capacity to participate. While indeterminacy is implicit with open systems, such works contrast with 20th century composer John Cage’s project of using chance operations to create an essentially closed system, a musical score or composition” (Spaid 1995). That initial attempt to qualify works of art as open systems preceded my awareness of Arendt’s philosophy. Five years later, I was quite aware of Arendt’s *vita activa*, yet I still failed to see the connections when I wrote the following remarks that accompanied the exhibition, *An Active Life*, whose title was not consciously Arendtian. “By activating these works or watching others play, engaged spectators become the subject of the work. What’s more, charged museum visits create lasting memories” (Spaid 2000).

In my own descriptions of the exhibitions I was curating, I was impelled to use a number of Arendtian concepts, such as trust, process, indeterminacy, irreversibility, the plurality of spectator experience, appearance, and durability, and the significance of action over labor and work. Since works that are open systems demand public display to be experienced as works of art, the presence of both spectators and participants enhances the experience. Works that are open systems literally embody the *vita activa*, since spectators don't merely observe and discuss them, they become active participants in both their form and meaning. Without the spectator's active engagement, they appear to be rather uninteresting, unartful things.

Imagine entering a museum and seeing a ping-pong table, a flying machine, a canvas maze, some game boards, soccer balls, go-carts, dresser-like objects, an all-in-one work-out/relaxation room, musical office supplies, a dance floor, plants, and an inflatable couch. None of these are ordinary objects, in that artists have designed, manipulated, and altered them in various ways, though these artist-imposed changes might not be apparent on first glance. One's first comment might be, "Where's the art?" or maybe even "My kid could do this." This kind of art only *becomes* art once people begin to experience the works in a public setting like a museum. It is not the museum's authority that grants them validity, but the special case of each participant and spectator experiencing the event and judging it in terms that extend an object beyond the boundary of entertainment, recreation, or shock value.

I immediately recognized *An Active Life's* political ramifications, though I failed to make the ties to Arendt's notion of the political life. In the accompanying essay, I wrote:

Artists who produce works that involve the spectator challenge both the idea of museum treasures (or monuments) and the authoritarian nature of most museums. Museums that dare to exhibit participatory art are allies in such a critique. Such pleasure-seeking artists want to transform museums into social spaces that connect strangers and foster joyful memories. (Spaid, 2000)

This description parallels Arendt's plurality of spectators, pleasure from doing and thinking, a concept of natality in the coming together of strangers, and the idea of durability in the form of joyful memories. Paralyzed by some insitutionalized amnesia regarding the political, I mistakenly identified the museum as a social space. But for museums to stake out their special

role, they must stop masquerading as social sites and initiate the revitalization of the political life via a public space that cherishes creative freedom.

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