

Aesthetic Resistance

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Povzetek

Članek raziskuje razmerje med umetnostjo in politiko, pri čemer se osredotoča na načine, kako se lahko umetnost upre zatiralskim režimom in navdihuje boj za svobodo. Prične se z vprašanjem svobode ter upora, ki vznikne iz njene izgube, čemur sledi razprava o vlogi umetnosti v političnih spremembah – estetskih revolucijah. Te ideje so prikazane s primeri iz slovenske in srbske kulture. Na koncu avtorica argumentira, da je v kontekstu umetniške svobode forma nekega umetniškega dela pomembnejša od njegove vsebine.

Ključne besede: svoboda, estetske revolucije, upor, avtonomna umetnost, angažirana umetnost

Summary

This paper explores the relationship between art and politics, focusing on the ways in which art can resist repressive regimes and inspire the struggle for freedom. It begins with the question of freedom and the resistance that emerges from its loss, leading to a discussion on the role of art in political change—i.e., aesthetic revolutions. These ideas will be illustrated with examples from Slovenian and Serbian culture. Finally, the author argues that in the context of artistic freedom, the form of an artwork is more significant than its content.

Keywords: freedom, aesthetic revolutions, resistance, autonomous art, engaged art

Introduction: What Freedom Is and How Resistance and Struggle Come About

The relationship between art and politics has long been a subject of philosophical inquiry, raising questions about the capacity of art to resist oppression, inspire collective action, and shape political consciousness. This paper argues that, while art can exert political influence through both its content and its form, it is ultimately the form of an artwork that holds the greatest potential for lasting political impact. Artistic form enables works to subvert repressive systems, evade censorship, and alter perception in ways that direct political discourse often cannot.

To develop this argument, we will begin by examining philosophical conceptions of freedom and the ways in which its absence gives rise to resistance and struggle. We will then introduce the concept of the aesthetic revolution and trace historical and theoretical connections between art and political life. The final section grounds these theoretical reflections in examples from Serbian and Slovenian culture – including Marina Abramović, the IRWIN collective, Vladimir Veličković, Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid – which demonstrate how both content and form can operate as modes of political resistance.

What Is Freedom?

The question of freedom is one of the fundamental philosophical questions that permeates various philosophical disciplines, including political philosophy, ethics, aesthetics, and metaphysics. We will focus on the political and aesthetic dimensions of freedom, with special reference to how they are intertwined and how they influence each other; begging the question, how does art influence politics?

A good way to start contemplating freedom is Sartre's existentialist philosophy, as he starts from the premise that freedom is the ontological foundation of human existence, which serves as a starting point for further exploration of the concept of freedom. To Sartre, man is "condemned to be free" because, once he finds himself in the world, he is confronted with the necessity of choice and becomes responsible for what he makes of himself.¹ We *will* freedom for freedom's sake, and even when we engage in actual fights, such as revolutions, we do so driven by an abstract will to freedom, which is the foundation of all our goals and values.²

1 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, p. 29.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 48. The will to freedom is described as abstract because it arises prior to and independently of any specific goal or demand. It is a fundamental impulse (open-ended and universal) that gives rise to

Our freedom is realized in a world that resists us as we encounter obstacles, choices, and the freedom of others. It is precisely these limiting conditions that make true freedom possible, for we make choices in a world that often clashes with our desires, goals, and moral principles. With every choice we take responsibility not only for ourselves but for all humanity, because to will our own freedom obliges us to will the freedom of others.³ This responsibility emerges from the fact that our freedom is always exercised in relation to others and in every encounter, our choices shape a world in which their freedom, too, must be possible. Simone de Beauvoir expands on Sartre's existentialist thought with gender and other social dimensions. However, unlike Sartre's, the emphasis of her political philosophy is on marginalized groups, especially women who do not have the practical possibility of action. In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir argues that women are historically positioned as "the Other"—not as autonomous subjects, but as objects in relation to men. This social positioning deprives them of the conditions necessary for action, which for de Beauvoir is the existential realization of freedom. Action is, according to de Beauvoir, essential to freedom, as freedom is not just an internal capacity, but also a practical possibility for action. Without the ability to act, i.e., to make choices, to shape one's life, to participate fully in both public and private spheres, women's freedom remains abstract and unrealized.⁴

Furthermore, in considering political freedom, it's useful to rely on the distinction presented by Isaiah Berlin in his *Four Essays on Liberty*. He observes that authors use the term "freedom" in two different senses: as positive—that which "derives from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master," and as negative—when a person is "free to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with [their] activity."⁵ Different thinkers have had different tendencies regarding which type of freedom they prioritize—for instance, Sartre understood freedom predominantly through its negative aspect, while de Beauvoir moved closer to the positive conception.

How Does Freedom Lead to Resistance and Struggle?

When we talk about the concept of freedom, we also talk about its opposite—unfreedom. Wherever there is unfreedom, individual or collective, there is also

our more concrete actions, including revolutions. Even when we act on clear political aims, we are often moved by something deeper: a general longing to be free, irreducible to any one outcome.

3 *Ibid.*; and Nikola Ačanski, *Smisao angažmana u Sartrovom egzistencijalizmu*, p. 39.

4 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 27.

5 Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," pp. 178 and 169.

resistance and struggle; i.e., if social and cultural incentives arouse or sharpen the awareness of repression and create a feeling that change is possible or necessary. As Sartre puts it: "There can be a free for-itself only as engaged in a resisting world. Outside of this engagement, the notions of freedom, of determinism, of necessity lose all meaning."⁶ This attitude leaves room for further interpretations, and later works such as *Existentialism Is a Humanism* show that Sartre did not speak only of existential engagement, but also one that includes a collective dimension—"types of engagement are different according to eras,"⁷ since personal meaning can only be developed in a community. However, that community may in some cases attempt to thwart personal meaning, and these antagonisms between individual freedom and the world that resists us need to be understood and changed through individual or collective engagement.⁸ Also, considering that for Sartre we are condemned to freedom, we are also condemned to engagement—we are unable not to choose, that is, abstention from making a choice is a choice in itself.⁹ For de Beauvoir, authentic existence does not only imply an individual decision to be free. Rather, it is achieved through constantly overcoming oneself in relation to other freedoms—women's struggle is a political and ethical act of liberation.¹⁰

Hannah Arendt brings us a new view of freedom connected to struggle: freedom exists only through struggle, and it is realized only through political action: "Only where change occurs in the sense of a new beginning, where violence is used to constitute an altogether different form of government, [...] can we speak of a revolution."¹¹ In this sense, not every rebellion or civil war is a revolution; the revolutionary is only that which leads to the creation of a new political body, which transforms liberation into freedom.

Common to all these authors is the rejection of the idea that freedom means "doing whatever we want." Contrary to the popular understanding of freedom as arbitrariness, their thought shows that freedom is always connected to responsibility, normativity, public action, and a critical attitude towards given circumstances. Freedom is thus not a passive state, but a dynamic process that is realized through action, be it moral, political, or artistic. It is precisely in this dynamic between individual and collective freedom, between resistance and responsibility, that there

6 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, p. 483.

7 Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, p. 50.

8 Ačanski, *Smisao angažmana u Sartrovom egzistencijalizmu*, p. 45.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 43–44.

10 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 27.

11 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 35; see also p. 255.

is a space for art as an authentic expression of a free subject, which then opens the possibility for further consideration of the aesthetic dimension of freedom.

Aesthetic Revolution

How Artistic Freedom Became Political Resistance

However—is art at all free, and is it capable of resisting a regime and thereby contributing to political life and struggle? In this regard, I will first consider the artistic phenomenon, the political aspects of which are considered by some authors to have led to historical consequences—that is, the phenomenon of the *aesthetic revolution*. The aesthetic revolution is realized by spontaneous collective action, utilizing movements that create “enthusiasm” that transforms individual cases into historically recognizable and interconnected events, realized by movements that today are displayed in material and discursive repositories of culture or are preserved as material cultural artifacts.¹² In the conclusion of the book *Aesthetic Revolutions*, Aleš Erjavec gives us overview examples of such revolutions: the avant-garde in Italy which briefly had political consequences, the Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) movement which was crucial in the affirmation of the independent Republic of Slovenia, and alternative culture which contributed to essential changes in the way of life in the USA during the 1950s and ‘60s.¹³

I will attempt to show how the idea that art and political life are connected developed throughout the history of philosophy. Their intertwining can already be found in Plato’s *Republic*, in which he advocates the banishment of poets from the *polis* because their poems arouse and strengthen emotions, that is, they destroy reason and thus negatively affect social life.¹⁴ There, we see that Plato believes that art can influence political life, as well as anticipating the idea that political actors should censor art, as later history has demonstrated.

Unlike Plato, Kant took a turn because for him the judgment of taste is free and disinterested in every sense; therefore, art has nothing to do with political life.¹⁵ However, as Jacques Rancière clearly understood, Kant’s idea about the freedom of art paved the way for a stronger connection between politics and art from

12 Aleš Erjavec, “Conclusion: Avant-Gardes, Revolutions, and Aesthetics,” pp. 266–267.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 281.

14 Plato, *The Republic*, p. 328.

15 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, pp. 45–46, 53–54.

Friedrich Schiller onwards: “Schiller attempts to show that it is on the very basis of its autonomy, its not being tied to immediate ends, that art can fulfill a task that cannot be fulfilled in any other way: the furtherance of humanity.”¹⁶ Schiller considers art to be a direct path to political change precisely *because it has no direct political aim*. However, he argues that art can bring about even greater changes than a political revolution, since people have already been morally shaped (or rather, distorted) by the political system, whereas only art has the power to “re-establish the previous unity and put together humankind’s torn halves.”¹⁷ Not even philosophy can present the rigor of moral principles to the extent that art can. In contrast to Plato, who banished poets from the *polis* for singing about falsehoods, Schiller sees illusion as the key characteristic of art because it has an educational function that can be achieved only from a distance from reality, thereby facilitating self-knowledge.¹⁸

In contrast to the views on the role of art in politics discussed above, Rancière in his work *Aisthesis* offers a new perspective, seeing art as political—not in the classical sense of a struggle for power or governance, but in the sense that he understands politics as the “reconfiguration of the distribution of the sensible” (the subjectification of politics), i.e., a shift in the way a community perceives, understands, and allocates roles, places, and forms of visibility. This is also related to his concept of the aesthetic regime of art. In this regard, Rancière’s view is in some ways a continuation of Schiller’s, as he too sees art as part of the process of “becoming truly human.” In this sense, art is political—not because it advocates a specific ideology or exerts direct political influence, but because it takes part in reshaping sensory experience and how we participate in a shared world.¹⁹ Moreover, Rancière connects art to democracy, seeing it as a means of making visible those who were previously excluded or silenced.²⁰

We posed that art is autonomous and disinterested, and then gradually came to recognize its connection with political life (in Schiller’s thought it remains autonomous, whereas, according to Rancière, art is fully political at the expense of its autonomy). The connection is most radical in what Sartre calls *engaged art*. As noted, Sartre maintains that we are condemned to be free and always engaged,

16 Erjavec, “Conclusion,” p. 282.

17 *Ibid.*, pp. 271–272.

18 Dušan Milenković, “Odnos obrazovanja, politike, i humanističkih ideala u Šilerovim pismima o estetskom obrazovanju čoveka,” p. 371.

19 Erjavec, “Conclusion,” pp. 269–272.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 270–271.

even when we abstain from making a choice. In a similar vein, he argues that art is always engaged, for the artist is inevitably implicated, and their works always carry meaning, regardless of how hard one might try to isolate them from it.²¹ Sartre ascribes the nature of engagement in art to literature, precisely because it operates with meanings, whereas (according to Adorno) he considers the other arts from a formalist standpoint.²² In *What Is Literature?*, he explains the difference he sees between the poet and the prose writer: the writer “uses words to inspire action, he reveals things so as to change them, and by doing so, he puts a great burden of responsibility on himself, especially concerning those things he has chosen to remain silent about,”²³ while the poet, too, conveys emotions arising from social indignation and political hatred, but expresses them in a different way – such that the poet “ceases to recognize them; the words take hold of them, penetrate them, and metamorphose them; they do not signify them, even in his eyes.”²⁴ For this reason, in prose, “to speak is to act”²⁵—meaning that prose is always engaged, its essence lies in its signification, and words function as signifiers of objects. Poetry, by contrast, treats words as objects in themselves, valued for their beauty and sensuousness, making it more challenging for poetry to be engaged.²⁶ The most vital element of engaged literature is the act of reading, for books are merely a means to an end—a path towards the reader’s freedom to find within them whatever they seek.²⁷ It is thus evident that Sartre, unlike Schelling and Rancière, emphasizes the significance of the *content* of a work of art, as it calls for action, while their *form* is considered secondary.

Adorno, however, opposes Sartre’s approach. He argues that engaged art, when subordinated to political aims, tends to oversimplify political reality and thereby diminishes its own political impact.²⁸ The autonomy of the artwork is crucial, and he illustrates this point by referring to the famous assertion that it is barbaric to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz. “When even genocide becomes cultural property in committed literature, it becomes easier to continue complying with the culture that gave rise to the murder,” a culture that, as he observes, “shows us

21 Biljana Vlašković Ilić, “Engaged Literature as Art, Prerogative, and Obligation,” p. 254.

22 Theodor W. Adorno, “Commitment,” p. 77.

23 Vlašković Ilić, “Engaged Literature,” p. 255.

24 Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, pp. 18–19.

25 *Ibid.*, 22.

26 *Ibid.*, 20.

27 Vlašković Ilić, “Engaged Literature,” p. 255.

28 Adorno, “Commitment,” p. 84. He cites Brecht as an example, arguing that his dogmatic play had no impact on human engagement—no more than *Guernica*, the effect of which Sartre also doubted.

humanity blossoming in so-called extreme situations.”²⁹ As an example, Adorno points to Arnold Schoenberg, whose atonal music provokes a sense of discomfort that, when translated into an image, appears as a wounded sense of shame before the victims. Autonomous works of art, he argues, are “negations of empirical reality; they destroy what destroys, what merely exists.”³⁰ However, though arising from that very reality—regardless of how transformed their form may be—these works resist it. This is best exemplified in the works of Beckett (about which Adorno remarks that while everyone finds them disturbing, no one can precisely articulate that they speak of what we already recognize and oppose) and Kafka (whom Adorno describes as such an author that, after having read him, one is no longer able to make peace with the world).

Here we can see that Adorno emphasizes the form of the artwork, as it is through its internal rupture that art breaks apart reality from within, whereas Sartre’s notion of engagement operates only from the outside. Hence, Adorno sees autonomous art as having a deeper and more lasting impact than art driven by direct political engagement. What Rancière, Sartre and Adorno have in common is their shared understanding of art as a space of freedom that awakens resistance within us and inspires change. Yet, each conceives this power of art differently—whether as autonomous or dependent upon politics, as a shift in perception, a path to self-knowledge, a matter of form, or one rooted in engaged content.

Form as an Essential Aspect of the Influence of Art on Political Life

The theories emphasizing the significance of artistic form in relation to the impact of art on politics provide a more adequate explanation of its actual political influence than those that highlight the primacy of its content. It is undeniable that throughout history, art has operated and achieved results through its content as well. However, I maintain that form is where the true power of art lies. While many other disciplines—such as philosophy, journalism, or the sciences—have the ability to grapple with content, art is unique in its formal capacity to create situations not encountered in everyday reality. As Adorno would argue: by working through art we can penetrate deeper into the inner life of human beings. This point can be further illustrated by an analogy between philosophy and science when it comes to content. Engaging with a specific scientific discipline allows us

29 *Ibid.*, p. 88.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 89.

to perceive the world in a certain way, but not in the comprehensive sense that emerges from philosophical inquiry, which can yield radically different perspectives on life as a whole and transform the way we understand the world. In this sense, art also possesses the means—i.e., its form—to reveal perspectives that can affect us in a manner akin to philosophy, reshaping the way we perceive ourselves and the world.

Examples of forms of art include metaphor, satire, irony, and sarcasm. These forms help artists express their thoughts and emotions even under repressive conditions without being censored—demonstrating that form often has a deeper political reach than content itself. Such works may outwardly appear naive, unserious (especially satire), or harmless to a given system, while in fact carrying a deep and layered message.

Contemporary Examples of Art of Resistance and Engagement in Serbian and Slovenian Culture

One of the most striking examples of the power of the form of art can be found in the work of Branislav Nušić, who became known for his satires in which he does not trivialize reality, but through irony and sarcasm causes authority to lose its power. For this, he was under surveillance, but his works were still accessible, meaning that through satire, he found a way to reach his readers. When it comes to metaphor as a form of artistic resistance, excellent examples can be found in the Slovenian art collective IRWIN (part of the Neue Slowenische Kunst movement) and in the paintings of Vladimir Veličković. The IRWIN group uses visual metaphor through the deliberate appropriation and reinterpretation of totalitarian symbols—their works, such as the famous Poster Scandal from 1987, reveal the similarities between different authoritarian regimes by “mirroring” their aesthetics and symbols. This form acts as a reflection of ideological emptiness and is appropriated to be emptied of its original content and returned to the viewer to provoke questions about these similarities. On the other hand, Veličković uses the metaphor of deformed bodies to express a deep, often inarticulate yet ever-present existential and political tension—his distorted, exposed bodies speak of violence that is systemic, elusive, and impossible to do away with. While IRWIN uses ironic recognition of symbols of power, Veličković depicts the internal consequences of that power, the bodily and psychological breakdown of the subject. Although their approaches differ, these examples show that art does not need to speak loudly to be political—often, it is enough to change the way of seeing. In that lies the true power of art: not to offer the truth, but to challenge perception, to create

discomfort, doubt, or empathy, and to awaken through form what repression has tried to suppress.

I will now present examples of approaches by artists from Serbian and Slovenian culture that illustrate the significance of art in political life. I will begin with Marina Abramović. Her performances serve as an excellent example of Rancière's theory, as they transform modes of action within the community—the audience, long accustomed to passivity, becomes active in her work. Through this shift, she may not contribute to any concrete form of political engagement, but she demonstrates that the world can operate differently from what we have been accustomed to. As she emphasizes in an interview with Cecilia Hansson, politically engaged artists are, in her view, the worst (a sharp rejection of Sartre's position), as politics is constantly changing, while the artist should be universal, possessing multiple levels and a complex practice to ensure the work's survival.³¹ For this reason, we can also connect her to Adorno, for whom the autonomy of art was central. At the same time, Abramović's performances completely transform form—in Adornian terms, it is a "negation of empirical reality"—by dismantling art from within and thereby affecting the human psyche in a deeper, more profound way.

An example of the relationship between art and politics in Sartre's theory can be found in the work of Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid. In 1990, they created a video artwork titled *Bilocation*, which thematizes the resistance of the Albanian people against the repressive regime in Kosovo, after they were stripped of all political power. Here we see a pure example of engaged art—female artists recognize oppression and use artistic expression to document and criticize it, combining documentary footage with fictional elements. Precisely because of the political sensitivity of the content, the video was never shown in its entirety on RTV Slovenia, and was thus exposed to a form of censorship. However, it was shown at many international festivals.³²

It is thus evident that art reshapes political consciousness, and that even under the most repressive regimes, it is precisely art that retains enough freedom to provoke critical reflection—through its use of satire, metaphor, the reconfiguration of the sensible, or the negation of empirical reality—thereby fostering resistance that can ultimately lead to struggle. It is through the form of an artwork that completely new ways of perceiving the world arise.

31 Sesilija Hanson, *Beznadežno, ali ne sasvim*, p. 112.

32 Ivana Marjanović, "Bilokacija, istorija, politika i uslovi produkcije: intervju sa Marinom Gržinić," p. 128.

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