

Titolo || A Polity of its Own Called Art?

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Numero pagine || pag 1 di 5

Lingua || ENG

DOI ||

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di Richard Schechner

Ordinary citizenship itself is tough enough. Why be burdened with a subcategory like “artistic citizenship”? Can a profession enact its own brand of citizenship? Or is being an “artistic citizen” just hot air?

Historically, the practice of citizenship developed as a way to draw people from diverse backgrounds, opinions, and interests toward a common purpose. If “the people” – as in “We, the people” – remains America’s most encompassing civic designation, that of “I am an American citizen” parses the collective into its individual agents each acting purposely with a commitment to the polity. That does not mean that all citizens agree on policy, values, opinions, what constitutes the public good, or anything else. Citizens must agree on only two things: that the polity is worth preserving; and that preserving it requires participating in its governance.

More needs to be said. The concept of “citizen” is multifarious. Historically, a citizen is of the city, not the countryside; a commoner, not gentry; a civilian, not a soldier. These distinctions no longer hold. What remains intact is that each citizen is an enfranchised inhabitant of a political entity, not an alien (legal or illegal). For Athenians, citizenship was restricted to permanent male residents only – not women, slaves, and non-Athenians. In the USA, African Americans were not citizens until 1868 when the 14th Amendment to the Constitution was ratified (and even after, this citizenship was imperfect); women were not enfranchised until 1920 with the ratification of the 19th Amendment. During the French Revolution, “Citoyen” was the term signifying the bond of ordinary people united against aristocratic power, those addressed “Monsieur” (my lord). Later, the communist “Comrade” made the same point. Both terms were relatively short lived. And how different from all the above is the “anti-citizenship” implied in being “a citizen of the world,” a cosmopolitan free from the parochialism of this or that place.

Etymologically, the English word “citizen” is rooted in the Greek *khinen* – to rouse or move. Thereby one of its branches leads to “cinema,” moving pictures, while hanging on another branch are “citation,” “excitement,” “incite,” and so on. But “citizen” also has roots in the Sanskrit “shiva,” the name of the god who dances the world into existence and obliteration. Paradoxically, “shiva” also means “friendly” and “homey.” This root connects to the sense of a citizen as someone who enjoys the privileges and accepts the obligations of belonging to a particular place: one’s “home country,” “native land,” and the rest.

In common usage, to be a citizen means enacting one’s affiliation with a place and its people, their aspirations and common purposes, rights, duties, history, and future. One is a “good citizen” if one is willing to lay down one’s life in defense of the common purpose; one is a “bad citizen” if one avoids performing the duties of one who belongs.

To be a “non-citizen” is another matter altogether with many possibilities. A non-citizen may be someone who belongs to someplace else. “She is not a citizen *here*” implies that she is a citizen *there*. Or one can pretend to be a citizen expressly to do harm as spies and terrorists do. Or one can be rejected, as are millions of today’s nomads and stateless. Or one can withdraw to the “forest” (actually or figuratively) as did Vedic ascetics long ago or more recently Henry David Thoreau who spent his famous year on Walden Pond. Thoreau developed the theory and practice of civil disobedience – a paradoxical performance in which one acts the bad citizen in the service of good citizenship. Civil disobedience demonstrates to the majority just how wrong their laws are. By willfully suffering the consequences, the civilly disobedient exposes, subverts, attacks, and often ultimately overturns these unjust laws. Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King inspired and led millions in masterful performances of civil disobedience.

Artistic Citizenship

Which brings me to artistic citizenship. Is the category separable from citizenship “in general”? Is there a special species of citizenship that pertains to artists only? If so, what are its qualities? Is such a category a good thing? Or to put it another way: Is there a polity called “art” to which persons belong, owe allegiance, and derive benefits? If there is such a polity, what practices does being an “artistic citizen” require? Raising money? Helping other artists get their work produced? Forcefully speaking truth to authority even at the expense of losing public financial and other support? Donating one’s art to socially uplifting, charitable, or progressive causes? But what about Thoreau-like actions, in violation of the law, performed to change the way things are? Or played out in protest of wrong decisions made by those in authority as Antigone did at the cost of her life? What kinds of laws – the conventions and habits of art, the laws of the state, or both? Is being avantgarde – violating the canons of art – comparable to breaking the law of the land? Do the two kinds of laws operate in tandem or independently of each other? That is, can one be perfectly law abiding in with regard to the state and artistically a law-breaker; or vice-versa: be an activist, anarchist, or terrorist with regard to civil society but conventional as an artist?

Of course, art history provides plenty of examples of both kinds of artistic citizenship – from those who accept commissions from wealthy patrons and entrenched governments to those who explode the bases on which power stands. There is, also, the very broad middle path, much followed today because of the contradictions that many artists find themselves living. On this middle path, artists speak out and act up, but only within the rules of the game. There are many “tenured radicals” (count me one) and “house avantgardists” who self-censor when they fill out NEA or foundation applications or accept work at venues whose curators cannot afford to violently rock the boat. Good people who are trying to make a living and reform, if not revolutionize, the social order.

The persistence of the “jihadist”/“terrorist” movements – nihilistic to some, idealistic to others – complicates the matter

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Numero pagine || pag 2 di 5

Lingua || ENG

DOI ||

greatly. Is exploding a bomb in a subway an extreme instance of civil disobedience or a socio-cultural disease? Are these bombs – suicide or not – weapons-of-choice in a war or an extreme example of a reality show-artwork of those who want to obliterate the polities they attack? Can terrorism/jihadism be both a war and an artwork? This is what composer Karlheinz Stockhausen said after 9-11. It's worth looking at this a little more closely.

Terrorism and Art

The 9-11 attacks destroyed the World Trade Center, damaged the Pentagon, and crashed a third plane – probably headed for the White House or Capitol – in the woods of Pennsylvania. United 93 never struck its target because passengers banded together to bring that plane (“Let’s roll!”). Given four planes and three targets, why almost immediately did “9-11” mean the destruction of the WTC? Did the jihadists/terrorists know Sinatra’s “New York, New York [...] If I can make it there, I’ll make it anywhere”? The WTC was the epicenter not only of the attacks but of the imaginary that is “9-11.” And what kind of imaginary is that? When, a few days after the attacks, Stockhausen was asked to comment, he called the destruction of the WTC:

the greatest work of art imaginable for the whole cosmos. [...] Minds achieving something in an act that we couldn't even dream of in music, people rehearsing like mad for 10 years, preparing fanatically for a concert, and then dying, just imagine what happened there. You have people who are that focused on a performance and then 5,000 [sic] people are dispatched to the afterlife, in a single moment. I couldn't do that. By comparison, we composers are nothing. Artists, too, sometimes try to go beyond the limits of what is feasible and conceivable, so that we wake up, so that we open ourselves to another world (Spinola 2001).

Also commenting on 9-11 was the 1997 Nobel Laureate for Literature, Dario Fo, who circulated an email stating:

The great speculators wallow in an economy that every year kills tens of millions of people with poverty -- so what is 20,000 [sic] dead in New York? Regardless of who carried out the massacre, this violence is the legitimate daughter of the culture of violence, hunger and inhumane exploitation (Erlanger 2001).

Stockhausen’s remarks were met with outrage, while Fo’s hardly caused a ripple. Why?

Fo left art out. He uttered boilerplate left politics: the chickens come home to roost, what goes around comes around, the US imperialists got their just desserts. Ironically, Fo’s playwriting and directing is highly political, while Stockhausen’s grand (some would say grandiose) compositions are apolitical. Stockhausen claimed for art an importance, a place in the “real world.” Not “artlike art” but “lifelike art” – art that is action, not representation. As theorized by Allan Kaprow, “[...] artlike art holds that art is separate from life and everything else, while lifelike art holds that art is connected to life and everything else” (1983:38). Kaprow’s lifelike art is sustaining, constructive, and meditative. 9-11, if it is art at all, operates destructively, on the dark side.

Literary theorists Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe were not shocked by Stockhausen who they saw as one of a long tradition of artistic fanatics:

The desire beneath many romantic literary visions is for a terrifying awakening that would undo the West’s economic and cultural order, whose origin was the Industrial Revolution and whose goal is global saturation, the obliteration of difference. It is also the desire, of course, of what is called terrorism. Transgressive artistic desire—which wants to make art whose very originality constitutes a step across and beyond the boundaries of the order in place—is desire not to violate within a regime of cultures (libel and pornography laws, for example) but desire to stand somehow outside, so much the better to violate the regime itself.[...]

As any avant-garde artist might, Stockhausen sees the devotion of high artistic seriousness [...] in the complete commitment of the terrorists [...]. Like terrorists, serious artists are always fanatics; unlike terrorists, serious artists have not yet achieved the “greatest” level of art. [...] The terrorists did the thing that he would do but hasn’t yet done, having not yet reached in his music the plateau of “the greatest” (2003: 2-3, 11-12).

In other words, Stockhausen (and those artists who agree with him) is envious of the “artists” who devised 9-11. The jihadists/terrorists are center stage, while artists are marginalized. A single attack has changed world history. What art act can even come a fraction of the way?

But who are those artists? Surely not Mohammed Atta and his crew. They would absolutely reject the labels “art” and “artist” in relation to their actions. If there is art in 9-11, it is in the reception: what Stockhausen imagined when he saw the media representations of the attack on the WTC. Or in the unfolding event and its aftermath: what visual artists, performance artists, writers, artists of any kind “do” with what happened. There is nothing new in that: Goya and Picasso – not to mention Aeschylus, Vyas, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, and Hemingway (from a very long list) – made masterpieces from the horrors of war. The question here is different: the act itself, not its representation. The “lifelike” tendency in art – can it go too far? But what of non-representational arts such as the “martial arts,” the “art of cooking,” or any activity executed with graceful expertise? Is “art” in this sense mere metaphor? I don’t think so. What the non-representational categories indicate is an artistic “approach” or “style” that can inflect any activity.

Lentricchia and McAuliffe do not stop by situating the 9-11 attacks within a tradition of transgressive art. They go on to

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Numero pagine || pag 3 di 5

Lingua || ENG

DOI ||

discuss 9-11 in relation to popular culture – how soon after 9-11 the New York site of the attack became “Ground Zeroland,” a “Mecca” (how’s that for irony) for tourists, and a site for nationalist myth making.

On December 30, 2001, Mayor [Rudolf] Giuliani opened a viewing platform for the folk over the mystic gulf that is Ground Zero, a stage to which he urged Americans, and everybody, to come and experience “all kinds of feelings of sorrow and then tremendous feelings of patriotism.” [...] The platform’s purpose is to connect tourists to their history at a site that perfectly conjoins terrorism, patriotism, and tourism (2003: 14-15).

By now the platform is gone, but its intention lives on in the work of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation.

But maybe I am missing the point – what comes *after* something like 9-11 can certainly be anything at all: art, commercial exploitation, re-enactment (as in restaging the 1863 Battle of Gettysburg). The fascist bombing of the Basque town of Guernica in 1937 was one thing, Picasso’s great, anguished painting *Guernica* is something else again. The question before us is: Can 9-11 *in itself* be “art”? Or usefully understood under the rubric of art? And if so, what kind of “artistic citizens” perpetrated such a horror? I am exploring the possibility not to validate terrorist actions or insult the dead and wounded, but to point out that terrorism/jihadism, as art, works more on states of mind (and feeling) than on physical destruction. Or, if you will, the destruction is the means toward the end of creating terror, which is a state of mind. From this perspective, 9-11 was an example of Artaud’s prophetic assertion in “No More Masterpieces” that “We are not free. And the sky can still fall on our heads. And the theatre has been created to teach us that first of all” (Artaud 1958: 79).

A Special Kind of Person?

Artists like to think of themselves (ourselves) as special. Perhaps all healthily self-esteeming human beings think they are special. No matter: either uniquely, universally, or somewhere in between, artists tout their peculiarity both in regard to their individuality and in regard to their social position. Here I am talking about modern and postmodern artists, artists within those societies that mark art as a separate occupation. There have been, and continue to be, plenty of times, places, and cultures where artists are regarded as artisans and/or ritual specialists – such as the anonymous souls who architected, sculpted, painted, and formed the stained glasses and mosaics of many Romanesque and medieval churches; or the shamans who dance, sing, storytell, and costume themselves so magnificently as they cure or exorcise. But these differences are evaporating in the heat of the market economy. In today’s markets, including the museum market, the works of these anonymous and shamanic artists fetch top euro, yen, and dollar – with the rupee and the yuan on the way.

Returning to modern and postmodern artists – how are they, we, special? First, we operate in a way approaching the double-agency of moles, spies, and cons. Artists both work within and stand aside from the dominant culture. Many filmmakers, even while trying to make it in Bolly- Holly- Wood, think that artistically they are independents. Actors circulate from media to live, from off Broadway to the regional theatres, from art to commercials. Visual artists want their stuff to hang in the trendiest Chelsea galleries but also want to end in MOMA or even the Met. Vincent van Gogh’s trajectory is iconic: from disrespected outsider to masterpiece maker whose work is traded for mega-millions. The dream of many an art student is to make it *and* to maintain both a critical stance in relation to society *and* an independence from the very success one craves.

Can this triple objective be achieved? Paradoxically, as long as an artist is unsuccessful, she can flaunt her outsider position; but when success kisses her, or even while trying to make it, she must play the game. In today’s America (but not only here), the game consists of pleasing patrons and/or producers, private, foundations, and government; of knowing how to promote and market one’s artistic “product” (from artifacts to the intangible “it”); to network; and to find sequestered time and space to “do the work.” All this involves being on the inside to some degree or other. How many lifelong outsiders who have also made it do you know of? The two categories are mutually exclusive. And what do I mean by “outsider”? Our present day culture is so media saturated that success equals notoriety. “Lonely” success is impossible. Take Andy Warhol as an example whose lifestyle/art continues to reverberate. Once Warhol achieved success, he was copied many times over. To be expected, of course, because Warhol was the King of Copy, his Factory the home of his “individuality.” Warhol’s trail is now a super highway not only linking the pop and the high, but even obliterating differences between the two.

But does being inside and winning at the game preclude being critical of the way things are? Michael Moore’s films are both good box office (relatively speaking) and severely critical. Many other artists in many genres also succeed with the public while maintaining their independence. This is partly because there is no single public, but multiple publics. One finds support within one’s own community. In a way, different artists are citizens of different “nations.” The paradox here is that if we sing to the choir we are not likely to really be effective in reshaping society; and if we insist on bringing our message to the seats of power, we risk retaliation that can damage our careers or even have more deleterious outcomes. And of course there is a lot of art that has no message or that is designed to entertain not to educate or criticize. It would be a very nice for me to say, “Of course, I can be successful and critical at the same time! I oppose the war in Iraq and support the Kyoto Accords, etc.” But, sorry, the answer is not so simple.

Societies are increasingly organized according to dominant codes – I mean not merely ways of behaving but deep modes of conforming. How one gets money – appearances managed by presenting organizations, government and private funding, rich patrons, and so on – commits artists at all levels to play the game. The game is tightly bound by a myriad of rules. Standing outside this encompassing system is somewhere between difficult and impossible. To be truly independent economically equals

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Numero pagine || pag 4 di 5

Lingua || ENG

DOI ||

failure. And to be part of the managed care system of the arts industry – from arts schools onwards into the various professional fields – means that one is playing the game. Of course, individual artists and groups find their niches. And one niche is – naturally – that of “rebel,” “outsider,” “independent,” “social and political critic,” “radical” or whatever you want to call what used to be called the “avantgarde.” There is nothing outside the game. Is this game the polity called art – and is playing the game being an “artistic citizen”? All artists are in the position of either licking or biting the hands that feed them. And if one bites too hard, not only does funding dry up, along with appearances, but the government comes down on you. Remember what happened to the “NEA Four”¹ in the early 1990s and to Steve Kurtz of the Critical Art Ensemble in 2004².

The Polity Called “Art”

Almost always, artistic citizens will hold dual or even multiple citizenships. No one I know is exclusively an artist. Artistic citizens inhabit a conceptual region within a tangible political territory where individuals pay taxes and obey laws. Or, to some artists, the artistic polity is the larger domain containing within it the socio-political one. When these citizenships are in harmony, there is no problem. But when they conflict, individuals must decide how to enact (or ignore) the conflict. Thoreau performed his US citizenship by accepting the consequences of disobeying the law. By writing about what he did, he brought his artistic skills to bear on the problem. But he did not act as an “artistic citizen.” He did not go to jail because he was an artist or to make a point about art.

Artists like the NEA Four or the Critical Art Ensemble suffered because of their art. Their artistic citizenship and their US citizenship collided. Many other artists have suffered much more grievously in societies that demand ideological orthodoxy. The Soviet theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold was harassed, arrested, and shot because of his work. The Nazis hounded Walter Benjamin to suicide because he was gay and because he was a leftist intellectual. Bertolt Brecht fled Germany first to Denmark and then to the US – where, ultimately, he was called before a committee of the House of Representatives to explain his communist beliefs. The day after testifying, Brecht left America for good. There are too many examples, from the present as well as the past.

Let’s return to the question I asked at the outset of this writing: “Can a profession enact its own brand of citizenship?” Is there is a polity called art? That is, an entity populated by “artistic citizens” dedicated to their particular community. Is anyone an artist who says she is an artist? Are there rules or canons of art? Can we say with assurance that the job of artists is to make works that are beautiful, emotional, critical, and engaged? But can’t art also be ugly, dry, accepting, and detached? Or ironic, parodic, and bitter? Are the rules and canons in place *both* to be accepted and destroyed? Just as civil society encompasses the sheriff and Thoreau, doesn’t artistic citizenship include the conventional artist and the avantgardist/experimenter? The important thing may be to know what kind of work you are doing in each particular circumstance. But the opposite may also be true: to strike out into the unknown without predetermining what the process or outcome will be. Do artists hold the mirror up to nature or construct a separate reality or both, depending on the work, on the artist, on the circumstance? Should art be artlike or lifelike? Are ordinary activities, political acts, and terrorist attacks all subsumable under “art”? Is art the practice of artists or a method of critical inquiry or both? And if it is not possible to define what art is or what it does, how can we possibly say what an “artistic citizen” is?

So many questions, so few answers.

¹ In 1990, responding to pressure from Congress and the right, John Frohmyer, head of the National Endowment for the Arts, acting under instructions from the National Council on the Arts (an advisory committee of elected officials, academics, producers, and a few artists) vetoed grants already unanimously approved by a peer review panel and destined for Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller. Frohmyer said he was bowing to the “political realities.” In 1993, after going to court, the NEA Four were awarded money equal to the grants they were denied. However, the NEA by then had stopped giving any grants to individuals. The result has been a distinct lessening of NEA support for experimental, risky, and edgy art. See Phelan 1991 for a fuller exposition of what happened and its consequences.

² The Critical Art Ensemble, a performance group specializing in connecting art and the sciences, was scheduled to participate in a 2004 Mass MOCA (the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art show, *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere*. CAE’s installation was *Free Range Grain*, dealing with genetically modified crops. The installation was designed to address the question, “How can artists and the public become engaged in complex sciences like biotechnology, sociology, and anthropology?” *Free Range Grain* never opened. According to Rebecca Schneider and Jon McKenzie: “On the morning of 11 May, two weeks before the opening of *The Interventionist* show, Steve Kurtz awoke to find that his wife had passed away in the night. If the death of a loved one was not tragic enough, Kurtz’s 911 call to EMS set off a long and troubling set of events. Soon Kurtz found himself surrounded by regional terrorism investigators, FBI agents, and the federal Joint Terrorism Task Force. Their suspicion: possession of illegal biological agents. [...] News images showed agents in HAZMAT suits going in and out of the house, the street in front closed off with police tape. The Kurtz residence in Buffalo, New York, doubles as a studio for Critical Art Ensemble. As CAE’s recent work has focused on the biotech industries, the main floor of his house contained laboratory equipment, petri dishes, and biological samples. Reportedly, it was these scientific art materials that led authorities to contact federal officials, who detained Kurtz and later arraigned him before a federal grand jury, even though state investigators declared his house safe and the suspected organisms harmless” (2004:6). Eventually the domestic terrorism charges were dropped. But as of this writing, Kurtz is still charged with mail and wire fraud because of purchasing the bacterium *serratia marcescens* for use by Kurtz in his artwork.

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Numero pagine || pag 5 di 5

Lingua || ENG

DOI ||

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