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Introduction to Contemporary Art Across Political Divides

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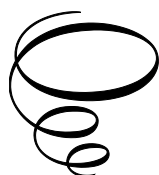
Contemporary Arts Across Political Divides:

Difficult Conversations

Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

CONTEMPORARY ARTS ACROSS POLITICAL DIVIDES: DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

ALLA MYZELEV AND TIJEN TUNALI

What is called “the Neoliberal Era” has generated profound changes in the economic and political spheres and social and cultural life. Immediately before and after the dramatic political changes in Central and Eastern Europe that culminated in the demolition of the Berlin Wall in 1989, liberal democracy and market capitalism triumphed. The era celebrated a new political and economic liberalism, proclaiming the free market and a minimal state as the only road to the capital, disallowing all alternatives. For the past four decades, neoliberalism has come to define the economic project of a particular political philosophy – namely, the product of a discursive combination of the logic of liberal democracy with the dictatorship of the market.

In this global order under the neoliberal capitalist system, which has fostered new technological advancement, climate change, ecological destruction, and armed conflicts, we are confronting challenges of a new kind – challenges that question traditional conceptions of art and politics. Activists create alternative possibilities for politics, artists seek new visual languages, and intellectuals strive to capture and influence the constantly shifting terrain of the social conscience. The goal is to envision new ways of making systemic change possible. Art has been in the middle of this quest for several decades. We need a more thorough understanding of the generation and application of radically different epistemological frameworks and the imaginings that art pushes us to recognize. Political and aesthetic shifts are necessary to create effective responses to such unimaginable

problems as exponential growth, climate change, and economic and health crises; these shifts are also necessary if we are to negotiate commonality in plurality and difference.

On the other hand, in recent years, the state, governmental institutions, and municipal regulators have increasingly intervened directly in art's ontological framework through censorship, control of art markets, and withholding of economic support. On the other hand, neoliberal capitalism now penetrates every level of our social existence, including the media, consumption, the family, and social interactions. Our common world is a conglomeration of worlds shaped by political and economic (and now public-health) emergencies. In a society dominated by social inequalities and risk, art is embedded in the unmediated capitalist reality of the twenty-first century. Marina Vishmidt warns us that transferring art from the sphere of culture into the realm of neoliberal business is just a step away: "It allows it to stop *being art*, or to stop being *only art* and allows it to start playing a much more direct role as a channel of empowerment, governance, and even accumulation – if only of 'social capital'—for specific communities in specific contexts."¹ It is not new to observe that art can be a jewel in the crown of power, a commodity in the business world, or a safety valve that discharges repressed energies. Still, art can also be something else: a tool to create dialogical communities. Kester recently reminded us that we should not give up on art in social struggles:

...the modalities of disruption we typically encounter in the arts have long ago succumbed to a kind of repressive re-sublimation in which the ostensibly audacious attack on the viewer's consciousness becomes simply another occasion for aesthetic delectation and profit maximization. What we require is a far more nuanced account of both consensus and dissensus as experiential modes in contemporary art and political resistance.²

¹ Marina Vishmidt, "'Mimesis of the Hardened and Alienated': Social Practice as Business Model," *E-flux Journal*, vol. 43, 2013, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/43/60197/mimesis-of-the-hardened-and-alienated-social-practice-as-business-model>.

² Grant H. Kester, "The Limitations of the Exculpatory Critique: A Response to Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen," *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 25, no. 53, 2017, p. 77.

This volume offers a wealth of multidisciplinary, multinational examples united by their interest in creating participation, agonism, and the prospective capacity of “possibilizing” – equitable interaction and the common creation of the difficult imaginary and imagined agonistic coexistence through artmaking, circulating, and viewing. The art discussed here is centred on its dialogical properties rather than creating a specific aesthetic–political praxis. The contributors – who are social activists, museum professionals, art historians, and practitioners of collaborative art practices – propose strategies of engagement in art in the regions that are sharply divided politically. They ask some timely questions regarding the role of art in establishing difficult conversations and creating connections and methodologies that will facilitate imperative political responses. Can contemporary art cross political divides and move towards democratic social interaction, openness, and contingency? How can artists help to understand agonistic experiences in the urban public space? Could the artworks achieve reciprocity while regressive forces of nationalism, racism, and misogyny are dangerously gaining in strength across the globe? Whereas the autonomy of art is dissolving from view, can artists create new contexts within which to articulate a political aesthetic as a democratic dialogue?

This edited volume discusses how some experiential art projects and interventions make underrepresented subjectivities visible and audible. They also create difficult dialogues between members of different and, at times, oppositional cultural, political, and national groups. The works of art analysed in the book fall outside the commonly named categories of activist art, political art, or social-practice art. They are envisioned and created for their dialogical properties in complex topographies rather than for creating a particular aesthetic–political praxis. Articulating different modes of political and aesthetic contestations, inside and outside the institutions of art, the examples in this book raise questions about art’s evolving role as a communicative apparatus, thus indirectly challenging the existing social paradigm. The contributors, among whom are museum professionals, art historians, and artists, propose strategies of social engagement in the art that has emerged in regions that are sharply divided politically. They discuss how contemporary art forms, practices, and interventions attempt to break

complacency and create a dialogical ground between members of the different cultural, political and national groups. The authors ask: can such dialogue create democratic communities?

Three decades ago, proposing the idea of “subaltern publics,” Fraser wrote:

...under conditions of social equality, the porousness, outer-directedness, and open-endedness of publics could promote intercultural communication. After all, the concept of a public presupposes a plurality of perspectives among those who participate within it, thereby allowing for internal differences and antagonisms, and likewise discouraging reified blocs ... All told, then, there do not seem to be any conceptual (as opposed to empirical) barriers to the possibility of a socially egalitarian, multi-cultural society that is also a participatory democracy. But this will necessarily be a society with many different publics, including at least one public in which participants can deliberate as peers across lines of difference about policy that concerns them all.³

The contributors to this volume propose that democratic communities, as Fraser imagines, not only debate and improve but also find new cultural languages and modes of operation that allow for the coexistence of different and constantly competing viewpoints. In its quest to understand art’s role in making social equality, cultural diversity, and participatory democracy possible, the book intends to transform this perspective of a plurality of publics into an agonistic coexistence, which the dialogical and aesthetic properties of art could enable. The major tasks of the book are, first of all, to respond to the need to conduct timely and critical analyses of art across political divides in both informing and echoing the public search for agency, dialogue, and self-representation; and, secondly, to analyse how artists across the world use aesthetic means to transform these social relations into a shared commitment to bridging political divides and conflicts. Beyond the politics of art, the contributors conceptualize art, agonism, and participation within the broader registers of political, social, and cultural differences. In light of the multifaceted opportunities of art practices to articulate counter-hegemonic voices, stories, and narratives, the authors look beyond the overt

³ Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text*, no. 25/26, 1990, p. 70.

messages of these practices and the procedures of “politics” of art towards recognizing their powers in creating agonistic and socially active places, relations, and coexistences.

Dissensus, Dialogical Communication, and Agonism

Jacques Rancière understands politics as opening a void of possibility in the partition of the sensible, wherein new political subjects emerge despite the police principle, which strives to maintain fixed roles. For Rancière, art’s aesthetic is a social arena where individuals and the community come together to recompose the shared sensorium.⁴ In its constant contesting of partition and exclusion, as opposed to uniting and inclusion, Rancière’s philosophy could be recognized as closely related to the struggle of the oppressed for spatial and temporal reconfiguration and representation. Such politicization of ordinary citizens and their demands for the political space of visibility and speech that belong to them would open the way to true democratic representation and revolutionary politics. Rancière’s remark that “words, stories and performances can help us change something in the world in which we live” points to the dialogical exchange among diverse actors and, more specifically, their aesthetic exchanges. Hence, Rancière’s theory of aesthetics and politics emphasizes the conceptualization of political subjectivity based on action, dialogue, and dissensus that are not based on the “essence” of political or artistic thought.

For Rancière, politics is the configuration of the everyday world in which everybody is in their place, performing their role in society. He articulates this as the police order that passes itself off as *real*. True politics, then, starts with dissensus. When this sense-making mechanism is broken, the distribution of justice can be reconfigured: “[dissensus] is a conflict about who speaks and who does not speak, about what has to be heard as the voice

⁴ Jacques Rancière, “The Emancipated Spectator,” *Artforum*, March 2007, pp. 271–281; Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, translated by Steven Corcoran (Cambridge; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009); Jacques Rancière, “The Paradoxes of Political Art,” in *Dissensus: on Politics and Aesthetics*, edited by Steve Corcoran (London; New York: Continuum, 2010); Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp, *Reading Rancière: Critical Dissensus* (London: Continuum, 2011).

of pain and what has to be heard as the argument on justice.”⁵ Dissensus is not a conflict between groups or people. It is a conflict about the existence or nonexistence of our common world, and what is included, who is included, and how they are included in that common world. Rancière explains that class war should also be understood in terms of dissensus, as: “not the conflict between groups which have opposite economic interests, but the conflict about what an ‘interest’ is, the struggle between those who set themselves as able to manage social interests and those who are supposed to be only able to reproduce their life.”⁶

Like Rancière, Chantal Mouffe insists on moving away from the desire for consensus and recognizing and accommodating antagonism, which necessarily produces pluralism. Mouffe looks at identity in Derridean terms: “the constitution of an identity is always based on excluding something and establishing a violent hierarchy between the resultant two poles – form/matter, essence/accident, black/white, man/woman, and so on.”⁷ Therefore, for Mouffe, antagonism is necessary, for “every identity is relational and ... the condition of existence of every identity is the affirmation of a difference, the determination of an ‘other’ that is going to play the role of a ‘constitutive outside.’”⁸ She argues that “cultural and artistic practices could play an important role in the agonistic struggle because they are a privileged terrain for the construction of new subjectivities.”⁹ Mouffe and Rancière ascribe to art a unique potential to instigate a disruption in the existing sensory and discursive regime and to contest the emergence of hegemonic consensus. The contributors test the hypothesis that the dialogical relations that connect contested places and people in conflict can create an agonistic togetherness involving participation, interpretation, and creation – a weaving together of what is witnessed, known and recollected.

The book’s discursive framework is also indebted to Mikael Bakhtin’s understanding of dialogic communication. His theorization of dialogue and

⁵ Bowman and Stamp, *Reading Rancière*, p. 2.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 141.

⁸ Ibid., p. 2.

⁹ Ibid.

dialogism offers complimentary conceptual tools with inclusive and liberating capacities that can be useful for the understanding of agonistic coexistence. We propose that dialogue provides freedom, creativity, and independence for establishing reciprocal relationships among agonistic subjects. According to this dialogical approach, the artist and the community are reciprocal and politically equal participants with unique qualities. Bakhtin's understanding of dialogue goes beyond a mere conversation or a type of narrative articulation in the process of communication. It is an interaction of a plurality of voices geared towards new understandings, connections, or possibilities. Dialogue has the capability to initiate the development of sophisticated ideas. Bakhtin writes that: "all else is the means, dialogue is the end. A single voice ends nothing and resolves nothing. Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence."¹⁰ His approach focuses on the idea of polyphony in creating plural societies with a "plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses."¹¹ Bakhtin's understanding of polyphony refers to the equality of voices interacting with each other where no single voice, particularly not an authorial voice, is important.¹² He also emphasizes that a dialogue can involve multiple participants and various perspectives in a shared existence. The many examples in this book's chapters show how disparate beings and ideas confront each other in their encounters with artistic ideas and experiences.

Echoing Rancière's, Mouffe's, and Bakhtin's perspectives on democratic communities, the chapters in this volume contest the many earlier claims that art's power is located in its originality and message, and instead show that its politics consist of the shaking of the usual order of things, relationships, and perspectives. Through conceptual framings of pluralism of dialogue and agonistic coexistence, the authors invite us to think about how art can and cannot reveal the circumstances of identities becoming hierarchical and violent, and how to bridge the political gap between those identities. The authors contend that the production of common worlds via

¹⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, edited by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 252.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

artistic practices in contested spaces operates within and against a more complex social totality of contemporary capitalism that is overdetermined by the social relations of production. The wide variety of artworks from around the world examined here have different methodological and conceptual engagements and social contexts. Still, they have a shared political drive to break away from normalized ways of seeing, doing, and viewing art. Thus, while engaged in creating another sociality and politicality, these works of art have less to do with creating consensus and more to do with locating a political demand with regards to how we share our encounters with the world in which we live.

Art as a Tool of Agonistic Coexistence

For scholars defining the space of “the political” through agonistic politics, there is no confrontation between power and freedom since the two are constitutive of each other. The question is how to create and structure power that will allow for “agonistic confrontations” that are more “compatible with democratic values.”¹³ The framework of the “agonistic confrontations” which could lead to “agonistic coexistence” is especially productive for this volume because it shows how the struggle for plurality and democracy happens in many parts of the world. Michel Foucault explains his understanding of agonism within the states and governments of power. Foucault writes that “the analysis, elaboration, and bringing into question of power relations and the “agonism” between power relations and the intransitivity of freedom is an increasingly political task – even, the political task that is inherent in all social existence.”¹⁴ While Foucault and his followers conceptualize agonism in relation to power and freedom, Mouffe uses it as an essential component in democratizing social conflicts.

For Paulina Tambakaki, Mouffe’s use of passion is an instrument for a commitment to democratic plurality, where differences cannot be resolved through common reason. She writes that, for Mouffe: “Passion defines

¹³ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London; New York: Verso, 2000), pp. 17–21.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, edited by James D Faubion, translated by Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 343.

democratic practice because it captures the type of (necessary) tie or bond that develops among democratic citizenries; that is, all those identifications – practices and discourses – that at one and the same time constitute collectivities and unite citizenries.”¹⁵ Mihaela Mihai, further discusses that Mouffe’s use of passion is rooted in the construction of affective response. She notes: “Mouffe’s idea that affect must support identification with democratic aims, i.e. must be made compatible with the ethico-political principles democracies are based on, presupposes an understanding of passions as malleable, transformable, sociable.”¹⁶

Yet, as Mouffe argues, evoking emotions through resistance, political appeals, or artwork is insufficient. “Not all emotions and not all ways of expressing them are conducive to adversarial encounters,” Mihai warns while paraphrasing Mouffe. Strong emotions attached to an essentialist or other non-democratic strategies or values may make agonism revert to antagonism. In this case, fostering emotions that could be used in agonistic struggles becomes the role of the institutions.¹⁷ Institutions such as museums and galleries should be able to create an environment where affective responses can serve the agonistic coexistence and foster adversarial debates. This volume argues that affect is a vital tool in creating opportunities for agonistic discussions fostering emotional projects and, more importantly, that in some cases galleries and other institutions are not ready to represent and allow for agonistic voices. It follows that grassroots, individual artistic performances are needed to foster affective events among politically divided audiences (Myzelev, Grewal, Tunali). The contributors in this book investigate whether art can be a force to mobilize the affective responses of diverse groups in conflict with each other to consolidate a political potential for agonism.

The contributors follow Alina Kolańczyk’s definition of an affective reaction as a “momentary, positive or negative reaction of an organism to a

¹⁵ Paolina Tambakaki, “The Tasks of Agonism and Agonism to the Task: Introducing ‘Chantal Mouffe: Agonism and the Politics of Passion,’” *Parallax*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2014, p. 6.

¹⁶ Mihaela Mihai, “Theorizing Agonistic Emotions,” *Parallax*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2014, p. 9.

¹⁷ Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, p. 104.

change in the environment or in the subject itself.”¹⁸ When experiencing an artwork, one often encounters intense feelings of empathy, horror, and beauty; sometimes, it is a feeling that is impossible to define. Such an initial encounter, created outside our cognitive faculties of perception, is called an “affective event.”¹⁹ While earlier in the history of art witnessing or experiencing an artwork was related to aesthetic enjoyment and the awe-inspiring experience of looking at what was considered a work of genius – or what Walter Benjamin would call the “aura” – in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the aesthetic experience is thought to affect the beholder’s perceptual experience. Luiza Nader notes that “the questions of what we feel and why, and whose affects and emotions works of art project on us, belong both to the sphere of intimate questions and to that of important political ones.”²⁰ Mihai further explains that scholars see the formation of emotions as based partly on an individual’s biological constitution and partly on the social background.²¹ In this case, we can explain why people react to art differently and with varied intensity. Teresa Brennan argues that affect forces us to bid farewell to the concept of individualism.²² While affective experience seems individual, it is in reality completely immersive and based on what a work of art can provide. For instance, Altomonte discusses how Palestinian artist Khaled Jarrar uses relatable objects, such as a soccer ball, to produce affective responses to the separation between Palestine and Israel. Such objects and artworks have the potential not only to appeal to the emotions of the marginalized – in this

¹⁸ Alina Kolańczyk, “Procesy Afektywne i Orientacja w Otoczeniu,” in *Serce w Rozumie. Afektywne Podstawy o Rientacji w Otoczeniu*. (Gdańsk: Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, 2004), p. 16.

¹⁹ While affective event theory was developed by Cropanzano et al. to predict and measure job satisfaction, it has been utilized to explain artistic and emotional responses. Russell Cropanzano, Marie T Dasborough, and Howard M Weiss, “Affective Events and the Development of Leader–Member Exchange,” *The Academy of Management Review*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2017, pp. 233–58. See, for instance, Ernst Van Alphen, “Affective Operations of Art and Literature,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2008, pp. 20–30.

²⁰ Luiza Nader, “An Affective Art History,” *Teksty Drugie*, no. 2, 2015, pp. 236–61.

²¹ Mihaela Mihai, “Theorizing Agonistic Emotions,” *Parallax*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2014, p. 14.

²² Teresa Brennan, “Introduction,” in *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp. 1–23.

case, the Palestinians – but also to create emotions in their adversaries – the Israelis.

Yet, as Mouffe argues, evoking emotions through resistance, political appeals, or artwork is insufficient. “Not all emotions and not all ways of expressing them are conducive to adversarial encounters,” Mihai warns while paraphrasing Mouffe. Strong emotions attached to an essentialist or other non-democratic strategies or values may make agonism revert to antagonism. In this case, fostering emotions that could be used in agonistic struggles becomes the role of the institutions.²³ Institutions such as museums and galleries should be able to create an environment where affective responses can serve the agonistic coexistence and foster adversarial debates. This volume argues that affect is a vital tool in creating opportunities for agonistic discussions fostering emotional projects and, more importantly, that in some cases galleries and other institutions are not ready to represent and allow for agonistic voices. It follows that grassroots, individual artistic performances are needed to foster affective events among politically divided audiences (Myzelev, Grewal, Tunali). The contributors in this book claim that examples of outbursts of artistic energies create democratic encounters because they constitute a creative space as a common space. This commonality serves as the moderating and dialogical element in their confrontations with each other, which prevents antagonism and violence while bringing them into an open and plural coexistence rather than a consensual and harmonious one.

The Volume’s Organization

In the first chapter, Gohmert and Malek discuss the collaborative artwork *Entre Quatro Paredes*. This work’s public performance and interactive installation comprised four collapsing walls, emphasizing separation in political and domestic realms. The four artistic collaborators emphasize Germany’s xenophobic past and comment on the increasingly less tolerant views of the populist right in Germany, the European Union, and the United States. The design of the four walls, based on DDR aesthetics, refers to a time when the performance’s location was behind the Iron Curtain, before

²³ Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, p. 104.

the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The performance took place in Weimar and evoked the history of the Bauhaus art movement's progressive and inclusive ideas, and the history of Nazism that obliterated Bauhaus. Gohmert and Malak record the experiences of the four women artists who created the work and were around during each installation to explain to and guide the visitors. According to artists Gohmert and Malak, participatory art is a powerful tool to engage people by placing them in a more receptive state of open-mindedness and democratic sociality.

The relatively simple structure and clear idea of the performance allowed the artists to create opportunities for the audience to reflect on domestic violence against women, which also often remains taboo and happens privately between four walls. The artwork responded to the connotations of domestic violence by turning domestic rooms outward. It is the dualism – between “us” and “them,” between inside and outside, between artist and spectator, between public and private space, between “West” and “non-West” – that *Entre Quatro Paredes* sees as epistemologically problematic, primarily because these oppositions have been constructed by the Western culture to support Western hegemony. Perpetuating such dichotomies only serves colonialist, misogynistic, and racist agendas and power structures. The chapter discusses how these walls have acquired a variety of often-conflicting meanings. During the performance, the artists become spectators, and the spectators become artists; the walls are simultaneously an object and an agent, private and public, “us” and “them.” The performance then becomes simultaneous in that it produces meaning, and instead of creating meaning that is binary and oppositional, the conversations and affective responses to the artwork are dialogical. The walls, then, express simultaneity rather than “dichotomous differences.” With this strategy, the artists perpetuate the understanding that what participants bring to dialogue is fused in encounters with different meanings. Therefore, in the dialogue inherent in participatory art, participants experience a fusion of horizons and unity in difference. *Entre Quatro Paredes* uses its role as an instigator of conflict-oriented artwork to expose that every individual actively takes a side as a participant on the public stage, whether they are silent or not.

Siân McIntyre discusses art practices in Papua, New Guinea, that offer continual resistance to the colonization and assimilation that Papuan culture has experienced. Her chapter, “In the Doing: Resistance as Practice,” analyses the conversation surrounding this art and its display both in Aboriginal territories and Australia, investigating the attempts of contemporary curators to rethink art production to bypass or overcome colonial legacies and traumas. Mainly, her work relates to the various discussions surrounding art production locally and nationally. McIntyre discusses several projects, most of which were created locally, and explains how the work of “doing” or creating, performing, and continuing art ensures that the Australian Aboriginal communities remain relevant. These projects offer an opportunity for dialogue about Aboriginal art and its current state in Australia. They also attempt to find a different and more contemporary artistic language, such as video and installation art, to situate Papuan art in the context of contemporary artistic practices. Her analysis revolves around various ways of producing and discussing aboriginal artwork created in a local art centre that caters to Aboriginal populations, in the tourist art market, which allows for little experimentation, and in the larger urban centres inside museums and galleries. In all of these contexts, aboriginal artwork needs specific communication to audiences that should avoid previous colonial discourses and maintain Aboriginal art as a contemporary art practice – one that is both parts of the mainstream art world and retains a specific space in the post-colonial cultural landscape. The colonial past of the Papuan culture comes into the discourse about art both on the side of the Western art institutions and that of the Aboriginal producers. The conversations that such exhibitions produce contribute to furthering the agonistic coexistence of Papuan artists, mainstream curators, and audiences. Rather than looking at activist, artistic work as a product, McIntyre argues for process-led auto ethnographic approaches to practice described as “in the doing.” This is broken down into approaches such as maintaining culture through practice, speaking to context, creating new connections, gathering bodies, and resisting institutions, led by artists and curators collaborating within their communities. As an Australian settler artist and curator living in Scotland, McIntyre interrogates the problematics of “political art” when performed as a privileged spectator and within the neoliberal definitions of labour and value.

Alla Myzelev investigates rare collaborations, fraught with contradictions, between an Israeli artist and several Iranian ones. Their shared goal was to create an artwork that promotes peaceful dialogue and coexistence between Israelis and Arabs. The chapter analyses one durational art project, *Dinner with Friends*, founded by the Israeli artist Shirley Siegal, who sought to collaborate with several Arab and Iranian artists. The project built on Judy Chicago's feminist work *The Dinner Party* through sharing a meal. Siegal's installation was dedicated to fusing the traditions and religions of the Jews and Arabs. The most important visual affective tool she and her collaborators used was portraits of the female "guests," often members of marginalized groups. Myzelev investigates the affective possibilities of portraiture in a political project. She also looks at the project as an embodiment of third-wave and post-feminist art. One issue that comes up in her analysis of the project is that, although it was conceived of as creating dialogue and promoting peaceful conversations, it quickly became a quintessentially agonistic artwork since most of the reactions, exchanges, and collaborations were fraught with difficulties, such as the inability to travel to see each other, and calls to boycott the project by Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS).

Tijen Tunali's chapter analyses subversive aesthetic strategies and their political ramifications during and after the teachers' revolt in Mexico in 2006 and Turkey's Gezi uprising in 2013. In the past two decades, most scholarship on art's sociality has concentrated on artistic groups and projects requiring public participation. Such art practices, which mostly happen in a gallery space, aim to destabilize the heroic figure of the artist. They have been deftly deflated for their ambiguous outcomes in the social sphere. However, another kind of participation in the artistic and aesthetic sphere has also surfaced during the recent uprisings and occupations worldwide. In the public squares and behind the barricades on the streets of Oaxaca and Istanbul, while the battle with the police forces was deadly, diverse groups of activists and artists initiated collaborations that created new forms of social relations, specifically trans-class and trans-ethnic encounters that challenged traditional social and political divisions. Indebted to Rancière's theory of politics and aesthetics, Tunali discusses examples of artistic practice during and after the occupation of public spaces

in Oaxaca and Istanbul and analyses how the conjuncture of aesthetics and politics in the areas of urban protests could create impossible conversations among the protestors who were political rivals. The chapter argues that, in both cases, art's aesthetic properties functioned as a collaborative and dialogical act, and that the spontaneous dialogues created a collision of different political identities and perspectives. This did not make protestors with different political views and agendas reach a rational agreement and a reconciliation of differences. Still, it created a dynamic political atmosphere of agonistic coexistence during the protests and occupation that perpetuated unity and difference. However, in the case of Mexico, artists' collaborations with Oaxacans enabled diverse segments of the society with different ethnic and class identities to recognize and experience art's expressive and dialogical power. In Turkey, the emphasis was on anonymous artistic production and aesthetic experience that strengthened dialogical aptitudes among social groups that otherwise identify as antagonists or enemies.

Dimitra Gkitsa investigates the multiple political, philosophical, and aesthetic trajectories of collective curating in south-eastern Europe. A central notion in her analysis is "affective collective commoning," which is understood as designating a strategy of grassroots art curation and organization that aims to redefine spaces and notions previously associated with collective trauma or disaster. She adopts this theoretical and philosophical standpoint to understand the interventionist strategies of several curatorial collectives that proved fruitful and effective in the region. Gkitsa's work addresses the curatorial strategies and the specific spatial dimensions of agonistic artworks. In her case studies, we learn about spaces that curatorial projects attempt to redefine and re-articulate. Their communist past and the traumatic memories associated with it are seen as a liability, hence the need to move on and rethink how these spaces could be rehabilitated. Through curatorial projects, art performances, symposia, and debates, the communist past becomes part of a discursive agenda that could be processed, understood, and re-articulated. These projects are agonistic because, as Gkitsa describes them, they provide the venues needed to express viewpoints and often-conflicting memories of the trauma and events of the past.

Jenna Altomonte delves into the idea of a border as being simultaneously a separation and a bridge across divided societies, as expressed by Palestinian artist Khaled Jarrar. Jarrar's works take state borders as a starting point, both conceptually and practically, to direct our attention to the consequences of militarized societies and gendered spaces of violence. Jarrar raises the question of who profits from war and political conflict. Using materials he collects from the borders, he then remakes (upcycles) them into more playful objects (for example, a cement soccer ball, soccer shoes, and a racket). These objects are familiar pieces that evoke affective responses from the viewers. Altomonte looks at Jarrar's work as a "platform" for conversation, symbolically and literally, as Jarrar removed and re-appropriated a piece of the partition wall in Palestine to create a ladder that now stands as a symbol of crossing for Mexicans who are separated from their American relatives. Jarrar's bold, internationally acclaimed, and sometimes controversial works challenge the conceptions of border zones and the borders around our comfort zones. Similar to the discussion of Malak and Gohmert on the walls of their installation, which can become symbols of both separation and unification, Altomonte approaches the border as a constructed zone that could be used to create art that allows for reflection and the questioning of the very need for these separations. As such, they become representations of the conflictual dialogue that puts into question the presence of borders and geographic separations and their role in cultivating communities that often feel more united because of the physical separations.

Jagtej Kaur Grewal's chapter examines artistic struggles in the contested space of Kashmir. Grewal looks at several artists who drew attention to the events that had taken place in Kashmir. Kashmiri and non-Kashmiri artists have responded to the tragedy unfolding in the region, seeking to raise awareness of the human price of the conflict. One such artist and photographer is Sheba Chhachhi, who worked on documentation and advocacy with women's groups in Kashmir in the 1990s. Through photo documentation and consequent research over six years in collaboration with another photojournalist, Chhachhi erected an installation project that gave a voice to the women of Kashmir and their view of the conflict while simultaneously transcending polarization based on religious belief. Another

artist Grewal discusses is Veer Munshi, from the displaced and dispossessed Kashmiri Pandit community. Munshi has established a collaborative practice with Kashmiri artisans working in papier-mâché, creating new forms via this craft in times of conflict. Grewal theorizes the importance and the artistic and political limitations of such works of art in sustaining difficult dialogues in the community. Similar to other chapters in this volume, the discussion surrounds the artwork's ability to create conversations that go beyond providing information about or raising awareness of the situation in Kashmir. Grewal's chapter explores the limitations of artworks conceived of and then shown in places of conflict, but also points to the opportunity of creating more dialogical and passionate responses to affectively charged artworks. Like Myzelev's analysis of *Dinner with Friends*, Grewal pays special attention to the artwork created as part of a broadly defined feminist agenda, and indicates ways in which changing the viewpoint from male as universal to female allows the reactions and discussions to become more specific and localized.

Elena Gordienko's chapter focuses on the works of Russian artists created in the spring and summer of 2022 during the war unleashed by Russia in Ukraine. It shows how this protest art counteracts the language of propaganda, based on the dehumanization of the enemy side, with an empathetic approach. Artists like Victor Melamed, Svetlana Nagaeva, Oleg Kuvaev, and Varya Yakovleva in the first place build solidarity with the victims of the war. In several projects, the artists transpose the devastation inflicted by the Russian army on Ukrainian cities onto Russia to bring the experience of catastrophe closer to the audience. The author notes how the documentary projects that fix the state crimes and the traumatic situation for victims and witnesses of the war sometimes use the known ways of working with the memory of the problematic Soviet past. The addressee of the artists' messages is not only the government, disapproval of whose policies these works primarily express, but also the very society whose indifference – and normalization of war – is shown to be culpable for what is going on. The artists try to appeal to the society for a moral consideration of this war and make the suffering of civilians visible. Anti-war works appear as performances, actions, illustrations, cartoons, and documentaries. Although some works appear directly in the public space of Russian cities, primarily

Moscow and St. Petersburg, most artists prefer digital media because of the high risk of public performances or performing their work abroad. This allows them to reach a large audience, and gives a voice to the part of Russian society that does not support this war.

Isabel Carrasco Castro's chapter examines a Florentine non-governmental organization called *Angeli del Bello* [*The Angels of Beauty*], whose mission is, in their own words, the improvement of national civic behaviour and a sense of decorum, care for the common good, and the recuperation of the city's beauty. Castro analyses the nature and strategy of *Angeli del Bello* and their role in Florence as moral guardians, or angels, who assume and impose a specific normative conception of the city. Their main target is the obliteration of public wall-writing, such as tags, messages, poetry, and political graffiti, thus silencing dissident voices. While whitewashing some graffiti, Castro explains why this group respects other street art based on particularly figurative and classical art in the form of paste-ups. For Carrasco Castro, this peculiarity not only feeds into the debate about the hierarchy between image and writing, even in street art, but also echoes the supposed inferiority of public wall-writing as perceived by the general public. She notes that the *Angeli del Bello* organization has been criticized in street art by other local practitioners, thus becoming a subject by itself, striking up the conversation about the legitimacy of interventions in the city's public spaces. Castro's contribution is essential for discussing how and why anti-dialogical acts are legitimized and supported in the public space. Questions are raised about how some art forms are deemed appropriate and others not, one key question being who gets to decide what can be made visible on the walls of a city.

The last contribution is the interview with the coordinator of the creative project "Not War," Svitlana Krot. After the Russian occupation of Eastern Ukraine in 2014 and the subsequent conflict between the separatists with the Ukrainian forces, local youth organizations wanted to imagine the coexistence between various parts of the population: those who have always lived in the region and those resettled from other Russian regions. The project lasted for three years and included several meetings and workshops culminating in exhibitions. The project's main goal was to teach young people (aged 18–30) to overcome the one-sided narrative of the propaganda,

learn to hear personal stories, and empathize with the “other.” The interview, conducted by Alla Myzelev, outlines the main goals and results of the project. Krot also discusses the appropriateness of such a methodology for improving understanding and communication between opposing groups. Agonistic relationships between young people were expressed through art projects with the help of designers and curators.

The works discussed in the book offer the possibility of relating emotionally through “tension, ambiguity and discomfort.”²⁴ The contributors ask whether these art practices could invert common thought patterns, challenge established social and economic exchanges, and change what is traditionally accepted as art’s politics. The case studies from Australia, India, Mexico, Turkey, Palestine, Israel, Italy, North Macedonia, Serbia, Russia and Ukraine discuss the possibility and impossibility of building avenues for participation, equitable interaction, self-organization, the shared creation of the imaginary, and imagining a culture of dialogue. They investigate whether contemporary art can cultivate an “agonistic” way of togetherness and facilitate difficult conversations through a multitude of contradictions, diverging views, and conflicting visions. The book pursues these discussions and investigations to approach a broader and more conflict-oriented understanding of art and politics, and explores how contemporary artforms can sublimate antagonism into an agonistic way of coexistence.

In light of the manifold opportunities of critical artistic practice to articulate counter-hegemonic voices, stories, and narratives, the book proposes to look beyond the praxis of “politics” visibly at stake in the processes of making, exhibiting, and circulating art. We seek to respond to the scholarly need to conduct critical art analyses across political divides, informing and echoing the public search for agency, dialogue, and self-representation. We aim to offer a more sustained knowledge and multidisciplinary understanding of what art and artists can do to create democratic spaces, forms, and languages in a world devastated by multiple crises. By that, we seek to push for a broader and more conflict-oriented understanding of art and politics to

²⁴ Kari M. Grain and Darren E. Lund, “The Social Justice Turn: Cultivating ‘Critical Hope’ in the Age of Despair,” *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2016, p. 47.

imagine democratic communities and expand discussions recognizing art's dialogical powers in agonistic relations.

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