
Review

The political space of art: The Dardenne brothers, Arundhati Roy, Ai Weiwei, and Burial

Benoît Dillet and Tara Puri

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Dillet and Puri bring together a diverse and exciting constellation of artists and art forms – the films of the Dardenne brothers, the writing and film of Arundhati Roy, the visual art of Ai Weiwei, and the music of Burial – to examine politically engaged art in material terms. This materiality or “space” of art is said to have three facets: (i) the socio-political and physical spaces from which it emerges and to which it speaks; (ii) the specific media, sites, and networks from which it is produced and by virtue of which it interfaces with and “works” on individuals and communities; and, what sets it apart from mass production, they argue, (iii) the new spaces for thought and being it ushers in and gestures to as “omens of things to come” (p. 3), as well as the new publics this generates.

This emphasis upon materiality and its tripartite definition blurs traditional distinctions between “art” and “craft”, signals that art as *poiesis* means material production as much as the disclosures and revelations that such products can effect. This definition grounds their argument for what they call “techno-aesthetics”, an account of art that serves as counterpoint to both the historical denial of art’s physicality (as in Kant) and the acknowledgment of such mechanics merely in terms of loss (as in Benjamin). Techno-aesthetics, rather, insists on art’s distinctiveness from other forms of production without extracting it from the material to do so.

Art works, then, by reflecting, circulating through, creating “spaces”. This is also why the aesthetic, for Dillet and Puri, is inseparable from politics (p. 4). Indeed, how they define the “political” in art reveals how inseparable they are seen to be: art is political insofar as it (i) “speak[s] to a political context”; (ii) “create[s] a space...in which a certain kind of politics can be articulated”; and (iii) works politically through its reception and circulation (p. 7). Although not acknowledged by the authors, the very reasons art is said to be material, then, are also said to make it political: far from abstract on the one hand or autonomous on



the other – two long-standing legends in art theory and criticism – art is here construed as both produced by and producing via complex relations. Art *works* as art by emerging from, communicating through, and creating new contexts – and is defined as both material and political in doing so.

Space is used in this project “not as a method to study particular works of art”, but as a reminder of the physicality of artworks (p. 1). It operates as an optic in each analysis of the four chosen arts, with each definition of the “space” of art appearing with varying emphasis throughout.

In the films of the Dardenne brothers, the authors find the liminal and forgotten spaces of the post-industrial city – the woods, the motorway – to be protagonists as much as the characters who inhabit them. These spaces set limits on life chances for those cast off and circumscribed by the productive city – junkies, petty criminals, illegal immigrants, vagabonds – but they also enable forms of experience and action the city otherwise forecloses: the play of percepts, resistance, and critical experimentation with the given “here”. For Arundhati Roy, the authors argue, her art is spatial insofar as the language she employs generates a space for meaningful encounter with marginal realities and claims – to hear what has been dulled by “frequency, repetition, ordinariness” (p. 48) – as well as a space for critique, subversion, and invention. Ai Weiwei’s materiality is discussed in terms of its physical production and interface with audiences, as it uses semiotically lush and historically loaded artefacts as well as vast, vivid, or innumerable products that dominate and redefine the spaces in which they are installed. Burial is engaged as spatial insofar as his work evokes “another world” (p. 9), both in terms of a lost past of 1990s London rave culture and in terms of an urban and musical world yet in composition.

Each of these cases is depicted with remarkable care, even tenderness, as chapters open with vivid vignettes that thrust the reader into an encounter, if ever indirect, with each oeuvre. The book’s translation of multiple genres is remarkable and certainly among the biggest challenges of the book, as the rolling atmosphere of Burial’s (post) dub-step acoustics or the visual moods of the Dardennes’ gritty and grainy landscapes are rendered in academic text. This tenderness, and the poetic precision it often yields, propels one to search out and submerge oneself in (other approximations of) these artworks, and hear, see, read, and consider them in a new light. This, in turn, layers and underlines the authors’ own questioning of the “physicality of arts in a digital age” (p. 4), which troubles the distinction between authenticity and simulacrum and highlights the relation between market circuitries and artistic encounter in contemporary art and audience experience.

And yet the potency of these close readings is not matched by the theorisation of such practices that the book promises, indeed, for which it potentially provides the terms. This is apparent in the scant three pages of its conclusion where linkages, tensions, and overlaps between the four arts are explored. Great insights abound within particular chapters, as the book touches on key debates and issues that



characterise art and art criticism regarding politically engaged art: Roy's straddling of fiction and non-fiction genres and her derision of the dichotomising label "writer-activist" provoke discussion of art's typically indirect and diffuse form of political intervention; Ai's participatory art installation at the Documenta 12 art festival highlights uncertainties regarding whether such projects should be assessed according to aesthetic excellence or the experiences they enable; Burial's ambivalence with his own market success enables reflection on the tensions inherent to public engagement via mass consumerism. And yet these insights are minimally, if ever, discussed in dialogue with one another or the debates in art theory in which they tacitly participate.

It is also apparent in the latent and intermittent return within each case study to the definitions of both the political and spatial dimensions of art set out in the introduction. This might be due to the core definitions of "space" and "politics" that it establishes and deploys. While "space" and "politics" operate effectively as filters for recognizing throughlines within and across these artists' oeuvres and respective genres, these terms are defined so capaciously that it might hold anything. Indeed, these framing concepts give the impression that both might be used to describe any act that ushers in the new via physical means. Yes, with Arendt, we might agree that natality is always political. Yes, with Rancière, we might say that reconfiguring the lines that distinguish invisible from visible, impalpable from palpable, is always a political act. Yes, in the wake of affective and material turns across disciplines, we concede that everything is physical. But a concept to all is a concept to none, and one is left with the sense that both, as defined here, are too all encompassing to be particularly useful.

In fact, the book roused almost existential questions while reading: What is the difference between art and politics? Is all art political, in a meaningful sense? Is all that is spatial? At times one term seems to stand in for another: Burial pushes his musical genre into new terrain, and draws on and produces a nostalgic utopia in doing so, but, while "spatial", is this truly "political"? If Ai's useless objects "can be nothing, they can mean anything" (p. 83), what, if anything, distinguishes *them* as political? Is art that speaks from the margins, as the authors claim each artist here does, always political or the same kind of politics?

Likewise, one wonders if "space" or "politics" can be used to describe all physical and conceptual contexts in, through, and for which art works (pp. 7, 111) without losing analytic clout. Although all are "spatial" in the broad sense, is the depiction of marginalisation and agency on the motorway in the Dardennes' films in the same category as Ai's beautiful brutalisations of treasured Chinese artefacts, or Burial's generation of new acoustic cadences and crackles? How is the politics of Ai's participatory art comparable to the invocation of implicated witness rather than victim in Roy's writing and film, or to Burial's complicated dance of invitation and retreat with the music industry through which his works reach their public? What does it give us, conceptually, to see space or politics operating in these



diverse ways and to varying degrees in these four sites? What might be gained by delving with greater precision and tenderness into the complex relations and implications of these instances of the spatial and political in and across such artworks?

It is the strength of this book that it provokes such lines of questioning. Its finely wrought descriptions and subtle exigences of each art form provide fecund material for political theorising. And yet perhaps it is too humble in its hesitation to explore some of the questions that it elicits in the context of the wider “space” these multi-modal, diversely political juxtapositions generate.

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