

Introduction

Taking Aesthetics from Resistance to Resilience

Bram Ieven, Eliza Steinbock, and Marijke de Valck

What endures? What rebounds in the face of massive economic upheaval instigating the drip, drip, drip of social erosion, the increment of civic intolerance, and the subsumption of critical discourse into the desiccating bubbles of social media feeds? Can anything endure at all, ultimately? And more daringly perhaps, is there anything that can go beyond endurance?

Under the current conditions, what would be able not just to endure but to contain and counter the pressure neoliberal social and political transformations have put upon communal and artistic life—capture it and turn it into a form of aesthetic activism? If such an activity—such a form of activism in the face of capital-induced ecological catastrophe and social disintegration—would turn out to be possible, it would need to be more than a form of resistance alone. It would be a veritable form of resilience, a form of art that nurtures and fosters our possibilities for change, for thinking and living otherwise, and for moving beyond the deadlock of the social system we currently live in. Constructive rather than resistant, nurturing and fostering activism instead of only protecting what forms of activism still remain, an aesthetics of resilience would move beyond the creation of small pockets of resistance, perhaps working within the current of neoliberal times to invent novel forms of rebuilding community, re-imagining new political horizons.

It seems to us that we need this kind of aesthetic resilience, both within the realm of art and in the realm of activism. But, in all honesty, when we set out to develop this book in late 2017 within the context of the international Art & Activism: Resilience Techniques in Times of Crisis conference, and when we started to approach authors and invited them to think about this issue, our ideas on what aesthetic resilience might be were not fully formed. The notion of identifying a set of techniques for practicing aesthetic resilience was more like a hope or a desire, or in any case far from a fully-fledged empirical observation or systematic theory. Instead, the project's rationale, as it were, articulated an aspiration based around deep-founded intuition and, true enough, also some evidence that there might be more than just the onslaught of neoliberalism. There might be resilience.

Initially, we started out with a problem, a seeming deadlock. That problem was one of an apparent emptying out of the artistic and political realm by neoliberalism, indeed one of massive economic upheaval causing social erosion in all corners of the world.

Since the mid-1970s the art world—like the social sphere in general—has been subjected to massive upheaval and deforming forces of both political and economic nature. By the end of the 1970s the new economic infrastructure of neoliberalism started to tear apart the tightly knit social fabric of everyday communities. To be sure, this was not just

a process in which the state withdrew and let the market sort things out. Quite to the contrary, the political infrastructure of the 1970s not only allowed this to take place, it actively participated in its organization. In their critical reader on neoliberalism, Alfredo Saad-Filho and Deborah Johnston have pointed out how, “under the ideological veil of non-intervention, neoliberalism involves extensive and invasive interventions in every area of social life.”¹ In recent decades, we have witnessed the impact of these active interventions in the art world as well and with regard to activism. We have gone through a dismantling of the social and economic infrastructure for contemporary art on the one hand, and of governmental policies that broke the emancipatory movements and civil rights organization of the 1950s and 1960s on the other hand.² This resulted in an emptying out of the political and social possibilities of art and culture during the 1980s. As the neoliberal economic policies of the late 1970s were beginning to take their toll on employment and the welfare state, in the United States the newly elected president, Ronald Reagan, launched his 1981 campaign to abolish the National Endowment for the Arts.³ Meanwhile in Europe, several countries were revising their art policies. In the Netherlands, the government reorganized its Ministry of Recreation, Culture and Social Work, arguing that art and culture were not socially relevant.⁴ In the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher “reduced funding for the arts, changed the governance structure of museums and put in place incentives for private (especially corporate) funding of the arts.”⁵

In short, as a result of the active intervention in social life organized under the aegis of neoliberalism, art, much like society itself, was coached toward an ever more individualist and liberal conservative position. In the art world in many places around the globe, state-financed art projects became less evident, while the growing influx of private capital contributed to a further commodification of art, of which the revival of painting in the late 1970s and early 1980s was perhaps the clearest symptom. It provided “the groundwork for today’s inflated contemporary art market” and led to “an influx of money” that has yet to subside.⁶

Taking this as a starting point, it would seem that there is little left to hope for. “Resistance to the present,” as Deleuze and Guattari once suggested, may be the best we can offer.⁷ But the picture is skewed. Because in spite of this neoliberal onslaught, the insights, tactics, and achievements of civil rights organizations, which had been painstakingly built up during the 1950s and 1960s, have not been lost to art-making practices or communities. During the 1980s, while the social infrastructure for art and culture was being dismantled and the art market in North America and Europe started to grow exponentially, something else was stirring. At that time, with neoliberalism getting up to speed, the arts seemed to recalibrate their connection to social and political activities, marking the beginning of a turn in the relation between art and activism. Witnessing the exponential swing to the right and the hollowing out of the achievements of the civil rights movements, in which art had been heavily involved,⁸ activist art sought a new approach to the relation between art and politics. In the light of Thatcherism, Reaganomics, and a quickly expanding art market that threatened to engulf everything even vaguely related to art or aesthetics, artists began to understand that “thinking the same things we have always thought and doing the same things we have always done—only more so, harder and with more ‘conviction’” was not enough.⁹ Without losing focus on the achievements of the emancipatory movements for race and gender relations from the 1950s and 1960s, artists and art institutions alike started to rethink the meaning of aesthetic strategies and the way these would contribute to activist forms of engaging with politics.

That is where this book comes in. To come to grips with the way the arts realigned themselves with activism during the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, we are bringing together critical and historical essays that hope to provide an overview of this realignment and its current concerns, however fragmentary. Moreover, it hopes to articulate new ideas for conjoining art and activism in light of more recent systemic crises: the rise of Russian and Chinese nationalism, recent migrations due to war and ecological collapse, Indigenous assertions of sovereignty, and the movement of the squares across the Mediterranean. The contributions thus consider the time period of neoliberalism's dominance through to the recent acceleration of systemic crises broadly painted as the anthropocene. Reading the history of the past four decades through the concept of aesthetic resilience, the contributing authors discuss how the ideas, tactics, and achievements of the civil rights era were transmuted into new aesthetic weapons, new ways of engaging with politics through art.

This was not simply done by *resisting* the systematic attack on these accomplishments; more than a defensive, reactionary movement, the artistic activism of the past four decades has been developing the means to recover and re-emerge from the blows that minority groups, the social fabric, and the art world not wholly aligned with the nation-state has been dealt. This process of recovery, which goes well beyond defending what remains of the art world and betrays a stubborn optimism with regard to the possibilities and ideas of art, is what this book addresses through the concept of *aesthetic resilience*.

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines resilience in its literal sense as a form of “elasticity; the power of resuming an original shape after compression, bending etc.” In its more figurative meaning, the OED defines resilience as “the quality or fact of being able to recover quickly or easily from, or resist being affected by, a misfortune, shock, illness, etc.” While the economic and social forces that have been putting pressure on the arts have by no means been mitigated, the conceptual resonance of resilience can serve as a congenial starting point for a reflection on the way in which art practices have been “fighting back”; how, for better or for worse, they have recovered and have rebounded from shock, misfortune, or withering. Resilience, the authors of this book contend, expresses more than simply a property of organic or inorganic material; more also than a passive faculty or ability of living organisms to withstand shock or pressure. Resilience delineates the *active* ability to rebound and spring back from deforming cultural, material, and economic forces.

The starting hypothesis around which this book is centered, then, is that the arts take on a formative role when it comes to building up civil and political capacities to recover, that is, to be actively resilient. When we argue that the arts can contribute to building civil and political resilience, resilience here also points toward an element of civil, aesthetic, and political “elasticity.” While the arts in general cannot be said to be about elasticity in a literal sense, they are directly involved with the issue of plasticity: through (re)shaping the imagination, engaging one's embodied perception, the arts are a site where activist strategies and techniques can be developed and performed. One way in which the arts build up civil resilience is through fostering our political imagination. Presenting us with alternative forms, practices, and experiences, art (or more exactly, the *work* or *practice* of artists) has the ability to stimulate our political imagination and populate it with new, perhaps revolutionary, ideas. Moreover, it tends to do so by explicitly or implicitly taking issue with the social, aesthetic, and civic context in which it situates itself, and as such it provides the viewer-participants an enriching starting point for their own reflection on the political and civic context.

The contributions brought together in this book deal with the impact and importance of artistic contributions to re-imagining gender, (dis)ability, sexuality, color, coloniality, and class. The authors gathered in this collection are variously trained as critical analysts of art, literature, or film, but also, and importantly we would say, practicing artists and curators with a first-hand understanding of how and where art and activism come together. This point of view emphasizes the community-engaged arts practices, or participatory arts, that have increased in the spaces of museums, galleries, and within political demonstrations. Taken together these contributors can still not provide a systematic or global overview of the problem at hand. To claim such systematicity or encyclopedic overview with regard to a topic like aesthetic resilience, a concept and practice that is still in the making, would be academic hubris. Instead, and more useful perhaps, the authors brought together in this collection each provide a unique entry into the question of what aesthetic resilience might look like, how it has been articulated since the 1980s throughout the globe, and what challenges it faces for reinvigorating artistic activism. To achieve this aim, the book is divided into three parts.

A first part, “Resilience: Searching for New Weapons While Fleeing,” articulates the central concept around which this book is centered. This means it delineates what exactly is understood by aesthetic resilience, outlines its adjoining concepts and problemata, and relates it to the central social issues that art and activism have had to deal with over the past four decades. To understand our current predicament, we need to study the path that led us here. Therefore, these chapters also provide an insight into the historical background of the attack on the arts from the 1970s and 1980s and show how the arts have responded to this. This part of the book focuses, first, on theoretical developments of resilience in relation to filmic enactments of it, then of feminist strategies, and then moves on to the history of institutionalized art by way of an analysis of Documenta. The final two chapters in this part survey patterns of artistic resilience in the face of extractivism and how communities form “movements of movements” in Global South locales that, when taken together, show evidence of the prevalence of new ways of thinking about relationality that feed into aesthetic resilience. In sum, the contributing authors discuss how the ideas, tactics, and achievements of the civil rights era—here feminism, postcolonial critique launched in independence movements, and new pan-European ideals—were transmuted into new aesthetic weapons, new ways of engaging with politics through art. The inventiveness of the active ability to respond to debilitating forces of inequality—crises drummed up by economic forces, patriarchal ideologies, Eurocentrism, extractivism, and modernism writ large—is considered through comparative frameworks for how these crisis are responded to, by, and through poetics and aesthetics.

The second part, “Global Conjunctions of Aesthetic Resilience,” queries the global implications of art and activism. This part of the book answers questions such as: To what extent is this problem of crisis global in scale? What are the differences in engaging in art-activism in South Africa versus Hong Kong versus Russia or Macedonia? And what does the image culture of revolution look like in Tahrir, Egypt and Gezi, Turkey? How do these differences—usually related to a different political and economic situation, paired up with a differing institutionalized position of the arts—account for different approaches to art and activism and building resilience? Taken together, these chapters provide the basis for a disjunctive comparison which, while by no means preemptory, allows for a first understanding of how art and activism come together in specific regions and throughout the globe.

In the third and final part of the book, “Artistic Practices of Embodied Persistence,” we learn from artists and curators themselves about how their embodied persistence to just

make the work reveals the structured and institutionalized barriers that need to be, and are being, transformed. We see that the durational persistence involved in their practice, rather than short-lived bouts of resistance, is in itself a form of activist politics. As well, by foregrounding their accountability to the needs and concerns of their communities, these artists model a form of socially embedded art-making that makes the doing of art itself a means to practice aesthetic resilience. The first contribution is a historical case study that attests to our argument that today's practice of embodied resilient practices in many ways harks back to the radical politics of the 1960s and 1970s. The following chapters turn the spotlight on inspiring contemporary examples in Canada, North America, and Brazil, and feature strong visual illustrations—in the form of installation views, drawings, and photographs—of the artistic practices in question.

Without laying any claim to the exhaustivity of these three possible trajectories and modes of reflection—theoretical, comparative, and artistic—the three sections of this book hope to provide a starting point for the myriad conjoining and intertwining historical and political events that constitute our present situation.

Notes

- 1 Alfredo Saad-Filho and Deborah Johnston, "Introduction," in *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader*, ed. Alfredo Saad-Filho and Deborah Johnston (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 4.
- 2 See David Greenberg "The Reorientation of Liberalism in the 1980s," in *Living in the Eighties*, ed. Vincent J. Cannato and Gil Troy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 51–69.
- 3 See Livingston Biddle, *Our Governments and the Arts: A Perspective from the Inside* (Washington, American Council of the Arts, 1988).
- 4 See Roel Pots, *Cultuur, Koningen en democraten: overheid & cultuur in Nederland* (Nijmegen: SUN, 2000).
- 5 Victoria Alexander and Marilyn Rueschemeyer, *Art and the State: The Visual Arts in Comparative Perspective* (London: MacMillan, 2005), 72.
- 6 Sven Lütticken, *Cultural Revolution: Aesthetic Practice After Autonomy* (Berlin/New York: Sternberg Press, 2017), 34.
- 7 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (London/New York: Verso, 1994), 108.
- 8 See Susan E. Cahan, *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
- 9 Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*. (London: Verso, 1988), 11.



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>