

BOOK REVIEW:

Nicholas Gamso,

'*Art after Liberalism*', 2021

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Art after Liberalism
Nicholas Gamso

This is an account of creative practice at a moment of converging social crises. It is also an inquiry into emergent ways of living, acting, and making art in the company of others.

The apparent failures of liberal thinking mark its starting point. No longer can the framework of the nation-state, the figure of the enterprising individual, and the premise of limitless development be counted on to produce a world worth living in. No longer can talk of inclusion, representation, or a neutral public sphere pass for something like equality.

Nicholas Gamso's ***Art after Liberalism*** argues that the present is defined by a crisis in the liberal order. The idea that the political and economic turbulence of the last decade heralds the fragmentation of the Neoliberal consensus is not a new one; however, it has not previously been used as a premise for art writing, so far as I am aware. During the same period that liberal hegemony has unravelled, contemporary art has become more politicised. By focusing on Liberalism instead of 'capitalism', which is more commonly taken as the leitmotif of politicised art criticism, Gamso evokes a situation where a hegemonic political settlement is fragmenting, even if the capitalist order endures. In the midst of such instability, he proposes that politicised art and art activism offers a vision of community, however fragile, which points beyond liberal nostrums such as 'the nation-state, the figure of the enterprising individual, and the premise of limitless development' (cover). The book unpacks this rich material across eight chapters, all of them well supplied with images, via readings of recent art that are consistently insightful.

Although ***Art after Liberalism*** treats a wide spectrum of contemporary practice – including public art, documentary photography, moving image, installation art and painting – it turns consistently to 'socially-engaged' or interventionist works, to take its political bearings. After two decades of debate surrounding the 'social turn', the argument that art renegotiates the relation between aesthetics and politics is now a familiar one. Gamso develops his argument

through works that, as he puts it ‘deindividualize creative expression through novel combinations of space, matter, bodies and environment, generating shared worlds of mutual appearance and interdependence’ (p 18). Sometimes, the works themselves are collectively realised, or they take the form of protests or social interventions; at other times, Gamso contextualises art so that it resonates with an aspiration towards a new kind of ‘shared world’. This is art writing produced in solidarity with art activism, and which tracks the crisis of Liberalism across international borders and fragmenting political geographies. Case studies include works created in Europe, Asia and North America; however, it would be fair to say that the centre of gravity of the book is its treatment of activism that is located in New York (although also within a transnational network). The introduction makes reference to the New York campaigns of Decolonize this Space, and the book includes an interview with the founders of MTL Collective, Nitasha Dillon and Amin Hussain, who are both theorists and organisers of art activist interventions.

Most of the works discussed in **Art after Liberalism** were made after 2016, at which point the economic stresses created by globalisation were finding expression in the resurgence of nationalist and neo-fascist elements within liberal democracies. Brexit in the UK and Trump’s successful presidential campaign in the US represent paradigmatic examples for the Global North, although there are comparable developments in Hungary, Italy, Turkey, Brazil, India and the Philippines. Gamso advocates for a transnational interpretive frame for art, but he has an eye on the national political and economic circumstances that have encouraged a lurch to the right. Transnational and national perspectives are often balanced brilliantly in readings of a specific work. For example, the introductory essay, titled ‘Convergences’, has as its centrepiece a public sculpture situated in Dresden, Germany, made by Manouf Halbani. Installed in 2017, and simply called *Monument*, the work consists of three single-deck buses stood on end in a public square, intended to recall the same arrangement of vehicles used by civilians to create shelter from sniper fire during the siege of Aleppo in Syria between 2012 and 2016. As Gamso notes, Dresden is a city that suffered economic decline under Neoliberalism and has since become a centre for right-wing mobilisation. In this context, *Monument* became the target for protests by the AfD, a German nationalist party opposed to migration. The upended buses speak both to the ruination caused by war (which Dresden experienced in World War Two), but also ‘a relation between political life and its economic bearings’, or an allegory of ‘stalled progress and disintegrating social worlds’ (p 14). This reading of *Monument* provides a succinct introduction to the conflictual terrain that has emerged now that Liberalism has lost credibility as a guarantor of economic and social progress.

The second essay, ‘Modalities of Appearance’, considers the representation of migrants and refugees. Gamso notes that displacement has been an important subject for art of the last decade, which invites reflection on ‘the shifting representation strategies that have accompanied the rise and the corrosion of globalization as a cultural, political and indeed material phenomenon’ (p 45). The chapter begins by comparing two representational strategies:

the geospatial view provided by drone photography (seen in work by Rocco Rorandelli, Rasmus Degenbol and Forensic Architecture), which provides a depersonalised view of migration set in a landscape viewed from above; and the social-realist tradition that seeks to capture in a picture the human experience of migration (in an image by Mauricio Lima). Drawing on the theorists Nicholas Mirzoeff, T J Demos and Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, Gamso sets out to think through how these images ‘support emergent political life’ (p 46). The aerial view is complicit with modernity’s imperative to rational mastery, and the social-realist tradition has often romanticised suffering – but, even so, both these modes can have political effects when employed in visual activism that addresses migration and displacement. Gamso affirms this political potential, while also acknowledging the xenophobic, or hypocritically sentimentalising uses of these representational strategies.

A second line of argument in the chapter considers how displacement is not simply a humanitarian tragedy but also a form of communal life created outside of formal citizenship and national sovereignty: ‘an emblem of resistance to the social death of dispossession’ (p 45). If images have the capacity to articulate openings for civic participation by migrants, they do not provide the ‘civic body’ that legitimates and supports this communal existence (p 58). Using examples such as Marina Nuprushkina’s Berlin-based initiative *Neue Nachbarschaft / Moabit* (new neighbourhood Moabit) and Tania Bruguera’s *Immigrant Movement International* in Corona, Queens, New York, Gamso notes that works of ‘social practice’, a genre of art focused on direct social intervention, have sometimes taken on this role. The effect of this anti-spectacular artistic work, he argues, is to ‘dismantle the sovereign frameworks that turn sites of mutual appearance into symbols of the nation-state, availed of the discourse of citizen and noncitizenship’ (p 63).

The third essay, ‘Truth, Politics and Disintegration’, treats the documentary *Triple-Chaser*, which was commissioned by the 2019 Whitney Biennial, directed by filmmaker Laura Poitros and narrated by David Byrne. The 15-minute film is named after a brand of tear gas grenade manufactured by Safariland, a company owned by Warren Kanders, who was then the Vice Chair of the Whitney Museum of American Art. It documents digital research methods developed by the UK-based collective Forensic Architecture, which used open-source software to analyse documentary footage to establish whether Triple-chaser rounds have been fired by security forces in Gaza and on the US-Mexican border in actions that infringe international human rights legislation. The film also presents research coordinated by international networks of NGOs and art activists that has provided evidence implicating Kanders’s company as a supplier of arms used in war crimes in Gaza. Gamso reads this work as revealing political implications of a ‘post-Truth’ situation where digital algorithms amplify disinformation, but also supply powerful analytic resources to explore the social world. The chapter argues that the disordering of the public sphere by digital technologies creates a ‘crisis in liberal certitude’, which creates important opportunities for activists (p 89). For example, *Triple-Chaser* contributed to campaigns that eventually forced Kanders to resign from his position in the Whitney. One issue at stake in this affair is the role of the art institution. Were the funds awarded by the

Whitney to *Triple-Chaser* an attempt by the institution to neutralise criticism of Kanders, by incorporating it into the institution? Or is *Triple-Chaser* an example of activists coordinating and amplifying their work through the museum? Gamso ultimately argues for the latter interpretation, reading *Triple-Chaser* and similar projects as attempts to ‘reclaim autonomy amid disintegration’, echoing an argument also made by the artist Augustina Woodgate (p 91).

Each of the remaining four essays focuses on a single artist, while continuing to explore Liberalism’s crisis of legitimacy. ‘Queer Worldliness’ surveys Wolfgang Tillmans’s work via his attempts to create politically-engaged images in the lead up to the 2016 referendum in the UK, where he lives, as part of the unsuccessful ‘Remain’ campaign. This essay provides a persuasive conjunctural reading of Tillmans’s work, placing its affirmation of queer sociability within the post-1989 liberal consensus that is now being eroded by a reactionary turn in the legislation of many countries. The fifth essay considers Paul Chan’s installations of kinetic nylon sculptures inflated by electric fans, called *Breathers*. Gamso interprets these works via the distinctively liberal relation to life evoked by the Foucauldian concept of biopower, and in relation to the increased prevalence of environmental disaster. The short sixth essay focuses primarily on photographs by the Chinese artist Ren Hang, used to explore how representation of queer intimacy takes on shifting political stakes, filtered through dominant Western conceptions of China and ‘reframed to serve multiple social and commercial interests’ (p 151).

The seventh essay treats racial politics after the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, primarily via the reception of the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat and especially his painting *Defacement (The Death of Michael Stewart)* from 1983. This work protested the unexplained death in police custody of Stewart, a graffiti artist, in that year. Basquiat’s painting is a reminder that anti-black violence has played an integral role in law enforcement in the US, but also in the UK, Europe and South America. Gamso uses this example to problematise attempts made by museums to appropriate such images to advertise their liberal multiculturalism, while deflecting criticism away from their complicity in networks that sustain racialised violence (as the Safariland protests demonstrated, for example). The final essay, ‘In Absentia’, returns to consider Tania Bruguera’s work in more depth, reading her practice in relation to her campaigns against decree 349, legislation enacted by the Cuban government to limit freedom of speech.

As this brief outline suggests, **Art after Liberalism** traverses artistic forms and political geographies to explore the critical stakes of recent art. A key strength of Gamso’s argument is that it demonstrates how the ‘social’ – an elusive and ubiquitous term – has become a touchstone and horizon for all kinds of politicised artistic activity. Debates on documentary now engage problems of activism in a way that explores the transitivity of images; at the same time, other artists eschew images and incorporate instead social processes into the material of their practice. Typically, the social domain is viewed as contested and malleable, but nonetheless permeated by the power of the state. A decade ago, criticism typically treated Neoliberalism as so hegemonic that even participatory art could be read as an expression of its forms, such as

‘networks, mobility, project work, affective labour’.¹ Gamso demonstrates how much has shifted in ten years, now that Liberalism is in retreat. The politics of recent art has become ambitious, intersectional and emancipatory. It is contradictory and unstable, too, certainly – a point that Gamso acknowledges by ending on a note of self-criticism. He writes that politicised art captures ‘a moment of escalating social crisis in order to dismantle the forms of complicity that Liberalism as instilled in us all’ (p 204). As decolonisation has now become a watchword for universities and art institutions, it is all the more important that **Art after Liberalism** explores what this term means in militant cultural practice.

Where the book is weaker it is because of ambiguities in its subject matter, especially where politics is concerned. Liberalism is a difficult idea to pin down. For the left, ‘liberal’ is a term of abuse that signals hypocrisy, as it also is for the right but for entirely different reasons. But there are left and right versions of Liberalism. Some conservatives consider themselves the true inheritors of a classical liberal tradition, while many social democrats do also, although with alternative conceptions of freedom. Perhaps because the scope of his work is already so ambitious, Gamso avoids acknowledging varieties of Liberalism. The political analysis of the book might have been sharper if it asked whether politicised art aims beyond Liberalism to something else, or instead attempts to renew its founding emancipatory premise. For example, it is interesting to consider the work of the political philosopher Charles W Mills, who was a radical critic of what he terms ‘racial Liberalism’ – the ideology of white, propertied males that persists in ‘colour-blind’ liberal universalism – but nonetheless believed that the radical implications of Liberalism might be reclaimed.²

A more careful parsing of liberal ideology would have helped to unpack some of the tensions in the artistic politics of the last few years. Gamso’s focus is on synchronic tendencies within the crisis of Liberalism, which tends towards a truncated historical view. Art activism, which has a long history, is nourished by its relationship to diverse social movements and especially by anarchist and communist conceptions of freedom. The inheritance of these ideological traditions is clear in the interview with MTL Collective who frame their interventions in the museum as ‘training and learning’ (p 222). Amin Hussain states, for example, that what the campaigns of Decolonize this Place and other projects directed at the Whitney and MoMA try to do is ‘engage people’s imagination and threshold of freedom’, learning how to ‘get free’ along with others who might not have the same political investments (p 222). Hussein and Dillon’s analysis understands MoMA and other high profile art institutions as emblems of the liberal settler-colonial state. Activist campaigns that reveal the complicity of their trustees with military and carceral industries puncture the mystique of art and demonstrate the interconnectedness of state power.

The programme outlined by MTL is powerful because it construes art activism as a context in which to question and reimagine individual subjectivity and community. But it is unclear

¹ See Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Verso, London, 2012, p 277

² See Charles W Mills, *Black Rights / White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2017, pp 5–9

whether or not art does now command an important place in liberal nation-building, in an era of transnational capital. Gamso himself notes that the ‘financial architecture’ of the museum is threatened by the dynamics of Neoliberalism, but this observation is not developed (p 91). If liberal hegemony is in retreat, it is partly because it has been undermined by the imperatives of capitalism. The observation might have been used to show that the political stakes involved in the crisis of Liberalism are complex and multi-polar – for example, right-wing polemicists also target contemporary art institutions. Gamso and MTL rightly point out that liberal multiculturalism can be a smokescreen, but for the right even the smokescreen is a hated sign of the advance of ‘cultural Marxism’. Where Liberalism is politically weak, it is typically the right that is in a position to wrest power. It seems reasonable to argue, then, that the liberal institution of the museum might sometimes need to be defended, not attacked. This choice depends very much on local conditions. For example, an activist project like Strike MoMA, which calls for abolition of the museum, makes sense only where Liberalism retains its political centrality, as it does in New York. The same demand would be problematic where art is under the imminent threat of falling under the control of right-wing ideologues.

The inheritance of anarchist and communist thought is more muted in Gamso’s own essays, perhaps because their key theoretical reference point is Hannah Arendt. The choice of Arendt makes sense for the book because she was a thinker who provided trenchant analyses of fascism and antisemitism, and was herself a migrant. Her philosophical work has formed an important reference point for Azoulay’s writings on documentary photography, as well as for Tania Bruguera’s recent work in the collective project Instar.³ Arendt is also a theorist for whom the political realm is inherently conflictual, which is why her ideas resonate so strongly at a moment when hegemonic ideas are contested. In other respects, however, Arendt does not sit easily with the subject matter of **Art after Liberalism**. She was a critic of the liberal settlement of the postwar period, but her critique advocated a return to the well-springs of the liberal revolutionary tradition of the Enlightenment. For Arendt, a renewal of this tradition was possible only via a kind of elitism (although an elite that she argued was open to anyone to elect themselves to participate in).⁴ In a sense, then, Arendt intended to renew Liberalism: a position that is defensible, as Mills has shown. However, Arendt tended to be ambivalent about the populist implications of social movement politics. This much is clear in her ‘Reflections on Little Rock’, an essay published in the midst of the Civil Rights era that seems to offer a defence of segregation, as an expression of a right to prejudice.⁵ Gamso does touch on the work of poet and theorist Fred Moten, who has criticised Arendt’s conception of politics (p 178). He also

³ See, for example, Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Rela Mazali and Ruvik Danieli, trans, Zone Books, New York, 2008, pp 137–138; on Tania Bruguera and Instar, see ‘Cuban Artists Show Up En Masse to Documenta, Bringing Their Plight at Home to the Wider Art World’, *Artnet News*, 17 June 2022 <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/instar-documenta-15-2132472>

⁴ See Hannah Arendt, ‘The Revolutionary Tradition and its Lost Treasure’, in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, Peter Baer, ed, Penguin Books, London and New York, 2000, pp 530–531, pp 508–539

⁵ See Hannah Arendt, ‘Reflections on Little Rock’ in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, op cit, pp 231–246

acknowledges in passing that Arendt's work has sometimes been repurposed to 'export Liberalism to the decolonizing Global South', but the book would have benefited from clearer acknowledgement of Arendtian blind-spots in regard to popular emancipation (p 45).

Although there may be some issues that are skated over in the theoretical framing of **Art after Liberalism**, it is important to acknowledge that the book would be hard pushed to cover so much extra material alongside the wide-ranging insights that Gamso has communicated so effectively. The analysis is both timely and compelling. If there are omissions, they are signs of a project that resists falling back on established critical tropes and which has identified fresh territory, not yet completely explored.

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