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What Fighting Back Feels Like: Affect, Aesthetics, and Protest in 2012 Québec

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to understand the relationship between aesthetics and politics, specifically as it pertains to the phenomenon of red square graffiti during the 2012 Québec Spring movement. The red square is an ideal example of affective responses to political art because it shows the tight interrelation of three concepts: politics, aesthetics, and affect. Affect theory argues that politics and aesthetics work together in a mutually reciprocal relationship to build and sustain affects of resistance. This is due to the nature of political art, in that this small graffiti intervenes in the public sphere in non-authorized ways which reveal a desire for politics outside of the sharply defined public sphere of electoral politics. The implication is of the need for openness to the affective force of politics and aesthetics, a fidelity to the potential of resistance.

KEYWORDS: affective turn, aesthetics, political art, protest, Québec



The last decade or so has seen the emergence of a turn to affect, which aims to understand human subjectivity, aesthetics, politics, and belonging. Like any broad theoretical turn, it can be utilized in numerous ways. This paper attempts to use affect theory to address one aspect of the affective turn's potential: the role of affect in elucidating the relationship between politics and aesthetics. The role aesthetics plays in politics, and vice versa, is always going to be context-dependent; therefore, this paper does not claim to give the definitive answer to the question of the relationship between politics and aesthetics. What it does attempt to do is give an account—necessarily situated in my own experiences—of the role of aesthetics during the Québec Spring of 2012.¹ This paper centers its analysis on the affective responses tied to the red square, which was the symbol of the movement. Looking at the way graffiti of the red square intervenes in the public sphere and in affective relations does not provide a framework for what kinds of aesthetic interventions “work” politically. Rather, using affect theory to look at the relationship between aesthetics and politics allows us to elaborate an understanding of the great potential

contained therein. This potential is never a guarantee, but it underlines the need for openness and fidelity in order for politics and aesthetics to thrive. I argue that the relationship between aesthetics and politics was reciprocal and mutually constituting in the Québec Spring, which generates the affective force of the red square. This force is also a political force which sustained the movement, so that aesthetics, politics, and affect must be understood in their interrelation in order to comprehend the phenomenon of the red square. This argument begins with the context of the 2012 Québec Spring, followed by defining what I mean by political art and affect. The main section concerns the role of affect in understanding the frequent use and impact of red square graffiti. It then concludes on some thoughts about how we might not so much move forward as move laterally, embracing a politics and an aesthetics that open rather than foreclose possibilities not only for resistance, but also for the laudable goal of survival.

Context

Finding the moment the Québec Spring begins is difficult, as it had been years in the making. One possible starting point is the series of unlimited student strikes in opposition to proposed tuition hikes, starting in February 2012. By March 22, the date picked to stage a massive protest, 305,000 students were on strike across the province, more than three quarters of all post-secondary students. The government chose to ignore this show of mass support for the student cause, stating, in all seriousness, that they needed to respect “the silent majority” (Bonenfant, Glinoyer, and Lapointe 2013, 53). One hundred night protests were held in Montréal between April 11 and August 1, counting only those that occurred in the metropolis (106). There were 3418 arrests across the province between February 16 and September 3 (236), often amongst allegations that the police had kettled peaceful protestors and not given them the chance to walk away.

What is most striking about this moment is that the response to state repression was a widespread rejection of the legitimacy of the state apparatus, especially the police. On 18 May 2012, the Québec legislature passed a special law, Bill 78, rather euphemistically named the “law permitting students to receive the teaching dispensed by the post-secondary establishments they frequent”.² Amongst other provisions forcing the striking students back to class, this law severely limited the right to protest by declaring illegal any gathering of more than fifty people who did not advise the police of their trajectory eight hours in advance. The fines for those found to be in an illegal protest were astronomical, ranging from \$1000 to \$5000 for the average citizen, \$7000 to \$35,000 for employees or representatives of a group that organized a protest deemed illegal, and \$25,000 to \$125,000 for student associations and unions (Assemblée nationale du Québec 2012). In sum, Bill 78 was an intimidation tactic meant to outlaw peaceful protest and to undermine the student associations’ main tool—the strike—with the use of crippling fines.

In response, new protests against Bill 78 erupted, crystallizing in nightly pots and pans demonstrations, in which people gathered outside their homes or in other public places every evening at eight o'clock to bang on pots and pans as a sonorous demonstration of their disapproval of the government, a type of protest that originated in Latin America. More so than in the protest marches, people from all walks of life joined, disturbed by this attack on their democratic rights. The draconian measures of the law drew international scrutiny: Amnesty International condemned it on May 25, while the United Nations registered concerns on two occasions, May 30 and June 18 (Bonenfant, Glinoyer, and Lapointe 2013, 246; 256; 284). It is this context of upheaval which is wrapped up, symbolically and affectively, with the red square.

Political Art and Affect

The protests and strikes ended with the electoral defeat of the Liberal government in September 2012. These long months of turmoil, however, have had a profound impact on the people who have lived through them, myself included. What I will be examining is an aesthetic form that may or may not be typically accepted as works of art: simple street graffiti. I consider these to be something which I call political art. This concept of political art is central to understanding that aesthetics and politics have a reciprocal, but not causal, relationship, which explains and qualifies the affective role of the red square. This term requires clarification, especially if we take Jacques Rancière's critique of the notion of political art seriously. He criticizes those who believe that art has an effect through a relationship of mimesis:

Despite a century of critique—or so-called—directed at the mimetic tradition, it appears to be still firmly entrenched, including in forms of supposed political and artistic subversion. Underlying these forms is the assumption that art compels us to revolt when it shows us revolting things, that it mobilizes when it itself is taken outside of the workshop or museum and that it incites us to oppose the system of domination by denouncing its own participation in that system. This assumption implies a specific form of relationship between cause and effect, intention and consequence. (Rancière 2010, 135)

Rancière's critique is that the relationship of aesthetics to politics is not a voluntary one, one that can be directed at leisure by the artist or creator. This would seem to imply that the artist knows what art is and how one directs it, which is in complete disagreement with Rancière's understanding of art as dissensus: "doing art means displacing art's borders, just as doing politics means displacing the borders of what is acknowledged as *the* political" (Rancière 2010, 149). If aesthetics has a relationship with politics, for Rancière, it is in that they are both essentially ungraspable, necessarily pushing at the boundaries of common sense.

Consequently, aesthetics are not a necessary part of politics. However, this does not preclude a relationship between the two; it is simply not one of direct causality. Steven Shaviro agrees with this troubled relationship between politics and aesthetics: “Aesthetics does not translate easily or obviously into politics. It takes a lot of work to make them even slightly commensurable” (Shaviro 2010, 138). Considering these insights, in this discussion, the term “political art” does not mean either that it necessarily results in political revolt or political change, nor that it means that an aesthetic strategy has a related political strategy. Rather, I use political art as a useful shorthand for a form of art that engages in politics in Rancière’s sense: it pushes the boundaries of what is generally accepted, it is “an intervention in the visible and the sayable” (Rancière 2010, 37). The red square, as political art, does not have a guaranteed political effect. Nonetheless, it is political because it enacts a dissensus, visibly challenging the ideas of where politics ought to be and what it ought to look like. Whether that challenge is taken up, ignored, or repressed is up to those who see (and feel) it; that is where affect comes in. Aesthetics and politics share more than the ever-shifting boundary of the possible; they both interact with the subject in a way that cannot be said to ever be only rational, but rather is affective. I seek to locate the affective space of the red square, so that while we might not be able to grasp an aesthetics/politics of genuine protest, we might be able to lay a groundwork to ask: what does resistance in the age of neoliberalism feel like?

In order to proceed, the term affect requires definition. Different strands of affect theory define it in differing ways, from the individual experience of emotion to less tangible phenomena which circulate between bodies. For my purposes, the definition I am using is located somewhere between these two: it is not strictly incorrect to refer to affects as feelings, but these feelings are not fully conscious, and circulate, are created, and are sustained by their interaction between people. In this way, my definition is closer to that of Sara Ahmed’s (2004), in that affects circulate through repetition and stick to bodies, ideas, and words, even though Ahmed oscillates between using the terms emotions (2004) and affect (2010). For Lauren Berlant (2011), drawing on psychoanalysis and its theory of the unconscious, emotion is not an adequate term to describe affect because it implies an ability to know our interiority, an intentionality. Berlant’s insistence on the unknowability of the self and the impossibility of controlling relation greatly influences what follows.

Red Square Graffiti and Affect



Fig. 1: Red square graffiti in Gatineau, Quebec, circa 2012

The strongest use of aesthetics during the Québec Spring, I argue, was graffiti. Specifically, those graffiti that depict the single most powerful symbol of the Québec Spring, the red square (see Figure 1). There are three reasons why more intricate graffiti may have less impact on the movement. First, the more intricate the graffiti and its representation, the more likely it is to be part of the mimetic tradition, criticized above. The second reason is simply because the required skill means that it could not be that widespread. The final reason relates to the affective relationship between the graffiti and those who view it. This third reason bears more elaboration.

For Gilles Deleuze (2003), writing about Francis Bacon, painting is defined by sensation. What is important about sensation is that it is immediate, not mediated by the brain catching up and making sense of what it is seeing. Sensation is the movement of affect through the body; affect in Deleuze, like in my own framework, being distinct from feelings as they are commonly understood:

Percepts are no longer perceptions; they are independent of a state of those who experience them. Affects are no longer feelings or affections; they go beyond the strength of those who undergo them. Sensations, percepts, and affects are beings whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived. They could be said to exist in the absence of man because man, as he is caught in stone, on the canvas, or by words, is himself a compound of percepts and affects. The work of art is a being of sensation and nothing else: it exists in itself. (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 164)

The idea of an imperceptible affect that runs through the subject immediately upon encountering the work of art is helpful to understand why aesthetic effect (and affect) is not always, or even commonly, related to the prettiness or pleasantness of a work of art.

Deleuze's sensation is a limited concept, because he denies the possibility that it could be caused by abstraction. He opposes the logic of the figurative, otherwise known as representation or narrative, because there is no sensation, no immediacy, and the artwork is mediated through the narrative that it is trying to share. If "painting has neither a model to represent nor a story to narrate" (Deleuze 2003, 2), then there are two potential ways out of the logic of the figurative: abstraction and isolating the pure Figure. Deleuze promotes the latter, because he claims that sensation affects the nervous system, whereas abstraction must be understood through the brain. However, Deleuze does not make a convincing argument for why all forms of abstraction lack the immediate nervous system impact of sensation. In fact, red square graffiti can have the effect of a sensation running through the body. This sensation has a historicity: all the different signs, symbols, and histories that are attached to its use cannot be divorced from the subject's experience of it. The red square is sticky in the sense that, like any object, it has an accumulated history of contact with discourses, signs, and ideas, which create its meaning (Ahmed 2004). The most useful understanding of Deleuze's sensation, therefore, is not art which has no history, which evokes sensation through "pure" affect. Sensation understood as that which is immediately affective, instead of mediated by reason and narrative, however, explains what makes such graffiti so powerful.

Red square graffiti multiplied everywhere in Québec, to the extent that walking down the street was always a matter of being with these tangible signs of the movement. Just a few red squares graffitied on the side of the road might seem like a small thing, but they served an identificatory purpose. An acquaintance of mine who was very aggressively against the strikes reported feeling angry and violated whenever she saw the graffiti. She felt as if something undesirable had invaded her

personal space. Conversely, in response to the graffiti, I always felt in the company of friends. Even though I never witnessed the physical presence that must have generated the graffiti, the presence lingered in that square; not just “so-and-so was here,” as with washroom graffiti, but we, the people, are here.

What explains these differing reactions to the same innocuous red square? A difference in political affiliation of course, but there is something else at play. This power was in fact recognized by the city of Gatineau, which made a point of erasing every single graffiti. The city reported to Radio-Canada that they were attempting to find the “vandals” who had painted the squares, bemoaning how much money it would cost them to replace signage that had been “defaced” (Radio-Canada 2012). No one seemed to stop and consider that a bit of red paint on a sign is not that meaningful—unless, in fact, it is. The tangible presence of these graffiti can be understood with the help of Jacques Lacan’s gaze.

Lacan theorizes that the object of desire, the *objet petit a* that exists in the field of the visual, is the gaze. This gaze is not that of the subject, but that which escapes grasping, as it avoids the eye. The gaze pre-exists us, so that as we look at objects, they look back. Lacan describes this gaze as such:

It is quite clear that I see *outside*, that perception is not in me, that it is on the objects that it apprehends. And yet I apprehend the world in a perception that seems to concern the immanence of the *I see myself seeing myself*. The privilege of the subject seems to be established here from that bipolar reflexive relation by which, as soon as I perceive, my representations belong to me. (Lacan 1998, 80–81)

The gaze is slippery; it is not so simple as to state that the red square *is* the gaze. The gaze can never be fully grasped. Nonetheless it might be fair to say that the red square gazes back when encountered by the subject, and that is part of the reason why it so profoundly affects those who see it.

What the red square renders visible is desire, in the Lacanian sense, or lack. Encounters with desire are always disconcerting. Berlant’s (2011) analysis of these sorts of artistic/political interventions is that they express a desire for the political by entering public space, but without re-entering into the logic of the political as the public sphere. The desire for the political can be a form of cruel optimism, since the people keep voting and believing in their contribution and power over the political even when all evidence points to contemporary representative democracy being little more than oligarchy. A belief in the politics of the people taking up the public sphere outside of its allowed parameters—such as political graffiti—breaks with the attachment to the mainstream political, while still demonstrating a clear desire for politics. For those who are being (re)awakened to the idea that they can enact politics, that it belongs to them at all times, these little reminders serve to extend that experience beyond the moment of protest, to build solidarity without even exchanging words. Therefore we see that the relationship between politics and

aesthetics in this case is reciprocal: the graffiti is a symbol birthed by a political movement, but its gaze also gives life to this same movement.

Resistance and Survival: Moving Laterally

What has preceded is only a very partial examination of one way in which the relationship between politics and aesthetics in one concrete case can be theorized through the affective turn. Both the use of aesthetics to expand the public sphere and thus politics itself, and the affective relationships that give seemingly small symbols their power, can account for the role that graffiti plays in the maintenance and production of affects of resistance, which sustained the movement over long months with little to no success ahead. The temptation is to try to quantify and locate a successful aesthetic, so that it can be repeated until some form of lasting change can be achieved. This is not possible; while the theorists used in this paper would disagree on some of the details, calling this phenomenon by different names, a point of agreement is that any attempt to come up with the appropriate formula for a working politics/aesthetics would only fall into co-optation, the logic of the police, or the logic of figuration.

Barring the perfect solution, what is left besides this often quite depressing prospect that any attempt at subversion or change will only be reabsorbed? Badiou's "Philosophy of the Faun" (Badiou 2005) may give some direction on this matter. This text is a reflection on a text by Stéphane Mallarmé, but contains within it some astute observations in order to "sustain a subject through fidelity to the name of a vanished and undecidable event" (Badiou 2005, 126). Politics and aesthetics, through their relationship to sensation, and by their constantly shifting boundaries, can never be pinned down as a knowable event. There are three temptations to avoid in order to stay true to the ungraspable event: to revel in the "ecstasy of the place" in order to forget the event (129), to replace any need for fidelity by embracing a simulacrum (132), and the giving of "a single and sacred name" that awaits the return of the event (137-38). These temptations are exemplified first by the ones who choose to ignore what happened, to revel in the givenness of neoliberal logic, to claim that nothing of importance occurred in 2012. In regards to the second and third temptations, the attempt to reignite a similar movement in 2014 and 2015 show the weakness of either trying to imitate what was, or to elevate it to a stable name, to something that can be defined, and therefore utilized and experienced again. The repeated failures to again grasp what was lost when the movement of the Québec Spring petered out of existence make the following words ring especially, bitterly, true: "What one can be faithful to is characterized by its not repeating. A truth is in the element of the unrepeatable. The repetition of the object or the loss (it's the same thing) is nothing but a deceptive infidelity to the unrepeatable singularity of the true" (Badiou 2005, 137). The event is passed, and will not return.

This is not, however, cause for despair. Two authors who write about the neoliberal present as a moment that is as inescapable as it is harmful give us not a way forward nor a way out, but a way to manage, to survive. For Shaviro, an accelerationist aesthetic that plays to the excess of neoliberalism may not provide a solution, but it does provide a form of relief in reveling in it (Shaviro 2013). This is far from the aesthetics discussed here, which are not accelerationist, but one of his observations is especially relevant: “There is some value in the exhaustive demonstration that what we actually have, right here, right now, is not a viable alternative either” (Shaviro 2010, 137). The red square is an affective reminder of the fact that a different world is possible, one that follows the subject in their life outside the protest.

This is a call to interrupt what Berlant names the current moment of “crisis ordinariness” (Berlant 2011, 10), because of how crises proliferate in ordinary life without the relief of a dramatic event to make sense of them. This logic can be interrupted, if not defeated. It is lateral agency that is engaged with the process of surviving and managing this sense of being stuck in the present, allowing for what she calls “glitches” in the ongoing present (Berlant 2011, 198), small moments of interruption of the logic of the ordinary that are part of daily life. A flash of red on a nearby building, a chant that is tens of thousands strong; these are glitches, moments of possibility. They do not allow us to radically change or overturn the system, but they provide us with a glimpse of different attachments, different possible realities. An orientation to affect gives us the tools to see how the reciprocal relationship of aesthetics and politics is involved in creating and sustaining these possibilities.

Concluding Remarks

The red square is an ideal example of affective responses to political art because it shows the tight interrelation of three concepts: politics, aesthetics, and affect. The reciprocal relationship of aesthetics and politics that can be found in political art is part of the affective force of the red square. This small graffiti intervenes in the public sphere in non-authorized ways which reveal a desire for politics outside of the sharply defined public sphere of electoral politics. Such glimpses of desire gave strength to a movement facing repression and exhaustion. The role of affect in sustaining protest movements should not be underestimated.

For a paper on affect, it only seems fitting to close with an anecdote. That same summer, I’m lying on a thin mattress on the floor of my friend’s apartment in Montréal. We have just come back from one of the gigantic nightly protests, the ones that are technically illegal but impossible to police. We walked for hours, and we are exhausted and quiet. In the dark, my friend asks me: “Can’t you hear them still? The protesters, I mean?” Despite the silence, I knew what she meant, because I did. As a presence running through my body, under my skin, I could feel the voices of thousands. Years later, I still do. The sight of a small red square painted

on a sidewalk carries that affect, as a sudden sensation, the desire and potential for a different kind of politics.

Notes

1. What to call these protests presents a terminological difficulty. While commonly known, especially in English Canada, as the Québec Student Protests, I object to this name, as it reduces a larger social movement to post-secondary students. In French, the term “printemps érable” was commonly used, a play on words referring to the Arab Spring. While this has often been translated to Maple Spring, without the original wordplay, this term loses its implied meaning. Consequently, I will be using the term “Québec Spring”, even though this also has limitations, specifically that the activism both preceded and exceeded the months of spring.
2. Loi permettant aux étudiants de recevoir l’enseignement dispensé par les établissements de niveau postsecondaires qu’ils fréquentent.

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