

**Mieke
Bal**

WAITING FOR THE POLITICAL MOMENT

The world is everything that is the case.
Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, first sentence

Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.
Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, last sentence¹

The political moment: a moment when being in the world becomes being for the world. Strangely and painfully, it is like death: physically no longer in the world, the dead friend and colleague leaves the trace that is *for* the world, a gift, for us to do with what he wanted to do with but is now no longer able to. His work is a trace of the same order as the material images from the past the presence of which for the world is so important to us. José Luis Brea: an intellectual leader in visual studies in Spain and beyond, once given a limitation to his time in the world, decided to double his efforts and do three things that mattered to him. He wrote a new and brilliant book, a definitive intellectual trace, about the intermingling of images as traces. He composed a special issue, taking on the time-consuming job of editing a volume about—against, in a “no, unless” and “yes, but” kind of argument, the much-abused category of political art. Time running out on him, he chose to continue collaborating, because he believed in the togetherness of thought. And he started to make an essay film about the three eras of the image. Three activities:

¹ Wittgenstein, Ludwig (2001). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. New York: Routledge. (Original Version 1921)

deploying his brilliant mind, collaborating with colleagues, and creatively transforming his medium.

My engagement with José Luis involves all three of these activities. To his own writing, I wish to continue our dialogue about the tension between generalizing and the singularity of art. To his special issue, I seek to sum up how I see the need for political art. And to his work with film, I juxtapose a cinematic work. My title, “Waiting for the Political Moment,” harbors a synthesis of all three.

Waiting for the political moment is the opposite of what the phrase alludes to by *contraposto*, so to speak: waiting for the barbarians. The barbarians do not exist, and their failure to arrive leaves us empty-handed, incapable of agency, while others, the true albeit self-appointed barbarians, go to war. This is the lesson from Cafafy and Coetzee in literature, from Geers and Gómez Peña in art, and from all the others who have deployed the theme of barbarism to demonstrate the futility and, ultimately, a-politicizing disempowerment of the concept of barbarism. I can only refer to Maria Boletsi’s brilliant study for an in-depth argument that demonstrates how waiting, especially for what will not come because it does not exist, is in itself a political disempowerment.²

Instead of dividing the world, the political moment we are waiting for takes place *in* the world. And we know what the world is, say, from the opening sentence of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*: everything that is the case. This casts the world in the *present* tense; the present where José Luis’s work continues to roam, unsettling self-satisfied stultification. The phrase also evokes the notion of my favorite genre of the case study, seemingly opposed to José Luis’s philosophical generalizations. Three questions emerge from this phrase that challenge the case study:

- What is the relationship between the situation described by the phrase “to be the case,” as a way of understanding “the world,” hence, the political moment; and the notion of the case study, a practice of scholars who seek to understand art?

² Boletsi, Maria (2010). *Barbarism, Otherwise: Studies in Art, Literature, and Theory*. Ph.D. Diss., Leiden University.

- What is political about that relationship?
- Where and when does this relationship take place?

I argue that the political moment is now and here, and that therefore, waiting is the greatest deception and disempowerment imaginable. This, I speculate, is why José Luis Brea elected not to wait but to hurry, to do what he could to leave traces for us to pick up and bring to bear on the world.

Sometimes, you go to see an artwork, and when you enter the space, you look around in bewilderment. Where is the artwork? Then, retrospectively, you realize that that first turn of your head was already a response; something the work had *made you do*. And so the game called “art” begins. *Shibboleth* (2007, fig. 1), an artwork by Colombian sculptor Doris Salcedo, is a work that prompts such a response. I have described its effects, meanings, and visual speech acts in that timely special issue of *Estudios Visuales* José Luis had undertaken.

Shibboleth consisted of a long cut in the floor of that huge hall. For the rest, the hall was entirely empty.³ Beginning at one end as an extremely thin line, a crack made by means of a dentist’s drill, the cut became wider, meandering through the length of the space, until it became wide enough to open up its inside. There, wire fence incrustated in irregularly shaped but smoothly polished concrete sides demonstrated that this crack was different from the cracks caused by earthquakes. Standing at one end and looking to the other end, I saw a long, somewhat unsettling fissure, as if my personal safety was no longer guaranteed. Walking along the opening to the other side, I stopped frequently and looked inside. Teasingly, the bottom of the cleft was never securely visible. After the tenure of the installation expired, in April 2008, the crack was filled up again. The work was buried. But a *trace* of it remains. Concrete, like human societies, cannot render what lies below its surface entirely invisible.

³ Bal, Mieke (2009). Arte para lo político. *Estudios Visuales*, 7, 39–65.



Fig.1. Doris Salcedo, *Shibboleth*, 2007. Crack in the floor of the Turbine Hall, filled with concrete and wire fence, approx. 167 m. Tate Modern, London. Courtesy of Alexander and Bonin, New York, and Jay Jopling / White Cube, London.

This work, or installation, is the case. It exists, in real time and space. Moreover, it is “the case” not only as artwork, but also as *breach*. The fissure *is* a fissure, not a representation of one. As such it is, according to Wittgenstein’s opening sentence, in and of the world, in addition to being “on” (as in “about”) that world. It is part of the reality in which we all live—some under better circumstances than others, as *Shibboleth* intimates. *Shibboleth* challenges common conceptions of what “art” might be. At the same time, it challenges common ideas of *political* art. For, as it is a non-representational, silent work, its potential to contribute to the political is not obvious either. In terms of José Luis’s division, it is a material image, whose materiality is cast in the negative; a hollow image.

This challenge is key to the question of the relationship between art and politics. Neither art nor the political are defined by subject matter. They are domains of *agency*, where acting becomes possible and can have effects. In the case of political art, that agency is one and the same; it “works” as art because it works politically. My reflection here rests on the inseparability of those two elements, which nevertheless remain irreducible to one another. Political art such as Salcedo’s shows that they can neither be equated nor severed. Instead, they deeply impact each other. Exploring what makes art political, I search where art’s political efficacy can be located; how it performs; how it exerts agency; and what the point is of art’s political agency for the larger domain of culture. And what “waiting” has to do with it. I hope to offer some ideas concerning the agency of art—or, to use a politically suspicious word, its *power*.

Looking at the world obliquely, from the a-central position of the artist engaged with it, the artist of material images handles materials as a form of, for example, “hopeless mourning.” Such art is a priori in displacement. The importance of the concept of displacement for political art is an indication of where I will look for the political function of art. Salcedo rubs the past into the present. In so doing she blocks the process of forgetting. Art can accomplish this; it can construct, solicit, and even enforce a gaze that, in spite of the fragility of its merely passing caress, will itself bear the traces of the horror encrusted, scarred, or entombed in the work. *Horror*, not the narratives of it; *affect*, as process, not its specific semantic content; experience through empathy, balanced by distance—this is what Salcedo effectuates without sentimentality. In this practice she hovers over the distinction between case study and generalization, making the opposition between them void, or rather, dialectical.

If I begin putting forward a view of political art for our present time through and with the work of Salcedo, it is because her art relentlessly keeps together the three components of such art I find distinctive for our present time: the *affective*—albeit oblique—engagement with the *present*, the refusal to excise the *past* from that present, and the *displacement* or “migratoriness” so characteristic of today’s world. The first component, affect, makes the art compelling, without dictating in what way viewers will be affected. Affective shock occurs, for example, when one looks myopically at the surface of one work from Salcedo’s *Unland* (1997),

and realizes the two table tops on display are put together by means of human hair. The second, the implication of the past in the present, turns perception—an indispensable element of the process of art—into memory. The third, displacement, is a spatial condition for the efficacy of art. These topics converge with my own efforts in videos that I have been making from 2002 on. For these videos, these principles have compelled us to a specific cinematic style, appropriate for the goal of making them work politically. They are specifically geared towards what I have termed “migratory culture”—which is such a hot and painful issue on both politics and the political.⁴

All three components are involved in Salcedo’s cut in the floor of the Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall. The work “happens” in the present, whenever viewers contemplate the empty space where an artwork, a sculpture, was expected. The perception of a fissure in a normal, sturdy and stable concrete floor brings memories from the past, of images of earthquakes or landscapes or people who lost their homes to the roaring earth or human-inflicted violence huddled together. All these memory images are metaphors that make the possible meanings of “ground” shift between the institution, the artwork, and the viewers. They are metaphors of the divisions that the cut articulates, actively widening the circle of involvement to include the past as well as other places. They are also metaphors of the *montage* that exhorts us, the viewers, to make the narratives required to act against cultural amnesia; to de-silence the past and to mobilize once again that which has become stagnant. That activity is the political moment the artwork has been waiting for.

A second reason why I have chosen Salcedo for the articulation of issues pertaining to political art lies in the clarity and consistency of her work, and at the same time in the constantly transformative innovations that characterize her practice. Thus, her work is not only “the case” as in Wittgenstein’s opening phrase, where the phrase refers to existence, the real, and the present; it is also the “case” I can rely on to make my own “case,” in a third sense of that noun. At the same time, however, I should insist that Salcedo’s work is not an illustration of a

⁴José Luis participated in discussions about this in the “encuentro” Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro and I organized in Murcia and in Amsterdam around the video exhibition 2MOVE in 2007-08.

theory of political art—something abhorrent to José Luis and me. One of the many reasons I have selected her work is, precisely, the opposite: it is, in a strict sense of the word, *singular*, in spite of associations one can have with other art. Moreover, its political thrust concerns singularity. This is why Salcedo's body of art and her artistic practice cannot simply be "a case."

Between particularity and its underlying individualism, voyeurism, and anecdotal irrelevance, on the one hand; and generality with its erasure of specificity on the other, I underwrite José Luis Brea's insistence on singularity as a property of the material image that, I want to add, also characterizes the politically effective image. Here we found ourselves in agreement, his philosophical and my critical position notwithstanding. I find that term most apt to responsibly account for the elements of multiplicity without either erasing or hyperbolically and defensively hypostatizing group identity.

I understand singularity in opposition to generality in order to acknowledge and focus on the strictly irreducible differences between people and what happens to them. At the same time, this distinctiveness is not reducible to anecdotal information, which is of the order of the particular. Instead, the singular is that which maintains difference without turning it into the (generalizable) ground for group identity. Singularity allows for an active life of the political where particularity would be silenced, and generality would turn out to be irrelevant.

The relationship between the singular and the general that these formulations suggest complicate the notion of the case study. With its long history ranging from seventeenth-century Jesuit casuistry through case law and psychoanalytic case histories, the case study has acquired a dubious reputation as a facile entrance into theoretical generalization and speculation. The major problem the case study poses is that of generalization on the basis of a single case; an overextended form of induction. Rather than generalizing on the basis of a singular case, then, I go back and forth between one special view and another. In terms of the logic of reasoning, this movement is neither deductive nor inductive but what the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, with an idiosyncratic term, called "abductive." Abduction is that type of inference which leads to hypothetical explanations for observed facts. In this sense it is the opposite of deduction.

Abduction goes from consequence (Wittgenstein's "what is the case") to possible cause. This type of logic is "diagnostic." Deduction, in contrast, reasons from cause to consequence and is thus prognostic. Abduction is the way through which new ideas become possible. It makes creative leaps and has the singular as its starting point. It thrives on uncertainty and speculation, but its origin in observable fact remains primary.

Abduction is a paradoxical form of logical inference. "Peirce holds both that hypotheses are the product of a wonderful imaginative faculty in man and that they are products of a certain sort of logical inference," writes philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt.⁵ Frankfurt proceeds to undo this paradox by reformulating abduction not as the formation but as the (provisional) adoption of hypotheses. The term "working hypothesis" comes to mind. Although this makes abduction logically unproblematic, I contend that what Frankfurt considers a paradox is in fact a description of the case study when redefined according to the multiple meanings of "the case." The case, in the practice of casuistry, is also a dispute or discussion, and in law it is a quite precise form of abduction. According to Wittgenstein, the real existence in the world of the thing that is the case—here, art, as the "wonderful imaginative faculty in man"—is a condition I gladly adopt.

What I infer from Salcedo's work are "thoughts" about those conditions, circumstances, modes, or strategies. These thoughts are, in turn, up for discussion—they are neither recipes nor prescriptions. The artworks—not only the objects but their conditions of making, of being exhibited, and of becoming-public—are able to offer visual thoughts that I, as a critic, seek to articulate. The artwork does not think like a person, nor is the artist the thinker behind it. The artwork *in situ*, in process, inspires thoughts that pertain to the social collective that in turn inspired it.

Salcedo's work lends itself particularly well to such a collective reflection because she is not invested in leaving her signature, but instead considers art a means to affect the world outside of herself. Art, that is, has the potential to produce knowledge greater than that of its creator. This knowledge is neither reducible to

⁵ Frankfurt, Harry F. (1958). Peirce's Notion of Abduction. *Journal of Philosophy*, 55 (14), 593–597, 594.

individual psychology nor to the great categories of sociology. It is a type of knowledge that is constantly on the move, since its fragile articulations can only occur in a singular relationship to viewers, users, or readers of a work of art. In this sense, Salcedo's work is singular but not particular.

Instead of the term "case study," which has been overly inflected by exemplarity and comprehensiveness and which has also, paradoxically, been marred by generalization, I am more inclined to use the alternative, equally over-extended but more specific term "theoretical object." In the dynamic between the works as objects, their viewers, and the time in which these come together, accompanied by the social buzz that surrounds it, a compelling collective thought process emerges. To return to the starting point *Shibboleth*, the metaphoric buzz around "ground," the metonymic shifts departing from the void of the cut, and the narrative activity compelled by the montage that a cut also is, are the sites of these thought processes.

Part of my motivation to discuss the issue of political art in this way, is resistance to generalization; to convey the fragmentation of any knowledge we can possibly develop of political art. The choice of this artist lies in the issues her work poses, elaborates, and experimentally attempts to answer. In Wittgenstein's terms, her work "is the case," and *therefore* it cannot be a "case study" in the classical sense: it emphatically endorses the inescapable fact that it is part of the world in which it occurs—in which, and hence, for which, it is the case. Wittgenstein's opening phrase binds existential and performative claims together: as part of the world, the work labors for its transformation.

To further clarify this I now invoke a very different work, Eija-Liisa Ahtila's *Where Is Where?* In an installation of six screens, a vision of the history of the Algerian war is presented in a mix of documentary footage and fiction, set both in Algeria and in Finland. The main character and narrator is a Finnish poet. The murder of a young boy by two classmates is the center of the Algerian historical story, and in depicting this, the work broaches ethical and emotional dilemmas. Produced for the occasion of a retrospective exhibition, this work is both site-specific and time-specific, pertaining to the here-and-now, to Sarkozy's Paris in 2008. At the same time it harks back to the 1950s. The anecdote of the murder



Fig. 2. Eija-Liisa Ahtila, 2008, *Where Is Where?*. Still from 53 min. 43 sec. 6-channel projected high definition installation with 8-channel sound. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York and Paris © 2008 Crystal Eye – Kristallisilmä Oy.

comes from Franz Fanon's virulently anti-colonial treatise *The Wretched of the Earth* (*Les damnés de la terre*) from 1956.

Ahtila's video installations, often in large formats, offer an intense experience of *heterogeneity*. They exemplify the potential of art, especially of the art of the moving image, to generate experiences that are different from the customary ones. Ahtila revitalizes and subverts well-known images, jarring and thereby activating the visual memories of her spectators. Importantly, her works never advocate a particular political position. And if *Where Is Where?* for the first time in her oeuvre takes up a highly charged historical episode with strong political impact and consequences, the embedding of that subject in the work is such that the plainly historical and political meanings become "minor," while the primary effect is "affective contagion."

This final image of the main body of the work shows the last thing the Algerian boy who has murdered his classmate says to the doctors who examine him. This is an affection image in Deleuze's terms. It is important to realize that this type of image does not *mediate* between the work and the spectator; nor is it an enticement to action. These two negations name processes which are, at first

sight, of crucial importance to our reflection on what political art can be and what it can do. Yet, we must suspend the potential they negate to avoid a shortcut from the images we call close-up into the political. What the affection-image does instead is to provoke a confluence, even if conflicted, between subject and object, without canceling out their heterogeneity or falling into a deceptive harmony. Affect, in this conception, is a medium, not a message.

The affective force of the image is enhanced by the acting style. The young actor, Allaedin Allaedine, suspends all emotion. In Fanon's text the interview is a transcription of a psychiatric expertise. There, the psychiatrist implicitly interprets the lack or suspension of emotion as a particular disturbance, which today we would call trauma. In Ahtila's visual work it signals avoidance of the pathetic. The addressee in Fanon is the psychiatrist whose questions the boy is answering. In the installation, the addressee is the spectator. She is addressed, appealed to, sensitized by the intensity of the acting, yet left free to feel emotions of her choice.

Only some works of art address their participation in the political and make the political part of what they do. This is the kind of art I call "political": it works not only in but with and for "the political"—waiting, that is, for the political moment when the viewer, in relation to it, is moved into exerting her agency. I use the term "political" broadly but nevertheless specifically here. It indicates a specification of what Wittgenstein calls "the world," namely, a practice that takes place, hence, "is the case" in the world.

In her presentation of the two antagonistic domains of politics and the political with reference to an area of real conflict in contemporary societies Chantal Mouffe writes that

the dominant tendency in liberal thought is characterized by a rationalist and individualist approach which forecloses acknowledging the nature of collective identities. This kind of liberalism is unable to adequately grasp

the pluralistic nature of the social world, with the conflicts that pluralism entails; conflict for which no rational solution could ever exist.⁶

Paradoxically, then, individualism, which takes multiplicity as its starting point, is unable to deal with the actual plural nature of the social world. The cult of individual freedom is in fact a severe limitation of multiplicity. The repression of group identities in the name of the individual makes for an easy slide from individualism to consensus, or worse, dictatorship.

Working with conflicts is therefore necessary, not to eradicate them at the cost of plurality, but to turn enemies into adversaries. The notion of enemy draws sharp us/them distinctions that cast the “them” into the role of enemy to be fiercely combated, so that there is no need to come to terms with the conflict. The notion of adversary accepts such distinctions between groups but still acknowledges the legitimacy of the “them” — the adversary, to be engaged in debate. Hence, the adversary is not a “them” but a “you”—another to be faced, with whom discussion and disagreement is possible and on whose account the hope that *mésentente* can one day be resolved is never quite given up.⁷

Throughout her prolific oeuvre, political theorist Wendy Brown offers a stimulating discussion of the political, without using the distinction I just outlined. I see her definition of politics, which she bases on the Greek antecedent word, as being very close to Mouffe’s “political”:

The rich connotative content of *politeia* suggests that politics refers always to a condition of plurality and difference, to the human capacity for *producing* a world of meanings, practices, and institutions, and to the constant implication of power among us—its generation, distribution, circulation, and effects.⁸ (emphasis in text)

⁶ Mouffe, Chantal (2005). *On the Political*. New York and London: Routledge, 10.

⁷ Mouffe, *On the Political*. The term *mésentente* comes from Rancière, Jacques (1999). *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

⁸ Brown, Wendy (1995). “Postmodern Exposures, Feminist Hesitations.” In *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 30–51. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 38.

For Brown, the conditions of a functioning political domain are the formation of judgments, the performance of democratic acts, and the availability of what she calls “political spaces.” Both Ahtila’s and Salcedo’s art not only present and address these three conditions; their art operates through them as well as results in them. This is why these oeuvres are profoundly political, not as a side effect or thematic preoccupation, but *qua* art.

The first two of Brown’s conditions are alternatives to the predominant derivation of the good from the true and to the institutionalized rituals of democracy, respectively. This art compels viewers who are affected by it to make judgments about justice, not about truth. Making such judgments is an exercise of democratic agency. I understand the latter term to require contexts where the issues that make up the political can be spoken. Where this is not possible, other means must be invented to prevent Wittgenstein’s conclusion: “Of what one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” Such a logic silences agency. The contexts that democratic agency necessitates are contexts in which the antagonisms can be enacted without resulting in the enmity that leads to war and other forms of lawless violence. They are places where, instead, judgments of justice and acts of democratic dispute—even silently, in the form of thought and deliberation—are not only allowed but actively enabled. It is in the absence or scarcity of such spaces that this art seeks to open them up. In this sense, the entire life projects of these artists are deeply political: both Ahtila in her video installations and Salcedo in her exhibitions construct political spaces.

This art is deeply anchored in the private sphere, which it seeks to wrench out of its isolation and confinement. It addresses head-on the way in which the disruption of the political destroys bodies. A further understanding of political space, its features, and its susceptibility to qualitative improvement and enrichment is the horizon of my approach to art as itself waiting for the political moment that we viewers are summoned to make happen. It is the joint task of art and the academic fields that study it to seek alternatives to these features for the qualitative benefit of political space as a condition for democratic life, for which we cannot wait, but which must begin now-here. Art can help us with that task, for it is politically effective in that it waits for its viewers to endorse their agency; and thus offers a contribution to the political make-up of today’s world—art that

is “the case” when nowhere, with a small but political space, morphs into nowhere. There is no barbarian to wait for anyway, and waiting drives you mad. Instead, as José Luis has so brilliantly understood and lived by, we must take up our own agency so that art can take its own up through and with us; in and for the world.

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