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Spectacularization of political activism: Subject matter and social effect

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ABSTRACT

*Political actionism can be defined as a type of political participation that manifests through various spectacular forms of sociopolitical activism and has become increasingly prevalent in contemporary politics. This paper aims to show the significance and effectiveness of political actionism as a modern form of political activism. It will be argued that political actionism is capable of reshaping political processes through theatrical representations, specifically the play format, and other forms of entertainment. Furthermore, evidence will be presented of its increasing importance in the information society. The different possible functions and directions of political actionism in postmodern politics will also be outlined and the role of symbolization, visualization, provocation, and carnivalization in political actionism will be elucidated. Departures from the previous system of political activism will be exemplified through a discussion of political performances, happenings, and art installations, three essential forms of political actionism, and emphasis will be laid on the varying role and social significance of political actionism depending on the political regime of a particular state. Finally, a comprehensive typology of actionism will be proposed.*

Keywords: political activism, actionism, political performance, political happening, political art installation

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, a new (non-classical) political aesthetic has been actively formed, one which offers an updated vision of the representation of political ideas and demands. Despite the dominance of classical, well-established forms of political activism, political processes are now being reshaped by the increasing use of figurative, emotionally charged instruments, which can be subsumed under the unifying concept of *political actionism* (Gruieva, 2018, p. 20). Political activism is beginning to resemble drama; the play is becoming an attribute of sociopolitical activity. Politics has taken on a new configuration and is turning into a stage for postmodern performances. In the “society of the spectacle”, as Debord (2000) describes modern communities, simulacra, virtuality, and performances (or plays) have acquired paramount importance (op. cit., p. 21). Political processes have thus developed a ludic component. Political events have become shows of sorts, performed in front of an audience of starstruck citizens, as part of everyday life. In sum, politics is becoming increasingly spectacular and theatrical.

Political actionism as a system of artistic manifestations of political protest, discussion, and debate, in which drama, entertainment, and acceleration of sociopolitical dynamics play a key role, has existed at different stages of the history of politics. However, it is only in the postmodern period that it has become prevalent. Postmodern philosophical and political discourse emerged due to a crisis in the traditional understanding of political activism and of the position of the individual in society. ever since, postmodernism has favored the incorporation and spread of visual images, embodiment, spontaneity, nonlinearity, audience participation, and other forms of interactivity in politics. These components have contributed to the development of dynamic, dramatic techniques in political processes, making politics more vivid and spectacular. Actionism “fits into the sociocultural matrix of postmodern life, where semiotic and symbolic activity becomes dominant” (op. cit., p. 21). Thus, the play is becoming part of sociopolitical activism and it offers wide-ranging possibilities for political actionism.

There is strong reason to believe that the obvious changes in the visual aspects of political processes have occurred in response to the requirements of the modern information society, which is captivated by information that is socially significant or

simply unconventionally presented, including through the techniques of actionism. The various creative forms of interpretation of political meaning that have recently emerged need to be studied further in the domain of political sciences, with particular attention to political actionism, which includes political performances, happenings, art installations, street art, etc. It is also important to determine the different roles that political actionism plays in the political processes of states with dissimilar political regimes, political cultures, or traditions in terms of liberal democracy.

## 1. THEORETICAL NOTIONS AND PREVIOUS WORK ON POLITICAL ACTIONISM

Spectacular forms of political participation are part of the modern repertoire of collective action. The concept of such repertoires, proposed by Tilly, as quoted by Della Porta and Diani (2006, p. 168), refers to “a whole set of means [a group] has for making claims of different types on different individuals”. The population of each country has its collective action repertoire, grounded in a common past and collective interests. Whereas Tilly’s concept refers to collective action, actionism covers both collective and individual actions.

Collective action repertoires have evolved throughout history to finally reach their current, postmodern form. The most remarkable shifts in collective action repertoires occurred from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward, as a wider public began to assert its interests, a revolution which has been discussed by Tilly (1986, pp. 391-392). The consolidation of the nation-state, the rise of capitalism, the emergence of modern means of communication (Della Porta and Diani, 2006, p. 169), the progress of education, and the consequently heightened popular interest in politics all contributed to the transformation of collective action. However, the hallmarks of political actionism are absent in the formative period of the new repertoire. Of course, vehement protests incorporating various more or less artistic elements have existed since times immemorial in public life, as evidenced by the long history of burning effigies or mock parades such as the charivari. One could also add carnivals, which had a latent function as protests in their medieval and early modern forms, as one can deduce, for example, from their incorporation of the aforementioned charivari ritual, which allowed the community to

express its disdain for individuals who breached cultural norms, hence to protest against them.

Tilly and Tarrow have both plausibly claimed that the modern repertoire of collective action has changed little since its formation at the time of the French Revolution (Tilly, 1984; Tarrow, 1994). Indeed, revolutions, boycotts, petitions, pickets, and demonstrations have persisted as forms of collective action since then. Nevertheless, protests have undergone thorough restructuring due to advances in information technology, radical changes in means of communication, globalization, and several other modern trends. Since the 1960s and 1970s, postmodernism has been setting a new model for collective action repertoires and actively shaping repertoires of individual action too. These processes entailed the emergence of actionism as an art of action. Therefore, the last half-century provides a solid empirical basis for the study of spectacular forms of sociopolitical activism.

One of the reasons that political actionism has recently flourished in its various forms is deteriorating democracy. Specifically, in addition to traditional forms of political activism, creative protest has come to serve as a non-violent, artistic way of mounting resistance against human rights restrictions, pressures on the institutions of civil society, political encroachment on media freedom (primarily by ruling parties), etc. The presence of such grave issues in Russia explains why local political actionism has attracted so much scholarly attention in recent years. For example, Jonson, Erofeev, Engström, and others (Jonson and Erofeev, 2018) have studied the features of artistic strategies of resistance to Russian neo-authoritarianism. Jonson has also analyzed the evolution of Russian counterculture in art in recent decades, which satirizes and ridicules the regime and the values it represents (Jonson, 2015). Beumers, Etkind, Gurova, and Turoma (2018), in turn, have examined in detail the artistic practices which gave rise to actionist protest movements in the post-Soviet space. Due to the pronounced element of protest inherent in them, cases of Russian actionism could hardly be excluded from the present study. In the latter half of this paper, an interpretation will be proposed of their role in the context of Russian neo-authoritarianism.

Within cultural sociology, pioneered by J. C. Alexander, it has been argued that each action is embedded to some extent in “affect and meaning” (Alexander 2003, p. 12),

and cultural pragmatics shows how individual or collective social actions (performances) can be analyzed similarly to theatrical ones (Alexander 2006). Alexander has also defined performativity as the focus of power (2011). Furthermore, Downey (2014) has studied more than 200 cases of interaction between politics and art, seeking to determine whether art has the potential to “speak truth to power”, and he has compellingly identified a radical change in the approaches and techniques used by artists to convey their sociopolitical ideas. His research is focused on the latest processes of interaction between artists and politics, in particular, what issues are at stake in them and what tools artists choose to creatively express political ideas in order not only to raise public awareness of political matters but also to invite people to question political institutions and policies. Similarly, Mesch’s research addresses the question of how contemporary art employs a wide range of strategies to convey political messages (2000). Analyzing political actionism, she shows how art was used to reflect political events during the period of drastic social transition after the end of World War Two. At that time, art emerged as a vehicle of political change, and researchers of political actionism are nowadays increasingly inclined to acknowledge the role of art as a reflection of a political agenda (Klanten, 2011).

European thinkers such as Vujanović, Cvejić, Kunst, Lorey, and Nyberg have analyzed artistic practices that have emerged alongside new social movements, investigating how theatre, dance, and performance, in general, respond to “new political insights [and] experiments” (Vujanović and Piazza, 2019, p. 14). In this regard, many scholars have found that political performances, installations, and other events are a form of civil disobedience (Çıdam, Scheurman, and Delmas, 2020).

Nowadays, the visual dimension is particularly accentuated in political actions. To explain the specificities of the spectacularization of political activism, one needs to refer to the theory of political participation and the theory of communication. The former can be associated with the concept of participatory democracy, which denotes the involvement of the whole of society in political life. In this sense, political participation is the basis for the functioning of modern civil society and its interaction with the state. It also expands the scope of politics, implying a majority of actors from civil society rather than politicians, including ones who convey political messages in spectacular, theatrical

forms. With some exceptions, such political participation is unconventional and challenges or even rejects existing political institutions and prevailing norms.

As for political communication theory, it is significant to the study of the spectacularization of political activism insofar as it provides a framework within which the process can be studied as a visual and creative transfer or exchange of political information. From this perspective, it can be observed that art has introduced new means of communication into politics; it, therefore, acts as an instrument of veritable political transformation. In addition, art increasingly expropriates politics. The result is political actionism, which can be described as serving as an episodic, expressive, and public model of communication. It essentially consists of political gestures outwardly framed as artistic ones. Consequently, it is not a mere art with political import, but rather a new approach to political communication which relies on creative methods to convey political messages. It can furthermore be thought of as a type of communication with symbolic connotations. The symbolism of political actionism makes it possible to convey veiled political ideas, which is especially important in neo-authoritarian states, where open criticism of the government can be highly dangerous.

For a study of political actionism and its role in modern political processes, the concept of creative democracy is instructive. It was first used by Dewey in his 1939 essay “Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us”. He was one of the first philosophers to consider ways of increasing democracy’s capacity to bring more change to people’s daily lives (Dewey, 1939/1989). Later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, researchers began to show more and more interest in artists’ creative expressions of their political views and how their works affect society and political culture (Vail and Hollands, 2013). In recent decades, they have raised many issues that lie at the intersection of political participation and art. In particular, art scholars have explored many subjects that pertain to creative democracy (Bishop, 2006; Belfiore and Bennett, 2007; Uzzi and Spiro, 2005), but many novel aspects of the interaction between art and politics have been overlooked in political analysis.

To understand political actionism, one needs to take into account that in postmodern reality, political action is most effective when it is provocative or even outrageous. Given the current information overload that society faces, political events

must depart from classic models, especially visually, to be noticed by the media and by people in general and thus succeed in conveying their intended message. Innovative forms of political activism, which are essentially synonymous with political actionism, aim to reach out to the public and arouse its interest specifically through performances, happenings, art installations, or other events with a rebellious and provocative spirit.

Actionists challenge public authority or society as a whole and criticize imposed myths through public art events laden with political overtones. It seems that the influence of such artistic expression is no less far-reaching than that of other forms of political activism. The powerful role that art has in society as a tool of protest has already been acknowledged and applauded; for example, the Human Rights Foundation has been awarding the Václav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent annually since 2012. The aestheticization of politics has been ongoing in Western societies since the 1980s, and the theatricality of western politics, be it conventional or contentious, is a well-established element of public communication (Edelman, 1988). In this way, politics has taken on a new configuration and is turning into a stage for postmodern performances, put on as part of daily life, for an audience who despite its relative indifference to politics has been and still is happy to be coaxed with bread and circuses at all times. It is therefore unsurprising that politics is increasingly approached in a playful, interactive format and that actionists creatively respond through art to pressing challenges in postmodern politics.

This paper studies the performances of several actionists, including Serbian artist Marina Abramović, Russian actionist Pyotr Pavlensky, the Russian feminist punk rock band Pussy Riot, and the originally Ukrainian and now international movement known as Femen. The discussion will also cover the happenings organized by the Polish political and artistic movement Orange Alternative (Pomarańczowa Alternatywa) and the events of two Ukrainian revolutions – the Orange Revolution (2004-2005) and the Revolution of Dignity (2013-2014). Lastly, political art installations will be examined through examples from the works of Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, in addition to other revolutionary installations created in the last decade in various parts of the world. The analysis of these diverse cases will allow for a new typology of actionism to be proposed and will shed light on the precise roles of different types of artistic and political actions within the system of nonviolent protest strategies.

A description of the principal forms of political activity and a detailed presentation of specific cases are beyond the scope of this paper, the goal of which is to demonstrate that nowadays, political actionism is a new integral unit of the extensive system of forms of political activism, one which conveys political ideas through non-classical and specifically artistic methods. Reference will be made to individual cases to the extent needed to clarify the nature and function of political actionism.

## 2. FEATURES OF POLITICAL ACTIONISM AS A TYPE OF ACTIVISM

Political actionism is understood in this paper as a creative form of protest which employs a wide range of artistic techniques. Theatrical forms of political participation, as well as the contemporary sociopolitical art of action, are used to convey a creative, bold, innovative, and often provocative response, usually in an open urban space.

The May 68 protests in France stimulated the dynamic development of postmodern politics and actionism<sup>1</sup> and blurred the boundaries between political and civil life, as evidenced by some of the students' revolutionary slogans, such as "Politics is in the streets", "Action allows us to overcome divisions and find solutions", "We are assured that  $2 + 2$  does not equal 4", "Anything that does not surprise is fake" and others.

Actionism has introduced modern forms of expressing political issues through art. The defining properties of such artistic expressions are the means of expression, the signs and symbols used, the artistic context, and the subtext. Symbolization is the basis of political actionism and consists of embedding veiled but recognizable messages into political actions. Actionists view contemporary society as a society of the spectacle and liken it to a masquerade or a carnival. Actionists cannot always predict the course of their political actions, but in many cases, they clearly define the goals they wish to achieve.

Debord argues in his analysis of the society of the spectacle that truth, realism, and reality no longer exist and that political and moral performances prevail (2000). This claim is plausible since theatricality and entertainment are emphasized in public political actions at the expense of rational argumentation and debate, which leads to public perception of politics as a show, as well as the emergence of highly unconventional or

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of sociopolitical actionism can be found in Dadaist and surrealist art projects from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, only in the 1960-70s did political actionism become conceptual.



downright scandalous political actors such as Darth Vader, the leader of the Internet Party of Ukraine; Francisco Everardo Oliveira Silva (Tiririca), a Brazilian politician who has worked as a clown; Jón Gnarr, comedian and former mayor of Reykjavík; and others. There has also been a surge in conceptual street art, notable representatives being British underground artist Banksy, Ai Weiwei, Canadian-American artist Gabriel “Specter” Reese, Pussy Riot, the street art band Voina, and Femen. Their works have taken politics beyond their classical scope.

The artistic techniques of actionism, such as politically oriented performances, happenings, art installations, and street art, are examples of the profound penetration of art into sociopolitical space. Actionists work with political subjects and modify traditional forms of political activity through creative input. They have thus reworked demonstrations into ‘monstrations’ and rallies into happenings, for example. They essentially use art as a tool to call for political freedom. As Anderson has rightly remarked about postmodernism, art is the basis of any protest (2011, p. 41).

Actionists can only assume how their projects will unfold and what consequences they will have since they cannot know for certain how the public will react once it becomes involved. Actionism is focused on the process rather than the outcome and it is this initial involvement of the public that is their primary goal, which they pursue by seeking to inspire strong emotions in both prepared and unprepared audiences and possibly to prompt them to join in. That is why actionists’ performances, happenings, and art installations are often avant-garde and provocative: a shocking idea is declared, a naked body is exhibited, injuries are inflicted. Such projects violate commonly accepted societal norms and as a result, actionist artists are accused of antisocial behavior, provocation, offending public decency, and moral transgressions, or even prosecuted for breaking the law. Be that as it may, the purpose of most of their actions remains socially significant, and even though an individual action may be organized and witnessed by only a small amount of people, its message is sure to spread far and wide afterward by way of contemporary information technologies.

Current sociopolitical developments and topics determine the content of actionists’ projects. These are always meant to draw attention to a given issue, through a relevant but bizarre or outrageous event or message that is apt to trigger further social

debate regarding the underlying problem and possibly spur the government to react too. In other words, actionism publicly challenges the existing social order and aims to reach citizens and authorities alike. This function of actionism will be illustrated in the following through a discussion of performances, happenings, and art installations.

### 3. PERFORMANCES IN POLITICS: SIGNIFICANCE FOR DEMOCRATIC TRANSFORMATION

In recent decades, performances have been integrated into contemporary politics, particularly into protest movements. As events are directed according to a certain script in front of an invited audience, political performances are public in nature. They are used as a technique for interactive communication with the audience and consist of symbolic, ritual activities carried out to impress spectators and the community as a whole. They are staged in response to certain social issues or events, to which they call the public's attention (Olshansky, 2003, p. 348), and they usually serve to denounce or oppose governmental policies, rather than promoting them.

Political performances primarily rely on visual rather than verbal elements (Chudovska-Kandyba, 2009, p. 280), and if there is verbal interaction between performers, it has an essentially symbolic value (Stanislavska, 2016, p. 87). In other words, it contains a subtext that spectators are encouraged to look for and interpret (Hruieva, 2016, p. 100). Abruptness, provocation, and outrage are hallmarks of the aesthetics of political performance. The whole content of the political play is founded on absurdity and paradox. Performers often intentionally try to shock the public or make it uncomfortable through their playful or directly provocative actions. For instance, performers might self-harm and thus endanger their health or even their lives for the sake of conveying a message and furthering a cause. By unsettling the audience, actionists endeavor to subvert conventional political beliefs. Consequently, it can be said that political performances have a positive impact on the political culture of the community.

During a performance, members of the audience are always observers rather than participants, unlike in the case of political happenings. The performers use their bodies or various accessories and assign a symbolic meaning to each pose and gesture. The advantage of political performances is that the only resources that they strictly require are

a body and a public space. This means that the body becomes a political tool in such performances.

Among the pioneers who dramatized politics through political performances, one can mention Provo, a group of left-wing Dutch radicals and artists established in 1965; the American Yippies movement established in 1967, which combined the ideas of the New Left and the hippie counterculture; and Austrian artist Valie Export (born Waltraud Lehner), active since 1968. Serbian artist Marina Abramović is of particular note. Her birthplace was socialist Yugoslavia, where the power of political ideology constrained citizens' freedom for a long time. This left the artist traumatized, but also served as a source of inspiration for her art, in which she used her body to subvert sociopolitical ideas and ethical principles. Her most famous performances include *Lips of Thomas*, originally held in 1975 and again in 2005, which consisted of a ritual symbolizing the artist's redemption, one in which she cleanses herself of the contradiction between communism and Orthodox Christianity in her childhood; *Communist Body/Fascist Body* (1979), which turned into a protest against the division of people through ideological barriers; and *Balkan Baroque* (1997), a response to the armed conflicts that had started in the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1991.

Today's neo-authoritarian regimes provide fertile ground for political performances, even though in such countries, artists are repressed by the government and the politically conservative public is loath to accept such radical intrusions of art into sociopolitical life. In Russia, for instance, the seeds of political actionism were sown in the 1910s and 1920s through avant-garde artistic experiments, it developed over the rest of the century despite periodic setbacks, and since the beginning of the third millennium, it has been an instrument of open confrontation with the authorities. In the last decade, many highly sensational performances have been delivered by Pavlensky, Pussy Riot, Voina, and 23:59, another Russian art group.

Pavlensky's political performances are perhaps the most striking instances of modern Russian actionism, of which only a few representative examples will be presented here. To start with, in 2012, Pavlensky carried out a campaign called *Seam* in protest against the criminal prosecution of members of Pussy Riot. He stood beside Kazan Cathedral with his mouth sewn shut with a thread, drawing the community's

attention to limited free speech and the intensification of censorship in Russia. The following year, for his art event titled *Carcass*, he had himself wrapped in barbed wire naked and deposited in front of the building of the Legislative Assembly of St. Petersburg, in protest against Russia's repressive legislation, particularly laws that cripple civic activism. His most provocative performance was *Fixation*, delivered later that year: the artist openly displayed his naked body on the Red Square beside the Kremlin, with his scrotum nailed to the pavement. This performance addressed the political apathy and fatalism of modern Russian society. As a final example, in his 2014 performance called *Segregation*, the artist, once more in the nude, cut off his earlobe while perched on the fence of the Serbsky State Scientific Center for Social and Forensic Psychiatry, in protest against the use of false psychiatric diagnoses as a pretext for silencing political dissidents. There can be no doubt that such performances are intended to arouse the public's interest and spur them to take action. However, such political actionism against the government, as explicit and creative as it may be, fails to foment further political dissent in Russia due to the firmly entrenched patriarchal culture and a prevalent tendency to sacralize the Russian state.

Although Pavlensky fled Russia and obtained political asylum in France, his actions have not become less insurgent, as evidenced by his 2017 performance called *Lighting*, in which he set aflame an office of the Bank of France in Paris, finding this financial institution to be a quintessential symbol of the repression of social revolution. These kinds of actions show how actionists challenge different political regimes by attacking state institutions in non-classical ways.

It should be noted that in societies where political actionism is widely practiced and receives feedback from the public, one also finds stable self-expression values, the increasing significance of which had been studied by Baker, Inglehart, and Welzel, among others (Inglehart and Baker 2000; Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Inglehart 2018). Conversely, Russia, like most post-Soviet states, emphasizes and predominantly cultivates survival values instead, as reflected by the Inglehart-Welzel cultural map of the world (version 2020). Spectacular forms of sociopolitical activism, with their distinctive elements of protest and outrageous presentation, receive little social approval in such societies. Political actionism is also marginal in countries with nascent democracies

burdened by a totalitarian past. This geographic variation in the intensity of political actionism can be understood in terms of the previously discussed diachrony of collective action repertoires (Tilly 2006, Traugott 1995).

Another remarkable example of actionism in neo-authoritarian Russia would be Pussy Riot's performances. The most famous of them is a song titled *Virgin Mary, Banish Putin!* (2012), performed during the 2012 presidential election campaign. The Russian authorities described the act as hooliganism motivated by religious hatred. The scandalous aspects of the performance were the singers' garments, which consisted of balaclavas, brightly colored dresses, and tights; the venue, a pulpit where only male clergy is allowed; the lyrics, which were later qualified by the Russian authorities as extremist; and the overall conduct of singers, which blatantly flouted Orthodox Christian principles of proper female behavior. Consequently, the performance conveys much more meaning than its bare title might suggest. It also decries the tightened bonds between the Russian Orthodox Church and the state and voices a feminist revolt against the established patriarchal norms of Russian society (Marinenko, 2016, p. 237-238). As such, it quickly led to a repression of the band's members, but they also won a fair amount of support from the world community.

In 2020, Belarus, another neo-authoritarian state, also became a platform for actionist events, which serve as non-violent protests against the Lukashenko regime. Examples include human chains of protesters bearing flowers as symbols of peaceful resistance or girls kissing law enforcement officers. It should be emphasized that these various forms of creative protest do not give law enforcement agencies any obvious reason to crackdown on protesters. Similar peaceful protests have been held in Ukraine, for example during the Revolution of Dignity, with the blue and yellow piano as a symbol. Femen, on the other hand, is known for the much more outrageous aspects of its protests against various sociopolitical issues, including its topless participants, the movement's trademark. The explicitly political actions it has carried through so far include *Ukraine Is Not Alina*, held in 2010 to protest against Putin's visit to Kyiv; *Long Live Belarus!*, held in 2011 in Minsk to demand the release of Belarusian political prisoners; *God Persecute the Tsar!*, held in 2011 in Moscow near the Cathedral of Christ the Savior to support free thought in Russia and to denounce the Kremlin autocracy; and

protests against femicide and *Stop Putin's War!*, held in 2019 in Paris, in front of the Élysée Palace shortly before a Normandy Four Summit. The preceding discussion shows that it is especially under neo-authoritarian regimes, or other regimes with a deficient democracy, that a creative component is being woven into traditional forms of protest, but that political actionism is also found in the West.

#### 4. POLITICAL HAPPENINGS AS AN EXTREME FORM OF PROTEST

The political happening is an even more radical form of political activism than the performance. This type of action is only tentatively scripted and its course and outcome are unpredictable. Unlike in political performance, members of the audience are actively involved in a political happening and can be counted among its creators (Honcharenko, 2013, p. 334). One could say that a political happening is a ludic improvisation within a certain public space that allows all bystanders to express themselves. As such, it corresponds to the needs of modern citizens, who live in a largely visual society, feels strongly about the political events they witness, and consequently desire to be co-creators rather than mere spectators.

Music, dance, poetry, visual arts, videos, films, and even the environment, for example, the weather or background noise such as the clatter of train wheels on a railway, can be used to promote a particular political message on the occasion of a political happening. The venue is an open area, one which is not primarily intended for political events, for instance, a subway station or a shopping mall, in keeping with the characteristic tendency of contemporary sociopolitical theatrical art to pervade urban space. The atmosphere of absurdity, and sometimes of violence, that accompanies a political happening is a reflection of its creators' sociopolitical reality, specifically of issues such as hate speech, terrorism, ethnic conflicts, intolerance, discrimination (e.g. sexual), and so on.

In a political happening, the classical relationship between performers and the audience is completely subverted. During its course, the original organizers and the spectators alternate their roles. To blur the boundaries between themselves and members of the audience, performers intentionally provoke the latter. They try to embarrass or shock them or inspire other strong emotions that will spur them to join in. It is therefore

essential that the happening be held in a space where all can freely express themselves. A political happening gives people the possibility to flout and poke fun at matters that are otherwise treated with the utmost formality and solemnity (Andrienko, 2009, p. 127).

Some of the most notable examples of political happenings can be found in the Polish anti-communist protests of 1987–1989, held in opposition to the military dictatorship of General Jaruzelski. They were organized by the Orange Alternative, led by Waldemar Andrzej Fydrych. The main weapons of these happenings were humor, irony, and sarcasm, which enabled the movements' members to cover up the element of protest and avoid repression by the communist regime. Thus, they painted images of dwarves and handed out orange caps, ostensibly harmless activities. Through its happenings, the Orange Alternative drew attention to acute political and social issues. It criticized Jaruzelski's regime, for example, the intelligence agencies and the shortages caused by the unsuccessful planned economy. The carnivalized happenings of the Orange Alternative also ironically celebrated contemporary state holidays, particularly the anniversary of the October Revolution. Such actions had an important impact on Polish culture because they allayed citizens' fears and normalized the phenomenon of street protest (Kovalenko, 2012, p. 32-54).

Fydrych continued his "orange happenings" during the Ukrainian Orange Revolution of 2004 (Górska and Koschalka, 2011). On his initiative, a long orange scarf knitted by Poles was brought to Ukraine as a token of Polish solidarity with Ukrainians and handed to future president Viktor Yushchenko on Independence Square (Maidan Nezalezhnosti) in Kyiv (Naumkina and Gruieva, 2016, p. 89). The scarf itself symbolized the brotherhood between the two nations, as the first loop had been knitted by Ukrainian singer Ruslana Lyzhychko. The gesture was complemented by two large chocolate sculptures of the heads of presidential candidates Yushchenko and Viktor Yanukovich, also crafted on Fydrych's initiative. On their way to Kyiv, Yushchenko's supporters had made stops to offer people to take a bite. Yanukovich's chocolate head was eaten beyond recognition, while Yushchenko's fared better (op. cit., p. 89).

Political actionism was also prominent during the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity and the relevant events have been described as political happenings (Averianova, 2016, p. 50-51). After the initial mass demonstration on November 24, 2013, protests

took on a bright, artistic tone, and the Ukrainian public's prowess for revolutionary creativity shone through. The first creative actions included performances on the aforementioned blue and yellow piano, termed the "instrument of freedom", which kept changing its location, players, and audience. On New Year's Eve, 2013, the Ukrainian anthem was performed on Independence Square and sung in unison by about half a million Ukrainians, which broke the world record for the largest number of people singing a national anthem simultaneously. This can be considered a revolutionary happening in itself.

A further example of political actionism in Ukraine would be the protests against the authoritarian laws of January 16, 2014, which prohibited citizens from wearing masks and helmets during peaceful street rallies and from driving in a line of more than five vehicles in an attempt to repress dissent. In response, over the next few days, people came out to protest wearing kitchen utensils (pots, colanders, frying pans, etc.), hard hats, and combat helmets and covered their faces with scarves and medical masks painted blue and yellow. Drivers deliberately formed motorcades of more than five cars and posters bearing the inscription "I am the fifth! Don't follow me!" hung on the backs of passers-by. In this way, the Ukrainian community demonstrated its revolt against the new authoritarian legislation through a variety of creative means.

## 5. ART INSTALLATIONS AS AN EXPRESSION OF POLITICAL IDEAS

Nowadays, the most common actionist practice may well be art installations, which are three-dimensional compositions displayed in an open public space. The objects that are incorporated in an installation lose their utilitarian value and acquire a symbolic one instead. Political art installations are aesthetic gestures which on the one hand have an artistic form on and on the other represent a certain political idea or convey a message, expressing their creators' revolt. Consequently, they can be regarded as social protest techniques that rely on artistic means. Though they are fragile and often short-lived constructions, they serve as powerful weapons for artists in the furtherance of their sociopolitical causes.

It should be noted that political art installations also serve to preserve and consolidate collective memory and thus to reconstruct the past in the present. For



instance, Brazilian artist and sculptor Néle Azevedo reminded the world of the victims of World War One through her installation *Minimum Monument*. On August 2, 2014, 5,000 anthropomorphic ice figures were placed on the steps of Chamberlain Square in Birmingham, UK. The use of ice as a material for the installation and its rapid melting symbolized the fragility and caducity of life and the transition from one state to another, while the physical proportions of the installation were a homage to the immense number of people who fell victim to the war.

In general, art installations related to war and its ravages are among the most expressive ones. One significant example is *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red* (2014), designed by Paul Cummins and Tom Piper and exhibited in the moat of the Tower of London. The installation was composed of 888,246 ceramic red poppies, one for each British and Commonwealth soldier officer who perished between 1914 in 1921, in the First World War, or from their wounds after returning home. It was also symbolic that the last flower was laid on November 11: on this day in 1918, the Armistice of Compiègne was signed, which finally ended the war.

One of the largest projects in the history of art installations has been *One Million Bones*. More than 250,000 people have joined the creation of installations for this series. They have crafted millions of models of human bones and displayed them as installations symbolizing mass graves, in protest against the different genocides and human rights violations in countries such as Sudan, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, and Burma, to name a few. The installations have served as a call for efforts to effectively prevent violent conflicts throughout the world. Thus, in addition to paying tribute to genocide victims, they have appealed for world peace on behalf of their descendants.

The cult figure of political actionism is Ai Weiwei, who has been persecuted in his native China for his initiatives, openly critical of local politics. One of his most famous installations, *Sunflower Seeds* (2010), was a protest against Mao Zedong's anti-democratic Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The installation thrust the question of the individual's role in a totalitarian society into the limelight. Weiwei's art installations have also drawn attention to the exploitation of China as an inexhaustible source of cheap labor for the entire planet. His most acute works are his installations centered on global

migration issues, a subject which became particularly topical following the start of the European migration crisis in 2014, which saw increasing numbers of refugees flood EU countries. To raise awareness of the problem, the artist used objects that had been an integral part of the refugees' ordeals – life jackets and inflatable boats. It is noteworthy that Weiwei set up his migration installations in busy places, thus ensuring that he would reach a wider audience. For instance, he has mounted installations on the façade of the Palazzo Strozzi in Florence, in the pond of the Belvedere Palace in Vienna, on the façade of the Kunsthall Charlottenborg museum in Copenhagen and on the columns of the Berlin Konzerthaus. The sociopolitical component of Weiwei's installations goes beyond the aesthetic function of art.

As the preceding discussion has shown, actionists use the most unexpected materials to create their installations. Further examples are *Le Pyromane* (The Pyromaniac), an installation of matches by Lebanese-French artist Ali Cherri, lit on display; an installation of eggs set up as part of the 2014 Hong Kong protests, in which brightly colored umbrellas were also used as a symbol, whence “The Umbrella Revolution”; and the bare framework of the New Year's Tree on Kiev's Independence Square, the decoration of which was interrupted by the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity and which protesters ended up decorating in their way, decking it with posters and political messages. Furthermore, unconventional locations are often chosen to accommodate political installations. For instance, Weiwei selected Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary, now open to visitors, for a series of human rights installations.

## CONCLUSION

Political actionism combines the latest forms of artistic expression to tackle political issues. The whole spectrum of actionist art relies on creativity, visual representation, and symbolism. The latter element allows actionists to protest through veiled but recognizable messages. The above analysis has shown political actionism to be a vehicle of sociocultural reflection and one of the modern approaches to reshaping the traditional mechanisms of conveying political ideas and demands. As such, it undeniably fits into the socio-cultural matrix of the postmodern present, dominated by semiotic and symbolic

activity. It offers a spectacular representation of politics and its manifestations, in the play format that is currently in demand.

In the face of the deficiency and deterioration of democracy worldwide, the social demand for new non-violent means of protest is on the rise. Such strategies emerge at the intersection of political activism and art. Not only has actionism been inspired by postmodernism, but the multitude of actionist projects executed over the last half-century has also significantly contributed to the evolution of postmodernism itself. The modern need for non-standard forms of conveying political information can also be understood in the light of the information overload that contemporary society faces. The individual cases of actionism discussed above reveal that it mostly serves as a means of protest, challenging the political status quo through provocation. It departs from classical models of political participation, relying instead on elements such as theatricality, playfulness, entertainment, and outrage. As a result, the audience is led to reflect more profoundly on the political issues that actionism showcases, and the actionists' political messages resonate more strongly in society.

The range of political performances, happenings and art installations examined in this paper indicate that political actionism has become a highly important form of peaceful political activism. It has served to convey and reinforce the *vox populi* in democratic and undemocratic states alike. Where the quality of democracy has deteriorated in recent decades, it appears that the frequency and intensity of actionism have increased. A possible reason is that in such countries, the population has already tasted freedom and there is a tradition of democratic political culture, which disposes of the public to respond to the degeneration of democracy through both traditional and creative means.

However, in countries with a severely flawed democracy, actionism has a much more limited constructive impact, despite its relative prevalence. As this paper has shown, in communities dominated by a parochial, submissive political culture, spectacular forms of political activism often remain unheard or incomprehensible or are even condemned by most citizens. Russian actionism is a vivid example of this phenomenon. Thus, the goals of actionism are usually not fully attained in undemocratic societies. However, in forms of actionism such as political performances, happenings,

and art installations, the outcome does not matter as much as the reaction of the public and its involvement. Even some degree of mobilization can be considered a success. Meanwhile, in countries with strong traditions of liberal and democratic culture, as well as in countries where political, institutional, and axiological modernization is currently underway, political actionism has already demonstrated its effectiveness as a soft power tool.

The role of political actionism in a given society and the extent of its impact on local politics, just like political culture in general, depends on two main factors: the society's institutional system and its value system. The former is decisive for the effectiveness of actionist projects in the sociopolitical life of a state, and even for their very existence; for example, under undemocratic regimes, authorities tend to control all public spaces that could serve as platforms for political actionism, thus nipping it in the bud. As for the latter, a community's existing values determine how it responds to political activism and how willing it is to accept non-classical ways of conveying political messages. For actionism to successfully mobilize people, they need to share its initiators' values. Conversely, if actionists' ideas run afoul of the local political culture, they may be ignored or even scorned by mainstream society. In particular, if a certain community is characterized by ascendancy of survival values over self-expression values, as defined by Inglehart, it will have a very weak culture of responsible protest and be disinclined to make peaceful demands from the authorities, through art or otherwise.

Based on this study of political actionism, a typology of modern actionist practices can now be proposed. Firstly, collective mobilizations such as mass protests can be distinguished from individual artists' projects. Secondly, different types of actionism can be differentiated based on their motivations, their objectives, and the type of projects they carry out. In this regard, it is important to emphasize that actionism is understood here as the art of action and is not necessarily political. When it is, it can represent an intrusion of art into the sociopolitical sphere and serve as a protest against the current reality, revolutionary street art being a notable example, but in other cases, political actionism can simply invite sociocultural reflection, without instigating protest or otherwise calling for mass action. The role of such actionism is only to draw the attention of the government or the public to a particular problem through artistic means. An

example would be an art installation made of household waste as a way to point to deficiencies in the governments' environmental policy. Therefore, it is important to distinguish political actionism as a form of protest from problem-oriented political actionism.

Thirdly, actionism can also be classified depending on whether the actions are carried out in an open or closed public space and whether this space is real or virtual. Most political actions are held on the streets, where they can attract the most people, especially with the help of streamers, bloggers, and journalists who publicize the event. However, some actions take place indoors, for example, in galleries: Berlin's Haunch of Venison, London's Saatchi Gallery, Birmingham's Ikon Gallery regularly serve as platforms for the expression of political ideas through the language of art. More often, particularly as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, art activism, including its political variety, is moved to cyberspace. In essence, the boundaries of space have stretched to satisfy the requirements of safe social distancing.

Fourthly, this paper demonstrates that actionism can also be classified according to the criteria of audience participation and the presence or lack of a well-defined scenario for the actionist project. For example, political happenings encourage the active involvement of spectators, but they are not scripted or oriented toward a specific outcome. Conversely, the course of political performances is usually well planned and precludes the participation of spectators as co-performers or writers of a dynamic action scenario. Fifthly, political actions can be distinguished according to their replicability. For instance, political happenings are always dynamic and their course depends on the mood and inclinations of a specific audience, so each such occurrence is unique, whereas a political performance or a political art installation can usually be repeated at a different time or place.

Lastly, actionism can be classified according to its stance concerning the system. As political actions always serve as a public response to certain events or processes in society and an expression of civic position, the vast majority are oppositional, and some of them are even anti-systemic. However, political actionism can also be pro-regime if the artistic actions are organized in support of certain policies adopted by the authorities.

In the latter case, political actionism loses its characteristic component of protest and begins to resemble propaganda.

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