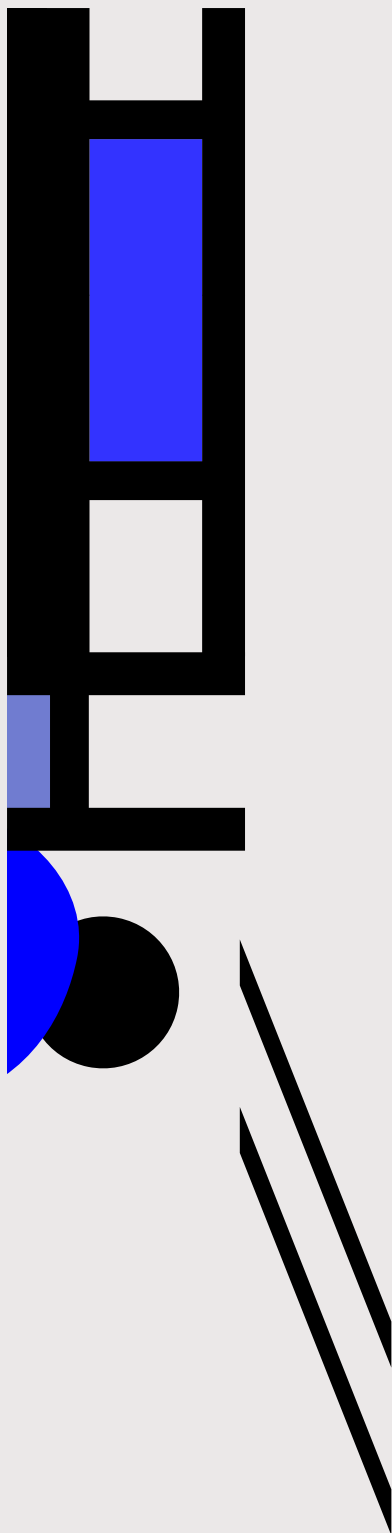


**Staying in the
Liminal Space
Between Politics
and Art:**

On Rehearsing
Hospitalities

—

Mike Watson



Refelections on

Gathering for Rehearsing Hospitalities

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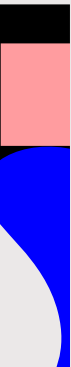
Rehearsing Hospitalities visual identity:

Elina Holley




The political focus of the contemporary art world has sharpened since the 2007–2008 economic crisis, building on the earlier political programming of the European centre left and pushing the notion of an ‘art for all’ that could help transform society. This mission has become so ingrained that ‘political art’ or ‘social art’ as a sub-genre of contemporary art has become, in a sense, the ethical vanguard and conscience of the wider art world. Yet, while not all contemporary art can be overtly described as political art, all art is to some degree seen as political, given its perceived role in flattening out social class divisions and including marginalised groups as well as more privileged ones in a dialogue that both entertains and informs.

However, a parallel dialogue has built up alongside the officialised cultural line, stating that the art world does little but co-opt genuine political opposition –acting to whitewash neoliberal democracy while providing a veneer of incisive questioning. As such, an invitation to follow the activities of Frame Contemporary Art Finland , as it continues its socially engaged public programme *Rehearsing Hospitalities*, and the exhibition *Secured - Politics of Bodies and Space* at Vantaa Art Museum Artsi was very welcome, particularly as I was asked to critique it openly and honestly. In doing so, I have been able to trace what I consider to be some of the most important difficulties facing art institutions dealing with political subject matter in social democratic and neoliberal societies today. Chief among these challenges is how some of the contradictions that political art practitioners and professionals face are considered immutable limitations, intrinsic to cultural production and reception. These contradictions have come down from fundamental inconsistencies identified in the art-making and viewing process, determined by philosophy and critical theory, which may assure against decisive political action emanating from the cultural field. As a result, our success is often seen in how we coexist with these limitations rather than overcoming them.




Principal among the contradictions that create stasis in the art world is that regarding the ‘autonomy’ of art, or its ability (and that of art practitioners and audiences) to act with agency. Put simply, art must claim autonomy from the dominant economic and political system in a given society to be convincing in its social critique. Yet, it can never actually be truly autonomous as this would mean it would either be unintelligible (in the case of abstract art) or so politically



charged as to be censored (in the case of directly political art). As such, the art world arguably censors itself in the belief that the internal contradiction regarding autonomy is so ingrained as to be beyond question. Yet, what if we asked, “what if autonomy is possible?”. Or if it isn’t, and if strongly independent political art is liable to be excluded by museums, censored by the media and punished by the judicial system, we might ask, “What will then happen if we make or perform it anyhow?” or “What if we just do politics instead?” To some degree, *Rehearsing Hospitalities* asks these questions while stopping short of risking the above sanctions, and perhaps understandably so. After all, in the relatively stable conditions of Finland (and indeed the Nordic Region and large parts of Europe), there is little to be gained in inviting ostracisation, joblessness, or even imprisonment. Though, if this is the case, might we not admit openly that the purpose of political art is to precisely occupy a kind of liminal space between inaction and action as a kind of quiet revolt of privileged believers of justice? If so, what value does this quiet protest have? And when does it need to tip over into something more radical?

The *Rehearsing Hospitalities* programme was initiated in 2019 and will run to 2023 with the intention of fostering “new host-guest and subject-object relations that go beyond binaries rooted in Western social and economic knowledge-power structures”. It approaches this by bringing together neighbouring institutions in Helsinki and working with local and international artists and theorists to jointly critique the conditions of ‘hosting’ and ‘guesting’ within the art world. A private conversation with Frame’s Head of Programme, Jussi Koitela, suggested a wide scope to the overall challenges of hospitality, incorporating questions over how to bring the disaffected and excluded into the art world. This concern develops the project’s early interest in didactical methods within the art world and situates them within broader inclusion processes – which has matured within Finland and were also brought here by foreign academics and cultural influencers online or in real life.

Indeed, the combination of Finland’s desire to understand its identity and the importing of identity politics from the US and UK, amplified by social media, has created a kind of hall of mirrors of racial reckoning, made grotesque by the presence of right wing populists with supremacist views. Given the art world’s role



as an extra armature of social and educational services in European states, it is unsurprising that arts funding bodies often seek projects that aid the integration of underprivileged groups, or that art institutions respond by providing them.

Though this desire of the art world to go beyond its limits and introduce more actors or, indeed, let them propose their own projects raises a further internal contradiction linking to that of art's autonomy. Namely, one over art remaining critically distant from society versus it becoming part of the public realm. All of these contradictions essentially go back to the foundational text of modern aesthetics, Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. In what is often referred to as Kant's 'Third Critique', the German philosopher attempts to plug gaps in his *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Critique of Practical Reason* and finally locate the basis of a common human reason via the experience of making judgments on objects and nature. While he considers most judgments to be biased, based on whether a given object is 'good' (pleasing) or 'useful' (having a function) to an individual, the judgment regarding something being 'beautiful' is for Kant characterised by a lack of critical discernment. Thus, when faced with a mountain range or unkempt forest, the individual cannot ascribe utilitarian values to what they see. Therefore, given the suspension of critical judgment, it can be assumed that all humans will find accord on the object of natural beauty. Kant here sets up the conditions for a *sensus communis* or common human understanding, which exemplifies how we might find a common accord on ethics. However, he simultaneously left us with an internal contradiction that we grapple with today: If the exemplar of the universal human capacity of judgment derives its capacity from its lack of purpose (as use or pleasure value) it follows that any attempt to instrumentalise it will fail. As such, aesthetic experience in the form of beauty – and, Kant later argues, the sublime experience – cannot be made subservient to ethics.

In the two centuries that have elapsed since Kant wrote the *Critique of Judgment*, the potential of natural beauty as exemplary of common human values has been transposed onto art via Hegel and Adorno, given the perceived estrangement of nature from humans in industrial society. The trouble is that for Adorno, whilst allowing for a critique of society from within, the autonomy of art (which is really only ever feigned anyhow), immediately fails the moment it identifies with a political cause, thus becoming a rhetorical instrument. It is this problem that art



JOUHA (RIOT POLICE) BY ANNIKA RAUHALA, 2017 AT VANTAA ART MUSEUM ARTSI. IMAGE BY ANNA AUTIO

institutions and art professionals face when engaging in a political subject (the difficulty in leading any attempted engagement of the public, particularly minority groups, to effectively restage with real actors) and the seeming impossibility of aesthetic practice in having a concrete social value.

The exhibition *Secured - Politics of Bodies and Space* held at Vantaa Art Museum Artsi as part of the *Gathering for Rehearsing Hospitalities 2021* programme organised around questions of hospitality, security and safety, appeared as a contemplative reiteration of this contradiction. In framing the show around the security apparatus of the state and the topic of safety, it effectively drew attention to the role of institutional art in policing the thin line that separates art from autonomous political action. Though the question ultimately raised is whether art can really be, or do, anything else.


Annika Rauhala's *Jouha (Riot Police)* (2017) is perhaps emblematic of this last point. The multi-channelled video installation featured footage of heavily militarised Finnish riot police on duty during demonstrations and protests. The

piece to some degree reverses the male gaze, focusing on the officers' sexualised poses employing the physicality of powerplay, of which the police operatives themselves seem highly aware. Despite inverting the male gaze, the riot police still embody power in terms of the force they could exert on the individual or group. The viewer is thereby led to ask themselves where they stand in relation to the ongoing exhibition of power in the public realm. To ask this question in the first place requires a degree of autonomy, yet at the same time, the museum (any museum) implies public, state, art-historical, academic, and financial power (not to speak of CCTV monitoring and the presence of museum guards and attendants as a constant reminder of these elements). *Jouha (Riot Police)* highlights the far reach of state and financial control and its utilisation of culture as 'soft power'.

Speaking of museum guards, Hito Steyerl's video *Guards* (2012) follows the Head of Security at the Art Institute of Chicago, Martin Whitfield and guard Ron Hicks, as they patrol the institute's exhibition space. As they walk around the exhibition spaces, the security personnel describe works as objects to be protected




GUARDS (2012) BY HITO STEYERL AT VANTAA ART MUSEUM ARTSI. IMAGE BY ANNA AUTIO



and people as potential threats. This effectively strips away any pretence of the autonomy of art, locating the art viewing experience as linked to the security-industrial complex and its role in protecting finance capitalism. It also lays bare the difficulty in art seeking to forge links with the public, minority groups, or workers. The depicted African-American security workers are effectively instrumentalised as carriers of a message and a meta critique that belongs more to art world theory-speak than to the realm they work in day to day. They are simply doing their job, which has its own value irrespective of antinomies peculiar to the art world. This is not to critique Hito Steyerl, who we can only imagine as being completely aware of the internal contradictions of her work and political art in general. However, the question becomes one over when or how we may overcome the multi-layered critical tendency of contemporary art when our every action feeds back into the contradictions we seek to overcome. Self awareness (which political artists possess to a high degree in my experience) is no insurance against the repetition of these contradictions. Indeed, when a critique acts as a critique of itself, where does the eventual responsibility for art's complicity within the power structure lie?

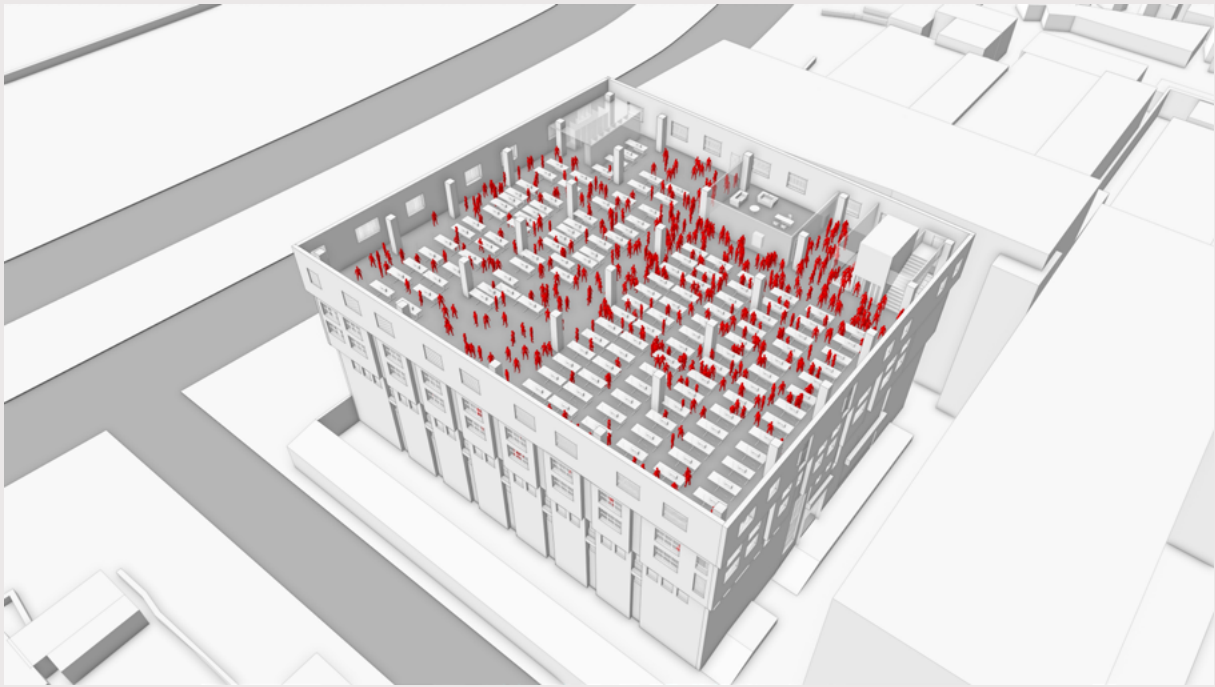
This is not to say that *Secured - Politics of Bodies and Space* overplays its self-awareness regarding the contradictions it presents and must fail in resolving. It cannot be doubted that there are genuine moments in the show – and the performances that happened during its opening – that risk leaking into the political realm. Panos Balomenos' series *Ellinikó* (2020-2021) featured watercolours on free-standing easel-like supports, with each side bearing a different work. On one side of these stands, the artist depicts scenes from Athens' Ellinikon International Airport, since it was redeveloped as part of the 2004 Olympic preparations. While on the other side he depicts political dissidents and stories of political oppression. One individual standalone painting depicts Russian journalist Oksana Chelysheva, given asylum by the Finnish authorities in 2008 due to threats following her criticism of Putin's regime. Such a work sees the museum take a position in regard to sensitive political issues, not least given Finland's considerable population of Russian emigres. The question only remains over whether such a work could have been said to be 'art' if it had drawn enough attention to elicit political action against the museum, the work itself (by way of boycott's or vandalism, for example) or the artist. However, we might then reply by asking whether something has to be art at all. Indeed, this same question could





ELLINIKÓ BY PANOS BALOMENOS, (2020-2021) AT VANTAA ART MUSEUM ARTSI. IMAGE BY ANNA AUTIO

be asked of Forensic Architecture's investigative video documentary *The Killing of Zak Kostopoulos* (2019), which investigates the public mob killing of the LGBTQIA activist in Athens in 2018, infamously caught on social media. By recreating the scene, the work raises inquiries regarding the involvement of plainclothes police in Kostopoulos' killing and whether Zak's involvement in activism had slowed the investigation into his murder. This piece – and Forensic Architecture's *Outsourcing Risk* (2018), another part of the *Gathering for Rehearsing Hospitalities* programme, displayed in Helsinki's Museum of Finnish Architecture – draws its power in the art exhibition context from its refreshing disengagement with art itself. Indeed, the latter work, which investigates via CGI reconstruction a fire that killed 259 workers in a textile factory in Karachi, Pakistan in 2012, escapes association with art anyhow, having a utilitarian documentary value that informs rather than embellishes, aided by its display alone in a room that has a didactic feel. In learning of the opportunistic flouting of safety laws by the capitalistic Ali Enterprises, the viewer was completely free of the obligation to reflect upon the thin and frustrating line between autonomy and politics, given the information value of the documentary piece. More of this, please!




FORENSIC ARCHITECTURE'S *OUTSOURCING RISK* (2018) AT MUSEUM OF FINNISH ARCHITECTURE



A CUBE INSIDE A CUBE: NOT TOO CLOSE, NOT TOO FAR, SOMEWHERE BETWEEN STANDING AND DEPARTURE BY SEPIDEH RAHAA, 2021 AT VANTAA ART MUSEUM ARTSI. IMAGE BY SHEUNG YIU.

In light of the question over whether we need to stick with this category, 'art', Sepideh Rahaa's performance – *A Cube Inside a Cube: Not Too Close, Not Too Far, Somewhere Between Standing and Departure* (2021) – made a valuable contribution. In it, a more or less crowded museum witnessed the artist recount stories of her homeland from within a cuboid structure – comprising a wooden frame and linen drapes, with hanging wooden cutout letters, spelling out in Farsi, "Nowhere better than here" and "Resist". After she told the public of a visit to her father in Iran, in which he presented her with a pomegranate (symbol of eternal life and prosperity), she left the structure and cut a pomegranate into pieces on a plinth before offering it to the audience. While the durational performance had multiple stages, the most powerful moment came when the artist unrolled a long sheet of paper onto the floor, measuring several meters. She then covered her hands in charcoal before prostrating herself as if praying and dragging her hands down the paper, leaving a trace of a petal-like ellipse on the scroll. Following this, the artist scattered soil from her home country, saying to the public, "this is my soil". She then declared, "Doing an exhibition is not enough. We need more protest" before placing a flower in each pile of earth, and attributing to each mound a place: Iraq, Afghanistan, and Finland.

Reflecting on the meaning of this work, it is worth bearing in mind that Finland, which considers itself generally to be a neutral country, historically speaking (and despite its alliance with Nazi Germany), had a military involvement in both the Afghan and Iraq wars. While such a factor is often overlooked in public discourse, it is most likely to be discussed in academic and cultural sectors, which act jointly as a kind of conscience for the nation. The long-touted and perpetually delayed invasion of Iran – discussed by multiple US administrations for decades – will likely also be discussed in art spaces should it ever happen, though we would perhaps do better to protest it in front of parliament for its duration. Is our problem as 'political art professionals' (a strange and contradictory category that by now surely exists) that we are trying too hard to do art specifically as a means of not doing protest? I think Rahaa intended very clearly to ask this – with the Artsi museum and Frame facilitating the question. Of course, another pertinent question would be over whether Artsi and Frame allowed the question to be asked, as a further level of metacritique aimed at protecting the sacrosanct contradictions



handed down to us from Kant, via Adorno, and the entire network of curatorial and art theoretical bachelors and masters programs which act to perpetuate them. However, this would be a simplistic worldview. My feeling is that the contradictions are so ingrained that art institutions and professionals both fully want to overcome them and need them. After all, maybe Kant and Adorno simply articulated facts regarding the impossibility of traversing the unassailable independence of beauty from politics, and perhaps political art professionals are people who, like our philosophical forefathers, simply don't want to accept this reality.

Conclusion

Being given free rein to write on an art institution's exhibiting and curatorial practices and to specifically 'audit' their performance as purveyors of political or social art is an exciting prospect, though a daunting one. The opportunity to say what I really think about the field of political art and to have an institution listen is welcome, though, indeed as a practitioner (albeit a theorist) working within the arts, I am subject to the famous internal antagonisms of the wider art world itself. In this case, if I am to ask whether political art can be genuinely critical in the way it claims to be, I ought to ask whether I can be truly critical as an arts and media theorist committed to pointing out the hypocrisies of the cultural fields. As such, the only fair thing to do as a theorist or critic critiquing an art institution concerning their political art practices (and one long committed to publishing and curating around political art) is to state that where I stick the knife into the institution, I agree by inference to stick the knife in myself too. The only problem here is that no one would be left standing in the art world after a short while.

Perhaps the only answer is to simply admit the difficulty one has as a political art professional and resolve to make more significant efforts to transgress the line that separates the artistic from the political. Is it not possible, for example, that we use as a starting point not a museum or arts body, arts grants system, but instead a trade union, political party or pressure group? This obviously presents challenges that would be compromising for art professionals, as embedded in neoliberal culture as they are. Yet, with the performative acting out of politically taboo positions by the far right, both online and in real life in Finland – just as

in the USA, UK, Italy (to name a few examples) – perhaps we should take seriously the prospect of a radicalism of the centre that goes beyond the gestural activities of the art world. If we're obsessive enough to grapple eternally with the contradictions of artistic autonomy, we ought to be bold enough to subject these problems to the scrutiny of, for example, trade unionists and political party activists.

The *Rehearsing Hospitalities* programme appears in many ways to reflect the status quo, though, to its credit, with a highly self-conscious awareness of doing so. That is to say, if political art lies in the liminal space between the complete artistic irrelevance of, for example, poorly made landscape copies and the blatant political messaging of protest banners, then *Rehearsing Hospitalities* to some degree (and particularly the exhibitions which I have considered here) openly traverses that space in between – with Balomenos, Rahaa, and Forensic Architecture leading the charge into the political realm. I look forward to *Rehearsing Hospitalities'* continuing programme, hoping it will seize the paths it so far offers.

Mike Watson

(PhD from Goldsmiths College) is a theorist, critic and curator who is principally focused on the relation between culture, new media and politics. He has written for *Art Review*, *Artforum*, *Frieze*, *Hyperallergic* and *Radical Philosophy*, and has curated events at the 55th and 56th Venice Biennale, and *Manifesta 12*, in Palermo. In September 2021, he will publish his third book with ZerO Books, *The Memeing of Mark Fisher: How the Frankfurt School Foresaw Capitalist Realism and What to Do About It*.



This text is published in the context of *Rehearsing Hospitalities*, Frame Contemporary Art Finland's public programme for 2019 to 2023. *Rehearsing Hospitalities* connects artists, curators and other practitioners in the field of contemporary art and beyond to build up and mediate new practices, understandings and engagements with diverse hospitalities.

As part of the 2021 programme Frame and partners hosted *Gathering for Rehearsing Hospitalities Autumn 2021*, a four-day programme of online and onsite events in Helsinki taking place September 8-11. The gathering included exhibitions at the Museum of Finnish Architecture and the Vantaa Art Museum Artsi, discursive and performative events, and a publication.

Forensic Architecture: Outsourcing Risk at Museum of Finnish Architecture presented Forensic Architecture's video documentary *Outsourcing risk: The Ali Enterprises Factory Fire* (2018).

Secured – Politics of Bodies and Spaces at Vantaa Art Museum Artsi presented works by Panos Balomenos, Forensic Architecture, Elis Hannikainen & Vappu Jalonen, Flo Kasearu, Kristina Norman, Sepideh Rahaa, Annika Rauhala, Shubhangi Singh and Hito Steyerl. The exhibition was co-curated by Christine Langinauer, exhibition curator at the Vantaa Art Museum Artsi, and Jussi Koitela, Head of Programme at Frame Contemporary Art Finland.

The *Gathering for Rehearsing Hospitalities Autumn 2021* programme was co-organised with the Museum of Finnish Architecture and Vantaa Art Museum Artsi and produced in collaboration with additional partners the Finnish Cultural Institute in New York and IHME Helsinki.

For more information visit

<https://bit.ly/gfrh2021>

