

**ART, EDUCATION, AND ARENDT:  
POLITICAL AND AESTHETIC GESTURES OF *AMOR MUNDI***

by

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submitted by Anna Ryoo in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## Abstract

This dissertation engages with the work of Hannah Arendt as the backbone of this study to question what it means to act for the love of the world at the intersections of art, aesthetics, education, philosophy, and politics. I delve into some of the contentious aspects of her political theory and philosophy as entry points to probe into what it means to respond to world events aesthetically and educationally.

This dissertation consists of two parts. In Part I, I explicate why it matters to think with Arendt, one of the most idiosyncratic thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To do so, I first discuss three of what I call Arendt's un/identified methods: existing in excess as a work of art, engaging in the activity of thinking, and critiquing and prying loose the rich and the strange as a pearl diver. I follow this account with my re-interpretation of her assertion that education is pre-political and must be conservative, as education is that which occurs between Arendt's notion of the first miracle and the second miracle.

Part II transitions into the public, political realm. I begin by placing a spotlight on some of the artworks from the Sichuan earthquake project led by Chinese contemporary artist Ai Weiwei. I then examine contentious aspects of what is considered a suitable political art from the multiple perspectives of political theorists, political philosophers, art critics, and art theorists. To further think critically about Arendt's notion of political action, I consider her critics' views on the inadequacy of her thoughts for today's political sphere and use their criticisms to lay out some of the most fundamental aspects of her work. I contend that Arendt's scholarly endeavor was neither to incite a new revolution nor to suggest a blueprint of any kind via aestheticizing action. I conclude the study with what Arendt meant by *amor mundi* (love of the world), or *to be concerned for the world*, and what we might learn from it.

## **Lay Summary**

With the thought-provoking work of Hannah Arendt as the main framework, this dissertation explores the question of what it means to act for the love of the world at the intersections of art, aesthetics, education, philosophy, and politics. By thinking with Arendt's idiosyncratic notion of action, which she also refers to as miracle, this dissertation considers why we must deepen and broaden our understanding of what action is and in what conditions it might occur, rather than focusing on its transactional value to deal with crises in the world. I draw on some of her provocative assertions that are contentious to this day as entry points to probe into what it means to respond to world events aesthetically and educationally.

## **Preface**

This dissertation is an original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Anna Ryoo.

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Dear Rita, without your ongoing support and generosity, this work likely would have been unachievable. You let me, and all your students, know that you are there for us. That meant a lot. You made it seem easy, but I am sure most of us knew how it takes special effort and mindset to make us feel that way. You are indeed one-of-a-kind from whom I learned so much. As I recently picked up my paintbrushes again, my mind wandered back to the time when you invited me to Gordon A. Smith's art opening at the Equinox Gallery on Granville Street, and how, upon encountering one of his paintings, my eyes unexpectedly welled up with tears. I experienced it again several years later, during one of my visits to your lovely home. There, I was moved by another piece by Smith, your hospitality, and most importantly, your love for art. These are two of many moments I spent with you that my mind wandered in the past few months. They reminded me that I could not have been more privileged to have this opportunity to be on this journey with you.

Sam, I am grateful to you for exposing me to the aspects of graduate student life that seemed unavailable prior to your arrival at UBC. Whether it may be the weekly reading group you held or having serious conversations and laughter over late lunch/dinner and drinks, sometimes with you singing and playing your guitar in the background and other times without, I got to experience something special. As well, the sight of piles of books that seems to overflow out of your office and your bold moves in your scholarly endeavor have been inspiring to say the least. Because of these exposures, because of you, I was able to dare to take on this philosophical work.

Bill, you refer to yourself as a secular scholar. And, yet I always felt a pastoral quality in you as I listened to you reading your texts out loud, through which you invited those who were present in the room to attune to what you were offering and find our own relationship to what was being offered. You exemplified for me how you bring your own subjective presence in your scholarship, which continue to evoke new questions and elicit a deeper commitment to this field of education. Your condensed responses always seem to carry far more weight and meaning than what most of can conjure up in a lifetime. Thank you for the warmth you shared with me that has been a source of nourishment to keep me going.

Special thanks are extended to my dear colleagues and friends for their friendship, companionship, and conviviality. I will always treasure insightful discussions as well as many other unforgettable moments we had (and will continue to have) together.

I would like to also thank the financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

Finally, my dear family, thank you. Thank you for being my home.

## Dedication

To my one and only dad,

Who kept his *promise*,

That he won't leave on their wedding anniversary,

His last words,

*I love you, and I'm sorry,*

His last gesture,

*An impossible hug* with every last bit of energy left in his body,

To my mom

In the early hours of the day after their 45<sup>th</sup>.

# Prologue

## The Year of Breath

The year 2020 shall be called the Year of Breath.

It was one of the most *revealing* times of our lives when the old and newly forming boundaries as well as each of our priorities and ideological stances became so strikingly visible as we witnessed the widely varied ways in which each country, group, and individual responsibly and irresponsibly responded to incalculable nightmarish crisis unfolded before us. It is a year that began with unusually intense wild bushfires in Australia which killed and dispersed billions of species. It is a year when George Floyd's 'I Can't Breathe' brought out one of the darkest sides of the human condition into the spotlight. And it is a year when a deadly new virus caused breathing in close proximity with fellow human beings to turn into a probable death sentence and countless bodies to die of suffocation due to their own bodily fluid. Breathing, something that we unconsciously do over 20,000 times a day, became a conscious act for many of us in 2020.

Within a matter of months, we experienced and witnessed a vast number of *unplanned aesthetic ruptures* that disrupted our habitual ways of seeing, thinking, and living. These ruptures perhaps resembled aspirations of artistic interventions of the artists who understand the aesthetic effect of the art, that is, art that offers "the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused ... by that which resists signification"<sup>1</sup> without anticipating its efficacy. To experience such a rupture is to experience a break in the continuity where what we thought we knew to be true becomes questionable and triggers a visceral reaction (like a sense of numbness or palpitation of the

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2004), 63.

heart). Such an experience suspends one's understanding of temporal and spatial existence of oneself. What we have undergone in the Year of Breath, and are still undergoing, are arguably the most powerful aesthetic ruptures in modern days. They came at us at first like a silent tsunami, and its unremitting aftershocks continued to affect us all in every aspect of our lives.

One of the ghastliest ruptures was caused by the invasion of the newest "invisible enemy," the COVID-19. At the onset, it territorialized every space, annexing the majority of the mediascape, filling up the sleepless city like Las Vegas with eerie emptiness, and breaking out a new slice of science-fiction everywhere. Daily news reports became wallpapered with colourful graphs and numbers, such as: dramatic ups and downs in the stock market, available ventilators, months required to produce the vaccine, occupancy rate of ICU beds, unemployment rates, projections of casualties and much more.

Seeing numbers on the screens was not new. What was new was the hyper intensive level and duration at which myriad numbers reported the so-called present and predicted future outlook. As the experts from various fields rushed to figure out what needed to be done, the governments around the world imposed on their people never before seen forms of strict restrictions of movement as lockdowns began. Planes were grounded. Public parks and beaches were closed. Daycares, schools, and university campuses shut their doors. Sidewalks became deserted. Oil prices plummeted. And more surreal moments ceaselessly unfolded around the world: from the video footages of keyholes on the doors of residents in Wuhan getting welded off by officials, to the sight of refrigerated trucks and U-Haul trucks parked near the hospitals in the New York City to load the deceased, to another sight of trapped migrant workers on the streets of New Delhi being whipped and hosed down by officials due to the sudden lockdown, and to the sight of thousands of people being forcibly prohibited to kiss their loved ones goodbye to the sight of absurdity coming out of the mouths of supposed leaders. Above all, what has been, *and is*, perhaps most striking is how even these most visible crises of our lifetime that placed a transcendental emergency brake on every human-made flow (whether they may be travelling on land,

water, or in the air, global trades, or daily routines like walking on sidewalks) have proven to be insufficient to bring about significant changes. What could have been a rare opportunity to re-orient ourselves submerged as a growing number of people sought to get back to the so-called normal, where presumed certainties and stabilities were available. The crashing waves of aesthetic ruptures, in other words, revealed a pervasive thoughtlessness that is as widespread as the unprecedented ongoing effects of the virus, and simultaneously, a fragile condition of life.

### **‘Education’ During the Year of Breath**

For the field of education, what came into view in an amplified form is the predominant perception, or more precisely, the misperception of what *education* means to the public. In public media, school closure was often portrayed as missing months of ‘learning’ and ‘education,’ and teachers were portrayed as those who deliver what students need to learn (i.e., planned curriculum) so that the students can be where they need to be rather than being left behind. Whether these teachers were depicted as heroes (for staying on the job), victims (for not being given a proper level and amount of support from the government), or dissents (for refusing to get back to work), they were politicized in the public eye as *public servants* and derogatorily at times as *servants to the public*.

The misperception of education as schooling (i.e., as an investment for the future and as something to be received and completed at a certain designated time) prevailed as millions of people made a massive migration to virtual space, which became the best alternative to provide ‘education.’ This swift transition expanded already expansive digital spaces at an exponential level. In the process, the disparity between the haves and have nots became plainly visible. Moreover, the not-so-ubiquitous



access to the Internet, nor devices, nor digital literacy and skills required to handle tasks made the gaps not only deeper and wider, but possibly irresolvable.<sup>2</sup>

What we witnessed, in other words, is education being seen as a system that must be in constant operation like those conveyor belts carrying vaccines running 24/7 to meet the global demands. To keep the myriad operational systems running, most things were expected to run according to the set schedules that were arranged prior to the pandemic. And this misperception led the public to make claims, such as ‘the whole generation has lost a full year of education,’ and would cause some parents to do whatever they can to not let their kids fall behind, even if it meant making outlandish choices like spraying disinfectant on their kids.

I wonder, what might have happened had we embraced the transcendental pause from a set schedule, set curriculum, set goals? What kind of meaningful educational experiences may have been possible? If in its place, we had embraced this rare opportunity to understand our present as being between the past and the future, what might have shifted and actualized? What kind of present might we have established for ourselves?

### **To Breathe**

I remember the moment from almost two decades ago in my first art studio when I took a step back and stared at my very first eight-piece canvas oil painting, *Too Much Reality for Friday*. There was a sense of accomplishment that led to releasing a sigh of relief, but also a sense of ambiguity that let out a different sigh. Three canvases in the first, three more in the second row, and the last two in the third row, but none of them touching one another and some tilted, I hung those square-shaped canvases together for the first-time using fishing lines along one empty wall. Fragmentedly hung from ceiling to

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations, “Policy Brief: Education during Covid 19 and Beyond,” August 2020, [https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg\\_policy\\_brief\\_covid-19\\_and\\_education\\_august\\_2020.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_education_august_2020.pdf).

the floor, I saw that I had painted a lone figure in the center canvas walking up the windy asphalt road at night amid buildings that did not share any architectural design. The only other creatures alive in the paintings were the two streetlamps bending over or engulfing, the figure, as if they were studying the figure. Perhaps it was a self-portrait. Perhaps it was what I saw in others. Perhaps it reflected what I somatically experienced when I no longer could see the world in the way I used to and began to see the harsh reality. In the process of composing the first draft of what was beginning to look like a dissertation, this particular work came to my mind as I breathed out loud.

Many moments during the writing of this dissertation were emotional because of the sheer realization and visceral experience of frailty that exists. What I aspired to do was engaging in something that is not lifeless. Surely, any artefact arguably has a life of its own as it gets taken up, passed on, and utilized in some way, but I wondered if a study can sustain its own pulsation without depending on its usefulness or immediate applicability to remedy a problem. Such hope came with an enormous weight of responsibility, because it entails dwelling in between intoxicating oneself in aesthetic sensibility and trying to remain critically conscious of the choices one makes that is neither formulaic nor overtly abstract while being attuned to what is unfolding.<sup>3</sup> William F. Pinar writes: “The opposite of arrest, to activate means to vitalize, to breathe life into, and be breathed into life.”<sup>4</sup> Although I may have breathed life into this dissertation, I feel as though I, too, have been breathed into life through the writing process, especially in the last several years when most of the days were filled with shallow breaths and deep sighs. What follows in the rest of the dissertation is perhaps my quest to understand what it means to breathe.

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<sup>3</sup> Rita Irwin, “Toward an Aesthetic of Unfolding In/Sights through Curriculum,” *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2003).

<sup>4</sup> William F. Pinar, “Resolve,” in *Educational Experience as Lived: Knowledge, History, Alterity. The Selected Works of William F. Pinar* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 181.

## **Part I**

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Aim of the Study

“Who are you reading these days?”

“Oh, Hannah Arendt.”

“What does she have to do with art education?”

During a casual conversation several years ago at an international art education conference, a long-time member of the art education community asked who I was reading at the time. As soon as I mentioned Arendt, I was met with this immediate response. To him, who identifies art education as an applied field and is critical of non-school-based discourse around art education, Arendt had nothing to do with the field. The name, Hannah Arendt, is in fact rarely mentioned in art education literature, whereas scholars influenced by her, such as Maxine Greene, would make a more frequent appearance. Arendt is, after all, more well known as a political theorist and philosopher and did not extensively discuss art nor aesthetics in her published work. It is only in recent years that attention has been paid to the heretofore neglected aesthetic quality and judgment in her political thought, and her name began appearing in English literature and the arts as well as in contemporary art discourse.<sup>5</sup> Most recently, the Richard Souton Gallery in London held an eight-part fifteen-month long exhibition based on Arendt’s *Between Past and Future: Eight Political Thinking Exercises* and titled each part according to the titles

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<sup>5</sup> For example, see *Reflections on Literature and Culture* by Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb, *Doing Aesthetics with Arendt: How to See Things* by Cecilia Sjöholm, and *Our Sense of the Common* by Kimberley Curtis.

she used for the chapters in the book.<sup>6</sup> In philosophy of education and in curriculum studies, on the other hand, Arendt's work has been more widely discussed and referenced for several decades, covering a wide range of topics.

In this dissertation, I seek to *think with* Arendt, an extraordinary thinker who left us with provocative thoughts that made her one of the most influential and controversial minds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I seek to understand what *amor mundi* (a love of the world) meant for her and to discover what we might learn from it.

To *think with* denotes what the aim of this study *is not*; that is, to place her on a pedestal, to focus on Arendt, to prove an aforethought I have of her work in relation to today's educational, artistic, social, and/or political sphere(s), and finally, to use her work to make a strong case for art or art education via identifying Arendt's thoughts on, and appreciation for, the arts. If this dissertation were to aim to do any of the previously mentioned, such aims could be achieved by examining: her conception of art as thought-objects, her observation on theatre as art par excellence in its resemblance with political action, her thoughts on art influenced by her close intellectual circle in New York that included W. H. Auden and Clement Greenberg, her distinction between disclosure and expression, her placement of fabrication of art in the activity of work (and not in that of action) but distinct from other forms of fabrication, her remark on poetry as rhythmic remembrance that remains closest to thought, her ability to cite almost all German poetry by heart, and last but not least, her own seventy three

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<sup>6</sup> This exhibition titled "On Hannah Arendt: Eight Proposals for Exhibition" was held during the pandemic outbreak, which meant the gallery had to make their exhibitions available online and the number of in-person visitors was limited. What stands out is how they invited a different guest lecturer for each part of the exhibition to hold a virtual reading group. The invited guest lecturers were Roger Berkowitz, Martin Jay, Shai Lavi, Judith Butler, Griselda Pollock, Ken Krimstein, Seyla Benhabib, Lynsdey Stonebridge, and Ann Lauterbach.

poems written over half a century shared mostly in her written correspondences with those who were close to her.

Instead, what to *think with* denotes is multifold. One of them is to engage in an activity of understanding, which Arendt identifies,

as distinguished from having correct information and scientific knowledge, is a complicated process which never produces unequivocal results. It is an unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the world.<sup>7</sup>

Another is my commitment to approach various thoughts presented in her scholarly endeavor with an “enlarged mentality,” which for Arendt meant “being and thinking from my position where actually I am not.”<sup>8</sup> To do so, I engage with discourses from multiple fields of study (i.e., art education, contemporary art, philosophy of education, art history, curriculum studies, political theory, and philosophy of aesthetics) to consider competing arguments and to take into account multiple perspectives on the object of concern. Lastly, to *think with* denotes my interest in examining aspects of Arendt’s work that are “contentious” to this day, such as: education must be conservative and belongs in the pre-political realm; love is anti-political; social concerns are not a political matter; and one may love one’s friends but not an entire group. I seek to approach her contentious remarks as points of entry and departure to re-examine what we have come to perceive as matters of fact. To emphasize, rather than trying to defend Arendt’s position or to apply her concepts to justify my standpoint, each chapter in this dissertation is, conceivably, my attempt at understanding *what it means* to act for the love of the world in the extraordinary time in which we live.

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<sup>7</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Understanding and Politics,” in *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1994), 307-308. (Arendt originally titled it “The Difficulties of Understanding.”) I further expand on Arendt’s notion of *understanding* in Chapter 2.

<sup>8</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (Pennsylvania: Penguin Books, 1977), 241.

## 1.2 A Love of the World

Love is invoked frequently across the terrains of contemporary politics, media, entertainment, and education. The message behind these invocations is, simply put, more love equals a better world. I have unquestioningly accepted love as such and come to regard it as an essential constituent for removing all the ills of this world. Perhaps it was due to the influence of Christian *agapē*, a kind of willful and sacrificial love I equated as true love either as a beloved child of my parents or as a young Presbyterian. Perhaps it was the inundation of love stories found in books, movies, and elsewhere. Until my encounter with the writings of Hannah Arendt, I had not questioned this axiomatic notion of love.

*Amor mundi* first appeared in her dissertation published in German in 1929 at the age of 23, titled *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustine*.<sup>9</sup> She presents different concepts of love across multiple texts (for example, distinctions between *agapē* and *eros*, between *caritas* and *cupiditas*, and among neighbourly love, romantic love, and respect), but the phrase *amor mundi* fleetingly appeared only few times, such as in her correspondence with Karl Jaspers<sup>10</sup> and in *The Promise of Politics*.<sup>11</sup> In other

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<sup>9</sup> In 1996, it was published posthumously in English under the title, *Love and St. Augustine*. E. B. Ashton began the translation work in the early 1960s, and it was continued by Arendt into the mid-60s. It was stalled due to her own life commitments and circumstances. (Cited in Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, 490.) More precisely speaking, the exact phrase “*amor mundi*” does not appear here. However, drawing from St. Augustine’s two meanings of *mundus* (one, the divine fabric, heaven, and earth, two, as the lovers of the world), she discusses *dilectio mundi*, which means the love of the world and *dillectores mundi*, the lovers of the world. For one of the most thoroughly examined literature on Arendt’s original dissertation and subsequent translation works done by Ashton and by Stark and Scott, see Stephan Kampowski’s *Arendt, Augustine, and the New Beginning: The Action Theory and Moral Thought of Hannah Arendt in the Light of Her Dissertation on St. Augustine*.

<sup>10</sup> She wrote to Jaspers, “Out of gratitude, I want to call my book about political theories *Amor Mundi*.” (Cited in Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers, *Correspondences, 1926-1969*, ed. Lotte Köhler and Hans Saner, trans. Robert and Rita Kimber, (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 310.)

<sup>11</sup> She states, “the human world is always the product of man’s *amor mundi*, a human artifice whose potential immortality is always subject to the mortality of those who build it and the natality of those who

words, she did not explicitly discuss love in depth aside from her dissertation, yet, *amor mundi* would later be considered, “the theme which permeates all of her thought.”<sup>12</sup> I would add it may also be considered a kind of atmospheric spirit or a uniquely Arendtian aesthetic approach that one can encounter in the oeuvre of Arendt, without sentimental or affectionate tone.

As well, I posit that *amor mundi* may be understood as two forms of love that are interdependent. One of them is Socrates’ language for “*the quest for meaning*.”<sup>13</sup> What she profoundly suggests is how this kind of love “establishes relationship with what is not present,” and therefore, “the objects of thought can only be lovable things,” because “thought’s quest is like desirous love.”<sup>14</sup> The other one is a love of the world, that is, love that takes on *political* significance. For this love to be possible, the object of love cannot be an individual, group, or ideology, but should be *the world* itself.<sup>15</sup> What these two forms of love indicate for Arendt, then, is that the world already appears as an object of thought, a lovable thing. To put this in another way, doing of the activity of thinking and thinking of the activity of doing are integrally responsible for one another.

### 1.3 Guiding Questions of Inquiry

The central guiding questions of this dissertation are:

- ◆ *What kind of reorientation might take place in our educational and scholarly practice if we sought to understand and enact the meaning of amor mundi?*

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come to live in it.” (Cited in Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 203.)

<sup>12</sup> James W. Bernauer, preface to *Amor Mundi: Explorations in the Faith and Thought of Hannah Arendt*, ed. James W. Bernauer, S.J. (Dordrecht, Drechtsteden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), v.

<sup>13</sup> Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking* (New York, NY: Harcourt, 1978), 178, emphasis added.

<sup>14</sup> Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 178-179.

<sup>15</sup> I will elaborate on her important notion of the world throughout the rest of this dissertation.



- ◆ *How might our understanding of what it means to intervene in the world artistically and educationally shift if it was informed by Arendt's conception of political action?*

#### **1.4 The Tension between Art and Education**

Before delving into these guiding questions of inquiry, I want to point out the invisible tension that exists between *art* and *education* in art education. Art and education have a mutual relationship but have their own separate immanence. That is, art is not always already pedagogical or educational, nor is education always already resembling artistic practices in some way. There are those in art education who hold a firm belief in the emancipatory power of art, and there are also those who jump into the strong current of outcome-based educational discourse to overcome art's precarious state of being sidelined in school curriculum. In both cases, art education finds itself locked into double endless cycles of having to advocate for itself, because many tend to discuss art in terms of its usefulness and ability to enhance other personal and educational attributes when art itself constantly resists being defined or categorized.<sup>16</sup> As Gert Biesta observes, when education and art are conceived in these manners, what should be of concern for the art education community is how “instrumental justifications for the arts in education” may bring about “the potential disappearance of art from art education,” and conversely, “the potential disappearance of education from art education.”<sup>17</sup> He proposes instead to consider asking what it means to exist in the world as a vital question, which might shift our understanding of the educational task and where we might find the educative power of the arts.

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<sup>16</sup> Gert Biesta, “What if? Art Education Beyond Expression and Creativity,” in *Art, Artists and Pedagogy: Philosophy and the Arts in Education*, eds. Christopher Naughton, Gert Biesta, and David R. Cole (Abingdon, Oxon and New York, NY: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Biesta, “What if,” 12.

Biesta's insight grounded in an ethical and existential approach to rethinking art education can be read alongside John Baldacchino's claim that art and education hold separate immanence and dialectical position.<sup>18</sup> Baldacchino cautions against "presum[ing] a cultural consensus" of the convergence at which the transactional relationship between art and education occur "that is often regarded as intrinsically *good, beautiful* and somehow *true*."<sup>19</sup> He discerns the danger behind this consensus is conformity, which neuters the dialectic of respective dimensions of art and education that are incommensurate and incongruent.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, he asserts that art and education should not be regarded as transactional instruments, performing liberal and progressive pedagogies that are based on constructivist assumptions. He argues that when art is caught in "the polity's instrumental rationale,"<sup>21</sup> art in art education can only find itself constructed on the unfree grids of epistemological teleology.<sup>22</sup> At a time when "instrumental reasoning itself ha[s] become "commonsensical,"<sup>23</sup> Baldacchino claims, "art education must take on the indirect mechanisms by which it seduces while it introduces the student to new avenues whose allures would prompt learning to reverse itself and undo what it supposedly constructs."<sup>24</sup>

Recognizing the tension between art and education that Biesta and Baldacchino have identified entails critiquing the predominant modes of speaking about art education. This is possible when one takes a distance from what have become common conception of art and education, and in turn, art

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<sup>18</sup> John Baldacchino, "Art±Education: The Paradox of the Ventriloquist's Soliloquy," *Journal of Education* 3, no.1 (2015): 64, emphasis original.

<sup>19</sup> "Art±Education," 64.

<sup>20</sup> "Art±Education," 65-67.

<sup>21</sup> "Art±Education," 74.

<sup>22</sup> "Art±Education," 74.

<sup>23</sup> "Art±Education," 66.

<sup>24</sup> "Art±Education," 71.

education. Considering such an invitation perhaps might possibly help those in art education to begin to think about the being and doing of art, and about when and how education occurs, that is, the untimeliness of education.

## 1.5 Overview of Chapters

I explore the guiding questions of inquiry and compose this dissertation inspired by Canadian intellectual Ted A. Aoki's *and*.<sup>25</sup> Aoki's *and* derives from multiple philosophical traditions extending from Martin Heidegger to Gilles Deleuze and many more. He takes it up in multiple interpretations such as bridge, lingering space, space in-between, and in the middle. Each notion is used in his writing, not as a simple "mere joining wor[d]."<sup>26</sup> What he attends to is both the visible and invisible *and*. For example, in an article with a section titled, "A note for the next half-century ... And ... And ... And ...," he writes the following as if making a note to himself:

As I move to dwell in the *and*, I sense I need to caution myself, for I seem to be caught in all the risks of dualism. I jump up and down in the *and* and let more *ands* tumble out. ... I revel in the writing space that seems to dissolve beginnings and endings, that proliferates and disseminates *and* here, there, and in unexpected places.<sup>27</sup>

Aoki's playful yet reflective *and* is not only what he notices and activates in scholarly documents and books, but also in mundane administrative documents. It is one of Aoki's scholarly attitudes and

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<sup>25</sup> Rita L. Irwin refers to him as "the pedagogue of the pedagogues" (Cited in Irwin, preface to *Curriculum in a New Key: The Collected Works of Ted T. Aoki*, eds. William F. Pinar and Rita L. Irwin (New York: Routledge, 2004), xxi). William F. Pinar expresses his respect to Aoki in the following way: "If there were a Nobel Prize in education, [he] would be a recipient" (Cited in Pinar, "A Lingering Note: Introduction to the Collected Works of Ted T. Aoki," *Curriculum in a New Key: The Collected Works of Ted T. Aoki*, eds. William F. Pinar and Rita L. Irwin (New York: Routledge, 2004), xviii.)

<sup>26</sup> Ted T. Aoki, "Legitimizing Live Curriculum: Toward a Curricular Landscape of Multiplicity," in *Curriculum in a New Key: The Collected Works of Ted T. Aoki*, eds. William F. Pinar and Rita L. Irwin (New York: Routledge, 2004), 215.

<sup>27</sup> Ted T. Aoki, "Five Curriculum Memos and a Note for the Next Half-Century," in *Curriculum in a New Key: The Collected Works of Ted T. Aoki*, eds. William F. Pinar and Rita L. Irwin (New York: Routledge, 2004), 260.

commitments that we might strive to emulate in our own scholarly endeavors. By holding himself accountable for his own perception, he notices the spaces before, in between, and after a simple phrase or idea, thereby opening possibilities to imagine how things may be viewed otherwise. In so doing, he imaginatively and critically engages with what he encounters, but his tone remains alluring in ways that his thoughts are shared invitingly. Art education necessarily draws insights from other established disciplines and fields of study. It seems vital that those working in the field of art education consider both the invisible and visible *and* in order to recognize the bridges, boundaries, and distances among those studies and disciplines, no matter how porous they have already become. I attend to the rest of the dissertation with this understanding of *and* that connotes the convergences of concepts, questions, and discussions.

This dissertation is divided into two parts. Part I consists of three chapters. It begins with this introductory chapter, followed by Chapter 2, *Thinking with Hannah Arendt's (Un)Identified Methods*, and Chapter 3, *Education as Pre-Political: Between the First Miracle and the Second Miracle*. Part II consists of four chapters: Chapter 4, *Performing Miracles through Political Art?*, Chapter 5, *Meeting Place between Artistic Practice and Political*, Chapter 6, *The Second Miracle: Aestheticization of Action?*, and finally, Chapter 7, *Conclusion and Lingerings Thoughts*.

**Chapter 2: Thinking with Hannah Arendt's (Un)Identified Methods** will be a propaedeutic to the question, Why Arendt? I focus on what I consider to be some of the core uniquely Arendtian scholarly approaches in three parts: “*Existing in Excess as a Work of Art*,” “*Engaging in Activity of Thinking*,” and “*Critiquing and Prying Lose the Rich and the Strange as a Pearl Diver*.” Arendt has been criticized for not being explicit about her methodological approach, or lacking an identifiable structure in her writing. Her intellectual opponents considered it as inadequacy, while her intellectual companions considered it as an illuminating quality of her work. I contend that even though she may not have followed a conventional writing structure, that did not mean her work lacked a method. More importantly, not following an established methodological approach was an intentional move “to try

[her] look at the technique of dismantling” Western philosophy with all its known categories.<sup>28</sup>

Through discussing some of her (un)identified methods, I posit Arendt first as a one-of-a-kind scholar who approached her political thinking exercises like an artist, and second, as one who demonstrated what it means to engage in the activity of thinking grounded in the world of appearances, and third, as one who demonstrated her ability to judge as “a worldly citizen” and “a worldly spectator.”<sup>29</sup> Although Arendt intentionally resisted being labeled or associated with a school of thought, I name some of her approaches to denote the significance of recognizing her intent and to think with her.

### ***Chapter 3: Education as Pre-Political: Between the First Miracle and the Second Miracle***

focuses on “The Crisis in Education,” one of Arendt’s most cited works in educational literature, to closely examine her contentious assertion that education belongs in the *pre-political* realm. The chapter opens with Arendt’s insightful use of light and darkness as a metaphor. This metaphor can be found across many of her texts, but how she uses it specifically in this essay reveals the complexity behind her political thought on the essence of education and educational responsibility.

Following the discussion on this metaphor, I introduce her notion of *miracle*, which is not mentioned in “The Crisis in Education” and fleetingly appears in other texts. However, I put forth that this notion is extremely helpful in understanding why she believed conservative attitudes were fundamental to carry our educational responsibility. What comes to the fore is the depth and the

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<sup>28</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 212.

<sup>29</sup> Arendt states, “One judges always as a member of a community, guided by one’s community sense, one’s *sensus communis*. ... [O]ne is a member of a world community by the sheer fact of being human; this is one’s “cosmopolitan existence.” When one judges and when one acts in political matters, one is supposed to take one’s bearings from the idea, not the actuality, of being a world citizen and therefore, also a *Weltbetrachter*, a world spectator.” Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 31.

breadth of ontological and existential conditions that Arendt considered in order to explicate the crisis of education in modernity.

In the final section, under the subheading of “Education in the Glaring Light,” I expand on Arendt’s critique of modernity to discuss the kind of condition in which education is occurring and is expected to occur today. By denoting some of the concerns she had at the time of writing that led her to exercise her political thinking on education, I affirm why her insights are relevant today for making sense of challenges many of us in education are faced with and to re-orient our thoughts about education itself. I underscore in this chapter that Arendt’s chief concern is having respect for the world we have in common, because the new (i.e. newcomers and new beginnings) can easily destroy the old (i.e. the world and what existed before the arrivals of the newcomers), and, conversely, the old can be in a ruin without the world-building activity.<sup>30</sup> Thus, I come to an understanding that educational responsibility entails recognizing the precarity of both the old and the new and their dependence on one another.

**Part II** transitions into the public, political realm where Arendt posits that individuals initiate something new to put forth their concerns for the common world, that is, to perform the second miracle. Prior to directly examining “contentious” aspects of Arendt’s conceptualization of political action in Chapter 6, I enter the realm of contemporary art to examine an ongoing debate on modes of artists’ participation in dealing with political issues. I do so to take into account various stances on ways of intervening in worldly affairs by exploring the complicated and interrelated relationship between art and politics.

*Chapter 4: Performing Miracles through Political Art?* explores works by one of the most internationally renowned art activists, Chinese contemporary artist Ai Weiwei. I chose Ai because, to

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<sup>30</sup> Arendt used the term “newcomers” to refer to all those who are born into this world.

an extent, he is a political actor, who inserts himself into the world to take an initiative and renders political perspectives through his artistic practices and aesthetic strategies. Yet, he also problematically blurs the boundary between public and private realms through his art and expects efficacy of his work. While the spotlight is on the works derived from Ai's Sichuan earthquake project, alongside, I present two installation artworks by Columbian contemporary artist Doris Salcedo in an interweaving manner to create multiple access points to think about how these artists conceive their role and that of their work to do the kind of political work they each envision. I attend to presenting their artworks rather than inserting others' interpretations of them (for example, those of art critics, art historians, and philosophers of art) so that this chapter may almost act like an exhibition space or a catalogue and provide time and space necessary for the exhibition visitors to encounter their work.

*Chapter 5: Meeting Place between Artistic Practice and Political Practice* further delves into the interrelations of art and politics, particularly in terms of what it means for art to work politically *and* what it means for one to do political work through art. Broadly speaking, the former connotes art existing as an end in itself, whereas in the latter, art is used as a pedagogical and/or politicized tool. I look into the porosity between art and activism by introducing perspectives offered by Russian philosopher and art critic Boris Groys, Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe, and French philosopher Jacques Rancière on their understanding of political art. The perspective I focus on most is that of Rancière, particularly his distinctions between works of art that are representational, ethical, and aesthetic, to think about why certain works of art may be considered more suitably political than others.

To consider diverse aspects of what is broadly referred to as "political art," I turn my gaze back to Ai Weiwei, who is often identified as an emblematic figure of art activism today. Using Ai's participation in the realms of art and politics as an example, I consider various perspectives to question what is required of an artwork if it is to be considered beyond critical, and why this might be necessary in thinking about taking a political action via artistic practice. I offer multiple readings of Ai's work from various fields of study, from those who criticize the *pathos*-driven quality of his work, to those

who place an emphasis on the lived experience of the artist in evaluating his work. In doing so, I hope to reveal the tension between what is expected of political artists and that of the worldly and public matters they create, and moreover, to think about what it means to *act* in the public realm.

**Chapter 6: *The Second Miracle: Aestheticization of Action?*** invites Hannah Arendt back into the discussion to attend to her notion of *political action*. I first lay out why two of Arendt's contemporary critics, Jacques Rancière and Chantal Mouffe, denounce the inefficacy of Arendt's work in their perception of today's political sphere. Mouffe's central argument against Arendt is that Arendt did not recognize "the ineradicability of conflictual dimensions in social life."<sup>31</sup> Rancière, on the other hand, disapproves of the recent resurgence of interest in Arendt's work because he sees it as outdated and founded on ontological presuppositions caught in a vicious circle. In place of raising Arendtian objections, I introduce Arendt as "a self-consciously marginal critic,"<sup>32</sup> who neither sought to follow any established school of thought nor establish her own. I present the complexity behind Arendt's intent on redefining *action (vita activa)* and assert that her critics made their judgment on the "failure" of what was never meant to be a "political project." To do so, I delve into several significant aspects of her scholarly endeavor. I begin with her critique of political philosophy, followed by her notions of natality, plurality, and in-between. I conclude the chapter with two of her provocative propositions: one, that love is an antipolitical force, and two, that we must *first be concerned for the world* rather than being concerned for humanity.

**Chapter 7: *Conclusion & Lingering Thoughts*** begins by revisiting arguments raised in the previous six chapters. I then return to the two central guiding questions of inquiry and offer some

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<sup>31</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *On Political: Thinking in Action* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 4.

<sup>32</sup> Lisa Jane Disch, *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996).



parting thoughts to the question of *what does it mean* to exercise *amor mundi*? I conclude the dissertation with the overall significance and contribution of this research.

## Chapter 2: Thinking with Hannah Arendt's Un/Identified "Methods"

### 2.1 Introduction

A political theorist, an anti-modernist, a German, a phenomenologist, an existentialist, a political philosopher, a historian, a journalist, a conservative, a rebel, a refugee, a Jew, and a critical theorist are some of the labels often used to describe Hannah Arendt. If she were alive today, she likely would have accepted only one—a Jew, since this is the only one that could not be changed. She repudiated being labelled and did not identify herself with any school of thought, nor did she seek to establish a school of her own.

To expand on what I meant by "*thinking with Arendt*" in Chapter 1, in this chapter, I discuss one of the main factors that caused Arendt to be both highly respected and criticized, which is that she engaged in unorthodox approaches to her writing that consisted of elements of paradox and perplexity.<sup>1</sup> I add a new label to the long list of labels she resisted, *an artist*, who understood that "[t]he immediate source of the art work is the human capacity for thought,"<sup>2</sup> and that "it is precisely the thought process which the artist or writing philosopher must interrupt and transform for the materializing reification of his [or her] work."<sup>3</sup>

Steven Buckler, one of the few Arendtian scholars who insightfully studied and articulated her methodology within the terrain of political theory, observes that for some people her unorthodox

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Buckler, *Hannah Arendt and Political Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 2. Arendt's unique style of writing was seen as lacking a typical structure of academic papers.

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 168.

<sup>3</sup> *The Human Condition*, 170-171.

approach to writing “has been a source of profound insights, and for others, simply baffling.”<sup>4</sup> For the latter group, Buckler notes, the baffling quality comes from Arendt’s resistance to offering a conceptual structure or resolutions to her political thoughts, which can be applied routinely elsewhere. Her critics, thus, typified Arendt as inadequate to be given authority to talk about politics due to what they found to be elusive and unconventional qualities of her work. On the contrary, for the first group (to which I belong), her critical yet non-reductive, deeply rooted yet multi-faceted, and well-thought-out yet non-mechanical style is profound. Arendt has her own unique scholarly approaches that cannot be emulated, and through them, she provokes something far more important. She *propels one to think*, not necessarily with her in agreement but to view and think in ways unavailable before. Indeed, this quality of her work is one of the most important reasons why I have chosen Arendt’s work as the backbone of this study; that is, to set up a condition through which I may embrace the journey of studying and inquiring into, rather than answering, the questions I have posed.

It was not only her critics, but also her close friends and intellectual companions, who pointed out the lack of use of wonted argumentative structure in her work. Unlike the critics, however, they did not consider this to be a major flaw that would undermine the value of her work. For example, Margaret Canovan succinctly describes one of Arendt’s seminary books, *The Human Condition*, as “a long, complex piece of writing that conforms to no established pattern, crammed with unexpected insights but lacking a clearly apparent argumentative structure.”<sup>5</sup> Then she goes on to write, “the book’s difficulty and its enduring fascination arise from the fact that ... [t]here are more intertwined strands of thought than can possibly be followed at first reading, and even repeated readings are liable

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<sup>4</sup> Buckler, *Hannah Arendt*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Canovan, introduction to *The Human Condition*, by Hannah Arendt (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), viii.

to bring surprises.”<sup>6</sup> Karl Jasper, Arendt’s lifelong intellectual companion, beloved friend, as well as dissertation supervisor, noted that he “always found [her] somewhat lacking” in articulating the method of her work.<sup>7</sup> This reluctance to characterize her own “methodological” approach, however, was a benevolent contention as he was well aware that Arendt intentionally avoided being explicit about it. She arguably remained reticent of laying out what her methods were, as if to say that she would rather have them disclose themselves like a work of art that exists in excess, which reveals a new illumination upon each encounter.<sup>8</sup>

In the following sections, I lay out some of the un/identified methods in Arendt’s work in three parts: “Existing in Excess as a Work of Art,” “Engaging in the Activity of Thinking,” and “Critiquing and Prying Lose the Rich and the Strange as a Pearl Diver.” In so doing, I seek to give recognition to how she engaged with the activity of thinking grounded in the world of appearances, that is reality, and how she sought to move away from dogmatism and skepticism like a Kantian critical thinker and a Benjaminian pearl diver.

## **2.2 Existing in Excess as a Work of Art**

Arendt and her selective pieces of work received the highest praises and harshest criticisms in her lifetime, and her words continue to be a subject of intense debate. Her critics have accused her of not conducting a proper historical analysis, being too conservative or too liberal, not being compassionate for her fellow Jews, having aestheticized action, manifesting opacity due to English not

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<sup>6</sup> Canovan, viii.

<sup>7</sup> Arendt and Jaspers, *Correspondences, 1926-1969*, 576. At the time of writing this letter, Arendt was 58 and Jaspers was 81. It was around this time that Jaspers was working on his book on Hannah Arendt.

<sup>8</sup> “Let me now at the end of these long reflections draw attention, not to my “method,” not to my “criteria” or, worse, my “values”—all of which in such an enterprise are mercifully hidden from its author though they may be or, rather, *seem* to be quite manifest to reader and listener—but to what in my opinion is basic assumption of this investigation.” (Cited in *The Life of Mind: Thinking*, 211.)

being her first language, being underqualified to speak with authority, or not adequately providing how her theory can be enacted to bring about change. What remains resolute, I would argue, is the undeniable quality in her oeuvre that cannot be imitated because of her idiosyncratic aesthetic sensibility and scholarly commitment. This is true for any timeless work of art that can breathe on its own, and it is in this sense, I claim, that her writings are authentic reifications of thought, art that offers endless interpretations and remains as relevant today as it was at the time of writing. As how George Orwell reflects about his own writing: “And looking back through my work, I see that it is invariably where I lacked a political purpose that I wrote *lifeless* books and was betrayed into purple passages, sentences without meaning, decorative adjectives, and humbug,”<sup>9</sup> Arendt’s work possesses the manifestation of imperishability. It has a life with its own breath like the ones that she herself admires, which embody the fleeting greatness of word and deed, and it finds its place in the world that is common to all.<sup>10</sup> This to me is how we might define a work of art that exists in excess.

What other qualities might we find in such a work of art? First, its effect is indeterminable and cannot be put under control by any force.<sup>11</sup> Whatever the motive or intended purpose may have been in its creation, it is no longer privately owned once it is released into the public. It outlives its creator, albeit not in their original nor tangible state. Second, a thing becomes a work of art when it appears in

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<sup>9</sup> George Orwell, “Why I Write,” in *Such, Such were the Joys* (New York, Harcourt, Bruce and Company: 1952), 11, emphasis added.

<sup>10</sup> Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Culture,” in *Between Past and Future: Eight Thinking Exercises in Political Thought* (Pennsylvania: Penguin Books, 1977), 218.

<sup>11</sup> For those who are familiar with Arendt’s work, this description may sound similar (if not more fitting) to Arendt’s notion of action rather than a work of art. As the readers read the rest of this chapter and dissertation, my hope is that they consider a possible difference between an artwork and one that exists in excess, thereby how creation of the latter may be regarded as a form of action. I conceive an artwork as how Arendt defines it in *The Human Condition* (pages 167 to 174); that is, a thought that has turned into a reality and a tangible thing by mortal hands that becomes responsible for the durability of this world. A work of art that exists in excess, on the other hand, “establish[es] a present for [itself], a kind of timeless time.” (Cited in *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 211.)

public and refuses to be understood in its entirety. Insofar as it exists in excess, it deals with what cannot be said,<sup>12</sup> which is what makes it so challenging, and at the same time, so alluring to attempt that endeavor. Every work of art that exists in excess (whether visual, aural, performative, or written), therefore, subliminally promises a different experience for the subsequent encounters. Hidden treasures always await being found upon each new encounter. How does one come to create such a work of art? For Arendt, it was via employing her own hermeneutic interpretation of the works of others and the worldly phenomena, like an artist who might explore her artistic materials. Arendt understood works of art, “thought things” she called them,<sup>13</sup> come into existence through the “useless” activity of thinking, which differs from cognition and logical reasoning.<sup>14</sup> She also understood that her work will come to its existence as it is judged, and that the meaning behind the work is not something to be told but to be revealed in its own time.

### 2.3 Engaging in the Activity of Thinking

The most visible and consistent method to be found in her work is the activity of thinking. After all, Arendt articulated and demonstrated *what it meant to think* throughout her oeuvre.<sup>15</sup> It is one of the most foundationally and methodologically important commitments Arendt made, and I would emphasize, it is vital in understanding Arendt and her work.<sup>16</sup> Of course, many great minds have

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<sup>12</sup> Mieke Bal, *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> *The Human Condition*, 169.

<sup>14</sup> *The Human Condition*, 170-174.

<sup>15</sup> The task of synthesizing her articulations on the business of thinking is immense, and it deserves an entire study devoted to the activity of thinking alone. I am introducing only some of the important articulations.

<sup>16</sup> The task of synthesizing her articulations on the business of thinking is immense, and it deserves an entire study devoted to the activity of thinking alone. I am introducing some of the important articulations in this chapter.

studied the business of thinking, but what defines Arendt's work from that of others is how she showed that the activity of thinking is more than taking responsibility for the world that we share. This stance arose out of realizing that Western philosophy was inadequate to deal with and make sense of one of the most atrocious historical moments she lived through, that is, the rise of Nazism, which had a profound effect on her life.

"[T]hinking," she stated, "is always out of order, interrupts all ordering activities[,] and is interrupted by them."<sup>17</sup> She knew well that undergoing the activity of thinking could be an agonizing experience, that it could be "as relentless and repetitive as life itself."<sup>18</sup> What is apparent in her work is how she painstakingly traced back multiple strands of thought, exhibiting her capacity to weave them differently each time. Arendt cited Kant's posthumously published notes<sup>19</sup> in her posthumously published first volume of the book, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, to describe this self-destructive characteristic of thinking activity:

the business of thinking is like Penelope's web; it undoes every morning what it has finished before. For the need to think can never be stilled by allegedly definite insights of "wise men"; it can be satisfied only through thinking, and the thoughts I had yesterday will satisfy this need today only to the extent that I want and am able to think them anew.<sup>20</sup>

She demonstrated this in her own work. Although reiteration of certain points can be found across multiple publications, or even in the same chapter, they are brought up and discussed in ways that illuminate how they are mentioned elsewhere. She reflectively and relentlessly re-visited the objects of

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<sup>17</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 197.

<sup>18</sup> *The Human Condition*, 171.

<sup>19</sup> "I do not approve of the rule that if the use of pure reason has proved something, the result should no longer be subject to doubt, as though it were a solid axiom"; and "I do not share the opinion . . . that one should not doubt once one has convinced oneself of something. In pure philosophy this is impossible. Our mind has a natural aversion to it." (Kant quoted in *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 88.)

<sup>20</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 88.

concerns raised before, which is what makes her work simultaneously mesmerizing and challenging. Each piece of writing implicitly demands to be read in relation to another, which is perhaps the chief reason why her critics found some of her work to be either ambiguous or contentious.

If in the 1930s and 40s Arendt saw how the intellectual rigour of thinking in Western philosophy utterly failed to prevent people from committing the unthinkable, the focus for her in the 50s was to bring the activity of thinking back into human affairs. In Arendt's view, so-called political philosophy was an odd, separate branch that would later develop in Western philosophy. For her, the political is always already part of philosophy as observed in the philosophies of Socrates and Immanuel Kant. As such, it was soon after the completion of *The Human Condition* in the late 50s that Arendt would experience "certain doubts that [would] plagu[e]"<sup>21</sup> her and would lead her to "venture from the relatively safe fields of political science and theory into these rather awesome matters."<sup>22</sup> She unmistakably meant she was going to return to philosophy by elaborating on the life of the mind philosophically, on thinking, willing, and judging.<sup>23</sup>

### 2.3.1 Not *Vita Contemplativa*

What were the doubts she had? One of them was regarding her own use of the phrase "*vita contemplativa*" in *The Human Condition*, a book that was originally conceptualized as an introduction to political theory that deals with "the problem of Action, the oldest concern of political theory."<sup>24</sup> By

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<sup>21</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> I am reminded of one of the correspondences between Arendt and Karl Jasper in which Jasper declines to write a review on her book, *The Banality of Evil: Eichmann in Jerusalem*. His reason was not because he cared any less about Arendt, her work, or the trial, but because he sought to return to philosophy himself after spending years in the political realm.

<sup>24</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 6. *The Human Condition* is called *Vita Activa* in its European version and is thought to be her account of theory of action. The first two editions of the English version were categorized under philosophy and history, but the third edition is placed under philosophy only.



offering her own account of action and the political via “*think[ing]* about what we are *doing*,”<sup>25</sup> she sought to give *action* its due, which she considered to be absent in western metaphysics. The activity of thinking she exercised was to be distinguished from that of *vita contemplativa*. While the notion of *vita contemplativa* referred to a kind of life for the privileged few, she believed the activity of thinking (that is, the life of the mind that involves thinking, willing, and judging) is capable by all, but not exercised by all. She described the activity of thinking as “the highest and perhaps purest activity of which [all] men are capable,”<sup>26</sup> whereas *vita contemplativa* is a term “coined by men who were devoted to the contemplative way of life and who looked upon all kinds of being alive from that perspective”<sup>27</sup> that problematically privileges contemplation over the active way of life. It was thought that “thinking aims at and ends in contemplation, and contemplation is not an activity but a passivity; it is the point where mental activity comes to rest.”<sup>28</sup> Arendt disavowed this form of professional thinking, because she firmly believed moral questions that arise out of the world of appearances cannot be dealt in “sheer quietness.”<sup>29</sup>

### 2.3.2 Sleepwalking in Thoughtlessness

The other doubt that plagued Arendt was the kind of *thoughtlessness* that Adolf Eichmann exhibited in his trial. How was it possible for a man like him, who is “educated” and quotes Kant comfortably, to commit one of the most heinous crimes and not think it was wrong? She witnessed the

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<sup>25</sup> *The Human Condition*, 5, emphasis added.

<sup>26</sup> *The Human Condition*, 5. Arendt uses the Germanic word “man” to mean a person and “men” to mean humanity (or humankind). When quoting Arendt, I intend to keep these words in their original text.

<sup>27</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 6.

<sup>28</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 6.

<sup>29</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 6. In other words, even though she may have used *vita contemplativa*, she in fact meant the activity of thinking at the time of writing *The Human Condition*. That is, an active activity that takes place in the realm of the world of appearances and not a passive activity that occurs somewhere above and isolated, reserved for the professional thinkers.

danger of non-thinking during the time of totalitarian regime, when even her intellectual circles could become thoughtless and morally irresponsible, and thereby unable to see the reality and make a judgment.<sup>30</sup> She saw how they were incapable of taking a critical distance to see the phenomenon that unfolded before them and quickly became part of the mass. While she did not offer much of her own biographical account in her work, this critical experience undeniably impelled Arendt to examine non-philosophical phenomena at hand. She did so by both physically and intellectually stepping out of the circles to which she once belonged, and by extensively studying the meaning of political action. However, it would be almost three decades later when she witnessed Eichmann on the stand, and after going through hundreds of pages of transcripts and other documents related to the trial, that she was “struck by a manifest shallowness in the doer that made it impossible to trace the uncontestable evil of his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives.”<sup>31</sup> What ignited a renewed impulse for Arendt to further question the connection between the problem of good and evil and the faculty of thinking was witnessing in person how this “educated” man, who took part in devising efficient means for the mass transport of Jewish people, was using cliché-ridden language to defend his thoughtless action.<sup>32</sup> The ‘evil’ she expected to see was not in evidence at the Israeli court when she volunteered herself to the *New Yorker* to write the reports. There was no correlation between one’s intellect and being able to think. There was only a glass-caged, ordinary looking man who claimed that he simply followed orders and did his job like others around him.

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<sup>30</sup> Her prime example is Martin Heidegger who “entered the Nazi Party in a very sensational way in 1933—an act which made him stand out.” (Arendt, “What is Existential Philosophy?” 187.)

<sup>31</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 4.

<sup>32</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 4-5.

Arendt re-described this frightening phenomenon and the danger of thoughtlessness of “the sleepwalkers”<sup>33</sup> in her last book:

non-thinking, which seems so recommendable a state for political and moral affairs, ... shield[ds] people from the dangers of examination, it teaches them to hold fast to whatever the prescribed rules of conduct may be at a given time in a given society. ... The more firmly men hold onto the old code, the more eager will they be to assimilate themselves to the new one. ... The ease with which such a reversal can take place under certain conditions suggests indeed that everybody was fast asleep when it occurred. ... And the sequel—the reversal of the reversal, the fact that it was so surprisingly easy “to re-educate” the Germans after the collapse of the Third Reich, so easy indeed that it was as though re-education was automatic—should not console us either. It was actually the same phenomenon.<sup>34</sup>

Being able to think *is not* about being able to contemplate or about requiring special skills. Eichmann “responsibly” carried out his tasks but felt no sense of responsibility because he lacked the capacity to exercise the imaginative thinking that leads to making judgments, which can only be made when one can think from the perspective of others.<sup>35</sup> As Arendt diligently engaged in the activity of thinking herself, she unwaveringly believed that “our *ability* to think is not at stake” because “we are what men always have been—thinking beings.”<sup>36</sup> What concerned her was the total lack of moral responsibility she saw in Eichmann, that is the ability to think reflectively in recognition of plurality. More devastatingly, there were many more like him who sleepwalked during one of the most atrocious, inhumane crimes and were then so easily re-educated.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 191. The full quote is, “Unthinking men are like sleepwalkers.”

<sup>34</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 177-180.

<sup>35</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, (Pennsylvania: Penguin Books, 1977).

<sup>36</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 11, emphasis original.

<sup>37</sup> More than half a century later, her poignant points and piercing reading of the reality of her time are still relevant and ring true. For some Arendtian scholars, the recent surge of interest in Arendt and her work may be a cause for celebration; but it is also an indication of the presence of kind of *darkness* casting over and permeating amongst us and of the need to seek after *illuminations*.

### 2.3.3 Thinking as a Dangerous and Profitless Enterprise

It would be a mistake to assume that Arendt posited thinking would prevent a crisis, or that she prioritized this activity over action. In this final section of “Engaging in the Activity of Thinking,” I would like to discuss another crucial aspect of the activity of thinking, which certainly is not the last of Arendt’s articulations on the business of thinking. One of her most astonishing “findings” about this activity of thinking is that it is “a dangerous and profitless enterprise.”<sup>38</sup> Non-thinking, she knew, is more dangerous, but Arendt also brought to our attention that thinking itself offers no guarantee of preventing atrocious events from occurring and can have a destructive and paralyzing effect. Questioning after the meaning of something that has been defined is to undergo the experience of questioning previously accepted doctrines and rules to examine them anew.<sup>39</sup> Through her examination of Socrates’ use of the metaphor of the wind, she denoted that this effect is like undergoing destructive onslaughts where all frozen thought constructions get blown away.<sup>40</sup> In the process, unassumingly used common notions, standards, and orientations that incite a mutual agreement evolve into perplexities, and applying general rules is no longer possible when making an argument. Arendt stated,

These frozen thoughts, Socrates seems to say, come so handily that you can use them in your sleep; but if the wind of thinking, which I shall stir in you, has shaken you from your sleep and made you fully awake and alive, then you will see that you have nothing in your grasp but perplexities, and the best we can do with them is share them with each other.<sup>41</sup>

Equally important, as Arendt insightfully observed, the wind may arouse the sleepwalker and the unfreezing may begin, but that wind can just as easily have negative results, such as the reversal as well as the reversal of the reversal. In other words, thinking does not prevent the recently aroused

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<sup>38</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 175.

<sup>39</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 176.

<sup>40</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 174-177.

<sup>41</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 174-177.

sleepwalker from falling back asleep again. Moreover, the above passage can be understood as describing what thinking means for Socrates: “To think and to be fully *alive* are the same, and this implies that thinking must always begin afresh.”<sup>42</sup> Arendt clearly understood what he meant by this, because her oeuvre exemplifies how the activity of thinking is done, undone, redone, and undone. She unremittingly sought to give tangibility to her thoughts and place them in the world of appearance. This is perhaps why a renewed sense of desire to understand what it means to think can be felt throughout her oeuvre.

## 2.4 Critiquing and Prying Lose the Rich and the Strange as a Pearl Diver

What other ways might her un/identified methods be described? I will first begin with *critique*. Referring to Kant’s use of *critique* in the title of his prominent works written during the Enlightenment, Arendt stated, “[w]e know both too little and too much why Kant chose this surprising and somewhat derogatory title, as though he meant no more than to criticize all his predecessors.”<sup>43</sup> She then went on to note that despite its negative connotation, what he perhaps sought to do was to lay out all philosophical systems in order to evaluate them in “the spirit of the eighteenth century, with its enormous interest in the aesthetics.”<sup>44</sup> From here, she excavated the heart of the Kantian critique—*critical thinking*. This phrase is indeed commonly mentioned in educational literature, promoted as a skill to be taught to students. However, as we shall see, Arendt uncovered something else about critical thinking through her analysis of Kant’s approach to metaphysics. She wrote: “It would be a great error to believe that critical thinking stands somewhere between dogmatism and skepticism. It is actually the

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<sup>42</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 178.

<sup>43</sup> *Lectures on Kant’s Philosophy*, 31.

<sup>44</sup> *Lectures*, 32.

way to leave these alternatives behind.”<sup>45</sup> To critically think, then, one would need to be able to recognize the truth claims made by the dogmatists as well as by the skeptics, but this critical thinker would not be synthesizing them or siding with one over the other. Rather, this critical thinker would stand against both dogmatism and skepticism so that the thinker might see what can be known and what cannot be.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, this stance also further reveals what she meant by one of the dangers of thinking discussed in the above section; that it may start the reversal and the reversal of the reversal, that is, “negative results of thinking.”<sup>47</sup> Arendt discerns, “the quest for meaning ... can at any moment turn against itself, produce a reversal of the old values, and declare these contraries to be ‘new values.’ ... All critical examinations must go through a stage of at least hypothetically negating accepted opinions and ‘values’ by searching out their implications and tacit assumptions.”<sup>48</sup> The Kantian critical thinker thus stands against, not in between, both systematic thinking and nihilism. As if she had internally understood and appreciated the Kantian critique to which she was exposed in her teenage years, there is no philosopher, thinker, thought, or religious belief that she does not critique, including Kant.<sup>49</sup>

Another scholarly approach we might identify in Arendt’s work is that of being a *pearl diver*, a term she used to describe Walter Benjamin’s scholarly commitment. In two of her texts: *The Men in Dark Times* and *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, she made a distinction between those who simply seek to discover things from the bottom of the sea for the sake of putting them on public display, which may

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<sup>45</sup> *Lectures*, 32.

<sup>46</sup> *Lectures*, 33-34.

<sup>47</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 176.

<sup>48</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 176.

<sup>49</sup> I say “internally” because reference to Kant does not appear in her work until the early 1950s.

potentially destroy the timeless present they carry, and those who, like Benjamin, understand the process of crystallization. In the first of the two texts, she wrote,

And this [gift of thinking poetically], fed by the present, works with the “thought fragments” it can wrest from the past and gather about itself. Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths[,] and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of the past—but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages. What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of the time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things “suffer a sea-change” and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living—as “thought fragments,” as something “rich and strange,” and perhaps even as everlasting *Urphänomene*.<sup>50</sup>

At this pivotal moment when she was returning to philosophy to write *The Life of the Mind*, she concluded the first volume of the book with the following passage, as if to respond back in/directly to Jasper and others like him who inquired about her methods:

Let me now at the end of these long reflections draw attention, not to my “method,” not to my “criteria” or, worse, my “values”—all of which in such an enterprise are mercifully hidden from its author though they may be or, rather, *seem* to be quite manifest to reader and listener—but to what in my opinion is the basic assumption of this investigation. ... I have clearly joined the ranks of those who for some time now have been attempting to dismantle metaphysics, and philosophy with all its categories, as we have known them.<sup>51</sup>

What Arendt is referring to is the systematic thinking that metaphysicians and great thinkers fall back on to question their predecessors or to develop their own. In this sense, Arendt is denoting that she could not possibly put forward methods or criteria because that move would have caused her to fall into

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<sup>50</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Walter Benjamin,” in *Men in Dark Times* (New York, Harcourt, Bruce & World Inc.: 1968), 205-206. *Urphänomene* means primary phenomena.

<sup>51</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 211-212. For Arendt, Kant, as discussed previously, serves as a primary exemplary figure who made a similar attempt: “Kant himself did not see the clearly destructive side of his enterprise. He did not understand that he had actually *dismantled* the whole machinery that had lasted, though often under attack, for many centuries, deep into the modern age.” (Cited in *Lectures on Kant*, 34, emphasis original.)

the same trap. More importantly, Arendt described the core of this dismantling process, which is reminiscent of the above passage on Benjamin, in the following way:

It is with such fragments from the past, after their sea-change, that I have dealt here. That they could be used at all we owe to the timeless track that thinking beats into the world of space and time. If some of my listeners or readers should be tempted to try their luck at the technique of dismantling, let them be careful not to destroy the “rich and strange,” the “coral” and the “pearls,” which can probably be saved only as fragments.<sup>52</sup>

There is a sense of deep respect she paid to the crystallization that took place. And, there is no doubt that this pearl diver sought to carry those precious thought fragments that survived through the generations in order “to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages.”<sup>53</sup>

## 2.5 Conclusion

In *The Moments of Being*, Virginia Woolf wrote: “[e]very day includes more non-being than being . . . a kind of nondescript cotton wool.”<sup>54</sup> She went on to describe three examples of “a sudden violent shock” or “three instances of exceptional moments” she experienced as a child that brought with them “a peculiar horror and a physical collapse” like “the sledge-hammer force of the blow”<sup>55</sup> that offered her moments of being. Such a blow became “welcome” and “valuable” for her as she got older because she realized,

[the blow] is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me. . . . Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. . . . From this I reach what I might call a philosophy . . . that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art

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<sup>52</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 212. This passage is inserted between a few lines from *The Tempest* and a few lines from W. H. Auden.

<sup>53</sup> “Walter Benjamin,” 205-206.

<sup>54</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings* (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: 1978), 70.

<sup>55</sup> *The Moments of Being*, 71-72.



. . . we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock.<sup>56</sup>

Arendt's work carries out a philosophical undertaking that is grounded in real worldly phenomena where the sledge-hammer blows she witnessed and experienced are turned into words to reveal the pattern behind the cotton wool. As it was for Woolf, who noted how those moments left her feeling either in despair or satisfaction but the desire to explain them, and taking the action to do so in the form of writing enabled her to blunt those moments, Arendt similarly was engrossed in creating parts of the work of art. Every piece of writing she released into the world exhibits this commitment to think—that is, to be fully alive—and each new piece is tackled with a renewed sense of desire to understand.

What I have put forward in this chapter are three un/identified approaches or methods that she employed to exercise what she later called a technique of dismantling metaphysics: creating and thinking with works of art that exist in excess, engaging in an activity of thinking grounded in the world, and attempting to be a Kantian critical thinker and Benjaminian pearl diver. Unlike Martin Heidegger, who had a strong influence on Arendt's thinking particularly with his *Being and Time*, for which she would refer to him as the philosopher of the philosophers, Arendt was not keen on playing with words. That is, she did not coin a new term; instead, she looked to the root of words. Etymology, therefore, served as one of the fundamental ways through which she studied the subject matter at hand, and in doing so, reminded her readers and listeners what we might have forgotten or not known about. To put it differently, the focus for Arendt was not on conveying information in a comprehensible manner to appeal to a broader audience, nor to foster a new school of thought. Instead, she thought out loud alongside those that have,

been born in the small, inconspicuous track of non-time which their authors' thought had beaten between an infinite past and an infinite future by accepting past and future as directed,

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<sup>56</sup> *The Moments of Being*, 72.

aimed, as it were, at themselves—as *their* predecessors and successors, *their* past and *their* future—thus establishing a present for themselves, a kind of timeless time in which men are able to create timeless works with which to transcend their own finiteness.<sup>57</sup>

Arendt was a rare kind of pearl diver who critically engaged with the world of appearances with the pearls and corals that survived, things that embody timelessness that “sprin[g] ... from the clash of past and future.”<sup>58</sup> And at the same time, it seems to me, the artist herself created what would be regarded as pearls and corals for generations to come.

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<sup>57</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 210-211.

<sup>58</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 211.

## Chapter 3: Education as Pre-Political: Between the First and the Second

### Miracles

#### 3.1 Introduction

Why did Hannah Arendt, an artist (who sought to create and think with works of art that exist in excess), an active thinker (who engaged in an activity of thinking grounded in the world of appearances), and a critic (who strove to be a Kantian critical thinker and Benjaminian pearl diver), to exercise her political thought on the state of education as well as the essence of education?

Amongst Arendt's numerous publications, there exist only two that explicitly deal with matters related to education: "Reflections on Little Rock"<sup>1</sup> and "The Crisis in Education."<sup>2</sup> To underscore, neither essay was written for the education community nor did they propose new approaches to education, because she did not perceive herself as an "educational authority," a "professional educator," a "specialist," an "expert," or a "pedagogue."<sup>3</sup> Both pieces, as she called them, were *political thinking exercises*. The first was a topical essay commissioned by an editor of *Commentary*,<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977). The English version was originally published in the fall issue of *Partisan Review* in 1958.

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," *Dissent* 6, no. 1 (Winter 1959).

<sup>3</sup> These are the terms she used in "The Crisis in Education" to distinguish herself from those who work in the field of education. In both essays, she identifies herself as an "outsider."

<sup>4</sup> "Reflections on Little Rock" was ready to be published around the same time as "The Crisis in Education," but it was published after the publication of "The Crisis in Education" by *Dissent*. This was because of what was considered to be the controversial nature and content of her reflections on the events at Little Rock. As she noted in her preliminary remarks in "Reflections on Little Rock," the two essays differ in that "Reflections on Little Rock" deals with the danger of "the routine repetition of liberal clichés," and "The Crisis in Education" focuses on "the wide-spread, uncritical acceptance of a Rousseauian ideal in education." (Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," 45-46.)

and the latter was originally composed as a speech in German entitled “Die Krise der Erziehung,” which she gave at the 70<sup>th</sup> birthday of Erwin Loewenson in 1958 in Bremen.<sup>5</sup>

These occasions indeed gave rise to Arendt to write these papers, but as she denoted in “The Crisis in Education,” “the recurring crisis in education” was one of the effects of the modernity, which “has become a political problem of the first magnitude” in the 1950s in America.<sup>6</sup> She went on to describe another effect: “[o]ne can take it as a general rule in this century that whatever is possible in one country may in the foreseeable future be equally possible in almost any other.”<sup>7</sup> To attend to education for Arendt, in other words, was about disclosing “aspects of the modern world and its crisis that actually revealed themselves in the educational crisis,” as well as “the obligation that the existence of children entails for every human society.”<sup>8</sup>

As briefly mentioned in the introductory chapter, a great number of publications have been (and will most likely continued to be) published in the field of education on Arendt and her work, particularly by those in the philosophy of education and curriculum studies. Some of the themes

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<sup>5</sup> Roger Berkowitz, “Public Education: The Challenge of Educational Authority,” in *Hannah Arendt on Educational Thinking and Practice in Dark Times: Education for a World in Crisis*, eds. Wayne Veck and Helen M. Gunter, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 27. In the same year, it was first published in the German edition of *Between Past and Future*, and later it was translated from German to English by Denver Lindley and published in *Partisan Review*. Three years after that, in 1961, Arendt published the revised version of this as *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought*, and then, in 1968, the final version of the book came to be known as *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*.

<sup>6</sup> Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” 173.

<sup>7</sup> “The Crisis in Education,” 174. What she saw in American education, such as schools being turned into a political apparatus, is indeed what we see in many parts of the world today in its amplified versions.

<sup>8</sup> “The Crisis in Education,” 184-185.

discussed include: judgment,<sup>9</sup> political action,<sup>10</sup> democratic citizenship,<sup>11</sup> authority,<sup>12</sup> beyond critical theories,<sup>13</sup> childhood,<sup>14</sup> thoughtlessness,<sup>15</sup> politics of education,<sup>16</sup> forgiveness,<sup>17</sup> and teacher education.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For example, David Coulter and John R. Weins, "Educational Judgment: Linking the Actor and the Spectator," *Educational Researcher*, 31, no. 4 (May 2002); Steven DeCaroli, "Arendt's *Krisis*," *Ethics and Education*, 15, no. 2 (2020); Franco Palazzi, "'Reflections on Little Rock' and Reflective Judgment," *Philosophical Papers*, 46, no. 3 (2017).

<sup>10</sup> For example, Natasha Levinson, "Hannah Arendt on the Relationship between Education and Political Action," *Philosophy of Education* (2001); Aaron Schutz and Marie G. Sandy, "Friendship and the Public Stage: Revisiting Hannah Arendt's Resistance to 'Political Education,'" *Educational Theory*, 65, no. 1 (2015)

<sup>11</sup> For example, Ramona Mihăilă, Gheorghe H. Popescu, and Elvira Nica, "Educational Conservatism and Democratic Citizenship in Hannah Arendt," *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 48, no. 9 (2016); Gert Biesta, "How to Exist Politically and Learn from It: Hannah Arendt and the Problem of Democratic Education," *Teachers College Record*, 112, no. 2 (February 2010); Michalinos Zembylas, "Hannah Arendt's Political Thinking on Emotions and Education: Implications for Democratic Education," *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 42, no. 1 (2020); Anya Topolski and K. U. Leuven, "Creating Citizens in the Classroom: Hannah Arendt's Political Critique of Education," *Ethical Perspectives: Journal of the European Ethics Network*, 15, no. 2 (2008).

<sup>12</sup> For example, Gordon Mordechai, "Hannah Arendt on Authority: Conservatism in Education Reconsidered," *Educational Theory* 49, no. 2 (1999).

<sup>13</sup> For example, Jo-Anne Dillabough, "Dialogue: The 'Hidden Injuries' of Critical Pedagogy," *Curriculum Inquiry*, 32, no.2 (2002); Naomi Hodgson, Joris Vlieghe, and Piotr Zamojski, Eds. *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy*, (Goleta: Punctum Books, 2018); Naomi Hodgson, Joris Vlieghe, and Piotr Zamojski, "Education and the Love for the World: Articulating a Post-Critical Educational Philosophy," *Foro de Educación*, 16, no. 24 (January-June 2018).

<sup>14</sup> For example, James Conroy, "Caught in the Middle: Arendt, Childhood and Responsibility," *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 54, no. 1 (2020).

<sup>15</sup> For example, Mario Di Paolantonio, "Wonder, Guarding against Thoughtlessness in Education," *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 38 (2019); Oded Zipory, "Can Education Be Rid of Clichés?" *Philosophy of Education* 1, (2019); Marie Morgan, "Hannah Arendt and the 'Freedom' to Think," *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 48, no.2 (2016).

<sup>16</sup> For example, Peter Lilja, "Defending a Common World: Hannah Arendt on the State, the Nation and Political Education," *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 37 (2018); Emily Zakin, "Between Two Betweens: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Education," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 31, no. 1 (2017).

<sup>17</sup> For example, RM Kennedy, "Toward a Cosmopolitan Curriculum of Forgiveness," *Curriculum Inquiry*, 41, no.3 (June 2011).

<sup>18</sup> For example, Anne Phelan, *Curriculum Theorizing and Teacher Education: Complicating Conjunctions*, (New York: Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2015).

Arguably, one of the most commonly mentioned or discussed notion in most of these texts is *natality*, a central concept in her oeuvre. This chapter, too, puts a spotlight on this notion, but with a different intention; it does so in order to examine her “controversial” stance that education belongs in the pre-political realm and that it must be conservative. One of the key approaches I take in this examination is principally focusing on “The Crisis in Education” in relation to her two other major books, *The Promise of Politics* and *The Human Condition*, through which I create an occasion to re-think about the notion of natality. I seek to invite the readers to consider natality via some of her conscious insertions that have received little or no attention: one of them is her metaphor of *light and darkness* and the other one, *miracle*. One other key approach I take is making a deliberate effort to stay with her words as much as possible to examine her thoughts, without substantial conversions, reinterpretations, and generalizations. Doing so, I believe is vital, especially when one deals with writings by Arendt, whose political thought has caused both bafflement and inspiration as described in the previous chapter.

I begin by examining how she subtly used the metaphor of light and darkness in their double meanings to illustrate the need to “decisively divorce the realm of education from the others, most of all from the realm of public, political life.”<sup>19</sup> I then inquire into Arendt’s distinctive notion of miracle, which is found in other texts she published around the same time, such as *The Human Condition* and “Introduction into Politics.”<sup>20</sup> I propose that both the metaphor of light and darkness and miracle are crucial in understanding what she considered to be the essence of education, “natality, the fact that human beings are *born* into the world,”<sup>21</sup> in relation to the other fundamental human condition *plurality* found in the public, political realm. I discuss natality and plurality in terms of the *first miracle* and the

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<sup>19</sup> “The Crisis in Education,” 195.

<sup>20</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Introduction into Politics,” in *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> “The Crisis in Education,” 174, emphasis original.

*second miracle* respectively to posit that education occurs between the two, and that it has to be protected as a spatial-temporal space for newcomers to become acquainted with the world, and, equally important, to protect the world from newcomers.

What came to the fore as I spent time inquiring into her thoughts on education is that this notion of miracle embodies her hopeful optimism for the world, and at the same time, there lies her sincere concern for the world, or cautious optimism. Upon this realization, I give thought to what we are currently undergoing and highlight the significance of her political thoughts on educational responsibility in the final section of this chapter, under the heading of “The Social Sphere: Education in the Glaring Light.”

### **3.2 The Metaphor of Light and Darkness**

. . . the mind’s language by means of metaphor returns to the world of visibilities to illuminate and elaborate further what cannot be seen but can be said.<sup>22</sup>

In almost all of Arendt’s work, her uses of metaphor are illustrative of her approach to thinking and releasing her thoughts into the world, like an artist who views almost everything around her as a source of inspiration.<sup>23</sup> One of the metaphors that is frequently mentioned is that of light and darkness, which enables her to critique political philosophy, to distinguish the political from the social, to describe the need for the separation between the public and the private, and much more. In “The Crisis in Education,” what stands out are the subtle ways she described education via the metaphor of light and darkness as that which belongs in the realm of the pre-political. In this particular case, the light and the darkness indicate *both* the vital source of life and the cause of destruction.

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<sup>22</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 109.

<sup>23</sup> Her account of metaphor in relation to language and thinking activity can be found in *The Life of the Mind: Thinking* from page 98 to 125.

The word *pre-political*, as the prefix suggests, indicates *before* the political. She used this term a couple of times to locate when and where education occurs and to denote what she deemed to be the essence and responsibility of education. Metaphorically, she stated: “*Everything that lives, not vegetative life alone, emerges from darkness and, however strong its natural tendency to thrust itself into the light, it nevertheless needs the security of darkness to grow at all.*”<sup>24</sup> The realm of education is conceived as a time and space where the security to grow is offered to the new life. Although it may appear to be an obvious statement at first, what might be difficult to accept is how she identified darkness as time and space of education, as if to prevent a child from thrusting itself into the light. To grasp the complexity behind this metaphor that exemplifies her insistence on the separation of the realms, I will first explain what she meant by the public and the private spheres.

According to Arendt, the term *public* signifies: first, what appears in the public which constitutes reality (i.e., being seen and heard by everybody through speech and action), and second, the common world itself (i.e., not the earth or nature, but the artificial world constructed by human beings).<sup>25</sup> This notion of public holds a significant meaning for Arendt. It is here where the light is brightly lit, living bodies become visible before others, human beings cognize how they are related and separated, and actions take place. Thus, without the public realm, reality could not exist and the common world would be in ruin. However, as Arendt reminds us, no life can withstand a constant stream of light. At the end of the day, we all need a private sphere, a place to retreat where our living bodies can take the guard down and be restored and rejuvenated in order to head back out again to the brightly lighted public realm.

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<sup>24</sup> “The Crisis in Education,” 186, emphasis added.

<sup>25</sup> *The Human Condition*, 50-52.



There is another foundational difference between the private and the public sphere for Arendt. The private sphere is where thinking activity occurs. We can think of how great minds, whether they may be poets, writers, artists, researchers, or musicians, require time and space to think and to practice their craft. The notion of privacy in this sense can be taken up as in the physical sense, where one actually tries to be physically alone, and in a mental state where one can let one's mind wander, even with all the activities occurring around oneself. Similar to the danger of being in the public, however, Arendt cautioned that while no living thing can thrive without this private sphere, prolonged moments of darkness have their own danger, such as the death of passion or of the loss of reason to take part in reality, ensued by loneliness, pain, and fear. This is because *to live* means *to appear*, which is possible only in the presence of others. Therefore, she discerned, we need both light and darkness. It is just as difficult to imagine always living under a bright spotlight as it is to imagine living in darkness for weeks on end without a single source of light.

To return to the metaphor: In Arendt's view, a new life that is new to this world needs "the *security* of darkness to grow,"<sup>26</sup> that is, the spatial-temporal space of education. It is about being introduced to the world as they begin imagining the kind of miracle they might perform. This darkness is not a complete darkness. Schools, for instance, are pre-political places for Arendt that are situated between the private and the public, neither in complete darkness nor in bright light. In such a space, newcomers can be gradually exposed to a glimmer of light so that they can see the common world, which "we have in common not only with those who live with us, but also with those who were here before and with those who will come after us."<sup>27</sup> Such a space allows them to be protected from being fully exposed to the bright light. This level of darkness or brightness may be compared to those

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<sup>26</sup> "The Crisis in Education," 186.

<sup>27</sup> *The Human Condition*, 55.

moments when we view the stars in the night sky or watch a movie in a theatre. Not only can we see the stars and the movie better in the dark without an extra source of light, but they also demand our attention. In such a space, it is as if we are temporarily transported into another world and may be mesmerized by the spectacle.

To my knowledge, there is no educational literature on Arendt and education that highlights this specific metaphor of light and darkness that appears in “The Crisis in Education” to question her “controversial” stance on the separation of realms. There are instead misinterpretations of this essay. For instance, Aaron Schutz reads Arendt’s proposition as barring children from public engagement that resemble aspects of totalitarianism,<sup>28</sup> and Gert Biesta positions her as though she believed children are not capable of participating and creating a political space.<sup>29</sup> As her metaphor of light and darkness illustrates, however, Arendt designated education in the pre-political because she knew the newcomers can be forced (and out of their natural tendency) to be political beings. “Everything that lives,” she reminded us, has the “natural tendency to thrust itself into the light.”<sup>30</sup> Whether it has to do with the pursuit of fame or success or to engage in political matters to bring a social change, Arendt thought that it is the duty of oldcomers to provide newcomers with this spatial and temporal space of education that gradually introduces them to the world that is older than them. Nevertheless, questions from her critics remain to be answered: When will they be, and how do they become, ready or equipped to take part in the political if they are kept away from the light? To respond to this, I present the other side of Arendt’s

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<sup>28</sup> Aaron Schutz, “Is Political Education an Oxymoron? Hannah Arendt’s Resistance to Public Spaces in Schools,” in *Philosophy of Education*, ed. Suzanne Rice (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2001), 327.

<sup>29</sup> Gert Biesta, “How to Exist Politically and Learn from It: Hannah Arendt and the Problem of Democratic Education,” *Teachers College Record*, 112, no. 2 (February 2010).

<sup>30</sup> “The Crisis in Education,” 186.

illuminating argument—that the pre-political realm has the obligation to *protect the world* from the newcomers.

### 3.3 Protecting the World

Miracles. For Arendt, miracles are not only that which “the entire framework of our physical existence—the existence of the earth, of organic life on earth, of the human species itself—rests upon,”<sup>31</sup> but it is also those events that occur *miraculously* in the arena of human affairs.<sup>32</sup> What defines a miracle as such is not its religious, transcendental power. Rather, for her, it is that which “*bursts into* the context of predictable processes as something unexpected, unpredictable, and ultimately casually inexplicable.”<sup>33</sup> In this way, she used the term *miracle* to denote two different births that we as human beings experience. First one refers to the physical birth of every human being. Every birth is a miracle for her because, by the sheer fact of being born, a new life has the power to create a beginning of something with an unpredictable end. The second birth has to do with a birth of a different kind that happens later in life. Every human being, she discerned, is “a miracle worker—that is, that man himself evidently has a most amazing and mysterious talent for working miracles.”<sup>34</sup> Unlike the first one, the second one, which involves doing “the improbable and unpredictable,” can only occur “as long as they can act.”<sup>35</sup> But what do these miracles have to do with protecting the world from the new?

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<sup>31</sup> Arendt, “Introduction into Politics,” 111.

<sup>32</sup> “Introduction into Politics,” 113.

<sup>33</sup> “Introduction into Politics,” 111-112, emphasis added.

<sup>34</sup> “Introduction into Politics,” 114.

<sup>35</sup> “Introduction into Politics,” 114.

### 3.3.1 The First Miracle

Arendt held a critical view on Rousseauian educational ideals “in which education became an instrument of politics, and political activity itself was conceived as a form of education.”<sup>36</sup> The purpose of education, in Arendt’s view, should not be about training and molding the newcomers to fit into an idealized future, because this would mean “striking from the newcomers’ hand their own chance at the new.”<sup>37</sup> Yet, the common perception of education has continued to be framed in preparatory instrumental terms. What is embedded in this conception, or more precisely misconception, is the assumption of an existence of a natural process; an ever-occurring birth of new generations, as well as ongoing social, political, and cultural issues to attend. Viewing our world as a place of repetitive natural processes leads to establishing systems focused on implementing managerial and standardized methods to deal with predictable outcomes, which in turn creates a condition for regarding the young as fabricable objects or human capital for the future. What Arendt reminded us, however, is how this predominance of instrumentality can lead only to the disappearance of the beauty of uniqueness of every birth, i.e., the first miracle, thereby threatening our common world.<sup>38</sup> In her view, the instrumentality of education is, without a doubt, detrimental to “the entire framework of our physical existence.”<sup>39</sup>

This strong emphasis on natality in Arendt’s political thought derives from her understanding of the common world as: first, the *earthly* world that depends on biological rhythm, which can sustain itself without human interference; and second, the *artificial* world built by humans with its own

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<sup>36</sup> “The Crisis in Education,” 176.

<sup>37</sup> “The Crisis in Education,” 177.

<sup>38</sup> Uniqueness of each birth has to be understood in association with the first miracle and not individuality.

<sup>39</sup> “Introduction into Politics,” 111.

“biological” rhythm, which is “irrevocably delivered up to the ruin of time unless human beings are determined to intervene, to alter, to create what is new.”<sup>40</sup> In another passage, she defined “the common world” as “what we enter when we are born and what we leave behind when we die. It transcends our lifespan into past and future alike; it was there before we came and will outlast our brief sojourn in it.”<sup>41</sup> Here lies her concern for the world. Her understanding of the common world implies “destruction” that is required *to save* the common world as much as *to prevent* its complete destruction so that the common world may “transcen[d] our lifespan into past and future alike.”<sup>42</sup> This respect for the world and its past is the reason why, she asserted, the educational task “is always *to cherish* and *protect* something—the child against the world, the world against the child, the new against the old, the old against the new.”<sup>43</sup> We see that Arendt is not a perpetual optimist. She brings to our attention the contingent relationship between the newest and the oldest and everything in between. This means “the child requires special protection and care so that nothing destructive may happen to him from the world. But the world, too, needs protection to keep it from being overrun and destroyed by the onslaught of the new that bursts upon it with each new generation.”<sup>44</sup> The educational task thus entails “mediat[ing] between the old and the new, so that [this] very profession requires of [us] an extraordinary respect for the past.”<sup>45</sup>

Becoming educated as a child, a newcomer, a new human being, or a becoming human being, therefore, cannot be about being prepared for the future to come. It has to be about getting to know

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<sup>40</sup> “The Crisis in Education,” 192; See also *The Human Condition*, 246.

<sup>41</sup> *The Human Condition*, 55.

<sup>42</sup> *The Human Condition*, 55.

<sup>43</sup> *The Human Condition*, 192, emphasis added.

<sup>44</sup> “The Crisis in Education,” 186.

<sup>45</sup> “The Crisis in Education,” 193.

oneself in one's uniqueness in the sameness, and this occurs as one becomes familiar with the world. Oldcomers, especially those of us in education, have the responsibility to cherish and protect the new beings *and* the world by keeping the guiding lights on.

### 3.3.2 The Second Miracle

To emphasize, Arendt's thought centered on life rather than death. She firmly believed the beauty of life lies in the very fact that every new birth has an enormous power to affect everything into which it was born and beyond. This implied not only the birth of individuals, but also their actions. Arendt defined *action* as second birth, or *second miracle*, referring to the moment when the newcomers insert themselves into the public, political realm of human affairs with word and deed to begin something, to set something into motion.<sup>46</sup> This, she believed, was essential for the renewal of the common world. At the same time, she understood the other side of the miracle—the danger behind this power; that is, the unpredictability of action. In the broader context of her political thought, experiencing the second birth is to exercise “the faculty of action” that *all* human beings “are capable of by virtue of being born.”<sup>47</sup> When the second miracle is performed, the effect is “interruptions of some natural series of events, of some automatic process, in whose context they constitute the wholly unexpected.”<sup>48</sup>

At the time of writing “The Crisis in Education,” Arendt suggested that we could think of this moment as a departure from the pre-political realm, roughly after vocational training or college.<sup>49</sup> This

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<sup>46</sup> *The Human Condition*, 176-177.

<sup>47</sup> *The Human Condition*, 247. This is one of the core concepts in Arendt's political thinking, which I will delve into in a greater depth in the subsequent chapters. In this section, I will try to limit my discussion to the realm of education.

<sup>48</sup> Hannah Arendt, “What is Freedom?” in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 168.

<sup>49</sup> “The Crisis in Education,” 196.

is a problematic time frame for Arendt's critics and even for an Arendtian scholar like Gert Biesta. He states: "For Arendt, ... education thus always operates in the domain of *preparation*. It is only when the state of adulthood is reached – that is, when education has come to its end – the political life can begin."<sup>50</sup> Biesta further critiques that Arendt "fell prey to a mistake that is not uncommon when philosophers turn to education ... to assume that the only available vocabulary for talking about education is psychological one."<sup>51</sup> He alleges that she uses developmentalism, or a temporal framework imbued with psychological terms such as childhood and adulthood, to indicate that "a readiness of politics ... coincide[s] with the transition from childhood to adulthood."<sup>52</sup> In so doing, he further notes that this "seems to make it impossible for her to acknowledge the political dimensions of educational processes and practices."<sup>53</sup>

Similar to Biesta, I initially held a critical view of Arendt's use of developmental language. After all, it would have been possible for her to avoid using the school system-related time frame and language to think about the crisis in education. However, it must be remembered that Arendt was *exercising a political thought* about education. She did not write the essay as a philosopher of education or a specialist in the field of education.<sup>54</sup> For Arendt, examining a critical situation that one is not immediately involved in is like being given an "opportunity ... to explore and inquire into whatever has been laid bare of the essence of the matter" and "to make direct judgments" that are not based on "prejudices."<sup>55</sup> Upon further reading of Arendt's work, through which I came to realize that she is

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<sup>50</sup> "How to Exist Politically," 565, emphasis original.

<sup>51</sup> "How to Exist Politically," 558.

<sup>52</sup> "How to Exist Politically," 567.

<sup>53</sup> "How to Exist Politically," 567.

<sup>54</sup> "The Crisis in Education," 174.

<sup>55</sup> "The Crisis in Education," 174.

dealing with the essence of education—that is, natality—against the widely accepted progressive education system in America that is “rooted in the political attitude of the country,” the “psychological” terms in the essay became less problematic for me, if not a complete non-issue.<sup>56</sup>

Furthermore, unlike Biesta, who insinuates that Arendt could not acknowledge the political dimensions of educational processes and practices, I contend that it is the opposite. It is because she recognized their political dimensions that she sought to think with the separation of the realms and placed education in the pre-political realm. As we may recall from the discussion on the metaphor of light and darkness, she noted that there exists a natural tendency to thrust oneself into the light. In another passage, she wrote,

Exactly for the sake of what is new and revolutionary in every child, education must be *conservative*; it must preserve this newness and introduce it as a new thing into an old world, which, *however revolutionary its actions may be*, is always, from the standpoint of the next generation, superannuated and close to destruction.<sup>57</sup>

What we see here is Arendt’s recognition of the need for newcomers to be shielded from inserting themselves into public life until they are “ready.” Or, to put it differently, they are always already ready to insert themselves, as they have the natural tendency to thrust themselves into the light, but they are not ready in terms of having become sufficiently acquainted with the world and of being able to stand against the bright spotlight. This readiness, therefore, does not imply equipping them with knowledge and skills.

As well, she did not argue for prohibiting newcomers from experiencing the second birth, nor did she believe that only adults are capable of exercising the faculty of action. Moreover, second birth is not something to be pre-planned or worse, taught, because action occurs with others *spontaneously*,

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<sup>56</sup> “The Crisis in Education,” 180.

<sup>57</sup> “The Crisis in Education,” 192-193, emphasis added.



and its end is always unforeseeable. And, because of this spontaneity, she understood that it cannot be schooled. Schooling in how to perform the second miracle, she knew, would erode “the revolutionary in every child.”<sup>58</sup>

So, to return to the question posed earlier, in what way does the second miracle have anything to do with protecting the world from the new? I will elaborate on what she meant by this using Arendt’s own revelation that came to her in her later years.

As she sought to remind us of the significance of the spontaneity of action, she also revealed the other important aspect of the spatial-temporal space of the pre-political realm that has not been given due attention in the educational discourse on her work, namely, the kind of special protection an institution may provide for those at college and university levels to exercise their true freedom. In the 1950s to mid-70s, Arendt encountered hundreds of intellectuals and younger generations from all walks of life through her appointment at the New School of Social Research and by being a guest lecturer at numerous colleges, universities, and many other organizations. It was during these years that Arendt saw the United States in turmoil with the Civil Rights Movement, the Free Speech Movement, the Vietnam War, the antiwar movement, and the deaths of Dr. Martin Luther King and Jr. and John F. Kennedy, to name a few. Even though a great many historic political events of her time would have served to validate if not elucidate her political thoughts, she did not directly address these events. She offered instead rare glimpses of her thoughts about these political upheaval moments through non-academic work, such as interviews and correspondences.

In one particular interview with Adelbert Reif in the summer of 1970, for instance, in which the focus was the student protest movements, Arendt shared her view of the movements that occurred

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<sup>58</sup> “The Crisis in Education,” 193.

in the 50s and 60s.<sup>59</sup> On the one hand, she remarked on how she was struck by the ways in which some of the student protest movements “actually accomplished what could be accomplished through purely political action” with their “determination to act” as well as “joy in action,” plus “the assurance of being able to change things by one’s own efforts.”<sup>60</sup> On the other hand, she cautioned against the potential destruction of the universities by the students if they were to become preoccupied with not the political, but the internal crisis of the universities.<sup>61</sup> What this caution implies is that she believed that destroying universities would be to destroy their base of operation, which would lead to the end of the movement to rebel against the decisions and measures they were seeking to change. Secondly, more pertinent to this chapter, she viewed that “[t]he universities make it possible for young people over a number of years *to stand outside all social groups and obligation*, to be truly free.”<sup>62</sup> As noted earlier, Arendt posited in 1958 that departure from the pre-political realm occurs roughly after college years. Over the years since then, however, to her own surprise, she witnessed how these students performed exemplary spontaneous actions that characterized the second miracle, and that this was possible because their educational institutions had provided them with a public space to gather and offered a kind of protection unavailable in the political realm.

As much as many of the student protest movements epitomized the second miracle in their effort to carry out revolutionary actions, she saw that it could also lead to destroying their world, the historical institutions to which they belonged to that could function as a public realm and where they

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<sup>59</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Thoughts on Politics and Revolution: A Commentary: Interview by Adelbert Reif. *Crises of the Republic*, Summer 1970,” in *The Hannah Arendt: Last Interview and Other Conversations*, trans. Denver Lindley (New York & London: First Melville House Printing, 2013).

<sup>60</sup> “Thoughts on Politics and Revolution,” 70-71.

<sup>61</sup> “Thoughts on Politics and Revolution,” 76-77.

<sup>62</sup> “Thoughts on Politics and Revolution,” 77, emphasis original.

could gather, appear before each other, reveal who they are, and possibly act together as an act of love for the world. What can be observed in this is her stance about recognizing the precarity of both the old and the new and their dependence on one another, the idea that we must protect the new against the old, and the old against the new.

### 3.4 The Social Sphere: Education in the Glaring Light

Here in the final section, I introduce the third sphere, or, more precisely, the blurring of the private and the public that Arendt referred to as the social sphere. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt writes,

the emergence of the social realm, which is neither private nor public ... is a relatively new phenomenon whose origin coincided with the emergence of the modern age and which found its political form in the nation-state. What concerns us in this context is the extraordinary difficulty with which we, because of this development, understand the decisive division between the public and private realms, between the sphere of the *polls* and the sphere of household and family, and, finally, between activities related to a common world and those related to the maintenance of life, a division upon which all ancient political thought rested as self-evident and axiomatic. In our understanding, the dividing line is *entirely blurred*.<sup>63</sup>

According to Arendt, the tie between economic growth and politics became inseparable, while the thread to the past was fragmented in the modern world. She was deeply troubled not by the existence, but the enlargement of this sphere that induced conformity and an exposure to constant light. She observed this would lead to a progress-driven way of living where the mutual relationship between the old and the new becomes forgotten.

What also concerned Arendt is the plausibility of the sublimation of the human condition, that is, *plurality*. The actualization of the plurality depends on being able to live as a distinct and unique being among equals, where one may appear before others who are simultaneously related and separated

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<sup>63</sup> *The Human Condition*, 28, emphasis added.

by “the intermediary of a common world of things.”<sup>64</sup> The enlargement of the social sphere that induces conformity-based consensus rids the distance necessary to observe the worldly things in reality. Arendt understood that this condition is detrimental to the occurrence of second miracles. In turn, she revealed how the necessary protective boundary for the educational realm, too, had dissolved due to the constant rate at which the social sphere enlarged, and how this enlargement caused harsh light to penetrate through the walls of the pre-political and private realms. The blurring of these divisions for Arendt is not at all about everyone becoming equal and freely entering multiple realms. Instead, the rise of the social meant the realm of the public and that of the private were constantly flowing into each other with an ongoing penetration of economic terms.<sup>65</sup> Equality, for instance, became more associated with justice and based on conformism. In the *polis*, equality once meant “to live among and to have to deal only with one’s peers” and “was the very essence of freedom: to be free from the inequality present in the rulership.”<sup>66</sup> In modernity, equality connotes members behaving and acting similarly in masses, because the social realm is “economically organized into the facsimile of one super-human family [which] is what we call “society,” and its political form of organization [which] is called “nation.”<sup>67</sup> In such a society, individuals gradually become obliterated through conformism, and, more worrying for Arendt, the miracles are seen as deviations.

The portrayal of modernity in her writings captures the core of what we are faced with today, the immeasurably large social sphere and its consequences beyond what Arendt had foreseen. Today, the number of screens that emanate glaring light is growing exponentially. Many are hooked up to the

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<sup>64</sup> *The Human Condition*, 58.

<sup>65</sup> *The Human Condition*, 33.

<sup>66</sup> *The Human Condition*, 32-33.

<sup>67</sup> *The Human Condition*, 29.

global network at all times, and reactive judgments are made and shared worldwide in a millisecond, which can cause a substantial impact to the world and on the life (and death) of an individual.<sup>68</sup> Under such bright light that remains turned on 24/7, anonymous participation in political affairs is possible, as are the propagation of distorted realities and changes of history.

### 3.5 Conclusion

Does education belong in the pre-political realm? Insofar as one considers education and politics to be inherently intertwined and current living conditions as inevitable facts of life to which everyone must adapt, Arendt's proposition may be seen as controversial and outdated. What I hope this inquiry into Arendt's thoughts on education revealed is that what Arendt offers us is precisely a basis for confronting such ways of thinking and speaking of and about education so that we might be reminded of the magnitude of educational responsibility.

Spatially speaking, the pre-political exists between the public realm and the private realm, and, temporally speaking, it is the time before entering the political realm. The realm of education is where young individuals may familiarize themselves with what has existed before them, learn about what it might mean to enter the public realm, explore their interests and curiosities, and imagine the kind of story their lives might turn into as part of the great storybook. This meaningful experience of becoming acquainted with the world—that is, coming to understand what makes us common in the common world we share—is what Arendt saw should take place in security. More than anything, she understood that, without holding regard for the common world, the new could bring the world to ruin, and, simultaneously, the reverse is also true: that without the newness, the world that has been built by its

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<sup>68</sup> Consider, for instance, the number of cases in the past decade alone where a single photo, a tweet, or a blurb “shared” online caused an individual or a company to gain instant fame or defamation, or the stock market to inflate or plummet.

dwellers will be in ruin as well. The pre-political realm, therefore, serves two important existential functions: to protect the new from the old, and to protect the old from the new.

What concerned Arendt, and it should be of our concern today, are: first, the loss of time and security for the newcomers to get to know the world that existed before them (that there is a growing tendency for them to face “the merciless glare of the public realm”<sup>69</sup> too early on), and second, an endless interference of political measures and economic language that frame education as a means to an end. These conditions in turn affect people’s understanding of the essence of education and the responsibility of education. Educating is not the same as teaching for Arendt.<sup>70</sup> For her, a qualified educator understands the subject matter and can carry out this educational responsibility, whereas one who simply teaches, on the other hand, may not be well versed in the subject matter and be more interested in utilizing innovative teaching techniques. Thus, the former is the mediator between the old and the new, and the latter is a mere deliverer of lessons, so to speak.<sup>71</sup> The former will be able to introduce the world to the becoming human beings; the latter will be keener on unleashing their ‘potential’ to start something new. Arendt also reminded us of the fundamental difference between politics and education. In politics, a “conservative attitude ... can only lead to destruction,” but this attitude is vital for education.<sup>72</sup> We might note that a future-driven attitude in education (such as being hyper-vigilantly focused on fast-paced efficiency and innovation and expecting return on investment) could possibly lead the world to destruction. Or, more precisely, such an attitude is not a characteristic of education, but rather of a political apparatus.

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<sup>69</sup> “The Crisis in Education,” 186.

<sup>70</sup> “The Crisis in Education,” 196.

<sup>71</sup> “The Crisis in Education,” 193.

<sup>72</sup> “The Crisis in Education,” 189.

Despite the many crises that unfolded before her eyes, she believed in miracles, the miracle of new births as well as the second miracle. This belief differs from “the pathos of the new [that] has its most serious consequences,” which itself is the consequence of the enlargement of the social sphere.<sup>73</sup> For Arendt, the notion of miracle is not about making the situation better with an interventionist approach. Instead, its power lies in the very fact that it has no predictable end, which therefore, can cause most unexpected, surprising effects that could not have been preconceived. It is for this reason an attempt to eliminate foreseeable failures or predetermining paths that the newcomers should take is to strike from the newcomers’ hand their own chance at the new. Equally important, for Arendt, is that the second miracle is performed by those who regard “[o]ur present” as “emphatically, and not merely logically, the suspense between a no-longer and a not-yet.”<sup>74</sup> In depicting the crisis in education in the time of modernity, what she revealed to us is the disappearing necessary conditions in which *education* may occur, that is, between the first and the second miracle. She reminded us “that we have all come into the world by being born and that this world is constantly renewed through birth”<sup>75</sup> and succinctly pointed out our educational responsibility of partaking in not only *renewing the common world*, but also *protecting* it—that is, to enact *amor mundi*.

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<sup>73</sup> “The Crisis in Education,” 178. Consider, for instance, the fascination with the new gadget or fashion, which has caused irreversible environmental disasters.

<sup>74</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Karl Jaspers: Citizen of the World?” in *Men in Dark Times* (Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company: 1970), 90.

<sup>75</sup> “The Crisis in Education,” 196.

## **Part II**



## Overview of Part II

Part II makes a leap into the public and political realm. It consists of four chapters: Chapter 4, *Performing Miracles through Political Art?* Chapter 5, *Meeting Place between Artistic Practice and Political*, Chapter 6, *The Second Miracle: Aestheticization of Action?*, and finally, Chapter 7, *Conclusion and Lingering Thoughts*.

What may come as a surprise to some readers is how there is no discussion of Hannah Arendt's thoughts on works of art or political action as well as no further explicit discussion on education in relation to contemporary art, aesthetics, or the second miracle in the subsequent two chapters. As stated at the onset of this dissertation, Arendt's work is the backbone of this study. To put it differently, this study is not *on* Arendt, but in *thinking with* her, I seek to create conditions that may allow me to stay "open to wonder and surrender, while being attuned to what is unfolding."<sup>1</sup> I approach this study to *think with* her thoughts, that is to say, each chapter in this dissertation can be described as my different attempts at *understanding what it means to act for amor mundi* in the extraordinary time in which we live.

As for the absence of direct links to education, this, too, is an intentional move. I seek to focus on the public, political realm where Arendt posited that individuals initiate something new to put forth their concerns for the common world, that is, to perform the second miracle. To do so, I first enter the realm of contemporary art to reveal complex layers that exist in the interrelated relationship between art and politics, and then in Chapter 5, I draw upon diverse perspectives to examine an ongoing debate on modes of artists' participation in dealing with worldly affairs.

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<sup>1</sup> Irwin, "Toward an Aesthetic of Unfolding In/Sights through Curriculum," 67.

What I hope the “surprised” readers may recognize is the significance of these moves being made prior to delving into what her contemporary critics view as “contentious” aspects of her “political project” in Chapter 6. Through venturing into the public, political realm in such a manner, I will then arrive at the final chapter, Chapter 7, where the act of bringing Part I and II together makes it possible to attain new insights.

## Chapter 4: Performing Miracles through Political Art?

### 4.1 Introduction

By the government's estimates, 7,000 classrooms collapsed in the tremor. In Dujiangyan, children lay on the street in body bags; in Hanwang, they were stored on concrete ping-pong tables in the schoolyard; in Beichuan, the ground was thick with small corpses, ghostly with dust. The air stank of death. A teenager described lying trapped under rubble, touching the cooling skin of a classmate and knowing that she was dead. Another young boy came up to ask if anyone knew the fate of his best friend. Everywhere you went there were small bodies and welling pain and anger—magnified by the needlessness of their deaths.<sup>1</sup>

What became known as the Sichuan earthquake ripped through southwestern China on May 12, 2008, when China was receiving international attention for pouring money into perfecting its image ahead of Beijing Summer Olympic Games. For this event, the city of Beijing underwent a massive makeover. In the process, well over a million Beijing residents were evicted with poor compensation, if they were lucky, or with physical abuse and jail time, if they were not, as the government bulldozed their homes in order to make room for newly paved asphalt roads, the Olympic Forest Park, rows of tall glass skyscrapers, and much more.<sup>2</sup> More massive bulldozing, digging, clearing, and reconstruction were also underway in rural parts of China where the “already among the poorest and most vulnerable”<sup>3</sup> lost their homes and livelihood to this earthquake and its aftershocks. An officially estimated 46.25 million people were affected by this mega earthquake; among them, thousands were injured, 69,227 died, 17,923 went

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<sup>1</sup> Tania Branigan, “Suffer in Silence,” *The Guardian*, Aug. 26, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/aug/26/chinaearthquake.china> 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Aidan Hartley, “Unreported World: China’s Olympic Lie,” first aired on Channel Four Television Corporation on October 19, 2007, video, 24:15, <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/unreported-world/episode-guide/series-2007>.

<sup>3</sup> Vivian Argueta Bernal and Paul Procee, “Four Years on: What China Got Right When Rebuilding after the Sichuan Earthquake,” *The World Bank*, May 11, 2012, <http://blogs.worldbank.org/eastasiapacific/four-years-on-what-china-got-right-when-rebuilding-after-the-sichuan-earthquake>.

missing, and 15 million were displaced.<sup>4</sup> Heroic support did come their way in various forms from those in multiple-colour uniforms offering physical aid to international financial aid. According to the World Bank, which provided almost 700 million US dollars over 7 years,<sup>5</sup> the Chinese government “capitalized on the opportunities presented by the disaster to plan the reconstruction in a way that allowed the affected provinces to move forward.”<sup>6</sup> The government took a series of immediate actions and reconstruction totaling 146 billion US dollars<sup>7</sup> that “[b]y 2011, close to 3,000 miles of roads, 3,000 schools, and 37 cities and towns had been rebuilt at a cost of more than 95 billion [pounds].”<sup>8</sup> The officials did not just build homes and roads, but built “the elegant housing projects for the homeless, the towering sports stadium and the immaculately kept parks that flank the town.”<sup>9</sup> They left behind some of the earthquake-hit areas as they were, as official memorial sites, also commissioning Cai Yongjie to design a National Earthquake Memorial.<sup>10</sup>

Another heroic move was underway. Ai Weiwei, along with his team of assistants and volunteers, joined a human rights activist Tao Zuoren to be the voice of silenced victims via what came to be known as Ai’s Sichuan earthquake project that would completely alter the course of his life.

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<sup>4</sup> Bernal and Procee, “Four Years on.”

<sup>5</sup> The World Bank, “Wenchuan Earthquake Recovery,” last updated in 2016, <http://projects.worldbank.org/P114107/wenchuan-earthquake-recovery?lang=en>.

<sup>6</sup> Bernal and Procee, “Four Years on.”

<sup>7</sup> Bernal and Procee, “Four Years on.”

<sup>8</sup> Tom Phillips, “Children’s Deaths Airbrushed from Memorials to China’s Worst Earthquake in History,” *National Post*, May 13, 2013, <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/childrens-deaths-scrubbed-from-memorials-for-chinas-worst-earthquake>. For instance, they relocated the entire former residents of one of the hardest hit areas, Beichuan County, to Yongchang, or what the new occupants refer to as New Beichuan.

<sup>9</sup> Phillips, “Children’s Deaths.”

<sup>10</sup> Cai Yongjie, who won the design competition, incorporated the original footprint of Beichuan Middle School and its sport field, by using the former school gate as the beginning of an axis. All facilities were built so they would be embedded in the parklike landscape. However, there was no mention of unsafe use of construction materials, nor any record of identities of the victims. At the time, Koegel noted, “Covered under the name of land-art for the memorial, the traces still testify to the political failure.” (Eduard Koegel, “Earthquake Memorial in Sichuan,” *World-architects*, December 13, 2015, <https://www.world-architects.com/en/architecture-news/reviews/earthquake-memorial-in-sichuan-1>.)

Ai was born in 1957, at the time of “Great Leap Forward” movement in China that caused Chairman Mao to become an enemy of the state and literary minds, such as a renowned poet like Ai Qing, Ai’s father, to become censored and exiled. Ai Weiwei lived through changes in political climate in China, left for Parsons in New York in 1981 after having attended a film school in Beijing, and in 1993, returned when his father’s health deteriorated. During his absence, the infamous student-led demonstrations (later became known as Tiananmen Square Massacre) were held in 1989, directed toward the Communist government with one-party political system that took advantage of fast-growing economic development, and along with it, a strong sense of instability.

1989 was also the year when the Chinese Avant-Garde Exhibition was shut down, which was an indication of a dramatic shift in contemporary art movement. This was not only largely due to the democracy movement that ended with a catastrophe with no accurate record of number of deaths and casualties, but also “the unexpected rise of mass culture” in China.<sup>11</sup> This shift meant many of the Chinese avant-garde artists, who once “saw themselves as cultural pioneers whose task was to enlighten the masses, fight for social reform, and rebel against . . . the state dominant ideology,” abandoned “their humanist passion” and turned to “neutral and Cynical Realism in the 1990s.”<sup>12</sup>

Four years later, Ai Weiwei found himself back in this evolving China, where its contemporary art scene nevertheless enthralled the contemporary art world that predominantly existed in the West.

This first chapter of Part II attends to some of the works derived from the Sichuan earthquake project by this Chinese contemporary artist, which made him globally famous as an art activist and a dissident. By introducing Ai’s politically engaged art, particularly this project, I open up ways to inquire into the complicated, interrelated relationship between art and politics.

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<sup>11</sup> Ning Lu, “How Chinese Art Became Contemporary,” *Artnet*, Mar. 11, 2013, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/how-chinese-art-became-contemporary-50469>.

<sup>12</sup> “How Chinese Art Became Contemporary.”

I chose Ai, because he is, in an Arendtian sense, an artist who problematically blurs the boundary between the public and the private realms through his art, and, at the same time, may also be regarded as a miracle performer who has constantly appeared in public to incite immediate response to oppression, censorship, and humanitarian catastrophe. I insert selective pieces by Columbian contemporary artist Doris Salcedo in an interweaving manner to create different entry and exit points to think about how artists employ political and/or aesthetic strategies of their own to do the kind of political work they envision.

The aim of this chapter is not about a making a case for art or the artist, whether it may be arguing for political, transformative power of art, positing artists as public intellectuals, or asserting educational, pedagogical value of art. Rather, I seek to invite the readers of this dissertation to take a look at various moments at which art and politics collide and crash into each other, affecting everything they come into contact, like the waves along the shorelines. If the previous chapter attended to questioning ‘education as pre-political,’ here I attend to artworks themselves to question the ‘political-ness’ of the art as a way to create a space to think about the worldliness and publicness of the artworks.

## **4.2 The Earthquake that Revealed More Perilous Chasms**

At the time of the earthquake, Ai was involved in constructing the National Stadium (also known as the Bird’s Nest) for the 2008 Beijing Olympics which was led by the internationally renowned architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, became one of the outspoken voices for the silenced victims. His interest peaked when he traveled to the disaster zones along with a few of his assistants several weeks after the horrific event and encountered numerous parents suffering amongst the ruins.<sup>13</sup> Unlike the local government officials who were keen on determining the total number of casualties, Ai’s team and 160 volunteers joined in the work of Tan Zuoren, a veteran democracy activist, who was already

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<sup>13</sup> It is unclear whether the team traveled to the disaster zone in passing and what Ai encountered and gathered became a source of inspiration and medium for his artwork, or if he went there with the intention of making art from the tragic event.

identifying the names of the children who had been “buried alive in their classrooms” in seven hundred schools.<sup>14</sup> Ai’s team launched Citizens’ Investigation, a form of “participatory investigative journalism” that uses social media as a way of advocating for social and political activism.<sup>15</sup> Although using social media is one of the most common route these days to disseminate information, it was not the case in 2008, and especially in a country like China. Ai intensely blogged about the event on his already famous blog site, which one of his followers referred to as a “social sculpture.”<sup>16</sup> He actively sought to make the local and central governments take responsibility for the substandard, shoddy engineering of the schools. When the blog was shut down by the State, he opted for microblog sites and other social media platforms to gather information and disseminate the audio and video recordings and documentations of Citizens’ Investigation, which was possible because tens of volunteers dedicated months into interviewing the parents, gathering the data, and drafting reports with no specific end date in mind.<sup>17</sup> In a country with no free press, he had created his own, which made him a main subject of investigation by government officials. His team was accused of being spies from the U.S.A. and Japan and faced countless other hostile confrontations with the police who stalked their every move physically and via other means, such as installing CCTVs in front of Ai’s house and tapping his phone lines.

Ai nevertheless sought to be the voice for parents who had been silenced by their government.<sup>18</sup> Of course, it was one of the biggest earthquakes in the history of China, and a large number of casualties

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<sup>14</sup> Ian Johnson, “After-Shocks of the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake,” *The New York Review of Books: NYR Daily*, May 9, 2018, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/05/09/after-shocks-of-the-2008-sichuan-earthquake/>. Tao Zuoren was soon imprisoned and served the maximum sentence of 5 years until 2014, and then was put under further probation.

<sup>15</sup> Multiple Journalism, “Citizens’ investigation,” last accessed in July 2020, <http://multiplejournalism.org/case/citizens-investigation>.

<sup>16</sup> It has been turned into a book entitled, *Ai Weiwei’s Blog: Writings, Interviews, and Digital Rants, 2006-2009 (Writing art)*.

<sup>17</sup> To use Twitter, for example, they had to use a third-party app to get to Twitter as it is blocked in China.

<sup>18</sup> Ai is his last name. His father Ai Ching, “the Chinese Communist Revolution’s beloved poet Ai Qing, named him. According to Ai Qing’s diary, he closed his eyes after his son was born to think of a name when the character wei (威) materialized. In Chinese, wei signifies power, might, and prestige, forming

were inevitable. However, what fueled anger in the broken hearts of those affected, particularly the parents, was the fact that the death of their only child could have been prevented had it not been for the poor infrastructure of the school buildings, which were made of “concrete you could brush away like powder and thin steel frames that had buckled beyond recognition.”<sup>19</sup> Unlike the surrounding buildings, the school buildings had collapsed to rubble, which even to untrained eyes were unsafely built from the beginning to cut costs. Many of these parents initially trusted their government to launch a full investigation and persecute those who were responsible for constructing what came to be referred to as “tofu buildings” or “tofu projects.”<sup>20</sup> As their angry cries for justice continued while digging through the rubble with their bare hands, they were metaphorically and literally forcefully silenced. In a country with a zero tolerance for any form of protest or expression of discontent toward government, especially at a time when a glitzy debut of the new China to the whole world was just around the corner, nothing was tolerated.

### 4.3 A Chasm at the Turbine Hall

A year before the Sichuan earthquake, a different kind of seismic fissure appeared in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern in London in 2007. This 167-meter-long fissure was made by a Colombian artist, Doris Salcedo, and a team of engineers as an art installation called *Shibboleth*.<sup>21</sup> Upon first glance, this

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compound words such as quanwei (权威; “authority”), as well as weixie (威胁; “to threaten and menace”). Finding it inappropriate to bestow upon a “powerless intellectual’s son” a name of awe-inspiring political authority, Ai Qing quasi-prophetically announced: “reality is too cruel, we will call him ‘love the future,’” providing a homonymous logic at the heart of Ai Weiwei’s name (艾未未).” (Cited in Christian Sorace, “China’s Last Communist: Ai Weiwei,” *Critical Inquiry* 40, no. 2 (Winter 2014): 418.)

<sup>19</sup> Branigan, “Suffer in Silence.” The one-child policy is one of the biggest social engineering experiments in history, which came into effect in 1979 in China. The policy changed to a two-child policy in 2015 due to numerous serious problems it has caused, such as an overpopulation of men (by an estimate of 34 million), a low birthrate, an aging population, and human trafficking of women.

<sup>20</sup> Eve Cary, “China’s Dangerous Tofu Projects,” *The Diplomat*, February 10, 2012, <https://thediplomat.com/2012/02/chinas-dangerous-tofu-projects/>.

<sup>21</sup> The dimensions of the work are length: 155m (500 ft), width: 23 m (75 ft), height: 35 m (115 ft). Since 2000, Tate Modern has commissioned a living contemporary artist each year to create a “large scale sculpture and site-specific installation art” for their “vast and dramatic” 3,300 m<sup>2</sup> (35,520 sq ft) entrance space. (Cited in *Tate*, <https://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-modern/turbine-hall>)



long crack appears to be another work of mother nature. The floor appears to be in need of an immediate repair before the actual art installation can be properly exhibited. However, the crevice into the concrete floor was all there was in this large exhibition space.

*Shibboleth* is an inverted 500-ton installation work made of concrete and barbed wire in the artist's studio in Bogotá, Columbia, that took months to make and was designed to be permanently installed in the floor of the Turbine Hall. According to the artist, the title,

refers to a word, phrase, or custom that can be used to test whether or not an individual belongs to a particular group or region. It was first used in this way in an Old Testament story in which the Ephraimites, defeated in battle by the Gileadites, were challenged by the Gileadites to say the word 'shibboleth' in order to be allowed to flee across the river Jordan. The Ephraimites were unable to pronounce the 'sh' sound, and as a consequence all 42,000 were slaughtered by the Gileadites. With this in mind, ... *Shibboleth* ... could be seen as a symbol of the damage caused by cultural and geographical exclusion.<sup>22</sup>

Thematically speaking, *Shibboleth* reflects the artist's oeuvre, which often deals with memory and pain caused by insensible acts of violence. She has been living in her impoverished country, a country that underwent endless periods of atrocious political violence. In *Of What One Cannot Speak*, Mieke Bal puts the intention behind Salcedo's work this way:

The space of the Tate Modern emphatically belongs to modernism—both in its previous function as a power station, and in its current incarnation as a space where art can boast its importance, its monumental proportions. Salcedo played with this monumentality, taking it as its word, so to speak. She left it entirely empty, thereby filling it with the entire world—with the *scar tissue* of its divisions, histories, differences, and repressions.<sup>23</sup>

Instead of filling it with sculptural works, objects, light, or sound, Salcedo opted to make a work that would turn people's gaze downward by creating "a distinctive negative space, a monumental puncture into the museum's surface."<sup>24</sup> Her decision to work with the concrete floor was informed by several

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<sup>22</sup> Celia White, "Doris Salcedo: Shibboleth III 2007," last modified December 2014, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/salcedo-shibboleth-iii-p20336>.; Tate, "Doris Salcedo – Shibboleth: TateShots," posted on August 13, 2008. YouTube video, 05:07, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NIJDn2MA9I>.

<sup>23</sup> Mieke Bal, *Of What One Cannot Speak* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 238, emphasis added.

observations she made after she was commissioned. One of them was her observation of Europe, often portrayed as the developed, democratic society that has learned to resolve issues through dialogue, and yet, the social fabric has always been torn and never been a whole. For instance, the existence of extreme racial hatred exists despite its self-portrayal of an advanced society.<sup>25</sup> Another source of inspiration was when she saw visitors entering the Turbine Hall often looking up, narcissistically marveling at the modern and impressionistic building.<sup>26</sup> Salcedo “turn[ed] upside down that perspective” by creating this crack on the floor to force people “to look down as a way of seeing reality,” instead of looking up.<sup>27</sup> What is interesting to note is how she inverted this again when she cited Theodore Adorno in her interview, “that we should all see the world from the perspective of the victim. ... to see the world from down there.”<sup>28</sup> In this reversal, it is not just about making the visitors look down. In one sense, she imagines the world being upside down, seeing the world from inside the fissure, and, in another, imagines them being transported into the fissure to have an exchange of gazes and perspectives they have not encountered before. “Where Adorno, the philosopher par excellence of post-Holocaust art, had to leave off,” writes Bal, “Salcedo takes that discussion up again.”<sup>29</sup>

Unlike any other work exhibited in this space, this installation is the only work ever exhibited in the Turbine Hall that left its permanent visible trace behind. The “scar tissue” was looked after once

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<sup>24</sup> Julie Rodrigues Widholm, “Presenting Absence: The Work of Doris Salcedo,” in *Doris Salcedo*, eds. Julie Rodrigues Widholm and Madeleine Grynsztejn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 26.

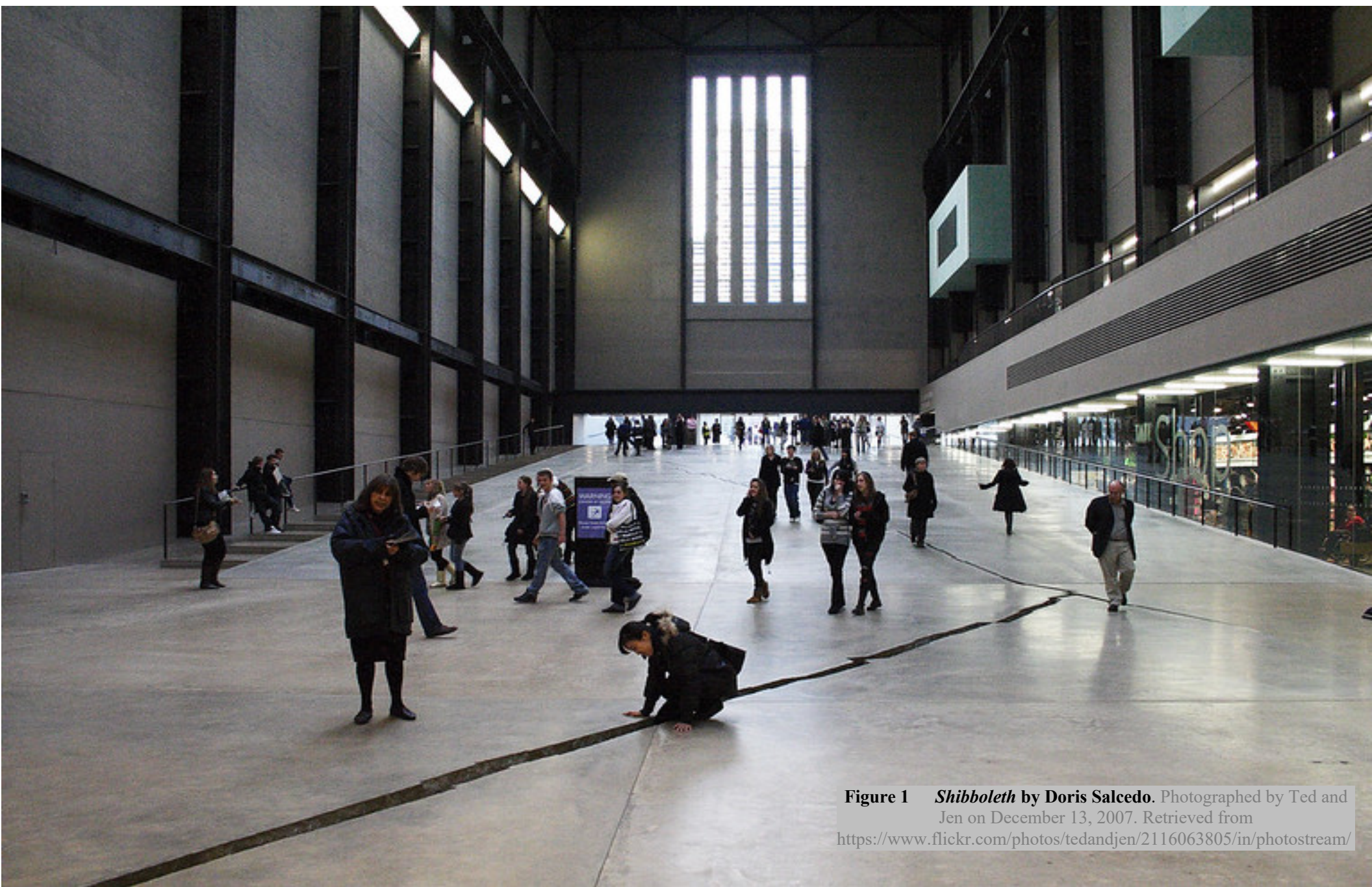
<sup>25</sup> Doris Salcedo, “Doris Salcedo: Shibboleth: The Colombian Artist Discusses Why She Cracked the Turbine Hall Floor,” October 1, 2007, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/doris-salcedo-2695/doris-salcedo-shibboleth>.

<sup>26</sup> Art 21, “Doris Salcedo in “Compassion,”” October 7, 2009, <https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s5/doris-salcedo-in-compassion-segment/>.

<sup>27</sup> Art 21, “Doris Salcedo.”

<sup>28</sup> “Doris Salcedo: Shibboleth.”

<sup>29</sup> Bal, *Of What One Cannot Speak*, 17.



**Figure 1** *Shibboleth* by Doris Salcedo. Photographed by Ted and Jen on December 13, 2007. Retrieved from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/tedandjen/2116063805/in/photostream/>

the exhibition ended by removing a portion of her 500-ton art installation off the floor and filling the remaining cracks with concrete to mend it back.<sup>30</sup> In her interview during the exhibition, she described the fate of *Shibboleth* this way: “the piece will be sealed ... [and] remain under the floor ... so a permanent scar will always be [in] the Turbine Hall as a memory, as a commemoration of all this life that we don’t recognize.”<sup>31</sup>

#### 4.4 A Dissident Artist

Ai’s Citizens’ Investigation was a publicly subversive act against the state, which gave Ai a permanent worldwide label of dissident. In a country where the massacre in Tiananmen Square has been deliberately removed from its history, and even a passing mention of the event is subject to imprisonment,<sup>32</sup> what Ai and his team did is unthinkable for any ordinary Chinese citizen. His earlier works, such as a series of photographs called *Study of Perspective* taken between 1995 until present, captures his middle finger being thrown at the State, other institutions, and landmarks around the world. However, the body of works created in consequence of the extensive Citizens’ Investigation took subversiveness to another level.

From 2008 to 2018, Ai created a large number of artworks using the found materials, information, and data gathered from the Sichuan earthquake Citizens’ Investigation.<sup>33</sup> Of course, none of these were ever exhibited in China.<sup>34</sup> The first of these is called *Remembering* (2009), a site-specific installation

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<sup>30</sup> The process of installation, removal, and mending was kept largely secret until the opening.

<sup>31</sup> “Doris Salcedo: Shibboleth.”

<sup>32</sup> Ben Westcott, “Tiananmen Square Massacre: How Beijing Turned on Its Own People,” June 3, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/02/asia/tiananmen-square-june-1989-intl/index.html>.

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.5122018.com> is one of Ai Weiwei’s websites that contains almost everything produced in relation to the Citizens’ Investigation as well as selected essays, interviews, and press release. The digits indicate the date of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Sichuan earthquake.

<sup>34</sup> Unlike most other contemporary artists, he does not produce one or few works at a time. With a large number of full-time assistants, he is able to create works for multiple major exhibitions around the world each year. Moreover, given that his interest extends to architecture and design, no publication and no

piece which does not immediately register as a politically contentious work. This 10m by 100m large installation was created to be displayed temporarily on the facade of the Haus der Kunst in Munich, which looks from afar like a huge colourful banner, with 15 Chinese characters in red, yellow, green, blue, and white. The artist chose the colours and the design, inspired by Toys R Us.<sup>35</sup> Upon close encounter, however, one may realize that the installation is made up of backpacks, 9000 brand new children's backpacks to be exact. The 15 Chinese characters translate as, "For seven years she lived on the earth," which was an utterance from a mother that Ai's team had recorded.

Ai's choice of using Chinese characters was intentional. Had he used German, it may have been regarded as just an enormous display on the museum façade, disrupting the otherwise usual facade of the museum. He expected visitors and passersby to take some extra steps to get to know the work. Moreover, in taking those extra steps, figuratively and literally, Ai hoped the weight of 9000 backpacks could be felt by visitors passing through them as they enter and exit the museum. One of the things that immediately stands out is the stark contrast between the crisp, clean appearance of these backpacks to the forsaken ones Ai encountered countless times at various earthquake sites. Another notable aspect is the anonymity. While the actual backpacks found at the sites have their own distinctiveness, the shape and size of these new backpacks are exactly the same. What can be discerned is that while the Citizens' Investigation project was focused on finding the individual names of students, their birthdates, and their school names, *Remembering* was about honoring *all* the young lives lost. There is no order of importance or any other distinction to be made amongst these neatly organized backpacks.

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exhibition could ever pull together his entire body of work in one platform. What is significant about this aspect is, on the one hand, his almost hyperactive presence in the art scene, media, and other online sites, a point which I will return to later, and, on the other hand, his feet on each side, that of art and the other of activism.

<sup>35</sup> Ai Weiwei, "Ai Weiwei: The Artwork that Made Me the Most Dangerous Person in China," *The Guardian*, February 15, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/feb/15/ai-weiwei-remembering-sichuan-earthquake>.



Figure 2 *Remembering by Ai Weiwei*. Photographed by Mar.tin on December 22, 2009. Retrieved from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/dermartin/4349783136>





Furthermore, covering the façade of this particular museum, which the architects had created for Hitler, was Ai's aforethought "political act."<sup>36</sup> Ai sought to make a remark against this dictator who disdained abstractionist, expressionist, and surrealist art. An added layer to this is how the Sichuan earthquake project was Ai's very first engagement with real-life tragedy and human rights through his art. Out of all the artworks created from this project, Ai notes working on this particular piece, *Remembering*, had the most profound impact on his course of life, and that he realized from that point on, making an artwork for him requires his life.<sup>37</sup>

During this exhibit, another significantly heavier—roughly 72 tons heavier—installation work was already under construction in his Beijing studio, which took more than three years to make. Unlike the clean, store-bought backpacks in his earlier piece, *Straight* (2008-12) is made of the mangled rebars from the earthquake zone which Ai purchased when the bars were earmarked for recycling.<sup>38</sup> These rusty steel bars were then transported to his large warehouse-size studio in Beijing and straightened by hand to bring them back to the state they were in prior to the construction.

Carefully laid out horizontally and in the same direction on the gallery floor in various heights, the steel bars form low valleys and mountains. As a whole, this massive work evokes eeriness. The bars may not immediately register as art to be viewed and studied upon first glance. Instead, they appear as though they are ready to be used again for another construction. Their dominant occupancy of an institutional space, however, makes it possible to regard them as an art installation, but still without a straightforward message or meaning to be found. It is only when the viewer becomes aware of their context that the work, in its entirety, performs as a memorial site for the lives lost. Piles of straightened construction material once utilized to build tofu buildings may begin to be seen as hurdled fragile bodies

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<sup>36</sup> Ai Weiwei, "Ai Weiwei."

<sup>37</sup> Ai Weiwei, "Ai Weiwei."

<sup>38</sup> Tim Marlow, John Tancock, Daniel Rosbottom, and Adrian Locke, *Ai Weiwei* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2015).



**Figure 3** *Straight* by Ai Weiwei. Photographed by Adrian Berg on September 28, 2013. Retrieved from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/aoberg/10149340653>



straightened to rest more peacefully, but piled up nevertheless in a form of mass grave, indistinguishable from one another. Due to its extreme weight, institutions that have exhibited the work thus far had to reduce its size as they feared that their exhibition spaces might collapse. There, unintentionally, some lives were excluded again, like the bodies that were never recovered.

Aside from *Remembering* and *Straight*, there exist at least 25 other works derived from the Citizen's Investigation project.<sup>39</sup> One of them is *Brain Inflation* (2009). These are two MRI images of his brain that Ai obtained from the hospital in Munich where he received an emergency surgery for a cerebral brain hemorrhage. This injury was caused in a police raid in the middle of the night when Ai and his assistants were asleep at a hotel, before testifying for the defense in the trial of Tan Zuoren the next day in Chengdu, China.<sup>40</sup> Another work he exhibited is *Illumination* (2009), a snapshot he took of himself using his cellphone camera while being taken away by the police officers. The image portrays the reflection of the mirrored surface of the elevator of the hotel.<sup>41</sup> He also created *Remembrance* (2010), a 443-minute-long audio work, which began as a Twitter campaign and later turned into a compilation of Ai's Twitter followers reading out the names of the victims of their own choosing. Furthermore, Ai created five documentary films, such as *Ai Weiwei: Lao Ma Ti Hua* (2009),<sup>42</sup> *So Sorry* (2012),<sup>43</sup> and *Never Sorry* (2012), which informed his foreign audience of what he had to undergo during and after the Citizens' Investigation project. For instance, it was a daily affair for them to be under surveillance wherever they were, as they continued to identify the young victims on situ and online. His team used small handheld cameras and camera equipped phones to capture what they underwent, which in *So Sorry*, for example,

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<sup>39</sup> <https://www.5122018.com/> lists 27 in total, including the documentary films.

<sup>40</sup> Marlow et al., *Ai Weiwei*. Ai recorded audio sound in that moment in the dark hotel room during the police raid.

<sup>41</sup> This selfie was used as a proof that police brutality did occur.

<sup>42</sup> Ai Weiwei, “艾未未工作室：老妈蹄花 (Ai Weiwei: Lao Ma Ti Hua),” aiweiweidocumentary, uploaded on January 3, 2011, YouTube video, 1:18:39, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TUizD8WDDFI>.

<sup>43</sup> Ai Weiwei, “So Sorry 深表遗憾》English Subtitles,” uploaded on December 16, 2012, YouTube video, 54:41, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MrL8WIHplqo>.

**Figure 4** *Names of the Student Earthquake Victims Found by the Citizens' Investigation by Ai Weiwei.* Photographed by Jonathan Beacher. June 6, 2012. Retrieved from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/jonathanbeacher/9862929285/in/photostream/>



appear to be used as means of documenting as well as protecting themselves, as weapons and shields against the authority. The films, which capture numerous confrontational moments in a montage of raw footage, unveil untold ethical, social, and political issues of China.

Last but not least, conceivably the most important findings of the Citizen's Investigation, the collected information on the identities of the young victims, became an art piece called *Names of the Student Earthquake Victims Found by the Citizen's Investigation* (2008-2011). The work itself is essentially laser printouts, white paper background and black fonts. It was exhibited in different formats

depending on the shape and size of the exhibition space. What he seems to have intended, though, is to display it on a large wall at every exhibition space so that it takes up as much square footage on the wall as that of the rusty rebar valley on the floor, evoking a memorial wall with engraved names of the dead. The not-so-simple, nor light, pieces of white paper displayed in this way show the enormity of the tragic event, the souls neglected by the government, and what taking an action against censorship and control can look like.

#### 4.5 The Acts of Mourning

*"I began to wonder if art could represent a death of death."*<sup>44</sup>

It was deadly quiet when I walked up to the second floor of the Art Museum of Chicago.<sup>45</sup> It may have been because of the absence of a group of tourists or children, or perhaps it was due to the heavy presence of guards in sea blue colour uniforms. The entire floor seemed to demand absolute silence. Or, perhaps, it was Salcedo's sculptures and installations that filled eleven exhibition spaces that commanded silent respect, so overwhelmingly to a point where I became immediately conscious

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<sup>44</sup> Doris Salcedo, "A Work in Mourning," in *Doris Salcedo*, ed. Julie Rodrigues Widholm and Madeleine Grynsztejn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), <https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/texts/a-work-in-mourning/>.

<sup>45</sup> This exhibition was held from February 21 to May 24, 2015.

of how I was breathing upon entering the first space. At the top of the stairs, *Plegaria Muda* (2008-2010), loosely translated as silent prayer, occupied the largest exhibition space. There were many random rows of wooden tables slightly different in colour neatly piled in pairs, the top one being upside down. From where I first stood, the tabletops created a thick horizontal weight across the room while being crisscrossed, with the four legs toward the floor and the other four pointing toward the ceiling. They were not intimidating in size, but rather in number and in their dark tone.<sup>46</sup> Upon looking more closely at the first table, I found a pleasant surprise awaiting. There were blades of green grass growing along the edges and between cracks of the dry wooden tabletop. Skeptical that it was real grass and mesmerized by the juxtaposition of colours, I moved my gaze to the sprouting green on every unit and found a soil-like substance rigidly packed between the tabletops.<sup>47</sup> The fascination over what seems to be an impossible kind of germination and growth of life lasted for some time until I found myself stuck in this maze-like arrangement of tables. I suddenly felt as though the spaces between the units seemed to close in on me, and became fearful of death among the (in)visible dead corpses, the coffins, and the cemetery.

When I looked around, a guard was quietly gesturing me toward a way out of the maze and toward the rest of the exhibition spaces, as if to say, “you are not the first one.” I collected myself, thanked him, and made my way to the next area, which led me to the other ten spaces. Although there was no more maze, the peculiar feeling of suffocation continued. As I walked through the rest of the exhibition space, which was filled with Salcedo’s acts of mourning for the dead, all protected by the heavy presence of guards and in an eerie silence, I found myself holding my breath and feeling like an uninvited guest who did not belong in their presence.

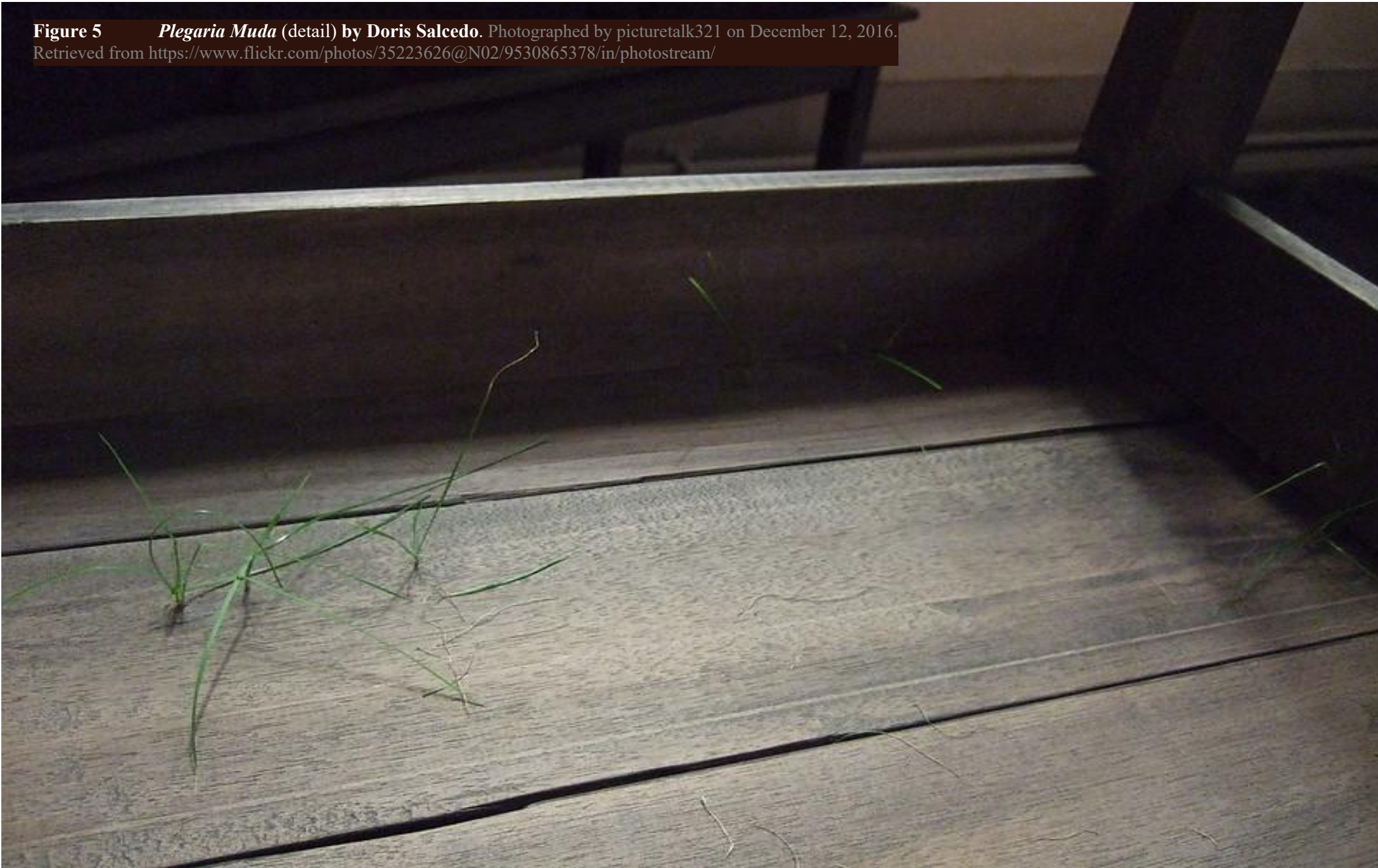
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<sup>46</sup> There were 71 units in this exhibit, but Salcedo made 166 units in total. Nevertheless, they were set up in a way that there would always be more of them than the number of visitors in the exhibition space.

<sup>47</sup> The substance is a mixture of concrete and soil. Concrete is one of the materials Salcedo utilizes most in her art. In this work, it is used more discreetly than in the other ones.



**Figure 5** *Plegaria Muda* (detail) by Doris Salcedo. Photographed by picturetalk321 on December 12, 2016.  
Retrieved from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/35223626@N02/9530865378/in/photostream/>



#### 4.6 Seeking after Freedom

Even before the Sichuan Earthquake, Ai was slowly and steadily gaining international fame. Three factors, however, contributed to putting him permanently on the global stage. One of them was Ai's and his followers' active use of social media. As he noted in his recent interview, "My entire life is social media. Without social media, "Ai Weiwei" simply does not exist. I live by social media. In a religious sense, it's not unlike the biblical reference to "the way, the truth, and the life."<sup>48</sup>

The second factor was the worldwide campaign, 'Where is Ai Weiwei?' that went on when Ai was taken away to an undisclosed location in 2011. This campaign drew attention to China's authoritarian regime and the artist at a global scale. After 81 days of solitary confinement and interrogations, all while being watched over by two guards 24/7 even when he was asleep at night, Ai was released and given a 2.4 million dollar fine for presumed tax evasion.<sup>49</sup> He was then put under house arrest with his passport taken away for 4 years. During that time and afterward, however, he did not stop making and exhibiting countless large-scale works of art around the world and he did so at an incredible speed. The sheer number of works he produced since then would be unimaginable for most artists, not to mention having places and funding available to exhibit them around the world.

The third factor is his outspoken and confrontational way of condemning an oppressive regime. This side of him can be vividly seen in his documentary films filmed in China as well as during the four years when he was under house arrest. For instance, he installed cameras in his own

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<sup>48</sup> Chris Wiegand, "Ai Weiwei: 'I Became the Enemy of the Established Power, But without a Crime'," interview by Wiegand, *The Guardian*, April 24, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/apr/24/ai-weiwei-hampstead-theatre-aiww-the-arrest-of-ai-wei-wei-streamed>.

<sup>49</sup> Ai turned this experience into two types of work. One of them is *SACRED*, scale dioramas in six iron boxes that depict the conditions he endured in detention. The other is a heavy rock album entitled *The Divine Comedy*.

house during the house arrest, subversively turning his life into an artistic medium and supplementing his own surveillance videos to those who voyeuristically wanted to watch him.<sup>50</sup>

When he received his passport back in 2015, he exchanged his regained freedom to leave the country as a Chinese citizen for another kind of freedom he had fought for, which was the freedom to critique his own government by whatever means possible. While keeping his residence and studio in Beijing, Ai initially moved to Berlin with his young wife and his son who was six at the time. After relocating, he taught at the University of the Arts and continued to produce a set of works that depicted his distinct feelings of nostalgia for the Mao era, which began prior to the Citizens' Project. He also turned his attention to what he deemed to be humanitarian crises happening elsewhere in the world. Some examples are: *Reframe* (2015), lifejackets wrapped around the Palazzo Strozzi museum in Florence; *Low of the Journey* (2017), a large black inflatable rubber lifeboat with anonymous figures installed at the Prague National Gallery; *Laundromat* (2016), an art installation of discarded items found at the refugee camps that have been cleaned and displayed in an organized manner; *The Human Flow* (2017), a documentary film on refugee crises in 23 countries; *Good Fences Make Good Neighbors* (2017), large public art works in New York on political divisiveness and nationalism; and *Ayotzinapa Case Chronology* (2019), on the disappeared bodies of 43 Mexican teachers and students from the Escuela Normal Rural de Ayotzinapa. His exile in Berlin did not last long. Witnessing the German government's lack of active response to the refugee crisis, he left the city leaving his art studio behind, an underground maze of 150-year-old underground beer cellars he had converted into a modern studio.

#### **4.7 Death-in-Life**

A period known as *La Violencia* in Colombia from 1948 to 1958 is one of the most horrific periods in history that put in full display how inhumane, how barbaric living beings in human form

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<sup>50</sup> Sorace, "China's Last Communist," 405.

can be. What is even more unfathomable is that Colombia's civil conflict existed prior to *La Violencia* and continues to exist to this present day.<sup>51</sup> Even without the official statistics, which do not exist and cannot ever be properly estimated, the impact of decades of extreme political violence on the people of Colombia is beyond comprehension.

Back in 1998, Salcedo was asked how she perceived her role as an artist, followed by this subsequent question: "Could we say that the work of art might play a part in enabling us to recognize difference and commonality, in order that we might understand both the specificity of the violence on the subject to whom you refer and an experience that may be common to us all?" She responded,

Living amongst war, my role is to think of war, both from the point of view of the victim and of the perpetrator. I am interested in war as a part of human history, as a central activity of all societies in the past as well as in the present. The enemies change, the forms of annihilation change, the weapons change, but the nature of war is the same. When I take the case of Colombia, I do so because that is the reality that I know best. I do not speak of the violence in Colombia from a nationalist perspective. I focus on the individual and not on the acts of violence that define the State. I am not interested in denouncing before an international audience what is happening in my country here and now. I am aware that art has a precarious capacity to denounce. Moreover, violence is present in the whole world and in all of us. As a result, I am interested in questioning the elements of violence endemic to human nature. Cruelty, indolence, and hatred towards others are universal. I look for the possibility of making the connection between the one particular and harsh event that takes place in Colombia and the equally cruel and harsh everyday life that takes place elsewhere.<sup>52</sup>

For over two decades, Salcedo's stance, orientation, and disposition regarding her role as an artist addressing war, violence, political issues, and the precarious capacity of art have largely remained the same. She notes how *Plegaria Muda*, for example, was her response to the death of over 2500 boys and young men from deprived areas between 2003 and 2009 who had been lured to their deaths by

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<sup>51</sup> Nick Miroff, "The Staggering Toll of Colombia's War with FARC Rebels, Explained in Numbers," *The Washington Post*, August 24, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/08/24/the-staggering-toll-of-colombias-war-with-farc-rebels-explained-in-numbers/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.3b06595d728b](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/08/24/the-staggering-toll-of-colombias-war-with-farc-rebels-explained-in-numbers/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.3b06595d728b); Claire Felter and Danielle Renwick, "Colombia's Civil Conflict," *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 11, 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/colombias-civil-conflict>.

<sup>52</sup> Doris Salcedo, "Artist's writings: Interview with Charles Merewether, 1998," in *Doris Salcedo*, eds. Nancy Princenthal, Carlos Basualdo, and Andreas Huyssen (London, UK: Phaidon Press, 2000), 141-142.



false job offers by the Colombian army which deceptively disguised them as killed in combat. These boys were told to change into false outfits to be presented as unidentified members of guerrillas, and then all were murdered for nothing else but reward money.

Around the time when Salcedo was researching this atrocity, she was also conducting research on gang violence in Los Angeles that had taken more than 10,000 lives of young boys in the span of two decades. *Plegaria Muda* came out of her intensive fieldwork, in which she spent months with families of the victims in LA as well as a group of Colombian mothers who were searching for their disappeared sons and identifying their abandoned bodies in mass graves.<sup>53</sup> Salcedo also remarked on how the majority of those affected, whether in Bogotá, Chicago, or LA, were already facing ““social death” or “death-in-life,” a condition in which people are not considered fully human nor afforded the same rights as others.”<sup>54</sup> Death-in-life is a kind of death that continues even if one makes it out alive and escapes the most treacherous condition because there awaits the next one: having no family to return to, going through the agony of losing another loved one, being imprisoned without proper evidence or trial, living maimed and displaced, or constantly being lured to do the most unthinkable. It is a kind of death that starts even prior to one’s birth, being born into a world occupied by victims of the victims of the victims suffering from irreversible moments in history caused and prolonged by thoughtlessness. It is a condition that makes perpetrators indistinguishable from victims.

#### **4.8 Conclusion**

What is the role of ‘political’ art and the role of the artist in contemporary society? How might we distinguish political art, a term broadly used to refer to works that deal with political subject matters, from art that works politically? How do different aesthetic strategies affect the ways in which the artists incite a sense of responsibility to face tragic events and educate the viewers about injustice,

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<sup>53</sup> Salcedo, “A Work in Mourning.”

<sup>54</sup> Salcedo, “A Work in Mourning.”

oppressive institutional power, and local and global conditions? Furthermore, what should be of concern when artworks are presumed as useful? These seemingly simple, yet complicated questions are some of the subset of questions of the two central guiding questions of inquiry that I thought with as I composed this chapter, and with which I will continue to quest after for the remainder of Part II.

To conclude this chapter, I return to the earlier sections as though I am making my way to exit the exhibition spaces while reflecting on what I had just encountered. As I do so, perhaps due to how the works were curated, I am led to making a comparative observation on the two artists and their artworks.

Ai regards himself only as an artist (not a political activist, rebel, or dissident) who uses art and social media platforms as mediums to participate in publicized political action that promotes democracy and recognizes the rights of all humans. His body of work puts a spotlight on what he deems to be violations of universal human rights, and his expectations from viewers are inscribed in the work, that they should do something to change the situation he presents to them. Art, to him, is a means of intervening in order to make this world a better place. Therefore, the artist expects there to be a reciprocal response, especially from those who are better off and are able to respond to the hardships around them. In his view, they must be willing and take actions to care about fellow human beings caught in all forms of cruelty and injustice.

Salcedo's work, on the other hand, exudes silence. The solemn quality of her work is not *silent* in terms of having nothing to speak of, but rather demands silence so that nothing but what is before the viewer is viscerally felt. For her, it is not about bringing justice to the parents nor ending the horrific conditions in Colombia or elsewhere through her art. She has accepted that certain profound crises are irresolvable, and her work, or any art or action, cannot change the reality. The role of an artist she seeks to take on instead is to give society tools of mourning for the total absence, that is, for the disappeared bodies deprived of proper burials or any public recognition. Each of her works is based on a specific event or events, "but they emphatically elide representation, preferring the visual

strategy of an aesthetics held in suspension.”<sup>55</sup> In other words, there is no “overdose of narrativity,” which allows her work to evade a form of static memorialization that is stuck in time.<sup>56</sup>

Ai, on the other hand, often puts into practice politically charged, reactionary responses since he deals with current events in his art. One of the leading causes can be attributed to several extreme conditions he lived through since he was a child. His intriguing life story begins with his famous father, Ai Ching. Prior to the Cultural Revolution, Ai Ching’s work was so prolific and renowned that he, for instance, made a state visit to Chile and spent time with Pablo Neruda at his house. But his life turned upside down when the revolution began. Ai’s family was sent to live in exile for twenty years, during which time Ai Ching was prohibited from writing anything. Born in the Mao era, young Ai Weiwei grew up with this literary mind prohibited from writing anything, yet whose innate sense to write was not taken away. What Ai Ching could not write, he spoke out loud to young Ai. Even while living under extreme conditions, in the desert in a hand dug out cave and making money by cleaning public toilets, Ai was greatly influenced by what his father offered him to hear. Ai underwent another form of exile in New York in the 80s and 90s, where everything seemed possible. For over a decade, he had the opportunity to live with freedom of expression, but then went back to Beijing, where the most boundaryless contemporary art was starting to flourish under the authoritarian government. He, again, now lives in exile in Europe while his former lawyers are serving prison sentences or waiting to be sentenced in China.

Salcedo’s main concern does not lie in monumentalizing tragic events, nor is she “interested in denouncing before an international audience what is happening in [her] country here and now,” for she believes “art has a precarious capacity to denounce.”<sup>57</sup> She is more concerned with showing respect to

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<sup>55</sup> Bal, “Of What Cannot Be Said,” 13.

<sup>56</sup> Mieke Bal, “One,” in *Louise Bourgeois’ Spider: The Architecture of Art-Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 3.

<sup>57</sup> Salcedo, “Artist’s writings.”

the dead, with “art that does not belong to her ... as means to affect the world outside herself.”<sup>58</sup> Like Ai, Salcedo is calling on collective responsibility, but unlike him, it is not about taking immediate action in the domain of the ethical and the political. It is instead about recognizing the absence generated by those who have been forcibly made absent.<sup>59</sup> It is an act of “rub[bing] the past into the present ... [that] blocks the process of forgetting” and in so doing, her art is able to “bear the traces of the horror encrusted, scarred, or entombed in the work.”<sup>60</sup> Her approach, thus, is to fervently *resist* making art that forcefully induces compassion.

Contrary to Salcedo, Ai is after actualizing the possibility of eradicating human cruelty against fellow human beings. To put it differently, Salcedo accepts violence is inevitable and exists everywhere, and thereby focuses on mourning the dead. Her intent is to recognize the past that continues in the present. Ai, on the other hand, uses his art to engage with political discourse. Much of the public appearance he makes through his art and his spoken and written words are means of communicating on behalf of victims to those who can afford to do something about the problems he has identified, yet about which they are doing nothing.

As I transition over to Chapter 5, where I will delve deeper into the relationship between art and politics by specifically examining Ai Weiwei’s work from various perspectives from the domain of contemporary art, I end this chapter with the following preliminary concluding remarks. Despite their differences, both artists engage with the world through their art. They take up the role of an interpreter who seeks to make the intangible tangible. In so doing, they actively seek to bring attention to that which may be forgotten or ignored in ways that only art makes it possible.

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<sup>58</sup> Mieke Bal, “Research Practice: New worlds on Cold Cases,” in *What is Research in the Visual Arts? Obsession, Archive, Encounter*, eds. Michael Ann Holly and Marguard Smith (Williamstown, Mass: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2008), 7.

<sup>59</sup> Salcedo, “A Work in Mourning.”

<sup>60</sup> Bal, “Research Practice,” 3.

## Chapter 5: Meeting Place between Artistic Practice and Political Practice

### 5.1 Introduction

What makes a work of art political, and how might this be different from conceiving a work of art as that which works politically? In the previous chapter, I presented a number of ways in which Ai Weiwei and Doris Salcedo deal with political matters in their artistic practice. I made a conscious effort to refrain from making any suggestions as to what makes an artwork more “political” than the other, because, as this chapter will illustrate, drawing such a conclusion (if at all possible) requires “enlarged mentality”<sup>1</sup> to think about the meaning of “political” itself.

When something is described as “political,” it has various implications, for instance that: it is related to governmental affairs, it is a form of advocacy, or it deals with a disputable object of concern. What else does this word imply? When all art is proclaimed as political, as Ai has done for instance, questions arise: Is all art indeed political? Is being political an ontological condition of art? Does such a claim suggest that art is always expected to do something?

This second chapter of Part II casts a net to examine aestheticization of politics and the aesthetics as a political terrain by taking into consideration debates on the political involvement of artists and asking, what does it mean to *act* in the public realm through art?

What makes this venture challenging is that there is no single clear definition of aesthetic or contemporary art, and, further, the notion of *political action* has more layers to be revealed in the following chapter. Contemporary art, for instance, is “defined and institutionalized as a sphere of common experience at the very moment that the boundaries between what is and isn’t art [is] being

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<sup>1</sup> For Arendt, this means “being and thinking from my position where actually I am not.” (Cited in Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” 241.

erased.”<sup>2</sup> As for aesthetics, it might be best described with the question posed by Rancière: “How can the notion of ‘aesthetics’ as a specific experience lead at once to the idea of a pure world of art and of the self-suppression of art in life, to the tradition of avant-garde radicalism and to the aestheticization of common experience?”<sup>3</sup> Inquiring into politically engaged art in its multiple facets, I believe, however, is a significant step to put into question some of its preconceived understanding and to further ponder upon some of the questions I had posed earlier.<sup>4</sup>

I intentionally leave out Arendt’s account of the arts as well as that of political action. It will be in the next two subsequent chapters where: I examine if indeed she aestheticized action as her critics claim she did, and I attempt to understand why Arendt posited “works of art [as] the most intensely worldly of all things” in relation to the durability of our common world and political action. Thus, although much relevance can be drawn from her work, here in this chapter, I seek to concentrate only on the contemporary art discourse on the interrelated relationship between art and politics, which in itself is a rough terrain that requires intense focus to explore. I also do not set out to make connections to art education nor bring about educational or pedagogical value of art. Such connection, which has been made implicitly thus far, will be made explicit in the concluding chapter, where it properly belongs.

To navigate through this challenging venture with rough terrain then, I first introduce a perspective offered by a Russian philosopher and art critic, Boris Groys, followed by a Belgian political theorist,

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<sup>2</sup> Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey, “Art of the Possible: An Interview with Jacques Rancière,” *ARTFORUM* 45, no. 7 (March 2007), <https://artforum.com/print/200703/fulvia-carnevale-and-john-kelsey-12843>.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (London and New York: Continuum, 2015), 116.

<sup>4</sup> What is the role of ‘political’ art and the role of the artist in contemporary society? How do different aesthetic strategies affect the ways in which the artists incite a sense of responsibility to face tragic events and educate the viewers about injustice, oppressive institutional power, and local and global conditions? Furthermore, what should be of concern when artworks are presumed as useful? How might we distinguish ‘political’ art, a term broadly used to refer to works that deal with political subject matters, from art that works politically? (From 4.8 and 5.1)

Chantal Mouffe, and that of French philosopher, Jacques Rancière. I then turn my gaze back to Ai Weiwei who is often identified as an emblematic figure of art activist today. I offer multiple readings of Ai's work from various fields of study (i.e. philosophy of art, art history, art criticism, political theory, and political science), from those who criticize the *pathos*-driven quality of his work, to those who place an emphasis on the lived experience of the artist in evaluating Ai's work. I begin with the following section that portrays the tension between what is expected of artists and that of the worldly and public matters they create.

## 5.2 Aestheticization, Art Activism, and Art's Usefulness

The phenomenon of contemporary art activism, Boris Groys observes, is different from critical art in the past few decades that was about criticizing the systems or conditions under which these systems exist.<sup>5</sup> The focus of this new phenomenon shifted to bringing changes in reality itself through political and social protests. What this shift implies for Groys is that artists seek to embody dual roles: as art activists who seek to change the world by being *useful*, and as artists who, traditionally speaking, engage in *useless* activity seek to refashion that activity itself *useful*.<sup>6</sup> Groys posits this combination of art and social action as a historically new position where he sees political, theoretical, and practical problems arise. For example, for those who follow the intellectual tradition of Walter Benjamin and Guy Debord, “the use of art for political action necessarily aestheticizes this action, turns this action into a spectacle and, thus, neutralizes the practical effect of this action.”<sup>7</sup> In this interpretation, art, by becoming “useful,”

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<sup>5</sup> Boris Groys, “On Art Activism,” *e-flux Journal*, 56, (June 2014), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/56/60343/on-art-activism/>.

<sup>6</sup> For some groups in the art community, Groys' description of art as “useless” may sound derogatory. In the Arendtian sense, it connotes that the making of art belongs in the private realm, because it is not considered a form of action nor created for an immediate need.

<sup>7</sup> Groys, “On Art Activism.”

undoes what it wants to achieve and what it wants to be, and art as such may be argued that it is no longer art.<sup>8</sup>

Groys, thus, suggests analyzing the meaning and political function of the word “aestheticization” from two opposing traditions of aestheticization to clarify where he considers art activism to stand and act: one of them is “the politicization of aesthetics rooted in political design,” and the other is “the aestheticization of politics rooted in modern art.”<sup>9</sup>

In the first domain, aestheticization connotes making the object or event more appealing and agreeable to the masses. Groys defines “the whole art of the premodern past as, actually, not art but design.”<sup>10</sup> As does Rancière, Groys states that art as we know it today started in the 18<sup>th</sup> century during the French Revolution, but unlike Rancière, he places emphasis on death, or the end, stating that it started when the French Revolutionary government decided to turn the objects of the Old Regime into “not of use but of pure contemplations” through the method of aestheticization.<sup>11</sup> Unlike the usual method of iconoclasm, what they did, Groys writes, was a “violent, revolutionary act” leading to the emergence of art “as the death of design.”<sup>12</sup> Today, well-designed commodities have become ubiquitous, whether they may be the next million dollar products on the market, like mobile devices, or an electoral campaign that requires professional image making. Art activism, in this sense, uses art as political design to change the status quo; that is, to improve reality. According to Groys, this is a legitimate use of art, especially during the present time of political upheaval when design has become an integral part of our culture.

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<sup>8</sup> This point of contestation is also of consideration for education as discussed in Chapter 1.

<sup>9</sup> Groys, “On Art Activism.”

<sup>10</sup> Groys, “On Art Activism.”

<sup>11</sup> Groys, “On Art Activism.”

<sup>12</sup> Groys, “On Art Activism.”



In the second domain, aestheticization in art is not about improving the status quo, as is the case with design, but “accept[ing] the status quo as dysfunctional, as already failed.”<sup>13</sup> Groys notes how an artist such as Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, who is known for his Futurist Manifesto published in 1909, did not write this manifesto or make his art to aestheticize modernity, but instead, did so as if “imagining himself in the ditch of History” from a retrospective view looking at progress-driven modernity as a total catastrophe.<sup>14</sup> According to Groys, what thus makes modern and contemporary art undesirable by many is that art in this second domain does not strive to be creative, that is, to aim for the better, but “to reveal the invisible presence of death where we tend to see only life.”<sup>15</sup> In order to bring true transformations, he believes contemporary art activism should embrace artistic aestheticization in the second sense that goes against the logic of market economy, against the widely accepted views on progress and adapting the backward glance as if the end is here. He asserts, “in our contemporary world, only art” that embodies this tradition of the aestheticization of politics “indicates the possibility of revolution as a radical change beyond the horizon of our present desires and expectations.”<sup>16</sup>

For those who regard art activism as lacking practical implications, Groys’ theoretical proposition might leave a gap to be filled. After all, to accept his proposition as an art activist is one thing, but to do so as a spectator is another. It is to wake up from more than a century-old hypnosis mired in the new, and to see reality as if it is already in the past, and to learn to view the present as already obsolete. Moreover, while Groys offers a perceptive view on how art came to be, he brushes aside the other side of criticism art activists often face: “the morally good intentions of art activism substitut[ing] for artistic quality.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Groys, “On Art Activism.”

<sup>14</sup> Groys, “On Art Activism.”

<sup>15</sup> Groys, “On Art Activism.”

<sup>16</sup> Groys, “On Art Activism.”

<sup>17</sup> Groys, “On Art Activism.”

He outright rejects this criticism because he believes “all criteria of quality and taste were abolished by different artistic avant-gardes” in the twentieth century.<sup>18</sup> To him, what is art or non-art is not of consideration, and in this light, “what makes art, art?” is a dead question. I believe the conundrum, however, is that art becomes nothing and everything for those who view art through the lens of is and is not in reading Groy’s paper, as well as for those who accept art as anything and everything that does something to affect the status quo and our perception.

### 5.3 Beyond Critical Art

#### 5.3.1 Mouffe: Agonistic Public Spaces

How else might we approach the relationship between politics and art? In this section, I examine perspectives offered by Chantal Mouffe, and more closely, by Jacques Rancière. One of their similarities is that they were both invited by the art community to share their insights, and the other is that they both make a distinction between so-called critical art and art that is more than critical. Mouffe strictly resided in the domain of political theory until *On Political: Thinking in Action* was published in 2005.<sup>19</sup> The book consists of no reference to art or aesthetics, but nevertheless led her to being invited to speak at museums, art schools, and biennale.<sup>20</sup> She admits this experience has led her to step into the realm of art and begin drawing connections between her agonistic politics and artistic practices.<sup>21</sup> Aligned with her political

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<sup>18</sup> Groy, “On Art Activism.”

<sup>19</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *On Political: Thinking in Action* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*. (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2013), xiv.

<sup>21</sup> Rancière experienced something similar. “Rancière first gained recognition in the international field of contemporary art after the invitation by Marten Spänberg, a Swedish performer and choreographer, to extend his previous reflections on the theme of emancipation to the fields of aesthetic pedagogy and the contemporary condition of spectatorship.” (Cited in Nikos Papastergiadis, “A Breathing Space for Aesthetics: An Introduction to Jacques Rancière,” *Theory, Culture, & Society* 31, no. 7/8 (2014), 5.) It is perhaps no coincidence that they gained attention from the art world when many were trying to grapple with the world in

theory on antagonism, Mouffe upholds those artistic practices that can “contribute to the counter-hegemonic challenge to the neo-liberal hegemony.”<sup>22</sup> This implies the need to differentiate between what counts and does not count as critical art that uses an agonistic approach, which necessitates “scrutinizing the role of critical art practices in the public space.”<sup>23</sup> For Mouffe, all art activism<sup>24</sup> performs critique in public spaces, but what sets artistic practices with agonistic approach apart from the rest is that they do not aim to achieve a final reconciliation or consensus through rationalist appeal or lifting false consciousness to reveal so-called true reality. The kind of counter-hegemonic intervention she envisions is one that can be “a strategy of ‘disarticulating’ the existing ‘common sense’ and fostering a variety of agonistic public spaces.”<sup>25</sup> She explains this strategy using Alfredo Jaar’s project for the Skoghall Konsthall in 2000. His “pedagogical strategy” for this work, Mouffe claims, “never impos[es] his own vision, but instead bring[s] people to articulate their own needs,”<sup>26</sup> and he does this “by setting in motion a process that will make them question their unexamined beliefs ... by awaking consciousness of what is missing in their lives and by bringing them to feel that things could be different.”<sup>27</sup> This interpellation, she argues, “transforms people’s consciousness by acting on their sensations.”<sup>28</sup>

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the state of chaos after 9/11, following U.S. President George W. Bush’s proclamation of a “war on terror,” as well as media release of photos of torture being done to prisoners of Abu Ghraib.

<sup>22</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 91.

<sup>23</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 91.

<sup>24</sup> The terms she uses to refer to critical art practices are artistic activism, artistico-activism, and activism. The term *political art* covers a wider range. It is often used to denote art that deals with politics as its medium or subject matter, as well as art that has the capacity to intervene. Lucy Lippard, for example, distinguishes political art as socially concerned art and activist art as socially involved art, while Claire Bishop and Tania Bruguerra recently published a book titled *Political Time Specific Art* that calls for art that could have an immediate impact on an issue at hand as the event unfolds.

<sup>25</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 94-95. This statement sounds very much like Rancière, but to my knowledge, neither of them mentions the other in their work.

<sup>26</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 96.

<sup>27</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 95.

<sup>28</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 97.

According to Mouffe's envisaged counter-hegemonic art, what becomes discernible is why Ai and other artist activists tend to experience inefficacy of their effort. For instance, Ai indeed has expressed his disappointment on many occasions for government's lack of involvement in making humanitarian efforts despite their capacity to do so, whether it may be that of China or Germany or another nation. From Mouffe's perspective, Ai's direct confrontational approach is likely going to be an ineffective way of "subverting the existing configuration of power,"<sup>29</sup> because it pursues direct response from the viewers to recognize the ill and to treat every human being as a human being. Such forms of political art, created to be useful with an aim that seeks to arouse the viewers to act in concert, is what Mouffe considers to be a kind of ethical work that will never bring an end to injustice. In her view, unless one acknowledges the inherent antagonism, the perpetual cycle of remaining in the domain of problems will continue. What alternative is there then?

### **5.3.2 Rancière's Suitable Political Art: The Ethical, the Representational, and the Aesthetics**

If Mouffe utilizes political art to supplement her political theory, Jacques Rancière offers a considerably more complex and expansive understanding of distinction between critical art and art that is beyond critical, or that which works politically. Based on his decades of scholarship around the politics of aesthetics, not as a philosopher of art, but rather as an outsider of the art world, Rancière has long been making his own observations about the politics of art. These observations were made not to directly speak of art or politics, but to conduct historical and political research that focuses on the aesthetic dimension of political experience: in particular, analysis of the worker's movement in 19<sup>th</sup> century France.<sup>30</sup> It was

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<sup>29</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 105.

<sup>30</sup> Rancière frequently denotes his dissertation, *La Nuit des prolétaires. Archives du rêve ouvrier*, published in 1981, as the point at which he began to understand how aesthetics functions. The English translation became available in 1989 under the title, *The Nights of Labor: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*.

unintentional that he came to be referred to as “a political philosopher” and “a philosopher of art,” because it was through the course of his research and presenting his own work over the years that the “requests [were] made by persons who thought that, out of [Rancière’s] unidentified field of research and mode of presentation, something could be recycled in the usual terms of political or aesthetic theory.”<sup>31</sup> Through answering these demands, he further drew analogies between the political and artistic fields where, as he did with his first and subsequent works, he noticed *time* and *space* to be fundamental and at the core of the whole affair.<sup>32</sup> Investigation of time and space for him is an aesthetic topic that questions *a police order*, that is, what is prescribed as possible and not possible, who can and cannot, and what is sensible or not sensible. Aesthetics, in other words, is a form of politics for Rancière, and, in turn, politics means not a theory of parties and policies, but instead the enactment of disrupting this police order.<sup>33</sup>

In line with his understanding of aesthetics, Rancière defines “the dream of *a suitable political work of art*” as “disrupting the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable ... that would transmit meanings in the form of a rupture with the very logic of meaningful situations.”<sup>34</sup> What this implies is that,

*Suitable political art* would ensure, at one and the same time, *the production of a double effect*: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification. In fact, this ideal effect is always the object of a negotiation between opposites, between the readability of the message that threatens to destroy

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<sup>31</sup> Jacques Rancière, “From Politics to Aesthetics?” *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* 28, no.1 (2005), 18. He earned *critic* as one of his labels which he finds to be “controversial because unlike the art critics, he is not working with the established frameworks and criteria to judge what is and is not art or high art and low art. (From Jacques Rancière, “Machete Interviews Jacques Rancière: Farewell to Artistic and Political Impotence,” *Machete* 1, no. 3 (December 2009), <http://www.marginalutility.org/publications/zines/2009/machete-zines-december-2009/>.)

<sup>32</sup> Rancière, “From Politics to Aesthetics?” 19.

<sup>33</sup> Rancière’s definition of politics, as discussed in the last chapter, is that which intervenes and interrupts the police order to shift the distribution of the sensible, or partition of the sensible.

<sup>34</sup> Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, 59, emphasis added.

the sensible form of art and the radical uncanniness that threatens to destroy all political meaning.<sup>35</sup>

For Rancière, then, what distinguishes political art that is critical from that which is suitable is this “double effect” that emphasizes the temporality of the state in which suitable political art reaches its dream. Moreover, this suitable political art’s highest aim has no set criteria, because such art cannot be predetermined to attain a certain form of efficacy.<sup>36</sup>

This is where aesthetics come into play. What Rancière terms “the aesthetic regime” refers to “a specific mode of the possibility of works, combining forms of visibility and enunciative possibilities. It is a system of relations between *doing*, *seeing*, *saying* and *sensing*.”<sup>37</sup> In an interview, Rancière defines the politics of aesthetics as follows:

[It] means that ... the work is an implementation of an idea of the artist, which means that the work is an implementation of the relation of an artist to politics. But this does not mean at all that the artist can anticipate political effects of the work. Thus, the effect, the aesthetic effect, is not the effect of a work in the sense that a work should produce this energy for action of this particular form of deliberation about the situation. It’s about creating forms of perception, forms of interpretation.<sup>38</sup>

Art that belongs in the aesthetic realm that bears upon politics, for Rancière, is neither the message nor the way it deals with issues and conflicts. Such art has to do with reframing configured time, material, and symbolic space.<sup>39</sup> It “*suspends* the ordinary connections not only between appearance and reality, but also between form and matter, activity and passivity, understanding and sensibility.”<sup>40</sup> Artists involved in

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<sup>35</sup> *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 63, emphasis added.

<sup>36</sup> Here, we might see some resemblance in Arendt’s definition of political action. This point will be further elaborated in the following chapter.

<sup>37</sup> Jacques Rancière, “What Aesthetics Can Mean,” in *From an Aesthetic Point of View: Philosophy, Art, and the Senses*, ed. Peter Osborne (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2000), 19, emphasis added.

<sup>38</sup> Rancière, “Machete Interviews.”

<sup>39</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009), 23-24.

<sup>40</sup> Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 30, emphasis added.

creating art that works with the politics of aesthetics are always in the pursuit of bringing into question the disappearance of political difference caused by homogeneity. Rancière's "philosophy of art" brings to our attention the precarity of the precariousness of political art, because the kind of political art he identifies as suitable has to constantly displace the boundaries within and outside of where it finds itself.

#### 5.4 Representational and Ethical Works of Art

Would Rancière categorize Ai Weiwei's body of work as suitable political art? It would be safe to assume that Rancière would identify the works presented in this dissertation as critical art, caught up in multiple police orders and "between two types of pedagogy: one that could be called *representational mediation*, and another that we might refer to as *ethical immediacy*."<sup>41</sup> The first one is referring to the efficacy of art that has to do with improving the behaviour of the spectators through representation. The underlying belief is that when the viewer sees a performance, an artwork, or a book, the viewer will then understand the intention of the artwork and be compelled and mobilized to do that which it incites. Whatever strategies and practices artists employ, the assumption here is that art can be politically effective and pedagogical.

He describes the second one, the ethical immediacy, also as "archi-ethical," which is "to have all living bodies directly embody the sense of the common."<sup>42</sup> The ethical turn in politics and in art, to him, is not something to be joyful about because it has resulted in dissolving the specificity of political and artistic practices, the distinctions between fact and law, between what is and what ought to be.<sup>43</sup> What concerns him is not only the consensual order as a consequence, but also "the reduction of art to the

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<sup>41</sup> Jacques Rancière, "The Paradoxes of Political Art," in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), 137, emphasis added.

<sup>42</sup> Rancière, "Paradoxes of Political Art."

<sup>43</sup> Jacques Rancière, "The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics," in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (London and New York: Continuum), 184.

ethical witnessing of unrepresentable catastrophe.”<sup>44</sup> This ethical turn in his view countermanded the orientation of time from the revolution to come to the catastrophe of the past; from the promise of collective future emancipation to fighting for the infinite justice that places itself above the law that looks back.<sup>45</sup>

Under these sets of conditions, Rancière would likely posit that Ai’s work is representationally and ethically critical, because the kind of disruptions Ai initiates insist on prescribing political messages. While there is no doubt that his body of work has had an impact on shifting gazes and questioning police orders for some, it only temporarily exercises the politics of aesthetics as it is soon overpowered by its representational and ethical qualities. To underline: For Rancière, the distinction between ethical, representational, and aesthetic is not about setting up a hierarchy or permanent categorical boundaries between different types of art. He understands that boundaries shift and do not remain unchallenged, since the alternative is for it to remain conformed under the police order. Rancière also recognizes there are overlaps amongst the representational, ethical, and aesthetic, and that it is not a simple matter of inciting antagonism. For him, what is at stake is a politics of aesthetics that reconfigures time and space to contest the givenness of the perceived reality. He is, thus, *not* advocating for blurring boundaries where all things are possible, because without the police order, his proposals are meaningless. To question the distribution of the sensible, boundaries must exist in the first place. More importantly, these boundaries or police orders are not permanent doctrines that govern how, what, when, where, or why things should be as such.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Rancière, “The Ethical Turn,” 201.

<sup>45</sup> An article, “Contemporary Art on the Current Refugee Crisis: The Problematic of Aesthetic Versus Ethics” written by Balca Arda, directly addresses Ai’s work using Rancière’s distinction between aesthetic art and ethical art.

<sup>46</sup> I further address Rancière’s police order in relation to his criticism toward Arendt’s separation of realms in the following chapter.



To further explicate what might be considered beyond critical art from yet another perspective, I share two art critics' views of Ai's recent exhibitions in the following section. Then, in the final section, I introduce two more perspectives offered by philosopher Jason Miller and political science scholar Christian Sorace. Miller proposes a different spin on Rancière's argument, and Sorace brings forth a cultural emphasis to re-read Ai's controversial body of work.

## **5.5 Criticisms from the Art Critics: Consumable Humanitarian Political Kitsch**

Ai Weiwei, as noted earlier, is frequently referred to as a dissident and an activist artist in the Western contemporary art world and in mainstream media. Although he became more well-known after 2008, earning the title of "a Chinese dissident artist" due to the events leading up to and following the Sichuan earthquake, he has long engaged in creating and exhibiting works that were provocative. One of the major changes in his artistic practice that took place after 2008 is that his body of work became much larger in scale. Major contributing factors discussed in the previous chapter include: the fast-changing conditions of China as the country embraced capitalism; the widespread public use of the Internet; the Beijing Summer Olympics; and his 2011 captivity by the Chinese government that led to a worldwide campaign, "Where is Ai Weiwei?". These conditions created a perfect setting for the artist to unleash many of his interests, including architecture, design, filmmaking, album production, and book publications, and it was only a matter of time before his artistic practices would become amplified in every aspect, from the number of assistants in his studio and the scale of his exhibition sites, to the kind of impact his work has had with his large-scale projects. Ironically, or perhaps predictably, these changes mirror what his country itself went through as China sought to dominate the global market.

Another major change is that Ai refrained from making direct harsh, confrontational comments toward his own government following his release from captivity. The lens through which he has sought to make art has remained largely the same—that is, making art that makes critical social and political commentary on spectacles he witnesses—but his critical gaze on his country was forcefully shifted to

elsewhere. The latest documentary film, *Human Flow* (2017), for example, depicts displaced people in 23 countries who are fleeing from human-made crises, such as famine and war. Ai also created other large-scale sculptures and installations on these issues and others. Simultaneously, he paid attention to another refugee crisis, one that is happening along the border of the United States and Mexico.<sup>47</sup> On this issue, he was given the largest public commission in New York City to create outdoor installations. Within the same span of a few years, countless more were made and exhibited, not to mention ongoing exhibitions of his previous works around the world. The amount as well as the speed at which these artworks were created and exhibited appeared as though Ai considered them as a means to reflect the urgency of political and social situations that he saw unfold. All the while, he kept up with a strong presence in social media, participated in protests, appeared in public venues to give talks, and was interviewed for his views on diverse political battles and movements around the world.

Despite being named one of the most influential artists alive<sup>48</sup> and being constantly invited to hold major exhibitions, reception of Ai's work is conflicted. There are critics who denounce Ai as an artist and regard his work as being kitsch, ineffective, or overtly reactionary. For instance, in an article, "Noble and Ignoble," with a subtitle "Ai Weiwei: Wonderful Dissident, Terrible Artist," art critic Jed Perl<sup>49</sup> states Ai does not qualify as an artist for several reasons. In his view, Ai has been ascending to the

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<sup>47</sup> A national tragedy occurred when 43 student teachers from Ayotzinapa in Guerrero state were first kidnapped and possibly murdered by drug smugglers. Like Dolcedo's victims, the disappeared bodies of these young men have not been found. Ai created an investigative documentary film along with portraits of them using Lego blocks. He titled the exhibition "Resetting Memories." (Cited in MUAC, "Ai Weiwei: Resetting Memories," National Autonomous University of Mexico, accessed April 13, 2019, <https://muac.unam.mx/exposicion/ai-weiwei?lang=en>.)

<sup>48</sup> For example, Ai was ranked 43rd in *The Art Review* "Power 100" in 2009, 13th in the following year, and 1st in 2011 as well as a runner-up *TIME* Person of the Year in the same year. (Cited in Marlow et. al.)

<sup>49</sup> Jed Perl, "Noble and Ignorable: Ai Weiwei: Wonderful Dissident, Terrible Artist," *The New Republic* (February 1, 2013), <https://newrepublic.com/article/112218/ai-wei-wei-wonderful-dissident-terrible-artist>.

global stage largely because of what happened as a result of Citizen's Investigation and also the Bird Nest Olympic Stadium he co-designed with Herzog and de Meuron as the official artistic consultant of the Beijing Olympics.<sup>50</sup> Another reason is because of what he perceives to be Ai's relatively short and insufficient CV prior to his sudden stardom. Third, a harsher reason is because Perl perceives Ai to be lacking creativity and originality even though Ai is hailed as prolific, courageous, and influential in the eyes of many other prominent figures in the art world. The artist has publicly shared numerous times that his artistic practice is largely influenced by artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Robert Rauschenberg,<sup>51</sup> but Perl criticizes Ai nonetheless for making so-called art that constantly borrows works of American artists utilizing the American "original" idea to make Ai's own ready-mades that are "true post-Duchampian practice."<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, he accuses Ai of being "an extraordinarily self-possessed naïf" who does not understand and has never experienced what John Berger refers to as the "limits" a real artist constantly grapples with.<sup>53</sup> Ai's "purely instrumental" and "blunt and programmatic" ways of creating his "postmodern minimalist political kitsch, albeit in the name of a just cause" is problematic for Perl, particularly when "[Ai] poses a threat to the artistic universe he dreams of inhabiting."<sup>54</sup> Perl makes it evident that he is discontented with the ways in which art museum spaces are being exploited by "*a political activist ... [insisting] on pleading his case*"<sup>55</sup> and finding his main audience members in the West where infrequent museum goers are wowed by his overly explicit work that often deals with controversial topics.

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<sup>50</sup> Ai stepped down before the completion of the project.

<sup>51</sup> Doris Salcedo also considers Marcel Duchamp as one of the most influential figures in her artistic practice.

<sup>52</sup> Perl, "Noble and Ignorable."

<sup>53</sup> Perl, "Noble and Ignorable."

<sup>54</sup> Perl, "Noble and Ignorable."

<sup>55</sup> Perl, "Noble and Ignorable," emphasis added.

Another critic, Andrew Stefan Weiner, has expressed discontent for very different reasons toward Ai's four exhibitions that were on display at three different galleries in New York simultaneously.<sup>56</sup> He describes two of them, titled *2016: Roots and Branches*, "dull." Weiner observes,

there are enough recognizably "Chinese" elements ... to make his work appear culturally specific and thus semi-exotic, but not so many that it reads as unmodern or folkloric. The formal strategies ... are current enough to read as contemporary, but have enough art historical pedigree to be a safe investment. Politics recedes into the background.<sup>57</sup>

Regarding the third exhibit, *Laundromat* (2016), which to Weiner demonstrates more of "artist-activist commitments" because of its subject matter—the Syrian refugee crisis near the EU border between Greece and Macedonia—Weiner claims this, too, fails to offer "complexity" by "proclaim[ing] itself to be radical and urgent."<sup>58</sup> He comments further that while the work "can generate enormous *pathos* ... which lasts for a *long beat* ... [it] is soon overcome by a sense of ickiness," and therefore, "isn't going to change what one thinks or how one feels about the refugee crisis."<sup>59</sup> Last but not least, as does Perl, Weiner describes Ai's work as "kitsch" and writes, Ai is "pioneering a new form of humanitarian kitsch" that "caters to familiar expectations and is easily consumed; it aims to produce simple effects ...; it is constructed according to academic or institutionalized formulas."<sup>60</sup>

There are several points to be drawn from these critiques. What is obvious at the outset is indeed how prior knowledge and expectation play a large role in determining the quality of the work. In Perl's view, Ai simply does not have what it takes to be a real artist because of his background, lack of historical understanding, and copied artistic flair. As a gatekeeper, Perl seeks to maintain the high standard of the

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<sup>56</sup> Andrew Stefan Weiner, "Ai Weiwei's "Laundromat" and "Roots and Branches," *Art Agenda*, (December 20, 2016), <https://www.art-agenda.com/features/239589/ai-weiwei-s-laundromat-and-roots-and-branches>.

<sup>57</sup> Weiner, "Ai Weiwei's."

<sup>58</sup> Weiner, "Ai Weiwei's."

<sup>59</sup> Weiner, "Ai Weiwei's," emphasis added.

<sup>60</sup> Weiner, "Ai Weiwei's."

space of the museum he has in mind, even if remaining open depends on infrequent museum goers. Therefore, regardless of what, how, or why Ai creates, Perl is likely to find Ai's work distasteful and continue to disqualify his status as an artist. By contrast, Weiner had hoped to see a highly political body of work that has complexity and embodies what he deems to be important in Ai's artistic practice – a “Chinese” “rebellious” “contemporary” “political” “artist” who once directly and fearlessly challenged his authoritarian government and used art as means to do so. Weiner praises *Laundromat* to an extent, but again, he is dissatisfied with Ai's and/or *Laundromat*'s inability to move him sufficiently to act upon the injustice which the work explicitly calls the viewers to do. He had expected Ai's work to intrinsically move him and for others to join the cause, but instead was met with what seemed like an institutionalized formula-induced pathos that quickly turned into a kitschy display. These critics acknowledge the expansiveness of the body of work Ai has created across multiple genres, the brutality he suffered, the urgency of message the work seeks to convey, and the level of impact his work has had in raising awareness. These aspects are, however, insufficient for Ai's critics. What serves as the main criterion—that is, a ticket into “the artistic universe he dreams of inhabiting”—is having the ability to move beyond the domain of critical art that makes “a safe investment.”<sup>61</sup>

## 5.6 Recovering Political Potential from the Mao Years

Contrary to these critics, political theorist Christian Sorace offers more of an empathetic reading of Ai's body of work.<sup>62</sup> He asserts that Ai envisions a form of democracy in the vision of Chairman Mao and exposes a deeper dimension as to why and how Ai does what he does. Sorace remarks, Ai “draws significantly [on] China's communist heritage to inform his own egalitarian political desires and

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<sup>61</sup> Perl, “Noble and Ignorable.”

<sup>62</sup> Sorace, “China's Last Communist”; Christian P. Sorace, *Shaken Authority: China's Communist Party and the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake* (New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017).

conceptualizations of individuality as socially mediated; even his critical rhetorical style often sounds as if it had been lifted directly from Mao Zedong's *Little Red Book*.<sup>63</sup> This observation is drawn not only from the body of his visual work, but also from thousands of blog posts, images, tweets, as well as numerous interviews Ai gave via news media channels, independent press, and invited talks.<sup>64</sup> According to Sorace's account, Ai's pursuit—after fighting against human inflicted, systematic injustice—may be seen as an attempt at envisioning a different kind of political world in his country and other parts of the world. Westernizing China, Sorace argues, is not Ai's aim when he advocates for freedom of speech and human rights. Rather, "Ai's Maoism is ... the reclamation of political potential buried within [the Mao years]"<sup>65</sup> when "everyone is equal and a merciless criticism ... is always done in public."<sup>66</sup> Sorace raises an overlooked aspect of Ai's work which, we might say, was able to flourish particularly upon his return to China after having lived in New York. China was no longer the country he once lived in; it was undergoing massive economic and political transformations that resulted in a huge surge of interest in Chinese contemporary art. Sorace's analysis is indeed helpful especially in understanding the works Ai created while he was living in China, which demonstrate Ai's attempt to show actualization of political potential in public spaces.

One other insight I seek to conclude this chapter with is that of a rare critic of Rancière, Jason Miller. Miller posits "Rancière's programme of aesthetic antagonism" to be problematic in that it "place[s] unnecessary restraints on both the production and reception of contemporary art."<sup>67</sup> Miller, who traces back to Plato and Friedrich Schiller as Rancière has done, argues that Rancière's distinction is "a

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<sup>63</sup> Sorace, "China's Last Communist," 399.

<sup>64</sup> See *Ai Weiwei's Blog* and *Weiwei-ism*.

<sup>65</sup> Sorace, "China's Last Communist," 404.

<sup>66</sup> Sorace, "China's Last Communist," 406.

<sup>67</sup> Jason Miller, "Beyond the Middle Finger: Plato, Schiller and the Political Aesthetics of Ai Weiwei," *Critical Horizon* 17, no. ¾ (2016): 316.

false dichotomy between what he might refer to as the antagonistic [model] and affirmative [model] of political aesthetics.”<sup>68</sup> For instance, he questions the kind of ambiguity found in Rancière’s argument for artworks that employ aesthetic antagonism that “yield more inclusive and democratic forms of experience,”<sup>69</sup> and yet criticizes works of artists that fall within what Nicolas Bourriaud articulated as *Relational Aesthetics*,<sup>70</sup> which, broadly put, focus on reconfiguring existing relations and experiences to foster a new sense of community as well as going beyond object-centered art.<sup>71</sup> Another example Miller raises is the emphasis we place on the descriptive words in front of Ai Weiwei, that is, dissident *Chinese* or *dissident Chinese*. He argues it is important to not read Ai’s work strictly through the lens of political antagonism because doing so diminishes the complex interrelations of art and politics and, equally important, Ai’s role as a mediator between the cultural sphere and the political sphere.<sup>72</sup> Similar to Sorrace, he argues there lies the significance of recognizing the “confrontational aesthetic strategies” Ai employs as “part of a broader attempt to re-assert Chinese culture in a modern global context.”<sup>73</sup> In Miller’s view, aesthetic antagonism itself is not the issue, but rather, regarding it as the most important criterion for determining whether or not a work is suitable political art in contemporary artistic practice.

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<sup>68</sup> Miller, “Beyond the Middle Finger,” 305.

<sup>69</sup> Miller, “Beyond the Middle Finger,” 316.

<sup>70</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetic* (Dijon, France: Les Press Du Reel, Franc, 1998). Some of the artists are Rikrit Tiravanija, Felix Gonzales-Torres, Liam Gillick, etc.

<sup>71</sup> See also Jason Miller, “Activism vs. Antagonism: Socially Engaged Art from Bourriaud to Bishop and Beyond,” *Field: A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism*, 3 (Winter 2016): 165-183.

<sup>72</sup> Miller, “Beyond the Middle Finger,” 312.

<sup>73</sup> Miller, “Beyond the Middle Finger,” 319.

## 5.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented various facets of political art. Using Ai Weiwei as a primary example, I examined: what happens to art and its reception when the artist explicitly tries to raise social and political issues through his artistic practice and participation in public engagements? Can an artist and/or his work change the part of reality he sees by being useful and seeking to make his creations useful? What kind of obstacles, conundrums does an artist face in his desire to be a political actor, an active participant in the public realm? I took into account diverse perspectives of art critics, art theorists, political theorists, philosophers of art, and political philosophers to consider these questions in the hope of creating multiple points through which I may tackle the question of what it means to perform the second miracle in the contemporary world in the following chapter.

Several important contentious points surfaced in this effort. One of them is, as Groys notes, aestheticization and neutralization of action that occurs when an artwork is made to anticipate its political effectiveness. In his critics' view, Ai appears to use excessive ways of showing his political stance that attend to the needs of people, at times at the expense of exploiting art. Even if Ai is posited as a radical avant-garde artist who sees the need to compete against a constant decrease in public space and enormous appetite for the new, what does not change is their perceptions of him as a reactionary political artist. Another point is the complicated relationship between emotions and politics. The two art critics, for instance, although their views do not completely coincide, regard Ai's aesthetic strategies as insufficient precisely because of their dependence on pathos. The impact of artwork is reduced "to the anecdotal level and providing the viewer the opportunity to trade affect for pity and the need of a political change-of-heart into feel-good condescension."<sup>74</sup> Although his direct approach might be fitting for the media

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<sup>74</sup> Mieke Bal, "Research Practice: New worlds on Cold Cases," in *What is Research in the Visual Arts? Obsession, Archive, Encounter*, ed. Michael Ann Holly and Marguard Smith (Williamstown, Mass: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2008), 208.



platforms or in political protests, in their view, he needs to “rejec[t] the single-track emotional narrative”<sup>75</sup> for his art to work politically. Last but not least, related to the above two points is the call for artists to turn to the politics of aesthetic, that is, to focus on shifting the terrain of the sensible. Seen from Mouffe’s and Rancière’s views, Ai’s work simply seeks to be critical. Thus, according to Rancière’s distinctions, Ai’s work falls within the realms of ethical immediacy and direct representation instead of the realm of the aesthetic, where the artwork is able to incite new ways of questioning what is perceptible, sensible, or acceptable. There thus lies the difference between aestheticization and aesthetics. The former “opt[s] for a literal and anaesthetic sentimentality,”<sup>76</sup> while the latter is about art generating a kind of atmosphere, or a deep visceral impression, that leads to “the refutation of a situation’s given assumptions, the introduction of previously uncounted objects and subjects.”<sup>77</sup> What is expected of an artist, then, is to create works that trigger visceral responses, and bring about a surge of questions beyond the perceptible and known, and thereby, as Rancière proposes, “redefine our capacities for action.”<sup>78</sup>

What is interesting to note is how, over the years, Ai has repeatedly expressed that he does not like being referred to as a political artist or dissident. In fact, he believes it is “an insult,” because “art, any art if it were to be art, is inherently political.”<sup>79</sup> This raises new questions: what might be missing in these critics’ reading of Ai’s participation in the political? Further, when art is posited as *inherently* political, what other meaning(s) might this term “political” signify?

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<sup>75</sup> Jill Bennett, *The Practical Aesthetics: Events, Affects, and Art after 9/11* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 184.

<sup>76</sup> Bennett, *The Practical Aesthetics*, 186.

<sup>77</sup> Rancière, “Introducing Disagreement,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 9, no. 3 (2004): 7.

<sup>78</sup> Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey, “Art of the Possible.”

<sup>79</sup> Brooklyn Museum, “Brooklyn Talks: Ai Weiwei and Tania Bruguera,” (November 2, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MsZNiaJy2FE>; Despite what the artist says, many continue to compliment him for his outspokenness against his government and for his courageousness while seeking advice as to how to take on risky moves.

I believe I have dealt with the first question by looking into the influence of Ai's background and the contextual setting from which he engages with worldly affairs; from growing up as a young refugee with his famous father, Ai Ching, a literary mind who was forbidden to write for decades during the Cultural Revolution, to Ai's experience living in New York, to his return to a new China undergoing immense shifts in its contemporary art scenes. In addition, I took into consideration Christian Sorace's reading of Ai in which he posits that Ai's endeavor is about re-discovering the political potential of the Mao years when the public spaces existed in which everyone could critique anyone. As well, I included Jason Miller's critique of aesthetic antagonism to put into question what he perceives to be an unnecessary criterion placed on political art.

To tackle the second question as well as to explore the contentious points that surfaced as discussed above, I invite Hannah Arendt back into the discussion and focus on her notion of political action, the second miracle, in the next chapter. In so doing, I hope to be able to arrive at the underlying core question of this dissertation, which is, *what does it mean to love the world at a time like this?*

## Chapter 6: The Second Miracle: Aestheticization of Action?

### 6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I return to the notion of Hannah Arendt's hopeful and cautionary notion of *second miracle*, or "the one miracle-working faculty of man," that she called *action*.<sup>1</sup> I first presented this notion in the educational context in Chapter 3 as: 1) the second birth, that is, when an individual inserts oneself into the public realm to initiate something new, 2) something that everyone is capable of performing, 3) that which occurs when newcomers are ready to put forth their concern for the common world after having been acquainted with the world, and 4) that which occurs spontaneously with an unforeseeable outcome. In Chapters 4 and 5, I tacitly showed what performing a miracle might look like in the realm of contemporary art and its contingencies. In this chapter, I delve into this notion in the context of politics by using Arendt's critics' points of denunciation of her work as an entry point to take a closer look at why Arendt sought to redefine action (*vita activa*).

In what follows, I first lay out arguments raised by Arendt's contemporary critics, Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière, whose political writings from the 1980s to recent years have been influential in studies in a broad range of fields, including contemporary art and education. They are often referred to as antagonistic theorists who elicit debates about the significance of re-thinking what it means to participate in the political. Both critics place emphasis on the dimension of conflict in the political, which entails exposing and critiquing dominant narratives, institutional thinking and practices, and consensual order in everyday life. As well, they denounce the efficacy of Arendt's work in their perception of today's political sphere and in terms of dealing with numerous issues we are facing today.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Human Condition*, 246.

Rancière, in particular, explicitly claims Arendt's conceptualization of political action is inadequate as a basis for a true revolution.<sup>2</sup> I will first discuss Mouffe's central thesis, that we must first recognize the ineradicability of a conflictual dimension in social life. Then, I will discuss Rancière's reasons for disapproving of the recent resurgence of interest in Arendt's work, which he views as outdated and founded on an ontological presupposition that is caught in a vicious circle.

In the second half of this chapter, I illustrate why I believe Arendt's critics made their judgment on the "failure" of what was never meant to be considered a political project. In place of raising Arendtian objections, I present the complexity behind Arendt's intent on redefining action. To do this, I delve into several important aspects of her scholarly endeavor. I start with her critique of political philosophy, through which she sought to rethink the meaning of the political and rediscover *vita activa*. I then introduce Arendt as "a self-consciously marginal critic"<sup>3</sup> who neither followed a school of thought nor sought to establish one. This label, I contend, resembles what Mouffe refers to as a conflictual actor and what Rancière calls a supernumerary political subject. Third, I discuss Arendt's notion of *in-between*, which, like *miracle*, is briefly mentioned in her oeuvre. The three different kinds of in-between she denotes are worldly in-between, a subjective in-between, and a space in-between. Finally, I conclude the chapter with Arendt's contentious stance on emotions and politics, or more specifically, *love* and politics. I argue that considering these notable, yet not widely discussed aspects of Arendt's scholarly endeavor are significant in thinking about the second miracle, and, relatedly, about Arendt's provocative proposition that we must first be *concerned for the world* rather than being concerned for humanity.

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<sup>2</sup> This is based on his reading of Arendt's *On Revolution*.

<sup>3</sup> Disch, *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy*, 23.

## 6.2 Mouffe: The Ineradicability of Conflictual Dimension in the Social Life

One main proposition to be found in most of Chantal Mouffe's work is that we must recognize "the hegemonic nature of every form of consensus and the ineradicability of antagonism."<sup>4</sup> What does this mean? To explain it, Mouffe redefines "the political" and "politics," placing the former at the ontological level and the latter on the ontic level. She states, "by 'the political' I mean the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies, while by 'politics' I mean the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political."<sup>5</sup> With the notion of "the political," Mouffe seeks to assert the existence of *radical negativity*, arguing that the political always already constitutes "the ineradicability of the conflictual dimension in the *social life*."<sup>6</sup> She sees modern democratic political thinking and politics as being fraught with dangers because of the belief in a universal rational consensus through reconciliation, sociability, and reciprocity—or "a worldwide implementation of liberal democracy."<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, the notion of "politics" implies dealing with antagonistic arguments through consensus, which is located at the level of concrete practices. Politics, in her view, is futile because it suppresses conflicts rather than subdues them. It not only leads to an eventual dangerous explosion, but also cannot make an ontological dimension of social life disappear. In other words, Mouffe's resolute position is that no real changes can occur through the suppression of conflicts via the measures of politics

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<sup>4</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 11. She has made a similar argument, almost verbatim in most instances since the 1980s to the present.

<sup>5</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 9, emphasis added.

<sup>6</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 4, emphasis added. See also Chantal Mouffe, "An interview with Chantal Mouffe: Questions by James Martin," in *Chantal Mouffe: Hegemony, Radical Democracy, and the Political*, ed. James Martin (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 125.

that view consensual agreement as the final resolution. What primarily needs to occur, in her view, is accepting and recognizing the conflictual dimension of the political as the given ontological condition.

One of the main issues Mouffe sees in Arendt's vision of plurality is related to her belief in radical negativity. Mouffe acknowledges that Arendt's vision is agonistic. However, she points out "[Arendt] never acknowledges that this plurality is at the origin of antagonistic conflicts," and that "what [Arendt] looks for in Kant's doctrine of aesthetic judgment is a procedure for ascertaining inter-subjective agreement in the public space."<sup>8</sup> The difference Mouffe sees in her work is the establishment of a pluralistic world order via agonistic debate, which occurs at a shared symbolic space between adversaries who belong to the same political association.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, what she calls for is not consensus, but *conflictual consensus*—"consensus on the ethico-political values of liberty and equality for all, dissent about their interpretation."<sup>10</sup> She admits it is not easy to distinguish between antagonists and adversaries, and harder still to distinguish both from enemies who do not share the ethico-political principles.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, Mouffe believes her agonistic conception of the public space is crucial because such space, which is not singular but multiple, allows forms of hegemonic projects to be confronted without coming to a final reconciliation.

Is Mouffe right about the need to abandon the democratic belief in achieving intersubjective agreement? What new frame of reference does Mouffe's advocacy for radical democracy offer those who firmly believe in the collective action? One of the ways to consider these questions is by looking at how Mouffe problematizes the universalization of human rights. Borrowing Sousa Santo's notion of "mestiza" that allows for different formulations of human rights according to different cultures, what Mouffe insists

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<sup>8</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 10.

<sup>9</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 121.

<sup>11</sup> Mouffe, "An interview with Chantal Mouffe," 231.

on is a plural understanding of human rights instead of globally imposing Western conception of human rights.<sup>12</sup> For Mouffe, *mestiza* means recognizing the world as a pluri-verse, embracing a multipolar one without a central authority, and thereby acknowledging that the pluralistic nature of the social world has to do with raising political questions that do not, and cannot, result in rational solutions. Not only is Westernization problematic in her view, but also the belief in the possibility of coming together in agreement, as if any form of exclusion can be gone. To put it differently, Mouffe firmly maintains that political unification of the world is not achievable, nor should it ever be an aim.

Another dimension of her radical pluralist democracy involves believing that alternatives are infinitely possible, and that every dominant hegemonic order can endlessly be disarticulated by counter-hegemonic practices.<sup>13</sup> She notes this does not entail advocating for perpetual antagonistic conflicts because “[p]roper political questions,” she states, “always involve decisions that require making a choice between conflicting alternatives.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, proper political questions are not about averting confrontations by accepting all views, nor deciding harmoniously on the best solution based on reason. Instead, to raise proper political questions is to engage in the process of disarticulation via counter-hegemonic interventions; that is, an act of re-articulating a given situation in a new configuration.<sup>15</sup> This is why recognition of an ontological dimension of conflicts and power relations is integral to Mouffe’s work.

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<sup>12</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 125-126.

<sup>13</sup> It is with this dimension of her work that drew attention from the art world in the 2000s and continues to draw attention today. For Mouffe, it is also when she began to realize how certain works of art have the capacity to re-articulate and enact arguments put forward in her previous writings.

<sup>14</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 71-82.

The other main issue she sees is Arendt's conception of public space and reference to Edmund Burke's "acting in concert."<sup>16</sup> Mouffe locates herself in agreement with the post-foundational political thinkers, such as Oliver Marchart who holds a dissociative view of the political rather than associative, or the Schmittian tradition and the Arendtian tradition respectively.<sup>17</sup> For both traditions, the existence of "a vibrant 'agonistic' public sphere of contestation" denotes the importance of plurality, the capacity to differentiate and consider various alternatives.<sup>18</sup> However, she argues, they differ in their conception of the public space. Mouffe's conception of the public space is a battleground, a striated terrain where hegemonic projects can be and are confronted. Her pluralist democracy is based on the existence of public space that makes visible the dimension of the conflict that has been repressed by the dominant consensus and derives at a conflictual consensus out of conflicting choices amongst those who are in agonistic relation.<sup>19</sup> She claims the associative view, on the contrary, tends to regard it as a place to come together by overcoming the differences whether through persuasion or logical reasoning. Thus, the notion of acting in concert or acting together, is dubious for Mouffe, as it denotes belief in the emergence of consensus, a collective body aiming to work toward deriving at a final resolution despite the ineradicability of antagonism.

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<sup>16</sup> Burke's well-known statement is as follows: "no men could act with effect, who did not act in concert; that no men could act in concert, who did not act with confidence; and that no men could act with confidence, who were not bound together by common opinions, common affections, and common interests." (Kampowski, *Arendt, Augustine, and the New Beginning*, 67.)

<sup>17</sup> The terms "dissociative" and "associative" come from Oliver Marchart's book. "Dissociative" refers to Marchart's differentiation of Schmittian approaches to the political from those of so-called Arendt-influenced political theories, such as the work of Habermas, that emphasize the "associative" aspect. "While the 'Arendtians' see in the political a space of freedom and public deliberation, the Schmittians see in it a space of power, conflict and antagonism." Oliver Marchart, *The Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 38.

<sup>18</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, (London and New York: Verso, 1985).



### 6.3 Rancière: Conflictual Actors and Radical Equality

Another one of Arendt's contemporary critics is Jacques Rancière, who prefers to be referred to as a philosopher rather than a political philosopher, a philosopher of aesthetics, or a critic. This is because he does not situate himself in any specific branch of philosophy nor believe in those divisions. As if to encapsulate his philosophy on the politics of aesthetics, he notes "philosophy consists of singular nodes of thought which are opened by *undoing the established divisions* between disciplines."<sup>20</sup> This act of undoing is emblematic of a kind intellectual life he lived through. He opted to "wander into literature, social history, politics, and aesthetics" to study "problems and objects of thought thrown up by 'non-philosophical' events."<sup>21</sup> What is significant is that his desire to identify existing boundaries as he sought to undo them is not about favoring boundarylessness, nor prioritizing one side of the boundary over the other. What he has aimed to do is recognize the significance of noticing and shifting sedimented boundaries, or dominant consensual orders, while not subscribing to progressive or regressive movement. He is not interested in blurring what is and is not, but rather re-articulating those boundaries and orders, and, equally important, perceiving what exists and occurs on both sides of them.

There are some overlaps between Mouffe's and Rancière's understanding of the political, particularly in the ways they problematize consensus.<sup>22</sup> Rancière, too, stresses the inherent conflictual nature of social life, the irresolvable conflict between "politics" and "the police,"<sup>23</sup> and thus, regards

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<sup>20</sup> Rancière, "Introducing Disagreement," 3, emphasis added.

<sup>21</sup> Rancière, "Introducing Disagreement," 3. There are several similarities between Arendt and Rancière. Both of their work is informed by "non-philosophical" disciplines as well as events, which is why neither of their work is easily categorizable. As well, both attempted to engage in the activity of thinking without the established frameworks.

<sup>22</sup> Neither Mouffe nor Rancière acknowledges each other's work in their writings despite the similarity between their conception of the political, that is, the terrain on which the intervention of 'politics' in the 'police' order occurs (in Rancière's terms).

<sup>23</sup> Like Mouffe's distinction between "the political" and "politics", Rancière also redefines these terms. In general, his "politics" means Mouffe's "the political", and "police" means Mouffe's "politics". For

consensus as that which “eras[es] the contestatory, conflictual nature of the very givens of common life, [which] reduces political difference to police-like homogeneity.”<sup>24</sup> Consensual order also abolishes what he refers to as *dissensus*; that is, the political process that may put into question the sensible order and established frameworks of perception, thought, and action.<sup>25</sup> Dissensus is possible when “supernumerary political subjects” (or the conflictual actors) who are as precarious as politics itself, are able to constantly expose the divisions between the social and political, private and public, visible and invisible, audible and inaudible.<sup>26</sup> Their existence, Rancière observes, is precarious in a world where a political community turns into that which is ethical and then into that which is national. Rancière contends “what is” and “what ought to be” become indistinguishable in such a community, and the logic behind the terror becomes infinite justice.<sup>27</sup>

At a quick glance, Mouffe’s and Rancière’s political conflictual actors appear to share some similarities. They seem to be capable of seeing beyond what is immediately visible and of challenging the existing condition. As well, these actors’ identities are not pure or given, but rather always in the making through political action. Upon taking a closer look, however, what each conceives of as a political actor differs. In Rancière’s work, Mouffe’s Schmittian trace of we/they relations, as well as the centrality of antagonism, cannot be found. According to Mouffe, this we/they relation makes forms of politics based on togetherness impossible, such as friendship or cooperation, because Mouffe’s political actors are

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Rancière, “police” establishes classification and identification, whereas “politics” has to do with intervening and interrupting the police order to shift the distribution of the sensible (or partition of the sensible).

<sup>24</sup> Rancière, “Introducing Disagreement,” 7.

<sup>25</sup> See *Dissensus*.

<sup>26</sup> Rancière, “Introducing Disagreement,” 7. The most common exemplary figures who may be identified as supernumerary political subjects in Rancière’s work are artists and writers who create politically engaged work.

<sup>27</sup> See *Dissensus*. See also “The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics.”

created negatively.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, Rancière's political actors can be singular or collective, and they can give rise to politics by enacting equality in a situation of inequality.<sup>29</sup> One of the central theses in Rancière's work is that equality is not something to be achieved but given, that doing political work and creating politics is not for the selective few. Therefore, a political question that interests Rancière is: "What happens when *any* human being judges herself equal to everyone else and judges everyone else equal to them?"<sup>30</sup> This is Rancière's conception of *radical equality*, which makes his work more ontologically oriented than that of Mouffe, and moreover, undergirds some of the main premises of his critique against Arendt's work.

Rancière is critical of the recent surge of interest in the political thought of Hannah Arendt, because, in his view, she is someone who upheld ancient philosophy and whose argument on political action is outdated. Some of the key issues he raises include Arendt's insistence on separating the realm of political from the social, which to him is impossible, and relatedly, what he suspects to be her ontological presupposition.<sup>31</sup> In one occasion, he writes, "Arendt's political purism, which pretended to separate political freedom from social necessity, becomes the legitimation of the necessities of the consensual order."<sup>32</sup> He is especially critical toward what he views to be her seemingly elitist stance toward one's

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<sup>28</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 18-20. Mouffe transforms antagonism into agonism conceptually: "If we want to acknowledge on one side the permanence of the antagonistic dimension of conflict, while on the other side allowing for the possibility of its 'taming', we need to envisage a third type of relation which I have proposed to call 'agonism'. While antagonism is a we/they relation in which the two sides are enemies who do not share any common ground, agonism is a we/they relation where the conflicting parties ... see themselves as belonging to the same political association, as sharing a common symbolic space within which the conflict takes place." (*On the Political*, 20.)

<sup>29</sup> See Mustafa Dikeç's interpretation of the movement of sans papiers in "Beginners and Equals: Political Subjectivity in Arendt and Rancière," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38 (2013): 78-90.

<sup>30</sup> Dikeç, "Beginners and Equals," 82, emphasis original. Dikeç notes this was also the pedagogical question that interested Joseph Jacotot, which Rancière showed in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.

<sup>31</sup> Jacques Rancière, "Politics and Aesthetics an Interview," *Angelaki* 8, no. 2 (2003): 202.

<sup>32</sup> Rancière, "The Ethical Turn," 18-19.

capacity to participate in the political realm, which suggests to him her notion of equality is something to be earned. Mentioning the intellectual lineage from Edmund Burke and Karl Marx to Arendt and Jean-François Lyotard, he suggests that they believed human rights cannot be the rights of the human as human (the apolitical human), but that they must be other than human (the citizen) to have rights.<sup>33</sup> For instance, Arendt states the Greek polis was for those who did not have to be concerned with necessities of life, that is, those who could afford to be political. This meant excluding slaves, women, or anyone else whose existential status was decided at birth (and were predominantly connected to the private realm) from participating in the political.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, she distinguishes the political realm as the place where those who appear are seen as equals and can act and speak to one another as equals, whereas the private domain is a realm of *life* where a hierarchical relationship is needed to rule the household.<sup>35</sup> Thus, even though language is an important criterion for both Arendt and Rancière in being able to take part in the political, Rancière regards all human beings as literary (that is, they have excess in words),<sup>36</sup> and Arendt distinguishes those who have the level of comprehension and the ability to make others understand from those who do not (or from language of commands to language of persuasion).<sup>37</sup> For Rancière, being able to participate in the political is not a matter of whether one has or does not have the right to speak.

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<sup>33</sup> Rancière, “The Ethical Turn,” 8-9.

<sup>34</sup> She makes a brief remark, for example, that “barbarian empires of Asia” are driven by their needs and wants, that is the necessity of life, along with anyone who used violence as means to force people. (Cited in Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 27.)

<sup>35</sup> Arendt writes, “If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who came before them, nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them. If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or will ever be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood.” (*The Human Condition*, 175-176.)

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Schaap, “Enacting the Right to Have Rights: Jacques Rancière’s Critique of Hannah Arendt,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 10, no. 1 (2011): 36.

<sup>37</sup> See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 26 and 179-181.

Instead, it is a matter of how time and space are created and what one does with them. What did he mean by this?

His criticisms are predominantly based on his doctoral research on workers' emancipation.<sup>38</sup> It verified the opposite; the poor (those who Arendt refers to as unseen) are capable of making a claim to visibility, therefore, possessing capacity for appearance.<sup>39</sup> The workers, he argues, brought emancipation for themselves by utilizing time they did not have, that is, nighttime. In so doing, they invalidated how time was designated for them; they made an impact on the distribution of the sensible. This archival research he conducted is one of the historical pieces of evidence that shows what the supposedly unseen can do, through which he insists that the capacity to challenge the social order is not reserved for the privileged. The workers were supposedly marginalized and disenfranchised subjects who had no part in the political community. In Rancière's view, they demonstrated their *given* equality by enacting their rights and exercising capacities they purportedly lack, such as using written and spoken language to voice their rights. For him, the ontological grounding of Arendt's conception of the political is caught in a vicious circle because it presupposes there are those who are qualified for political life and those who are not.<sup>40</sup> He believes what constitutes the political is when those who are seen as not qualified "to take part in the political not only claim their visibility, but also exercise dissensus to challenge the established frameworks. Thus, for him, identities of conflictual actors fluctuate; subjects emerge out of political actions to question the distribution of the sensible.

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<sup>38</sup> Rancière, *The Nights of Labor: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. by John Drury (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1989). It was his dissertation originally published as *La Nuit des prolétaires. Archives du rêve ouvrier* in 1981.

<sup>39</sup> Rancière, "Politics of Aesthetics."

<sup>40</sup> Schaap, 29-33.

## 6.4 Arendt's Political Thought

What might be Arendt's replies to Mouffe's and Rancière's criticisms and on their work if they were sitting around a round table? In place of returning to their remarks to refute against their claims, in this second half of the chapter, I highlight four aspects of political thoughts to show how her critics made their judgment on the "failure" of what was never meant to be a "political project."

Numerous debates that Arendt's work has generated to this day can be attributed to what she held to be "the political and intellectual position of the *pariah*,"<sup>41</sup> or the position of the "self-consciously marginal critic ... who works within a tradition while attempting to renegotiate its fundamental assumptions."<sup>42</sup> Being against both the skepticism and dogmatism as discussed in Chapter 2, Arendt "presented herself to her audience as someone who inhabits many worlds without belonging wholly to any one" of them.<sup>43</sup> This description of Arendt denotes several important aspects of Arendt's work: her writings refuse to belong in a certain ideological camp; they do not seek to establish a new school of thought; and they have some degree of abstract quality, which allows for multiple interpretations. These qualities are also reflective of those whom Arendt regarded as her own pariahs, which in turn describes Arendt's particular mode of understanding the phenomena.<sup>44</sup> As Lisa Jane Disch writes,

Arendt's pariahs are poets, novelists, and essayists who would have nothing to write about if they were not embedded in the web of human experience but whose very commitment to the act of writing means that they are not fully at home anywhere in the world. They are marginals in the

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<sup>41</sup> Lisa Jane Disch, *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), 22, emphasis added.

<sup>42</sup> *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy*, 23.

<sup>43</sup> *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy*, 18.

<sup>44</sup> Her exemplary pariahs are, for instance, Franz Kafka, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Walter Benjamin, and W. H. Auden. Tuija Parvikko asserts that Bernard Lazare was another political model for Arendt who shaped and provided a framework from which to evaluate and judge in politically extreme and unprecedented situations. (Tuija Parvikko, "Committed to Think, Judge, and Act: Hannah Arendt's Ideal-typical Approach to Human Faculties," in *The Judge and the Spectator: Hannah Arendt's Political Philosophy*, ed. Joke J. Hermsen and Dana R. Villa (Belgium: Peeters, 1999), 125-126.

sense of existing on the fringes of a plurality of intersecting worlds, neither at the “absolute margin” of the Archimedean vantage point nor at the center of a particular tribe.<sup>45</sup>

The term *marginal* signifies not an outsider in the sense of a complete outcast who is abandoned by the community, nor a philosopher who seeks isolation away from public life. Instead, a self-consciously marginal critic requires both publicity and isolation; that is, to appear and be in presence with others as well as to have time and space to think in darkness. Thus, Arendt’s philosophical or theoretical account does not uphold the all-knowing gaze of a thinker or absolute impartiality, nor does her work rely on her life experience to “build [a] consensus ... that promise[s] universal peace.”<sup>46</sup> As a conscious pariah, she rejected both the position of a philosopher who distances herself from the world, as well as the position of a marginalized figure, a German Jewess refugee, who heavily relies on the experiential account. This unique position Arendt held is one of the main reasons why Disch argues “both humanist critics of modernity and poststructuralist critics of humanism claim her as an ancestor,”<sup>47</sup> and, I would add, is what makes her work productively contentious to this day.

In the following sections, I offer examples of Arendt taking on the role of a self-consciously marginal critic who sought to “exis[t] on the fringes of a plurality of intersecting worlds.”<sup>48</sup> I first discuss how she troubles prevalent Platonic conceptions of action to rediscover the meaning of political by reidentifying what philosophy once used to be and can be.<sup>49</sup> I then present Arendt as “a theorist of

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<sup>45</sup> *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy*, 22-23.

<sup>46</sup> *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy*, 9.

<sup>47</sup> *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy*, 11.

<sup>48</sup> *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy*, 23.

<sup>49</sup> It seems to me this is one of the significant similarities between Rancière and Arendt. Much like how Rancière prefers to be called “a philosopher” rather than “a political philosopher,” Arendt dismisses the term “political philosophy.” For Arendt, this term itself “is extremely burdened by the tradition.” (Cited in Hannah Arendt, ““What Remains? The Language Remains”: A Conversation with Günter Gaus,” interview by Günter Gaus, in *The Last Interview and Other Conversations: Hannah Arendt*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Brooklyn and London: Melville House, 2013), 4.)

beginning,” whose idiosyncratic focus was on birth rather than death, unlike those she thought with.<sup>50</sup> Lastly, I expand on what Arendt perceived to be the necessary conditions for action via discussion of her notion of *in-between*, a notion—similar to *miracle*—that she did not discuss in depth, and I discuss her contentious stance on *love* as an antipolitical force. I believe these are significant in thinking about the second miracle in relation to Arendt’s provocative proposition that we must first be *concerned for the world* (*amor mundi*) rather than being concerned for humanity.

#### 6.4.1 Re-Discovering Action within/against Political Philosophy

In a famous television interview with Günter Gaus in 1964, Arendt explicitly states she prefers to be referred to as a political theorist rather than a political philosopher.<sup>51</sup> She preferred the first term because her work had been about looking at politics in its *essence* by consciously not following the intellectual lineage of established political philosophical arguments.<sup>52</sup> As well, “political philosophy” is a problematic term for Arendt since it is rooted in Plato’s influence on reducing the political to a form of making, or *poiēsis*, that is thought to provide more reliability than *praxis*.<sup>53</sup>

In her view, philosophy was not in enmity of politics until Plato came to doubt *peithein*, the Athenians’ way of conducting political affairs, which was considered to be the highest, the truly political art.<sup>54</sup> Arendt notes Plato established the Western tradition of political philosophy with his denunciation of *doxa* (a common, popular opinion), and in its place he yearned for absolute standards that may achieve

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<sup>50</sup> Margaret Canovan, introduction to *The Human Condition*, iiv.

<sup>51</sup> Although she is commonly introduced using both terms today, I contend that neither term adequately describes Arendt.

<sup>52</sup> Arendt regarded Immanuel Kant as the last true philosopher, and any “philosophers” after Plato as “professional thinkers” and “theoreticians.” She qualifies Marx, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard, for example, as guideposts and great thinkers.

<sup>53</sup> It also is the case for Rancière as noted earlier.

<sup>54</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics,” *Social Research* 57, no. 1 (1990): 73-74. This was the third and final part of a lecture series she gave at Notre Dame University in 1954.



some measure of reliability. She accuses Plato of turning away from the old articulation of action that consequently created a division between knowing what to do and doing it.<sup>55</sup> While she gives recognition to the “unique ... mixture of depth and beauty” of Plato’s work, she faults the Platonic separation between knowing (command and rulership) and doing (obedience and execution) as problematic, substituting the realm of action for the realm of fabrication.<sup>56</sup> What is most troublesome for her is Plato’s conception of action, which persistently and dominantly survived through centuries, as it instrumentalizes action and degrades politics into a means. This implied placing under control the boundless forms of action. In her view, action is an end in itself, which did not belong in the realm of fabrication. It, therefore, cannot guarantee tangible products or certain outcomes to deal with the frailty of human affairs.

She reminds us *to act* (from Greek word *archein* and Latin *agere*), which “means to take an initiative, to begin, ... to set something in motion.”<sup>57</sup> This notion of *action* embraces the beginning of something new that has the “character of startling unexpectedness” and “always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which ... therefore always appears *in the guise of a miracle*.”<sup>58</sup> If Plato and his followers sought to renounce a human being’s capacity for action to avoid unforeseeable danger, Arendt considered it to be essential to the human condition with all its boundlessness, uncertainties, and potential danger.<sup>59</sup>

This understanding should not be made equivalent to today’s motto, “everything is possible.” Her belief in natality, the theme of birth as discussed in Chapter 3, does not equate all interventions, experiments, innovations, and other activities as actions. Her specific notion of action must be understood

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<sup>55</sup> *The Human Condition*, 223.

<sup>56</sup> *The Human Condition*, 225.

<sup>57</sup> *The Human Condition*, 177.

<sup>58</sup> *The Human Condition*, 178, emphasis added.

<sup>59</sup> *The Human Condition*, 195.

in consideration of what she perceived to be fundamentally important to the human condition, namely, natality and plurality, which are intricately connected.

#### 6.4.2 Natality and Plurality

Arendt is not the first thinker to critique the philosophers' preoccupation with death, nor is she the first to discuss the theme of birth. What differentiates her is that natality is thoroughly rooted in her oeuvre and "is worked out politically as well as in its phenomenological and ontological dimension."<sup>60</sup> She thought of human beings as natals instead of mortals whose birth might be conceived as a "point of articulation and passage between biological life and biographical life, between the private, the social, and the public, between labour, work, and action."<sup>61</sup> Arendt writes,

If left to themselves, human affairs can only follow the law of mortality. ... It is the faculty of action that interferes with this law because it interrupts the inexorable automatic course of daily life. ... The life span of man running towards death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are *not born in order to die but in order to begin* ... a peculiar deviation from the common natural rule of cyclical movement. ... In the language of natural science, it is the "infinite improbability which occurs regularly."<sup>62</sup>

Arendt's notion of action, therefore, differs from the conventional interpretations of action that are based on Plato's conception, which is more closely related to what Arendt refers to as work (something that can be fabricated and pre-planned). In *The Human Condition*, she applies her deconstructive method to re-discover what *action* is, as distinguished from *labor* and *work*. This method was not a means of categorizing the three activities to elevate action, but to reveal action's complicated history and its interdependence with labor and work, and, most importantly, to understand the phenomena of her time.

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<sup>60</sup> Françoise Collin, "Birth as Praxis," in *The Judge and the Spectator: Hannah Arendt's Political Philosophy*, eds. Joke J. Hermesen and Dana R. Villa (Belgium: Peeters, 1999), 104.

<sup>61</sup> Collin, "Birth as Praxis," 103.

<sup>62</sup> *The Human Condition*, 246, emphasis added.

To briefly go over the three activities, Arendt defines *labor* as an activity associated with life necessities occurring in a repetitive cycle; it has to do with producing and consuming. *Work* has to do with durability that makes possible the existence of the artificial world beyond the natural cycle. It involves creation of tangible things like building structures, works of art, laws, and so on. One of the remarkable distinctions she makes is, while the products of labor and work involve solid materials, can be done alone in isolation, are reversible to an extent, and mostly take place outside of the public realm, *action*, on the contrary, is irreversible. It cannot be undone, does not have a predictable outcome nor a specific start or end point, and cannot occur without the public realm. For Arendt, these characteristics are what makes action the most political activity of all, without which human beings would live only in the automatic course of daily life.

The other fundamentally important factor for the human condition is plurality. Arendt defines plurality in the following way:

the reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised. For though the common is the common meeting ground of all, those who are present have different locations in it, and the location of one can no more coincide with the location of another than the location of two objects. Being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position. ... Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear.<sup>63</sup>

This passage captures Arendt's envisaged plurality, which involves people of diverse perspectives *and* recognizes the absolute distinctiveness of each individual. Action, which involves venturing forth in speech and deed, cannot occur in isolation; speech and deed must be heard and seen. This means those who are present must have the desire and capacity to appear before others, and, equally important, others must be present to witness and judge the action unfolding from varying locations. As such, individuals

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<sup>63</sup> *The Human Condition*, 57.

enter the public political realm to be confronted with different views without predetermining whether they will be actors or spectators. Arendt understood that the presence of many does not always lead to action; as well, that the ephemeral quality of action has no guarantee of occurring nor being remembered as action. Its permanence depends on those who seek to remember and turn them into things that will outlast the lives of all of us. Arendt's human condition of plurality relies precisely on these things. Without the tangible presence of those that have existed before us and will outlive us, plurality cannot exist. These things that separate and relate us to one another must exist so that "worldly reality truly and reliably appear[s]" and we may "see the sameness in utter diversity."<sup>64</sup> For all of this to be possible, the public realm is essential.

#### 6.4.3 The In-Betweens

Arendt refers to these things that we find common as *worldly in-between*. It is one of the three ways in which she uses in-between to denote how everything is intricately interconnected. The other two are *subjective in-between* and *space in-between*. These three notions, I believe, elucidate the depth and expansiveness of Arendt's ontological and existential investigation of the human condition. First, "physical, worldly in-between"<sup>65</sup> is concerned with *inter-est*; that is, *interesse* in Latin, which means "to be between."<sup>66</sup> She writes,

These interests constitute, in the word's most literal significance, something which *inter-est*, which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together. Most action and speech is [*sic*] concerned with this in-between ... so that most words and deeds are *about* some worldly objective reality in addition to being a disclosure of the acting and speaking agent.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> *The Human Condition*, 57.

<sup>65</sup> *The Human Condition*, 182.

<sup>66</sup> Arendt regards plurality as "the condition of human action." Thus, she notes, "the language of the Romans, perhaps the most political people we have known, used the words "to live" and "to be among men" (*inter homines esse*) or "to die" and "to cease to be among men" (*inter homines esse desinere*) as synonyms. (Cited in *The Human Condition*, 7-8.)

<sup>67</sup> *The Human Condition*, 182, emphasis original.

Worldly in-between is, in other words, “the human artefact, the fabrication of human hands, as well as ... affairs,” which makes being-together tangibly possible.<sup>68</sup> And because it is more permanent than their makers or authors, the worldly in-between ensures durability of the common world. Works of art are thus exemplary worldly in-between, because they turn the precarious “action, speech, and thought” into “worldly things [that] must first be seen, heard, and remembered and then transformed, reified as it were, into things—into sayings of poetry, the written page or the printed book, into paintings or sculpture, into all sorts of records, documents, and monuments.”<sup>69</sup> As mentioned above, for the intangible quality of deeds and speech of the actors to become tangible for the common world, it requires spectators and workers (in Arendt’s term *homo fabers* who create things with their hands) to make them appear in public and to save them from the destruction of time. Yet, as vital as these *worldly things* are in ensuring the common world to “survive the coming and going of the generations,”<sup>70</sup> she reminds us this in-between would consist of “a heap of unrelated things”<sup>71</sup> if it is not “overlaid” and “overgrown with an altogether different in-between,” which Arendt refers to as “subjective in-between.”<sup>72</sup> What endows the worldly in-between with affective quality is this second in-between that is intangible and immaterial.

The second one is the *subjective in-between*, which she describes as the *web of human relationships*. This in-between existed before we were born and will exist after we die; each of us as a newcomer to the world is inserted into it where we begin our own unique life story, “affecting uniquely the life stories of all those with whom he comes into contact.”<sup>73</sup> In describing this in-between as it appears

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<sup>68</sup> *The Human Condition*, 52.

<sup>69</sup> *The Human Condition*, 95.

<sup>70</sup> *The Human Condition*, 55.

<sup>71</sup> *The Human Condition*, 204.

<sup>72</sup> *The Human Condition*, 183.

<sup>73</sup> *The Human Condition*, 184.

to her, she sees the beauty and danger of each individual's capacity to act as she gives recognition to how each of our own stories affects those we encounter and how everything we create conditions us.<sup>74</sup> To put it differently, almost everything we do, whether it deals with the kind of space of appearance we create or making reifications that outlive us, all doings are integral to the ontological and existential condition of the common world, but they also inevitably start new chains of process in the web with unforeseeable consequences. Thus, the kind of common world each of us envisions and chooses to be responsible for is inexorably contingent on our unpredictable, uncertain consequences of action. The danger, to repeat, lies within every initiative. At the same time, without it, the common world will follow a natural life process of things, decaying as it were without anything to sustain it. The *precarity* for Arendt is not something to be overcome; rather it is the human condition which those before us, we ourselves, and the generations to come will continue to face. In that, action is *a miracle* for Arendt.

The third is *the space in-between*. It denotes a necessary distance between people that must exist for the irreducible differences (or absolute distinctiveness) of the individuals to be recognized.<sup>75</sup> This distance is an essential condition for plurality, with which the meaning of being-together can be distinguished from oneness, unitedness, or sameness. It is this in-between that Arendt's critics—like Mouffe and Marchart—overlooked when they problematized her use of acting in concert. What makes

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<sup>74</sup> "In addition to the conditions under which life is given to man on earth, and partly out of them, men constantly create their own, self-made conditions, which, their human origin and their variability notwithstanding, possess the same conditioning power as natural things. Whatever touches or enters into a sustained relationship with human life immediately assumes the character of a condition of human existence. This is why men, no matter what they do, are always conditioned beings. Whatever enters the human world of its own accord or is drawn into it by human effort becomes part of the human condition. The impact of the world's reality upon human existence is felt and received as a conditioning force. The objectivity of the world—its object- or thing-character—and the human condition supplement each other; because human existence is conditioned existence, it would be impossible without things, and thing would be a heap of unrelated articles a non-world, if they were not the conditioners of human existence." (Cited in *The Human Condition*, 9.)

<sup>75</sup> This, of course, is also contingent on many factors, such as willing to appear before others and to disclose oneself to reveal who one is rather than what one is.

this in-between provocative is how the emphasis is on having *concern for the common world* rather than on humanity. Arendt claims being concerned for humanity is to rid of the space in-between, because humanity as well as other terms like labor and death that “attest to sameness are non-worldly, anti-political, truly transcendent experiences.”<sup>76</sup> Relatedly, and more controversially, Arendt argues that emotions such as love, compassion, and hatred are “non-political, apolitical, anti-political” as these emotions also lead to sublimation of plurality, eviscerating the very possibility of politics.<sup>77</sup> What makes this position controversial is how these feelings are what many perceive to be vital constituents of political action. After all, is it not what we feel that creates the impulse to act?

#### 6.4.4 Love and Politics

The final section focuses on Arendt’s distinction of three kinds of love in her oeuvre, out of which only one of them properly belongs in the political realm, *respect*. Arendt’s first discussion on love can be traced back to her dissertation published in 1929. She posited that *caritas* (or neighborly love) emulates God’s unconditional love, which requires loving a neighbour with a “sublime indifference of what or who he is,” while neighborly love maintains the space in-between.<sup>78</sup> However, the latter love is still problematic, because it ignores *the worldly significance* of the in-between. To put it differently, love of neighbor is *not* based on things made of human hands, because it itself becomes the in-between, thereby taking on the function of the world and extending to all people.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> *The Human Condition*, 215. This is a point on which Mouffe, Rancière, and Arendt might agree.

<sup>77</sup> *The Human Condition*, 215.

<sup>78</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Love and St. Augustine*, eds. Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 43. “The emphasis in this neighborly love is on mutual help, and this insistence is the clearest sign that love remains harnessed to the “for the sake of” category, which rules out meeting my fellow men (in their concrete worldly reality and relation to me) in their own right. Augustine is aware of the problem this creates for human relationships and of the danger, one could say, of degrading men into mere means of an end.” (Cited in *Love and St. Augustine*, 42).

<sup>79</sup> Stephan Kampowski states: “To find a bond between people strong enough to replace the world was the main political task of early Christian philosophy, and it was Augustine who proposed to found not only the Christian “brotherhood” but all human relationships on charity. ...The unpolitical, non-public charter of the

She discusses another kind of love that requires greater intimacy, the love between lovers (*erōs*). It is immediate and has the power to disclose the uniqueness of the *who* between the lovers in their shared intimacy. In that, it resembles action. Arendt acknowledges that this form of love is “perhaps the most powerful of all antipolitical human forces,”<sup>80</sup> and one of “the greatest forces of intimate life—the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses.”<sup>81</sup> However, unlike action that can occur only in the public realm, this form of love is thoroughly private. Arendt observes this love “is killed, or rather extinguished, the moment it is displayed in public ... [b]ecause of its inherent worldlessness.”<sup>82</sup> In her view, the intensity of these human forces can only be experienced in privacy, because they are often transformed into shapes “fit” for public appearance when they appear in public. In so doing, though they may “greatly intensify and enrich the whole scale of subjective emotions and private feelings, this intensification will always come to pass at the expense of the assurance of the reality of the world and men.”<sup>83</sup> Additionally, this intensification “ha[s] such an extraordinary and infectious charm”<sup>84</sup> that it has the possibility of becoming a mixture of over-sensitization and de-sensitization. The “enlargement of the private” threatens the existence of the space in-between, if not abolishes it, and therefore, no politics can be arisen.<sup>85</sup> While intimate love may be a powerful human force, in Arendt’s view, its anti-politicalness

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Christian community was early defined in the demand that it should form a *corpus*, a “body,” whose members were to be related to each other like brothers of the same family.” (Kampowski, *Arendt, Augustine, and the New Beginning*, 68-69.). See also *The Human Condition*, 52-54.

<sup>80</sup> *The Human Condition*, 242.

<sup>81</sup> *The Human Condition*, 50.

<sup>82</sup> *The Human Condition*, 51.

<sup>83</sup> *The Human Condition*, 50.

<sup>84</sup> *The Human Condition*, 52.

<sup>85</sup> *The Human Condition*, 242.



“can only become false and perverted when it is used for political purposes such as the change or salvation of the world,” and diminish the public realm.<sup>86</sup>

Her provocation regarding love and politics sounded as controversial when it was first spoken as it does now. In the letter she addressed to James Baldwin on November 21, 1962, as a response to his essay “Letter from a Region in My Mind,”<sup>87</sup> she critiqued his “gospel of love” and told him, “In politics, love is a stranger” and “[h]atred and love belong together, and they are both destructive.”<sup>88</sup> She meant that universalizing love in politics via displaying it in the “implacable, bright light of the constant presence of others on the public scene”<sup>89</sup> can cause us to become “unconcerned to the point of total unworldliness with *what* the loved person may be, with qualities and shortcomings no less than with his achievements, failings, and transgressions.”<sup>90</sup> That is, if every citizen is loved unconditionally, whether neighborly or intimately, the web cannot be sustained because each being is no longer distinct from other beings and thus one becomes one of many in the sameness. To underscore, for Arendt, “[p]olitics arises *between men*, and so quite *outside of man*.”<sup>91</sup>

In place of the two kinds of love referenced above, Arendt suggests a third one, *respect*. She deems respect (or a kind of *friendship*) as worldly and that it thus properly belongs in the domain of human affairs.<sup>92</sup> This love is closely connected with how she perceives the act of forgiving, which she

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<sup>86</sup> *The Human Condition*, 52.

<sup>87</sup> James Baldwin, “Letter from a Region in My Mind,” *The New Yorker*, November 9, 1962, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1962/11/17/letter-from-a-region-in-my-mind>.

<sup>88</sup> It is now referred to as “Meaning of Love in Politics: A Letter by Hannah Arendt to James Baldwin.” It is available at HannahArendt.net: Journal for Political Thinking, <https://www.hannaharendt.net/index.php/han/article/view/95/156>.

<sup>89</sup> *The Human Condition*, 51.

<sup>90</sup> *The Human Condition*, 242.

<sup>91</sup> *The Promise of Politics*, 95, emphasis original.

<sup>92</sup> *The Human Condition*, 242-243.

regards as a form of *action* due to its revelatory character.<sup>93</sup> What distinguishes this love from the other two is how a person can be regarded “from the distance” and “independent of qualities which we may admire or of achievements which we may highly esteem.”<sup>94</sup> The space in-between is possible between two individuals who regard one another with respect, because one can see *and* be seen by the other in the space of appearance “without intimacy and without closeness.”<sup>95</sup> Respect, Arendt states, makes the disclosure of a common world possible, because in putting plural perspectives in action, we reveal *who* of ourselves that corresponds to the ineffable quality of singularity—natality.

## 6.5 Conclusion

I began this chapter with Chantal Mouffe’s and Jacques Rancière’s noteworthy insights to question what they consider to be the inadequacy of Arendt’s political theory. Despite the differences in their intellectual history and their theoretical arguments, Mouffe and Rancière are often categorized as antagonistic theorists who centralize their arguments around conflicts through which they problematize consensual order. They both position themselves as opposed to Arendt in terms of their stances against consensual order in politics and what they perceive to be her attempt at purification of the political. Mouffe’s reductive interpretation of Arendt’s work seems to come from her reading of contemporaries of

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<sup>93</sup> In making distinctions among revenge, punishment, and forgiveness, Arendt makes the following assertion about the last one: “In contrast to revenge, which is the natural, automatic re-action to transgression and which because of the irreversibility of the action process can be expected and even calculated, the act of forgiving can never be predicted; it is the only reaction that acts in an unexpected way and thus retains, though being a reaction, something of the original character of action. Forgiving, in other words, is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven.” (*The Human Condition*, 241, emphasis added.)

<sup>94</sup> *The Human Condition*, 243.

<sup>95</sup> *The Human Condition*, 243.

Arendt, such as Jürgen Habermas. Rancière's interpretation can be said to be influenced by the intellectual milieu of his time in France.<sup>96</sup>

In the second half of the chapter, I focused on several important aspects of her scholarly endeavor as a way of responding to her critics and to further delve into the notion of second miracle. Rather than raising Arendtian objections directly, I re-introduced her as a self-conscious marginal critic who arguably enacted the role of a conflictual actor envisioned by Mouffe, Rancière, and Arendt herself. I examined some of the most foundational insights of Arendt's political thought to consider the depth and breadth through which Arendt re-thought about *vita activa*.

One of the aspects of Arendt's work that her critics are highly critical of is how she appears to reinstate old categories and distinctions out of nostalgia and conservative attitude. Rancière, in particular, rejects her insistence on thinking with the separation of realms. I put forth, however, that it was out of her effort to give recognition to the essence of the public realm that she consistently separated the private from the public realm. Arendt believed that blurring of the realms indicates disappearance of plurality, which in turn meant disappearance of a condition that makes action possible. Her critique of modernity, therefore, was not about the mass society itself but about the pervasiveness of mass mentality in the society that generates homogeneity.

Another aspect is Arendt's mention of acting in concert. Mouffe interprets it as taking an action together after deriving at a harmonious decision, whether through a debate or an intersubjective agreement. The issue she sees is the danger behind suppressing conflicts in order to come to an agreement which may cause a dangerous explosion as well as futility against making substantial changes to the

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<sup>96</sup> Schaap writes: "Following hints given in Rancière's own texts, the context in which Arendt has been received in France appears to have been somewhat different. In particular, Arendt was appropriated by thinkers associated with the 'new French thought' of the 1980s ... It is no doubt due, in part, to their appropriation of Arendt for a state-centric consensus politics that Rancière singles out Arendt for criticism." ("Enacting the Right to Have Rights: Jacques Rancière's Critique of Hannah Arendt," 37.)

ontological dimension of social life. For Mouffe, what we should aim for is not the resolving of problems and easing of tensions. Instead, she argues, the focus should be on engaging in an ongoing process of disarticulation via counter-hegemonic interventions so that new configurations may be formed. This aspect of her political theory shares affinity with Rancière's emphasis on challenging the police order as a political practice as well as recognizing the social struggle itself as the core of politics.<sup>97</sup> Both Rancière and Mouffe support interventionist approaches to challenging the status quo and the given perceptible. However, Mouffe's criticism of Arendt's use of acting in concert fails to consider Arendt's phenomenological understanding of the human condition. Arendt did not argue that deriving at an intersubjective agreement can be a permanent resolution. For Arendt, acting in concert, or being-together (being related and bound together), as opposed to mere homogeneity or oneness, denotes the moment when the "revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are *with* others and neither for nor against them—that is, in sheer human togetherness."<sup>98</sup> This *sheer human togetherness* is a rare political moment, and in its ephemeral rarity, Arendt argued *who* of somebody, the actor, is revealed.

I also put forward that Arendt's notion of political action involves thinking beyond the futility of life in its inevitable mortality by having an "authentic concern with immortality" of the common world.<sup>99</sup> Even when Arendt speaks of the absolute distinctiveness of individuals or performing miracles, the emphasis is on her authentic concern for the world, which,

is what we enter when we are born and what we leave behind when we die. It transcends our lifespan into past and future alike; it was there before we came and will outlast our brief sojourn

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<sup>97</sup> "When the concerns arising from the ontological condition of life and the struggle to sustain it enter into the struggle through which human plurality is disclosed, it degenerates into an anti-political struggle between those who are poor (not just in wealth but in world) and those world-forming citizens who share the proper attitude of care for the polis. The political is eclipsed by the social; plurality is flattened out by preoccupation with the public gratification of identical needs and wants; collective life is threatened with futility and meaninglessness." (Schaap, "Enacting the Right," 31.)

<sup>98</sup> *The Human Condition*, 180, emphasis original.

<sup>99</sup> *The Human Condition*, 55.

in it. It is what we have in common not only with those who live with us, but also with those who were here before and with those who will come after us.<sup>100</sup>

Her political thought denotes how everything that ever existed, exists, and will exist are interrelated and interdependent. This implies that the absolute fundamental human condition calls on each of us to be responsible for taking care of what is most common amongst all—the common world. To further explicate the intricacy of her thought on this, I presented the three in-betweens: 1) worldly in-between that connotes a physical, worldly thing that lies between people as a common objective concern of the world, 2) subjective in-between that has the spatial quality in the act of weaving and insertion of new stories, but more of a temporal construct as it concerns the time before, after, and between, and 3) space in-between that arises between people, without which no plurality is possible. The first one is concerned more with remembrance and memory, and the second one is concerned with bringing a sense of renewal. The two together enable us to understand why being concerned for the permanence and durability of the common world took precedence over that of humanity. The third one is a necessary distance (or condition) to participate in the political.

Finally, I offered Arendt's stance on emotions and politics as an example to elaborate on the notion of space in-between. Arendt argued that emotions, such as love, hate, and compassion, are antipolitical, which may obliterate the space in-between. Although she knew that such emotions spark protest movements, because they are indeed strong forces, she argued that they can make us lose sight of what relates and separates us.<sup>101</sup> This is why she claimed respect is the only form of love that properly belongs in the political sphere since it maintains the space in-between.

What Arendt witnessed during the totalitarian regimes in the 1930s and 40s was the destruction of the common world. She saw and experienced at first hand the unimaginable atrocity when people became

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<sup>100</sup> *The Human Condition*, 55.

<sup>101</sup> Arendt's reaction to student protests, as discussed in Chapter 3, illustrates this point.

imprisoned in the subjectivity of their own singular experience. Such imprisonment, she observed, was due to either the conditions of mass society's distinct characteristic of conformism or those of radical isolation when people were deprived of plural perspectives.<sup>102</sup> This experience played a major role in turning Arendt's attention toward rethinking the political as a domain of human experience, thereby prompting her to look beyond the canon of political philosophy. Rancière is similar to Arendt in this regard. His own personal encounter in France in May 1968 caused him to re-examine philosophical intellectuals' animosity toward politics and to become more concerned with the sensible world of appearance. Contrary to Mouffe, these two political thinkers understood politics as aesthetic in nature and were thus concerned with the meaning inherent in the appearances.

What seems to be missing in Mouffe's and Rancière's criticisms of Arendt's work? One of them is arguably her most inspiring reminder—natality, the miracle of beginning. Arendt asserted, “[t]he miracle of freedom is inherent in this ability to make a beginning, which itself is inherent in the fact that every human being, simply by being born into a world that was there before him and will be there after him, is himself a new beginning.”<sup>103</sup> Furthermore, Rancière accuses her of promoting purification of the political by drawing lines between the public and the private, and among those who can and cannot participate in human affairs according to their socially determined status. I contend that this was a misreading. What Arendt sought to do was to trace back to the time when the public realm was given its due prominence and to redefine the public realm as that which is ephemeral, where a miracle may be performed and forge its own chain that interrupts a process in progress and starts another. Moreover, for Arendt,

The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, “natural” ruin is ultimately the tact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other

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<sup>102</sup> *The Human Condition*, 57-58.

<sup>103</sup> Rancière, “Introduction into Politics,” 113. St. Augustine and Immanuel Kant are the most notably influential thinkers in Arendt's conceptualization of natality.

words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born. Only the full experience of this capacity can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope, those two essential characteristics of human existence which Greek antiquity ignored altogether.<sup>104</sup>

There is a sense of perpetual optimism in her proposition—that every human being possesses this most amazing and mysterious talent to perform the miracle. At the same time, she discerned the other side of action, the improbability and unpredictability of any new beginning. She comprehended clearly why Plato attempted to put this gift under control and why totalitarian regimes have sought to not only “squench freedom of opinion, but have also set about on principle to destroy human spontaneity in all spheres.”<sup>105</sup> Arendt, however, turned this around, and reminded us, “Men are free—as distinguished from their possessing the gift for freedom—as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to be free and to act are the same.”<sup>106</sup> What becomes clearer here is that this freedom is not given by the sheer fact that we are born. To be free, we must act—we must seek to perform the second miracle.

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<sup>104</sup> *The Human Condition*, 247.

<sup>105</sup> Rancière, “Introduction into Politics,” 126.

<sup>106</sup> Arendt, “What is Freedom?” 153.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion and Lingering Thoughts

### 7.1 Art, Education, and Arendt: Political and Aesthetic Gestures of *Amor Mundi*

*What does it mean to love the world at a time like this?* We are living through extraordinary times. This is not an infrequent statement used to describe enigmatic moments we are still trying to grapple with, whether they may be moments that left us in utter awe, or terror. Yet, how else might we describe what we are experiencing in recent years? What we witnessed in the Year of Breath and during the subsequent aftershocks of the pandemic as well as in numerous other ethical, political crises that ensued before and after are clashes between ugliness and beauty and between fragility and resilience of all living things.

I had initially set out to question what appeared to be a thin threshold that exists between a hopeful attitude toward the future that assents to today's motto, "everything is possible," and the other kind based on critical models that seek to raise awareness to bring changes. If the former attitude seemed as though it carries a sense of having a permission to commit whatever is necessary for the sake of a better future to come, the latter seemed to focus on finding the wrongs and correcting them. As the study progressed, what emerged is a different kind of hopeful attitude or cautious optimism exemplified by Hannah Arendt that is neither obvious nor easy to articulate. Only after spending some significant time with her thoughts that I was able to come to describe it as an atmospheric spirit of *amor mundi*<sup>1</sup> and then to title this dissertation as *Art, Education, and Arendt: Political and Aesthetic Gestures of Amor Mundi*.

Arendt's move is not that of a reversal, questing after the way things were, nor the reversal of the reversal, suggesting the opposite or other extremes. Rather, she relentlessly posed the question 'what are

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<sup>1</sup> I have briefly discussed this in the first chapter.



we doing?’ to understand the meaning of things in essence and to think from the world of appearances. This relentlessness is exhibited in ways in which her thoughts are so tightly interwoven and resist being encapsulated. To navigate through this one-of-a-kind scholar’s thoughts, I designated some of the contentious aspects of her political theory and philosophy as entry points. What this designation instigated was abandoning preconceived ways of thinking and speaking of art, education, and art education and taking a step back from language of advocacy and predominant future-oriented discourses. In so doing, the focus of this study did not become an argument for why the role of artist, or education, or art education matters, but a gradual understanding of them *as things that relate and separate us*, which are responsible for the durability of our world. In the process, one of the things that I came to understand is that art thoroughly belongs in the world of appearances, whereas education does not.

To further think through and give an account of this distinction as well as the complicated inherent mutual relationship between art and politics, I divided the dissertation into two parts. Part I focused on two aspects of Arendt’s work that are contentious to this day. One of them is what her critics, as well as her lifelong intellectual companion Karl Jasper, critiqued; that is, her refusal not to be explicit about methods which made her work appear to lack an identifiable structure. As I sought to understand what inspired Arendt to take such a stance, I ended up labeling some of Arendt’s un/identified methods, which I presented as “Existing in Excess as a Work of Art,” “Engaging in the Activity of Thinking,” and “Critiquing and Prying Lose the Rich and the Strange as a Pearl Diver.” Although Arendt herself would have resisted labeling her scholarly approaches, giving recognition to them seemed vital for understanding what made Arendt one of the most controversial thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and how they contributed to making her work either heavily criticized or appreciated by different intellectual groups.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I also hoped that this chapter (which deserves to become an entire study of its own) tacitly illustrates what impacted me to undergo the kind of reorientation in my own scholarly practice.

The other aspect I examined in Part I is Arendt's assertion that the realm of education is pre-political, and that education must be conservative. I began the third chapter by looking into Arendt's use of the metaphor of light and darkness in "The Crisis in Education" to better grasp what she meant by pre-political. In showing how this particular metaphor denotes light and darkness as *both* the vital source of life and the cause of destruction, I offered my account of the meaning of pre-political and the importance of thinking with separation of realms, the private, the public, the social, and the pre-political. Moreover, I engaged with this essay in the broader context of her oeuvre. What came to the fore in doing so are: one, a form of love that is discussed only in relation to education, and two, the notion of miracle. The notable common theme to be found in Arendt's work is her respect for the past, a vital thread without which the common world cannot exist. This respect, the third form of love she notes in *The Human Condition*, is the essence of what it means to perform a miracle; that the newcomers need to first become acquainted with the world in order to have respect for the world that was there before us and will be there after we die, and that those who are responsible for showing them what is common, that is, the common world, should first love the world. Miracle, which denotes the birth of newborns as well as political action, became a significant notion to think about the time and space of education and of miraculous events. I concluded this chapter on education by re-interpreting education as that which occurs between the first and the second miracle to highlight her foundational belief in natality, and equally important, the significance of protecting the new from the old, and the old from the new.

The main aim of Part II of the dissertation was to understand what it means to perform a political action, or what Arendt referred to as a second miracle. Rather than directly moving into discussing what Arendt's critics point out as contentious aspects of her conception of political action, I secure the first two chapters, Chapters 4 and 5, to examine how politically engaged art has become an ongoing topic of debate in the contemporary art world and a significant source of exemplary practices in political theory and philosophy (as can be observed in Mouffe's and Rancière's work, for instance). Leaving Arendt out of

these two chapters was an intentional move to think about and to depict how the measure of suitable quality of political action via art is conceived in contemporary discourse.

In the first chapter of Part II, Chapter 4, I introduced selective works from Ai Weiwei's Sichuan earthquake project and inserted a couple of works by Doris Salcedo in an interweaving manner. The purpose of this chapter was not about conducting a comparative analysis, but *to open* complicated layers and perspectives around art and politics. Thus, I took into consideration the artists' life experiences and the contextual settings from which they have created their work, and as well, how each artist regards the public sphere and their role differently. This chapter provided ways to survey various perspectives in the following chapter around: whether an artwork should anticipate its political effectiveness, what makes it possible for an artwork to actualize its un/imagined political work, the politicization of art and the aestheticization of political action, and the ethical orientation versus that of the political.

In Chapter 5, I took into consideration diverse points of views from art critics, art theorists, art historians, philosophers of art, and political theorists to further ponder upon politicalness of the art. Using Ai's work as a primary example, I borrowed Rancière's distinctions to posit that most of Ai's artworks discussed in this dissertation belong in the ethical and representational regimes, because his art anticipates its effect rather than creating conditions to suspend ordinary connections or incite new ways of questioning what is perceptible, sensible, or acceptable. Seen through the lens of Ai's critics and of the proponents of aesthetics, his critical work cannot but experience inefficacy in its inability to bring the changes Ai advocates since it passes on anecdotal messages and induces compassion in the spectators to join the cause. The two art critics, Jed Perl and Andrew Stefan Weiner, for instance, view Ai's aesthetic strategies as insufficient to fulfill what Ai aims to achieve through his art, precisely because of how his strategies "trade affect for pity and the need of a political change-of-heart into feel-good condescension."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bal, "Research Practice: New Worlds on Cold Cases," 208.

Seen from Groys's point of view, Ai is not quite categorizable so to speak because he desires to become useful while at the same time makes work that deals with invisible deaths as well as life. Sorace and Miller, who seek to recognize his Chinese heritage rather than a famous dissident, offer yet another counterpoint, which is that favoring aesthetic antagonism over the ethical and the representational is to dismiss a wide variety of ways in which an artwork may work politically.

If Mouffe and Rancière were introduced as political thinkers who depend on contemporary art to further explicate Mouffe's political theory and Rancière's philosophy, in Chapter 6, I re-introduced them as contemporary critics of Arendt who disapprove of the recent resurgence of interest in Arendt's work in various fields. Via each critic's point of view, I sought to reconsider Arendt's stance on what it means to perform the second miracle and what constitutes a political action that is fitting for today's political sphere. Even though both Mouffe and Rancière offer critical insights, what was revealed is their failure to consider her phenomenological understanding of and concern for the immortality of the common world. For instance, contrary to their definition of public space as the place where disarticulation of the dominant consensus needs to take place to form new configurations, Arendt's conception is not as conflictual and is both tangible and intangible. Cultural institutions and universities are examples of tangible spaces that are responsible for sustaining the durability of the world for Arendt. These places are also responsible for housing material things that are specific worldly in-betweens. Intangible public spaces, on the other hand, are formed only when people gather. These spaces are ephemeral because they disappear the moment when people disperse. This signifies the subjective in-between, the web of human relationships that is formed among those who hold plural perspectives. Thus, to perform a political action in the Arendtian sense, I contend, is beyond an individual's exercising of their right to incite a new initiative (as Rancière points out) and beyond a group of individuals' acting in concert to achieve a common goal (as in Mouffe's simplification of Arendt's claim). Instead, it is to perform a miracle spontaneously with all its unpredictable outcomes, out of love of the world that we have in common, yet which appears before us differently according to our relative positions in it.

## 7.2 Reflecting on the Central Guiding Questions of Inquiry

One of the guiding questions of this inquiry was: *how might our understanding of what it means to intervene in the world artistically and educationally shift if it was informed by Arendt's conception of political action?* The other question was: *what kind of reorientation might take place in our educational and scholarly practice if we sought to understand and enact the meaning of amor mundi?* These questions stemmed from several wonderings, such as: What would it mean for the discipline of art education if it were to accept Arendt's assertion that the realm of education should be pre-political, when many of its members closely draw ideas from the contemporary art world where art is regarded as inherently political? How might art and education be conceived if they are not considered as a means of responding to the political, social, and ethical problems of the world? Only now that I have come to this moment to reflect on what I have been toiling over and putting into writing, that is, to make tangible the unending activity that Arendt called "understanding," I am able to draw the concluding remarks for this study, which in essence sought to quest after understanding what it means to act for the love of the world.

### 7.2.1 Politically Speaking

Politically speaking, Arendt argued true political activities cannot rely on emotions, whether they may be compassion, love, or hatred. This had been a particularly contentious issue during her lifetime and remains one to this day. After all, how is it possible for us to overcome racial divides, aftermath of war, and numerous other generational sufferings and injustices without empathy and compassion? Here lies a misinterpretation of Arendt's stance on emotions and politics. It is not that she believed these emotions have no effect on politics or on the ways in which they move people to take actions. Rather, one of the main issues she pointed out is how these emotions eviscerate the in-betweens as discussed in the preceding chapter. Another issue she saw unfold is how love (intimate love and neighbourly love) was becoming a political principle. Questioning the foundation of love in political terms, she observed that claiming love for all as in charity or dwelling in the atmosphere of intimate love is neither viable nor sustainable. Love in this way, she asserted, "is unworldly, and it is for this reason rather than its rarity that

it is not only apolitical but antipolitical, perhaps the most powerful of all antipolitical human forces.”<sup>4</sup>

What this exemplifies is the *primary* concern that undergirds her oeuvre—that is, the common world and not humanity.

Arendt defined the common world as that which “thrusts itself between people ... where all human affairs are conducted.”<sup>5</sup> It cannot spring up and be maintained naturally, but must be created and secured by the plural beings. As such, the precarity of the space is contingent on not only the existence of plural human beings, but also their actions in creating and securing the space in-between. Furthermore, she asserted,

such a common world can survive the coming and going of the generations only to the extent that it appears in public. It is the publicity of the public realm which can absorb and make shine through the centuries whatever men may want to save from the natural ruin of time.<sup>6</sup>

The intricacy of her argument is that to live in a world that contains a public space is to be mindful of the transcendence of the lifespan of mortal beings without which no politics, no common world, and no public realm are possible.<sup>7</sup> Arendt’s understanding of the world, thus, encompasses more than the space of politics as she clarified in her famous interview with Günter Gaus: “I comprehend [the world] in a much larger sense, as the space in which things become public, as the space in which one lives and which must look presentable. In which art appears, of course.”<sup>8</sup> This appearance involves not just visibility. What *appears*, in Arendtian sense, is “meant to be seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled, to be perceived by sentient creatures endowed with the appropriate sense organs.”<sup>9</sup> Arendt, therefore, discerned

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<sup>4</sup> *The Human Condition*, 242.

<sup>5</sup> “Introduction into Politics,” 106.

<sup>6</sup> *The Human Condition*, 55.

<sup>7</sup> *The Human Condition*, 55.

<sup>8</sup> Arendt, “What Remains? The Language Remains,” 34.

<sup>9</sup> *The Life of the Mind*, 19.

that whatever occurs in this space of appearance is political by definition, even when it is not a direct product of action.<sup>10</sup> Under Arendt's definition of political, then, all art is political insofar as it appears.

### 7.2.2 Artistically Speaking

Artistically speaking, Arendt's proposition about the anti-political force of love and other emotions seems to support the debate on aestheticization and aesthetics. For instance, Rancière asserts works of art that aestheticize political matters results in an anaesthetic sentimentality, while the ones that exercise politics of aesthetics seek to generate a kind of atmosphere, or a deep visceral impression, that leads to the "the refutation of a situation's given assumptions" and "the introduction of previously uncounted objects and subjects."<sup>11</sup> In other words, if an artwork were to become a true political activity and not merely a "political" work so to speak, the kind that belongs in the aesthetic regime is more suitable since it occurs in the realm of action. This realm, as Arendt discerned, is the only one that has the potential to bring about unexpected responses and a chain of actions, without the mentality of fabrication.<sup>12</sup>

A contingency such as this is what makes, for example, Ai's body of work on the Sichuan earthquake and refugee crisis difficult to judge. On the one hand, some may argue Ai is a contemporary version of an Arendtian political actor who, from the edges of society as a marginal critic, interrogates and exposes the layers of the heinous underbelly of the world today, whether it may be about living under an authoritarian regime or the harsh conditions that millions of refugees find themselves in. He understands the fundamental significance of the public realm and actively seeks to enter it to participate in

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<sup>10</sup> "What is Freedom?" 154-155, emphasis added.

<sup>11</sup> "Introducing Disagreement," 7.

<sup>12</sup> Depicting the culture of mass society of her time, she observed that "the mentality of fabrication has invaded the political realm to such an extent that we take it for granted that action, even more than fabrication, is determined by category of means and ends." And then she goes on to add, "This situation, however, has the advantage that fabricators and artists have been able to give vent to their own view of these matters and to articulate their hostility against the men of action." (Arendt, "The Crisis in Culture," 217.)

political debates, and when he is barred from participating, he creates them whether they may be physical or online spaces. On the other hand, if not the artist but his work were to be solely judged, it may be regarded as an unsuitable political work of art, since even though the work “generate[s] enormous *pathos* ... which lasts for a *long beat*,”<sup>13</sup> it is insufficient to reconfigure “the very terrain of the sensible on which artistic gestures shake up our modes of perception and on which political gestures redefine our capacities for action.”<sup>14</sup> To put it differently, when a representational and ethical work focuses on depicting what occurred, it tends to operate with a reductive knowledge transfer, condensed to include as much factual information while weaving it all into a grand narrative to derive a point. Such work, for those who follow Rancière’s politics of aesthetics, is created with fabricated senses to retell a story, which will likely remain in a vicious cycle. From Arendt’s point of view as well, an artwork that makes an emotional plea may be perceived as unsuitable to do the political work it seeks. At the same time, however, as Justman argues, “art” for Arendt has the potential to “exemplify the “actualizing” of things: art discloses things (art strikes us with the force of a disclosure) as it brings them into being.”<sup>15</sup> This may be interpreted as a work of art that resembles political action has the power to disclose that which may otherwise not have been actualized. In that, such art is similar to the actions of a political actor who comes to disclose their who-ness, and in both cases, it is the spectators who have the privilege of witnessing, judging, and remembering what has been disclosed.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Weiner, “Ai Weiwei’s,” emphasis added.

<sup>14</sup> Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey, “Art of the Possible: An Interview with Jacques Rancière,” *ARTFORUM*, March 2007, <https://www.artforum.com/print/200703/fulvia-carnevale-and-john-kelsey-12843>.

<sup>15</sup> Stewart Justman, “Hannah Arendt and the Idea of Disclosure,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 4, no. 8 (1981): 408. One of the insightful distinctions he makes is the difference among disclosure, unmasking, and expression. In the Arendtian sense, unmasking requires force to unmask someone else but not oneself, and expression, too, needs to be pressed out, again with force. Disclosure, on the contrary, means to bring something to light. As such, through speech and deeds, one actualizes, and to be actualized means something has become a disclosure.

<sup>16</sup> “The public realm is constituted by the critics and the spectators, not by the actors or the makers. And this critic and spectator sits in every actor and fabricator; without this critical, judging faculty the doer or



I caution against simplifying or generalizing Arendt's political thoughts on the interrelationship between art and politics, and equally important, aestheticizing her political thought instead of looking into aesthetics in her political thought. George Kateb, for example, accuses Arendt of positioning the political actor as a creative individual with free reign to act without considering the moral consequences much like an artist.<sup>17</sup> But I would argue that Arendt does not place emphasis on the promise of political action, nor does she ignore moral responsibility. She understood the significance as well as the danger behind every initiative. Although her notions, such as miracle and natality, reveal her firm belief in taking initiatives to protect the common world, she unequivocally made it clear that any new beginning poses dangers, since human spontaneity means that we do not know the ends of our action when we act. She therefore claimed, it is not a matter of how good the intention is, because any given action in the public sphere generates unlimited consequences "where every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes."<sup>18</sup> Hence, the boundlessness of political action is one reason why action rarely, if ever, achieves its goal, because "one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation."<sup>19</sup> Far from aestheticizing action, as her critics accuse her of doing, she was keenly aware that action is one of the most ephemeral of all human activities and is contingent on many factors.<sup>20</sup>

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maker would be so isolated from the spectator that he would not even be perceived. Or, to put it another way, still in Kantian terms: the very originality of the artist (or the very novelty of the actor) depends on his making himself understood by those who are not artists (or actors)." (Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Philosophy*, 63.)

<sup>17</sup> George Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (New Jersey: Rowan and Allanheld Publishers, 1984), 30-35. See also Kimberly Curtis, *Our Sense of the Real: Aesthetic Experience and Arendtian Politics* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999.)

<sup>18</sup> *The Human Condition*, 190.

<sup>19</sup> *The Human Condition*, 190.

<sup>20</sup> Although Rancière distinguishes himself from Arendt, I would imagine they would agree on Rancière's point about moving beyond ethics-induced ways of thinking that produce a never-ending fight for justice and seek to reach universal agreement. This is because they are both concerned about plurality, and thus, calling for humanitarian effort rather than directly dealing with politics, for example, is to reduce people to a population, thereby obliterating differences. (See Rancière, "The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics.")

Moreover, political actions require a certain durability, which is why Arendt bestowed this task (of turning the ephemeral quality of action into that which may be remembered) on the spectators and the worldliest things they might create. Arendt claimed, “works of art are the most intensely worldly of all tangible things,”<sup>21</sup> because they are the disclosure of the world itself. As well, she remarked, “[n]owhere else does the sheer durability of the world of things appear in such purity and clarity, nowhere else therefore does this thing-world reveal itself so spectacularly as the non-mortal home for mortal beings.”<sup>22</sup> The existence of these things, however, is contingent on the occurrence of political actions that may be turned into tangible things, designated public spaces to house them to be seen, and the judgment of spectators on their fittingness. Additionally, the permanence of the world as a space common to all cannot be dependent on these conditions only, but also how newcomers, who are born into this world as strangers and as the newest spectators, undergo each of their educational experiences and come to make judgments of their own. Thus, when Arendt asserted, “Beauty is the very manifestation of imperishability,”<sup>23</sup> “beauty” does not refer to those that are aesthetically pleasing to the eye. Instead, Arendt was referring to things created “from a deeply contextual, deeply specific worldly engagement”<sup>24</sup> that are “specific time-bound responses to universal dilemmas embedded in the human condition.”<sup>25</sup> They exist in “timeless time in which men are able to create timeless works with which to transcend their own finiteness.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, what is beautiful has to offer “the thrill of experiencing the beat of life” as the creator or doer “inserts [one]self into the forces of past and future and threads a ‘track of non-time,’ a present.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *The Human Condition*, 167.

<sup>22</sup> *The Human Condition*, 168.

<sup>23</sup> “The Crisis in Culture,” 218.

<sup>24</sup> Curtis, *Our Sense of the Real*, 100.

<sup>25</sup> *Our Sense of the Real*, 13.

<sup>26</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 211.

<sup>27</sup> *Our Sense of the Real*, 101.

### 7.2.3 Educationally Speaking

What about education? Education, on the contrary, stands outside of the interrelated and dependent relationship between art and politics. Whereas art and politics are “both phenomena of the public world”<sup>28</sup> and the things produced via these phenomena (without predictable outcomes) have potential immortality, education is about studying the phenomena and their products. It belongs in the pre-political realm. Insofar as we consider the essence of education to be offering protected time and space for newcomers to become acquainted with this world through these things produced in the public realm, and for them to imagine what they may contribute to build this world, education should not focus on reacting to realities. It is neither inherently political nor should it be utilized as a political tool or activity. Yet, not only have many come to posit education as such, but more importantly, this extraordinary time we are living through has made it almost impossible to avoid exposure to the harsh bright light, that is, reality. Arendt depicted the impact of the rise of the social that dissolved the necessary protective boundary for the educational realm. The condition has, without a doubt, intensified today, where one blurb or image (whether it has been taken out of context or falsified) can be disseminated within a millisecond and can have a stupefying global and personal impact in a matter of seconds.

There is another fundamental difference between politics, art, and education. The realm of education without emotions, especially love, is meaningless or even nonexistent. This is why I believe Arendt ends “The Crisis in Education” with the mention of love, which rarely appears in any of her texts. She writes, “Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it ... And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough to

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<sup>28</sup> “The Crisis in Culture,” 218.

prepare them in advance for the task of renewing of a common world.”<sup>29</sup> The heart of this quote is *amor mundi*. The utmost important educational task is to help the newcomers begin to recognize what lies between that separate and relate us, and their existence and identities in the web of relationships. Getting to know the world is not about accumulating knowledge and information. Rather, it is about developing affinity for things that are unfamiliar, without which it would be impossible to perform the second miracle with *amor mundi*. Not all of us have the same obligation for all human beings, nor affinity for everything that exists. We feel a stronger responsibility for those who are closer and familiar to us. To put it differently, there lies a difference between thinking of ourselves as fellow human beings and thinking of ourselves with worldly and subjective in-betweens in mind to enact *amor mundi*.

What does this signify? The educational responsibility. This utterly important responsibility is about protecting *both* the old (what existed before) and the new (what comes into existence) *from* each other. What the oldcomers introduce to the newcomers will have an impact on the kind and level of responsibility and the respect they may have for the things that were before us and will outlive us. And conversely, the revolutionary interventions of the newcomers will have an impact on the phenomena of life and that of the world that exceeds our imagination. So, an important question the oldcomers might ask themselves again and again and again is: *what do we wish for the newcomers to become familiar with and have affinity for?* And the newcomers might ask themselves again and again and again: *am I truly doing this out of love for the world?*

### 7.3 Lingering Thoughts

Those who are reading this dissertation likely have positioned themselves as oldcomers. I admit, I too have positioned myself as such until the final stage of drafting this dissertation. Now that I am about

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<sup>29</sup> “The Crisis in Education,” 196.

to conclude this dissertation, I realize that I am both an oldcomer, and to an extent, still a newcomer. This is because I believe one's educational journey does not stop unless one stops getting to know the world. Thus, insofar as I am on this journey, I am a newcomer. And if we indeed are questing after the meaning of lovable thought objects,<sup>30</sup> so shall most of us regard ourselves as such.

It is not an exaggeration to say that, in the field of education, what happened, happens, might happen in the world in its full spectrum— i.e., all political matters—has become a critical “educational” issue, which impacts research agendas, curriculum revisions, allocations of funding, policymaking, and much more. The field seems to be immersed in taking upon itself the task of making the world a better place, further pressured by political interventions and ever-increasing expectations from the society at large. Consequently, many in the field tend to support action over thinking, answers over questions, immediate effect over long term consequences, as though the former can be genuinely enacted with the absence of the latter. In her dissertation, *Love and St. Augustine*, Arendt writes,

So long as we desire temporal things, we are constantly under this threat [of losing happiness], and our fear of losing always corresponds to our desire to have. ... Constantly bound by craving and fear to a future full of uncertainties, we strip each present moment of its calm, its intrinsic import, which we are unable to enjoy. *And so, the future destroys the present.* ... [F]or Augustine the happiness of having is not contrasted by sorrow but by fear of losing. The trouble with human happiness is that it is constantly beset by fear. It is not the lack of possessing[,] but the safety of possession that is at stake.<sup>31</sup>

Simultaneously denoting the temporal quality of the present while pointing at our never-ending quest for “temporal things,” Arendt knew being shackled to the threat of losing is our own doing. It is not the moment itself, but us “bound by craving and fear to a future full of uncertainties, we strip each present

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<sup>30</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 178-179.

<sup>31</sup> *Love and St. Augustine*, 10, emphasis added.

moment.”<sup>32</sup> Another question then arises: what are we fearful of losing, and what are we trying to maintain possession of in education? In fact, what “happiness” are we chasing after?

The academic field of education has been, as William F. Pinar writes, “so very reluctant to abandon social engineering” by constantly looking for and promoting “the right technique, the right modification of classroom organization[,] ... [or the] best practices,” working under the assumption that “*then* students will learn what we teach them.”<sup>33</sup> Engineering the newcomers as future investments to be made through schooling is to see them as always already insufficient on their own, students who need to become useful to meet the demands of the unpredictable future. In her critique of modernity, Arendt observed, “[w]e are perhaps the first generation which has become fully aware of the murderous consequences inherent in a line of thought that forces one to admit that all means, provided that they are efficient, are permissible and justified to pursue something defined as an end.”<sup>34</sup> Efficiency, along with applicability, usefulness, success, practicality, productivity, and competency, are some of the economic terms that have come to hold axiomatic values in educational literature and practice. When educators speak of potential, for example, as in “the student has yet to meet his full potential,” an assumption is made—that potentiality can be measured. But how “full” is full, and, according to whose time should the child be expected to meet that expectation? Is it not, as Pinar described almost five decades ago, an act of disconfirmation of who the child is?<sup>35</sup> Our false sense of time forces us to re-enter the perpetual cycle of

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<sup>32</sup> *Love and St. Augustine*, 10.

<sup>33</sup> William F. Pinar, “Study,” in *Educational Experience as Lived: Knowledge, History, Alterity. The Selected Works of William F. Pinar* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 12, emphasis added.

<sup>34</sup> *The Human Condition*, 229.

<sup>35</sup> William Pinar, “Sanity, Madness, and the School,” in *Curriculum Studies: The Reconceptualization*, ed. William Pinar (Troy, NY: Educator’s International Press, Inc., 2000), 372. It was originally published as *Curriculum Theorizing: The Reconceptualists* (Berkeley, CA: McCutchan Pub. Corp., 1975).

conceiving education and everything in it to be fabricated and in need of making it more appealing via proving its worth.<sup>36</sup>

Failing to recognize what makes up the fleeting moments of the present is, as Samuel D. Rocha describes, to follow the eschatological narrative of “schoolvation” that preaches a way to survive the apocalypse of the present.<sup>37</sup> What is lost, Rocha asserts, is the enchanted hope of desire, the desire to see education as a real, mysterious thing in the world.<sup>38</sup> If we regard education as that which exists without its absolute fullness, shape, or promise, could we perhaps imagine it as a kind of force, like love, that springs up unannounced that we have no control over, that affects us all in varying degrees and duration?<sup>39</sup> If education is like that, there is no definitive way *to be with* it, because love’s impermanence requires the lovers to constantly make an effort to get to know the other. Education becomes a lovable thought object. Considering education as such will inevitably involve “confront[ing] perspectives, situations, and ideas that may not be just unfamiliar, but appear at first glance as a criticism of the [other’s] view”<sup>40</sup> where all become undone in the process of transference.<sup>41</sup> Equally challenging is voluntarily staying off the roads that are well paved with clichés with good sound bites.<sup>42</sup> As well, “[m]ore often than not,” as Deborah

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<sup>36</sup> Consider, for example, the ranking system of establishments based on numbers of graduates, levels of student satisfaction, or research funding allocations based on potential “positive” impact, regardless of how long or to what extent the research would leave a mark.

<sup>37</sup> Samuel D. Rocha, “Education as Mystery: The Enchanting Hope of Desire,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 48, no. 8 (2016): 820-821.

<sup>38</sup> Rocha, “Education as Mystery.”

<sup>39</sup> Samuel D. Rocha, *Folk Phenomenology: Education, Study, and the Human Person* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015).

<sup>40</sup> Deborah P. Britzman, *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning* (New York, NY: SUNY Press, 1998), 11.

<sup>41</sup> Deborah P. Britzman, *The Very Thought of Education: Psychoanalysis and the Impossible Profession* (Albany, State University of New York Press: 2009), xi.

<sup>42</sup> Oded Zipory, “Can Education Be Rid of Clichés?” *Philosophy of Education* 1, (2019).

Britzman writes, “the very thought of education collapses our capacity to think with the thing-in-itself” because our own “experience of education overrides thinking the very thought of education.”<sup>43</sup>

Arendt’s insights that defy established frameworks and refuse to be prescriptive, thus, have been an unexpected ongoing impulse causing me to question my prior knowledge and to reorient myself throughout this dissertation writing process. I found her method of disclosing to be grounded in the world of appearances, and her quest to understand the phenomena via the activity of thinking and articulating her thoughts anew to resemble the work of a gifted weaver. She used colourful threads of various thickness and textures to create an interwoven tapestry to show her understanding of the world. Every strand that makes up a section in the tapestry is interconnected to the rest of the tapestry with loose ends along the edges, which shows that this gifted weaver did not engage in her scholarly endeavour with a complete design in mind. She left room for further interpretation.

Two years before her sudden death, she made the following remark:

Each time you write something and you send it out into the world and it becomes public, obviously everybody is free to do with it what he pleases, and this is as it should be. I do not have any quarrel with this. You should not try to hold your hand now on whatever may happen to what you have been thinking for yourself. You should rather try to learn from what other people do with it.<sup>44</sup>

It is a noteworthy statement, especially from someone who faced many critics in her lifetime, but not as remarkable given that it embodies her political thought. Every encounter with something leaves an imprint, however minuscule and transient it may be, and no experience can be captured in its entirety as it always exceeds our capacity to understand in full. These things being so, one can never predetermine the level and the kind of impact an object, individual, or experience may have on one’s life, nor what each

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<sup>43</sup> *The Very Thought of Education*, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Canovan, introduction to *The Human Condition*, xx.



individual does with the imprint, because such fleeting moments occur in the subjective time.<sup>45</sup> In the act of inserting herself into the public world, or—as I shall refer to it—as professing her love of the world, Arendt seems to remind us in the above remark what is missing in Kant’s spectators: “even if the spectacle were always the same and therefore tiresome, the audiences would change from generation to generation; nor would a fresh audience be likely to arrive at the conclusions handed down by tradition as to what an unchanging play has to tell it.”<sup>46</sup> In this, Arendt teaches us how even the greatest reification of a generation may still be tested for its durability, hinting at the possible danger of a broken thread of the past. What is more, she seems to conjure up one who might be most “trusted to tend and take care of a world of appearances,” that is, to demonstrate “active love of beauty.”<sup>47</sup> Such an individual has the capacity to exercise “taste judgment,” which involves “neither the life interests of the individual nor the moral interest of the self. ... For judgments of taste, *the world* is the primary thing.”<sup>48</sup>

We might say that, to be educated, for Arendt, is to become this individual, “a cultivated person ... who knows how to choose [one’s] company among [people], among things, among thoughts, in the present as well as in the past.”<sup>49</sup> To become such a person is not a goal to be achieved, but rather an aspiration (from the verb in Latin *aspirare*, which means *to breathe*) that accompanies us in our educational journey.

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<sup>45</sup> Through St. Augustine, who is not only one of Arendt’s major intellectual influences but also the first philosopher to derive an understanding of time through introspective questions, it was made possible to re-think about time as that only exists in the mind — “what the mind expects, attends and remembers: what it expects passes, by way of what it attends to, into what it remembers.” (St. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. F. J. Sheed (New York: Sheed & Ward Inc., 1943), 284.) If time is as subjective as St. Augustine reminds us, “when” one is ready to enter the political realm cannot be determined by the arrival of a certain age or standard measurement. Subjectivity of time also implies no two human beings can share exactly the same recollection or expectation.

<sup>46</sup> *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 96.

<sup>47</sup> “The Crisis in Culture,” 219.

<sup>48</sup> “The Crisis in Culture,” 222, emphasis added.

<sup>49</sup> “The Crisis in Culture,” 226.

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