

## Art and Political Emotions (Florence/online, 8 Sep 25)

Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut (Florence, Italy), Sep 08, 2025

Natalie Arrowsmith

Transdisciplinary Study Day of the Research Group “Ethico-Aesthetics of the Visual”:  
Art and Political Emotions in the 20th and 21st Century.

With Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, Vasyl Cherepanyn, Hana Gründler, Luiza Nader and Francesca Raimondi.

In his 1984 essay “Six Asides on Culture,” the Czech playwright and dissident Václav Havel reflected on the political power of art and culture under totalitarianism. He noted that “the current regime has a better nose [...] for what it considers to be its true threat [...]” than the contemporary art theorists, namely “what is most artistically pervasive, even if it does not look particularly “political” on the outside.” Havel challenged normative and simplistic notions of political art, insisting rather on the importance of complexity and subtle subversion in aesthetics. Almost 30 years later, the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum emphasised the normative function of art instead: art can reduce conflict, stir ‘good’ emotions like love and compassion, and help build a more ethical society. This is why according to Nussbaum “the space for subversion and humor should [...] remain as large as is consistent with civic order and stability” (Political Emotions. Why Love Matters for Justice, 2013). Although Nussbaum’s insistence on the affective dimension of art is significant, her highly didactic and idealistic vision overlooks that art can also serve as a powerful instrument to normalise and justify negative (political) emotions such as anger, envy and aggression. From this perspective, the modernist idea that art derives its power by challenging norms, embracing ambiguity and exposing conflict is far off the mark.

History has shown us that art has constantly moved between different registers: from official, often one-directional propaganda in authoritarian regimes (such as under Nazism, Stalinism, or in former Eastern Bloc countries), to the equally ideological denial of its social and political dimensions, to subversive work emerging from unofficial art scenes. Today, as we face new cultural hegemonies – to borrow Antonio Gramsci’s term – and a deeply affective political sphere, it is crucial to rethink the parameters of political art, to acknowledge the complexity of political emotions and move away from binary models of political and apolitical art. (One need only recall the CIA’s Cold War strategy of promoting ostensibly ideology-free abstract art as a political weapon.)

Instead, we should ask: When is art political? Is there an apolitical political art (especially in light of thinkers like Theodor W. Adorno and Václav Havel)? How can we distinguish different registers and relationships between art and politics? Can art sensitize the beholder not only aesthetically,

but also ethically, reaching beyond univocal political messages? What does the current landscape of political emotions look like, and how might art intervene in them to foster social change? Can artistic imagination help us raise awareness of alternative ways of thinking? And finally, if art helps us understand the present and past, how might it also support democracy and civic participation?

#### PROGRAM

14.00 – 14.15

WELCOME Hana Gründler (KHI – MPI)

14.15 – 14.55

Luiza Nader (Academy of Fine Arts, Warsaw)

Affective Art History and Beyond. Empathy, Compassion, Solidarity

14.55 – 15.35

Francesca Raimondi (Freie Universität Berlin)

Visceral Power and the Work of Affects in Jelena Jureša's 'Don't Take it Personally'

#### B R E A K

15.50 – 16.30

Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen (University of Copenhagen)

Internationalism, Anticapitalism and Anticolonialism in the Situationist International

16.30 – 17.10

Hana Gründler (KHI – MPI)

Of Martyrdom and Kitsch: Aesthetics of the Underground in the ČSSR

#### B R E A K

17.30 – 18.10

Vasyl Cherepanyn (Head of the Visual Culture Research Centre, Kyiv Biennial)

Watching the War of Others

18.10 – 19.00

Roundtable Discussion

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This will be a hybrid event.

#### VENUE

Palazzo Grifoni Budini Gattai

Via dei Servi 51

50122 Firenze, Italia

To participate online please register in advance via Zoom:

[https://eu02web.zoom-x.de/meeting/register/T8\\_E42qYTt-rilaFFtismQ](https://eu02web.zoom-x.de/meeting/register/T8_E42qYTt-rilaFFtismQ)

After registering, you will receive a confirmation email containing information about joining the

meeting.

Contact: Research Group Ethico-Aesthetics of the Visual

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