A provisional space for a group of words that have been forced to abandon their meanings. While disruptive, this event of separation may also be enabling; displaced from their “proper” definitional locations, the identities of these word refugees are also rendered indeterminate. This does not mean that they can mean any and everything—wondering in exile, they still bear the traces of the violent interpretive conflicts that have historically attempted to fix them into place and put them to use. Gathered precariously in this new edition of the OED, the word-refugees seem to lose their sense of usefulness. But paradoxically, this loss precipitates the birth of another utility all together; the word-refugee begins to map, usefully, a world in which sense, knowledge and action are lacking absolute guarantees. They map, in other words, the uncertain terrain of the political.[[1]](#footnote--1)

The text accompanies a film, *M\*Bethlehem*, in which a female voice babbles, the voice-over to images shot with documentary starkness of Bethlehem under curfew, a documentary voice-over gone awry. “Babble” flows into sonorous rhythm, an aural texture at odds with the direct visual long shots. This musicality, in turn, solidifies into a system (the alphabet), as it becomes clear that the voice, at once lulling and stuttering, is working through the letters of a dictionary. Text and sound, written by Ayreen Anastas, reminds us that “autonomy” could never be confused with apoliticism. Loss of grounding precipitates a poetics of protest reconcretizing language, and, more broadly, the meaning of activism. Indeterminacy and provisional autonomy articulate those political, social, and economic precarity, becoming more concrete than the meta-political slogans on the one hand, and participatory potlucks, usually mobilized to address such sites.

Anastas is a founding member of the artist and activist collective “16 Beaver,” which broadly attempts to set specific and intentional objectives in the interest of transnational anti-capital, anti-corporate movements. 16 Beaver has hosted, among many other events ranging in scope and format, talks by and screenings of filmmaker Harun Farocki, screening of Alexander Kluge’s work, seminars with Brian Holmes on the interconnection of aesthetics and politics, open discussions on Rancière’s work in addition to less delimited tendencies in contemporaneity, such as the recent recrudecenses of abstraction; it has hosted autonomist theorist Franco Bifo Berardi as well as activists involved with Tahrir Square demonstrations this past January and February (2011). The collective holds events at institutions in numerous cities, nationally and abroad, hosting teach-ins at MIT, Cambridge among others. A program entitled “strategies of resistance” occurred at the Kunsthalle
Exnerghasse,Vienna and the Contemporary Arts Center, Vilnius.

In its “mission statement,” Anastas and fellow founder Rene Gabri state: “16Beaver is the address of a space initiated/run by artists to create and maintain an ongoing platform for the presentation, production, and discussion of a variety of artistic/cultural/economic/political projects. It is the point of many departures/arrivals.” The description is vague at best, anomic at worst. “Departures and arrivals” become a metaphor for peripatetic transience, evoking the generic space of the airport, the trope of capitalist globalization and the vapid, exhausted monad that postdates the subject created by such spaced. This vagueness, however, is necessitated by the present inadequacy of available descriptive language to circumscribe 16 Beaver’s committed—I take them at their work, and surely the long duree of their efforts testifies to their dedication if not the rigor of their rhetoric—attention to many geopolitical contexts in the interest of anti imperialist, transnational class equity.

The risk of symptomatizing the globalization it attempts to (those clichéd twin words) “critique” and “resist” are a strength and simultaneous weakness of 16 Beaver. The organizers at 16 Beaver describe their “teach ins” as places to learn “strategies of resistance,” and as “a web-project which is developing in relation to a series of conversations regarding Artists/Collectives/Politics.” Activism here is understood to be a form of organization mobilized toward specific ends, although these ends are understandably held in abeyance, suspended until the right time.That said, the statement continues along weak if not problematic lines: “The idea is to engage these issues while creating new relationships and networks between groups and individuals who would otherwise remain isolated.”[[2]](#footnote-0) The participant who may show up seeking more militant forms of instruction—such as how to perform getting arrested non-violently, how to deal with cops, or what kind of legal aid may be available, how to ward off rape and sexual harassment—is disappointed yet appeased with another potluck and, if lucky, some good conversation.

The activist horizon of 16 Beaver’s “project”-- in the sense of an integrated, consistent focus on relevant contemporary problem sets-- may or may not be clear. What interests me here is the word “art” in the mission statement, which appears after the term “activism.” The meaning of this word suffers an even greater lapsus. 16 Beaver persists in attempting to define the relationship between activism and art, one of the most continuous, agonistic searches of 20th century Marxism, through committed process over many years, as I have mentioned. That it cannot yet “define” art testifies to the group’s endurance: it does not adopt facile slogans. It is, however, evident that “art” is neither a site of autonomy-- an exceptional site of “free play”—in the tradition of Baumgarten, Kant, and most significantly, Schiller. And yet, 16 Beaver does not espouse the “Art Into Life” mission of the historical avant-garde; shock, negation, access to oscillating infantile drives, and transgressive “excess” work to counter instrumentality do not constitute its horizon. Finally, it cannot be misrecognized as part of the most compromised misprision of the historical avant-garde: the “relational,” and open “participatory” ethos of the 90s and early 2000s. The latter takes place, one term among several, in a framework of “the aesthetic turn,” founded on recent interest in the work of Jacques Rancire, to which I will return. [[3]](#footnote-1)

The present essay focuses solely on Ayreen Anastas’s work which diverges from the stated intentions of the collective she co-founded, in turn suggesting a relationship between art and activism other to “art into life.” Anastas embeds most of her artistic practice artist as part of a collaborative effort with Gabri. In 2009, they presented a formal lecture together against American foreign policy in the Middle East at the NY Public Library. By contrast, her solo work--which I differentiate because of the antagonism between activism and art, a friction that makes the co equal labor of political activism on the one hand and poetic, artistic practice all the more imperative—revivifies a negative modernist cultural practice, a set of processes so frequently vilified by critiques of “the autonomy of art” begun by the historical avant-garde and continued into the present.[[4]](#footnote-2)

Anastas’s filmic work insists on the provisional autonomy associated with modernist idioms, more specifically poetic language folded in on its own materiality, the condition for the possibility of communication over communication itself. This insistence does not, however, act as a “return,” a “turn,” a trend of any kind, but rather, a historically grounded negative dialectical response to post-fordist conditions which the autonomists (Virno) have characterized as bereft of boundaries between any and all human endeavors. How, then, to impose borders, and in what sense may the recrudescence of an impossible autonomy also impose a politics lost in the collapse of differentiation?

*M\*Bethlehem* (2004) and *Pasolini Pa Palestine* (2005) both use non-referential language, multiple frames set mis-en-abyme in an homage to self-referentiality, and other putatively “formalist” techniques to telegraph the inadequacy of political and meta-political language in thinking “The West Bank.” Tension is maintained not as a formal end in itself nor as an open-ended means, but as a necessary condition for concretizing the abstract, or more radically, thinking the impossible in order to arrive at an understanding that would not merely reproduce the given hegemonic mode of liberal democratic politics, which are entwined in colonialism. Determinative, denotative language remains inadequate to the political indeterminacy of Palestine. The archive of language articulates the problem of reference and autonomy well. The Oxford English Dictionary, understood as both a “reference” point for “living” language and as a repository of history, a place of dynamic yet specific temporalities and spatialities. *M \* Bethlehem* presents “straight” documentary views, shots extended temporally, of Bethlehem under curfew. The “voiceover” of the documentary is displaced, replaced by Anastas reading, by turns, “theory” (Foucault and Agamben, among others) and The Oxford English Dictionary, and her interruption of both authoritative “sources.” The OED demonstrates the excess and lack of language on the one hand in relation to a preconstituted signifier generative of the power of language as law on the other in aporetic conjuncture. The latter, an abstraction performed concretely at the price of “mere” life,” is performed as such.[[5]](#footnote-3) During the process of making *M \* Bethlehem*, Anastas worked with the OED to generate The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, which she discusses as

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What seems at first glance to be a rehearsal of modernist poetics oscillates and finally flickers forth as poetic language operating necessarily—not arbitrarily, not by chance, not open ended-- in a constellation of political militancy. The excess and lack of language, far from a rehearsal although it does revivify the premises of Mallermean poetics, is a political condition. This condition, in turn, is one that must be met, but resisting hegemony involves a reshuffling of abstraction and concretion. Commitment is a function of estrangement. One example of a *New OED* entry is “enemy” under E:

**enemy** 1 The fact, condition or position of being near or close by; nearness, neighborhood. a in space. b in abstract relations, as kinship; affinity of nature, nearness in time, etc. …

And “fundamentalism” under F:

**fundamentalism** 1 a word, sense, or phrase peculiar to or originating from the United States of America. 2 *fig* to make dark or obscure in meaning or intelligibility, to destroy the clearness of. 3 the great errors and dangers, that may result out of the misconception of the names of things 4 *fig.* A mark of disgrace or infamy; a sign of severe censure or condemnation , regarded as impressed on a person or thing; ‘brand.’ 5 *spec.* The making of distinctions prejudicial to people of a different race or colour from oneself; racial discrimination.

Here, the constitutive potential of language is not reducible to context.[[7]](#footnote-5) It is precisely their provisional decontextualization—an interval apart from the performative that characterizes every aspect of post-industrial life as Virno and the autonomists would have it--that clarifies the concrete specificity of contexts. First, Anastas rehearses Said’s Foucauldean argument in *Orientalism*, namely, the qualifications of the objects originate in the subject and are not inherent attributes of the object. The term “fundamentalism” entered common American English at a particular historical moment (in recent “memory,” the hostage crisis, the beginning the Reagan administration, although the term goes back much further).[[8]](#footnote-6) Extracted from habituated use, permitted to take weight as a temporarily “autonomous” yet contingent object, the word comes into focus as one with particular effects, one whose origins are vague and/or clearly bound up with state ideological apparati. Continuing with Anastas’s entry, the word—a part of code tasked with communication, with some element of transparency in order to be shared among three or more speakers of the code—obscures, darkens, betrays the burden of words. The third part of the entry revisits the way in which power organizes intelligibility, a regime of knowledge, the archive as Foucault discusses it in *The Order of Things* at a place and time. As such language is a system of effects rather than a referential tool. Those effects are material, concrete, impressed on life in its precariousness. None of these potential ends, or provisional closures in meaning, are either explicit or conclusive. Anastas allows the dictionary to be a topology of potentiality, in which reference coagulates, disrupts, and continues to move. Disruption on the one hand, and imposition of militant meaning, while not antithetical, are aloowed the friction necessary to allow each a charge not possible with aestheticist synthesis of art and politics (against which Benjamin warned). Poetic language—unassimilated to slogans—retains revolt in potentio.[[9]](#footnote-7)

Of course that potential has been the object of debate for the last century. It is a truism, indeed a reified assumption, that poetics and political activism are incompatible. Unlike the discursive category “art,” evoked as a generality inclusive of politicized practices such as tactical media, and “politics,” the terms “poetics” and “activism” pose a more specific and localized binary, one that appears, by definition, to obviate the possibility of complex terms: “activist poet,” “poet activist.” “Poetics” forecloses definitive meaning and remains indeterminate while “activism” demands the fulfillment of a bare minimum of predetermined goals. Vulgarly, one is posited as means, the other as ends. Arguments for each have, recursively through the history of 20th C political and cultural speech, suspected advocacy of the other of unaccountability or even violence. The constellation of debates throughout the 20s and 30s among Adorno, Lukacs, Benjamin, and Brecht are one such oft-cited example.[[10]](#footnote-8) Ironically, another instance is the emergent debate after WWII between Sartre’s concept of “Committed Literature,” and Adorno’s aporetic indictment and simultaneous expectations of lyric poetry.[[11]](#footnote-9) His oft cited statement that lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, frequently cited as an instance of modernism’s autonomy as authoritarian disavowal misses the caveat: “it is all the more necessary.”[[12]](#footnote-10) It also fails to recognize Adorno’s passionate devotion to the necessary impossibility of articulating violence and loss at the historical scale of the Shoah. Commemoration and resistance must be hard won, or they risk being reified, so many fetishes of a post war capitalist democracy in which even suffering and memory become affective trinkets (in a phrase, Oprah culture). Appearances as such do not amount to activism, nor, sadly, to the rigors of poetic language.

Rare are the contingent historical moments wherein both the axes of radical activism and those of sensory experimentation and an investigation into the materiality of language approach a relation of proximity. Claude Cahun’s work with Contre Attaque, the anti-Vichy regime collective, comes to mind, as does her book of experimental verse and prose, *Les Paris Sont Ouverts.* [[13]](#footnote-11) Recently, the relationship between poetic “abstraction” and concrete political action continues to be rehearsed, often with the same historical figures now crudely instrumentalized as personifications of generalized historical political positions. In a conference on contemporary politics and art (poetry seems to have been added as a sub category of “art”) hosted by the Hammer at UCLA, poet and activist Juliana Spahr, in conversation with Joshua Clover and Chris Nealon remarked: “There is a stand off that could be cartoonized as that between Adorno and Brecht and that part of the problem with how we study literature in the academy is that Adorno has won.”[[14]](#footnote-12) While Spahr acknowledges situating “Brecht” and “Adorno” caricatures—problematic in that both are overtly and equally radically political, and provide different ways of practicing politics—her claim that Adorno “has won” amounts to a hegemonic blindness to poetic language’s ability to “move people to action.” “Adorno has won,” sadly, becomes shorthand for describing the smug self satisfied stasis of academia. Poetic language, in other words, is not understood to take part in activism. Spahr laments the absence of “movement poetry.” She points out that, far from a means without ends, even the most intimate and/or “open ended” language is active because it “moves” the other, producing affect and possibly action. Of course the nuances in the debates of the Frankfurt school are lost. When Spahr points out that even love poetry moves one to action by effecting affect, she could be citing Adorno as much as Brecht! Discussant Joshua Clover cautions, in response to Spahr, that despite the movement-to-affect inherent to poetic language, writers are not necessarily also organizers, nor does activism move from language to the street. His next claims rehearse Adorno’s famous dictum about the barbarity yet necessity of poetry against a historical horizon set by Auschwitz, without the dictatorial language of course:

At the same time, though, I wanted to suggest that even poets whose work doesn’t initially seem to be thinking about historical crisis, about capitalism, about politics, often are thinking about it. So I wanted to assign myself a task: given that poets aren’t the same as activists, but that poetry is a really sensitive barometer of the present, could I try to describe or act out a reading practice that took poetry seriously as a way of thinking about politics? To answer yes, it turned out, meant to accept that the poetry that interests me runs along a whole gamut of “thinking about politics” that makes more sense if you re-phrase it slightly, as “thinking about the present.” That way, I felt like I could begin to insist that divides in poetry between stances like “quietude” and “activism” made less sense than did a whole landscape of time-telling strategies that included, yes, straight-up calling for revolution but also a sit-and-wait attitude.[[15]](#footnote-13)

In this internal debate-as-rehearsal of 20th C debate, at stake is the immediacy, the mediation, of call to action. Anastas preserves the tension of “impossibility” and “necessity” passionately set by a position that would later be misunderstood as simply autonomous.[[16]](#footnote-14) At the same time, her abstract language becomes clearly a matter of “Palestine,” and not vaguely, “the present,” which can never be present to itself. [[17]](#footnote-15) The tension, and specificity, of Anastas’s work surfaces a nuance in “modernist aesthetics” too often collapsed into the now, in 2011, vapid term autonomy. For Adorno, preserving tension permitted a true politics rather than

works of art [that] merely assimilate themselves to the brute existence against which they protest, in forms so ephemeral (the very charge made against autonomous art by committed writers) that from the first days they belong in the seminars in which they end. The menacing thrust of the antithesis is a reminder of how precarious the condition of art is today. Each of the two alternatives [commitment and autonomy] negates itself with the other. Committed art cancels the distance between the two. ‘Art for art’s sake’ denies by its absolute claims the ineradicable connections with reality which is the polemical a priori of the attempt to make art autonomous from the real, i.e. provisionally detached. [[18]](#footnote-16)

The tension between Anastas’s poeticism—disconnected and reconnected to the documentary quality of the visual field—and activist politics both resists that of the geo-political site she addresses and reflects it. For the political horizon is itself “suspended” in an indeterminate aporetic condition in many contexts. One such example of aporia is “Palestine” itself. Suspended in a non-state, locked in one of the greatest instantiations of nationalism, Israel, a “neither/nor,” or, more accurately and worse, a “both/and,” those who barely survive within the parameters of this non existent proper name “Palestine” constitute neither an independent state nor a position of clear interiority as an ethnic minority in relation to Israel. Palestinians are not given the rights of citizens but are subject to the law, to numerous and barely mediated forms of discipline, violence, and control.[[19]](#footnote-17) This topology, I would call it an aporetic topology, is well recognized to be the condition of everyday life, indeed precarious survival, in Palestine. The zone of indistinction that subtends modernity acts in a heightened way in that context.

“In *Pasolini Pa Palestine*, Anastas retraces Pier Paolo Pasolini’s trip to the West Bank in 1963 to search for an authentic Palestine for his film “The Gospel According to St. Matthew.”[[20]](#footnote-18) Anastas works from within Pasolini’s search for subaltern authenticity to materialize the post-1948 gradual colonization of the West Bank and Golan Heights. A problem for Anastas with Pasolini, for which she much introduce the fragmentation inherent in language.

Anastas’s implicit critique of Pasolini’s search for authenticity grounded in the land and those who live on it acknowledges that the concept of an authentic community risks becoming a reaction formation that avoids overcome politics through recourse to the dream of an organic community, a melancholically aestheticized iteration of Romantic imaginaries of the land and “the people.”[[21]](#footnote-19) *Pasolini Pa \* Palestine* pays homage to formations substitute a mythic or pseudo-scientific notion of common sense. Examples of this "common sense" include eugenics, the romanticized primitivism of agrarian and Third World Communism, or the statistical fiction of consensus.

Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri’s collaborative work evokes Palestine indirectly. Their best known project, shown at Art in General in 2006, entitled “Means Without Ends: Camp Campaign,” took its name from Agamben’s *Means without Ends* as well as his concept of the “camp as the nomos of the modern.”[[22]](#footnote-20) “Curious” about how a camp such as the one in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba could exist in the 21st century, Anastas and Gabri went on a road trip across the US, starting in New York City and ending on the West Coast. Throughout their journey, Anastas and Gabri filmed specific sites of enclosure—Native American Reservations, gated communities, national parks—and held interviews and public discussions in parking lots, at memorial sites, community centers and exhibition spaces, any remotely public site in order to explore the punitive function of enclosures in modern statist sovereignty.

T.J. Demos, in his ground-breaking essay on Anastas and Gabri’s collaborative work, argues that their project carves a space neither aesthetic nor purely political, or neither pure means nor means to an end. “Entitled Means Without Ends: Camp Campaign,” Demos argues that the pair “direct the entwinement of aesthetics and politics against the force of separation that has arisen recently in reference to the camp.”[[23]](#footnote-21) While the author lauds the Camp Campaign for its politicization of aesthetics, it is never made clear how this operates, if indeed it does, or if the project may not, sadly, aestheticize politics. I wonder why you call it ground breaking. I haven't read it. Part of the indistinct quality of the work may result from the failure to adequately think the conjuncture of aesthetics and politics more specifically, or how that conjuncture operates in a way specific to Anastas and Gabri’s practice rather than the ideas that pre-exist the work. The author tells us many times that the word is both art and politics; however, the conjuncture is neither demonstrated by the essay on the work nor the work itself. Beyond telling us that “the artists break from a descriptive and analytical trajectory by introducing a certain opacity in the map’s format, represented by the inclusion of passages of poetic language, stuttering repetitions and nonsensical sequences of words.” We are not shown how this absence of sense, stuttering and “poetic language” deliver us to the commitment of Anastas and Gabri’s work. Moreover, the aspects of *Camp Campaign to* which Demos refers to as “poetic” differ significantly from that of Anastas’s films. While the former ge collapses of politics and aesthetics to bordering on anomie, the other results in a tension between terms that communicates political aporia with a lucidity that direct denotative language could not achieve.

Demos, after Agamben and dozens of others, applies the concept of biopolitics coined by Foucault in the conclusion to the third volume of A History of Sexuality, and elaborated in a lecture entitled “17 March, 1976,” delivered at the Collège de France, Foucault defined on biopolitics as “the acquisition of power over man insofar as man is a living being…which led to state control over the biological.”[[24]](#footnote-22) Agamben’s theorization of the camp as “nomos of the modern” which the *Camp Campaign* explicitly mobilizes, owes its premise to Foucault’s framework. Crucially, however, Demos erroneously states that “It is precisely the force of separation—between life and law, between human being and citizen—that for Agamben brings the camp into existence,” reversing Agamben’s point that it is the *proximity* between life and law that endangers mere life. The latter is susceptible because of its indeterminate proximity, not its distance. It is abandoned by, yet held within, the axes of law.[[25]](#footnote-23) Agamben summarizes his project with the statement: “He who has been banned is *not*, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather *abandoned* by it, that is, exposed to a threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable.”[[26]](#footnote-24) He calls this a topological zone of indistinction.[[27]](#footnote-25)

Those who have spent decades on the problem from the vantage within Israel, such as Ariella Azoulay and Adi Ophir argue, the distinction Benjamin made between law making violence and law preserving violence enacted toward a legally sanctioned end does not apply in Palestine, or any occupied, stateless territory.[[28]](#footnote-26) Suspended violence in the absence of laws or rights are neither constitutive nor preservative. There is no language in keeping with law that could articulate a demographic outside the bounds of language, be it punitive or protective. Ariella Azoulay, describing the intersection of photojournalism and activism in *The Civil Contract of Photography*, discusses the Palestinian as an a-subject position occupying an oblique angle to hegemony. Palestinians are scotomized in civil rights discourses which originate in and revolve around the discourse of the nation state. “Because Palestinians are considered stateless, they are absented from the discourse on citizenship.”[[29]](#footnote-27)

Neither Azoulay nor Ophir address cultural production outside of documentary photography as a denotative form by which to communicate with the outside world on behalf of voiceless, within hegemonic order, persons, a culturally oriented activism does exist in Palestine. Khaled Jarrar, a young artist who also lives and works in Ramallah insists on his role as an activist, not unlike Anastas. Trading a concrete gesture for language, Jarrar designed and produced a passport stamp. An occupied territory, there are no institutionalized processes or entry or exit into Palestine. One must pass through myriad Israeli checkpoints but once in Palestinian “territory,” can traverse unsurveilled, off of any systematic political metric. In a sense, this allegorizes the degree to which Palestine does not “exist” according to international codes. Visitors are absorbed into the streets of West Bank cities like Ramallah as though off of any map. Jarrar, a la tactical media, mimics forms of discipline and control to challenge it in a way that turns meaning onto the other. Some passport holders yield to a fear of Israeli authority, declining the stamp, while others embrace it as a sign of their own political stance. Jarrar claims "I believe in art that makes a difference, that talks about change. My art is making a political statement."[[30]](#footnote-28) But Jarrar does not make “statements;” he acts, performing within the parameters of every day “life.” He actively approaches anyone and everyone in the streets of Ramallah, proposing to act on their passport, a radical militant action in a post 9/11 global order. He is aware of the risks of his actions. Those actions, however, depend on a reliance on the administrative functions that shore up a nation state. He is imagining, in a way not unlike tactical media artists the Yes Men, an alternative reality, one in which Palestine would be a sovereign state. In this sense, Jarrar relies on the given order of the state and statehood. He mimics Israeli—an extreme form of the modern nation state--nationalist logic. The artist’s tactic adheres to neither a Marxist modernist universality nor the transnationalism of the historical avant-gardes, Constructivist, Surrealist or Dada. Yearning for a specificity in a geopolitical site effectively voided, Jarrar locates it in identity: a stamp of national identity. Of course the passport stamps cannot be called nationalist—there is no nation whereof to speak—it does border on identitarian. Identity is a function of the very constitutive violence of which Benjamin speaks in “Critique of Violence,” and Hannah Arendt after him in *The Origin of Totalitarianism*. Hannah Arendt, in her well known “The Decline of the Nation State and the End of the Rights of Man” begins with a simple question: how is it that he or she who could embody the rights of man as such, the stateless one, or the refugee, signals a legitimating crisis at the heart of the concept of rights?

The conception of human rights based upon the assumed existence of a human as such, broke down at the very moment that those who professed to believe in it were for the first time confronted with people who had indeed lost all other qualities and specific relationships –except that they were still human.[[31]](#footnote-29)

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The tension between criticality and autonomy associated with modernism has long been dismissed as a lingering Kantianism, owing much, paradoxically, to those in favor of the putative “aesthetic turn.”[[32]](#footnote-30) The latter tendency, to which I return, attempts to dissolve the generative friction between art and politics in what risks becoming a neutralizing synthesis, one that betrays both politics/activism and aesthetics/poetics. Great. I like that this is said, here, after you say that Brecht and Adorno both are right.

Étienne Balibar and Jacques Rancière, among others, have tried to think the necessary connection between aesthetics and resistant social formations, and the collective articulations of dissent through the lens of “human rights” following Arendt, over the past few decades. Despite the fact that neither uses the word “activism” as such-- a curious omission in terminology--both try to redefine politics as that which occurs among shifting understandings of “the people” rather than at an electoral level, or what Rancière calls “metapolitics.” Protest and forms of critical expression are the object of their common inquiry despite their many differences. Another shared problem set for both is that of “aesthetics,” which they attempt to wrest from a history of thought intextricably bound with a Kantian legacy. For both, aesthetics do not fall outside the parameters of politics, are not occupy a position of either alterity or autonomy. Visibility—indeed representation—make both terms dependent on the other. Provisional groupings formed through disagreement who elect to manifest dispute, among whom we might include activists, do so through forms of visibility and representation. Both acknowledge that dissensus entails a sensory elements irreducible to ideology.

In *Politics and the Other Scene*, Balibar builds on Benjamin’s twin concepts of constitutive and maintenance violence. In “Internationalism or Barbarism,” the state, though a source of violence, is a form of necessary violence, one that checks the atavistic tendencies of groups and clans. “The fact remains that nationalism(s), racism(s), and fascism(s) represent a spectrum of ideological formations which, in a sense, presuppose each other.”[[33]](#footnote-31) While this leads to the “phantom” of unified nationality, or impossible nationality, nationalism binds and limits the latter tendencies that are part of its very foundation, its “other scene.”[[34]](#footnote-32) Jarrar’s passport stamp suggests a similar claim: recognition of Palestinian identity as such is foremost, organization to ebb the tide of non-recognition as violence is also emphasized. The passport stamp project reintroduces tactically, and tactfully, a “politics of civility” guarded by the state and perpetually renegotiated through mutual recognition, a balance of identification and disidentification. Aesthetics plays no insignificant role in the maintenance of equilibrium, by turns challenging and upholding status quo, containing and letting irrupt forces of irrationality. It’s part is greater than that of activism, what the author calls “civility from below” which can result in “disincorporation.”[[35]](#footnote-33) Art provides a totality that supercedes the minoritarian quality of issue or identity specific activism.

Dis-incorporation is a double-edged sword. The political hypothesis of “civility from below” cannot, then, choose between the strategy, or language, of the becoming majoritarian or the becoming minoritarian of resistance, since it defines itself both as alternative to the violence inherent in the state, and as a remedy for the state’s impotence in respect to the two faces of cruelty. If this is not a theoretical choice, then it is a conjunctural question, a question of the art of politics—and perhaps simply art, since the only means civility has at its disposal are statements, signs, and roles.[[36]](#footnote-34)

Balibar permutes Benjamin’s well-known formula that the politicization of aesthetics is socialism’s logic while fascism entails the aetheticization of politics, arriving at a collapse where politics is an art, a form of the social. What part might activism, with its specific aspirations, play? Why emphasize “art,” its statements and signs ultimately indeterminate?

Another articulation of an inadequate attempt to rethink the link between politics and aesthetics resulting in more of a meaningless collapse that a productive aporia, would be the term “partition in the sensible,” posited by Jacques Ranciere who privileges anti-autonomous, or art-into-life, aesthetics (rejecting differentiations between interwar and post World War II iterations of the avant-garde, such as the account put forward by Peter Burger in *Theory of The Avant-garde*) more explicitly. He defines politics as the drive toward appearances of those, the marginalized, who “do not count” or do not appear in the space of representation (politically or culturally) and those who do. To participate in the enactment of equality becomes a matter of visibility, presentation, indeed theatricality.[[37]](#footnote-35) “It is an order of the visible and of the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise."[[38]](#footnote-36) The political occurs when hegemonic orders are interrupted by the sudden appearance of the heretofore unperceivable. Because it produces transitions in perceptual experience, politics are aesthetic by definition. The very word “representation” locates the seam of an always already existent imbrication of politics and aesthetics. This leaves little room for activism outside of visibility.

Politics, as opposed to the spectacle of meta-politics or media driven dramatization of hegemony, entails the manner of appearance, the way in which the non-hegemonic elements demonstrate their demands, enacting, in effect, an art of monstration. “Politics does not happen just because the poor oppose the rich. It is the other way around: politics (that is, the interruption of the simple effects of domination by the rich) causes the poor to exist as an entity.”[[39]](#footnote-37) This attempt to rethink the conjuncture of art and politics does not explicitly address activism in the discourse of “art” although it would appear to be the means of monstarion, of new frames, or, as Rancière would have it, “partitions in the visible.” The reframing of the relation among fiction and fact is one of the most radical breaks enacted by the concept of “partitions in the visible;” visibility is not synonymous with hegemony, wherein models of critical resistance would require exposing the fictions or lies in the sociopolitical real. Now, the problem does not lie in Ranciere’s definition of “disagreement” as an incommensurability of elements rather than a system of dissembling and repression (spectacle). Ranciere’s argument was seductive during the era of triumphant liberalism and “enforced consensus” of the 90s and early 2000s. The collapse of politics and aesthetics under the term visibility not only threatens to neutralize both, but proves to be hopelessly relativistic. In the avoidance to posit a horizon against which totality, universality might be rethought in concrete, material terms. Any iteration of disagreement is “political,” or worse, “poetic.”

One open question among others might the criteria by which to differentiate radical resistance from repetition, re-entrenchment, or indeed, a reactionary politics, if both frame perception of the social field anew. There are, now, smokers rights activists, the Tea Party participants call themselves activists, etc. To what extent does “a partition in the sensible” neutralize both politics and aesthetics? “Politics …causes the poor to exist as an entity” is a dangerous proposition precisely for its reliance on visibility as the central means to the end of political change. This theory serves the reactionary right as much as the radical left. Those who hold visibility, however momentarily, direct politics.

Recent tendencies—among them relational and participatory practices and a Rancierean ethos that subtends them--run the risk of, to borrow the language of argumentation in favor of politicized autonomy, “merely assimilat[ing] themselves to the brute existence against which they protest, in forms so ephemeral (the very charge made against autonomous art by committed writers) that from the first days they belong in the seminars in which they end.”[[40]](#footnote-38) The menacing thrust of the antithesis is a reminder of how precarious the condition of art is today. Each of the two alternatives [commitment and autonomy] negates itself with the other. Committed art cancels the distance between the two. ‘Art for art’s sake’ denies by its absolute claims the ineradicable connections with reality which is the polemical a priori of the attempt to make art autonomous from the real.” By contrast, Anastas’s insistence on the materiality of language, historically deemed a-political and indifferent to politicized meaning, becomes the site of politics at an elemental level because of that very materiality, especially in the context of “dematerialization” mercilessly enforced as much by advancing regimes of refined and integrated capital as by Nationalist ideology, or worse, the entwinement of both. Concrete language is not a metaphor, but a necessary resource. One might wish to address recent events where language itself is being privatized via copyright law.

I would like to close the present lines of thinking with a timely statement made in the contemporary art journal *Eflux*. Franco Berardi Bifo, rethinking the meaning of autonomy in contemporaneity, summarizes nicely the degree to which the collapse of culture into every day life has assisted hegemony, that is, the forward march of capitalist expropriation.

We should be able to consider what possibilities remain available for creating an autonomy for knowledge from capitalism in the future. We should be able to imagine a pathway for knowledge workers to self-organize, and we should be able to create the institutions, or models for future institutions, of knowledge production and transmission. The complex mutation of knowledge production and transmission, and the related transformation—or devastation—of modern institutions of education, has been a crucial outcome of financial dictatorship in the sphere of semiocapital.”[[41]](#footnote-39)

The emphasis on art into life, life has art, has effectively eclipsed a space from which to think and from which to act.

1. The iteration of the project cited here was published in the exemplary volume edited by Tanya Leighton. *In The Poem About Love You Don’t Write The Word Love.* New York and Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2006. P. 196. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. This statement, consciously or otherwise, it is not clear, risks advocating the model of conviviality as antidote to “alientation” and capitalist modernity first formalized in Nicholas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics*. 1998. That which must be resisted, for which the group assists in formulating strategies, appears to be loneliness more than any particular operations of transnational capital. Although Claire Bishop’s seminal essay “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics.” *October*. No 110 was paradigmatic and seems to have raised awareness about the inefficacy of relational “art,” activist “art” doesn’t appear to have found a way out just yet. For a set of examples of more militant and rigorous forms of art as activism, see Emily Apter, “Thinking Read: Ethical Militance and The Group Subject.” *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Practice.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. Against the standard melancholic lament of the failure of the historical avant-garde, some scholars are arguing for its “success.” See Gavin Grindon. “Surrealism, Dada, and the Refusal of Work: Autonomy, Activism and Social Participation in the Radical Avant-garde. Oxford Art Journal No. 34 (2011): 79-96. See also Blake Stimpson and Gregory Sholette. Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007. Helen Molesworth’s work has been pioneering in this regard. See Part Object, Part Sculpture. Columbus: Wexner Center for the Arts, 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. Anastas has emphasized the work of Gertrude Stein in the formation of her own practice. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
5. The term “mere life” derives from Walter Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence.” *Reflections*. Ed. Peter Demetz. New York: Schoken, 1978. P. 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
6. The iteration of the project cited here was published in the exemplary volume edited by Tanya Leighton. *In The Poem About Love You Don’t Write The Word Love.* New York and Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2006. P. 196. I am grateful to Yates McKee, who not only assisted the artist with the preparation of her text for publication, but drew my attention to Anastas’s work. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
7. The performative “nature” of language is of course inextricably linked with modernist poetics, from Mallarme on. As ever, see Jacques Derrida’s “Double Session” in *Dissemination****.***Trans. Barbara Johnson. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981. Pp. 173-286 and “Signature, Event, Context” in *The Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. Pp. 307-330. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
8. See Mahmood Mamdani. *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, The Cold War and the Roots of Terror*. New York: Doubleday Press, 2004. And Tariq Ali. *The Clash of Fundamentalisms.* London: Verso, 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
9. Julia Kristeva. *Revolution in the Poetic Language*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
10. See Bertolt Brecht’s “Against Georg Lukacs, “Walter Benjamin’s “Conversations With Brecht,” Theodor Adorno’s “Letters to Walter Benjamin” and Benjamin’s “Reply,” succinctly edited in *Aesthetics and Politics: The Key Texts of the Debate within German Marxism*. London: Verso, 1977. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
11. See Theodor Adorno’s well-known “Commitment,” reprinted in *Aesthetics and Politics: The Key Texts of the Debate within German Marxism*. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
12. Theodor Adorno. “Commitment.” Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
13. Claude Cahun. *Les Paris Sont Ouvertes*. Paris, 1934. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
14. “Poetry and Politics Round Table with Joshua Clover, Chris Nealon and Juliana Spahr.” *Evening will Come: A Monthly Journal of Poetics*. Issue 6. (June 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
15. Ibid. Adorno’s term for Clover’s “doesn’t initially seem to be thinking about historical crisis, about capitalism, about politics, often are thinking about it” “an apoloticism that is in fact deeply political.” *Commitment*. P. 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
16. I admire the spirit of Spahr’s point, that the academy narrowly delimits its field, and tautologically reproduces itself. Intuitively true as this may be, using “Adorno” as a proper name to summarize the problem serves neither an expansion of the field nor an understanding of Adorno’s interest in a non-facile commitment. Later in the conversation, Joshua Clover asserts that. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
17. Giorgio Agamben. “What is the Contemporary?” in *What is an Apparatus?* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009. See also the *October* “Questionnaire on the Contemporary.” No. 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
18. Theodor Adorno. “Commitment.” Reprinted in *Aesthetics and Politics: The Key Texts of the Debate within German Marxism*. London: Verso, 1977. P. 177-178. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
19. See Gil Anidjar. *Semites. Race, Religion and Literature*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2008. And Anidjar’s *Our Place in Andalus: Kabbalah, Philosophy, Literature in Arab Jewish Letters*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002. See also Ilan Pappe. *The Ethnic Cleaning of Palestine*. London: Oxford UP, 2006. And *Wrestling with Zion: Progressive Jewish Amerian Responses to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*. Tony Kushner, ed. New York: Grove Press, 2003. Finally, two useful overviews remain *Palestine: The Arab-Israeli Conflict*. Russell Stetler, ed. Sanfrancisco: Ramparts, 1972; *Intifada: The Palestinian Uprising Against Israeli Occupation*. Zacharay Lockman and Joel Beinin, eds. Boston: South End Press, 1989; Edward Said. The Question of Palestine. New York: Vintage Press, 1980; *The Israel-Arab Reader.* Laquer and Rubin, eds. New York: Penguin, 1970; and Noam Chomsky’s Introduction to *The New Intifada.* London: Verso, 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
20. Pasolini’s project may be productively discussed in these terms. In a variety of media (poetry, essays and films), from from *Le ceneri di Gramsci* (1957) to *Notes Towards an African Orestes* made in 1975, the year of his death, and his last posthumously published work, *Petrolio*, Pasolini searched for a cultural context unspoiled by capitalist modernity. The two terms are inextricably linked. Pasolini’s agonistic yearning for a pre-lapsarian space cannot be misprised and dismissed as another form of a colonialist ethos on the one hand or a reactionary anti-Modernism on the other; it elaborates itself from a Marxist and anti-colonialist vantage. While Pasolini’s work could be understood as an early harbinger of “left Heideggerianism,” it also teases out the Romantic strands of Marxism in Italy in the 60s. See Angelo Restivo. *The Cinema of Economic Miracles: Visuality and Modernization in the Italian Art Film.* London: Duke UP, 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
21. Anastas’s negative dialectical approach to Pasolini recalls Adorno’s methodology, and more specifically, The Jargon of Authenticity (1964, translation 1973). Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1973. Anastas demonstrates the degree to which Pasolini is at once critical of the colonialist politics productive of contemporary Palestine and unable to acknowledge the shattered aura of Palestine, the shattered aura writ large in the face of modernity. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
22. Giorgio Agamben. “The Camp as the Nomos of the Modern.” *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998. P. 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
23. TJ Demos. “Means Without Ends: Camp Campaign.” *October*. No. 126 (Fall 2008). P. 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
24. Michel Foucault. “17 March, 1976” *Society Must be Defended*. Trans. David Macey. New York: Picador, 2003. Pp. 239-263. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
25. *The Power of Inclusive Exclusion*. Adi Ophir, Michael Givoni, and Sari Hanafi, eds. New York: Zone Press, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
26. Gorgio Agamben. “The Logic of Sovereignty.” *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998. P. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
27. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
28. Ariella Azoulay and Adi Ophir. “The Monster’s Tail.” *Against the Wall: The Art of Resistance in Palestine.* New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 2011. See also, Adi Ophir, Michael Givoni and Sari Hanafi. *The Power of Inclusive Exclusion: Anatomy of Israeli Rule in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.* New York: Zone Books, 2009. Their discussion is predicated on the same framework I use here: Walter Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence.” *Reflections*. Peter Demetz, ed. New York: Schocken Books, 1978. P. 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
29. Ariella Azoulay. *The Civil Contract Of Photography*. New York: Zone Books, 2008. P. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
30. Interview with Khaled Jarrar. Hareetz. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
31. Hannah Arendt. “The Decline of the Nation State and the End of the Rights of Man” *Origins of Totalitarianism.* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
32. See a special issue of the *New Left Review* that focuses on aesthetics and Rancièrian thought for one example among many: *The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes*. NLR 14 (March-April, 2002). I implicate myself in this “turn” (or “trend”); see also Hinderliter, Kaizen, Maimon, Mansoor, and McCormick. “Introduction.” *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
33. Étienne Balibar. *Politics and the Other Scene*. London: Verso, 2002. P.49. For an elaboration of Balibar’s approach to problem of transnational identity see *We, The People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship.* Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
34. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
35. Ibid. P. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
36. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
37. Rancière’s concept of the political and the sensible has been rehearsed many times in numerous publications. Again, see Hinderliter, et at. *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2009. See also a special issue of the *New Left Review* that focuses on aesthetics and Rancièrian thought. *The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes*. NLR 14 (March-April, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
38. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement,* tans, Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
39. Ibid. P. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
40. Theodor Adorno. “Commitment,” reprinted in *Aesthetics and Politics: The Key Texts of the Debate within German Marxism*. London: Verso, 1977. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
41. Franco Berardi Bifo. “I Want to Think Post-U.” *E-Flux* No. 24 (April, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)