

Engaging (for) Social Change

Towards New Forms of
Collective Action

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Painter and the Pledge of Silence

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Philosophers, these language officials, often have a distrustful, even hostile, attitude towards pictorial images. This *tópos* of philosophical literature is also reflected in the matter of whether painting can be considered a form of social engagement. Jean-Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Merleau-Ponty provided the reasons for the negative or at least skeptical response in the times when the question of *l'engagement* was explicitly and decidedly entering the space of phenomenology. Visual arts in their figurations cannot be socially engaged activity in the strong sense of the word¹.

On the other hand, outside of the field of philosophical assertions of a generation of French phenomenologists, there are painters whose work *strives* to be the proof of the contrary. Counterexamples which challenge this position can be found in the tradition of Spanish and Yugoslav painting,

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1 The support for this judgement can be found in the first chapter of Sartre's polemical text "What Is Literature?" [integrally published in 1948, as "Qu'est-ce que la littérature?" in *Situations*, II], which begins with: "No, we do not want to 'commit' painting, sculpture, and music 'too', or at least not in the same way. And why would we want to?" (Sartre 1988: 25). In the essay "La Réalité et son ombre" [originally published in 1948, in the journal *Les Temps modernes* 38], Levinas has no doubt: "But a work would not belong to art if it did not have this formal structure of completion, if at least in this way it were not disengaged. We have to understand the value of this disengagement, and first of all its meaning." (Levinas 1987b: 2). Finally, Merleau-Ponty writes in "L'Œil et l'esprit" [first appeared in the journal *Art de France* 1, in 1961.]: "Only the painter is entitled to look at everything without being obliged to appraise what he sees. For the painter, we might say, the watchwords of knowledge and action lose their meaning and force." (Merleau-Ponty 1964b: 161). Of course, those are not the only places where the relationship between painting and engagement is mentioned and thematized in their works.

primarily in the works of Francisco Goya and Đorđe Andrejević Kun. The philosophical figures of phenomenological thought should thus not be worshiped as idols, they should not be regarded as “gods of gold” whose judgment is taken as correct by default. Instead, the arguments contained in the core of their conclusions should be analytically investigated and the soundness of their principles should be determined. Why did they show reservations about the suggestion of painting being an engagement act?

Phenomenology, as a philosophical project, is obsessed with the category of time. The temporal flow is the condition for the accumulation of experience, the development of, and the stringing of words together. The human life is predominantly defined as a facticity which has a duration, consciousness as an ability to (re)constitute its correlative objectivities through retentions and protentions, and the very being as a temporal structure. Is such a position the consequence of an emphatic insight into the fact that humans are universally mortal and transient, or the result of an epoch obsessed with the concept of historicity? Either way, this is not the place for such a debate. Phenomenology is so fascinated by the perspective of time that it views the meaning of all of the products from the horizon of their temporality. Pictorial images as originally spatial entities have not been spared from the judgment based on this theoretical point of view.

The status of a canvas, an engraving – as an object occupying a certain place and spatializing it by its visual appearance – suffers, within the phenomenological frame of thinking, from an idealistic premise by which time overrides space and pushes it aside. If verbal exposition of experiences and thoughts is an activity that requires, in order for it to occur, the flow of interconnected elements that compose it, that is, temporality as its own *a priori*, works of

painting, of this non-verbal, unlike the novel or poem, are limited to the presentation of a single moment. According to this perspective, paintings would be nothing more than a freakish or defective image of the potentiality of time. In “Reality and Its Shadow” work of spatial art is described as “an instant that endures without a future” (Levinas 1987b: 9). It captures the infinity of a moment in which no tomorrow exists. A nauseous image of time frozen in place, finiteness without any prospect for further movement. On the other hand, in Merleau-Ponty’s essay “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” the very genesis of the visual art is defined as a process of constitutive and implacable amnesia. The painting cannot internalize and reflect within itself the ideas accumulated in those that preceded it, in the way that works made of words can do, nor can it be remembered in those that will come after it. A radical opposition exists between verbal signs and pictorial images when it comes to their relationship with time, because the word is “not content to push beyond the past, claims to recapitulate, retrieve, and contain it”, it does not seek to “to push it aside in making a place for itself in the world”, but to preserve its sense and spirit (Merleau-Ponty 1964b: 80). Instead of movement and animateness, immobility and death; instead of memory and time, oblivion and the infinity of a single moment.

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There is another important moment in the *corpus* of the analyzed phenomenological texts, which contributes to the further collapse of the status of the visual art as a form of expression within the philosophical systems from which it is observed. The abstraction of a pure meaning from a painting is considered a futile undertaking. The signified of a pictorial work is inherent to it in a way that it always remains “tied” in its material structure. This is why the meaning of the painting is considered incompletely transparent.

In explaining this type of argument, the photo-metaphoricity of phenomenological language is particularly emphasized. For Levinas, works of art are “the very obscurity of the real”, that is, “a shadow of being” (Levinas 1987b: 3, 8). Sartre sees the intentional act of penetrating into the meaning of a word like light freely passing through the sign: “Since words are transparent and since the gaze looks through them, it would be absurd to slip in among them some panes of rough glass”. (Sartre 1988: 39) In this type of relationship, a spontaneous “sacrifice” of the word occurs in the name of what it refers to. The verbal sign not only “illustrates”, it itself is non-opaque in nature, because – as it can be read in the text “L’Artiste et sa conscience” – the reader’s attention is directed towards the object being referred to through the spontaneous forgetting of the sign itself, while, conversely, the observers will receive a deeper sense of the pictorial image if they remain focused on its perceivable aspects for longer (Sartre 1964: 29–30). Merleau-Ponty speaks of “the mute radiance of painting” (Merleau-Ponty 1964b: 78) as the luminosity of being, but he also emphasizes that spoken language has the power of separating meaning from the signs, the transcendence of the silent dimensions of the world on which it rests. To conclude, the obscurity of the pictorial image does not correspond to the transparency of the verbal sign.

All three philosophers share an explicit skepticism about the axiom of painting being a language² in greater or lesser measure, with occasional hesitation and met-

2 Visual art is not seen as an intelligible communication system. Painting is not a language, despite what is heard “too often” (Sartre 1963: 71), and this attitude is marked as “dogma” (Levinas 1987b:1) or “one of the commonplaces” (Merleau-Ponty 1969: 66). For Sartre, the painter does not deal with signs, because the function of his creations is not to refer to the other objects beyond them. Levinas treats in an ironic manner the presumption according to which artworks are the expression of knowledge and that they “tell” something. On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty starts from the premise of closeness between language and painting, based on the power of creative act of expression they share, but accepts it only as an operative analogy.

aphorically used verbs which state the opposite and disrupt the negation of the aforementioned principle³. This theoretical proposition is defended by the assertion that artistic images are non-conceptual entities. Since concepts are manifested through linguistic forms, the being of the pictorial work cannot express them; the reality of the pictorial image is not discursive in nature. Overall, the spatiality and hence the strong materiality of the painting halts the extraction of its already translinguistically instituted meaning:

After all, we think with words. We would have to be quite vain to believe that we are concealing ineffable beauties which the word is unworthy of expressing. And then, I distrust the incommunicable; it is the source of all violence. When it seems impossible to get others to share the certainties which we enjoy, the only thing left is to fight, to burn, or to hang. (Sartre 1988: 228–229)

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But it is also true that ineffability should not be reduced to inexpressibility in general. Sartre speaks from the point of view of the philosopher or the writer. Perhaps the painter would not sign this assertion without reluctance. Is painting undemocratic in its being? There is no equivalence between verbally incommunicable and intersubjectively unshareable, because the pictorial expression “tells” the opposite and, while making it, the painters do not always have to stimulate violent acts towards the members of their community.

In prose, unlike in visual arts, silence can only be expressed linguistically — therefore, never through the absence of words, always indirectly. The section in literary work which contains the action that was left unsaid about, or signifies a moment of silence in the dialogue, the state of taciturnity

³ Such as the use of the verbs “speak” (*parler*) or “say” (*dire*) when referring to the contents of the painter’s act.

of a person, the course of narration or description, is represented through lingual statements and through them only. Sartre's novella *The Wall* abounds with such strategies. In this work, which describes the last night of prisoners before they are sent to the firing squad in the midst of the Spanish Civil War, the dialectics of the stated and unsaid, the tension of sound and silence, are present from beginning to end⁴. The relationship between visual and linguistic works is inversely proportional. In the art of painting, words serve silence, and in literature, silence is based on words.

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From all three perspectives, the visual artist is seen as an egological figure standing in a position of isolation and observing the world in front of him as a spectacle, as an image of a series of events in which, due to his radical passivity, he does not participate. For the painters, the world is reduced to a visual phenomenon. Moreover, the visual artist is radically silent, because he is "mute"⁵. He does not take action, he is not part of the historical scene, but he observes it from a sufficient distance. The visual artist creates images that magically fascinate observers and which, with their muteness, do not provide them with any explicit answers to their doubts, fears or demands:

4 Silence can generally serve as a determination of the atmosphere of a situation: "When they took us back, we sat and waited in silence." It can also be expressed through the mute gesture of the literary character: "But the desire to talk left me completely; I shrugged and turned my eyes away." Or: "He kicked me without great conviction and I kept quiet." It can also be instantly constituted through an act of silencing, either through the use of the imperative "Shut up!", or by a neutral description of the scene: "His lips trembled. A guard shut him up and took him away." In certain parts of the novel, there is also "shading" of the intensity of silence: "I started to speak in a low voice too." (Sartre 1975) The gradation of filling the space with sound reaches its upper limit with the scream of one of the prisoners or with the gunshots at dawn. Here, the act of silence also expresses the inner state of fear. The action of mechanical speech blocks deeper reflection.

5 In "What Is Literature" it is explicitly stated: "The painter is mute." (Sartre 1988: 27). In *The Prose of the World* there is a variation of this observation: "Painting is unable to speak." (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 101) The author of "Reality and Its Shadow" is distancing himself from the following claim: "An artist – even a painter, even a musician – tells. He tells of the ineffable." (Levinas 1987b: 1) The art of painting uses means different from words.

From the writer and the philosopher, in contrast, we want opinions and advice. We will not allow them to hold the world suspended. We want them to take a stand; they cannot waive the responsibilities of men who speak. (Merleau-Ponty 1964a: 161)

In the aforementioned section, words and responsibility are brought together to the greatest possible extent, almost to the point of their identification. Since the painter fatefully chose to refrain from words, starting from the domain of his profession, he would not be in a position to persuade people or to literally respond to their inquiries, so he is judged – but not always with a negative connotation – to be irresponsible.

The essay “The Transcendence of Words” (1949) points to the advantage of spoken words in which the thought is active in its liveliness and immediacy, as opposed to paintings, which are based on their closeness and radical silence (Levinas 1987a: 219). In Sartre, Levinas’s ethical reservation towards all poetic works is limited to art outside of the registry of prose, but also to those literary works in which speech is paradoxically equated with silence in which it vainly disappears. In “What is Literature”, the prose word is defined pragmatically – it is an act which affects reality and changes it. The writer’s word, in a somewhat surrealist manner, is compared to a gunshot, it incites alertness or makes noise: when he writes, the author shoots, the pen is his gun. Even the extreme claim is made that in losing the power of speech, one loses the ability to adequately act. If the writer does not get an aphasia or a similar disorder, if he does not forget to speak, his silence is never innocent, it must be meaningful and instructive, because once he enters the vortex of linguistic acts he can never exit completely again, he can just attempt to temporarily displace himself out of it:

This silence is a moment of language; being silent is not being dumb; it is to refuse to speak, and therefore to keep on speaking. (Sartre 1988: 38)

In fact, painting cannot be socially engaged art to the fullest extent, as it does not use words, but visual figures. Its mutism inevitably leads it to further its position of disengagement. Visual art, without the immanent ability of speech that would clarify and sublimate its meaning, stays out of the space of action, outside the field of direct influence on social flows and political events by way of denouncing and naming them, and by asking the addressee to become aware and properly act. If the pictorial work is silent, its echo is not heard. Visual art, in its mute purity, cannot in a literal sense denominate or call for reflection. Since it is not a language, it is by itself not able to capture and provide any form of knowledge, except in obscure intuition. The lack of transparency of its meaning oscillates between the hermeticity and the ambiguity of its content, that is, between the dark illegibility and the absence of a clear fixation of meaning:

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The work is completed in spite of the social or material causes that interrupt it. It does not give itself out as the beginning of a dialogue. (Levinas 1987b: 2)

The impenetrable aestheticity of pictorial works opposes every ethical demand that through them could be presented before someone. In the text “Unprivileged Painter”, Sartre constructs and analyzes the various paradoxes that occur in painting with respect to the relation of the beautiful and the good. How does one express and present a massacre? The observer will never return to the ugly painting, while a beautiful one would, in a Luciferian or demonic way, betray the nature of its subject. And when the theme of the pictorial image is a violent event, this violence is pacified through visual figuration and acquires the “calm plastic Beauty”

(Sartre 1963: 63), Beauty with a capital B. Henceforth the question arises: how would one denounce the crime, while simultaneously not paying it artistic homage?

The present exposition has shown that the phenomenological consideration of the relation between the verbal and non-verbal expressions with regard to the question of (dis)engagement is mainly based on antithetical discourse, full of figures of contrast. Is it possible to resolve such difficult question at all?

The taciturnity of the painter is not a negative act. The fact that he refuses to speak does not mean that he does not act in a different way. His intentional act of silence is manifested and as such it is directed towards another human being. Action is not only taken through words because there are other, non-linguistic, types of action. The exhibited painting is the ultimate expression of the artist's project and, although it is mute, it does not have to remain unnoticed and to potentially not obligate its observer. There remains the question of how impenetrable the message is that is being transmitted through such a form of poetic activity. Silence is an ambivalent phenomenon, and its content is subject to different interpretations. The visual artist does not *explicitly* say anything through his figures, but by keeping silent, he does not have to keep treacherously holding his tongue. Visual testimony does not conceal anything in a strong sense, but socially engaged art must keep a count of the tension of the ethical and the aesthetic, because the irrationality or evil intention of a particular act must be neutralized or blocked by displaying its consequence through the arranged structure of a successful and effective work of art, that is, through beautifully arranged forms.

The painter, certainly, is aware that he is practicing a non-verbal discipline to the highest possible degree. This

also implies that there are moments when, by exploring the scope of his profession, the painter must also face its limitations. When he wishes to present a *particular* historical event, and to express and publicize his political and ethical attitude towards it, he is faced with the very difficult task of achieving this through visual forms only, *sans mots ni paroles*. Because of this, in such circumstances, he might be forced to use words, that is, to “soil” the purity of the artistic image by introducing originally external elements to it, either by bringing it into the pictorial space itself or by adding it alongside the painting. Here, of course, what is being referred to is the title of the painting. Without it, the observer will have problems finding out exactly what is happening in the scene he is looking at and determining the exact geographical location and historical moment depicted in the work. The face of an innocent woman suffering, or of a crying and unhappy child, once painted, has a universal and transhistorical value, while the titling of such a scene associates with one unique situation.

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Artists preoccupied with social injustice or personal and collective tragedies of which they testify often complement their pictorial works linguistically. Đorđe Andrejević Kun inscribed the titles of his works directly on his canvases in order to more specifically direct the audience to what he is presenting. He did this on the oil paintings such as *No pasaran* (1948) or *For Peace, Bread and Freedom* (1950). In the first canvas, the words written in the upper part of the composition decidedly indicate the intended message. Without this slogan with clear connotations, the woman with a rifle in her arms could be perceived as an indeterminate female figure carrying a weapon.



Picture 1 Đorđe Andrejević Kun, "No pasarán", 1949, Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade

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Picture 2 Đorđe Andrejević Kun, "The Spanish People Are Rallying to Fight to Defend Freedom", *For Freedom*, 1939.

On one of the prints from Kun's map of graphics For Freedom the title of the entire series is included in Spanish – "por la libertad". The print in question is no. 7, whose description within the map is: "The Spanish People Are Rallying to Fight, to Defend Freedom". The artist's credo is clearly expressed and reflected in the whole narratively structured work⁶. Kun moved to Spain in 1937 to participate in the Civil War as a volunteer in the International Brigades, and he would print the map in 1939, after experiencing the front and upon returning to Yugoslavia.

Combinations of text and images can be traced back to the tradition of the emblematica, where the *pictura* is combined with the linguistic elements labeled *inscriptio* or *motto* and *subscriptio* (Vuksan 2008: 9–11). Such is the case with the series of graphics *The Disasters of War* by Francisco Goya, another and earlier piece of socially engaged visual art strongly interrelated with the aforementioned map by Kun. Goya started to work on these graphics in 1810, and they abound with scenes of atrocities that took place during the Spain. Both Kun's and Goya's work owe something to the French occupation of structure of the emblem (in the graphic "The Spanish People Are Rallying to Fight to Defend Freedom" the text entered is in the position of *inscriptio*). This model served to make their acts of engagement with a testimonial character more pronounced.

Each of Goya's images is followed by a specific comment in the place of a *subscriptio*. For instance, "And There Is no Help" (no. 15). Kun's graphics are also accompanied by a guide that directs the observers to the meaning of their content. One of the first in the series, entitled "They Are Shooting", is vividly described as a scene in which the vic-

⁶ Effortlessly "readable" story of the map is the correlative of the author's ethical and political stance. His "dialogue" with the paradigms from the European art history here is not based on the concept of artisticness, impenetrable to the targeted public, but on the aim which transcends the position of erudition for its own sake. (Ćupić 2015: 261–262)



Picture 3 Francisco Goya, "And There Is no Help",
The Disasters of War, 1810–1820.

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Picture 4 Đorđe Andrejević Kun,
„They Are Shooting”, *For Freedom*, 1939.

tims stand “in front of the mouths of the rifles’ barrels” (Bihalji-Merin 1946: 3). Moreover, if the titles of Kun’s prints are arranged in order and combined, a complete, rounded-off narrative is obtained, which, as more than counterpoint to the graphic images, functions as their independent supplement. In this way, it eliminates all the ambiguity of the visual expression regarding the clear ethical or political message of the artist. In both of the artistic works, in *The Disasters of War* and in *For Freedom*, the figure of the victim, and not the executer, is put at the forefront.

Too direct an engagement in art and literature is bothersome, because it is too obtrusive, aggressive. In the event of such an overstatement or unidirectedness, the work is “killed” by being turned into an ideological pamphlet or moral breviary, regardless of whether the subject is a fictitious event or not. Perhaps the potential of indirectly engaged attitude in visual art is in the ambivalent status of its messages, which do not burden the recipient in a categorical and explicit manner. The mute visual act does leave space not for enchantment, but rather for mystery, which again stimulates reflections in which there is no place for one-sided and clear answers, but neither for the stuttering of meaning.

The social appeal of the painters is a problem. A visual artist as a witness does not speak of crime or violence, but he does not hush them up either. The appeal is *appellatio* – addressing a word, speaking out against injustice, a title, a naming. When a visual artist titles his work, he marks what is the subject of viewing and orients this act into one direction. But the very fact that the title is just one of the elements of the painting indicates that this is an artistic totality whose visual burden cannot be fully supported by the verbal element alone.

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