

Preface

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The journey to this book started when we, now the four editors of this volume, met in conferences and seminars driven by our interest in “activism.” Artistic activism appeared to be a practice of engaging with collective orders in a mode of creativity, sensation, and affect—rather than rational argumentation and interest bargaining. What interested us was how, in activism, art, and politics come together and what effects this generates.

Starting to read our way into and around the subject, and discussing possible ways to conceptualize and study activism as a combined practice of art and politics, we soon recognized that we would have to frame the topic more broadly. In particular, we quickly found aesthetic modes of engaging with collective orders also in protest and alternative lifestyle initiatives featuring sensory and affective strategies. There are, for example, the songs of political protest, special choreographies of street protest, the design of posters, agitative speeches... Furthermore, we found that sensory and affective modes are not limited to attempts at disrupting and renewing collective orders—but are also widespread in strategies to build, stabilize, protect, and expand already dominant orders. Here we come across governmental public relations, party campaigns and sensorily oriented strategies of steering human behavior. Also, private corporations work with the senses and affects to generate acceptance and support for products, technologies, brands, policies, and broader visions of collective life and progress.

We found that aesthetic practices are obviously as much a means of stabilization, control, and governance as they are of disruption, emancipation, and innovation. At this point, activism seemed to reflect a broader issue: a hitherto not much studied aesthetic dimension of governance and innovation. Thus, we became interested in all the different ways collective ways of living are shaped in the dimension of sensory experience and affect—and with how this relates to politics, that is with how we usually think of the shaping of collective orders: through the articulation of interests, collective strategies, norms, and rules.

This is what led us to publish a call for such studies and organize a workshop to bring them together. Wary of the limits of translating sensory experience into words, we invited not only academic contributions but also artistic performances

and activist demonstrations to offer cases for reflections and discussion. We held the workshop “Sensing Collectives—Aesthetic and Political Practices Intertwined” on 14–16 November 2018 at Institute for Cultural Inquiry (ICI) and Hybrid Lab of the Berlin Universities of the Arts and of Technology. We asked all contributors to extract from their cases how aesthetics is practiced: How is it that patterns of sensory attention, experience, affect, and appreciation are engaged with and become shaped? Symmetrically, we asked them to extract how politics is practiced: How is it that patterns of collective subjectivity, identity, will, interest, and agency are engaged with and become shaped?

The workshop began with public keynotes and a reception at the ICI. Sophia Prinz (Zurich University of the Arts, ZHdK) and Antoine Hennion (Centre for the Sociology of Innovation, Paris) opened the discussion with two complementary perspectives, one focusing on hegemonic political and sensory orders and the potential of art to bring them into motion, the other focusing on the continuous emergence of new ways of tasting by letting objects and subjectivities co-emerge in experimental practices. Their two lectures, brought into view two complementary orientations in current studies of aesthetics and politics. One starts from examining the sensory dimensions of dominant orders (“aesthetic governance”), the other starts from attempts to work with the senses for opening up and renewing collective orders (“aesthetic innovation”). For this book we have arranged revised versions of workshop contributions accordingly.

The cases range from governmental public relations to insurgent artistic interventions, from feminism to the design of infrastructures, from moving and eating to listening and seeing, from corporeal fervor to digital data, from Dresden to Beijing and the Silicon Valley, from undermining and disrupting collective orders to building and stabilizing them. The chapters are authored by scholars of various branches of social research and by activists working artistically. Some chapters are more analytical, others more poetic or agitating. What they all do is to show how the making and unmaking of sensory experiences and affects is deeply intertwined with the making and unmaking of collective subjectivity, will, and agency. Together with the conceptual framework outlined in the introduction, these case studies can start us off at differentiating specific patterns in which political and aesthetic practices intertwine in constituting sensing collectives.

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