BRIANNE COHEN, *DON'T LOOK AWAY. ART, NONVIOLENCE, AND PREVENTIVE PUBLICS IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPE*

Durham, NC/London: Duke University Press 2023, 272 pages with 22 color and 23 b/w ill., ISBN 978-1-4780-1946-6 (Paperback).

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While democracy is predicated on an ideal of equal access to the mechanisms of political action, specifically the public sphere, in practice this falls gravely short for many populations. This is particularly true in the European Union where precarious populations have ascended in numbers even as the expansion of a democratic vision based on multinational cooperation, free trade, and flexible movement for European citizens has come to fruition in the EU's unified project. The ideals of a representational democracy, and specifically its enactment in public spaces where discourse is a means to representation, are unavailable to people with contingent status – from asylum seekers to climate refugees to migrant laborers.

Brianne Cohen engages the issue of precarious publics in her highly focused study of art and politics. Through the work of the German filmmaker Harun Farocki, Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn, and the art collective Henry VIII's Wives, *Don't Look Away* explores the contours of an existential problem of our time, namely the impossibility of traditional conceptions of political life to adequately defend, support, or enfranchise vulnerable populations. While clearly outlining the ways in which Europe's consensus-based

21: INQUIRIES INTO ART, HISTORY, AND THE VISUAL
#1-2024, pp. 261–268

https://doi.org/10.11588/xxi.2024.1.103158

democracy is premised in an ethic of inclusivity and accountability, Cohen likewise demonstrates that Europe's insistence on universal values have produced a culture of fear and defensiveness supported by the structural violence of securitarian states that atomize, rather than unify, Europe's increasingly heterogeneous publics. To take one example, Cohen describes how surveillance systems have come to dominate the priorities of government, and have taken the place of more careful attention to financing and administering institutions that support social welfare.

Don't Look Away embraces an optimistic ethos grounded in the practical. Cohen defends art as both a reflector and driver of possibility. As she writes in her introduction "the following chapters aim to elaborate how both embodied and mass mediated artworks may actively envision a more democratic social imaginary built on plurality and nonviolence" (p. 28). In contrast to art activism, which prioritizes direct action, the case studies of *Don't Look Away* are drawn from artistic practices that aspire to less obvious outcomes. Cohen remains "committed to redefending the imaginative, poetic, often more elusive potential of art in changing mindsets and resisting violence" (p. 8).

Importantly, Cohen's book reveals that the problem of political ineffectiveness for Europe's disenfranchised populations is also a problem for those who *do* have a place at the table of democracy. Here Arjun Appadurai's notion of the "minoritarian" affords Cohen's analysis some weight. As she writes in her conclusion, the sidelining of Europe's minority publics within European societies reveals the "vulnerability that majoritarian publics feel, upended by a feeling of little or no control over larger political and economic events and outcomes" (p. 181). As Appadurai writes, "Minorities, in a word, are metaphors and reminders of the betrayal of the classical national project" (cited in Cohen p. 181). Who is actually winning in this limited framework of political agency?

Many of Cohen's case studies include artworks that pointedly make specific groups visible, from the Romani people exterminated by the Nazis at the center of Farocki's film *Respite* (2007) to the Muslim residents in an Amsterdam neighborhood renarrativized in Hirschhorn's *Biljmer-Spinoza Festival* (2009) to Henry VIII's Wives' reenactments of iconic geopolitical scenes with white pensioners (e.g., *Assassination of a Viet Cong*, 1999). Within these artworks is a clear attention to the accountability of the majority white, Christian, and able-bodied population histories that have brought them to a limited conception of the public sphere, a view that likewise constrains the definition of citizenship.

Cohen's dexterous and dialogical use of a few core thinkers of geopolitics – Appadurai, as well as Hannah Arendt and Judith Butler – is supported by her attention to the role that visual representation can play to extend equality. The scholar and curator Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's idea of the "civil gaze" in particular, reinforces the book's central focus on art. Azoulay identifies the visual as both the means and the assertion of the social and political needs

of the marginalized subject. She argues that although by necessity originating in private, the "political imagination" of marginalized populations must become civil, that is to say, it needs to assert itself in public life. "In other words," Cohen writes, "imagination must be communicated in order to foster public discourse and transformation" (p. 41). Writing through the lens of artwork examples made by white European artists, Cohen engages Azoulay as a way to emphasize how the work of artists like Farocki, Hirschhorn, and Henry VIII's Wives reimagines political equality, arguing that this is not only their task but the obligation of their primary audience of art consumers, which is typically white, educated, and politically enfranchised.

Cohen's chapter on the filmmaker Harun Farocki centers on the challenges that the Information Age poses to an empowered citizenry. In its opening pages she writes, "It is the flood of images, or raw data, that has increasingly characterized and tested contemporary society, and galvanized Farocki's practice" (p. 61). She continues to explain, "In generating numerous observational films, in utilizing an ethnographic lens, and in reframing found footage, Farocki questions a contemporary public's ability to navigate such an information-saturated world" (p. 61). Farocki's 2007 film *Respite* draws attention to this data glut through the Holocaust, the narratives of which formed a central part of Germany's post-Nazi recovery. The film repurposes the ninety minutes of raw footage shot in May 1944 by Jewish prisoner Rudolf Breslauer at the Westerbork transit camp in Northeastern Holland. Farocki's edit highlights the experience of transportation, and emphasizes the transition periods, that is to say the dehumanizing qualities of a group of physically and psychologically abused inmates as they await their movement to concentration camps. Cohen attends to the repetition and focus of Farocki's forensic, which is to say investigative, use of the found footage. In *Respite*, the artist isolates particular details "in order to bring new information to light and to thread it to future knowledge of the concentration camps", the details of which – she writes elsewhere – have been "relegated as old history for many a younger generation in Europe" (pp. 65–66). Farocki summons a well-understood collective memory in Germany to urge a rehumanization, or to think with Azoulay, "to rehabilitate one's citizenship or that of someone else who has been stripped of it" (cited in Cohen p. 68). For Cohen *Respite* excels in its recognition of "the plurality of the camera's operations", from the photographer to the photographed, from the context of its making to the accidental records it contains, including, for instance, the face of a Sinti girl named Stella Steinbach. Farocki includes a statistic that reveals that over one-third of people deported from Westerbork to Auschwitz in May 1944 were Roma and Sinti. The Romani experience in the Holocaust has not been a primary focus of the narrative of grief and trauma surrounding the Nazi genocide. Cohen interprets the significance of the repeated image of Steinbach as centralizing "a question of the historical and contemporary vulnerability of Romani peoples" (p. 74). This representation of Romani

genocide underscores the hostility they face, and suggests that their continued absence from the German public sphere is a problem of a lopsided approach to the post-WW2 conception of citizenship.

One of the strengths of *Don't Look Away* is Cohen's articulation of the ways in which majority/status quo populations are complicit in the asymmetries of political power that prevent a more equal world. Cohen relies on the foundational definitions of the public sphere afforded by Hannah Arendt, specifically how access to public life is a prerequisite to political agency. Thinking through *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Cohen writes

> political affiliations are meant to safeguard rights of equality against a tremendous background of real, disquieting human differentiation [...] without a political umbrella in the first half of the twentieth century, without concrete ties to a specific state, minorities, refugees, and asylum seekers paradoxically lost the most abstract right to have rights in the first place (p. 21).

In short, according to Arendt, totalitarianism's establishment of a system of classification for its own purposes of exclusion was absorbed into the post-WW2 world in which refugees and asylum seekers were welcomed into western Europe.

Cohen addresses the significance of an unequal form of civic life through a critical review of the installations of Thomas Hirschhorn. To take one example, a so-called neighborhood sculpture like 2002's *Bataille Monument*, installed in a largely working-class Turkish German area north of Kassel for *Documenta 11* was accused of having been "calculated to incite controversy" (p. 95). Critics maintained that the artist's choice of the surrealist philosopher Georges Bataille was arbitrary; some even suggested Hirschhorn had installed his project in a neighborhood of some of Germany's least empowered workers to exploit cheap labor. Writing in defense of Hirschhorn, though still from a critical distance and even at a remove from her previously published analyses of his work, Cohen writes that the artist's neighborhood sculptures produce ambiguity and bring that nuance to spaces that have otherwise been reduced to narratives of despair. In *Don't Look Away*, Cohen sees Hirschhorn employing imagination and uncertainty through "creative processes of self-reflexive public formation" (p. 97). To this end, and through other projects by Hirschhorn that were less firmly rooted to spaces inhabited by marginalized communities, Cohen suggests that Hirschhorn is less interested in community than he is in the way publics are formed. In short, he is looking to estrange his audience, rather than to find commonality, and in the process of estrangement produce relationality among strangers. That relation is public, not collective. In *Swiss-Swiss Democracy* (2004), for example, Hirschhorn employs common consumer goods, like packaging tape and cardboard, with slogans employed by his homeland to celebrate their robust economy. The project exaggerates and makes strange

the coherence of Switzerland's national identity. Surrounded by a mountain landscape also constructed of tape and cardboard and set to life with a model train looping through its tunnels, an assembly of chairs and couches installed within the banked seating of an auditorium summons to mind the parliament where Switzerland's isolationist policies are decided and defended. "Additionally," Cohen writes, "the three predominant colors on the walls – pastel blue, yellow, and pink – also territorialized and satirized the space as Swiss" (p. 108). The parody is both well-suited and ironic. Installed in the Centre Culturel Suisse in Paris, the work monumentalizes Switzerland's lauded cultural and economic capacity, but calls these achievements into question through an excess of cheap materials. After all, these are the materials that build an encampment and not an economy. *Swiss-Swiss Democracy* has a nightmarish quality typical of Hirschhorn's institutional works, and thus brings to light the critiques of idealization that center his neighborhood installations. These are not works of social practice, but rather of social agony.

In her final case study chapter, Cohen turns to the largely unfamiliar Henry VIII's Wives as an example of how collective authorship and mass identification come into contact in contemporary art. Active from 1997 to 2014, the members of Henry VIII's Wives (Bob Grieve, Rachel Dagnall, Sirko Knüpfer, Simon Polli, Per Sander, and Lucy Skaer) first met at the Glasgow School of Art, and collaborated from locations across western Europe after graduating. Their irreverent and utopian practice often centered on reconstructing or refashioning recognizable icons of modern European history. One of the better known works, *Tatlin's Tower and the World* (2005–2014), for example, aimed to construct the never realized Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* (1919–1920) in pieces around the world. The project at once embraced this symbol of unification as one that could consolidate a globalized post-Communist world, while at the same time offered a reminder of the failure to build a globalized and Communist world. *Tatlin's Tower and the World* took on greater significance in 2009 when Henry VIII's Wives led a farcical campaign to request permission from the Swiss population to build the structure in Bern. This campaign coincided with a national referendum that ultimately banned the construction of minarets in the Swiss landscape. As Cohen describes it,

> Henry VIII's Wives suggested the construction of the *Monument for the Third International* to Bern citizens in order to query a set of issues related to public fears of cultural difference, slow violence, and how to effectively build a space for productive stranger relations again after traumatic, spectacular events such as 9/11 (p. 164).

The Tatlin project's presumptive failure to enter the landscape is, for Cohen, a metaphor for the populism that dominates European political discourse, specifically its efforts to homogenize a public based on a vague set of core European values. "Populism", she

writes, "operates chiefly by its sheer vagueness and emotional resonance" (p. 168).

> More than a parody, however, *Tatlin's Tower and the World* was also a campaign to counter through contretemps a visual field exploited by demagogues to propagate a clash-of-civilizations mentality and to spread fears, for example, of immigrants and Muslims (p. 168).

Of course, that a monument to Communism would pacify a right-wing, neoliberal, and anti-immigrant community is absurdist. To Cohen, however, the efforts of Henry VIII's Wives served to draw attention to the reductive quality of alt-right cultural artifacts.

In her conclusion, Cohen engages the global response to 2015's Charlie Hebdo attack, a horrific event that pitted the dignity of Islam violently against the European value of free speech. The response – a slogan-based campaign that brought *Je suis Charlie* signs across western European media for months – sidelined a nuanced discussion and encapsulates Cohen's larger point about the urgent need for greater subtlety as an antidote to the oppositional logics of contemporary Europe. Cohen's conclusion reinforces this noble cause of bridging social divisions: "Art can have a critical role to play not only in challenging injurious public discourse but also in actively reconceiving the groundwork of more ethically self-reflexive, pluralistic public spheres" (p. 179). These assertions are well-articulated when taken as imperatives, that is to say, as directives and as identifications or, to think with the biological construction of contemporary nation-state power offered by Appadurai, as diagnoses of a systems problem. In this regard, Cohen's book is extremely convincing. There is a clear disconnect between what European Union nation-state democracy purports to be doing and what it is actually doing. (It bears mentioning that Cohen devotes a significant amount of her first chapter, which frames her later analyses of art in discussions of the public sphere, to a careful articulation of the foundations of the EU project.) Yet, *Don't Look Away* leaves me wondering how these artists bring disenfranchised publics to their art. And, what about the right-wing populations who so clearly need a little more nuance in their understanding of Europe's precarious publics, whose numbers are ever ascending? Put another way, I am uncertain as to whether the artworks Cohen describes will actually have impact on mindsets that urgently need to be impacted.

Cohen's book has not convinced me that the artists of her study are preventing something, or that the audiences they produce (their publics) are preventive. It has convinced me that art, when taken as a speech act, does much to articulate the ways in which ideals of political agency have historically subordinated groups into classifications of vulnerability, precarity, and marginality in ways that are reinforced and repeated in a "complex of visuality" (to think with

Nicholas Mirzoeff) that has naturalized a definition of citizenry that is decades out of date.[1] As Cohen writes,

> Whereas Mirzoeff's notion of visuality assumes a kind of intentionality behind the disciplinary actions of classification, segregation, and aestheticization [...] securitarian publics are dangerous precisely due to their lack of any centralizing self-reflection or self-realization (p. 69).

The center of power today is held by fear, insecurity, and suspicion.

To this end, I praise Cohen for returning to a few key phrases that do much to identify the problem of Europe (really a problem of geopolitics today), writ large. She borrows the term "slow violence" from the eco-theorist Rob Nixon, which identifies "aggressions that are slower, more habitual, or historically sedimented" (pp. 15–16). The concept, to which she returns often, is also wed to Ann Laura Stoler's idea of duress which describes Europe's structural violence as perpetrated by "differentially distributed futures" (p. 16). Slow violence helps to establish the primacy of her title phrase "preventive publics", which articulates a contradiction in contemporary politics within the roles that state-based vs citizen-led publics play in the maintenance of a safe and secure society. On the one hand, in the "Age of Terror" the nation-state makes decisions based on a need to protect populations in the aggregate. On the other hand, the idea of a "preventive public" reveals the need for a population – in this case its artists – to articulate, reject, and confront the ways that securitarian governance limits the emergence of certain publics. Cohen's related term "slow violence" thus likewise describes the impacts of a surveillance system, or a nation-state that finds no political place for the migrants upon whom its sense of self (let alone its economy) nevertheless depends. This raises parallels between the historical cases of structural violence (i.e., colonialism) and the contemporary ones (i.e., intergenerational poverty) that are the legacies of colonialism.

Understanding *Don't Look Away* as a kind of essay – which is to say as an attempt – that explores a problem rather than resolves it allows its rhetorical strategy to come into focus. Cohen (let alone these artists) cannot solve the problems of citizenship, political agency, and public life that trouble our world, but she (they) can specify its origins and reveal its contours through material examples. *Don't Look Away* is an attempt at identifying a phenomenon and its structural conditions. Taken another way, it is a catalog of artworks that identifies a turn in contemporary European art that does not want to avoid (i.e., to look away from) the foundational problems of our time. If the foundations of a post-totalitarian democracy that form the premise for the unified nation-state project that is the European Union are today untenable in the face

[1] Cohen engages Mirzoeff briefly in her chapter on Farocki. See page 69.

of a catastrophic twenty-first century, then the vision of a global culture itself needs to be reimagined. The book is a medium for thinking through these issues. The art is a way of finding the community – a social relation – that may, perhaps, someday not only demonstrate but drive the alternatives these artists have long-since revealed as necessary.