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Art on the Barricades; or, the End of Art, but This Time Actually Conceived as the Possibility of Its Death

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Abstract
Starting from the anecdote according to which Bakunin, during the siege of Dresden in 1849, proposed hoisting Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* and other masterpieces on the barricades to dissuade an attack of the insurgents' position, this article explores the philosophical meaning of the 'end of art' – not in the strictly traditional and Hegelian sense of transformation toward a new modern art but as the possibility, in times of crisis, of art's material destruction, art's 'death'. The episode from 19th-century Dresden has inspired several contemporary artists (e.g., Ahmet Öğüt or the Arsenale Institute for Politics of Representation) and invites parallels with present-day forms of protest and activism, such as certain climate activist interventions. Through an analysis of these cases, this article identifies a specific function of the examples discussed: They reveal the political significance of art, not as a vehicle for content or message, but as a representation of a social or human community in which all participants can recognize themselves and as a premonitory warning in the face of impending disaster.

Keywords
End of Art, Art and Politics, Mikhail Bakunin, Ahmet Öğüt, Climate Activists

1. *Introduction*

The early days of May 1849. The streets of Dresden are in revolt. Movements for equality and democracy are spreading throughout Europe. After the failure of the project for a unified State proposed by the Frankfurt National Assembly of 1848, Frederick Augustus II of Saxony seized the opportunity to dissolve the Saxon parliament. This was a blatant abuse of democratic freedom, and discontent grew steadily among the population, which consequently revolted, initiating the May uprising – the so-called *Dresdner Mai-*

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aufstand. The prince responds by requesting help from the Prussian army to suppress the riots. The troops, increasingly violent, fire on the crowd. The rioters are vastly outnumbered, untrained, and adrift. On the list of rioters sought by the Saxon government, we find future eminent cultural figures, such as architect Gottfried Semper and the then chapel master Richard Wagner. The end result is fairly predictable, but the revolt is not easy to quell. In fact, 108 barricades are erected, making it difficult to encircle the rebels at the old market square. Despite being improvised and disorganized, the revolt manages to last a week (Ruhland 1995; Ludwig & Neemann 1999).

The Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin is also among the rioters. He is of particular interest here as the protagonist of an anecdote that lies between legend and curiosity. At one point, in the desperate circumstances faced by the rioters, Bakunin is said to have made an unusual proposal to his comrades: to hoist Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* and other paintings from the *Gemäldegalerie* onto the barricades (Hexelschneider 1998, pp. 81-95).

At the time, the *Gemäldegalerie* in Dresden was one of the leading museums in Germany and among the most important in Europe. Among the paintings in this extraordinary gallery, Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* was probably the most important, admired, and frequently copied masterpiece, especially from the middle of the century onwards (cf. Putscher 1955, p. 152). Bakunin is said to have proposed that this particularly important and famous artwork be placed between the rioters and the Prussian-Saxon troops, in the hope – but perhaps more accurately, in the belief – that the soldiers would never dare fire on such a work of art

It is not known whether the anecdote is true. Sources are relatively few [1], and some historians refer to it as a "picaresque legend" (Carr 1975, p. 192). However, the veracity of the anecdote is not particularly important. What matters is what it seeks to convey.

[1] However, sources are not lacking, such as the testimony of the writer and philosopher Alexander Herzen ("Bakunin erscheint als militärischer Kommandant in Dresden; der ehemalige Artillerieoffizier lehrt die Professoren, Musiker und Pharmazeuten, die zur Waffe gegriffen haben, das Kriegshandwerk […] er gibt ihnen den Rat, die ›Madonna‹ von Raffael und die Bilder von Murillo auf die Stadtmauern zu stellen und sich mit ihnen vor den Preußen zu schützen, die zu klassisch gebildet seien, um es zu wagen, auf Raffael zu schießen"; Herzen 1962, p. 452) or that of an anonymous fragment ("*anno domini*, des Jahres achtzehnhundertneundvierzig, wir schreiben den 4. Mai, sitzt der Russe Bakunin, abends gegen 9 Uhr, im Dresdner Rathhaus; Cigarre rauchend, an ein Pulverfaß gelehnt. Er und seine Kampfgefährtinnen und Gefährten discutiren seinen unglaublich anmuthenden Plan, morgen, am Sonnabend in aller Frühe, Bilder aus der Gemäldegalerie zu holen, um sie auf die Stadtmauer zu placiren. Bakunin plädirt für das Bild von *Raphael von Urbino*, der *Sixtinischen Madonna*" (quoted in Kramer 1999, p. 232). Cf. Also Jeschke & Ulbricht 2000.

Although some people see Bakunin's irony in this episode, for others, it is a moment to be taken seriously in all its tragic nature. At a point between the life and death of a community, during one of those epochal turning points – what Bakunin himself calls a *Barrikadenwetter* (barricade weather) in an article dated May 3, 1849 from Dresden (cf. Bakunin 1995) – the Russian anarchist proposes jeopardizing a masterpiece of art because, in his view, this would be the way to protect the community from violence. According to Bakunin, enemy troops would not dare damage the artwork. It is a piece that somehow becomes the ultimate symbol not only of a specific side of the community – the insurgents – but also of both the insurgents and the enemy troops, since the latter would have had to stop before it. In other words, it becomes a representative element of a specific human community and of humanity in general, in which people recognize themselves and which they consider a common good. In a work of art at risk of destruction, an additional meaning emerges beyond that expressed by the work itself – a kind of second-order aboutness in which the threatened artwork is about the community, belongs to it, and represents it, such that it signifies that the very history, tradition, cultural identity, and overall existence of the community that produced it are also under threat. The work thus comes to function as a kind of last-chance social contract, or social pact, through which the possibility of the community itself may be established or reestablished.

Starting from this anecdote, I wish to offer some reflections on the moment in which art becomes a political tool precisely through the possibility of its annihilation – that is, through the eventuality of its end, understood here as actual death. I therefore begin by considering the possibility of interpreting the well-known theme of the end of art not so much in terms of transformation, however radical, but rather in terms of actual cessation or literal death (1). I then explore this situation in greater depth through contemporary references to *Barrikadenwetter* and Bakunin's anecdote, drawing parallels with present-day political movements – above all, the climate movement (2). Finally, I attempt to interpret the phenomenon and its possible meanings (3). In what follows, I aim to show how, in cases in which art is at risk of being physically and definitively destroyed within a situation of general crisis, it acquires a political value that extends to the entire community surrounding it. This political value takes the form of a warning or a defense – an attempt to protect, preserve, and enhance the best that the community has produced and that resides within it, thereby prompting action for the common good.

2. *The End of Art as the Possibility of Its Death*

Those familiar with Hegelian aesthetics – particularly the thesis of the end of art and its numerous contemporary revivals – know that it is not uncommon in discussions or texts introducing this thesis to clarify that the end in question is not to be understood as a literal or definitive cessation.[2] Artistic production does not cease to exist, and art does not die. On the contrary, it undergoes an 'end' – often in quotation marks – as a pivotal moment in its existence, renewing its role and status. Art continues to exist after passing through this decisive moment.[3] This signifies art undergoing a transformation—more precisely, one in its relationship to its surroundings, to the society that envelops it, and to its mode of being in the world. In this sense, the idea that art comes to an end can carry many meanings. In the most faithful interpretation of Hegel's lectures, the end of art means that art has become, in Hegel's words, "a thing of the past". Art is no longer at the center of society as it once was, such as in classical Greece, where theatrical performances set the cultural and political tone. Art no longer directs cultural or political choices but assumes a more peripheral role compared to other forms, such as philosophy, although it remains necessary – this is the so-called *Vergangenheitscharakter*, the 'past character' of art.[4] In a less literal but equally insightful reading, the end of art is seen as a moment when art transforms into something other than itself. Art reaches its end, shedding the sensory and emotional characteristics that have defined it up to that point and becoming a reflection, a question, a concept. In this sense, art – moving away from pure aesthetic expression – becomes philosophy.[5]

In any case, what characterizes the end of art is that it marks

[2] Reflecting on his reinterpretation of the thesis on the end of art, Danto writes, "It was not my view that there would be no more art, which 'death' certainly implies" (Danto 1997, 4). In a context more closely linked to Hegelian studies, on the other hand, we can read, "Hegel's thesis on the end of art, together with the topos of the end of history, caused great consternation. In both cases, the inadmissible identification of the end with decline and death led to a huge misunderstanding that is still effective today. The end of art in no way implies the decline or death of art; on the contrary, it is the beginning of the unfolding of free art" (Vieweg, Iannelli, Vercellone 2015, 9, my translation).

[3] The translation of *Ende der Kunst* as "death of art" is potentially misleading. It is derived partly from colloquial usage and partly from the highly theoretical employment of the term by Benedetto Croce, who also claimed it in his polemic with Bosanquet. Even in this context, he did not mean the material cessation of artistic production. For more on Croce's notion of the death of art, see D'Angelo 2015, pp. 275-287 and Siani 2024, pp. 105-114.

[4] Cf. Siani 2024, pp. 2-6.

[5] This reinterpretation can be found, for example, in Danto 1981, p. vii.

a turning point – a moment when art gives way to new forms, new versions of what art is, could be, or should be, *per se*, and of what it can be in relation to society. In short: new life for art. The end of art serves as a way of philosophically reading and discussing a transformation – a profound, radical, and irreversible change – in which art continues to be present, continues to exist, and does not die.

However, one might ask what would happen if, for once, we took seriously the possibility that the end of art could truly mean the concrete death of art, or, more precisely, the possibility of its material death. The anecdote about Bakunin seems to point in this direction – the end of art is framed not as a theoretical closure but as a real threat to the possibility that a specific artwork might die and cease to exist. At the same time, along with this particular work of art, a more general dimension concerning the community and art in general seems to be under threat. Faced with the possibility of the destruction of the *Sistine Madonna*, even the oppressors would have had to stop, because, in that destruction, they would have had to recognize the destruction of something that also concerned them – something that concerned the community as a whole, both as a producer of art in general and as a human community.

This is a decisive difference, in which the end of art, as a theoretical concept, is a nuanced and powerful argument with great explanatory capacity. In contrast, the death of art, understood as the possibility of art no longer existing, becomes perhaps a more trivial, if not outright vulgar, condition – one that highlights all the concreteness and materiality of the work of art, and, at the same time, its political dimensions in a situation of crisis.

In some ways, this notion of the end of art as actual cessation seems to resonate in certain proclamations and passages from the manifestos of historical avant-garde movements, ranging from Russian Suprematism to Italian Futurism. In these very well-known cases, the end of art often carries the tone of a threat of annihilation in the face of a revolutionary future or a general rebirth. There is a kind of driving force – often violent, utopian, and unrealizable, yet also deeply unsettling – to destroy works of art, to dismantle their institutions (first of all, the museums), and to end art in general in terms of its death. Taking this outcome seriously and analyzing the words of Kazimir Malevich ("Everything that we [as artists] do is done for the crematorium") on the one hand and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti ("Turn aside the canals to flood the museums! ... Oh, the joy of seeing the glorious old canvases bobbing adrift on those waters,

discolored and shredded!") on the other, Boris Groys writes that "modern and contemporary art allows us to look at the historical period in which we live from the perspective of its end" (Groys 2016, p. 55). Like Benjamin's *Angelus Novus*, the historical avant-garde, and the activism of contemporary artists, Groys continues, "teach one how to practice metanoia, a U-turn on the road towards the future, on the road of progress" (Groys 2016, p. 56).

However radical their tone and imagery may be, these perspectives on the end of art, which appear to propose its death, are, in fact, clearer and more intense expressions of the end of art understood as transformation and not as an actual and generalized death. They call for a cessation of art as it was established in early twentieth-century bourgeois society, to achieve a renewal that affects society as a whole. Here, the logic might in part resemble that of the example of the end of art as the possibility of its death: There is a moment of crisis, an epochal transition in which there is a need to risk everything, an air of a situation between life and death, and, on this basis, the threat of destruction – the death of works of art – is feared. Actually, the picture shifts for several reasons, and this death of art is more accurately described as a 'simple' end of art.

First, the end of art is invoked as an artistic operation of palingenesis, in which it is not art itself that must die but rather the art of the past, presented in a more violent and exalted version of the classical 'end of art' concept. Here, art remains, in essence, 'a thing of the past'. After the end of art, even after its destruction, art continues or is supposed to continue to exist, particularly in the version of those who invoke its death – namely, the avant-garde movements. There is an idea of transformation that involves society and the world around us, but it occurs in parallel or through an 'internal' transformation of art itself, influencing its content, methods, and status without eliminating it as art. Despite the effectiveness and decisiveness with which they express themselves, the historical avant-garde movements remain within the realm of the end of art as an ending, not as a death[6].

In this sense, the anecdote about Bakunin and the *Barrikadenwetter* acquires more radical significance. Rather than addressing the transformation of art or of humanity through art, it threatens

[6] In light of developments in contemporary art, the 'end' of art, understood as its actual 'death', has recently been explicitly proclaimed by Yves Michaud (Michaud 2021). Yet even this further affirmation of such a seemingly clear-cut endpoint may be understood as part of the profound transformation of art as we have known it, or of "Great Art", articulated in the radical terms of its "vaporization" and "hyper-aestheticization".

the very possibility of the cessation of both art and human community, thereby foreshadowing catastrophic scenarios. It is probably no coincidence that this anecdote has resurfaced so forcefully in contemporary artistic discourse.

3. *Bakunin's Barricades: Then and Now*

This is a topic that appears particularly relevant to our contemporary context, to the extent that the episode reappears in several significant recent works of art. These artworks engage with social emergencies and problems as well as the role of art within them. In a way, they express a sense of urgency surrounding this kind of conceptual framework in times of crisis – a societal crisis that is increasingly finding expression through art (cf. Charnley 2021, pp. 1-20; Osborne 2022, pp. 3-38).

The topic of the barricade from Bakunin's anecdote reappeared in 2023 through work of the Venice-based Arsenale Institute collective that explores the history and problematization of the barricade in *Barrikadenwetter: Visual Acts of Insurrection*[7]. This work is almost more documentary than artistic in nature, gathering images and testimonies on the topic from the French 1500s to the present day, passing through nineteenth-century episodes and the events of 1968 in the twentieth century via the episode of Bakunin's *Sistine Madonna*. It offers reflections on specific issues related to the metaphor of the barricade, such as the role of the Situationists in the barricades during the student uprisings in Paris. The work centers on the concept of the barricade as a crucial moment of crisis, when tensions come to a head, and as a revelatory moment for the relationship between art and politics.

The episode is more explicitly revisited in the 2015 work, later revived in several versions, by Turkish artist Ahmet Öğüt[8], titled *Bakunin's Barricade (2015-2022)*. In this work, contemporary barricades are constructed entirely with hanging or stacked pieces from the collection in which the work is displayed. The installation features barricades, overturned cars, tires, and scaffolding. Hanging – almost as if they were cloths laid out in the sun – are sometimes a still life by Pablo Picasso, a portrait of Marilyn Monroe by Warhol, Barbara Kruger's prints, and other contemporary artworks. Next to the installation is a short text, a contract signed by the artist, which underscores the vitality and political nature of the work. The

[7] See also Scheppe 2021.

[8] For an overview of the artist's work prior to the installation I discuss, see Öğüt 2014.

contract also varies; one version states, "A loan contract, prepared in collaboration with a lawyer, stipulates that the barricade may be requested and deployed during extreme economic, social, political, transformative moments and social movements".

The artist mentions that he was initially inspired by the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul in 2013, as well as by Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and other recent movements. However, he is keen to emphasize that the work addresses not just the present but also the future of contemporary society. Furthermore, in an era of digital activism, the artist uses the tangible physical representation of the barricade through the artistic installation to reclaim real-world spaces for the struggle against inequality and for freedom. The aim is to revitalize political meaning through reflection on and positioning toward contemporary issues and matters affecting society within an institutional space that is often experienced as neutral or numbing, such as the museum. In doing so, the installation participates in the development of a contemporary museum institution that reconsiders – sometimes by adopting a radical stance – its role and the conditions under which it currently operates (cf. Bishop 2013), along with the resistance and difficulties that such a reorientation entails.[9]

In a compelling article published in April 2023 in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Anna Levett juxtaposes Öğüt's work with the Arab Spring and – what I find even more helpful here – protests in recent years in which young activists, such as those from Just Stop Oil, Last Generation, and Extinction Rebellion, engage in acts of civil disobedience related to climate and art (Levett 2023). These protests are well known: activists have smeared the glass of priceless paintings with paint or soup, glued their hands to the protective glass of acclaimed artworks, and interrupted theater performances or concerts. Beyond debating the merits of these protests, which is not my focus here, it is clear that climate activists – whether effectively or not, and for better or worse – use art not to harm it but as a vehicle to defend society and to call for the urgent need to save the planet. From this perspective, one interesting point that Levett highlights is how the motivations put forward by activists actually reinforce a logic that is, in many ways, contrary to their stated goals.

Climate activists attack works of art, pointing to them as superfluous, superficial, and distracting compared to the fact that "the

[9] So much so that the artist contested and requested the removal of the work from the Stedelijk Museum, which did not allow the work to be used during a protest against Israel's military intervention in Gaza (Villa 2024).

house is on fire" – that is, compared to the urgency of addressing the climate crisis and its resulting issues, such as pollution, global warming, and other human-made disasters. This creates an irreconcilable duality between reality and art, where the former is seen as a critical issue and the latter is dismissed as mere fiction, entertainment, or useless play. An often-repeated slogan is, "There is no art on a dead planet". However, choosing to target works of art rather than something else means exactly the opposite: Art is not superfluous. It is, in fact, a vital expression of human capability, and it is precisely because of this significance that attacking it causes such a scandal, making it a crucial element in the political discourse of these activists.

Commenting on soup thrown at the glass of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* at London's National Gallery in 2022 by two Just Stop Oil activists, who shouted, "What is worth more, art or life?" Levett writes, "Yet the choice to vandalize Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* suggests that beauty does have a role to play in the fight to save the planet. In the act of protest, the painted sunflowers become a stand-in for life on earth, not a distraction from it"[10]. In these actions, there was no intention of damaging the artwork, as the demonstrations targeted the protective glass of the painting.[11] However, the risk highlighted, represented, and performed[12] by these actions is that the artwork itself may disappear – that art will no longer serve as a sign of humanity's passage on this Earth, precisely because it is human beings whose days are numbered on the planet if they do not take action. It is the act that denounces the perceived futility of art in relation to the pressing issues that elevates the work to the utmost importance, especially at a time when the equally significant (if not more so) question of the end of humanity and the Earth arises. The danger implied, both in the specific context of the action and in broader terms, is that art will be destroyed, damaged, or rendered irrelevant, prefiguring the disappearance of human beings and their way of life on the planet as we know it. It is a kind of end of art, understood in terms of its potential death.

[10] It is interesting to note how Levett employs the concept of 'beauty', attributing a kind of auratic quality to the work of art. However, what she expresses could likely be conveyed just as effectively using the concept of 'art' or 'work of art' alone.

[11] This aspect – summarized as the threat, and thus the possibility, of destruction, where that possibility serves purposes beyond the mere annihilation of the artwork (e.g., drawing attention to the climate crisis) – distinguishes these cases from those in which works of art are destroyed with the explicit aim of eliminating the artwork itself, whether for personal or ideological reasons, as analyzed in Pickshaus 1988 and Pickshaus 2007.

[12] While these protests undoubtedly involve an element of spectacularization – and arguably, of aestheticization, in general terms – this does not detract from the message they aim to convey; on the contrary, it may serve to amplify it.

4. *Hypotheses on Destruction*

In cases in which art is situated at the center of a *Barrikadenwetter* and used to express an ultimate concern – not about a specific issue but about the very survival of the community that hosts and produces it – art becomes the bearer of a message. This message is not tied to any particular medium, style, or content but is conveyed through art itself, transcending time and form. When confronted with the possibility of its material destruction, art reveals its status as one practice among human practices, as a specific form within human practice (cf. Bertram 2014), and, in its specificity, shows itself to be one that holds value for humanity itself. In this manifestation of valuable human practice, art acquires additional significance as art that extends beyond possessing – to use a concept dear to Danto, among others – a specific aboutness as a particular work (for example, a painting represents something, is about something). It takes on a further level of meaning, a kind of second-order aboutness, which has to do with its role in relation to the collective dimension. Broadly speaking, it becomes a symbol of the social community, of humanity itself in one of its best expressions, and the possibility of the artwork's destruction becomes the possibility of the destruction of this very community. In such circumstances – whether in the midst of battle or amid the climate crisis – human beings come to recognize art as their own product, their own double, insofar as they perceive in it the trace of their passage on Earth, in the form of art history, tradition and cultural heritage. In this sense, art, precisely in its vulnerability to destruction, comes to function – particularly in the case of climate activism – as a genuine political warning – a call to safeguard the human community as such as well as the shared home of humans and nonhumans that is currently being destroyed. The possibility of art's destruction makes human beings aware of the damage they have inflicted and continue to inflict on the Earth, on themselves, and on nonhuman life, foreshadowing the potential disappearance of humanity from the planet. Art becomes the medium of the message, not because of what it conveys but because it *is* art. In its apparent futility – and, somewhat paradoxically, precisely in its supposed autonomy – art reveals its political and social value. Those who employ it and ascribe political significance to it are often not the artists themselves, who may communicate something more specific through their work. In this way, art transforms into a method, a practice, a tool, even utilitarian in its most immediate sense, and perhaps even a defensive instrument for protest. This is not the

kind of transformation proposed in various interpretations of the 'end of art'; what is at stake here is its final, irretrievable cessation.

In this scenario, art becomes a common good that affects everyone in a concrete way, in which everyone can recognize themselves and recognize in art something that belongs to them, to the community, and to society and humanity as a whole, speaking in an abstract and general sense. At the same time, art that places its own existence at risk becomes a kind of embodiment – a symbolic distillation of human beings or of the good that human beings have been capable of achieving – in which both the oppressed and the oppressors can find themselves reflected. According to Bakunin's logic, no one – especially not the oppressors – should dare to attack barricades bearing hoisted paintings, because masterpieces are recognized by all parties involved as human beings, and the possibility of art's death signals the destruction of a social condition, an ideal, a tradition, a cultural heritage, a history, or perhaps even the planet itself.[13]

In this sense, art also becomes a symbol of the possibility of salvation for humanity – and of humanity as part of the terrestrial community of humans and nonhumans – but not quite in the way Santiago Zabala conceives it (Zabala 2017). Here, art is not, in Zabala's Heideggerian terms, a remnant of Being that issues an ontological call to which we must respond. Rather, it is fundamentally a concrete object – both material and spiritual – which, in alliance with the data and projections of the natural sciences, allows people to envision the possibility of total destruction and nothingness. It is precisely in this imaginative confrontation with annihilation that art's salvific value – if it can be called that – resides and that political awareness for society is generated.

This logic arises from the specific nature of art and what it represents for a community. While there are countless examples, acts of destruction or vandalism involving other common objects or spaces, such as breaking a shop window, or the disruption of other collective activities, such as interrupting a football match, are unlikely to provoke the same level of indignation or irritation, invoke the same kind of outrage, and generate the same level of

[13] Insofar as global issues are concerned, this logic clearly appears to function within the community that produces the artwork and must be understood in socio-economic terms, both in relation to the parties involved and to the concept of art itself. However, it becomes more difficult and problematic to apply universally, whether from the perspective of a supposed general concept of humanity or of a hypothetical shared concept of art. In fact, throughout this article, the concepts of humanity and art have been discussed in relation to the specific cases presented, but due to space constraints, examining their broader problematic nature is not possible.

public attention – often tinged with hypocrisy – even among those who are not typically engaged with or interested in art. This is because the logic in question unfolds within the artistic sphere, an element that, in a certain sense, appeals to the entire community and is collectively recognized as its own.

Furthermore, the risk of damaging the uniqueness or irreplaceability of a work of art is not the only reason it provokes such a strong reaction, although this factor certainly plays a role. It is true that a damaged artwork can rarely be fully recreated, however expertly it is restored. Yet, what seems to be at stake is not merely the physical harm done to the object but rather the deeper meaning of the artwork as a trace and double of human beings. In this sense, the destruction of a work of art may symbolically represent the potential destruction of a community of individuals.

This highlights the social essence of an artwork: It is both a specific product and a reflection of human experience, which, in the context of the climate crisis, prompts political consideration even beyond the human sphere. Moreover, the political scope and implications of such an action stem not only from what the art expresses but from its very existence as art. In this way, art holds its potential as a tool for protest, as a message carrier, even before it conveys any specific content.

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