

FIVE. Play Drive in the Hard Drive

Schiller's Poetics of Politics

While the French Revolution was spinning out of control, Friedrich Schiller wrote *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794.)¹ He began the night he heard that Louis XVI had been executed.² Soon, the very Jacobins who killed the king (after inviting Schiller to be an honorary citizen) would themselves go to the guillotine. The *Letters* don't rail against violence. An aggressive tone would have violated Schiller's conciliatory message that art, not arms, achieves political freedom. It is a promise that has inspired generations of philosophers and activists to explore what art-for-everyone can do for democracy. Pragmatist John Dewey and post-Marxist Jacques Rancière cite Schiller as their mentor for recognizing art as a motor of political development. Liberal philosopher Jürgen Habermas cites him too, for stimulating the imaginative construction of new agreements through "communicative action." A mention of Dr. Winnicott's prescription to play, and of Freire's link between pedagogy and politics, develops this spotty genealogy a bit more but won't amount to an academic contribution. My purpose is more practical, as was Schiller's.³ It is to prime urgent conversa-

1 tions with his interdisciplinary, enduring, almost eerily contemporary invi-
2 tation to loosen up and play.

3 Today's troubles bring back Schiller's worries about the French Revo-
4 lution which had run headstrong behind reason into the "barbarism" of
5 political purges. Specters of that abstract and unfeeling reason brought the
6 United States to war in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the name of reason eco-
7 nomic disparity grows, immigration policy stagnates, and public education
8 squeezes out creativity.⁴ Schools earnestly bent on practical results add a
9 math class or a prep session, hoping to raise scores on standardized tests.
10 Ironically for educators and tragically for children, the sacrifice of diver-
11 gent play to convergent correctness has kept scores down, because the tests
12 measure more than data retrieval. They also gauge the critical faculty of
13 interpretation which develops by exercising the imagination, or playing.⁵
14 Schools are failing our children through indifference or excessive caution
15 about creativity.

16 We should worry again about the connection between play-starved edu-
17 cation and eroded mechanisms for political debate, if worry can lead be-
18 yond deadlocks. Too often, academic essays pursue analysis and critique
19 but stop short of speculation about remedies, as if intellectual work ex-
20 cluded an element of creativity. In fact, essays that remain risk-averse miss
21 the potential of the genre to "assay," or try out, ideas. I confess my prefer-
22 ence for the free play of new possibilities. Freedom to speculate is the con-
23 dition for "the new humanism," in a recent rehearsal of Schiller's concern
24 about imperious (French Enlightenment) reason that ignores (English
25 Enlightenment) sentiment.⁶ Schiller's contribution to the tension was to
26 identify and to coin a third kind of energy that new humanists can play
27 with: the *Spieltrieb* or play drive, our innovative faculty for turning conflict
28 into works of art.

31 Let's Loosen Up

32 Our humanity depends on it. Play is the hardwired instinct for freedom and
33 for art, Schiller was sure and neuroscience confirms.⁷ It is the drive that can
34 harness man's two other and mutually murderous instincts, the passionate
35 *Sinntrieb* and the rational *Formtrieb*, into the energy for producing aesthetic
36 pleasure. Between the rock of reason and the hard place of mindless sen-
37 suality, man is practically a civil war in himself: savage by enslavement to
38 passionate nature, and barbarous by the pitiless exercise of reason (letter

20).⁸ Humans survive, Schiller observed, when they get those drives to play together. Seriousness may address what is true or moral (and intransigent), but play (amoral and disinterested) opens paths toward liberty (letter 15). Other philosophers watched the revolutionary convulsions in France and turned anxiously to political events, where they assumed the “great destiny of man is to be played out” (letter 2, 223); they evaluated competing designs for a State that could construct and preserve civilization. But Schiller mistrusted the cold scrutiny, and he bracketed the big political questions. Instead, he went to the heart of the matter and to the heart of man when he named the political crisis as an abandonment of the imaginative arts and therefore of freedom: “Utility is the great idol of the time, to which all powers do homage and all subjects are subservient. In this great balance of utility, the spiritual service of art has no weight, and, deprived of all encouragement; it vanishes from the noisy Vanity Fair of our time. The very spirit of philosophical inquiry itself robs the imagination of one promise after another, and the frontiers of art are narrowed, in proportion as the limits of science are enlarged” (letter 2, 223). More than two centuries later, the recurring impatience would compel Martha Nussbaum to remind readers why democracy needs the humanities.⁹

Schiller anticipated objections. Perhaps the young reader to whom he addresses these letters would prefer “a loftier theme than that of art,” which probably seemed “unseasonable in desperate times” (letter 2, 222). Yet Schiller’s brief for the arts is quite practical, he explains, because play can lead indirectly to political liberty while more direct means, including didactic “art,” keep missing the mark. “For nothing agrees less with the idea of the beautiful than to give a determinate tendency to the mind” (letter 22). Making something new—something for which there is no prior concept—is the liberating activity that raises man above his dual and dangerous nature.¹⁰ Only playfulness creates multiple perspectives that bypass the mono-vision of sensuousness or of reason.¹¹ The opposite of play is not work or seriousness, not even depression, anthropologist Gregory Bateson would explain for socio-ecological reasons; it is the one-dimensionality or literal-mindedness that leads a species to extinction.¹²

True artists don’t deny or avoid conflict; they struggle with it, energized by contending forces. New works of art bear a mark of the freedom that engendered them. And that mark, made visible or audible to the public through a work of art, multiplies the experience of freedom into a shared, or common, sense that supports enlightened politics. By contrast with play

1 as a path toward liberty, the impulsive and deductive political philosophy
2 of France forfeited the freedom it too desperately pursued. Mere reason
3 underestimated the real dangers of resistance and reprisal, which is why
4 Hannah Arendt preferred the liberal and pragmatic American Revolution.¹³ But now in late or postmodernity when liberal routes seem clogged,
5 what path can we take toward political freedom? Schiller would not have
6 been stumped by the question, because his answer has staying power.

7 It is play understood as artistic creativity that offers the only sure, if in-
8 direct, conduit to liberty. Schiller insisted that “this matter of art is less for-
9 eign to the needs than to the tastes of our age; nay, that, to arrive at a solu-
10 tion even in the political, the road of aesthetics must be pursued, because
11 it is through beauty that we arrive at freedom” (letter 2, 224). Almost any-
12 one at the time could see that pursuing reasonable shortcuts to liberty, in-
13 different to human passions and material needs, does violence to the very
14 humanity that reason would set free. Schiller’s remedy for revolution is an
15 aesthetic education. To be moved by an aesthetically pleasing effect is to
16 acknowledge freedom in wrestling material into new forms, repairing the
17 damage that flesh and spirit do to one another. At precarious peace in the
18 world, an artist or an admirer—both count as active citizens for Schiller,
19 though real fans play at being artists—achieves freedom and invites others
20 to share and to cultivate the experience. Cultivating this freedom into a
21 general condition of possibilities in collective political life is Schiller’s am-
22 bition. And since wrestling with matter and circumstance takes discipline
23 and training, he sends *Letters* to encourage and advise us.

27 Face to Face

28 Strategically, Schiller addresses himself to one reader, his patron, Prince
29 Friedrich Christian of Schleswig-Holstein-Augustenberg in Denmark. By
30 publishing the letters, Schiller invites each of us to read as if we were the
31 prince himself. (Did Schiller learn the tactic from Machiavelli?)¹⁴ The point
32 was to reform one individual at a time. Even though he concedes that “the
33 establishment and structure of true political freedom” is the most perfect
34 work of art (letter 2, 223), that work needs to prepare appropriate material
35 in the shape of sturdy and judicious citizens. Unlike other arts that can
36 transform raw material beyond recognition into new objects, pedagogy
37 and politics demand a gentler touch; they depend on preserving the in-
38 tegrity of human beings as both the material and the ultimate users of the

product: “The political and educating artist has to treat his material with a very different kind of respect from that shown by the artist of fine art to his work. He must spare man’s peculiarity and personality, not to produce a deceptive effect on the senses, but objectively and out of consideration for his inner being” (letter 4, 229). The aesthetic education offers a “subjective” transformation of each person’s private war of conflicting drives into a knack for making beautiful public peace offerings.

“To deny the importance of subjectivity in the process of transforming the world and history is naïve and simplistic,” Paulo Freire would confirm in response to “scientific” Marxists; “It is to admit the impossible: a world without men.”¹⁵ The response repeats in Fredric Jameson’s endorsement of aesthetics over the social sciences. Abstract concepts can be taught directly, Jameson admits, but “it is increasingly hard for people to put this together with their own experience as individual psychological subjects in daily life. The social sciences when they try . . . become an ideology. Aesthetics addresses individual experience,” and effects a change of heart.¹⁶ This attention to subjectivity and skepticism about rule-generating human sciences characterize Gramsci’s project too, as the real revolution will be the achievement of gradual cultural change. Equally skeptical about the pretensions of politics, Jacques Rancière defends the subject-centered, one-on-one approach to social change.¹⁷ No enlightened masterpiece of legislation can move people to identify with the state, unless each participant is already educated in the spirit of freedom that the state presumably represents. “Perhaps there is a vicious circle in our previous reasoning,” Schiller teases (letter 9). The discouraging circle is familiar to Freire too: “If the implementation of a liberating education requires political power and the oppressed have none, how then is it possible to carry out the pedagogy of the oppressed prior to the revolution?”¹⁸ Rancière puts it this way: “People were dominated because they were ignorant and they were ignorant because they were dominated.”¹⁹

To break out of the frustrating circle, Schiller coaches, take a step back, away from the conflicting sides. The opening activity or “instrument” that affords some distance for contemplation “is the art of the beautiful” (letter 9). There is really no alternative because without the “disconnection” from habit that art provokes, man stays torn, stuck in material appetites and arrested by strictures of morality.²⁰ Coaching takes time, Schiller admits, so we should be prepared to spend it. (Gramsci’s unorthodox cultural reformism needed time too.)²¹ No quick fix will do for human development

1 because rushing ahead of our “subjective” time-bound bodies to design an
 2 “objective” timeless State is sure to suppress a good part of our humanity
 3 (letter 4, 229). The best part is our capacity to experiment, to select and re-
 4 arrange existing materials, to imagine unprecedented combinations; that
 5 is, to play.

8 Symbolic Destruction

9 Donald Woods Winnicott would come to the same conclusion through
 10 his work with children. On the thrilling border between subjective fan-
 11 tasy and objective reality, play is the fundamental activity of human devel-
 12 opment and of sustained psychic health. Agreement with Schiller may be
 13 coincidental. Perhaps Winnicott read Schiller’s briefs, though we have no
 14 evidence.²² We do know that Winnicott developed an aesthetics through
 15 psychotherapy, one child at a time, early on; and he elaborated his notes
 16 on play over a lifetime.²³ Schiller wrote “man is truly human when he plays,
 17 and he plays when he is truly human,” (letter 15) as if summarizing Winni-
 18 cott’s work.²⁴ The therapist included his own practice among the playful
 19 and creative (that is, human) activities he studied: “Psychotherapy takes
 20 place in the overlap of two areas of playing, that of the patient and that of
 21 the therapist. Psychotherapy has to do with two people playing together.”²⁵
 22 This means free and nonpurposive communication, which the analyst must
 23 not force into reasonable sequences.²⁶

24 The instinct to play surfaces immediately, says Winnicott, with a new-
 25 born’s search for its mother’s breast.²⁷ The breast materializes because the
 26 mother also plays, bending to the baby’s will in order to welcome it as cre-
 27 ator of its world. The early games multiply throughout life as “play is the
 28 continuous evidence of creativity, which means aliveness.”²⁸ People play at
 29 affecting the world, not only in a response to hostility or to repair a loss, as
 30 Melanie Klein had thought.²⁹ Play is an innate drive—in Schiller’s sense—
 31 to achieve tacit control over existing, often conflicting, materials and de-
 32 mands. Riskiness spikes both art and analysis with dangers of unpredict-
 33 ability, dangers that cannot be abolished if work is to proceed. So the work
 34 demands a steadiness that can anticipate and survive aggressive surprises
 35 meant to unhinge the playmate.³⁰ “The drive is potentially ‘destructive’ but
 36 whether it is destructive or not depends on what the object is like; does the
 37 object *survive*, that is, does it retain its character, or does it *react*? . . . But
 38 destruction of an object that survives, that has not reacted or disappeared,

leads on to use.”³¹ Using people, as Barbara Johnson underlined after reading Winnicott, amounts to loving them.³²

How do people and things survive destruction and become useful and desirable to each other? They do so when the tussle takes place in the imagination and opens up a border space, neither entirely subjective—because the aggression fixes on something in the real world—nor entirely objective, because the world is framed subjectively. The dangerous and therefore exhilarating contact zone between inner and outer worlds is Winnicott’s transitional space dedicated to free play. There the “push and pull, to and fro reaches towards the complex, the subtle-minded, integration of divergent and heterogeneous raw materials” to produce transitional objects,³³ those intimate and ingeniously re-signified playthings that belong to both the internal world of fantasy and to the external world that resists and survives aggressive fantasies. “There is no anger in the destruction of the object to which I am referring, though there could be said to be a joy at the object’s survival.”³⁴

Healthy, symbolic destruction enables the integration of the subject with the objective environment and emotional maturity, while pathological and truly destructive acting-out keeps the immature subject split off from the world. Much of Winnicott’s work describes a structural link between healthy living and art-making: “Through artistic expression we can hope to keep in touch with our primitive selves whence the most intense feelings and even fearfully acute sensations derive, and we are poor indeed if we are only sane.”³⁵

Take the Risk

The unpredictable, disarming quality of art remains the signpost for Schiller’s education, as it was for Kant’s aesthetics. But Schiller broadens aesthetics beyond Kant’s disengaged judgment to include active exploration of artistic processes. His first letter respectfully promises to “rest chiefly upon Kantian principles.” Yet he soon leaves the master to become a maestro, artist as well as teacher. Whether or not his use of Kant is philosophically sound, Schiller refused to exercise judgment alone while passions ran high and inflamed whole populations. Difficult times needed outlets for the energy that would otherwise ignite or fester; they needed ever-new experiments to form pleasing works from conflicting matter. “If hitherto truth has so little manifested her victorious power, this has not de-

1 depended on the understanding, which could not have unveiled it, but on the
2 heart which remained closed to it, and on instinct which did not act with
3 it" (letter 8, 242).

4 Schiller was not always sure about art's good effects. He tormented him-
5 self about his early play, *The Robbers* (1781), which the public loved for its
6 bandit hero who lets his father die, who murders his mistress, and goes on
7 robbing. Schiller hoped that the outlaw's popularity came from his solilo-
8 quies about the injustices of far greater but "legal" crimes of exploitation.
9 The poet struggled with Plato's notorious mistrust of artists, and also with
10 Rousseau's sober objections in 1758 to Voltaire's and d'Alembert's recom-
11 mendation that Geneva sponsor a state theater.³⁶ By 1784, Schiller took
12 the risk of defending art along Voltaire's lines — to promote civic culture —
13 when he supported a public theater for Germany. The law needs art, he
14 agreed, as a vehicle for both education and subjective embrace of collective
15 norms.³⁷ But this already conventional argument didn't entirely cancel his
16 concern over art's accountability. It wasn't until he read Kant's *Third Cri-*
17 *tique* that Schiller would decide the ethical question in favor of art.

18 Contra Rousseau, who dismissed art as entertainment, Schiller could
19 now argue that aesthetic pleasure is different from amusement: it is the
20 enjoyment of freedom beyond concerns of truth or goodness. This sen-
21 sation of aesthetic freedom is the precondition for political liberty, Kant
22 suggested in the *Third Critique*. Thinking and feeling intensely without re-
23 gard for personal or collective interests, without commitments to existing
24 values and ideas, is the condition of Enlightenment philosophy.³⁸ The chal-
25 lenge was how to prepare a broad population to think freely. The innate
26 faculties of *pure* (scientific) and *practical* (moral) reason are not free; they
27 depend on a priori principles of objectivity and ethics. Only aesthetics es-
28 capes determinism because it doesn't depend on reason, but on rule-free
29 judgment. (See chapter 3, "Art and Accountability.") Kant believed that
30 judgment levels differences among citizens because anyone can judge; and
31 he cites Cicero on "how little difference there is between the learned and
32 the ignorant in judging, while there is the greatest difference in making."³⁹

33 Schiller disagreed. Though his *Letters* take Kant's advice to train judg-
34 ment through aesthetics, they also exhort everyone to imagine and to make
35 beautiful things. Art-making raises the intensity of Kant's discussion of
36 mental faculties (reason, understanding, imagination, and judgment) to a
37 register of raw instincts. The *Formtrieb* (formal drive) lines up more or less
38 with pure abstract reason. On the other side, the *Sinntrieb* (sensual drive)

would burn reason away, if it were not for the third *Spieltrieb* that plays with combustible conflict. “Just as liberty finds itself between the two extremes of legal oppression and anarchy, so also we shall find the beautiful between two extremes, between the expression of dignity which bears witness to the domination exercised by the mind, and the voluptuous expression which reveals the domination exercised by instinct . . . it follows that the third state in which reason and the senses, duty and inclination, are in harmony—will be that in which the beauty of play is produced.”⁴⁰

Sublime Modernity

Classic culture could count on continuity between nature and art. But in Schiller’s frenzied world, man needs to work continuously to make connections. Moderns cocreate new societies; and new works of art help to negotiate temporary truces between conflicting drives. They are sublimely unstable and honor the dynamic of world-making more than they revere any product. Much as he admires the ageless equilibrium of ancient Greek art, Schiller notes that its very perfection forfeits the freedom to stray from an ideal, so he prefers the tortuous and obsolescent historicity of contemporary arts (letter 16). Experiments trump the timeless enchantment of classic art along with Kant’s flat baseline of training taste as civic education.

Schiller the poet relished the effort, the detours, and the self-doubt that art-making demands. He even accepted outright failures, however envious he might have felt about the natural talent that apparently flowed from “naïve” poets.⁴¹ Innate ability paradoxically undercuts their merit, he says, “because it is not the work of their choice. . . . We are free, and they are necessary; we change, they remain the same. . . . We therefore perceive *in them* eternally that which is missing from us, but after which we are required to strive, and which, although we never attain it, we nevertheless may hope to approach in an infinite progress. We perceive *in ourselves* an advantage, which is wanting in them.”⁴² The advantage is freedom, and its sign is error, the capacity to deviate from nature.

The very success of the ancients is a constraint on creativity and therefore an obstacle to freedom (letter 16).⁴³ Schiller develops this comparison in *Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* (1801), a manifesto for modernity’s difficult freedom.⁴⁴ In any age, noble souls can be childlike and rise above, or stay clear of, contradiction in this simple way. (Schiller’s favorite example is Pope Adrian VI [1522–1523] whose upright and transparent character ex-

1 posed corruption in the Roman Catholic hierarchy and made a mess of po-
2 litical affairs.)⁴⁵ When, however, nobility of character is achieved through
3 effort and risk, when sleepless souls reconcile reality with an ideal, great-
4 ness becomes effective and truly praiseworthy. Likewise with art: oscilla-
5 tion, doubt, failure, and fleeting accomplishments are grander than God-
6 given perfection.⁴⁶ Kant had bet on nature; he understood that form
7 stimulated aesthetic pleasure and attributed beautiful form to nature. But
8 Schiller's last words in *On the Sublime* (1801) put nature in its primitive
9 place: "Because the whole magic of the sublime and the beautiful subsists
10 only in semblance, art thus possesses all the advantages of nature without
11 sharing her shackles."⁴⁷

14 Difficult Freedom

15 Schiller's preference for insecurity is a taste for freedom. Beauty, he points
16 out, is constrained by nature and leads to easy pleasure without exciting
17 the human will. But the sublime is no cheap thrill, and Schiller shares this
18 preference with Kant. Sublime pleasure begins with fear or confusion. Then
19 reason comes to the rescue by acknowledging human limitations. "We
20 therefore experience through the feeling of the sublime that the state of our
21 mind does not necessarily conform to the state of the senses, that the laws
22 of nature are not necessarily also those of ours, and that we have in us an
23 independent principle, which is independent of all sensuous emotions."⁴⁸
24 Having survived the horror and the perplexity, we feel free, relieved, and
25 proud to have processed pain into the pleasure of freedom. This shock of a
26 world independent of us makes the sublime Schiller's entry point into an
27 ethical politics of care for others.⁴⁹

28 Probably Schiller's most important improvement on Kant was to stretch
29 the duration of aesthetic experience beyond the moment of judgment
30 toward the time-consuming labor of creativity. The stretch had enormous
31 consequences for philosophy from Hegel on. Making art — which includes
32 judging, exploring, speculating, and testing possibilities — replaced a serial
33 notion of history. Now history became a movement of forces in collision,
34 resolving themselves into new forms which then provoked fresh tensions
35 to be harnessed into yet newer arrangements. The very distinction between
36 naïve and sentimental poetry identified epochal changes in form and sen-
37 sibility, and therefore in the relationship between man and the world. The
38 realm of appearances that Schiller had safeguarded against both naïve and

cynical detractors is where human faculties thrive. Driven by disagreement itself, the imagination can speculate beyond conflict.

It would have been complicit with disaster — as far as Schiller was concerned — merely to look on as the Revolution whipped practically everyone into destructive activity. When Walter Benjamin remarked that the history of civilization was also the history of barbarism he was glossing Schiller.⁵⁰ (Gilberto Freyre would quip that Europe had a “siphilizing” mission in the Americas).⁵¹ Schiller sometimes sounds shrill and he knows it: “Have I gone too far in this portraiture of our times? I do not anticipate this stricture, but rather another — that I have proved too much by it. You will tell me that the picture I have presented resembles the humanity of our day, but it also bodies forth all nations engaged in the same degree of culture, because all, without exception, have fallen off from nature by the *abuse of reason*, before they can return to it through reason” (letter 6, 232, my emphasis). Returning to reason will need to take passion into account: “Reason is obliged to make this demand, because her nature impels her to completeness and to the removal of all bounds; while every exclusive activity of one or the other impulse leaves human nature incomplete and places a limit in it” (letter 15, 264).

This was a call to action that recruited all citizens as artists and potential artists. Schiller’s *Aesthetic Education* demystified the work, while Kant had described artists as rare geniuses. The almost immediate effect of Schiller’s pedagogy was far-reaching through Wilhelm von Humboldt. Schiller’s student and close friend would establish Europe’s first modern and public university in Berlin in 1810, dedicating it to civic education through arts and sciences.⁵² In Jena, Humboldt had heard Schiller’s lectures on history that developed the line of his *Letters* and took to heart the maestro’s exhortation to make new forms: “Soon it will not be sufficient for things to please him; he will wish to please” (letter 27, 309). The public university responded by creating an innovative space for personal excellence and collective accomplishment. There the drama of development would be narrated in the “first person plural,” as Boal later identified the agency of individual characters to community theater. “Independently of the use to which it is destined, the object ought also to reflect the enlightened intelligence which imagines it, the hand which shaped it with affection, the mind free and serene which chose it and exposed it to view” (letter 27, 309). When an artistic experiment succeeds, it charms even philistines to recognize, and eventually to emulate, the man-made miracle of new forms:

1 The gravity of your principles will keep them off from you, but in
 2 play they will still endure them. Their taste is purer than their heart,
 3 and it is by their taste you must lay hold of this suspicious fugi-
 4 tive. In vain will you combat their maxims, in vain will you con-
 5 demn their actions; but you can try your molding hand on their
 6 leisure. Drive away caprice, frivolity, and coarseness, from their plea-
 7 sures, and you will banish them imperceptibly from their acts, and
 8 at length from their feelings. Everywhere that you meet them, sur-
 9 round them with great, noble, and ingenious forms; multiply around
 10 them the symbols of perfection, till appearance triumphs over
 11 reality, and art over nature. (letter 9, 247)

12
 13 This is no romantic brief for feeling contra reason, no advice to aim for
 14 the heart instead of the head. Schiller is holding out for enlightened dis-
 15 passionate taste as a common sense of value. “Their taste is purer than
 16 their heart.” Cultivate that taste (judgment) with real beauty, he adds in a
 17 Kantian spirit, and common sense will overtake pettiness. Since cultivation
 18 won’t take root under Kant’s constraints on world-making, Schiller incites
 19 us to play. We can enchant even unwilling subjects with more art than they
 20 can resist; that way, reluctant spirits can find freedom instead of blocking
 21 the way for others. Reason is quite helpless here because arguments excite
 22 counterarguments in the desperate spirals that Foucault would trace.

23 24 25 **Play’s the Thing**

26 Schiller didn’t despair; nor would John Dewey, Herbert Marcuse,⁵³ Paulo
 27 Freire, Antonio Gramsci,⁵⁴ Augusto Boal,⁵⁵ Antanas Mockus, or Jacques
 28 Rancière. These and other exemplary agents of change investigate the
 29 spirals of power and passion to locate cracks or weak points where alterna-
 30 tives can open a wedge. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), Freire called
 31 these fissures “limit situations” that provoke interventions to derail current
 32 procedure.⁵⁶ These points of entry become what Mockus calls ambiguous
 33 or unfinished moments of a narrative, available for a new twist.⁵⁷ Con-
 34 ventional endings go around in circles, Freire warned when he proposed short-
 35 circuiting the dialectic of mastery and bondage that Hegel had described:
 36 as masters become dependent on their slaves (who change the world
 37 through work) newly empowered slaves lord it over their former masters.
 38 The loop straightens out by replacing the top-down and bottom-up single-

mindedness with two-way dialogue. By a simple change of preposition, Freire rejected a vanguard leadership style that works *for* the oppressed, and stays in the lead, for collaborations that work *with* the oppressed to interrupt systematic, recurrent unfairness.⁵⁸ Liberty lives in the rehearsals of these lateral labor relations.

Freire's appreciation for innovation doesn't exactly depend on art; he hardly mentions it. But the instructions for disarming hierarchies through cultural interventions bring him into direct conversations with artists (Augusto Boal called Freire his "last father") and indirectly with Schiller.⁵⁹ The risky collaborative experiments that Freire advocated merit the name of art, even if they are not "purposeless." Like an artist, he is practically indifferent to the substance of lessons but alive to the hierarchical or transactional form of teacher-student relations.

John Dewey wasn't coy about his debt to Schiller. His pragmatic encomium to art is paraphrased from the *Aesthetic Education*: "The existence of art is the concrete proof . . . that man uses the materials and energies of nature with intent to expand his own life, and that he does so in accord with the structure of his organism—brain, sense-organs, and muscular system. Art is the living and concrete proof that man is capable of restoring consciously, and thus on the plane of meaning, the union of sense, need, impulse and action characteristic of the live creature."⁶⁰ A fan of Schiller and impatient with Kant's exemption of beauty from any practical purpose, Dewey considered art to be everything done with care, intensity, and satisfaction:⁶¹ "The tense grace of the ball-player infects the onlooking crowd . . . the delight of the housewife in tending her plants. . . . What Coleridge said of the reader of poetry is true in its way of all who are happily absorbed in their activities of mind and body."⁶² ("Doing," in Winnicott's similarly broad and basic formulation of human activity means living creatively; that is, living.)⁶³ Dewey's democratizing adjustment of registers between the ordinary and the extraordinary specifically rejects categorical distinctions between intellectuals and artists, bringing philosopher Dewey even closer to artist/philosopher Schiller: "The difference between the esthetic and the intellectual is thus one of the places where emphasis falls in the constant rhythm that marks the interactions of the live creature with his surroundings. . . . The odd notion that an artist does not think and a scientific inquirer does nothing else is the result of converting a difference of tempo and emphasis into a difference in kind."⁶⁴ Dewey didn't privilege one form over another, but celebrated them all, staying close to Schiller.

1 “Form is experienced for itself” is Jacques Rancière’s shorthand for
 2 Schiller’s founding and “unsurpassable manifesto” for the “aesthetic
 3 regime” of art.⁶⁵ Schiller’s aesthetic revolution “produced a new idea of
 4 political revolution,” Rancière says, as the realization of a common and
 5 creative humanity. This became the core of German Romanticism “summa-
 6 rized in the rough draft of a program written together by Hegel, Hölderlin,
 7 and Schelling.” But the political movement failed and tainted the aesthetic
 8 model: “Modernity thus became something like a fatal destiny based on
 9 a fundamental forgetting.”⁶⁶ Rancière decries the lost aesthetic road to
 10 revolution, not to scold but to jog our cultural memory into rediscover-
 11 ing Schiller and company. It is too soon to declare defeat, he reminds col-
 12 leagues, while the aesthetic regime still promises to multiply and redistrib-
 13 ute instances of art in egalitarian relation to life. Academic defeatists are
 14 irresponsibly inactive, he adds, when they complain about collective losses
 15 while they live relatively well above the rubble.

16 The accusation of bad faith recalls Schiller’s objection to the willful and
 17 humorless dismissal of playfulness by “extreme stupidity and extreme intel-
 18 ligence” (letter 26). The one has no imagination, and the other wants noth-
 19 ing but the truth. They stay boxed in by reality and consequently surren-
 20 der the freedom that appearance (*Schein*) can offer. Freedom assumes risks
 21 as it plays with possibilities; it anticipates failures as cues for abandoning
 22 some experiments and designing new ones. Free play also admits to living
 23 the shadow-life of counterfactual “appearances.” Mayor Mockus defends
 24 counterfactual thinking as if Schiller were coaching him. Philosophically,
 25 Mockus understood his administration in rational procedural terms that
 26 can generate shared norms and build consensus. This line of thinking is so
 27 indebted to Jürgen Habermas that some students affectionately called the
 28 mayor Professor Habermockus. But in practice, Mockus achieved consen-
 29 sus and civility by spiking communicative action with the kind of uncon-
 30 ventional creativity we call play or art.

31 Deliberative Differences

32 “Appearance” is the counterfactual contribution that Habermas receives
 33 from Schiller in order to facilitate discursive action. Action assumes that
 34 universal values do not yet exist among conflicting parties, but that they
 35 can be constructed through communication. The challenge is to imagine
 36
 37
 38

possible points of agreement and to try them out. Under-determined and available for explorations, *Schein* had already drawn John Dewey to Schiller for related ethical reasons. Dewey described ethical deliberation as “dramatic rehearsals” that take place in the imaginary space where artists consider options before making the cut or stroke or rhyme that determines a form. “The instinct of play likes appearance, and directly it is awakened it is followed by the formal imitative instinct” (letter 26). That mental theater of possibilities is where Dewey’s deliberation can play out a range of scenarios without defaulting to habit and preconceptions. “We are apt to describe this process as if it were a coldly intellectual one. As a matter of fact, it is a process of tentative action; we ‘try on’ one or other of the ends, imagining ourselves actually doing them, going, indeed, in this make-believe action just as far as we can without actually doing them.”⁶⁷

As a clinic for curing political inflexibility, Habermas defends the room for imaginative rehearsals against the dispiriting matter-of-factness that Schiller called extreme stupidity and extreme intelligence. For Habermas, Surrealism was an example of willful stupidity; and deconstruction a case of perverse intelligence. In the 1920s and ‘30s, Surrealism had imagined that art could dissolve the tensions between desire and reason by plumbing the irrational depths of the unconscious where life melds indistinguishably with art.⁶⁸ By the 1970s, deconstructive philosophy revived this campaign against reasonable distinctions: if meaning is constructed from words and words are artificial abstractions that overshoot or underestimate their marks, then words betray us and undermine communication.⁶⁹ Presumptively real information unravels under rigorous scrutiny to lead practically nowhere. Both Surrealists and deconstructionists exposed the fragile differences between data and desire, hoping finally to unhinge the gate between art and life, rhetoric and meaning.

But Habermas hopes to repair the hinge and to protect a space for art as the laboratory for better living. So he takes an “Excursus on Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*” to safeguard room for counterfactual “appearances” just after starting *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1987). Habermas claims this space as his playground for constructing collective agreements: “If art is to be able to fulfill its historic task of reconciling a modernity at variance with itself, it must not merely impinge on individuals, but rather transform the forms of life that individuals share. Hence, Schiller stresses the community-building, solidarity-giving force of

1 art; its *public character*. The point of his analysis is that . . . particular forces
2 could be differentiated and developed only at the cost of the fragmentation
3 of the totality.”⁷⁰

4 “*Totality of character* [of a society] must therefore be found in a people
5 that is capable and worthy of exchanging the State of need for the State of
6 freedom” (Schiller, letter 4). The side step from reality into art isn’t exactly
7 what readers expect from the sober theorist of communicative action. But
8 we should take Habermas at his word. It was Schiller’s art-making amend-
9 ment to Kant’s *Third Critique* that taught Habermas to pick his way out of
10 modernity’s deadlock between impersonal reason and embodied desire.
11 Kant himself gave art credit for developing intersubjective common sense
12 by communicating feelings and ideas that don’t yet have names. Artistic
13 genius can give voice to ineffable (and therefore private, possibly con-
14 tentious) states of mind to make them “generally communicable.”⁷¹ This
15 Kantian connection between art and common sense, amended by Schiller
16 to include a universal faculty for creating connections, underwrites Haber-
17 mas’s long sessions of communicative action.

18 The amendment also puts Hannah Arendt in Schiller’s debt. Despite
19 distrusting him for being an artist, a “fabricator,” she evidently learned how
20 to read Kant’s political philosophy from reading Schiller’s *Letters*.⁷² It was
21 Schiller who first interpreted Kant’s aesthetics as the “surprising” key to his
22 politics.⁷³ Arendt’s *Lectures on Kant* seem daring to her student and edi-
23 tor who supposes that she overinterpreted Kant in order to argue her own
24 political position.⁷⁴ But the blame or praise is too strong, because it was
25 Schiller’s bold use of Kant that had clinched the role of aesthetic judgment
26 as a moment in the process of creating political accords. Judgment bridges
27 politics, morality, and the law to the natural and social sciences, as we saw
28 in chapter 3.⁷⁵ And that bridge leads back to aesthetic education, which for
29 Schiller cultivates the optimism of creative decision-making.

30 For Habermas, Schiller’s unpretentious shuttle from judging, to making,
31 to pausing again for judgment made good on Kant’s enlightened project of
32 disinterested communication:

33 Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* also provided an entry for speculative
34 Idealism that could not rest content with the Kantian differentia-
35 tions between understanding and sense, freedom and necessity,
36 mind and nature, because it perceived in precisely these distinctions
37 the expression of dichotomies inherent in modern life-conditions.
38

But the mediating power of reflective judgment served Schelling and Hegel as the bridge to an intellectual intuition that was to assure itself of absolute identity. Schiller was more modest. He held on to the restricted significance of aesthetic judgment in order to make use of it for a philosophy of history. He thereby tacitly mixed the Kantian with the traditional concept of judgment, which in the Aristotelian tradition (down to Hannah Arendt) never completely lost its connection with the political concept of common sense. So he could conceive of art as primarily a form of communication and assign to it the task of bringing about “harmony in society”: “All other forms of communication divide society, because they relate exclusively either to the private sensibility or to the private skillfulness of its individual members, that is, to what distinguishes between one man and another; only the communication of the Beautiful unites society, because it relates to what is common to them all.” (letter 27)⁷⁶

Imagination gets across the otherwise impassable differences that concern Habermas: “The unbridgeable gap Kant saw between the intelligible (realm of duty and free will) and the empirical (realm of phenomena, inclinations, subjective motives, etc.) becomes, in discourse ethics, a mere tension manifesting itself in *everyday communication* as the factual force of counterfactual presuppositions.”⁷⁷ Without counterfactual appearance and short of the free play that appearance allows—that is, without Schiller—Habermas could hardly incite us to play at bridge-building.

I offer this fundamental connection between aesthetic education and discourse ethics as a tribute to Mayor Mockus and to other public figures who strive to adopt Habermas’s political advice.⁷⁸ Defending the ever-changing and self-correcting explorations of art, in contrast to the heady ambition of Idealist philosophy, Habermas underlines the debt that dialectical history owes to Schiller for conceiving of progress as an uneven movement between fits and starts through moments of aesthetic accomplishment. With Schiller’s advance as a point of departure, Hegel will take on Kant’s inflexible categorical ethics of abstract universals to advocate for a more deliberative process; and Habermas will follow up with an argument for communicative action. Thanks to the flexibility and the stretch that he learns from Schiller, Hegel can level a critique against the short shrift that Kant gives to the procedure of judgment, and he can offer the remedy of

1 expanding the moment into a working session of intersubjective delibera-
 2 tion. “Discourse ethics replaces the Kantian categorical imperative by a
 3 procedure of moral argumentation.”⁷⁹ Habermas’s reading of Hegel rounds
 4 out the circle that Kant had opened when he dislodged “imperious reason”
 5 from its deluded self-sufficiency in the first two *Critiques*.
 6

8 Anxiety of Agency

9 Schiller encountered resistance, to judge from his irritation with willful stu-
 10 pidity and smug intelligence. His exasperated tone anticipates posthumous
 11 trouble too. Paul de Man is a sign of the trouble. I’ll mention his objec-
 12 tions because de Man can stand in for a whole generation of skeptics who
 13 continue to haunt the humanities. Though Gayatri Spivak, for example,
 14 takes a bold turn toward intervention and toward Schiller in her recent
 15 *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2012), she stays tied to
 16 de Man and to deconstruction through a habit of translating tension into
 17 the tormented stasis of double binds. This knot of conflicting demands de-
 18 scribed particular tight spots for Gregory Bateson who coined the term.⁸⁰
 19 But double bind is generalized in deconstruction to mean a simultaneous
 20 possibility and impossibility to say or to do almost anything. It practically
 21 amounts to an interdiction against action. Spivak claims to be stuck be-
 22 tween dedication to scholarship and the call to engagement.⁸¹ In fact, she
 23 pursues both admirably in a syncopated rhythm that artists understand.
 24 Schiller described that irregular progress of getting beyond binds. That was
 25 his project: to overcome the impasse between reason and passion, time and
 26 eternity, obligation and desire, indirectly. Through play, he argued, humans
 27 can reconcile conflicting demands into new forms that change the players
 28 and change the world in the process.

29 De Man’s animus against Schiller wasn’t envy or resentment; he ap-
 30 parently felt no overpowering admiration that might have soured into
 31 an anxiety of influence. The contrast with Johan Huizinga’s parricidal jab
 32 underlines the difference. Huizinga rehearsed the *Letters* in a book that
 33 clearly owes Schiller a great but unacknowledged debt, *Homo Ludens:*
 34 *A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1938). He dismissed Schiller, made
 35 him look silly, in a single mention delayed past the middle of the book.
 36 The master who taught everyone from Hegel to Habermas to recognize
 37 play as the motor of human arts, culture, and society is reduced to a pop-
 38 psychologist of doodling: “A theory designed to explain the origin of plas-

tic art in terms of an innate ‘play-instinct’ (*Spieltrieb*) was propounded long ago by Schiller. . . . As an explanation of the origin of decorative motifs in art, let alone of plastic creation as a whole, a psychic function of this kind must strike us as somewhat inadequate. It is impossible to assume that the aimless meanderings of the hand could ever produce such a thing as style.”⁸² Huizinga’s gesture hopes to establish authorship and authority regarding play; it is a mean-spirited confirmation of Schiller’s contribution.

But de Man’s hostility is sharper than envy, contemptuous of Schiller’s project. His objection rankles at the political ambition of the *Letters*. De Man surely sensed that ambition through Schiller’s admirers, Walter Benjamin among them. Benjamin took up Schiller’s account of world-making, but reframed the relay between humanity and nature as a dystopian decline rather than an erratic path to freedom. Benjamin named the narrative form of this historical zigzag between art and environment “dialectical allegory.” De Man dismissed the term and the implied time it took as a naïve contradiction, so he stopped the movement and straightened out Benjamin’s bidirectional form into a standard two-tiered allegorical structure.⁸³ Targeting Benjamin’s defense of change through time, de Man was also aiming at Schiller’s social dynamism, especially his optimism about art.⁸⁴ A disturbing passage about statesmen using people the way a sculptor uses stone is meant to evoke Schiller. But the quote belongs to Joseph Goebbels.⁸⁵ The *Letters* had, on the contrary, admonished political artists not to treat human beings that way. Why authorize Goebbels to speak for Schiller? Perhaps it was to say that the Nazis could construe his invitation to aesthetic politics as a license to kill, because Schiller was the original guilty party for leading the way from art to disastrous agency. De Man’s irritation with Schiller’s brief for art is probably as historical as it is philosophical, since symbolic destruction—called art—had failed to avert the real thing in World War II. After wartime collaborations that de Man refused to confess, aesthetic pleasure became a scandal to him. “Steeled against the pleasures of art and thought, his criticism is an allegory of denial and deprivation.”⁸⁶ While all political objectives seemed naïve or dangerous, deconstruction dismissed Schiller for the same socially engaged reasons (“his stress on practicality, on the pragmatic”) that prompted Habermas to revive him.⁸⁷

Another way to denigrate Schiller—along with the agency of art—was to call him a monger of lies and false effects, to reduce his notion of play to frivolity and entertainment.⁸⁸ Serious people tell the truth, facts, not

1 counterfactual fantasies (as critics of Mockus would reproach). But with-
2 out imagination, the work of philosophy shrinks to thinking only about
3 what already exists, which makes change literally unthinkable as we saw in
4 chapter 1. It is a surprising retreat into positivism, as narrow as the philoso-
5 phy that J. L. Austin mocked for fixing only on true or false statements.⁸⁹ To
6 clinch his case against Schiller and imagination in general, de Man resorts
7 to a misogynist corollary: the preference for art with its mass appeal over
8 elite philosophy amounts to a feminine preference for form over a mascu-
9 line respect for content.⁹⁰ Hostile or grumpy, de Man dismisses women,
10 formalism, and Schiller in the same stroke, even if it requires defending the
11 “meanings” that deconstruction would otherwise malign and dismantle.

12 Schiller was careful to distinguish between appearance and deception:
13 one opens a vista for rehearsing scenarios to act in the world; the other
14 squints at it. The distinction should relax ethical concerns about play. But
15 some skeptics won’t respect useful boundaries, Habermas complains. The
16 excessive caution that accompanies a dehumanizing zeal for reality ban-
17 ishes “all the fine arts of which appearance is the essence,” tragically sac-
18 rificing freedom by ostracizing beauty as “only an appearance” (letter 26,
19 302). Today, a grim seriousness that has passed for high theory refuses the
20 broad-based seductions of art and eliminates the arts from public educa-
21 tion, while the business of art booms. Privileged producers play to cura-
22 tors and collectors who value artworks as measures of acquisitive power.
23 Meanwhile, the fundamental play drive, the faculty that Schiller was sure
24 amounted to our talent for being human, gets too little room for everyday
25 exercise. Weak and underfunded, how will it save us from savage passion
26 and from barbarous reason?⁹¹

27 28 29 Ready?

30 Schiller’s *Letters* can gird citizen-artists to defend art and to woo skeptics.
31 His book is not so much a training manual as a companion through the
32 oscillations, failures, and temporary successes of art-making in modern
33 times. Schiller is both frank and eloquent about the challenge to charm
34 both technocrats and pessimists. He wants us to win them over to art
35 through a profoundly human susceptibility to beauty, even when reason
36 fails to join us. The *Letters*, seductive and persistent, have set off genera-
37 tions of correspondence with political philosophers, pedagogical reform-
38 ers, artists, teachers, and citizens.

As moderns who must continually construct connections to each other and to the physical world, the instinct for play drives us toward cultural agency of modest and sometimes momentous social change. So Schiller's invitation to co-create is an opportunity and an obligation. Even when nothing occurs to us at critical moments, when conflict and scarcity demand new forms or a particular skill that we can't muster at the time, frustration can prime a future contribution. Failure can feel "like an itch in the brain," to quote an indigenous facilitator of Forum Theater in her newly learned Spanish. I hope that this book about great and also small works will suggest a palette or a tool kit to keep handy for inspiring new cases. Apprenticeship to the artists mentioned here—those who work from the top of political power to animate collective creativity, and those who start small and scale up—will share some lessons they learned from trial and error.

Mayor Mockus discovered that wit is essential to art. It is an element of the collective pleasure that cities can generate through collaborative art in order to sustain projects of social change. He also inquired, and then demonstrated statistically, that admiration for co-artists is the foundational feeling for citizenship.⁹² Asking after the effects of one's work, pausing from play to measure and to judge before making a next move, Mockus is a maestro worth emulating. His inclusive approach to art multiplies the makers, as does Augusto Boal's recruitment of actors and nonactors into open-ended Forum Theater. Boal explored tragic determinism as a cop-out, or a cop-in-the-head, an unnecessary bad ending because theater offers space to rehearse a variety of options. Leadership, Boal concluded, is the art of facilitating imaginative interventions by the greatest possible number of spect-actors; it is no vanguardist knack for giving directions. Effective facilitators, Gediminas and Nomeda Urbonas of the Pro-Test Lab experimented with art to drive an ethical agenda without depending on positive outcomes. The pleasure of art-making can be the energy that animates a politically impossible project, for pushing impossibility past one and another checkpoint on a receding horizon, until the project achieves real political success. And ACT UP discovered that collective action can mitigate personal risk; it may also provoke spin-off projects that translate dissidence into renewable energy for the movement. With Pre-Texts, the arts of recycling triggered commonplace creative agency, first through the easily multiplied model of Eloísa Cartonera's publishing project, and then through a pedagogical sequel that appropriates literary classics and high theory for the irreverent fun of advanced literacy.

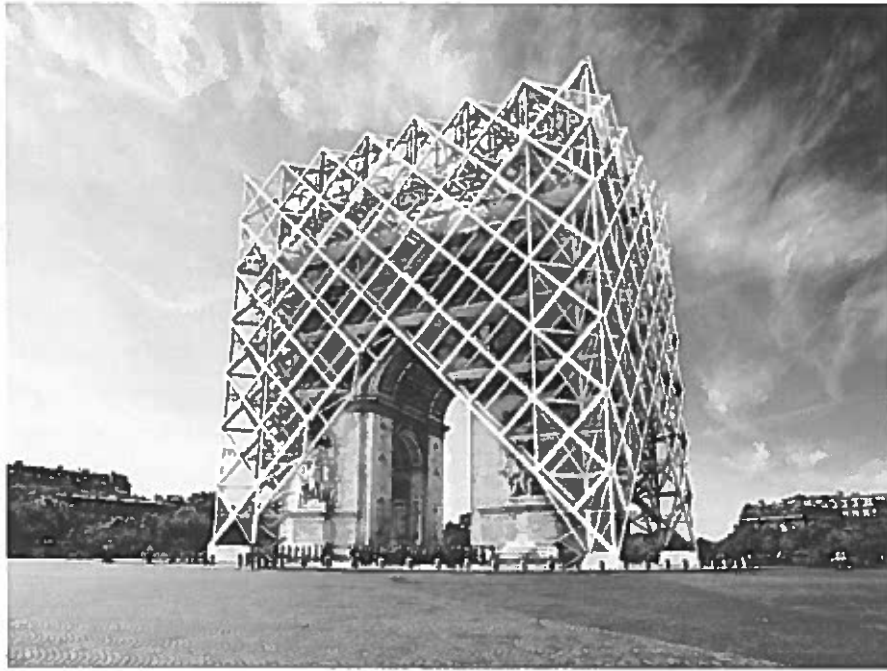


FIGURE 5.1. Krzysztof Wodiczko, *The Abolition of War*. Courtesy of the artist.

All of these experiments — along with philosophical defenses of artistic trial and error including those by Dewey, Gramsci, Freire, Rancière, and Habermas — lead back to Schiller, to his optimism and to his tolerance for tension and for failure. Schiller's best readers know that freedom doesn't always reach an intended mark. Error is a risk that art takes; it is a sign of unscripted activity. Schiller never promised a direct route to freedom. In fact, he warned against it if the pursuit hoped to avoid self-canceling intransigence. Only the pleasures of indirection and experimentation can sustain the repeatedly unrealized but approximating efforts. After reading Schiller's *Letters* and some of its sequels in art, philosophy, pedagogy, and politics — trials and errors that promise a future for syncopating between failure and new forms — can you resist an invitation to press “play”?