ABSTRACT:

Many artists claim to have something to say, through their art, on the legitimacy of contemporary bio-institutions. Bio-art practitioners often frame their claims to political importance by mobilizing a singular cultural persona: the figure of the amateur. This paper presents a critical genealogy of the amateur as it has been appropriated and transformed since the 1990s. Evaluating its effects, I argue that this figure is the most significant contribution of bio-art to the social construction of contemporary biotechnologies. I show that the figure of the amateur primarily circulates under the guise of "the biotech hobbyist", expressing how bio-artists are non-scientists manipulating biotechnologies to aesthetic ends. These ends, however, are also political. Discourse analysis suggests that the amateur is effectively understood as an instantiation of “the faceless figure of anyone at all” (J. Rancière), as bio-artists claim to represent “the citizen” as being in principle entitled to and capable of making relevant claims on the uses and abuses of biotechnologies. Evaluating the forces of this view requires engaging the radical claim that anyone at all is entitled to and capable of voicing pertinent opinions on the means and ends of life in common without being an expert. Moreover, it asks to consider how bio-artists also express concerns over a "demagogic" democratization of biotechnologies benefitting the biotech industry. These concerns bring them to insist that, like computer hackers, biotech amateurs should remain partially unaccountable if “biotechnology from below” is to retain a critical edge. Can, does and should bio-art resist stabilization?
The Importance of the Figure of the Amateur in Contemporary Bio-Art

“According to that view [of political things that was characteristic of the old political science], what is most important for political science is identical with what is most important politically. [...] The break with the common-sense understanding of political things compels the new political science to abandon the criteria of relevance which are inherent in political understanding. Hence, the new political science lacks orientation regarding political things; it has no protection whatever except by surreptitious recourse to common sense against losing itself in the study of irrelevancies.”


Claims worthy of attention

One of the reasons contemporary artists are studied by a number of scholars, today, at the intersections of philosophy, the social sciences, and the humanities, may well reside in the fact that contemporary artists produce a remarkable quantity of claims about the sense and importance of their practices. The “Artist Statement” as a form is even being taught in college and university courses in programs of study offered by faculties of Arts. Many of those who call themselves artists today once have or are enrolled in such programs. An indefinite number of conventions or norms preside to, if not strictly codify, what can plausibly be welcomed by institutions, critics, and other artists as an acceptable statement on, or of one’s work. In this context, it is not surprising that some artists have taken this very form of “the Artist Statement” as the occasion of their work, as a central object to
challenge and play with. Something very similar to an “Artist Statement” or a “Critical Appraisal” such as those produced by artists, critics, commentators and curators can easily be imagined as presenting the sense and the importance of a work that would take the “Artist Statement” as an art form. Indeed, I arguably produced such a statement or appraisal already, by suggesting such a work would hold this form as a central object to challenge and play with. Challenging, playing with, or questioning, interrogating, investigating, reimagining, critiquing, deconstructing and subverting are common verbs in the language games of the contemporary art world. Why this is the case, how this situation has come into being, and whether it is a laudable or deplorable situation are precisely the types of question that are raised by and engaged in research works produced at the intersections of philosophy, the social sciences, and the humanities, in disciplines or fields such as art history and the sociology or philosophy of art. These engagements tend to hold the explicit claims made by artists on the sense and importance of their works as claims worthy of scholarly attention.

In this paper, it is my contention that the types of question outlined above, as well as the broader question of what claims are worthy of attention, should be of acute interest for contemporary political science, for political thought, political theory, political philosophy and political sociology – or more generally, for what may be called politology, following a French usage. Politology names any attempt at formulating a logos of politikos, of the polis or politeia, that is: a language, an argument, an account, a rationale or a reason of political life, politics, or the political. To assert that politology

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1 For a particularly polemical example, consider the “performance project” submitted to the selection committee of a students’ exhibition by Québécois visual arts student David Dulac in March 2013, which resulted in Dulac being charged with “uttering death threats or threats of physical harm” against “children of the region of Québec City.” Two courts found him guilty. Dulac is now appealing this decision in the highest court of the province (see Lamy 2014; Lemieux & Labrecque 2014).
should pay attention to the types of question outlined above is admittedly a prescriptive or programmatic, a “normative” claim on my part, an “Ought.” From a descriptive, diagrammatic, or “factual” perspective, it is the case that a number of influential politologists have done, are doing, and will do research on contemporary art, or on aesthetics broadly understood. By arguing questions on the language games of the art world – including those language games through which delimitations of this (or these) world(s) occur – should be of interest to politology, I am not quite issuing a call for more politologists to focus on this one object at the expense of others. For one, I do not know what the effects of an increase of “politologists of art” would be. Issuing such a call would also presume or presuppose that issuing “calls” is a valid modality of politology. While it certainly has been and is a widespread gesture in politological texts, it is not certain that it is a desirable one (see Gunnell 2011, 9-31). Furthermore, to call for more politologists of art would be to take for granted the unity of what I described as “this one object.” However, the very modalities of such a unity or unification are precisely one of the things that the study of the language games of art seeks to explain or to account for. If one accepts the widespread view that “impredicative” concepts are “bad” concepts (see Labrecque 2012), one would have to reject from the outset such a presupposition of one’s conclusions, or such a begging of the question.

By arguing that questions regarding how artists make claims on the sense and importance of their work should be of interest to politology, I am not in fact being very controversial. In effect, to the extent that the making of such claims is grasped as a

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2 In political sociology, for example, consider the works of Pierre Bourdieu (1979) and Murray Edelman (1995). In political philosophy, consider the works of Jacques Rancière (2008; 2000), Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (1987) and Boris Groys (2008), for instance. In international studies, consider the works of Roland Bleiker (2001) and Michael J. Shapiro (2010; 2008).
practice of (self-)legitimation or (self-)authorization, these claims already fall within the province of what politology tends to consider its privileged field of problems. These claims, or the practices of making such claims, at least fall within this province of politology where and when the latter is not restricted to the actions of “the State,” but includes such questions as the (self-)legitimation or authorization of the very notion of “the State” (in the singular, with a capital “S,” etc.) as a particular, situated type or form of political community or entity, or as one type of world, if you will. I simply claim that artists “world,” too, to use a verb that has gained some currency in recent years (see Manning 2007). Their “worlding” practices may not be the most important ones, politically, but they are in any case occurring in relation to other practices of “world-making” that are undoubtedly political. As such, they should at least be acknowledged by politologists, whether or not one holds – as I tend to do – that the reflective character of those claims to sense and importance produced in the art world make them privileged or exemplary.

Interestingly, contemporary artists “world” by making claims not only on the *artistic* sense and importance of their art, but also on its cultural, social, historical, economic, ecological, and political sense and importance. This is the case not only when art is explicitly put into the service of a “cause” (say, through cinematic propaganda or consciousness-raising theater), but also when artists or theorists of art assert “the autonomy of art” or “aesthetic sovereignty” as both a manifestation and a condition of political freedom (Schiller 2004 [1795]; Menke-Eggers 1999). The specific artistic practices that I am engaging in this paper can be situated between these two poles of the instrumentalization of art as a set of means for political ends, and the abstraction of
political life in function of aesthetic (or experiential) finalities. These specific practices can be designated as “bio-art,” as artistic works and deeds that deal with biotechnologies. Engaging claims that assert the political importance of these somewhat marginal practices of bio-art is to attend to a contemporary political configuration, and to ponder its sense and importance.

There are two reasons for placing the following engagement under the sign or auspices of Leo Strauss’s distinction between “the old political science” and “the new political science,” the former being identified with ancient political philosophy and the latter with the positivist-behaviorist social science that marked the last century (Strauss 1962). On the one hand, paying attention to practices as marginal as bio-art, and thereby claiming that they matter politically to an appreciable extent, can seem an exemplary illustration of the “lack of orientation” of “the new political science” regarding what matters politically, a case of politology “losing itself in the study of irrelevancies.” On the other hand, as I will try to show, researching and studying contemporary bio-art practices can also offer a useful way of addressing what Strauss called common-sense political understanding. This is so especially because bio-art practices weave and put forward a singularly thought-provoking character or persona in the guise of what I call the figure of the amateur. The insistence on this figure is, in my view, the key reason why bio-art practices matter politically, and should therefore matter politologically.

**Bio-art and the issue of expertise**

Like many, and perhaps all artistic currents, forms or genres, the practices that one can gather under the nomination “bio-art” or “bioart” (Daubner & Poissant 2012; Mitchell
2010; Kac 2007; Annas 2006) are sometimes named otherwise. Other nominations include “biotech art” (Hauser 2003), “art in the biotech era” (Pandilovski 2008), “bioaesthetics” (Munster 2008), “bioethics in action” (Zylinska 2009), “tactical biopolitics” (da Costa & Philip 2008), “cultural research dealing with biotechnology” (Thacker 2005), and “artivism” (Lemoine & Ouardi 2010). The works of the same artist or art collective can be and have been described by many of these terms. This is the case, for example, with the works of individual artists Eduardo Kac and Stelarc, and of the collectives that call themselves Critical Art Ensemble, subRosa, and the Tissue Culture & Art Project. While naming can be a highly polemical and political practice, most of the artists who attempt to deal with biotechnologies through art since the 1990s seem to accept virtually any one of these labels, or to be equally indifferent to them precisely as they are labels. Recently, Perth-based artist Sean Morris has even illustrated a small book titled *Is this bioart?* that playfully and wittily engages this issue of (in-)adequate naming, of just what counts and what does not count as “bioart” (Morris 2011). Whether this or that is “truly” bio-art is a question that is arguably faced by anyone who engages publically with these practices, as one’s interlocutors seek to ascertain their grasp of what is at stake by way of exemplifications, of attempts at circumscribing the limits of the set of all instances that fall within the province designated by the abstract notion of bio-art. As Morris’s book suggests, however, uncertainties always remain in such a field, and arguably in all fields. Designations are unstable, even if they can be stabilized through a number of discursive practices such as repetition, or hammering. The stabilization and destabilization of designations is a crucial site of politics – if one allows, through this usage, a certain destabilization of a common concept of politics that designates primarily,
if not exclusively, state actions, which are themselves very often discursive actions. What matters, here, is that the “agents” concerned with those practices designated as bio-art make explicit claims to the effect that they conceive of their work as constituting sites or occasions that engage some uses and abuses of past, present, and future biotechnologies.

The main issue addressed in and through bio-art practices seems to be the power of experts. In effect, bio-art tackles (or seeks to tackle) the practices involved in the authorization and legitimation of certain voices and stances, and the disqualification and delegitimation of innumerable others as “chatter,” “gibberish,” or “noise.” While the power of certain experts is already at play in the issue of the qualification or disqualification of this or that work or deed as an instance of bio-art, this problem is more particularly raised, in and through bio-art, with respect to the more or less acceptable uses of biotechnologies. Who is able (or enabled) to think, do, or claim something that truly matters on these matters, today, and who is not? This question is both “empirical” and “normative,” if one accepts this common distinction, for it asks both who is in fact legitimated and authorized to make such relevant claims, and who should in principle be legitimated and authorized to make them. Of course, it may well be the case that the “Is” and the “Ought” do not coincide.

When and where biotechnology is grasped as the name of present – and most of all future (see Sfez 2001) – advanced tools (and discourses) developed and put to work at the intersection of “Big Science” and “life itself,” it often seems that “legislation” regarding their uses and abuses is effectively (or clearly should be) the province of those who possess highly specialized knowledge. This is the position put forward in and
through claims to the effect that the highly specialized knowledge in question is that of scientists or technicians who master and create biotechnological means. It is also the position put forward in and through claims to the effect that the knowledge at issue is that of (bio-)ethicists or (moral) philosophers, who are (or claim to be) especially competent for identifying and pondering the rightful ends that biotechnologies are, could, but also should be made to serve – and those ends they are not, cannot, or should not envisage to be serving. To call for a collective body (a council or a commission, for instance) that would bring together both the highly specialized knowledge of biotechnological means and the knowledge or adequate consideration of rightful ends also amounts to claiming biotechnologies should (and perhaps, cannot but) be put or be left into the hands of “experts.” Ultimately, those who argue that governments, or elected politicians, should be the ones who decide also tend to attribute a form of expert knowledge to governments, or elected politicians – even if it is only the knowledge of how to win elections.

One way of understanding the claims to political importance made in and through bio-art practices is to read and frame them as attempts at including artists in the virtual list of relevant specialists or experts whose voice should be heard and listened to with regards to the uses and abuses of biotechnologies. To the question of just what and who is an expert or specialist, however, this reading of bio-art as an attempt at inclusion or a call for deliberative or dialogic participation adds the difficult questions of what and who is an artist, and of what the expertise or knowledge of (bio-)artists consists in, and of how it relates to politics and politology.

The difficult character of these questions is expressed, for instance, in how being described “a true artist” today does not necessarily implies one has attended an art school
or received a degree in one art or another, nor even that one practices one of those activities that are commonly described as arts (say painting, sculpture, dance, or theater). A boxer or a tennis player may well be described with credibility as a “true artist.” So can a barber, a mechanic, a surgeon, or a politician in the most common sense of the term. A famous phrase attributed to Bismarck even characterizes politics itself as “the art of the possible.” Artistry, in these common uses of the term and of its derivatives, names a form of exceptional skillfulness, or even expertise itself insofar as it is grasped as a knowledge of “forms” that is irreducible to that of “contents” for it involves a capacity for creation or creativity, for producing novelty. “Artist,” in that sense, is a word of praise similar to “virtuoso.”

It is in fact through this last notion of virtuosity that political theorist Hannah Arendt has somewhat famously claimed that art and politics are analogous, for both the performing arts and political action require a space of appearances, a public in relation to which virtuosity can show itself and exist (Arendt 1961, 153-154; see Lamoureux 1994). When and where bio-art practices and works are characterized as political, it is seemingly because they are perceived as taking part in producing or in modulating such a space of appearances, or even as “spacing” a world within or through which interesting deeds can occur in relation to the space(s) in and through which biotechnologies are already appearing in a variety of ways, with a variety of effects. The ways in which certain “bio-artists” have put into question the very novelty of biotechnologies, for instance, can be analyzed as attempts at “re-spacing” or reframing what the Critical Art Ensemble has described as “the promissory rhetoric of biotechnology in the public sphere” (Critical Art Ensemble 2002, 39-56). By insisting that very ancient, archaic practices like the
production of cheese, bread, and wine, or livestock breeding, crops selection, and agriculture in general are always already biotechnological since they involve a “harnessing” of “life itself” or of “biological processes” for human ends, such works may succeed in modulating the arguably prevalent view that the vesting of decisional and legislative powers in the hands of experts is made necessary and even urgent by the radical novelty and momentous, even epochal changes fostered by biotechnology “itself.” At the very least, bio-artists attempt to render problematic, or to show the problematic character of the assumption of a “self-identity” of biotechnology in the singular.

At the same time, however, being characterized as an “artist” today is not necessarily to be praised. It can in effect also mean that one is being scorned, mocked, or ridiculed, if not blamed. Usually, this involves charges of “self-centeredness” or “narcissism,” or of paying too much attention to forms and surfaces at the expense of “substance” or “depths.” Artists, in this view, are self-indulgent, individualistic, and even “parasitic,” as they live off public funds rather than have “a proper job.” This caricature can be related to the view of artistry as virtuosity: to explicitly claim for oneself the status of artist can be heard as a most-often over-pretentious affirmation. As bio-art is concerned, claims to the effect that a work like the production of a bunny that “glows in the dark” under a certain light (Kac 2000), or of maps of “organ flows” on the basis of the unverified stories of trafficking told by audience members (subRosa 2008), constitute important interventions at the intersection of art, science and politics can appear as blatant exaggerations. This reading is likely to insist on the “confidential” character of such works, which are only known to or noticed by a handful of people, by a small circle mostly made of artists, critics, scholars, and perhaps of a few amateurs.
Interestingly, the double valence of the term “artist” parallels the double valence of this last word, “amateur.” Many practitioners and commentators of bio-art insist on the positive value that can and arguably should be attributed to amateurism, especially under the guise of “the citizen scientist” or “the biotech hobbyist,” whose proliferation is explicitly desired (see, for instance, Grushkin 2013; Kelty 2010; Catts & Cass 2008; Catts & Zurr 2008; La Chance 2007; Critical Art Ensemble 2006; Jeremijenko & Thacker 2004). On the other hand, amateurism is often seen as the royal road to catastrophe at the intersection of science and politics, either in the future, the present, or the past. For my part, I hold the figure of the amateur that is (re-)valued in and through bio-art constitutes the most interesting, and arguably the most important political contribution of contemporary bio-art.

The manifold figure of the amateur

Etymologically, the term “amateur” in English comes from the French *amateur*, which itself comes from the Latin *amator*, “lover,” from the verb *amare*, “to love.” As a noun, “amateur” evokes someone whose actions or practices are performed out of affection, passion, or love. Presumably, these actions or practices are thereby distinguished from actions or practices performed out of other motivations, and especially for pecuniary incentives or material gain. In that sense, the figures of the professional and of the employee are antithetical to the figure of the amateur as another name for the aficionado. The latter can be seen as more noble that the former insofar as affection, passion or love are nobler than greed or self-interest, for instance. This is arguably how the amateur in sports was and is portrayed, as a “gentleman” distinguished from professionals, or
“players.” Greed, however, could also be described as affection, passion, or love of money or wealth.

The figure of the amateur as it is positively presented in and through the claims and works of bio-art practitioners and commentators is a virtuous figure. Among other figures, it recalls or resonates with the figure of the philosopher as presented by Plato’s Socrates, that is: as the lover of wisdom, who searches for wisdom with a certain passion, with philia, without yet – and arguably, without ever – truly “possessing” sophia (Perry 1904). One of the crucial characteristics of Plato’s Socrates’ philosopher resides in how this character or persona expresses disdain and even contempt for money or material gain, contrary to the sophist who claims to possess sophia and receives large payments for teaching “the better argument,” without considering the just or unjust character of the ends that this logos (or muthos) is made to serve. According to the great Western-Modern narrative of the history of philosophy as a history of progress toward science, knowledge, and mastery, this virtuous figure of the philosopher as an amateur and generalist has been superseded by the figure of the scientist or expert through processes of specialization and professionalization. These can be described as processes of “sophisticization,” or of sophistication in a literal sense, one that bears the two valences of a becoming-wise and a becoming-sophistic. Idealizing “the Renaissance humanist” as a passionate lover of research, for instance, takes part in reinforcing the impression that “something has been lost” in these processes (Finnegan 2005; Humbert 1933). To this day, however, fields like history and archeology (Levine 1986), musical performance (Booth 1999), and even diplomacy (Mattox 1989), retell their own story as that of a linear movement from
amateurism to professionalism. This movement is read as a form of emancipation from minority.

Considering that the amateur is “immature,” an unenlightened minor in the Kantian sense of the word, opens up the second, pejorative value attributed to amateurism. To be an amateur, in this sense, is primarily to lack something, be it competence, credentials, or some particular virtue. This is the sense of amateurism that prevails in Max Weber’s essays gathered in the volume Political Writings, for instance, especially when Weber writes of littérateurs. The editors of this collection of essays translated in English put it most succinctly in their Glossary:

*Literat:* man of letters, littérateur. Occasional Weber uses the term in its neutral, descriptive sense (of a literatus or “lettered person”) to refer to the literate classes whose skills made them invaluable as administrators and advisers. In the contemporary context, however, Weber mostly uses it censoriously to refer to those writers, frequently in academic positions, who seek to influence political life by their writings although lacking, in his opinion, the expertise to do so and shouldering no political responsibility for the effects of what they write (in Weber 1994, 377).

In using the term littérateur in this way, especially in his “political” texts[^3], Weber is less building a social-scientific “ideal type” than a polemical character, the figure of a particular mode of political subjectivity which he opposes to both “the scientist” and “the politician” of vocation – who are amateurs in a certain way, precisely since they have a certain love, a passion or vocation for science and/or politics. The term “amateur” itself appears some thirty-one times in Political Writings, mostly in association with pejorative uses of the term “littérateur,” except when Weber describes what he calls “administration

[^3]: “Littérateur” appears some twenty-four times in the 1917 “Suffrage and Democracy in Germany” (Weber 1994, 80-129), some forty-six times in the 1917-1918 “Parliament and Government in Germany under a New Political Order: Towards a political critique of officialdom and the party system” (130-271), and one time in the 1918 “Socialism” (272-303).
by amateurs” in the American “spoil system” that is receding in the face of “rationalization” and “professionalization.”

In 1919, the same year Weber gave his “Politics as Vocation” lecture in Munich to an audience composed of scholars and students, a young Carl Schmitt published *Political Romanticism*, a rather polemical book that takes issue with a “self-centered” mode of subjectivity that recalls that of Weber’s littérature and that Schmitt calls “the romantic type.” In his preface to the 1925 revised and expanded edition of this book, Schmitt writes: “Romanticism is subjectified occasionalism. In other words, in the romantic, the romantic subject treats the world as an occasion and an opportunity for his romantic productivity” (Schmitt 1986, 17). The romantic subject follows personal inclinations and affects. It is a figure that fully emerges only in a specific world-historical context, one that Schmitt links to bourgeois liberalism:

It is only in an individualistically disintegrated society that the aesthetically productive subject could shift the intellectual center into itself, only in a bourgeois world that isolates the individual in the domain of the intellectual, makes the individual its own point of reference, and imposes upon it the entire burden that otherwise was hierarchically distributed among different functions in a social order. In this society, it is left to the private individual to be his own priest. But not only that. Because of the central significance and consistency of the religious, it is also left to him to be his own poet, his own philosopher, his own king, and his own master builder in the cathedral of his personality (20).

The world of the romantic subject is politically problematic, for Schmitt, because it is “a world without substance and functional cohesion, without a fixed direction, without consistency and definition, without decision, without a final court of appeal, continuing into infinity and led only by the magic hand of chance. […] We can assent to it aesthetically, but taking it seriously in a moral or objective fashion would call for an ironic mode of treatment” (19). The resulting politics – which, for Schmitt, is no politics
at all, in the “proper,” decisionistic sense of the word – can only be the reinforcement of the status quo and of the prevalent trends of the age.

Schmitt’s critique of romantic subjectivity as a mode of depoliticization prefigures many aspects of the contemporary critiques of “consumer society” as a society of self-centered individuals who show virtually no interest for “the common good” (e.g. Bloom 1987). The figure of the consumer echoes that of the amateur where and when the latter is seen as the figure of the uncritical “fan,” an abbreviation of “fanatic.” As a consumer, the fan is represented as someone who is certainly enthusiastic but whose object of enthusiastic investment is ultimately merely one of those objects that producers make available to him or her. The fan chooses, decides what is worthy of his or her attention, but the choice or decision is a “false” one since it is constrained and ultimately determined by the limited set of options that a specific mode or regime of cultural, social, and economic production and reproduction allows to occupy the non-laboring time of its laborers.

As Bernard Stiegler recently put it, in the productivist-consumerist model of capitalism put into place at the dawn of the 20th century, the industrialist seeks to “capture the desire of consumers in order to sell his production” (Stiegler 2008, 24; I translate). The thought or science of marketing seeks “not to form and exploit producers, but to control consumer behaviors.” A form of “psychopower as the control and fabrication of motivations” (25) is put to work. Consumers are seen as dominated and alienated by this form of psychopower developed in and through the mediatic capitalist economy by way of research in applied cybernetics, producing knowledge of how to capture “brain time” and modulate attention spans.
Interestingly, Stiegler also announces that “we are entering a third period of industrial capitalism where the production/consumption opposition tends to become secondary, i.e. to no longer be the bearer of the dynamism of this dynamic system that is industrial capitalism” (27). In effect, “The new industrial relations, instigating new social relations in the hyper-industrial and hyper-material society, will be more and more of the order of contribution,” as they “will be made possible by technologies of collaboration” (28). Crucially, for Stiegler “The figure of the contributor, for which the amateur in the world of art and culture is a specific occurrence,” is a bearer of “metamorphoses of labor.” He makes the hypothesis that the revival of the figure of the amateur and the correlative emergence of the economy of contribution are made possible both by a powerful desire on the part of the population, and in particular of the youth, which no longer wants to be content with consuming, and by the deployment of digital relational technologies that break down the opposition between production and consumption by providing functions of self-production and indexation on the Web where new types of networks that we call “social” are woven. We think that the concretization and the systemic crystallization of this evolution will lead to an industrial economy of contribution (29).

Stiegler adds that it is

most of all through cultural practices and the new figures of the amatorat that they engender within the new relational environment – both in the sometimes very knowledgeable form of the hacker culture, and in the sense in which the sharing of music files constitutes the embryo of an amateur musical practice as the expression of a choice and of an act of assembling samples – that the ideal type of what is a contributor is unearthed, fostering the emergence of an economy of contribution that no one has willed and that truly upsets the interests of all those who would want to protect their capacity for willing, that is their power.

The “u-topian” ideal type of the amateur as “a figure of the perfectly realized libidinal economy” (32) represents the contributor as he (or she) “who reaffirms the necessity of constructing a sustainable libidinal economy, if I may coin the phrase, and who constructs it himself. He does not wait for industrial society to construct it in his place” (33). For
Stiegler, the hacker is an embodiment of the amatorat as a collective political subject as this figure is defined “by its capacity for appropriating the technological and industrial supply without conforming to the prescriptions of this supply’s marketing, willed by the development plans conceived by the industry” (35). In that sense, the amateur-hacker is a subversive figure, a figure of emancipation. The figure of the amateur put forward in bio-art is virtually identical with the ideal type of a subversive hacker-contributor put forward by Stiegler.

A figure of politics itself

Stiegler’s positive revaluation of the figure of the amateur is taking place and taking part in a more general configuration within which the positive revaluation of the figure of the amateur in and through bio-art is also situated. In France, for instance, where Stiegler mainly works, the scholarly journal Alliage. Culture, science, technique published a special issue titled “Amateurs?” in 2011, which included a text by Stiegler. For its part, the Institut de recherche et d’innovation, created under Stiegler’s impulsion at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, held two seminars on the topic: “The figures of the amateur,” coordinated by Jacqueline Liechtenstein in 2008, and “Politics and technologies of the amateur,” coordinated by Laurence Allard in 2008-2009. A figure that is quite similar, and arguably equivalent to the figure of the amateur is also put forward by the Canadian scholarly journal Les Cahiers de l’idiotie, based at the University of Ottawa. The

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5 Recordings of these seminars are available online. The sessions of the first one can be found at http://web.iri.centrepompidou.fr/fonds/seminaires/seminaire/detail/1 (Accessed June 12, 2014); the second at http://web.iri.centrepompidou.fr/fonds/seminaires/seminaire/detail/9 (Accessed June 12, 2014).
revalued figure of “the Idiot,” seen as a conceptual persona (Deleuze & Guattari 1991), is used to ground an epistemological position that questions disciplinary boundaries and hierarchies (Couture & Giroux 2012) through the ontological claim that “the Real” is “without reflection or double,” a true idiots (Rosset 1977), and the methodological commitments of “artisanal philosophy” (Hébert 2004) as an engagement with everyday experiences and objects as worthy of true thought.

In a broader constellation, these revaluations of the figures of the contributor and idiot also recall the Nietzschean figure of “the child,” famously presented in the passage “On the Three Metamorphoses” in Thus Spoke Zarathustra as following the camel and the lion: “The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a wheel rolling out of itself, a first movement, a sacred yes-saying. Yes, for the game of creation my brothers a sacred yes-saying is required. The spirit wants its will, the one lost to the world now with its own world” (Nietzsche 2006 [1885], 17). The child, for Nietzsche, is the figure s/he who can create new values. Interestingly, a similar figure is also valued in the so-called “hard” sciences. Alexandre Grothendieck, for instance, a Fields medalist mathematician-turned-hermit, evokes the figure of the child in his 1000-page autobiographical account circulated under the title Récoltes et semaines (Grothendieck 1986). The child is a name for the creative force at work in pioneering mathematical research and conceptualization. The passion, curiosity, and tenacity of the child are required, in Grothendieck’s view, to recompose whole fields of problems anew, beyond stabilized, established ways of seeing that tend to hinder discovery and the production of new knowledge, not only of new values. This figure echoes the figure of the amateur as a figure of invention.
The figure of the amateur is also put forward and valued positively in more “classically” political or politological accounts. In his recent book *Les écarts du cinéma*, in particular, political philosopher Jacques Rancière gives an account of his own interest in films as a matter of an amateur’s passion. He goes further, writing:

the position of the amateur is not that of the eclectic who opposes the richness of empirical diversity to the grey rigors of theory. Amateurism is also a theoretical and political position, that which rejects the authority of specialists by reexamining the manner in which the borders of their domains trace themselves at the crossroad of experience and knowledges (savoirs). The politics of the amateur asserts that cinema belongs to all those who have in one way or another traveled inside the system of gaps (écarts) that its name installs, and that everyone can authorize oneself to trace, between this or that point of this topography, a singular itinerary that adds to cinema as a world and to its knowledge (connaissance) (Rancière 2011, 14; I translate).

While this is Rancière’s most explicit statement on amateurism, it can be argued that the figure of the amateur is in fact at the core of his political thought, as a figure or a “position” that involves questioning or “reexamining the manner in which the borders of [specialists’] domains trace themselves at the crossroad of experience and knowledges.”

As such, the amateur is not merely one political figure among many, but a privileged, exemplary figure of politics itself. Arguably, it is a figure of equality, of emancipation, that stages “the universalization of the capacity of anyone at all” (Rancière 2009a). For this argument to be intelligible, however, one has to consider the specific meaning that Rancière gives to the term “politics.”

Rancière’s short text “Dix thèses sur la politique” gathers ten key claims that can be used to summarize his position:

1) “Politics (la politique) is not the exercise of power. Politics must be defined by itself, as a specific mode of acting put into deeds by a specific subject and depending upon a
specific rationality. It is the political relation that allows us to think the political subject, and not the reverse” (Rancière 1998, 223; I translate);

2) “What is specific (propre) to politics is the existence of a subject defined by its participation to contraries. Politics is a paradoxical type of action” (226);

3) “Politics is a specific rupture of the logic of the arkhè. In effect, it does not only suppose the rupture of the ‘normal’ distribution of positions between he who exercises a power (puissance) and he who suffers it, but also a rupture in the very idea of the dispositions that render ‘fit’ for these positions” (229);

4) “Democracy is not a political regime. It is, as a rupture of the logic of the arkhè, i.e. of the anticipation of command in its disposition, the very regime of politics as a form of relation that defines a specific subject” (231);

5) “The people that is the subject of democracy, and therefore the matrical subject of politics, is not the collection of the members of the community or the laboring classes of the population. It is the supplementary part in relation to any count of the parts of the population, which allows for the identification of the count of the uncounted with the whole of the community” (233-234);

6) “If politics is the tracing of an evanescent difference with the distribution of parts and of social shares, it follows that its existence is in no way necessary but that it occurs as an always-provisional accident in the history of the forms of domination. It also follows that the essential object of the political litigation is the very existence of politics” (237-238);

7) “Politics is specifically opposed to policing (la police). Policing is a distribution of the sensible whose principle is the absence of void and of supplement” (240);
8) “The essential work of politics is the configuration of its own space. It is to make visible the world of its subjects and of its operations. The essence of politics is the manifestation of dissensus, as the presence of two worlds in one” (241);

9) “Inasmuch as what is specific to political philosophy is to found political acting in a specific mode of being, what is specific to political philosophy is to erase the litigation constitutive of politics. It is in the very description of the world of politics that philosophy effectuates this erasure. Hence its efficacy perpetuates itself even in non-philosophical or anti-philosophical descriptions of this world” (247);

10) “The end of politics or the return of politics are two complementary manners of cancelling politics in the simple relation of a state of the social to a state of the statist dispositive. Consensus is the vulgar name of this cancelation” (251).

Politics, for Rancière, is therefore identical with what he calls emancipation, or the staging of the logic of equality. What he names policing is identical with the process of government, or the staging of the logic of inequality and “the reduction to identity.” Government as policing functions through the identification of subjects with specific modes of being, perception and action, tracing a complete, saturated distribution of roles that is grounded in a distribution of abilities and inabilities. Politics as emancipation functions through dis-identification, through processes of subjectivation that occur by way of the situated instigation or staging of a specific rupture within and from this consensual order, by way of “scenes” of dissensus. Exemplary scenes or stagings of dissensus include, for instance, the claim voiced by the French students of May 1968, “we all are German Jews,” uttered in solidarity with Daniel Cohn-Bendit. This was clearly a “false” claim in terms of the official institution of citizenship or identity card,
but as such it introduced a gap, a break that arguably put into question this very institution. The vocal women who, during the French Revolution, asked whether they were included in “the rights of man and the citizen,” for example, also staged a scene of dissensus, a political event.

The figure of the amateur in bio-art is a figure of politics in Rancière’s sense as it is a figure of equality, a figure of emancipation from the allegedly natural distribution of proper voices on and powers over biotechnologies. In Rancière’s mode of thought, this primarily means that the amateur, like “the people” or like the Greek demos, is irreducible to or ultimately unidentifiable with a precise segment of “the population” or with “empirical” or “concrete” individuals or groups. In that sense, the figure of the amateur is effectively close to what Stiegler, following Weber, calls an ideal type, or to what Deleuze & Guattari call a conceptual persona, or even to what Schmitt calls a mode of subjectivity, insofar as no individual or group can be said to be nothing but such a mode, but is also always something more, something else, in excess or supplement.

Crucially, according to Rancière the distribution of the sensible which he calls policing and which functions through the logic of the arkhè, of an originary title to commandment, already undermines or deconstructs itself. The Aristotelian claim that some are natural rulers and others are natural slaves, for instance, relies on the claim that the former have access to the exercise of reason or language (a hexis of logos) while the latter only have a perception or apprehension of it (an aisthesis of logos) without being able to exercise it. In other words, “slaves by nature,” not unlike “tame animals,” can receive orders but are not able to give them. This configuration of inequality, however, supposes a form of equality as it presumes that those who are made to receive orders have
the capacity to understand and follow them as they were intended. They therefore share in reason or speech with those who claim they are ultimately not logical, or not as rational. For Rancière, this fact undermines from the outset any and all claims to a natural arkhè, to a given title to command grounded in a natural distribution of abilities and inabilities. It shows “the sheer contingency of any social order” (see Rancière 1995). The plausibility of this axiom of equality is what policing seeks to hide or obscure, for the sake of “order.”

The politological question of “the regime”

The figure of the amateur interpreted as a figure of “the universalization of the capacity of anyone at all” arguably works in the same way than the figure of the demos put forward by “classical” political philosophy. As Rancière indicates in La haine de la démocratie (Rancière 2005) and in other texts, the Athenian demos and democracy itself were – and often remain – primarily put forward as objects of contempt, or hatred. “Democracy, as we know, is a term invented by its adversaries: all those who have a ‘title’ to govern: seniority, birth, wealth, virtue, knowledge. With this term, they enunciate this unheard of reversal of the order of things: the ‘power of the demos’ is the fact that those who command specifically have for their sole common specificity the fact of having no title to govern” (Rancière 1998, 232). In this respect, as Plato and Aristotle both indicate, the political practice that is fundamentally characteristic of democracy, of “the power of the demos,” is not the practice of election – which is “aristocratic” since those who are elected are deemed “the best” in one way or another –, but random selection by lot. As is the case with the contemporary practice of the selection of members of a jury, for instance, those who are selected for office through a form of
lottery are deemed apt to the task they are entrusted with precisely because they are “anyone at all,” or “men and women without qualities,” to paraphrase the title of Robert Musil’s most famous novel. Their title to command the whole is the non-title of having precisely no proper part or share in the distribution of parts that makes up the whole as such. The share of “anyone at all” is no true share: it is the “part des sans-part,” the share of the shareless. “Democracy” enables the ceaseless retracing of this share that is not one.

While Rancière emphatically asserts that democracy is not a political regime (231), he nonetheless distinguishes it from, and opposes it to, the order or regime of the police or of policing, which is described as “a distribution of the sensible whose principle is the absence of void and of supplement” (240). This description leaves open the possibility that what Rancière calls democracy, the ceaseless tracing of a part of those who have no part, or the never-final instigation of a share of the shareless, is itself a distribution of the sensible, but one whose principle would be something like the presence of a void or supplement – or at least, whose principle would not be the absence of void or supplement. In that sense, Rancière can be said (against his explicit claims) to reiterate, or to repeat with a difference, the “classical” question of “the regime,” and even the question of “the best regime,” which Leo Strauss famously insisted was the defining question of classical political philosophy.

The notion or concept of distribution of the sensible shares many features with the classical notion of “the regime,” if the latter is grasped as naming not simply a form of government or organization, but a whole form of life and experience. The expression “distribution of the sensible” translates Rancière’s term “le partage du sensible” (see Rancière 2004). A more literal translation would be “the sharing of the sensible.”
“Sharing,” like “partage,” implies two connotations: the participation or inclusion in something common, and the division or partition of what is common into exclusive parts.

In his book titled *Le partage du sensible*, Rancière writes:

> I call distribution of the sensible this system of sensible evidences that makes visible at the same time the existence of a common and the partitions (*découpages*) that define respective places and shares therein. A distribution of the sensible thus fixates at the same time a shared common and exclusive shares. This repartition of shares and places is founded upon a distribution (*partage*) of spaces, of times and of forms of activity that determine the very way in which the ones and the others take part in this sharing (*partage*). […] There is thus, at the basis of politics, an “aesthetic” that has nothing to do with that “aestheticization of politics” proper to the “age of the masses,” which [Walter] Benjamin speaks of. This aesthetic is not to be grasped in the sense of a perverse capture of politics by a will to art, by the thought of the people as a work of art. If we value the analogy, we can understand it in a Kantian sense – eventually revisited by Foucault –, as the system of a priori forms determining what gives itself to be sensed. It is a partition of times and spaces, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that defines at the same time the site and the stake of politics as a form of experience. Politics bears on what we see and what we can say about it, on who has the competence to see and the quality to say, on the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time (Rancière 2000; 12-14; I translate).

The concept of distribution of the sensible, or of aesthetics of politics (see Labrecque 2014), thus names “the system of a priori forms determining what gives itself to be sensed,” if one wishes to hear it “in a Kantian sense.” Adding the clause “eventually revisited by Foucault” is a way for Rancière to specify how this “system of a priori forms” is not properly a priori or transcendental. Rather, it has the “quasi-transcendental” character of a contingent, situated “historical a priori” (Foucault 1969, 166-173) that informs how politics appears as given. The order of the police is grasped as a *historical* configuration of modes of perception, thought and action, one that tolerates no void or supplement. It is a specific “regime” among many possible ones. For Rancière, it is clearly not “the best regime.” For its part, “Politics is an ‘impossible’ regime, but the
impossible regime is the ground of politics as such” (Rancière 2009b, 120). In a way, this claim is a very ancient claim.

Strauss and others have described the view that the “ideal” is both impossible and a driving force and ground as a fundamental claim of ancient or classical knowledge or wisdom. In “The Three Waves of Modernity,” for instance, Strauss writes that Machiavelli is the founder of modernity, the instigator of its first wave, as he rejected “classical political philosophy” as “a quest for the best political order, or the best regime as a regime most conducive to the practice of virtue or of how men should live,” and for which “the establishment of the best regime depends necessarily on uncontrollable, elusive fortuna or chance. According to Plato’s Republic, e.g., the coming into being of the best regime depends on the coincidence, the unlikely coming together, of philosophy and political power” (Strauss 1975, 84). According to Strauss, “the Republic conveys the broadest and deepest analysis of political idealism ever made” (Strauss 1978 [1964], 127), rather than being a blueprint for the instauration in deeds of “the city of the military camp” that is “the city in speech” constructed through the dialogue as the best regime. Aristotle agreed with Plato “in these two most important respects: the best regime is the order most conducive to the practice of virtue, and the actualization of the best regime depends on chance” (Strauss 1975, 84-85). Machiavelli, for his part, famously claimed “fortuna is a woman who can be controlled by the use of force” (84). In one sense, Machiavelli seems to agree with Aristotle by saying that one cannot establish the desirable political order if the matter is corrupt, i.e., if the people is corrupt; but what for Aristotle is an impossibility is for Machiavelli only a very great difficulty: the difficulty can be overcome by an outstanding man who uses extraordinary means in order to transform a corrupt matter into a good matter; that obstacle to the establishment of the best regime which is man as matter, the human material, can be overcome because that matter can be transformed (Strauss 1975, 85).
In the modern view, at least according to Strauss, this transformation of “man as matter, the human material,” is thought to be possible through both “natural” and “social” sciences and technologies. In the “classical” view, “the human material” does not change – or does not change on command, or without ceasing being human.

Through contemporary biotechnologies, it is often hoped or feared that the transformation of “the human material” soon will reach, if it has not already done so, a radically novel stage or level of epochal magnitude. Crucially, both the utopian and dystopian discourses on the possibilities of using and abusing biotechnologies that arguably feed on one another tend to gravitate around the political issue of whether the changes that are in the process of being made possible for both non-human and human beings are changes for the better, or changes for the worse. Those who primarily fear biotechnologies brandish meditations like Huxley’s *Brave New World* to claim that biotechnological “social engineering” is the royal road to dehumanizing totalitarianism. This dehumanization by both the State and Capital promises to affect the very modes of perception, thought, and action that are available to members of the species *homo sapiens*, the effective distributions of the sensible, so that something like the loss of “humans’ humanity” would itself be imperceptible in the end. Those who actively desire the coming into being and the spread of novel biotechnologies brandish statistics on the positive contributions of recent scientific developments to indices like life expectancy, child mortality, and overall health, to claim that biotechnological innovation has the power to improve the human condition, if not to bring into existence a “super-” or “post-human” condition. Between these two positions, both of which can be adopted out of a variety of motives, including the possibilities for artistic or artful creation (see Dyson
2007), there exists a number of more moderate voices, among which one can count the voices and deeds of a number of cautious biotech amateurs.

**Politics, science, and art**

It is worth remarking that a number of “Straussians,” including Leon R. Kass and Francis Fukuyama, have taken an active part in what politologists call the policy process regarding the determination of legitimate and illegitimate uses of novel and future biotechnologies, not least by acting as members of the President’s Council on Bioethics under Georges W. Bush.\(^7\) This body, like previous Bioethics Commissions in the United States, primarily acted as an advisory board. The policy decisions, in effect, ultimately rest in the President’s hands. Natural scientists, social scientists, ethicists and philosophers participating in such bodies are asked for their ethical opinion on the means and ends of biotechnological practices, but the State’s position seems to remain broadly in line with the one adopted, in the United States and elsewhere, regarding the issue of nuclear energy in general, and nuclear weapons in particular. This position remains exemplified by how “A key message of the Personal Security Board finding against [J. Robert] Oppenheimer in 1954 was that scientists overstep the boundaries of their authority when they concern themselves ethically with the consequences of their work. In a democratic society, the board insisted, questions of ends should be left to elected representatives” (Thorpe 2006, xiii). Recalling Weber’s distinction of the vocation of

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\(^7\) See the archived website of this Council at [https://bioethicsarchive.georgetown.edu/pcbe/](https://bioethicsarchive.georgetown.edu/pcbe/) (Accessed June 12, 2014). Kass in fact chaired the council from 2001 to 2005. For a nuanced discussion of the uses and abuses of the label “Straussian” in relation to the neoconservative nebula active in Washington from the late 1970s to the invasion of Iraq and beyond, see *Leo Strauss and the Invasion of Iraq* (Hirst 2013, especially 1-8; 54-80).
politics and the vocation of science as mutually exclusive vocations that respectively concern ends and means, this position distributes parts, shares, or roles in a hierarchical framing of “the whole.”

By putting forward the figure of the amateur, a number of bio-artists are attempting to put into question and to trouble the stability of this ordered hierarchy. Arguably, the “regime” they thereby express their desire for is neither the current “liberal-democratic” regime in which elected representatives – who are undeniably influenced by industrial and financial interests – have the ultimate power and authority to decide, nor the “enlightened-aristocratic” regime of the rule of experts – who are also influenced by the interests of the biotech industry (see Copper 2008; Sunder Rajan 2006). There is a sense in which both the scientist and the politician are equally considered as figures who are unable, or at least, who are not more able than anyone else to make sound decisions regarding the most important things, or “ends.” In a sense, one can argue that through the figure of the amateur, bio-artists are reviving or at least revisiting a piece of the wisdom of “the ancients,” shared by both philosophers opposing democracy as selection by lot and democrats defending this “regime,” namely the notion that power should primarily not be given to those who desire power – the argument of Plato and Aristotle, here, being that appointment by lottery leaves open a space for demagogues who desire power to control “the people,” and the argument of democrats against an aristocracy of “the wise” being that those who claim to have found wisdom desire power to actualize it, rather than remaining concerned with the unending love or search for wisdom, and therefore, like Socrates’ depiction of the reluctant philosopher in The Republic, without desire for power. There is, of course, a danger of identifying the
biotech amateur with a specific individual or group who would become, precisely because of an active love or passion, more apt to decide than others. Politics, in Rancière’s sense, would then turn into policing. This is a risk that is always present, however, and studying bio-art offers a way to open up reflection on its stakes in the contemporary age of biotechnology. The practice of bio-art produces knowledge, or science, less because it participates to the technological enterprise of the biotech industry, or to the scholarly enterprise of biological science, than because when “high-modern technology” is concerned, “as soon as we use this machine in a paradoxical manner, as soon as we make it run on neutral or consider it from an aesthetic point of view, it begins to give its engineer information on himself” (Sloterdijk 2000, 33; I translate). Rather than producing knowledge or science in an “objective” sense, one should ponder whether bio-art cannot produce some form of wisdom, perhaps through the love of research and experimentation that it both embodies and promotes, as a mode of self-knowledge and a form of self-reliance.

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