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Out of or in Control?

Stefano Velotti

The word “control” is on everyone’s lips. We all experience the controlling and self-controlling effects of our digital technologies: if the newspapers are full of alarming headlines about new forms of capillary surveillance by power, they also report frequently on “out-of-control” situations, which are often accompanied by a growing belief that the major crises we are experiencing today have no direction, not even a hidden one. Occult control of reality is the secret hope of conspiracy theorists, who would thus find meaning in all the world’s events. Yet if we listen to one of the main characters in the catastrophist film *Leave the World Behind* (2023), “the truth is scarier,” for “no one is in control.” Directed by Sam Esmail and produced by Barack and Michelle Obama, the film was the most watched in 2023 on all streaming platforms.

The word “control” derives from the medieval Latin *contrarotulus* (through the French *contre-rôle*). On a *rotulus*, usually made of parchment, accountants and scribes recorded all or some of the characters of an earlier *rotulus* to ensure that there were no errors or no tampering going on. The Latin root of the word can be easily detected in many languages.¹ Its vast family of meanings (in its nominal or verbal form) branches out through a long series of synonyms or quasi-synonyms. Among its innumerable shades of meaning, though, *control* is mostly used either in the sense of *domination* (the agent *in control* is the one who has the power to enforce his or her—possibly arbitrary—will on others) or *regulation* (the controller detects a difference between reality and some established parameters, and this difference works as an injunction for action). Today control is often associated with the problem of surveillance, sometimes in reference to the expression “society of control” popularized by Gilles Deleuze, or to authors such as William Burroughs, Michel Foucault, Mark Fisher or Shoshana Zuboff.

Etymologies sometimes may provide important clues, but we should not set too much store by them. It is evident, for example, that from being a means for recording and preserving the identity of important documents, *contrarotuli* acquire different contents and forms, exercising performative power: they dictate the organization and “proper” or “normal” performance of multiple activities and forms of experience, which must be molded to the parameters against which they will be monitored, evaluated, optimized, often in the process losing sight of their primary objectives. Thus control’s function of regulation and evaluation is easily transformed into that of domination. When this happens, both acting and operating risk losing their original purpose (or purposelessness) in favor of conformity to established values. This perversion of the function of control is certainly familiar to the readers of this article: the reporting of academic activities, obsessively demanded by university administrators or assessment committees, often ends up limiting or dictating the ways in which assignments and functions are carried out, or encourages the churning out of useless or repetitive publications. We witness,

¹ The language that has retained in the most recognizable way the Latin form and the most basic control function is, to my knowledge, Portuguese, as is evident from the following example: “IGP disporá de um *rótulo* aprovado pelo Conselho Regulador e de um *contra-rótulo* numerado, controlado e fornecido pelo Conselho Regulador”Regulamento (CEE) no. 2081/92 do Conselho, (“IGP shall have a label approved by the Regulatory Board and a numbered back label, checked and supplied by the Regulatory Board,” Council Regulation (EEC) No 2081/92), my emphasis.

in short, an inversion between means and ends. But this is certainly not only true for the academy.

On the other hand, as I mentioned, this suffocating grip of control (and self-control) is accompanied by a widespread perception that not only have we lost control over our own lives, but that the selfsame institutions, agencies, state or international organizations that are purportedly in charge are in truth flying blind or groping their way in the dark. The mechanisms of control exercised by individual or institutional agents over the most diverse domains (psychological, environmental, political, financial, technological, etc.) seem to have become, at the very least, problematic. It is as if one of the main anthropological characteristics that differentiate humans from other species has become inoperative, epigenetically “silenced.”² A form of life is characterized by the experiences that it fosters or inhibits, but the meaning of the experiences we have in turn shapes the forms of life in which we find ourselves immersed.

I would like to bracket these brief “Notes from the Field” between two dates. The first is marked by an article by Ernesto De Martino—whose work today is again the focus of interest of many anthropologists, ethnologists and philosophers³—written in the aftermath of the devastation of Kungsgatan, one of the main streets in downtown Stockholm, during New Year’s Eve 1956. The second date, to which I will return shortly, is instead marked by the first measures enacted by the right-wing Italian government elected in September 2022.

A little more than a decade after the end of World War II, against the backdrop of his studies of archaic societies, De Martino sought to offer a diagnosis of a series of events that repeated themselves in the heart of a rich and modern social democracy that was looked upon with admiration far and wide. “Furor in Sweden” (published in *Italia Domani* and later in the collection *Saggi Italiani ‘59*, edited by Alberto Moravia and Elémire Zolla for the publisher Bompiani), opens with a description of “teenagers in a furor”:

La sera di capodanno del 1956 il Kungsgatan, l’arteria principale di Stoccolma, fu invaso da una turba di circa cinquemila adolescenti in furore. Indossavano pesanti giubbe di cuoio sulle quali figuravano emblemi di teschi e misteriose iscrizioni cabalistiche. Per tre ore i giovani tennero la strada, molestano i passanti, rovesciando automobili, frantumando le vetrine dei negozi, erigendo barricate con inferriate e montanti divelti dalla più vicina piazza del mercato. Alcune bande profanarono delle antiche pietre tombali che circondavano una chiesa, e altre ancora dall’alto del ponte che scavalca il Kungsgatan lanciarono sulla strada sacchi di carta imbevuti di benzina in fiamme.

On New Year’s Eve 1956, Kungsgatan, Stockholm’s main artery, was invaded by a mob of about five thousand teenagers in a furor. They wore heavy leather jackets on which appeared skull emblems and mysterious Kabbalistic inscriptions. For three hours the youths held the street, harassing passers-by, overturning cars, smashing store windows, and erecting barricades with gratings

² In his *The Evolution of Agency: Behavioral Organization from Lizards to Humans* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2022), Michael Tomasello has reconstructed and distinguished the evolution of agency of different species based on the feedback control systems that characterize their behavior and openness to contingency. However, Tomasello focuses only on the adaptive benefits of control systems, without touching in any way on the individual or collective need, universally attested in all cultures, to make room for uncontrollable experiences.

³ In the last decade, some important works by De Martino have also become available in English, thanks to Dorothy L. Zinn’s careful translations: *The End of the World: Cultural Apocalypse and Transcendence* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2023); *Magic: A Theory from the South* (Chicago: HAU Books, 2015); and *The Land of Remorse* (London: Free Association Books, 2005). The important text entitled “Crisis of Presence and Religious Reintegration” was translated in 2012 by Tobia Farnetti and Charles Stewart, *HAU* 2, no. 2 (2012): 434-50.

and uprights torn from the nearest market square. Some gangs desecrated ancient tombstones surrounding a church, and still others from the top of the bridge spanning Kungsgatan threw paper bags soaked in burning gasoline onto the street.⁴

The only minimal ritual aspect of these demonstrations was that they were repeated from one Saturday to the next on the same streets in Stockholm and other Swedish cities. Otherwise, De Martino considered them to be

pure e semplici esplosioni di aggressività, senza premeditazione e senza organizzazione, senza capo e senza scopo. Gli episodi di violenza non insorgono per qualche cosa o contro qualcuno: inesplicabilmente, come per un richiamo misterioso, gruppi di adolescenti e di giovani, dai quindici ai vent'anni, senza conoscersi fra di loro e nulla avendo in comune tranne l'età, formano banda temporanea ed entrano in furore distruttivo.

pure and simple outbursts of aggression, without premeditation and without organization, without leaders and without purpose. The episodes of violence do not arise because of anything or against anyone: inexplicably, as if by a mysterious call, groups of teenagers and young people, from fifteen to twenty years old, without knowing each other and having nothing in common except age, form temporary gangs and enter into a destructive furor.⁵

No goals, and no fun either. Silence and loneliness reign among their somber faces, which leads them to aggregate occasionally without creating anything: “le bande temporanee si sciolgono così come si sono formate, senza lasciare traccia di rapporti oltre la scarica distruttiva” (temporary gangs dissolve as they are formed, leaving no trace of relationships beyond the destructive discharge).⁶ Given the social background of the adolescents, De Martino ruled out economic motives for such furor, nor was he convinced by those who attributed its causes to the specific conditions of Sweden’s affluent and bored society or its short winter days and long dark nights. Rather, De Martino appealed to the metapsychological notion of the “death instinct” theorized by Freud, which the latter believed to be universally present in civilizations of all eras. But with one essential difference in the present case: whether it was the Babylonian New Year, the Roman Saturnalia or other carnivalesque forms, the temporary return to chaos, “l’angoscioso essere afferrati dalla nostalgia del non-umano, è l’impulso a

⁴ Ernesto De Martino, “Furore in Svezia,” in *Furore Simbolo Valore* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1982), 167. All translations in this article are my own.

⁵ Ibid..

⁶ Ibid., 168. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting a comparison between De Martino's analyses and George Bataille's reflections on “The Notion of Expenditure” (1933) and “The Psychological Structure of Fascism” (1933–34) as published in Fred Botting and Scott Wilson's *The Bataille Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997). Although such a comparison would indeed be intriguing, I am not aware of any existing work that has undertaken this task. Despite belonging to different cultural traditions, both De Martino and Bataille were influenced by the research of Marcel Mauss, as were many other twentieth-century anthropologists and philosophers. However, given the scope of these brief “Notes from the Field,” a detailed comparison cannot be provided here. It is worth noting, though, that Bataille focuses on the co-option of “heterogeneity”—the unproductive expenditure (*dépense*) of excess that is not reintegrated into calculable surplus value—by the homogenizing forces of fascism. According to Bataille, these forces, consistent with their etymological roots (as he frequently mentions), seek to unite and bind heterogeneous elements around the cult of a leader (“Duce” or “Führer”). In contrast, De Martino's analysis of the “Stockholm New Year's Eve” highlights the persistent loneliness and disintegration experienced by its participants.

lasciar spegnere il lume della coscienza vigilante e ad annientare quanto, nell'uomo e intorno all'uomo, testimonia a favore dell'umanità e della storia" (the anguished being gripped by the nostalgia of the nonhuman, the impulse to let the light of vigilant consciousness be extinguished and to annihilate whatever, in man and around man, testifies in favor of humanity and history) was functional to a cultural and social redemption. Only the latter would allow for "rigenerare l'esistenza, e che ricostituiva i valori dopo averli distrutti, rinvigorendoli tutti in una nuova fondazione simbolica" (regenerating existence and reconstituting values after destroying them, reinvigorating them all in a new symbolic foundation), one that favors "una risoluzione culturale all'impulso di distruzione" (the cultural control and resolution of the destructive impulse). In the case of Stockholm, the teenagers' rampage was not followed by anything at all: "nessun legame interpersonale nasce da tali tempestosi assembramenti, da queste orge di furore" (no interpersonal bonds arose from such stormy assemblies, from such orgies of furor).⁷ A decade after the end of the war, De Martino could not then avoid comparison with the great Fascist and Nazi rallies, without yet being able to measure their full extent, while nevertheless lamenting that "le nostre istituzioni sociali si mostrano impreparate a fondare un'umanità più adulta e responsabile (our social institutions show themselves unprepared to found a more adult and responsible humanity)."⁸

In conclusion, what sense can be attributed to this furor? De Martino referred to the widespread response that these were manifestations motivated by the vacuum left by the decline of traditional religions. His commentary on that view, with which the article closes, is worth reading in full:

Questa risposta può assumere però due significati nettamente opposti. Secondo un dato orientamento culturale l'esigenza oltremondana che si esprime nella vita religiosa appartiene alla natura umana, e la democrazia laica avrebbe il grave torto di lasciare insoddisfatta tale esigenza, suscitando così la nemesi degli istinti. Chi cerca solo l'umano, lo perde, perché trova invece il sub-umano e l'antiumano; per trovare il mondo, occorre perderlo. Secondo un altro orientamento, che personalmente condivido, il mondo è incamminato verso la democrazia laica e verso il riconoscimento di ideali integralmente mondani: ma per una crisi di crescita il nuovo umanesimo non ha ancora trovato il suo giusto equilibrio. Si è verificata una crisi delle credenze tradizionali, ma gli individui non trovano ancora nella società i modi adatti per partecipare attivamente all'esperienza morale che alimenta la democrazia laica, e per sentirsi protagonisti del suo destino. A una falsa libertà fondata sulla miseria si è creduto troppo spesso contrapporre una democrazia fondata esclusivamente sul benessere, mentre il problema centrale resta la partecipazione a un certo ordine di valori morali, un piano di controllo e di risoluzione culturale della vita istintiva. Senza questa partecipazione e al di fuori di questo piano, c'è sempre il rischio che il capodanno babilonese si converta nel capodanno di Stoccolma.

However, this response can take on two distinctly opposite meanings. According to a certain cultural orientation, the otherworldly need expressed in religious life belongs to human nature, and secular democracy would be gravely wrong to leave this need unsatisfied, thus arousing the nemesis of instincts. He who seeks only the human, loses it, for he finds instead the subhuman and the antihuman; to find the world, one must [first] lose it. According to another

⁷ Ernesto De Martino, "Furore in Svezia," 169.

⁸ Ibid., 173.

orientation, which I personally share, the world is on its way to secular democracy and the recognition of integrally worldly ideals: but because of a crisis of growth, the new humanism has not yet found its proper balance. There has been a crisis of traditional beliefs, but individuals still do not find in society the proper ways to actively participate in the moral experience that nurtures secular democracy, or to feel themselves protagonists of its destiny. A false freedom based on poverty has too often been believed to be countered by a democracy based solely on wealth, while the central problem remains participation in a certain order of moral values, a plane of control and cultural resolution of instinctive life. Without this participation and outside this plan, there is always the risk that the Babylonian New Year will be converted into the Stockholm New Year.⁹

Today it is impossible to accept unreservedly this belief in the “crisis of growth” of a “new humanism” characteristic of “secular democracies.” The issue of the lack of participation in public, political and social life, however, remains central to all democracies. And so I come to the second of our two dates, namely that of the Italian parliamentary elections in September 2022, which saw the victory of the right (and of abstentionism). Of course, I do not intend to venture here into yet another analysis of the outcome of the vote, but only to highlight something that has a strong symbolic value: the so-called “rave decree.” Although not in the new government’s official program, one of its first acts was a controversial decree aimed at disincentivizing what it termed “illegal gatherings.” Converted into law after deletion of the most ridiculous and unenforceable provisions (the “invasion of land or buildings” for “entertainment purposes” would be considered as occurring if the “number of people” is “greater than fifty,” etc.), it went into effect on December 31, 2022.¹⁰

Leaving aside the specific measures included in the law (such as heavy penalties for organizers, provisions for wiretapping, etc.), I would like to propose some observations:

1) it has been said that decrees and laws of this kind are “weapons of mass distraction” designed to raise a media smokescreen, shifting the public’s attention from the country’s real problems onto spectacular-sounding but completely useless resolutions. But perhaps this observation should be rephrased in other terms: not being able to control anything relevant—that is, lacking any medium- and long-term policy perspective in relation to major national and global crises, from prisons to affordable housing, from climate change to migration, from inequality to energy, from environmental destruction to wars—the government propagates draconian measures to suppress some of the few vital manifestations that still allow for an enhancing interplay between control and noncontrol. If useful legislative measures are many,

⁹ Ibid., 174.

¹⁰ The decree introduced Article 633-bis (“Invasion of land or buildings with danger to public health or public safety”) into the Criminal Code, which stipulates that “chiunque organizza o promuove l’[invasione arbitraria](#) di terreni o edifici altrui, pubblici o privati, al fine di realizzare un raduno musicale o avente altro scopo di intrattenimento, è punito con la [reclusione](#) da tre a sei anni e con la [multa](#) da euro 1.000 a euro 10.000, quando dall’invasione deriva un concreto pericolo per la [salute pubblica](#) o per l’[incolumità pubblica](#) a causa dell’inosservanza delle norme in materia di [sostanze stupefacenti](#) ovvero in materia di sicurezza o di igiene degli spettacoli e delle manifestazioni pubbliche di intrattenimento, anche in ragione del numero dei partecipanti ovvero dello stato dei luoghi” (whoever organizes or promotes the arbitrary invasion of other people’s land or buildings, public or private, in order to put on a musical gathering, or having other entertainment purposes, shall be punished by imprisonment from three to six years and a fine from 1,000 to 10,000 euros, when the invasion results in a concrete danger to public health or public safety due to non-compliance with the regulations on narcotic substances or on the safety or hygiene of shows and public entertainment events, including by reason of the number of participants or the state of the places).

useless ones are endless. Now, why among the infinite useless measures would this government choose specifically the repression of rave parties? Because this makes it possible to perform a sleight of hand, i.e. to strike at a vital and sought-after form of uncontrollability, in order to give the electorate the illusion of its being able to control real problems, which should be controlled and instead are not. Indeed, not all forms of uncontrollability are the same. As German sociologist Hartmut Rosa reminds us, there are destructive forms of uncontrollability (such as Stockholm New Year's Eve), but there are also forms of uncontrollability that are necessary to make experience alive and meaningful (total control of the experience, in fact, makes it mute and dead: "we are done with it"). He remarks cogently that "the uncontrollability of our counterpart in a resonant relationship is a *qualified form of uncontrollability*, not a result of mere chance or contingency. We can only resonate with a counterpart that in a way speaks with its own voice, that has something like its own will or character, or at least its own inner logic that, as such, remains beyond our control."¹¹

In other words, beyond the more or less successful or questionable specific cases of individual raves, the decree is aimed precisely at those kinds of events promising a sociality that provides for a "qualified form of uncontrollability."¹² It is a measure intended to strike at this desirable form of social uncontrollability, and at the same time to give the impression that the government is controlling the serious problems it is in fact unable to tackle. I could mention other examples, of varying weight and severity, including the harsh repression—with police use of batons—of high school students demonstrating in Pisa and Florence in February 2024, or the plans to build "Centers of Permanence and Repatriation" (CPRs) on the model of the Panopticon designed by Jeremy Bentham in 1791 (which was elected by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* as a paradigm of the modern "disciplinary society") in the face of the government's inability to deal effectively with a global phenomenon such as migration.¹³ I could add here the agreement to build two CPRs in Albania, the aversion to the legalization of cannabis, and, indeed, the recent decree banning the production and sale of "light cannabis" (with THC levels below 0.6 %).

2) These heterogenous measures are being taken while our daily lives are increasingly split between moments of pervasive (self-)control (surveillance, digital profiling, reduction of experience to its accountability, evaluations and "optimizations" of each individual's performance), on the one hand, and uncontrollable "Stockholm New Years" that are not socially, culturally or symbolically reframed, on the other. I believe, in fact, that we are witnessing a growing polarization of control and non-control mostly *deprived of any enhancing interplay*—of the feedback of the uncontrollable on the controllable, and vice versa—that affects most of our life, making it ever harder to render experience meaningful. Thus, for example, the "high" following a hyper(-self-)controlled workday *does not nourish* the ability to transform, expand and enrich our everyday life, being only an outlet for accumulated excessive pressure. The space of the public square, although hypercontrolled by cameras and police patrols, can suddenly turn into an out-of-control battlefield, with no short- or long-term change in the sociality of the square itself (after the place is cleaned up, on the following day the cycle sterilely continues to repeat itself).

In this regard, public squares deserve a separate discussion. Perhaps the most painful and emblematic example, in the heart of old Rome, is Campo de' Fiori, the only Roman piazza

¹¹ Hartmut Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World*, trans. James C. Wagner (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), 59, my emphasis.

¹² On raves see, for instance, Simon Reynolds, *Energy Flash: A Journey through Rave Music and Dance Culture* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2012) and McKenzie Wark, *Raving* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023).

¹³ See Giovanni Tizian and Nello Trocchia, "Migrants, Armored CPRs as Cells: Here's the Government's Secret Plan," *Tomorrow*, October 24, 2023.

without a church, where the statue of Giordano Bruno, standing in its center, was once a lively meeting place. If Campo de' Fiori is still a square where there is a morning market, there are few fruit and vegetable stalls now. These holdouts are desperately resisting the invasion of vendors hawking cheap mass-produced merchandise for tourists (bottles of limoncello in the shape of penises and testicles, alongside low-quality tricolor pasta, etc.). While this is bad enough, the real horror is unleashed when the market closes. With the disappearance of neighborhood stores (haberdashers, artisans, hardware stores, etc.), which have been replaced by a hyperconcentration of bars, ice cream parlors, restaurants and pizzerias for tourists, Campo de' Fiori is nightly overrun and occupied by an army of outdoor tables, without any respect for the legal limits set by the municipality. The sociality of the square as a place of informal encounters, conversations, courtships, leisurely strolls, and petty illegal behavior has been destroyed and replaced by a whole system of illegality (including the exploitation of service workers). The common space of the piazza is controlled by tourist traps, complete with touts (the so-called "buttadentro"), flashing lights and megascreens, as well as displays of obscene totems made out of dessicated foodstuffs. A veritable public dispossession. This commercial hypercontrol—fueled by the phenomenon of overtourism and a parallel economy driven primarily by dirty money—often turns, in the late hours and as alcohol levels rise in the young people who frequent the square, into "Stockholm New Year's Eve"-style ruckus and brawling. From the most regimented control comes a loss of control devoid of any interpersonal or creative outcome.¹⁴ Municipal administrations of every political stripe have allowed and encouraged this monstrous transformation of Italy's piazzas, for so many centuries one of the key places for citizens to meet and participate in civic life. These urban spaces are not only of incalculable civic, cultural and political importance, but are also places intended for pleasure and fun. Their systematic destruction over the past decades is a loss for all of humankind, as it marks the disappearance of the places that most immediately contributed to weaving a fabric of sociality, participation and aggregation that distinguished Italy and Italian life in the eyes of the world.

3) Failed "redemptions" from the loss of control include the recent pandemic. Out of control and therefore accompanied by draconian measures to control it, the pandemic seems to have left no trace: the slogan "we cannot go back to normal because normality was the problem" has been quickly forgotten in the haste to return to business as usual.

4) Last but not least, to this list could be added the "tolerance" shown toward menacing and often violent re-editions of Fascist and Nazi rallies, through which aberrant mythologies and rituals survive. These are dismissed, in public statements made by their political parties of reference, as merely some irrelevant folkloric "boyish pranks," instead of being taken seriously as symptoms and regurgitations of a dangerous historical and social syndrome.

These contingent phenomena, to which many others could be added, are manifestations of a relationship that has become problematic, at least in our Western forms of life, between control and uncontrollability. That relationship, I believe, is at the very heart of culture, which is never reducible merely to formal education. And I do not mean "culture" in the descriptive, anthropological sense (which includes every practice, from those most related to body techniques—such as gait or breastfeeding—to social norms etc.), but rather what is usually bandied about as the "cultural sphere," or Culture with a capital C. Such Culture, always invoked in official proclamations and mostly betrayed or opposed in fact, is not distinguished from culture in the anthropological sense by the fact that it is "high" or elite, as opposed to "low" or pop culture, but only by the fact that it is not simply experienced as if it were "natural."

¹⁴ A semi-serious version of this mechanism emerged in graffiti on a wall in Rome during the pandemic: "*Basta facebook, menamose!*" (Enough of Facebook, let's brawl!).

Culture (in the normative and axiological sense) can be distinguished from culture (in the descriptive sense) only insofar as it puts on display the very anthropological culture from which and within which it emerges, suspending its operation and thus offering it up to the possibility of being recognized, observed, investigated, and, perhaps, changed.¹⁵ After all, the disinterestedness controversially invoked by Kant for aesthetic and artistic experience points first and foremost to this: namely the effort not to live blindly, by not flattening ourselves in regard to the “obvious” or “natural” practices of the cultures in which we have become subjects, and to make our forms of life visible, inspectable, and revisable by deactivating their immediate purposes. However, to put on display our forms of life, our practices, or our cultures (in the descriptive sense of the term), is not an easy task that can be fulfilled deliberately. *Conditions must be provided such that it is possible to put on display deep layers of our associated living, which cannot be captured by relying only on controlled practices.* This is the paradox facing anyone who seeks to understand how to produce and inhabit a fruitful form of uncontrollability—that which makes us alive—without falling into a “Stockholm New Year’s Eve” sort of sterile uncontrollability.

Referring to artistic production, Theodor W. Adorno expressed this paradox as the need to produce “the voluntary in the involuntary,”¹⁶ while in a completely different context, the philosopher and sociologist Jon Elster analyzed, with great acumen, different types of actions aimed at paradoxically producing “states that are essentially byproducts” of actions aimed at other ends, i.e. mental or social states that might be highly desirable but that cannot be produced directly through a controlled deliberate action.¹⁷ From a sociological perspective, this problem is the focus of Hartmut Rosa’s attention today. A short book of his, which condenses and summarizes his findings, has an eloquent title: *The Uncontrollability of the World*. In a nutshell, Rosa’s overarching thesis is that

the driving cultural force of that form of life we call “modern” is the idea, the hope and desire, that we can make the world controllable. Yet it is only in encountering the uncontrollable that we really experience the world. Only then do we feel touched, moved, alive. A world that is fully known, in which everything has been planned and mastered, would be a dead world.¹⁸

Rosa develops his thesis by opposing a relationship with the world characterized by a series of “points of aggression”—a world conceived as a set of objects to be known, mastered and exploited—to a relationship of “resonance,” which occurs when we relate to the world with an attitude of “semi-controllability.” Semi-controllability does not imply disavowing the necessary role played by control over the environment exercised by individuals and societies

¹⁵ The notion that art is not primarily a form of technology but rather a practice that “puts on display” the technologies that shape our daily lives has its roots in Kantian thought. This idea has been revisited and expanded upon by Alva Noë, particularly in his recent works, *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2015) and *The Entanglement: How Art and Philosophy Make Us What We Are* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023). I suggest that this relationship between the technologies influencing our everyday lives and art can be extended to encompass all relationships between culture in an anthropological-descriptive sense and cultural practices in an axiological or normative sense. However, the belief that artistic practices or Culture can significantly challenge and alter lived—almost pre-reflective—culture strikes me as overly simplistic or optimistic. While art and culture can indeed create fissures in common sense, these fissures are likely to close unless further widened by political action.

¹⁶ “The voluntary in the involuntary [*Willkür im Unwillkürlichen*] is the vital element of art, the ability to reach it [*die Kraft dazu*] is a reliable criterion of artistic power [*künstlerischen Vermögens*],” Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), 174, my translation.

¹⁷ Jon Elster, “States that are Essentially Byproducts” (1987), in *Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 43–109.

¹⁸ Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World*, 2.

—which remains a necessary condition for making the world “reachable”—but requires us to recognize first and foremost that there are essential dimensions of human life that are not entirely controllable. Indeed, for Rosa the indiscriminate attempt to control the uncontrollable leads to an alienated relationship with the world, reminiscent of the disenchantment evoked by Weber, and—paradoxically—results in a new, “monstrous” uncontrollability.

The perspective I propose, and which I began to probe in my recent book *The Conundrum of Control*,¹⁹ is articulated differently. On the one hand, I am interested in understanding the relationship between control and non-control as a condition of possibility of all meaningful experience (as John Dewey argued in his 1934 book *Art as Experience*). On the other hand, I wonder whether these conditions of possibility (in the transcendental, ontological or universally anthropological sense of the term) manage to find their own working space in our current societies, or whether they are not instead mostly “silenced,” just as some genes are shut down under certain environmental conditions. The problem is to regain spaces of “qualified uncontrollability” that are increasingly being sacrificed to control and self-control, on the one hand, and to powerless and simply destructive uncontrollability, on the other. A “qualified uncontrollability” (often associated with traits of spontaneity, resonance with the world and others, informal sociability, creativity, collective joy, etc.) is such only if it is able to affect everyday life, with a feedback effect on the culture or “common sense” belonging to a given society. From my perspective, the question is whether and how artistic and cultural practices—which always imply, by their very existence, a relationship with the uncontrollable—have a role in the transformation of common sense, or whether instead they are practices now destined to follow it, accompany it, and do little more than decorate it. Some contemporary art practices have the potential to open up fissures in common sense in order to reveal it or put it on display, and thus to make the latter investigable and transformable. This is possible only insofar as such art practices are not abandoned to themselves or to the market. It is up to the political action of active citizenship to keep these possible fissures open, to foster their looping back into our lives, and to widen them in order to reorganize common sense.

One of the most significant active citizenship associations in Italy today, chaired by Fabrizio Barca and Andrea Morniroli, the Forum Disuguaglianze e Diversità (Inequality and Diversity Forum) is moving in this direction (<https://www.forumdisuguaglianzediversita.org/>). Within their articulated field of research and activism, they also find room for addressing the problem of the effectiveness on social imagination of artistic practices, to which the forum has recently dedicated a seminar entitled “Common Sense, Social Justice and the Arts.”²⁰ The goal is ambitious: “changing common sense” is the most concrete revolution we can hope for. It would be a mistake, I think, to underestimate the role of the arts and Culture in changing common sense, whether by keeping them confined to festivals and biennial exhibitions, or by abandoning them to market forces. They should be seen, rather, as laboratories in which we may continue to experiment with forms of life in which the native and original relationship between control and non-control cannot be stifled. It should be obvious, I think, that among the many conflicts occurring in our era, the struggle for cultural or symbolic hegemony is certainly not to be underestimated.

To sum up, the current social relevance of artistic practices is deeply connected to the disruption, suspension, and silencing of the original relationship between control and non-control in Western societies. These two aspects, once intertwined, are now increasingly viewed as separate and independent, weakening their fundamental connection on a lived, phenomenological level. As a result, we are losing our ability to learn from experience, and

¹⁹ Stefano Velotti, *The Conundrum of Control: Making Sense through Artistic Practices* (Leiden: Brill, 2024). Cf. also Stefano Velotti, *La dialettica del controllo* (Roma: Castelveccchi, 2017).

²⁰ Their programmatic “non-paper” can be downloaded at this link:

<https://www.forumdisuguaglianzediversita.org/il-laboratorio-sul-cambiamento-del-senso-comune/>.

even more so, from art. Some artistic practices testify to this situation better than others, even though they cannot but rely for their success on the relationship that is being dissolved. Their testimonial role, however, runs the risk of being exhausted in individual experiences, devoid of any effectiveness on the social imaginary and thus on social and political reality. The risk of a purely individual fruition is what Hannah Arendt already pointed out in “The Crisis in Culture,” i.e. the use of art and culture as a mere means to cultivate one’s own “self-perfection.”²¹ We should reflect on the real consequences for common sense that cultural events and products (raves and artworks included) can have that require, in order to flourish, a fruitful relationship between control and non-control. Rather than abandon our forms of life to the sterile and destructive alternation of control and non-control, we should work to re-establish an enhancing interplay between the two poles.

²¹ Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and its Political Significance,” in *Between Past and Future* (New York: The Viking Press 1961), 197–226.