

## The Neutral

Following the epochal break of a year ago, a concept emerged with great force, which has been churning relentlessly ever since in geopolitical and security policy debates and the subsequent moral questions: what does it mean to be neutral? Can we really afford to choose neutrality as a guiding principle for political action? Although alternative and non-binary ideas may recently have gained visibility, discursive presence and acceptance in terms of socio-political and identity politics – at least within certain social and cultural milieus in the West – in the wake of the Ukraine war, the term is taking on a negative charge.

In a situation such as this, it's important to be on the right side, not on no side. How can anyone be neutral now, is a common sentiment these days. Or: anyone who argues for neutrality in the face of this conflict is already on the losing side. Not an easy stance for neutrality, indeed.

Roland Barthes would likely vehemently disagree, particularly where it concerns the political. He regarded a neutral stance or neutrality not as a kind of passivity or idle and naive floundering into moral pitfalls, but rather as a tool and form for deliberate (deconstructivist) subversion, a strong position from which to challenge a general order that is essentially binary and defined by oppositions. Barthes presented his lecture course on *The Neutral* exactly 45 years ago (between February and June 1978) at the Collège de France in Paris, and despite his expansive views on the term, he was explicit at the outset about how he understood it, and his intentions: “Whence the idea of a structural creation that would defeat, annul, or contradict the implacable binarism of the paradigm by means of a third term.” Neutral is everything – *ne uter* (lat.) = neither of the two – that which is neither A nor B, and resists classification to either. Neutral thus stands for action, resistance and animation. We cannot subvert the dominant dichotomies with restraint and detachment: it “is an ardent, burning activity.” Barthes also insists that “that the Neutral not be conceived or

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connoted as a flattening of intensities but to the contrary as a bubbling up {émoussillement} (< champagne foam).” He attempts to semantically recast or re-evaluate the neutral: “For ‘virility’, or for the lack of virility, I would be tempted to substitute vitality. There is a vitality of the Neutral: the Neutral plays on the razor’s edge: in the will-to-live but outside of the will-to-possess [...].”

Despite his alternative take, the associations of neutrality that Barthes “meanders through” in his lectures are somewhat familiar. His „Images of the Neutral“, for example, is devoted to various negative qualities traditionally or historically associated with the neutral: charmless, evasive, dowdy, impotent, indifferent or vile. His choice and treatment of (sub-)themes such as “Retreat” or “Silence” also run along rather conventional expectations of what the neutral entails, summarised essentially as different types of abstention they create semantic shifts toward escapism, introspection, and retreating from the world. Barthes also includes formal aspects such as colour in his tour d’horizon. To him, the common conflation of neutral and colourless is only justified insofar as the neutral embodies a preliminary stage of incompleteness and indeterminacy, a pre-final state. According to Barthes, the neutral is “time of the not yet, moment when within the original non-differentiation something begins to be sketched, tone on tone, the first differences.” The underlying dimension of meaning here goes beyond the purely formal: the “monochrome (the Neutral) substitutes for the idea of opposition that of the slight difference, of the onset, of the effort toward difference, in other words, of nuance,” from which Barthes in turn draws the fundamental conclusion that “nuance becomes a principle of all-over organization” .

So if the Neutral or Neutrality were chosen as the overall theme for the 2023 Curated by festival, it could follow Roland Barthes into a diverse and dense field situated somewhere between the non-binary as an additional gender classification and a problematic political exercise in indecision, evasion and procrastination; between a positive focus on a third way and deliberate non-definition, or a negative one, that either leads towards autonomy and freedom, or threatens to destroy and render them unattainable. By no means should the political be set as the keynote. On the contrary: to prescribe or expect anything defined by a rigid and definitive relationship to something else – and thus establish a binary context – is

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to disregard the Barthesian Neutral. It would be more in his spirit if the exhibitions and the artistic works presented would seek out, activate, process, sound out and capture states of provisionality, incompleteness and – potentially contradictory – undifferentiation. This year's Curated by could be a celebration of nuance, a constellation of curatorial projects that go beyond the interstices to welcome the transitions, deviations and marginalities. A walk along the third way, a borderline walk perhaps, "on the edge of language, on the edge of colour" . Full of ardour, intensity and determination.

Maximilian Geymüller, March 2023

[1] Roland Barthes, *The Neutral* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 7.

[2] *ibid.*

[3] *ibid.*, 197.

[4] *ibid.*, 73.

[5] *ibid.*, p. 8.

[6] *ibid.*, 69-72.

[7] *ibid.*, 50.

[8] *ibid.*, 52.