

Art & The Political Seminar: Part 2 Democracy and Its Discontents 2nd March 2007, Glasgow School of Art Chaired by Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt

Participants: Professor Klaus Jung (Head of Fine Art, GSA and Director, Studio 55: Centre for Research in Fine Art Practice); Minty Donald (AHRC Research Fellow in the Creative and the Performing Arts, Mackintosh School of Architecture, GSA); Ranjana Thapalyal (Researcher School of Design, and p-t Historical & Critical Studies, GSA); Eileen Reid (Development Officer Wider Access, GSA); Rhona Warwick (editor, *Arcade: Artists and Place-Making*); Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt (Freelance curator/writer, Glasgow) (Chair); Ross Sinclair (Researcher, Sculpture & Env Art, GSA); David Bellingham (Researcher, Fine Art Photography, GSA); Shauna McMullan (Sculpture & Env Art, GSA); Erik Andersson (Lecturer and researcher, School of Global Studies/Department of Peace and Development Research, University of Gothenburg); Justin Carter (Sculpture & Env Art, GSA); Kyle McCulloch (Artist, Glasgow - and editor of spoof art magazine *Pear: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*); Dr. Ken Neil (Head of Historical & Critical Studies, GSA).

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Introduction (Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt)

Following this morning's GFT lecture by Chantal Mouffe on agonistic democracy, this afternoon's Seminar will focus upon two recent projects which engage in different ways with the concept of democracy and representation. Firstly we will hear from David Bellingham on *Turnout*, an installation based on the number of people who voted in the first election for the new Scottish Parliament which in May 1999 was 58%, falling to 49% in 2003. (As Chantal Mouffe notes, given the current emphasis on consensus, it is not surprising that people are less and less interested in politics and that the rate of abstention is growing.) Appropriately, *Turnout* was sited in Parliament Hall in the University of St. Andrews where the Scottish parliament met during a plague in Edinburgh in 1645-46. Secondly, Shauna McMullan will discuss the research process and contexts for *Travelling the Distance* a work commissioned by the Executive as permanent tribute to the dedication and sacrifice of Scottish women - past, present and future - to improving the opportunities, rights and conditions for women and furthering their democratic role, which opened on the 88th

anniversary of women voting in a General Election. This work takes the form of a collection of handwritten sentences by 100 women across Scotland about their female role models and then sculpted in porcelain.

In order to provide a common basis for discussion, I want to summarise some of the points made in this morning's lecture (feel free to correct me): Chantal Mouffe asked: can art still play a critical role when the boundary with advertising has become blurred and artists and cultural workers are part of the capitalist system? To answer this question we must first acknowledge: 1. Art and politics are not two separately constituted fields between which need to be made. 2. There is no such thing as non-political art. We should not only use the term 'political art' for those practices which challenge the existing order but also for those that reinforce it. Instead, we should think about critical art that questions hegemony. 3. Social relations bypass markets – total resistance is possible – social spaces circumvent and undermine capitalism. Mouffe broadly reiterated the categories laid out by Richard Noble and paraphrased by Craig Richardson in the last Studio 55 seminar as follows:

Practice that makes visible what the dominant hegemony aims to obscure.
Practice which aims at challenging the consensus e.g. Reclaim the Streets,
Tute Bianche (Ressler)
Artistic correction – Yes Men
Satire
Art using marketing strategies
Artistic practice envisaging alternative ways of living, built around values
other than capitalism

Mouffe went on to assert that we can no longer constitute an avant-garde offering radical critique as art is not powerful enough to avoid being recuperated by the capitalist system or to bring about a revolutionary moment. Because of this inability of art to avoid recuperation, there are those who say that art can no longer have a critical role. There are others, also, who aim to replace aesthetic with moral judgments, considering the moral to be political but, as we heard, Mouffe rejected this as anti-political.

Similarly, Mouffe rejected the notion of critical art as simply a manifestation of refusal or negation. Too much emphasis on dis-identification happens at the expense of re-identification, i.e. we don't only need a critique of what exists, trapped within a deterministic framework, but also a re-imagining of what is possible. Artists play an important role, in this receipt, by subverting hegemonic power structures. Critical art practices can, at the very least, disrupt the smoothness of corporate capitalism, bringing its repressive qualities to the fore.

Firmly in favour of parliamentary democracy, Mouffe breaks with liberal thinking – that society's antagonisms can be transcended and a rational consensus achieved – to propose that productive antagonisms are inherent in society and a notion of the political: 'one of the main tasks for democratic politics consists in defusing the potential antagonism that exists in social relations.' Mouffe argues, such antagonisms can be 'tamed' and 'sublimated': 'Conflict, in order to be accepted as legitimate, needs to take a form that does not destroy the political association.' So, whereas with *antagonism*, the two sides are enemies with no common ground, with *agonism*,

conflicting parties acknowledge there is no rational solution to their conflict, but nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents. In an agonistic democracy, the political is constituted not by enemies but by *adversaries* who 'see themselves as belonging to the same political association... sharing a common symbolic space within which the conflict takes place.' While this agonistic model of the political might offer a viable solution to a situation like the Palestine/Israel conflict, I would suggest that we could consider what happens when artistic antagonism refuses to be tamed and does not see itself as belonging to the same political association that Mouffe's concept of agonism implies.

Elsewhere, Mouffe has stated that: 'What an agonistic approach certainly disavows is the possibility of an act of radical refoundation that would institute a new social order from scratch.'¹ Without wanting to pre-empt David's and Shauna's presentations, one might deduce in advance that they adopt different positions in relation to the parliamentary democracy that forms the starting point of Mouffe's analysis.

Finally, perhaps of interest to those involved with Glasgow School of Art, we could consider the meaning of democratic institutions referred to by Mouffe in her writing, and the possibility of using them to stage conflicts that are agonistic.

¹ Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 33.