

Editorial

Agonism, Appropriation, Anarchism

The relationship of art to the political is not confined to fixed polarities but formed in the dynamics of relational processes.
(Nikos Papastergiadis)¹

... politics has its aesthetics, and aesthetics has its politics. But there is no formula for an appropriate correlation.
(Jacques Rancière)²

The second issue of *Art and Research* is focused upon the interrelationship between art, politics and theory, with particular emphasis upon the concept of ‘the political’ as articulated and developed by Chantal Mouffe. In the two decades since the publication of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), Mouffe has pursued the concepts of the political, radical democracy, antagonism and agonism, through a series of works: *The Return of the Political* (1993), *The Democratic Paradox* (2000), and *On the Political* (2005). Rejecting deliberative and consensus models of democracy, advanced by thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls, Mouffe argues for an ‘agonistic’ model of ‘radical democracy’ claiming, ‘we need a democratic model able to grasp the nature of the political.’³ Somewhat controversially for a thinker on the left, the nature of the political Mouffe has in mind is drawn from the writings of right-wing theorist, Carl Schmitt; a former Nazi and dominant influence upon Leo Strauss and the Neo-conservatives of the Chicago School, Schmitt developed his concept of ‘the political’ as a critique of Liberalism and parliamentary democracy in works such as *Political Theology* (1922), *The Concept of the Political* (1932), and *The Theory of the Partisan* (1963). At the heart of Schmitt’s political philosophy is an absolute social antagonism: ‘The phenomenon of the political can be understood only in the context of the ever present possibility of the friend-and-enemy grouping, regardless of the aspects which this possibility implies for morality, aesthetics, and economics.’⁴ Proclaiming triumphantly: ‘Nothing can escape this logical conclusion of the political.’⁵ Schmitt’s insistence upon the irreducible nature of the ‘concrete antagonism’ at the heart of social relations informs Mouffe’s critique of liberal models of democracy which seek to dissolve social antagonisms (of class, race, gender, for example) in appeals to ‘non-political’ concepts such as ‘universal humanity’, insisting: ‘Only by acknowledging “the political” in its antagonistic dimension can we pose the central question for democratic politics.’⁶ From such a perspective, the move towards the passionless centre ground of politics by mainstream political parties amounts not to a triumph but to a failure of democracy. For Mouffe, ‘radical democracy’ is a space which acknowledges the existence of irreducible conflicts and gives voice to the irrational passions which inspire them. However, Mouffe’s model of radical democracy is not content simply to maintain social

¹ Nikos Papastergiadis, *Spatial Aesthetics: Art, Place and the Everyday* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 2006), p. 54.

² Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 62.

³ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 99.

⁴ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, translated by George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 35.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁶ Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 14.

antagonisms to the extent that their final resolution is only conceivable in a future violence. Rather she invokes a social model of 'agonistic pluralism', whereby Schmitt's antagonistic 'enemies' are transformed into agonistic 'adversaries', concluding: 'the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public, in order to render a rational consensus possible, but to mobilize those passions towards democratic designs.'⁷

In the essay included here, 'Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces,' Mouffe turns her attention to art, addressing the role artistic activism can play in the realization of radical democracy. She writes:

I do not see the relation between art and politics in terms of two separately constituted fields, art on one side and politics on the other, between which a relation would need to be established. There is an aesthetic dimension in the political and there is a political dimension in art. This is why I consider that it is not useful to make a distinction between political and non-political art... The real issue concerns the possible forms of critical art, the different ways in which artistic practices can contribute to questioning the dominant hegemony.⁸

The concept of the political derived from Schmitt and developed by Mouffe, is the context for Okwui Enwezor's recent question with regard to the direction of contemporary art in his statement to announce the opening of the 2nd Seville Biennial of Contemporary Art (2006).⁹ In this text Enwezor reflected upon the potency of radical artistic practices which seek to challenge capitalist cultural production, in the context of counter-hegemonic political struggles:

Under the current conditions of uncertainty, in fact, the idea of artistic intervention in the cultural sphere increasingly appears both fragile and anachronistic. This is not just due to the accelerating commodification being generated by the art market complex but also to a certain loss of ethical clarity in contemporary art as a whole. Artists need to do more than merely report on this situation, more than simply register their own responses to the pervasive anxiety that dominates cultural production. The question, then, is this: how might art become integral rather than peripheral to the widespread challenge that affect not only the production of art but its reception as well, particularly in light of the deleterious effects of reactionary, conservative and fundamentalist politics on all world social formations today?¹⁰

Enwezor's question speculates upon the kind of art which is both possible and necessary in the light of the inescapable adversarial conditions of artistic production and reception, an art antagonistic to hegemonic forces of political and cultural domination operative in East and West alike. In throwing down of the gauntlet of demonstrable effect to artists, in relation to anti-globalisation movements, for example, Enwezor echoes the position held by Slavoj Žižek when he contends:

⁷ Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, p. 103. In her mobilization of passion in the field of the political, Mouffe's agonistic rallying cry could be one raised in solidarity with Jacques Lacan: 'Kant avec Sade!'

⁸ Chantal Mouffe, 'Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces', *Art and Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, Volume 1, Number 2, Summer 2007. www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html. A version of this text was delivered as a SoFA Friday Event lecture, GFT, Glasgow, 2 March 2007.

⁹ In the opening to his text, Enwezor cites the opening line of Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology*: 'Sovereign is he who decides on the exception.' Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, translated by George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 5.

¹⁰ Okwui Enwezor, 'The Unhomely: Phantom Scenes in Global Society': www.fundacionbiacs.com

More than ever, one should bear in mind Walter Benjamin's reminder that it is not enough to ask how a certain theory (or art) declares itself with regard to social struggles – one should also ask how it effectively functions in these very struggles.¹¹

In accord with Enwezor and Zizek here, Mouffe asserts:

What is needed is widening the field of artistic intervention, by intervening directly in a multiplicity of social spaces in order to oppose the program of total social mobilization of capitalism. The objective should be to undermine the imaginary environment necessary for its reproduction.¹²

One way artists have intervened in the circulation of commodities that constitute the social imaginary of capitalism (whether to undermine or redirect its flows of desire) is through the critical practice of appropriation. In 'Living With Ghosts: From Appropriation to Invocation in Contemporary Art,' Jan Verwoert reconsiders the tactic of appropriation with regard to the question of narrative and history. The political challenge of contemporary artists, according to Verwoert, is to reclaim and redirect a multiplicity of social and historical narratives in an art of invocation. Drawing upon Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*, Verwoert challenges the thought of theorists such as Crimp, Owens and Jameson, asserting crucial difference between the critical momentum of appropriation art today and the theory and practices of appropriation art of the 1980s.

The political dimension of artistic practice is addressed from the perspective of anarchist political economy in the interview with Michael Albert concerning his chapter on art in *Realizing Hope: Life Beyond Capitalism* (New York: Zed Books, 2006). Albert's concept of participatory economics, or *parecon*, proposes a society in which people in 'balanced job complexes' contribute to all aspects of necessary or socially-useful labour and thereby dissolve the economic injustice of class relations which lead to social antagonism. As well as being an 'anarchist economics', Albert also claims that (contrary to many artists' objections): 'Parecon is art friendly. It is an artistic economy.'¹³ But in what way is parecon an artistic economy? What is the role of art in parecon? What are the relations between art and anarchism in Albert's thought?

We might account for Albert's interest in addressing art by his involvement in the production of an artwork; the anarchist economist was interviewed by the Vienna-based artist, Oliver Ressler, for his ongoing project, *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies* – a work situated between art and activism, which presents interviews with anti-capitalist economists, political scientists, writers and historians. Ressler – who participated in Okwui Enwezor's Biennial in Seville – is an artist who recognises the ineluctable presence of social antagonism as the fulcrum of his practice as an artist. In projects such as *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies* and the collaborative video *5 Factories – Worker Control in Venezuela* (which tracks factory workers implementing socialism in Hugo Chavez's Venezuela), Ressler offers us an image of art as an act of solidarity with social struggle in the epoch of globalisation. Such is the resolution of Ressler's rejection of neo-liberal hegemony and his commitment to an activist form of artistic practice, that we might presume he shares Michael Albert's conclusion: 'There is no end to history. There is no end to dissent.'¹⁴

¹¹ Slavoj Zizek, 'The Prospects of Radical Politics Today', *The Universal Exception: Selected Writings, Volume Two*, edited by Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 238.

¹² Mouffe, 'Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces'.

¹³ Michael, Albert, *Realizing Hope: Life Beyond Capitalism* (New York: Zed Books, 2006), p. 107.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

Ressler's statement 'An Ideal Society Creates Itself: Venezuela and the Bolivarian Process' is a shortened version of a SoFA Friday Event talk he gave in Glasgow prior to the GSA Studio 55 Seminar, 'Art and the Political I' (1 December 2006), chaired by Craig Richardson and which included presentations by Justin Carter, Dominic Hislop, Chad McCail and Ressler. In his introduction Richardson refers to Richard Noble's 'Some Provisional Remarks on Art and Politics' presented at 'To Change an Opinion: A Conference on Art and the New World Disorder' (The Showroom, London, 2004). Noble's categories of critical art's relation to politics prove useful in distinguishing the positions occupied by each of the artists presenting at the seminar. For example, in Noble's first category, 'art as political criticism' we might locate the work of Oliver Ressler; in his second category, an art which explores 'positions and identities defined by otherness,' we might find Dominic Hislop's engagement with re-mapping cities according to the experience of the homeless, economic migrants or political refugees; in Noble's third category of art as 'utopian experimentation' we might position Chad McCail's billboard-scale paintings which draw upon the psychological theories of Wilhelm Reich expounded in works such as *The Sexual Revolution* (1936), *The Function of the Orgasm* (1942) (which influenced Dan Graham's *Detumescence*) and *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1946); McCail also envisages scenes familiar to the anarchist aspirations of Michael Albert's *parecon*; in Noble's final category 'art as an investigation of its own political condition' we might encounter the work of Justin Carter which combines environmental and ethical concerns in the approach and execution of his work. In their various manifestations of contemporary critical art practice these artists prompt us to reflect on the thought of Schmitt and Mouffe. For example, might we legitimately consider these artists as new partisans? Yet, as convenient as Noble's categories may be in assisting us to comprehend differences in ideas and methods of critical art practice, in the last analysis we must agree with Nikos Papastergiadis when he maintains: 'Art can never be a prisoner of politics and theory.'¹⁵

Papastergiadis's view is amply confirmed by the artists presentations in 'Art and the Political II: Democracy and Its Discontents' (2 March 2007). This seminar focused on two projects which raised questions about democracy and representation in the context of devolution: David Bellingham's *Turnout* - an installation and publication based on the number of people who voted in the elections for the Scottish Parliament, 5 May 2005 - and Shauna McMullan's *Travelling the Distance* - a commission from the Scottish Parliament to make an artwork to commemorate Women's suffrage and the importance of Women in Scottish political life. In his presentation, Bellingham points to the crucial importance of the poetic and the oblique in critical art and also to an expanded notion of the contemporary in his appropriation of classical philosophy. The open-ended nature of the research methodology McMullan developed in the creation of her installation - a methodology which echoes that employed by Sarah Tripp in her film *Anti-Prophet* (1999) - is eloquently illustrated by her reference to a work by Felix Gonzalez Torres, where a line is made on parchment by a pen once the ink has run out. McMullen reads this almost invisible indentation as a landscape for new questions and creative uncertainty. Perhaps the articulation of this space is akin to Mouffe's radical 'decision in an undecidable terrain', or what Enwezor refers to as 'the current conditions of uncertainty' - or even Alain Badiou's void of the event: however it plays out in theory, this situation of uncertainty is the space of art itself. 'As long as the world has

¹⁵ Papastergiadis, p. 50.

not yet come altogether into its own,' wrote Maurice Blanchot, 'art can probably reserve a place for itself there.'¹⁶

The critical placement of art in the world is a theme developed in Nicolás Guagnini's interview with Dan Graham which focuses on Graham's work for magazine pages.¹⁷ Famous for pavilions, performance and video work, Graham's works for magazines sought to bypass the economy of the art market and to debunk the claims of art criticism through the 'disposable' status of the everyday: 'My idea was to go right back and to put things into printed matter. Into magazines as magazine pages. They would be disposable. They would also be both about the magazine system, as well as art criticism.' Equally, Graham wanted to puncture the commercial economy of the magazine system itself (based on advertising revenue), by producing an artwork (such as *Common Drugs Side Effects*) which occupied the space of advertising but refused to sell you anything. In this artist-to-artist interview with Guagnini, Graham reveals that political anarchism was an important influence upon his development as an artist, as was the research of figures such as Reich. Equally important in this context is Graham's confession that he first wanted to become a writer rather than an artist.

Dan Graham's emphasis on the figure of the artist as writer is an appropriate context to approach the contribution to this issue by Sarah Tripp, who continues her exploration of methodologies for artistic research across a range of artistic practices (as documentary film-maker, designer and writer) with the contribution of *Let me show you some things* - a short story with photographic images.¹⁸ Tripp's exploration of the relationship between narrative and photographic image evokes the methodology of a writer like W. G. Sebald. Like Sebald, Tripp interrogates the role writing plays in producing an archive of everyday life.

Perhaps the interruption of Erich Maria Remarque's poignant novel on the futility of war *All Quiet on the Western Front* into otherwise banal domestic scenes of sibling strife in Tripp's narrative, provides a bridge between her work and Lisa Oppenheim's *The Sun is Always Setting Somewhere Else...* - a slide sequence of 15 images of photographs of sunsets taken by soldiers in Iraq held up to obscure the view of a sunset in New York. In his introduction to her work, Brian O'Connell situates Oppenheim's practice in the critical territory between appropriation and reconstruction and concludes:

The result is a mixture of political and aesthetic critique that seems, if through nothing but its being a 35mm slide show, to evoke a not-so-distant past in which 'bringing the war home' was an equally pressing concern. In this case, however, the immediacy of such a project seems overwhelmed by blogs from the front and held at bay by the Romanticism not only of the image, but of a project which is thoroughly tangled up in mediation.¹⁹

With these 'blazing sunsets more familiar to greeting cards than war mementos', are we looking at the desublimation of the Romantic sunset? Or are we witnessing the last remaining vestige of the sublime disappear behind the ultimate ethical horizon of critical art?

Arguably collaborative artists Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson occupy similar critical territory between appropriation and reconstruction (or

¹⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, translated by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1989), p. 213.

¹⁷ This interview took place at the Orchard Gallery, New York, 13 May 2007 and is reproduced here by kind permission of Dan Graham.

¹⁸ *Let me show you some things* was commissioned for The Scottish Show 07, The Lighthouse, 17 May-12 August 2007.

¹⁹ Brian O'Connell, 'Between Appropriation and Reconstruction', www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/oppenheim.html.

perhaps between appropriation and invocation), in their publication and exhibition: *nanoq: flat out and bluesome* a survey of British taxidermic polar bears 2001-04. This project comprised a period of site research and photographic archiving (2000-2004), an installation of ten bears at Spike Island, Bristol (2006), a publication with Black Dog Publishing (2006), organization of symposia and presentation at academic conferences. A multifaceted work, *nanoq* (Inuit for polar bear) explores the particular status of the polar bear as cultural and environmental signifier - a factor noted by Sam Stead in his review of the *nanoq* publication. Ultimately, *nanoq* engages in a critique of representational practices in the discipline of Natural History, forces us to confront our contemporary access to the sublime, and raises ethical questions surrounding human relationships with animals. The philosophical, aesthetic and ethical contexts of *nanoq* are discussed by the artists in conversation with Steve Baker (author of *The Postmodern Animal*) in relation to the writings of Jacques Derrida. Questions with regard to the form of *nanoq*, in terms of the role of the object and the photograph, are also discussed in relation to the pivotal conceptual artwork of Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs*. The discussion of Kosuth in this context led to the question of art as a process of 'enframing' (Heidegger) or 'unframing' (Guattari), questions which approach the origins and function of the work of art.

Perhaps it is an appropriate reflection of the aims and ethos of *Art and Research* to end with a dialogue between artist and theorist. As Nikos Papastergiadis recognises (echoing the language of Mouffe), the dialogue between art, politics and theory does not seek to collapse the differences between discourses but to maintain their integrity in agonistic dialogue of critical intimacy - a reflection which may serve as invitation for others to contribute their voices to the future of the journal:

[T]he exchange between art, politics and theory is not like that of antagonists trapped in a militaristic game of surrender and defeat, where the truth of one position can only be grasped by gaining distance from all the configurations that are implied within it. Rather, the relationship between art, politics and theory resembles a rhetorical game between agonists who are in dialogue with each other, who measure each other's truth claims by gaining some critical intimacy with their respective worldviews, and who are bound to respect the integrity of their mutual differences.²⁰

²⁰ Papastergiadis, p. 51-2.