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Public Spheres and the Functions of Progressive Art Institutions

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In times of expansive global capitalism, corporatization of culture, the demolition of the welfare state and the marginalization of the critical left, it is crucial to discuss and assess modes of critique, participation and resistance in the crossing fields of culture and politics – specifically, the intersection of political representation and the politics of representation, of presentation and participation. What is, for instance, the relationship between artistic practice and political representation? Or, put in another way, the difference between representing something and representing someone? What is the relationship between the claimed autonomy of the artwork, and claims for political autonomy? If art, be it the single work or the whole institution, can be conceived as a meeting place, how can we mediate between representation and participation? And, finally, what are the similarities and differences between representation and power?

Such questions are crucial to contemporary art institutions, be they 'progressive' or 'regressive' in their self understanding and in the view of others (both inside and outside the artworld), since art institutions are indeed the in-between, the mediator, interlocutor, translator and meeting place between art production and the

conception of its 'public.' I here deliberately use the term 'public' without qualifying (or quantifying) it, since it is exactly the definition and constitution of this 'public' as audience, community, constituency or potentiality that should be the task of the so-called 'progressive' institution: a place that is always becoming a place, a public sphere. Historically, the art institution, or museum, was the bourgeois public sphere per excellance, a place for rational-critical thought and (self)representation of the bourgeois class and its values. As aptly described by Frazer Ward,

The museum contributed to the self-representation of and self-authorization of the new bourgeois subject of reason. More accurately, this subject, this "fictitious identity" of property owner and human being pure and simple, was itself an interlinked process of self-representation and self-authorization. That is, it was intimately bound to its cultural self-representation as a public. [1]

The abstract and ideal projection of how a public sphere formulates itself and its subjects across social differences, despite the obvious contingency of this subject (as classed and gendered, to start with), has of course become somewhat normative, as theorized by Jürgen Habermas in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. A model that has since been heavily criticized, mainly through the efforts of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge. In their book, tellingly entitled Public Sphere and Experience, they describe the bourgeois public sphere as a receding horizon, and an ideal that does not correspond to our everyday interactions with, and access to public spheres – in plural rather than singular. Rather, they claim, our lives and sense of publicness, individuality and community is heavily compartmentalized and fragmented into multiple (public) spheres or spaces that are dependent on different experiences, mainly in an antagonism between bourgeois ideals and proletarian realities. We no longer conceive of the public sphere as an entity,

as one location and/or formation as suggested by Habermas. Instead, we have to think of the public sphere as fragmented, as consisting of a number of spaces and/or formations that sometimes connect, sometimes close off, and that are in conflictual and contradictory relations to each other. There not only exist public spheres (and ideals here-of), but also counter-publics. If we can, then, only talk about the public sphere in plural, and in terms of relationality and negation, it becomes crucial to understand, situate and reconfigure art's spaces – institutions – as 'public spheres'.

When establishing the artworld as a particular public sphere, we must explore this notion along two lines; firstly as a sphere that is not unitary, but rather conflictual and a platform for different and opposionary subjectivities, politics and economies: a 'battleground' as defined by Pierre Bourdieu and Hans Haacke. A battleground where different ideological positions strive for power and sovereignty. And, secondly, the artworld is not an autonomous system, even though it sometimes strives and/or pretends to be, but regulated by economies and policies, and constantly in connection with other fields or spheres, which has not least been evident in critical theory and critical, contextual art practices. In contemporary art practices we can see a certain 'permissiveness', an interdisciplinary approach where almost anything can be considered an art object in the appropriate context, and where more than ever before work with an expanded praxis, intervening in several fields other than the traditional art sphere, and as such touching upon such areas as architecture and design, but also philosophy, sociology, politics, biology, science and so on. The field of art has become a field of possibilities, of exchange and comparative analysis. It has become a field for thinking, alternativity, and can, crucially, act as a cross field, an intermediary between different fields, modes of perception and thinking, as well as between very

different positions and subjectivities. It thus has a very privileged, if tenable and slippery, and crucial position and potential in contemporary society.

It is, then, perhaps not surprising that such art institutions are under constant scrutiny from funding and ruling bodies, be they state controlled or private. What are, after all, their goals? Do they compromise a critical and oppositional space, or are they merely on the vanguard of new modes of working and thinking, and there for the taking for corporate models of production and capitalization? As I mentioned in the beginning, we are witnessing a closing of potential critical spaces, or at least a regulation of them in terms of law if perceived as outside governmental control, and a limitation of funds and/or imposition of a managerial model taken from the corporate world, in the case of government run institutions. Institutions seem caught between a rock and a hard place, as it were, and here I have not even mentioned the pressures internal to the artworld. Ironically, financial cutbacks from governmental bodies are usually done in the name of the public: the public sphere is narrowed in the name of the public – public here meaning people, and people meaning taxpayers. The people, it is said, are not generally interested in something as particular as art, unless this art can seen as part of the culture, or more accurately, entertainment industry. The public sphere is here conceived of in terms of populism: Give the people want they want, which is always already bread and circus.

We see, then, a double movement diminishing the so-called autonomy of art and the artworld: one the one hand, its own particularism, or historical strive for autonomy, from being an arm's length away from the political sphere has indeed removed it from the trust and goodwill of political funding bodies. On the other hand we see that the dissolvement of the bourgeois public

sphere has resulted in a decrease of interest from politicians for an upkeep of the bourgeois public sphere per excellance, the art institution. With political populism on the rise, especially, the traditional space for critical-rational thinking is becoming more and more unwanted. But also within the welfare model are we witnessing new contingencies and limitations, mainly a surge towards merging culture with capital. Obviously, we do not want to maintain, claim or return to the bourgeois category of the art space and subjectivity, nor to the classical avant garde notions of resistance, which is why we need not only new skills and tools, but also new conceptions of 'the institution'. I would suggest that we take our point of departure in precisely the unhinging of stable categories and subject positions, in the interdisciplinary and intermediary, in the conflictual and dividing, in the fragmented and permissive – in different spaces of experience, as it were. We should begin to think of this contradictory and non-unitary notion of a public sphere, and of the art institution as the embodiment of this sphere. We can, perhaps, think of it as the spatial formation of, or platform for what Chantal Mouffe has an agonistic public sphere:

According to such a view, the aim of democratic institutions is not to establish a rational consensus in the public sphere but to defuse the potential of hostility that exists in human societies by providing the possibility for antagonism to be transformed into "agonism". [2]

If we want to address the problems the art institution is facing without reverting to a historical and unusable model and rhetoric, I think that an emphasis on the democratic potentials of the art space is paramount. Democracy is, arguably, the uniting, empty signifier of our times, and as such something insurmountable and impossible to deny or defy openly. In the public language game, no

one can argue against democracy within democracy, and by insisting on the art institution as the place for democracy and, indeed, its everlasting agonism, I believe one can counter both populism and managerialism. This emphasis indicates how our notions of audience, the dialogical, various modes of address and conception(s) of the public sphere(s) has become the all important points for our institutional constitution, and how this entails both the ethical and the political: Art that is not just concerned with the artworld, but with the world.

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[1] Frazer Ward, 'The Haunted Museum: Institutional Critique and Publicity', October 73, Summer 1995, p. 74.

[2] Chantal Mouffe, 'For an Agonistic Public Sphere', in Okwui Enwezor et al. (Ed.), *Democracy Unrealized*, Ostfeldern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje-Cantz, 2002, p. 90.