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## **The Art of Democracy: Constitutive Power and the Limits of Dissensus**

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### **Abstract**

This article engages critically with the normative framing of socially-engaged/collaborative art as a consensual/dissensual dichotomy. The main exponents of this position are Claire Bishop and Chantal Mouffe, and while there are important differences in how they theorise the relationship between art and politics, they share the view that consensual practices amount to a form of political abdication. This way of framing participatory practices that cross between art and activism gives rise to three significant problems however: one concerns the passive positioning of viewers/participants relative to the authorial autonomy of artist/artwork; the second concerns an inadequate understanding of power; and the third is an apparent inability to think consensus and dissensus together, i.e. as features of the same arena of practice. These issues are examined through reference to specific artistic practices, drawing on concepts from the literature on social and political power which are used in conjunction with Grant Kester's work on dialogical aesthetics. The article argues for a more open and dialogic approach to studying the relationship between politics and aesthetics, thereby avoiding the trap of using artistic practices as illustrative cases in support of conclusions that have been reached before the analysis has even commenced.

**Key words:** Constitutive power, dialogical aesthetics, relational antagonism, socially-engaged art, subjectivation

## Introduction

As part of the annual *Wiener Festwochen* (Vienna Festival) in 2000, the late Christoph Schlingensiefel<sup>1</sup> combined his experience as artist, filmmaker and theatre producer by staging a provocative piece of work titled *Bitte Liebt Österreich* (*Please Love Austria*). Part performance and part reality TV show, *Please Love Austria* took place in front of the Vienna State Opera house, within a makeshift detention centre assembled from two portkabin's stacked one on top of the other, a shipping container, and portable steel fencing. This was Schlingensiefel's way of responding to the electoral success of the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ), and as the performance began, he unveiled a sign bearing the slogan *Ausländer Raus* ('Foreigners Out', Figure 1). The main event commenced with the arrival of a bus transporting a group of asylum seekers from an official detention centre outside of the city (see Bishop 2012, pp. 41-4; Thompson 2012, p. 24). Upon their arrival, the asylum seekers took up temporary residence in what would become known as 'Schlingensiefel's container'<sup>2</sup>, which was equipped to parody the *Big Brother* reality TV game show. The 'participants' were offered the chance of cash prizes, and for the overall winners – depending on the availability of willing volunteers – the possibility of Austrian citizenship through marriage. Life inside the container was broadcast via the internet, with members of the public invited to vote on who should be evicted. At 8 p.m. each evening for six days, two asylum seekers were escorted from the container by burly men in black T-shirts bearing the word 'Security', and returned to the state-run detention centre to face deportation. Outside, atop the portakabins, Schlingensiefel used a megaphone to goad his audience. He dared the FPÖ to remove the banner; he toyed with the boundary between art and politics by declaring 'This is a performance! This is the absolute truth!'; he encouraged members of the public to air their views, and he provided running commentary on the evictions, making announcements such as 'It's a black man! Once again Austria has evicted a darkie!' (quoted in Bishop 2012, p. 43).



Figure 1. Christoph Schlingensief, *Please Love Austria*, Vienna 2000. Image courtesy of David Baltzer © davidbaltzer/bildbuehne.de

Less than two years later, asylum seekers interned at the Woomera Immigration Reception and Processing Centre in the South Australian desert staged a hunger strike. The official title of the camp – framed as a facility that greets new arrivals (the sign attached to the perimeter fence included the word ‘Welcome’ in large bold font<sup>3</sup>) – masks the privations endured by those who fall within the scope of Australia’s policy of mandatory detention for non-citizens, and it was this harsh reality that saw some of the hunger-strikers adopt even more drastic measures to communicate their plight. One of the Iranians opened a vein and used his own blood to write ‘freedom’ in English and Farsi, in letters almost a metre high on the walls of one of the compound buildings. A group of seventy – children among them – sewed their lips together in a gesture that caught the attention of the media and the public (Ahwan 2002; Marks 2002).

On the other side of the perimeter fence, protesters gathered in support of the hunger-strikers, and two who travelled to participate in the Easter weekend demonstrations – Ross Parry and Dave McKay – decided to stay on and create a ‘Refugee Embassy’. The Embassy offered support by visiting the detainees; it also took on an advocacy role, challenging the

extortionate cost of mobile call charges imposed on the Woomera inmates under a contract licensed by the Department of Immigration, and it produced a book documenting the life stories of some of the detainees from Iran and Afghanistan (McKay and McKay 2000). The Embassy itself, a physical space in the form of a bus offering sanctuary and conveying a message of 'hope', was both a symbol of solidarity and a way of staging communicative action<sup>4</sup> (Figure 2).

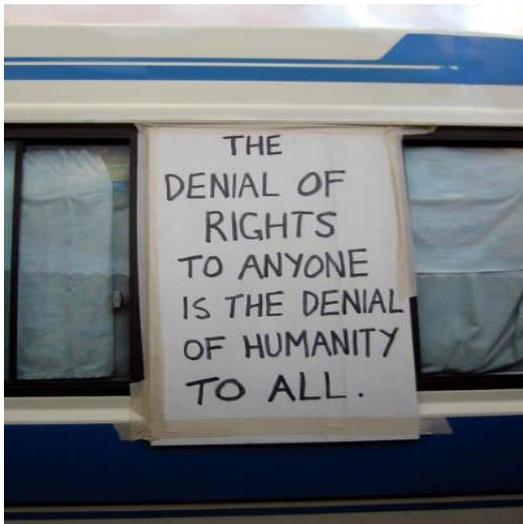


Figure 2. Woomera Refugee Embassy, © Stavros @ Journeys and Stargazing, <http://dodona777.wordpress.com/>

The issue at the centre both of these events might be described, from Jacques Rancière (2010), as a situation where *some* people – people who could (in altered circumstances) be *anyone*, and hence are representative of *everyone* – are positioned as a supplement to those who are counted among the population, and thus do not count in matters concerning the distribution of places, positions and entitlements. We also see something of how the interweaving of creative practice and communicative action can shape situations structured by relations of solidarity and enmity, cooperation and contestation.

The Woomera inmates were all but silenced by the physical remoteness of the camp, and also by legal instruments and administrative procedures that restrict the scope of what

can legitimately be said and done. By sewing their mouths shut, the hunger-strikers transformed their refusal to eat into a more urgent and insistent message that entered into the public arena in the form of news articles and reports, internet posts, and email alerts, and though transmitted primarily in the form of written and spoken words, the power of this message lay in its visual impact. Even without evidence of what this self-inflicted violence actually looks like (a photograph for example), once it is known what these people did to themselves, it is all but impossible not to imagine their faces. This message, which was also an action that acted upon the actions of others, exhibits a striking aesthetic quality that works at the intersection of art and activism. Furthermore, in the way it shocks and disturbs, it is comparable to the tactics employed by artists working in the tradition of the avant-garde<sup>5</sup>. Schlingensief's provocation is a case in point. As Claire Bishop points out, the 'shocking fact is that Schlingensief's container caused more public agitation and distress than the presence of a *real* deportation centre a few miles outside Vienna' (2012, p. 44, original emphasis). But it is not just solidarity that emerges from this type of agitation, and this is of equal importance, because the wider context is also shaped by hostility. In Woomera, one of the locals made a point of telling Ross Parry and Dave McKay that 'If I came across one of them bastards [the detainees] wandering about in the outback, I wouldn't care if he was eight years old. I'd slit his throat as soon as look at him, and I wouldn't miss a moment's sleep over it either' (McKay and Mckay 2002, p. 14). In the case of Schlingensief's container, a group of left-wing student activists attempted to liberate the refugees. But many others applauded the spectacle as an endorsement of their own support for the FPÖ; indeed Schlingensief seems to have encouraged this tensioning of the situation.

In both of these examples can be seen something of how aesthetics and politics intersect and interact, and yet this process of mutual contamination does not dissolve the boundary between one and the other. The boundary may be porous but it nevertheless persists

as a space of interplay, which presents an interesting and perplexing question: how can we think art and politics together? In a recent article on the ‘Challenges of re-politicisation’ (2012), Yannis Stavrakakis opens his account by posing this very question which, he states, ‘is again on the agenda and is hotly debated in many fora’. The key word here is ‘again’, because this is a question that runs like a red thread through a whole series of movements fusing cultural production to social reform and political renewal, from Futurism and Russian Constructivism during the early decades of the twentieth century, through Dadaism, Surrealism, Fluxus, and Situationism. The most recent manifestation of this lineage has been described as a ‘social’ or ‘collaborative turn’ in art. This is a loosely configured umbrella term, and it incorporates a diverse body of currents and practices: relational aesthetics (Bourriaud 1998), dialogical practice (Kester 2011), social practice (Lind 2012), and relational antagonism (Bishop 2004). I think it would be a mistake – i.e. both futile and counterproductive – to try to reduce this diversity to some sort of singularity (another ‘ism’), yet there are at least two core characteristics that make it possible to generalise from the particular, both of which are in evidence in the examples sketched above. One is an understanding of social life as a living texture of relations which *has* been formed and *can* be re-formed (Thompson 2012, p. 29). Another is the conviction that this process of re-formation can be orchestrated through collaborative and participatory undertakings: projects that fuse creative practice to communicative action. This however seems to mark the limit of what can be said without entering into the realm of dispute. In the next section I examine how this collaborative turn has been framed at the threshold of political theory and art criticism, focusing on the work of Chantal Mouffe and Claire Bishop, both of whom privilege dissensual art practices as a means of reinvigorating and radicalising democracy, which is apparently threatened by a pervasive (anti-)politics of ‘consensus’. My argument is that this way of theorising the relationship between art and politics culminates in an unnecessarily

restricted understanding of participation and also an inadequate understanding of power, and in the second part of the paper the focus shifts to projects that take us beyond the limitations of Mouffe and Bishop's dissensus/consensus dichotomy. Here will be seen evidence of how the art of democracy is practiced through the interweaving of cooperation and contestation, which combine as an agentic mode of constitutive power.

### **Agonistic Democracy and Relational Antagonism**

Mouffe's theory of agonistic democracy is premised on the argument that there can be no social order or political unity of any kind which is not constituted by an 'outside' – an excluded surplus or excess which can never be fully incorporated, and which is both the product of past antagonisms and the source of further (potential) conflicts (2000, pp. 45-8; 2005, pp. 18-19). This clearly overlaps with the reference to Rancière above concerning the uncounted, or those who have 'the part of no part' (2010, p. 33), and there also seems to be little doubt that Mouffe shares Rancière's disdain for consensus, which he equates with the 'shrinkage of political space' (2010, p. 72), and which Mouffe associates with a 'post-political *Zeitgeist*' (2000; 2005, pp. 1-5). In approaching Mouffe's position on the relationship between art and politics, I want to begin by briefly examining how she cleaves the problem of consensus so that it constitutes a threat which is anchored in two domains<sup>6</sup>. On one side is what might be termed an empirical trend: the drift to the centre on the part of social democratic and labour parties, so that the political Left is seen to have formed an unacknowledged alliance with the Right in establishing the hegemony of neo-liberalism (2000, pp. 108-13). On the other side is a trend in normative political theory, which goes by the name of 'deliberative democracy', and which posits rational deliberation and consensus as the means and ends of democratic politics (Mouffe 2000, pp. 45-9). Mouffe seems determined to hold this trend in political theory to account, which is perhaps why Jürgen

Habermas – as an influential exponent of deliberative democracy – receives such a barrage of criticism in her writings. As a neo-Gramscian, Mouffe is attuned to the political salience of ‘common sense’, and she seems to hold Habermas’ discourse ethics (in his earlier work, this was known as the ‘ideal speech situation’) partly responsible for the prevailing post-political consensus. As an idealised form of communication whereby participants engage in a deliberative process steered only by the ‘unforced force of the better argument’ (1996, p. 306), Habermas’ discourse ethics is a way of thinking about how collectively-binding decisions might be reached without resorting to compromise or coercion<sup>7</sup>. In Mouffe’s view however, this helps to legitimise the discursive framing of conflict as threatening to democracy, which is also what Rancière refers to in the idea that the space of politics is shrinking.

If Mouffe’s theory of agonistic democracy were a play or a novel, Habermas would be the hero’s nemesis. ‘Habermas’ is the name given to what, for Mouffe, is a flawed understanding of human sociality: the idea that people are ‘moved by empathy and reciprocity’, which in turn supports the misguided assumption that rational deliberation can take us beyond enmity and violence. The mistake, argues Mouffe, is to overlook the ways in which passionately articulated desires and fantasies – as affective dimensions of collective identifications – can be mobilized politically (2005, p. 24). Furthermore, unless it is acknowledged that this is an ineradicable feature of the democratic contest, then conflict and struggle will be perceived as a threat to democracy, and thus repressed, thereby creating conditions for more violent and destructive manifestations of ‘affective forces’ (2005, p. 24).

This way of thinking about democracy is derived in part from Carl Schmitt, which might be seen to court controversy given Schmitt’s well known ‘compromise with Nazism’ (Mouffe 2005, pp. 4-5), but Mouffe claims that she is using Schmitt *against* Schmitt (2000, pp. 36-57). For Schmitt, the distinction between *friend* and *enemy* is what sets ‘the political’

apart from other dimensions of human existence – the moral, the aesthetic, and the economic – and is also what structures all political relations of ‘union and separation, association and dissociation’ (Schmitt 1996 [1932], pp. 26-7). Schmitt’s ontology of acrimony is appropriated by Mouffe and posited as the ‘necessary starting point for envisioning the aims of democratic politics’ (2005, pp. 13-14). Once this initial move is made, Mouffe deviates from Schmitt by insisting that the friend/enemy relation must be configured in such a way that it can accommodate ‘the pluralism which is constitutive of modern democracy’ (2005, p. 14). Schmitt insisted on a fundamental opposition between liberalism and the democratic ideal of equality, with the latter – as already noted from Rancière, based on a *decision* that partitions those who are counted among ‘us’ from those who do not belong. For Schmitt, the relationship between liberalism and democracy is one of mutual negation: they cannot co-exist. Mouffe however argues that this relationship should be understood as a contingent historical articulation – a fortuitous accident which has created a paradox. However, the ‘democratic paradox’ (Mouffe 2000) is not a puzzle to be solved so much as a way of staging agonistic political strategies. In other words, if opponents engage each other as adversaries rather than as enemies, then the democratic contest will prevail. This then is the defining feature of Mouffe’s theory of ‘agonism’: a democracy where ‘confrontation is kept open, power relations are always being put into question, and no victory can be final’ (2000, p. 15).

All of this foregrounds the role that Mouffe assigns to artistic activism as a way of staging counter-hegemonic interventions, and in her recent work she has begun to explore the ways in which a ‘critical art’ can ‘contribute to the struggle against capitalist domination’ (2007, p. 1; 2013, p. 91). One of the difficulties to be surmounted, and here Mouffe draws explicitly on Luc Boltanski and Eva Chiapello’s *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005), is the ease with which critical gestures are ‘recuperated and neutralised by the forces of corporate capitalism’ (Mouffe 2013, p. 85). The way to avoid this, she argues, is to broaden the field of

artistic intervention by ‘working in a multiplicity of social spaces’, using these spaces to stage ‘agonistic interventions within the context of counter-hegemonic struggles’ (2013, p. 88).

An example of Mouffe’s understanding of critical art (see Mouffe 2013, pp. 94-7) is a project by Alfredo Jaar from 2008 titled *Questions, Questions*. Jaar used the city of Milan as his canvas, populating billboards, the sides of buses, advertising spaces in subways, and the walls of derelict buildings with posters posing questions such as ‘Culture Where Art Thou?’ and ‘Does Politics Need Culture?’ (Figure 3). Jaar has paid tribute to Antonio Gramsci on more than one occasion, and according to Mouffe, *Questions, Questions* was an exemplary deployment of Gramscian tactics: an attempt to ‘unsettle common sense by posing apparently simple questions that, in the context of the intervention, are likely to trigger reflections that will arouse discontent with the current state of things’ (Mouffe 2013, p. 95). By ‘current state of things’ Mouffe is referring to what, at the time, was the grip exerted over ‘Italian space by Berlusconi’s media and advertising network’, so that Jaar was attempting to create ‘a desire for change’ on the part of the citizenry, in effect emulating Gramsci’s notion of ‘war of position’ as a struggle staged on the terrain of social consciousness.



Figure 3. © Alfredo Jaar *Questions, Questions*, 2008, Public Intervention, Milan. Image courtesy of the artist, New York.

Before commenting further on Jaar's intervention, I want to look at how Mouffe's negative framing of consensus is mirrored in the work of art critic Claire Bishop. Given that Mouffe constructs her political theory against the foil of consensus, it might be expected that her views on the subversive efficacy of critical art would be contrasted against the artistic equivalent of Habermas' discourse ethics. Mouffe does in fact mention 'a marked tendency to replace aesthetic judgements with moral ones, pretending that these moral judgements are also political ones' (2013, p. 104), but she does not elaborate on this beyond remarking that this is further evidence of political abdication. Bishop however has engaged forcefully with this purported trend.

Bishop writes in defence of 'relational antagonism', which is a very specific understanding of aesthetics, and she opposes this to a consensual type of collaborative art that relinquishes authorial sovereignty and surrenders control to participants. According to Bishop, the latter is 'less interested in a relational *aesthetic* than in the creative rewards of collaborative activity' (2006, p. 179, original emphasis), and the shortcomings of this type of practice are deemed evident in the ways in which it helps to de-politicise spaces where politics might otherwise emerge. Bishop's point seems to be that it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish consensual social art from social work and soup kitchens, and this reflects the extent to which publically-funded community-based art has been deployed as an instrument of neo-liberal state reform (see Roche 2006).

Someone who features prominently in Bishop's writings, and who exemplifies the kind of creative practice she is advocating, is the Spanish artist Santiago Sierra. Sierra has staged a series of works where he employs people at the margins of society, including homeless persons, illegal immigrants and asylum seekers, to participate in projects such as *10 People Paid to Masturbate* (2000), *Workers Who Cannot be Paid, Remunerated to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes* (2000), *Hiring and Arrangement of 30 Workers in Relation to their*

*Skin Colour* (2002), and *The Penetrated* (2008). In these projects, Sierra hires labourers to perform useless or demeaning labour for consumption within privileged white-cube exhibition spaces. Participants are paid the minimum, and their role involves some form of ritualised degradation, as was the case in *Hiring and Arrangement of 30 Workers*. Job applicants were paid to strip down to their underwear and to line up facing a wall, their bodies arranged according to skin colour in a version of racial profiling. In *The Penetrated*, which is a 45-minute film shot during the Spanish holiday commemorating Columbus' discovery of the Americas, participants were paid to engage in group anal sex. The acts of 'penetration' were scripted in accordance with eight possible permutations of male/female, male/male, white/black, so that the First Act depicts 'White race men penetrating white race women', followed by 'white race men penetrating white race men' (Second Act), 'white race men penetrating black race women' (Third Act), and so on<sup>8</sup>. The faces of the hired participants are digitally blurred, not to protect their anonymity but to depict them as dehumanized and modular workers, which is a theme that runs through much of Sierra's work. *Los Penetrados* is an allegory of conquest, domination and submission staged at the intersection of class, race and gender, but the acts performed for the camera are not simulations, and the work erases the distance between representation and reality.

In these public displays of exploitation, Sierra's intention seems to be one of causing maximum discomfort on the part of the viewer. For *Workers Who Cannot be Paid*, exhibited at the Berlin Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art, Sierra hired six asylum-seekers (who under German law are not permitted to work, hence the title of the piece) to sit concealed within cardboard boxes for four hours a day. Responding to the charge that this was exploitative, Sierra turned the invective back onto his critics:

...they criticized me because I had people *sitting* for four hours a day, but they didn't realize that a little further up the hallway the guard spends eight hours a

day on his feet... Many of the people who make those criticisms have never worked in their lives; if they think it's a horror to sit hidden in a cardboard box for four hours, they don't know what work is. Also, if I compensated these people more, they'd be talking about how "good" I am. But if I find someone who does something that's hard for 50 euros and it usually costs 200, I use the person who does it for 50. And of course extreme labour relations shed much more light on how the labour system actually works (Sierra and Margolles 2004).

Sierra is also emphatic in stating that he has no illusions about art 'actually achieving anyone's redemption, because that's absurd... When you sell a photograph for \$11,000 you can't possibly redeem anyone except yourself' (Sierra and Margolles 2004). Sierra's stance seems clear: his work eschews utopian visions and gestures, aiming instead to create a visceral portrayal of the world as it *is*, which he sculpts from the brute reality of degraded labour.

It is Sierra's attitude, method, and mode of address that combine as an aesthetics of relational antagonism. What this entails, argues Bishop, is constructing 'highly authored situations that fuse social reality with carefully calculated artifice', thereby engineering an 'aesthetic impact' that fosters discomfort and frustration on the part of the viewer (Bishop 2006, pp. 181-3; 2004, pp. 77-9). Relational antagonism creates a relay between aesthetics and politics, but it does so without dissolving the boundary between art and activism, and for Bishop it is this type of practice that offers an antidote to relational art practices which she thinks are complicit in the depoliticising logic on consensus. Moreover, this acts as a catalyst in countering what she describes as 'well intentioned homilies that today pass for critical discourse on social collaboration' (2006, p. 183; 2012, p. 40).

Here Bishop is not referring to any specific example of consensual-collaborative art, but to commentary *upon* such artworks, which she refers to as an 'ethical turn' in art

criticism. The problem as she sees it is a growing aversion to ‘art that might trouble or disturb its audience’, which in practice means adopting an ‘ethics of authorial renunciation’ (2006, p. 181). In other words, the artist surrenders control over how the artwork is produced, encountered, and experienced, while curators and essayists facilitate and applaud these efforts at repairing the social bond.

In the way that the focus of her critique oscillates between collaborative artistic practices and the ‘ethical turn’ in art criticism, Bishop draws attention to the ways in which art *itself* is a type of raw material which is shaped and formed discursively. In other words, *interpretation* is a strategic and tactical game, so that irrespective of whether the work under discussion is defended or denounced, it is a means of promoting and defending a particular normative position. Much of what is produced by artists such as Sierra is ephemeral; the actual work exists for the duration of an event such as a biennale, so that what remains afterwards are traces, typically photographs, video footage, and texts documenting the work. But these traces are more than mere documents. They are part of an editing process that shapes the meaning of practice, and in this way the artwork is made to do other types of work: it is pressed into the service of what Rancière calls ‘dissensus’ (see Bishop 2012; 2006).

The ideas underpinning Bishop’s relational antagonism resonate strongly with Mouffe’s support for agonistic interventions which aim to ‘unsettle the dominant hegemony’ by ‘making visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate’ (2013, pp. 91-3). The arena where this contest is staged is social consciousness, and the method might be called political ophthalmology. The objective is to correct the faulty vision of those among us who cannot see things ‘as they really are’, which is not a problem of ‘false’ consciousness so much as a failure to perceive the extent to which we are complicit in the reproduction of a system that prevents us from living more fulfilling lives. Everyone other than the critical

artist and the critical theorist is apparently a dupe, which is why interventions staged by practitioners such as Jaar and Sierra step in to administer a dose of shock therapy to a public which has been incapacitated by the spectacle of mass-mediated entertainment and consumption (see Kester 2011, p. 178). But what of those who actually experience this art? Within the textual space of Mouffe and Bishop's analyses, the voices of anyone other than the artist and the analyst are muted to the point of near total silence.

Common to Jaar's use of public space and Sierra's gallery-based projects is the way that both artists attempt to script the response of the viewer (Kester 2011, p. 63), so that art is used as a tool to act upon a generalised and homogenised spectator (Sierra) or public (Jaar). Yet those who frequent the venues where Sierra exhibits are well versed in the aesthetics of disquiet and discomfort; in fact if they were not 'shocked' or 'disturbed' by the spectacle they would probably find cause for complaint. As argued by Grant Kester (2011), being made to feel 'uncomfortable' has long been an anticipated part of the avant-garde experience, as is being able to demonstrate virtuosity in decoding the work through conversation with others who have attained fluency in this particular language game. In the case of Jaar's more public intervention (and setting aside the possibility of his posters being interpreted as the lead-in to an advertising campaign), are we really to believe that this type of didactic art triggers discontent, or that people are incapable of desiring change without first being jolted into an awareness that change for the better is possible?

By insisting on such a definitive split between dissensus and consensus, Mouffe and Bishop construct a dichotomy that follows the contours of Carl Schmitt's conception of the political as a friend/enemy relation. This also marks the limits of Mouffe's agonistic pluralism, because for both Mouffe and Bishop, 'consensus' is not a worthy adversary but an enemy to be vanquished. Indeed, Mouffe does not shy away from this, because she insists that politics is necessarily founded on a Schmittian *decision* distinguishing 'legitimate

adversaries' from the enemies of democracy (2005, p. 121; 2013, pp. 13-14). Consensus is apparently one such threat: an epochal and apocalyptic evil, a Trojan horse that allows the forces driving the post-political *zeitgeist* to grow stronger. For Mouffe, counter-hegemonic interventions play the part of messianic saviour, so that critical art is a spearhead in the quest for a redemptive political strategy. Things are less straightforward in Bishop's analysis, where critical art is tasked with staging disruptive events and causing discomfort among viewers. Relational antagonism does not work in the service of an emancipatory politics because anything more than episodic disruption risks being recuperated and instrumentalised. Differences aside, Mouffe and Bishop meet on the terrain of a position where politics and aesthetics join forces in confronting an ethics of consensus, and they leave us with a stark choice: all or nothing – either wholesale transformation (Mouffe) or a theatre of disturbance (Bishop), and neither is particularly useful as a way of dealing with concrete problems. Furthermore, it seems to me that this dichotomy replicates a very conventional way of thinking about power. The next section begins by problematizing Mouffe and Bishop's aversion to power, following which I look at two examples of relational art that shift the focus of analysis beyond their dissensus/consensus dichotomy.

### **The Constitutive Power of Collaborative Art**

When examined analytically through the prism of power, 'consensus' is generally associated with power *to* and *with* as distinct from power *over* (Haugaard 2002; Haugaard and Ryan 2012). For example, in Hannah Arendt's formulation, this is a mode of power that comes from acting in concert with others, which for Arendt is a condition of freedom (2005, p. 147). However, this analytical purity is shunted aside by critical theorists working within the ambit of post-structuralism, who tend to be deeply suspicious of power *to* and *with*, because when people act in concert they also exercise power *over* each other, which may give rise to

hierarchical and asymmetrical power relations, and ultimately to relations of domination. For the critical theorist who adopts this perspective – and Mouffe and Bishop are both cases in point – the task is either to unmask consensual power in order to expose its hidden machinations, or to keep it at bay altogether through the use of tactical interventions that seek to prevent any kind of discursive closure. The historical record provides an abundance of evidence in support of this suspicion of consensual power, but it seems unnecessarily limiting to assume that any trace of consensus is domination in disguise. Yet this is what Mouffe and Bishop’s dichotomy implies: resistance to power *over* also necessitates suspicion of power *to* and *with*, because even if the goal is to subvert relations of domination by acting in concert with others, this will inevitably lead to further power asymmetries, and thus what begins as a politics of emancipation merely substitutes one form of domination for another. Hence the problem from this perspective is not simply *power over* but *power as such*.

There is however a third way of thinking about power, *constitutive power*, which is implicit in Mouffe’s neo-Gramscian commitment to counter-hegemonic interventions that open out possibilities for ‘the construction of new subjectivities’ (Mouffe 2013, p. 105). But constitutive power can be detached from this type of normative critique, where it is harnessed to pre-formed judgements concerning particular practices, and also grafted to blanket assumptions about the deficiencies of those who are to be subject to ophthalmic interventions. This is my intention in what follows, i.e. to appropriate Mouffe’s normative horizon (the constitution of new subjectivities) by shifting the focus of analysis away from what it is that the analyst thinks socially-engaged artists *ought* to be doing. Removing that filter broadens the scope of analysis by clearing a space for curiosity regarding what it is that people *are* doing or attempting to do through the interweaving of aesthetics and politics. I will begin by sketching two very different examples of what Kester calls ‘dialogical aesthetics’.

*Dialogue Interactive Artists Association: Pilla Gudi (Temple for Children)*

The Dialogue Interactive Artists Association (DIAA) is based in the city of Kondagaon, which is south of Raipur in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh, and works primarily with Adivasi communities. The Adivasi are indigenous to the sub-continent, and are recognised by the Indian Constitution as a ‘scheduled tribe’<sup>9</sup>, which entitles them to legal protection against discrimination as well as affording preferential treatment in accessing higher education (Kester 2011, p. 246). Despite these constitutional protections, the Adivasi way of life is threatened in at least three ways: by the encroachment of timber and mining corporations; by Hindu nationalism, and in particular fundamentalist organisations bent on ‘civilising the forest dwellers’; and by the Naxalites, who have been waging a Maoist-inspired insurgency against the Indian state for decades, which has ongoing implications for the safety and security of tribal communities. This is the context within which the DIAA operates, and Kester notes that it is a context shaped by questions of adaptation and survival, resistance and assimilation (2011, p. 78). The DIAA itself was established by Mumbai artist Navjot Altaf, who began working with the Adivasi communities in the Bastar district of Chhattisgarh in 1996, and Kondagaon artists Rajkumar, Shantibai, and Gessuram. DIAA’s creative philosophy is succinctly captured by the words incorporated into the name of the group: dialogue, interaction, and association, yet while the group is committed to the principles of collaboration and reciprocal learning, this does not mean that the creative labour facilitated by the group is analogous to an anti-politics of consensus. On the contrary, Dialogue works through non-confrontational innovations to effect alterations to power relations structuring the spatial, gendered, and generational vectors of communal life<sup>10</sup>.

An example of how this type of innovation is worked out in practice can be seen from the DIAA’s Pilla Gudi (Children’s Temple) project, which is modelled on the Adivasi institution of the Ghotul – a dormitory-style building where unmarried adolescents teach art

and crafts, such as dance, song, and wood carving, to the younger children. The Ghotul also provides an opportunity for younger members of the village to form romantic and intimate relationships, which is encouraged by parents and Adivasi elders, but frowned upon by many Hindus, and there have been attempts to repress the Ghotul tradition (Kester 2011, p. 84-5). The Pilla Gudi was envisioned as a way of reinventing the Ghotul by creating a space where village children can gather, play, interact and educate each other. The first was designed by Rajkumar in 2001, and took its key architectural reference point from a renowned Adivasi temple known as the 'Mother Goddess' temple, which features carved deities built into the interior of the roof that look down upon the worshipers below. What Rajkumar did was alter the significance of the upward gaze of worship by removing its religious significance: he fitted mirrors to the interior ceiling of the Children's Temple, so that when the children look up they see their own reflections gazing back at them. Kester makes the point that this transforms the traditional 'performative submission' to symbols of metaphysical authority, so that agency and authority are attributed to the children themselves (2011, p. 85). Importantly, the mirrors are not simply a passive adornment but are activated through workshops with the children, so that they function as a platform to explore ideas and themes relating to reflection and distortion, self and community<sup>11</sup>.

A second Pilla Gudi was created by Navjot Altaf, and was designed as an open-air space for performance and discussion. The design again inverted the architecture of a nearby temple, this time by burying a concave dome in the ground, which was then filled with sand to serve as a stage. The submerged dome is surrounded by a circular concrete seating structure which is deliberately fractured in one section. Titled *12 + 1 = 13 (Hence it is not a Circle)*, the break in the circle symbolises a type of interruption to the cyclical flow of village life, and whoever occupies this fractured space is expected to introduce questions for discussion or suggest activities for the group (Kester 2011, p. 86). Finally, a third Pilla Gudi

was designed collaboratively, and this one is of particular significance because its design reflects the wishes of the children themselves. The children envisioned a space that would be sited on the periphery of the DIAA compound, turned away from the other DIAA buildings, and thus removed from adult scrutiny. The children also produced drawings of a building that would be both a playground and a meeting place, and where the space of interaction would extend from the ground to the roof of the structure itself (Figure 4). Kester sees this as being continuous with the first Pilla Gudi, in that both ‘invert the traditional architectural syntax’, so that in the first Temple, ‘ceiling-as-heaven becomes ceiling-as-mirror’, while in the third, ‘roof-as-shelter becomes roof-as-playground’. Kester also makes the point that all three temples ‘literalise the child’s agency, their capacity to remake and reinvent the world, to act rather than being acted upon’ (2011, p. 86).



Figure 4. Dialogue Interactive Artists Association. Pilla Gudi (Temple for Children), Kondagaon, Chhattisgarh, India. Image © Grant Kester.

Although Kester does not use the concept of power in his analysis, he nevertheless seems to equate the Pilla Gudi project with empowerment. But it would be a mistake to assume that empowerment is beyond reproach, or that good intentions obviate the need for

critical reflection. The mirrored ceiling, the twelfth seat, and the roof-as-playground are unobtrusive pedagogical techniques, and each in its own way promotes a set of values: autonomy, equality of status, and mutuality founded on the principle of equal moral worth. By displacing the authority of religion, these architectural innovations prompt children to take critical distance from aspects of Adivasi culture, which also equips them to withstand the assimilatory pressure of Hindu nationalism, which is in effect a non-antagonistic mode of dissensus. The Pilla Gudi is in fact a technology of government – a way of acting upon the children’s capacity for action (Foucault 2007) – and in this sense is a species of *power over*. This is not to suggest that the children are coerced; rather it is an observation that emplaces the DIAA’s work with children within the historical arc of practices that seek to orchestrate social change and cultural renewal by training and educating children (see Ryan 2015, 2008). The key to this, or so I would argue, is a mode of constitutive power that operates through subjectivation. This is also evident in a very different example of dialogical aesthetics, Park Fiction, which shifts the scale of analysis from the micro-politics of the DIAA’s collaborative practice, to collaborative work that operates at the macro-political level of state institutions and social formations (Kester 2011, p. 202).

### *Park Fiction/Gezi Park Hamburg*

Kester traces the origins of Park Fiction to 1981<sup>12</sup>. It was at this time that squatters began to occupy vacant city-owned buildings along the harbour-front of St. Pauli Hafensstraße in Hamburg, adjacent to the city’s notorious Reeperbahn red-light district. By 1987, at which time the squatters had established a school, day-care, café, library, legal aid clinic, and pirate radio station, the city was attempting to evict them. What began as forced evictions and intimidation tactics – arbitrary arrests and interruptions to the electricity supply – rapidly escalated, with squatters erecting barricades and engaging in street battles with police

(Schäfer 2004, p. 39; Kester 2011, pp. 199-200). The violence gradually abated, and in 1996 a compromise was reached when the remaining squatters were offered a deal allowing them to purchase a block of occupied buildings for one-third of the market value. But a new wave of struggle was already unfolding, triggered by a process of gentrification, and in particular a planned development project that would have enclosed the Hafenstraße behind a wall of high-rise office buildings and apartments, thereby blocking access to the waterfront. In organising to resist the proposed development, a group of residents formed the Harbour Edge Association (HEA). In his reflections of this early phase of Park Fiction, the artist Christoph Schäfer (2004, p. 42) presents it as a continuation of the Hafenstraße squats, but after a full year of ‘demanding a park’ came the realisation that ‘the classic forms of lobbying were about to lead to a dead-end’, and this marked a turning point. The Hafenstraße ‘barricade days’ are deeply embedded in the local social consciousness, and the HEA had reactivated this symbolic resource in a way that was continuous with the tactics and strategies deployed over the previous decade. But as Schäfer points out, once it became apparent that the context had changed, that ‘eighties-style militant activism had lost its momentum’, that ‘the squat had been legalised’, and that ‘the former fighters had retreated into their houses’ so that ‘private had become private again’, then it became apparent that a new method would have to be created in order to ‘open public space as a field of dispute’ (cited in Kester 2011, p. 202).

The new method fused art and activism, and it took the form of a parallel planning process that was to serve as a vehicle for negotiations between the Park Fiction collective and the formal planning authorities, thus avoiding ‘the trap of taking the “legal” bureaucratic path’ (Schäfer 2004, p. 44). The parallel process was conceptualised as a ‘platform of exchange’, enabling people from a variety of ‘cultural fields’ – musicians, artists, café owners, squatters, priests, teachers, children – to participate in a sustained process of dialogue and mutual learning (Park Fiction 2013). Against a strictly textual mode of address, such as



Though heavily used by children, skateboarders, musicians, dog-walkers, and courting couples, the park is much more than an amenity. It is also hugely symbolic in that this is a patch of land which has been claimed as a public space where people can assemble and associate, not just for the purpose of leisure, but also to organise for collective action. It is for this reason that Kester describes the park as a ‘monument to the creative and improvisational nature’ of Park Fiction. Both of these modes of action – creativity and improvisation – are crucial to understanding this particular collaborative practice, which avoided militant confrontation with the coercive powers of the state while also keeping at bay the pressure to yield to codified procedures and protocols. The fusion of art and activism subverted the logic of either/or by opening out a third possibility, and here Kester makes an important observation when he notes that Park Fiction has not, as Schäfer seems to think, entirely bypassed the ‘the trap of taking the “legal” bureaucratic path’. The park exists only because it was supported by the city’s Municipal Culture Department and financed through the formal channels of public art funding, and this was possible because of an agreement reached through negotiations staged in the form of a ‘round table’ which was installed near the park site, and thus on Park Fiction’s home ground. Park Fiction was obliged to ‘half accept’ the ‘dominant way of thinking and negotiating’ (Schäfer 2004, p. 45), but so too did the Municipal Culture Department concede to the demands of the Park Fiction collective (Kester 2011, pp. 209-10). The point to be taken from this example of dialogical practice is that it exceeds the simple dichotomy between consensus and dissensus. Park Fiction exists not solely as a result of organised resistance to *power as such*, but because of the interweaving of cooperation and contestation, which in this case has been enacted through a complex web of interaction that zigzags across the boundaries of power *to*, *with*, and *over*. As with DIAA’s work in Kondagaon, this is again an example of how constitutive power operates at the threshold between the poles of Mouffe and Bishop’s dichotomy, and it is also

an example of how subjectivation is practised.

### **The Art of Democracy**

Notwithstanding the many differences that distinguish the collaborative practices of the DIAA and Park Fiction, Kester identifies a number of common characteristics: both are premised on durational interaction rather than rupture; both problematize the authorial status of the artist by engaging in ‘improvisationally responsive’ rather than ‘scripted’ relations among participants, and in comparison to Bishop’s aesthetics of antagonism, both rely on more conciliatory strategies in attempting to transform the consciousness of participants, thereby generating possibilities for new subjectivities, insights, and ‘modes of being-together’ to emerge (Kester 2011, pp. 65, 76, 101-5). When schematised in this way, dialogical aesthetics may appear to be diametrically opposed to Mouffe and Bishop’s views on critical art, but this is not what Kester is proposing. Instead he argues for a continuum of relational practices, from the disruptive to the collaborative, with the collaborative end of the spectrum shading into overt forms of cultural activism (2011, p. 33). Furthermore, as can be seen from the examples above, dialogic practice is not equivalent to a purely consensual mode of interaction. Against this type of caricature, Kester argues for an understanding of collaborative art that operates in ‘multiple registers’, so that the creation and enhancement of solidarity can work in tandem with counter-hegemonic strategies (2012, p. 161). This might be seen to overlap with Mouffe’s notion of conflictual-consensus, but the key difference is that Kester does not eschew the possibility of collaborators entering into a Habermasian-type speech situation. This type of mutuality need not function as a consensual cage however, as discursively formulated compacts that enable people to act in concert in pursuit of shared objectives can be effective even when it is agreed that these are provisional and tentative measures. Furthermore, and here Kester departs from Habermas’ discourse ethics, dialogic

practice is not premised on the fiction of ‘ontologically stable agents’ (Kester 2012, p. 159). In Habermas’ ideal speech situation, participants working towards shared understanding and mutual agreement may be swayed by the unforced force of the better argument, but there is no indication that this entails more than a degree of cognitive revision on the part of the subject. What Kester is interested in is the extent to which subjectivity itself is ‘formed through discourse and inter-subjective exchange’ (2012, p. 159). This is really the key insight that I am attempting to elucidate here: at the conceptual level this concerns the relation between constitutive power and subjectivation, while at the level of practice it operates as a relay between consensus and dissensus.

Common to the micro-politics of the Pilla Gudi and the macro-politics of Park Fiction is a type of practice that reconstitutes relations of power through a process of subjectivation, yet this does not wholly conform to what are arguably the most influential analytical renderings of this process, certainly among post-structuralists, i.e. in the work of Foucault and Rancière. In Foucault’s analyses we see how the subject is formed through relational practices and technologies which are constituted by regimes of truth, and though subjectivation is linked to technologies of the self in his later work, so that the subject practices freedom by transfiguring the present, in much of Foucault’s writings the question of subjectivation pivots around the problem of domination (Foucault 1997a, 1997b). Neither is the constitutive power of dialogic aesthetics reducible to the subjectivation (*la subjectivation*) of Rancière, which is the name he uses for episodes whereby those who are rendered invisible and inaudible by the existing order succeed in ‘undoing the formatting of reality’ by attempting to right a wrong through acts of ‘disidentification or declassification’ (1992; 2004, p. 65). What makes this a uniquely *political* act in Rancière’s view is that it activates the ineradicable kernel of *the* political: we are all equal (Rockhill 2004, p. 13). Foucault’s genealogical method examines subjectivation as a ‘positive’ or constitutive mode of power

which, in terms of effects, is more or less equivalent to *power over*, though he also allows for the possibility of reducing the extent and intensity of domination through a critically informed understanding of how the subject is formed. For Rancière, subjectivation is first and foremost a dissensual bid for emancipation, which is possible only if and when the uncensored move against the grain of the regime of the sensible, or the order of ‘police’, which is the source of *power over*. The constitutive power of the DIAA and Park Fiction, of Schlingensiefel’s *Bitte Liebt Österreich*, and also the actions of those on both sides of the fence as the Woomera detention centre in 2002, is all of this and more: it is deeply agentic; it is enacted by subjects who name themselves through participation in collaborative/dialogic practices and processes; and it is (trans)formative at the level of both subject and context. In addition, this mode of subjectivation is constituted in contexts shaped by the interlacing of conflictual and consensual power relations, but the precise configuration of power cannot be ascertained without a deep understanding of the context in question, which is why collaboration that fuses art to activism necessitates – as noted by Brian Holmes (2012, pp. 78-9) – a ‘tight articulation’ of analytical and aesthetic concerns, or a ‘broad division of cultural labour’, which entails analysing the complexity of social phenomena, disseminating the results of analysis through expressive practices, and producing an awareness that can serve a catalyst for transformative action.

If the art of democracy is restricted to a politics of dissensus, then it omits the constitutive power produced through collaborative/dialogic practice, which is eclipsed by a hyper-normative analysis which seems unwilling to question its own core presuppositions. The problem with such an approach is that it uses relational practices as illustrative cases in support of conclusions that have been reached before the analysis has even commenced. An alternative strategy is to begin from practice itself, using critical theory as a conceptual toolbox rather than as a rigid template, which might then afford the opportunity of learning

from practitioners who are currently doing the work that Mouffe envisions: creating new subjectivities, and hence also new social forms. Moreover, if the goal is to avoid violent antagonisms of a Schmittian variety, then can we really afford to disqualify collaborative practices on the grounds that these are not sufficiently agonistic or disruptive?

## Notes

1 Christoph Schlingensiefel died in 2010.

2 This is the subtitle title of Paul Poet's documentary (*Ausländer Raus! Schlingensiefel's Container*, 2005, Monitorpop Entertainment).

3 A photograph of this Welcome sign is available on the Australian Human Rights Commission website: <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/last-resort-national-inquiry-children-immigration-detention/5-mechanisms-protect-human> (dated 13th May 2004).

4 The concept of communicative action is most closely associated with the work of Jürgen Habermas (1984, 1987). Here I am using this as a normatively-neutral concept in the tradition of speech act theory (Austin 1962), and thus deviating from Habermas' usage, which is discussed briefly below.

5 The Russian performance artist Petyr Pavlensky seems to have made this connection when he sewed his lips together to protest against the arrest of members of Pussy Riot. Pavlensky discusses this action in an interview published on *Dazed Digital*, available here:

<http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/14077/1/petr-pavlensky-v-vladimir-putin>.

6 Mouffe does in fact defend what she calls 'a sort of conflictual consensus'. This is consistent with her theory of agonism, assuming as it does that opponents within the space of the democratic contest share a commitment to core ideals such as freedom and justice, but at the same time disagree on the meaning of these ideals and how they should be implemented

(2005, p. 52; 2013, p. 8). I will offer an alternative way of thinking the relationship between conflict and consensus in the next section.

7 This relates to note 4 above, i.e. Habermas' discourse ethics is anchored in his Theory of Communicative Action, his argument being that the implicit norms built into the structure of communication push interlocutors to try to reach mutual understanding and normative agreement, with the question 'why?' (why did you say that, why did you do that) acting as a 'warranty' against insincerity, deceit and manipulation.

8 Stills and video footage from these works can be viewed on Sierra's website here:

[http://www.santiago-sierra.com/index\\_1024.php](http://www.santiago-sierra.com/index_1024.php)

9 Along with the 'scheduled castes', the Adivasi were previously counted among those known as 'untouchable'.

10 On the issue of gender, see Kester's discussion on the Nalpar project, which concerns the refurbishment of water-collection sites and the creation of enclosures that enhance the autonomy of Adivasi women (Kester 2011, pp. 78-83).

11 Imagery from the workshops is available on Navjot Altaf's website:

<http://www.navjotaltaf.com/pillagudi.html>

12 Park Fiction was renamed Gezi Park Hamburg on June 16<sup>th</sup> 2013, in support of the Gezi Park protesters in Istanbul.

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## **Acknowledgements**

To follow