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In the Place of the Public Sphere?

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This essay is an attempt to map out the territory of the 'public' sphere as both localizable and imaginary, and to discuss the changed and changing possibilities for art production as communicationary toolbox and representational politics in the public realm. I will take my point of departure in conceptions of practice and spectatorship based on the notion of a fundamentally 'fragmented' public sphere, and explore which potentials, problematics and politics lies behind the construction (real or imaginary) of a particular public sphere or space. Where can a public sphere be located today, and how can critical and/or artistic interventions be made in it? How does one perceive and/or construct a specific public sphere and positional and/or participatory model for spectatorship as opposed to (modernist) generalized ones? Does this entail a reconfiguration of the (bourgeois) notion of the public sphere into a different arena and/or into a mass of different, overlapping spheres? Or, put in other terms, what can be put in the place of the public sphere?

The notion of public art works traditionally entails the installation of an art work in public space, pure and simple. Works installed in this manner and context are thus supposed to be distinguished from art in the private sphere, such as works circulating and sold

through galleries. Public art projects entail a different audience and indeed different notions of spectatorship. They are usually also involved in a different (public) debate that takes place before as well as after the installation of the work, and the construction of the piece usually involves a long political and planning process: What can be installed where, and for whom?
In modernism such questions were deceptively easily answered: the form of the work was an answer in itself - it was a synthesis. Architectural and sculptural forms were produced from a similar modernist matrix, and adding a sculpture to a square usually meant continuity rather than discordance. There was, presumably of course, a unity between the conception of the public sphere and the public art work. Such a unity has, however, been much discussed and criticized. It was, after all, always a construction, an ideal, rather than an actuality. The public sphere was never entered and used uniformly, and art works naturally had both different conceptions and significations to be read in different ways. We must, then, rather talk of a fragmentation and differentiation of the public sphere on the one hand, and of an expansion and/or dematerialization of art works on the other. Which, in turn, requires different understandings and realizations of public works. As opposed to high modernism's ideals of a singular, autonomous and formally complete artwork, we would now consider artworks as placed in a heterogeneous field, where the significations and communications of the work shift in relation to space, contexts and publics. Just as there is no complete, ideal work there is no ideal, generalized spectator. We cannot talk of art's spaces as a common, shared space we enter with equal experiences - on the contrary, the idea of the neutral spectator has been dissolved and criticized, and the identity of the viewer have been specified and differentiated by both art practices and theories since the 1960s. This shift also entails, naturally, different notions of

communicative possibilities and methods for the artwork, where neither its form, context or spectator is fixed or stabile: such relations must be constantly (re)negotiated, and conceived in notions of publics or public spheres. This means, one the hand, that the artwork itself (in an expanded sense), is unhinged from its traditional forms (as material) and contexts (galleries, museums etc), and on the other hand, is made contingent on a(nother) set of parameters that can be described as *spaces of experienc*e, that is, notions of spectatorship and the establishment of communicative platforms and/or networks in or around the artwork that are contingent on, and changing according to different *points of departure* in terms of spectatorship.
The gaze of the spectator is, of course, not only dependent on the work and its placement, but also on the placement of the spectator socially (in terms of age, class, ethnic background, gender, politics etc.). Or, more broadly speaking, experiences and intentionalities. We can, thus, speak of three variable categories, that, in turn, influence the definition of each other; work, context and spectator. None of which are given, and each of which are conflictual, indeed agonistic.

When thinking about art production and representation, it is therefore crucial to negotiate these terms both individually and in relation to each other. And just as contemporary art practices have shown that neither the work nor the spectator can be formally defined and fixed, we have also come to realize that the conception of a public sphere, the arena in which one meet and engage, is likewise dematerialized and/or expanded. We no longer conceive of the public sphere as an entity, as one location and/or formation as suggested in Jürgen Habermas' famous description of the bourgeois public sphere. Jürgen Habermas' sociological and philosophical investigation of the emergence of the so-called 'public sphere',

most often categorized and criticized for being normative and idealist, is basically a reconstruction of the ideals and selfunderstanding of the emergent bourgeois class - positing a rational subject capable of public speaking outside of itself, *in* society and *of* society. Thus the separation between *the private* (the family and the house: property), *the state* (institutions, laws) and *the public* (the political and the cultural).[1]

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. And we have, through the efforts of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, come to realize that our interactions as subjects with the public spheres are dependent on experiences. There not only exists public spheres and ideals here-of, but also *counter-publics*. By placing the emphasis on the notion of experience, Negt and Kluge do not only point to the inequality of access to the public sphere in Habermasian terms, it also allows them to analyze modes of behavior and possibilities for speech and action in different spaces. In their analysis both the workplace and the home as 'public', ie. spaces organizing collective experience. And they attempt to posit a specific, but plural, public sphere that can be termed 'proletarian' in opposition to the normative 'bourgeois' public sphere.[2]

Counter-publics can be understood as particular parallel formations of a minor or even subordinate character where other or oppositional discourses and practices can be formulated and circulated. Where the classic bourgeois notion of the public sphere claimed universality and rationality, counter-publics often claims the opposite, and in concrete terms often entails a reversal of existing spaces into other identities and practices, most famously as in the employment of public parks as cruising areas in gay culture. Here, the architectural framework, set up for certain types of

behavior, remains unchanged, whereas the usage of this framework is drastically altered: Acts of privacy is performed in public.[3] According to Michael Warner, counter-publics has many of the same characteristics as normative or dominant publics - existing as imaginary address, a specific discourse and/or location, and involving circularity and reflexivity - and are therefore always already as much *relational* as they are *oppositional*. The notion of 'self-organization', for example, in recent art history in itself most often an oppositional term, and certainly one filled with credibility, is thus not itself a counter-public. Indeed, self-organization is a distinction of any public formation: that it constructs and posits itself as a public through its specific mode of address. Rather, the counter-public is a conscious mirroring of the modalities and institutions of the normative public, but in effort to address other subjects and indeed other imaginaries:

Counterpublics are 'counter' [only] to the extent that they try to supply different ways of imagining stranger sociability and its reflexivity; as publics, they remain oriented to stranger circulation in a way that is not just strategic but constitutive of membership and its affects.[4]

If we can, then, only talk about the public sphere in plural, and in terms of relationality and negotiation, it becomes crucial to understand, place and reconfigure art's spaces as 'public spheres'. Are the artworld - the public arena in which 'we', reader and writer alike, are presently located - to be seen as one fragment of a generalized bourgeois public sphere, or is there a possibility of opposing spheres within it? And how are these related? If we analyze a particular public sphere called 'the artworld' what is its delimitations, and how can it be employed strategically to engage with other public spheres? Finally, there is the question of how artworks and the thinking around art can intervene in these

different spheres - on the one hand taking its point of departure in the specific fragment the artworld, and on the other engaging in other spheres directly or indirectly.

Just as the modernist conception of the singular artwork and spectator, the idea of the universal, bourgeois public sphere now seems purely historical. The well-ordered bourgeois public sphere is as much a fragment as other formations, and the question is indeed rather whether it has ever at all existed as anything other than a projection, an ideal. A projection that does not seem useful in our multi-cultural and hyper-capitalistic, modular society. Perhaps this modulation of division of society into different areas and specialized disciplines should be seen as the foundation for the realization and fragmentation of the public sphere into different camps and/or counter-publics. Fragmented spheres that together form the "imaginary institution of society" as described by Cornelius Castoriadis. For Cornelius Castoriadis, society and its institutions are as much fictional as functional. Institutions are part of symbolic networks, and as such not fixed or stable, but constantly articulated through projection and praxis. But by focusing on their imaginary character, Castoriadis also suggests that other social organizations and interactions can be imagined: that other worlds are indeed possible.[5]

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 agonistic and a platform for different and oppositional 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.[6] Since the formal, autonomous work is no longer a useful model, we have been witnessing a number of artistic projects that takes their point of departure in the notion of different fields, if not down-right in the notion of difference in itself: projects that relates to a specific set of parameters and/or a specific public as opposed to the generalized and idealized. In other words, we are speaking of works that do not employ the notion of the bourgeois public sphere, but rather different fragments, camp- and/or counter-publics. Or, at least, different ideas of a public, be they utopian or heterotopian. It is a question of to and for whom one is speaking, and on what premise. We see here a proliferation of formats, going well beyond the object based matrix-like artwork of modernism, but rather dealing with models of display and curatorial work in the exhibitionary complex, combining self-authorization with institutional critique. But also tactical employment of other spaces than traditional art spaces, such as the educational facility and pedagogy, alternative publishing, local and public television, street culture and more specifically the space of demonstrations, and finally the new sphere of netculture (for instance list serves and open source networks).

Efforts to construct new models, new public sphere formations can be seen as, if not 'the answer' to such questions, then as attempts at indicating the routes one was to follow if one was to answer these questions. Such platforms must distinguish themselves by not creating single projects or interventions in (a generalized) public sphere, but rather try to constitute a continuous counter-public stream. Such a project must attempt to perceive and construct a specific public sphere *and* a (op)positional and/or participatory model for spectatorship as opposed to a (modernist) generalized one. And it entails a reconfiguration of the (bourgeois) notion of the public sphere into a different arena, into a potential

multitude of different, overlapping spheres and formations. It must replace the notion of 'the' public sphere in singular into plural sub- and/or counter-publics. The task before us becomes, then, how such practices can conceive of their specific public, their interfaces with it and towards which aims? *Relational publics are also always specific ones*. We must thus map and define these different arenas and possibilities *and* methods for interaction within and between them. And, finally, question how this should relate to and alter artistic production, art's spaces and institutions, and their 'publics'. Obviously, we are witnessing not only a different conception of art and its publics, but also, just recently, the emergence of new models for art institutions that involves different conceptions of production and representation, both in the form of alternative spaces as well as in publicly funded art institutions.[7] Historically, the art institution, or museum, was, of course, 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*.[8]

This role now seems purely historical, obviously, partly due to the different spaces of experience of the spectators, but also due to a structural change in the mode of address within former 'bourgeois' institutions themselves. Indeed, funding and political support for art institutions and the production of fine arts in general - even in its more critical and radical forms within the neo avant-garde - was historically sustained through an enlightenment ideal of how the

self-representation and self-authorization of the bourgeois class was maintained through a specific spatial formation, through a specific public sphere, if you will. The modernist white cube is in this sense merely a spatial technique of representation, and it is precisely the constitution of the sphere itself that is crucial rather than the objects, statements and formulations within it. This enlightenment model, that, to some extent, was tolerant of avant-garde art, of representing other values than bourgeois values of conduct, order and productivity has now been superceded by a more thoroughly commercial mode of communication, by a culture industry. Where the enlightenment model tried to educate and situate its audience through discipline, through various display models identifying subjects as spectators, the culture industry institutes a different communicative model of exchange and interaction through the commodity form, in turn identifying subjects as consumers.
For the culture industry, the notion of 'the public', with its contingent modes of access and articulation, are replaced by the notion of 'the market', implying commodity-exchange and consumption as modes of access and interaction. This also means, that the notion of enlightenment, rational-critical subjects and a disciplinary social order is replaced by the notion of entertainment as communication, as the mechanism of social control and producer of subjectivity. The classic bourgeois spaces of representation is likewise either replaced by markets, such as the mall replacing the public square, or transformed into a space of consumption and entertainment, as is the case in the current museum industry. In this sense, fragmentation and different spaces of experience is not a similar deconstructive threat to the culture industry as it is to the historical formation of the bourgeois public sphere. Rather, fragmentation and difference can be mapped in terms of consumer groups, as segments of a market with particular demands and desires to be catered to, and to be commodified.

Indeed, fragmentation must be seem as one of the conditions of neo liberal market hegemony. This condition of simultaneous fragmentation and commodification also direct consequences for art's spaces, be they bourgeois or otherwise inclined, in terms of public funding (always the main tool of cultural policies). Interest in the upkeep the bourgeois public sphere, and its institutions such as the traditional museum and exhibition space, is clearly in decline, from both left *and* right. And in a fragmented and differentiated public, we will have to define, address and establish both processes of self-representation and self-authorization, as well as their contestations in different always specified ways, and, perhaps, in terms of singularity and certainly articulation. Certainly, we cannot, nor even desire to maintain, claim or return to the bourgeois category of the art space and subjectivity, and to its adjacent classical avant-gardist notions of resistance. Rather, we need not only new skills and tools, but also new conceptions of 'the public' as relational, as articulatory and communicatory. 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 called 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".[9]

In her work on the agonistic public sphere, Mouffe, significantly

critizes Habermas for his separation between the private and public realm, and exertion of politics from the former, just as his belief in impartial public institutions (that is, in effect, impartial positions) amounts to a fundamental inability to deal with pluralism, with difference. Instead Mouffe argues for a 'conflictual consensus', multiplying the discourses, institutions and forms of democracy. We can thus begin to think not only of fragmentation and counter-publics, but also of the connections between them. What can be termed chains of equvivalnce between fragments, connecting different struggles and spheres, and we can attempt to posit the various public spheres or formats of cultural production - the exhibitionary complex, the educational facility, public televison et al - as precisely the arena for these contestations and articulations.

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[1] See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere – An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962), Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989.

[2] See Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience – Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (1972), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

[3] George Chauncey, 'Privacy Could Only Be Had in Public', Joel Sanders (Ed.), *Stud – Architectures of Masculinity*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996.

[4] Michael Warner, Publics and Counterpublics, New York: Zone Books, 2002, pp. 121-22.

[5] See Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1975), London: Polity Press, 1987.

[6] Pierre Bourdieu and Hans Haacke, *Free Exchange*, London: Polity Press, 1995.

[7] Of particular interest here, is not only the transformation of 'bourgeois' art institutions by particular agents, but also the current movement of willful self-institutionalization seen in such art related platforms as Center for Land Use Interpretation, Center for Urban Pedagogy, Copenhagen Free University, Community Art School, Institute of Applied Autonomy, The Invisible Academy, School of Missing Studies, University of Openness and Université Tangente, that all somewhat mirrors and reverses educational facilities. Here, discourses are established and circulated not through a negation of publicness, but through a deliberate and tactical self-institutionalization. Societal machines for knowledge production become subjective ones – produced through identity rather than producing of identity.

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

[9] Chantal Mouffe, 'For an Agonistic Public Sphere', in Okwui Enwezor et al. (Ed.), *Democracy Unrealized*, Ostfeldern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje-Cantz, 2002, p. 90. For a more elaborate theoretical
account of the notion of 'agonism', see Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, London: Verso, 2000.