

## The Public and The Imaginary

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### Guest lecture: Seminar 3 Working in Public: Quality and Imperfection

Thanks to Anne and Suzanne for inviting me. It is the first time I have been to the Highlands, so it is very exciting. I will talk about a couple of things tonight. It might be a bit theory-based. Then at the end I will also show you a video of an artwork and I will explain later why I have chosen that work.

I will talk mainly about two things: one is how do we define the public – not only as public space, but the public as a group of people. I am very interested in these issues both in a curatorial and a theoretical sense. Those in the core group have read some of these thoughts so they will be familiar to you, but I thought maybe it would good in this context to go into some detail.

Then I will move from that to the idea that a public is not a given thing. It is not something that exists. It is something that is partly produced from a mode of address. It could be a work of art. It can also be a political speech act. It can be a piece of architecture. In order to construct such a mode of address, one has to try and *imagine* the public. This is the current research project that I have just started. It will probably end up in a book in three or four years' time. The book will be about what you might call the 'imaginary' as a conceptual tool. (I will talk about that a bit more later on). What is the relation between art production and exhibition-making on the one hand, and on the other what we can call the political imagination. That is - how do we imagine the world, and how do we imagine the world being different?

First I will try and map out the territory of the public sphere and see what the changes are that have happened within it. What do those changes mean for art production? I would name this a toolbox for communication and for the politics of representation or representational politics in the public realm. Perhaps the Oakland projects revolved around these concepts.

I will take as my point of departure different conceptions of the public sphere based on practice and spectatorship. This idea of public space (even as a construction) is fundamentally fragmented. It does not exist as a unitary space, as 'a' space. It exists as a number of fragments – perhaps. I will then explore the problematic but also the potential that lies in this idea of a fragmented public sphere. What kind of politics lie behind the construction of a particular public space (as real or imaginary)?

Where is work in a public sphere located today? Is it in a public space or is it in the media, perhaps? Is it in parliament and politics? Is it in newspapers or to use an old word, in letters? We do not know. How can critical interventions be made into this public sphere? How can artistic interventions be made into this unlocalised public? How can *critical* artistic interventions be made into it?

How do you perceive, or construct, a specific public, a position or a participatory model for spectatorship? How is this different from a more generalised modernist notion of the public? Does this entail a reconfiguration of what was known as 'the bourgeois notion of the public sphere'? Does it entail a completely different arena, or perhaps a number of different spaces and spheres? To put it in other terms: 'What can be put in the place of the public sphere?'<sup>ii</sup> This is double-edged of course. If there is a place of the public

sphere, what can you put in it; and, on the other hand, if the public sphere as an historical formation is disappearing - and that is arguable, what would we put in its place?

Finally, I will talk about the connection between the public and the imaginary. As a simple example, whenever one is involved in a certain speech act, a certain representation, one tries to imagine one's public. Even in this case, I can probably see most of my public (except from the virtual public on the screen), but I can still only imagine how you will receive the way I speak. I can try to speak in a way that I think is interesting to you, or that would make me look interesting, or that will make me look convincing, that will make me have a certain authority, or I can try to deconstruct my own authority. I can use different kinds of speech in order to try and produce you, as a public, in a way that will fit to my – let's say – politics of desire, or intentionality.

We tend to know instinctively what public art is. Traditionally it was very simple what it was. It was an object placed in public space – usually the city square. This has also been called 'plop art' by some people. It is supposed to be distinguished from art made in the private sphere but it is basically gallery art. Private spaces are not public spaces, even though some people tend to think of galleries as public spaces. Museums, on the other hand, *are* public spaces. Public art in museums would traditionally (or at least from the middle of the twentieth century until today) entail a different audience, a different notion of spectatorship. What was done in a gallery could be elitist but in public space you would have to talk in a much more universal way to everyone at the same time. It had to be unassuming and, usually, abstract or representational in a very historical way.

Interestingly enough, the debate around the public artwork still takes place as much before the conception of the work as after. That is completely different, of course, from galleries or museums where, if there is any public debate, it is after the work is shown. There might be a scandal, or it might be a joyous occasion. Everyone might think this is *the* show, record high numbers of people coming to see it, such as the artificial sunset at the Tate Modern in London, Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project*, Oct 2003-March 2004. In public art, there is always a debate by which you have to ask the community, 'Do you like the sculpture here?' or 'Can we have it there?'. There is a whole consultation process to determine the materials of the work. I mean material in both senses: the way the work is constructed (its formal language) and its content. This material has to last for generations. When we put up something in public space, it has to last for a long time. It has to supersede history. These sets of issues involve a long political and planning process.

Sometimes there is also a lot of debate after the work has been sited, resulting in the work's removal or re-siting in other locations. The most recent example of public sculpture gaining great symbolic value through its siting and subsequent removal, is the monument for the liberation of Estonia in 1945 that had originally been put up by the Soviet Union. A large number of Estonians (or rather the current National Estonian Government) considers what happened in 1945 as *not* a liberation from fascism (even though it certainly was that as well). They see it mainly as colonialism from Communist Russia and an end to their independence (which it undoubtedly also was). So they wanted to remove this sculpture that had a very significant site and put it elsewhere. All of a sudden there was a lot of tension because the Russian minority felt that removing this work was an attack on them. There was a big public debate around sculpture that no one had really, otherwise, noticed.

The interesting question to ask is - What public was produced here? Why did the politicians take the decision at this point in time to remove the sculpture? This is not a representational act. I would describe it as an act of de-presentation - that is to remove a certain history and remove certain ideas from the imagination of the citizens in a country. They wanted to remove that history, but in doing so, produce conflict with the effect of

demarcating clearly the Estonians from the Russians. It was very complicated because the Russian minority does not have the same rights to citizenship as the people who are ethnically Estonian. The Russian minority is actually about 40% of the population.

With public sculpture it is just a question of what can be installed where, and for whom is it installed – not *how*, but *for whom*. In modernism, this was very easily answered because the form of the work addressed the issue by being form in itself. It was a synthesis. The architectural form of modernist buildings would somehow correspond to the sculptural form that was produced from a similar modernist matrix. Adding a sculpture to a square meant continuity, rather than discontinuity. There was supposed to be a unity between the public sphere – as such – and the public artwork.

Today this seems to also hold true to how these modernist sculptures can seamlessly fit into corporate architecture. Interestingly enough, we can see that this kind of public sculpture was extremely popular both in so-called communist countries and in so-called democratic countries. Similar modernist matrices were employed.

However, this unity has been heavily deconstructed and criticised, first of all, by art practice and later by art theory and art history. It was always a construction – an ideal – to claim unity between the artwork and the site.

The public sphere is no longer considered a unified space. It was never entered and used uniformly. This corresponds to the difference of art and gender. Artworks had different conceptions and significations that were read in different ways. That is why we now talk about fragmentation or differentiation of public space on the one hand, and, dematerialisation of artworks on the other as a strange double-movement within art production itself. On the one hand there is now an expanded field of artistic practice (an expansion of what is art) and, on the other hand, a dematerialisation of artworks by which these works no longer use conventional (sculptural) materials.

This strange double movement means that we have a different understanding of 'public'. It is no longer unitary. And we have different interpretations of the artwork. Perhaps we can say that both have been dematerialised to some extent. This means that in the post-modern era (arguably in the modernist era as well), the communicative possibilities and methods of an artwork have had to be renegotiated.

Neither the form nor the context of an artwork, nor its potential spectators, is fixed or stable. They can be conceived in multiple terms, rather than in terms of the singular.

By separating the artwork from its traditional form and context, it has become dependent on another set of notions and parameters, that I have tried to describe as spaces of experience. This entails notions of spectatorship and networks around the artwork that are dependent on, let us say, contingency and specificity. It means that there are very different points of departure in terms of the spectator. The gaze of the spectator is not just dependent on the work, and where the work is sited. It is dependent on where the spectator is situated in terms of age, class, ethnic background, gender, and also this person's politics – this person's imagination. Broadly speaking, what is referred to here can be called experience and intentionality.

I have tried to argue that we should speak of three variable categories when talking about public artworks today - the work itself, its context and the spectator. Rather than a dualistic model, we have to have a triad. None of them are givens. They are often in conflict with each other. We could even call their relationship agonistic.

When we think about contemporary production and representation (and I think this really goes for both artistic production and political representation), we need to negotiate these terms of reference individually. What do they mean in themselves and also in relation to each other?

Art since the 1960s has demonstrated that you cannot fix meaning. In the same period, I think, we have come to realise that the public sphere or public space is not something we can take for granted either. It is as elusive as it has become deconstructed. If we look at some of the major theories of public space (or the public sphere, rather), we have a nominative model, and then we have a critique of that model.

The nominative model was mainly formulated by Jürgen Habermas, the German sociologist who was very influential in Germany in the post war period. He was closely allied to the Social Democrats. He made an historical survey of the emergence of the idea of a public sphere that he attributed to the ideals and self-understanding of the emerging bourgeois class in the nineteenth century that had posited a notion of public space as a space for political deliberation. In Germany at the time (that Habermas was writing) private institutions for art were called *Kunstverein*. These spaces required active membership by subscription. They were actually seen as the precursor to the invention of democracy and political speech. They were very strategic: They worked within the assumption that going to the art gallery, looking at these strange things and developing a rational discourse around them, trained you in rhetoric and in political speech. You could then use this experience in the bourgeois transformation of society or, in some cases, bourgeois revolution.

Public space then had to support the self-understanding of an emerging dominant class - the bourgeois class. That meant that public speaking was something you did in society and of society and thus, always, outside of yourself. In speaking in public, you had to speak in a specific way beyond personal interests, beyond the irrelevant, beyond the personal, anyway. You had to speak in a rational way. Therefore it was important to have a separation between the private, which was the family and the house and (very importantly) your property, the State with its institutional laws and the public, which was the cultural and political arena in which you could then discuss and legislate.

This is also why access to the public space was, by definition, restricted. Hannah Arendt has written about this: How can you actually speak beyond yourself, beyond your living conditions effectively if you are not independent in an economic sense? In reality only property owners can speak in a rational way beyond themselves because they are not thinking about their daily survival when speaking about society. The same applies to gender: really only men could speak in this rational way because women were confined to the home where they would speak about private matters.

Thus, in the 1970s, the famous feminist slogan - 'The personal is political', is a complete reversal of the bourgeois notion of public space where you have clear separation between the private and the public. All of a sudden the private became public, and thus political.

We now think much more of public space as a fragmented space. Part of this has to do with different critiques of Habermas' model. This model was considered to be normative and a reconstruction of a bourgeois project. Habermas did not say that there should be limited access, but he clearly felt that everybody in a modern democracy should speak in this rational way in public space in order to have a sensible, critical, conversation. For him, the big enemy – the destroyer of democracy and this pure public space – is the media, because media reiterates the personal and the irrelevant all the time.

There has been a critique of Habermas' version of public space. The first came from two other German theorists. One was an artist – a film maker, Alexander Kluge, the other, Oskar Negt, a sociologist (who had actually worked with Habermas). They wrote a book with a very instructive title - *Public Sphere and Experience*<sup>i</sup>. They are saying, 'Well, this may be the ideal, but our experience of public space is completely different from the ideal'. This text was written in 1972 as an answer to Habermas' book of the early 1960s. They said, first of all, we do not all have equal access to speech enactment in this bourgeois public space. Secondly, it is always an individual space – not one for collective experience. So where is collective experience formulated? Then they said, in our life experience, what is public? Where we are formed is, for most people, the work place or the school or the home. These are, what has later been called counter-publics (and I will return to that shortly). For them, it was fairly clear that life experience (lived experience) was in the factory. Then maybe you would go to the pub, which comes, of course, from *public*, and then you would go home. Women would be confined to the home, mainly, and children to schooling and so on. A lot of institutional spaces that were considered outside of the public arena, were actually those through which we are socialised, those through which we have to fight our political fights. They were the arenas for struggle. They are not an abstract space of rational deliberation, but rather the space of life experience, which would be, in their case, mainly the factory.

Interestingly, Kluge and Negt also have a very negative notion of the media, but quite different from that of Habermas. They call it a 'programming industry'. It is there to programme us into thinking in a different way. Of course, if we look at the history of television, we can see how it actually functions exactly through a kind of space/time division. So you have programming that is structured around a day. In the mornings you have children's programmes. During the day, you have a romantic television series that are for housewives and again programming for the kids when they come home from school. Then you have the news for the father of the house. Then you have some light entertainment. At the end of the evening, you have dramas and thrillers and, late at night now (at least on certain channels) you will then have pornography.

There is another notion that I want to mention within the idea of what can be called the 'counter-public'. That comes, not from Marxist theories such as Negt and Kluge's, but from queer theory. One of its theorists is Michael Warner, an American scholar who published *Publics and Counter-Publics*<sup>iii</sup>. Warner says that a counter-public has many of the same characteristics as the so-called dominant public, namely that they exist as an imaginary address. They produce, let us say, a 'fanzine', like a magazine in nineteenth or even eighteenth century Britain. The 'fanzine' tries to imagine there is a circulation of readership that they did not try to get to know through exchanges of letters sent in and so on. This is an imaginary address in relation to a specific discourse or a specific location (it could be the art space, for instance). It always involved circulation and reflection and as such Warner would say that counter-publics are as much relational as they are oppositional. They would become oppositional only under specific conditions.

Let us look at this in relation to the art world. There is a huge fetish around the notion of the alternative space. It is considered to be oppositional to dominant spaces. But if we look at how it is architecturally structured, if we look at how the exhibition is structured, we will see that they are very similar to normal gallery spaces and big museums. It is the same white cube. It is the same idea of having an opening night. It is the same idea that the audience exists through the people on your mailing lists and passers-by. It consists of a three-week show of some kind and it usually has posters announcing the artist. There is very little opposition. It is a complete mirroring of large museums and galleries.

What Warner says is that counter-public should be understood as a parallel formation of a minor or even subordinate character, but a place where oppositional discourse and practices can be formulated and circulated.

Where the classic bourgeois notion of the public sphere claimed universality and rationality, counter-publics often claim the opposite and, in concrete terms, entail a reversal of existing spaces. So, we take an existing space (it could be the art space) and reverse it into a space for a different activity - a different kind of identification and identity and a different practice. The most famous example, of course, is the notion of recruiting. A public park is made for a specific type of behaviour. During the day it is a place for leisure for heterosexual families, but at night it turns into something quite different, namely an area for cruising. Here we have an architectural framework, the park, that remains completely unchanged, but the usage of this framework is drastically altered. As another scholar, George Chauncey, has famously put it, 'Acts of privacy are performed in public' – very concretely in the case of cruising. A completely different subjectivity is produced in this space and one that goes completely against what the architecture was designed for.

A counter-public is a conscious mirroring of the modernity and institutions of the nominative public in an effort to address other subjects and, indeed, other imaginaries. To quote Michael Warner (this is his definition of when it becomes, not just pure mirroring, but a different type of subject): "Counterpublics are 'counter' to the extent that they try to supply different ways of imagining stranger sociability (*because in the public it is usually the strangers that are gathered – just like here own comment*) and its reflexivity: as publics, they remain orientated to stranger circulation in a way that is not just strategic, but also constitutive of membership and its affects."

Naturally, it is not that we had a dominant public sphere and then we have counter-publics. It is rather that we have a lot of parallel formations that can overlap and emerge in different ways as is the case with alternative space. On the one hand you can say it is clearly connected to the classic gallery space. On the other hand it is also in some opposition to it. It is a relation of both opposition and compliance, in a way. It is a complicated endeavour.

In the same way that the modernist singular artwork, and the idea of the spectator as a universal, the bourgeois public sphere seems historical to us. It seems to be as much a fragment as any other kind of sub-public or counter-public. Indeed, we can ask whether it ever existed as anything other than a projection – an ideal. I would say it is imaginary. It is a projection that I would argue does not seem very useful – this idea of the rational, universal, and masculine speech acts. It does not seem useful in what we can now call a modular society that is both multicultural and hyper-capitalistic.

Perhaps this modulation or division of society into different arenas and specialised disciplines (one of them being art, perhaps) should be seen as the foundation for the realisation and fragmentation of the public sphere into different camps and/or counter-publics. However, it is not only from the kind of critical idea of queering of space that the bourgeois notion of rationality has been criticised, deconstructed and replaced. It is also that the idea of the bourgeois public space has also been left behind by the cultural industries (I would argue) because, for the cultural industries, the notion of *the public* with its contingent modes of access and articulation is replaced by the notion of *the market*, implying a commodity exchange and consumption as the modes of access and interaction. Basically, if you can consume, you are welcome. So you can have, as in the case with queering - 'Well, OK, they are queers, so we can make a market for them and we can do it in certain cities and certain areas in these cities and they can stay there and do whatever they want, as long as they pay'.

Returning to art production this also means that the notion of the Enlightenment, of rational, critical subjects and the disciplinary social order that we know from museums and from public sculptures is replaced by a notion of entertainment as communication. Entertainment as the mechanism of social control and the producer of subjectivity. If we

look at the old Enlightenment museums, we see that they are less and less involved with educating the public than they would have been from the early nineteenth century into the latter half of the twentieth century. They are rather interested in entertainment. We can see this in how they are designed spatially. There are more and more place for gift shops and cafés. The National Art Gallery in Copenhagen where I come from even has church services. They have concerts. They have fashion shows and they now have guided tours not by art experts, but by celebrities. Celebrities show their favourite pieces in the collection and they are extremely popular, more popular than the art experts. I would rather go to one of those – I have to say. I think it must be much more interesting to hear whatever a rapper or actor has to say about the National Gallery than a trained scholarly person.

As I mentioned with the example of marketing for gay people, fragmentation and different spaces of experience are not the same deconstructive threat to the current hegemony of cultural industry as was the case in 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. They are thus to be commodified – commodification of desires; commodification of identities. Indeed, fragmentation must be seen as a condition of the new liberal market hegemony.

In order to construct new models, new public sphere formations can be seen, not an answer to such a question, but as attempts to indicate the routes one has to follow if we want to try and answer such questions. I would argue that such projects must distinguish themselves, not by creating single interventions in a generalised public sphere, but rather try to constitute a continuous counter-public stream.

Such projects must attempt to perceive and construct a specific public sphere and a model for spectatorship as opposed, of course, to the modernist generalised ones. We cannot talk of a general audience. We can only talk of specific audiences and one that is imagined and new every time, one that is produced through the mode of address employed.

If we are then only talking of a completely fragmented society, the task becomes how are they connected? How does an art practice today conceive of its public? How does it conceive of *the* public, or *its* public? How does it conceive of interfaces with publics, and worthwhile aims? Relational publics are also specific. One really has to map these strategies and this, perhaps, has to do with quality and imperfection. Perhaps there is a quality too in imperfection, also.

As I have tried to argue, any kind of public speech, and thus any kind of artistic endeavour, is the making of a public and thus the imagination of a world. It is therefore, in my view, not a question of 'art for art's sake' or 'art for society' or of poetics or politics. They are rather a matter of understanding the politics of aesthetics, and the aesthetic dimension of politics, or to put it in another way, it is the mode of address that produces the public. If one tries to imagine different publics (different notions of what was called stranger relationality), one must reconsider the mode of address itself or, if you will, the format of the artistic production, the format of the project, the format of exhibition-making. Any exhibition or artwork must imagine a public in order to produce it and to produce a world around it – a horizon.

Here I will move into the second part of my talk.

If we are satisfied with the world and with the art world we have now, we should continue to make projects as it was always done – repeat formats and circulations. If, on the other

hand, we are not happy with the world and art world we are in, we will have to produce in a different way. We have to produce other subjectivities through other imaginaries.

I would argue that the great division of our time is not between various fundamentalisms, as some argue, since I think they all ascribe to the same script although with a very different idea of who will win in the end. I would argue that the great division of our time is between those who accept, and thus actively maintain the dominant imaginary of society, subjectivity and possibility – and those who reject the current imaginary of society, subjectivity and possibility, and, instead, partake in what I will call other imaginaries.

Here I am mainly referring to the work a deceased Greek French philosopher called Cornelius Castoriadis<sup>iv</sup>. He had a very interesting trajectory because he worked as an economist for the OECD, and then he was involved in a group called, '*Socialisme ou Barbarie*'. In the 1950s in France, they broke with the Stalinist Communist Party. He also taught philosophy, and then, later on, he became unhappy with working for the World Bank, so he trained as a psycho-analyst and started practising psycho-analysis in the 1970s up until his death in 26 December 1997.

According to Castoriadis, any society is not something that appears naturally or along a kind of evolutionist line. It is always a symbolic construction that is held together by specific social imaginaries and specific institutions. These institutions are as much fictional as they are functional. That does not mean that they do not produce real effects. The best example is money. Money is pure belief. We believe that this note is worth what is printed on it. Why, I do not know because the International Gold Standard was given up in 1973 and even gold is a completely imaginary endeavour. And why gold would be worth more than a rock in the first place, I also do not know.

So societies are not created through any kind of natural rationalism or through an historical progressive determinism. They are instituted, he says, through creation, through imagination. Society and institutional forms and norms are, as I said, fictional and not only functional. Castoriadis then calls society an imaginary institution. He says, 'that what holds society together is, of course, its institution'. This is really meant in all senses of the word – the whole complex of its particular institutions, what I shall call 'the institution of a society as a whole'. The word, 'institution' is taken here in its broadest and most radical sense: norms, values, language, tools, procedures, and methods of dealing with things and doing things, and of course, the individual itself – both in general and in the particular type, form and gender– given to it by the society considered.

These institutions, and the way of instituting (meaning subjectivity, for instance, legality and so on), appear as a more or less coherent whole, as a unity, but can only appear so through practice and belief. This also means then that these social imaginaries can be redefined through other practices or even collapsed when no longer viewed as adequate. Social change occurs through discontinuity rather than continuity, either in the form of radical innovation and creativity. An example that Castoriadis used is Newtonian physics - one creative act changed the whole way everyone looks at the world; or in the shape of a symbolic and political revolution also completely changed the world – France in the 1789 revolution. These creative acts, he says, can never be predicted or understood in terms of determinant causes and effects or an inevitable, historical sequence of events – the way, for instance certain Marxists believed that conditions of production would inevitably lead to revolution or the way, nowadays, liberalist commentators view the fall of the Communist Block as being brought by natural law of economics.

Change emerges, rather, through the establishment of other imaginations without pre-determinations through practice and a will that establishes another way of instituting. This requires a radical break with the past in terms of language and symbolisation and thus with ways of doing. However, as you probably know, one of the problems of any



revolutionary project is exactly this: how do we implement radical change? Not just in the significations and sedimentations of institutions, but in how they institute and how they can produce social relations in you.

This discussion then finally brings me back to the question of contemporary art and the notion of the imaginary. How are new languages created? Which new languages can be produced and which languages are only old things said with new words? We can put it in another way. What can be imagined, and what can not be imagined? What modes of critique are affirmative, and which are transformative? Which artistic creations are illustrative, sometimes even celebratory of the current hegemony? An aesthetic gesture, I would argue, consists like a political one in the creation of a new ensemble of things in a restating of what we perceive as real. This also means that one cannot, I am sorry to say, distinguish between political and non-political works of art or, in a broader sense, representation. The very imaginings of each specific mode of address lies, the politics of aesthetics. Jacques Rancière<sup>v</sup>, a contemporary philosopher, developed this term in another context. Nonetheless it is a useful notion to illustrate what I am talking about.

For Rancière the politics of aesthetic practices lie in how they partake in what he called 'the partition and distribution of the sensible'. This is used here not in the sense of rational but in the sense of what can be seen, and not seen; what can be sensed, and not sensed; what can be said, and what can not be said or in the terms that I have used, what can be imagined, and what can not be imagined?)

In the very imaginings of each specific mode of address lies the politics of the aesthetic. In contrast, the political, in connection with works of art, is historically described in two ways: either as use value (which could even be propaganda); or, secondly, in terms of the politics of representation – How is a subject represented by an artwork? Who is the speaking subject behind it (the identity of the speaking subject)?

We have to expand on the notion of what political representation means and analyse artworks through their imaginary character, namely - what kind of horizon do they set up, or set themselves up against? What kind of horizon do they feel limited and framed by without these aspects necessarily being in opposition to each other? The politics of an artwork lies then, not so much in the intentionality of the artist nor, only, in the reception of the spectator i.e. the politics of reading. The politics of an artwork does not nor exclusively lie within the politics of representation i.e. how things are shown, who is represented and who is not included. It lies with both artist and spectator and how they imagine what we can represent or, as I mentioned with the example of Estonia, de-present. How can certain ideas be removed from the spectrum? What we can think and not think; include or exclude; amaze or shock; entertain or lecture – and so on.

An artwork can, in my mind, be seen as a way of instituting; of producing and projecting other worlds and a possibility for the self-transformation of the world. It can be seen as an institutionalisation that is produced through subjectivity, rather than only producing subjectivity. It can, very simply, offer a place from which to see and, hopefully, from which to be seen differently, from which to imagine another world – as much as an object to look at.

We have to rephrase our notions of the critical and the affirmative in artworks according to how they attempt to institute a particular imagination of the world or, if you will, of the phantasmagoric. In the latest Berlin Biennale we can see this current wave in a lot of large-scale exhibitions. These move away from the content based on what was called the 'enigma of art' to a kind of de-presentation, as a political move that really is not about the political intentions of the artist, but rather in its politics of aesthetics. So, in this case, an artwork that does not partake in creating a different horizon is, by definition, affirmative of the current horizon, of what art is and what politics is.

It is primarily in the imagination and sometimes in the lack of imagination of the work, and not the intentions of the producer, in which the politics of aesthetics are located. What is at stake is the future as well as of the past and how it is imagined. It is what Walter Benjamin would have named as 'past as future'. It is the way in which the work produces other imaginaries of the world and its institutions, rather than merely reiterating existing ones – even if it does so in critical terms. It is what can be called affirmative critique.

It becomes then a matter of what horizon can be imagined as well as ways in which to institute it. So, again taking the cue from Castoriadis and his analysis of society as self-created and existing through institutions, we should then speak of other ways being instituted, other ways of instituting. To say that, if there is one world, and this is created through an imagination, also means that other worlds are, indeed, possible. So self-institutionalisation actually becomes crucial, not just as an organisation of collective experience, but also as a mode of address in works that politicise aesthetics rather than the other way around. Any political aesthetic is not just a representational act that supports politics, but also a mode of address that politicises aesthetics. To paraphrase Jean-Luc Godard: 'It is not a matter of making political films, but of making films politically'. By that he meant how you sequenced the images and sounds and also the working relations of the people producing the film, how the film was distributed, what were the politics of distribution?

Therefore one must reconfigure the very mode of address itself and, in turn, its imagined subjects be they audiences, constituencies, communities and/or adversaries or perhaps all of them at the same time. That is a reconfiguration of both the mental and material conditions of the work itself.

This is also concerned with the setting up of horizons. Before I show you the work by Katya Sander, I just want to mention an interesting debate in terms of the idea of horizon: how to construct an horizon that can formulate your imaginary. In revolutionary images, this is extremely important. If you remember all historical depictions of Lenin, he is always pointing outwards in the distance. Where is he pointing? He is pointing to the horizon. That is where we have to go. He shared an obsession with time along with the Bolshevik Revolution had. When they gave away the Ukraine to the Germans, Lenin famously said, 'I'll give up space to gain time.'

There is a book that came out a couple of years ago which was trying to attest to the crisis of the left. This is a dialogue between three theorists - Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Zizek about hegemony, contingency and universality<sup>vi</sup>. They tend to disagree more and more as the book goes on, which is very interesting. They each have a first set of questions, then they each have a contribution, and then they have an exchange so the book is constantly divided between the three voices. They really end up in a huge fight when they started out with common goals. Notoriously, Zizek, always being the provocateur, accuses his interlocutors as being well and squarely based within the dominant imagination of liberal capitalist democracy. They cannot imagine anything else than that, therefore all their political thoughts are useless, he says. This gets a rather strong reaction from Laclau that I will quote because it is an example of theory also being quite amusing. Laclau is saying, 'I can discuss politics with Butler because she talks about the real world, about strategic problems people encounter in their actual struggles, but with Zizek it is not possible to even start to do so.' He says later on, 'I have no idea what other worlds Zizek is talking about and I am beginning to have the feeling that he does not either.'

The interesting thing is Zizek's response which is - Well, what is the real world? Is it an imaginary (even though he does not refer to Castoriadis' ideas)? In order to achieve change, where is the horizon? Should perhaps that horizon be close to you? Is it to say – can we get these people into the City Council and these people out? Or is it to say, we

have to smash capitalism? To post a horizon that seems faraway. I do not know. These are strategic questions. But Žižek's answer is that, in effect, today one cannot even imagine a viable alternative to global capitalism. Laclau, however, situates politics in the real world, even though being a Lacanian, I am sure he knows that the real is a wholly imaginary enterprise.

I think there is a certain poignancy to Žižek's claim about the imagination, that only by imagining an horizon far away can one advance in giant steps. The closer one is to a horizon, or rather, the more limited our horizon is, the less imagination we have, the less space there is for movement and thus for social change and, yes, progress. Rather than accepting this current horizon of what has been called 'post-politics' and what we can call the 'aesthetics of administration' that we see everywhere, we have to posit another world, socially, sexually, economically, politically as the imaginary institution of a society to be or the community to come. We need to posit that other worlds are indeed possible or, for our present situation, that another art world is indeed possible if we want it.

I will just end with a quote before showing you the film. It is a film that deals with the notion of horizon. It is not so long and it is, hopefully, entertaining. Castoriadis said,

*'The super session of present society which we are aiming at because we will it and because we know that others will it as well, not because of the loss of history, the interest of the proletariat or the destiny of being, the bringing about of a history in which society not only knows itself, but makes itself as explicitly self-instituting, implies a radical deconstruction of the known institution of society in its most unsuspected nooks and crannies which can exist only as a positioning and creating not only new institutions, but a new mode of instituting and a new relation of society and of individuals to the institution.'*

It is not a question of just changing institutions, but actually changing how we institute, how subjectivity and imagination can be instituted in a different way or, as the poet, Delmore Schwartz, once wrote, 'In dreams begin responsibilities'.



<sup>i</sup> Sheikh, S ed., 2002, *In the Place of the Public Sphere? or Critical Readers in Visual Cultures* 5 b\_b books Berlin

<sup>ii</sup> Negt, O., & A. Kluge, 1993 *Public Sphere and Experience: Towards an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* University of Minnesota

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- <sup>iii</sup> Warner, M., 2002, *Publics and Counterpublics* New York: Zone Books
- <sup>iv</sup> Castoriadis, C., translated Kathleen Blamey, 1998, *The Imaginary Institution of the Society* MIT Press: Cambridge
- <sup>v</sup> Rancière, J., 2004, *Politics of Aesthetics: The Limits of Art and Politics* Continuum Inti Publishing Group
- <sup>v</sup> Walter Benjamin, 1999, *The Arcades Project*, Harvard University Press
- <sup>vi</sup> Butler, J., Laclau, E. & Zizek, S., 2000, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* WW Norton, Co Inc