

The artist's fear of politics or being in the world...

Judith Stewart

The fear of politics that I'm going to speak about here is not to be confused with a fear of what Chantal Mouffe has described as "the domain of philosophers who enquire...about the essence of 'the political'"¹. What I speak of relates to the fear of straying so far beyond the "meeting place between artistic practice and political practice"² that the art gets left behind. Running through this fear is also an awareness of the limitations of language, and the resulting hesitancy felt by artists when attempting to speak of their work, and of their - justifiable - wariness regarding the application of language to their work by others. I will also speak of how the context - time, viewer, circumstances, as well as place - can add to this fear, creating a particular type of politicisation that drags art into places it was never intended to go.

November 2000 - looking through proposals sent to my predecessor, one in particular stands out. "Can we do this in six months with no guarantee of a budget?" I ask Mario.

When I began my curatorial collaboration with Mario Rossi back in 2000, the art world (not, I hasten to add, *artists* but the structures responsible for the reception and distribution of art) sought to distance itself from the political. The overtly political work of the 1970s and 1980s that arose from identity politics had long been designated passé and although art arising from a political sensibility was no longer necessarily message driven, curators in the UK at least appeared to avoid anything that hinted at the political. It was in this context that Mario and I began a collaboration that set out to deliberately explore the relationship between art and politics. Our collaboration on *Host*, playing with the hegemonic politics of museums, led to *strangers to ourselves*, a more overtly political project that grew out of our conversations about art, curating and politics.

I hesitate here. I want to talk about *strangers to ourselves* because it says much about Mario's work, but am inhibited by my own fear of language - or rather of the potential misuse of language brought about by selective hearing, misunderstanding or my own inability to use words precisely. The more I read, the more fearful I become, acutely conscious that my floundering in the realms of philosophy, drawn on here to help me explain my thinking about art and being in the world, are probably mis-readings. But does that matter if it helps me to think?

¹ Mouffe, C., 2005. *On the Political*. Oxford: Routledge. 8

² Rancière, J., Carnevale, F. & Kelsey, J., 2007. 'Art of the Possible'. *Artforum* March 2007, 256-269. 259

“What is your work about?” is the dreaded question that, if answered, instantly excludes a host of other possibilities. So if I say that *strangers to ourselves* was ‘about’, ‘referred to’, ‘responded to’, or ‘was informed by’ current patterns of human migration, it invites a particular way of thinking. The “...whole issue of how a poem, or a play or a novel, can ‘refer’ to anything is an intriguing one”, writes Michael Wood³. It suggests that art is always following, dragging behind, and we flounder when we try to find alternatives. Perhaps, in reality, to say “This is how I think” would be closer to the truth. We need a shorthand to describe what we do, or to help us make decisions as to what we want to see or read, but doing so immediately frames the viewer’s or reader’s response and overlooks the essential multi-layering of art.

2001 – We attend an Arts Council session on funding for touring exhibitions and outline the ideas for strangers to ourselves. “That’s a bit ambitious,” says one officer.

The period that saw the development of *strangers to ourselves* was one that, in the UK, witnessed art being increasingly used as a means to political ends, both social and economic. Putting the words ‘politics’ and ‘art’ together now not only conjures up the political art of the past but current practices commonly referred to as ‘socially-engaged’, ‘relational’ or ‘dialogical’. With the emphasis in these being on participation and collaboration, where did that leave artists whose work was part of their ‘being in the world’, whose process was also the work, and who made objects to be shown in particular, designated spaces? Was this not socially-engaged?

I stray into murky territory again. In continuing to ask questions about what the art object might do when let loose in the world, we opened ourselves up to misunderstandings. Were we proposing a return to a modernist position that believed in the autonomy of the object, suggesting that some quasi-spiritual experience lay in wait for the viewer if they were correctly attuned? If so, what did that say about how we live in the world, about our politics?

The process of developing *strangers* threw the problematic relationship between art and politics into sharp relief. Looking back, the thing I remember most clearly is how it pointed up the divide between implicit and explicit political work and how the work that we selected effortlessly straddled both positions, addressing its subject directly and inventively through prioritising the aesthetic. In other words there was no question but that the work existed in the domain of art.

Attempting to find a home for the *strangers* project proved more difficult. At times it felt like less of a meeting-place between art and politics and more like trench warfare as we held on to what may be seen as a counter-intuitive belief that the work would be *more*

³ Wood, M., 2008. ‘Yeats and Violence’, *London Review of Books* Vol. 30 No. 16 August 2008. 20-25.

political if allowed to retain its integrity as art. When I speak of ‘integrity’, this is not about a separation from the world but allowing the work to operate in its own domain. In spite of our attempts to articulate the thinking behind the project, responses tended to latch onto the word ‘migration’ and fell into one of two camps. Generally, these can be summarised either as an opportunity to develop a social project involving residencies or workshops with refugees, or finding it ‘too political’ and likely to raise issues that were too sensitive to be openly discussed. In other words, what we were proposing was considered ‘unrepresentable’⁴.

2003 – strangers to ourselves. Ken Lum’s work, ‘There is NO Place Like Home’ is installed on billboards at the entrance to the railway station. A week later it is removed (and destroyed) without consultation on the orders of a councillor because he believes it will cause offence.

What does it mean to allow art to function within its own domain? It is not a call for art to be returned to the safe white walls of the gallery, although there is clearly still a need for the gallery as a designated space. Neither does it mean that there are areas – physical or ideological – where art should not go. I think it is more appropriate to think of the domain of art in terms of the intentions for it – what do you think it can do? Alongside this question, we should also ask what is the work of art *for*? What is its’ purpose?

The arguments in support of taking art out of the gallery and into the public realm are partly grounded in a political desire to make it ‘accessible’ by removing the cultural and class barriers that prevent people from entering galleries. There are other effects – often difficult – but nevertheless intriguing when art is placed outside of the gallery. It is almost as if, in assuming the role of ‘interloper’, the reactions it provokes sometimes reveal something of the structures of the social and political framework that are more usually veiled. But the gallery itself is not neutral, particularly now when the term ‘gallery’ or ‘gallery space’ does not only mean four white walls but can also apply to temporary occupations of disused or derelict buildings which still bear the imprint of their former use. The ‘gallery’ then can question the supposed neutrality of the work, with the interaction between the two sometimes resulting in an antagonistic relationship.

It is not the simple act of removal from the gallery that takes the art out of its domain: what takes it out of its own domain is having intentions for the work that go beyond what Pavel Büchler has described as ‘purposeful uselessness’. In other words when we want to *tell* the viewer something, to create a specific response, or expect the art to perform for some other social or political purpose. For some, this is what it means to make political art. For others, it is rather the case that art cannot avoid being political and, for those of

⁴ For further consideration of the ‘unrepresentable’ see the final chapter ‘Are Some Things Unrepresentable?’ in Jacques Rancière’s *The Future of the Image*. (Trans. G. Elliott) London: Verso 2007.

us belonging in this camp, our position is that of Adorno's: that it is only by retaining its autonomy that art can retain its critical opposition to society; that it is what happens in the work itself and in the relationship between the work and the viewer that has the potential to develop its critical (and political) potential⁵.

2004 – I'm asked to remove Mario's 'Reminiscences of Killer Fog' paintings and his installation 'Corridor of Mesmeric Transference' from an exhibition of works in a corporate HQ because they have proved upsetting to someone recently bereaved.

It has become commonplace over recent years to place an increasing emphasis on ethical considerations when discussing art. Instead of asking if something is 'good art', the focus is more on whether it is 'good'. Mouffe argues that this is part of a wider shift from political struggles based on left/right ideologies to one based on 'right and wrong'⁶. In art, as well as bringing our own ethical positions to the work, we want to know the ethics of the artist, and whether they have exploited anyone involved in the making of the work before we feel able to offer an opinion. It is a trend that is particularly applied to 'socially-engaged' artists and is not, as one artist pointed out to me, applied even-handedly to artists, let alone to curators and that section of the art world driven by the market.

For a critical artist, the ethics will be embedded in, and will form an integral part of, the work's aesthetic. This is not to say that the ethics will be consistent, unimpeachable or that the work will not (or should not) cause offence. In his review of Mark Neville's *Glasgow Book Project*, Martin Vincent points out that Neville's struggle to make work that is part of his own moral and ethical sense of being in the world, effectively becomes the subject matter⁷. Neville's own account⁸ of the project shows that this doesn't only involve the subjects of his photographs but the ethics of the project organisers, which frequently conflicted with and compromised his own sense of morality and the aesthetics of the work.

In explaining the processes of making the film *Tibb's Farm*, Mario spoke of how he had deliberately *not* engaged in a dialogue with the migrant workers on the farm. In fact, he not only avoided discussions with them but decided not to tell them anything about what he was doing. In the ethics of socially-engaged practice, this is probably a reprehensible action, but in terms of *Tibb's Farm* being what Neville has described as 'investigation in a

⁵ Adorno, T. *Aesthetic Theory* 225

⁶ Mouffe, C. *ibid.* p5

⁷ Vincent, M., 2006. 'Mark Neville'. *Frieze* October 2006, 272.

⁸ Neville, M. 2004. From exhibition notes provided by the artist.

contemporary art sense⁹, deliberately keeping the workers in the dark creates an uncomfortable edge to a film that could otherwise be seen as a nostalgic rural idyll. It is the presence of such qualities that allow us “a moment of wondering self-estrangement” because we can “...turn around upon ourselves, stand a little apart from our own vantage point and begin to grasp the *relation* of our capacities to reality...”¹⁰

Because the reception of the work is never within our control – unless we structure it in such a way that we determine precisely what a viewer will think - we will never be able to predict what may cause offence. When the art involves any of the three big taboos – sex, religion or politics – it is reasonable to assume that *someone* will be offended, but what has surprised me over and over again is that it is often the least likely thing that causes the most upset. I am not talking here of those rare moments when art hits a particular nerve and causes a shocking, unlooked for, response but about those almost commonplace moments when our morals and beliefs are affronted. In the past, this would have mattered less than it seems to now, when peoples’ sensibilities appear to have become more overdeveloped in relation to the imaginary than to ‘real’ life. The work of art would seem to possess a greater capacity to offend than the political act.

Unfortunately this reveals more about our relation to politics than it does about the power of the art object, and perhaps Rancière is right in saying that art has the potential to occupy the spaces left vacant by the disappearance of more traditional political spheres¹¹. If so, and the readiness to take offence is matched by its counterpart – a readiness to engage – then we should continue to look for art that “...is extricated from its ordinary connections and is inhabited by a heterogeneous power”, because when this occupies its’ rightful place in the “domain of art”, it creates “a form of thought that has become foreign to itself”¹². What I think this means is that, whatever our intentions for the work, if it is operating in the domain of art, then we cannot (and should not) predict reactions to it.

This space that Rancière calls the ‘meeting place’, between artistic and political practices, bears important similarities with what Mouffe calls ‘agonistic spaces’. Rejecting what she sees as the liberal ideal of a democratic society created by consensus, on the grounds that in a pluralistic society conflicts are inevitable. Her ‘agonistic spaces’ are places where the

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ Eagleton, T. *ibid* 89

¹¹ Rancière, J., Carnevale, F. & Kelsey, J., 2007. ‘Art of the Possible’. *Artforum* March 2007, 256-269. 262

¹² Rancière, J., 2004. *The Politics of Aesthetics*. (Trans. G. Rockhill) London: Continuum. 13

‘constant displacements and renegotiations’ essential to a functioning democracy can take place¹³. It would seem that the artistic domain is now established as one of these.

2004 – We inspect an alternative space for the London version of ‘strangers’. It seems an ideal spot in Mayfair - across the road from the Kennel Club, next door to a ‘Gentleman’s’ Club, and just round the corner from the hotel whose migrant employees have been found sleeping in the basement.

The language we use to speak about art is often unnecessarily pompous, a habit that in part arises from our overblown expectations of what art can do. We think an encounter with art should provide us with some sort of extraordinary experience and, when it fails to live up to our expectations, feel disappointed and cheated; or, like the government, we expect it to make people happier and more productive. The reality is that art can only be what it is: “...forms of visibility that disclose artistic practices, the places they occupy, what they ‘do’ or ‘make’ from the standpoint of what is common to the community.”¹⁴

Those of us immersed in theories of art that stress the importance of qualities such as openness and unspeakableness, of leaving space for the response of the viewer, shrink from the possibility of the work being described in terms that negate these qualities. I want to stress here that the ‘unspeakable’ – what we don’t know - is not the same as the ‘unrepresentable’ – what we are afraid to know. The art I’m speaking of, what Rancière calls ‘critical’ art, is not attempting to ‘represent’ or stand in for the unspeakable but arises *from* that place – whatever it might be. Inevitably this brings me to the vicious circle of attempting to speak of what we do not know and cannot imagine. Or, as Eagleton describes the dilemma facing Marxists in attempting to speak of what communism would look like – because it is rooted in history and experience, and is therefore contaminated, the result will always end in failure. What is important though, in both art and politics, is the attempt.

At the London Review of Books bookshop in January 2008, Slavoj Žižek made a case for avoiding political action, arguing that there are times when non-action is the most political act. “There are situations” he writes, “when the only truly ‘practical’ thing to do is to resist the temptation to engage immediately and to ‘wait and see’ by means of a patient, critical analysis.”¹⁵

¹³ Mouffe, C., 2007. ‘Artistic Activism & Agonistic Spaces’. *Art & Research* Vol.1 Summer 2007.

¹⁴ Rancière, J., 2004. *The Politics of Aesthetics*. (Trans. G. Rockhill) London: Continuum. 13

¹⁵ Žižek, S., 2007. *Violence*. London: Profile Books Ltd. 6

I suppose what I am proposing the domain of art provides is a space to think. When artistic practice is permitted to function within this space it allows us that possibility: not just to think, but to experience the work in ‘a way that is not programmed’. The importance of this as a political action should not be underestimated. Many artists, particularly those affected by the instrumentalist use of the arts to deliver social outcomes, would agree with Chantal Mouffe’s statement that “Nowadays artistic and cultural production play a central role in the process of capital valorization and, through ‘neo-management’ artistic critique has become an important element of capitalist productivity.”¹⁶ If we go further than Mouffe and take Zizek’s suggestion that, by acting without proper critical analysis, we all become implicated in the systemic violence of the political regime, then attempting to categorise art into political and non-political becomes nonsensical. Whether it is political or not is not the question, but rather in what way is this political and how does contact with it affect my being in the world?

2008 – “Nor, as you are aware,” wrote Mario, “do I consider myself to be a political artist”.

References

- Rancière, J., 2004. *The Politics of Aesthetics*. (Trans. G. Rockhill) London: Continuum.
- Rancière, J., Carnevale, F. & Kelsey, J., 2007. ‘Art of the Possible’. *Artforum* March 2007, 256-269.
- Rancière, J. 2007. *The Future of the Image*. (Trans. G. Elliott) London: Verso
- Eagleton, T. 1990. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.
- Mouffe, C., 2005. *On the Political*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Zizek, S., 2007. *Violence*. London: Profile Books.

¹⁶ Mouffe, C., 2005. *On the Political*. Oxford: Routledge. 1