

**Paper 1 (Dr. Andrew Hewitt, Senior Lecturer in Art & the Public Sphere, artist Partisan Social Club)  
Art, Partisanship and Public Spheres**

(1) How do **spatial practices** effect public exchange and opinion formation in urban public space, and enable more empathetic and inclusive ways of living together?

Art practice that interacts with people and communities is typically understood as an 'inclusive' activity that purports to employ democratic processes in order to support individual beliefs. However, this can incline towards embedding and entrenching pre-existing knowledge and attitudes. The art group, Partisan Social Club (PSC) utilise 'the workshop' as an element of their art practice in order to create new political groups and models of collective working. This paper explores a recent project, '*On being together; memberships, collectives and unions*' and proposes inventive ways in which partisanship can be a useful tool in overcoming the rise of unsympathetic factions in community relations.

**SLIDE 1**

***PUBLICS are Party People***

Given the acceptance of contemporary arts 'social turn' into mainstream institutional thinking and subsequent recuperation and depoliticization – what is to be done? Art practice that interacts with people and communities - social practices are typically understood as an 'inclusive' activity that purports to employ democratic processes in order to support individual beliefs. My research is concerned with how do such social practices affect exchange and opinion formation and enable more empathetic and inclusive ways of living together?

What I want to discuss today is does social art practice require a stronger form of political commitment? Is a better articulation of publics and politics required? Is the idea of art being 'inclusive' – **driven** by the ameliorative and socio-ethical institutional demands placed on social practice – and is this the undoing of arts political ambition? Instead do we need to return to more agonistic models of art that practice the complexities of politics, collectivity and action – to see what can happen? Might this include overtly political formations such as membership and with it partisanship?

To explore this issue I will use the recent project '*On being together; memberships, collectives and unions*' by the art group, Partisan Social Club (PSC). In this instance PSC utilised a workshop as an element in our art practice in order to create new political groups and models of collective working. More of that shortly.

Firstly, what do I mean by **social practice**? I am referring to artist, designer and urbanist-led projects whose practice take place in the public domain and address social issues through collective action. I think social practice plays an important role in democratic societies as it reveals and addresses issues that may not come under usual political or municipal attention and acts as an agent for democratic values enabling a community of citizens to come together to exchange opinions and ideas, which in turn may have the potential to generate longer-term social change.

Two examples include,

In 1994, **WochenKlausur**, addressed a social issue that was being hotly debated in the political arena at the time: the provision of relief organizations for drug abusers. They set themselves a concrete goal to generate support and funding to create a shelter where female sex workers with addiction problems could find refuge during the day. The

method WochenKlausur employed to secure the financial, political and media support for the project was to bring together participants from all of Switzerland's political parties, the mayor of Zurich, the chief of police, representatives from various drug relief organizations and sex workers, and send them out in small groups on three-hour long boat trips around Lake Zurich.

**Park Fiction** (1994-2017) is a SAP that took the form of a bottom-up urban planning application to establish a public park in a site that had been rezoned for high-rise office buildings. The Park Fiction committee achieved their goal by acting as though the park had already been officially sanctioned and proceeding to host public events, such as open-air film screenings, concerts, raves, exhibitions and talks. The combined effect of these happenings and the media attention they generated, transformed what was a fictional (or illegal) park into a social reality, thereby making it difficult for the city council to refuse to officially endorse its existence. In 2005 Hamburg city council finally passed the committee's unorthodox planning application and Park Fiction became a reality.

There are **theories of Social practice** we should consider for a moment to understand what is a broad field, with various positions and potential effects, but in which *encounters between people* comes to the fore. With art as spectatorship overturned by processes of participation, co-production and even collaboration.

The key arguments that frame this field in relation to contemporary art, are those between writer and curator Nicholas Bourriaud, art historian Clare Bishop, and theorist Grant Kester. I will give a quick condensed version of their positions on 'the art of encounter',

Starting with **Bourriaud**, his *Relational Aesthetics* has framed what are largely convivial exchanges between *gallery goers* e.g. in the work by Rikrit Tiravanija in which the artist plays host to the visitor in the rituals of sharing food.

Whereas **Bishop's** version is marked by making visible in the work itself, forms of antagonism, as seen in Santiago Sierra's hired subjects labouring in the gallery or Thomas Hirschhorn's pedagogic projects sited in urban contexts to bring into contact usually distinct socio-economic and ethnic communities. Bishop places an emphasis on the reading of the images of such events in which negations and contradictions are plain to see. So following an art historians interest in the picturing of events *over* the political process and outcomes.

**Kester's** dialogical and ethical exchanges between artists and communities, is reminiscent of an inclusive community art in which the purpose of the art is for ethical community relations in which dialogical exchange can overcome difference. *As a vehicle for ethical behaviour this art then rejects antagonism and with it politics.*

What is important to remember is that **all** these theorists aim to make hegemony in the social world visible. However I am concerned here with the limitations in these theories.

I think social art practice needs a **strong** understanding on ideas of what constitutes publics and politics. I am thinking here of a **critical cultural public** with people coming together and institutionalizing their values and beliefs and who then make appeals to or look to inform broader political discourse. As is common to *civil society*.

Civil society, as we know, was founded on the needs of the bourgeoisie through its version of the public sphere via its clubs, groupings and publishing houses with all its sectionalism, exclusiveness and repression, growing in strength and purpose in reaction to other groups it aimed to contain. Bourgeois values and ideals then became the dominant idea of what was thought of as *common sense* and of the *common good* and has been the basis for all critical and democratic action ever since.

From the outset then, civil society has been the space for various oppositional counter publics; to follow Nancy Fraser, 'some weak and some strong'. As counter public spheres with rival social actors, a place where politics, or the question of how are we going to live with one another, is addressed.

I think we need *strong critical counter publics*. Democratic groupings, clubs, associations and parties, including those who address the critical function of art in society.

On writing about **political parties and partisanship**, Jonathan White and Lea Ypi <sup>1</sup> provide an analysis of how, as a civic ideal its 'ideas, orientations, obligations and actions' are, they say, the basis of contemporary democratic theory. As indeed so does, Chantelle Mouffe.

White and Lea identify some key characteristics of parties and partisanship.

- The political **worth** of partisanship is the core idea of a party, for the pursuit of **political visions** irreducible to the self-centered aims of personal interest
- They claim that partisans inspire **collective action for themselves** – the role of party is to advance **their** principles and aims and to practice them.
- Partisanship wants **adversarialism** (albeit regulated), tempered by rules and also a commitment to persuade others of their views
- Partisan collectives have self rules which require their **commitment**, as part of their associative relations
- Partisanship must retain space for the **extraordinary and the disruptive** – for the logic of revolutionary action, and for action aimed at creative new institutions
- **Institutions** are at the core of partisanship, whether as partisans find them, or as they hope to establish them.
- Partisanship is a practice orientated to **long-term** projects.

I am now going to quickly discuss the **Partisan social club** and our experience of using ideas of partisanship within a social practice project. The PSC's version of publics, and with it publics of art, differ from those constructed and played out in

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<sup>1</sup> White, J., Ypi, L., (2016) *The Meaning of Partisanship*, Oxford University Press

the arts sector - encouraged by Arts council and played out through funded institutions - where SAP most often functions to enable *social cohesion* and also to advocate in liberal terms for art as a 'public good'. This occurs in off site projects, public art commissioning and art biennials.

As we have come to know, social art practice is often given the ethical role of connecting and interacting with a non-arts audience at the behest of the gallery to justify public funding. This is to supposedly bridge **cultural and social division** simply by increasing and diversifying arts audiences through *audience development*.

### **SLIDE 2**

The PSC reject this function for art. The PSC is interested in ideas of members and membership, to see what this might produce.

'On being together; memberships, collectives and unions', was held at *Beaconsfield Gallery Vauxhall, London from 13<sup>th</sup> September – 24<sup>th</sup> November 2018*.

The project was for people with shared interests and commitments, or who were simply curious about what it meant to join an association that supported politicized art. *The project was inspired by Kristen Ross' account of the Paris Commune<sup>2</sup> in which the communards worked together to defend their beliefs and in doing so constructed their political values through their social commitment, labour - and ultimately for many, their lives.*

### **SLIDE 3**

The PSC called forth a membership already informed on politicized art. Out came our *friends*, our *social practice students*, and as it happened, some people who lived nearby who we got to know through the process. The *inclusive* liberal gallery became an exclusive 'closed shop' for political organization.<sup>3</sup> This led to some tensions with the host gallery as their expectation was for an inclusive '*general public*' –to meet the expectations of their funders.

### **SLIDE 4**

The format was a series of workshops over three days that would bring people together to get to know each other through planned activity. Such a durational project, albeit for three days, requires an economy of presence, which we did try to support with a modest subsistence of £25 per day to support food and travel costs.

### **SLIDE 5**

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<sup>2</sup> REF Kristen Ross' account of the Paris Commune

<sup>3</sup> (this is perhaps a norm for visual and aesthetic artists who are not judged on the social relevance of their work).

Over a short but intense period the workshops brought people into close working proximity, testing their skills and the desire to work collaboratively. Mel Jordan and I ran sessions on slogan writing and embodiment along with collaborator Sean Griffiths who brought his skills and know how to enable the construction of social sculptures.

#### **SLIDE 6**

What transpired was a strong response by *members* who initiated their own subsequent workshops and projects over the six-week period in which we occupied the gallery space. The partisans organized workshops on song writing with slogans, on political music, a drawing and slogan writing workshop and an end party, which included guest speakers and a bingo evening.

#### **SLIDE 7**

Were we a party?

- The PSC did **begin** to formulate a shared **political vision** on social and critical art and did begin to have the momentum of a party
- The *practice* of **being together** and practicing associative relations was for many members a key outcome, as some in the group had expressed a sense of political isolation.
- Our partisans did want **adversarialism**, they wanted a party and they wanted to publish their views.
- Our partisans relished their new identity and they shared a passion for **disruption**
- In our short time together they took over an existing **institution** and established their own.
- Is it **long-term**? PSC has now established through practice many new connections that we think will last.

We are still all in contact and perhaps there is more to come.

#### **SLIDE 8**

*Our view was that Partizanship is a necessary means of thinking about politics and art. A political commitment to share views – but also a willingness to agree and disagree.*

*To form spaces for dialogue in which to associate and practice their values. This in response to often weak ideas of general publics as audiences of the gallery.*

Thanks