eurozine

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The violence of participation

Spatial practices beyond models of consensus

In view of increasingly fragmented identities, we need to find a form of co–existence that makes it possible for conflict to work as a productive confrontation: "a model for unconventional participation that allows outsiders to judge existing debates without the fear of rejection." Markus Miessen on the necessity to break with the "consensus machine".

> The disappearance of class identities and the end of the bipolar system of confrontation have rendered conventional politics obsolete. Consensus finally reigns with respect to the basic institutions of society, and the lack of any legitimate alternative means that this consensus will not be challenged.
> *Chantal Mouffe*[1]

> In contrast to cooperation, collaboration is driven by complex realities rather than romantic notions of a common ground or commonality. It is an ambivalent process constituted by a set of paradoxical relationships between co–producers who affect each other.
> *Florian Schneider*[2]

When people assemble, spatial conflicts arise. Spatial planning is often considered as the management of spatial conflicts. To deal with conflicts, critical decision–making must evolve. The city –– and, indeed, the progressive institution –– exist as social and spatial conflict zones, re–negotiating their limits through constant transformation.

Today, there is an ever–increasing need to consider breaking with the consensus machine. Taking this notion as a possible starting point, my research attempts to understand and illustrate the importance of critical engagement in alien fields of knowledge –– based on spatial conditions as a means of a cultural investigation. It aims to interrogate both the role of the architect and the role of the contemporary institution.

This text presents and discusses today's need for actors who operate from outside existing networks, while leaving behind circles of conventional expertise and overlapping with other post–disciplinary fields of knowledge. An alternative model of participation within spatial practice will be rendered, one that sets out from an understanding of participation beyond models of consensus. Instead of aiming for synchronization, such a model could be based

on participation through critical distance and the conscious implementation of zones of conflict. By means of cyclical specialisation, the future spatial practitioner could arguably be understood as an outsider who –– instead of trying to set up or sustain common denominators of consensus –– enters existing situations or projects by deliberately instigating conflicts as a micro–political form of critical engagement with the environment that one is operating in. Using the architect's expertise in mapping out fields of conflict, this research raises a set of questions that try to uncover the relevance of spatial and architectural expertise and how, in the remit of institutions, they can facilitate an alternative production of knowledge. It seems that today we are in urgent need of a re–evaluation of spatial production beyond traditional definitions, acknowledging the possibility of an "architecture of knowledge" that is being built up by actively participating in space. The understanding, production and altering of spatial conditions provide us with a prerequisite for identifying the broader reaches of political reality.

Participation and conflict

Participation is war. Any form of participation is already a form of conflict. In war, enemy and adversary usually hold territory which they can gain or lose, while each has a spokesperson or authority that can govern, submit or collapse. In order to participate in any environment or given situation, one needs to understand the forces of conflict that act upon that environment. In physics, a spatial vector is a concept described by scale and direction; in a field of forces, it is the individual vectors that participate in its becoming. However, if one wants to participate in any given force field, it is crucial to identify the conflicting forces at play.

Participation is often understood as a means of becoming part of something through pro–active contribution and the occupation of a particular role. However, it seems that this role is rarely understood as a critical platform of engagement, but rather based on romantic conceptions of harmony and solidarity. In this context, I would like to promote an understanding of conflictual participation, one that acts as an uninvited irritant, a forced entry into fields of knowledge that could arguably benefit from spatial thinking.

Undoing the innocence of participation

From the beginning of "Sex and the City", Charlotte York is portrayed as the most innocent of the four protagonists. Throughout the series, she is the only one who follows "dating rules" and expresses a serious desire to marry and have children. In Episode 55, Charlotte decides to quit her job as a curator at a Manhattan art gallery. When she reveals her intentions to her disapproving friends, she explains why she wants to stay home. In order to not feel "bad" about her real motives (wanting to be pregnant and redecorating the house), she justifies her decision by stating that she want to "volunteer at Trey's hospital and raise money for the pediatric wing". In Charlotte's case, doing volunteer work for an important social cause is portrayed as her voluntary participation in a good cause that prevents her from being judged for quitting her job.

Isn't this kind of practice precisely the modus operandi that we can find in so many "socially relevant" practices today? There is an interesting similarity between this way of arguing and the way in which particular practices have hijacked the notion of participation as a positive, unquestionable means of engagement (which forms their economy). But the question is: how is it

possible to "participate" in a given environment or situation without having to compromise one's role as an active agent that is not interested in consensus and "doing good", but in asking questions while attempting to inform practice in a particular direction? Becoming a vector in the forcefield of conflicts raises the question of how one participates without catering to pre–established needs or tasks, or –– from the point of view of the traditional architect –– how it is possible to participate in, for example, urban micro–politics by inserting friction and asking questions rather than doing local community work through Section 106 agreements.[3]

In architecture, there are frequent examples where critical engagement conflicts with the realities of business interests. In 2006, London–based architect Richard Rogers was sent to New York by a number of clients, who had read that he let his office be used by a group of architects that were connected to "Architects and Planners for Justice in Palestine". Lord Rogers was called to the offices of the Empire State Development Corporation (which is overseeing the re–design of New York's 1.7–billion–dollar Jacob K. Javits Convention Centre that Rogers is in charge of) to explain his connection to the group, which held a meeting at Roger's London office on 2 February 2006. As a result, several New York officials urged that Rogers be removed from the publicly funded project. Interestingly, this case illustrates how, although architects are often used by power structures, from the perspective of the power structure itself the architect is not welcome as a participating vector or enabler in this force field, but understood as a service–provider who delivers a product. As Rem Koolhaas argued in a conversation recently: "I would say that, particularly in America, political obliviousness is considered part of the role of the architect."[4] It is this chasm that I am attempting to tackle.

Collaboration as post–consensus practice

Conflict refers to a state of antagonism or opposition between two or more groups of people. It can also be described as a clash of interests, aims or targets. When we look at conflict as opposed to innocent forms of participation, conflict is not to be understood as a form of protest or contrary provocation, but rather as a micro–political practice through which participants becomes active agents insisting on being actors in the forcefield they are facing. Thus, participation becomes a form of critical engagement. When participation becomes conflict, conflict becomes space. Re–inserting friction and differences into both the scale of the institution and the city bears the potential of micro–political forces that render conflict as practice. In this context, participation becomes a form of non–physical, productive violence. Micro–political action can be as effective as traditional state political action.

In July 2006, Rem Koolhaas and Hans Ulrich Obrist interviewed more than 50 people over the course of 24 hours. Their so–called "Interview Marathon" at the Serpentine Gallery London was set up as a model to deliver a cross–section of practitioners that, in one way or another, define what London is today. Although the event was interesting and successful in many ways, one could also sense a certain frustration amongst the more critically oriented audience. Surely, it could be thought, if one sets out to trace some kind of cross–section, one would include a multitude of dissimilar voices. Now, in order for this not to be misunderstood, it needs to mentioned that I am not trying to argue for a more inclusive model or one based on political correctness. On the contrary: what was missing was precisely the conflict that "is" the city. The Marathon was set up as a "stimulating set of discussions". However, all participants were either part of an existing network of cultural practitioners, thinkers or

commentators or at least originated from the same cultural milieu.

Now, I would like to argue that –– in order to include the complexity of the city –– one also needs to include the conflicting forces of that city. Consensus is only achieved through relationality of powers. One could argue that if such a relationality is broken, another kind of knowledge is produced; one that helps us to understand the composite realities of the contemporary city and the forces at play. In this context, it could be useful to re–think the concept of conflict, seeing it as an enabler, a producer of a productive environment rather than as direct, physical violence. A more diverse set of conflicting voices could potentially create risks. However, it also allows multiple agencies and discourse that, through the recalibration of vectorial forces by means of critical conversations, could produce alternative and unexpected knowledge.

In order for any kind of participation to reach a political dimension, the engagement needs to be based on a distant critical voice. Through this kind of "conflictual participation", the exchange of knowledge in a post–disciplinary field of forces starts to produce new forms of knowledge. As a starting point for such a model of "conflictual participation", one could make use of the concept of collaboration, as opposed to cooperation, that Florian Schneider distinguishes in "The Dark Site of the Multitude":

> As a pejorative term, collaboration stands for willingly assisting an enemy of one's country and especially an occupying force or a malevolent power. It means to work together with an agency or instrumentality with which one is not immediately connected [...]."[5]

Since a notion of collaboration like this is also based on the idea of the inside and the outside (if you are inside you are part of an existing discourse which is to be agreed with and fostered), it will increasingly be the outsider that will manage to add critically to pre–established power relations of expertise. Although the outsider will be understood as someone who does not threaten the internal system due to lack of knowledge of its structure, it is precisely this condition that allows such a person to fully immerse him/herself in its depth in a "dilettante" manner.

What we need today are more dilettantes that neither worry about making the wrong move nor prevent friction between certain agents in the existing forcefield if it is necessary, a means of –– as Claire Doherty calls it –– "circumnavigating predictability".[6]

One could therefore argue that instead of breeding the next generation of facilitators and mediators, we should try to encourage the "disinterested outsider", the one that is unaware of prerequisites and existing protocols, entering the arena with nothing but creative intellect. Running down the corridor with no fear of causing friction or destabilising existing power relations, such people open up a space for change, one that enables "political politics".

Given the increasing fragmentation of identities and the complexities of the contemporary city, we are now facing a situation in which it is crucial to think about a form of commonality that allows conflict as a form of productive engagement: a model of bohemian participation in the sense of a point of entry for outsiders who access existing debates and discourses, untroubled by disapproval.

1 Chantal Mouffe, "Introduction", in Chantal Mouffe (ed.), *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, London: Verso, 1999, 3.

2 Florian Schneider, "The Dark Site of the Multitude", in: *theory kit* http://kit.kein.org/node/1

3 Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act of 1990 allows a local authority to impose legally binding obligations when giving planning approval. These obligations are sometimes called "Section 106 arrangements". They are a main way of imposing restrictions on building developers, and obliging them to minimise the negative consequences of a development on local communities and take measures to improve living standards in a district.

4 Rem Koolhaas in conversation with Markus Miessen, interview published in *Bidoun*, no 8, Fall 2006).

5 Florian Schneider, op. cit.

6 Claire Doherty, "The New Situationists", in Claire Doherty, *Contemporary Art –– From Studio to Situation*, London: Black Dog, 2004, 11.